

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

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Reprinted from "The Puritan and The Profligate" —
an interview with Allen Ginsberg in the December 1990 issue
of *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*.
The interview was conducted by John Lofton,
a former columnist for *The Washington Times*.

JOHN LOFTON: In the first section of your poem "Howl" you wrote: "I saw the best young minds of my generation destroyed by madness." Did this also apply to you?

ALLEN GINSBERG: That's not an accurate quotation. I said the "best minds," not "the best young minds." This is what is called hyperbole, an exaggerated statement, sort of a romantic statement. I suppose it could apply to me too, or anybody. People who survived and became prosperous in a basically aggressive, warlike society are in a sense destroyed by madness. Those who freaked out and couldn't make it, or were traumatized, or artists who starved, or whatnot, they couldn't make it either. It kinda cuts both ways. There's an element of humor there.

LOFTON: When you say you suppose this could have applied to you, does this mean you don't know if you are mad?

GINSBERG: Well, who does? I mean everybody is a little mad.

LOFTON: But I'm asking you.

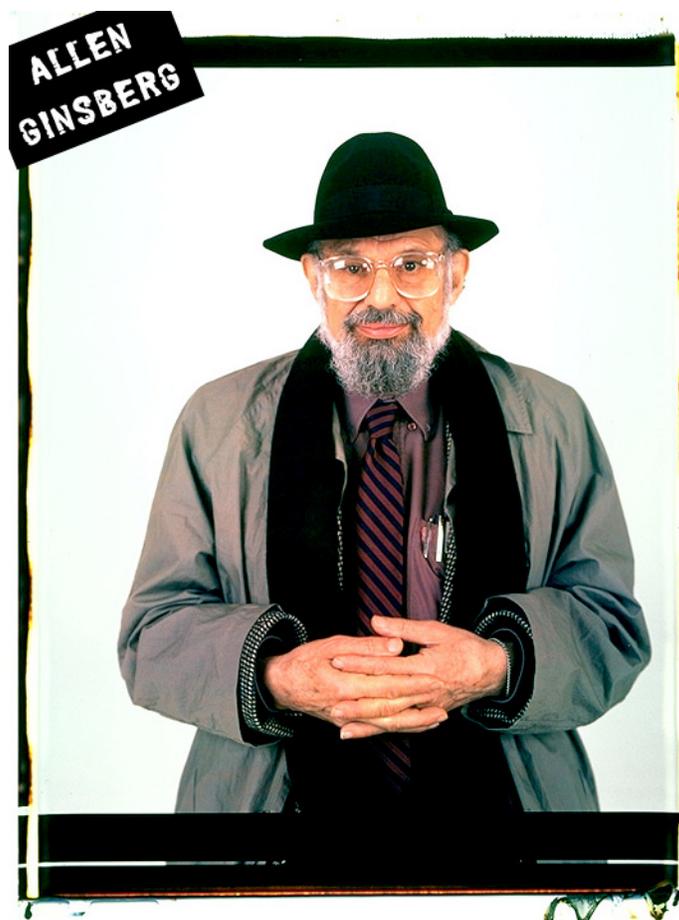
GINSBERG: You are perhaps taking this a little too literally. There are several kinds of madness: divine madness—

LOFTON: But I'm talking about this in the sense you spoke of in your 1949 poem "Bop Lyrics," when you wrote: "I'm so lucky to be nutty."

GINSBERG: You're misinterpreting the way I'm using the word.

LOFTON: No. I'm asking you a question. I'm not interpreting anything.

GINSBERG: I'm afraid that your linguistic presupposition is that "nutty" as you define it means insanity rather than inspiration. You are interpreting, though you say you aren't,



by choosing one definition and excluding another. So I think you'll have to admit you are interpreting.

LOFTON: Actually, I don't admit that.

GINSBERG: You don't want to admit nuttin'! But you want me to admit something. Come on. Come off it. Don't be a prig.

LOFTON: I'm just trying to understand what you meant by what you wrote. But this question of madness.

GINSBERG: There's also another background. In Zen Buddhism there is wild wisdom, or crazy wisdom, crazy in the sense of wild, unlimited, unbounded. Or as in jazz, when someone plays a beautiful riff or extemporizes, they say, "Crazy, man,"

LOFTON: But I am interested in this question of your possible madness. It's not a gratuitous question. There is a history of madness in your family.

