

Pleasure

A Creative Approach to Life

FOREWORD

When I was first asked to write a foreword for my father's book, "Pleasure: A Creative Approach to Life," I thought it would be easy. After all, the book was dedicated to me, and the pets in the house; the dogs, cat, and parrot. Being raised by, and growing up with Alexander and Leslie Lowen, I understand Bioenergetics intuitively, and intellectually. It is suffused in my being. Anyone who knew Al Lowen knows that he practiced what he preached. He lived a "bioenergetic" life, and it rubbed off on me.

Yet, thinking through the subject, pleasure, I found it difficult to write. Not only is it principally subjective, it is so much more subtle than other feeling states, like fear, depression, anxiety, or joy; and, pleasure is experienced in so many ways: obviously in sex, success, and recreation for most people, but also in work, eating, and creativity; complicated further by the fact that what is pleasurable to some, is painful to others.

In truth, I also find it difficult to write because I am no expert on "pleasure," academically or personally. Although I feel I have had my share of pleasure in my life, I often find it elusive, and at times challenging. Like most of us, I experience a high degree of pleasure in exciting recreational physical activities, skiing and sailing for example. Also, sexual activity is often a reliable source of pleasure, as are varieties of social interactions. Of course, if the conditions, circumstances, or relationships are poor, pain results, not pleasure.

More subtly, excitement is not necessary to experience pleasure. Reading a book, watching a video or movie, working in the garden, or playing with children or pets, enjoying good food, the company of friends, music, art, dance and theatre are all sources of pleasure for people.

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Also subtle, is the pleasure derived from work. Unfortunately, most people derive little pleasure from their jobs. On the other hand, for many, career and work is a great source of pleasure. It is not simple to understand the nature of their experience of that feeling state. The “pleasure” people gain from their work may be healthy if it is integrated into a whole life, balanced by other pursuits. But if work dominates one’s life, it is an addiction: a substitution of a seeming pleasure for life’s real pleasures, while degrading one’s real pleasures as an attempt to avoid a painful or feared reality.

Another source of pleasure is derived from achievement, success, fame, and/or the acquisition of wealth, status, or influence and power. Clearly different from the excitement of physical activity, or the viscerally calming and pleasing creative activities of play and work, the pleasure associated with status or wealth is an ego-gratification. Unlike other sources of pleasure originating from the body, the pleasure from success, winning, and acquisition is derived from the realm of ideas and ideals of the mind. It may have a bodily affect, like when one receives a big promotion creating bodily excitement. Conversely, a severe drop in one’s financial fortunes may cause fear, anxiety, irritability and sleeplessness, even without any actual impact on one’s lifestyle.

Everyone knows what “pleasure” is. It is like happiness, and fun, and creativity. It is familiar, like an old worn shirt, comfortable and unremarkable. Pleasure is something we all feel we know about, like sex and breathing, but in fact, we know very little. As familiar as we are with pleasure, and as much as we like the idea of pleasure, in reality too many people’s lives are governed by power, not pleasure. I found pleasure was not an easy subject to capture! I had to re-read the book!

If asked “what is the opposite of pleasure?”...I suspect most would answer that pain is the opposite of pleasure. However, Alexander Lowen shows that power is the anti-thesis of pleasure. Pain, like pleasure, is a feeling state in the spectrum between agony and ecstasy. Except for relatively few unfortunate individuals, no one seeks out pain unless it serves to gain pleasure or power in the future.

Most people are motivated to seek pleasure, and/or acquire power, or protection from power. If the seeking and acquisition of power and wealth enhances one's self, expanding one's freedom and security, power and wealth may be used constructively and creatively. If on the other hand, power, wealth and status are substitutes for one's self, that is, if one is identified with one's power, wealth, and status, then it serves only to enable one to stand out in the crowd as a "mass individual," not a true individual standing apart from the crowd.

While pleasure and power are not necessarily mutually exclusive, for those who substitute the pursuit of power for the pursuit of pleasure and happiness, Lowen shows how and why pleasure is so elusive, and why there is so much more power and pain than pleasure in this 21st Century.

When power is substituted for pleasure, and the ego replaces the self, power and wealth become destructive. The pleasure derived from one's power and wealth is an ego gratification, a "sugar high" evaporating like a dream. Unlasting and unfulfilling, the acquisition and exercise of power is repeated over and over again as a futile attempt to compensate for insecurity, emptiness of self, and proof of superiority.... all driven by a lack of pleasure.

In the current state of affairs, where power and money have become ends in themselves, and despite unprecedented power and wealth, yet never enough for many individuals, social and environmental insecurity and stress are also unprecedented. In my mind, this is evidence that the extremely powerful and wealthy leaders of business and government have substituted ego, power, and ego-gratification for self, self-expression, and pleasure. A condition commonly known as "greed," it imperils us all.

I am proud that my father's book continues to be relevant and fresh after more than 40 years in publication. With its focus on the human body and psychology, it is timeless and classic. The work of my father's mentor Wilhelm Reich, and the work of my father have not been fully explored and utilized. Even in the field of neurophysiology,

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where great knowledge has been gained in just the past few years, Reich and Lowen recognized decades ago the association of the sympathetic autonomic system with contraction, and the parasympathetic system with expansion...fundamental to the pulsatory nature of life, yet unrecognized even today.

