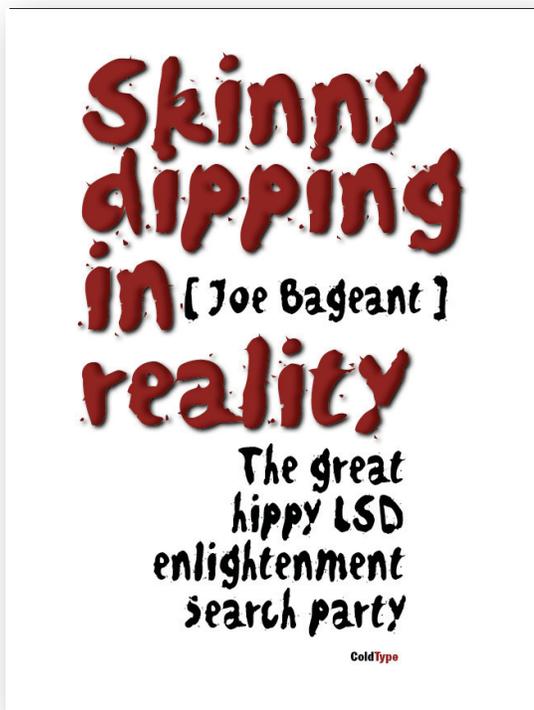


Skinnny
dipping
in [Joe Bageant]
reality

The great
hippy LSD
enlightenment
search party



THE AUTHOR

Joe Bageant is the author of the best selling *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's class war* (Random House, 2007) and a frequent contributor to the BBC and other international media. A selection of his writings and commentary from working class Americans may be found at JoeBageant.com

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Skinnydipping in reality

The great hippy LSD enlightenment search party

There's nothing better than 250 mics of good acid to kick start the cosmic coonhunt for Enlightenment. It takes juice. After all sonny boy, you don't knock down stars with a bee bee gun.

– Mad Dog Howard, *Hippie Doper/Philosopher*

First LSD trip, 1965: Tumbling, tumbling, tumbling inward with eyes closed, I could hear the spider plant hanging in the basket overhead singing in its green subatomic plant language, a hymn to the sunlight charging my bedroom atmosphere. On the back of my eyelids spun a great wheel of existence, turning both ways simultaneously generating an unearthly mournful chant that seemed to be composed of every human voice on earth. It rose in some unknown universal tongue singing, “Wheel of life, wheel of death, Bangladesh, Bangladesh. Wheel of life, wheel of death, Bangaladesh, Bangaladesh.”

“

No words can describe an LSD trip, but let me say that at the end of this one, I sat down and cried. For happines

Millions of starving faces, young men, girls, old men, babies, crones, materialized in uncountable swarms, each face transfigured by some unnamable mutual understanding that I could not share. Then they atomized, leaving the room filled with the scent of wood smoke, shit and citrus blossoms (an odor I would instantly recognize decades later in poverty stricken Central American villages.)

No words can describe an LSD trip, but let me say that at the end of this one, I sat down and cried. For happiness. My deepest hope and suspicion, the one to which I dared not cling, had been confirmed. Life could indeed be significant, piercing and meaningful.

I first took LSD in Winchester, Virginia, thanks to my gay friend George, who was being “treated” for his homosexuality with lysergic acid and enjoying every minute of treatment. Ever since reading about LSD in a Life magazine article a year before, both of us had wanted some of the stuff. Then one day George walked

into my basement apartment and threw a cellophane packet onto the kitchen table. “There it is Bageant,” he said. Next day, after creating a small meditative space with plants, a Tibetan mandala, and classical music on the turntable, we took it. Five years later I was still taking it at least once a week, and to this day I consider LSD the promethean spark of whatever awakening I have managed to accomplish in the life.

Hard as it is to imagine today, LSD was perfectly legal at the time. Legal and apparently not dangerous. In fact, it never even interfered with my job at a microbiological laboratory in the local Shraft’s frozen food plant, but seemed to improve work. Often I arrived there still under the influence of the previous night’s psychotropics and still managed to impress the hell out of the lab boss, Ray Trotta, for my ability to note extremely subtle differences in cultured bacterial colonies. Of course, when we put our eye to the same lens of the dark field colony counter, we were by no means looking at the same colony, as I skimmed across and through the colorful landscapes and towers of teeming metropoli of bacterial civilizations.

