

THE LOSS OF SUBSTANCE: DRUGS

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I don't consider myself much of an expert on drug addiction, because I never did drugs all that much, prescription or otherwise. I took a few 'bennies' (Benzedrine) back in the late 1950s, some Dexedrine in the early sixties, and a bit of Methedrine in the later 1960 during the band (performing music) days. And sure, I smoked pot from time to time back then, and 'yes' to Peyote, a bit of Opium, even LCD and other hallucinogens, but nothing that I later had to shake off, unless it was the aftereffects of LSD. That did take some time, and I will address this later on. For now, I will start with pot.

Marijuana

Back in the late 1950s when I so desperately wanted to be part of the then-fading Beat movement, aside from alcohol, it was all about speed and pot. Sure, there were hard drugs back then, like heroin, but I never had any. However, friends of mine and people I knew died from them, for sure. And I can remember sitting around watching addicts with their elaborate paraphernalia cook the stuff up and inject it into their veins, while I stood by spellbound, a rapt observer.

And yes, following the direction of the Beat poets, we would sometimes drive from town to town hitting drug stores for the brands of cough syrup or inhalers that had a little bit of codeine or speed in them. You could only buy one at a store (something like that), but if you made enough stops, traveled far enough, you had something you could get high on, although the aftereffects were literally nauseating, at least with the inhalers. Back then we would try anything.

Just out of high school (which I never finished) I took Peyote in the little basement room where I lived, the one where every spring and fall (when the rains came) a little river would run right down the middle of the floor. I chewed the Peyote buds, threw it all up, and went on to see tigers leaping in my mind and all kinds of other marvelous apparitions. So this was what the term 'mind-altering substances' was all about, I thought. At the time I was reading everything by Kerouac, Ginsberg, and the Beat poets, plus hitchhiking back and forth to New York City with friends like Bob Dylan and other players.

Later in 1967 I recall watching Eric Clapton and Cream shoot up speed in the green room before playing at the Fillmore Auditorium in San Francisco for their first U.S. Gig. My band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, opened for Cream in August of 1967. While a performing musician, I saw a fair amount of that kind of drug thing, but never shot up myself. So much for speed; pot was a different thing.

I once had a whole pound of marijuana hidden under the floorboards in the attic of the place where I lived, and I worried a lot about its being there, that is: until we smoked every last fiber of it. And it was not even very good pot, probably nothing like I hear and read they have available today. It did a little something to us, and we were happy about that. Back then my generation wanted so much to find its way out of our ultra-straight upbringing into whatever was cool and relaxed. I would drive into downtown Detroit late nights and catch jazz greats like Cannonball Adderley playing at clubs like the Minor Key. Things like that.

In the late 1950s, as a high-schooler in Ann Arbor, I hung around whatever was bohemian, including the "Promethean," a one-horse Beat coffee shop in Ann Arbor where they served mulled cider, regular coffee, and listened to Shelley Berman records. We would sit around, smoke cigarettes, drink coffee, and talk about serious things. The only movies we watched back then were the dark, tragic European flicks like Ingmar Bergman films. The Promethean did not last long.

We soon graduated to the private houses and apartments in Ann Arbor where jazz was being played weekend nights and marijuana was being smoked. Because we were just kids, we were seldom offered any of that precious weed, but we used to snort the ashes from the butts of joints in the ashtrays for a kick. Now that is dedication!

Pot has never been my thing. In truth, I get a little paranoid on it, but that is not my main complaint. For me, in my experience, it was pretty much a waste of time. Many years ago I had hopes that pot might enhance my creativity. But when I rather thoroughly checked it out, smoking it and then trying to play music, paint canvas, or write a poem or something meaningful, in every case the next day when I took a look at whatever I had done the night before, it was worthless, like a bad joke. Humiliating.

What I thought was so creative when I was high on pot (and doing it) was trivial and laughable come morning. The creativity was all in my imagination; it literally went up in smoke. In other words, pot was not a high point for me and I never become that attached to it. But I did get really fucked up on it from time to time, pot and hashish.

