

# **My Time with Ralph Metzner, 1969-70**

## **Ralph Abraham**

### ***Abstract***

Ralph Metzner and I were close friends from Fall 1969 until Fall 1970. In the summer of 1970 we shared a house in Escondido, California while studying Actualism with the founder, Russell Schofield.

After my return to Santa Cruz at the end of the summer, there was a lapse in our interaction until Ralph moved back to Northern California in the 1980s.

I will begin with a brief summary of the psychedelic events leading up to our meeting in 1969.

### **1. Onramp, 1959-68**

My memory of 50 years ago is poor. But I have a journal from August 1969 on, which has survived intact. In this first part, supported only by the published works listed in the Bibliography, I recall some highlights of the runup to my meeting with Ralph, in two parallel tracks. Part 2 depends on the journal.

#### ***1A. Ralph from Harvard to Millbrook, 1959-1967.***

Ralph met Tim Leary in the Fall of 1959 while a graduate student at Harvard. At the end of that school year, the Harvard Psilocybin Project was created by Tim

Leary, Frank Barron, and Richard Alpert. Ralph had his first Psilocybin trip at Tim's home on March, 1961. About a year later he finished his Ph.D. Shortly after that he had his first LSD trip in Zihuatanejo with Tim. In the Fall of 1962, he returned to Harvard on an NIMH postdoc. In the Spring, the Psychedelic Review journal started up, edited by Ralph, Paul Lee, and Rolf Von Eckartsberg. Then the axe fell, and he, Tim, and Richard left Harvard for Millbrook.

At Millbrook, among many other fabulous meetings and creations, Ralph worked with Gerd Stern and his group of multimedia artists, USCO, in the Fall of 1964 to create the Psychedelic Theater, a set of performances for theaters in New York City. Ralph and USCO, along with Tim and Michael Hollingshead, created Psychedelic Explorations, a show presented at the New Theater at 154 E. 54th Street in New York City on Monday evenings beginning June 14, 1965.

These shows featured psychedelic light shows with transparent liquids by Richard Aldcroft. They were presented around the East Coast during Fall 1965 and Winter 1966. In the Summer of 1966, new shows were presented at the Village Theater on 2nd Avenue. The idea of these shows was to give some indication of a psychedelic experience. Full details may be found in the references listed below.

I attended one of the shows in NYC. This was a crucial influence in my decision to experiment with marijuana (Fall 1966) and LSD (Fall 1967), with the help of my Princeton undergraduate friends. This led directly to my move to Santa Cruz in the summer of 1968. Santa Cruz was a center of the Hip culture. It was full of hippies, and had nightly acid test events with light shows, at a venue called The barn. Santa Cruz is where I later met Tim Leary, Ram Dass, and Ralph.

In the Spring 1967, Millbrook dispersed.

## ***1B. Me from 1959 to 1968***

While Ralph was following his path from Harvard to Milbrook, 1959-67, I finished my Ph.D. in math at the University of Michigan and moved, with my wife Caroline, to my first jobs at UC Berkeley, Columbia, and Princeton. Early in my time at Princeton, I recall seeing Ralph and his psychedelic show in the East Village.

In 1966, I wrote my first book, *Foundations of Mechanics*. During this time of writing and lecturing in Princeton I slept only about three hours a night. I lived in an alternate reality, dreaming vividly while going about my daily errands. When the book was finished in summer 1966, I was a bit confused, and was open to radical experiments. I smoked dope for the first time., and in November 1967, my first LSD trip. That Spring, I was offered a tenured position at UC Santa Cruz. I visited Santa Cruz, discovered the light shows at the Barn, loved the local Hip culture, and decided to accept the offer. Thus, after four years in Princeton, we moved to Santa Cruz in 1968.

## **2. California Street, 1968-70**

In these first two academic years at UCSC, we lived in a 24-room Victorian mansion on California Street in Santa Cruz. It was a thriving commune.

## ***2A. Santa Cruz and London, 1968-69***

After a 1968 summer math conference in Berkeley, I arrived in Santa Cruz with my family. Some East Coast friends had preceded me to the UCSC faculty: Paul Lee, in philosophy, Page Stegner, creative writing, and Marvin Greenberg, math.

All four of us, perhaps not coincidentally, were LSD veterans. DeLee Lantz and Gerd Stern were also at UCSC at this time.

Page helped me find a house, the Victorian mansion. It was a wreck, which we turned into a Hippie commune and local psychedelic hot spot. Paul introduced me to Tim Leary, who visited and gave inspiring talks at UCSC in the Fall.

Throughout the Fall and Winter we had various study groups meeting at 724 California Street: Gurdjieff, astrology, alternative education, and of course, psychedelics. At some point during this time I made contact by phone and letters with Ralph, about these esoteric subjects.

## ***2B. Santa Cruz, Meeting Ralph, 1969-70***

Contacts with Ralph continued in the Fall of 1969. Here are some excerpts from my journal.

