

Harvey Milkman and Stanley Sunderwirth

PATHWAYS TO PLEASURE

The Consciousness and Chemistry of Optimal Living



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PATHWAYS TO PLEASURE

To our children

Tasha and Arielle
—Harvey B. Milkman

Arliss, Caleb, Stanley, and Eric
—Stanley G. Sunderwirth

You must do the things you think you cannot do.

—Eleanor Roosevelt

Preface

We are prepped to avoid temptation ad infinitum—no drugs, no sex, no cholesterol. Very little has been offered by way of *yes*. We have therefore written a guidebook on self-actualization—a descriptive volume for becoming engaged in pleasurable and creative pursuits while maintaining a steady fix on personal harmony and sense of purpose throughout the lifespan. The concept of *natural highs* is introduced as a means for achieving extended pleasure through activities that promote health and well-being.

Guided by the Personal Pleasure Inventory (PPI) and other personality-probing tools, readers learn to practice a style of pleasure-seeking that fits their individual needs and can be used to develop greater intimacy, fulfilling projects, and a healthier lifestyle. *Pathways to Pleasure* invites readers to discover their own lifelong path to joy and fulfillment.

Drawing on current research in human development and the growing field of neurobiology, the underlying premise of *Pathways To Pleasure* is that mere knowledge of what's good for you doesn't ensure optimal living. While the book examines and explains in clear, everyday language the roles of psychology and brain chemistry in all pleasurable activities, we also devote considerable attention to the skills and attitudes necessary to deepen and intensify the abilities to relax, create, and enjoy. Intimate and caring relationships allow us to greet life's inevitable changes with celebration and grace.

PATHWAYS TO PLEASURE

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adventures of their own devising. Diverse as these activities quickly become, they all share a common bond. They all offer healthy pleasures, and that sensation of pleasure derives, in varying degrees of intensity, from natural changes in brain chemistry.

The role of brain chemistry in achieving even the simplest physical pleasures should not be underestimated. Self-induced dizziness, a universal behavior in toddlers, clearly suggests that one way to feel good is to feel different—by altering the chemistry of the brain. In *Intoxication: Life in Pursuit of Artificial Paradise*, Ronald Siegal points out that such attempts at “mind alteration” aren’t confined to the human race; a number of animals, including nonhuman primates, deliberately seek out various psychoactive substances found in nature—presumably so they can feel “different,” too. For example, elephants have been known to gorge themselves on fermented fruit to the point of intoxication, and certain species of birds often plummet out of trees after getting “stoned” on their favorite berries!

Of course, the human quest for pleasure doesn’t take quite such a ridiculous form—or does it? As young people mature, the more innocent varieties of childish play begin to lose their savor. During the transition from childhood to adolescence, spontaneous expression becomes inhibited as we begin to compare ourselves with others. We take on a facade, shaped by the expectations of community, family, and friends. The self-renewing pleasures associated with exercise, relaxation, art, nature, imaginative play—and even our everyday interactions with other people—gradually shift to the kind of vicarious satisfaction many of us take in following the accomplishments of media heroes such as athletes, movie stars, and television talk-show hosts. Our sources of personal pleasure become more “sophisticated” and, in many cases, more furtive: they include not only the joys of sex but the passive absorption of eating, shopping, and watching TV—and the potent effects of alcohol and drugs. One recent national survey indicates that by the time they have become high school seniors, 90 percent of our children have used alcohol, nearly 50 percent have smoked marijuana, and 40 percent have tried cocaine.

For many adolescents, this encounter with mind-altering chemicals will turn out to be merely a flirtation, an experiment. But for others, it will become a lifelong struggle with substance abuse, a struggle that is all too familiar to thousands of drug addicts and mil-

lions of alcoholics. The process of addiction defies simple explanation, just as it defies social expectation. When children are asked if they would choose to become alcoholics or drug addicts, they nearly always view the question as absurd: "Of course not!" Yet nearly 25 percent of our population suffers from one or more compulsive problem behaviors. How does the huge discrepancy between childhood idealism and adult desperation arise?

Certainly there has been no shortage of warnings about false paradise. Throughout the history of Western civilization, from the time of Hammurabi's Code to our own narcotics statutes, the laws and standards of human conduct have been riddled with injunctions against the use or abuse of certain substances. Even in ancient cultures, overindulgence in alcohol, sex, or food was frequently condemned. Our own society has a vast (if somewhat less than effective) tradition of seeking to battle addiction by controlling or banishing the substance in question. Just as the Puritans railed against tobacco and Carrie Nation sought to stem the flow of demon rum, so has the federal government sought to enlist the entire country in its "war" on crack cocaine.

