

In Defense of Intoxication:
How Our Natural Desire for Altered States Fuels the Creative Process

By

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*“Wisdom hath builded her house. Come and enjoy
my bread and wine which I have mixed for you.”
Proverbs 9:1 and 5*

Word Count: 2109

My fourteen-month-old daughter loves to swing. I take her down to the playground near our house, slot her little legs into the safety seat, position her hands on the chain, give her a dramatic count down as I lift the swing upwards, then, with her eyes wide with anticipation, *blast off!*, I let the swing go and she squeals with delight.

When we first started several months ago, I proceeded with caution, making sure she felt safe and that her large head atop her little neck wasn't being jerked around. As the months wore on, though, I began pushing her higher and higher, egged on by her obvious enjoyment. Sometimes it seemed like I might be pushing her too hard. The swing would start to wobble, her eyes would roll back in her head, and she would go silent. As her father, who wants nothing more than for her to thrive and feel loved and protected, I would immediately slow the pace and ask if she was OK. Startlingly enough, she would look me in the eye, remove her hands from the chain, and vigorously touch her finger tips together in front of her chest, sign language for “more!”

What is that my daughter likes so much about the swing, and not just the peaceful back and forth motion but those moments where the swing twists and jerks a bit, the moments where things get a little out of control? Is it a break from her ordinary routine of being coddled by her

loving parents? Is it a chance to feel the joy of motion months before she can walk on her own? Or is there something happening which is far more profound, something that points to more fundamental drives occurring in all of us?

In order to understand the experience of my daughter, we must delve into a very basic, yet somewhat ill reputed desire that affects us all: intoxication. The word intoxication has two distinct yet interrelated meanings. On the one hand, it implies inebriation: the impairment of ordinary physical and mental functions, such as fine and gross motor skills and compromises to our ability to think rationally, qualities that we disdainfully associate with drunkards and misfits. On the other hand, intoxication is associated with exhilaration, awe, the coveted act of falling in love, even spiritual and religious transcendence. Intoxication in this latter sense isn't reserved for the seemingly broken and maladjusted, but for the visionaries, innovators, poets, and mystics, those celebrated human catalyst stirring the pot of human progress.

Despite intoxication's ambiguous place out in society and within the needles of our own internal moral compasses, what's even more fascinating is how fundamental it is to the fabric of our existence. According to UCLA psychopharmacologist, Ronald Siegel, intoxication is known as "the fourth drive" after our more well known drives of thirst, hunger, and sex. As we all are well aware, thirst and hunger ensure that we gather enough water and calories to fulfill our most basic metabolic functions. Sex propagates our species into the future. But how might intoxication serve us, especially when it impairs our ability to do other basic things, such as walking a straight line, maintaining our reason, or, hugely important for us modern westerners, operating a motor vehicle?

In order to understand Siegel's assertion, we need to look at the rare plasticity of the human mind, as well as humankind's most defining feature: conscious self-awareness.

First off, all creatures, indeed all things have consciousness. Atoms have “social” relationships with other atoms that allow them to combine in some ways and not others. From the reclusive noble gasses such as helium and argon that keep entirely to themselves to the social mavens such as carbon and its ability to combine with other atoms in seemingly infinite ways, atoms and their resulting molecules have a rudimentary awareness of what they can and cannot do. Single-celled organisms possess consciousness, navigating the world through more sophisticated forms of attraction and repulsion. With insects and animals, the interactions of consciousness and self awareness, such as roles inside colonies and pecking orders within pack animals, become increasingly complex.

But for all of the above examples, consciousness is more or less fixed, ruled by the laws of nature and the slow pace of evolution.

Human consciousness, however, is not inherently fixed. It is unique among all the other known organisms in that not only do we have consciousness, our consciousness is aware of itself, which allows for a cognitive freedom that is different from most other creatures. Our brain, for example, is not a single “black box” of an organ issuing commands to the rest of the body. It is a multifaceted *universe* that reflects the 14 billion year evolution of our own universe. From molecular building blocks forming the intricate neural pathways to the strange convolutions visible to the naked eye, from the primitive reptilian brain stem surrounded by a paleo-mammalian cortex, with the outermost neo-cortex surrounding that—our brains reflect both the history of evolution of life on our planet and its culmination, all in one squishy, grape fruit-sized organ.

Still, despite these incredible capacities, most of us are still driven by habitual patterns—those unexamined, long-standing ruts of behavior that keep us doing the same things over and

over. For humans, however, especially little humans such my daughter, humans as yet unimpeded by thoughts of how they should or should not behave, with each new ability gained, there is also the accompanying desire to test it, to engage it in different ways. For example, she recently started walking, which involves balance and coordination. But soon thereafter, she learned how to spin, an ability which once she becomes dizzy, compromises her ability to stand upright. The combination of first balancing, then spinning and falling down, gives her *perspective*; it allows her in her own playful way to appreciate the value of both. Experientially, she knows what to avoid if she intends to stay upright and also what to do if standing upright for some reason becomes boring.

