

LIVELY UP YOURSELF

WAYS OF TROPICAL BEING

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Why do you dance?

You needn't necessarily jump in joyful ecstasy like the steelband supporters in the photo above. You don't have to trip the light fantastic. If you nod your head or snap your fingers or shake your booty, any movin' to the groovin', any tappin' your feet to a rappin' beat, any guitar played in thin air to the one that you hear, in my books you're dancin'.

As a matter of fact, let's cast the net wider - all motions you might make to music, marching to a different drum, working on the chain gang or rowing to a shanty.

Already I can see any number of neuroscientists raising their hands, eager to list the chemicals, dopamine and oxytocin and endorphins, that purportedly "flood" your brain to produce pleasurable feelings once you begin to wine down low. It's the same list of chemicals they trot out to explain anything that gives you a rise, from solving the cryptic crossword to haulin' ass down the highway on a hog with the wind in your face; from doom scrolling social media to walking on the wild side; from sweating in the gym to smoking crack in a dark alley to eating a curried shrimp roti or making love - dopamine all the way down.

An explanation that explains everything doesn't distinguish anything and therefore explains nothing, so let's put that aside and start at the very beginning.

We dance because it gives us pleasure. Music elevates us into a state of happiness. We dance because it brings us joy.

Each of those reasons reveals a different aspect of being human. Let's unpack them one by one, starting with pleasure, the shape-shifter - an emotion evoked by a wide range of very different stimuli both physical and mental. Dancing is only one of very many such stimulants.

Pleasure-generating activities vary according to a society's culture, history and even the individual enjoying them. However, underneath their idiosyncratic and myriad manifestations flow universal functions as fundamental as those of eating, resting, surrounding yourself with friends, having sex and making music. We evolved to enjoy those activities because they are important to our flourishing as individuals, as communities, as a species and - radical thought - as nodes of interconnection on a living planet.

Pleasure and pain are biological opposites, pleasure the carrot and pain the stick and together they propel us onward. Dancing, for instance, leverages the pleasures of physical closeness and moving together that in turn harken back to the primal pleasure of connection that you experienced as an infant with your caregiver - the pleasures of being safe, loved, not alone in this world.

(Note that even if it's just you in the shower singing and dancing, you still experience a deep connection - to the music itself and to humanity in an abstract but no less real level. For instance, grooving to a love song you can feel gloriously in love, even if in real life you're single because the music leavens the emotion.)

Dancing, even alone, manifests emotions beyond words, such as the display of sexual fitness in the language of embodiment. Alas, pleasure is easily manipulated, often for commercial or exploitative purposes and to generally less beneficent ends. Physical synchronicity generates emotional synchronicity, which builds tight bonds, which is the reason soldiers are made to march together - not because it directly makes them better fighters.

"Pleasure has a constant tendency to exceed its functional purpose, to not know its place," said Berger. That is, it becomes playfully gratuitous. It transcends biological needs. Animals grooming one another, puppies chasing each other, children romping, friends liming, lovers cuddling, they all exhibit more pleasure than when eating. As Johan Huizinga wrote, "Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing."

The gratuitous pleasure of play transforms sex, for instance, into lovemaking.

There are pleasures and pleasures. The reciprocal pleasures that cannot be bought or sold - such as the pleasures of discovery and understanding - are more enriching and engaged than others. The pleasures of bonding embraces connections, which in turn enrich the pleasures of the senses that are especially vital to a social species. I enjoy a meal or a movie, a painting or a dance, much more when it's shared with others. Indeed, if I prepare an especially tasty meal, it becomes almost irritating to

not share it. Contrariwise, the pleasure of conversation with friends is enhanced with more sensuous pleasures such as food.

Note that I do not argue that the pleasures of dance derives mainly from the synchronizing the body and the mind. That only occurs in highly individualistic cultures. The pleasures of dance are more derived from the joy of communion with a community.

Pleasure can overflow into happiness. Happiness is the mood generated by the extension of pleasure beyond its original stimulus. It is pleasure's afterglow. For instance, dancing conjoins you to others which morphs into happiness. If you're in pain it can alleviate your pain and lift your mood, whether caused by minor discomforts or severe physical or emotional suffering, and replace them with pleasure and by extension happiness. That is how a generalized pleasure overflows its functional purpose into happiness.

