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Emily Nagoski:

I want you to think about your day so far. You woke up and then what? Maybe you took a shower and paused for a moment to savor the sensation of warm water on your shoulders. Maybe you bit into a carrot, and it was like you had never tasted a carrot before, an astonishment of crunch and sweet and earth and rain. Maybe you were waiting in line somewhere and a song came on that just happened to be exactly the song that captured your current mood. And in that moment, you felt like the whole universe had your back. This is pleasure.

VOX POP SPEAKER 1:

Oh, my God. I mean, so many things are pleasurable. Honestly, just laying down with my boyfriend in bed, listening to music.

VOX POP SPEAKER 2:

I love ASMR.

VOX POP SPEAKER 3:

At the beach, at the park, reading a book, just being in nature.

VOX POP SPEAKER 4:

Making ceramics or cooking or painting my nails and doing face masks, pampering myself.

Emily Nagoski:

What if every choice you made about your sexuality was about following that feeling. That feeling of "Yes." I'm Emily Nagoski. I've been a sex educator for over 25 years. I'm the author of two bestselling books, *Come As You Are*, and *Burnout*. And my purpose in life is to help people live with confidence and joy in their bodies. And this is the *Come As You Are* Podcast, where I answer your questions about sex with science.

ANONYMOUS CALLER 1:

Hi, Emily.

Emily Nagoski:

Hi there.

ANONYMOUS CALLER 2:

Hi, Emily.

ANONYMOUS CALLER 3:

I'm calling in because...

ANONYMOUS CALLER 1:

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I have a question for you.

ANONYMOUS CALLER 2:

I have a question regarding-

ANONYMOUS CALLER 3:

Sex drives.

ANONYMOUS CALLER 2:

Orgasm. How can I increase my spontaneous desire again?

ANONYMOUS CALLER 1:

So I'm just a little confused on that and...

ANONYMOUS CALLER 2:

I kind of want your advice.

ANONYMOUS CALLER 3:

I would love some help.

Emily Nagoski:

I get questions every day from people all around the world and they're amazing, important questions that deserve great evidence-based answers. So that is what I'm going to be doing on this podcast. Every episode I'll answer your questions and bust myths and misconceptions about sex.

But before we even get into talking about sex, we first need to talk about pleasure. Whether you're having sex with yourself, with partners, or not having any sex at all, finding your genuine pleasure is the bedrock of everything I'll be talking about on this show and it's relevant to everybody. In my quarter century as a sex educator, everything I've learned can be summarized in one statement. Pleasure is the measure. Pleasure is the measure of sexual wellbeing. It's not about how much you crave sex, how often you have it or who you do it with or where, or in what position, or even how many orgasms you have. It's whether or not you like the sex you are having, whether it's genuinely pleasurable to you. And you can only get to pleasure if you know what pleasure feels like for you in many different contexts. And if you practice accessing it.

And you may be saying, 'Emily, how am I supposed to remember what pleasure feels like in this post row capitalist hellscape where our democracy is failing and we're teetering on the edge of climate, crisis, and totalitarianism?' Good question. It's a question I've been asking myself over the past few years. No surprise. And to answer it, I've had to get really specific about what pleasure is and how to practice it. I've had to relearn my own pleasure pathways and reconnect to pleasures small and large in my own life to help introduce the life-changing exercise of pleasure. I've asked for help from a pleasure activist, writer, and organizer, adrienne maree brown.

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adrienne maree brown:

Pleasure is not something that just happens to you in the same way, like no one's ever just going to ride in on a white horse and scoop you up and take you off to love land. Pleasure is a practice.

Emily Nagoski:

Adrienne's written half a dozen books including this gorgeous REM dream of a book called *Pleasure Activism*. My copy is highlighted, written all over and filled with page markers. It is a practical and poetic guide to accessing greater pleasure. You ask in pleasure activism for readers to consider who taught you to feel good.

adrienne maree brown:

Yes. What Pleasure Activism really is reclaiming our right to have pleasure and contentment from the myths of supremacy and oppression and for Pleasure Activism. The lineage is really Audre Lorde, who was a Black feminist poet and organizer in 1978, she published this essay called "The Uses of the Erotic as Power" and same thing, she really talked about what it means to be satisfiable and satisfied.

Emily Nagoski:

Audre Lorde is the origin story of understanding the connection between pleasure and social revolution. I could spend hours talking about her work, but I'm just going to say if you haven't read it, or honestly even if you have "The Uses of the Erotic" is on YouTube, read by Audre Lorde herself after you listen to this episode, take a break, and give yourself a gift. Sit outside or lay in bed with your eyes closed and listen to Audre's powerful message. She has the best definition of erotic that I've ever heard.

Audre Lorde Archival Tape "The Uses of the Erotic":

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos and power of our deepest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire.

adrienne maree brown:

Once we actually experience true erotic awakening. True, yes, true living our lives to a full yes, it becomes impossible to settle for suffering.

