Readings for Sept 2, 2018

For this Sunday, September 2, 2018, the Today's Issues will discuss:

1. An article by Jennifer Szalai, "The Cry of the Centrist: In 'Tailspin,' Steven Brill Bemoans a Polarized America," A Review of the book Tailspin. Steve Meier will summarize the book for us. From the New York Times, June 5, 2018. Available online at: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/05/books/review-tailspin-steven-brill.html
2. An essay by A.J. Lees, "'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky," a review of two books about psychedelic drugs. From the New York Review of Books, August 16, 2018, page 34.

The group meets in the Religious Education building next door to the church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. Please do the reading and join our lively discussion.

A copy of the Readings is attached.

The Cry of the Centrist: In 'Tailspin,' Steven Brill Bemoans a Polarized America
By Jennifer Szalai
June 5, 2018 NY TGimes

The eagle has crash-landed, or it's about to, leaving a trail of red stuff on the cover of Steven Brill's new book. The image may look dire, but he (Brill, that is; no one can say how the poor eagle feels) hasn't given up hope yet.

"Is the world's greatest democracy and economy broken?" Brill asks at the outset of "Tailspin: The People and Forces Behind America's Fifty-Year Fall — and Those Fighting to Reverse It." "Not compared to the Civil War years, or to the early 1930s."

The comparison is presumably meant to be reassuring, though not so reassuring that you'll resist another 400 pages devoted to American decline. The country may not be in utter shambles, Brill argues, but it's getting there. President Trump is just the latest manifestation of rampaging anger and resentment. Declining social mobility, a shrinking middle class, widening income inequality, crumbling infrastructure — there's plenty to be mad about, and plenty of blame to go around.

Brill says the idea for his book came before the November 2016 election, when he landed at a "grimy terminal" at Kennedy Airport and got stuck in traffic on the "dirty, pothole-filled" Van Wyck Expressway. The bumpy road jolted him into thinking about everything from politics "to economic opportunity to health care to simple civility." "How had things deteriorated so badly?" he wondered. He spent the next two years combing the country to find out.

Well, not quite. From the looks of “Tailspin,” he really spent the next two years combing his backlist. Brill, a lawyer who became a journalist and entrepreneur, draws quite a bit here on his previous work, using several decades of writing and thinking about subjects as varied as education and corporate malfeasance to figure out what has gone wrong.

The book succeeds and suffers accordingly. On the subjects he’s written about, Brill knows a lot. For instance: Having published “America’s Bitter Pill” in 2015, he gets rightly incensed about the parlous state of American health care, an issue that affects everyone but is so intricate and perplexing that the details seem to excite mainly policy wonks and pharmaceutical executives.

He explains that Republican opposition to President Obama’s Affordable Care Act made no sense — unless you viewed it as simple obstructionism. Obama’s system of private health care exchanges without a public option was in fact an enormous concession to the medical industry, what Brill calls “a classic Republican/business lobbyists’ solution.” Obama had “deferred the fight over costs and profits in order at least to get expanded access.”

“At no time did the Republicans offer an alternative to Obamacare,” he writes, “because Obamacare had always been their alternative.”

You can almost feel Brill’s exasperation emanating from the page, though it’s not the fury of the stymied leftist but the frustration of the disappointed centrist. Nothing seems to inflame him more than partisan grandstanding interfering with his idea of sensible policy.

As such he’s hesitant to indict one side without trying to indict the other, making for some tortured equivalences. After chastising Obama-thwarting Republicans, he says he’s puzzled by Democrats whose “highest priority in the Trump years” seems to be “thwarting this president” (before conceding that the president is “such an outlier” that blocking him may be “defensible”). He venerates bipartisan consensus and compromise, even though he shows how they can lead to terrible deals. Obamacare, by placating the insurance industry, was a quintessential compromise — as was the haggling after the 2008 financial crisis that kept even the most notorious bankers from jail.

But the main split, Brill says, isn’t Democrats versus Republicans; it’s “the protected versus the unprotected,” or the self-preservationist elite versus everyone else. He dates the beginning of the “tailspin” to the 1960s, when school reformers set out to replace the old-boy aristocracy with a system more open, more fair, more meritocratic.