GINSBERG: Very much so.

LOFTON: Your mom died in 1956 in a mental institution. Before that, in 1949, when you were twenty-three, you spent eight months in the Columbia Psychiatric Institute. What was this psychiatric disability and why did you spend just eight months in this institute?

GINSBERG: Well, I had a sort of visionary experience in which I heard William Blake's voice. It was probably an auditory hallucination, but it was a very rich experience.

LOFTON: This happened while you were masturbating, right?

GINSBERG: Yes, but after.

LOFTON: I want to ask you about this psychiatric disability.

GINSBERG: No, no, no. no, no, no, no, no. Sir, first of all your tone is too aggressive. You have to soften your tone, because there's an element of aggression here. There's an element almost like a police interrogation here.

LOFTON: But that's not all bad. The police, in some instances, do a good job, particularly in dealing with criminals.

GINSBERG: Sir, in this case it's a little impolite. You're being a little harsh and unfriendly and making it very difficult for me to relate to you gently and talk unguardedly and candidly.

LOFTON: There's no doubt that from what I've read about you, I don't like what you have stood for over the years. I don't like your politics, the kind of sex you engage in. So if you mean there's a hostility here toward what you are, absolutely there is.

GINSBERG: But you're talking to me as if I'm an object of some kind and not a person in front of you. I'm asking you, in a sense, to watch your manners.

LOFTON: That's interesting, because I'm not asking you to respond in any particular way. Why are you telling me how to ask questions? So, can we return to my question? What was this psychiatric disability that put you in an institute for eight months?

GINSBERG: Well, I'm not sure it really was a disability to begin with. So I can't answer the question the way you pose it.

LOFTON: But I'm asking you if it's true, that you had this disability?

GINSBERG: It's neither true nor not true.

LOFTON: But it is true that you were in an institute?

GINSBERG: Yes, I was. I had a kind of vision-

ary experience relating to a text by William Blake, “The Sick Rose.” It went: “O rose, thou art sick! / The invisible worm / That flies in the night / In the howling storm, / Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy, / And his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy.” So, it’s a very mysterious, interesting poem that keyed off a kind of religious experience, a visionary experience, a hallucinatory experience—whichever way you want to interpret it. All three descriptions are applicable and possible. Reality has many aspects.

LOFTON: Were you using drugs while you masturbated and had this experience?

GINSBERG: Not at all. I had been living very quietly, eating vegetarian diets, seeing very few people, and reading a great many religious texts: St. John of the Cross, the Bible, Plato’s Phaedrus, St. Teresa of Avila, and Blake, so I was in a kind of solitary, contemplative mood.

LOFTON: Did you put yourself into this institute?

GINSBERG: More or less. Because I questioned my own sense of reality and I couldn’t figure out the significance of the illuminative experience, whether it was a kind of traditional religious experience, where there is a sudden sense of vastness and ancientness and respect and devotional awareness or sacredness to the whole universe. Or whether this was a by-product of some lack-love longing and projection of my own feelings, or some nutty breakthrough.

LOFTON: Do you think you were better when you got out of there?

GINSBERG: I think they said I wasn’t ever really psychotic or crazy, just an average neurotic.

LOFTON: Did you go to anywhere else besides this institute?

GINSBERG: Oh, later—I’m going to a psychiatrist now.

LOFTON: I assume you’re going to a secular humanist-type psychiatrist.

GINSBERG: I never inquired about her religious beliefs.

LOFTON: Really? So you’re going to someone whose religious beliefs, whose presuppositions, you know nothing about?

GINSBERG: I know some, through body language and the response to the immediate situation in front of me, which is what I am really interested in, rather than, say, this conversation. I’m dealing with you in terms of how you display yourself here, not the history of your thoughts. I’m trying to deal with the evidence or manifestation of how you present yourself here—your harshness, aggression, and insistency and—

LOFTON: Why not call it my perseverance? Isn’t that a nicer word? Or guts? Or tenacity?

GINSBERG: I would say there is a little element of S&M in your approach. Power.

LOFTON: No. I would say this is more like the kind of sex you like.

GINSBERG: And I would say this is the kind of power relationship you like, judging from your behavior.