Audre Lorde Archival Tape "The Uses of the Erotic":

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness or those other supplied states of being, which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.

adrienne maree brown:

It feels like she gave us this key that's like, if you have experienced oppression or if you're experiencing oppression, part of what's been taken from you is the idea that you could be satisfied in this lifetime and that you could have contentment and small pleasures. There's so much about being a body in this world

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that trauma happens, and life happens, and oppression happens, and then you reclaim yourself. And what does that mean?

Emily Nagoski:

That essay, of course, is extremely important to anybody who does this kind of work, including me. I quote it extensively and one of the most powerful things for me is the idea that erotic is not sexual. Erotic isn't even necessarily pleasure itself.

adrienne maree brown:

Exactly.

Emily Nagoski:

It is aliveness.

adrienne maree brown:

It's aliveness.

Emily Nagoski:

As someone who is in the breath as of menopause and aging and disability and chronic pain, recognizing that the discomforts of my body, when I can turn toward those with kindness and compassion, patience and a welcoming that acknowledges their passage through me, it increases my sense of I'm alive. That sensation is there because I am alive, which is really good practice for me to recognize pleasure when it comes.

adrienne maree brown:

That's right.

Emily Nagoski:

To recognize its passage through me.

adrienne maree brown:

It's my aliveness.

Emily Nagoski:

More after the break.

MIDROLL BREAK

I'm Emily Nagoski and this is the very first episode of the Come As You Are Podcast. It's a prelude, an introduction to the most important concept of all. Pleasure. I know a lot about the science of sexual wellbeing, but science has its limits. In fact, the science of pleasure is very limited. Sometimes the thing that really helps us to connect to our sexuality, our aliveness is not science, it's poetry. And that's Adrienne's specialty.

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I believe in the power of science. I think it's going to be a necessary part of how we make the world a better place. And also, the distance science has gotten me as a sex educator is pleasure is the measure of sexual wellbeing. It's not how often you do it or who are with, or even how many orgasms you have, whether or not you enjoy--

adrienne maree brown:

That's right.

Emily Nagoski:

--the sex you are having, but you get all the way to pleasure is freedom.

adrienne maree brown:

Yes.

Emily Nagoski:

Pleasure is the measure of freedom."

adrienne maree brown:

That's right.

Emily Nagoski:

Which is such a more expansive vision.

adrienne maree brown:

Yeah. Well, I mean it's related, right? It's all related. So freedom is what my orientation is as a Black liberation oriented person that I'm like, I was born into a context in which my freedom was curtailed. My freedom was like I knew that I should be freer than I was allowed to be. And both in race, but also in sexuality and gender and all these other ways, I was like, "Hold up. I can feel inside myself of different reality than what the world is telling me."

Emily Nagoski:

Even though my job is teaching people how to find pleasure themselves, I sometimes struggle to practice pleasure myself. Too often I fall into the trap of centering my life around productivity or what Audre Lorde refers to in "Uses of the Erotic" as a travesty of necessities.

Audre Lorde Archival Tape "The Uses of the Erotic":

The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need. The principal horror of any such system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power, its erotic life appeal, and fulfillment. Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities-
[tape fading out]

Emily Nagoski:

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My producer Mo taught me the term 'chore-asm'. It apparently describes the feeling you get when you cross the last thing off your to-do list. A 'choregasm' can admittedly feel great, and we live in a world that defines the good as making a profit instead of meeting human needs. So it rewards us for being productive and punishes us for our aliveness. So I like everyone have fallen into the trap of focusing on my productivity and forgetting to notice my aliveness. I know a ton about the brain mechanisms underlying access to pleasure and that doesn't mean I always have access to pleasure.

adrienne maree brown:

What happens?

Emily Nagoski:

So I'm writing a book and it's a book about sexual pleasure.

adrienne maree brown:

Yes.

Emily Nagoski:

But I'm so focused and so stressed and so busy that I can't let go and there is a certain pleasure and joy and disappearing into a work project.

adrienne maree brown:

For sure.

Emily Nagoski:

God knows, but I have a relationship with a person I would like to feel glad is with me.

adrienne maree brown:

laughter Yeah, that's right. I think there's this piece, this journey from understanding stuff theoretically into being in the practices of it. There's this quote from Octavia Butler in *The Parables* where she says, "belief initiates and guides action or it does nothing." And many of us are socialized to be in states of obligation with each other, states of polite lying. We are trained to overdo everything in the spirit of capitalism and we're trained that our value is only about what we can produce, which is very unsatisfying because you can never produce enough. I say that as someone who's like, I'm producing as much as I can, and I promise you there's no 'click, yes, that was enough.' That's not where satisfaction comes from.