A meritocracy seemed like an improvement — in theory. Brill argues that reformers ended up creating a new aristocracy even more entrenched than the one it supplanted. Meritocrats “were able to consolidate their winnings, outsmart and co-opt the government that might have reined them in, and pull up the ladder so more could not share in their success or challenge their primacy.” The winners in this new dispensation feel their privilege has been earned, rendering them self-satisfied and unresponsive.

The argument isn’t new. Chris Hayes made a similar case in his prescient 2012 book “Twilight of the Elites.” (He used the pulled-up ladder metaphor too.) But “Tailspin” arrives at a different moment. Hayes was writing when the clouds were just visible on the horizon; Brill is writing from the eye of the storm.

It’s odd, then, that so much of Brill’s prose feels padded, as he mines his accumulated knowledge to deliver disquisitions on the Bayonne Bridge in Staten Island and the vagaries of the gas tax. (Strangely, there’s no mention of a devastated post-hurricane Puerto Rico or the water crisis in Flint, Mich., except in an endnote.) He complains of lawyerly bloat in government, producing “rules that were comically complicated and so long,” though his own long book seems to suffer from a mild version of it. “It is difficult to overstate the degree to which the ubiquity of arbitration clauses has un-leveled the playing field,” he writes, as if to warn us, before giving it a try.

Still, Brill does have some stunners in store. The most surprising parts of “Tailspin” come at the end, when he tries to forecast what might happen next, offering a rather extraordinary mix of doomsaying and wishful thinking. He envisions a day when things get so bad that President Trump’s supporters will awaken to “the debacle that their choice produced.” He foresees coal miners deciding to “march on Washington and demand help in transitioning to an energy industry of the future.” He anticipates the productive “public fury” that would erupt “if a bridge collapses on the same day or in the same week that two trains derail, a big city loses electricity and a school system finds out that its water fountains are gushing lead.”

That Brill sees hope emerging from the literal rubble shows the limits of a certain strain of politics, one that sees public policy mainly in terms of incentives, with the most desirable outcome being an electorate that “will now settle in the middle.” Call me pessimistic, but if a bridge collapsed on the same day as two train derailments, a blackout and another water crisis, chances are the result wouldn’t be less rancor but more.

’Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky
A.J. Lees AUGUST 16, 2018 ISSUE
How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence
by Michael Pollan
Penguin, 465 pp., $28.00
Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation, and Change
by Tao Lin

Vintage, 308 pp., $16.00 (paper)

Emi Fontana Collection/© Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin/Boris Kirpotin
Adrian Piper: LSD Self-Portrait from the Inside Out, 1966; from ‘Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Intuitions, 1965–2016,’ a recent exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City. The catalog is edited by Christophe Cherix, Cornelia Butler, and David Platzker and published by MoMA.

In 1938 Albert Hofmann, a chemist at the Sandoz Laboratories in Basel, created a series of new compounds from lysergic acid. One of them, later marketed as Hydergine, showed great potential for the treatment of cerebral arteriosclerosis. Another salt, the diethylamide (LSD), he put to one side, but he had “a peculiar presentiment,” as he put it in his memoir LSD: My Problem Child (1980), “that this substance could possess properties other than those established in the first investigations.”

In 1943 he prepared a fresh batch of LSD. In the final process of its crystallization, he started to experience strange sensations. He described his first inadvertent “trip” in a letter to his supervisor:

At home I lay down and sank into a not unpleasant, intoxicated-like condition, characterized by extremely stimulated imagination. In a dream-like state, with eyes closed (I found the daylight to be unpleasantly glaring), I perceived an uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colors.

After eliminating chloroform fumes as a possible cause, he concluded that a tiny quantity of LSD absorbed through the skin of his fingertips must have been responsible. Three days later he began a program of unsanctioned research and deliberately ingested 250 micrograms of LSD at 4:20 PM. Forty minutes later, he wrote in his lab journal, “Beginning dizziness, feeling of anxiety, visual distortions, symptoms of paralysis, desire to laugh.” He set off home on his bicycle, accompanied by his laboratory assistant. This formal trial of what Hofmann considered a minute dose of LSD had more distressing effects than his first chance exposure:

Every exertion of my will, every attempt to put an end to the disintegration of the outer world and the dissolution of my ego, seemed to be wasted effort. A demon had invaded me, had taken possession of my body, mind, and soul. I jumped up and screamed, trying to free myself from him, but then sank down again and lay helpless on the sofa…. I was taken to another world, another place, another time.