For the first time in years, my life in that small town was very enjoyable. In fact Winchester soon spawned its own small psychedelic scene, one among thousands in heartland America at the time. We never hear about them today, the media having since trivialized the entire Sixties (which actually ran into the Seventies) into a handful of newsreel snippets of the Haight Ashbury, Kent State, long hair, Vietnam and the Beatles.

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In Winchester, an assortment of perhaps fifty artists, gays, hillbilly hipsters, academics from a nearby college of music, passing beatniks, and psychedelic enthusiasts had accumulated around town, hanging out at a marvelous old “dinner and juke joint” in the poor section

enthusiasts had accumulated around town, hanging out at a marvelous old “dinner and juke joint” in the poor section. Winchester’s good Southern burghers couldn’t help but notice all this “suspicious happiness,” as the mayor once called it. But because the sons and daughters of local doctors, lawyers and authorities, including the daughter of the town’s prosecuting attorney, were in the mix, and because the queer son of a state senator hung out there, a hands-off policy prevailed for the first couple of years. Finally, the good fundamentalist Christians and Republican business community just couldn’t take it any more.

Meanwhile, I’d gained a profile for myself through openly espousing consciousness expansion and by working to racially integrate the all white Shraft’s frozen food plant, which was later accomplished when the plant got a liberal New York manager named Hank. It was hairy for a while, but together we got it done.

As an aside, last year, some forty years later, I again saw the first Negro we hired (I use the non-PC word because it was the term of the day and feels right in this telling of the times), Ted, a religious man with a spark in his eye and built like a small tank. As we sat in his little house in Winchester’s still-black section, Ted, now completely white haired and with one of those post cancer bowel bags attached, recalled that “Them was the days of Jim Crow, but they wasn’t the worst thing to come along.” “How’s that?” I asked. “Crack,” he answered. “Crack be destroyin’ this generation. But if God took us through Jim Crow, he can take us through crack.” We clasped our hands and closed our eyes in a short prayer.

Given that I openly advocated LSD and psychedelics, my uh, notoriety, grew, resulting in becoming the town’s first pot

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bust. Titillating as it was for the readers of the *Winchester Star*, the regular fare of which featured such things as potatoes that looked like Bob Hope and large unidentified bugs brought into its offices by local farmers, the trial itself was a dismal little thing, completely uninteresting in retrospect, even to the arrestee, despite that I was facing 15 years.

Anyway, several months later I was acquitted, partly for the fact that it was one of the few pot sales I didn't make around town, but mostly because of a hard boozing old Southern attorney named Massey, who sported white linen suits and carried a load of buckshot in his ass acquired while climbing out the window after screwing some guy's wife years before. Ever savvy, he selected blacks for the jury, people who for good reasons had no fondness for Winchester's lily white judicial system and law enforcement. Massey personally did not have much use for "cullids," and believed, as we were taught in schools then, that blacks were lazy and inferior because their culture evolved in a warm climate where fruit fell out of the trees and in the absence of the need for work, they just fucked all day. At the same time he understood that "the sight of cullids in the jury box is unnerving as hell for any prosecutor, the way they sit there blinkin' so inscrutable and all. You never know what they are thinking, but you know it ain't good for the prosecution. And besides, the commonwealth's prosecuting attorney is gonna have his hands full just keeping his daughter's name from coming up in your marijuana adventures. Nachully, you are gonna mention it every chance you get, and I'm gonna give you plenty. And we're lucky as hell, boy, that he's incompetent to boot." This all turned out to be sheer prophecy.

The verdict was "not guilty." Still, there



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was no living in Winchester after being all over the front pages of the paper. In fact, there was no living there during the long wait for the trial anyway because waiting for anything is boring as hell in an already boring place. So I moved to a tent in Resurrection City, the Poor People's Campaign camp on Washington's national mall, to wait for the trial.

