

THE BOOK OF SLACK

PUBLISHED BY THE INTERNATIONAL CHURCH OF SLACKLIFE
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THE BOOK OF CEREMONIES

Opening Prayers

Chongo's Creed

*Our Father Chongo,
who art in Yosemite,
hallowed be thy Fame.
Thy line be hung,
thy sent be done,
on Aero or Mantra webbing.
Give us this day our daily session,
and forgive us our tensioning,
as we forgive those who tension against us;
and lead us not into rock climbing,
but deliver us from Clif Bar.
Amen.*

- Written by Dan Walsh -

Our Slackline

*Our Slackline,
which art in the air,
Hallowed be thy webbing.
Thy tension come. Thy bounce be done,
Over canyons as over water.
Give us this day our daily fun,
and forgive us our dirty feet,
as we trust in your breaking strength,
and lead us ever into temptation,
but deliver us from everyday life.
For thine is the ellington,
and the leverage, and the elasticity,
for ever and ever.*

- Written by Friedi Kuhne -

- Translated by Katy Schmohl -

Slacker's Creed

*We believe in the SlackGods,
the makers almighty,
creators of slacklines and stoke,
of all things heady and beautiful.*

*We believe in one Mecca,
Yosemite National Park,
born of the universe,
and eternally epic as fuck.*

*Cliff to Cliff, Anchor to Anchor,
true Gap to true Gap
loose, not tight*

*on one main with the backup.
Through flow, all sends are made.*

*From whippers to walk offs
the journey is the same.*

*By the power of breath
and the safety meeting, times two,
the full man is gained.*

*For our sake,
we pray the rig stays bomber under tension
so no tragedy or injury is suffered.*

*We double check everything
then check it again,
forever forgetting the leash.*

*We ascend the line
then walk off into glory
and come again to test the power
of our mind, spirit, and body.*

*We believe in the slackline, our Prayer, the bringer of flow,
to change our lives and dash our egos.*

*With movement and play
the SlackGods shall be worshiped and glorified.*

*We believe that to be sandy as fuck,
one must first fuck sending.*

*We believe in getting involved,
helping others,
and having others help us in return.*

*We believe the sky is NOT the limit,
and our slack journey will have no end. Amen.*

- Written by Kimberly Weglin -

Summary of Beliefs

Who We Are

The International Church of Slacklife is a church based on the science of ultimate human performance. We believe in living in the moment, conquering your fears, finding balance in all pursuits, experiencing the life-changing power of flow state, and shattering the self-imposed and falsely perceived limitations on your mind, body, and spirit through slacklining and other venues of free expression.

Members of the International Church of Slacklife are known as slackers, and our religion is called the Slacklife. Our community of slackers are bound together by the sacred Webbing that has positively influenced our lives and our spiritual growth as we walk upon it. Through ritual, guided by spiritual practice, church members honor the SlackGods using the sacred slackline to reveal their best version of self, their true potential, and their love of life. In turn, they enrich their community and the world with the fruits of these realizations.

Unlike other faiths, we provide guidance without the guilt. We recognize that the Church, its members, and all humankind are fallible and imperfect. The leaders of this church do not claim to be special in any sense. Rather, what we claim is this: Before we found the Slacklife, we were asleep; now, we are awake. Awake to the infinite possibilities of human achievement, individual expression, environmental care, community engagement, radical inclusion, unbelievable adventures, and the unifying belief in love for all beings. The Awakened State is where happiness resides, as it has been and always will be.

Though we have set in place principles of faith to guide us as followers and as a community, ultimately, everyone is free to worship on the line in their own individual way. We claim no unquestionable doctrine, and our holy texts simply serve to guide your practice and encourage your spiritual journey into the almighty state of Flow. In fact, we believe in freedom of thought so much that we actually highly encourage you to question all of our scripture! Always, always think for yourself!

Our Mission

The International Church of Slacklife aims to heal the disconnect between the mind and body in all people, using the Slackline as the vessel. Our mission is to spread the stoke far and wide.

