

INTRODUCTION: METABOLIC VOYAGER

It was an old bread van that had slid comfortably into being a mobile home. One winter in the 1970s it began appearing around the ski resort of Mammoth. Those were simpler times; I did my taxes that year right on the bar at the Village Inn. You could emerge from there, blinking into a bright afternoon or an icy starscape, and there would be the van. Painted across its side in broad liquid lettering was *Metabolic Voyager*.

Never met the voyager, but I didn't have to; the message was clear even in its wavy lettering. Plain to see in a certain light and easy enough to understand, if you thought about it. I saw a mirror illuminating big chunks of my life, the parts that drove me up walls of rock and questing on skis out into ten thousand square miles of white wilderness. Both right beyond the edge of town. Those things were adventure, sure, but day-by-day it was just fun, thrilling. And the thrill comes from the metabolism. Flows right out of it, as fluid as that lettering.

That metabolic process is time-honored, and it leads to getting high. The voyage, the adventure, is arduous and dangerous. You pull yourself up a rock wall, and the muscles in your arms and shoulders begin to quiver with effort as the ground recedes. In your brain, a hormonal tide is rising. Glance between your legs at the prospect of smashing into the rocks below. Hormones transform, and the voyage becomes a trip. And the trip gets you high. Things become more vivid and start to feel profound. You're in the flow, amped yet serene. Naturally high, organically loaded, but the metaphor, the closest experience to help explain it, comes down to drugs. Here's William Burroughs in *Naked Lunch*:

Buddha? A notorious metabolic junky...Makes his own, you dig? So Buddha says, "I'll by God metabolize my own junk...I'm gonna metabolize a speedball and make with the Fire Sermon."

Buddha's own speedball is a mixture, an infusion, a hormonal cocktail arising from the brain blender. In the Buddha, it comes from sedentary meditation. But for adventure athletes, that flow is activated by a lot of sweat and a bit of fear. I call it physical meditation.

Like Burroughs' book itself, this feels like banned information. Or at the least veiled, esoteric and unreachable, a fire-tempered path that exists only out on the ragged edge of experience, say after years of piercing meditation under a bodhi tree, or maybe like the tunnel of white light described by those accidentally snatched back to life from the jaws of death.

Well, I disagree. It's tempting to call such remarkable experience once-in-a-lifetime stuff, locked away out on the nether edge of existence. But that's too easy, oddly dismissive, and anyway making such experience impossibly special is just wrong. It flows most often out of strong action, sure, yet sometimes I see the vibrant loveliness of the visionary hovering around me on even an afternoon jog. That little can be enough to kick in the necessary metabolism. And occasionally even less than that. The visionary state can arise spontaneously, unbidden, a gratuitous moment of grace. Suddenly your perception turns hot, and there before you is the burning bush.

Usually, though, it takes a healthy dose of effort and a dash of fear to open the doors of perception, to jar your metabolism in the direction of profound sight. And insight.

We have arrived at the central point of this book, that effort plus a degree of fear shifts your brain in the direction of seeing more sharply, more clearly—and feeling more deeply. It does that by shifting the dynamic balance of hormones in your head. And then transforming some of them. The upshot is a change in metabolism that becomes literally psychedelic.

But subtle. Just a shimmering edge, brewing a sense of the profound. Definitely “manifesting the human spirit,” as the word *psychedelic* was coined to suggest in the fifties. Yet for adventure athletes in the thick of action, that doesn't lead to leaving your body and going off into slow rolls through deep space, which became such a hallmark of psychedelic experiences in the sixties. To the action crowd, that's simply overdose.

Yes, I'm saying that your brain as well as mine makes its own psychedelic compounds. Real ones. Potent ones. And that it laps them up. Eagerly. It knows them, it needs them. And when you

challenge yourself, step up to the adventure, their effects magnify. You'll be surprised to see the science behind this, because it's just now emerging.

And yes, we're going to talk about psychedelic drugs here, because they are the closest analog to the natural experience. But drugs are not the point. Neither is the spaced-out popular sense of the psychedelic experience, which loses all touch with reality. Where we're going here is toward illuminating the inner workings of our brains. This is your brain on action. Ultimately we can use that knowledge to become more effective at being human. Look at this as a kind of tech manual for the brain chemistry of consciousness. Especially among some of its more profoundly altered states. The better you understand how it works, the more effectively you can raise your consciousness.

We're all metabolic voyagers, every day. Ordinarily that's in little ways we can dismiss as mundane, as mere nuances of mood. We take for granted, for instance, sweeping changes like waking up, and regularly brush past more subtle effects like a few tiny neurons whispering to each other about brightening their perceptions. We float ceaselessly on tides of hormones that define the timbre of consciousness. Sometimes, though, when your day veers more directly into the face of adventure, when things get dicey around you, with sketchy conditions and uncertain outcome, the metabolism ramps up in ways that turn the voyage into a real trip.

In the end it turns out that the drugs are not just a metaphor but a signpost, pointing toward where our metabolism, acting under the stress of a meaty challenge, really leads.

Then, *you* become the metabolic voyager.

*Don't need no ticket,
You just get on board.*