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Jonathan: From Amsterdam, This is Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute, a treasure trove of the best and the brightest of American thinking. I'm Jonathan Gruber, and this week's guest is one of the world's greatest journalists, experimenters and thinkers about things that go on in your body. Michael Pollan Up until now, he's written about food. This time, He's written about something else entirely.

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Pollan: I was dissolving and turning into liquid, and I was. I was kind of covering the landscape like I'd been buttered, you know, or I was a coat of paint. And again, that's fine. That's I just had complete equanimity about what happened.

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Jonathan: If it sounds like Michael Pollan was describing a hallucination. That's because he was. Mr. Pollan came to the John Adams in 2018 to talk about his book: How to Change Your Mind. It's a literal title because he'd moved on from his research on food to delve into the world of medicinal psychedelics. He did this because there's a renewed interest in psychedelic research as a form of psychiatric therapy. In this episode of the John Adams podcast, Mr. Pollan makes the case for more research to see if these drugs can really help. Later in the show, he's joined by the head of the Psychiatry Department of the Amsterdam Medical Center, Professor Damiaan Denys, for a pretty candid conversation on why maybe, possibly, psychedelic drugs could be the treatment we've been waiting for. But of course, Michael Pollan being Michael Pollan, his research couldn't be merely, shall we say, academic.

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Michael Pollan: I decided that in the interests of my readers, education, and my own keen curiosity, that I would have to do this as reluctant as I was. And you know, when you approach psychedelics, as you, as you approach 60 years, I did. It's a little different than when you're 18. One thing is you have a cardiologist to ask about it. So I talked to my cardiologist and to my surprise, he kind of green lighted everything except MDMA, which I wasn't really interested in anyway. But, that's an effective meaning can raise the heart rate. And he kind of was like, cool with the others. And I and I did a lot of research to understand the risk that I was taking. I was kind of a nervous Nellie about this, more nervous than many of the people in the room clearly. And I learned that, I learned some remarkable things about psychedelics. One is that they're remarkably nontoxic. There is no lethal dose that has ever been found for either psilocybin or LSD. They're not too many drugs. You can say that about. You have drugs in your medicine cabinet now, cold remedies and the headache remedies that have a lethal dose. And it's surprisingly it's in the tens or twenties of pills. But nobody's ever found that for psilocybin, or they really act in a very targeted way on certain brain receptors. And that's it. So that was one reassuring fact. The other fact was that they're not addictive. They're not habit forming. And those of you who use them know that your first feeling after completing a soul shattering psychedelic journey is: got to do that again. No, it's usually like, do I ever have to do that again? So and if you put a rat in a cage and you have that set up where they have two levers one for cocaine or heroin and the other for food, they will press the cocaine till they die or the heroin until they're addicted. Put LSD in that set up. They'll do it once and never again. Animals apparently don't like to trip. So I so I was kind of cleared on that, I mean, the risks were psychological and there are.

And they are really are real psychological risks. People at risk for schizophrenia, people who have a history of mental illness in their family should probably not do it. People do have bad trips. Although in the kind of controlled environment that I'm describing that I've just described, there have been so far no adverse events. And that was reassuring also. So I decided I would take the plunge and without going into a lot of detail, I found guides that I was comfortable with and that took a while. I did interview some people I didn't feel I could entrust my mind to. I remember talking to a very gruff Romanian guide who had a lot of experience, and I explained my nervousness to him about which he had no patients at all. And I said, What happens if someone has a heart attack and dies, you know, with your retreat in the woods? What do you do? And he goes: Bury them with all the other people. It's not what I wanted to hear. So I crossed him off the list, but I ultimately found some guides. I was comfortable with one in particular. I want to tell you about named Mary, but I have to tell you every night before I had one of these big experiences, I had a sleepless night where I was just kind of having this Ping-Pong match where I was like, Are you crazy to do this? You're going to go up on the mountain with this person you barely know there's no phone service. And what if something happens and how can you trust this person then? And I realized eventually that was my ego defending itself against what would be a profound assault on my ego. And the ego is very clever and it has command of our rational faculties, and it was trying to argue me out of this. But ultimately, I ignored it and proceeded. And every time once I passed the point of no return and ingested the medicine, I was OK. It went away. So that was that was a relief. I'm going to tell you about one particular experience that was, for me, the most profound that I had. I had others, some, some, some much less happy than this one. But this one was important, I think, and it sheds light on the issues that I'm looking forward to talking to Damien about. Mary was the guy. That's what I call her in the book. And I went to see her and I decided I would have a kind of high dose psilocybin trip. I would basically imitate the dose that was being given in these trials and then I went to her. She had a kind of loft in a little city on the east coast of America, and she was a very compassionate woman. She was in her late 50s, and I'm going to tell you how she looked because it becomes relevant a little later. she's very Nordic looking, she has long blonde hair parted in the middle and high cheekbones and I liked her quite a bit, and she had a lot of kind of ceremonial touches and there was Palo Santo that she was burning and blowing smoke and a crow's wing and stuff like that. OK? You know, I can... I'm down for that. And so but the trip didn't start out very well. I took the beginning of the dose, which was this giant mushroom. I'd never seen one quite that big and I was supposed to eat all of it, and she gave me some chocolate and alternated bites of chocolate and mushroom, which is a very good way to do it. And she puts on this music, though, and you know you're wearing eye shades. I didn't mention that, but that's very important. And you're listening to music, either on headphones or on a stereo. And she puts on this guy. Maybe you've heard of him. I never had. ??? David, I look this up later, and it's new age music. It's kind of electronica. It's the kind of music that if you were getting a massage at a really nice spa would be fine, but not for a deep exploration of your soul. I looked him up later and iTunes says he was nominated three times for Best Chills Slash Groove album note. He was only nominated. He never won. And so this, what happens in psychedelics very often is that sound. You know, synesthesia is the name for it, but basically your senses are crossed wired and you are seeing what you're hearing and this music. Every note of it created a landscape, and the landscape was a black

