

Nurse calls for end of drug war!

(For the good of the world and for the love of each other)

Calling All Nurses

I am a Registered Nurse and I believe that the War on Drugs has become a War on People? Have you gotten there yet? If you do not believe it now, I hope that you will understand what I am saying by the end of this book. In a perfect world, nurses might use their power to bring this awful war to a halt because we are the largest profession of highly educated people in the world. We know the war on drugs has failed simply by looking at the health of our communities and witnessing what it has done to many individuals, our brothers and our sisters. We have the ability to teach and inspire our leaders to care in the way that we do and serve as health promoters. If we acted collectively we might demand that our lawmakers stop the practice of punishing people who use drugs and instead begin helping them. Why haven't we done this?

The year is 2016 and in our United States we continue a decades old policy of arresting, fining and giving felony convictions to our citizens because they chose to put a substance into their own body. If they are a person who needed help, we as a society have instead chosen to do the opposite. It is as though we have set out to ruin them instead. Those practices have made them sick and our communities worse off. If nurses could find the courage and will to unite, they could be in the position to demand that certain laws and policies be changed so that our nation might begin a new campaign toward public health and safety. But why haven't we spoken up so far? We are some of the most compassionate people you will meet. Are we complacent, apathetic or fearful of the authorities, of our own government?

I cannot win this fight alone and a war cannot be fought with just one person. I honestly wish I could inspire my fellow nurses to examine our culture which sets out to punish people who use drugs instead of trying to first help and to heal. Together, we could do many great things. We could help to create a unified scientific understanding of all drugs and how they impact the health of the individual and our communities and not leave that job to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). We could inspire each other to achieve a deeper understanding that by helping people with drug problems, rather than punishing them, we could actually create healthier communities and decrease crime. We could demand that all drugs be removed from the black market economy and into the control of our communities for the safety of our children and our own public. Some have already begun speaking out against impaired driving and other irresponsible behaviors. I know we can and should do more. Perhaps if we created a better world, people would be too busy making healthier choices and find less need to use drugs at all.

Nurses view the war on drugs through the eyes of caring. Our goal is to help people and heal our communities.

I am a Registered Nurse. It is how I make a living - caring for others. Living the life as a professional nurse has shaped the way that I view the world and has guided me to a better understand those around me. We Nurses are thinkers, but in order to be effective healers, we must also use our hearts, we must care. Our practice always begins with what we call assessment. Our task is to assess the health of the individual by examining each major system for optimal functioning. We have developed a systematic approach to examine how every element works together to create health or cause sickness. Our approach is based on scientific principles, but it is also based upon and understanding of our human needs for love and understanding. To do this we must be smart and also have heart.

Do you know how nurses think and behave? We have our own theories, our own process, our own methods of assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation. I am continually using my assessment skills to try to better understand my own current state of health and the health of my community. It is even part of the nurses' realm to consider the public health of our country. Am I healthy? Are the people in our country and the larger world living healthy lives? In my assessment, the "War on Drugs" is the single most damaging policy that is actually creating sickness and suffering across the globe.

My success as a nurse has always been fueled by love for my fellow man. My passion for fairness is something that I've always had from an early age. Nurses believe that each human being is equally deserving of dignity, basic human rights and a good world to live in. Today we see so much unfairness in the world and hate of people who are different than us. It bothers me. To do nothing about it seems a crime. Under the pretense of fighting the "war on drugs", lawmakers across the globe have turned toward policies of punishment and have hurt so many more people more than they have helped. I think this wrongheaded collection of bad ideas has actually created many of the problems in our world today and has wasted precious resources. From my point of view there is plenty of "low hanging fruit", things that we as a society could easily do today to greatly improve the health of our nation and our world tomorrow. We could begin by addressing the prohibition of marijuana, but please, let's call it by its scientific name; cannabis.

Throughout this book I have made a deliberate attempt to avoid using the name marijuana because it is actually a made-up name designed by people hoping to create fear about it. Let's all make the conscious effort to call it cannabis instead, OK? When we use the name cannabis, people will automatically understand that we have moved beyond the fears of the past and have begun to promote a scientific understanding of the plant and its properties.

A few of us might sincerely believe that the prohibition of cannabis and all other drugs is actually helping people by keeping it out of their reach. In my assessment though, making drugs illegal has not made them much harder to get. Even people in jail can get lots of drugs. They seem to be everywhere and people are very defiant of the law no matter how harsh the penalties are. They use the stuff anyway. The drug war has not and will not stop them. Our own governmental officials from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) have shown time and time again that not even they themselves can follow the drug laws. The system is full of corruption at every level.

I am just one citizen speaking out. I hope that not only nurses, but everyone will begin making their own assessment. I am very concerned that the end of the federal prohibition of cannabis might be a long way off. Legalizing other drugs like Cocaine and Heroin could be an even bigger challenge. It distresses me that many more people are still in harm's way. Drugs can cause real harm, I understand that, but I have come to understand that the laws that are supposed to address our concerns can be more harmful than the use of the drug.

Our president, Barak Obama says he is in favor of moving away from a system of incarceration to deal with the problems that drugs can sometimes cause. I want to share my belief that the unintended consequences of the war on drugs actually creates crime and causes more problems than it solves. It has weakened our country. I must strongly disagree with Mr. Obama's current drug policy which states that the legalization of drugs runs counter to our public health and safety. I believe that we must legalize cannabis at the federal level right away to begin moving our nation toward a public health model. Then we can work toward reducing the harm to individuals from other drugs and put our citizens in control of drugs for the first time in our shared history.

It is absolutely appropriate for nurses to address law reform because we can see that our current laws only hurt people, not help them. Solutions will need to be found for problems that have not even become apparent to us yet and it will be an ongoing process. We must continually assess where we are a nation, make plans for improvement and then evaluate how those improvements worked, right? That is our process.

How might a nurse assess the problem and evaluate the consequences of prohibition, namely punishment and mass incarceration? I do not think the majority of nurses believe that the war on drugs actually promotes a person's health and I do not believe the process of jailing people in our communities is making our towns safer or healthier. Still, there may be a few nurses who believe that an individual who uses any drug should go to jail and might benefit from the experience. I hope there are not many who believe that. If they do, I've also wondered if they can truly understand how criminals are treated without ever going to a jail to see it firsthand. From my point of view as a nurse, I've got to say that sending someone to jail sounds like a sure fire way to make someone sick, not healthier. I'll bet that when someone gets sent to jail for a non-violent offence like simply using drugs, it makes their families sick and suffer too.

I am also an older nurse – I am 56 years old. When I meet a new patient, I have been known to introduce myself as “Old Nurse Tony” in hopes of comforting them by the fact that they have a very experienced nurse taking care of them that day. I've heard that in the United States, there are one million nurses over the age of 50. If only 60% of those nurses agree with the ideas put forward in this book, that would mean that there are 600,000 voices or 600,000 voters to begin a more positive direction toward helping to heal our world by ending the war on drugs. I want to appeal to everyone's sense of decency.

I would like to inspire an army of “anti-warriors” to take action and fight back against a group of people who might not be intentionally setting out to hurt us, but are stubbornly doing it anyway. Later in the book I will talk about these people. They represent corporations and major industries that will be affected when the laws change. They are doing everything they can to stop cannabis from becoming legal. They are taking hurtful actions today which must be counteracted by caring actions today, not tomorrow. When they shout “War”, I think we should speak “Peace”. How many of us will “speak out” though?

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There are dozens of ways to get your voice heard by others in our free society. I have tried several already, but I intend to do more. I would not at all be surprised if one day you might even spot me atop a “soap-box” with a megaphone, not shouting to people, but speaking gently to them about a better way, a more peaceful way we might all live together. Do you know what you might be willing to do? Are you a blogger, a letter writer or a talker? At what point might you be pressed into action and speak up? You probably would not be inclined to do a thing if you believed that the “War on Drugs” has nothing to do with you. If you don’t already, I hope to get you to see that it has everything to do with you.

I know what nurses believe about drug abuse. I have lived and worked with my nursing colleagues for the better part of my life. They are deeply disturbed by the suffering that addiction to drugs can cause. It breaks our hearts. We witness it more than most people because of the nature of our work. We want to see less addiction in the public. We want people to enjoy health. In my assessment, our current system actually hurts people and leaves their addictions untreated. It doesn’t help them. Together, nurses could communicate the failure of punishing people and promote a new positive direction toward public health. I know that nurses could become a powerful force of reason and compassion to actually heal the world. In a better world we might find less drug use. Please read along, I am only trying to help.

You’ve heard only part of my assessment, what follows is part of my planning for real change. I hear it all the time, “there is not enough money in the budget for prevention programs or treatment programs”. I believe we can fix that problem by taxing, regulating and controlling the use of drugs. I understand what I am saying completely and it has taken me a while to figure a way out of our current predicament. We need to go beyond decriminalization and one day find the courage to legalize all drugs. You might not be ready to consider this argument, but I hope to get you thinking. You see, I feel certain that legalizing all drugs will make treatment easier to get, and not only that, it might be available for free to anyone who needs it. Also, legalization of drugs will make it harder for kids to get ahold of because for once, we the people will control it, not the underworld and black markets and drug cartels from Glen Burnie to Mexico. We do not control illegal drugs now and drug dealers do not “card” anyone to check if you’re 21 years of age.

Just two days ago, the Johns Hopkins Lancet-Experts urged decriminalization of minor drug offences and said that the war on drugs undercuts public health across the globe. A discussion is just beginning to occur in the medical community but I do not think their ideas go far enough. We are finally talking about decriminalizing the individual which you might think is a good step, but I think it is too small a step. It still leaves the drug cartels in control and they are wreaking havoc across the globe. They use the money to buy guns, where we might use the taxes generated to build schools, support our good policemen and women and also guarantee treatment for those who need it.

Nurses really do care about people. If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t bother sharing my love of the nursing profession and this collection of my personal stories with you. You see, I know that the criminalization of cannabis, for instance, is based entirely on lies. There are proven medicines already found in cannabis, yet our federal government disputes it to this day. I also believe that there are many beneficial properties in cannabis that have the ability to help ordinary people, not just sick people. For decades, our federal government has placed a complete and total roadblock on research. As CNN’s Health Correspondent Sanjay Gupta has said “People have been misled” and I think even “brainwashed”. As a result, our federal government remains trapped by a faulty foundation that we should have never allowed them to build.

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I've wondered what might happen to me personally if I was to state that "I enjoy smoking cannabis and that I think it is OK for adults to do it if they wish?" Putting forth the idea that the use of cannabis might have real health benefits and might even be "good for you" is taking it one step further. Could those statements be interpreted as going against my Code of Nursing Practice? My conscience guides me to take the risk. The risk is worth it if it helps to generate an open and honest discussion and help us to begin moving in a positive direction. If someone finds my ideas objectionable and it is reported to the American Nurses Association, actions might be taken against me to cause me to lose my nursing license. You see, I am bound by a pledge that every action that I take as a nurse must guide the patient toward health. If it is decided that my statements guide people toward illness, I could be in big trouble.

It is an expectation that the nurse also be an example of healthy living. A nurse who uses illegal drugs is not able to meet that standard. Nurses must be careful about the public perception of our legal drug use too. Nurses can get fired from their jobs for posting photos where they appear drunk at parties. Our patients and their families can view those images and report it to the hospital, saying "I do not want that impaired nurse taking care of my loved ones' critical needs." Hospitals do not want to be in the position of having to defend a post titled "Nurses Gone Wild". Nurses already know to monitor their posts and each other for possible violations. Still, I have cringed at some of the posts I've seen and I will not share any of those stories because my nursing buddies would become irate, for sure. Some have even hinted that they might have "smoked" something, but said it jokingly.

I currently do not use cannabis at all. I am trying to not be ashamed of the fact that I used cannabis in the past. I did, and unlike Bill Clinton, I will admit: "I inhaled". I knowingly chose to take a big risk, but it is a risk that millions of Americans take each day. I am not unique. Does that strike you as stupid or foolish that I used cannabis and I knew it was against the law? Did I put my family at risk, my freedom at risk? I am about to share some very personal stories about my experiences with drugs with the hope of accomplishing two things. I want to show that I am an ordinary person and that my freedom and my very life has been unnecessarily at risk all along. My government has taken the position that putting a plant substance into my own body is a criminal act punishable by law.

I think those laws are wrong, that's why I ignored them. I am now taking another risk. I am risking rejection by you the reader, by my fellow nurses. If I've got the argument all wrong, my own profession might act against me. When I participated in the fight to decriminalize the use of cannabis by adults over the age of 21 in Maryland I was using a tiny amount of cannabis almost daily. People there are now allowed to possess 10 grams of it without criminal penalty – it is at most a civil offence. At present, I am living in Florida. Do you know what might happen to me personally if I was found by the police to have a mere ounce of cannabis in my possession in this state? I could face a stiff fine of \$25,000 dollars and a felony conviction with up to three to five years in jail. That stands in stark contrast to what is allowed in the state of Colorado. How can these three states treat their own citizens so differently?

And the issue is far from settled in Colorado, because the use and sale of cannabis is still considered a federal crime. Even though it is legal there, nurses are not free to use cannabis. They are free to drink themselves to death but not free to choose a safer substance. I will speak about that later. You see nurses has been in disagreement with our government for decades. As scientists we know that cannabis is measurably safer than alcohol. Only recently has the DEA released news that they might consider rescheduling cannabis mid-year 2016. I am watching, but I do not trust a thing they say or do. Why should we leave this regulation of drugs to them anyway? They have got their facts all wrong and their policies and corruption have hurt us too much already. I'd rather hear what our nurses and public health officials would recommend.

The idea of any person being punished for using cannabis makes me feel ill and very mad. Some people want to use it recreationally, but others are truly sick people who are desperately trying to benefit from the medicine in cannabis. My own sister benefitted from cannabis in many ways at the end of her life. She died of Colon Cancer years ago and I cannot begin to tell you the many ways she suffered from the chemotherapy and experimental treatments. Cannabis helped her with the chronic pain, loss of appetite and it helped her spirit. At the time, her husband wanted to buy her a pound of pot. Had he been caught by the police, he might still be in jail to this day.

On March 31st, Florida governor Rick Scott signed into law House bill #307. It expands the laws “right to try act” by permitting terminally ill patients to experiment with non FDA approved remedies to include the use of medicinal cannabis. Remember that the federal government (DEA), continues to stand by the notion that there is absolutely no medicine to be found in cannabis. You must see that there is a real disconnect between the scientific community and the policies of our government. This issue affects the health and vitality of our communities, so I believe it is within the nurses’ realm to weigh in on it if we are to advocate for public health and ease suffering as we have pledged to do.

I am an advocate for sensible policies.

Please bear with me, I’ve got a lot more to say about drugs and health. I will admit that, like many people who are reading this, I too would like to live in a world where people found no need to use drugs at all. I admire sobriety. I am sober right now or I might not be able to organize my ideas about this complex subject. I am trying to paint a picture, to form a personal argument. If we allow our citizens to use a dangerous drug like alcohol without penalty, then I feel the use cannabis should be allowed without penalty since it is safer than alcohol in every way.

Once the federal government legalizes the use of cannabis by adults, any adult should be allowed to use it, even doctors and nurses and air traffic controllers. Of course we would need to maintain current practices which prohibit people from reporting to work impaired and never allow persons to drive under the influence of any drug. We cannot do everything at once. Certainly it would make sense that we decriminalize drugs first, but after that we should be making plans as to how we can safely move on to facing the facts about all drugs and taking control. Until we do, the drug cartels will be the leaders, not us.

I will continue my fight for sensible policies until the day when we no longer drug test for cannabis. We certainly do not drug test for alcohol or beer. I’m not the only one fighting for these principles and I am not the first nurse. I am passionate and vocal however and I wonder what the world will make of me? Will I be vilified in certain circles? Perhaps the answer is a resounding “yes”! Will it stop me from speaking my mind? I would have to say no, because it usually turns out that the truth gets out eventually. It’s just taken a bit longer than usual in this case.

We already know alcohol is more dangerous than cannabis. Alcohol can kill you today by overusing it. It is a toxic substance and yet it is legal. As you might be aware, no single death has ever been directly attributable to the use of cannabis whatsoever. I am quite angry that we do not hold all drugs to the same standard. Alcohol is not only given a free ride, but it’s use is glorified and glamorized. Do you watch television? Our airwaves are flooded alcohol commercials, but I do not ever recall seeing one which states the fact that alcohol can cause death and disease. Only rarely do you hear the message that “it should be used responsibly.” Drugs like Cocaine and Heroin can be dangerous too, I know that, but the current way we do things has created “gangsters” and I want them to have to find some legitimate line of work, even if it is growing the stuff for public sale or running their own dispensary. I don’t care, just as long as they follow the law and allow the public have the tax dollars generated to use for social good.

