

LIBERTY AND LSD © John Perry Barlow

OVER THE LAST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, I've watched a lot of Deadheads, Buddhists, and other freethinkers do acid. I've taken it myself. I still do occasionally, in a ritual sort of way. On the basis of their experience and my own, I know that the public terror of LSD is based more on media-propagated superstition than real world familiarity with its effects.

I know this, and, like most others who know it, I have kept quiet about it.

But I've finally realized that if I continue, out of fear, to conceal what I believe in this or any other area of public interest, I participate in a growing threat to the minds of America's young greater than any which acid presents. I mean by that the establishment of permissible truth in America. In a word, totalitarianism.

Shortly after the Bill of Rights was drafted, English philosopher John Stuart Mill said, "Liberty resides in the rights of that person whose views you find most odious." The Buddha was wise to point out that people must be free to work out for themselves what is true from actual experience and express it without censure.

I will go further and say that liberty resides in its exercise. It is preserved in the actual spouting of those odious views. It is maintained, and always has been, by brave and lonely cranks.

Lately, it seems our necessary cranks have been falling silent, struck dumb by a general assault on liberty in America. This is no right-wing plot from the top. Like most totalitarian impulses, it has arisen among the people themselves. Terrified of virtual bogeymen we know only from the evening news, we have asked the government for shorter chains and smaller cages. And, market-driven as ever, it has been obliging us.

This is what is still taking place in our conduct of the War On Some Drugs. In this futile jihad, Americans have largely suspended habeas corpus, have allowed government to permanently confiscate our goods without indictment or trial, have flat-out discarded the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution, and are voluntarily crippling the First, at least insofar as any expression might relate to drugs.

In my gloomier moments, I wonder if the elimination of freedom in America is not what the War On Some Drugs was actually designed to accomplish.

Certainly we haven't engaged this campaign because the psychoactive substances we are so determined to eliminate are inherently more dangerous than those we keep in plentiful and legal supply. Indeed, the most dangerous, antisocial, and addictive drugs I've ever taken—the ones I'm afraid to touch in any quantity today—are all legal.

Alcohol, nicotine, and prescription sedatives do more damage every day than LSD has done since its psychoactive properties were realized in 1943. Each year, alcohol kills hundreds of thousands of Americans, many of them violently. It is a factor in most murders and suicides in America. It is a rare case of domestic violence or abuse where alcohol plays no role.

Yet I don't hear people calling for its prohibition, nor would I support such an effort. I know it won't work.

It's not working for LSD either, and it's even less likely to. Lysergic acid diethylamide-25 is active in doses so small you can't see them. It's colorless, odorless, and it doesn't show up in drug tests. And you have to be pretty high on acid before anyone's going to notice you being anything but extremely alert.

Does this mean that I think LSD is safe or that I am recommending its use? Hardly. I consider LSD to be a serious medicine, strong enough to make some people see God or the Dharma. That's serious medicine. Two points need to be made: First, by diminishing the hazards inherent in our cultural drugs of choice and demonizing psychedelics, we head our children straight down the most dangerous path their youthful adventurism can take. Second, LSD is dangerous but not in the ways generally portrayed. By dressing it up in a Halloween costume of fictitious dangers, we encourage our kids to think we were also lying about its real ones. And LSD is dangerous.

It is dangerous because it promotes the idea that reality is something to be manipulated rather than accepted. This notion can seriously cripple one's coping abilities, although I would still argue that both alcohol and TV advertising do that more persuasively than LSD. And of course, if you're lightly sprung, it can leave you nuts.

But LSD is not illegal because it endangers your sanity. LSD is illegal because it endangers Control. Worse, it makes authority seem funny. But laugh

at authority in America and you will know risk. LSD is illegal primarily because it threatens the dominant American culture, the culture of Control.

This is not a sound use of law. Just laws arise to support the ethics of a whole society and not as a means for one of its cultural factions to impose power on another.

There are probably twenty-five million Americans who have taken LSD, and who would, if hard pressed in private, also tell you that it profoundly changed their lives, and not necessarily for the worse.

I will readily grant that some of these are hopeless crystal worshippers or psychedelic derelicts creeping around the Oregon woods. But far more of them are successful members of society, CEOs, politicians, Buddhist meditation teachers, ministers, and community leaders.

This is true. Whether we want it to be or not.

But the fact that so few among these millions dare utter this truth is, in a supposedly free country, a symptom of collective mental illness.

I neither expect nor ask any young person to regard me as a role model. There are easier routes through this world than the one I've taken. But I do like to think of myself as someone who defends his convictions. And I hope to raise my three daughters to be brave enough to own their beliefs, no matter how unorthodox, and to own them in public, no matter how risky. I dream of a day when anyone's daughters will feel free to do that.

The most I can do toward a world in which their liberty is assured is to exercise mine in this one.