

The battle to direct legislation and policy often seems to be a fight between greed and compassion. Emotions run high, but the problems being debated—climate change, universal healthcare, LGBTQ rights, gun regulation, economic inequality, and the separation of church and state—desperately need to be resolved.

Human Compassion for Beginners

by Johnny Townsend

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HUMAN
COMPASSION
FOR
BEGINNERS

JOHNNY TOWNSEND

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Nukes Don't Kill People, People Kill People

(Published in *LA Progressive* on 19 December 2012)

If opponents of common sense gun control insist that “Guns don't kill people, people kill people,” I wonder how we can maintain our belief that Iran and North Korea shouldn't possess nuclear weapons. If there is nothing wrong with *owning* a weapon because the weapon itself is neutral, then why can't everyone own any weapon they want?

Don't I remember the U.S. going to war with Iraq solely for the erroneous suspicion that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, and we thought that was a bad idea? Aren't some politicians posturing even now to invade Iran if any more evidence surfaces about their nuclear program?

It's clear that we want to control who owns nuclear weapons because the weapon itself is dangerous. The same is true of guns, which have killed far more people than nuclear weapons ever have. Letting anyone own almost any gun they want, as the present laws with all the gun show loopholes allow, is the same as letting any rogue nation own any nuclear or chemical weapon they want. Sooner or later, many, many innocent people are going to be brutally killed.

And gun owners, please take a deep breath and calm down. No one is calling for a complete ban on all guns. Opponents of “gun control” always throw that up as an actual

danger. But there is a constitutional amendment prohibiting this as an option, so a total ban is simply not going to happen. What “gun control” means is that we start serious discussions about regulations. Just as an unregulated Wall Street brought disaster in 1929 and again in 2008, unregulated gun sales will lead inevitably to disaster after disaster after disaster.

We regulate who can drive a car, don't we? It's called getting a Driver's License. You have to answer lots of questions and take an actual driving test before you can get behind the wheel on your own. Why? Because even an object as neutral as a vehicle becomes a deadly weapon in the wrong hands. So why can't we have background checks and exams and required classes for gun owners? Surely, guns are at least as dangerous as cars when used by the wrong people. And the second amendment never said anything about denying this type of regulation on guns.

If the voters want to keep the same deadly status quo, then so be it, but please stop saying guns don't kill people. All weapons kill people. If we have to ban heroin because of its danger, if even pot is banned in 48 states because of the hazard it presents to society, then surely guns warrant our attention as well.

And it isn't just the mass shootings of children or theatergoers we should want to avoid. I personally don't want to be shot even if I'm the sole victim of the shooter. According to Mercer University School of Medicine, there were over 30,000 gun-related fatalities in the U.S. in 2010 and an astonishing 200,000 non-fatal gun-related injuries. Being shot at a political rally isn't the only thing we have to worry about.

We're riveted to our televisions when we see a schoolroom full of children shot to death. We cry and bemoan

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the sad state of the world. But then we go about our business and don't do anything to prevent the next horrific tragedy.

And that makes us accomplices to murder.

Teetotalers for Legal Marijuana

(published in *The Salt Lake Tribune* on 11 Sept 2018)

I have never smoked a joint. Or eaten an “edible.” Or smoked tobacco. Or drank alcohol. Or used cocaine, or heroin, or meth, or LSD, or Xanax, or...well, to be honest, I don’t really know all the drugs out there, since partaking of them never interested me. I’m 57 years old, was excommunicated from the Mormon Church at 26 for being gay, and spent years socializing in French Quarter bars. New Orleans is the “City That Care Forgot,” whose motto is “Laissez les bons temps rouler.” There is a party or festival almost every week of the year. The streets flow with beer on Mardi Gras.

But neither the availability nor the popularity of alcohol ever led me to take even one sip. I knew that many people could drink moderately without any problem, and that doing so seemed to enrich their lives. But I was also aware that some people who drank became alcoholics, and there was really no way to know if I belonged to this latter category until it was too late. A lifelong introvert, I understood as well that a drink or two might make social situations easier for me. But the risk was just too great, and I chose not to take it. For me, that was the right decision. But it would be ridiculous to think everyone else in the entire world must make the same decision. Even if drinking turned out to be a mistake for them, people are allowed to make mistakes.

My sober world did not come to an end simply because I could legally buy alcohol at a drive-thru daiquiri shop. There's no law, after all, that says people HAVE to drink alcohol, which has been legal my entire life.

Likewise, marijuana has been legal in Washington state, where I now live, for a good while, and I'm still not interested in that either.

To be honest, I think marijuana stinks. Literally. On my grandparents' Mississippi farm as a child, I sometimes smelled the repulsive odor emitted by skunks. And for the first few years after moving to the Pacific Northwest, I would look around downtown Seattle, mystified. There were occasional bear sightings in the suburbs, and raccoons in my urban neighborhood, but where in the world were the skunks hiding around all those bus stops I waited at? I was shocked to discover that other people actually liked that acrid odor and paid good money for it.

I still immediately think of skunks whenever I smell someone smoking pot.

The fact that I do not need medical marijuana myself for the many conditions it alleviates doesn't absolve me of the obligation to make sure those who do need drugs derived from cannabis have access to it. And while I am not interested in any mood- or mind-altering substances of any kind, I am convinced that we not only need to decriminalize the sale and use of both medical and recreational marijuana, but we must legalize it as well.

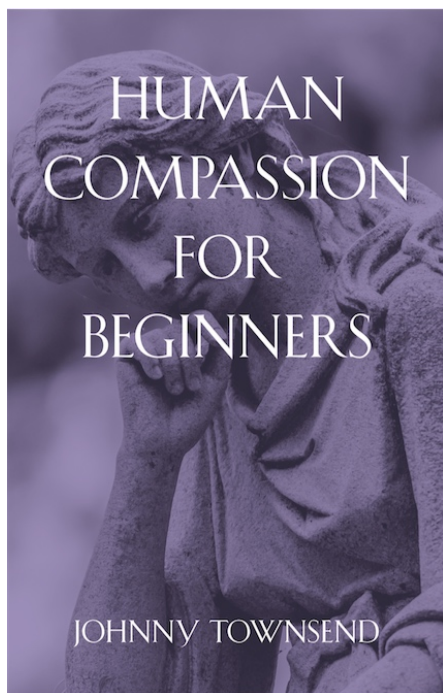
Mormon leaders say it's okay for church members to use medical marijuana where it's legal, but then they campaign heavily to make sure it isn't legal in Utah.

Critics of legalization insist marijuana can be harmful, and that may possibly be true, but the point isn't terribly relevant. We KNOW alcohol and tobacco can be harmful, so harm alone can't justify a prohibition on cannabis. Sugar is harmful, isn't it? Fat, too, at least in large quantities. Even drinking too much water can lower a person's sodium to fatal levels. Over-the-counter acetaminophen taken in amounts above the recommended dosage can kill. As can insulin. As can almost anything in excess.

So let's go ahead and put warning labels on marijuana. Let's fund rehab for those either physically or psychologically addicted to any substance at all (even the aforementioned sugar). If we're truly worried about the health of our citizens, denying them access to medical marijuana, or healthcare in general, certainly isn't the answer.

But we need to stop wasting millions of dollars and ruining countless lives on a losing battle. I find it odd that it is mostly political conservatives, those who complain that the government has too much control over our lives, who always insist on making laws which limit the freedoms of others.

If those political conservatives don't want to partake of marijuana, if devout Mormons don't want to partake, even if liberal atheists like myself don't want to partake, we don't need to. But it is wrong on every level not to allow others the freedom to do so.



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