Most walk through life asleep: mindless, not in the moment, without a purpose or vision embraced by one's heart. Yet we believe that all people SHOULD be free to walk through life awake and CAN be taught to do so. By teaching people to confront their fears, find their purpose, and take control over their minds, we can better serve one another and actively make the world a better place. Once we start the process of healing ourselves, we can then

focus on helping others by sharing the healing and mind opening benefits of the Slacklife with our friends, families, and communities.

This Church is a safe haven for Slackers, and ALL people, to challenge themselves, find balance, share their vulnerabilities, and explore real, logic based solutions to their problems WITHOUT JUDGEMENT.

Core Tenets

The following principles are the core tenets that underpin ALL Slacklife philosophy:

1. Balance, movement, and play
2. Lifelong learning
3. Living in the moment & Saying YES to life!
4. Using Flow to live a purposeful life
5. Spreading the stoke
6. Safety meetings
7. #GetInvolved!

Statement of Faith

The congregation of The International Church of Slacklife unanimously believes that freedom is a mindset, and external events only have power over us if we let them. We believe that the principles of movement, change, growth, optimism, smiles, and laughter can teach us how to live in the moment, conquer our fears, find balance, attain flow state, and shatter the self-imposed and falsely perceived limitations on our minds, bodies, and spirits.

Through our worship, we have come to believe that the sky is NOT the limit. Each one of us has the power to create our own reality, improve our situation, and be whoever we want to be, simply by manifesting aloud our dreams, goals, and ideas and then working tenaciously and purposefully toward them.

We believe the SlackGods to be the creators and sustainers of all things heady and beautiful. They are the the energy of all life and all stoke. They take many forms and appear to everyone in different ways, though many believe their true form to be that of primates or monkeys. We trust the SlackGods to watch over us while highlining and guide our hands while rigging. They have the power to grant us favorable weather for slacklining-- or strike down our line with lightning if it is longer than they allow. We believe that the SlackGods guard the gates to Flow State, or heaven on earth, yet generously let us through with open arms once we have proven our commitment to the practice and mastery of the line.

We believe the SlackGods bestowed upon us the slackline as our main instrument of prayer and worship. We believe the slackline to be the holiest of vessels; the ultimate instrument of meditation, used to transport our minds into an otherworldly experience and catapult our

spirits into an enlightened state of being, the peak human experience, called “Flow-State”-- something we shall all never stop striving to attain. Our lifestance is that when we regularly slackline, our minds are elevated and we become a better version of ourselves. Slacklining gives us access to the source code of our mind, while breaking down our delusion and elevating us to reality. Thus, we see the slackline as our greatest tool in healing the disconnect between the mind and body; our greatest weapon in the never-ending fight to vanquish our egos and conquer our negative thoughts and dispositions.

We believe the world is our church and the slackline is our pew, and that every person possesses the ability to worship whenever and wherever they can, simply by setting up their slackline.

We hold The Slacklife Bible and The Bolting Bible to be the inspired words of the SlackGods. However, the Church recognizes that we are all human in this congregation and that humanly errors could have been made in the transcription of these texts by ordinary people. As such, we welcome logical discussion and rational reasoning in the questioning of our holy scriptures--preferably backed up by field tests, life experience, or scientific research. In fact, we are more than open to altering our scriptural advice if you have found a proven error.

We believe in accessible, freely shared education on the ethics and rituals of rigging and the minimization of risk in order to safely practice and share our religion. We believe that the only way to expand our collective knowledge of what the SlackGods have intended for us in this life is through lifelong learning: through the constant questioning, review, and reflection of our actions, what we believe, and why we believe it, personally and as a congregation.

We recognize Yosemite as the mecca of our faith: the beginning of it all. We believe every slacker has an obligation to take a pilgrimage to the holy land and experience the sacred airspace of the Valley, including all lines over water.

We believe in immersing ourselves into the wilderness and pursuing the pure, true, honest, and unbridled feeling of freedom to do what you want and be who you want.

