

# **LSD Experiences as an Opening to the Feminine: A Personal Account**

Natalie Rogers

## *THE DECISION TO TRY LSD*

I am presently fifty-four, a psychologist, a feminist psychotherapist and a group facilitator. In 1970 I had been in a traditional marriage for twenty years and was enjoying mothering three children. I was terrified, however, when my teenage daughters were dabbling in the psychedelic culture. As a parent I was legitimately worried that my children might harm themselves with the stuff the neighborhood kids were passing out. My reaction to their explorations was panic and to tighten the reins as a disciplinarian. At that time I was working with a psychiatrist whose practice focused on adolescents and young adults. In the group sessions where I was a co-therapist I was listening to the “trips”—the highs and crashings—of these students. Since they were not *my* children, I could open my ears with less fear and listen carefully. There was nothing about their descriptions that turned me on. Quite the contrary. We were having these groups to help them with the problems that either initiated their drug use and abuse or to help them with the consequences.

I say this to let you know that taking LSD was a complicated decision for me. I am concerned about the possible long range physical complications of any drug, whether it is cortisone, aspirin, alcohol or LSD. And contemplating using a chemical as a way to new awareness and knowledge was a thoughtful process for me.

After a period of serious depression—a feeling of having vanished, drowned or disappeared—I pulled out of my 20 year marriage to start anew. I had been writing a journal as a way to be honest with

The author is on the Editorial Board of *Women & Therapy* and is living in Ashland, Oregon. She has created a program in Expressive Therapy in Norway.

myself about my feelings and to clarify my thoughts. As a midlife woman, the world “out there” seemed scary and overwhelming. These writings turned into a book, *Emerging Woman: A Decade of Midlife Transition*, one chapter of which discusses my two LSD experiences as part of my inner journey. I quote:

Opening, unfolding, delving deeper, searching inward, plunging to scary depths, discovering still waters—these are the things of which I wish to speak.

During the past seven years, while I was discovering my new self—my anger, my strength, my ability to act and do—I was simultaneously experiencing much that is of a whole different order. I am reluctant to label it. Some friends would call this my transpersonal adventures, my spiritual awakening, the merging of masculine and feminine, or becoming aware of my unconscious. I prefer to call it simply, opening.

I have found this private inward journey to be at least as important as my activist, outreaching path. I am still looking for the evolutionary nature of this journey; probing the significance of these experiences; pondering their meanings for my being in the universe.

... After much thought, consideration and waiting for the right time, I tried windowpane acid. (1974) I had listened to the tales of a psychiatrist friend who had found LSD an exhilarating, opening experience. He was not treating such trips lightly. Nor was I. I was waiting until I felt an inner stability and a time when I was not responsible for anyone else, particularly my children. My worst fear was that I would go into some insane space and not be able to return.

The decision to try acid was part of my risk taking, adventurous, emerging self.

### *A NEW DEATH/LIFE PERSPECTIVE*

My view of death ten years ago was this: “Death is like a black box. When I die, my flesh will shrivel and rot, there will be nothing else. Death is the end. It is fearful to contemplate—so I don't think about it.”

My philosophical and political views were held with fervor. I

grew up adamantly agnostic, pragmatic, a skeptic about anything “religious” or “spiritual” with a down-to-earth orientation. I scorned notions of god, or life after death. I dismissed the possibility of psychic phenomena and denied that dreams might be an important part of my life.

How can it be, then, that one 24 hour experience altered my view and feelings about death? After my first LSD trip I described death, thus: “Death is like fusing into the horizon. My sense is that a strong beam of light from the setting sun on the ocean horizon will pull me into its orange warmth and will sink into a blissful ‘beyond.’ It will be the ultimate in ecstatic experiences. I am not denying that there will be physical pain and a desperate struggle to stay in this world. But the *moment* of death will be a glorious fusion with the cosmos.”

I can never return to my black box image. The impact of my first LSD journey was to entirely alter the lens from which I perceive death. It was as though the lenses of early adulthood had been coated with black paint. That opaque black had been wiped away by the LSD and replaced with a telescopic lens that let me glimpse into in-guilty.

