



## About Getting Religion (Gimme That Old Time...)

I WAS BORN IN 1945, IN OGDEN, UTAH, THE SECOND CHILD OF THREE (OLDER BROTHER AND YOUNGER SISTER), BORN TO A MORMON MAN AND HIS NON-MORMON WIFE. It took me a long time to realize that Dad's choice of an unchosen (i.e., non-Mormon) woman was in itself a statement of who he was. His rebellion against his Mormon roots became more obvious to me as the years (and decades) passed.

Growing up in Denver, where my family migrated from Utah when I was an infant, we attended the local Mormon church. By the time I was in my early teens, I came to realize that my family was not a "real" (i.e., orthodox) Mormon family. We attended the basic Sunday morning services but none of the many other gatherings on Sunday and throughout the week that more devout worshipers made a regular part of their weekly schedule. This was probably my first experience with feeling like an outsider, while not understanding exactly what that meant. This sense of being an outsider would continue as a tenacious life script.

I got through elementary school without much trauma, as far as I recall. There was one Black, one Jew, and the rest of us. As far as I was aware, I was the only Mormon. In junior high school, racial/religious/ethnic diversity increased, but my sense of being different remained a major part of my experience. Although I was placed in the group of students who were presumed to be bright and therefore college bound, that was not my perception of myself. My father made it quite clear to me that I was not intelligent and that although college was seen as a nice aspiration for most kids, it was something that was not likely to work for me. In this way, he layered

JOHN RHEAD believes he was a psychologist by the age of 10 and a cowboy even earlier than that. He eventually acquired academic credentials to convince others that he is a psychologist but has never wrestled a steer, so his cowboyhood is a more subjective experience. He is increasingly inclined to listen to the universe as a way of knowing who he really is. Psychotherapist comes up frequently, as does spiritual seeker.

*[jrheadphd@gmail.com](mailto:jrheadphd@gmail.com)*

in another script that would become a lingering part of my self-narrative: I was not only an outsider, but apparently not a very bright one at that. Nevertheless, I got through high school without a great deal of difficulty—other than failing at athletics and at seducing girls.

A friend convinced me to apply to Dartmouth, even though I doubted that even the state university would accept me. When I was accepted by Dartmouth with a generous financial aid package, I thought it must have been a mistake. I headed out to New Hampshire, having never even seen the campus, in June of 1963, as my parents and younger sister moved from Denver to a Chicago suburb. Having lost my Colorado roots, I went off to college with the expectation that I would be the dumbest guy in the freshman class and would flunk out the first semester. I also expected to have no friends, since all the other students would be so much brighter and more interesting than I and would therefore have no interest in me. I planned to just regard it as an interesting little one-semester adventure in a world beyond my reach before I returned to my blue-collar life in Denver. That I did well enough over the next four years to graduate with honors and even a few friends sometimes still amazes me a bit.

Being accepted into Stanford's Ph.D. program in psychology astonished me just as much as having been accepted into Dartmouth four years earlier, and for a while I reactivated my expectation to flunk out without friends. This narrative dissolved a bit more rapidly than it had the first time, and I was able to enjoy myself more during graduate school in spite of the turmoil surrounding the war in Vietnam and the threat of being drafted.

I had gone to graduate school hoping to do my doctoral dissertation on the use of LSD, but the political winds reversed that summer (1967) and made this impossible. I accepted the wise advice of an LSD researcher I met and went ahead and earned my Ph.D. without ever mentioning LSD until, as he said, "the ink is dry on your diploma." Then, amazingly enough, a job opened up in Maryland at the only facility in the United States that was still doing legal research on LSD and other psychedelics.

