

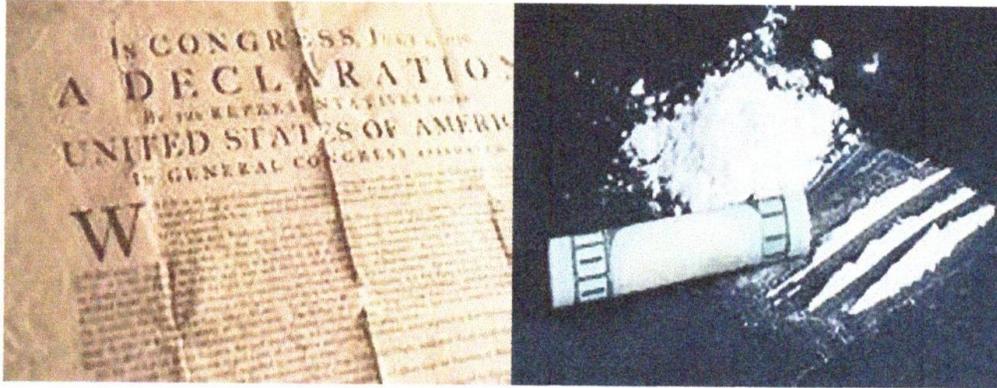


**Life, Liberty, and the
Pursuit of Highs**

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LIFE, LIBERTY
AND THE
PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

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The question of whether all drugs should be legal is a complex one, although it has often been answered with a yes or no. There are drugs used to cure ailments of the body, insulin for diabetes, antibiotics for infections, chemicals for cancer. These drugs (medicines) are dangerous unless they are prescribed with precision. Then, there are drugs for pleasure that are called “recreational drugs.” They, too, are dangerous when abused and are classified by laws as “controlled substances.” These substances are illegal to use (namely, heroin, cocaine, LSD, etc.) or are regulated by the state (alcohol, marijuana). Added to this, there are a class of drugs (such as opioids and amphetamines) that can be used for pleasure but require a prescription from a medical doctor. It is the pleasure drugs that are treated here as worthy of consideration to be legalized.

In my pursuit of arguments concerning social issues, I was introduced to an argument by psychiatrist Thomas Szasz in his essay, “The Ethics of Addiction: An Argument for Letting Americans Take Any Drug They Want.” He writes: “Although I recognize that some drugs—notably heroin, the amphetamines, and LSD among those now in vogue—may have undesirable personal or social consequences, I favor free trade in drugs for the same reason the Founding Fathers favored free trade in ideas. In an open society, it is none of the government’s business what idea a man puts into his mind; likewise, it should be none of the government’s business what drug he puts into his body.”

A wandering journalist and I. At a dinner party, I asked a man who is a mentor in AA what he thought of this idea. He had a positive response because he said that the drugs could be better regulated. He had heard that a dangerous drug, fentanyl, was being added to marijuana and that people were dying from this combination. He felt, however, that if drugs were totally legal, there must be better recovery programs established nationwide.

At a memorial service, I asked a lady who is an artist, what she thought about this idea. She felt that drugs should be kept illegal because they are very addictive and, if they are legal, more people will become addicted. A tall man at the service, wearing a blue checkered shirt, said he was all for legalizing drugs that give pleasure because it is a victimless crime and only the user is at risk. A lady standing next to him said that she could understand his point of view, but she didn’t want drug addicts lying dead on the streets.

I asked a sheriff’s deputy what he thought, and he said that most of the disturbances that he was called out to assist in were related to alcohol. He believed that it would help if more mental health professionals were involved in police work where there are drug addicts involved.

An elderly woman sitting on a bench in a city park said that drugs were dangerous and that she still believed that drugs like marijuana, no matter how soft they may seem, are a “gateway” to harder drugs.

An architect friend, at a university gathering, said, “Oh, yes, fentanyl in everything!” He was being sarcastic.

A professor, who had been to Peru and taken ayahuasca (a psychoactive drug used in ritual spiritual ceremonies), said that ethical standards surrounding drug use in American society are shifting.

A scholar who sat in a chair across from the professor said (I had my tape recorder): “In *The Doors of Perception*, Aldous Huxley claims each one of us is potentially Mind at Large. By exploring his specific mind, he finds mescaline to be a way to cleanse the doors of perception and, thereby, enter the Mind of the universe.”

I asked a Buddhist monk his view, and he told me that he has a vow not to become intoxicated. He says that his vow covers drugs as well as alcohol, because these substances cloud the mind and prevent *samadhi*, or meditative equilibrium.

An evangelical preacher told me that drugs are The Devil incarnate. The human body is a sacred vessel and must remain pure since it will be resurrected on The Day of Judgement.

In the book, *Morality and Moral Controversies* (Simon & Schuster, NJ, 1999, p. 337), John Arthur, the editor, added this abstract of Szasz’s essay: “Relying explicitly on John Stuart Mill’s discussion of liberty (‘On Liberty’), Thomas Szasz discusses the legalization of drugs. After reviewing the historical effects of prohibition, he argues that such policies lead to socially harmful consequences and fail to respect the legitimate control citizens may exercise over their own lives. A decent regard for individual liberty demands that government respect citizens right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of highs.”

Another religious, a Sufi initiate, echoed this sentiment and told me that drugs are both a disease and a cure, and they can be used to bring joy and freedom of insight as well or, being monetized and weaponized, can bring enslavement and death. She said that the author of *Ecclesiastes* has the answer—there is a time to love, a time to dance, and a time to get high.

We live in an angst-ridden society, and reckless drug use is a symptom of a society that encourages aggressive consumption and material wealth beyond attainment. The rampant death and destruction of property tells me that we don’t really know how to handle our drugs, how to get high without getting arrested and hurting people around us. The drug lords make stronger drugs and ruin the quality of the experience. The government sees a source of revenue to keep the polis in line with its economic model. The church wants obedience to moral absolutes that even Angels have trouble obeying. The newbie to drugs has no notion of how high to get. The down-and-out dropout just wants oblivion.

Research has shown that recreational drugs have both negative and positive effects. I am not advocating Dionysian excess. A concept known as *set and setting* was first introduced by Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert (Ram Das) in their 1964 book, *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The concept of set and setting refers to the inner and outer factors influencing a drug trip. If drugs are used in a safe setting, where they are monitored and prepared with ritual care, the insights gained through such experience can contribute to psychological and spiritual health. Again, the rampant use of drugs should not be encouraged, but it cannot be ignored. Having used many of these substances, I can see that there is both a drive towards pleasure and a drive towards death at play (Freud). I am still unsure why I took sixteen caps of peyote when I was told to take eight. Impatience, probably. It was a heroic dose. The “doors of my perceptions” were opened. Sixty years later, I’m still high from that trip.

