

Introduction

The Life Force is like a juggler; it is always contriving that we shall watch the hand with which the trick is not being done. When we look back, we often discover that it was the symptom we were studying, not the cause.

Gerald Heard, *Narcissus*, 1924

You've probably never heard of Gerald Heard. The first person to tell me about him was Michael Murphy, the cofounder of Esalen Institute at Big Sur. That retreat center on the California coast was the birthplace of the human potential movement—a heady blend of psychology and spirituality that captivated so many people in my generation of seekers. Murphy and I were at his home in Marin County, across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, sitting in the sun on a vine-covered deck just off his kitchen. Mount Tamalpais rose up behind us.

We were talking about the roots of Esalen Institute, which opened its doors at the dawn of that wonderfully weird decade, the 1960s. Murphy told me a story about how he and Dick Price, his founding partner at Esalen, had traveled down to Southern California in the summer of 1961 to visit Gerald Heard at his cottage in Santa Monica. Price and Murphy

spent four hours with Heard, a British philosopher who enraptured the two young men with tales of esoteric Old Testament rituals, inspiring stories about obscure Christian mystics, and amazing accounts of new scientific research into paranormal activity and psychic phenomena. New ideas seemed to pop into Heard's head as he recounted his still-developing theories about the evolution of human consciousnesses.

Heard was seventy-two years old, nearing the end of a long career during which he had published more than three dozen books, from deep philosophical tomes to weird mystery tales. Murphy had already been to India on his spiritual search, and Price was looking for a more humanistic approach to helping people struggling with mental disorder. Heard told them about a short-lived interfaith retreat center, Trabuco College, that he'd started in the 1940s in the Santa Ana Mountains south of Los Angeles. At the time of his encounter with Heard, Murphy was wondering what to do with an old hot springs resort his family owned up the coast at Big Sur. Heard went into a reverie about the spiritual power of such a place, overlooking the vast Pacific, the perfect setting to bring together East and West.

"Gerald knew Big Sur very well and had this whole theory about this westward movement toward the cutting edge of social change," Murphy said. "That was it. We left that meeting with Gerald and decided to push the 'go' button for Esalen. Gerald was a big part of the inspiration. That meeting was the tipping point."

The next time I heard the name Heard was from Huston Smith, a renowned scholar of world religions. We were sitting in two armchairs in the bay window of Huston's home in Berkeley, talking about Smith's early influences, about what had inspired him to write *The World's Religions*, which has sold more than two million copies since it was first published in 1958, and which is still widely used as a religious studies text. Smith explained how he discovered Gerald Heard. It was back in the 1940s. Smith was writing his PhD thesis at the University of California, Berkeley, and was fascinated by Heard's idea that humanity had the potential for a breakthrough in human consciousness. He read every book Heard had written and then tracked him down in Trabuco Canyon.

When Huston Smith talks about his first encounter with Gerald Heard,

he sounds as impassioned as Michael Murphy. That meeting led to another event that would change Smith's life. Heard introduced Huston to his friend Aldous Huxley, the famous English writer who had recently published *The Perennial Philosophy*, his extended 1945 essay that explores the common mystical truth running through all religions. Sitting there that day in Berkeley, I realized that I might want to learn more about this Gerald Heard character, who, it turned out, was one of Huxley's closest friends and a major influence on him.

Huxley was my favorite writer in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when I was coming of age and starting to think about the meaning of life. I began with Huxley's last book, *Island*, his 1962 novel about a cynical reporter who gets shipwrecked on an island where the natives live in cosmic harmony. After *Island*, I started working my way back through Huxley's body of work, first with *Brave New World*, his best-known novel, then *The Doors of Perception*, his long essay recounting his mescaline trip in the spring of 1953. I was in my mother's womb in New Jersey when Huxley had his psychedelic baptism in his home in the Hollywood Hills, but something was born in me, years later, when I read *The Doors of Perception*. I was still a teenager. It was 1970, but for me "the sixties" were only beginning.

My life over the next few decades was marked by a number of inspiring highs and a few soul-shattering lows. By the time the new millennium rolled around, my choice of drugs had progressed from mushrooms and marijuana to alcohol and cocaine. I'd had a satisfying career as a religion reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. I'd met and interviewed all manner of enlightening people, including the Dalai Lama, Pope John Paul II, Thich Nhat Hanh, Mother Teresa, J. Krishnamurti, and Billy Graham. I'd won awards and had three books published. But there was a little problem. I was an alcoholic, and I was addicted to cocaine, and it was all starting to come crashing down. Today that seems like another life. In the fall of 2004, I checked myself into a hospital in Oakland, California, to try to detox my body and heal my soul.

My recovery involved going to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous—something I did *not* want to do. I had lots of preconceived ideas about

AA, something its members call “contempt prior to investigation.” I was different. I’d written newspaper stories about the recovery movement and twelve-step spirituality. I knew enough to know AA wasn’t for me. It was fine for evangelical Christian drunks, but not for an enlightened drunk like me. I’d written countless stories about cults, and I didn’t feel like joining one. But at the same time, I didn’t see many effective alternatives. So I decided to set aside a lifetime of finely honed skepticism—at least for a few months. I checked myself into that substance abuse center in Oakland for a twenty-eight-day treatment program. I started going to meetings. I started “working the program.” But, being a newspaper reporter, I couldn’t resist the temptation to investigate the story behind the founding of AA.