**Sept. 24, 1969.** I called Ralph. We spoke about Gurdjieff, Esalen, and my ideas for an institute and journal. He suggested I call Michael Murphy, Charles Muses, and Shyam Bhatnagar. He said he was giving up the Psychedelic Journal, and going south to work full-time on Agni Yoga.

**Sept. 25, 1969.** My wife Caroline reported talks with Ralph about planes of awareness.

**Sept. 27, 1969.** Ralph called and said he would visit us at 724 today.

**Sept. 28, 1969.** Ralph visited. We spoke of Gurdjieff and Russell Schofield, the founder of Actualism, aka Agni Yoga. Ralph recommended inviting Ram Dass, now back from India and living in New Hampshire, to lecture here at UCSC. (Later, Ram Dass stayed in our Victorian for about six weeks.) Ralph told us about his time with Tim Leary. Ralph had been working with Nyland on Gurdjieff, with a Reichian, with Rolfing, and had quit regular psychedelics. Now he was going

to the Actualism school every month or two. He gave me Schofield's address in West Hollywood. He said that Shyam was an excellent teacher, that Shyam and DeLee Lantz (my colleague at UCSC) had studied with the same guru in India, and that Carlos Naranjo had gone to South America to study with a Sufi teacher.

**Oct. 1, 1969.** Caroline went up north to see Ralph.

**Oct. 30, 1969.** Ralph came to visit with Bernie Aaronson. Norman O. Brown came to visit with us, we spoke about astrology and mythology. Ralph thought Norman remarkably conservative and restricted. Ralph and I discussed possible research projects on astrology. Then we turned on with recordings of ritual music.

**Nov. 15, 1969.** Caroline went south to meet with Ralph and Schofield at the School of Actualism. She took to it right away. We thought of going down there in January. Eventually, we decided that we might profitably spend the summer 1970 with the group of devotees of Actualism in Valley Center, CA. Which we did, along with an extended family of like-minded souls from our 724 California Street group.

## **2C. Actualism, Summer 1970.**

Ralph found an excellent house in Escondido, near the Actualism center in Valley Center. It was large enough for the community of 11 who wanted to live together for the summer experiment with Actualism, including me, Caroline and our sons, Peter and John; Ralph and his son Ari; Lori Williams and her son Eran, Emelia Hazelip and her daughter Selenia; and Winston Nelson.

We passed the summer weeks with stoned lessons in Actualism, taking the children to swimming lessons, and exploring the surrounding desert. Arguments developed about

the children eating ice cream and watching TV.

As Fall approached, I began to plan my return to UCSC to teach, while Caroline decided to stay with Actualism. Arguments over the plans for our children to return to school escalated into a major contention. I did not want the children to be brought up in a cult. I understood that Ralph intended to create a school along this line.

So, the family split apart. Caroline, Peter, and John would stay in Escondido, while Emelia, Selenia, and I would return to Santa Cruz. Thus, the family separated in early September, 1970.

### **3. Offramp**

#### ***3A. Santa Cruz, 1970-71***

Back in Santa Cruz, the house on California Street was rented out to a group of students, while Emelia, Selenia, and I moved into an old orchard and house on Ocean Street Extension.

Caroline, backed by Ralph and Schofield, decided to proceed with a legal divorce process. This made life in Santa Cruz very difficult for me. The divorce trial was in San Diego. The School of Actualism was represented by Schofield, Ralph, and several members of the group.

The children came for occasional weekend visits. This ended on my birthday, July 4, 1971. I was devastated. Also, the lawyers had seized all of my UCSC salary. I decided to go to Europe until things cooled down.

#### ***3B. Europe and India, 1971-72***

I spent academic year 1971-72 teaching at the University of

Amsterdam. In the Summer of 1972 I went to India for a brief holiday, but ended up staying until January 1973.

The conflict in Escondido led to Ralph and I going in different directions. But in 1984, Russell Schofield fell asleep at the wheel of his car, hit a tree, and died. Following this tragedy the entire Actualism community dissolved., Many members moved on to other spiritual traditions. Ralph became a therapist again in private practice in Northern California, giving crucial help to other grieving members of the group. Ralph and I resumed our friendship. We enjoyed occasional visits to each others homes, which were close enough for day trips.

### ***3C. Epilogue 2019***

After a long time, my second wife Ray and I planned a visit to Ralph and his wife, Cathy Coleman. On February 18, 2019, we arrived for dinner and were joined by DeLee Lantz, our mutual friend of long standing. After we sat down for dinner it became clear that Ralph was having a hard time breathing. He told us he did not have long to live. By the time dessert was on the table, Ralph came around to the subject of our remote past in Escondido and its aftermath, my divorce from Caroline. He expressed a sincere apology for his role in that, and referred to Actualism as a cult. I was greatly relieved by this, and I believe he was also.

In less than a month, Ralph had died. He had two crucial influences on my life: the introduction to LSD, and the divorce. All turned out much for the good, so I am deeply in his debt.

## ***Bibliography***

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