After acquittal of the charge, I was gassed up, greased and ready to hit the road. I knew there was a big-time counter-culture out there somewhere, thanks to regular trips to D.C. to get publications such as Paul Krassner's *The Realist*, and by damned my wife and infant child and I were going to join them for good. Several months later, after a stint in New Orleans' French Quarter at the invitation of a junkie jazz man named Ed, who'd blown through Winchester earlier with his hooker wife, Kathy, after being released from Leavenworth. N'awlins was a scene in itself, given that we lived across the street from a hippie storefront church whose sole ritual was dropping acid.

Later, while headed for San Francisco, I found myself and my little family in Boulder, Colorado. Definitely this was a culture counter to the rest of America. Hell, they were hawking LSD out loud and openly on the streets! At least a dozen of them looked at us and asked, "Do you need a place to crash brother?" Or call out, "Brother and sister, come share food with us." We wanted for very little as we worked toward buying the old psychedelic school bus, a 1947 Dodge, that became our home. Not that we lounged about in drugged out ecstasy (though there was some of that involved too). I was working at a car wash from the first week there. Also beginning a serious attempt at writing – at first for the small alternative weeklies, dealing a little dope

now and then, but increasingly I got assignments from the larger slick magazines as years went by.

By 1970, the great hippie wave had years before broken on the West Coast, and the backwash had reached its high water mark, flooding the streets of Boulder and surrounding mountain canyons. There, thousands of similar minded young people sat up all night discussing metaphysics, the illusory nature of the “straight” world, and the coming revolution in American consciousness and politics we all felt was coming. Here in this self dubbed “Himalayas of the New World,” midnight oil burned in mountain cabins and attic apartments of the town below. From the ponderosa pine’s edge, mule deer pricked their ears and looked on at the noisy outdoor camps of America’s new culture gypsies – restless strange young nomads with psychotropically morphed street names and identities such as Cloud, Spaco Mike, Berkeley Betty, John The Baptist, Deputy Dawg, Chrisie the Shrimp Girl, STP John, Wabbit, Goldfinger, The Glass Man. They smoked homemades, screwed and read a lot, and diced up reality beyond recognition under the influence of bootleg insight. A weird electricity arched over everything, as blown away rap sessions drove into the starry night while sanity cowered in the back seat. Yup, this was paradise all right.

It’s a mortal sin for writers to paraphrase their betters in the craft, but I’d have to echo the late Hunter S. Thompson in his sentiment that, I wouldn’t recommend drugs and mayhem to anyone, but it’s always worked for me. For starters, LSD



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resolved, dissolved might be a better word, my bleak black/white, right/wrong judgmentalism forged in a fundamentalist childhood. But not the way one might think. As anyone who has used much of the stuff knows, acid can melt away painful lifelong imprints with a single blast of insight. But not usually. And it’s potential is never quite the same for any two people, and definitely different for a redneck kid who’d been raised on Christian fundamentalism. You start discovering from the space and life experience you already know. For me, LSD began to power deep meditations upon the meaning of Christian symbols, especially of the holy cross. Not motionless sitting meditations, but physically active ones, in this case woodcarving. As the product of generations who worked with their hands, to this day my hands must always be in motion, either playing guitar, tapping the keyboard – “talking with my hands.” So for hours, days and weeks I carved every sort of cross imaginable – plain ones, Coptic ones, Celtic ones, coarse ones and gold leafed ones, just sitting in our school bus home by dim lantern light carving, sometimes on peyote or acid.

And often the soft presence of a gentle and loving Christ would fill the air with a sense of transcendent peace. Despite my many personal conflicts with the Police Court Jehova of Christian fundamentalism, it was becoming clear that Christ was a guy whose actions were worth deep consideration, even if you considered yourself an atheist. Police Court Jehova be damned. Other times would come zappy symbolic glimpses of quasi cosmic order: Aha! The upright bar of the cross represents the onrushing spirit and mind of man through eternity, and the horizontal crossbar stands for undifferentiated matter. And where they meet

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one another all we know is made manifest – all pain, all ecstasy and everything in between. Pure existence. Years later I related this to one of the numerous Asian Buddhist masters who passed through Boulder. He crinkled up his face and laughed in recognition. This mysticism, if that’s what it is, was clearly not new.

