



The New York Public Library
Manuscripts and Archives Division

Guide to the

Timothy Leary letters to William Scanlon

ca. 1930s-1940s

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Compiled by Kit Messick, 2013

Summary

Creator: Leary, Timothy, 1920-1996

Title: Timothy Leary letters to William Scanlon

Date: ca. 1930s-1940s

Size: .1 linear feet (1 folder)

Source: Purchased from Glenn Horowitz Bookseller Inc., 2012.

Abstract: Timothy Francis Leary, clinical psychologist and Harvard professor, became an advocate for the use of psychedelic drugs and a counterculture icon after conducting experiments with psilocybin mushrooms and LSD. The collection consists of fifty letters from Leary to his childhood friend and classmate, William Scanlon. The letters span Leary's late high school years through his enrollment at the United States Military Academy at West Point, his studies at the University of Alabama, and his subsequent enlistment in the United States Army. Also included is one undated letter to "Rosemary," ostensibly Rosemary Woodruff, Leary's fourth wife.

Preferred citation: Timothy Leary letters to William Scanlon, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

Processing note: Compiled by Kit Messick, 2013

Creator History

Timothy Francis Leary, clinical psychologist and Harvard professor, became an advocate for the use of psychedelic drugs and a counterculture icon after conducting experiments with psilocybin mushrooms and LSD. Born in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1920, he attended the United States Military Academy at West Point, but was court-martialed for an honor code violation. When he refused to resign from the Honor Committee, his fellow cadets were ordered to shun him. He ultimately chose to leave the Academy.

Leary obtained his degree in psychology at the University of Alabama and his Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley. During a visit to Mexico Leary tried psilocybin mushrooms and, as a result of this experience, began research into the effects of LSD and other psychotropic and psychedelic drugs on

individuals. In the late 1960s, Leary was arrested twice on drug-related charges and sentenced to two consecutive ten-year terms. He escaped from prison and was smuggled out of the country with the help of the Weathermen, but was later forcibly returned. After his release from prison in 1976, he had a successful career as an author and lecturer on philosophy, psychology, and futurism. Timothy Leary died of cancer in 1996.

Custodial History

The letters were previously in the possession of author and Leary biographer Peter O. Whitmer, who acquired them from William Scanlon.

Scope and Content Note

The collection consists of fifty letters from Leary to his childhood friend and classmate, William Scanlon. The letters span Leary's late high school years through his enrollment at the United States Military Academy at West Point, his studies at the University of Alabama, and his subsequent enlistment in the United States Army. Early letters reflect his youthful interests, particularly in sports, while letters sent during his time at West Point mention his court martial and "silencing." Letters during his matriculation at the University of Alabama discuss his decision to leave the study of philosophy in favor of psychology. Later letters describe his work as a psychologist for the United States Army. Also included is one undated letter to "Rosemary," ostensibly Rosemary Woodruff, Leary's fourth wife.

Key Terms

Occupations

Students

Names

Leary, Timothy, 1920-1996 -- Correspondence

Leary, Timothy, 1920-1996 -- Friends and associates

United States -- Army -- Military life

United States Military Academy -- Students

University of Alabama -- Students