

Parenting in a War Zone: A Conversation with the Grey Family

interviewed in 2003 by Jon Hanna

Tell us a little bit about your relationship. How do you get along? Do you ever fight?

ALEX: I'd say we're a pretty peaceful crew, the three of us. There's a lot of love in the house. We feel fortunate. A lot of families split up. We're just very happy together.

ZENA: Personally, I think I have the best relationship with my parents, compared to a lot of my friends. I get along with my parents so well, and we hardly ever fight and disagree. It's really amazing.

ALLYSON: I think all that's true too.

A spiritual approach toward life is obviously important to your parents, Zena. We can infer from Alex's 1996 painting Family that you sometimes pray together. To what extent does spirituality play a part in your own life?

ZENA: Well, I'm not *incredibly* spiritual or anything. But, I do pray and stuff like that. We pray at every meal that we have together, which is mainly just dinner. And I usually pray before I go to bed. It's not one of those things where I kneel down and say that "Now I lay me down to sleep..." thing. But, I dunno, just like a thing to God to bless me and my family—thanks for every day and just how happy I am. And, if I want anything, like a part in a movie or something, I might just add that in. [laughs]

ALLYSON: When Zena says that she's not very spiritual, I think what she means is that she's not very *religious*.

ZENA: Yeah.

ALLYSON: Because I don't think that we're very religious. But I think we have a rich spiritual life that is integrated with our regular life. Our spirituality is from all different religions. We celebrate Jewish, Christian and Pagan holidays and go to Buddhist retreats occasionally. We read aloud from the *Bhagavad Gita*, Buddhist scripture, the Bible, Rumi and other Islamic mystics. We look for the common thread in all wisdom traditions. We have no prohibition from practicing the occult. Zena likes to pull runes, we throw the *I Ching* and interpret each others dreams. It all adds to an intuitive and inner directed life.

At what age do you think that it is reasonable to begin a discussion on the topic of drugs with one's child? At what age do you think it is reasonable to mention one's own drug use?

ALLYSON: I always answer every question that Zena has directly and specifically. I try not to say *more* than I think she wants to know, because I don't want to scare her or encourage her. I just want to answer her questions. So whenever she might have had a question about drugs, I'd answer it. But, at the same time, she would hear a lot of messages about not smoking, and if she would see us smoking pot or something, then I would have to address that. We would talk about it. I think that when she was pretty young she saw us smoking pot—not that we smoked very often, we smoke very rarely. Occasionally with friends who might smoke in front of her. We didn't hide it from her, because I really can't stand that. I don't like hiding anything from Zena. I don't like to smoke pot all the time either, so that's a good thing. I wouldn't want you to think that I was constantly getting stoned every day. But if we were at a party, and we were with some friends, and we lit up, it might have surprised her when she was four or five years old, and she might have been curious about it then, and later on too.

When we saw propaganda television from the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, we explained to her that these were sponsored by drug companies that wanted people to buy *their* drugs, not the ones that the government had decided were "wrong." In addition to that—well maybe I'm jumping the gun here—but we had to explain to her early on that our own drug use was not something that she could talk to her friends about. We explained to her that it was like the early Christians who had to hide their religion from Roman persecutors; that we believed what we were doing was not wrong. We believed that it was right and it was part of our spiritual life, but it was against the law. It was illegal and it could be dangerous. We could go to jail for it. So we wanted to tell her about all of those dangers right away. And we didn't want her to think that the drugs themselves were not dangerous either, since drugs can be very dangerous also, when they are used by people who are too young, or by people who are mentally unstable, or used in excess, or whatever. So we would tell her those things. What age did we tell her those things? Well, as they started to discuss this in school. They would bring this topic up in school, and we would counter it with our own particular message.



What sort of “drug education” have you been exposed to in school, Zena. What impact has this had on your own attitude toward drugs?

ZENA: The message in school is basically, “Don’t do drugs, don’t do drugs, don’t do drugs.” Over and over again. It doesn’t teach you anything about drugs. It says nothing specifically that might be good about drugs. Everything is bad. No good will come from any of it. And I wonder why they lie about this? I don’t know. I suppose that they just want people to believe that what they are saying is true, so that they won’t do drugs. However, I agree that people shouldn’t be doing drugs at my age—like 13 or 14.

You’re about to turn 14, right? To what extent are you aware of others around your own age using drugs? And if this goes on at all, what drugs are popular?