LSD, by way of a discussion with Tim Leary, also delivered the question within a question: What is the question to which my life is the answer? Right away I knew I’d rather peel that metaphysical onion the rest of my life than grovel before a hollow religious institution which flails its cowering followers with the question WHY? Why does the world exist? Why does god take little children, or allow natural disasters? Why did god put so much fucking hair on my back?

So finally, I figured out that “Why?” was never the question. “Why?” was a bullshit ontological query Christianity forced upon its followers, so its priests could pretend they had the answer, and thus control the longing masses by withholding the answer. It’s sure as hell worked. People raised in Christian cultures are still asking it. And still not getting an answer because there is no answer to a non question. I was very lucky in that I never completely inherited the quest for that question, despite coming from a fundamentalist family loaded with preachers. But be damned if I wasn’t forced to go out and find some other unanswerable question anyway, because I did inherit their essential grim religiosity in approach to life – the dirty cultural/spiritual genetics of misery the loving Protestant European peasantry.

Of hundreds, I only had one bad LSD trip, one in which I felt I could not get my breath and was being smothered to death. It turned out that I actually couldn’t



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breathe, I’d always had bad lungs and I was experiencing the onset of COPD lung disease, which would later limit my life severely. If you’ve never experienced suffocation under the influence of a powerful mind altering substance, I’m telling you dear hearts, you can well grasp the horror of things like waterboarding and the kind of people who’d sanction such a thing. But even that experience taught me something, showed me once again the face of mortality. Eternity. Eternity without Joe Bageant in it. We may dance, make love and argue passionately, eat, shit and extrude children onto the floor of spinning speck of cosmic dust. But the universe yawns at the whole affair.

Nevertheless, once you’ve seen the face of eternity, you are left with the question of what to do about it. How to respond. “How will I live my life, in light of what I have seen?” I’m still wrestling with that question – but then that’s what I had wanted, wasn’t it? That Great Question which would lead to the Great Answer? LSD doesn’t give answers, just questions. But used with directed and sincere effort – to the degree that is even possible – it can make you ask the Great Questions, the only important ones. Such as “What are you going to do to eliminate human suffering? What are you going to do, Joe Bageant, now that you have seen the faces in the Great Wheel that turns both ways simultaneously? What will be your direct action?” If you really give a shit about the world, LSD will “serious your ass up real fast,” as we used to say.

Grave as such propositions appear, one must, to my mind at least, be both serious AND silly about exploring consciousness to get results, do it in the spirit of enlightened philosophical levity. Even after all these years, that spirit – when and if it happens to be available

at the moment – still gets me through the day. It enables me to face the increasing sorrows that come with age. One of the nasty little truths about life is that it gets harder with age, not easier, and that there is no prize at the bottom of the box of crackerjacks. But the good news, as I see it, is that we are inherently capable of becoming stronger and more deeply resonant with the world in a way that swamps personal misery into insignificance. Denial ceases to be the first reaction to uncomfortable truths. There are billion dollar industries in this country based upon denial and our refusal to acknowledge mortal entropy. Even death is supposed to be more or less negotiable through fitness, medical science – and we are lied to that we are as young as we feel and act. There is no inherent virtue in being either young or old. We are young when we are young and old when we are old, and any attending virtue comes with whether or not we actualize truth.

Enter Buddhism. It is damned near impossible for any literate person to launch off on a teleological trajectory without being sucked into the gravitational force of Buddhism. Especially if the launch is powered by LSD, which is the difference between a journey on foot and a ride in a rocket sled. By the way, there is no Buddhist commandment that says, “Do not take drugs,” though most Buddhists do not. Nor is there one that says, “Do not drink,” though it’s not the most recommendable thing to do. Buddhist leader Trungpa Rinpoche, founder of Boulder’s Naropa Institute, got drunk often, got laid too, and was very controversial for it. Our American Calvinism makes us equate morality and rightness with prohibition, especially of pleasure. The Christian church has always been about controlling its followers. Buddhism is not



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so much about prohibition, except for harming life. It’s not even about religion, but more about the ultimate order of the world and liberation.