and white because it was kind of this electronica, this black and white digitized, video game landscape that it looked like the kind of stalactites and stalagmite styrofoam you see in a recording studio to blunt sound. And it went on and on, and I felt so claustrophobic and I had to change the music. It didn't get any better, and I was kind of trapped in this video game world, and that's just not my thing at all. I wanted to be outside, I wanted natural imagery, and I was and there was I had this kind of rising panic that I was going to spend the day trapped in this place. It was really scary. So to kind of relieve that tension, I took off my eye shades and something you can always do, and it kind of changes the channel in a profound way. And there was the world again. Oh, windows, doors, a ceiling and all this wonderful light in this fractal pattern. And I had to take a pee and I asked, I told Mary and she kind of walked me by the elbow to the bathroom, and I felt a little better and I went and I was very careful not to look at the mirror. And I mentioned this to an audience in England and someone in the audience. Says: ah yes Tripp's face. You don't want this. So I guess you're familiar with. Idea of not the term and. And I produced a spectacular crop of diamonds that I was very impressed with and then made my way back very haltingly, and when I got to the futon that I was on, Mary said, Would you like a booster? And I was at this point in for the whole thing, and I said yes. And I looked up at her and she was squatting next to me, holding out this mushroom, and I looked at her face and I had this shocking realization that she had been transformed. And now she had black hair and leathery brown skin and these wrinkled brown hands that she that handed me this mushroom and she had been transformed into someone I recognized from my research. Maria Sabina, who is the massive tech Indian who in nineteen fifty five, gave magic mushrooms to the first Westerner ever to take them: Gordon Wasson. And that is the introduction of psychedelic culture to the West. I mean that and LSD a couple of years earlier, and I didn't think I should tell Mary what had happened to her. And as I went back under, there was the computer world again. But suddenly I was. I beheld it from this new vantage place and I looked out and I saw myself. This being I recognized myself explode into this cloud of little post-it notes. I was just reduced to just little slips of paper. And but I was fine with it. I had no problem with it. I had no desire to pile myself back together again. Now, who is this other I who was experiencing this? That's kind of a mystery to me, but there I was, and then I looked out again and I was I was dissolving and turning into liquid, and I was I was kind of covering the landscape like I'd been buttered, you know, or I was a coat of paint. And again, that's fine. That's I just had complete equanimity about what happened. So there had been this split in my first person and what was myself was gone, and there was, it had been succeeded by this other eye that I have no explanation for. Aldous Huxley would have said it was the mind at large. It was some kind of transpersonal consciousness. I don't tend to buy that idea. I think it was a production of my mind, but a part of my mind I had never had access to before. And this was amazing because there is a, you know, I realized, Wow, my ego, there it was. It was gone. Yet there was some other ground on which to stand. And the lesson that I learned was, I wasn't I wasn't identical to my ego that there is more to your mind than this self, this chattering, controlling, self-critical voice that controls us so much of the time and punishes us so much of the time. And then one more thing happened that's relevant. And then I'll move on. And that is that she, we finally agreed on a piece of music and I saw on her playlist she had busts, unaccompanied cellos, suite number two in G Minor, which is just an extraordinary piece of music. I urge you to listen to it tonight. It's the saddest piece of music

