

GETTING REAL ABOUT GETTING HIGH

An Interview with Andrew Weil, M.D.

BY RICHARD GOLDSTEIN

The current war on drugs is taking its toll on knowledge about drugs. There has been no debate about the assumptions that underlie our laws, or about the reasons so many people— young and old, rich and poor—choose to break them. If anything, the antidrug crusade has had, as its aim, the elimination of discussion and dissent.

In 1983, Andrew Weil, a drug researcher, and Winifred Rosen, a writer of books for young people, published *Chocolate to Morphine: Understanding Mind-Active Drugs* (Houghton Mifflin). It is a remarkably revealing book, even for adults; but its language and contention that "drugs are here to stay" are clearly aimed at teenagers. Teaching adolescents who want to use drugs how to do so with the least damage to self and society is controversial in liberal times, but in the current climate, that idea seems, to some, impermissible.

Paula Hawkins (Republican, Florida), who faces a tough battle for her Senate seat, recently read selections from Weil's book into the Congressional Record. "With drug abuse running rampant," she proclaimed, "we may well ask ourselves why it is that our children are being exposed to such garbage. . . . I would recommend that all curricula be redirected to teach our children to say no to drugs. No more teaching about responsible use." As a result of Hawkins's objections, the Tampa school board voted to remove *From Chocolate to Morphine* from school library shelves. Does the senator support that decision? "Her statement speaks to the point," an aide replied—and declined to say more.

Andrew Weil is a lecturer at the University of Arizona College of Medicine. He has written several books on drugs and consciousness, including *The Natural Mind* (Houghton Mifflin). "The truth about drugs cannot do harm," Weil writes. "It may offend sensibilities and disturb those who do not want to hear it, but it cannot hurt people. On the other hand, false information can and does lead people to hurt themselves and others. . . . People make decisions on the basis of the information available to them. The more accurate the information, the better their decisions will be."

What's going on now?

Well, I think there's a politically motivated drug panic which is more severe than anything I've seen in the 20 years I've been involved in this issue. Some of it is because the elections are approaching. Some of it is to divert people's attention from issues that are more serious. Some



of it is generated by the news media, which have learned that fearmongering sells programs and papers.

But the media are always titillating, and there are always serious problems that people are trying to hide. Why didn't this happen 10 years ago?

It was happening 10 years ago, but not in as extreme a form. I think it is the same stuff that's gone on for most of the century. There was an anti-opium paranoia in this culture 80 years ago, a lot of it motivated by racial prejudice against the Chinese. There was an anticocaine hysteria around the time of the First World War, which was motivated by racial prejudice against blacks. There was marijuana stuff going on in the '20s and '30s, and all the '60s stuff around psychedelics, which produced tremendous polarization of society. Whenever a new intoxicant comes into a culture, it invokes this kind of response. Usually, the people who take up a new intoxicant are going to be the deviants—the subcultures and ethnic minorities and outsiders; they're perceived with suspicion already and their drug use is colored by that. There was an anti-bacco hysteria in Europe and Asia in the 16th and 17th centuries, when some countries tried to prohibit its use by the death penalty. That didn't work; in fact, if anything, it hastened the spread of it.

Are drugs more prevalent in America today?

Well, no. I think we've always been a drug-ridden society. There probably were as many psychoactive drugs in use 100 years ago. But there was no crime associated with drugs. There was no use of these things by very young children. There was no use of them to drop out of society or act out anger or aggression against authority. I think all of those features of the drug problem are creations of our policies. The more we create stiffer penalties and so forth, the more we produce the very thing we want to change. As I say, the policies that we've followed have created the phenomena that we're afraid of. The reason we have kids using crack today is because of the approach we've taken in trying to deal with this through criminal law. It has made drugs attractive and it has made worse forms of drugs come into existence.

Do you anticipate that the result of this hysteria will be that drugs become more prevalent?

Yeah. I think that they will continue to be prevalent and to be used in worse and worse ways. By more and more people. Wars on drugs never work. The end result of them is to stimulate interest and curiosity on the part of people who otherwise wouldn't be interested in them. It

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Continued from preceding page also, I think, encourages the drug taking in negative ways: To act out anger and resentment against authority. Especially when information is presented in a hypocritical manner as this society is now doing. In other words, we have this bill called the Drug Free America Act, but there's no intention to include alcohol and tobacco. The government continues to subsidize tobacco addiction, and cigarettes are the worst form of drug abuse in this culture, the greatest public health problem that we have, and the most flagrant example of drug pushing, since most of it is pushed on teenagers, who are lured by advertising into thinking it's cool to smoke. If you want to talk about death penalties for drug pushers start with the executives of tobacco companies.

But the argument against illegal drugs is that they produce violent, antisocial behavior.