Towing my motorcycle on a trailer behind my '51 Chevy, I made the pilgrimage back to the east coast as the newly anointed DOCTOR Rhead and plunged into my training to guide psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy sessions. This training included the requirement for some personal experience of being guided myself in psychedelic journeying, an experience that further confirmed my passion for this kind of work. The little Mormon boy who had been taught that psychoactive substances as minimal as alcohol and caffeine were sinful had a lot to integrate as old narratives fell by the wayside.<sup>1</sup>

My interest in psychedelics was an outgrowth of my interest in spirituality in general. This interest, seeming to me to be quite clearly who I am, was strongly supported by my

---

1 In my thirties, I petitioned the bishop of the local Mormon church to remove my name from the membership list since I had not been active since I was 18 and did not believe in the theology of the church. This request eventually resulted in my getting to meet with the local bishop, which I thought would be a good format for my saying a final goodbye to that part of my life. However, the meeting actually turned out to be a trial, with the threat that I might be excommunicated. I decided that was good enough—I wanted to quit and they told me that they had to fire me. What was shocking about that meeting was an encounter with one of the older men on the jury. As one of the younger men began to show some interest in my account of my own spiritual journey, this older man cut him off and leaned toward me. He warned me with great intensity that I would be going to hell (or some similar place) if I followed the heretical path I was on. For a moment, I felt panicked at the possibility that he might be right.

non-Mormon mother. She was very much of a polymorphous spiritual seeker and gave me the permission, if not the mandate, to be the same. Going through grad school as a closeted psychedelic researcher was only the superficial part of the story. I came to see myself as standing with great fascination at the intersection of psychology and spirituality,<sup>2</sup> and that fascination has not diminished over the last 50 years. I have found myself very grateful for the fellow travelers, not to mention the mentors, I have found along the way.

The most fascinating part of my first job out of grad school, working with LSD and eventually other psychedelics, was working with people who were dying from cancer. To sit with people who were trying to find peace and meaning as their lives were cut short by a terminal illness was a great challenge and privilege, particularly at the young age of 26. One older psychiatrist I knew at the time told me it was “a very sick thing” for a man as young as I was to be so interested in death. Although his diagnosis scared me for a brief time, I quickly became quite certain that we should all be contemplating death as a way of helping us figure out what is really important in life.

A year or two after starting to work with LSD I got into therapy with a protégé of Sheldon Kopp, who referred me to his protégé because he wanted nothing to do with the complicated circumstances of my life, which included death threats from my wife’s former husband. Integrating this kind of existential-encounter type of therapy with the psychedelic-mystical work I was doing at my job was quite a leap. Eventually it led me to the American Academy of Psychotherapists (AAP), which has resulted in a great deal of additional stretching over the last few decades.

AAP has not only caused me to stretch, but also to work at a syncretic integration of my various spiritual pursuits with the gospel of AAP.<sup>3</sup> As I have explored Buddhism, Sufism, Shamanism, and a host of other spiritual beliefs and practices, I have tried to integrate them with the emphasis in AAP on intimacy with other people and with one’s own psyche. Occasionally I have given workshops on this process of integration. Although it is hard to capture these experiences conceptually, I get something of a handle on them when I think of all the ways that spiritual traditions emphasize that we are all parts of a whole rather than separate little selves. Wandering around the dining room at an AAP dinner and gazing at all the people with whom I have become closely connected gives me more of a feel for this oneness, challenging that old story of being an outsider.

---

2 My heart raced and my palms sweated for a few seconds. Then I realized, with amazement, that I had been so abusively brainwashed as a child that such a threat could still terrify me. My panic quickly turned to rage with this realization. I did not express my rage directly, but instead let it steel my resolve to continue on the path I was on. At the conclusion of the meeting/trial the bishop invited me to give the closing prayer, which I did with gratitude, wishing all of us success in our spiritual journeys. As I left the building and went out into the parking lot, I had the most manic-like episode of my life, leaping into the air and shouting out gratitude for my freedom from what I had been raised (poisoned) with as a child. I think that much of what I do now as a psychotherapist is an attempt to offer my clients a chance at a similar type of freedom: Therapy can be a process of letting go of outworn scripts and beginning to discover a new and deeper narrative.

That first summer at Stanford was the famous “summer of love” in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco as thousands of young hippies converged to experiment with the insights they had gleaned from the experiences with LSD. My metaphorical intersection of psychology and spirituality became a geographic reality. During the week, I was at the psychology department at Stanford, and on the weekend, I was visiting “The Haight.”

