

# ABOUT DRUGS—A LETTER TO MY DAUGHTER

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## INTRODUCTORY COMMENT

Two years ago I wrote this rather didactic letter to my daughter, who was a freshman at a school with an excellent academic program and also an active drug scene. That meant bright kids, highly verbal kids, and no doubt some manipulative kids. Moreover, she was a year younger than most. Whatever you say to that situation will be inadequate at best. Even so, the letter was used for some heated discussions there. Later on people occasionally asked my advice on this subject — as if I knew! —, and use of portions of the letter has led me to think others might find it of interest.

Since that time I have participated in drug education programs of various kinds, and I have learned a great deal more about sundry drugs and their effects. That, too, has some influence on my decision to put this in print. For much of the drug education pitch seems to stress the importance of parents' having expertise in the subject, much of which amounts to learning the latest lingo. Obviously parents should be able to discuss subjects of importance to their children, should develop some trust and rapport, if possible, and should be alert to danger signals of many kinds. However, the assumption seems to be that expertise will provide effective guidance.

That assumption is open to grave doubts. If knowledge of danger were an effective deterrent, heroin addiction would surely have abated. Everyone knows of its horrors. And in time that knowledge may stem the tide, but so far, unfortunately, the trend is certainly not one of abatement. The Director of Student Psychiatric Services at the University of Wisconsin, Dr. Seymour Halleck, has written wisely on this problem: "The Great Drug Education Hoax" (*The Progressive*, July, 1970).

What can a parent do? The answer to that must vary according to circumstances, including those of the personalities involved. Doubtless there are several viable styles and approaches, and a multitude of bad procedures. In some situations the answer may be nothing or very little. But the one thing it seems to me that frequently can be done is to reinforce his child's confidence in his own good judgment.

If it comes down to sheer pronouncement, the parent probably does not stand a chance in comparison with the influence of peers. Or even if he does, at present, that means that the child is being controlled by the power of someone else's voice, rather than his own best judg-

ment, which is hardly a desirable state of affairs. And not a very reassuring one, since sooner or later the "child" will be out of range of the parental voice and desperately need to make his own decisions for himself. Involved in the approach which strives to undergird the child's self-confidence is not only the possibility but the probability that these decisions will be different from what the parent might wish.

Still, one could do worse than be confident that his child will, by and large, make decisions that are reasonable, responsive and responsible from his own point of view. I have used the term "child" in the generic sense of off-spring, but also because the parent is inevitably inclined to think of his off-spring in terms of dependency and immaturity. It is precisely this "child" who needs to develop confidence in his own best judgment, which sometimes will be contrary to the pleadings of peers and ways of the world.

What the parent cannot do is persuade a young adult that he is wiser and better informed in those things that are most immediate in the youth environment. And that for the very good reason that he is not. Thus the parent who bones up on the drug scene and tries to snow the child with his superior knowledge is doomed to defeat. This leads to the game of one-upsmanship, in which youth can always win, since the parent suffers the defect of being over-the-hill, of having grown up in a different world. Furthermore, to be technical about it for a moment, the fact is that most empirical reports about the effects of drugs — whether from defenders or opponents — are of no value for sound generalizations, because: (1) the actual chemical contents vary tremendously and often are not what they are claimed to be; (2) individual reactions vary remarkably even where the chemical contents are known.

Nor can a parent be very convincing by an appeal to the established way of things. Most pamphlets warn about marijuana on the basis that it is against the law and the penalties are severe. Unfortunately youthful readers often interpret this to mean that that is also the main reason for avoidance of hard drugs from the establishment point of view. Vietnam has simply rendered establishment mores bankrupt. Until this year in Colorado the second conviction for selling marijuana to someone under twenty-six years of age carried the penalty of either death or life imprisonment.<sup>1</sup> Youth are not impressed by that sort of legislative wisdom. My argument is not that what the law says is unimportant, but it is not conspicuously persuasive with young people, especially on this subject.

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<sup>1</sup>I had considerable difficulty confirming this at the Library of the Colorado Supreme Court. Lawyers have told me flatly that there is no such law. The revised criminal code, awaiting the Governor's signature as I write this, changes this penalty, which was, in fact, the law.