A doctor was summoned but found nothing amiss apart from a marked dilation of his pupils. A fear of impending death gradually faded as the drug’s effect lessened, and after some hours Hofmann was seeing surreal colors and enjoying the play of shapes before his eyes.

Further experiments conducted on animals in his laboratory showed that LSD had unusual effects. It made mice lick repetitively and affected how spiders built their webs. When it was administered to cats, it made their hairs stand on end; they ignored or took fright at mice let loose in their cage. “A caged community of chimpanzees,” Hofmann wrote,

reacts very sensitively if a member of the tribe has received LSD. Even though no changes appear in this single animal, the whole cage gets in an uproar because the LSD chimpanzee no longer observes the laws of its finely coordinated hierarchic tribal order.

None of the animals exposed to LSD suffered any detectable lasting harm. Further clinical studies in the psychiatry clinic at the University of Zurich, including self-experimentation by the head of the department, Werner Stoll, confirmed that LSD was a “phantasticum”—it had effects on the mind similar to those already reported with mescaline.

In 1947 Sandoz offered vials of LSD free of charge, under the trade name Delysid, to mental health professionals in the United States on the condition that they write up their findings. An estimated 40,000 patients suffering from anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, and alcohol dependence received the drug over the next twenty years, often paying their therapists considerable sums for the treatment. Some patients with neuroses improved noticeably when LSD was combined with psychotherapy, but Sandoz was unable to advise practitioners on the ideal dosage or how frequently the drug should be administered. At the same time, psychiatrists and scientists were investigating LSD’s use as a simulator of madness and referring to the molecule as a psychotomimetic rather than a hallucinogen.

Aldous Huxley knew that if the “elixir” continued to be associated with schizophrenia it would acquire a bad name. “People will think they are going mad,” he said, “when in fact they are beginning, when they take it, to go sane.” The need to rebrand the drug was obvious. In a letter to Huxley, Humphry Osmond, the psychiatrist who had first given Huxley mescaline in Los Angeles in 1953 and had used it to treat alcoholics in Saskatchewan, came up with the winning couplet:

To fathom in Hell, or soar Angelic
You’ll need a pinch of psychedelic.

Osmond’s neologism, which combines two Greek words, roughly translates to “mind manifesting.”

Albert Hofmann despaired that a substance that, in his view, should be as respected as the sacred plants of ancient civilizations had become a casually consumed recreational drug. But it was “the beautiful people” who had provided many of the best descriptions of the effects his compound had on the human mind. In The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, an account of the psychedelic experiences of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, Tom Wolfe wrote:

But these are the words, man! And you couldn’t put it into words. The White Smocks liked to put it into words, like hallucination and dissociative phenomena. They could understand the visual skyrockets. Give them a good case of an ashtray turning into a Venus flytrap or eyelid movies of crystal cathedrals, and they could groove on that, Kluver, op.cit., p. 43n. That was swell. But don’t you see?—the visual stuff was just the décor with LSD.

Hofmann believed that the true value of LSD lay in providing chemical support for spiritual contemplation. He had chanced on LSD and in a sense it had discovered him. Right up to his death at the age of 102 in 2008, he was unable to explain why he had gone back to investigate an apparently unpromising molecule after a gap of five years. The recent release of Hofmann’s Sandoz papers (to the University of Bern) is likely to show that there is more to the story of LSD’s discovery than the version he recorded in LSD: My Problem Child.

Michael Pollan’s How to Change Your Mind comes to its readers with a warning from its publisher: “This book…is not intended to encourage you to break the law and no attempt should be made to use these substances for any purpose except in a legally sanctioned clinical trial.” But in the course of his investigations into the history of psychedelics as a creative force, Pollan defies this advice. After reassurance from his cardiologist, his mind-expanding experiences with the tryptamine psychedelics—acid, magic mushrooms, and bufotenine (“the toad”)—lead him to conclusions that resemble those of the mystic chemist. “For me,” he writes,

the psychedelic experience opened a door to a specific mode of consciousness that I can now occasionally recapture in meditation. I’m speaking of a certain cognitive space that opens up late in a trip or in the midst of a mild one, a space where you can entertain all sorts of thoughts and scenarios without reaching for any kind of resolution.