3 Long-time AAP member and past president, Fred Klein, once referred to *Voices* as “our sacred text.”

My most recent exploration of a new spiritual path involves Quakerism, which I stumbled upon about three years ago. I have recently learned that there are at least two main branches of Quakerism: programmed and unprogrammed. The latter is what I have found and come to love. We sit together for an hour with no speaking other than when people feel arise within themselves a message<sup>4</sup> that they should transmit to the group. Sometimes there are none, and we spend an hour in blessed silence. Sometimes there are too many, and it feels like some people are making long speeches or giving academic sermons. Sometimes there are quite a few, but they are each brief and seem to be part of a synergistic flow. After that hour, people are invited to share joys and sorrows they are currently experiencing and to make requests that particular people or situations be “held in the Light” (Quakerese for “prayed for” as far as I can tell). It feels to me like I have always been a Quaker in my heart. The meeting process also feels like it has a few things in common with a good psychotherapy group.

When the opportunity to work legally with psychedelics disappeared about 5 years after it started, I tried a number of things professionally. These included working in research at a medical school, heading up the young adult program at a private psychiatric hospital, providing clinical services at a prison and at a special school for kids who weren't making it in regular school, doing some writing, and private practice in psychotherapy. When I gave up everything but the private practice 25 or 30 years ago, I declared myself retired. My definition of retirement refers to doing something I love, that feels meaningful to me. My retirement and my spiritual journey continue.

I think I have for the most part overcome my belief in my intellectual inferiority. Doing well at Dartmouth and Stanford helped, along with getting high scores on some tests along the way. It was particularly affirming to get off-the-record feedback about how I had done exceptionally well on the big exams at the end of the first two years of grad school and on the licensure exam a few years later. However, probably the most impactful event in this regard came from a personal relationship when I was about 30. I was falling in love with a very beautiful and bright Jewish woman who had completed her Ph.D. at about the same age I was when I graduated from college. I shared with her my stereotype that Jews are very bright, at least implying my sense of my own intellectual inferiority. She looked me straight in the eye and told me that I was very smart. She seemed to have the authority to override my father's message about intelligence. The fact that she was also romantically interested in me was the icing on the cake.

A similar event had challenged my outsider script a few years earlier. My best friend and fellow grad student (a nice Jewish boy named Gary) and I were assigned the task of helping a visiting professor from Israel get settled in for his year's sabbatical in the Stanford psychology department. The three of us became drinking buddies, and one evening, after several Bloody Marys, Professor Minkovich (“Mink”) suggested to Gary that they make me an honorary Jew. With a little joking about circumcision and a toast, the deed was done. I was confused by how touched I was and for the most part tried to conceal my tender feelings. These feelings have come up at other times since then when questions about Jewish identity have arisen, and have reminded me of how important it is to feel accepted and included by others as an antidote for feeling like an outsider.

---

<sup>4</sup> The source of the message is open to the usual list of possible labels: God, Sacred Mystery, The One, The Buddha, Allah, and the like. My psychologist self also likes to include Collective Unconscious in this list.

All of the experiences I have had in my life, especially the ones described above, have had an impact on the way I approach psychotherapy. That the relationship with the therapist is the most important factor in therapy has grown more clear to me over the years and now this idea has quite a substantial amount of research support, so that it can even be ordained as “evidence-based.” What still seems to be widening for me is the range of relational objects and the basis, relationships. I see the basis of relationships expanding to include not only deep emotional connection, but also spiritual connections, which are intrinsically deep. I recently had a first session with a woman whose frustrated psychiatrist referred her to me. Her daughter died a year or two ago, and the psychiatrist has been unsuccessful at medicating her pain or getting her to accept the reality that her daughter is gone and to give up the fantasy that her encounters with her daughter in her dreams are real rather than wishful fantasies. I warned the woman that I might not be the right therapist for her, since I do not dismiss the idea that her encounters with her daughter may be real and in fact believe they may be part of a deeper reality than we often allow into our awareness. That’s probably my last referral from that particular psychiatrist. ▼

---

It isn’t so astonishing, the number of things that I can remember, as the number of things I can remember that aren’t so.

—Mark Twain, *A Biography*