I can remember one time during the band days. We were playing at a teen club in upstate Michigan somewhere. Dressed out in suits and ties, we were also stoned out of our mind. This was when Iggy Pop was playing drums for us. I can remember looking across the stage at my brother Dan (who was playing lead guitar, while I played rhythm) and the two of our eyes meeting, glued together in the moment. Neither of us had the remotest idea of what chord came next in the song we were playing. We were freaked, but always, somehow, at the last instant, we would find that chord. You get the idea. That was pot, an extravagant diversion or distraction.

In time, marijuana was for me just not worth bothering with. I did not get out of it as much as I had to put into it, so I just let it go. Yet I have known (and still know) so many good friends that can't live without it, friends who use it every day and every night even today. In fact the first thing some do each morning is roll a day's worth of joints and line them up all in a row. I have watched them do it.

And I have also seen these same friends smoke and wax eloquent, at least to their own mind. I can't follow them half the time and am not interested in much of what they say when stoned. It sounds to me just like they are stoned. It is odd to see sixty-something year olds wanting to get away from it all by smoking marijuana. Many have more or less smoked their lives away and never did what they set out to do. It would be one thing if they were happy, but many are not, although some seem to be. Most still mean to do what they once hoped to do if given time, but it would seem to me a little too late for that scenario to play out happily.

In my case pot was just a waste of time, pleasant at best, nerve-racking at worst. I have no moral judgment against using it, but in my observation it seems to me that the folks I know who dote on pot seem none the wiser for it and worse, have become mostly transmitters with no receivers. In other words, they can talk, but they no longer listen. They are effectively 'gone'

when it comes to a two-way conversation, which is the definition of conversation. This then to me is sad.

If I have learned anything from using marijuana, it is that my mind, just as I have it at birth, is already creative. For me, pot only confused and stained an otherwise clear mental sky. I much prefer my natural mind just as it is these days and I realize that most drugs cannot in anyway enhance the mind, any more than you can salt the salt. Enough said. We all have our opinions.

Now LSD is a whole different story and here I 'am' very vulnerable. Let me preface my remarks by pointing out that LSD in my opinion was a generational thing, something that had its place in time and, although I am sure they still make it, I doubt that the experience could be quite the same today as it was in the early 1960s. And before I jump into LSD, let me say a few words about prescription drugs.

If illegal drugs are the tip of the iceberg, then prescription drugs make up the rest of it. For all the hullabaloo about pot and LSD, almost nothing is said or written about the effects of prescription drugs, although they are ubiquitous. This is gradually changing, I know. I am not one for any kind of prescription drugs if they can be avoided, and seldom take even aspirin or ibuprofen. Tylenol in more than a single dose makes me sick and so do things like Vicodin. I can't use them.

When I see the endless cabinets of pills and drugs that many people use, I cannot help but feel compassion for these folks. Drug after drug, day after day, pill after pill, these drugs may relieve symptoms or be even more useful than that, but I also imagine that they (layer on layer) obscure the crystal-like clarity of the mind we were born with, that same mind that is the one key to fulfilling our deepest wishes. Drugs, for all their value, can cloud, obscure, and put on hold any opportunity to wake up. Some of you reading this with more experience with prescription drugs than I have should tell this story. That being said, back to my own account. Of the drugs I have had, the only ones that I must honestly say actually led to greater understanding of myself are the hallucinogens, in particular LSD.

I have tried several kinds of hallucinogens, including soaking and chewing up Morning Glory seeds (the 'Heavenly Blue' variety), letting them do their thing in my stomach, then throwing it all up, and lastly, getting high. I did that, but not too often for obvious reasons.

I would really need an entire blog or two to go into detail about LSD, its effects, and its residue in the mind stream. Suffice it to say here that of all the drugs I have experimented with (not really that many), LSD is the only one that made me think, that actually expanded my mental horizons in any permanent way. I only took it a few times, and had only two of those trips that were worthwhile in my opinion, but they were doozies. I will try to explain.

First, a few words about the advent of LSD back in the early 1960s. Before any of us ever tried LSD, we had heard about it. Like all new highs and drugs, coming events cast their shadows, and the shadow of LSD was formidable and scary. Everyone agreed that it was not simply another "high" but, as science has documented, it was a "mind-altering" drug. That alone gave us pause, because we had no idea of what "mind-altering" meant in this context. We thought pot and any old other drugs were already mind-altering, so this brought us up short... but only for a while. We didn't really know what the mind itself was, much less what it would be if you altered it. You get the idea.