There are many, many forms of Buddhism, but they all fall roughly into two types. If I may vastly over simplify – Mahayana and Theravada, “big boat” and little boat” Buddhism. Big boat aims at the enlightenment, over many incarnations, of all sentient beings through, among other things, selfless love. Little boat holds that you are alone responsible for your own enlightenment through your actions, and may possibly achieve liberation in a single lifetime – enlightenment being the liberation from the desires that create unhappiness and pain in mankind. As I said, I am vastly oversimplifying here, which is sure to put American trust fund babies in ashrams around the country and elderly Theravadan gurus into a snit, generating an onslaught of disputative email, but the essence is correct as far as I’m concerned.

There is a lineage of Buddhism which translates as “crazy wisdom.” It is the antithesis of what westerners usually think of in conjunction with religion, and it’s purposefully full of irreverence, goofiness, shifting perspectives and absurdity. Crazy Wisdom has been described as the unifying metaphysical force field of “poets, philosophers, artists and gurus and other crazy fools gushing with wisdom.” In one variant, the great Japanese poet monk Ikkyu found antidote to Zen formality in whorehouses and bars, i.e., “Her mouth played with my cock the way a cloud plays with the sky.” For whatever reasons, the “People of the Book,” Judaism, Christianity and Islam, opted out of the wine and blowjobs, which may partly explain the general crabbiness and vindictiveness that inspires them to enthu-

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siastically kill other people who disagree with them, not to mention each other during such things as The Crusades, or more recently in Gaza.

By no means am I an adept at crazy wisdom, thus I am sure thousands of folks sitting zazen in Boulder and San Francisco are livid at my sloppy explanation and less than deeply dedicated application of its principles. “Using crazy wisdom as an excuse to escape the discipline of Buddhism,” is the usual charge. Which is much the same discipline ridden thinking as that of my Baptist-Pentecostal boyhood. Lawdy Miss Claudy, the American system instills a psychosexual love of discipline in all of us. No sex in the park bushes, no marijuana for Americans, but rather debt slavery and airport cavity searches by direct orders from the Christian police court Yaweh, whose face is now the Department of Homeland Security. It all comes down to just how much discipline is the right amount for an individual. A thirsty man needs but one drink of water to continue his journey, not the whole tank. Drinking the tank not only halts the journey, but in all likelihood kills the traveler. At any rate, as the years go by, what I take or mistake to be crazy wisdom continuously opens inner doors, even given my poor discipline (and small intermittent doses of it at that).

Crazy Wisdom was brought to Boulder in early 1971 by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a remarkable Chinese/Tibetan guru whose confrontational, unpredictable teaching style was smart, and controversial. Rinpoche (“The Rinp”) put away quarts of Johnnie Walker scotch, possessed an overwhelming charisma and humor, and turned your mind inside out, emptying it of its conditioned defenses. Rinpoche was both an enlight-



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ened teacher and an intentional charlatan, which if you think about it, is exactly in the spirit of crazy wisdom. He never doubted for a moment that all who came within his presence benefited from the experience. I remember an occasion when he arrived in town dead broke, though already with a couple of followers. “The Rinp” was invited to dinner at the Pygmy Farm, an early commune in Boulder. Upon leaving, Rinpoche gave the commune members a bill for his attendance. Which makes perfect sense when you consider that Crazy Wisdom forces change through confronting convention at every turn and by any means available. Another one of those things you either get or don’t get. Although it’s about the purest wordless kind of awareness, being literate does help you start to get it, which is why it attracts so many highly intelligent people.

By no means am I stretching things to say ours was a more literate generation. Most of the hippies I hung with in Boulder followed the contemporary literary scene, had read Hesse, Joyce and Mann, Hobbes, Faulkner, Freud, Jung, Huxley, and had a passing knowledge of such things as Zen and Sufism. Not to mention an expanded consciousness. So when Rinpoche explained how the “mind is emptiness, the true world is empty” and that “the emptiness is permanent and all else is merely passing mental display” they could get their heads around it. And have room to spare.

At the time however, I too often judged Rinpoche from my born-and-bred American perspective and background, so I missed a great learning opportunity, many in fact, regarding Rinpoche Trungpa. If nothing else, I owe Trungpa,

for several things, some of them minor, such as coming to understand that the Tibetan Book of the Dead is a manual for living. And some of them major, such as that I'd lived most of my life in my head in an effort to avoid suffering.