We tried to criminalize the sale and distribution of alcohol in America in the 1930's and it did not hold. In fact, it is pretty well accepted that Prohibition was a complete failure. It did not work for alcohol and in our prohibition of cannabis and other drugs, we are witnessing the same disastrous results. In my assessment, prohibition actually creates crime and promotes a distrust of our police. I believe that people all over the world should be free to use cannabis today without fear of their rights being taken away from them. At times, it might even be good for them. How do you interpret that statement? Does it appear that I am saying "drugs are good"? If it does, please read along and bear with my clumsiness. Please understand that I am only commenting on the idea that responsible use of cannabis by adults over the age of 21 should be legalized. It would be a great first start. Would you be shocked that a Registered Nurse might say such a thing? As a nurse, I give drugs to my patients every day. Some drugs that I give are very powerful, some are considered addictive. As a human being, I take drugs almost every day too. I currently enjoy excellent health. How do I do it?

I am a health advocate.

Note of caution about cannabis – Certain members of the general population may potentially become psychotic or schizophrenic at some point in their life. At present, the scientific community has no way of predicting who those persons might be with 100% certainty. Using any drug, even cannabis, may cause symptoms of those mental illnesses to appear in those people sooner than if they had not used drugs at all. Nurses would advise that if you have any reason to believe you might be a person prone to developing a mental illness, you should stay away from any and all drugs not prescribed by a physician. However, if you are a normal adult with no history of mental illness or mood disorder and you wish to use cannabis, I will happily share this with you – when faced with the basic facts, most nurses would have to agree that it is safer than alcohol. That does not mean that it is entirely safe. Taking any drug at all has risks. I would encourage you to do your own research and make your own informed decisions.

I want to change the world for the better. I consider myself a health promoter and advocate for healthy communities. Good health is no accident whatsoever – anyone can become sick at any time and our towns can become "sick" too. We can easily become unwell by doing "wrong things" or not doing "right things". We know that we all need clean water to drink and unpolluted air to breathe. We must have a healthy diet of fruits and vegetables and some sort of proteins and fats if we are to grow and meet our most basic physiological needs. Human beings are much more than biological machines though. We have a conscience, complex ideas, spiritual needs. We strive to not only seek food and water, but to find psychic balance and meaning in our lives. We also need love.

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In 1943 Abraham Maslow proposed a theory in psychology he called the Hierarchy of Needs. Every nurse studies it. At the bottom of the hierarchy, we learn that we must first meet our most basic needs like oxygen, food and water. If we don't get those things we cannot move up to meeting higher needs like safety, love and belonging, esteem etc. Not everyone achieves the highest level which is called self-actualization, but I believe my parents have. They have achieved health, esteem in their community and devote much of their energy and resources to helping others. They describe their life as "fulfilled" and feeling "happy". Their drug of preference is alcohol. After sharing many talks with them, I think they seem to understand that people who use cannabis might be using it in an identical way that they do when they reach for a glass of wine in the evening. You would have to ask them. They are on a journey too.

Nurses study psychology and psychiatry and learn that human beings also have complex emotional needs that can confound us. We do all sorts of complex things from making love to making war. Some people have so much fear and anxiety about the outside world that they are not able to leave their home. Others take risks and jump out of airplanes, go scuba diving a hundred feet underwater or run one hundred miles to get the “high” they desire. Sometimes people even use drugs to try to get the same effect or satisfy some need within them. Some people even say that they are on a spiritual journey. I cannot tell you exactly why we do all those things. I must leave that job to people who are much smarter than me. I do feel that I am smart enough however, that nurses are smart enough, to make a good assessment of what healthy and responsible behavior is. A nurses’ education also prepares us to respond to the immense spectrum and range of human behaviors in a unified way. We treat each person with dignity and accept their right to self-determination.

Some people go through life without even questioning drug use and others are horrified or ashamed that we use drugs at all. There may even be nurses who feel that the use of certain drugs is immoral or would be for them, a personal sin. The nurse however is compelled to show compassion for our patients and teach healthier behaviors rather than make personal judgements. We provide the same high level of quality services to care for people equally, even those addicted to drugs. We understand that people who use drugs are exactly that – people. Nurses must not use derogatory names like “pothead” or “junkie scum” to describe their patient. It goes against our core belief that we must avoid cultural judgements and allow individuals to make their own choices. Just as individuals have a right to not take a drug recommended by their health care team, they also have the right to put substances into their body that they believe will improve their health or help them to find their “balance”.

There are times in each of our lives when it can be a great challenge to find physical, mental and spiritual balance. Taking care of you, the public can be a stressful business. How do nurses cope? Sometimes we nurses’ turn to drugs too, to help ease our own suffering and to help us to forget about yours. The statistics are out there for anyone to view with only a few key words typed into a Google search bar. You might type in “drug use among nurses” for example. What you might learn is that we are human too.

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But how does anyone really learn about healthy living and finding balance? Is it the job of the family, our church, our schools? Certainly our co-workers might not be the best role models for healthy behaviors because they are going through the same process that we are – they are trying to cope with the same stresses we encounter. How do we each learn to not abuse drugs? Good genes might protect some of us and good role models may help guide us, but most importantly, I think we need a good education on how to take care of ourselves.

Education is better than criminalization

When I began my college education at Saint Mary’s College of Maryland in the Fall of 1977, there was only one way to do research. We would go to the library and read books and journals to find knowledge and the facts. We would look through the plastic Microfiche cards to find out what was being published in books and journals across the globe. If there was a book or journal article about our subject of interest, we could fill out a form for an inter-library loan and the journal or book *might* be delivered to our school in a couple of weeks. The semester was only sixteen weeks long, so the student needed to get right on it if you wanted to use any of that information in your term paper. Remember, at that time, the internet did not exist.

Think of how far we've come. Now, one only need to type in a few key words into a Google search bar and you can potentially have the whole world at your finger-tips. I say, potentially, because you can potentially get a lot of junk too. What you might find can either be useful, informative, fact based knowledge or pure speculation, opinions or even lies. Some of these lies might even be put forward by our very own governmental institutions like the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). But what is a lie? Must be deliberate or can it just be untrue out of ignorance only stated like it was truth? How are we to know what is what? It turns out, that in 1977 we might have been better off with the challenging search for truth and knowledge because the distractors were not as abundant as they are today. Also we were forced to do some critical thinking that the internet will do for you if you let it.

How do we as a society actually communicate our values and form arguments? I am writing this book about how my home town of Baltimore has been affected by the War on Drugs. I am trying to share and communicate my nursing values with you and form an argument. I am faced with many challenges. First off, what exactly is the "War on Drugs", and how has Baltimore really changed because of it? In my honest assessment, it has never been a war against crime. What is my unique view about those things that is reflective of my nursing education and profession? Yes, I did type in many key words into the Google search bar – "drugs" and "cannabis" and "war on drugs" and "war on drugs in Baltimore" for example, but what happened next is where the "rubber meets the road". I had to think. I tend to think like a nurse.

I spent a great deal of time reading "facts" from the government's point of view like the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) reporting that medical properties in cannabis is "yet to be proven". I also read journal articles published by our own government stating that there are only compounds in cannabis that might be medicinal. I also found Op-Ed's from people like David Simon who wrote "Homicide: A year on the Killing Streets published in www.themarshallproject.org. His solution to make Baltimore better – "End the f***ing drug war." I had to try to sort out in my own mind what was fact and what was fiction. My filter, the way I view drugs, society, authority, community, is uniquely mine and is changing all the time.

What do most people truly believe we should do about drug use? I also wonder what the public perception of Baltimore is, especially by people who had never even been there? And I wonder what Baltimore might be able to become one day if we could find the courage to try a new way of doing things. How might Baltimore be different today had we listened to Baltimore's Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke in 1988? He told Congress that legalizing the possession of illicit drugs would help, not hurt, the United States. Instead of a drug policy based primarily on law enforcement, Mr. Schmoke proposed "a measured and carefully implemented program of drug decriminalization," similar to the repeal of Prohibition of alcohol. That was nearly thirty years ago. Politicians have not done much since then, not without the public demanding it. Marylanders have the small comfort, 10grams worth, that cannabis use by adults has been recently decriminalized, but the gains in sensible reform are continually being challenged.

Also, just because the citizens of Baltimore are not considered criminals for possessing small amounts of cannabis, that does not mean that the people have a safe supply to legally purchase it. Have you ever wondered where Marylanders get their cannabis from? There is no way for a customer to be certain what they are buying or knowing if it is contaminated with another drug or mold or fungus. Marylanders do not have a safe supply which puts their health at further risk.

My assessment is that the prohibition of drugs has also helped to create a city full of homicides in Baltimore. People are afraid to go to certain places in my home town, and for good reason. Certain people there are said to be “out of control”. The sale of drugs is out of our control and is left for the criminals to control. People who sell drugs are human beings though and I have to assume that they are doing the best they can do. We created an underground economy for them to exploit and make money off of. Their neighbor is competing for that same money, an economy which totals millions and millions of dollars. We know this. I consider them to be ordinary people trying to make money to meet their needs by selling drugs. They are doing the same behaviors as millionaires who sell drugs in Colorado. They are my neighbors, trying to pay their bills and trying to survive in the system that we created. Yes, they often turn to violence to protect their money and drug trade. That is exactly what we have instructed them to do by designing a system of prohibition and punishment.

We, the people, our politicians and lawmakers created the system of prohibition. And what is the logical outcome for people who sell drugs? We punish them and give them a criminal record making them under-employable. Then, some people will have the audacity to say that “people who use drugs don’t bother to get a job” or “black men are not contributing to their families”. Of course they are not, I say, “it is by our own design”. We created a system of laws that are carried out differently depending on which neighborhood you live in. We can change it too, but it may take some creativity, it might take some imagination or guts. Imagine if we turned the whole war on drugs upside down and began taking the police out of the business of trying to control drugs. I don’t think they accomplished what they set out to do anyway. Imagine if we treated drug use as a public health matter. Could we use the money in a more productive way than the drug cartels do? Could we improve the health and safety of our communities? I think we could do a better job.

From my unique, personal point of view, I probably look at the problems of drugs and society way differently than many people do. Nurses are scientists and teachers who must filter through volumes of complex scientific facts and share them with our patient, you, the public. I wonder if I could teach people about my values in an effective way and share a different point of view? My goal would be to have the reader understand that I am trying to not only share knowledge and facts, but values, the values of a nurse.

Most nurses have steered clear of drug addictions, but not all have been so lucky. I do not think I will ever become addicted to prescription drugs or cocaine or heroin, but how can I be sure of it? There are many factors that contribute to the possibility of becoming addicted to drugs. Our genes may be a factor in keeping ourselves well, our education and upbringing and our coping skills can help too. Having a good paying job doing meaningful work in an interesting environment surrounded by supportive people would be an excellent recipe to fight addiction. But an injury, major stress or life crisis might knock us out of balance. We should all strive to learn as much as we can about the subject. When we become sick, I think we should try to help one another.

We need to talk about cannabis

I am writing about cannabis primarily, but I hope that many of my ideas about cannabis might be generalized to the larger War on Drugs. I am also writing about Baltimore and I hope that my ideas about this topic might be “spot on” with my friends, family and neighbors. More importantly though, I want to reach out to an audience who are frightened of the way things are going in America, and in Baltimore. I hope that my views do not alarm the reader, but rather comfort them that Baltimore can become a more prosperous and peaceful town by trying this better approach. Will Cannabis be legal in Maryland too one day as it is in Colorado? Many say with certainty that it will. Does that frighten you? I hope it doesn’t. Give me a little bit more time to share what I believe before you decide if I am right or wrong.

We know it is a plant, but other than that, most people do not know much about cannabis. People are frightened that it is “much stronger now than when we were growing up”. I think they are certainly right about that and under the system of Prohibition it only makes sense that it would become stronger. You see, since it is illegal, a smaller amount of stronger stuff means that the smuggler needs to sneak a smaller amount across the border to make the same amount of money. And drug growers are both farmers and scientists too. I have a friend who is nothing short of a Gregor Mendel when it comes to cannabis. Nurses who are interested in genetics learn about Mendel, a scientist and German-speaking Augustinian friar, on day one when they study genetics. We learned that he was given the posthumous credit as the founder of the modern science of inherited genetics. Farmers have known for a long time that crossbreeding of animals and plants could create certain desirable traits. Mendel conducted experiments between 1856 and 1863 on pea plants. Does this sound familiar? He crossbred pea plants that had different characteristics to create plants with predictable results that we now call the laws of Mendelian inheritance.

Well, that’s exactly what my friend did – he crossbred cannabis plants to try to not only get stronger and stronger varieties, but to also yield plants that gave a certain type of “high”. He kept detailed notes about which properties he was trying to promote. Each seedling had a tag with tons of detailed information that was tracked on his computer for detailed analysis. He would describe certain strains as having a sedative quality and others having properties that would yield a more euphoric effect on the user. He also spoke about how these genes could be dialed down” to create very mild forms of the drug. He told me “most people do not want that”. Still, I found it interesting to know that one day when it is legalized, consumers might guide the farmers to what they want, rather than the other way around. Under a legal system, consumers might actually choose a product that gives a mild “buzz”.

I know quite a bit about the subject of cannabis because I grew up with it. It was part of my culture growing up in America. When I was a teenager, it was considered normal for kids to experiment with “pot”, another name for cannabis. Our parents and school teachers’ kind of expected it. I’ve also talked about the effects of cannabis openly and honestly with lots of people. It is a subject we should all be talking about. We should talk about it to our kids and to our parents and each other and about why people even use drugs. I like to talk to people about ways we can enjoy ourselves without using any drugs at all. It’s our job as nurses to teach new behaviors that promote health and can yield even better, more predictable results than you could get from any drug.

I have often wondered what some people are actually trying to accomplish when they use drugs. I have witnessed the responsible use of drugs and I have seen the worst of all possible outcomes from drug use and abuse. The two do not equate with each other. I believe that people have the ability to use drugs without abusing them. I believe that we also have the ability to use drugs in a responsible way. I’m guessing that many nurses would be OK with adults over the age of 21 using cannabis in the privacy their own home with no children around. What percentage of nurses would find this to be acceptable I wonder? It is only one statistic that I’d like to find out. Also, it is a fact that any person can quit using any drug at any time. But how?

For some people, quitting drugs might be the most challenging task that they will ever accomplished in their life. Some can quit on their own, though it is sometimes a fact that they put it off until they have hit “rock bottom.” Other’s cannot do it alone and are helped by self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. We also know that no matter how hard some people try and no matter how hard people around them try to help, some will need extensive professional help to quit a drug addiction. Even when treatment is successful, there is still the possibility that they might experience relapse and return to using drugs. My values guide me to pull out all the stops and do everything we can to help this hardest hit group.

You may wonder how we can help these people by legalizing drugs, but it is not a solution that can be stated in one sound bite. Our plan must include a multi-pronged approach that begins with the collection of tax money to pay for it all. And when we control the sale of drugs, I believe that there will be plenty of money for treatment and also plenty of money for education. It is our responsibility to care for each other.

I am curious, I love learning and I am a talker. I have talked about all these things and about times when I personally got "high" too. Guess what? The world did not come to an end. I've had many conversations with friends and total strangers and cops and lawmakers. I have a few true stories to share. I have some surprising facts and knowledge too about a plant that some call a "medical miracle".

Have you ever heard of the Endogenous Endocannabinoid System? It is pretty remarkable. The more you learn about it, the more amazing it seems. I'd call it beautiful. It seems to help regulate almost every major system in our bodies and it helps us to maintain balance of all of our systems, our homeostasis. It directs complex actions in our immune system, nervous system and almost all of our bodies organs. Scientists estimate that this system evolved in primitive animals almost 600 million years ago. So why is it that we are just now learning about it?

The endocannabinoid system is named after the plant that led to its discovery, but you do not need to have ever used cannabis for the system to work. It is naturally part of us. It seems to help our bodies to achieve and maintain health from the cellular level on up. The system appears to be responsible for everything from embryonic implantation on the wall of our mother's uterus, to how we have an appetite and nurse and grow, to responding to injuries and dealing with pain. It helps us to survive in a hostile world. It is a complex and amazing system.

A proficient understanding of the topic might require at least a beginner's background in human anatomy and physiology, basic chemistry, neurochemistry and pharmacology to sift through the scientific facts about what we already know. I have a strong interest in the topic, and I look forward to learning more about it because I know that my having a better understanding of it will help me to explain why we must learn more. Nurses do that sometimes. We care so much about you that we are compelled to learn more so that we can help more. That's why we've become so smart. We are driven by our desire to heal because we care and because we love to teach.

You might be surprised to hear me say this, but if you would like to learn more about the science of cannabis, I would highly recommend the library of resources posted online from an organization called NORML. Unlike many medical journals, the scientific facts are presented there on a level that most people can follow and understand. Rick Steves, a famous television travel host, serves on the board of directors for that organization. He is dedicated to promoting a better understanding of cannabis and promoting more sensible policies. I hope to meet him one day so that I can thank him for his dedication to helping others. If you are a nurse, the American Cannabis Nurses Association (ACNA) is another valuable resource to look into.

Registered Nurses see you inside and out

I have spent the majority of my life working and serving my community as a Registered Nurse. My upbringing, my education and my training has led me to view the world in a unique way. I am a caregiver. I have taken care of you and your families in times of sickness and crisis and I cared about you every time. For twenty-six years I have taken care of the people in my home town. I have come to know you as a nurse does. I feel that I always cared the same way without judgement. I have compassion. I have witnessed people causing themselves to be sick from making bad choices like using cigarettes and drinking alcohol too much.

