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## A brief trip with Caveh Zahedi.

By grippinglyauthentic

From the biography on his website: “[Caveh Zahedi](#) began making films while studying philosophy at Yale University. After graduating, he went to Switzerland to try to work with Jean-Luc Godard, but Godard refused to meet with him after he phoned Godard at three in the morning to offer his filmmaking services. Disappointed, Caveh returned to the United States and got a job trying to teach video to autistic children.

When fellow workers started mistaking him for one of the autists, Caveh quit his job and moved to Paris to try to raise money for a film about French poet Arthur Rimbaud.”

The story continues in both heartbreaking and amusing directions, and might be one of the most self-effacing biographies you’ll read about someone on their own website. It also proves that nothing can stop Caveh Zahedi.

He is the winner of an IFP [Gotham Award](#) for “Best Feature Not Playing At A Theater Near You,” the Rome Prize from the [American Academy in Rome](#), and a Sundance Documentary grant. His films have won critical acclaim, yet they haven’t been widely seen. Each is autobiographical and fearless in the way they investigate Caveh’s idiosyncrasies and addictions, which probably doesn’t equal box-office success, but the film maker creates what is true to himself, and we like that quite a bit.

Caveh was good enough to speak with us over the last couple of months, and here’s what he had to say:



**grippinglyauthentic**: Let's start with where we first "met" you, so to speak, which was the segment of [Waking Life](#) – Richard Linklater's beautiful and ground-breaking film – called "The Holy Moment." Can you tell us how you got involved with the project and how your segment was set up? Were you simply asked to have a conversation or was it scripted?

**Caveh Zahedi**: I got a package in the mail one day from Rick Linklater, who I'd met at Sundance in 1991 when we both had films in competition there. I was there with [A Little Stiff](#) and he was there with *Slacker* and we liked each other's films and became friends.

The moment I got the package in the mail is actually documented in my 1999 year-long video diary film entitled [In the Bathtub of the World](#).

In the package was a scripted scene as well as animation samples by [Bob Sabiston](#), the head animator, to show me what it would look like. I loved the animation but I didn't think I could deliver those scripted lines very convincingly. I explained this to Rick and he said "No problem, we'll figure it out when you get here."

So I flew to Austin and Rick asked me if there was something else I'd rather say instead. I said I had four ideas for things to talk about and he asked to hear them. I told him the four ideas and he said he liked all of them and that we might as well shoot them all and that he would decide later. We shot the four scenes in about half an hour and that was that.



He later used one of the deleted scenes for his own segment about Philip K. Dick. That scene (about a dream I'd had) was pretty much verbatim what I had said on tape, and he simply re-enacted it. If you listen to it carefully, you can hear the same verbal rhythms and inflections that I typically use. I thought it was a really good idea to put that scene in the movie at that point but with his character saying it.

The idea of the holy moment I kind of just made up, but the term is used in a slightly different context in [A Course in Miracles](#), a "channeled" book that I was obsessed with for many years. In that context, it refers to a moment in which two individuals surrender their egos to what the Course calls the "Holy Spirit."

**ga**: We're not surprised that you talked about what you wanted to. You seem incredibly adept at being Caveh Zahedi, at stating your mind and being present, for better or worse. The performance felt spontaneous. What you were saying and how you said it, along with Sabiston's ethereal animation, reminded us of those perfect little epiphanies we have when a degree of clarity enters our minds and we see what is truly important to us. We'd like to live in those moments, though it would probably be exhausting.

Experiencing someone on a level that feels authentic and sincere is always elevating, almost like a kind of

high. Can you talk about some of your own epiphanies, when some piece of seemingly divine information opened up to you and maybe changed the way you saw the world around you or the way you lived in that world?



**CZ:** A lot of my epiphanies have happened on drugs. I was on [LSD](#) once and I “saw” a Buddha with a flower in his outstretched hand. And what I got from that was that “beauty” (symbolized in this case by the flower) is always available and right in front of you and that you don’t have to go looking for it – it’s right there in front of you!

