

# A Nation Sedated But Suffering Still

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Archon Khephra Burns

A dear friend lost her only son recently. He was 29, six foot ten, handsome, intelligent, gentle, and like so many who are suffering behind affable smiles and the facade of middle-class respectability, self-medicating to anesthetize the pain. Like so many others, Sean suffered from a mostly undiagnosed but chronic condition of the body politic, social disaffection and the myriad anxieties of life in modern urban America.

Heroin use in the United States has doubled since 1996. It's cheap and on the rise not just in New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore and similar size cities north and south, but also in areas of the country you might not expect: Anchorage, Roanoke; Jasper County, Indiana; Utah, Wisconsin and Connecticut. It has spread into affluent suburbs. And according to studies cited by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, most of the estimated 282,000 new users are under the age of 26, some as young as 14. They are the children of a drug culture shaped in large part by pharmaceutical companies that have evolved a huge industry around the management of pain, both real and imagined; an industry that is invested in, and profits from, convincing us that we are in more pain than we realize and that they have just the thing for fast temporary relief.

This new generation of addicts, drug enforcement officials say, are trying to replace the high they get from expensive prescription opiates like Oxycontin, which they find in their parents' medicine cabinets. What can we say to them about the risks of drug abuse? Every television commercial touting the drugs their parents use warns that "side effects may include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, hearing loss, blurred vision, shortness of breath, kidney failure and in rare instances death." But most are not deterred. As a nation of consumers addicted to the quick fix, we have weighed the health risks against relief from the pain of our fractured lives and made our choice.

Biologists, neuroscientists and cultural anthropologists agree that the perception of pain and our response to it are, at least in part, a cultural phenomenon. There is a critical period in the development of pain perception during which an infant learns how to respond to pain by watching his or her parents, whose own responses have been shaped by a culture that has

been shaped by images and messages mass marketed to consumers of pain relief. This is not to minimize the fact that Americans are in real pain. Perception is reality.

I suspect that some who say they are just getting high don't even know they are in pain, that they are suffering emotionally. How would you if, say, it was all you have ever known? Such pain would be your baseline condition, like living with gravity. We might take it for granted, never giving it a thought, until one day we found ourselves soaring high above it. Some Eastern philosophies even assert that pain is a condition of existence, a condition of our separateness and longing for union with a transcendent reality, with God. Psychologists and sociologists see it as a sign that we are out of harmony with nature.

There is a growing dissonance today between our consumer society and the individual that can best be viewed in the retreat of so many to chemical havens of respite and relative peace. The barrage of media messages and meaningless stimuli is unrelenting. Perhaps the world is too much with us. Perhaps we try too hard to inoculate against our fears of future pain with dramatizations of remorseless maniacs and dramatic reports of real maniacs (who are themselves in some sense sick and striking out in pain). We can only cope but for so long with the sustained assault on our emotions – our fears, horror and outrage – before the brain shuts down in a self-protective reflex. On a larger, societal level, the result is likely to be a growing insensitivity to the pain, hunger, joblessness, homelessness and death of others; a retreat from civic and humanitarian concern presaged by the lure of heroin and its less potent, though no less deleterious, licit alternatives. Users wax rapturously about a wave of warmth and security that comes over them and a numbness to, and absolute apathy about, the myriad concerns of the world. "I could have been robbed and shot or had my ID cards taken. But I simply didn't give a f\*\*\*," concluded a typical testimonial on the website Erowid Experience Vaults.

Pain is information. It hurts locally but warns us of possible harm to the health of the larger body – the human being, the body politic, the body of Christ, the planet. It hurts locally because generalized it's just an abstraction with little sense of urgency to act. And so one mother's loss becomes a conduit for the expression of all the world's suppressed pain; a looking glass for those who can't bear to look at it except as reflected in the mirror we each hold up to others. In her we recognize at last the real face of pain, up close and personal, inconsolable, quaking with sobs that come in waves between merciful laughter and half-rational attempts at the meaning of it all. In her we have an omen of a great wailing to go up throughout the land. How many more will die for our sins of neglect, willful blindness, apathy and lack of compassion? Ω