I have documented in my records many patient's physical findings directly related to drug use and abuse. I have carried pieces of Cirrhotic livers and bladder cancer specimens to the Pathology lab and charted descriptions of rotten teeth from the use of Crystal Meth. When I testified in the Maryland Senate hearings in support of Medical Cannabis, I stated that, "I had never taken care of a single patient who had any signs of acute or chronic illness caused by Cannabis." As a responsible nurse, however I felt obligated to give a balance testimony and state that "I know that it has caused some mental health problems in a small percentage of the population."

Nurses immerse themselves into the care of each patient by using their minds and their hearts. As part of my training as a nurse, I am keenly aware that my thoughts and ideas must have a foundation in science if I am to be effective. My words must also be used responsibly. Like a doctor, I too have taken a pledge to do no harm. In writing about what I have experienced and witnessed, I have a duty to educate the public and guide people toward healthy choices. I would not ever encourage people to use drugs of any kind. I want to help people live healthy lives. Right now, the process of writing this book is giving me what I would call a natural high. It is the feeling of satisfaction that we get when we are involved in something that is important or meaningful to us. Like when we help somebody or fix something or make art or play sports.

Those best times in our lives allow our brains to create something like drugs from inside us that make us feel good or satisfied. We might all be better off if we didn't use any drugs at all. That being said however, I must admit that there are times when the use of drugs may actually help us. What we human beings need to do is find balance. We need to achieve Homeostasis or a steady state to be well. The recipe for a steady state cannot be the same for everyone. That wouldn't make sense. We intuitively know that we each have a unique chemical makeup. The neurochemistry in our brains might be perfectly balanced at one time in our lives, and unbalanced later. It may simply be the nature of life. And some people probably should never experiment with any drugs ever, but, as I said earlier, we have no way of knowing who those individuals are ahead of time.

Drugs can be medicines and they can be poisons. Have you ever heard of water intoxication? Did you know that even water itself can kill us if you drink too much of it? I recall a very sad story in the news where the parents of a five-year old child used ordinary drinking water as a punishment for stealing a treat from the refrigerator. They forced the child to drink so much water that it caused brain swelling and death of their child.

As a nurse, as a person, I am compelled to try to make our world a better place for everyone to live in. If people are having problems with drugs, I want to help them, I want to educate them. Did you notice that the use of cigarettes is down amongst teenagers and adults? Have you wondered how and why? Yes, the price went up, but so did the effort to educate people to the risks of smoking. I remember growing up watching television commercials promoting different brands of cigarettes. One featured a doctor saying that it was actually "good for the lungs". Today you can view anti-smoking commercials on TV and people understand that smoking causes all sorts of health problems, not just lung cancer. I believe it was the education that led to the change in behavior. Tobacco is another legal and deadly drug but we now understand that criminalization of tobacco was not needed to reduce the harm and protect the public.

Drugs can be found everywhere across the globe. Nurses give them every day. We are expected to understand the chemistry of each and every medicine we give. It is also imperative that we understand the interactions of the drugs our patients take and how it halts the disease or promotes their health. It is an essential part of our training. We have to study complicated subjects like pharmacology, chemistry, biology, anatomy and physiology and share that knowledge with our patient on a level they can understand. I am very concerned that only a fraction of our doctors and nurses know the science about Cannabis.

The United States government, to this day, still disputes that the plant has any medical properties whatsoever. The government has also spent many millions of our tax payer's dollars try to frighten us about how the drug affects the mind and body. Given the stigma around the use of this plant and the government's effort to conceal the truth about it and even lie about it, it is not much of a surprise that the public knows so little. Did you know that in other parts of the world, Israel, for instance, scientists have studied Cannabis extensively and may be way ahead of us in their understanding?

There are lots of reasons for why we never learned much. Did you know that our government's Controlled Substances Act (CSA) places Cannabis as a Schedule 1 drug? Do you know what that means? A Schedule 1 drug has the "highest risk of addiction and abuse and has no known medical benefits". That is what our government really says. Another reason that our health care professionals know so little about cannabis, is that a path to greater understanding, namely research, has been severely restricted. That, combined with decades of propaganda, deliberate lies and misinformation by our government, has led us all to become ignorant about what this plant really is.

We are not just beginning to learn about the many medical and health benefits of cannabis. To say that would leave countless valuable researchers unrecognized. Hillary Clinton recently said "More research is needed" but cannabis might be the most studied plant of all time. More research will only strengthen my position and thankfully many facts are getting through to the public. Our understanding and attitudes are beginning to change, in part because medical marijuana is truly helping sick children who could not be helped with any other medicines. It has gotten peoples' attention, even in backwards places like Utah.

The government has already secured many patents on components of the cannabis plant. Don't believe me? Go to google and type in this number- 6630507. Isn't that ironic? They say there is no medicines in cannabis but they are creating patents on the compounds found in it. The patent is titled "Cannabinoids as antioxidants and neuroprotectants."

Soon the FDA will give the green light to what I call "Big Pharma" so that one day, certain people can become rich from selling the same stuff as todays criminals. The FDA is completely aware that scientists have isolated a medicine from cannabis that has been clinically proven to stop seizures in children with Dravet's Syndrome, a form of epilepsy. Now that a medicine derived from the cannabis plant has been proven to alleviate suffering and can make profits, we should soon see the plant move into the mainstream of scientific understanding. I hope you can pardon my mistrust of our own government and the DEA and the FDA, I am frustrated by the scientific disconnect and their tendency to punish rather than even pretend that they are trying to help us.

People trust Nurses. It is pretty well accepted that nurses high a high level of trust in our communities. Some say we are more trusted than doctors for giving straight talk to our patients. We are a profession devoted to the advancement of knowledge and research. We are known and trusted for our tradition caring. I certainly hope to do a good job with this project, this book. I am hoping my background in Nursing has given me a good foundation to teach and to heal.

Now that I have reached my retirement years, I have come to believe that the War on Drugs must be stopped. We are hurting people more than we are helping them. We are making people and our towns sick. Honestly, what happens to a person's mind when you put them in jail as a punishment for using drugs? Also, how does it affect their children and family. How does it affect our economy in Baltimore? I want you to consider looking at the War on Drugs through "Nurses Eyes". Can you see a person suffering with the problem of drug addiction as someone who needs our help and caring, rather than an evil person

who needs to be jailed and punished? Are you able to consider a different point of view? Can we forgive these people who are different than us? Are they weaker than us? Can we begin shifting our attitudes away from punishing and toward caring, toward helping?

And please understand this - I'm not talking about people in jails who chose to do hurtful things toward others. Folks who rob and rape and kill must always be stopped and held accountable for their actions. People who use drugs and drive their cars around must be stopped and held accountable for putting the safety of the community at risk. That must never change. But I do not believe that we should never criminalize a person for simply putting a substance into their own body, any substance. That is an example of our civil liberties being violated and perhaps our constitutional rights. We should help, not punish. And I want you to clearly understand this - Nurses never punish our patients, no matter what they might do while under our care no matter how sick they are. We never do it, we must not, we cannot.

Nurses never punish our patients, no matter what they might do while under our care no matter how sick they are. We never do it, we must not, we cannot.

In the course of my lifetime, I have met people with a wide range of ideas about drugs. Some people honestly believe that drug users should all be "locked up". Some folks say all drugs should be legalized. Being a nurse has shaped my ideas and now, I want to enlighten the reader to a different point of view. I hope that I can use the foundation of Nursing Practice to generate a more considered discussion about our drug use. Once we begin helping each other instead of hurting we can begin a process of evaluation and discuss our goals again. This book is about a place in America, Baltimore my home town, but it's also about the world and the people living in it. It is also about me; I am a person not a criminal.

I grew up in America

I was born in Baltimore Maryland, USA. The war on drugs hardly touched my life. My good hearted parents could be described as successful, white, middle class, church going Christians. I was one of five kids who grew up in a Suburban environment with peaceful neighborhoods, good public schools, lots of love and lots of fresh air. We ran about freely in the woods and back and forth to the shopping center with friends on bikes. My childhood and teenage memories are mostly happy ones. We had a lot of freedom. We grew up in a world where drugs were ubiquitous (that means they were everywhere) but not very well understood. I don't recall my parents ever having a "Birds and the Bees" talk with me about drugs. They may have told me "Don't do drugs", but I don't think they ever said why. I did not realize at the time that they themselves were using drugs on a daily basis. They drank coffee in the morning before their first Pall Mall cigarette of the day. At night they often would enjoy a cocktail or some kind of booze. They were very responsible drug users. They kept us safe and were good role models. Drunkenness was frowned upon, and one time when a cousin got drunk at a family picnic I remember that the entire family was quite upset. We learned a lot on our own. We did not believe all the propaganda about drugs. It seemed phony or untrue somehow. We "dared" to think for ourselves. My classmates and I did not have to endure the failed Dare to Keep Off Drugs program offered in schools, but my daughter did. She said "it was ridiculous".

At an early age, I knew that I wanted to become a scientist. I'll never forget inheriting a chemistry set from my cousins. They had only used three ingredients in the kit before they lost interest, they used up the sulfur, potassium chloride and charcoal. How do I remember this? Those were the ingredients to make gunpowder.

My best friend and I volunteered to be Science Lab Assistants. We got ahold of all kinds of things and experimented with all kinds of stuff that we were not supposed to touch without the teacher's permission. We touched liquid mercury with our bare hands and chased little balls of this liquid metal back and forth across our desks at each other. We took rolls of flammable magnesium oxide ribbon home with us and tried to cut through a metal pipe by wrapping it in this white hot burning ribbon and lighting it. It was the metal pipe holding up my neighbor's mailbox. We learned a lot on our own. We had curious minds and a pretty good public education. We knew what the "scientific method" was and we asked a lot of questions. We were curious kids and got a lot of special attention for it.

When my science teacher found out that I had begun a seed collection and that I had collected over two hundred different types of seeds in labeled glass vials, he had a talk with me that was not the ordinary patronizing teacher student interaction. Why are you doing that? It was not the only question he asked, and I had questions for him too. I remember asking how I could control the temperature and humidity in the containers so the seeds might be viable for decades in the future. Only recently did I learn that there is a world seed bank. It is stored in a vault in a remote island 800 miles from the north pole in Norway. I might have been a little ahead of my time in some ways.

I was not the most eccentric kid in the class either. One of my classmates learned from a television show that crayfish and lobsters could purposely eject a claw if they were losing a fight or were in danger if being caught. When I helped him collect crayfish from a local stream, I can clearly remember his conversations that gave me the impression of "mad scientist" at that time. He wondered how he could get these crayfish to eject a claw under controlled scientific conditions? He wanted to use an electric shock and a volt meter. Our science teacher ordered an apparatus from a company called Scientific American, I think. They adapted it and I wonder what he is doing with his life now. I am including this story only to share the fact that my love of science has always been with me, just as my awareness that there are always smarter kids out there.

I read books about plants and greenhouses. I loved the smell of greenhouses. I can smell that smell right now as if it was yesterday. We had some greenhouses down the street from me when I was growing up. I would practically stick my nose in the dirt. I adored clay pots and any creature crawling in and around and underneath them. As kids we roamed the woods with very limited supervision but always felt safe. A neighbor kid showed me how to bite a pine needle. Do you know what that tastes like? I wanted to taste other things too and I did. I had a curious mind. I loved nature. As a teenager, my parents actually allowed me to build a greenhouse on our back patio adjacent to my bedroom. My bedroom was half bedroom, half greenhouse. I recall creating a special area out of view for growing cannabis plants. I really enjoyed growing and nurturing my plants and even had a book called "Talk to Your Plants". I did.

My interest in nature led to my developing what my parents called a menagerie. At one point in my childhood I counted more than one hundred living creatures under my care. The majority of these animals were mice and rats that I raised to feed my pet snakes, but I had many others. My folks let me rehabilitate an owl with a damaged wing and I also was allowed to keep Caiman crocodiles in a plastic swimming pool in the basement. My parents encouraged my love of learning about animals. I even named one of my pet snakes Tricia in honor of President Nixon's daughter. Coincidentally we were given an English assignment that year to write a letter to the president of the United States. When we got the form letter back from the White House, I can remember hanging on the teacher's every word...No mention of me naming my snake Tricia? Too bad.

I guess you could say that I grew up in the sixties. Even though I was not an active participant, my observations of the era left a profound impression on me growing up. I was born in 1959 and can remember my older sister going crazy and screaming when a new song came out by the Beatles. It was called I Want to Hold Your Hand. I must have been only four years old. When Woodstock happened in 1969 I was only ten but I can definitely remember the news coverage on our black and white television set. My parents allowed us to see some of the things on the news because the television was on most of the time. I remember taking an occasional day off from school for being sick. From noon to three o'clock each day, Mom ironed and washed clothes and cleaned the house to the soap operas like Days of Our Lives. Do you remember the opening? I sure do – “Like sands through the hourglass, these are the days of our lives”.

On the nightly news we would catch glimpses of our changing society. I remember the day that President Kennedy was shot. The television was left on round the clock. I also remember coverage of the war in Viet Nam and Woodstock. My folks gave a word of caution about those young people on TV who were dancing around freely at Woodstock. My Mom might have said something like “Those kids better watch out, they might get into trouble”. I remember my folks using that phrase on other occasions too, but I did not know exactly what it meant. There was a place behind a pharmacy where kids used to “hang out”. I remember driving past the place one time in our station wagon full of kids and my parents targeted my sisters’ attention. They warned that sometimes girls “get into real trouble hanging out with boys in a place like that”. I sure did not know much about drugs or sex back then, only that things like that could get you into trouble.

The World seemed to be changing rapidly, with the Pope declaring that the pill was a “No-No” and president Nixon stating that “Drug abuse was public enemy number one.” The War on Drugs began to take a new shape in the 1970s, but somehow we didn’t think it applied to us, not in our little town of Perry Hall. When we were thirteen or so, my best friend and I had been exposed to a movie called Reefer Madness at the community college. My friends older brother managed a theater there and we would often tag along. The now infamous film was played as a comedy with commentary at the end made by some people with very long hair. It made us curious. What was it exactly, this Reefer?

We Discovered “Pot”

At the age of just fourteen, my best friend and I discovered “Pot”. In hindsight, I must admit, we might have been better off had we not stumbled upon the stuff at such an early age. We were just kids. It is my personal belief that we as a society have a responsibility to keep kids and young people away from drugs as long as possible. You see, when kids learn that drugs work so well at helping the user to forget about the problems at home, for instance, they will often choose the easy way out and turn to drugs rather than learn to cope with their problems and find other ways of dealing with their feelings.

We adults know that taking a long walk or bike ride or immersing ourselves in a hobby can “take your mind off of things”. That’s what drugs can do too. Long walks are an excellent way to take your mind off of things that are bothering you, have you learned that yet? And there are lots of healthier options to do this than using a substance, like taking a swim, playing sports, going for a run, gardening or doing art. Kids need to learn that. They are also in the challenging and perplexing process of learning about their own abilities and who they are and what they might become. It’s not an easy process to learn how to relate to other kids and the opposite sex and to learn about how to deal with feelings of anger, frustration and worry. Drugs can take your mind off of things like worries and fears and anxieties. I believe that children’s minds are growing so rapidly, they are learning so much, that they really need to learn how to cope without drugs if they are to become the most productive and successful people they can become.

But, before you consider my story as evidence that we need to keep drugs illegal, please consider this. It is my sincere belief that we kids' back then got ahold of cannabis because of the prohibition of it. It was nearly impossible for kids to get beer back then, just as it is today. Beer is controlled and regulated. One way to get beer was if you could steal it from your parents. 99% of parents would punish you for a month if they caught you doing that, we knew that for sure. Stealing liquor might be a little easier, but still very risky unless your parents were big time drinkers and wouldn't notice the level line being lower on the bottle, and most of my friends' parents were not that oblivious. Or, you could try to get an adult to get you some beer and most adults would flat out refuse and just laugh at you. Adults know too well that contributing to the delinquency of a minor can get you into big trouble. If you give alcohol to kids, the lawyer fees could cost a fortune and you could possibly go to jail. That rule must never change.

There is also the possibility of the fact since cannabis was illegal, it added to the allure, the mystery and excitement of sneaking away and using the stuff. Our parents didn't want us to smoke it. Isn't that what kids do, though? They sometimes do the exact thing that we tell them not to do. In my parent's generation it was cigarette smoking that was forbidden. Did that stop them? Hell no. My dad said that he started smoking cigarettes at the age of 14 or 15. Why did he do it? To be cool? Did he want to fit in because of peer pressure? Or perhaps it was driven in part by the media – the cigarette commercials back then were very glamorous and made smokers look very sophisticated and grown up. The Marlboro man was a rugged attractive freedom loving machine. He was an unstoppable fixture in our cultural landscape. We never saw him coughing or anything, he just looked very cool riding into the sunset. I remember lots of passionate cigarette commercials. Do you remember the slogan "I'd rather fight than switch?" I believe it was the brand Lucky Strike that showed people with one black eye, representing their love for the brand. They fought somebody because of their love for the product.