ZENA: I’ve only had a few friends that do drugs, but I actually don’t hang out with them anymore.

ALLYSON: How about acquaintances then? People in your class?

ZENA: Me and my friends talk about the fact that so many people in our grade smoke pot. And a lot of people have had problems with it, or have gotten into a lot of trouble when their parents have found out. There’s so many people in our grade that do that. And a lot of people drink. I know some people who have done acid and Ecstasy.

ALLYSON: In the ninth grade?

ZENA: Yeah.

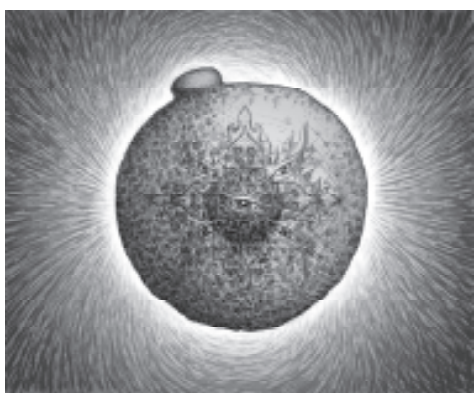
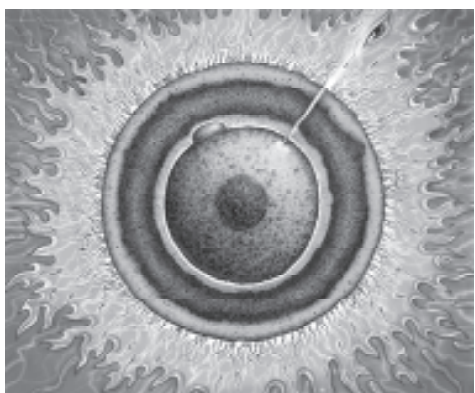
How prevalent would you say that such drug use is at your age—13, 14, 15 years old?

ZENA: I think that there’s a lot of people that are doing it.

ALLYSON: You think half?

ZENA: Yeah, if not more than half.

ALLYSON: And I’d just like to say, as a proud mother, whereas we have sacramentally used drugs for many years, and talked about it openly with Zena, whenever she was ready to hear about it, she knows that she is *not* ready. If you *talk* about it with your kids, it doesn’t mean that they are going to jump right into using drugs. The ones that are using drugs now in Zena’s grade, I would guess have parents who would be totally against it. Would not be using it, would be extremely petrified, and might have even kept any information from their kids or basically lied to their kids about the risks. Drug use is dangerous. For one thing, because it is illegal. But more than that. Young forming egos should not partake in mind-altering “ego dissolving” substances. Nevertheless, parents should still tell the truth, and not be afraid to include the positive effects that they might have had with drugs when they were younger. Not sharing openly with your kids leads to kids that keep things from their parents.



As parents, is there a particular age range where you feel as though it seems reasonable for a child to experiment with some drugs? Where would you place that age range, and what sort of an environment seems most suitable?

ALLYSON: I want to leave that up to Zena. I don't know, but I assume that she might want to experiment at some point. But she may never. I mean, my sister-in-law has never tried any drugs other than alcohol at all. People do go through their lives and not experiment, and if she doesn't want to, that's fine. I think that it will be up to her. The most perfect environment in my opinion for Zena, would be to do it with us. [laughs] I'd love to do it with her. When she is older, we could do it together. Yet, I think that in some ways it's a peer thing. That people should do it with their peers. We hear that from other people. But you know, it's not a bad thing if this is a part of your spiritual life, to share that with your family.