LOFTON: Well, that’s certainly what S&M is all about—power.

GINSBERG: And you seem to like that don’t you? Have your sexual fantasies ever involved that kind of power relationship?

LOFTON: No, not to my knowledge, I’m a Christian. So I don’t fantasize.

GINSBERG: Do you ever have sexual fantasies?

LOFTON: No.

GINSBURG: None at all?

LOFTON: No, I said I am a Christian.

GINSBURG: You've never had any sexual fantasies!

LOFTON: Before I was a Christian, I had them, absolutely.

GINSBURG: And since you're a Christian you don't?

LOFTON: No.

GINSBURG: And when you had them, did they involve any dominance/submission fantasies!

LOFTON: Mine were pretty orthodox heterosexual kinds of fantasies. But there's no doubt they were bad. And I am so glad that Jesus Christ delivered me from them.

GINSBURG: You have no erotic dreams now, at all, that you remember!

LOFTON: None that don't feature my wife, no.

GINSBURG: Yeah.

LOFTON: It's an amazing thing what Jesus can do for a person.

GINSBURG: Uh-huh.

LOFTON: Let's talk about some of your feelings over the years and see if they should be respected. In 1978, when you were on a Boston TV show, you shared your sexual preference for "young boys," and this caused an instant irate reaction from mothers who had children home on vacation from school. Is it true that you have a sexual preference for "young boys"?

GINSBURG: No, no, no. It's not accurate in the context of the broadcast.

LOFTON: Did you say you had a sexual preference for young boys?

GINSBURG: We're not on trial here. I'm trying to explain.

LOFTON: But in a way, we're all on trial.

GINSBURG: Well, then you must excuse me if I don't adopt the submissive attitude you wish. I got on the air and said that when I was young I was approached by an older man and I don't think it did me any harm. And that I like younger boys and I think that probably almost everybody has an inclination that is erotic toward younger people, including younger boys.

LOFTON: How young were the boys?

GINSBURG: In my case, I'd say fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen.

LOFTON: That you had sex with?

GINSBURG: No, unfortunately. I haven't had the chance. [laughs] No, I'm talking about my desires. I'm being frank and candid. And I'm also saying that if anyone was frank and candid, you'd probably find that in anybody's breast.

LOFTON: But why? Why do you persist in imputing your own rottenness to other people?

GINSBURG: One moment. Your question is: Why do I persist in imputing my own rottenness to other people?

LOFTON: That's right.

GINSBURG: You realize that you're using language that could be considered insulting.

LOFTON: I hope so. I think it's a rotten preference to want to have sex with young boys. And I don't think it's true that most people want to have sex with younger people.

GINSBERG: I didn't say that. You're putting words in my mouth. What I said was that most people have erotic desires for young people.

LOFTON: You mean a fantasy they don't want to act on?

GINSBERG: Most don't act on it. Of course not. But most people have in their breasts an erotic pleasure for younger people. This is a part of the general spectrum of human charm and emotion rather than sin or rottenness.

LOFTON: Do you now have a desire to have sex with young boys?

GINSBERG: I have a sexual desire for them, I must say, yes.

LOFTON: Still?

GINSBERG: Oh, the older I get, the more.

LOFTON: And after years of therapy, too. This therapy must really be doing a good job.

GINSBERG: You know what the therapy does?

LOFTON: It probably tells you it's fine, just get comfortable with it right?

GINSBERG: No, not quite. Usually it's a discussion of where this comes from and trying to find the origin of it. And find what conditioning affected me that I arrived at this particular orientation. That's all.

LOFTON: How about sin? Is it a possibility that you are a sinner?

GINSBERG: That doesn't come into play. The attempt is to understand the situation, not categorize it with knee-jerk words like sin.

LOFTON: But this sexual preference for young boys doesn't seem to be something you want to be delivered from. You smile when you talk about it.

You don't want to be cured of this, do you?

GINSBERG: I should say my sexual preference is not just for boys, but also for middle-aged men, straight men, and women. I've occasionally had fantasies about making out with trucks as well as beasts. And maybe I'll be making out with you, before it's all over. [laughs]

LOFTON: Well, maybe I could drive that truck while you make out with it, perhaps an eighteen wheeler, with the pedal to the metal.