The war on drugs, like most campaigns against addiction, seems to rise and fall depending on prevailing social attitudes. We move through cycles of tolerance and intolerance, establishing a national prohibition of alcohol and then repealing it, decriminalizing marijuana in one decade and recriminalizing it in the next. Ironically, at the moment the pendulum has swung far to the side of intolerance (or "zero tolerance") with respect to the drug problem. Nancy Reagan's campaign to get kids to "Just Say No" to drugs has become the battle cry for any number of causes: no drunk driving, no casual sex, no teenage pregnancy, no rap music. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the prevailing message our leaders are beaming to us is a big flashing NO, reminiscent of the kinds of signs one sees in subways and public buildings: NO—Eating/Smoking/Spitting/Alcoholic Beverages/Loitering/Ball Playing/or Dogs.

No doubt about it, we are prepped to avoid temptation ad infinitum. Why, then, do so many young people still become casualties in the war on drugs? Why do so many of them develop terrible dependencies on drugs, alcohol, or destructive forms of behavior (e.g., compulsive overeating) that dog them through adulthood and may actually shorten their lives?

Obviously, part of the answer is that knowledge alone—urging kids to “Just Say No” and providing detailed information on the dangers of smoking crack or drinking oneself into a stupor—isn’t sufficient to deter people from destructive pleasure-seeking. If knowledge were the key ingredient, then people who drive cars would always wear seatbelts, newfound lovers would insist that their partners get tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) before going to bed with them, and intravenous drug users would never share needles. Health information is effective only when received by a person fully equipped with what might be described as the emotional and behavioral “competencies” to act on that knowledge. Unfortunately, many people don’t seem to develop such competencies, except through bitter experience, if at all.

This book offers a connoisseur’s approach to enhancing pleasure in everyday life—without drugs, harmful addictive behaviors, or simplistic “recipes for feeling good” (e.g., get aerobic, meditate, eat your oat bran). Drawing on current research in developmental and self psychology, personal accounts of people who have made contact with their “creative spirit,” and the growing field of brain chemistry (five-year-old Tasha recently told a group of adults that “the brain works the body, and it works itself, too”), this volume presents a guide to becoming meaningfully engaged in one’s unique proclivities for learning, productivity, and self-expression while maintaining a steady fix on personal harmony and sense of purpose through the lifespan.

Alan Dumas, feature writer for the *Rocky Mountain News*, was given the assignment to write about people who are just ordinary, yet interesting in their personal means to maintain well-being through unique forms of self-expression. This book is written for readers who, like Dumas’s interviewees, are seeking a greater sense of fulfillment throughout their lives, but are not necessarily committed to becoming recognized for their extraordinary talents or physical abilities. In fact, a central lesson from his inquiry into the lives of more than 250 “creative spirits” is to stop thinking about artistic expression in terms of gift or talent. Whether the product of our efforts is “good” or not is a subjective judgment, quite independent of the genuine fulfillment resulting from self-expression. According to Dumas,

just about anybody who has the will to do so, and the confidence in themselves to do so, can enter into the creative process and be enriched by it. It is not something that is closed off to the talented or the beautiful or the powerful or the privileged. There are homeless people who are expressing themselves in a way that is very satisfying to them. There are all kinds of different people—old and young, rich and poor—nothing can stop the creative process when someone is determined to enter it.

Dumas found that people who are able to derive fulfillment from self-expression are not limited by traditional thinking about what constitutes a creative act—such as writing a book or playing a musical instrument. Some have discovered their creative centers privately, while others have found help in groups or organizations. A number have been thrust into the creative journey by personal crises, when dramatic changes such as a divorce, loss of a loved one, or retirement forced them to reconsider and restructure their patterns of existence, while others have simply started the creative process, without any apparent drama in their lives. Whatever the origin, the underlying thoughts and feelings are quite universal:

- I need to change my life.
- I want to uncover hidden feelings.
- There's something I want to contribute that is going unexpressed.

Consider Cindy Parker, who describes herself as a woman typical of her generation. At thirty-six, she has been married and divorced, is raising a teenage daughter, works as a secretary, and is not particularly well read. But she has always loved to write poetry and has dreamed of running her own business. She emerged from the mist of pure fantasy by combining her own romantic trials, her affinity for poetry, and her entrepreneurial drive. For the past four years, Parker has spent most of her spare time writing love poems for those too shy or uninspired to do so for themselves. Her special twist is that she doesn't strive to write good poetry; rather, she wants to write poetry that sounds like you or I (or whoever the client) composed it. She purposefully wrote this very ineloquent verse for a man who wanted something written for his wife's anniversary: