

# **White Hand Society**

**The Psychedelic Partnership  
of Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg**

**Peter Connors**



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## Blakean Vision in Harlem

July 1948. Allen Ginsberg lay in bed reading William Blake. He was 23 years old, heartbroken and lonely.

*Ab, Sunflower, weary of time,  
Who countest the steps of the sun,  
Seeking after that sweet golden clime  
Where the traveler's journey is done;  
  
Where the youth pined away with desire,  
And the pale virgin shrouded in snow,  
Arise from their graves and aspire  
Where my Sunflower wishes to go!*

It was a hot summer day in Spanish Harlem. The window was open beside Allen's bed and the slightest of breezes ruffled the pages of the book that was open on his chest, *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* by William Blake. His closest friends were scattered, far away. William Burroughs was living with his wife Joan in New Orleans. Jack Kerouac was living with his mother in Long Island and rarely came to visit Allen in Harlem. Allen's "psycho-spiritual sexo-cock jewel fulfillment" lover, Neal Cassady, was on the West Coast running his usual sixteen-ring circus of girls, girls, cars, and girls. In fact, in April Allen had

received a letter from Neal saying that he had just married Carolyn, the woman with whom Allen had been involved in a tug-of-war for Neal's affections. Carolyn had won. When Allen wrote back with blatant disgust and resentment, Neal lashed back at him, saying, "You and I are now farther apart than ever. Only with effort can I recall you." And further, "Let's stop corresponding—I'm not the N.C. you knew. I'm not N.C. anymore."

*O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm,  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm,*

*Has found out they bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.*

Allen's pants were open and he half-heartedly touched himself while reading Blake. He had read Blake's poems so often that he barely gave them any attention at all. The words puffed easily through his brain, a pretty-sounding daisy chain that no longer demanded interpretation. His mind wandered from the poems to the window, to his cock, to his loneliness and isolation, to the Harlem skyline reaching out and up into the sunny beyond. It was a meditative, peaceful loop that even allowed Allen to distance himself from his mother's horrifying situation.

Allen's mother, Naomi, was schizophrenic. Her mental state had been on a downward trajectory for years. However, in recent months her mind had taken a decisive plummet. Naomi had already become so paranoid and abusive of Allen's father, the poet and teacher Louis Ginsberg, that she

had moved out of the family's house and in with her sister, Eleanor. But now Eleanor was at wits' end with Naomi as well. Naomi was regularly accusing Eleanor of being a spy. Eventually, Eleanor called Allen in desperation, saying she could no longer house Naomi in the state that she was in. By the time Allen got to Eleanor's to pick her up, Naomi was completely out of touch with reality. The rooms were full of wires, her brain was full of wires, and everyone was a spy taking orders from dark, sinister forces. She was too far gone. Allen had no choice. He called the police and they took her to the police station, a final stop before committing her to a psychiatric ward.

At twenty-three years old, Allen was feeling the first pangs of a lonely adulthood. As with all youths, he had depended on his friends and family for reassurance that he was doing, thinking, reading, writing, learning the right things. He was still far from the bearded, freewheeling hippie-poet whose image would dominate the media (underground as well as mainstream) during the Sixties. His face still held the doughy softness of adolescence and his already penetrating gaze was magnified by thick black glasses. He looked like every other student of the era: short hair parted to the right, jacket, tie, and pressed pants. At Columbia, he had been part of a close circle of like-minded friends, but now those friends were far away. His mother was insane, and lobotomized. His father had reacted horribly when Allen came out of the closet to him, and their relationship was more strained than ever before. Allen was truly alone.

And then the world opened up to him.

Allen had just ejaculated when he heard a deep voice intoning Blake's "Ah, Sunflower" poem. This was not the

proverbial *voice in your head* or any sort of inner-monologue voice that Allen had ever heard before. At first, he thought it must be the voice of God. Who else could command the naked air to reverberate with such a solemn, commanding tone? But then he quickly decided that it was the voice of the poet himself, William Blake. Allen was convinced that he was receiving a spiritual vision directly from William Blake through the incanting of Blake's "Ah, Sunflower."