President Bill Clinton once made a famous quote about experimenting with marijuana, but said "I didn't inhale". I am about to share some pretty intimate stories about my childhood and growing up in the 1970's and I must admit that I did inhale. I want to tell you that ahead of time. I am trying to not feel ashamed to share these stories. Being older, I can accept the past for exactly what it is, my past. And I cannot take too much credit or blame for those times in America, which were not my creating. I only grew up in America – our America. I did not create the culture that I grew up in, I was only part of it. Those were different times and I think most Americans had a pretty relaxed view about cannabis back then. I think the attitude was "kids will be kids" and it was accepted that we were going to experiment with pot, as we called it back then, just like the previous generation experimented with cigarettes. Also I think that most people saw cannabis as pretty benign and safe compared to alcohol. It was before the War on Drugs got ramped up. People are beginning to relax their view again as the truth gets out.

My best friend and I experimented with Cannabis that we had stolen from his older brother's stash of seeds and stems. I say experimented because we had no certain idea what it would actually do to us. Even at this very young age we had an understanding that so much of the propaganda about cannabis was flat out false or a joke. Somehow, we knew or at least "felt" that it wouldn't really hurt us, but we honestly knew very little about what the plant was. Thank goodness it is not a very dangerous drug, or we might have gotten into what my parents called "real trouble."

Overall, I must say that we had a good time with it. It made us feel euphoric. As little scientists we questioned each other. "Do you feel anything?" We made observations about our senses, our perceptions and our state of mind. We giggled and the sound of our giggling sounded different. Things looked different and sounded different and we felt different. We felt pretty good, but as the little scientist that we were, we realized that we were actually a little bit impaired. We had to hide that from our parents and act normal, not "high".

As teenagers, we had no place of our own except the woods. Some of my fondest memories to this day were spent in those woods and we had quite a range of beautiful places to explore around our Baltimore neighborhoods. There were shaded streams with ferns and sunny pine forests that we explored under the influence of cannabis. The beauty of nature seemed amplified. The sounds and soothing sights seemed more beautiful than before. Many times we found ourselves in almost a religious state as we observed the beauty of witnessing a butterfly or some other of God's creatures. I recall a time when the two of us watched a caterpillar eating almost an entire leaf. We just sat there for a while watching this creature eat. After a while, we had wondered how long we had actually been there observing that beautiful sight. We had a beautiful idyllic summer with no responsibilities and lots of freedom to witness the beauty all around us.

Naively, we thought we were the only two kids in our school to have tried cannabis. It didn't take long for us to realize that we were not the only two kids at our school who had stumbled across the stuff and by the 10th grade, we learned that kids were smoking the stuff in front of the High School before the start of classes. I guess the kids in my school were pretty bold, but I'll bet it was an ordinary snapshot of American suburban life at the time. We were what Iggy Pop called the "undefeated" in a song where the lyrics went like this. "*We're the undefeated, we got what we want, we're so fuckin spoiled, life is just a bag of pot. We're the undefeated, TV in the shade, girls at all our parties, we have really got it made.*" It was a time of moratorium. That means we were not expected to be grown-ups yet, we were in between. We had little or no responsibilities, plenty of free time and every kid seemed to have a couple of bucks in their pockets for discretionary spending. We had enough money to buy a little bit of pot.

I was not the biggest "stoner" of the kids in my neighborhood. A stoner was a person who smoked pot all the time, had red eyes all the time and spent most of their time talking about pot or buying pot or smoking the stuff more than they did anything else like studying or homework or sports or anything. It was for some kids a way of life, a new identity, being cool. I was more of a "nerd", but because of that I was also a bit of a connoisseur. I liked the science of cannabis. My friends and I were very curious of the different strains we could get and how each one had a different effect upon us. Some made us highly creative and the world seemed to "sparkle" and some put us to sleep. I was also very interested in the science of how to consume it and I quickly learned that smoking "joints" or cigarettes of the stuff was very wasteful. We learned about bongs, or water-pipes from my best friend's older brother.

We were just kids at the time. We were not even driving cars yet and had no way to go to the "head shop", stores that sold paraphernalia, to buy a bong. We didn't have that much money anyway. But that did not stop us from figuring out some way to make one on our own pipe for free. Remember, we were the scientist kids, the nerds, we had a lot of imagination. We understood the basic principle of a water-pipe. The smoke is drawn through a straw that bubbles through water to cool it and make it easier on the lungs. It was not as wasteful; you could just use a tiny amount to take a "hit". That's all we ever had, a tiny bit. Also, it seemed to work better and made us feel pretty high. My friend and I made our first water-pipe out of a tennis ball can and a metal stem from a busted lamp. We thought we were pretty clever.

In an effort to paint a balanced view of my growing up with the occasional use of cannabis, I'd also like to share a story that highlights the fact that our safety was put at risk by using drugs. It is cautionary tale but it is true. I include it here to get a discussion going amongst ourselves, but more importantly amongst our kids. Some might criticize me for making pot sound fun or beautiful, but I want to share that we knew even back then, that we were impaired. That's why some people use drugs, they want to be impaired. But everyone must realize that if you put yourself in a position of being impaired, you are also putting your personal safety at risk.

A bunch of us went out one dark winter night to have some time away from the grown up world and hang out at the train tracks. Does that just grab your attention? There might have been six of us and the way I remember it, we had some beer and a little bit of cannabis. We were just being wild and free doing as we pleased and having what we thought was a good time. My best friend though it would be funny if we hid from the others at the railroad trestle where it went over the Gunpowder river. My best friend took two steps backward and disappeared.

I heard him shout “Tony, I’m down here”. When I looked down, I could see him hanging onto the lip of a cement wall, but it was so dark I could not see how far up we were on the bridge or how far down the bottom was. I remember him saying, “I’m just gonna drop, how far down is it?” My eyes began to adjust and I knew the answer was “No, do not drop down, were too high up!” Adrenaline must have been surging in my body, because I remember pulling him up off of that ledge and he has always been twice my size. The ledge was also at a 30 or 45-degree angle, so I don’t even know how I lifted him up. We marked the spot with one of those railway stones by making an “X” on the concrete so we could come back in the daylight and see where we had been. I’m not positive that it was the next day, but when we came back, we saw the X right away. When we looked over the edge in the light of day, we could see an 8-foot railroad tie sticking up at an angle out of the ice. It was 30 feet directly below where he was hanging. He might have died that night even had we not been using drugs, but we still blamed the incident on being “messed up”.

I’ve wondered if some parents would prefer to have their kids closer to home no matter what they are doing. I can recall one parent in our circle who said he’d rather if the kids would just drink or smoke in the back yard. Have you ever heard a parent say such a thing out of concern for their kids’ safety? I know these are troubling questions that every parent must face. I am not proud of the story I shared, but I included it to show that I am just an ordinary person trying to understand our own human nature.

Drugs were a part of American life back then, just as they are today. In the 1970’s smoking cannabis was considered pretty normal. Decades later, some writers and television producers would create a show called “The 70’s Show” it was about us. Just as my parents gave us lots of freedom to grow up in America, so did our principal and our teachers at school.

The driveway where the busses dropped kids off in front of our High School created an island of trees. That is where kids would party and smoke cannabis before school. It was right in front of the principal’s office. We could see him stand in front of his window and watch the unloading of the school busses. While the busses were unloading, we were getting “loaded”, another term for getting high. I was even so bold as to create a really crazy pipe for me and my friends to defiantly smoke on the special occasion of the last day of the school on my senior year. We smoked a water-pipe that I made out of a three-foot tall orange construction cone. After that, I hid it across the street in the woods – another “hang out” the students created.

I’m not exactly proud of my drug use as a youngster. I am only including these stories as a form of historical document or diary of one person’s experience in times before the drug war kicked into full gear. I’ll bet there is not one place in America today where kids are so bold or have as much freedom as we did, but who knows. I’ll bet I am going to get some fan mail and some hate mail for even talking about this stuff. Somebody is, no doubt, going to say that it sends a wrong message to the kids. That we got away with it. But please read on, not everybody got away as scot-free as I did.

I do not want to glorify drug use among teens. I want to stop it. My point is that prohibition certainly didn't stop us. I probably turned out OK, but not all of my friends made it through those times without being hurt in some way from the use of drugs, that is for sure. Some struggled with addictions to harder drugs than cannabis and some got arrested by the police and their lives were not always improved by the experience. One of my friends felt he did not get into the college he wanted to go to because of getting busted.

Teachers often looked the other way but not every teacher was cool. I will never forget a chat with my biology teacher who was upset that I came to his class after "C Lunch" which the seniors primarily attended. He said he could tell exactly what I was doing because sometimes I came to his class with red eyes. He was mad that on occasion, I came to his class "high". In our end of year conference, he told me his plan as to how he would discipline me. He said that *"after calculating my grade point average after the final, I had earned an 87% in his class."* It was up to his discretion if he might *"grade on a bell curve and give me an A for the year"*. Instead he told me that he had *"already decided to give me a C for his class."* He also told me that he would be *"more than happy to discuss changing my grade to a B if I wanted to have my parents come in for a parent-teacher conference."* Yeah, "That's OK" I said, and I really got a letter C grade that year despite my earning 87% of the points. I wonder if I learned my lesson?

My use of the plant came and went throughout my high school years. I would quit when I was running track and cross country, in part because of peer pressure from the girls who kept the track statistics. They thought it was bad for me and they were very cute, so I listened to them a little bit. I had also discovered the "runner's high" back then and would just go running. Next thing I knew I was at Essex Community College five miles away and had to run all the way back home for dinner. We did not have cell phones so we had to book it if we wanted to get home before dark.

Although other drugs became available to me once I started hanging around other "cool" kids. I will admit to trying some other drugs, but never getting "hooked" or anything. I was a good kid and never wanted to let my very caring parents down. I also had some good sense. I credit my parent's role modeling and my good public education with keeping myself out of drug problems, but I now understand that there must also be a role in our genes. Sometimes we can find entire families prone to alcoholism for instance. I feel lucky that I had a good upbringing, learned to think on my own and make good decisions. I was also fortunate to be born with good genes that are probably less prone to the tendencies of addiction. I reject the "Gateway Theory" and also like to remind people that anyone and everyone can quit drugs and be *cured* of addiction. That's not something that can be said for any other "illness".

I feel that I have become a very successful adult with a good mind. The use of Cannabis in my adulthood had probably helped me more than it hurt me, but not everyone I know would agree with that statement. Later in my life I used cannabis as a medicine to help me to forget the worries of my day and the dissatisfaction of my life. I was unhappy about my life. I was unhappy about Baltimore. I was mad that War on Drugs was actually causing more problems than it was solving in America. I was frustrated by the stubbornness of so many people who do not want our current system to change at all. I felt like I was just sitting on the sidelines of life and watching the war on drugs ruin our country and I was doing absolutely nothing about it.

For whatever reason, good or bad, I made the conscious choice to return to using cannabis. In fact, for the last eight or nine years, I used a tiny amount cannabis almost every evening after work. At the time I was working as a nurse in a large teaching hospital. For perspective, I can tell you that many of my coworkers were more impaired than me by the use of their drug of choice – alcohol. I could see it every morning when certain doctors and nurses were obviously hung over from a weekend of binge drinking. Their eyes were red, their heads ached and they reported being dehydrated but felt sick if they drank water. Coffee seemed to be the best remedy for these folks. Another acceptable drug.

Alcohol consumption, “drinking” is part of our normal culture. It’s how some of us deal with the enormity of the work experience caring for the sick. My nurse, doctor and anesthesiologist colleagues were doing the same or more drugs than me. How much drugs do Americans use? Not that it makes it ok, it’s just that drugs are part of our culture whether we like it or not. Some health professionals I know must submit to a weekly urine screening to test for narcotics that they got hooked on, medicines that were intended for their patients.

My drug use paled in comparison to many health practitioners then and at earlier times in history at the very same hospital. There is a fascinating history lesson for anyone to learn with a little research on Google. I am hinting about the true life story of two of the most influential doctors in medicine’s history - Dr. William Osler and Dr. William Halstead’s famous addiction to Cocaine and Morphine. Somehow their remarkable contributions to medicine were so great that it made it easier for people to avoid demonizing them or calling them criminals. We learned a lot from them and about them. We learned about ourselves too.

My daily use in the evening of a tiny amount of cannabis was very benign. I never reported to work under the influence and the little amount of cannabis that I consumed was way worn off by the following day. No one knew I was using any sort of drug at all, not even my wife. It did not affect my performance in any way and I rarely called out sick. I feel it actually helped me to “chill out”, which was a good thing. It might have even boosted my creative energy at this time in my life. My wife and I owned and operated an art gallery during those years and I created more than two hundred original marble sculptures. Without any background in art, I even created several marble portraits of doctors in shallow relief. I never thought that I could personally have any meaningful impact on the war on drugs. I just lived my life like I was an outsider and was immune from prosecution.

Now that I am older it seems only natural that my view of the world should change as I am near retirement. I am more reflective of my youth and the contributions I made to my community in my middle years. I find myself still wanting to serve others and I wonder what can I realistically accomplish at this time in my life? How can I make a difference?

I must admit to feeling a little bit naïve, and a little bit foolish now that I look around. For a long time, I just sat on the sidelines of life watching the drug war hurt people and make them sick. Only recently did I try to get involved in the political process and testify at legislative hearings on the state level. True to my character, once again, I found myself hoping to alleviate suffering. I wanted to educate adults and work to keep drugs away from kids as long as possible. I wanted to help adults explore a better way to cope and make the world a better place. During the course of most of my lifetime, however, some people in America were so afraid of people who used drugs, that they not only tried to punish them but they also found a way to make money off of them too. They spread deliberate lies to maximize their profits from the drug war. And up till now, I did nothing to stop them.

Profiting from the War on Drugs

Did you know that some people are actually profiting from the prohibition of cannabis and other drugs? There are Americans who own companies that operate private, for profit prisons, and those companies have shareholders who are concerned that if we decriminalize cannabis, it might cut into their profits. I’ve read that our former vice president Dick Cheney owns stock in private prisons. While some people are profiting from putting and keeping people locked up in jails for non-violent crimes and they are getting rich, I’m speaking out against the practice and I’m not making a dime. I’d rather be me.

While some people are profiting from putting and keeping people locked up in jails for non-violent crimes and they are getting rich, I'm speaking out against the practice and I'm not making a dime. I'd rather be me.

Other companies do not want our current system of laws to change because it will cut into their profits too. Have you ever wondered why companies such as American Brands (Jim Beam whiskey), Philip Morris (Marlboro and Virginia Slims cigarettes, Miller beer), Anheuser Busch (Budweiser, Michelob, Busch beer), R.J. Reynolds (Camel, Salem, Winston cigarettes), as well as pharmaceutical firms Bristol Meyers-Squibb, Merck & Company and Procter & Gamble have all contributed millions of dollars to "anti-drug campaigns"? Think about it. These are companies who sell drugs and they are giving lots of money to operations with names like Partnership for a Drug Free America. Does that make sense? It does if they are only trying to hurt their potential competition. Making a drug free America would mean that they want people to use less of their products, but that doesn't make sense – they spend millions on advertising to try to get us to buy more of their stuff. Did they donate that money to educate people about the dangers of drugs or did they do it to protect this year's profits?

To be fair in my reporting, the organization that runs www.drugfree.org discontinued any direct fiscal association with tobacco and alcohol suppliers in 1997, although it still receives donations from pharmaceutical companies. They are the people who brought us the iconic commercial "This is your brain on drugs." In which an egg is dropped into a hot pan of butter. I'd like to thank [Cynthia Cotts](#) of the [Village Voice](#) for bringing these facts to our attention. Cleverly, she found the proof in their federal tax returns. It is my worry that corporations often attempt to control public policy and perception without our being able to prove a thing. That group has been criticized that some of its public service announcements have had "little proven effect on drug use".

Are Americans worried about the lobbying power of pharmaceutical companies? I think they are. I am very concerned about how one pharmaceutical company might have influenced or "bought" a member of Congress – Maryland's Andy Harris. If you visit the website atn.com, you can read an article that they published in 2014 claiming that Harris' actions to continue the prohibition of cannabis was tainted by a conflict of interest. Thanks to the reporting done by atn.com, it was revealed that Harris' third largest campaign donor is the pharmaceutical corporation Emergent BioSolutions, based in Rockville, Maryland. One of Emergent's products is epsil, "a fast-acting treatment that reduces the pain associated with oral mucositis," which is a common complication of chemotherapy from cancer treatment.

Only recently has Harris begun to change his tune and admit that research should be done to study cannabis. In 2015 he said "We need to know one way or the other if marijuana has the widespread medical uses people claim." In fact, once cannabis is legalized in Maryland, the sales of drugs such as epsil might go down as people seek a natural remedy. I also find it disturbing that medical professionals, like Dr. Harris continue to use the name marijuana instead of cannabis. I believe that Congressman Harris does this intentionally. You see, cannabis is the scientific name for the plant, not marijuana. By using the name Marijuana, he continues the propaganda of fear promoted by the movie Reeper Madness. Why doesn't he just call it cannabis?