**ga:** It seems that accessibility is an issue you constantly deal with, whether or not anyone will see your work. Admittedly, it took Richard Linklater to introduce us to you, and fortunately what we saw in *Waking Life* was compelling enough to inspire some investigation, to make us seek out your work.

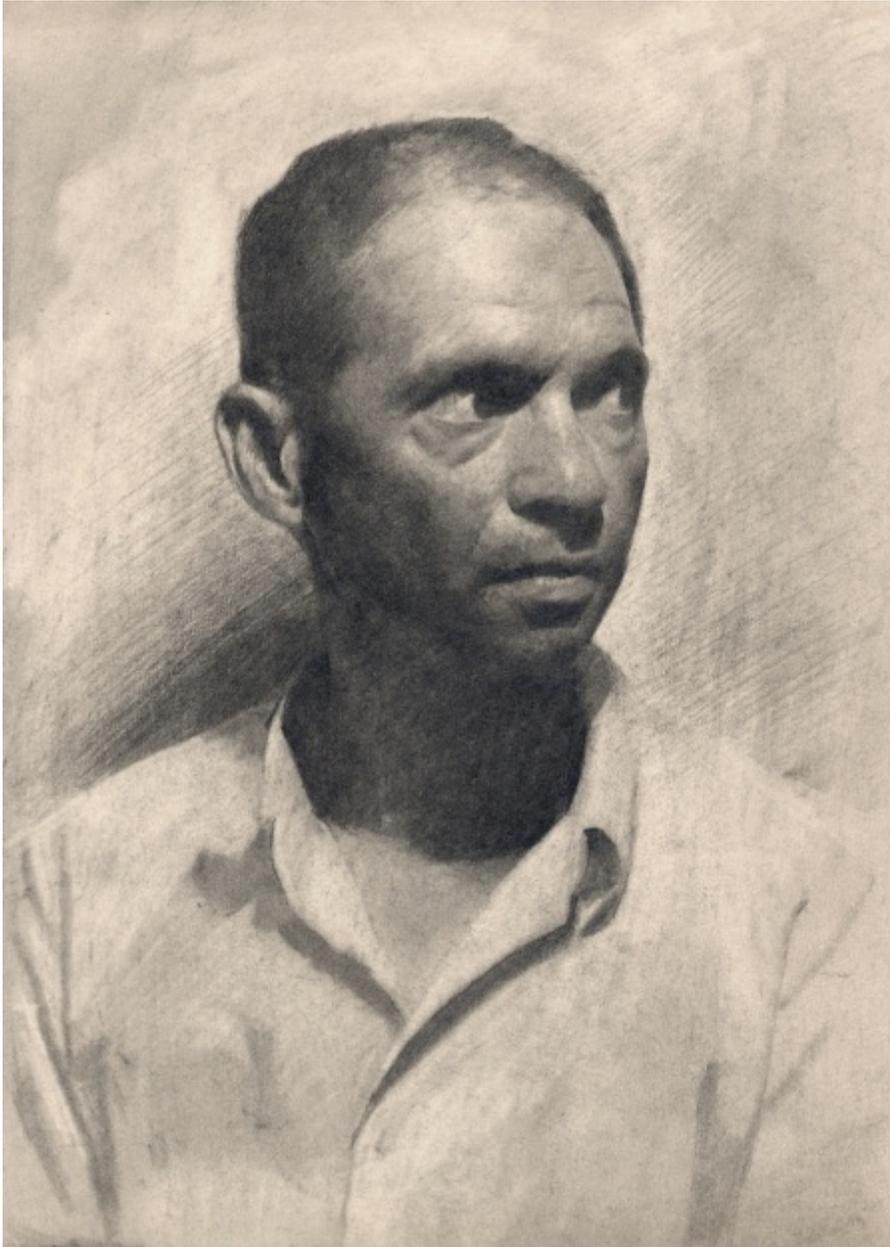
You’ve collaborated with film makers who reach larger audiences with some regularity, whether working with them in creating a film or starring in their work. Is there some level of frustration you feel regarding the size of your audience?

**CZ:** There is definitely a level of frustration regarding the limited audience I’ve been able to reach. It may be that having a small audience is a condition of the type of work that I make, but I love a lot of films that reach a much larger audience, so I would prefer that.