GINSBERG: Now there's your fantasy. [laughs]

LOFTON: Excuse me. but you raised the idea of having sex with a truck.

GINSBERG: You extended it.

LOFTON: I'm just trying to accommodate you. I even offered to drive the truck. And you attacked me. But to hell with you. I won't drive the truck. Get your own truck.

GINSBERG: Oh, you can't get out of it that easily. You've already driven the truck in my mind. Gosh, you're funny. But you've got this sort of contentious obsession—God knows what's underneath all that.

LOFTON: Well, yes, He does know.

GINSBERG: You've got to remember that I'm talking on the basis of the experience of remembering my unconscious. And maybe you're not as aware of what's going on in your mind as I am about what's going on in mine. And therefore when you condemn impulses or fantasies that I'm willing to be candid about you may not be so familiar with your own mind as to know that you do contain—

LOFTON: Mr. Ginsberg, the Book of Jeremiah says that the human heart is desperately wicked. You don't have to tell me—a born-again Christian, Calvinist, Reformed, Puritan—about the va-

riety of evil fantasies human beings have. I read the Bible, sir.

GINSBURG: But you don't read your unconscious, the contents of your mind, very carefully. You don't remember your dreams, your day-dreams, subliminal thinking.

LOFTON: You know why?

GINSBURG: Why?

LOFTON: Because I'm not like you. You're a heathen who imagines vain things. You have an overactive imagination, a mental cancer.

GINSBURG: No, it's not quite like that. Do you know anything about meditation practice?

[At this point Ginsberg offers to show Lofton how to meditate. Lofton agrees but asks Ginsberg if he plans to take off his clothes. Ginsberg says no. They meditate. They resume the interview.]

LOFTON: The 1970 Current Biography says that you aren't a proselytizer for homosexuality. What does that mean?

GINSBURG: I'm observing my own mind and consciousness and reporting on that and trying to be candid. Walt Whitman, who was a very great poet and, incidentally, gay, said he thought that for poets and orators of the future the great quality would be candor, frankness, truthfulness.

LOFTON: Well, Walt Whitman suffered from, if I may say so, what might be called terminal candor—not unlike yourself.

GINSBURG: You don't like Whitman?

LOFTON: No.

GINSBURG: Have you read Whitman?

LOFTON: Some.

GINSBURG. Do you remember the name of the poem you read?

LOFTON: Yes, one that says something like: "So I make mistakes. I contradict myself. So what? I contain all things." This is absurd. Talk about arrogance.

GINSBURG: Dig this.

LOFTON: I'm diggin' it.

GINSBURG: He says: "Do I contradict myself? Very well. I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes," Do you know what he meant by that?

LOFTON: Probably nothing good. And I doubt if he knew what he meant.

GINSBURG: Yeah, he did. I know what he meant.

LOFTON: How do you know what he meant?

GINSBURG: [laughs] Because I am large. I contain multitudes.

LOFTON. But you might contradict yourself.

GINSBURG: Yes. And I certainly will contradict myself.

LOFTON: This will be one of your multitudes the ability to contradict yourself.

GINSBURG: That's what Whitman is saying.

LOFTON: It's gibberish.

GINSBURG: That our own minds are so vast that we can wind up contradicting ourselves without having to freak out about it. It's very similar to what the poet John Keats said about negative capability. He said the quality of a very great poet like Shakespeare was his ability to contain opposite ideas in the mind without an irritable reaching

out after fact and reason. Meaning that that part of the mind which judges, and irritably insists on either black or white, is only a small part of the mind. The larger mind observes the contradiction, and contains those contradictions. The mind that notices that it contradicts itself is bigger than the smaller mind that is taking one side or the other.

LOFTON: You speak very confidently about this. Where do you get your ideas about what the mind is?

GINSBERG: By direct observation through meditation practice.

LOFTON: But at most this would tell you only about your mind, wouldn't it? You were making statements about the mind.

GINSBERG: I should say I noticed this about my mind and John Keats noticed it about his mind. Sure, you might want to check out which side is right but when you get irritable about it and insist on one or the other, black or white, it's likely you'll eliminate some information from both sides.

LOFTON: Is nothing black-and-white?

GINSBERG: Nothing is completely black-and-white. Nothing.