Look, maybe there's, at the outside, something like 300 deaths from crack a year. That's not good, but how many deaths are there from cigarettes a year? Something like 300,000. How many instances are there where somebody on crack has committed an act of violence? I don't know. But compared to the number

of acts of violence committed under the influence of alcohol, it's insignificant.

Are you suggesting that consumption of alcohol is more dangerous than consumption of crack?

In terms of its pharmacological power, the behavior it produces, and the numbers of people involved in its use.

Would that be true of angel dust?

It's true of all of them. I think there is no illegal drug that comes near alcohol in dangerousness. All you have to do is ask law enforcement agencies about the association of alcohol and violent crime.

What is the pharmacology of crack? How dangerous is it?

I think its dangers are exaggerated. I don't think it's a good drug. I don't think it's wise to smoke cocaine, first of all. If you want to explore its effects, you should chew coca leaves. I think that's a safe way to do it. It's not good to take cocaine out of coca leaves and it's especially not good to put it into your brain by smoking.

Why is it relatively safe to take coca leaves?

Because the content of cocaine is very low, so you're taking it in a highly dilute

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form, combined with other substances that moderate its effects, and when you chew coca leaves the cocaine that's there gets into your bloodstream and brain very slowly. So it's not just what the drug is, or the dose, but the manner in which you introduce it into the body. There's an enormous difference between chewing a coca leaf and letting a small amount of cocaine diffuse slowly into the bloodstream, and smoking cocaine and having it rapidly rise in concentration and enter into the brain. That's why tobacco—cigarettes—is the most addictive drug known: Because nicotine is a very strong drug, stronger than cocaine in terms of its

effects. And that manner of introducing it into the brain enhances addictiveness. So when you smoke cocaine, that's the most extreme way to experience its pharmacological effects; that's a stupid way to take it. But our policies have made coca leaves disappear from the market, because they're bulky and nobody wants to smuggle them, and we have created a situation in which it's profitable to smuggle this isolated, refined drug. And also to find ways of using a drug to get the maximum pharmacological power out of it.

What you're suggesting is that if there were a more open environment for drug use, people would, as a consequence of having more choice, choose substances that are better for them.

Might, especially if they were educated. I'm not just arguing for a more open situation; I think it has to go hand in hand with real drug education. What passes for that today seems like thinly disguised attempts to steer people away from the drugs we don't like by exaggerating their dangers, while not paying attention to the drugs that we do like. And I think that leaves our culture very uneducated about the benefits and risks of psychoactive substances.

So let's talk about an alternative way of educating young people about drugs.

I think the alternative is first of all to be objective about all drugs. I mean, there's nothing that sets alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine apart from crack, marijuana, and PCP. I think grade school students should start to learn about the nature of addiction. It's not just a drug problem: people get addicted to sex, food, athletics. Most people get caught up in addictive behavior. And you need teaching about that as well. I think there are two basic strategies: one is to teach people to satisfy their needs without using drugs at all. I'm very much in favor of that, and it's something I try to practice in my own life. But realistically a lot of people are going to use drugs because they take you where you want to go with no work. And I think it is important to encourage those people to use drugs sensibly. And that's the issue that just drives these Reaganites up the wall. You're talking about responsible drug use.

Why is there such a consensus on this issue, as opposed to, say, pornography—another form of pleasure-taking that's said to produce antisocial behavior.

All I can say is that if you look around the world at different societies, you see the need to divide behavior in this area into good and evil. In every society you see the same pattern: A small number of drugs are encouraged and defined as being good, and the rest are banned as being evil.

What is it about drugs that distinguish them from other forms of pleasure? Is it their capacity to alter consciousness?

I think that's the root of it, and I think it's that they are so powerful.

Does what's really going on have to do with the desire to regulate consciousness?

That's possible. I have written in other books that nondrug methods of altering consciousness often bring on the same kind of response.

There seems to be a desire to track transcendence toward the religious passions. Eyes toward militaristic ones. And there are more and more ceremonies that have to do with patriotism, sports—ceremonies of masculinity—but these are public highs. Maybe there's a connection between this tendency and the repression of drugs, which are, in this society anyway, a private and individual experience.

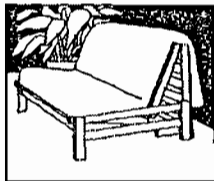
That is possible.

How does it feel to be singled out by a U.S. senator? Are you apprehensive about articulating your ideas in public now?

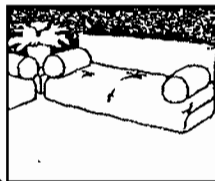
Well, I think that the hysterical mood that I've seen, this kind of legislative



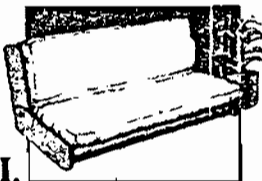
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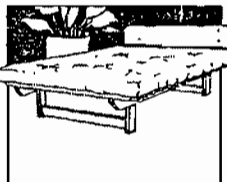
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 feeding frenzy, and the fact that I don't see people standing up to be counted on the other side, makes me feel that this is really not the time to debate the Reaganites in public. I just don't want to draw that kind of heat.

