

What the Drug Culture Meant

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For American kids in the 1970s, the term "drugs" referred to more than chemical compounds or plant extracts, more than a disease or a relief. Drugs, particularly marijuana and psychedelics, had cultural and counter-cultural meaning; they were, for us, symbols of the fact that we were different sorts of people than our parents and principals and political leaders: more open-minded, as it were, and more adventurous. Drugs were aesthetic (they affected our music and design arts and our heads fundamentally) and they were political, signaling anti-authoritarianism or an entire rejection of "the establishment." The term 'drug culture' is a sensible representation of the scope of the symbolic and economic activity; the drug culture was our native land. It was a resistant ethos, with rituals and sacred texts (by Abbie Hoffman, Timothy Leary, and Carlos Castaneda, for example), an underground world featuring, let's say, a third of the American population. We staked way too much of our lives and identities on substance abuse, I admit, gave drugs a symbolic weight that they cannot and really should not bear. But the power of the drug culture was in large measure derived from the sheer fact of illegality. In being part of it, each of us was a criminal, and we were all criminals together. That what we were doing was illegal is part of what made it seem, for a time, like a form of resistance.

I grew up in DC, just off Connecticut Avenue in upper NW, a leafy and lily-white neighborhood of detached early twentieth-century homes on the outskirts of "Chocolate City." I and my circle of friends started smoking pot when we were thirteen or so, circa 1971. We accounted ourselves younger hippies, junior members of the counter-culture, baby revolutionaries. "Boomers," of course, entered and left the 1960s at very different ages; it was quite different to be, say, 18 or even 16 in 1968—as the streets of Chicago and Paris exploded, and Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated—than to be around 10, as I and my cohort were. Neither I (at 11), nor my parents (in their forties) were going to head to Woodstock in 1969. As we went on, kids around my age and demographic lived in and embodied, or maybe just were, the decline of '60s idealism and optimism. We lost our naiveté early and ended up punks; we were born into consciousness as the peace and Civil Rights movements lost momentum or disintegrated, for example. We embraced the values, but with distance or a touch of scathing irony. By '75, we were wised-up post-hippies. You weren't going to keep selling us "flower power," which looked like wishful thinking and also an overwhelming flow of merchandise. It just hadn't worked out, but did you really think flowers were a reasonable reply to napalm?

As the decade and our teenagerhoods went on, hippiedom lost momentum, disco and punk replaced psychedelia, cocaine infiltrated the brains of potheads, and the peace and civil rights movements faded. We couldn't tell if "the youth movement" or "our generation" had emerged victorious or not. The US government kept muddling around in Vietnam until it lost, but it lost partly because it realized that there was not domestic support for any sort of major

offensive. Jim Crow laws were gone, but it was hard not to see that DC was still segregated and in a continual condition of racial tension. Maybe half-victories were all we could have reasonably expected, but the failures felt more salient; we started seeing hippie culture as something well over, the Grateful Dead as passé. Young me had considerable sympathy for groups such as the Weather Underground; for at least a moment, it seemed like "the movement" could go further toward societal transformation only by violence. By the time Weathermen were blowing themselves to smithereens, it had to occur to us (perhaps I should stick to 'me'; I'm not certain whom I'm speaking for, really) that the whole thing was over and that we had sort of missed it. Being in "the counter-culture" started to lose its meaning; it really signified little but that we did drugs, of certain kinds on certain occasions (or perhaps all occasions). Perhaps our parents poured cocktails at 5:00; we smoked dope all day. Indeed, the drugs were partly, or allegedly, an expression of '60s idealism, but also had their role in its end; serious potheads, to say nothing of actual junkies, are unlikely to be effective revolutionaries.

Chevy Chase DC seemed like a cliché version of what the hippies hated: a neighborhood of bungalows, suited to '50s-style Cold War domestic bliss in a close-in, or street-car, suburb, infested by white, "nuclear" families. I was the older of the expected two kids, born in '58, my brother Adam in '60. Our parents split up when I was 10 or 11, and Dad disappeared into the state hospital in Virginia to dry out. Mom re-married a year or two later, to a fellow high school teacher with two problematic sons a couple of years older than Adam and me. Jim, at 15, was already in and out of the Sheppard-Pratt "mental hospital" and juvenile detention facilities: rather a psychopath, as he frankly averred in later years. Bobby was worse, really, if less criminally flamboyant, at least for a while. When our parents got together, the four of us had a meeting and resolved to refer to one another as "brothers" rather than "step-brothers." I continue to call them my brothers here.