Congressman Harris also argues that cannabis is a gateway drug – I think his argument is a “smokescreen” used to protect his buddies in the pharmaceutical business. We know that in states where cannabis has been legalized, the number of deaths from prescription opiates has dropped significantly. I do not think that Congressman Harris has ever publically commented on the issue of conflict of interest. I doubt that he wants to talk about it. People like that prompted me to fight for more sensible laws in Maryland. When I gave my testimony on the state level, I wanted to counteract Andy Harris whom I call a “science denier”.

Even though Maryland’s only Republican Congressman (Harris) is a doctor, I do not think he really knows much about cannabis or at least he claims to be ignorant. And here is another thing that bugs me – one of his biggest campaign supporters is the American Medical Association. Why is there such a disconnect between that national organization and one of their members who rejects the wealth of scientific truth about cannabis? I am not an expert on the subject. I am a nurse. I would like to tell Congressman Harris, though, that he has not ever made a solid argument that cannabis is a gateway drug. He only repeats these sound bites when he chooses and then does not ever make a reasonable argument based on supporting facts. He has lots of those sound bites too, but that’s all that they are to me. He said recently that” if we legalize cannabis it will lead to more kids using it”. How will it? Perhaps it won’t. You are expected to make supporting statements to make your case, sir. I think you are flat out wrong Congressman Harris.

Forget about it

Cannabis, I think, has a role in “forgetting” and perhaps it has a role in remembering. When people use cannabis, they report that they feel different than earlier. They “forgot” what was bothering them earlier. They feel euphoric, they feel “better now”. For some people, forgetting is considered a beneficial quality of the plants effect on the user. Others find it disturbing. Not everyone gets the same effect of the drug and not everyone may interpret the changes in their mood or thinking as pleasant. Sometimes people may have a feeling of fear and paranoia, or worry that will forget where they put their keys or forget to lock the door on the way out of the house. They might get so “stoned” that they might worry that they will forget how to do it. I am embarrassed to admit to one occasion in which I perhaps smoked too much cannabis too quickly and then wondered if I was on the correct side of the door. By the way, as I figured out a moment later, you should always be on the same side of the door as your keys. Do you understand where my mind was at, at the time? Some will laugh, others will say it sounds like a scary place to be.

Recent research also shows that cannabis may actually improve our memory and slow the onset and severity Alzheimer’s disease by decreasing inflammation and allowing excess beta amyloid proteins to cross the blood brain barrier. Only through legitimate research can we begin to reveal the medicines in cannabis. Our government has no business blocking the research. We the people must demand they stop doing that.

I currently do not use cannabis, in part because of the potential criminal penalties. I am also routinely drug tested because of my profession. At this time in my life, I can manage fine without it, but If I allow myself to be honest, I must say that I think I might enjoy using cannabis again one day. It would have to be in a time and place where it is legal and it would have to include the opportunity to be in nature. Mind you, when I visit natural surroundings now, I am quite able to see the beauty of God’s natural world. In fact, I now feel that I can be totally honest with myself and admit that I see a “down side” to smoking cannabis. You know the saying “what goes up, must come down”. Well maybe right now I like the idea of getting high more than I like the idea of coming down. That being said, many people are not blessed with a good night’s sleep and cannabis might be useful or helpful for them. With the right place and the right friends and the right conditions, however, using cannabis might be a good time, a revelation, a party.

Have you ever tried it? I have, and there were many times when I must admit that I really “liked it”. Is that going to get me in trouble? Are you at all curious about if anything is going to happen to me, a nurse, for saying that? Do you think that my professional organizations are going to bust me for saying something that is unbecoming of a professional nurse? Will I lose my license?

Believe me, I feel very fortunate that my life has never been negatively impacted by my partying, but not all of my friends were so lucky. Some of my friends were arrested for possession of Cannabis and their lives changed forever. Some Americans are currently serving a life sentence for the non-violent crime of distributing the stuff. Meanwhile in Colorado today, the same behavior is turning people into respected million dollar entrepreneurs. Just as a note of curiosity, are more of those entrepreneurs white or black?

The war on drugs has promoted racism

Are you white? Are you black or brown? It matters, because the laws in fact are truly unevenly applied. Despite the fact that the percentage of whites and blacks who use Cannabis in Baltimore are roughly the same, more blacks are arrested than whites. In 2013, blacks suffered 95% of the arrests for Cannabis in Baltimore City. I say suffered, because these arrests often came with no help offered to the individual. There is not much real drug treatment available in Baltimore, especially not for free. These people suffered with the humiliation of arrest. They suffered with fines and court dates and disruption. They suffered with convictions which kept them from better income. For decades their families have suffered and their communities suffered because they made a choice to use drugs. In Baltimore we punish some drug users, but not all. It took a long time for Baltimore to get where it is. I think it could have become a better place than you will find it today. Where might we be, had we celebrated our Jazz singer Billie Holiday rather than see her persecuted for using Cannabis and other drugs? Where might we be today, had we tried to help generations of Baltimoreans who made the choice to use drugs. Instead we chose to fine them, jail them and hand out Felony convictions to them, making them unemployable so that their entire family suffers.

Here’s how I see the War on Drug playing out in Baltimore. The kid who had a parent that got arrested didn’t do as good as other kids. One of his parents got locked up and sometimes the kids have to watch it and are quite traumatized. Later in life, when they themselves became parents they lacked good role models, parents who made some poor choices in Prohibition times. Maybe they also had a little less resources and a little less opportunity. So guess what they did to “try to get ahead”? Often times, they sold drugs to make a few bucks.

The money is always there to be made, and if one dealer gets arrested, or a drug kingpin gets arrested - like El Chapo in Mexico, there is always another guy to take his place and take the money. And what does everyone want? Money. We need it to survive and when there is not much opportunity to make a living wage, there will always be the opportunity to make money selling drugs. We as a society created the opportunity through prohibition. And recently our Banking System was given a 1.9 billion-dollar penalty for money laundering of drug money but no one was arrested or anything. It’s a prohibition industry too.

The war on drugs hurt my home town. It hurt America.

When you think of Baltimore, you may think of how pretty the Inner Harbor area is. You might take a photo of yourself and your family next to the Constellation, a battleship from the War of 1812. The town is steeped in history. Some folks won't go there for fear of being robbed, because it is in the inner city. Have you seen the whole town? It is uneven, just like the whole of America. I grew up there. I spent most of my life there, but I do not live there now. I have left Baltimore. There are good neighborhoods of course and there are troubled ones, but no one really knows what the place might be like today, had it not suffered through so many decades of what has come to be known as the War on Drugs. It was the people who suffered though, and in turn, the town.

In my opinion the War on Drugs is a misnomer. It is a lie. If it was really a war against drugs themselves, the authorities would concentrate on getting rid of whichever drug they thought was the problem. Has it worked? By all measures drugs more prevalent now than ever and they are also plentiful in our most guarded places – our jails. What makes it a real problem for our society though, is the people themselves become the target of the drug war. It's a war against them. It is my belief that the war on drugs has always been a misguided attempt for social control that went terribly wrong. It has promoted racism and distrust of the other people who are different than us – the Mexicans, the Hippies, Jazz Musicians, the Blacks, the “Druggies”.

Some people now say that the country might be heading toward a Civil War. And I think it all started with a bunch of lies and a little bit of hatred. You see, I believe that we never really liked those people who used drugs, in fact we were so scared of them that we hated them. Perhaps we saw a little bit of ourselves in them, the part of us not in control. Maybe we felt we had to control them if they could not control themselves. Decades ago, we figured out a very simple way to control them and the bad idea stuck. It was a wrong idea that we collectively took for granted. We accepted what the authorities, cops and lawmakers told us because we actually did want safe communities and did not want a crime wave. We didn't want a bunch of crazies on drugs destroying our town. They got us pretty scared and then we felt that they must know what they are doing when they started locking everybody up as Mayor O Malley did in Baltimore in the 1980's. It started with a bunch of “other” people. People different than us, you know, bad people. Now they lock up anybody and everybody and we are only now beginning to seriously question it as an institution, as the American way. Not only that, our politicians insist that the other countries do it too if they want to remain our friends and keep the flow of money coming from US to them. Ever wonder why?

You see, I believe that we never really liked those people who used drugs, in fact we were so scared of them that we hated them.

Some people are even talking about how the inaction from the federal government to allow Colorado to legalize cannabis has undermined our own international treaties. We insist that other countries like Mexico continue the prohibition of cannabis if they want to receive federal aid. If Mexico legalized cannabis, there are many politicians that would go crazy.

Politicians from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Bill Clinton have put forth an agenda of being “tough on crime” and eradicating drugs from our culture. It did not work. It backfired and boomeranged. Drug users simply became the criminals for no other reason than using and possessing the stuff. Through the institution of Mass Incarceration, they have sought to lock up the drug users as an example to the rest of us. When we look at Baltimore, we can agree that it is very much like other cities in America. There are neighborhoods where so many people have been locked up that they are now called “Million Dollar Blocks”. Have you heard of that term? It means that it is costing us a fortune, sometimes a million dollars per city block to lock these people away from society. Meanwhile, we are losing the very people that could be contributing to our town and to their families.

My primary interest in writing this book is to help to heal my hometown and perhaps return there one day. I believe that ending the prohibition of all drugs would help Baltimore to begin a healing process. Decriminalizing drugs means that people who use drugs would not be considered criminals, they would be something else, human beings perhaps. I personally believe that taxing, regulating and controlling the legal use of Cannabis by adults would be a good first step. During these prohibition times in Baltimore, the sale and distribution of drugs is controlled by citizens trying to make money in an underground industry. It's a multimillion dollar economy that we created out of our fear, ignorance and unwillingness to honestly face our own drug use. Our neighbors simply compete with one another and kill one another trying to hold onto the flow of money.

I'd also like to point out that the war on drugs created some real monsters, people like Harry Anslinger, who probably knew they were doing something wrong but did it anyway. They didn't care for those people who used drugs, they didn't see them as human beings. Drug users were demonized. In recent history, Hillary Clinton expressed fear about young black men and teenagers who were out of control. She called them "Super Predators". They were from the bad part of America, from the bad part of Baltimore. They had it coming to them for not being like the rest of us good people.

The government has it all wrong.

As I begin my journey of sharing, I am confronted with the challenges that our government has it all wrong and that my nursing profession may call me "wrong". Our federal government stubbornly clings to the falsehood that cannabis must be considered a Schedule 1 drug. It has become clear to me that the public is also quite ignorant about what cannabis actually is, since deliberate lies have been told by our own citizens and our politicians for so long. What are the reasons that they have tried so hard to keep us from the truth? Is the motivation political or purely economic? Was there an effort to protect the logging and paper industry from the possibility of making paper from hemp? Was the liquor industry concerned about the use of cannabis possibly cutting into their profits? I believe that the blocking of research on cannabis by the government was just a stall tactic to protect certain industries.

Many of our nationally elected officials, our country's leaders, have known about the lies surrounding cannabis and the problems that prohibition of it has caused in our society. Ironically, many of them, including our last three presidents have admitted to using cannabis themselves. Our local and state representatives, like Baltimore's Martin O Malley have also perpetuated the war on drugs, turning my hometown into a place where I do not feel safe to be.

Lawmakers have failed to right their wrongs and right the wrongs of everyone before them. There are powerful forces of competition at work in our governments. Powerful lobbying groups pressure our elected officials every day to get what they want. In a free society, there are always going to be competing cultural ideals, just as there are competing drug and agriculture markets. I think politicians have sided with the wrong principles and I believe that they also lack the courage to admit that what they've done is wrong. They have committed a crime.

The leaders of our country – President Barak Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Eric Holder etc., all must understand by now that the federal prohibition of cannabis has done more harm than good and they've each done nothing to stop it. President Obama recently said of cannabis "I don't think it's more dangerous than alcohol." I honestly wonder how can our elected officials get out of bed every morning without wanting to make things right?

By not doing anything to turn our country around they have become complicit in the creation of a sick culture. I must assume that these are good people who have the intention of helping people, of wishing to make our country stronger and a better place for families to live and thrive, so why don't they do something? What forces are at work to keep the status quo failed policies of Prohibition alive?

Whether they are good people or not, they are at least guilty of inaction. If there is indeed a "War on Drugs" I believe they should be considered War Criminals, but it is not too late for them to find the courage to stop hurting people and begin to help America instead. They need to work together to end the federal prohibition on cannabis and ultimately on all drugs based on American principles and ideals and facts. Ideas like freedom, self-determination, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness should guide them. Then we can truly get back to the business of fighting crime and devote the proper resources to the task. The end of federal prohibition of cannabis must end due to the scientific facts that are growing in number every day and the prohibition must end because it is a wrong against the people of the world. Just like the prohibition of alcohol in the 1930's this policy has clearly failed and nearly everyone knows it. I am in effect saying – "give me liberty or give me death."

Civil Asset Forfeiture

Speaking of civil liberties, have you ever heard of civil asset forfeiture? It is a system of oppression that deeply bothers my spirit. It is a prime example of a Civil Rights violation created by our own government. Civil asset forfeiture allows police to take, keep and sell any property they allege is involved in a crime. The funny part about it is that you do not even have to be arrested or convicted of any crime at all. They can just take your stuff, your car, your money, even your home This clever treatment was originally put forth by well-meaning lawmakers as a way to cripple big drug operations and such. But you can hear lots of stories out there about ordinary citizens who might have a tiny amount of drugs on them, for instance, and the police pocket all their money and property because they were "probably going to use that money to buy more drugs". And, if you want to get your money and property back it is very hard to do. It can be very expensive and might cost you more time and money to go through the process than the value of the property they took.

Police currently take more of citizens' assets than do thieves.

I recently went to a county fair in South Florida and saw a beautiful exotic sports car on display at the County Sheriff's tent and crime exhibit. I believe the sports car had a sheriff's badge painted on the door, it was a Lamborghini Diablo. We asked the deputy, "was any taxpayers money spent buying such an expensive car"? He assured us "No, it was confiscated from some drug runners". Under this law, however, there are no clear guidelines and the police can do pretty much anything they want. Most people hearing this news might laugh and say, "Ha, it served them right". They used drugs, they sold drugs, they should have known better. Please forgive me if I am a little skeptical. I've just heard too many stories of cops dumping millions of dollars into their "general funds accounts" "to spend any way they like. I heard a sheriff's office in Camden County Georgia used \$90,000 in forfeiture funds to buy a Dodge Viper. He said he was going to use it for the Dare program to keep kids off of drugs. How?

And there is a lot of money involved. Thanks to a thing called equitable sharing, in the 2014 fiscal year, Florida agencies received \$16,143,203 in Federal payments. Under this increasingly corrupt program, the police in Sunrise Florida steered nearly \$375,00 to a local law firm that even the Justice Department saw as a clear attempt to circumvent some of its own rules. I recently read that Florida is trying to change their policies regarding Civil Asset Forfeiture, but they are not trying to get rid of it or anything. It is a far too profitable benefit for the created by the War on Drugs.

It does not seem fair, but fortunately some progress is being made in the name of justice for the American people. As of this writing, the Department of Justice just released a memorandum to announce that equitable sharing program for asset forfeiture funds has been temporarily suspended due to financial considerations. This just means that state and local law enforcement can no longer expect to receive a share of federal funds confiscated from us. We should all learn more about the subject and watch where the policies change in the future. This just in – the decision was reversed. They are doing it again.

In 2013 I testified in favor of decriminalizing the use of cannabis by adults in the Maryland House of Delegates General Assembly. I met a retired Maryland State Police Trooper named Officer Neil Franklin. Officer Franklin had served for many years as a drug force commander leading many busts and sting operations. After watching the failed war on Drugs “hurt more people than it ever helped”, after witnessing first-hand how it “made our communities less safe”, he decided that a different approach was needed to make our cities safer better places. He was there to testify in favor of decriminalization too, representing an organization called LEAP, Law Enforcement Against Prohibition. With an abundance of police officers present at the hearing he testified to the lawmakers that the police department had become “hooked on this flow of money” he said they have become addicted to Civil Asset Forfeiture like it was “Crack Cocaine” and that was one of the big reasons that the police do not want to see the laws change. I wonder what the percentage of police looting is done to black people compared to how much they steal from white people? Have you ever been robbed? The police take more money from us than muggers ever have.

Racial Inequality

I was born in the USA, so my view of race has probably been shaped by my growing up here. I attended 12 years of Public Schools in Baltimore County, Maryland. The majority of the kids were “white” and “black” kids accounted for probably only 2% of the student body. I used quotes on the words white and black, because, as a scientist I have learned that there is really no such thing as race. As a nurse I’ve taken care of all kinds of people. I have met white people who had many features of what you would call the black race and vice versa. I have seen every inch of you all inside and out and I can tell you this – our blood is the same color, that’s for sure.

In school we were taught that our country’s Constitution states that all men are created equal. Also, my parents raised me to understand that we are all equal in God’s eyes, blacks, whites, everyone. I suppose that is a Christian belief, but it is probably universal to all major religions. It does not make sense to me that God would love white people more than black people.

I remember attending a party as a young child where everyone was watching the Summer Olympics in 1964. I was only five-years old, but I remember one part of that day like it was yesterday. Several grown men at the party began making racially disparaging comments about a black Olympian runner. I swear I can remember the look on my Dad’s face. You know how kids look to their parents faces in times of conflict. Well, this was one of those times of conflict because one of the men kept using the “N” word. I didn’t know much about the word “nigger” at the time, but I knew it was meant in a hateful way.