One of my favorite filmmakers is [Lars Von Trier](#), and he manages to reach a much larger audience without sacrificing depth or extremity or innovation. If I could have the filmography of anyone other than myself, I would choose his filmography (with the exception of his pre-*Breaking the Waves* films).

**ga:** Even when Von Trier makes a film that isn’t necessarily easy to “enjoy,” he seems faithful to his ideas and faultless in his integrity. These are qualities we appreciate in your work as well, admirable in a business where art is often turned into product, integrity traded for market appeal. Though Von Trier reaches a large audience in Europe, there’s still some strong resistance to a lot of his work here, especially because of the explicit sexual content.

Do you think your willingness to talk about drugs in your films is something that scares people?



Caveh Zahedi by [Michael Grimaldi](#),

2008.

**CZ:** I don't know if my openness about drugs is holding me back from broader acceptance. In a way, it's part of the appeal of my work, I think, since there aren't a lot of filmmakers who are open about it.

I gave a talk on hallucinogenics recently – really just the autobiography of my drug use, and it was given at [Pete's Candy Store](#) in Brooklyn – and it was pretty packed and people seemed pretty hungry to hear and talk about this stuff. It would certainly be great if there were an intelligent debate about drugs for a change, and I'd totally be interested in participating in that. I love marijuana, but I think hallucinogenics are the really interesting drugs.

**ga: Does being a parent have any impact on drug usage for you?**

## Caveh Zahedi: My wife doesn't like me to get stoned in front of our toddler, so it means there are fewer opportunities.

**ga:** As far as audience-friendly films, is directing someone else's story something you would consider?

**CZ:** I would certainly consider directing someone else's story if I loved it (which is rare). I once got hold of the last screenplay that [John Cassavetes](#) had written before he died, and I thought it was ASTONISHING. I tried to get the rights to direct it but I was unable. I would have loved to direct that particular script. But it's probably the only one I've ever read that I was DYING to make. The directors, other than Cassavetes, that get me excited – Von Trier, [Ken Loach](#), [Lukas Moodyson](#), [Michael Haneke](#), [Frank Capra](#), [Mike Leigh](#), [Andrei Tarkovsky](#).

I recently saw a film by the [Safdie brothers](#) called *Daddy Longlegs* that I loved. Other films I saw recently that I loved are *Head On* by [Fatih Akin](#) (which is not terribly recent but which I only saw recently) and *Precious* by Lee Daniels.

**ga:** Not many filmmakers talk about drugs or other vices in the autobiographical and very personal way that you do. When watching your hilarious [Unmaking of I Am A Sex Addict](#), (we've never experienced a more honest, sincere, and illuminating "making of" before, and as is the case with Caveh's work, his unabashed candor made us laugh tears), we were struck by how well the medium of animation fit with your voice and energy. This brought to mind the [Tripping with Caveh](#) project we read about, which seems perfect for animation, especially by the people at Flat Black Films – Bob Sabiston's animation studio. It's easy to imagine, after seeing the hallucinatory work they did with *Waking Life*, that they could artfully illustrate your drug experience in a unique and compelling way.

Is *Tripping with Caveh* still on the table?

**CZ:** The *Tripping* project is indefinitely on hold. I might resurrect it if the right person to do it with comes along, but I don't like to repeat myself. Your animation idea sounds like a really good way to do it actually, so maybe I'll do it after all.

>> [See some of Caveh's feature-length films here.](#) <<

**ga:** Can you give some background on how *The Unmaking of I Am A Sex Addict* came to be?

**CZ:** The audio for that had been recorded at a monthly story-telling series in San Francisco, but there was no video. I was at a party one night and I met Brent Hoff, the editor of [Wholphin](#). He had seen [I Am A Sex Addict](#) and asked if I would be interested in making something specifically for Wholphin. I asked if he could pay me, and he said he could pay me \$1,000. So I said okay. In trying to think of something that I could do for that amount of money, it occurred to me to animate the audio from the story-telling series.

**ga:** It's perfect. The animation is manic and rough and compliments your voiceover. It's great to watch while high. (Segue.) Talk to us about drugs.

