

Globe and Mail, Facts and Arguments, July 9, 2004

Weeding out the reefer madness

Smoke dope with your adult kids?

A question faced by many a baby boomer.

“You want me to smoke grass with you?” I asked, in disbelief.

“Yes, but only if you promise never, ever to call it grass again,” replied my daughter.

“It’ll be a bonding experience,” said her best friend.

I’ve been asked before and have always refused, not because I really disapproved, at least completely, but because disapproval is what my kids wanted to hear. But now my daughter and her friends are in their early twenties; they’re at university or working, and they’re adults. Before, when they were teenagers, I knew they smoked weed, as I knew that sometimes they drank too much. My job was to hover, near and yet far, keeping a stern eye on things, letting them know that I was watching, but also giving them a safe place to do what they were going to do anyway. Maybe I was wrong, too lax. In comparison with some parents, however, I was puritanical. The dad of one of my son’s friends used to buy dope for his boy, and smoke it with him and his buddies. “He is so cool!” said my son. His young friend did, however, end up dealing in large quantities.

Now it’s different. I don’t need to maintain an abstinent moral pose; now I do want a bonding experience. My daughter is home from university for the summer, but next summer she’ll stay down east and work, and then the plan is to go overseas. Our bonding opportunities are growing fewer. And besides – what can happen?

But the drug scares me. Of course I used to smoke as a teen, during the sixties. In fact, I had the classic sixties experience, smoking my first joint at sixteen while listening to the Beatles’ just-released “Sergeant Pepper’s” for the first time. At one point I met the Perth County Conspiracy, a band of hippy musicians and actors from Stratford who grew fantastic grass; they sent me a bag in a hollowed-out copy of the theatre magazine “Plays and Players.” So groovy! I rolled it up and smoked in my bedroom before going out, blowing smoke out the window.

My parents, who were cool, finally said they’d like to try this new thing and asked to smoke with me and my brother. We all smoked some hash together one night in 1969, while listening to Bob Dylan. My mother had a wonderful time, giggling and weaving around the room as if drunk. My father sneezed several times. “Well, if nothing else,” he said, “this stuff certainly stimulates my mucous membranes.” But he didn’t like it. “I have my drug,” he said, pouring himself a glass of Burgundy.

By the early 70’s, I was with him. Dope was starting to make me shake. For some reason, marijuana made me introspective in the most negative way; instead of a glorious sensual experience, getting stoned brought up my failings, my losses, my enormous

stupidity. I had to stop smoking before I stayed in the dark hole into which the drug cast me. I quit and had not smoked since.

Now, thirty years later, here are my daughter, her boyfriend and her best friend, and they are holding one little joint. I can handle one little joint. I puff, hold it in, pass it on. Puff, hold it in, pass it on. Only three puffs, and it hits. And then I remember – I've heard that the dope these kids smoke is not like ours was. In only a few minutes I am very, very stoned. And suddenly, I am very, very scared. But this time, I can't show anything, must not make a fool of myself in front of my girl and her friends.

I am hanging onto the chair arms. Someone says, "Yeah, that's great, put that on." And out scrapes the raucous voice of Janis Joplin. Janis Joplin – what decade am I in? The room should be filled with incense, and I, sitting on a faded Indian bedspread over an ancient sofa, wearing little round glasses, a curtain of hair, bellbottoms, love beads. Janis Joplin. It hurts to hear her, shredding her vocal chords.

I am sick with fright. The pit – the deep dark hole is going to open up, and I will fall in. I can feel it there. You hopeless specimen of a human being, the voice begins. I hang onto the chair as the room spins. No, I say to myself. I am not going to fall into that hole. I'm not 23, as I was then, as my companions are today. I am 53, I've lived a good life, I've raised two children, we are sitting in my house, I have accomplished, I am all right. We are all, all right. I will not be pulled under again.

My daughter and her friends are laughing, chatting, unaware of the battle going on in me. "This stuff is much stronger than I'm used to," I manage to say, trying to laugh with them. I relax, and see that my daughter is extremely funny when she's stoned. She is proud of me. She tells me that her brother, who's away living with his dad, always wanted to be the one to smoke with me first. He'll be jealous, she says. Through my haze I listen to the kids. They're funny, smart, quick. I hear for the first time how bright her best friend is, and lean over to tell her so.

"Janis was different from the others," I hear myself announcing. "Jimi, Jim Morrison, they didn't have to die, they were careless. But Janis always seemed to be driving towards death."

"Wow," they say, blinking at me. This relic, this ancient monument, was actually there. "Do you want to hear about it?" I say.