We believe in tree pro, rigging all natural, the protection of our natural areas, and leaving no trace. Simultaneously, we believe in local bolting ethics and the inspired words of the Bolting Bible: “thee shall not penetrate virgin rock without feeling guilty” (Book of Bolting Ethics, 1:1, The Old Testament)

We believe in getting involved.

We believe slacker friendship to be the truest form of human connection, and we believe community to be the life blood of the Slacklife. There's more endurance, imagination, fortitude, inspiration, grit, energy, and power in all of us collectively than in any of us alone.

We believe that one should not highline before having a proper safety meeting.

And most of all, we believe that to be sendy AF, one must first fuck sending.

The SLACKraments

There are seven Slackraments of the Church of Slacklife which are essential for salvation and living the life that the SlackGods intend us to live. Of these seven, there are three important Slackraments that initiate an individual and welcome him or her into the family of Slackers—Baptism, Communion, and Confirmation. Baptism is the foundation of the Slackrament of initiation and frees one from the original sin of your previous life before finding the all holy slackline. Confirmation is the second Slackrament of initiation and is a significant moment in the strengthening of one's faith. Communion is the third and final step in the initiation process where slackers partake in the Flow of the world. These three Slackraments serve to confirm, strengthen, and increase one's faith and closeness within the Slacklife community.

Technically, you don't have to be a slackliner to live the Slacklife. You can live the Slacklife without slacklining as long as you *truly believe* you are living the Slacklife, representing our values, and willing to proclaim it outloud to anyone who asks what you believe in. But if you do choose to learn what life is like on the line, then these are the steps you will want to take to strengthen your faith and experience the true power of the Slacklife.

SACRAMENTS OF INITIATION

1. **The Gift of The First Line (a.k.a Baptism):** The International Church of Slacklife sees baptism as the first and most basic sacrament of the Slacklife initiation. The gift of the first line signifies the end of your old life and the beginning of something new. It frees you from the original sin that was bestowed upon you in your life before slacklining...before joining the community and finding a new way of life and higher living. There are two ways to partake in this Slackrament and be baptised into the Slacklife: 1) Gift a slackline to a child or a friend, or 2) Treat yo' self and buy yourself your first slackline. A good slacker will buy themselves multiple lines, gift many to friends and family, and donate lines to those in need whenever possible.
2. **The First Unassisted Steps (a.k.a. Confirmation):** Confirmation is the second Slackrament of the Slacklife initiation. You achieve this Slackrament when you take your first *unassisted* steps on the line. These first steps--steps that are truly your own--symbolize your dedication and commitment to the slacklife. It represents your willpower; that you don't back down from a challenge just because it is difficult. You keep at it and stick it out until you succeed.

This Slackrament is not to be taken lightly. Not everyone who gets on a line will reach this step. Many more people will fail than succeed. Most who attempt to stand on a

line will fall and immediately write it off as a stupid activity, or too hard, or not for them. They'll give up before they have really even tried, and by doing so will miss out on all the joys the Slacklife will bring. They'll miss out on its power to change their lives. Only the holy--only the people that *truly* belong in the slacklife--will use their precious time to actually learn to slackline and reach the second step.

3. **The Meditation (a.k.a. The Eucharist, Communion, Flow):** Eucharist is the third Slackrument of Slacklife and completes the initiation process. Your First Holy Communion is regarded as your first flow experience on the line. That first moment when you lose all track of time, space, worries, and self-consciousness while slacklining. It will feel like nothing else. This is because you just felt your first real communion to the line, yourself, the world around you, and the SlackGods. You can prepare for your First Communion by reading The Book of Flow to know what to expect and how to attain it faster.

Once you have accomplished your first communion, eucharist can be taken as often as possible. You take the Eucharist and honor the SlackGods whenever you spend time in meditation on the line. The only limits on this Slackrument are the ones you put on yourself. The Book of Flow offers much guidance on how to attain this Slackrument more often.

