

Paul Krassner

Adventures with Kesey

In February 1971, I moved from New York to San Francisco. Publisher Stewart Brand had invited me to come out and co-edit with Kesey *The Last Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog*. Brand told me that “Kesey said he’d do it if you would.” I replied, “Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.”

There were a couple of hundred cartons in my Lower East Side loft, and I went through each one, throwing stuff away, saving an occasional item. I came upon this strange card, praising “The Anal Sphincter: A Most Important Human Muscle,” which “can differentiate between solid, fluid and gas.” I couldn’t decide whether to keep it, so rather than break my rhythm, I simply stuck it in my pocket.

Kesey had been in Palo Alto for a week when I arrived. He was sitting in the backyard at a table with an electric typewriter on it. His parrot, Rumiako, was perched on a tree limb right above him, and whenever Rumiako squawked, Kesey would type a sentence as though the parrot were dictating to him. Kesey looked up at me. “Hey, Krassner, I’ve just been sitting here, thinking about the anal sphincter.” I reached into my pocket, withdrew that message about the anal sphincter that I had transported 3,000 miles, and handed it to Kesey. “My card,” I said. It was a magically appropriate gesture for a new beginning.

Each morning, Kesey would come by the Psychodrama Commune where I was staying. We’d have crunchy granola and ginseng tea for breakfast. Then, sharing a joint in an open-topped convertible, we would drive up winding roads sandwiched by forest, ending up at a large garage which was filled with production equipment. Kesey and I would discuss ideas, pacing back and forth like a pair of caged foxes. Gourmet meals were cooked on a



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pot-bellied stove. Sometimes a local rock band came by and rehearsed with real amplification, drowning out the noise of our typewriters.

Kesey had been reading a book of African Koruba stories. The moral of one parable was, “He who shits in the road will meet flies on his return.” With that as a theme, we assigned R. Crumb to draw his version of the Last Supper for our cover of *The Last Supplement*.

One morning in the Psychodrama kitchen, I couldn’t help but notice that Kesey was pouring some white powder – from a box he found on a pantry shelf – into his crotch. “I’ve used cornstarch on my balls for years,” he explained. It seemed like an organic commercial in the making, so the next morning, our Prankster managing editor, Hassler, brought his camera. Our public service ad would eventually appear on the inside back cover of the *Supplement*, with Kesey giving this pitch:

“Y’know how it is when you’re swarthy anyway and maybe nervous like on a long freeway drive or say you’re in court where you can’t unzip to air things out, and your clammy old nuts stick to your legs. Well, a little handful of plain old cornstarch in the morning will keep things dry and sliding the whole hot day long. Works better than talcum and you don’t smell like a nursery. Also good for underarms, pulling on neoprene wet suits and soothing babies’ bottoms. And it’s biodegradable.”

A pair of black women from Jehovah’s Witnesses stopped by the garage one day, and within ten minutes Kesey convinced them that in Revelations where there’s talk of locusts, it was really prophesizing helicopters. Actually, he was a practicing Christian who also threw the *I Ching* every day as a religious ritual. When his daughter, Shannon, was invited out on her first car date, he insisted that she throw the *I Ching* in order to decide whether or not to accept.

Once he forgot to bring his family *I Ching* to the garage, and he seemed edgy, like a woman who has neglected to take her birth-control pill, so I suggested that he pick three numbers, then I turned to that page in the unabridged dictionary, circled my index finger in the air and it came down pointing at the word *bounce*. So that was our reading, and we bounced back to work.

After a couple of months, we finished the *Supplement* and had a big party. Somebody brought a tank of nitrous oxide to help celebrate. Kesey suggested that in cave-dwelling times, *all* the air they breathed was like this.

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“There are stick figures hovering above,” he said, “and they’re laughing at us.”

“And,” I added, “the trick is to beat them to the punch.”

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Kesey lived on a farm in Oregon -- in a huge, sectioned-out barn, with a metal fireplace that hung from the living-room ceiling -- and he also had a house in La Honda, across the street from a hill where a pair of speakers were embedded and could be turned on from the stereo system in his living room. One evening, we were sitting on the large front lawn of the La Honda house, watching the sunset, when a car stopped on the road. A couple inside were arguing fiercely.

Kesey, with his wrestler stride, returned to the house and put on a record of Frank Sinatra singing “Strangers in the Night.” The couple was stunned by such loud – and appropriate – music emanating from the hill. We could see them smiling as they shared that mystery, then drove away.

I interviewed Kesey at my new home in San Francisco – each of us using an electric typewriter on my dining-room table, passing paper with questions and answers back and forth – but first he boiled a pot of hash tea for our creative fuel.

Kesey and I had discussed the fact that, during the sixties, when abortion was illegal, I ran a free underground referral service. Now I typed: “Since you’re against abortion, doesn’t that put you in the position of saying that a girl or a woman must bear an unwanted child as punishment for ignorance or carelessness?”

He replied: “In as I feel abortions to be probably the worst worm in the revolutionary philosophy, a worm bound in time to suck the righteousness and the life from the work we are engaged in, I want to take this slowly and carefully.”

He proceeded to type quite a long, poetic justification, concluding:

“Punishment of unwed mothers? Bullshit! Care of neither the old nor the young can be considered to be punishment for the able, not even the care of the un-dead old or the un-born young. These beings – regardless not only of race, creed and color, but as well of size, situation or ability – must be treated as equals and their rights to life not only recognized but *defended!*”

Can they defend themselves? You are you from conception, and that never changes no matter what physical changes your body takes. And the virile sport in the Mustang driving to work with his muscular forearm tanned and ready for a day's labor has *not one microgram more* right to his inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness than has the three month's fetus riding in a sack of water or the vegetable rotting for twenty years in a gurney bed.

“Who’s to know the value or extent of another’s trip? How can we assume that the world through the windshield of that Mustang is any more rich or holy or even sane than the world before those pale blue eyes? How can abortion be anything but fascism again – back as a fad in a new intellectual garb with a new and more helpless victim? I swear to you, Paul, that abortions are a terrible karmic bummer, and to support them – except in cases where it is a bona fide toss-up between the child and the mother’s life – is to harbor a worm of discrepancy.”

Krassner: “Well, that’s really eloquent and misty-poo, but suppose Faye [his wife] were raped and became pregnant in the process?”

Kesey: “Nothing is changed. You don’t plow under the corn because the seed was planted with a neighbor’s shovel.”

Krassner: “I assume that it would be her decision, though?”

Kesey: “Almost certainly. But I don’t really feel right about speaking for her. Why don’t you phone and ask?”

I then – uncomfortably – called Faye Kesey in Oregon and reviewed that dialogue. She asked, “Now what’s the question – if I were raped, would I get an abortion?”

“That about sums it up.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

A couple of years later, Kesey would change his position. He had become pro-choice. “I believe that a woman’s reproductive rights are inextricable from her freedom in general,” he explained – “that she should have control of her body as well as her mind.”

Back when I was still living in New York, I had told Bob Dylan about my plan to move to San Francisco. “Oh, yeah?” he said. “Well, if you see Joan Baez, would you tell her that I’d like to do a benefit with her again some time?” Now, before Kesey returned to Oregon, we went to a fundraiser for the United Farm Workers, and I saw Joan Baez there. When I gave her