And sure enough, LSD was mind-altering, and for many of us not just for a day or part of a day,

but for all time, and for a reason. And here I am pointing out a very important concept, so please, those of you interested, take note. LSD was not powerful just because it was a chemical concoction that somehow altered the mind, which it did appear to, but mostly because none of us back then knew anything about what the mind was in the first place, and this fact is key. It is said that the great Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche took acid and reported that nothing happened. That should tell us something right there. He certainly knew the mind.

It has taken me some thirty-five years of practicing meditation to know enough about the mind itself to get under and beyond the imprint left by LSD way back then, because LSD imprints deep! But I have done that and can report from my own experience that the mind cannot be altered by drugs or anything else, not in its essence or truth. However, experiences can dig deeper than we can otherwise reach in our day-to-day life experience, and unless we can get back to and beyond (get our arms around) where the drugs imprinted, we may never know the difference, and live with life-experience boundaries set by drugs, rather than know the true mind itself. This is indeed sad.

Therefore, at least in my case, no amount of psychologizing solved the disturbance that LSD wrought on how I saw the world. These drugs can change our perception and radically, but they cannot change the nature of our mind. However, to know that we have to actually know the true nature of our mind, and meditation is the only method I have found that can do that. I have pointed something important out here, but this topic deserves more discussion. For now I will return to the effects of LSD.

What LSD did back then was to remove the separation of subject and object in my mind, at least temporarily. It let me clearly see that what I saw out there in the world is a direct reflection of my biases and prejudices in here within my own psychology and mind and, that as I change my mind, what I see out there in the 'real' world changes accordingly. That is the good or wonderful part of LSD, and that is a huge lesson.

The bad part or downside of LSD is that the experience can be so disruptive and unsettling that it can take years to reestablish any kind of mental stability, not because you become crazy, but because the concept of a "Self" you once had is so shattered by the LSD experience (and rightly so) that it takes that long to reassemble itself again. Let me very briefly clarify, if I can, and this is not simple.

As the Buddhists point out, what we call our "Self" has (according to them) no true or permanent existence. This is not to say there is no self or that you ever can somehow lose your self. That is a pure misunderstanding of the teachings. The self will always be there, if only as a narrator and the organizer of our lives, the little voice that tells "you have a dentist appointment tomorrow."

What is not so understood IMO is that the self is not a permanent thing, but rather a composite, a collection of things we have gathered around us over time (like a warm blanket) to make us feel like we really are someone -- another habit. Actually, what we call our self changes yearly, monthly, and daily, as we forget about this thing or other and identify with some new thing. The idea of a permanent self is a convenient illusion, a comfort blanket that seemingly promises continuity and (by inference) some sort of personal immortality, as in: the immortality of our particular persona. Even a cursory look at our history will show how much the idea of our self changes over time. What was central to our self image when a kid (a new bike) might well be totally different later in life (a new wife or husband), and so on. The self remains, but what we consider important to our self image is more like a kaleidoscope, ever changing. We could have ten blogs on this.

My point here is that LSD (and other hallucinogens) shatters the self into a million pieces, forcing us to face the actual reality of our true nature, which we may perhaps glimpse. However, this self-shattering experience is so profound that it takes us, days, months, and years to put our Humpty-Dumpty self back together again, if only to cover up our emptiness. In my own case, it took years to stabilize myself after LSD, which is not something most folks can afford. And lastly, an air-tight self image (like most of us try to maintain) is not something that is even helpful. Humpty Dumpty no matter how carefully rearranged is still: Humpty Dumpty. I could go on.

In summary, while most drugs I have known are at best a pleasant waste of time, and some are addictive and vicious, only the mind-expanding hallucinogens gave me anything I would consider at all valuable in the long term, and even the useful effects of LSD and its kin are better (and more safely) today attained through the various forms of meditation, the true mind-expanding practice. But, as mentioned, this is just my opinion, just me. You will have your own story and objects may appear larger in your rear-view mirror than they in fact are.<G>

Knowing what I know now, I would never consider using drugs of any kind, but rather concentrate on learning to know and use my mind.

In the next Substance Blog, I will discuss my very real addiction to caffeine.