Are you in a tenured position?

No, I'm not, and obviously, life can be made difficult in that area. The thing is that this is all past work of mine. My current work is in alternative medicine; I have a medical practice, my research on medicinal plants. I'm not actively doing this drug stuff any more.

So you're tempted to retreat.

Yeah, but I've put it all out there. Over the past few weeks, when I've been asked to be on TV and radio shows, I've turned them down and told them that they can go read the book.

How do you know that your information about the effects of drugs is accurate? You yourself talk about the highly subjective nature of these substances.

I know it both, first of all, from my own experience with them and, secondly, from having studied them from many different perspectives. I've studied drugs from the

point of view of botany and medicine and psychology and psychiatry and sociology and politics, as well as having worked and lived in many different countries around the world, looking at these same issues. So I think that, more than most people, I don't adhere to any one frame of reference.

Let's define the terms set and setting.

Set is expectation of what a drug will do, both conscious and unconscious, and setting is the environment in which the drug is used, both the physical environment and cultural environment. And those factors are major determinants of drug effect, at least as important as pharmacology. So I don't see anything intrinsic about, say, PCP that makes people violent. I think it is likely to do that in certain sets and settings. The majority of people who use PCP are prone to violence and often take that drug out of anger and frustration—to get messed up. In that context, it's very likely to cause violent behavior.

Let's design a curriculum for high school students that would be realistic about drugs. How would you approach that?

First, so that people have a sense of how set and setting modify the effects of drugs. And then you could talk about

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problem sets and settings: The idea of taking drugs to get out of bad moods, for example, or taking drugs when you're bored, as opposed to using them for positive reasons. For example, many people use drugs as an excuse for social interaction, as we do with coffee. Many people have used drugs for religious experience. I would look at traditional people who use hallucinogenic plants in that way. And I would try to encourage people to find nondrug methods of satisfying their needs. I think that's very legitimate.

In your book you talk about forming a relationship with a drug. How would you define a bad relationship?

Addiction is one example. Unconscious

use of a drug—that is, not knowing what it is or not knowing that you're using a drug. Using it so frequently that you're impairing your health or your social or economic functioning. Using it so frequently that it's lost a desired effect.

So, for example, you would encourage people to use marijuana less frequently because being stoned about it enhances the effect.

Right. And losing the effect is a step on the way to using it additively.

To enhance the effects of drugs, what general suggestions do you have?

I think, first, a very important one: that less is more.

What would be a good relationship with heroin, if it's possible?

I think probably it would be best to use it in the form of opium and to take opium by mouth rather than to smoke it or inject one of its derivatives.

What would you teach a teenager about heroin?

That the addictive potential of it is very great, that the physical harmfulness is not, that the addictive potential of it is increased by putting it into the body in very direct ways, that the consequences of addiction to heroin are not terrific in terms of limitation of freedom—and that's a serious issue—and that all addicts think they can avoid addiction at the beginning.

Is it true, though, that heroin is not more addictive than cigarettes?

I think cigarettes are more addictive than heroin.

So in effect when you teach young people about cigarettes you would be very severe.

I would say that you should never smoke a cigarette. I think if you want to experiment with tobacco, you should put some in your mouth and chew it to see what its effects are and then you can decide if you want to use it or not; but it is not reasonable to smoke a cigarette to see if you like it or not, because the risk of addiction is too great.

What about coffee?

The thing to emphasize is that it's a very strong drug, with addictive potential and also the potential to alter behavior significantly and affect the body. It should not be thought of as a beverage, and it should be used only occasionally, not regularly.

How would you reduce the incidence of drug-related crime?

If drugs were legalized there would be no drug-related crime.

How do you know that?

Most of the crime associated with drugs has to do with their enormously inflated price, which is a direct consequence of their illegalization, so that people have to get the money to afford them, which often involves committing crimes. But the pharmacological effects of many drugs are against violence—that's certainly true with heroin, and probably with marijuana.

One thing we haven't talked about is the demographics of drug use. If you were looking at this from the perspective of a black woman living in Bed-Stuy who was in great danger of being mugged by almost exclusively male drug users, wouldn't you feel differently?

Probably.

You see these faces at the anticrack rallies, a lot of them are poor people who are just fed up with living in fear.

Right.

What would you say to those people?

That governmental policies—not crack or heroin or any other substance—have put you in danger. And that, as result of these policies, everything associated with this problem has gotten bigger and worse.

Research: Robert Marchant

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