While Allen had read the poem dozens of times, it now made sense to him in new and wondrous ways. He looked out the window, into the vast, blue sky where the radiating flares of the sun scorched into his eyes, "*Ah, Sunflower, weary of time, / Who countest the steps of the sun,*" and then back out across the rooftops and cornices of Harlem, "*Seeking after that sweet golden clime / Where the traveler's journey is done.*" He sensed the ancient wisdom, and he understood, through Blake's words and the pure, unearthly sound of Blake's voice, the tender, mortal, grave, and spiritual nature of his own life, and all the creation that surrounded him. "*Where the Youth pined away with desire, / And the pale virgin shrouded in snow, / Arise from their graves, and aspire / Where my Sunflower wishes to go!*"

In a flash of insight known to Buddhists as "satori," Allen understood that this was his initiation into the world of the visionary. The great poet-artist-prophet William Blake was anointing Allen by bestowing upon him the ability to see the true nature of existence. And what was the true nature of existence? "Looking out at the window, through the window at the sky, suddenly it seemed that I saw into the depths of the universe, by looking simply into the ancient sky. The sky suddenly seemed very *ancient*. And this was the very ancient place that he was talking about, the sweet

golden clime, I suddenly realized that *this* existence was *it!* And, that I was born in order to experience up to this very moment that I was having this experience, to realize what this was all about—in other words that this was the moment I was born for.”

Had Allen’s insight ended with a deeper understanding of his own flashing, ancient moment in the universe, that would have been enough to alter his perspective. However, the vision didn’t end there. Allen now saw the world as alive and purposeful in ways he had never perceived. “What I was speaking about visually was, immediately, that the cornices in the old tenement building in Harlem across the back-yard court had been carved very finely in 1890 or 1910. And were like the solidification of a great deal of intelligence and care and love also. So that I began noticing in every corner where I looked evidences of a living hand, even in the bricks, in the arrangement of each brick. Some hand placed them there—that some hand had placed the whole universe in front of me. That some hand had placed the sky . . . that the sky was the living blue hand itself. Or that God was in front of my eyes—existence itself was God.”

These hallucinatory insights launched Allen outside of his own life, outside of his temporary body, beyond the pull of his desires, beyond the tragic comedy of his existence, and bestowed upon him “a cosmic consciousness, vibrations, understanding, awe, and wonder and surprise. And it was a sudden awakening into a totally deeper real universe that I’d been existing in.”

Allen turned back to *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* and tried another poem. This time he heard Blake’s voice intoning lines from “The Sick Rose.”

While the insights of “Ah, Sunflower” were filled with lightness and joy, “The Sick Rose” is a darker poem. Again, Allen heard Blake’s solemn, sacred voice chanting lines, “O Rose, thou art sick! / The invisible worm, / That flies in the night, / In the howling storm, / Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy, / And his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy.” Allen was transported into a heavier, albeit no less inspired view of the universe; a realization of his own mortality and, indeed, the mortality of the universe; a flash into the true meaning of nothingness, complete emptiness forever and ever. While Allen had appreciated the poet Blake before, he now saw Blake’s words as “a prophecy, as if Blake had penetrated the very secret core of the entire universe and had come forth with some little magic formula statement in rhyme and rhythm that, if properly heard in the inner inner ear, would deliver you beyond the universe.”

Allen read on, this time “Little Girl Lost,” and once again Blake spoke to him.

*Sweet sleep, come to me,  
Underneath this tree;  
Do father, mother weep?  
Where can Lyca sleep?*

*Lost in desert wild  
Is your little child.  
How can Lyca sleep  
If her mother weep?*

*If her heart does ache,  
Then let Lyca wake  
If my mother sleep,  
Lyca shall not weep.*

“I suddenly realized that Lyca was me, or Lyca was the self; father, mother seeking Lyca, was God seeking, Father, the Creator; and ‘If her heart does ache / Then let Lyca wake’—wake to what? *Wake* meaning wake to the same awakeness I was just talking about—of existence in the entire universe. The total consciousness then, of the complete universe. Which is what Blake was talking about.”

Again, Allen turned to the world outside his window. And again, each and every detail of that world crackled with cosmic energy and revealed the fingerprints of a compassionate intelligence. It all fit together, and it was purposefully beautiful. However, the beauty and essence of existence was hidden deep within the details of our quotidian world. Allen made a vow right then that he would honor this vision throughout his entire life. “My first thought was this was what I was born for, and second thought, never forget—never forget, never renege, never deny. Never deny the voice—no, never *forget* it, don’t get lost mentally wandering in other spirit worlds or American or job worlds or advertising worlds or war worlds or earth worlds. But the spirit of the universe was what I was born to realize.”

But how can one sustain such insight throughout a lifetime? How can one even hope to achieve *flashes* of such powerful, ancient truths while living in a world that seems intent on concealing its true nature? How, or what, could assist him in following through on his vow to “never forget, never renege, never deny” the illuminations that his Blake visitations had bestowed upon him?



