

Catharsis on the Mall

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Burning Man art car Abraxas, the golden dragon, visits Washington DC for Catharsis 2016.

PARTY, SANCTUARY, VIGIL

In November 2015, the Drug Policy Alliance organized its biannual International Drug Policy Reform conference in Washington, DC. In some ways, the conference felt like Burning Man, with day after day of intentional serendipity, authentic connections, and interpersonal magic. Unlike Burning Man, however, this gathering was entirely focused on one goal: ending the failed war on drugs. Each day was filled with

content about human rights and drug policy; psychedelic science, sacrament, and therapy; and creative alternatives to punishment like harm reduction. However, the auspicious bustle of the event did not stay within the confines of the hotel (which, to the disappointment of the many cannabis users in attendance, was actually in Virginia, not in the capitol, which had already decriminalized the plant). A few miles away, just yards from the Washington Monument on the National Mall, another Happening was happening.

MAPS, represented by Policy and Advocacy Manager Natalie Ginsberg, joined Dr. Bronner's, the DC Cannabis campaign, and a team of DC-based social justice advocates and Burners, to organize an event called Catharsis. One of the organizers, writing for Burning Man about the event, called Catharsis "[equal] parts vigil, symposium, occupation, fire conclave, effigy burn, and party-until-dawn-under-the-stars... the first of its kind." Throughout the weekend of the Reform conference, Catharsis amplified the connections between the drug policy reform movement and the restorative, generative, and transformative culture that so many of us identify with. For three days, the alcohol-free space buzzed with activities, including a temple effigy, art installations, an open mic, a Zendo Project harm reduction space, outreach tables, a symposium of drug policy reformers, a vigil for lives lost in the war on drugs, a storytelling hosted by Psymposia, a ceremonial burn, and a dance party until sunrise. Activists and reformers discussed international and domestic consequences of the war on drugs. People directly affected, like mothers who lost their children in the 2014 mass kidnapping at Ayotzinapa, spoke of their experience. Others shared stories of how their experiences with psychedelics unlocked transformative channels of healing and joy within themselves, even in the midst of a perpetually challenging reality.

Witnessing the many variations of the impact of the war on drugs on different communities and in different places brought a unified awareness and empathy to the surface that many attendees, myself included, had never experienced before. Throughout the weekend, Catharsis became a container for people to share their truths with one another, filled with a richly spiritual fertilizer within which compassion, love, and resilience took root. We, the participants and co-creators of the experience, filled the container with connection after connection. People wrote messages on the Temple to loved ones who had been lost to addiction, police violence, or illness; they shared cruel stories of state-sponsored human oppression; they left mementos.

Late the last night, the Temple, which had been designed to look like a jail cell that had been lit on fire, was incinerated. As the Temple went up in flames, many of us reflected on the reality of the oppressive status quo, unifying in a shared spirit and commitment to continue to fight it. Together we chanted "No more drug war!" first quietly, and then louder and louder until the prayer rippled across the Mall. We danced into the next morning (at which point MAPS founder Rick Doblin ordered bagels and lox for the remaining "movers and shakers").

That weekend, and that night in particular, felt to me like

a rite of passage. I spent four days learning everything I could about the incredible world of drug policy reform. I met dozens of inspiring, passionate, and fundamentally good people, and to top it all off, I got to dance at sunrise with Rick Doblin. Most importantly, everything I had ever studied, thought about, and believed in was together in one place. I watched hundreds of people from all over the world, from hundreds of possible paths in life, dancing, connecting, and healing.

The war on drugs costs money, is logically inconsistent, and constricts our minds. Above all, however, it claims lives. We must fight back, and at Catharsis I saw in action how fighting back can include the simple act of healing ourselves. Indeed, that weekend I realized that for those who of us have been victimized by the war on drugs (paraphrased from the words of Audre Lorde), caring for ourselves is truly an act of political resistance.

AT THE UNITED NATIONS

Six months after the Temple burned at Catharsis, we carried this spirit of resilience to New York City, where the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on drugs (UNGASS) provided yet another opportunity for a committed network of drug policy advocates to convene with a purpose. Natalie Ginsberg and I, with help from Italy's Nonviolent Radical Party, had the opportunity to join these advocates in representing the positions of global civil society organizations. Although I was still in my last month of school as a student at Berkeley Law, there was no doubt in my mind that I needed to go. It was my first official event as a member of the MAPS team, with newly-printed business cards stating my role as Policy Fellow.

Over the course of the week, Natalie and I joined representatives from dozens of countries and international NGOs for formal meetings, brainstorming sessions, and networking events. We sat in on meetings organized by coalitions of organizations and member states, the Civil Society Task Force, the General Assembly, and others. We learned how different bodies interpret the right to health and the right to essential medicine, and how drug policy reformers around the world are influencing their countries. We were met with enthusiasm when we briefly spoke to Colombia's Minister of Health about the possibility of starting trials for MDMA-assisted-psychotherapy in Colombia. The Czech "drug czar" also sought our assistance in moving psychedelic advocacy forward in the Czech Republic. We also networked with an even broader collection of advocates than I had seen at the Reform conference, from even more communities affected by the war on drugs, and strengthened our connections with advocates in Latin America, Europe, Africa, Oceania, and Asia.

