

Books / Paul Smart

The Book of Highs, and a New Global Agenda

Everyone's got important stuff they're thinking about—everything that's going wrong at this moment in time. But maybe we should be turning our attention back to earlier styles of writing that aren't necessarily au courant. The time is right to buck anti-intellectual trends and those who scoff at knowledge not passed to them via bullet points or screens.

Two books with local roots may be a perfect tonic for the tumult of spring, the coming election season, and even early holiday lists.

Edward Rosenfeld's *The Book of Highs: 255 Ways to Alter Your Consciousness* (Workman) looks like the update of the 1973 classic that it is. At first glance the copy seems similarly tilted towards the psychedelic. But then the care with which this compendium of knowledge has been organized and written shines through. It's a remarkably concise, thoughtful, inspiring and cathartic book.

The author, who has been splitting time between Woodstock and the city his whole life, is an omniscient polymath, the sort who has always loved science and poetry as equal realms. He was at the famed *Omni Magazine* when its mix of science, science fiction and the paranormal presaged our blast off into the accessible computing and Internet age. His *Intelligence* newsletter and website has explored the frontiers, and ethics, of that same world. And the Poetry Science Talks Rosenfeld's centered for years here and in New York have long been considered one of the salons of any day, post Wilde, Reich and Bohrs.

By this book's end, one gets a perfect summation of the breadth of knowledge we have inherited, and that we can all plumb for our own benefits. At the same time, because of the ways in which the author has melded his 1973 and current viewpoints, there's a much-needed sense of validation of all we once knew but have sidelined in our constant pursuit of the new now that we can wiki everything.

Consider, for example, an entry on migraines as a means of altering one's consciousness that defines the painful headaches, describes the nature of the visual patterns that can appear before their onset, and how such hallucinations may be "a visual manifestation of the inner workings of our consciousness."

Moreover, the segment refers readers to a virtual-reality "migraine simulator" available at excedrin.com, of all places.

Read about the ways by which one can gain new, unexpected experiences in crowds, from simple running, through electronic dance music, and from all the therapies available to one these days (as well as religions and other modes of belief).

"Though it often seems that our skin envelopes shut us in, make us ultimately untouchable, we are not alone. Even on the most mundane level, this is obvious," reads a segment on awareness of other people, after bits about self-awareness, conversing with animals, semantic awareness, and cultural awareness of all that's come before us. "Sartre said, 'Hell is other people.' Heaven is other people, too. We are other people."

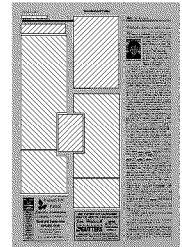
We hope, and suspect, this will become a bestseller.

Pathways of the International Community

Also new on bookshelves with a Hudson Valley pedigree is *A New Global Agenda: Priorities, Practices, and Pathways of the International Community* (Rowman & Littlefield), edited by Diana Ayton-Shenker of Rhinebeck, who serves as the Global Catalyst Senior Fellow at The New School. Talk about a bright, ego-less guide to what really needs our attention these days. Consisting of 21 heavily footnoted essays in three categories — People, Society and Planet — the work maintains a clear-eyed sensibility that stresses ethical considerations over simple economics, a great tonic for those looking for bigger picture answers to today's anxiety-riddled world.

"The book shifts from 'issues' to priorities, practices and pathways," Ayton-Shenker writes in her introduction. "This shift seeks to animate and activate the agenda from a list of 'what' needs to be addressed, to a framework for 'how' progress can be made to achieve the better world we see and seek. The book attempts to elucidate strategies rather than impose solutions, illuminating possible ways forward."

In the past the editor has worked with United Nations officials and agendas; this time she's stretched her arms wider while still drawing on the scholars and thinkers who guide so much of our international world of action. There are chapters on sustainable economics, new agricultural theories, health access, new uses for higher education, "crowdsourcing the feminine



intelligence of the planet,” and “An Economy in Service to Life.”

The result refreshes via its deep thoughtfulness, the fullness of its well-researched pieces, and the return to analysis that doesn't attempt to relegate difficult truths to bullet points, but instead finds a challenge to rise in all difficult situations. It's a book about hope, and how one can not only reengage it, but render it lasting.

Combined with Edward Rosenfeld's *The Book of Highs*, it's about reviving a sense of our inner thinking power to get beyond all challenges, political and more. ++