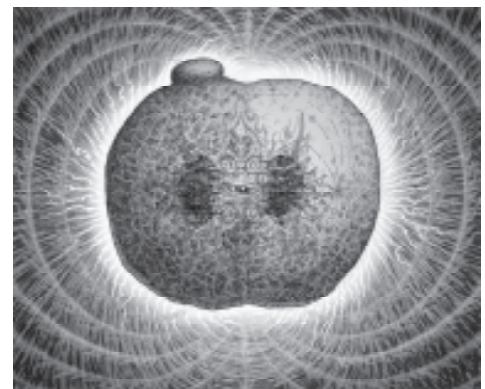
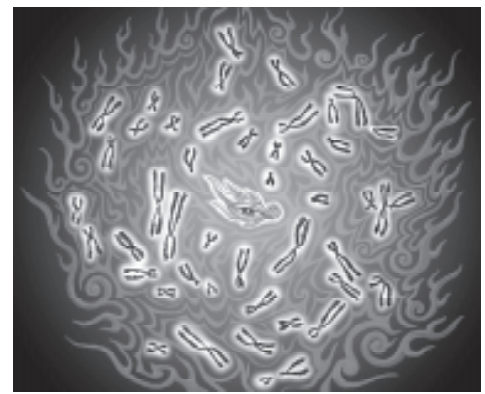
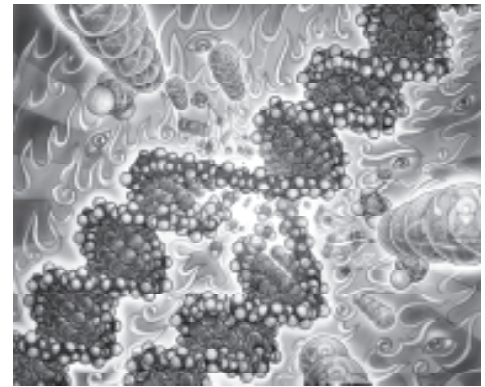
Alex, is there a particular age where it seems reasonable to you for children to experiment with drugs?

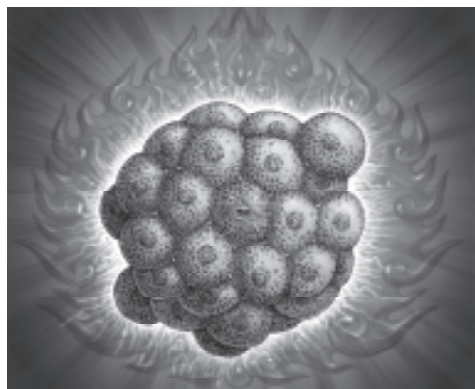
Alex: Children, huh? Oh God. [laughs]

Well, I guess by that I mean anyone under the age of 18.

ALEX: Are we talking about the crack babies, and whether they like it or not? God. I guess I'm of a mind similar to Stephen Gaskin, who basically feels that the drinking age is appropriate for the other stuff as well, in a general sense. That one wants to *form* an ego before one starts to transcend it. I know that my friends—when I was in junior high and high school—were probably 13 or 14 when they started trying LSD. And I think it really freaked most of them out. Some of these people stayed kind of rubbery throughout that period, and I don't know that it was helpful for them in gelling their personality, because they were dealing with a lot of other issues—their parents breaking up, and other kinds of things. It's kind of hard to tell what effects these things have on people, because our lives are complexly interwoven matrixes of lots of different forces. I can only speak from my own experience. I waited until I was around 21. My first trip was an extraordinary opening into resolving issues that had been coming up during adolescence, which kind of crystallized through that experience, resolved themselves in some ways, and suggested ways past my impasses. It might be that some kids would get that early, and they would be able to skip some of the doldrums or depressions of adolescence if they were initiated in a framework of support and by folks who were part of their tribe—a sort of wider and wiser family. And so if they were opening up and becoming vulnerable—exposing their psyche and delving into those dimensions in a loving supportive setting—then I can imagine that it could be done earlier than 21.

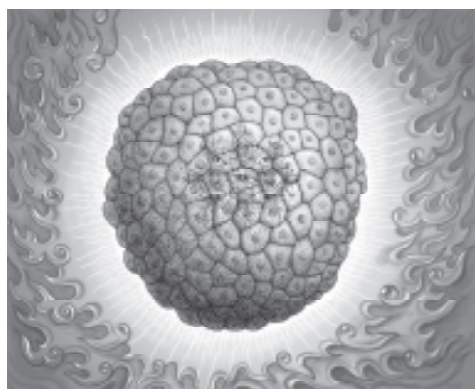
ALLYSON: I should say that I was probably 17. I left for college when I was 17, and I didn't start using LSD until then. But I really feel strongly about the aspects of set and setting. That if you are going to use LSD or this sort of thing, you really need to be in a perfect setting. It is best to be with someone who really cares about you, in case you experience that terror. You need to be with someone who is with you on that. It's not easy for high school students to find a place to do that. There's always the danger of parents coming in, or an authority finding out. To find the perfect set and setting, in nature where it is beautiful, and you can be





there for long periods of time—I don't think that is easy to find. Just being away from home and being on my own, it was better for me to start then than it was for me to do it in high school. But I know that kids are starting now much younger than that. Kids started younger than that when I was in school too, but I waited.