Emily Nagoski:

We will all be tempted by the transient reward of being productive. And that's exactly why Adrienne is reminding me that we all need an intentional practice of pleasure. Pleasure will take our hand, it will show us how good it is to be alive right now. It will remind us that we are already enough. And unlike the fleeting, fickle, shallow rush of productivity, once we start practicing pleasure in our everyday lives, then and really only then can we find our sexual liberation.

adrienne maree brown:

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It's not enough for me to just believe that I'm sexually liberated and to build a whole system of beliefs around how I should be, but it has to initiate and guide my action. So at various points in my life that has meant different things, but one of them is I have a consistent practice of orgasm, for instance, and not just orgasm. It's really broadened to just self-pleasure because sometimes I'll find that the most healthy thing for my day is actually to masturbate, but not to have an orgasm, right? To masturbate and just feel the pleasure and feel connected to myself and deepen my breath and notice what is generating desiring me in that day.

And sometimes it's a poem is pounding at the door of my mind, or the door of my heart and I could try to hold it off or I could release it and really feel the satisfaction of like, "Fuck. I got it onto the page." That's so good. I'm always asking myself how to make justice and liberation the most pleasurable things we can do, the most pleasurable experiences we can have as humans. So how do we bring our attention back to this gorgeous planet we've been given that is fecund and we can just go lay in the grass and receive sunlight on us. And that is an orgasmic experience.

Emily Nagoski:

One reason I wanted to talk to Adrienne is because I wanted her advice during the pandemic. I was working from home all day every day. So I spend the entire day writing in my office and then I emerge at 6:00 PM feeling productive but drained and disconnected from my body. I find myself struggling to get out of the head space of productivity and planning and into the head space of pleasure, aliveness, and connection. Adrienne had a suggestion for helping me get into that different head space.

adrienne maree brown:

You also might want to give yourself a transition window. I think sometimes that's the thing for me is when I finish a piece of writing or if I do a big event, if I'm doing a big event, and especially now in the pandemic, it's like you might do a massive event, but you're still sitting in your house, in your pajamas. But I'm still like, okay, but my whole system is flooded with the energy of what I was just doing, and so I need to take five minutes to... For me, my energy is like sometimes I'll go and just put my feet on the dirt outside if it's warm and just run that energy down into the earth before I try to interact with anyone. Sometimes I need a full, I need to take a bath and then I'll be a good human for other humans.

Emily Nagoski:

Yeah. Well, thanks for solving that problem for me.

adrienne maree brown:

Got it. I got you. Anything else we need to attend to?

Emily Nagoski:

I mean, that is the fundamental circling question of my life is how do I both do a job I love and be a person around people I love.

adrienne maree brown:

Yeah. Every day at the end of the day, I do a gratitude practice and what I'm offering gratitude for is what pleasure was I able to experience in this day.

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Emily Nagoski:

Gratitude is a major theme in Adrienne's work. One of my favorite passages in Pleasure Activism is a poem titled Radical Gratitude Spell

adrienne maree brown reading her poem:

radical gratitude spell

a spell to cast upon meeting a stranger, comrade or friend working for social and/or environmental justice and liberation:

you are a miracle walking
i greet you with wonder
in a world which seeks to own
your joy and your imagination
you have chosen to be free,
every day, as a practice.
i can never know
the struggles you went through to get here,
but i know you have swum upstream
and at times it has been lonely

i want you to know
i honor the choices you made in solitude
and i honor the work you have done to belong
i honor your commitment to that which is larger than yourself
and your journey
to love the particular container of life
that is you

you are enough
your work is enough
you are needed
your work is sacred
you are here
and i am grateful

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It's always radical to me that even on the worst days and even in the days where I'm like, I don't understand this world and it's filling me with grief and despair, but even on those days, there are small pleasures and even in my deepest grief, sometimes the only pleasure I have is thank you for giving me something I loved so much that I grieve it. But even on those days, there's something I can notice and that's the practice.

Emily Nagoski:

It's so simple, right? You think of one experience of pleasure you had today, and you say it out loud, you express gratitude for that experience of pleasure. But I've been doing this for months now and it has kind of changed everything. It's not just that it makes me more aware of the pleasure in my life. It makes it so that it is so much easier for me to get to pleasure so that in that moment at 6:00 when I literally step out of my office, I transition into my aliveness so readily and the world seems so much more vivid to me. I walk past the window where the aglaonema is growing and I see the new leaf that is starting to unfurl. I see my husband in the kitchen cooking dinner for us, and literally he looks more beautiful to me now because I am training my brain to find pleasure more easily, to dwell in a state of pleasure, beauty, joy, and love. I highly recommend it.

[MUSIC IN]

In the rest of the series, I'll be answering your questions.

ANONYMOUS CALLER 5:

Are you supposed to have sex when you get that old? What I'm saying. If you want it, I do want it.

ANONYMOUS CALLER 2:

How can I increase my spontaneous desire again?

On the podcast, I'd love to hear your thoughts about sex after divorce.

Emily Nagoski:

And as always, I'll be joined by my producer Mo. Hi Mo.

Mo LaBorde:

Hi Emily. You want to plug the hotline before we go?

Emily Nagoski:

Do!! If you have a question for me, call my hotline 646-397-8557 or send a voice memo to emily@pushkin.fm. Tell me your pronouns and name. Pick a name. Any name your question might be answered on the show.

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