A practical problem solver and psychiatrist, Al Lowen's "Pleasure: A Creative Approach to Life" offers understanding, exercise, and clinical examples to enable one to learn the factors that restrict and obstruct one's capacity for pleasure, how to expand one's experience of pleasure, and gain more of one's self for oneself. It is through the feeling connection with one's body that one's self is found. It is the connection with the body that aligns the ego with the unconscious, the autonomic body functions, nature and all living things. It is the source for limitless creativity beyond imagination, where, in the words of the song, there are no problems, only solutions.

In contrast, if the self is identified with the ego, motivated by fears and desires it doesn't understand, and limited in its narrow conscious awareness, it is capable only of seeking the recognition of others by any means available, often life-negating, destructive, and exploitive...not constructive, creative, and life enhancing.

From you the reader, and the therapist helping people, to the student of psychology, sociology, and/or political science, this study covers the subject of pleasure and creativity to help you, an individual, to live more freely and feel more fully; and, to help you, me, and we to live together with greater alignment, and less conflict, greed, and psychologically challenged leaders.

It is fascinating and counter-intuitive, but you cannot study pleasure without learning about power.

I believe you will enjoy my father's work "Pleasure: A Creative Approach to Life." It is indeed a pleasure to read!

*Frederic Lowen
September, 2012
Vermont, USA*

PREFACE

But ye, unfallen sons of heavenly duty,
Rejoice ye in the rich and living beauty:
The ceaseless flux which living works and flows
Envelope ye in bonds of love and grace;
And what in shifting seeming wavering shows,
Hold fast to it in thought's secure embrace.

The Lord's words in Goethe's *Faust*¹

Pleasure is not within the province of man to command or control. It is, in Goethe's opinion, God's gift to those who are identified with life and rejoice in its splendor and beauty. In turn, life endows them with love and grace. But God admonishes them, his unfallen sons and true believers: Though pleasure is ephemeral and insubstantial, hold fast to it in your mind, for it contains the meaning of life.

For most human beings, however, pleasure is a word that evokes mixed feelings. On one hand, it is associated in our minds with the idea of "good." Pleasurable sensations feel good, food that gives us pleasure tastes good, and a book that is a pleasure to read is said to be a good book. Yet most people would regard a life devoted to pleasure as a waste. Our positive reaction to the word is often hedged with misgivings. We fear that pleasure can lead a person into dangerous paths, make him forget his duties and obligations, and even corrupt his spirit if it is not controlled. To some people it has a lascivious

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connotation. Pleasure, especially carnal pleasure, has always been considered the main temptation of the devil. The Calvinists regarded most pleasures as sinful.

Each person in our culture shares these misgivings about pleasure. Modern culture is more ego-oriented than body-oriented, with the result that power has become the primary value, while pleasure is reduced to the position of a secondary value. Modern man's ambition is to master the world and command the self. At the same time, he is never free from the fear that this cannot be done, nor from the doubt whether it would be to his good if it could. Since pleasure, however, is the sustaining and creative force in his personality, his hope (or illusion) is that the achievement of these objectives will make a life of pleasure possible. Thus, he is driven by his ego to pursue goals which promise pleasure but demand a denial of pleasure. The situation of modern man is similar to that of Faust, who sold his soul to Mephistopheles for a promise that could not be redeemed. Though the promise of pleasure is the temptation of the devil, pleasure itself is not within the devil's power to give.

The Faustian story is no less significant today than it was in Goethe's time. As Bertram Jessup points out in the preface to his translation of Faust,² "Between the magic of the sixteenth century and the science of the twentieth there is no break in aspiration or intention to dominate and control life. If anything its significance has greatly increased with the decline of the moral authority of an omnipotent God." Elias Canetti says, "Man has stolen his own God."³ He has gained the power to doom and destroy, a power that was formerly the prerogative of a punishing Deity. With seemingly unlimited power and without a restraining force, what will prevent man from destroying himself?

We must realize that we are all, like Dr. Faust, ready to accept the devil's inducements. The devil is in each one of us in the form of an ego that promises the fulfillment of desire on condition that we become subservient to its striving to dominate. The domination of

the personality by the ego is a diabolical perversion of the nature of man. The ego was never intended to be the master of the body, but its loyal and obedient servant. The body, as opposed to the ego, desires pleasure, not power. Bodily pleasure is the source from which all our good feelings and good thinking stems. If the bodily pleasure of an individual is destroyed, he becomes an angry, frustrated, and hateful person. His thinking becomes distorted, and his creative potential is lost. He develops self-destructive attitudes.

Pleasure is the creative force in life. It is the only force strong enough to oppose the potential destructiveness of power. Many people believe that this role belongs to love. But if love is to be more than a word, it must rest on the experience of pleasure. In this book I shall show how the experience of pleasure or pain determines our emotions, our thinking, and our behavior. I will discuss the psychology and the biology of pleasure and explore its roots in the body, in nature, and in the universe. We will then understand that pleasure is the key to a creative life.