

Left Hand, Wide Eye

by Connor Freff Cochran

Let me say, going in, that I have no idea what you are going to make of this. The best I can probably hope for is the benefit of your doubt. Those of you who consider me a loon will think me even more so; those of you who feel otherwise may elect, at last, to join them; I just don't know. What I do know is that something is going on, something too powerful to ignore and too useful to explain away. The time has come to discuss it in public. This requires a slightly-but-not-*really*-divergent anecdote, a bit of historical background, and then a simple unfolding of certain events from the last two years. It will be more journalism than essay, laid out so you may reach your own conclusions.

You will not find any from me. Not where my conversations with Lefty are concerned.

Consider the pupil of your eye (this is the anecdote part). More correctly, consider the iris, since the pupil is just a hole in the center of that extraordinary construct. The mechanism that makes the iris expand and contract in response to light intensity, nearness of focus, and things such as love and drugs (both of which dilate the pupil by causing chemical changes in a sympathetic nerve way off in the neck) consists of two separate meshes of very fine muscle fiber. These two work in tandem, pretty much like any other opposed pair of muscles in your body, such as biceps and triceps. One of the meshes radiates out from the pupil like a sunburst. When it contracts, the iris is pulled into folds, widening the pupil. The other mesh—the *sphincter pupillae*—runs in a circle. When this mesh tightens it closes the pupil up like tugging on a laundry bag's drawstring. To dilate or not to dilate, that is the question...an apparently simple process that is, in truth, a complicated interaction mediated by feedback from lots of other parts of the body, including the muscles that aim the eye, the retina, and that busybody neck nerve mentioned earlier. Fortunately for us we don't have to think about it. The process is automatic. In point of fact, it is generally considered *autonomic*, meaning we can't consciously control it at all.

Only there are more things in heaven and eyesight than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio, because that's wrong. I can control mine. I can deliberately dilate and un-dilate my pupils. Within certain limits, yes, and I can't see worth a damn when I'm doing it (everything gets doubled and blurry), but deliberate control all the same. Last year I discovered that I can even make them pulse to a gentle beat, an utterly useless skill save possibly for weirding out people at parties.

The point? There are three of them. (1) Life is pretty strange. (2) You can

discover surprising new things about yourself at any age. (3) Some of your discoveries may fly in the face of apparent logic and accepted reason.

Like what is happening between me and my left hand, for example.

Now, I am not an *aficionado* of drugs (this is the historical background part). In 38 years I have never been drunk, never smoked a joint, never snorted cocaine, never even put a cigarette in my mouth. Your average over-the-counter "guaranteed mild" cold remedy turns me into a zombie for days, so you won't find any on my bathroom shelf. Even aspirin is strictly reserved for fevers of 102 degrees or greater. On the other hand, I am no puritan. I do have a deep interest in things that enhance the senses instead of dulling them, and an even deeper interest in the transformational capacity of ritual. Get blitzed and go bowling? Not me. Go to Mexico and join a ring of Huichol Indian shamans in a peyote ceremony? I'd love to; just tell me what to wear. It's my personal belief that drugs have no place in recreation at all...but that some specific drugs, approached carefully, have a powerful potential role to play in exploration.

One of the commoner drugs I've used in order to explore altered consciousness is oxygen; breathing techniques are the central spine of all meditation, and you can change the shape of the world big time through controlled hyperventilation. Another drug I have tried is LSD, in the form of eight blotter acid trips spread out over the four years from 1976 to 1980. I may yet try LSD again. I've learned a lot since those days, and might cull something useful from refreshed experience. But looking back I would have to say that acid, after the jewel-like novelty of the first journey, was mostly disappointing. The wild leaps of mind, the emotional insights, the creative flashes that dazzled me during the arc of an LSD trip all looked pretty silly and incomprehensible afterwards.

Not so with Ecstasy. Also known as X. Also known as MDMA. Also known, to limber-tongued chemists, as 3,4-methylene-dioxymethamphetamine: One of the very few natural or synthetic substances making the rounds that research had convinced me might offer substantive experience and minimal risk. As it happens, research was right. The insights that have come to me in my carefully-structured experiences with Ecstasy have been profound, humbling, and eminently sensible, even afterward. That's the test.

Besides, without it

I might never have met Lefty.

