Lesson plan by Zachary Conn

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"All Inhibitions and Barriers Seemed to Have Dissolved":

A Primary Source-Based Lesson about Evangelical Revivals, Religious Power, and the Limitations of the Idea of "Modernity"

In this lesson students wrestle with the complex connections between religious history and developments in other spheres such as politics, popular culture, and gender relations via two primary sources from the Second Great Awakening and one from a moment that might seem at first to bear little relation to the wave of evangelical revivalism that swept the early United States in the early nineteenth century. This material would fit well in a US History survey course's coverage of the Second Great Awakening or in upper-level courses on such topics as the history of American Christianity and the history of mental illness. The two early nineteenth century documents are contrasting portrayals in local newspapers of the famous itinerant preacher "Crazy" Lorenzo Dow. Born in rural western Connecticut, he experienced an intense Christian conversion while he was still a child and thereafter devoted his life to preaching the Gospel throughout the English-speaking world. Calling himself "The Eccentric Cosmopolite," Dow balanced two religious roles rarely combined in a single person: the devoted institutionalist and the passionately independent prophet. What made this possible was his position within the Methodist Church, an upstart evangelical Protestant denomination with an unusual emphasis on individual religious experience and, in the early United States, a reliance upon a clergy made up of traveling "circuit riders." At times Dow preached where the Methodist hierarchy asked him to. At other times, his human superiors' wishes lost out to the voice of Dow's personal God, who allegedly gave the preacher instructions to leave his regular circuit for destinations as far afield as Louisiana, Canada, and even the British Isles. Even when disobeying the Methodist Church's orders Dow saw himself as advancing the denomination's interests by helping spread its hardcore form of Protestantism, which took many of Luther's ideas—*Sola Scriptura*, the Priesthood of All Believers, and more—to what we might conceive as those principles' logical limits. Dow was so committed to his inward religious experience that he embraced his enemies' would-be epithet of "Crazy Dow"—far better, as he saw it, to be thought mad than insincere. In addition to his tireless preaching tours, Dow published a number of sermons and a continually updated memoir based upon the journals he kept of his travels; it impossible to calculate rigorous Best Seller Lists for the early United States but the memoir was likely one of the most popular books of the era. The third primary source is something of a "curveball": an excerpt from a nostalgic personal essay by the British writer Sharon Walker about the author's youthful participation in the so-called Second Summer of Love in late 80s Britain. The purpose of this reading is to help make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar, by getting students to consider the resemblance between rituals with which they are broadly familiar—"partying"—and the seemingly exotic frontier "revival meetings" at which large numbers congregated to pledge themselves to Christ in the early nineteenth century.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the first newspaper article portray Lorenzo Dow's message, conduct, and effect on other people?
2. What do you think the writer means by the claim "That a man should be suffered thus to destroy, with impunity, the repose of the credulous is to be lamented"?
3. How does the second article portray Dow's message, conduct, and effect on other people?
4. What do you think the writer means by the claim that Dow asked for a display of God's power and "it came"?
5. What accounts for the differences between the two sources' portrayals of Lorenzo Dow? Do you think one is a more reliable source than the other, or do they both have something to add to our understandings of the Second Great Awakening?
6. What can we learn from these sources about understandings in the early United States of what we would now call psychology?
7. Why do you think I assigned Sharon Walker's piece alongside the sources about Lorenzo Dow?
8. The French philosopher and historian of science Bruno Latour has provocatively argued that "We were never modern." What do you think he might mean by this? Do you think that our three sources support this argument or undermine it?

"A Letter from Lexington" (*Maryland Herald*, November 16, 1804)