My LSD experience brought to my awareness that the *process* of dying can be an ugly, painful time if I hold on desperately to this world. But if I *let go*, death will be a fusion with the universe. Words do not adequately describe such experiences. Poetry, art, music and dance would be better modes of communication. Since I am limited to words, here, I shall quote the portion of my journal (written the week after) which tries to capture the turning-point experience.

Approximately five hours into the acid trip:

I sit crosslegged facing the ocean and the sky. With back erect, breathing long and slow, I focus on the horizon. Lines, pathways of light leave that center to spread in all directions toward me. I am sitting, very aware of that center, focusing with quiet intensity upon it, and the pathway of light from me to the center feels strong. I begin to lose sense of my body and fuse, through the pathway to the bright circle. This is death. Horizon, fusion, merging. Peace, tranquility, unison. Death will be beautiful when I allow myself to die. It can be like this; a merger. Tears are streaming down my face, not in pain, but in joy. I am *there*.

## *WOMEN & THERAPY*

I'm not sure how long I was there. Five seconds, five minutes, an hour? I want to remember how that felt so that I can go there again, some way. I soothe and stroke my body to be *in* it again. I feel the ground with my toes.

Why do I allow myself to be so heavily influenced by this experience? I could just write it off as a chemical vision that has no real meaning, or I could say that this new concept of death is merciful self-deception. Yet I persist in thinking that there will be an exciting, peaceful end to my bodily life which is merely a transition to some organic unity. I believe I will go into another dimension. My answer, to myself, is that intuitively I trust this new image. The LSD opened me to a new way of knowing. Logic will not be useful in trying to defend my new knowledge, I "just know."

For me to change my belief system so drastically was an incredible step. How one lives one's life differently as a result of such a shift is hard to say. One thing seems obvious. My fear of death is almost nil. My fear of dying a slow, undignified death still lingers, but death itself seems like a potential release, almost appealing. Without this fear, new energy is available to me. Holding on to any fear takes its toll in bodily tension and blocked energy flow.

## *THE EYE/DANCE OF WOMANHOOD*

In 1977, before my second acid experience, I was, again, nervous about taking the trip, wondering if I would confront my own shadow side. In my own floating home—my sunny houseboat overlooking sailboats, the harbor and Sausalito hills—I wrapped myself in a soft yellow blanket which became my cocoon. As the hours went by and I passed through each new metamorphosis I would unfold the blanket and sit quietly allowing the scenes and feelings to flow. I now see the thread which connected each episode: it was the dance of being woman.

As I sit nude with the sun pouring in on me, I am aware of the beauty of women, of female bodies; aware of what it means to be a mother, a daughter, and a mother of daughters. Visions of my mother and my children pass through as though a movie is recapturing important events, both painful and joyful, of our lives together. Words flash: "There is a rite/right

of birth passage.” With the sun on my face, tears roll gently down; tears of sorrow for women all over the world; woman pain, woman suffering, keeping woman *down*. I am feeling the knife-sharp edge in my heart. Sorrow and pride; sorrow and pride! As the teardrops fall to my breasts and trickle down my belly they become both the river of female anguish and the elegant waterfall of woman-pride... Some of the tears are truly golden: with these I bathe myself rejoicing the delight of giving birth and being mother. I lie down to rest from this see-saw of emotions. I begin to experience uterine contractions; the pushing, the excitement of knowing a human being is finding its way through my passageway into a new life!

Suddenly the scene switches. I roll over on my belly, curl into fetal position, feeling surrounded with purple darkness. I am aware I am about to re-live my own birth process. I am terrified. “But there is no mid-wife here!” I say to myself. Panic sets in. I try to arouse myself, to gain control of the drug to keep me from going into the struggle and bloody scene I foresee. “You’re chicken, Natalie. Why don’t you let yourself go into this birth experience? ...I need another woman by my side, I need a mid-wife, I am terrified by my intuitive feelings of foreboding! I can go through it some other time, when I’m ready. I’m not ready.” I force myself to sit up and to turn away from a re-enactment of my birth.