So, as we got into our mid-to-late teens, Bobby and Adam were dealers (Jim too, maybe, but he was usually elsewhere). Adam was better than Bobby, because the latter did all the drugs before he could sell them. They were small-scale, relatively, but the person they usually bought from was just another high school kid who lived down on Nevada Avenue, with obscure but useful connections, able to wall off the Chevy Chase region with bricks of terrible Mexican weed. Early on (call it '72), we'd gather in Bob's room in the attic, cast black light over a Hendrix poster, listen to the Jefferson Airplane, and pass the joints around, taking ourselves to be having experiences, though the moment at which this was more than a ritualistic throwback or tribute had passed some years before. Nevertheless, as desired, or as was already traditional, when the emphasis shifted to acid and mescaline, the experiences seemed to us to grow more profound: we saw through the whole pathetic conventionalized reality of our parents and of Richard Nixon. That last sentence is, I admit, unfair to my mother, now 95, who had plenty of progressive tendencies, but I'm talking about the cultural symbol-system in which 'parents' were the establishment, 'the man' in our very own houses.

Drug culture was, of course, characterized above all by its secrecy. It created two worlds, the surface world of conventional appearances, and the covert criminal underworld, in every neighborhood in the city. We delighted in a situation in which parents, school administrators, and so on had little idea of what was going on under their noses (though sometimes they picked up a little scent). By the time I was 16 or so, I was embedded in an alternative economy. People had jobs in it, were figuring out how to invest (or even bury) their money. It had its own laws, institutions, and values, the first commandment of which was "Thou shalt not snitch." It's true that we more or less thought that someone who'd go to the authorities did not deserve to live,

though at our low level we never physically harmed anyone, just issued dire threats. We took our extreme anti-police emphasis this to be a kind of anti-authoritarianism, our permutation of the peace movement or something.

I got kicked out of the DC public school system at 16, not for drugs, but for what I deemed to be political activities, specifically for "disrupting" an assembly by seizing the microphone from an assistant principal to call for student liberation from compulsory attendance and grading. By then I had been suspended many times, for distributing an "underground" school newspaper and co-leading a student walkout; I was trying to be a real pain in the ass. And I was living in a whole anti-authoritarian youth culture. We were all felons, and that drove us toward anarchism, a dedication to evading and undermining authority that went well beyond the drugs. We were bourgeois white kids, and we were criminals, and we were proud of that. Also, we were DC, where power and politics seem like the very air; no wonder we interpreted our criminality through that medium.

Indeed, in the extremely racially polarized DC of my youth, two of the few things that crossed the line were narcotics and fandom for the Redskins (that is, black and white folks could agree on using a slur for a third group, which is really how you bring people together across racial and ethnic lines; the entity is known at the moment as The Washington Football Team). Black and white druggies and dealers definitely visited each others' neighborhoods, quite unusual at the time, though not entirely undangerous in either direction. Alice Deal Junior High and Woodrow Wilson High School, where Bobby, Adam, and I were going in different grades, were in a bit of a race war, but dealers and potheads reached across the line. Bob and Adam both developed connections "downtown," the sort of thing that led to an influx of PCP and heroin into upper Northwest, and maybe of cocaine and meth into Southeast.

Post-expulsion, I ended up at a "free school" known as Bonzo Ragamuffin Prep: 20-or-so "bonzos" above a storefront in the Adams-Morgan neighborhood. We were kids who couldn't make it in the public schools for a variety of reasons, including petty crimes, mental illness, being a chronic runaway, being gay, or, in several cases, being straight-up acid or PCP burnout cases. We came out on the other end with transcripts claiming that we'd taken classes, but the only ongoing programs were group therapy and drug use. The staff were potheads too, and the therapy was necessary for everyone involved.

My "senior year" (in Spring, '76) we took a class trip for three days to Chincoteague Island in Virginia. We may have been kind of noisy. On our last night, at 3:00, twelve Virginia state troopers stampeded in through front door. They made a pile of drugs in the middle of the living room (though they also included things like soap powder, asserting it was coke), and demanded that people say which was whose. We agreed among ourselves that we would, so that they wouldn't drag everyone off to jail simultaneously. I had managed to drop my vial of hash oil through a hole in the floor, so none of it was mine. But they did arrest the whole staff and a bunch of the kids including my girlfriend and her sister (who was Bobby's girlfriend). They charged the kids with possession for sale and every member of the staff with contributing to the delinquency of a minor. They found the headmaster in bed with one of the students, for example, an arrangement that we all knew about and approved. (Sometimes in later years I paused to reconsider how we were thinking about the sexual side of liberation; like, liberation for whom to do what to whom?) That was the end of my school. I took it merely as another sign of idiotic evil of the powers-that-be, which was pretty much my conclusion from any data set in that period.

