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Response: My Adventures with the Trip Doctors, by Michael Pollan

High Five. The Efficacious Use and Unexpected Benefits of Cannabis Legalization

“Is that a tire burning?”

Hillbrow, a Johannesburg neighborhood of high-rise buildings, was like any other city neighborhood in the late eighties. A distinct husky blue-grayness in the air seemed suffocating even by late-afternoon summer standards, already punctuated by thunderstorm humidity.

“Is it a necklacing?” I walked home, bolted the door, and wished I were somewhere else.

The *New York Times* had just given the barbaric act of necklacing, a kangaroo-court execution by hanging a gasoline-doused car tire around the neck of a suspected pro-Apartheid informant and setting it ablaze, international exposure. It revealed that the victims of the act of forced immolation are referred to as “Kentuckies” because they look *that* fried (Cowell).

Pulitzer-winning photographer Kevin Carter, part of the renowned Bang Bang Club of press photographers, was so traumatized by witnessing years of extreme violence that he committed suicide (Gauteng). Desmond Tutu threatened to abandon the liberation struggle as he questioned the very existence of humanity. “If the violence continues, I will pack my bags, collect my family and leave this beautiful country that I love so passionately and so deeply,” Tutu proclaimed a few days after wresting a crowd away from a man about to be set alight (Pfeifer). Winnie Mandela was, by contrast, committed to violence and she famously said: “Together,

hand-in-hand, with our boxes of matches and our necklaces we shall liberate this country” (Beauchamp).

Objectionable components were hidden from white eyes by relegating black South Africans to sprawling black ghettos. It was the crowning glory of an aggressive separatist agenda justified by constant tribal violence, frequently incited by the government who were gaslighting black communities to breaking point. The result has been a stressed-out national psyche rooted in the knowledge that Africa is not for the lily-livered. But I was in Hillbrow, the progressive multi-racial high-rise hub of anti-establishment punks, drag queens, and liberal Jewish grannies. And on that day Africa’s Sodom was appropriately redolent of Hades and choking on its own sulfur fumes. South Africans are no strangers to living with the stress of a country built on the intricacies of occupation and beset by violence. I sleep lightly. With one eye open.

In his renegade essay “My Adventures With the Trip Doctors” Michael Pollan touches on the intersection between mental health therapy using psychedelics, à la Timothy Leary, and Ralph Metzner’s excursions into treating mental health conditions with LSD. Pollan states that psychedelic therapy, whether for the treatment of psychological problems or as a means of facilitating self-exploration and spiritual growth is undergoing a renaissance in America.” Along the way (he writes with an enviable lightness of touch) Pollan touches on issues like consciousness, dying, depression, and addiction, through the lens of new science around treatment with psychedelics. He gives a riveting description of his own psychedelic trip under the guidance of an underground therapist, revealed us only as Mary—a nom de guerre, as the magic mushrooms she uses for therapy sessions are considered illegal in the United States. Pollan pauses at the reality that an FDA under the Trump regime would most certainly drag its

heels in approving anything that approaches the goals that the psychedelic therapy renaissance enthusiasts are hoping for. He briefly indulges the reader in the aural pleasure of Bach on acid, but frankly, Bach on brandy in a moody room with only a Labrador for company is already approaching its own form of superior mental health investment. Pollan's article, however, made an impression on me although it was for something that he curiously didn't mention (Pollan).

Pollan wide-berths the study of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is currently reaching a high of its own, as studies around prevalence, diagnoses, and treatment of PTSD are expanding exponentially. In a recent article Alexander Neumeister, MD, of the NYU Langone Medical Centre, points out that "There's not a single pharmacological treatment out there that has been developed specifically for PTSD." Neumeister continues that "we know very well that people with PTSD who use marijuana—a potent cannabinoid—often experience more relief from their symptoms than they do from antidepressants and other psychiatric medications" (Neumeister).

South Africans are plagued by PTSD. A 2016 Dutch study indicates that we are underestimating the effects and proliferation of exposure to extreme stress, which for reasons such as methodological inefficiencies and racial bias, are not adequately diagnosed (Atwoli). It shows up when we jump at the sound of a car backfiring. It's there when a traffic light is treated as an invitation and not a command. We all have friends who have been carjacked—some fatally—at a traffic light.