I calm myself. I breathe deeply. I re-enter the present, the here and now. The center of my feeling is in the warmth of my heart. “This trip is one of the heart chakra” I say. I place my fingertips mid-point between my breasts. I feel the heat pouring forth. Magically, it seems, I open that space in my chest to discover glistening red jewels with many facets. They radiate as the sun catches the ruby color. I am delighted with the riches and am aware that I want to give them away. “There will always be more gems if you keep giving them away.” These are “love jewels” to be shared. I feel I have much love to give.

I turn to the big Indian pillow sitting by my fireplace. It has much embroidery and a few round mirrors sewn into the decoration. I look into one small mirror studying my eye reflection. I watch as my eye changes shape and color and style. My eye becomes many women over many centuries. “This is the eye/I dance of Woman” I say.

## WOMEN & THERAPY

My eye changes. There are warm creases at the corner of the eye. There is a blue depth into which I fade. I am the eye of all women who are in tune, in touch, who look on the world with wrinkles of love and *knowing*. I am aware that women have a very special way of knowing.

I walk to the stark light of the bathroom to view my face in the mirror. I watch with amazement as my skin becomes ashen grey, cheekbones hollow. The knuckles of my hands turn bone-white. I laugh. "Hello, old-lady-me!" She shriveled even more. The wrinkles deepen to furrows. Her hair is coarse and straight. I study her (me) closely looking/penetrating into her eyes. "You look like a death-witch! You look ghastly, ghostly, ancient! And yet I like you, a lot! I see you are a very, very proud old woman. In your eyes there is dignity though your face is ugly. You are downright haughty! I love the witchy, shriveled, old prideful, you!" I laugh. I open my mouth and look into my throat. I see way down into the deep cavern of her being and view the fiery red-orange jewels I had discovered in my heart, earlier. "Oh," I say, "Life begins with the heart-jewels of death."

Some themes turn up repeatedly in my three LSD trips, but this day was about Woman: a day of opening my heart, of love, compassion and understanding of women through the centuries. I allowed myself to identify with woman-pain and the precious jewel-like qualities within woman. It was a connection to the value of women and of being in tune with the intuitive way of knowing. (I have since learned that other women experience the suffering and oppression of women through the ages during their acid experiences.)

The changes are subtle that occur in my life after such an experience. As a married woman I had not appreciated my female counterparts. Men had been my best friends. Thus I had undervalued myself. My inner dialogue had gone: "Men are more important, more intelligent and I want them for friends. Women are narrowly focused and less important." I hadn't realized that in this judgment of other women I was also judging myself as "not intelligent and not important."

So this second LSD journey pushed me further in the direction in which I was already traveling—that of valuing myself and other women and the feminine, intuitive, non-linear, right brain mode of being/thinking.

I was again aware, in this second experience, that LOVE is boundless and that the more I give the richer becomes the supply. (I had shut down some of my ability to love after my divorce.)