## A New Game

“My Darling, I cannot live without your love. I have loved life but have lived through you. The children will grow up wondering about their mother. I love them so much and please tell them that. Please be good to them. They are so dear.”

With those words, Marianne Leary took her life. Nine-year-old Susan Leary and seven-year-old Jack Leary lost their mother. It was Timothy Leary’s thirty-fifth birthday. October 21, 1955. His first wife had just killed herself.

For two years prior to Marianne’s death, Leary had been carrying on an affair with a project manager at the Kaiser Foundation Hospital named Mary Della Cioppa. Her nickname was Delsey. While Marianne and Timothy never discussed the affair, the dalliance was an open secret among their cocktail party crowd—a crowd that Leary had dubbed the International Sporting House Set. As sophisticated and enlightened as this may sound through the gauzy romantic light of history, there was no such veil over the situation for Marianne. Since young adulthood, Marianne had demonstrated a weakness for alcohol. Tim—with more than a trace of defensiveness—retold a story of Marianne falling down drunk outside the swank St. Moritz Hotel in New York City on their honeymoon. Now, as her husband’s afternoon trysts

with Delsey at his rented apartment on Telegraph Avenue became the fodder for cruel party gossip, Marianne relied more and more on alcohol to soften the sting. She had also begun seeing a psychiatrist and taking tranquilizers.

However, none of the therapy or stupor-inducing booze and pills could bury the fact that Marianne Leary was losing her husband. The couple had already agreed to a period of informal separation during which Marianne planned to take the kids to Switzerland. She had always felt eclipsed by Tim's outsize personality, charisma, and professional accomplishments, and the trip to Switzerland was meant to give her an opportunity to assert her independence away from him.

But they both knew the real score. The marriage was ending.

Tim and Marianne had spent the evening before his 35th birthday at a martini-fueled cocktail party with the International Sporting House Set. After they returned home, spun out on booze and at frayed ends, Delsey had stopped by the Leary house to quickly wish Tim a happy birthday before she boarded a plane to Reno for the weekend. Marianne saw the couple outside and stumbled out the door to intervene. It was a hideous situation for all involved. Leary shushed Marianne from the driveway and tried to send her back inside. Marianne began protesting but lost her footing and tumbled down a long flight of wooden stairs. To Delsey's horror, Tim was unfazed by his wife's fall. Perhaps recalling other such drunken falls, Tim assured Delsey that Marianne would be all right.

While Delsey had seen the couple's discordant escapades up close many times, this was ugliness at a new level. She extracted herself from the situation as quickly

as possible and drove off to the airport. Meanwhile, Tim shambled back inside, his steps heavy with booze and the scorn of two women.

According to Leary, he tried to make temporary amends with his wife. Nobody will ever know what truly transpired between the couple that evening in the privacy of their home. Either way, the outcome is the same.

When Tim awoke the next morning, Marianne was gone. She had written her note, then made her way out to the garage, started the car and waited for the noxious fumes to end her life.

Tim rolled out of bed and started searching through the house calling his wife's name. No reply. As Tim's search continued without success, he grew more frantic. His yells got louder, and Susan and Jack were stirred awake. Tim made his way out to the driveway. The garage door—always left open—was now closed. He heard the car running inside. Tim pulled open the heavy redwood door just as Jack rushed in beside him. Together, father and son discovered Marianne's body. Tim sent Susan to call an ambulance, but the trip to the hospital was a formality. Nothing could be done for Marianne. As they loaded her body into the ambulance the dissipating clouds of exhaust floated into the Berkeley morning.

Within a year of Marianne's death, Tim and Delsey were married. Another year later, they were divorced. Tim made a promise to Delsey not to discuss their marriage publicly, and he kept that promise throughout his life. The best insights into their short-lived, ill-conceived, and often violent relationship come from Delsey: "When we were married, we had a big fight one morning and I ran out of the house.

We both had to go to work and he chased me all over the hills and found me and I was fighting him in the car and I hit him on the nose and broke it and he never got it fixed. So the shape of his nose is my handiwork.” Their relationship steadily disintegrated, “He was trying to make me into Marianne and the very thing that attracted him to me in the first place was that I was unlike her.”

