

Reflections on Attitudes Towards Drugs in
East Kentucky

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This past summer I returned to my childhood home in East Kentucky. I stayed in a dilapidated cabin on the family hill farm in a remote section of large, sparsely populated Lawrence County. I knew quite a few of my neighbors as it turned out. Many of the younger ones I remembered from school. Older ones remembered my father from when he was county judge, or later when he maintained a law practice in the county seat, Louisa. So, after a brief settling in period, I was quickly accepted as a member of the community. Sense of community is very strong here owing largely, no doubt, to the fact that the two county police car radios don't work more than a mile out of town and that law enforcement officials ~~can~~ seldom come out the way anyhow. A strong protective attitude toward family and neighbors provides security. The one point of contention between myself and my neighbors was my refusal to carry or keep a gun. I believe they saw (and still see) me as a bit too sheltered for my own good. As one hired hand put it, "I wouldn't drive through this country without a pistol. To my knowledge, every one of the locals who visited me over the summer carried a weapon."

Still, as I have said, they can make a strong case of being armed out of necessity. I mention this only because it points to the major differences in the culture of East Kentucky and the rest of the state.

Young men of this region (young women are seldom seen out alone, for good reason), my neighbors, were a reflection of what my life would be if I wasn't a student. I was amazed at the extent to which I shared their underlying attitudes and biases. I had a peculiar (to me) feeling of being at home. But it wasn't a peaceful home. Many contradictions, doubts, and self destructive tendencies are entrenched in this culture.

For this class I would like to pass on some attitudes I encountered concerning folk medicine, mainstream scientific medicine, and controlled substance use and abuse.

I was strongly impressed by the sense of pride and identification with the more self sufficient mountain past that my peers showed. Perhaps returning after a seven year absence made me more aware of these feelings or perhaps they developed as the people matured. People with experience in 'natural healing' methods and plant use and

identification are widely respected. Apparently there is a genuine resurgence of interest in traditional healing techniques, scientific or otherwise. The 18 to 35 year old members of this cultural group are perhaps just now embracing the ideals of the back to the land movement, though many are far removed from the farm children of earlier generations who were brought up in traditional lifestyles. Their fathers and mothers went to Michigan, Texas, Ohio, and California. Many of them were born in those states. But they come back. And if you ask them why, they will tell you that East Kentucky is their home. They will tell you about total disenchantment with the workaday migrant factory hired hand life. ~~Disenchantment~~ A new realism is felt, no more booms in the northeast or southwest. They want homes, they want privacy, they want a closeness to the land, and unlike their counterparts in other social situations, such as inner city youth, they have the means to attain their goals.

Of course the average young hill dweller is not a walking encyclopedia of plant legend and lore, ready to live on the bounty of the woods - but the desire is there, and I think it's something new, at least new to the last four generations or so. There is a genuine ~~interest~~ eagerness to learn about traditional medicine and other arts. The average dream, if there is such a thing, is a home in the woods (as opposed to "on the big road" of the past), a vegetable garden, perhaps some livestock, a thriving marijuana patch to make ends meet, and in more than a few cases, a small distilling rig. Some have achieved this dream - and fight to protect it. I believe the common thread running through all this, although the people involved probably wouldn't put it this way, is a desire to move away from a mass culture and form small independent working communities.

All this sounds very positive. But the briefest

of visits to this area would make clear the destructive, dangerous habits of this same group. Lawrence is a dry county which makes for a lot of illicit small businesses. Virtually any form of alcohol is available within a few miles of any place in the county.

Moonshining still exists on a small scale for those who prefer pure white liquor to the adulterated government variety. Beer is usually 3.2 alcohol content which makes for massive consumption to get the desired effect. Homemade wines and beers are very much favored and I had a steady stream of visitors who enjoyed my homebrew. Strong religious taboos exist against the use of alcohol and seem to contribute to the Teetotals - horrible drunk swings I observed in some friends. The underlying attitude seems to be if you're going to do something, do it till you can't anymore and then drive at high speed on twisty dirt roads. These people have no sense of moderation.

Alcohol abuse has been prevalent for as long as white men have been around. The more recent recreational drugs have further polarized the society. The drugs of choice seem to follow the national norm, that is the people take whatever is available in reliable form. Lucaludes were big in the late 70's but faded as poorly bootlegged substitutes appeared. One commonly abused family of drugs is the tranquilizer group, especially Valium. Valium is a sedative-hypnotic which relieves anxiety without sedation at therapeutic doses. It was originally thought to have low abuse potential, but where there's a will there's a way. A childhood friend that I was reunited with is cross addicted to alcohol and downers, ~~though~~ he is able to function in his job and his wife and child are

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well taken care of. I have seen him eat well over 50 blue walnuts at once, which he says suffices for about four days (Walnut is stored in the body in large quantities). The same afternoon he was cutting locusts posts with a chainsaw. The point is, he sees nothing unacceptable in his lifestyle and for the most part neither do his peers. Psychoactive pharmaceutical drugs are seen as high-tech toys, to be used and abused with the same abandon as alcohol.

All of which contributes to fear and paranoia on the part of those who don't indulge. There are preachers here whose Sunday sermons make the government's late 60's anti-drug crusade seem unbiased in comparison. Drug use is blamed for every ill by a confused and anxious old guard. Hysteria naturally leads to confusion about what drug does what, which leads us into a discussion about the war raging around marijuana production and use. Marijuana, as any popularly elected sheriff knows, is an indispensable component in the local economy. Soon it will probably be the leading cash crop in the state (the DEA claims it already is, but we won't go into that). It is also making inroads into everyday life - many who grow it see in it positive medicinal values. This contrasts sharply with the ^{STRANGEST} opposing view which is remarkably similar to the Harry Anslinger obsessions of the '30's. But of course the same lack of restraint characterizes marijuana use. One hard-working local fellow walks around popping freshly picked juicy buds in his mouth, like a chew of tobacco. "It's just like a cup of coffee to me," he explains. I guess he doesn't know that uncooked marijuana is supposed to cause ~~terrible stomach~~ ^{terrible effects}

cramps. But it seems that these people have an amazing knack for avoiding serious damage through drug abuse. And after awhile even I got to feeling that this "if it feels good do twice as much" was normal.

Where are we? What to do? Obviously illicit drug use won't go away. It also seems to me that strenuous moral and legal objections to use contribute to the vicious cycle of abstinence and debauchery by adding to the guilt of the user. The ideal, I think, is to incorporate moderate drug use into acceptable cultural patterns. Responsible drug use could do much to change prevailing attitudes. As an example of what form this project could take I would like to introduce to you what must be one of the very best general health tonics around. It combines the skills of a brewer and marijuana grower to produce a "hi-brew". Jan leaves and other "waste" plant ~~parts~~ parts are collected, dried, and crushed. 1-4 ounces are wrapped in cheesecloth and placed in the just prepared beer (or wine, I suppose). Allow fermentation to proceed. The alcohol soluble THC is thoroughly dispersed throughout the brew during the working off process. The result is a full bodied beer with marijuana effects. I'm not sure why it is, but this beer seems to be less prone to abuse than commercial beer. Maybe people forget to open the third or fourth one. In any event, it is an interesting development at the grass roots level, so to speak. Who knows, it may become a staple in the hill household.