*LEFT/RIGHT, YIN/YAN AND ENERGYFLOW*

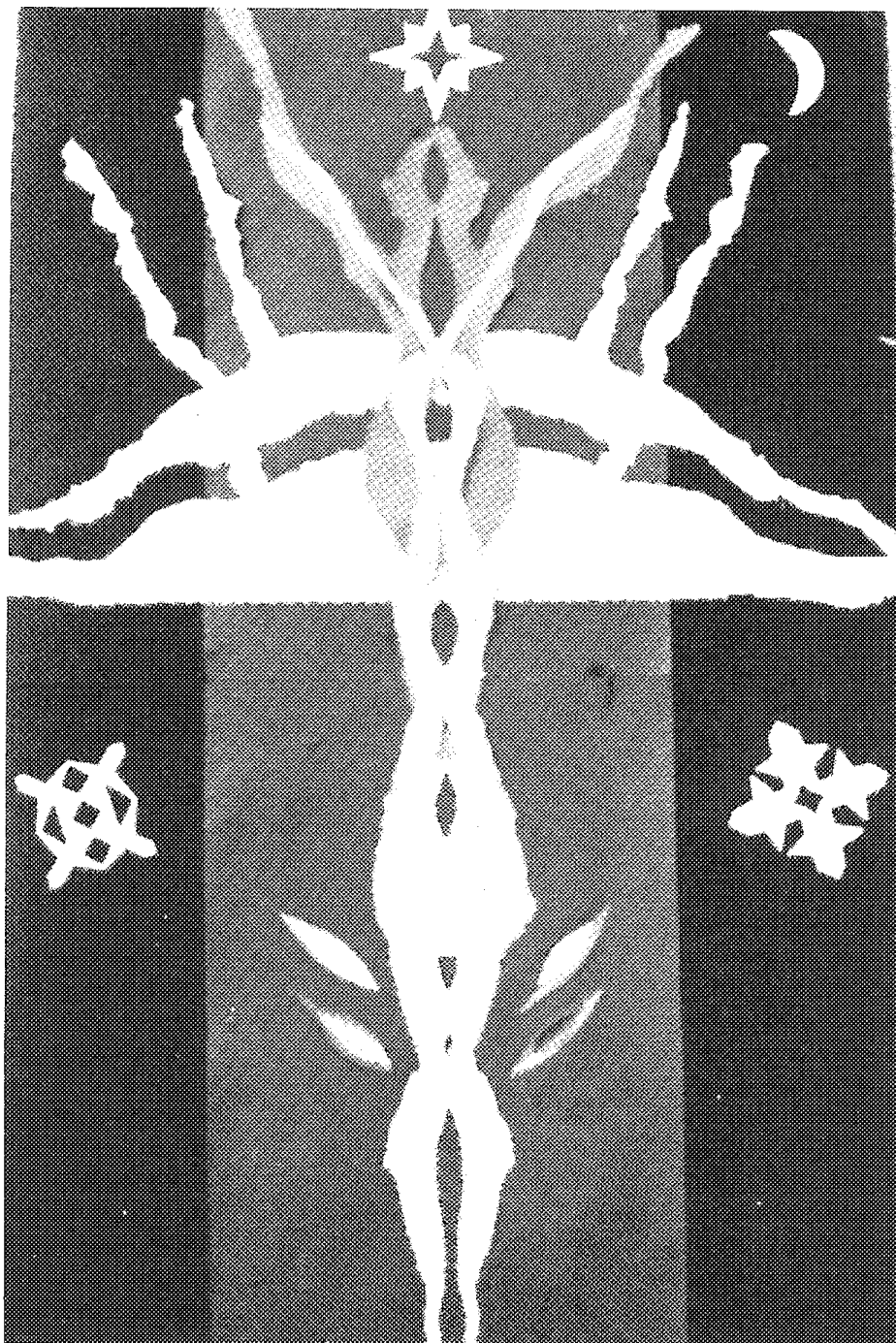
The above subtitle would have baffled me ten years ago. Now those concepts are a vital part of my life. Again, words limit me. It would be more illuminating to show the reader my pre-and post-LSD artwork.

Houses, shanties, tree trunks, rocks and still lifes—these were the subject matter of my pre-LSD paintings. Real life objects, landscapes, shapes with borders and edges were my focus. My colors were earthy browns and pinks and greens.

When I was coming down from the acid high I used my internal intensity to draw pictures with oil pastels. I created images that I had seen and felt. In one hour I produced a collage that was three feet tall and depicted the passageway of energy flowing through me. I worked in an excited state and was amazed that I had made, with folded paper and scissors, an eight-pointed star which I used in the collage. To this day I cannot repeat that papercut. It happened spontaneously, as did the elongated figure (me) with seven openings or centers. Months later I learned that there are seven chakras or energy centers in our body.