I suggest furthermore that the parent who shares a reasonable amount of trust with his child has the responsibility of making clear what his own moral judgment is. This probably has far less persuasive effect that one might wish, but it has an important function within the total pattern that the child is developing for determining his own decisions. A critical issue presents parental opportunity for enacting his moral stance, knowledge of which is quite necessary for a child's equipment in forming his own moral stance. My opinion is that this role is more helpful to the child than any amount of debate about the biochemical facts. All of which may seem a slender reed in stormy times. Indeed it is. But I have seen too many dogmatically defended methods fail to be persuaded that they are any better.

### THE LETTER

Dear Debi:

This is about the drug thing. I feel that I should say something, at least to let you know what I think, and, if I can manage to communicate, why. I have avoided a full treatment of the question, because (1) I suspect a parent has exactly the wrong effect when he sounds off; (2) too much nonsense has been written on both sides, and I will probably add some more; (3) I haven't been there.

I have talked with a number of young people who have given it the full treatment and I conducted therapy sessions at the Illinois Research Hospital. Even though I haven't been there, I found their testimony pretty convincing. I don't mean the bad trip horror threat. Frankly I'm skeptical about some of the dramatic stories you read; they lose nothing in the telling, that's for sure. What concerns me more is the cumulative effect hallucinogens have in creating depression and extraordinary loss of self-esteem. The desire to be turned-on makes great sense. What is sad is that people should find life so drab and that they should so lack imagination and perception that they would have to do this chemically. And doubly sad if the pay-off price down the road is to find real life intolerable and one's normal self insufferable.

There have always been these two kinds of mysticism: the one which destroys self-confidence and the other which strengthens it, lifting up so as to give sustaining power in very real trouble. Drugs are for people who find being alive unbearable. When I am dead I will be relieved of pain and guilt and boredom — for a long, long time. Meanwhile there are so many great things to enjoy, so many stupid and hateful people to fight against, and so much to learn and see and hear and do — when there isn't going to be time enough to do half of

it —, that it would be a bad bargain to finish out one's human career as a drunkard or nut or hop-head. I do not always *feel* this way about my immediate circumstances, but I have no doubt that this view is the voice of sanity and I have no doubt that this is what I have a mind for, namely to make clear-headed decisions and enjoy authentic perceptions, rather than turn decisions over to immediate feelings — especially feelings like self-pity, boredom, fear or rash self-destruction.

Another thing I have noticed is the evangelistic proselytizing style of the freaks. They say, "do your own thing," but what they act out is the hard sell and hidden persuasion. People who are secure in their own being are not threatened by those who do not share their enjoyments or convictions. They do not try to manipulate others into agreement. It has always seemed to me that there is something sick as well as insecure about the religious evangelist, who, like the Britannica salesman, becomes angry and abusive when you do not choose to buy his product. Somehow he clearly conveys the truth that *he* is the one who is the sucker. Your declining to buy touches off those self-doubts he cannot abide having awakened.

People who are really alive to something are quite rightly enthusiastic. So they may invite you to share, but not by manipulative coercion. The best example I have run into was once when I was auditioned by Stokowski for a youth symphony. (He said I needed more practice.) At one point he talked about music and being a musician. His enthusiasm and absolute devotion came through loud and clear, but it was all in the mode of "here is a wonderful world in which you can participate if you wish and if you are willing to work your head off." No anger, threats or cajoling. It was like Frost's, "you come too." People like that are obviously beyond any need of reassurance from you that what they are involved in was worth it all.

Of all reasons for buying anything, the worst, the absolute worst, is because you can't take the jibes and cutting down of the salesman. You know the tired lines they use: "I should have known you'd be chicken"; "what's your hang-up?" "anybody can see you're phony, plastic, unreal, uptight, etc. etc."

I make two exceptions. One is the sociopath, who, I have read, is sometimes opened up by LSD, and discovers for the first time in his life a capacity to care. For sociopaths I am all in favor of experimentation, but unfortunately O'Leary's evangelism resulted in cessation of those first experiments. Also, methadone is used to try to get off heroin, not because methadone is so great but because heroin is infinitely worse. But scientifically controlled use of drugs is an entirely different matter from the roulette game of street drugs.

The other exception is pot for middle aged people who have died

inside. It gives them euphoria, which they may not deserve, but temporarily they find surcease from some unnamed anxiety. It is like giving an electric shock to a jellyfish to show he is capable of reaction. No great harm done. That is like being in favor of tranquilizers for the tortured psychotic or anaesthesia for an amputation.