I moved out of the childhood home at 18, or was kicked out, and, maneuvered with some skill by my schoolteacher parents, started college at the University of Maryland (unlike most

of my friends, and maybe unlike any of the other bonzos). I moved into a group house (not quite a commune; it was a year too late for that) out near the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, where Bobby was already living. Bob himself by this point was the sort of person who took a shot of Jack Daniels before he got out of bed in the morning. He conceived the DC region as a Formula 1 race course, trying to set a new record every week for how fast he could get downtown through Rock Creek Park in a Karmann Ghia or a Mustang. The numbers he was reporting seemed fictive until I took the ride, one of the most harrowing experiences of my life. Bobby had crapped out as dealer by that time, or was merely an assistant dealer: a delivery guy, for one thing. His job as a mechanic allowed him to obtain, rehabilitate, and then total cheap cars. For example, he managed to flip a blue Chevy Suburban up a tree on Chevy Chase Circle (he claimed to have been doing 90 MPH). The vehicle, bent like a banana, inhabited our driveway in Bethesda for some years, and a decade later you could still see the scar on the tree, some ten feet up from street level.

Then there was Carl, a mustachioed reactionary whose Harley Electroglide was always parked in front, and who entertained strippers in his room upstairs, sometimes two or three at a time. He was also a gun nut, and it was hard to say what he had up there, really. He didn't like the street light outside his window, so he kept shooting it out until they decided not fix it anymore. Indeed, on several occasions he shot out lamps in his own room, not wanting to get out of bed to flip the switch. After it happened the second time, we had a house meeting and requested that he be more circumspect. But his mere presence, though liable to kill any of us on a bad night, also secured us against home invasion, which was indeed a concern. You'd have to think twice before invading Carl's house.

The penultimate guy bar me was a three-hundred pound bouncerish fellow named Phil, who had worked in "collections" (repossessing cars, for example) but soon became rather useless security- and other-wise because debilitated by depression. He didn't leave his room for months on end, except to go to the bathroom. We brought him sandwiches. He lost a hundred pounds in a year and ended up in a psychiatric hospital. Then there was me, living on the nominally-enclosed back porch, playing the blues harmonica and reading philosophy books. I seemed to myself and to my housemates to be the straightest and least interesting and macho of the bunch, and for a long time my self-understanding was perhaps tilted by comparison with my housemates at this era. How bad could I be, really?

At any rate, the house was owned by its fifth resident, initials JT, who must have been one of the biggest coke dealers in Bethesda. There was a constant stream of all sorts of people through that house: bikers and strippers, weird repo men, black and white dealers, hilarious party people and desperate coke addicts. We were worried about the bust moment by moment, of course, but JT seemed to have some sort of arrangement. That he was living in a bedroom in a house with four other guys and working every day as a car mechanic (he owned the shop where Bobby worked on Volkswagens) was part of the strategy: JT had a spot in the woods near his uncle's house where he stashed his own vintage cars and his boat. He had hundreds of thousands of dollars buried there too, or so he claimed. I believed him completely, because I saw the commerce and the extremely modest lifestyle (and the boat, from time to time). It was a very slick approach, really, and almost no major dealers have that kind of self-discipline. And really, JT, not me, was the quiet one in that house, just another post-hippie with a little blond ponytail, driving a Bug.

So we never did get busted, but that's not to say that there weren't problems. Indeed, my drug culture went terribly terribly wrong. Living in that house in Bethesda, particularly after the freebasing started, got to be something of a nightmare: it seems that once you base you

can never think about anything else again. Pretty soon my brother Adam, who lived over in Hyattsville, was in the house every night; he stopped even saying hi. He favored Bombay gin, as well, and by the time he was in his mid-twenties was being treated for pancreas problems. That was wickedly painful, and he went over to opiates. Adam worked as a lab assistant at NIH, and managed to steal thousands of Demerol pills and process them into a giant jug of pure liquid Demerol. Jim told me later that they both shot up out of that bottle for years. By the early '80s, Adam worked as a "New Wave" deejay at a club called Poseurs down in Georgetown, and maybe as a heroin dealer as well. Within a couple of years, he was writing bad checks from my parents' bank account, going in and out of rehab. He got a break from his last rehab for a court date, went down to 14th street and scored, shot up in my grandmother's apartment downtown, and died. I still don't know whether it was an accident or a suicide.