Pollan does justice to the contributions of Hofmann, Osmond, Huxley, and Timothy Leary but also emphasizes those of people like the physician Sidney Cohen, who warned that the use of LSD in psychiatry needed strict controls. Cohen recommended that patients be screened for psychotic tendencies and for their vulnerability to potential abuses of power by therapists. Pollan also mentions Ronald Sandison, a Scottish psychiatrist who studied the “psycholytic” effects of LSD at Powick Hospital in the English countryside.

Pollan’s thorough investigation includes new insights about one of the most baffling and elusive figures to grace the field of psychedelic research. Al Hubbard, known to his associates as “Cappy,” was a fabulously wealthy Roman Catholic with a mystical bent. His past was a closely guarded secret, but he told a few close confidantes that he had been born poor in the hills of Kentucky in 1901 or 1902 and had been imprisoned as a young man for smuggling. When he came under investigation by Congress for shipping heavy armaments to Canada and the UK before the US entered World War II, he fled the country, became a Canadian citizen, and founded a charter boat business in Vancouver.

Willis Harman, an engineer who became heavily involved in psychedelic research, recounted that Hubbard once told him that an angel had appeared before him on a hiking trip:

She told Al that something tremendously important to the future of mankind would be coming soon, and that he could play a role in it if he wanted to. But he hadn't the faintest clue what he was supposed to be looking for.

Later, in 1952, Hubbard managed to acquire a dose of LSD from a scientist who was testing it on rats. Under the influence of the drug, he had the most spiritual experience of his life and realized what the angel had meant. Using his considerable political and business connections, Hubbard was able to persuade Sandoz to supply him with an immense quantity of Delysid. By the time he embarked on his quest to liberate human consciousness, he was in his early fifties, short and stocky with a crew cut. He dressed in khakis and carried a Colt .45 in a holster on a belt studded with bullets. Despite the appearance of a small-town sheriff, he was a man of the world who could open doors closed to the rest of the psychiatric community. Over the next fifteen years Hubbard approached leading figures in government, business, the arts, and religion. Many of them willingly consented to take a trip with the Good Captain, although a few, including J. Edgar Hoover, declined.

Hubbard believed in promoting LSD by using what he called the "Eleusinian model"—turning on society's elite to its consciousness-expanding effects first. His screening tests for potential subjects included such questions as "Where do you think you actually came from?" and "What do you think about the cosmos?" Among the early subjects was Myron Stolaroff, a gifted engineer working at Ampex, one of the first technology companies in what would later become Silicon Valley. He and Hubbard ran a program to explore whether LSD could make Ampex employees more open-minded, flexible, and efficient at solving problems. This would be the first of a series of episodes that linked the use of psychedelics with the tech boom, and that would eventually lead Steve Jobs to say that "taking LSD was a profound experience, one of the most important things in my life."

Bettmann/Getty Images

Dr. Harry Williams and Dr. Carl Pfeiffer conducting an LSD experiment, Emory University, Atlanta, 1955

Although Cappy never considered himself a therapist or a shaman, he left a strong impression on most who met him. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he had grasped the importance of what was later referred to as "set and setting"—careful preparation of an individual's mindset, expectations, and environment in order to favorably shape the psychedelic encounter. Some suspected Hubbard might be passing information to the CIA as part of its MK-Ultra program, in which people were given psychedelics—often unknowingly—in universities, prisons, pharmaceutical company premises, and hospitals. He was also regarded as the hidden force behind the 1959 experiments with LSD at the Menlo Park Veterans Hospital, for which Ken Kesey had volunteered as a paid normal subject.

By the mid-1960s Cappy had become a strong opponent of the San Francisco counterculture. In 1968 Willis Harman, a futurist and leading light in the "human potential" movement, lured him out of semiretirement to work as a special investigative agent at Stanford Research Institute, ostensibly to keep tabs on drug use among the students. In fact Hubbard was running LSD sessions for engineers and academics. On his office wall hung a large photograph of Richard Nixon inscribed “to my good friend Al, for all your years of service, your friend, Dick.”

Pollan is enamored of recent attempts to use functional magnetic resonance imaging to study how the brain behaves under psychedelics by tracking changes in blood flow to cerebral neurons. He interviews Robin Carhart-Harris, a life scientist and psychedelic researcher at Imperial College London, who explains that the cerebral networks dealing with vision, attention, movement, and hearing become far more interconnected after an injection of seventy-five micrograms of LSD. At the same time, Carhart-Harris and his colleagues found that LSD reduces blood flow to a network of different brain structures called the default mode network, which he compares to the screensaver on a computer. When the brain has no tasks to solve, it does not shut down but gravitates toward an idling state that may assist forward planning. After some of this research appeared in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2016, the psychopharmacologist David Nutt, a former adviser to the UK government on drugs, told a journalist that the Imperial College group’s findings were “to neuroscience what the Higgs boson was to particle physics.”