**CZ:** The drug experience for me is essentially a religious experience. I was an atheist before I started experimenting with hallucinogens, and I'm not anymore. Most of my experiences of "God" or of mysticism or of the oneness and aliveness of all things come from drugs.

It varies from trip to trip, but under the influence of hallucinogens, it is usually clear as day to me that God exists. Sometimes it is a sudden and incontrovertible awareness of God's presence. Sometimes, this takes

the form of a kind of direct communication – God “speaks” to me, usually through a kind of telepathy, but with actual words being exchanged. Sometimes, God speaks “through” me, with me uttering the words out loud, and without knowing what exactly is going to come out of my mouth. A few times, I felt that I was “seeing” God, never directly but in some indirect form – once as a clock with the equation “ $E = MC^2$ ” written on it, once as a blue light that suffused everything. The clock moved towards me (in my mind’s eye) and I felt God’s LOVE, and I was stunned by the overwhelming intensity of it – a trillion times more intense than anything I could imagine. Another time, God appeared to me in the form of David Bowie, in a limousine and incredibly joyful and alive. I don’t think that God actually resembles any of these forms – just that these were the forms God took to communicate something specific to me.

I don’t subscribe to any religion. I’m a big fan of “A Course in Miracles.” That book really speaks to me. But it’s the opposite of a religion.

I tried to make a film about mushrooms at one point but I got sidetracked. It’s a tricky thing to convey, and I’m no longer sure that drugs are salvational in the way I used to think. By that I mean that I used to agree with [Terence McKenna](#)’s idea that hallucinogens are the only thing that can turn you around on a dime. But my experience is that, however transformative, we still have to do the daily work of living and working and coming to grips with this dimension of existence. I think hallucinogens are a great tool for understanding the big picture, but the day-to-day tasks are still where it’s at and where I need to put my attention. It can be very tempting to “transcend” the real, but it’s getting along with your girlfriend or boyfriend when he or she is being an asshole that is the true challenge and where the ultimate deep internal growth lies.

**ga:** What *is* your day-to-day life like? Are you constantly working on films, still teaching, pursuing other creative endeavors? And do you ever feel mired in the often mundane daily tasks? Transcending the real is an increasingly attractive idea today, when the “real” is becoming darker, when we’re bombarded by the water crisis, global warming, endless war, the expanding chasm between rich and poor, the buying and selling of government, and so on...

**CZ:** My day-to-day life is fairly mundane. I teach, which also involves a lot of administrative drudgery. I have a 18 month-old son, which is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me but also means I’m perpetually sleep-deprived and negotiating with a toddler’s world view.



We asked Caveh to send images of himself. This is what we got. He asked, "Is this too weird?" Nope.

I am constantly working on films in my spare moments, but these are fewer and farther between than ever before. If I don't spend a certain amount of time each week on creative endeavors, I become unhappy so I really have no choice but to keep doing it. I also enjoy it more than almost anything else, so it's really a no-brainer.

I often feel held back by the need to accomplish daily tasks which I experience as essentially mind-numbing and mundane. And yes, the "real" is becoming darker and more stressful – air travel has become less and less pleasant, the invention of the automated phone tree is a minor circle of Hell, people are busier and more stressed out than ever before, etc.

**ga:** Were drugs ever about escape for you, or have they always been a tool for enlightenment?

**CZ:** Psychedelics have never been about escape for me. They are way too scary and demanding for that.

But there was a time in my life when I was smoking too much marijuana in the sense that it was getting harder to enjoy life if I wasn't stoned and I had to pull back from that temptation.

It has always seemed to me that being "evolved" would mean being happy and content and fascinated no matter how mundane the external circumstances of one's life. In that sense, I think that the mundane can be a real teaching tool, in much the same way that the challenges of a relationship are always very growthful. Which is part of the reason that I try to make films about the mundane as opposed to the "spiritual." I think the intersection of those two things is the leading edge of personal growth.

**ga:** You've studied philosophy, and we're curious if there were particular thinkers who contributed significantly to your own personal philosophies? We wouldn't consider it inappropriate to call you a maverick, and we're always curious about how such individuals define themselves, where they draw their inspiration or take their cues from.

