

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ATW-16

Getting High and Staying There

Tucson, Arizona

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

I wrote the following article as an introduction to THE BOOK OF HIGHS by Edward Rosenfeld, to be published in late June of this year by Quadrangle Books. I hope it will be of interest to readers of Institute newsletters.

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Altered states of consciousness have become so respectable in the past few years that they are now known simply as ASC's, a sure sign that they are in fashion among scientists. Conferences on them are proliferating, (one took place recently at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.), and month by month ASC's carve out a bigger niche in the medical literature. But despite the accumulation of scientific data, we still do not know what it is to be high or what it means that we seek out that state so persistently.

The desire to have peak experiences, to transcend the limitations of ordinary consciousness, operates in all of us. It is so basic that it looks like a drive we are born with. Almost as soon as infants learn to sit up they begin to rock themselves into highs. Later, as young children, they learn to whirl into other states of awareness or hyperventilate out of ordinary reality. Still later they discover drugs.

The present book describes a great many techniques of

getting high, none of them making use of drugs. There has been much talk lately of alternatives to drugs. The drug problem would go away, possibly, if we could teach people other methods to achieve highs. This idea touches on several issues that are not simple. For example, what is wrong with drugs? They certainly work for many persons, and if used with the respect and care they demand, are no more dangerous than many things in common use in our society.

One objection to drug-induced highs is merely puritanical: it is too easy to get pleasure, let alone religious ecstasy, by swallowing a pill. One ought to work or suffer for that reward. I doubt that any drug user will be convinced by such an argument, especially if his pills do the trick for him. A more convincing argument (because it is the experience of many users) is that drugs sometimes do not do the trick. Sometimes they trigger panic states and depressions instead of highs. One can take steps to ensure that a drug experience will be good, but there is always a possibility that unforeseen factors will supervene. The trouble is that the drug, itself, does not contain the experience it triggers. Highs come from within the individual; they are simply released (or not) by the drug, which always acts in combination with expectations and environment -- set and setting.

Drugs reinforce the illusion that highs come from external, material things when, in fact, they come from the human nervous system. The practical consequence of this illusion-making tendency is that users find it hard to maintain their highs: one always has to come down after a drug high, and the down can be as intense as the up. The user who does not understand this aspect of drugs may become dependent on them because the easiest way to get out of a low following a high seems to be to take another dose of the drug.

I make no distinction between legal and illegal drugs here. Coffee, an innocent "beverage" in the eyes of many persons, is as dependence-producing as any illegal drug in just this way: the

stimulation it provides is offset later by lethargy and mental clouding, usually in the morning. In full-blown coffee addiction a person cannot get going in the morning without his drug, and the more he consumes the more his need increases.

Moreover, the more regularly one uses a drug to get high, the less effective it becomes. Many marihuana smokers find that their highs diminish in intensity the more frequently they smoke; chain smokers of the weed do not get high at all. And users of psychedelics, heroin, and amphetamines often look back upon their earliest experiences with the drugs as the most pleasurable.

The value of drugs is their ability to trigger important states of consciousness. People who grow up in our materialistic culture may need a drug experience to show them that other modes of consciousness exist. Very likely, many persons would not be interested in meditation or spiritual matters today if they had not glimpsed the reality of such things through drug-triggered highs. The problem is that drugs cannot be used regularly without losing their effectiveness. They do not maintain highs.

And so there is much searching for other ways of getting high and staying there. Some people say they are looking for more natural methods. But it is difficult to say just what is natural and what is not. Firewalking as practiced in northern Greece may be a terrific high. It is also dangerous when not done correctly; at least, those who try it without proper preparation may wind up with badly burned feet. Is it more or less natural than smoking marihuana? Would parents be any happier seeing their children get high by walking over live coals instead of using drugs?

In fact, the distinction between drug and non-drug methods of getting high might not be very useful because it is just another product of our current national obsession with drugs. Any technique making use of something material or external to the individual will tend to produce dependence, will tend to lose its effectiveness over time, and will limit one's freedom to get high.

Any method requiring things, for example, ties a person to his things -- whether they be glowing coals, biofeedback machines, or tabs of LSD. A better distinction would be between methods that one can use by oneself anytime, anywhere and methods that require something else. The person who can get high by himself is at a great advantage over one who requires something else.

Even if we could convert most of the drug takers in our country to meditators, chanters, or whirling dervishes, I am not certain we would end the dissensions. I think that many people who seem to be anti-drug would be suspicious of any methods used to get out of ordinary awareness. Meditation, for instance, despite all the support of orthodox religion, is widely regarded as an avenue to passive withdrawal from the world and would doubtless stir up much opposition if it were practiced openly on a larger scale. To the rational, straight side of our consciousness, the search for better highs may look like simple hedonism and a shirking of all responsibility.

No doubt, some persons are just out for new thrills and pleasures. But the drive to get high that appears in earliest infancy cannot be there for no reason at all; it is too basic a need. And many non-ordinary experiences are not pleasurable -- they are powerful, different, strange, even terrifying. Still, we call them "highs" because they seem fraught with positive potential and the capacity to change us for the better.

If we look over an extensive catalogue of methods for getting high, one common trait stands out: they all are techniques of focusing awareness, of shaking us out of habitual modes of perception and getting us to concentrate on something, whether a sound, a sight, an unusual sensation. Possibly, what we call a high is simply the experience of focused consciousness, even if the focus is on something we would normally consider painful or unpleasant. And possibly, when our ordinary consciousness is focused on anything, we can become aware of what is ordinarily

unconsciously perceived -- our internal organs, for example, or other people's minds, or even things beyond ordinary time and space.

Concentration is the key. In "normal" states of mind our conscious energies are scattered. Our attention wanders aimlessly from thought to thought to external sensations to internal sensations to the past to the future to snatches of tunes to hopes and fears to images and objects. Nearly all systems of meditation require preliminary practice at concentration, at stilling the restlessness of the observing mind. Meditation is nothing more than directed concentration. Concentration is power.


Sometimes we enter states of concentration spontaneously without making any efforts. An intensely pleasurable, painful, or unusual stimulus can draw our single-minded attention so completely that we simply find ourselves in an altered state of consciousness. All of us have the capacity to enter these states, and all of us probably spend time in them even if we are not aware of it. And the states are natural whether the means used to achieve them are peculiar or not. It is natural to be high and natural to want to be high.

In fact, being high might be the most natural condition of all. The euphoria of a state of focused awareness is almost always accompanied by a sense that it is the way things are "supposed to be." Instead of learning to get high, we may just have to unlearn not being high. By ridding ourselves of the learned habits of worrying, fearing, and scattering mental energy, we get down to that core feeling of joyful transcendence that feels like a basic state of the human nervous system.

Far from leading to withdrawal from the world, self-reliant methods of getting high can make us better able to function in ordinary reality. The better we get at getting high and staying there, the more we integrate the conscious and unconscious spheres of our mental life. This integration is the key to wholeness of

body and mind. We are caught up in a fever of experimentation with methods of changing consciousness, much of it generated by the young. There will be much wasted effort, some casualties. But out of it all will come a generation that will know how to use its consciousness more and more fully -- a generation that can build a truly high society.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'A' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'l'.

Andrew T. Weil

Received in New York on March 29, 1973