you've ever heard. You've probably heard it at funerals, actually. And she put that on and I had since I had no self left. I just kind of merged with this piece of music, and I heard music in a way I had never heard it before. I really I could feel Yo-Yo Ma's bow, the friction of the horse hairs going over my skin. And then I was inside the well of the cello and it was a mouth and I was there was no hearing of the music. I was being the music. And it was this ecstatic yet very sad moment, ecstatic in the sense of I was separate from my usual self, but not happy. It was very sad. But this piece of music just kind of reconciles you to death in a way that nothing else I know had. So I don't pretend to understand this whole experience, but. And I asked myself, what is this, what good is this momentary transcendence of the sense of self? It doesn't last. And after it was over, I came back from my integration the next day with Mary and I told her the whole story and I said that, yeah, it had this disillusion of self and but I survived it, and there was this other point of view. And she said, Well, isn't that worth the price of admission? And I said, Yeah, except my ego is back in control, back in uniform, patrolling the borders. The defenses again. So what good was that? And she said something interesting. She said, Well, having had a sample of that experience, a taste of it you can cultivate. And I asked her how and she said, well, through meditation is one way. And indeed, you know, since this experience, I've been meditating regularly and with a lot more success than I ever had before. And every now and then, not every day, but every few sessions, I can find my way back into that place, that amazing place. And so that was, that's how my mind was changed and specifically my understanding of the word spiritual changed, and I want to leave you with this: You know, I told you, I saw that spiritual the... I believe that the opposite term for spiritual is material and I realize that is wrong. What happened when my ego went away was that these channels opened up and all this information came in. I've described some of it. There's this ability to hear music, but in other times it's it's a connection with nature. And at other times it's this flood of feelings of love that I also had during this experience love for my wife, love for my son, love for my parents. And that these experiences, I realize, the ego stands in the way of and that our defenses keep us from these strong feelings, whether they're coming from outside us or inside us or a piece of music. And so I came to understand that the really for me, anyway, this may not be true for everybody. The proper antonym are opposite for spiritual is not material. It's egotistical. And that it is the extent to which you can drop the defenses of your ego that you open up to the spiritual and the spiritual is really a matter of connection, deep found connection. And so that was for me the profound insight I brought, the biggest takeaway from this experience. I believe this recognition, this idea has value not just for the individual, but for our society. And now I'll just be for a moment a little bit speculative. When you think about the two biggest problems we face as a civilization right now, I would I would say that those are the environmental crisis and tribalism. Both have a similar characteristic. Both involve in objectifying of the other. Both are forms of egotistical thinking. Tribalism is group egotism in a way, egos build walls, egos see the self as the only subject, and everything else is an object that you can exploit, demonize, whether it's in other that is the natural world or people of other faiths, people of other races, people of other countries. And we are certainly in a period where that objectification is stands in the way of making any kind of progress on the problems we face. So as it happens, psychedelics addresses both those issues, at least in the individual. We have research that suggests that that our connection to nature is enhanced by psychedelic experience. Psychologists also have a scale for nature connectedness, and

that goes up after a psychedelic experience. And you have this feeling when the ego is is disarmed of connection to other people feeling more like them, then different. So the challenge then becomes if you have such a medicine and it speaks to the crisis of not only the individual but of the collectivity right now. What do you do about that? You put it in the water supply. I don't think so. Do you give it to as many people as you possibly can and hope that change in society? That was Timothy Leary's idea. He made calculations on napkins. If he could turn on one point nine million Americans, it would change everything. It sort of did change everything, but not quite the way he meant. Or do you give it to the elite? Which was another theory Aldous Huxley theory? Give it to the captains of industry and religion and art and hope that the new consciousness filters down. I have no idea how to navigate this issue. It may not be navigable, but it's very suggestive that the reason that we're seeing this revival of interest in psychedelics may have to do with the real challenges that we face. So I just urge you to think about that, that we need somehow to democratize that experience of diminished ego, loosen the egos, hold and allow a broader, wider and more generous sense of self-interest. What is the self? What are the boundaries of the self to, to take its place?

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Jonathan: So after that description of an ego free moment, Michael was joined by the head of the psychiatry department at the Amsterdam Medical Center. Professor Damiaan Denys. Mr. Denys specializes in anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorders and the applicability of deep brain stimulation in healing patients, so it's no surprise that Damiaan began his line of questioning rather scientifically.