**CZ:** As far as philosophical influences, I was always really taken by [Nietzsche](#), [Heidegger](#), [Hegel](#), [Kierkegaard](#), [Heracleitus](#), [Parmenides](#), [Deleuze](#) and [Derrida](#). If I have a world view, it is probably a cross between Hegel and Heidegger but my spiritual worldview is mostly the result of drug experiences I've had.

The single text that has been the most influential on my world view is *A Course in Miracles*. I've read that book very, very carefully several times and it strikes me as absolutely dead on. I have also been very influenced and affected by the writings of [Maurice Blanchot](#) as well as the poetry of [Arthur Rimbaud](#), [Wallace Stevens](#), and [John Ashbery](#).

**ga:** Where and what do you teach, and how long have you been doing it?

**CZ:** I teach Screen Studies at [The New School](#) in New York. I've only been teaching here since the Fall, but I've taught on and off as an adjunct for the past ten years (in San Francisco).

**ga:** Have you met students who give you hope?



**CZ:** Absolutely. I really like young people. They're full of potential. Anything's still possible for them. I find them more conscious and more evolved generally than my own generation at their age.

**ga:** Regarding film, what are you working on now?

**CZ:** I'm shooting an 18 part, 18 hour mini-series. It's very loosely based on James Joyce's [Ulysses](#). It's a film about a day in real time, which each hour of the day represented by an hour-long episode.

**ga:** Where did the idea come from?

**CZ:** I read *Ulysses* in college and became obsessed. I wanted to make a film of it even back then and applied for permission to do just that as my senior project but my request was denied. I've wanted to do it ever since but was always waiting for the right time. I was about to turn fifty which was both daunting and seemed to call for a real taking stock, so I decided to make that the day that the *Ulysses* film would be about. Joyce's *Ulysses* was largely autobiographical, and my adaptation is entirely autobiographical as well.

**ga:** Will it be scripted?

**CZ:** Yes and no. The entire day itself was shot with three cameras running at all times: one on me, one on my wife – Amanda Field – and one on our 18 month-old son. So there is a random element to the film. But based on what happened, I will be shooting additional material – memories, fantasies, and digressions – and these bits will be scripted.

**ga:** Is there a timeline for the project?

**CZ:** It's essentially a mini-series. The idea is to do it as one hour episodes, each hour of screen time corresponding to a different hour of the day. I'm imagining it for television but it could also end up on the internet or DVD.

**ga:** How does Amanda feel about being on camera all day?

**CZ:** She has mixed feelings. She used to hate this kind of thing, but always liked the end result, so she's sort of come around. This said, there is inevitably conflict over the extent of the intrusion. In the case of this film, she was against having a camera person in the bedroom filming the baby sleeping, because she was (understandably) worried that it would interfere with his napping schedule, which for me is a small price to pay for a shot of him falling asleep, sleeping, and waking up. So we always end up with some conflict.

**ga:** Does your wife have experience in film?

**CZ:** She's not an actress and doesn't have a film background. But she enjoys acting, and has taken some acting classes.

**ga:** Was she ready and willing to be involved?

**CZ:** I had to talk her into it, but she has less resistance to the idea than she used to have.

**ga:** How is the overall dynamic of having the whole family on film?

**CZ:** One thing I've noticed is that having cameras film us for an entire day really affects our usual dynamic. We end up being less intimate, less relaxed, and less connected than we would be otherwise. It's certainly not a portrait of a typical day, but I think something of who we are comes through, even if it's who we are under stress.

**ga:** And how is the project progressing?

**CZ:** It's going well. It's hugely ambitious – by far the most challenging thing I've ever done, so it's going very, very slowly. I have no idea how long it will take to finish, but probably several years (hopefully less than ten).

**ga:** We will definitely keep our eyes open for it. Thank you for your time, Caveh. Any words you'd like to close with?

**CZ:** I've always liked this quote by Kafka: "The true way goes over a rope which is not stretched at any great height but just above the ground. It seems more designed to make people stumble than to be walked upon."

*Images courtesy of Caveh Zahedi, Michael Grimaldi, and, of course, Google.*

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