These cycles of first establishing one's footing, then falling down for one reason or another have driven the progression of human kind since the beginning. Over the last several hundred thousand years on the planet, with particular emphasis on the last two thousand years, and, even more dramatically, the last 200 years, human beings have made staggering changes their environments, their means of organizing their cities and governing bodies, indeed to themselves in the form of medical and technological advances.

In other words, we haven't been entirely driven by habit: there is a mechanism in place that keeps ushering us on to new, and, despite innumerable noteworthy hiccups, more and more sophisticated ways of understandings both ourselves and the world in which we live. That mechanism, I believe, is intoxication. In this respect, intoxication is no different than its more universally celebrated cousin, insight, which is the spark of creative innovation.

How then does it work? How does intoxication serve creative innovation?

As its two main definitions imply, intoxication compromises, or suspends certain abilities that we rely upon habitually so that shier insights and abilities can come to the foreground.

Anyone learning a second language, for example, will tell you that they often speak better, more fluidly, with a few sips of alcohol than they do when they are trying to communicate using the reasoning mind alone. Like a well placed stop light along a busy street, intoxication can skillfully stop the prevalent flow of traffic, so the other, more quiet streets of consciousness, can allow their passengers a bit of travel time.

Like the other basic drives, we shouldn't strive to be intoxicated all the time, nor to use it as a means of escape. We are all well aware of those writers, artists, and musicians, even members of our own family that have been undone by their inability to keep their desire for intoxication in check. Nor should we be striving to recreate the mass stupor portrayed in Huxley's *Brave New World*, nor the pain and desperation of the local Skid Row. For intoxication to be a powerful agent of self discovery and human progression, it needs to be balanced with our ability to reason, to make clear, level headed decisions, to delay gratification, and to think broadly, to recall our experiences in the past, to anticipate the future, and to consider the effects of our actions on other, including the natural world.

But to treat intoxication and the drive to be intoxicated as the bastard child of our otherwise civilized and well-behaved species is also preposterous. Intoxication is both a catalyst that draws our interest in novel directions and gives us the ability to appreciate what is right in front of us with fresh perspective. The celebrated Golden Gate Bridge, for example, was born out of its chief engineer's traumatizing concussion. Our current understanding of the cause of historic ice ages was born out of another's night of wine fueled revelry. Many of the most celebrated religious come from their most pivotal figures enduring hardship, exposure, and near starvation in inhospitable places, all of which create feeling of intoxication. The mouse, that

clever anatomical interface between the user and her computer, a device that most of us use every day, was conceived on a strong hit of acid.

It is my belief that intoxication is the biological drive that enhances the plasticity of the brain itself. By its very nature, intoxication kicks us out of our ability to conduct business as usual, leaving us impaired to certain things, but opening us up to fresh ways of seeing the world. Indeed, conscious self-awareness may have been a sort of mind mutation resulting from early primates mistakenly ingesting strongly psychoactive substance while foraging in the forest floor.

At its worst, our desire for intoxication, our submitting to intoxication, and our subsequent guilt or regret creates individuals with, Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde type personalities, one part that is blandly conformist, the other that is monstrous and out of control. We see this type of person all around, even in ourselves, first indulging our natural desires for intoxication, then berating ourselves for being impaired and temporarily unproductive. Is intoxication really a disservice to us? Is it a crime against society? For the US justice system, the answer seems to be an emphatic yes: half of the Federal Prison population is made up of inmates incarcerated on drug related violations.

On the other hand, if we embrace intoxication as a natural part of our body-mind makeup, we can utilize those miraculous states as catalysts for our own growth, creativity, and full-person integration. In this way, we don't look at intoxication as simply "checking out", "taking a load off", or "blowing off steam". We celebrate it for what it is: our very intelligent body, our unceasing heart, and our powerful, yet habit prone minds asking us to take a breather from our own, tired, world view.

Between the extremes of hollowed-eye vagrants destroying themselves for their next desperate fix and white knuckled puritans hiding behind walls of good and evil, there is a vast

space for curious, intelligent, and conscientious humans to explore. Only some of the territory can be viewed, for lack of a better word, sober.

So the next time you find the urge to feel your rhythmic swing begin to twist and shake, the next time you go weary of wading a straight line from one pre planned appointment to the next, honor that voice that desires to derail you, that voice that desires to set you astray. Take your phone off the hook, put your day planner in the drawer, leave the car in the garage, and unlatch the watch on your wrist. Cozy on up to your own well-to-do self running aground on the rocky shores of the unknown. Feel your ship splinter and the masthead fall into the sea. Drown for a spell; then resurface.

We are not human because we are instinctual. We are not human because we are omnipotent. We are human because we are able to experience the world in novel ways—a world that is sometimes stable, a world that sometimes heaves and buckles—and adapt accordingly. By submitting to those experiences and through our willingness to learn from them, we allow them to change our orientation, push us forth in new, enlivening directions, and to guide us deeper and deeper into the awesome mystery that surrounds us.

In this light, intoxication, when seen for what it really is, can be a wise teacher and a valued friend during our life-long journey.