When I looked at the intensity of color, the symmetry of line, the unusual forms, the primitive shapes, of these post-acid pictures, I could hardly believe they were mine. They were dramatically different from the art journal drawings I had done in previous years. After the acid trip I found myself drawing with *both* hands at once. Because of this, many of my acid pictures, unlike those I had done before, were quite symmetrical. Most of the energy in my body, hands and pictures started from the bottom and moved upward: lines spiraling upward, arms outstretched toward the sky, sensual genital forms. My image was of current flowing up through my legs, through my vagina, through the hollow tube in my spine, out the top of my head to a point on the horizon, then circling back to me. This is the reverse of giving birth, where all the energy starts from the top, pushing through the birth canal and out. Spiritual birth seems to be the reverse of this dynamic flow.

As I reflect on the experience of using both hands at the same time



"I worked in an excited state: in one hour I produced a collage three feet tall depicting the energy flowing through me."

to draw, I realize that the LSD was apparently allowing my right brain (left hand) to speak, to paint, to BE. I had experienced what scholars were, at that time, researching. Several years later I found the work of Robert Ornstein and others describing the theory of the separate function of the left and right hemispheres of the brain, the right brain being connected with the left hand. My left hand moves freely, gracefully, like a dance across the paper. My right hand draws or paints in a sensible, hard-edged, un fanciful, and direct manner. I continue to use both hands in my painting, although I don't use them at the same time. With my left hand I start the picture in bold strokes, with my right hand I do the controlled work, filling in the details.

The LSD not only allowed my left hand to become active, it allowed my right brain to function more freely. I have continued the yin/yang, right/left dialogue within me. This dialogue is much of my source for creativity. It goes like this: Left brain (right hand): "I want to be productive, assertive, accomplishing, logical." Right brain (left hand): "I want to be open, receptive, passive." If one side of me totally dominated the other aspects of me—this is when I would worry about myself. If I should become all logical, linear in thinking, pragmatic, moralistic and stern, I would find myself singleminded and dull. If I were predominantly intuitive, receptive, sensual and spiritual, I would feel ungrounded, spacey and strange. It is this occasional face-to-face confrontation of both parts of myself that stir deep excitement within. Instead of asking myself "which shall I be?" I am learning to ask myself, "What will I be if I push my boundaries in both directions?" The LSD opened me to the realization that I was capable of using both sides of myself. As I explore these polarities I also search for the experience of integration. How can I be assertive, competent and practical and at the same time soft, open and receptive?

The following year in a movement workshop I drew two huge pictures expressing feelings of my left and right sides. I put them on the wall and danced the polarities, then an integration.

### *THE LIGHT*

On my third acid trip I wrote very little following the experience. I was alone in my home in Inverness, California. I had prepared the fire in the fireplace, some records for the stereo and settled myself

down with pillows on the yellow carpet. In remodeling that house I had removed the false ceiling of the square living room to re-establish the original roof lines—that of a pyramid. On the north side of the roof I had installed a skylight. Although I jokingly referred to the pyramid energy I was creating in my aesthetic environment, there was also some vague, uneducated interest on my part of what that could mean. My art-studio-group-room was a remodeled garage and the large windows face south-west.

During the first hours of this experience I turned into an angry monster, growling, clawing and pounding the floor. Raging mask-like images came before me spewing mud and slop. The animal in me came loose. I pounded and cried. I wanted to vomit.

As exhaustion took over I lay on my back with a warm blanket covering me. The colors in the Van-Gogh like painting above the mantelpiece lifted off the canvas and began to dance: first the yellows, then the pinks, then the lavender. I laughed and relaxed. Relaxed further and further. I felt myself sinking, disappearing, the boundaries of my body leaving me. The thought occurred to me that I might indeed vanish. “I wonder if it ever happens, when ‘tripping’ that one actually vanishes?” I said to myself. “I wonder if I care? Should I care? I want to live, yet I don’t care if I disappear” Then it happened:

I am weightless. I see nothing yet all is light. I am nothing. I have no body, there are no boundaries, yet I am suspended. I have no thoughts, I am not even the observer watching myself with no thoughts. I am in oblivion, yet it is the opposite of oblivion. It is total presence. And the music and the white light permeate everything!