What I learned amazed me. It turns out that Bill Wilson, the cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, had been deeply involved with Gerald Heard. They met at Trabuco College in the 1940s and began a lifelong correspondence. They even took LSD together. In fact, Gerald Heard was Bill Wilson’s guide on Wilson’s first LSD trip in the summer of 1956. Wilson didn’t simply try LSD. He started a salon in New York City where he and a group of friends continued to investigate the spiritual potential of psychedelics.

At the time the drug was legal and thought to be a potential treatment for a variety of maladies, including alcoholism. Huxley, Wilson, and Heard thought LSD, used cautiously, could help some people deepen their spiritual lives. They saw direct spiritual experience—whatever inspired it—as the foundation for an ethical, compassionate life. Psychedelics could help some alcoholics and other selfish individuals see beyond the limited, egocentric worldview that limits our spiritual potential. Drugs could give us a glimpse of another way of seeing the world. Then the hard work would begin.

That hard work is the rest of our lives.

Huxley, Wilson, and Heard have been dead for decades, but their body of work continues to shape the way we envision the sacred and live our lives. My current spiritual practice includes a Saturday morning gathering with a small group, some in recovery and some not. It’s a blend of Christian mysticism and Zen Buddhism. We meet for about two hours

to socialize, meditate, and read scripture. One week we may reflect on a passage from the Bible. At the next meeting we may study a Buddhist sutra or hear a dharma talk from our teacher. I may be the only one of us who realizes it, but our little group would never have come together without the work of Huxley, Wilson, and Heard. In our approach to God, we, like these three men, draw wisdom from several faiths, seek spiritual experience over religious doctrine, and focus on personal growth. We—like so many other seekers in our generation—see ourselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

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Aldous Huxley, Gerald Heard, and Bill Wilson are a bridge between two worlds.

Queen Victoria was still on her throne when Huxley (1894–1963) was born into a famous family of British writers and intellectuals. He died the same day President John F. Kennedy was gunned down in Dallas. Huxley’s early novels and collections of poetry quickly established him as the leading prophet and spokesman for a generation of young Europeans searching for a new way of living following the horrors of World War I. Aldous’s long, happy, and unorthodox marriage to Maria Nys, a bisexual born in Belgium, prefigured the later breakdown of the traditional American family and the rise of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. Huxley spent the final twenty-five years of his life in Southern California, where his early experimentation with psychedelic drugs and his writings on their spiritual potential inspired another generation of alienated young people to question the consumerism, materialism, and conservative values of the 1950s.

Heard (1889–1971) was Huxley’s best friend and one of his most important mentors. They met in London in 1929 and came to the United States together in 1937. These two men may have been the last great polymaths of Western culture. In an era of increasing specialization, they were interested in everything. Heard was a leading writer, philosopher, and cultural critic in the years between the First and Second World Wars. He was the first science commentator for BBC radio in the 1930s and

wrote one of the first popular books about flying saucers in the 1950s. Under two different pseudonyms, Heard wrote a series of detective novels and pioneering articles on gay spirituality. But Heard, the so-called godfather of the New Age movement, was above all a mystic. His belief in the power of humanity to evolve spiritually and reach new levels of consciousness laid the foundation for the human potential movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Wilson (1895–1971) was the main force behind the growth of Alcoholics Anonymous, one of the most successful spiritual movements of the twentieth century. AA's twelve-step program for religious renewal and psychological well-being inspired the larger recovery movement and a new approach to spiritual fellowship, one that builds on the redemptive power that can be found when small groups of like-minded believers come together for solace and support. Wilson's interest in the writings of Gerald Heard inspired him to seek out Heard during Wilson's first visit to California in the winter of 1943–44. Their friendship and spiritual collaboration continued over the next two decades.

Wilson's practical, open-minded approach to religion helped change the way Americans envision the divine. At first glance, he may seem an unlikely partner in Huxley and Heard's crusade. Wilson began his adult life as a hard-drinking Wall Street speculator with little interest in religion. After nearly drinking himself to death in the 1920s and early 1930s, "Bill W.," as he became known, was reborn with a revelation that alcoholics and other troubled souls must connect with some sort of "higher power" before they can overcome their selfishness and obsessions. Gerald Heard and Aldous Huxley came to this same realization, but it was Wilson who put the philosophy into practice, founding a no-nonsense, self-help movement that has inspired millions of people around the world to find "*God as we understand Him.*"

Huxley and Heard settled in Los Angeles in the late 1930s with a group of displaced Englishmen who came to be known as the "British mystical expatriates of Southern California." Wilson came to the West Coast from New York battling depression but eager to embark on his own pilgrimage of self-discovery.

