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I'm Not Crazy, They Are Coming Around with Guns!

Charles T. Tart

SUMMARY. This experience strikingly demonstrated to me how my mind (and minds in general) can distort information, especially when strong emotions are involved. Interviewing people about unusual experiences made me more sensitive to distinguishing what happened to people from their feelings about it.

KEYWORDS. Consciousness, meditation, violence, telepathy, Patty Hearst, panic, fright, shame, craziness, sensitivity

The late 1960s and early 1970s were exciting times for those of us interested in the nature of the human mind. Psychedelic drugs, eastern religions, new research on the nature of dreams, biofeedback, and other developments had given us new ways to look at and experiment with our own minds, but the

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few of us working on scientific understandings of the mind largely worked in isolation. The too few meetings that brought us together were often the high points of the year.

In the spring of 1973, I attended one of the first Council Grove Conferences, dedicated to understanding the new developments in consciousness. Held at White Memorial Camp, an isolated church camp on the plains of Kansas, near the town of Council Grove, these unique conferences brought together people from all over the country who were interested in expanding human potentials, in understanding and developing some extraordinary things we could do with our minds if we could only transcend our ordinary limits. Council Grove is a good place for that kind of conference. There is something about the vastness of the plains and the wind sweeping in from vast distances that simultaneously humbles a person, yet says, "Think big!"

The Conference was a heady mixture of science and mysticism, with lectures by Indian yogis and American Indian medicine men following sober scientific reports on brain wave control and new techniques for self-healing. I had been studying various aspects of the human mind for many years, and came away inspired and stimulated with new ideas. Little did I realize that the Conference was to start a chain of events that would demonstrate one of the potentials of the mind to me and a friend in a frightening and vivid way, a way that was much more than just an idea.

A highlight of the Conference for me was meeting Terry Alexander (pseudonym), a bright young psychologist who was not only just getting his PhD in psychology from one of America's leading universities, but who had spent years personally studying meditation in India. Terry's combination of intellectual and experiential knowledge of an exciting subject like meditation was unique, and we had a lot to talk about. There is never enough time at conferences, though, so I asked him to let me know when he would be in Berkeley, California, where I lived, so we could continue our talks.

It was eight months before Terry got out to Berkeley, but he finally called me in February. We arranged for me to pick him up the next evening, February fourth, about nine o'clock. He was staying with friends in the same house that housed the Institute for the Study of Consciousness at 2924 Benvenue Avenue. The Institute, founded by Arthur Young, a well-known inventor, was a place I knew of as a developing center for scientists who had become interested in understanding consciousness, although I had not had a chance to visit it yet.

I knew the area, though, one of those lovely Berkeley residential neighborhoods of tree-lined streets, lovely old Victorians, and big brown-shingled houses that created the architectural style known as Berkeley brownshingle.

Terry mentioned that there would be a meeting going on in the front of the house when I arrived, and rather than disturb it, why didn't I come around to

the kitchen door in the rear? We would then go out to a coffee shop and talk. That was fine, and I looked forward to our meeting.

The next evening I left my home in the northern part of Berkeley and drove south on San Pablo Avenue, a main thoroughfare, and planned to then turn east up Ashby Avenue, another main thoroughfare which intersected Benvenue. I was driving up San Pablo Avenue. As I approached my turn on to Ashby Avenue, I lost track of what I had been thinking about and instead found myself thinking about bad neighborhoods with criminal gangs in them. I thought that was silly: I was going to a nice section of Berkeley, not to some ghetto. The thought not only persisted, it quickly built into a frightening set of obsessions about being beaten up, about gangs of people with guns, shooting, violence, and the conviction that I would be mistaken for a burglar and shot when I walked between the houses to meet Terry at the kitchen door. I became very frightened and wanted to turn the car around and drive away as fast as possible. The closer I got to Benvenue Avenue, the worse I felt!

Simultaneously with my panic and obsession with being shot and beaten up, I felt intensely ashamed and embarrassed: I had to be crazy to feel like this! There was absolutely no reason for any normal person to feel this way! Had I only been fooling myself all these years, thinking I was normal, while underneath I was as crazy and sick as some of the psychotic patients I had studied? The psychologist part of my mind diagnosed me as having a paranoid schizophrenic attack of high intensity, and the outlook for my future wasn't very good if I was this crazy underneath! I was even more acutely embarrassed because I had spent years working on understanding my own mind through various kinds of psychotherapeutic, psychological, and spiritual growth techniques, yet it looked as if I was crazier than when I started!

The fear kept intensifying, but I fought it. I pulled over twice, preparatory to making a U-turn to drive back home, but each time I pulled back out and kept going. I absolutely refused to surrender to this craziness! Finally I reached Benvenue Avenue, turned onto it, saw roughly where 2924 was, and looked for a parking place. Parking was difficult. I drove several blocks down Benvenue looking, finally found a place, parked and walked a couple of blocks back to meet Terry. I was still quite frightened and I looked into every shadow and parked car, and between houses, looking for gangs or an ambush. I avoided the few people on the street as much as possible.