But first, this interruption from The Bureau of Journalistic Responsibility. Nobody can stop you from putting beans in your ears if you really want to, but the facts might. Here are the facts concerning Ecstasy. The U.S. government has declared it illegal. It can have side effects, among them slight nausea, jaw-clenching, occasional nystagmus (medicalese for "lateral eye-wiggle"), and mild-to-moderate post-flight fatigue. It definitely depletes body levels of calcium, magnesium, and vitamins B and C, which can be countered with supplements before and after. It should NOT be taken in combination with stimulants or antidepressants, or by people suffering from heart ailments, glaucoma, hypertension, diabetes, hypoglycemia, hepatic or renal disorders, aneurysms, or a history of strokes. It ABSOLUTELY SHOULD NOT be taken by anyone who has to drive a vehicle any time in the next 12 hours. And, finally, it should not be taken by anyone who is suffering from any kind of emotional or psychological trauma. The standard rule here—and this goes for the legal drugs they'll sell you at the corner liquor store, too—is simple: If you aren't sure you are ready for the experience, you aren't ready for the experience. End of interruption.

A little over a year ago I decided it was time to share an Ecstasy journey with a well-chosen friend (this is the unfolding of certain events part). Together we thought it out a little further and decided we'd dedicate the trip to childhood things, from crayons to sandboxes. In the afterglow I even took a turn being pushed around a grocery store in a shopping cart, and damn if I didn't find it the easiest thing in the world to be three years old again and reaching for favorite foods with straining, pudgy fingers. But the most curious event took place at the high arc of the flight. We were sitting together on her bed. One of the things I had dreamed of being as a child was a singer like the ones I had heard on the radio, and when I confessed this to my friend, she asked me to sing. So I did. But not something from my childhood. Instead I found myself singing one of my own old songs, a half-awful thing about escaping the psychological imprint of one's parents. "I put away my father's hands," it starts, "And let go of his lies/I disregard my mother's plans/And pull out all her knives." I sang it through in a silver-clear voice I'd never managed to coax out of my throat before, and when I got to the final line—"And I, at last, am here"—then it started.

A tingling. In my left hand.

More than a tingling, actually. A bizarre, enigmatic sensation. On the outside my left hand looked perfectly normal, but on the inside it felt like it was auditioning for a job as a special effect in a David Cronenberg film. I couldn't square image and sensation. To the eye, four fingers and a thumb. To the hand itself, melting candlewax. To match the way it felt it should have been changing shape; sprouting new fingers and absorbing old ones; turning into anything at all but a hand.

I stared at it in some astonishment. My friend asked me what was going on. I told her. A physical therapist by training, she said "Hmm. Sounds to me like you just reclaimed something."

"But what?"

"Well, were you left-handed as a child and trained out of it?"

Nope. A rightie born and bred, as far as I knew. But one of the delights of Ecstasy is that it allows you to do more than think of alternatives; it lets you actually try them on for a comparative fit. So I thought to myself "Well, what if that were actually true?"

And the tingling stopped. Just like that.

If the story ended there, though, I'd have no reason to commit these events to print.

That night I noticed that I was automatically reaching for things with my left hand instead of my right. The toothbrush. Doorknobs. Hands to shake. By the middle of the next day the plain fact was unavoidable—my left hand had somehow woken up and was demanding sovereign equality. Within a week I was brushing my teeth with both hands, shaving with both hands, eating with both hands. After years of uncomfortable accommodation to a watch, I shifted it from left wrist to right and suddenly everything felt fine. My right hand was experienced at following orders, and objected not. My left hand, rebellious, would have none of it.

At this point I decided it might be time to read a certain self-help book I had bought months before and then studiously ignored. This tome fell into the generalized category of "discovering the Inner Child" but took the (suddenly interesting) approach of advocating written dialogs between dominant and non-dominant hands. Page after page of this book contained reproductions of such dialogs, by the author and her clients, and I found them fascinating. The technique was simple. Ask questions or make comments while writing with your dominant hand, then trade off, clear your mind, and let your non-dominant hand write whatever it wants to, even if it comes out gibberish.

I decided to give it a try...and met Lefty. Here is that brief initial dialog, unedited:

What's going on between me and Sharon?

LOVE. YOU LOVE HER BUT AREN'T LETTING YOURSELF FEEL IT.

Then what are all these emotions?

ACTING. THE NAME, NOT THE ROCK.

So what do I do?

BE REAL.

I don't know what that is.

BEING REAL IS SPEAKING THE WORDS THAT WANT TO BE SPOKEN NOT WHAT YOU THINK WANTS TO BE HEARD.

It hurts.

SINCE YOU WERE BORN. IT PROTECTED YOU.

From what?

I CAN'T TELL YOU THAT YET. YOU ARE TOO STIFF IN THE HEAD. OPEN WIDE.