A letter from Lexington dated Oct. 20th says, "On Tuesday last arrived in this town, the celebrated pedestrian & itinerant preacher, LORENZO DOW. This extraordinary character is a native of New England – he set out early in life to preach the Gospel – he has travelled on foot throughout most of the states in the union, and a considerable part of Europe. He refuses to receive money, or any other compensation, except a sufficiency of food and cloathing [sic] to make him comfortable. In Virginia he had "camp meetings" which were numerously attended – In his preaching, he displays considerable ingenuity; and by his gestures and expressions, possesses a peculiar facility of catching the attention of his audience. He pretends to have a knowledge of futurity; and has in this place, predicted the death of several females, some of whom appear much alarmed. –That a man should be suffered thus to destroy, with impunity, the repose of the credulous is to be lamented; but that he should be taken into the bosom of those who profess the religion of Jesus, is truly astonishing. His greatest admirers must know, that he is either a fanatic or a willful deceiver. – In either case, the consequence of his prophecies to persons of weak nerves must be dreadful – the intimate connection between the body and the mind is such, that the health of the one depends on the other. A depression of spirits, consequently must produce an effect on the corporeal system. And for a person who does not possess a strong mind to be seriously told by a popular preacher, who professes to read in the book of future events, that he should not remain more than a month an inhabitant of the world. Once to sap the foundation of his happiness, and might generate some disease, which would, in reality, accomplish the awful prediction."

"Camp Meeting," by an anonymous contributor to the *New Hampshire Gazzette* (re-printed in *Kennebec Gazette* July 17, 1805)

"I have lately had the pleasure of attending a Camp-Meeting, so called, at Norton, Massachusetts; held on a plan, familiar to those that have been so remarkably blessed in the Southern States, within a few years past. The meeting began on Friday June 7th, and continued till the morning of Monday

the 10th...Monday morning, we again assembled at 7 o'clock in the grove – at which time brother Lorenzo Dow delivered a profitable sermon from Acts xiii.41. After which, singular as it may seem to those who are not acquainted with this singular character, he proposed to all that were disposed to enter into a covenant to serve God – to come forward and give him the friendly hand. He began a parting hymn, and it was supposed that not less than 4 or 500 people by this token solemnly made an engagement to be for God. Of all the views I ever beheld, I must say that this to my mind was the most agreeable. After singing a parting hymn, he uttered a short ejaculation for God's power to be displayed. It came. Saints rejoiced, mourners felt their desires increase, and a solemn awe seemed to rest upon every mind. Surely it was no other than the house God, and the gate of heaven."

Excerpt from "Thirty Years Since the Second Summer of Love" (Sharon Walker in *The Guardian*, June 1, 2018)

It was the year I got my first job, the year I broke up with my boyfriend, the year I flew to Barbados and met Imran Khan on a beach, but of all the crazy life-changing moments, none had more impact than the night I first experienced acid house, age 22, in the summer of 1988. I'd arrived at Heaven nightclub, underneath the Charing Cross railway arches, on a hot Sunday afternoon to find my friends had already gone in – you didn't risk hanging back and missing your chance – so I joined the queue of kids dressed in the acid house uniform of Day-Glo dungarees and smiley T-shirts. I must have had the heads up on the attire as I was wearing baggy yellow surf shorts I'd just bought in San Diego, a far cry from the carefully curated layers of black that usually passed as a clubbing outfit, but other than that I had no idea what to expect.

The minute I was through the door I was swept into a cavernous room of flashing lasers, dry ice and sweating bodies. After the self-consciously cool West End club scene I'd dipped into in the mid-80s, the club night Spectrum was a revelation. From the moment you stepped on to the dance floor everybody loved you, and everyone was smiling and swigging out of each other's water bottles. Girls crowded around the mirrors in the bathroom telling each other they were beautiful. A girl in a swimsuit tipped buckets of water over her sweat-drenched body. I'd never seen anything like it. All inhibitions and barriers seemed to have dissolved in a heady mix of youth, summertime, the magical new music and, no doubt, a new empathy-inducing drug, called ecstasy, that many people had begun taking.

I experienced something like a religious conversion. "This," I thought, "is what I was born for." Spectrum became my regular Monday-night haunt – that original party had been a monthly all-dayer. That first time I stayed all night and emerged squinting into the daylight, I went straight to my job at a fitness magazine with my ears still ringing, sure that I'd discovered this incredible secret…

You could say the acid house movement was pure hedonism, but bigger cultural changes came of it, as people began breaking away from the "greed is good" 1980s. That summer certainly had a huge impact on me. The bleak depression and feelings of isolation triggered during the last year of university, after a painful break-up, had lifted in the swirl of dry ice and smiling faces and, for the first time in my life, I'd truly felt part of something. Even now, 30 years on, I'm still drawn to that kind of optimistic energy and moments of connection and, like many of the friends I met that summer, it's hard to stop me jumping up and down to an uplifting Balearic beat.