All these years later I am beginning to understand the effect living for a decade or so in a genuinely free time and place had on my life. Thanks to an ongoing attempt to understanding human consciousness, everything has changed over time. Yet nothing has changed at all, except my attitude toward everything. And yes, LSD had everything to do with it. When it comes to rewiring one's own neuro-circuitry toward ecstatic understanding and perception and playful wisdom, and real compassion, LSD and Buddhism can certainly jump start the awakening. Paradoxically, that awakening is to a dream. You come to see very clearly that the "It is the dream that is dreaming the dreamer." Such liberating insights are big as stars. And like Mad Dog says, "You don't knock down stars with a bee bee gun."

"But if I never get another look at the face of God on acid or pick up another splinter of insight for the rest of my life, it'll be too goddamned soon for me! Life may be a shit sandwich all right, but brain damage ain't ketchup either!"

– *The Mad Dog in retrospection*

Then that arc of electricity in the Himalayas of the New World snapped, and thus began what I call Enlightenment Fire Sale. For almost a decade change had come down like rain through the ozone (we still had some ozone left in those days) and Boulder found itself morphing into a metaphysical beachhead, a seething



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marketplace of salvation salesmen and exotic snake oil peddlers – hawkers of truth and burning skyfulls of revelation. The Ten Commandments played in the park, consciousness tramps did Sufi slapstick in the alleys, while more introverted souls curdled their brains as they saw fit, for about a buck a dose. In the throes of the new consumerism Boulder consumed every cosmic thing imaginable, short of a giant asteroid, even though it was surely contemplated during the comet Kahotek. But still no avatars. No ship of deliverance. No change in the price of bananas or sidewinder missiles.

Desire turned to demand, then exhaustion, disillusionment or plain boredom. Having lifted veil upon veil, mortality still grinned across the void, offering no new deals. The Cold War was thriving as much as ever. The murdering bastards in charge still had the upper hand.

The hippie generation represented a massive threat to Cold War America, already hell bent on Global Empire, but not acknowledging such. The harder you looked around at America, the more terrible the shock. Slow leaks in the bucket of our national destiny. Within that advanced core of the most optimistic, best educated and most visionary generation America ever produced, belief seeped away. Yet it nevertheless launched the ecological movement, the health food movement, and attempted to open up the closed darkness of American power politics, which made it avant-garde.

Avant-gardes are, by definition, small. Despite the claims of graybeard stock brokers and aging realtors at cocktail parties, the majority of the generation never took part in the movement. They were the same as they are today, concerned more with sports, pussy and bling. Oh, they smoked pot, talked the talk, but

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that's about all. Thomas Frank documented this very well in *The Marketing of Cool*. Still, they were more open than the previous generation, and certainly more open than they are now.

Meanwhile, many, if not most, of those dedicated to the movement did not grow so fat and well-heeled as they aged. I can name many dozens who've remained true to their beliefs at great personal cost to their lives and families. A few still live on their humble organic back-to-the-land plots, or spent their lives teaching in school systems that keep on rotting despite their own best efforts, because the schools are themselves part of a degraded Empire of the type against which they fought. Or working in social services or the ecology and earth movement. (Speaking of which, I still hold the Rainbow Family and its gatherers to be among the highest order of men and women in America.) Many, if not most of the true blue hippies now suffer the gloom and



Many, if not most of the true blue hippies now suffer the gloom and depression of any intelligent and soulful person in this age. But they endure

depression of any intelligent and soulful person in this age. But they endure. Few of them as there are compared to the 300 million American other-minded souls around them, they endure.

Often at my speaking engagements or readings, I see one or more of them in the audience – long gray hair, loose fitting sensible well worn clothing, soft eyes, and perhaps an herbal amulet around the neck or in the hair. I look very directly at them from the podium, until that old electric flash of mutual recognition pops. Immediately after the reading or talk or whatever, I seek them out if at all possible (press agents sometimes screw this up). Always there is the big smile and the hug.

And we are again brothers and sisters,” as we used to sincerely address each other on the street. And again I have been granted the gift, that brief spark of unquestioned mutual love and goodwill in a darkening time.

JOE BAGEANT

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