Leary’s romantic relationships were exploding in the most dramatic, tragic ways. His professional life as Director of Psychology Research at the Kaiser Foundation Hospital was wavering too. The flow of grant money was starting to trickle out due, in part, to Leary’s neglect of his duties there. His reputation as a golden boy, the hit of the party, the charismatic captain of the ship, was turning green with tarnish. It was time for Tim to perform the disappearing act he would eventually perfect.

In the summer of 1958, attempting to put two marriages and an increasingly uncomfortable social and professional life behind him, Tim whisked Jack and Susan away to Spain. His plan was to write his next psychology book, a follow-up to his renowned *Interpersonal Diagnosis*, and also work on a novel. The family started out living in a rented villa in Torremolinos on the Costa del Sol in Spain. By January, 1959, they had moved to a hotel, then into an apartment. By day, Tim sweated with little success over piles of statistics, numerical indices, and test scores. He was trying to wrangle the mass of information he had gathered in Berkeley into a coherent statement about the failings of the current psychotherapeutic model. Meanwhile, Susan and Jack attended school. Tim had attempted to lighten the kids’ situation by buying Jack a puppy. But the puppy (as puppies

do) defecated all over their little apartment. The kids were increasingly subjected to Tim's darkening moods.

Susan and Jack were also subjected to the strange, gloomy physical confines of the apartment itself. As Tim described it, the apartment was "tunneled into the rock at the foot of Calle San Miguel" and was a "cave with oozing stone walls. The beds were always damp."

Mentally, spiritually, and physically, Tim was falling apart. In addition to clear-cut clinical depression, his body had started turning against him. As Tim describes it, "There the break-through-break-down started. It began in the head. One morning my scalp began to itch. By noon it was unbearable. Each hair root was a burning rod of sensation. My hair was a cap of fire. I ran down the beach and cut my feet on rocks to keep from ripping my fingers through my scalp. By evening, my face began to swell and huge water blisters erupted from my cheeks. A young Danish doctor came, injected me with a huge needle, and gave me sleeping pills. . . . In the morning I was blind—eyes shut tight by swollen tissue and caked with dried pus. I felt my way to the bathroom, lit a candle, and pried open one eye before the mirror. . . . In the oblong glass I saw the twisted, tormented face of an insane stranger."

In a 1953 exchange between two figures who would play important roles in Leary's psychedelic future, Aldous Huxley wrote to Dr. Humphry Osmond, "Disease, mescaline, emotional shock, aesthetic experience and mystical enlightenment have the power, each in its different way and in varying degrees, to inhibit the functions of the normal self and its ordinary brain activity, thus permitting the 'other world' to rise in consciousness." While mescaline was not yet a part of his vocabulary, Tim certainly believed

that the “disease” he was suffering provided access to the “other world,” ultimately raising his consciousness. “By the time I wrenched back to the room. . . . I was weak and trembling. I slumped in the chair for the rest of the dark night, wrapped in a Burberry mackintosh.

“I died. I let go. I surrendered.”

At this point, Leary describes a massive transformation taking place, a sloughing away of his old values, ambitions, drives, and guilt. The transformation continues to the point that Leary describes his entire identity melting away. Later in his career, Tim would translate the Tibetan Book of the Dead into psychedelic terms and come to view it as a guidebook to the “other world” of consciousness travels that often led to the sort of ego disintegration that he was currently experiencing. But in Spain, Tim had no such guidebook. He was on his own. “With a sudden snap, all the ropes of my social self were gone. I was a thirty-eight-year-old male animal with two cubs. High, completely free.”

By morning, Tim understood that he had undergone a radically life-altering experience. In his words, it was “the first of some four hundred death-rebirth trips I have experienced since 1958.” Not only was he mentally altered, but his physical crisis was now abating too. The swelling in his face and extremities was subsiding. When he looked in the mirror, he once again recognized the face looking back at him. In many ways, it was the same old Tim. But it was Tim on a new mission. “I found a pen and paper. I wrote three letters. One to my employers, telling them that I was not returning to my job. A second to my insurance agent to cash in my policies. And a third long manuscript to a colleague, spelling out certain revelations about the new psychology, the limiting artifactual nature of the mind, the unfolding

possibilities of mind-free consciousness, the liberating effect of the ancient rebirth process that comes only through death of the mind.” His illness had, at least momentarily, emptied him of his past, and radically altered his perspective on the future.

Two years later, Leary would take his first dose of hallucinogens in the form of seven psychedelic mushrooms. By that time he would be employed as a lecturer at Harvard. That dose of psychedelics would pick up where this first “death-rebirth trip” had left him, and Dr. Leary was on his way to becoming the Timothy Leary the world would come to know.