Much to my relief, Terry was waiting out in front of the house, so I didn't have to go though the alley between the houses! We said hello, chatted as we walked back to my car, and drove off to a coffee shop that was a couple of miles away. I actively stopped myself from thinking about my experience, for while the fear had subsided, I still felt ashamed of myself. Talking to Terry distracted me from my obsession with gangs and guns and violence, so my fear finally faded away completely. Naturally I didn't say anything to Terry

about it: he was still a new friend and a respected colleague, and I would have hesitated to tell even my best friend about this crazy, shameful side of my mind.

Terry went back to the East Coast, and I thought no more about (repressed?) my "crazy spell" until a letter from him a week later brought it all back. After mentioning a few things of professional interest, he told me of a personal experience that he hadn't told to me the night we met because it seemed shameful to him. While he was waiting for me in front of the Institute, he started feeling paranoid, worrying about people with guns and getting shot! He too felt pretty silly and ashamed. He was relieved when I arrived and we left for the coffee shop.

So, the plot thickened. Had I been tuning in to Terry's mental state through some kind of telepathy? Was he tuning in to mine?

The next sentence in his letter was the real shock, though. Had I known that the heiress Patty Hearst had been kidnapped, just down the street, a few minutes after we had left?

I had not had a brief excursion into insanity, nor had Terry. Some kind of ESP was being used by the unconscious parts of our minds, and it was trying to warn us of real danger!

As I fought off panic and Terry felt paranoid a few minutes before nine, three members of the Symbionese Liberation Army, the SLA, had already kidnapped Peter Benenson, a mathematician at Berkeley's famous Lawrence Radiation Laboratory. He had gone grocery shopping at the Berkeley Co-operative Shopping Center on Shattuck Avenue, in the north end of town where I was coming from. A later newspaper interview with former SLA member Bill Harris (Oakland Tribune, Oct. 16, 1988) revealed that the SLA members had been standing in the Co-op grocery store parking lot for some time planning to steal a car, looking over cars as they drove by.

Benenson was the opportune victim. As he was unloading groceries from his car in his driveway, he was seized from behind by two men and a woman who had followed him. They threw him onto the back floor of his car and threatened that if he didn't stay down, they would kill him. The two men each carried an automatic rifle containing cyanide-tipped bullets, the woman waved a .38 automatic pistol. Benenson was in a state of terror for some time, as his car was driven around while he crouched on the floor. There was indeed plenty of fear and a gang with guns around for me and Terry to pick up on!

I drove up and down Benvenue Avenue after the SLA had kidnapped Peter Benenson, looking for a parking place. Benvenue is a street where it is always difficult to find a parking place, but, as I learned from later newspaper accounts, one or two other cars filled with armed SLA members were parked on Benvenue close to 2603 when Patty was kidnapped at 9:20 p.m. Were they

already there as I looked for my parking place? Did I drive right past them? Walk past some of them after I parked? I was frightened about gangs in cars, gangs with guns. If the SLA weren't already parked on that part of Benvenue Avenue, they were on the way.

Finally the three who had kidnapped Peter Benenson parked in the driveway of Patty Hearst's apartment. Armed with their automatic rifles and pistols, they went down the walkway between the apartment and the adjoining house that leads to the apartment entrance and knocked. When Patty's boyfriend, Steven Weed, opened the door, they rushed in, threw him to the floor, and began beating and kicking him. Patty Hearst was grabbed and carried screaming from the house. Weed finally managed to get loose and ran screaming from the apartment, while one of the men kept pointing his rifle at him with a cold smile on his face. A neighbor came to see what was happening: he was grabbed, beaten, and knocked unconscious to the floor, a floor that was already soaked with Steven Weed's blood. Two women who came out of the next apartment were driven back inside as automatic rifle fire splintered the shingled wall beside them. Patty's captors threw her in the trunk and fled in Peter Benenson's car, with Benenson still crouching terrified on the floor, expecting that the next shot would be for him. The two cars with the rest of the SLA roared away. The Patty Hearst story had begun.

Now I know that the only thing crazy about my experience was my insistence on thinking it was about my craziness. I was going into a potentially dangerous situation. There was a gang with guns who shot at people in the alleyways between the houses in that neighborhood, they did beat people unmercifully, lots of people were terrified. Part of my mind was telling me to get away. I misinterpreted it as my craziness. Luckily nothing worse happened to me or Terry than fright and shame.

I learned about how the mind can transcend ordinary limitations at a very deep level. It's not just an abstract idea. I've since applied my lesson in several minor happenings: when I've had a strong psychological reaction that doesn't make "sense," given my understanding of myself, I try to remember to look more carefully at the world around me. I haven't had to dodge any bullets, but I have looked and found other people under stress or needing help. Now I wonder how many other people are tuning into the world around them this way and unnecessarily suffering because they think it's their own craziness? What could we be like if we could understand and deliberately use this kind of psychic sensitivity?