I remember the look of disgust and anger on my Dad’s face. It was a tense moment, but I knew exactly where my dad stood on the issue. I clearly remember him saying “OK, everybody we are going home.” I also recall that to be gracious to the host he made some excuse of why we all had to leave. On the way home, though, he told us straight up that the way the man was speaking was very hateful and he and my Mom don’t think like that. He said it was wrong.

We didn't have black friends until High School. One time this kid from the track team called the house to speak to my brother Harry. My sister Karen answered the phone looking puzzled. I remember her saying "who do you want to talk to?" She was screwing up her face, and "what" is your name she asked? Clarence? She said "My brother does not have any friends named Clarence!" In disbelief she called up the stairs "Harry, some kid name Clarence says he wants to talk to you!" When he reached for the phone she cautioned him while she had her hand over the bottom part of the phone that you would talk into" He sounds black". She looked shocked when my brother started having a conversation with the guy. Her brother was having a conversation with a black boy.

Perhaps my neighborhood was more "insulated" than others. We grew up in a solidly middle class neighborhood, but I think the factors were more economic that made our neighborhood mostly white. Local kids called our neighborhoods the "Subdivisions". I guess that meant that what was once rolling farms was tuned into a suburban paradise with blocks of gleaming new houses. It was the American dream. Perhaps our country was still in the early day of normalizing race relations. A generation later, my daughter attended 12 years of public schools and had much more exposure to people of different cultures and backgrounds. She grew up with more diversity. I'm glad that she grew up to see color as "not an issue."

The reason that I included these personal stories here is to show that I do not have much knowledge of any culture other than my white middle class upbringing. I do not have much personal experience with black people or racism in America. I do not really know what it was like for poor black kids growing up in Baltimore city during the same time that I was growing up in the suburbs. I'll bet I had it much easier than they did and had many more opportunities for enrichment than they did. I just find it remarkable that many of my peers from the old neighborhood actually believe that racism does not exist in America and they had the same upbringing I did. They might call me names like "bleeding heart liberal", but I know that I have a heart and racism is not only real, but is very hurtful.

Dan Baum, writing in support of drug legalization at *Harper's*, has unleashed a frank 1994 quote from former Nixon policy advisor John Ehrlichman, and as inadvertently salient an argument for legalizing drugs. "At the time, I was writing a book about the politics of drug prohibition. I started to ask Ehrlichman a series of earnest, wonky questions that he impatiently waved away." "You want to know what this was really all about?" he asked with the bluntness of a man who, after public disgrace and a stretch in federal prison, had little left to protect. "The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did."

Today in Baltimore, I believe that color is as much an issue as it ever was, especially as it relates to the war on drugs, and I'm not the only one. David Simon is a well-known name in my hometown of Baltimore. He is Baltimore's" best-known chronicler of life on the hard streets." He worked for The Baltimore Sun city desk for a dozen years, wrote "Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets" (1991) and The Wire (2002-2008).

If you have an interest in how the drug war was carried out in Baltimore, I want to guide you to a thing called the Marshall Project. Mr. Simon is a member of The Marshall Project's advisory board. The stories about my home town will have you in disbelief at times. Mr. Simon is such an excellent writer and responsible reporter however, that you will feel pretty sure these wild stories are definitely not made up. He talks about probable cause and the people of Baltimore having their civil rights violated left and right in the name of the drug war. And most of these people were black so a lot of the poor police practices went unnoticed by the rest of us. Do the issues of social class and control and racism interest you? Mr. Simon talks about how mayor O Malley declared a third of Baltimore city as off limits to its own residents under the guise of it being a drug free zone. If you've suspected that the war on drugs in Baltimore has been more about social control and racism, I suggest you check out the stories at www.themarshallproject.org

David Simon's insight into the drug war in Baltimore goes far deeper than most people could ever describe. He wrote about it on a daily basis. Our mayor Martin O Malley developed his own "code" in response to the drug war that probably went against the Baltimore City police departments "code". In Baltimore I think the drug war created a sick culture and people came to expect it would never change. Like the nurses' code, our police officers are sworn to protect and serve, but what does that really mean. The phrase began as a winner in a motto contest for a Police Academy, but it is an iconic view of what many think police officers are supposed to do.

It is stated in the police code of ethics that the trust of the government is essential. There is a need for impartiality and citizens right of reliance. In other words, people need to trust and rely on the police. They are expected to do a fair job in following the law themselves as they oversee if the public is following those same laws. We know that this does not always happen. Sometimes the police take the law into their own hands and violate our trust. They sometimes break laws, steal from us and kill us.

Nurses have a code too. Sometimes we hear stories about how certain individuals have violated our standards of practice to erode the public's trust. Nurses sometimes steal from patients. Sometimes the crimes we commit are not actually crimes but torts, or civil wrongs which can cause someone to get hurt or suffer. Fortunately, our profession is viewed in a very positive light and these events are rare. The American Nurses Association (ANA) dictates that the nurse must practice with compassion and respect for the inherent dignity, worth and unique attributes of every person. The foundation of our code is based on human dignity. Nurses establish relationships of trust and provide nursing services according to need, setting aside any bias or prejudice. Factors such as culture, value systems, religious or spiritual beliefs, lifestyle, social support system, sexual orientation or gender expression and primary language are to be considered when planning individual, family and population centered care. Such considerations must promote health and wellness.

The police department of Baltimore City is working to restore the public trust in the aftermath of the Freddie Gray case and promote healing in the relationship between the police and the citizens. Many people actually fear "cops". My hope is that by decriminalizing drug use, our police departments can begin to view the citizens they are sworn to protect and serve as ordinary human beings. Prohibition is preventing that normal relationship between police and their community by giving citizens who use drugs the title of "criminal". They are merely following the law exactly as we have asked them to do when they find someone with illegal drugs and throw them in jail.

In our society, however, we have an avenue for change. It is our right, and probably our responsibility to interact with our current system to change laws for the better. We can get involved in politics directly by testifying in legislative judicial hearings as I have personally done. Laws are not written in stone, they are written by us, we the people. If a system of prohibition is actually causing crimes and hurting our communities, we can speak out against it. If we have an obvious unfairness in our laws, like how alcohol is more dangerous and is legal and cannabis is safer and it is not, we can lobby our position and our voices must be heard.

Hypocrisy of drug laws

The last three presidents of the United States admitted to using cannabis and they went on to become not criminals but holders of the most powerful position on the globe. They had access to the nuclear codes that could have caused the destruction of everything we know. President Obama and his Drug Czar have recently admitted that cannabis is not as dangerous as alcohol. So my question is this – how long will it take until persons choosing a safer substance will not be persecuted and prosecuted? If people are free to drink themselves to death, why not allow people the right to consume something less deadly? I believe that the prohibition of cannabis has continued for so long because the perception that cannabis is a worse, more dangerous choice has stuck. It was drilled into our heads so hard by our own government that even people like me figured that there must be some logical reason for these laws. They must know something that I didn't.

It turns out, I gave them too much credit. They were and are wrong. I am now speaking out about the unfairness and hypocrisy of those laws. The laws will be changed one day after I complete this book. After that, we can begin to make a better effort to protect our kids than we have done. Then we can protect ourselves from the violence of the drug cartels that prohibition has created. We can protect the public health by ensuring a safe product is available to consumers that will generate plenty of tax revenue. Our police will finally have the resources they need to be proactive and finally stop real crimes before they even happen. We will have money for education and finally be able to offer treatment to those who need it.

Bail and your One Phone Call – Speaking of real crimes, have you ever wondered why people have to pay money for bail? Not every country has this system of oppression – it hurts poor people way more than the rich. If a poor person cannot post bail, even if their offense is minor, they are often forced to do jail time that the wealthy can easily bypass. There are lots of stories out there, but only people who really care about the poor would be interested in hearing them. Your ability to remain free depends on the size of your wallet.

And that one phone call is a multimillion dollar business. It just makes me sad, that's why I want to at least mention it here. It is another aspect of the unfairness in our system. You see, a phone call to a loved one in jail can cost \$10. and a video visit can cost \$8. Did you know that? Have you ever wondered why? I've never had to call someone in jail, lucky me. It would probably break my heart to learn about all the little fees and charges that are taken from citizens by big corporations with names like Securus or Global Tel*Link (GTL). Did you know that those two companies reportedly make about \$1.2 billion dollars in revenue each year? These systems can be changed too, but the first step is to generate awareness that the problem exists and get people really talking about it.

DEA and the Narcotics Commission Schedule

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) does not exactly make money, but they do work hard to seize as much money as they can from drug smugglers, especially from Mexico. They actually cost us taxpayers money and plenty of it. The total budget of the DEA from 1972 to 2014 was \$50.6 billion dollars. I am actually frightened by the actions of that this governmental agency. The DEA seems stuck in a black hole, unable to learn the truth about the medicinal properties found in cannabis for example. If they responded to facts, they would change their own practices just as nurses do. We steer what we do toward what we call “evidence based practice”. If the DEA wanted to be fair, they would make an honest assessment and examine the factual evidence as nurses do. Then they would have to make changes based on facts instead of their deep history of basing their policies on lies.

Have you ever wondered why our Federal government even has a DEA and a “Drug Schedule”? There must be logical reason for it. Is it based on scientific fact? You may believe that the system of drug laws does not apply to you, or will never affect you because perhaps you do not use illicit drugs. Have you ever wondered if the laws serve to help people or are they simply there to punish people and make money? These laws clearly affect the health of our communities. I blame these laws on turning Baltimore into a more dangerous place to be.

These Federal laws of prohibition probably even hurt the individual more than the use of the drug itself could ever do, but thankfully the laws are not written in stone. Recently, the former Attorney General Eric Holder has said that he now thinks marijuana should be rescheduled, but nothing has happened so far. Cannabis is currently listed as Schedule 1, just as Heroin is. Everyone knows that Heroin is a very powerful, highly addictive drug, but did you know that our federal government has placed cannabis in the same category? Does that sound right? Cannabis, marijuana, pot, weed, whatever you want to call it is as bad as Heroin, why? Who decides this stuff, scientists or politicians? It is a serious question with potentially serious consequences.

Did you know that sentences for non-violent offenders convicted of selling Schedule 1 drugs can turn into life sentences? There are people serving life sentences in Federal prisons for selling only cannabis. Obviously, they did it more than once and got the “three strikes and you’re out” ruling. Most people probably believe that laws making drugs illegal help to keep our communities safer, but it is my personal belief that they make our communities worse.

According to the DEA’s Controlled Substances Act (CSA), Schedule 1 drugs or other substance have a high potential for abuse, have no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States and there is a lack of accepted safety for use of the drug or other substance under medical supervision. Also strict rules are placed on that class of drugs, effectively blocking research. Under the DEA's interpretation of the CSA, a drug does not necessarily have to have the same "high potential for abuse" as heroin, for example, to merit placement in Schedule I.

Even with the potential risk of abuse of cannabis, it is illogical to me as a nurse, that our own government would make a deliberate attempt to try to block doctors from studying it. We know that it is a plant that grows in the wild across the globe. Some people call cannabis an herb. So how did our government actually make it illegal and even a Class 1 federal felony, to conduct legitimate scientific research of any kind on it? At the time of this writing, Cannabis is still listed as a Schedule 1 drug, but I’ll bet that majority of people in the United states have come to understand that it is not Heroin, it is something else and it is safer than most people realize.

A circular string of arguments

Cannabis Is Destructive to Health to the individual – First of all, can cannabis kill you? Most nurses know it cannot. Nurses are smart scientific thinkers with knowledge about all kinds of drugs. What about everyone else in our community? What is the public perception? Men and women who work at the auto dealership or who work at the barber shop and beauty salon may have a very different perception. Have you ever wondered what police officers, attorneys and judges know about cannabis? How many of them have an objective view of what the plant really is? How many of them actually believe the decades of propaganda that has always been part of the police culture? How many have been able to see through some of those lies and think for themselves?

When I testified in favor of legalizing cannabis for use by adults in Maryland in 2013, counter testimony was being made by a consortium of police officers hoping to keep the public safe from legal “marijuana”. One police officer could see the writing on the wall and seemed to know that the “tide was turning” in favor of a more sensible approach to cannabis. He asked the speaker of the house “What am I supposed to tell my friends and neighbors now? I’ve been telling people for years that dope will kill you, and now, what am I supposed to tell them, It’s OK?” I could understand his frustration, but I felt a little bit sorry for him, he believed a great deal of the propaganda and lies that have been swirling around this topic for generations. He seemed very concerned, very genuine. I admired that.

Another officer testified in those Judicial Hearings against legalization of cannabis. His name was Officer Michael Pristoop. At the time, he was the Chief of Police for the City of Annapolis and his salary was more than \$147,00 per year. When Officer Pristoop took the stand I could tell he was dead serious about his testimony and he seemed frightened by the findings he was about to present. His voice seemed to shake and his tone was urgent. He testified to the Speaker of the house that “The first day of legalization, that’s when Colorado experienced 37 deaths from overdose on marijuana”. What you won’t see in most news coverage of the story is that he went on to read more satire from a website called The Daily Currant. It’s a website similar to the Onion. I’m guessing officer Pristoop had never heard of that one either. Pristoop quoted a doctor in in Colorado saying “We’re seeing cardiac arrests, hypospadias, acquired trimethylaminuria and multiple organ failures.” Being a nurse, an educated person, I knew it could not be true, especially when he said the word “hypospadias”. Nurses understand that hypospadias is a defect of the urethra detected in babies at birth, it is a penis defect mostly seen in baby boys. Surely the people of Colorado were not dying of that.

I guess you had to be there. The crowd was respectful but I could definitely make out lots of comments of disbelief. I heard at least one “No Way” in the crowd. Fortunately, a state Senator Jamie Raskin didn’t let him get too far into Comedy Central story and stopped him short. He was respectful and told officer Pristoop that unless he had some other source, it sounded like he was reciting a satire website that was featured on Comedy Central and held up his laptop to show him right away. Not surprisingly, Officer Pristoop stood by his false testimony out of pride, I think. At the time, I felt he was as ignorant as Harry Anslinger who knew he was wrong too, but had some kind of hate for drug users inside of him. He told Senator Raskin that he would stand by his testimony that cannabis caused 37 deaths in one day.

The next day, the local news reported his error but his police department superiors supported the officer one hundred percent. They said that he is “a good man” and has been working very hard to eradicate Heroin in Annapolis after a rash of heroin overdoses. I do not want to harp about a good policeman’s misstatements, but I feel that I need to speak out strongly about officer Pristoop’s ignorance. He was offering expert testimony, but knew zero facts, and he is the police chief. It made me wonder if his less experienced officers knew even less than he did.

Cannabis is the most widely used drug in the world according to a United Nations report from 2002. Nurses do not spend much time studying it because it is not one of the medicines we routinely give. Nurses who work with addictions may have a different view on cannabis than I do because they have seen a small percentage of the public get pretty screwed up while using it. This does not mean however that cannabis caused the mental illness. Still, some nurses may even believe that it can cause psychosis and schizophrenia. In my 27 years working as a Registered Nurse, I never encountered a single patient who had any identifiable illness from the use of it. As scientific thinkers, however, we Nurses must gather as much knowledge as we are able and filter out the erroneous data to make sense of what is going on.

We know that in some small percentage of individuals who become heavy users, people report they don’t want to quit or can’t. If it is considered a true addiction though, I think it is a very different and milder kind of addiction than we see in two legal drugs. It may present other health problems as well. From what I’ve read it does cause cancer, not like tobacco which is a proven cause of cancer. It may in fact even slow the growth of certain cancers. We also know that a medicine derived from the cannabis plant can ease suffering in many conditions from chronic pain, loss of appetite to easing spasms in Muscular Sclerosis. CBD oil from the cannabis plant can also halt seizures in children with Dravet’s Syndrome. Nurses are scientists. We know there are health risks associated with its chronic use but that medicines can also be found in it. We are learning all the time. Some see the health risks of using cannabis as very great, some see it as I do. It is a drug that is ‘safer than alcohol’.

Should people actually read this collection of stories one day, I am certain that I will get letters of praise as well as letters of condemnation for the way I am writing about the subject. Some nurses will call me irresponsible for not sharing all of the known “facts”, all the known risks. Let me stop here and get to my purpose of this book and let me point out my goal here. It has been an ongoing theme. Cannabis is a drug. How might it hurt people and how do nurses care for people using drugs? Do we think they should be put in jail? How do we approach these problems? How do we educate, and do we do it differently than a teacher, a doctor, a policeman? Is the risk to the health of the individual so great, that the person should be removed from society as we currently do? Some will say “we don’t do that” and my response is “yes we do, especially if you are found with a couple pounds of the stuff.” Nurses also study the health of people in prison, and in my opinion, these people suffer more risks to their health in prison than at home, using drugs or not.

Addiction and Withdrawal – Is cannabis truly addictive? Perhaps it is and perhaps it is not. Would the accurate answer steer us toward deciding if it should remain illegal? Compared to alcohol and tobacco, I can offer scientific facts as to how it is not as physically addictive. Did you know that trying to quit either of those perfectly legal drugs can cause observable signs of withdrawal?