*When I was in high school, perhaps about 16 years old at the time, I remember that one of my friend's parents let us have alcohol parties at her house. She didn't buy the alcohol for us. But her thought was that if the kids were going to be drinking anyway, that she would rather have it be supervised and somewhere that they could spend the night if they needed to, and where no one was allowed to drive home if they were drunk. She didn't clear these parties with the parents of the kids who were in attendance. Her heart was in the right place. But she certainly could have had to face a lot of pissed off moms and dads, as well as legal problems. She was walking a fine line with her attempt to be more responsible than the current mores of society allow, and there was risk involved. On the other hand, some adult users of psychedelics have admitted publicly to turning on their own juvenile kids. Steve Kubby is one example; he wrote in his book *The Politics of Consciousness* about sharing a low dose of LSD with his 16-year-old son Sky. And then there are traditional societies where visionary plants are used ritualistically for spiritual purposes at a much younger age, but these folks may not be facing the legal consequences.*



ALLYSON: Well, it is one thing to turn on your own one kid. But then to have a group your kid's friends over, you're really in danger. We would be really in danger, because we're known. People have read about us in *The New York Times*. I mean they know. So we can't have children over here doing that, and Zena knows that.



From a legal perspective, I can see the utility of waiting until one's kid is at least 18, before dosing with them. But in reality, the kid might not want to wait that long. So for parents who aren't comfortable tripping with their kid before he or she turns 18, what do you think some reasonable options are?

ALLYSON: Well, in Brazil it is legal to do ayahuasca. Parents do go down there with their teenagers and they have this experience together in a legal environment. We know people who have done that, and we've considered that.

That's a great solution.

ALLYSON: But of course Zena has to want to do it. It's not just our thing.



ALEX: One of the things that Zena asked us once during an interview was, "Do I have to do drugs?" No, definitely not. It is just something that some people are drawn to. And after which, if they have had an amazing experience, they think, "Oh my God, why are so many people in the world going without this?" It's like not knowing about having orgasms or something. There's part of you that wants to be a proselyte, to initiate people, or to try and cajole people into it. But then you realize that you're of a certain mind, and we're not in a society—especially in these dark days of the Bush Era—that is understanding of the motivations that would drive people toward a spiritual reality through altering their brain chemistry.

The fact that psychedelics are demonized by our current government places parents who use them in a strange situation. But one potentially beneficial side of that is that it allows for an opportunity to teach your child that it is important to think for him- or herself, and not blindly accept the government or media's propaganda.

ALEX: We've got a full-on Drug War, or rather a war on a certain state of consciousness. In the case of entheogen users, there are little rays of light that we have to celebrate. Certainly the Native American Church continues to use peyote, and they've been guaranteed that religious right. And there seems to be some opening up in New Mexico about the ayahuasca situation that is likewise used in religious settings as a sacrament. As far as the atmosphere that the government has promulgated, and how that helps to clarify drug education for our children, I think it's a lot like the sex education angle. Abstain. Don't do it. And without really any sort of informed education, there's *no* education to it.

ALLYSON: Marijuana is clearly a less dangerous inebriant than alcohol; and a lot of people feel this way. Alcohol is toxic in quantities that are very drinkable. You could drink enough alcohol in a day to kill yourself. You can't smoke enough in a day to kill yourself—it's just not as toxic. Some children are fiercely afraid of their parents smoking. We had friends who gave up smoking when their kids were pre-teenagers, because the kids were very afraid of their parents doing something that was illegal. They were so afraid of it that it caused them a lot of stress and anxiety, and so the parents stopped. Marijuana is more dangerous due to the potential legal ramifications, but less dangerous in terms of its physiological effects. People have been using inebriants in every society for ages. With this historical use of inebriants, it has been clearly shown over time that some drugs are less dangerous than others. And yet in the case of marijuana, children are taught to be *more* afraid of that drug. Society educates children incorrectly in this way.

ALEX: That's well put.