It is excruciatingly beautiful, this light. Prisms, colors, prisms of color. Giving up, letting go, totally. Then a white sword of light comes from the right, above. It splits me *open*. I allow it. Ecstasy, ecstasy forever. (How do I explain?) The soft yellows, the blues, greens, fuchsias, radiate light in a soft pyramid. The translucent pyramid enfolds me, takes me, I float in its center and let go into it. I hear music of the heavens yet all is perfectly still. I never want to leave. I float, suspended for hours.

Then back to pain and suffering, but not for long. I was transfixed, vibrating in every cell, yet totally calm. “No more light, NO MORE!” I cried out loud. “It’s too much! I’m

afraid of this much light!” Yet I stayed, suspended in the pyramid with a rainbow of colors stretched around the glass like walls. And the music! The music!

An hour or more must have passed in this way. When I gradually came back into my body lying firmly on the yellow carpet I wondered if I had died and returned. There was a moment of fear: “Am I alive now? Did I die? Can one die in this experience of ecstasy? (I had no statistical information on the subject.) Is that what death is like? Can it be?” I could feel my heart beating extremely hard and very slow.

Slowly I gathered my strength and walked wrapped in my blanket into my studio room. The sun was low in the sky as I stood in front of the glass doors. I noticed my shadow on the opposite wall. I let the blanket drop to see the shadow of my tall, nude body. I studied the shadow—my shadow—my body, appreciating its womanliness. As I focused on the shadow a rainbow of colors outlined the whole body: yellow, orange, and a lavender appeared on the white wall like layers around the shadow image. I felt warm and protected. Then the nausea returned and I moaned and doubled up groaning.

During the next weeks I contemplated my experience. I felt shy about sharing something so private. Yet it was magnificent, so how could I keep it to myself? Would people think I was weird? Knowing that I had friends who had experienced LSD often gave me the courage to tell my tale. Also, I went to books to see what images or words would come close to what I had experienced. I found a statement by William James. He experienced: “A light perfectly ineffable shone in my soul, that almost prostrated me on the ground. This light seemed like the brightness of the sun in every direction. It was too intense for the eyes.”

I felt better. If William James had that type of experience, I was in good company. Sunlight, however, does not describe the color of the light I experienced, only the intensity. The light was white. Illumination describes it more accurately. And in using that word I realize my description, my experience is one similar to those persons describing “Nirvana.” And I realize why those persons are motivated—at great cost to their ordinary lives—to try to return to that state of being. It is perfect, it is pure existence..., the ultimate, complete.

I realize the vignettes I have chosen to share, here, are, for the

most part, accounts of very positive experiences and feelings. I have included some descriptions of my fear of death, and the unwillingness on my part to re-experience my birth. The pain and suffering I have felt during my altered states have been very real, very deep, but not overwhelming. I have been aware that the acceptance of the ugly, dark, violent side of myself has also been part of these journeys. And that after allowing that dark side in, I have then flipped into feelings of relief, tears of joy and ecstasy, of being in tune with the dance of life. It fits with my theory as a psychotherapist that we must allow ourselves to experience the dark side whether it is grief, anger, pain, or suffering, in order to experience the light.

I have also learned, however, that people are more willing to experience and express their feelings of ugliness, anger and inadequacy than they are willing to experience love and compassion. In groups that I have led I have found that we may *worry* about seeing our dark side, but it is the light that is difficult to accept because it is so overwhelmingly beautiful and powerful.