An alcoholic can even experience seizures that can lead to death if they try to quit their drinking habit too abruptly. In the medical community it is known as alcohol withdrawal syndrome. It can occur in people who have been drinking heavily for weeks and months and then try to quit “cold turkey”. Even more surprising is that the symptoms of illness can begin as early as two hours after the last drink and persist for weeks. People can become shaky and anxious. I’ve had alcoholic neighbors tell me, “I need a drink, I’ve got the shakes”. Worse complications can occur, such as delirium tremens or DT’s and again seizures. I once saw a patient in the Emergency room who was confused, had a fever and fast heart rate. He was in alcohol withdrawal and was given medicine straight away. We were concerned he might die if we didn’t.

Even though it is legal, tobacco is a very serious drug. It has very real risks to the user including stroke, heart attacks and many types of cancer. I’ve heard that it is very hard to quit. Is it truly addictive? What does that mean? I know that when people try to quit smoking, they report feeling what they describe as “craving a cigarette”, but as a nurse I can tell you that when they do quit, they experience many real physical effects of withdrawal. A quick search on WebMD reveals symptoms of withdrawal including headache, nausea, constipation or diarrhea, fatigue, drowsiness or insomnia, irritability, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, depressed mood, increased hunger and caloric intake and increased desire for sweets. It sounds like a lot to go through and the whole time, the person probably knows that all these symptoms would vanish if they just had a “smoke”.

Is cannabis addictive? I must add that I find it very frustrating that for decades our own government has attempted to block legitimate research about the drug. If it is “addictive” it is certainly not addictive in the same way that alcohol is. A number of researchers have looked at the possibility of cannabis being addictive and determined that only a small percentage of those who try cannabis will become addicted. I know that from personal experience some people just do not want to quit. They like what the drug does for them, much in the same way that beer drinkers like their beer. Drug use, does not always equate with drug abuse, but I’ll admit some people get carried away. I once watched a woman smoke and smoke and smoke some cannabis at a friends’ house one afternoon. I wondered what in the world she was trying to do. I happen to know that she likes to drink a lot too. Some people seem to be prone to addiction. Some use drugs to hide from their feelings and problems.

Some people do seem to have a harder time quitting the stuff than others. One study by researcher David Gorelick, MD, PhD of the National Institute on Drug Abuse has shown that in heavy users, a total of 42.4% experienced at least one withdrawal symptom – most commonly, cravings, boredom, anxiety and sleep disturbances – when they tried to quit. Fortunately, some research has gotten through all the government’s red tape but some of the studies are funded by the same people who designate it a Schedule 1 drug. If the study is created by our government I tend to be skeptical of their facts for political reasons. I think we need scientists to study it rather than the politicians.

Only recently, Hillary Clinton made the claim that “more research needs to be done on marijuana”. Do you find it ironic how the government blocks research and then politicians use the lack of research as their excuse for not enacting more sensible laws? I think enough research has been done to know what we need to know. It can’t kill you.

Mortality / Can it Kill You? – If you are curious minded and you like to visit the world of the internet, go to Google and type in the search bar - Can Pot kill you? Once you do, hold onto your hat. You are going to find out that the answer is no, but you will also find some real “garbage”. Don’t be too surprised if you learn that doctors in Germany did “every test they could” on two guys who they say died from smoking weed, because they “ruled everything else out”. If you find any link to a Facebook account, I would encourage you to click on that too. That’s one way to find out what the public knows about cannabis. I guarantee that you will find yourself laughing.

The fact is that the use or abuse of cannabis has never been directly attributed to a single death. It is a fact that cannabis cannot kill you. Isn't it ironic that two legal drugs, tobacco and alcohol, are straight up deadly?

Tobacco - Nicotine can be toxic especially when tobacco products or nicotine-containing plants are eaten. It is rare, but death can occur from nicotine poisoning. Did you know that children can become sick following the ingestion of just one cigarette? E-cigarettes pose a danger too, especially to children. The CDC reports that more than 16 million Americans are living with a disease caused by smoking. Cigarette smoking is responsible for more than 480,000 deaths per year in the United States, including nearly 42,000 deaths resulting from second hand smoke. Also, on average, smokers die 10 years earlier than nonsmokers.

Alcohol – Unlike alcohol, cannabis is not only non-lethal, it could also be considered non-toxic. The over use of alcohol is toxic. It can kill you in a couple of minutes or hours and the abrupt quitting of it can cause death too. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that excessive alcohol use led to approximately 88,000 deaths and 2.5 million years of potential life lost (YPLL) each year in the United States from 2006-2010. Have you ever heard of YPLL? I honestly think it is very sad to think that 2.5 million years of potential life could be lost in a year due to the use of one drug. On the label of your bottle of beer, you might or might not notice a warning from the Surgeon General. It says women should not drink alcoholic beverages during pregnancy because of the risk of birth defects. You might also read that “it impairs your ability to drive a car or operate machinery and may cause health problems.” You will not read that it might cause your death, but that is precisely what it can do, and will not hear about that from a beer commercial.

Risk to the Health of Children and Families. -Nurses are as concerned as anyone about the health and safety of children and families. We study it as part of our training. We study the growth and development of children and understand that their growing minds must never come in contact with any drugs whatsoever if they are to develop into healthy productive adults. Children must learn to cope with their feelings, with growing up, with discovering their bodies and identities. It is enormous task and I am quite certain that 100% of nurses across the globe will agree that we must keep kids away from drugs. With the move to legalize cannabis for adult use sweeping across the country, there has never been any mention of changing the laws regarding children. In Colorado for instance where it is now legal for adults to use cannabis, there are strict laws protecting children from it. Adults can be jailed if they are found giving it to a child or teenager. Still, I'll bet most people do not want children to ever witness their adult parents smoking the stuff.

Nurses share the same concern for children being exposed to adults drinking alcohol, yet alcohol is part of our American social landscape from weddings to picnics. I think what really needs to happen is not criminalization, but education instead. We need to have a serious conversation about drugs and make a real commitment to our families and communities. My goal is to not condone drug use, but to always promote safety and public health. We have clearly made great strides with one drug – tobacco. Thanks to an honest educational campaign, adults, and more importantly, fewer kids are using it today. Education is the key to ending the war on drugs. When we take the control of drugs away from the criminal underground we will be far better off. When we tax, control and regulate it ourselves, it may make it harder for the kids to get ahold of.

Also, while on the subject of protecting kids and young people, I would like to speak out about the practice by our police departments and narcotics officers to coerce kids and college students to become confidential informants or CI's. And the majority of states don't require CIs to be of a certain age, trained, or protected by the departments that hire them. Did you know that there have been many cases where police have accused young people of being drug dealers with little or no evidence? By threatening them with the possibility of serving 20 years in prison and a felony record they are often intimidated into working with police. Police have been known to tell these young people that all the charges would be dropped if they make drug buys and such to capture the dealer or "king pin". One youngster was even murdered in the process. Whatever they do, I do not like the practice. Kids are not adults. I do not think that they should be able to do anything they want to our young people. I say, Hands off!

Risk to Public Health- When I testified in the Senate Hearings in Maryland in 2013 in support of the legal use of cannabis for adults I frequently heard one argument against it. It went like this. "We already have one legal drug, alcohol, that causes all sorts of problems to our society. Why add another?" As a nurse I can tell you that alcohol is probably the number one problem drug in our culture today. It carries the risk of death to the individual, the risk of life threatening diseases and creates an enormous risk to public health. Drunk driving is not the only activity that people do poorly at when they are under the influence. As a citizen I can understand that we all want to make our world better, not worse. But the fact is – cannabis is already present in our communities and it is not going anywhere. Our efforts to stamp it out has only stomped on us and made our communities less safe.

I am not in favor of people smoking in public. I do not like to smell it in public spaces – it stinks. It seems to have a stronger, more peculiar aroma than I remember smelling when I was growing up. As a point of interest, I'd like to interject here that one of cannabis' closest relatives in the plant world is Hops. Hops is another one of those peculiar plants that many people are drawn to – perhaps it is the "stink". My partner knows that I call IPA beers "stinky beers", but those are the kind that I am drawn to. I'm certain that parents of young children do not want their kids smelling stinky cannabis, much less breathing in the stuff.

In the name of public health and safety, if we decide to legalize the use of this plant in Baltimore, I think we as a healthy society, need to agree on some basic ground rules. If you are going to have a rule #1, I think it should be – Rule #1 Keep it away from children and teenagers. (Sorry 18year olds, I am calling adults - 21years of age and older) There that was easy, we are off to a good start. Rule #2 – do not put anyone else at risk, that means no smoking or eating cannabis and driving, boating, working, even biking. It all must be against the law so nobody gets hurt. Good, Rule#3 – Do not put yourself at risk. In my view, it should be ok to use in the privacy of your home or private property, but you must be responsible with your drug use, otherwise, you are not being a good public citizen. Rule #4 – it should be treated the same way we treat other drugs like alcohol. You never heard of anyone getting arrested because they had too much beer in their house did you? It should be the same for cannabis, if you are being a responsible citizen, you should be able to have in your possession pounds and pounds of the stuff as long as you are able to follow rule# 1 and keep it away from the kids etc.

It Sends the wrong message to the kids – This is one of the arguments I heard repeatedly used from the police officers to the lawmakers in the hearings to decriminalize cannabis in Maryland in 2013. The law enforcement community collectively joined together and rallied around this idea as a talking point. I even heard Congressman Andy Harris use that exact phrase in a press conference, so it kind of stuck with me. I just now did a Google search and typed in the phrase "sends a wrong message to the kids". I found plenty of sources, plenty of talking points. It is apparently a mainstream idea, part of the collective argument by Prohibitionists and the Federal Government against decriminalizing and legalizing cannabis. What does it really mean?

There are many organizations out there trying to maintain the status quo. They want cannabis to remain illegal. Some are worried that every day that the Federal Government does not intervene in what states like Colorado and Washington have done, they are a little bit closer to losing the drug war. They have asked our Attorney General Eric Holder (federal) to do his job and reverse state's rights.

*On January 18th, 2013, The Partnership for Drug Free Kids/ drugfree.org, posted a story quoting R. Gil Kerlikowske, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). The website heading is Legalizing Marijuana Sends Wrong Message to Young People, Kerlikowske Says "We are certainly not sending a very good message when we call it medicine and legalize it." he told **The Oregonian**.*

ONDCP calls marijuana addictive and unsafe, especially for use by young people. Marijuana which was recently legalized in Colorado and Washington remains illegal under federal law. Kerlikowske pointed to a 2012 survey that found 7.4 percent of California drivers tested positive for marijuana use – more than alcohol. In a recent ONDCP web post, Kerlikowske wrote, "it is clear that we are in the midst of a serious national conversation about marijuana."

That is the entire web post from drug free.org. The argument is what? That drivers in California tested positive for cannabis? That is not an effective argument for "sending a wrong message to the kids." It is only one statistic. What I found way more interesting is the eighteen comments posted below the article made by the public. Some of the comments were made by concerned parents of course. Most, however point out how the government propaganda against cannabis has been a huge failure. It turns out that Kerlikowske was a former Drug Czar in charge of the propaganda machine. I was hoping for a better argument from our highest ranking official.

Getting back to the kids, did you know that the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign is a current domestic government propaganda campaign in the United states conducted by the ONDCP? It is within the Executive Office of the President of the United States with the goal to "influence the attitudes of the public and the news media with respect to drug abuse" and of "reducing and preventing drug abuse among young people in the United States. This is the government office that is working to send the right message to the kids. Over the years, I have seen a few of the television commercials that our federal government has spent millions of dollars on. The government has also partnered with other non-governmental agencies.

As a nurse I am keenly aware of the effects of drugs on the growing mind. We must keep drugs away from kids. I met a lawmaker from Washington state who said "We must use this as our benchmark, our top priority is that we must keep our kids safe." Some research has shown that in states that have legalized cannabis, the use among teens is down. I've also heard that in places where it has remained illegal, kids report that cannabis is easier to get than beer. Here I am straying from the argument though. We all care about our youth. I think we all agree that we have a responsibility to keep drugs and alcohol away from kids. But what do we really mean when we say that legalizing cannabis sends a wrong message to the kids.

We all know what messages the kids are receiving about drugs when they watch a Lime-A-Rita commercial on TV. The message is that drugs are FUN. Once the people in the commercial start drinking the stuff, confetti starts falling out of the sky and the ballerinas in the art gallery painting come to life and start dancing around and twerking. Everyone in the commercial starts dancing, smiling and making flirty looks at each other looking very attractive and aroused. It is an awesome party. That is the message that they are getting about a legal drug. Drink some alcohol and you will have a blast.

What message are we worried about them getting from the legalization of cannabis? Are we worried that they will get the message that drugs are ok? Well if you go back and look at that Lime-A-Rita commercial, you can see that they are already getting messages that drugs are way better than OK, they are wonderful. So what is the difference with legalizing Cannabis?

Commercials can be very effective at getting a message to the public. That's why the government spent millions of dollars on TV commercials designed to turn kids off to the idea of drugs. If you look at the government's own statistics, the program was not only a failure, but repeated exposure to the ads made some young girls want to give it a try.

Here is a good question – how long can we expect to keep kids from learning the truth about the medicinal properties in cannabis? Many of them have better laptops than their parents and plenty of access to the internet? Many kids already know that there is medicine in cannabis. What kids seem to want most is the truth.

It is Not Medicine - In 2013 I testified in the Maryland Senate and House of Delegate legislative hearings in support of Medical Marijuana. I presented testimony as a citizen of Baltimore and as a professional Registered Nurse. I was the only nurse to testify in favor of legalizing medical cannabis at those hearings. I was compelled to testify because I felt a duty to help ease suffering. I knew that Federal Government's position was that there were no medical benefits to be found in the plant. It is a position that is still adhered to this day at the time of my writing this book. It is still listed on the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) Controlled Substances Act as Schedule 1, meaning it has no known medical benefits. As a nurse, as a scientific thinker, as a person with a curious mind, I knew it was not true.

Long before 2013, scientific facts were known about the certain beneficial medicinal properties found in cannabis. I knew because I love science. With a simple Google search, I found countless medical studies verifying the ability of one of the components of the plant – CBD oil, to stop seizure in children with rare forms of Epilepsy. By doing a PubMed search, I was able to sift through dozens of scientific papers from leading universities touting the many proven medical benefits and some of those studies were funded by our own government. There was a real “disconnect” between the scientific community and our government. It did not make sense to me. It made me mad. I felt frustrated because I knew that there were people who could be helped, there was sickness that could be lessened and our government was actively trying to stop people from getting help, from getting well.

In the lobby of one of those hearings I saw a woman walking around holding an 8x10 photograph of a baby in front of her. It was a photo of a baby boy who looked to be about two years old. I'll never forget her telling me that she was his Mom and her son would have turned two that week, but sadly had died recently. She told me that her little boy had a form of Epilepsy like Dravet's syndrome. She and her family had been desperately trying to get the child a medicine made from cannabis – a CBD oil known as Charlotte's Web to stop his daily seizures.

It was not the devastating seizures that took his life, but rather an episode of aspiration pneumonia than led to his death. As a nurse I instantly knew what happened. During one of those seizures, he lost the normal gag reflex and saliva or possibly stomach secretions went into his lungs. I was deeply saddened by her story and angered that elected officials with little or no medical background had the audacity to put their opinion forward that the “science was just not there yet, that it had not been proven in clinical research trials”.

Remember, Schedule 1 drugs on the DEA's Controlled Substances Act (CSA) limits and places strict controls on research making it costly and nearly impossible to study it? For decades, our government had deliberately put up roadblocks to block research, and here I was witnessing government lawmakers using the lack of research as proof that there was no medicine to be found in cannabis. To make a long story short, the measure was approved and Maryland now has a Medical Marijuana program. That fact alone runs contrary to the federal government's position – Schedule 1 states no medical benefits can be found in the plant. Have you wondered why that is?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not recognized or approved the marijuana plant as a medicine but has approved two medicines that contain cannabinoid chemicals in pill form. In recent news (3/14/2016), GW Pharmaceuticals reported that an experimental drug derived from cannabis - Epidiolex has succeeded in reducing epileptic seizures in its first major clinical trial. If the drug wins' regulatory approval, it would be the first prescription drug in the United States that is extracted from the cannabis plant. We must watch and wait to see how our own government responds to this news. Will they finally admit that there is medicine in cannabis? When will the government end the prohibition of it?

People are already free to use one legal drug, alcohol, which is already causing problems in our communities, why add another? – I heard a police commander make this counter-argument at the Maryland Senate Judicial hearings to legalize cannabis for adults 21 years and older. His argument almost made perfect sense since we have to assume that everyone wants our communities to become stronger and healthier, not worse by using drugs. And most people will agree – alcohol causes lots of health problems in individuals and it makes our communities less safe through the practice of drunk driving and many other activities that people do under the influence. The argument is that people are already free to get stoned out of their minds and drunk off of their asses with this socially acceptable drug – alcohol. Shouldn't that be enough? It seemed crazy to him that people want to add another legal intoxicant that will only add more problems.

