

From Steroid Madness to Bantu Marijuana

By [Michael Ortiz Hill](#) 06/02/14

Sacred Bantu marijuana was my miracle MS healer—it got me functional and even out of the diapers forced on me by prescription steroids.

May I be blunt? After being fired from Ronald Reagan Medical Center for being disabled with multiple sclerosis – this after being a registered nurse for 25 years - I think I have earned my piss and vinegar. So, shall we stop the lying already? Dare we? Shall we not just agree from the outset that Western culture is merrily addicted to drugs and to meds?

I've actually thought about calling this essay "What Western medicine *doesn't* know about drugs," but that's too fucking polite. Like many readers I know a lot about illegal drugs - first weed at 11 years old. And as I suspect is true for most readers, I've been discerning in this regard- and consistently so. I've stuck to my drugs of choice since I was a kid and I am an aging man now.

I lost a lover to methamphetamines. I was Jill's last friend in her intimate, anarchist community - which is to say as she descended into paranoia and I was naive enough to think I

could save her. Then, she committed suicide. An ordinary American story.

Meth for me? *Nah.*

Heroin? *Uh, uh.*

Crack?

Put it down brother, sister. I've long kept faith with marijuana - which is medicine. And psychedelics - which are medicine. But piss and vinegar wise, Western culture and Western medicine have long been addicted to meds - to Emergency Room drugs. Without question the strongest and most destructive mind-altering substance I've ever taken, prescribed by my neurologist, was the steroid Decadron.

I had the pleasure of hanging with a neighbor a couple of days ago who was long ago diagnosed with muscular dystrophy. We compared notes on the madness of steroid therapy.

My first meeting with my neurologist was when he diagnosed me with MS and tried to ply a steroid taper upon me. As an RN, forever working night shifts, one learns quite a lot about steroids. Not uncommon for an oblivious young doc to prescribe them at the beginning of your shift, thus doubling or tripling your work load.

Did I mention that Western culture is addicted to drugs and I've spent most of my adult life pushing them?

With the first flare up of MS, me falling in the street, couldn't drive 'cause it seemed I was losing my eyesight. (Not to mention I was learning to wet the bed for the first time since a kid and would occasionally "be shit" myself.) It was with terror and abject humility that I approached Dr. S. for my first steroid prescription. ON THE OTHER HAND, steroids proved to be miraculous.

As an anti-inflammatory (MS is an inflammatory disease), Decadron in three days had me able to walk and to see that I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life blind, as happens sometimes with MS. Very soon, however, it wasn't clear at all that I wouldn't spend the rest of life psychotic.

With "steroid taper" one starts with a big dose and then halves it a few days later – and then half again – until it eventually disappears altogether. As a nurse I gotta say: *elegant*. As a patient? My language lacks sufficient cuss words. Steroid taper manufactures a pharmaceutical bipolar event. Delusions of omnipotence (I once looked into learning flamenco dancing and marrying a Mexican Mormon). When you're high, anything is possible. *Anything!* (I emphasize this knowing that some readers understand this by way of meth, crack and ordinary cocaine).

It's hard not to look with affection at those steroid seasons of being "up!" But then there is coming down. And down one goes. Very far down, one goes. "Up" on steroids I would sleep

an hour a night if I was lucky. One could say one gets a tad wiggy after a few weeks.

After first visiting Bonkersville, I re-approached my Dr. S. Of course, he prescribed the antipsychotic Seroquel along with the antipsychotics Haldol (injected in whatever muscle) plus Thorazine and tardive dyskinesia. Normally, I like madness too much to mess with it. On the other hand, the Seroquel saved my ass. Until it did the most intimate bond/relationship of my life was terminally and irreparably damaged from my season in hell. My conclusion: I knew I had to find a reliable non-steroidal anti-inflammatory.

In search of this, for several years I'd oscillate between tribal Africa and the UCLA medical center. I was studying the African origins of African-American culture. Since the 1930s it has been noted that the Bantu tradition of the Spirits was central to what became black America. In Zimbabwe, I was literally initiated as a medicine man in the "ngoma" (medicine) of the water spirits. As I was immersed in this culture, I grew ever more cynical of the brutal drug pushing culture that I was born to.

[Every year Western allopathic medicine kills 250,000 patients in American hospitals.](#) How many have I killed? After I was fired from Ronald Reagan UCLA medical center (bless St. Ronnie: even after his death he continues), I wrote an essay

in my imagination called “The Patient I killed, the One I Tortured and the One Whose Life I Saved.”

Every MD and nurse knows these killing fields which have taken every one of these 250,000. Western culture loves its addictions, including to meds, and we all have stories of who has fallen, so we turn a blind eye to the cause.

It was in Zimbabwe I learned about real medicine – and one of “our” medicines is “mbanje” or marijuana.

It is the way of Bantu medicine to listen to an herb and what it tells you. Mbanje, in one of the tribal languages of my people, is also called “ambuya,” which means grandmother. Of course, you ritually receive her as an elder who is generous in her wisdom. In the medicine of the Bantu, a disease like MS is considered sacred. Illness is a gift. It opens the door.

The ‘ngoma tradition is both a peacemaking tradition and a healing tradition. To make peace is to heal. To heal is to make peace. And grandmother says that you have to learn to listen to what undoes you. Of course, contemporary American so-called medicine very much loves the metaphor of war - war on cancer, war on drugs, war on Muslims (thanks Dick) – and we Americans who know the killing fields, really know a lot about these various battles.

I first began taking *mbanje* seriously as a medicine when I noted that with marijuana I was no longer peeing or shitting my pants. In retrospect, I laugh at how I was still stranded

between medical traditions. The nursing school which I once attended in order to learn the physiological pathways, never taught me that (of all things) marijuana would make it possible for me to walk out in public without a diaper. Back then, when I was smartass to beat the band, it was obvious to me that this medical marijuana business was hokum – the invention of stoner MD's around their Hookah.

It is said by those sons-of-bitches who are wiser than myself that God has a sense of humor. Quite a card, they say. The last laugh was me without a diaper, and now the medical literature – I dare say “allopathic literature” – is becoming fascinating and extensive about multiple sclerosis and medical marijuana. Why, there was even a substantial piece in *Neurology Now* magazine.

And that piece dares speak the Holy Grail of the reparation of the myelin sheaths as accomplished by marijuana – the erosion of which sheaths, they say, makes for multiple sclerosis.

So, here is grandmother for me to attend to. Me and her, we gotta talk.

Michael Ortiz Hill is the author of [Dreaming the End of the World](#), [The Craft of Compassion at the Bedside of the Ill](#), [Conspiracies of Kindness](#), [Twin from Another Tribe](#) and [The Village of the Water Spirits](#).