My oldest brother Jim, an inveterate heroin addict from an early age, did five years in the state pen in Hagerstown for armed robbery in the mid-'70s. Legend (recounted by himself) had it that he robbed a hotel, then walked out front and hailed a cab for home. After a subsequent run as a crackhead (I spent a couple of extremely unedifying days long about '86 doing crack with him, the only time I ever smoked coke), he got sober, and was something of a 12-step activist and guru even through a series of relapses. Jim died in 2004, in his early '50s, of the long-term effects of a number of addictions, with hepatitis, diabetes, lung and heart disease; I'm not even sure what killed him, really. The two packs a day of Kools probably didn't help.

My mother and step-father retired as teachers in 1984, and moved to rural Virginia to set up as organic vegetable farmers. On a Sunday in June, Bobby was helping them move, and he brought a couple of friends with him to help haul furniture. I was in the caravan too, carrying some things in my own little Datsun. In Bob's panel truck on the two-hour drive, they were smoking PCP; they'd showed me their little canister of it before they left. When we got down to the new place, one of Bobby's friends kind of freaked out (I was watching this from the driveway, having pulled in ahead of them) and demanded that they turn around and drive back to DC without unloading the furniture. Bob refused, and his friend pulled out a gun (a .357 Magnum, the police told me). They drove off, but we heard the shot a few seconds later. I ran out onto the road and saw Bob's body slumped by the side of the road. I grabbed and lifted him; his chest was caved in, blood running from his mouth. He was...unnaturally relaxed. The shooter (a kid, really), wrapped Bob's truck around a tree a mile or two up Rock Mills Road, and died as well.

Myself, I got sober in '91 in 12-step programs, my basic problem being alcohol by that time. I relapsed in 2004 for a couple of years. You'd think that what happened to my brothers (and many other people I knew) would make it perfectly obvious that I'd better steer clear of all of this mess. But that's a complicated matter. By the time we were teenagers, my relationship with my brothers was centrally concerned with drugs and alcohol. Stopping almost felt like a betrayal, and in the midst of grief and desperation, you can still express loyalty to the dead by imitating the people you've lost, even by imitating what killed them, which is, after all, sort of what they died for. And once drugs are conceived as a culture, as your own culture, they open up larger affiliations encompassing your friends and siblings, now the occasion of nostalgia.

But though I was perhaps attracted to the drug culture initially as a cultural affiliation or a way to achieve a hippie identity, I didn't experience drugs, as I went on using them, primarily as a cultural or political phenomenon. Drug use became for me an internal psychological and somatic condition. If my drug use was initially social and expressed some kind of public identity, affiliation with a sub-culture, it wound up trapping me in my own head. It turned even us brothers into atoms: it is never beyond thinking that an addict will rip you off, not show up,

not love you as much as he loves opiates. The political and legal drama shifted scenes into our individual bodies, where it imposed internal self-divisions as well as divisions between groups or generations.

One might well think that addicts are characterized by lack of self-control, and of course this is true in a fundamental way: to be addicted to x is to be unable to control your desire for x and unable to control even your ingestion: that is, you lose control of your body in a profound way, or lose the illusion of control of your body, at least with regard to the substance to which you're addicted. But for me at least, drug use has been an attempt to impose or re-impose control over my body. I experience myself – I think I have since I was a small child – as an a priori addict always awaiting a substance. At any given point in my life I've been a kind of congress of addictions: to caffeine, nicotine, sleep aids, THC, or whatever else might be in play at a given moment. Or I could say that I've experienced my life as a kind of negotiation with my addictions: trying futilely to limit intake, or trying to find things to be addicted to that won't kill me, or that will kill me slowly rather than immediately (nicotine gum as opposed to cigarettes or dip, for example). Largely, this drama has been internal; I try to keep it from leaking, even to the people I love. My addictions have driven me inward or imposed a little gap between me and everything and everyone else.

But what drives it in my experience or in my case is not primarily the desire to abandon self-control (which can indeed be a liberating experience), but to impose it. I want to wake up fully, instantaneously; it'll take a quick triple espresso. I want to go to sleep on demand and control how long I sleep. I want to be energetic sometimes and lazy sometimes, and I want to be able to impose that on my body by an intentional act. I want to be self-contained sometimes and able to "let myself go" at others. That is, I experience substance abuse as a kind iron imposition of will, the attempt to make my whole physical self intentional, or make it the result of intentional action. My addiction problems, in other words, place my self in relation to my body as a Cartesian mind: the captain and navigator of my physical ship, and another thing I have been addicted to is exercise, trying to re-shape my body by impositions of will. The mutation of drugs from unevenly-produced-and-shipped farm products to standard-grade pharmaceuticals – from street heroin to oxycontin, homegrown pot to medical marijuana – enhances the controlled aspects of ingestion, or suggests, perhaps misleadingly, that one can control how one feels with a sort of perfect precision, down to the milliliter.