UNGASS brought a pragmatic realism to this work that I had not yet experienced. Even within the limited frame of UN action, UNGASS is far from the final conversation. The Special Session was called in preparation for the full General Assembly meeting on drugs, which is scheduled for 2019. At UNGASS, I realized that working with reactionary governments and their political baggage, as well as the snail-pace progress of global

policy change, will undoubtedly continue to challenge us as activists and advocates. Making these essential changes will only be possible if we continue to fortify ourselves as a community.

PRINCE, AND OTHER VICTIMS

On April 21, which fell during the week of UNGASS, Prince died. That Thursday night, an international group of committed civil society representatives—myself included—made one last stop after a busy, chaotic, and sometimes challenging week, hoping that an afterparty to the event would re-fortify our hearts. The DJ in the main room of Brooklyn's House ofYes was committed to the artist's legacy, playing nothing but his music throughout the evening. At the time, the cause of Prince's death was unknown. As with the tragic, early demise of any celebrity, overdose was always a possibility, but I remember wanting to believe that this death was different. That night we undoubtedly danced to party, taking advantage of the support and sanctuary that our community had created after an exhausting week of activism and advocacy. Although we did not know it at the time, we were also participating in another drug war vigil.

A few months later, the news came out that Prince had died of an accidental fentanyl overdose. This is the same fate that, in the last few years, has quietly met thousands of other people who use drugs. The synthetic opioid, which is 50–100 times stronger than morphine, has emerged in large part because illicit drug suppliers have begun to cut their heroin with fentanyl, which is cheaper, stronger, and easier to transport than heroin. Notably, Insys Therapeutics, a pharmaceutical company that manufactures fentanyl (and a brand new, synthetic THC) funded the successful anti-cannabis campaign in Arizona. Meanwhile opiate and other addictions are back in our mainstream national consciousness as overdoses in the United States rapidly increase, and there is little hope that traditionally accepted and presently accessible treatments will be any more effective than they have been in the past.

However, more innovative solutions may be on the horizon. In states like Vermont and New York, advocates have brought ibogaine research in the United States to the realm of legislative debate. Although ibogaine may not be a panacea for addiction, investigations into its effectiveness as an addiction interrupter hold promise. Now is a good time for US drug policy advocates to focus on obtaining support and permission for more research. Indeed, my work as Policy Fellow will include filling some of the gaps that still exist in the realm of ibogaine advocacy, and I will spend a significant amount of my time working with already-dedicated ibogaine advocates to push the discussion forward. Of course, access to ibogaine treatment is only one piece of the collective healing that must occur in the global drug-using community.

Early in November 2016—immediately following a traumatic election cycle, and appropriately over Veteran's Day weekend—the party, sanctuary, and vigil that is Catharsis was once again held in the shadow of the Washington Monument. Through more art, more activism, and more energy, its message



Monks visiting from Tibet stop to read and write reflections on the Temple of Rebirth at Catharsis 2016.

promoting community-wide healing from collective trauma once again resonated on the Mall. Thousands of people attended over the course of the weekend, many of whom expressed support and fascination both for the event as a whole and for MAPS itself. The event ended with a March for PTSD research, led by the giant golden dragon Abraxas, to draw attention to the urgent need for more government funding to find effective treatments—like MDMA—for trauma-related disorders and behaviors.

Prince will not be the last victim we dance for, and his death alone will not catalyze every change we hope to see. However, perhaps his passing carries with it a more urgent message, one that our society is finally ready to hear. 🌀

Ismail Ali, J.D., earned his J.D. at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law in 2016, after receiving his Bachelor's in Philosophy from California State University, Fresno, in 2012. As a law student, among leading and participating in other extracurricular activities which focused primarily on human rights, civil liberties, and racial justice, he also worked for the ACLU of Northern California's Criminal Justice and Drug Policy Project. In addition, Ismail served as co-lead of Berkeley Law's chapter of Students for Sensible Drug Policy, where he coordinated events that helped educate the law school community about entheogens, challenge the stigma associated with psychedelic drug use, and critique the racial dynamics of the emerging cannabis industry in California. To support his work at MAPS, Ismail received Berkeley Law's Public Interest Fellowship, a fellowship which provides funding for qualified Berkeley Law graduates who pursue legal work in the public interest. Ismail believes that psychedelic consciousness is a crucial piece of challenging oppression in all of its forms, and that legal access to psychedelics is an essential part of a progressive drug policy paradigm. He can be reached at ismail@maps.org.