Great. First time out, and my “non-dominant” hand was dominating me. In the book it hadn’t been that way. But I was intrigued by the intensity of the emotions that the experiment raised, as well as by the weird mix of abstract and specific in my left hand’s comments. So I continued, and over the next month a strange rough poetry of insight, demand, directive, and language was worked out between “us.” There were things coming through my left hand that startled me, inspiring rich, unexpected trains of thought. Reflecting on certain phrases moved things in my heart and life that I had previously considered unshakable.

ASK WHO YOU WERE BEFORE YOU WERE HERE.

GIVE YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS A BREAK. IT IS ONLY BUILT TO OBSERVE AND RECORD. LET IT KEEP THAT JOB. LEAVE DANCING AND CREATION TO YOUR BODY.

FEAR MAKES ANYONE POOR.

IF CANDLES COULD LIGHT THEMSELVES THERE WOULD BE NO DARKNESS.

YOU CAN'T SHED A SKIN BEFORE IT STIFFENS.

NOT BEING FROM HERE MEANS THAT YOU CAN BE ANY OF THEM.

BE EVEN STILLER.

BE THE WATER IN YOU, AND NOT THE CARBON STEEL.

THERE IS NO WAY TO HEAL A CUT BY ASKING TO KISS THE KNIFE.

THE NATURE OF PEOPLE, LIKE PHOTONS, IS THAT ALL CAUSES ARE CORRECT AND ALL OUT-COMES POSSIBLE. PHOTONS HAVE CHOICE. PEOPLE, BEING MADE OF LOTS OF PHOTONS, HAVE LOTS OF CHOICE.

PAIN IS A STRETCH YOU ARE NOT GIVING IN TO.

DOORS ARE JUST A WAY WE RATIONALIZE FINDING OURSELVES ON THE OTHER SIDE.

To date the transcripts of my left-hand conversations fill more than 200 pages. I’ve learned a lot in the process, and my foundations have been rattled more than once—

especially when I explored, for a time, letting Lefty gab with other people through me (talk about new heights in disassociation!).

And then there is the matter of the songs. Oh yes.

Between 1979 and 1991 I wrote something like 75 songs, most of them quite laboriously. The Emperor Franz Josef thought Mozart used “too many notes.” My new collaborator (and fellow *Keyboard* columnist) Brent Hurtig thought I used “too many words.” After looking through my stack of tunes he found only five he thought worth developing.

Then one day I told him about Lefty, and showed him ten lines of seemingly abstract poetry that had come through a few days before. To my great surprise he loved them. In minutes he had composed music to fit, then turned to me and demanded more. One verse does not make a song, he said. Two more. Now.

I took up pencil in my left hand, nervously...and watched as it slowly and carefully wrote out exactly what Brent wanted. Two more verses, perfectly matched in meter, structure, and tone to the one he was on fire for. Wilder yet, the new verses completed the first one *conceptually*. What had been a meaningless fragment was now a meaningful song. Done. And we’d both been witness to it.

Wow.

14 months and 60 new songs later I have come to trust the process, but am still surprised by it. These songs are not so much written as found, gifts from the other side of an inexplicable doorway. The pencil in my left hand moves across the page. I watch the words, wondering exactly what’s coming next. In the end they always make their own kind of coherent, compelling sense; and they sing like a dream.

So what’s going on, eh? Shall we get Freudian and explain this in terms of Ego and Id? Shall we cast it in terms of right brain/left brain theory? Shall we speak of angels? You tell me. Better still, try it for yourself and then tell me. Perhaps you have unknown treasures to find, too. All I know is that I feel like a red-mud Oklahoma farmer who has struck oil on land he was about to sell for ten cents an acre. One day I went to sleep with a good right hand and something useful for holding forks steady. The next day I woke up with two strong wings.

Like I said earlier. Life is pretty strange. And some of the discoveries in it challenge the boundaries of reason. But on the other side of that rationalized left-hand door, by whatever name you’d call him or definition you’d ascribe, I think I’ve found a friend. •

Originally appearing in the March 1993 issue of *Keyboard* magazine, this essay is part of Connor Freff Cochran’s long-running “Creative Options” series. More pieces from the series can be found at www.Freff.com. You can also order the first Creative Options book collection, *Brave Confessions*, by contacting Conlan Press in any of the following ways. Mail: Conlan Press, 712 Bancroft Road #109, Walnut Creek, CA 94598. Phone: 925-932-9500. Fax: 925-932-9551. E-mail: info@conlanpress.com. On the web: www.conlanpress.com.