A number of neuroscientists have written skeptically about studies that they think overextend these sorts of imaging methods, for instance by using them to look for spots in the brain associated with religious belief or romantic love. And although the quality of papers describing brain-mapping studies is improving, the researchers’ conclusions are still not always justified by the data. Even if Carhart-Harris’s results can be reliably and consistently reproduced (which is not certain, since some of the first brain-mapping trials with psychedelics had contradictory outcomes), it will be difficult to determine their wider clinical significance until we find more ways to test the effect of psychedelics on the brain.

Pollan is also impressed with the encouraging preliminary results of another of the Imperial group’s experiments, in which they used psilocybin to treat nineteen patients with treatment-resistant depression. The patients’ improvement in mood was found to correlate both with peak “mystical experience” and with reduced blood flow in the amygdala. As Timothy Leary pointed out, though, it is impossible to double-blind patients with a placebo in clinical trials using psychedelics, and no matter how carefully selected and prepared they might be, they will have markedly different expectations. Pollan’s enthusiasm for this kind of research is perhaps too unqualified.

Pollan also learns that clinical investigations of the use of psychedelics to treat substance dependence and end-of-life existential dysphoria tend to use psilocybin—not because of its superior pharmacological effects but because it meets with less institutional resistance than LSD or DMT. This leads him to muse over what biological function the psilocybin molecule might serve for the little brown mushrooms that produce it naturally. Paul Stamets—a self-taught mycologist from Washington State and the author of Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can

Help Save the World—becomes his guide. Stamets believes that the vast web of mycelia—thin, branching parts of fungus under the soil—is Earth's natural Internet, an intricate, self-repairing, reticulated system that connects vegetation over enormous distances. "Mushrooms are bringing a message from nature," he says. He also suspects that the production of psilocybin was an adaptation on the part of toadstools to win the devotion of Homo sapiens and thereby enlarge the species's range.

In the course of writing his novel Taipei, which in his new memoir Trip he calls "my first book to include psychedelics," Tao Lin searched for artificial paradises with psychoactive drugs such as LSD and psilocybin. At the beginning of Trip he describes the extent of the existential nausea and alienation he felt during these years:

Life still seemed bleak to me, as it had in evolving ways since I was thirteen or fourteen. I was chronically not fascinated by existence, which, though often amusing and poignant, did not feel wonderful or profound but tedious and uncomfortable and troubling. Life did seem mysterious, but increasingly only in a blunt, cheap, slightly deadpan, somehow unintriguing manner.

In this, his first nonfictional work, he goes on to describe how he finally found a cure for accidie, the eighth deadly sin, "on September 14, 2012," by watching thirty hours of the YouTube videos of Terence McKenna.

McKenna, the advocate for psychedelics whom Timothy Leary once called "one of the five or six most important people on the planet," becomes Lin's shaman from beyond the grave. (He died in 2000 at fifty-three from a malignant brain tumor.) McKenna's soliloquys instruct the young writer to observe things in greater depth and detail, eradicate his narcissism, and live in an atmosphere of continuous unfolding of understanding. From McKenna Lin also learns that ingesting the psychedelics that occur naturally in plants can stimulate his imagination and deepen his relationship with nature. McKenna's aphorisms recur throughout the book:

I don't believe anything.

I would entertain any idea, but believe in nothing.

I don't believe in belief.

Avoid gurus, follow plants.

Neither Pollan nor Lin uses psychedelics simply in the hope of inducing a pleasurable altered state of consciousness. But whereas Pollan conducts his psychedelic experiences under the guise of journalistic inquiry, Lin's trips are motivated by a belief that his brain is chronically depleted of the chemicals that cause us to feel happiness or wonder. He is vulnerable and struggling to find meaning in his life. His dependence on the Internet and on his cell phone compounds his confusion and malaise. He hopes that naturally occurring psychedelics will have a healing force, help him understand his own mortality, and show him why he is driven to make art.