ALLYSON: You were asking earlier about when it is the best time to talk with your children about drugs. I like to relate the following story, because people are always concerned about parenting, and when they should properly talk to their children about drugs. Zena has been going to Alex's talks where he discusses his art history and his life, since she was maybe two. When she was maybe four years old was the first time she sat through an entire talk, which lasted about an hour and a half. Alex talks about the first time he took LSD and his whole spiritual life related to drugs and art. As she got older—maybe she was eight or nine years old, or even older, ten perhaps—I remember one time she said to me, "Well, I know you guys have tried marijuana. But nothing else." As we were walking down the street she said this to me. And I thought, "Okay, that's what she knows." That's what she *wants* to know. They only take in what they really want to know. So if you don't tell them what they don't ask you, then they only know what they want to know. When they are ready to know more, then they ask you. So here she was, living in an environment where her parents were known users, but she believed that we didn't use, because that is all that she could hold right then. The drug education that she had had in school made our consumption of the other drugs seem impossible to her. We couldn't be doing *that*. So she just made up that we hadn't done that, even though she had





heard it over and over again through the years that we had. So it's interesting. They basically know what they want to know, and you don't have to keep it from them. They'll ask you when they're ready.

How have you addressed the topic of visionary drug use with your own families of origin? Have your parents been open to your explorations of inner space via this method, or had any interest in such explorations themselves?

ALEX: I think that my parents are understandably uncomfortable with the subject. I don't think that they have ever really appreciated my interests, and they have never had an interest themselves in psychedelics. I think that the first time I was introduced to the subject was through *Life* magazine and various news magazines when I was a boy around 12 or 13. I did a science report on it at that time. I was quite taken by Timothy Leary and the hippies, and all of that. Allen Ginsberg and all those fellows seemed like they were having a lot of fun. It certainly looked a lot more interesting than getting blown up in Viet Nam. I was also intrigued by unlocking the imagination, since I was an artist and knew I was an artist from early on. The visionary world was a subject of attraction and curiosity to me.

At that time it wasn't illegal. I think that my parents considered it to be interesting and unusual. But then as soon as the government started to crack down on it, well... my folks were staunch Republicans who embraced the idea of "my country right or wrong." The hippies must be wrong, those who are wanting peace must be wrong. When I have talked about my psychedelic experiences with them—because it has been published many times in my books and in other places, interviews and such that I have sent to them—they express that they are uncomfortable with the subject. But they are really just looking out for our welfare. They really just love us and they want us to be safe. They don't want any harm to come to our minds and they don't want any harm to come to us through the negative publicity and Drug War mentality that surrounds us. So I can understand their feelings. I'm afraid that they can't understand mine.

ALLYSON: I'd like to just say about families that both of our parents are still together, and both couples have been married for the same amount of years—about 52 or 53 years. They were married the same year. And all four of them are pretty conservative, they're all Republicans.

And they had artists as children. [laughs]

ALLYSON: Well, we had artists as parents too. Alex's dad is a graphic designer and my mother is an artist. But they just happened to be... well, my mother lived with my dad, so she's a conservative I think because of the influence there. I think that everything Alex has said I go along with. Our parents are more concerned about our welfare and our well-being. Like when they saw the article that came out in the *Times*, they were worried about the legal ramifications, and what our friends would think, and what the school would think, and whether we were going to get busted, and whether the police were going to get a search warrant and burst into our house. You know, they worry about those kind of things. That's their concern. I think that my mother is unusual, in that she is the most open of the four of them. She's more of a free-thinker, and is interested in all things about consciousness.

ALEX: She's a spiritually curious person.

