

# Abraham Maslow's Interest in Psychedelic Research: A Tribute

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## Abstract

In this brief tribute to Abraham Maslow, a founder of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, his interests in psychedelic research are described by the author who served as his research assistant from 1966 to 1967.

## Keywords

peak experiences, Abraham Maslow, psychedelic research

In my academic journey through five graduate schools, which lasted well over a decade, I encountered only one professor whose very presence engendered such profoundly deep respect that I found myself content simply to sit at his feet and listen. His name was Abraham H. Maslow, who liked simply to be called “Abe.”

We first met in early 1966 while I was pursuing a degree in the psychology of religion at the Andover Newton Theological School. Because of an acute cardiac condition he had never ingested a psychedelic substance himself; yet he was very interested in the rapidly expanding field of psychedelic studies and in the experiences I reported from my (fully legal) participation in research at the University of Göttingen 2 years earlier. Having read his books, *Toward a Psychology of Being* and *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*, I intuitively recognized that his theories originated

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in transcendental states of human consciousness similar to, if not identical with, those I had encountered. He respectfully described peak experiences of his own, including at least one that had occurred while simply lying on his back in the sunlight in his own backyard. Whether such experiences are understood as gifts of divine grace to a Jewish mystic or as the manifestations of his own genetic proclivity to generate endogenous dimethyltryptamine or similar substances within his own brain or lung tissue, it was clear that he possessed a profound appreciation for and understanding of mystical forms of consciousness. Were it not for his heart condition and the intense controversies raging in academic circles about psychedelic drugs at the time (Leary and Alpert had recently been fired at Harvard), he would have welcomed an opportunity to take mescaline, psilocybin, or LSD; yet it was clear that he already had “been there” and that there was no need for him to take psychedelic substances, either natural or synthesized. He understood that some transcendental states of consciousness include not only profoundly beautiful emotions but also intuitive knowledge—what William James had called the “noetic quality” of mystical states.

Inspired by his presence, I asked him if he would be my mentor if I applied for a PhD in psychology at Brandeis University. With his warm support, I made formal application and was interviewed by James Klee and other members of the faculty. I honestly, if naively, indicated on my application my interest in pursuing doctoral research in the area of psychedelic studies. With joy, I learned that it had been positively endorsed by the psychology department. In mid-August my wedding occurred and we moved into an apartment in Newton Centre, a convenient distance from Waltham where I expected to be studying.

Then, in late August, Maslow sadly informed me that a dean at Brandeis had overruled the recommendation of the psychology faculty and refused to approve my admission, citing a borderline score on part of the Graduate Record Examination as his justification. Maslow was furious and pleaded my case with testimony about my integrity and serious intent without success. He was convinced that the dean was worried that I might fan the flames of interest in psychedelics, if not deviously sell drugs on campus. Sensing my dilemma, as it was too late to apply anywhere else, Maslow defiantly proposed an ingenious solution. As a full professor, he could appoint anyone he chose as his research assistant. And, further, research assistants could participate in any courses in the department they chose to attend free of charge. So it was that I came to have the honor of serving as Maslow’s research assistant and studying in the PhD psychology program at Brandeis for almost two semesters (albeit without registration or formal academic credit) before my wife and I responded

to a job offers implementing National Institute of Mental Health–financed projects with LSD-assisted psychotherapy at the Spring Grove Hospital in Baltimore. My primary task at Brandeis was to keep Maslow updated on current developments in the field of psychedelic research.

In our periodic meetings in his office and while attending classes he taught, my appreciation for his scholarship and vision continued to grow. He was president of the American Psychological Association that year and long had been chairman of the department he had brought into being, but he still insisted on teaching the introductory course for new students. He wanted to “get students started right.” When responding to letters from potential applicants who “hated behaviorism” and wanted to study with him, he would answer, “Learn behaviorism better than the behaviorists know it, and then come and study with me.” He could be wistful and playful, commenting on how wonderful it is to soak up the warmth of the sun while lying nude in the privacy of your backyard, or speculating on the unrecognized joys of love-making in old age, notably the pleasure of sensuously running the tip of one’s tongue through the deep grooves in a lover’s face. He freely credited and valued his own mentors and spoke of how valuable his personal psychoanalysis had been for him, even though his perspectives stretched far beyond the limits of Sigmund Freud. He hired new faculty members who represented diverse perspectives in psychology and tolerated the disrespectful intolerance of some of them for his own ideas. As a whole, he reflected Teilhard de Chardin’s perspective that each of his students and faculty members were “spiritual beings currently having human, or physical, experiences.” His seminal book, *The Psychology of Science*, was published that year, and he deeply believed in the importance of its content.

Maslow died while jogging in 1970 at age 62. He had introduced transpersonal psychology as a “Fourth Force” (along with Psychoanalysis, Behaviorism, and early Humanistic Psychology), and in collaboration with Anthony Sutich and Stanislav Grof, launched the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* in 1969. I remain thankful to have known him.

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## Author Biography



**William A. Richards, PhD**, is a psychologist in the Psychiatry Department of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Bayview Medical Center, where he and his colleagues have been pursuing research with psilocybin, the active molecule in the so-called “sacred mushrooms,” for the past 16 years. His graduate degrees include MDiv from Yale Divinity School, STM from Andover-Newton Theological School, and PhD from Catholic University, as well as studies with Abraham

Maslow at Brandeis University and with Hanscarl Leuner at Georg-August University in Göttingen, Germany, where his involvement with psychedelic research originated in 1963. From 1967 to 1977, he pursued psychotherapy research with LSD, DPT, MDA, and psilocybin at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center, including protocols designed to investigate the promise of entheogens in the treatment of alcoholism, severe neuroses, narcotic addiction, and the psychological distress associated with terminal cancer, and also their use in the training of religious and mental health professionals. From 1977 to 1981, he was a member of the psychology faculty of Antioch University in Maryland. His publications began in 1966 with “Implications of LSD and Experimental Mysticism,” coauthored with Walter Pahnke. His book, *Sacred Knowledge: Psychedelics and Religious Experiences*, has just been released by Columbia University Press.