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Damiaan Denys: You think about, is it just a molecule? So how is it possible that such a fake artificial experience has such an impact on you?

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Michael Pollan: Yeah, the experience is not in the molecule of the molecule is setting off a cascade in the brain that we really don't understand, right? We know that it it activates the serotonin to a receptors, which is a very important, very well represented in the cortex, but they're also in weird places like the digestive system. We don't really understand why. And there is a cascade of effects, and that's a way of saying we don't know what the fuck happens after that.

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Damiaan Denys: You're a scientist.

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Michael Pollan: Now there's so many blanks. It's stunning. I mean, you develop a respect or humility, as you know, looking at brain science. But then what appears to happen is and this is based on neuro imaging that I talk about in the book fMRI is they basically. Take volunteers who are willing to take a high dose of psilocybin and then get slid into an MRI machine. Imagine doing that. These are heroic people. And then they take this image of their brains and they were quite surprised by what they found. The assumption was that you would find a heightening of activity throughout the brain because there's so much, so many fireworks in the experience. But what they found was actually a diminution of activity in one

particular brain network called the default mode network. Which is a set of tightly linked structures that are kind of at the top of the brain's hierarchy. It has many networks and they're arranged hierarchically. It connects the prefrontal cortex where planning and please correct me if I get anything wrong. Executive function takes place with the posterior cingulate cortex, which is, I'll tell you what it's involved with later. With older and deeper centers of emotion and memory. And this network, we think and we've only, it's only been recognized for about 15 20 years, is most active. It's called default mode network. Because they were doing baseline tests, they wanted to do fMRI and they needed the baseline. So they would just tell you, get in the machine and do nothing. Just don't think about a task. And this network would get very lively. It's kind of where your mind goes to wander when you don't have a task and it's involved in self-reflection, it's involved in mental time travel. The ability to think about the future of the past, it's involved in theory of mind, the ability to impute mental states to other people and what's called the autobiographical self. The kind of the construction of the narrative of who we are. We take information from our lives and we hook it up to this coherent story. And that's kind of how it generates a sense of self. It's the ego could be said to have an address. It's somewhere in that vicinity. And that part of the brain gets very quiet on a psychedelic experience, which is really interesting, I think, because it suggests that it's the absence of something that psychedelics is responsible for.

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Damiaan Denys: So I want to go back at the beginning of your very long answer. I asked you this.

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Michael Pollan: Message taken.

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Damiaan Denys: It's just the molecule, but you said, no, it's an experience, and that's something you stress in your book. You in a way you try to escape the mind-brain dualism by introducing a new concept, which is the experience. So could you I mean, talk about what? What is the metaphysical status of that experience is something between the mind and the brain. It's like a very Freudian concept. Like, I don't know this, this concept that is between matter and mind somewhere.

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Pollan: Yeah. Well, I mean, I think it's very much in mind. I mean, the point is we don't understand how the molecule leads to the experience, but we understand what the experience is, I think. And what I mean by that is that we're we normally think of drugs as 'the molecule creates a sensation'. But in this case, for the therapy to work. It's, it's not enough to have the chemical in your body. The chemical has to, however it does, it has to create this experience, which is an experience that the doctors in America at least call a mystical experience and they're using. William James did a kind of anatomy of the mystical experience and varieties of religious experience. And he listed the eight qualities that make up a mystical experience. He wasn't thinking about psychedelics. He was thinking about religious mystical experience and spontaneous mystical experience. And it appears to be when you have that experience, which may or may not happen depending, regardless of the dose that you receive enormous benefit. So in a sense, yes, you are prescribing an

experience to people, which is a very different way of thinking about a psychiatric illness, and people could get that experience by other means. And I think that will be a very interesting question to explore. We know that very experienced meditators can have a mystical experience and experience ego dissolution. So, so I think that is the key term, though.

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Damiaan Denys: because the mystical experiences we're talking about, you mentioned your book that in America, they do much better than in Europe. Yeah, that's because the preparation and the context is much more important. So yeah, I had two questions. First, is that true, is a context so important for the experience. That's the second and the first question. The second one is, I mean, talking about therapy in psychiatry, using regular drugs or treatments, shouldn't we focus much more on the context of preparation because it's so powerful in the experience.