Lin always provides the number of atoms contained in each mind-bending molecule and enjoys drawing their chemical structures. He writes that in an interview from 1988 McKenna had said that compared with LSD, DMT ("the God molecule") was "so much more alien, raising all kinds of issues about what is reality, what is language, what is the self, what is three-dimensional space and time." During one trip, Lin imagines that he has been fired out of a cannon into the Milky Way. But it takes him twenty-nine pages of inscrutable text to describe his waking DMT dream:

At 3:30 A.M., summarizing my last two hours, I typed "Recovered the video! By deleting a photo, then going to Edit then Undo Delete twice. Then watched it, then returned to beginning and summarized first 19:32 of video, working hard." I was asleep an hour later. "Can close my eyes and enjoyably deeply imagine and hear Chopin sonatas."

With a mix of bravado and courage Lin then smokes the leaf of Salvia divinorum, which contains the extremely potent psychedelic salvinorin A. After blacking out for a moment, he feels as if he's trapped deep inside himself in what he calls "a Being John Malkovich manner" and is being casually observed by foreign entities as different from him as he is from a cloud. Lin's account sometimes enters the third person, for instance in a passage he writes after his new psychedelic experiences while stoned on cannabis in San Francisco:

Like with DMT in 2012, 2013, and 2014, Tao felt he should "recover more" before trying relationships beyond friendship. Having hermit-like tendencies, a job and main interest in life that was solitary, and generally liking being alone, celibacy hadn't been difficult for him.

In the mid-1960s a moral panic broke out in the US over the recreational use of LSD. In 1966 Life published a damning article entitled "LSD: The Exploding Threat of the Mind Drug That Got Out of Control." Timothy Leary said in 1967 that "the kids who take LSD aren't going to fight your wars" or "join your corporations," which led Richard Nixon to castigate him a few years later as the most dangerous man in America. Those who rallied to the drug's defense were not patients with severe mental illness or psychiatrists but Hollywood celebrities like Cary Grant and liberals like Senator Robert Kennedy, whose wife Ethel was said to have been treated with LSD for neurosis.

LSD was banned, first in the US and then in many other countries, and in 1970 was classified by the Drug Enforcement Agency as a Schedule I drug—one with no medicinal properties and a high potential for abuse. But even before clinical use of psychedelics had been derailed by the 1960s counterculture, many psychiatrists had given up using them because of their inconsistent effects. Reports of people jumping off rooftops or running into the sea and drowning, although rare, were a further deterrent. By 1975 research on LSD and other mind-altering drugs had slowed to a trickle.

Some who have fought for the legalization of psychedelics for many years, like Rick Doblin of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), imagine that making them prescription drugs will pave the way for their incorporation into American society and culture. Doblin explains to Pollan that MAPS is undertaking a $25 million trial to make MDMA (which goes by the street names ecstasy and molly) a Food and Drug Administration–approved prescription medicine to complement psychotherapy in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder.

But allowing physicians to control the prescription of mind-altering substances is not without its own risks. In the 1950s millions of people legally took amphetamines as a supposedly risk-free shortcut to sobriety and slimness. One advertisement in a medical journal showed a cartoon of a plump woman eating a pie with the slogan “with Methedrine she can happily refuse.” The recent widespread prescription of synthetic opioids, which many doctors naively believed had a negligible risk of dependence, has caused an addiction crisis that now affects large parts of the US.

Rather than maintaining unenforceable bans, governments might license clubs where members could ingest legal compounds, specifically manufactured with human consumption in mind, for the purposes of spiritual enhancement and creative inspiration. In 1844 Théophile Gautier founded one such group, the outré Club des Hashischins, to explore the experiences hashish could induce. Members included Alexandre Dumas, Charles Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, and Gérard de Nerval. Jacques-Joseph Moreau, an alienist, supplied the members with Egyptian hashish, even though Indian hemp could be bought easily at a pharmacy.

Many editors of learned medical journals now automatically turn down publications describing the sort of scientific investigation that Albert Hofmann carried out on himself. Institutional review boards are often scathing in their criticism of self-experimentation, despite its hallowed tradition in medicine, because they consider it subjective and biased. But the human desire to alter consciousness and enrich self-awareness shows no sign of receding, and someone must always go first. As long as care and diligence accompany the sort of personal research conducted by Pollan and Lin, it has the potential to be as revealing and informative as any work on psychedelic drugs conducted within the rigid confines of universities.