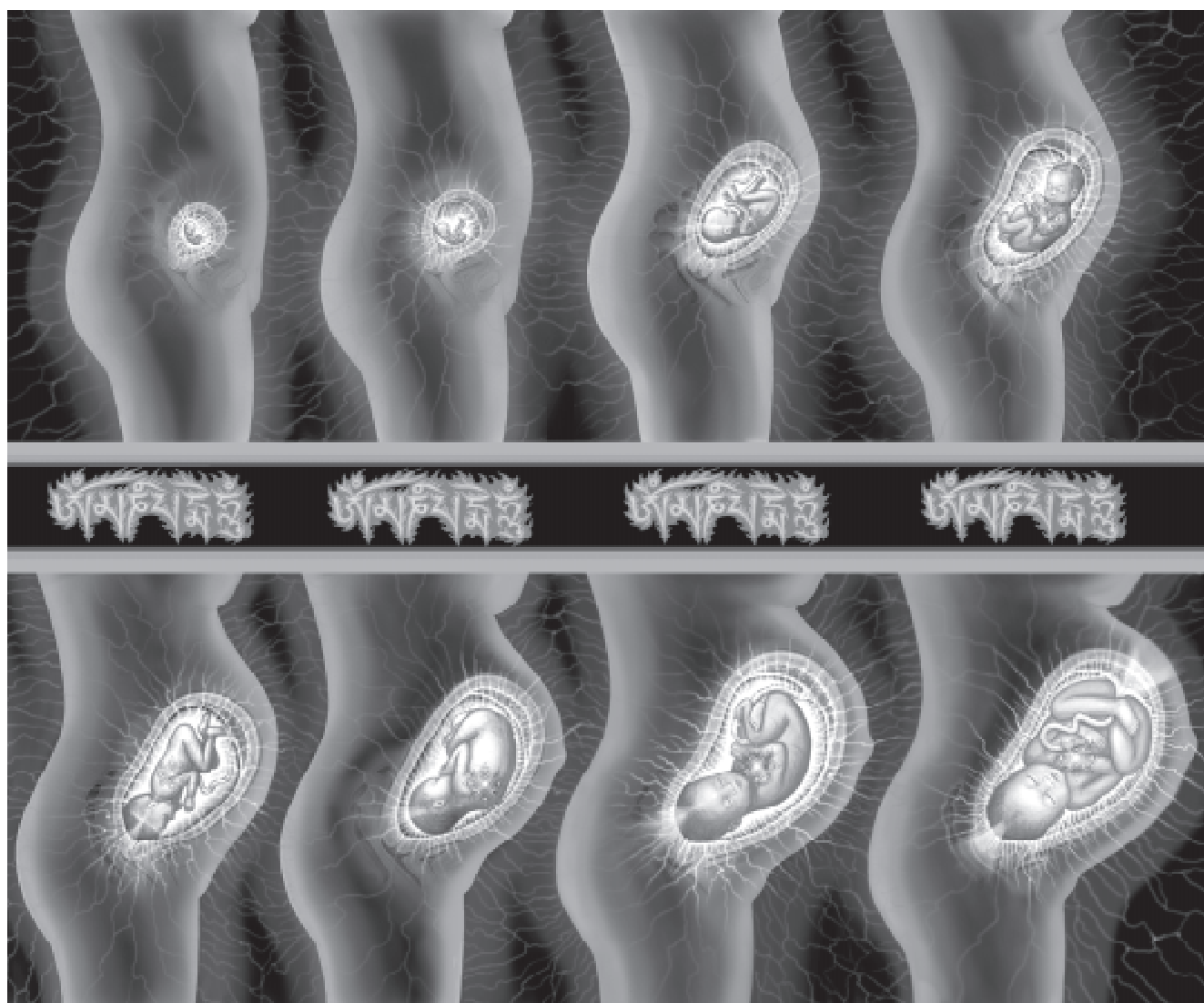
Knowing what you know now, would you have done anything differently in the past?

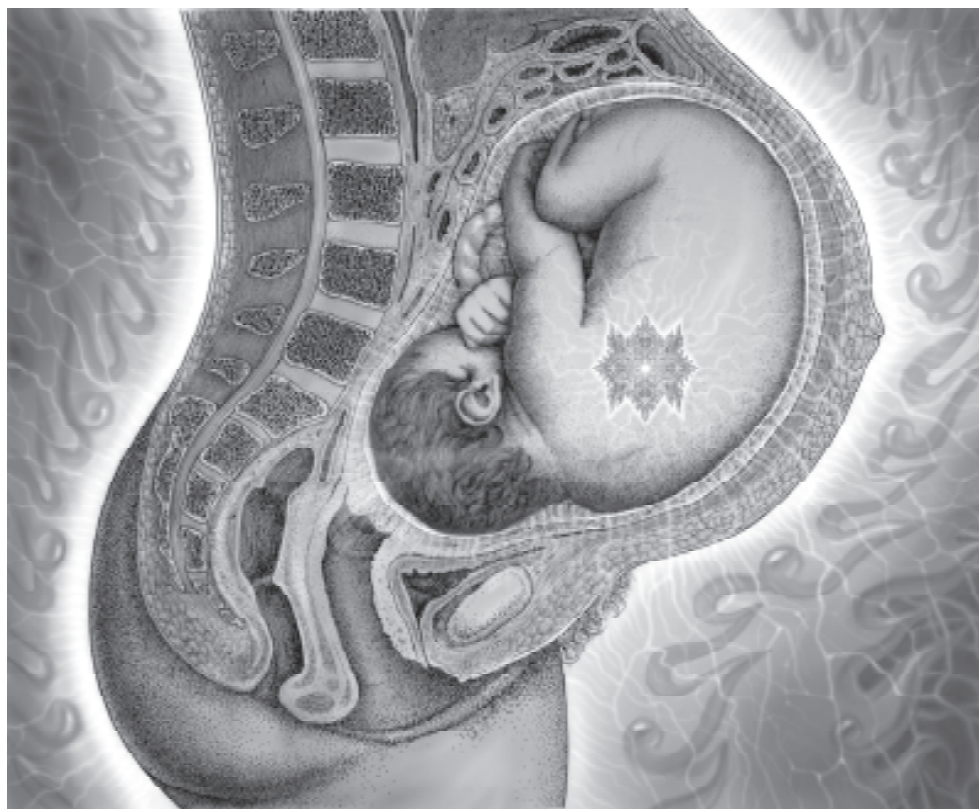
ALLYSON: No. I wouldn't do anything different. I am interested to hear what Alex has to say. But I think that Zena has come out perfect as far as I'm concerned. I wouldn't change a thing. She has a mind of her own. She's going to decide when it is time for her, or if it is never time for her. We've always told her the truth, and if she ever wants to know more, we would tell her more. I trust her implicitly. I think that if the time is right and she decides to experiment, she'll tell us. Because she tells us everything. She tells us everything because we don't implode or explode when she does. She'll tell us because we let her tell us without going crazy. I think she's turned out great. Would you do anything different, Alex?