It is not even ironic, I suppose, that the impulse to control one's own body perfectly is precisely what leads to the collapse of self-control, because we are just not the sorts of creatures who create ourselves or the conditions we face; fundamentally, we are going to be forced to accept our bodies, not transform them utterly and continually. If addiction shows anything, according to me, it is that the idea of us controlling our bodies is going to be futile and counter-productive in the long run. Addiction separates you from your body in imagination: turns it, i.e. you, as you experience yourself, into a sort of external object you are trying to control. It suggests, if I could formulate this quickly, that we should try to re-merge with our bodies, or lose the false sense of separateness which alienates us from ourselves. I think that neither cocaine nor God will actually permit us to transcend embodiment. Well, that is obvious in the cocaine case, where you are really doing nothing that is not biological, not aimed at your own body as lord and victim.

I swore off alcohol again after my early-2000s relapse, but kept smoking pot, which seems to keep me a bit steadier than I am without it, even if it also detaches me slightly from my environment (well, that might be necessary too in some respects). Now I've got my medical card,

and I can be a pothead without being a criminal, without even really getting high, though there is THC and CBD in my bloodstream. I've settled into a pretty stable state: not entirely sober, and not entirely insane, still obsessed with controlling the way I feel, and still unable to. But I also feel remarkably staid, deeply boring. After that youth, I got sucked entirely into the establishment. What I'm doing now isn't even as bold as cocktails at 5: it's a doctor's prescription; it's healthcare.

Nothing quite like my youthful sub-culture can happen except in the context of demented authoritarianism of the sort that led to mass incarceration. The secretiveness, the inward-turning culture, the potent symbolism associated with drugs: these all depended fundamentally on their illegality and the brutality with which the laws were enforced in that era. It's no surprise that Jim came out of prison more of an addict than when he went in, nor that his experience hovered in the background for his brothers. American authorities circa 1972 declared war on their own people, and made us into practical anarchists. Even if we ended up doing the wrong drugs, we ended up believing the right politics. I guess we have the police to thank for that. But if the drug war is finally easing (still a question, of course), the drug culture is becoming impossible.

One thing that hurt my head about all the death and destruction was that it more or less confirmed Nixon's picture of drug abuse, which was used for decades after as a justification for the "war" on young people, black people, and so on. Nevertheless, I'd be lying if I said that the whole thing was really fun and great; it definitely didn't end that way, not for Hendrix and not for us. The whole disaster was collaborative, of course: the police and the dealers and the users accomplished it in together. The authorities' many achievements in this regard included thinking that prisons made reasonable treatment facilities, or just not giving a shit about what happened to the wrong sort of people. That made it doubly clear to us, the wrong sort of people, that we should try to do whatever those assholes were telling us not to do. But the whole thing ended up driving us each of us inwards, and all of us away from one another, and it killed a bunch of us; I'll just admit that drug use has been no solution to anything; it has done little to alter the social divisions or the internal divisions that we were trying to treat.

But the drug culture nevertheless left me with some things I'm trying to hold on to. I'm still basically opposed to snitching, and to all hierarchies of power, and to prisons. I surprise myself, even now, by having an almost preternatural sensitivity to the proximity of police ('that's an unmarked car'), even though it's been some years, I think, since I committed a felony. I've tried, hard, to maintain the basic anti-authoritarian turn of mind—or really, of viscera—that the drug culture and the war on drugs gifted to me. I feel that prescription Adderall, anti-depressants, therapeutic microdosing, and medical hash oil don't have the same sort of meaning. The sub-cultures of now are on Instagram, not hidden away in blacklit attics or coke houses. So for obvious reasons, I wouldn't want to go right back to '70s drug culture, but I think kids never lack good reasons to mistrust or despise authority, and I'm sure the little rebels are cooking along somewhere. I hope they, and the people they're rebelling against, are cooking up something less destructive this time round, however.

I'm not sure how or why, but I've slowly come to accept that perfectly controlling my own body is not possible and not desirable, and even though I will never not be an addict, I take myself to have learned something important about all of us and to have found a measure of acceptance. Or, through the experience of a sort of separation from myself and the people around me, I have learned to yearn across the gaps, or come to awareness of the illusions, personal and political, of the self and of the state, that I cannot even yet escape.