There are lots of holes in that argument though. Nurses are hardly ever experts on civil liberties, but I'll bet most will see the hypocrisy in allowing the legal use of one drug and block the use of another that is actually demonstrably safer. It also does not account for the millions of cannabis users that are currently using the substance without any major problems. Statistically very few are reporting problems of troubles with addiction. Despite it being illegal, they are using it anyway, proving that the war on drugs is really not working at all.

The War On Drugs Is Working – This was one of the arguments I heard in the Senate Judicial Hearings regarding the proposed legalization of cannabis in Annapolis, 2013. A drug force commander stated that the drug war is indeed working and that the Police community just “needed more time.” Many American think that we are winning the war on drugs and we'd better not stop now. Some think that if we could simply devote more resources to it we could win. One officer spoke about the commendable work that the police had done in the last year to get “tons of drugs off the streets”. I do not mean to sound ungrateful for their efforts. I believe that they were doing the best that they could do and they were doing exactly what we asked of them. They were following the law.

My concern is that those “busts” were just a drop in the bucket. More drugs get through the dragnet than are ever confiscated. Drugs are more plentiful than ever according to their own statistics and their own data shows that they have failed in their mission to stop drugs from reaching the public.

Nurses have their eyes on the community and wonder is the war on drugs really working? We are trained to consider the health of the individual and the health of our communities. Many will agree that the health of a person never improves in the face of addiction. One day I hope everyone will come to understand that because of the war on drugs, our communities are suffering too. It seems like there are more crimes today than there was in the past. Some believe that decriminalizing drugs will free up police resources to concentrate on solving crimes rather than persecuting individuals who make the choice to use drugs, though many still think that drug users should be punished.

People should be punished for using Drugs – The argument goes like this “People knew it was illegal and they did it anyway, so they should be punished.” From the point of view of the nurse, our current system of punishing drug users is disturbing and sad. Nurses are taught to understand that drug abuse occurs in people trying to fulfill some need. We view the person as an organism trying to self-medicate themselves. The individual might be seen as ignorant and in need of education about drugs and the health risks of addiction. We might see the individual as having a low tolerance for drugs such as alcohol or some genetic predisposition to addiction. We tend to feel compassion for the person and their family and are driven to try to intervene and guide them toward healthier choices and making better decisions. Nurses strive to help people to explore a new, better path of coping with their worries and problems. We tend to not see our patient as evil or malicious. We view everyone as a human being worthy of dignity and care. They are our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers.

What I’ve come to understand about the police in our communities is that they love to follow the law. It’s all they have, it is their culture, it is their training. And what do our laws tell them they must do with persons who have drugs in their possession? We all know the answer. In recent times, though, we hear tales where if a cop finds a small amount of cannabis, they might take the law into their own hands and stomp the drugs into the dirt. In states where the use of cannabis is not decriminalized yet, some police officers understand it’s not really that dangerous of a drug and they will let the individual go without arrest. I’ve heard officers admit “it’s not worth my time to fill out all the paperwork and waste my time in court and the individual will get off anyway “.

Still, our current system is clearly and entirely based on punishment. Drug users face arrest, jail time, fines, court dates and more fees, bail system and that one phone call is far from free, which itself is a multi-million-dollar industry. Some jails are “for profit businesses”. As a rule of law, however, don’t you agree that the punishment should fit the crime. I think most reasonable people will agree that people who engage in theft and violent crimes must be stopped. They must be punished. But to punish a person for using drugs goes against what nurses believe. I mean to say “here is a person who is harming no one but themselves, like the alcoholic, perhaps they are sick or out of balance”, that is precisely the person that we are compelled to help, not hurt or punish.

Our current laws may baffle the nurse because punishment is something we must never do in any situation. We do not punish our patients, ever, ever, ever. Nothing that we ever do is based on punishment. We seek to help, to heal. How might the nurse approach the violent offender or teenager convicted of murder? One option is to lock them up for the rest of their lives and throw away the key. Another option is the death penalty. This is not the realm of nursing. It is up to our communities to decide. I’ll bet many nurses have served on juries for death row inmates and I’ll bet still want to help, to heal.

Our science has a long way to go for sure. How do we “cure” a criminal? The problem with the war on drugs is that all a person need do is use a drug and they become the criminal. Not all drugs are criminalized though. In fact, some drugs are glorified, alcohol for instance, itself once under strict laws of Prohibition, turning ordinary citizens into public enemy #1. Today you might watch the Super Bowl and see some really funny commercials promoting drugs, legal ones.

Today our prisons are filled to the brim with inmates whose sole crime is drug possession. It has become a Public Health issue, a Civil Liberty and Human Rights issue. It has hurt people, their families and our communities. It has cost us plenty too. We sought to punish them rather than help them and now we are paying the price for decades of a misguided approach. Once upon a time in American history, we sought to punish people for using alcohol. We do not do that anymore.

I'll bet that most everyone agrees that driving under the influence of any drug must never be allowed. The same goes for keeping all drugs from young people. The public needs to be protected. Our children need to be protected, but the idea of protecting people from themselves does not make sense to me. We don't protect people from alcohol. Why have we done it with Cannabis? I have my own ideas and opinion, but I also have facts. Did you know that it can be factually stated that cannabis is actually safer than alcohol? Do you know what that word "safer" means? It means that unlike alcohol, zero deaths have been directly attributed to the use or misuse of cannabis. Here's where our laws stop making sense. Alcohol is lethal and legal, Cannabis is non-toxic and illegal. Here is an area where nurse can educate the public about the scientific facts of these and all drugs though some might mistakenly think that alcohol is better.

Alcohol is better – As part of his Senate testimony against the legal use of cannabis by adults in Maryland, one police officer made the following pronouncement "***Alcohol is better than Pot. It is not addictive, that's why when I go home tonight, I'm going to drink a couple of Bud Lights!***" He went on to proclaim that "***when people drink alcohol, they do not always do it to get drunk, but every time people smoke marijuana, they do it to get high***". I would never dare make that up. It is recorded with my testimony somewhere in Annapolis. This is actual testimony and true understanding from one officer – Alcohol is not addictive and people do not get high from it. Nurses see it differently, remember, we've taken care of you. We have seen how certain members in our communities struggle to get free of the habit. They go to Alcohol Anonymous meetings and might be at risk for relapse at any point in their lives. That is why they strive for absolute sobriety. They fear that just one drink might restart the cycle of addiction.

"When people drink alcohol, they do not always do it to get drunk, but every time people smoke marijuana, they do it to get high".

I'll bet there are even a few nurses who despise what they think cannabis has done to their neighbors or loved ones or to their town. They might not have ever tried it and still say, "I hate Pot". They might mistakenly think alcohol is safer or "better", they might even call people who use cannabis "Stoners". They don't need to have tried it to form an opinion. Here I will challenge each and every one out there, though, especially the nurses and medical people. You are the scientific thinkers in our communities. Here is the question. Is alcohol safer than Cannabis? Your answer must meet scientific criteria. Can the drug cause death? As far as I can tell not one single death can be directly attributed to the use of cannabis.

If you have children, I guarantee that you probably do not want them experimenting with cannabis. You want them to be safe. You want them growing up with healthy bodies and healthy minds. It is my belief, though, that kids going to a drinking party are at much greater risk of injury and death. We hear about it all the time, kids boasting to each other saying things like "I can drink you under the table". Those contests too often end in car crashes or death from alcohol intoxication. It is a scientific fact – cannabis is safer than alcohol. It certainly won't turn you into a crazy rapist murderer like in the movie *Reefer Madness*.

Cannabis makes people violent, disinhibited, rapists – This was a real piece of government sponsored propaganda that Harry Anslinger put forth in the 1930's. He said that that cannabis turned people into violent murderers and rapists and needed to be locked up for our safety. He put together a thing called the "Gore File" which contained many dozens of stories describing the horrible things that marijuana caused ordinary people to do after they used the stuff. It was not until many years later that all of the stories were discredited. He made those stories to frighten people about what the drug might do to you.

What does Cannabis do to the user? What do nurses know about the subject? I'll bet many have not ever tried cannabis, but I would never presume that most have not. It's probably hard to tell. Though many nurses submit to a drug tested as a pre-employment screening, you can work for many years or for the rest of your career perhaps without ever having to pee in a cup again. Nurses might get drug tested when changing institutions but not routinely when changing jobs in the same hospital. I imagine that many nurses use cannabis – I did and for many years and no one knew.

Do we nurses know if cannabis makes people violent? Nurses in Emergency rooms could tell us many anecdotal stories about violent people under the influence of drugs, especially alcohol. How about cannabis. I've asked many nurses about this, and what I've heard is stories about people being stoned or too sleepy, sedated, not violent. But when we encounter violent people who have been using cannabis in our workplace, we usually find that the person has been taking some other substance too. There are many nurses across America who work with people who are getting treatment for addictions. Sometimes these people are what we call poly-drug-abusers and it is rare that witness people having a drug problem from just cannabis. We know it can happen, that people who over-use or abuse cannabis can become sick. That should not be a surprise to anyone in the medical community. I mean, is a drug, it is not water. But as I mentioned earlier, even water can kill you if you drink too much of it. As scientists, I think we should consider the person's behavior as the problem, rather than blaming it all on the drug. Anything can be abused, even cannabis, but how is cannabis different?

We hear people talk about people becoming unmotivated or sedated and they fall asleep when they use too much cannabis. Some people can even become paranoid and a little bit crazy if they do it too much, like a mild psychosis. I've also seen that with caffeine and energy-drink overdose. While it's too easy to blame the plant, I tend to blame the behavior since these people seem to be way overconsuming for some reason. They are going crazy on the stuff and getting messed up from it.

I'd like to teach people to not overdo it. I mean, why are you smoking that much cannabis? Are you trying to hide from your feelings, worries, anxiety or your pain by smoking yourself into oblivion? In my opinion, this kind of sickness does not occur in situations where persons are using it responsibly or in moderation as most people do. If you have a major grow operation in your basement, how about taking a day off or something. Do something else, like go for a swim or a bike ride or take a long walk. Take some time for some self-examination or talk to a person you trust about your drug use or a counselor.

Mass Incarceration is necessary to keep thugs off the streets – I actually heard this argument being made on September 5th, 1989 by President George H. Bush. He made a televised address to the nation on the National Drug Control Strategy. In it he outlined the need to build more jails. He declared that drugs were Public Enemy #1. In his view, President Bush was completely justified in criminalizing a large percentage of the population in order to protect the people who do not use drugs. People like me new it was a mistake, but did not do much about it at the time. We have more of our citizens in prison per capita than any other country in the world. Some would say that we have more criminals in this country than other countries do. We made them into criminals and we have the power to reverse those laws and finally face the task of fighting crime.

People who use Cannabis are baby boomers/ Hippies – I actually heard this argument made in one of the legislative hearings against a bill that would tax and control and regulate the legal use of cannabis for adults 21 years old and over in Maryland. The argument went like this – “Baby Boomers” are a bunch of 50 year olds and 60-year-old people who smoked cannabis when they were kids. Now that they are older they finally have extra free time on their hands so they can mess up the political process and try to legalize drugs just because they want to “get high”.

I think most of the things I've talked about in this book have discussed more relevant issues about why older Americans want to have more sensible laws. I only included this argument because I find it funny that the term Baby Boomer was used as an insult or derogatory name.

We know that the baby boomers are the older people in America now. Are they more knowledgeable about their civil rights and civil liberties than the previous generation? The American Civil Liberties Association (ACLU) favors the decriminalization of all drugs. Perhaps older people know that because they've been around longer. Also, older Americans are the one group most likely to be helped by using the safer medicines found in cannabis so that they might be able to avoid more dangerous and addictive drugs.

Civil liberties are not violated - Some people argue that the government not only has a right to make certain drugs illegal, but that it has a moral and ethical responsibility to outlaw drugs to protect the health and safety of the public. They argue that our Constitution declares that the individuals unalienable right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness does not include our right to use drugs. They don't believe the argument against alcohol is the same because I suppose they think alcohol is safer and marijuana is far too dangerous. Are Civil Liberties really guaranteed in this country, or are they like civil right? Civil Rights must be fought for, perhaps it is the same for civil liberties.

Prohibition of Drugs makes our Communities Safer - Some Americans actually believe this to be a fact. Using drugs is a crime, so locking up criminals will make us safer. It's an argument that I've heard many times before but the notion is being challenged in countries from Uruguay, the first country to actually legalize cannabis, to Portugal that has chosen to decriminalize all drugs as a matter of public health and safety.

How our communities can be safe when we allow a criminal black market to control the sale of drugs? Violence is often the result of their competition for the public's money. And there is a lot of money to be made from the sales of drugs. How can we be safe when we have no way of even knowing what is in a drug when we buy it on the black market? When it is supplied and controlled by the criminal underworld, the drug has no trusted label showing what is actually in it. There is no way that we can be certain that it has not contaminated with other chemicals or sickness causing molds or bacteria. There is no quality control in the drug cartels.

There is no quality control in the drug cartels.

Economic Costs – According to the CDC, the economic costs of excessive alcohol consumption in 2010 were estimated at 249 billion or \$2.05 per drink (0.6 ounces of pure alcohol). There are actually people who get paid to calculate the costs of drug abuse and they can tell you how much damage is done to our country per drink. There are also plenty of statistics about the health cost of diseases caused by tobacco and deaths caused by tobacco. And let's face it, there are probably people who could put a monetary number on the economic cost that cannabis causes from missed day of work or something.

My complaint is that the war on drugs only costs us money and there is no financial gain. It costs billions of dollars and what do we have to show for it but a weakened police force and mass incarceration and weaker families. Some people like Dick Cheney might argue that jailing people creates jobs, but it is all backwards. We need to turn our country around by turning the war on drugs upside down. Many more jobs will be created when we end prohibition and our communities and our economy will be stronger for it.

And may I point out that in Colorado alone, there is a lot of money being spent by people on cannabis. In 2015, the sales of Cannabis in Colorado totaled \$996,184,788. That is a big number, yes, it's \$996 million dollars. The voters also overwhelmingly approved a statewide ballot measure to spend 66.1 million in taxes collected rather than receive a tax rebate. Only \$42 million dollars was collected from alcohol taxes but all of that money can now be spent on the public good. And that is just one state. Imagine how it might transform my home town of Baltimore. People there are already using the stuff and I do not think that legalizing it will lead to more drug use, just the capturing of tax money that currently goes to an underground economy.

I say, bring it out of the darkness, and let's face our drug use in an open and honest way. Then we can begin to use our tax monies to make a safer better world, a healthier more livable world where, I believe, drug use will actually go down, not up.

Conclusions

One month from now, the United Nations will hold a summit to talk about drugs. The last time they met in 1998, their stated goal was "A drug-free world – we can do it". Well, that certainly didn't happen. For the past eighteen years we could have been creating a culture where we actually help people with drug problems rather than punishing them. I think our global leaders, our police and courts and jails made people worse off. Our punishments made them weaker, less healthy individuals. Our punishment of drug users made our communities weaker too. In my assessment, the whole process made a lot of people sick and most of us did nothing to stop it. Those who did were often told that they are "being soft on crime". The fact is that our current system of drug prohibition wastes so much time, energy, money and other resources that could be spent on fighting real crime and supporting our communities. All along we could have been easing suffering and healing our world.

I do not think that I am really putting my livelihood, my nursing license on the line by sharing my honest personal beliefs. People used to call my arguments pretty far out, but now they are considered more progressive and even mainstream. I also believe that my speech is protected by my First Amendment rights. I do not think that I am putting my freedom at risk by sharing my disgust for certain politicians and my distrust for our own governmental policies when it comes to drugs.

Throughout our country's history, our own government has done lots of bad things with drugs that were much worse offences than citizens ever do. In 1986, the Regan administration acknowledged that funds from cocaine smuggling helped fund the Contra rebels. The CIA was doing drug trafficking in Central America for profit and those drugs made it into our neighborhoods. Do you read the news? Things like that are happening all the time. Even in the DEA we often hear about rampant corruption but nothing much changes.

I believe that politicians like Richard Nixon hid the truth about the real reasons behind the drug war. He must have been scared to death of people who use drugs. He basically outlawed hippies and blacks. President Bill Clinton also contributed fuel to the drug war with his crime bill which promoted mass incarceration and put non-violent offenders away for life. Now it is up to you to decide if you want to insert yourself into a national discussion or simply sit and watch how it unfolds from the sidelines.

Some nurses and members of the public might believe that drug users deserve a criminal status without ever having been inside of a jail cell. Can they honestly know how people are treated in that system? While there are certainly going to be people who say my views are naïve, I must stand by my assessment that our current system is cruel and inhumane. We all deserve better system. We can create a better world where liberty is restored to people who choose to use a substance safer than alcohol, responsible drug use is maintained for the good of public health and individuals can get treatment for drug problems if needed. Nurses can teach people how to make better health decisions and inspire them to embrace life. A more educated public in a safer more prosperous community might choose to live a more fulfilling life without drugs at all. We all have to accept that some people are going to make the conscious choice to use drugs. Nurses can promote the idea of preserving health and responsible drug use so that our society can function in a safe and productive manner. We cannot afford to stay on the sidelines any longer when our community so desperately needs our leadership to turn the Drug War into a peace movement.

Out of love for our country and each other, I want to thank you for reading along.

Peace,

Anthony M. Walker R.N.