South African PTSD is not a white thing. Rising Afrophobia in the shadow of failed decolonization means that black South Africans in formerly segregated areas are especially vulnerable to victimization. Life is cheap. Whites are nervous. Oscar Pistorius' trial hinged on a

PTSD claim. He conceded that the physical challenge of his amputeeism, living in a place of violent hyper-reality, caused him to react explosively to a noise in the bathroom, indiscriminately shooting at the closed washroom door, and fatally wounding his girlfriend, Reeva Steenkamp. Neither his catastrophic actions nor his feeble excuses, were greeted with stunned reactions by the South African public. The cause of his alleged PTSD is, however, not a popular subject (Seal). Despite the fact that South Africa routinely makes the list of most dangerous countries in the world, and notwithstanding the staggering rape statistics, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has never confronted the South African love affair with violence and death. It is one of the reasons I decided to leave my birthplace in 2015, and relocate to the United States. Chicago. The irony. According to the National Institute of Mental Health nearly seven percent of adults in the USA develop PTSD in their lifetimes (NIMH). It's not *nothing*.

I have no quarrel with Mr. Pollan and his erudite essay on the efforts to normalize the treatment of mental health conditions through various drugs. I admire that he makes an even deeper point in his essay on the issues of legality around illicit substances when he refers to Metzner's frustration at the stalemate between the psychotherapy communities' view and that of the grey-hairs in government. A cursory Google search for PTSD treatments brings up significant research on MDMA, LSD, and of course, cannabis. Even WebMD, *WebMD*, avoids being too judgmental and suggests that medical marijuana is comparable to existing body chemicals in its regulating appetite, memory, and pain (Harding). In the United States, Echo Pharmaceuticals has been making significant inroads in educating the public on the prodigious range of cannabinoid treatments that are available while collaborating with medical researchers to develop literature and destigmatize the use of cannabinoid treatments. Echo inserts a weed-as-treatment talking

point into the ongoing legalization debate by creating supportive communities for those who have been written off by the medical establishment.

But beyond the medical weed and the weekend need, positive consequences and unexpected opportunities have revealed themselves since residents of several jurisdictions in the United States have started to legally light up. When Illinois, under the leadership of Governor J.B. Pritzker, moved to legalize the use of recreational marijuana, it became the eleventh state to do so. Several local city councils have since declined to allow the sale of recreational and medicinal marijuana, mostly following the usual NIMBY objections, as they wait to see if the projected tax benefit would be as considerable as the hype had suggested. Chicago receives up to 41.25% in taxes in some marijuana products, including a Cook County excise tax, and that does not even include the 7% state wholesale tax. In the state of Washington, you pay even more (Berg). Weed is big money. But besides the dollars and the medicinal value, an infinitely more textured reason to spark up the herb has started to emerge. And if you think weed by itself was an uncomfortable Sunday lunch conversation, I have a surprise for you...

The city of Evanston, essentially an extension of Chicago, will use the money raised from taxes on legalized marijuana to address issues around reparations. Their logic follows and augments that of the governor who plans to pardon and possibly expunge non-violent crime-related marijuana records. Since legalization, Pritzker has pardoned over eleven thousand low-level offenders, and action which he believes is a necessary step in the state's addressing of restorative justice, which has seen black residents disproportionately affected by entrenched racial bias and profiling. Evanston plans to impact the lives of black residents by making direct payments to qualified residents, and the thinking goes beyond homeownership extending into

support for building capacity through training. During an interview with NPR, Evanston Alderwoman Robin Rue Simmons explains that she wants “every black resident to have some way that they can qualify for this reparation, regardless of their education, homeownership status or even their income levels” (Garcia-Navarro). And she’s not kidding: the city plans to take 100% of the first ten million in tax revenues to fund their interpretation of reparations.

So yes, cannabis and its medicinal use, including the treatment of PTSD, is justified. Enlightened courses of action benefit survivors of PTSD, as well as cannabis-possession incarceration which is predicated on systemic bias. Poetic justice relishes in the fact that commercial, controlled, and community-minded cannabis sales presents an opportunity to plow cash back. Communities, who for decades have been marginalized by the very same thing that ripped them apart and reduced them to second-class citizenry can now—through legalized lighting up—finally get a hand up.

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