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Michael Pollan: much more powerful, I think, than we ordinarily recognize. So set and setting terms. You've heard about psychedelics. They were coined by Timothy Leary, and he noticed, though he wasn't the first to notice, that the kind of experience people have is powerfully shaped by setting, which is the physical setting they're in and set, which is the mindset you bring to it. So if you're expecting or you're been primed for having a kind of spiritual or mystical experience, you're much more likely to have. So there's a there's a very interesting dichotomy. If you ask the American researchers, they say three quarters of the time our patients have or volunteers have mystical experiences. If you ask the British, they say now we don't see a lot of mystical experience and they're giving the same dose to a similar patient population. So what does that about? Well, the American researchers and American culture in general has a more religious cast than English culture.

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Damiaan Denys: So in your opinion, is there a reality beyond reality?

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Michael Pollan: *Laughter* You know, the change in my mind on that question is that to me, I have a more open mind about that question. I think it's less settled as soon as you know this, but as soon as you start looking at the science of consciousness, you realize we don't know anything. And that the idea that brains produce consciousness, which most people accept and most scientists accept, is, as the Dalai Lama pointed out, just a hypothesis. To me, it seems like the most parsimonious hypothesis. But there are many people, especially people who've had psychedelic experiences, who tend to come to another conclusion that there is a transpersonal dimension and there are some. You know, there are some physicists who believe that consciousness we need to think of start thinking about consciousness as a property of the universe, much like electromagnetism or gravity, or that it's a building block of reality and it's out there in complicated systems. Partake of it or it's emergent.

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Damiaan Denys: But do you believe do you believe in no collective consciousness?

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Michael Pollan: No, I don't.

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Damiaan Denys: Despite your experience of being part of the world

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Michael Pollan: I felt that my the spiritual experience I had, I feel like and explain and completely naturalistic terms in terms of

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Damiaan Denys: so you're still a materialist in a way?

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Michael Pollan: I think so. But I'm entertaining doubt. I don't feel I have to come down in a strong way and I feel that nobody really knows and I have. You know, it's funny. It's one of the forms of pushback I got in this book. I didn't get it from where I thought I would. I thought law enforcement might have a problem with it. I thought the psychiatric community might have a problem with it. I thought my parents might have a problem with it. It came from people who believe in transpersonal consciousness and that they thought I hadn't taken that idea seriously enough. And as I said, that experience I had of that non egoic awareness. Huxley and others would interpret as that was a manifestation of that collective consciousness. I just was not quite there yet. How about you?

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Damiaan Denys: I'm going to try the whole thing this summer,

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Michael Pollan: So you'll let me know.

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Damiaan Denys: I will.

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Pollan: We'll have to reconvene. Yeah.

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Damiaan Denys: you're gonna to try it again?

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Michael Pollan: So I have not had another experience since I published the book. This was largely just out of caution. I am. I was very worried about not so much my own legal exposure because I'm very candid about breaking the law. But my guides and these are people who who gave me this amazing gift of these experiences and they took a great risk and I did everything I could to protect them. I changed their names and a couple of facts about their identity, but not that many, but in their jurisdiction where they lived. And if I were to do it again, I'd want to do it with one of these people I trust, but I don't want to lead anybody to them, for the same reason. I haven't made any referrals. I just made a policy, even people very close to me. I just I'm not referring them to gods because I don't want to jeopardize anybody. I mean, who knows who's watching, who knows who's reading my email? So, so I'm laying low in another world where these experiences were legal. I think I would have a psychedelic journey every year on my birthday. That would be my dream. I think it's a wonderful way to kind of take stock of your life once a year.

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Damiaan Denys: Why your birthday? Because...

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Michael Pollan: Oh, because it's kind of the ... that's, that's a good moment. Yeah, rebirth. And it's just kind of a good time. It takes

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Damiaan: what is your birthday?

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Michael Pollan: February sixth

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Jonathan: Damian Denys in conversation with Michael Pollan about his book 'How to Change Your Mind'. Here in Amsterdam back in 2018. The John Adams does not suggest that you go off and do your own psychedelic experimentation, but if you do find the right guide, you don't want to end up with trip face. Did you know that you can go to our website, john-adams.nl/videos, where there's a link to the video of this extraordinary event. We also have a newsletter you can sign up for and a veritable treasure trove of great American thinkers and speakers at john-adams.nl. And while you're there, why not become a member of the John Adams? Not only will you support what we do. You get a discount to future live events. In the meantime, you should go to wherever you get your podcasts and leave a review of this show. This will help get the word out, and we can keep on sharing the very best of American thinkers in Europe with you, free of charge. That's it for this week's show. Our theme song is called La Prensa by the Parlandos. Our editor is Tracy Metz. From Amsterdam, This was Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute. I'm Jonathan Groubert. Thank you for listening.