Joy overlaps with happiness too, sometimes. Not always but sometimes, especially in our privileged, modern lives, we experience both happiness and joy simultaneously. Then - the link with dance - we can literally jump for joy. Consequently they are often thought to be one and the same. They aren't, though. They are very different. Pleasure and happiness can come from without, from what we get - the gift, the reward, the compliment.

Unlike pleasure and the happiness based on it, joy emerges from within, from gratitude, meaningfulness, spirituality and connection. It is outwardly directed towards giving rather than receiving. Thus it is not susceptible, as is pleasure, to commercial exploitation.

That's why joy is integral to many religions. It provides solace and comfort in adversity; and it enjoins us to gratitude in times of abundance and inoculates us against entitlement. My paternal family is deeply religious in the best, spiritual way. At meals, before digging in, they offer a prayer known as grace before meals. Emotionally, I feel the grace after a good meal, however, when a contentment envelops me like a state of generalized well-being, a feeling that all's well in heaven and hell. Perhaps, instead of thanking the Lord for our food, rather than recognizing a god who put us in charge of everything, we could extend our gratitude to the animal or - even more radical, the plant - that sacrificed its life for our sustenance.

Happiness passes quickly. It's a mood that has to be regularly renewed. Joy, on the other hand, is an outlook on life. It is long-lasting, regardless of circumstances.

"The most singular difference between happiness and joy," thought J.D. Salinger, "is that happiness is a solid and joy a liquid."

As a solid happiness doesn't square with adversity. It recoils from and is negated by pain and suffering, grief and sadness. Joy, on the other hand, can co-exist with those emotions without compartmentalizing them. The greater my grief at the death of my friend Troppy, the greater my gratitude and joy for having known him.

The essential difference is dramatically illustrated in neurologist Oliver Sacks' memoir *A Leg To Stand On*, where he recalls a fall that smashed his knee and broke his hip atop a remote mountain. Unable to walk, he slithered downhill on his bottom in excruciating pain for hours, racing the onset

of night when he would surely freeze to death. Wading across a deep stream completely exhausted him, leaving him defeated and dying on its bank. Unable to continue he began to sing.

Before crossing the stream, I had muscled myself along – moving by main force, with my very strong arms. Now, so to speak, I was musicked along. I did not contrive this. It happened to me. I fell into a rhythm, guided by a sort of marching or rowing song, sometimes the Volga Boatmen's Song, sometimes a monotonous chant of my own... I got into the music, got into the swing, and this ensured that my tempo was right. I found myself perfectly co-ordinated by the rhythm – or perhaps sub-ordinated would be a better term: the musical beat was generated within me, and all my muscles responded obediently...

Somehow, with this 'music', it felt much less like a grim anxious struggle. There was even a certain primitive exuberance... And with all this, and perhaps other things, I found my internal weather was most happily changed... I had no room now for this fear, or for any other fear, because I was filled to the brim with music... With this playing, the musicality of my motion, I myself became the music.. A creature of muscle, motion and music, all inseparable and in unison with each other.

Sacks' descent with a slight stretch of the imagination might be considered akin to dancing. After all, he was moving to the music. Indeed, as he put it, he *became the music, a creature of muscle, motion and music*. No way, however, could you think he was a happy camper. There was clearly no pleasure and no happiness about his musicking. What then was the "certain primitive exuberance" that he experienced during his travail? To me that is perfectly encapsulated by Stevie Wonder's phrase "the joy inside my tears". Sacks discovered that joy can endure alongside extreme unhappiness and displeasure with the assistance of music and dance.

Oliver Sacks was one man whose life was saved at a unique moment on a particular day in 1974 through the joy he discovered in music. Thereafter musical joyfulness would pervade his life's work. Later, in *Awakenings*, Sacks wrote: "*The power of music to integrate and cure, to liberate the Parkinsonian and give him freedom while it lasts ('You are the music/while the music lasts', T.S. Eliot), is quite fundamental, and seen in every patient.*"

Extend Sacks' experience to, say, between thirteen and twenty million men, women and children and their descendants, and have it last for not a few hours but all day every day of their entire lives for generations that fill four centuries. Then it is both inevitable and miraculous that the African diaspora in the Americas created the world's greatest musical culture of joy inside their tears. It's what sustained our ancestors' souls to endure their travail without losing the ability to laugh and to love and, eventually, given the chance, to liberate their tormentors.

I asked people years ago when I first entered the rabbit hole, Why do you dance? One woman replied with the clarity of a mystic revelation: To avoid death.