ALEX: No. Because I feel as though that would mean either lying or not saying anything. And I've never felt comfortable doing that.

The attitude that you have is inspiring to me, because I think that it is very important to be truthful with one's children. I have some friends who used to hide when they smoked Cannabis—they tried as hard as they could to hide this from their children. At a certain point it got ridiculous, with them trying to hide this from their 13 or 14 year old daughter, because she'd figured it out. She knew what was going on. And then they had to have this sort of awkward conversation. So I decided for myself that I would be straightforward from the start about it with my daughter, and hope that this is the best approach.

ALLYSON: I think it has more integrity. If people are really concerned, they might consider temporarily stopping their use. For example, we have close relatives that





decided to give it up for a while. Their children were keen to them, and said, “We’re really scared for you, and it really makes us nervous. It really makes us upset.” I mean, you’re a family. You live together, and you have to make some sacrifices for each other. Sometimes if that happens, and the children are not going to be convinced about the positive effects, and it really makes them uncomfortable, it makes them afraid, so then for a few years you give it up. I mean, I gave it up when I got pregnant. Even before I was going to get pregnant, I gave it up for a while. Because I wanted to have the right environment for my womb. I think that it is possible to do that. It has more integrity to do that, than to hide. I don’t like hiding. I don’t want Zena to hide things from me. Everything I do, she’s going to do back. If I hide from her, then she’s going to be sneaky and keep things to herself. I would rather that she shares with me all the stuff about her life.

It seems like a good approach. Zena, what do your friends think about your parents?

ZENA: Well, *The New York Times* article came out. A lot of my friend’s parents are lawyers or corporate executives and they all read the *Times*, so my friends were all like, “Zena, your parents... they do LSD! And they smoke marijuana!” And I’m like, “Yeah, I know. Got it.”

“Yeah, I read the paper too.” [laughs]

Zena: Yeah. It’s an article about my parents. You would have *thought* that I would have read it. So after I was, “Yeah, whatever,” they just sort of dropped it. They don’t really talk about it all the time, like “Your parents are druggies.” The only thing that they say about them is that they are the coolest parents that they know.

Is there any advice that you might offer for a kid who is interested in taking drugs for the first time?

ZENA: I guess that I would just say think about it *a lot* before doing it. Maybe they could save this experience until later. Personally, I think that I am so young, if I just do everything and get it over with—have sex, and do drugs, and do everything *right now*—what will I have left to do when I get older? If you really want to do it, then waiting will give you something to look forward to. So I’m waiting. When you get older, and when you feel like you are *really* ready, perhaps that is a better time. As a comparison, are you really ready to have sex at a very young age? And then, are you really ready to have a baby? Are you really ready to accept the consequences of your actions? So the same can be said for doing drugs. Personally, I am not ready for those consequences. And I don’t think that a lot of kids my age are. I don’t want to deal with all of the stuff that comes with it all. If you *really* think you are ready, that might be another thing. But don’t come complaining to me if your parents find out! •