### A ROADBLOCK

Over the past seven years I have had the three LSD experiences described here. The first two are described more fully in my book, *Emerging Woman: A Decade of Midlife Transitions*. I include them in a chapter called Opening, which also describes dreams and fantasy journeys that have been part of my spiritual awakening. My book is an intimate autobiography about sex roles in marriage, learning to live alone, empowering oneself and spiritual awakening. It asks us to examine how we choose to live our lives and it gives midlife women courage to be fully themselves. Ironically, the publishers did not want it. One editor, after seriously considering my manuscript and telling me he thought the book a powerful document, later took his words back saying, "We don't want to advocate your lifestyle." As the phone conversation continued it became apparent that he was asking me to delete the sections that discuss my LSD experiences. "To give a positive account of such drug induced experiences would be to encourage other people to do the same," he said. After thinking this over I refused to eliminate the pages which describe some monumental changes in my life. He turned down the manuscript so I decided to publish the book myself. (A "first" for me.)

I recount this episode because it is my reason for spending time

writing this essay. To tell one more account of an acid trip does not seem important. But for those of us who have learned and changed from our experiences in ways that will be advantageous to humanity, it seems important to document the data. The roadblock I experienced from book publishers angered me. It has been part of our culture to tell, via TV, newspapers, movies and books of the horrors and tragedies in life. But the ecstatic experiences are seldom shared. Publishers will rush to print anything that is violent or corrupt but when we write about finding new ways of being that encompass love and visions of peaceful death, our words are less likely to be put in print.

Also, I couldn't help but wonder if I were a male describing such risk-taking and visions (such as John Lily) if a publisher would have been eager to advance his life-style. Was this one more instance of keeping woman in her place?

### CONCLUSION

In retrospect I see my three LSD experiences as an opening to my own Feminine; my intuitive, receptive and spiritual inclinations. I realize that in 1970 as a forty-year-old divorced woman it was part of my survival mechanism to become determined, productive and achieving. Not only was I coming out from under the shadow of three men—my famous father, a well-known brother and a high achieving husband—but I needed to learn how to earn my living, cope with aloneness and become a professional. I had to muster together all of my masculine energy to “make it.” I needed my anger and my feminist ideology to survive emotionally and practically.

So the LSD was, fortuitously, a balancing of the yang and yin, for me. The drug meant I *couldn't* control what happened for that day and I was forced into an altered state which allowed me to experience something of the feminine principle.

As I review the themes of my images in these altered states I notice that woman, womanliness, birth, death, rebirth and light are the path I have floated along. Opening to my Feminine to find my own personal integration as I proceed down the feminist path, seems important. I can see the changes that I am making in my life that parallel these images. (I don't claim they are cause and effect, only parallel.) Although I still feel the injustices and oppression of women, I don't seem to need to be so angry about it. I stand for and

live my equality more out of love for women than anger at men. I spend time meditating, dancing, painting and have focused my group facilitation on the creative aspects of all individuals. I am more interested in cooperation and community than I am in getting to the top of the heap. My inner journey has more importance to me than it did when I was forty or forty-five and I am aware that the more I find peace and beauty within, the more effective I will be with others.

When I wrote my book, *Emerging Woman*, I was between ages forty and fifty. These were courageous, strident, adventurous, risk-taking, angry and passionate years. I wore myself out. After ten years I teetered on the brink of emotional and physical exhaustion (as do many men who have finished that phase of life at age 40).

After two years of internal confusion and earth shaking dreams and images I feel I am emerging out of a Limbo period into a new unknown. The LSD trips are pointing the way to a more tranquil, light existence. I am not saying that LSD is some panacea. But I can say that for me I have found new avenues of profound self-awareness and a sense of being connected to the planet, the people on it, and to the larger universe.

## REFERENCE

The book, *Emerging Woman*, is available from: Personal Press, Box 789, Pt. Reyes Station, CA 94956. \$9.75 covers postage. 6 percent additional for CA residents.

## SUGGESTED READING FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON LSD AND PERSONAL GROWTH

- Grinspoon, Lester, and James B. Bakalar. *Psychedelic Drugs Reconsidered*. Basic Books, New York, 1979.
- Grof, Stanislav. *Principles of LSD Psychotherapy*. Hunter House, Pomona, California, 1981.
- Grof, Stanislav. *Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research*. Viking, New York, 1975.
- Masters, R.E.I., and Jean Houston. *Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*. Delta, New York, 1966.