Another thing I think important is to recognize that there are degrees of messing up. We all make stupid mistakes. Some kinds of mistakes, however painful, can be remedied or outgrown. Some leave permanent disabilities. Some are irrevocable. So many of the advocates of drugs seem to have lost any ability to make such an obvious discrimination. More than once I have had a student who was high turn in a paper that was either incoherent or utterly juvenile, who was convinced that it was brilliant. This made it easier to understand how their judgment could be so incapacitated when it came to moving from barbiturates to amphetamines. Or from depression to suicide. Or any other jump, of which there are many examples, from the unsatisfactory to the disastrous. Apart from seriously impaired judgment, the step to heroin is simply incomprehensible. No wonder the smart blacks are opposing drugs: it is because it is a difficult and disoriented world that we need our best judgment to cope with it.

Well, these are my prejudices. I am willing to defend them at greater length. What I want to stress is that I am particularly unimpressed by the phony arguments. 1. The huckster, about whom enough said, except that because others are bankrupt, I should try to become so too is simply silly. 2. How can you know if you haven't tried it? Well, I can look at those who have for some time — and I notice that their evaluation tends to be quite different from that of the recent convert. I haven't tried Russian Roulette either. I don't expect to. I once buried a man who did. 3. There are other ways of messing up. Granted. That is hardly a strong argument for anything! It may well be that too many martinis are worse than pot. I've buried some of them too, and spent hours, boring hours, with others in the most hellish misery. Lincoln's reply to Herndon who was angry because a man had told him to go to hell is what it is about. "I've looked up the law on that point; and you don't have to if you don't want to."

What it comes down to is the statement that is so often used in the opposite direction: "it's your life." It is, and what is more, it is the only one you will have. Well, reincarnation is very in at the moment, of course, but even if it were true, this life we have now is our only shot at this life in its circumstances with its ties and its possibilities. There is a sort of "this is it" thing about one's own life. The stage director whispers, "you're on — now! — and you only get one go at each scene." So when a parent says "do this" or "don't do that" you

have every right to say, "it's my life." Fair enough. But by the same token, when a peer (translation: somebody whose ridicule you fear) says, "do this, you don't know what you are missing," it is also true that it is not *his* life that is involved, but *yours*. And it is not entirely impossible to find out by close observation just what it is you are missing. But since it is your life, and not his or hers, it is not something to be taken lightly — or stupidly. Or from authority, either of parent or peer. If the Pope is not infallible — and he goes to some pains periodically to demonstrate that he is not — neither is some sophomore.

I think you would be somewhat astonished if you knew how much confidence I really have in your own considered judgment. And how little I have in groups. And even less in people of whatever age who may be glib and flashy, but for all that, messed up. That probably sounds snobbish and lacking in compassion. But compassion for somebody who hurts and confidence in his judgment are two quite different things. Maybe half the trouble in the world comes from confusing sympathy with truth. But I want to add that these conclusions I have come to have been shaped far more than I have indicated from looking at people I admire, who somehow have got hold of the right end of the stick, and who have something sort of victorious and buoyant about their life style.

Postscript: From long association with preachers and teachers I have noticed that the strings a man harps on are a reliable clue to his own failures. Schweitzer said it best: "whatever a man is drowning in, his mouth is full of." That applies to the over-thirties. It applies to me. It applies to some goof-off student militants. It applies to some self-righteous administrators. But the subject before us is the drug freaks, and it applies to them. Anybody who talks that much about "phoniness," "hang-ups," and "being turned on" has a problem with deception, inhibition, and dullness. And he thinks it is somebody else's fault. There is an aptness about the cliché, "that's your problem," which fits here. It is no wonder that establishment people have talked so much about being "responsible." They have been irresponsible all over the place. The correct response to that is to show them where and when. It is not to find some alternative nuttiness, baptized with good words.

My God, what we've done with language: "protective reaction strike," "pacification," "free fire zone," "Vietnamization," all of which *mean* something very different. Or, "liberation" for stealing. The older I get the more deeply I am impressed with Dostoevsky's "All deception beginneth with self-deception."

Well, that's how it looks to me. I have only one go at life. I will make mistakes — and some of them will be dillies — but no need there-

fore to work overtime at being altogether stupid simply because there is a new lingo abroad to camouflage how silly it is. And it does seem seem pretty silly to maim yourself, if you want to live your own life according to your best lights — or something more or less approximating that. Ciao. Shalom.

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