Heard and Huxley had come to believe that humanity had the poten-

tial for a breakthrough in consciousness. In the three decades leading up to the 1960s, they emerged as the leading evangelists of a philosophy that mixed meditation, mysticism, psychology, psychedelic drugs, and a utopian vision of an enlightened society. At the same time, their spiritual program was a utilitarian approach to living a more fulfilling life. Wilson called it “a faith that works.”

Wilson founded AA before he met Heard and Huxley, but Wilson’s later life and writings were deeply influenced by both men. And it was a mutual admiration society. Aldous Huxley called Bill Wilson “the greatest social architect of the twentieth century.” Each of these men independently led an inspiring life, but it’s only when we consider the three collectively, pausing at those moments where their lives intersect, that we fully appreciate their cumulative power. Huxley saw the social problem. Heard charted the spiritual course. Wilson recruited passengers for the journey.

For me, and for many others in my generation, that journey was the proverbial long, strange trip. Huxley’s writings on the spiritual dimension of the psychedelic drug experience inspired us to seek mystical enlightenment through the wonders of modern chemistry. We didn’t want to worship God. We wanted to *experience* God. Some of us wanted to *be* God. We were not interested in doctrine, dogma, or religious denominations. We wanted instant insight. We wanted to leave ordinary reality behind—to break on through to the other side—and there was no time to waste.

Gerald Heard was at least as enthusiastic as Huxley about the transcendent power of an LSD experience, but he also knew that an altered state of consciousness does not automatically lead to an altered way of life. It took me too many years to learn that lesson. True spiritual change involves hard work and an understanding that we are all in this together. Religious insight means little if it’s not shared and experienced with others. Drugs, including alcohol, can give us a taste of bliss, but many of us do not know when to stop. We find ourselves falling into isolation and addiction—not communion or enlightenment. Bill Wilson fell so far that he barely made it back.

Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychiatrist, corresponded with Bill Wil-

son in the early 1960s. In a letter to the cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, Jung pointed out that the Latin word for alcohol is *spiritus*. “You use the same word for the highest religious experience,” Jung wrote, “as for the most depraving poison.”

Distilled spirits, like psychedelic drugs, are double-edged swords. They can illuminate the ecstasy, but they can also unleash the agony. They certainly did both in my life. *Distilled Spirits*, the book, blends my story with those of Huxley, Wilson, and Heard.

All biography is in a sense autobiography, and that is especially the case in this book.* Biographers are always, at some level, trying to understand themselves, and that’s the main reason I wrote this book. I never met Huxley, Wilson, or Heard. They were members of my grandparents’ generation. But they were at least two generations ahead of their time, and their lives still provide a template for us to better understand our own.

Huxley shows me a way to break through the wall of cynicism, which is the first step toward cultivating compassion and connection. Wilson provides a step-by-step program to break the cycle of addiction by taming the ego and surrendering to a power greater than oneself. Heard offers a program of prayer and meditation, a way to live with and sometimes rise above the sadness and melancholy that shadowed their lives—and mine.

At their best, religion and spirituality are about interconnectedness—about looking for the similarities, not the differences, and being open to inspiration. I must confess up front that these qualities do not describe my natural state of mind. Most of my religious exploration occurred

*My inspiration for this approach comes, in part, from Lytton Strachey, the iconoclastic biographer and critic who came to know Huxley and Heard in the incestuous artistic and literary scene that enlivened London and its environs in the first decades of the twentieth century. Strachey’s work was a reaction against the ponderous biographical work of his era. His technique was to “row out over the great ocean of material, and lower down into it, here and there, a little bucket, which will bring up to the light of day some characteristic specimen, from those far depths, to be examined with a careful curiosity.” Strachey was a firm believer in “brevity—a brevity which excludes everything that is redundant and nothing that is significant—that, surely, is the first duty of the biographer.” Strachey (1918) 2000, pp. 1, 2.

when I was a reporter for the secular press. I was not getting paid to get inspired. As a newspaper reporter, I was supposed to keep my distance and remain objective. As a religion reporter, I had the tough assignment of writing about faith while sticking to the facts.

Inspired religion is about transcendence and reconciliation, but the territory religion writers explore tends to involve the endless conflict of the American culture wars. We are on a constant search for scandal, especially sex scandal. Newspaper reporters revel in writing about religious hypocrisy, and God knows that's never hard to find. But after nearly three decades, I had to turn in my press pass. Skepticism is an honorable trait, especially for journalists, but I'd spent enough time hanging out in that dim alley where cynicism meets skepticism, looking for a little light.

What I learned writing this book is what I found in my own recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction—the redemptive power of storytelling and the strength of fellowship. It's something we see at every meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. We can argue about whether twelve-step programs really work, or whether people in Alcoholics Anonymous are merely trading one addiction for another, replacing their cocktails with some amorphous higher power.

It's actually much simpler than that. AA and other recovery programs work because they inspire some people to change their social networks, to start hanging out with another crowd, and most important, to shut up and start listening. We find someone willing to listen to our story. We tell it as honestly as we can and try to live a more compassionate life one day at a time.