

Sirhan's Sealed Memories: **Assassination in a Trance**

When Berkeley psychiatrist Bernard L. Diamond examined Sirhan B. Sirhan, Robert Kennedy's assassin, he discovered a bizarre twist to the case. Under hypnosis, Sirhan boasted of killing Kennedy and could write out detailed answers to Diamond's questions about the crime. But in his normal state, Sirhan could not remember the crime or any of the details. Roland Fischer's theory of partial amnesia between different states of arousal sheds new light on the mystery of Sirhan's personality.

Altered states were familiar to Sirhan. He had joined the Rosicrucians, and through their correspondence courses had learned to enter a trance by staring into his own eyes in a mirror lit by candlelight. His journey into trance was complicated by his paranoia, dating from bitter childhood memories of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Sirhan would enter the trance with thoughts of peace and love, as the Rosicrucians taught, yet emerge to find his notebooks filled with words of violence. His memory was statebound. He had no recall of writing while in a trance, but knew the handwriting was his own.

Diamond cracked Sirhan's amnesia about the night he killed Kennedy by

having him answer questions in writing while hypnotized. Sirhan was an easily hypnotized subject whose cool, arrogant personality flooded with uncontrolled emotion during hypnosis. The hypnotized Sirhan vividly reexperienced events he could not recall normally. For example, the moment after Sirhan reenacted firing his gun at Kennedy, he actually began choking, a flashback to what he felt when Kennedy's bodyguards grabbed him by the throat. Diamond feels the hypnotic state simulated Sirhan's Rosicrucian trance, and so opened the way to memories that otherwise were sealed.

Sirhan's defense lawyers used the doctrine of diminished capacity to help Sirhan escape the gas chamber. Under this legal principle, accepted in California and many other states, a defendant is held responsible for a lesser charge if he was in an abnormal mental state while performing a crime.

This doctrine implicitly recognizes that, while our laws assume a normal state of consciousness, altered states have their own reality and logic. In altered states, such as those induced by alcohol, drugs, or high fever, we are less likely to meet the legal criteria for full responsibility for our actions. A person in certain altered states may be less able to "reflect upon the gravity of his contemplated act" or to comprehend "the duty imposed by law."
—Daniel Goleman