SACRAMENTS OF HEALING

4. **Confession, Reflection, and Penance:** The Slackrument of Penance is the first of two slackraments of healing. When a person strays from the true path of the Slacklife-- from their commitment to movement, play, balance, lifelong learning, getting involved, etc.-- then the Slackrument of Penance and Reconciliation will help them find their way back. To obtain forgiveness and reconciliation, one must first admit that they are not being true to the Slacklife. Once they have done that, the healing process can begin. Next, they will sit down in a quiet place, have a safety meeting or two, and and contemplate what led them to this point in their life. They can do this reflection by themselves, with other slackers, or with Church leaders. Ultimately, forgiveness and reconciliation is up to you. It is your responsibility to forgive yourself and decide how you want to fix your problems. No one is going to force you to live the slacklife or punish you if you don't. The only punishment you will receive is from yourself--from knowing you aren't doing everything you can to live your best life.
5. **Oms and Oils (a.k.a. Anointing of the Sick):** Anointing of the Sick is the second Slackrument of healing. In this Slackrument, the High Priestess/Priest, a minister, or a preacher will gather the community, anoint you with essential oils specifically for that purpose, light incense, and surround you with an Om circle. The anointing of the sick can be administered to anyone who is in danger by reason of illness or old age. A new

illness or a worsening of health enables a person to receive the Slackrament a further time.

SACRAMENTS OF SERVICE

6. **Holy Orders:** Holy Orders is the Slackrament by which a person (man or woman) is made a Minister, Pastor, or High Priest/Priestess, and thus dedicated to be an image of the SlackGods. The High Priest/Priestess is the minister of this Slackrament. Ordination as a minister confers only the power to administer the Slackrament of Marriage and officiate a wedding ceremony under The International Church of Slacklife. It does not entail the duty to preach or perform mass. Ordination as a Pastor confers the fullness of the Slackrament, making the Pastor a member of the body of successors of the SlackGods, and giving him/her the duty to provide guidance to the community, preach the Slacklife, and administer the Slackraments. Ordination as a High Priest/Priestess is the holiest position in the International Church of Slacklife and is a position that is held for life or until willing resigned, and the choice of a successor is made. The duty of the High Priest/Priestess is to be an earthly representative of SlackGods, the leader of the Church as a whole. The High Priest/Priestess determines the direction and tone of how the church moves, has full authority over all aspects of the Church of Slacklife, and nominates and confirms all ordinations.
7. **Marriage:** The Slackrament of marriage is all about love and respect. All this church cares about is that you live a healthy, happy, and conscious life. Therefore, we highly encourage you to think about what you *WANT* in a relationship, not what society tells you you should want. Marriage is simply a bond between partners that commit to going all in and doing life together. It is a bond between people that want to lift each other up and become better as a unit than any one of them could be individually. If you choose to live the Slacklife together and choose to have kids, the only duty required of you is to introduce them to the Slacklife as early as possible.

The International Church of Slacklife condones all types of relations and all types of marriage structures: gay, straight, monogamy, polyamory, polygamy...who cares? We don't! Want multiple husbands and wives? We are all about that. It doesn't even have to have a name! Figure out what you're into, and then structure your relationships around it.

As a condition for validity, this Slackrament must be celebrated in the presence of a Minister, Pastor, or High Priest/Priestess, and the people involved must express their conscious and free consent to a definitive self giving to the other. As for divorce, the Church recognizes that personalities, life situations, wants, needs, and desires change throughout life, and that it is okay. This isn't to say you should give up immediately when times get rough, but there is no shame in deciding to mutually split ways in a respectful manner.

SLACKrilegious Deeds

An act of slackrilege is defined as an act that destroys, hurts, violates, ruins, or injures a sacred person, place, or thing. When the slackrilegious offence is verbal, it is called blasphemy, and when physical, it is called desecration. A few examples of slackrilegious actions include, but are not limited to:

1. Showing up after the line is rigged and not helping carry any gear. OR Leaving early so you don't have to help derig and carry out. OR worst of all, a combination of both: showing up after the line was rigged, not helping carry, AND leaving before the derig. Actions like these are (mostly) inexcusable -- except with good reason and notified ahead of time. Actions like these desecrate the feel of the supportive community that Slackers everywhere pride themselves on. Slacklife is a team effort, and the punishment for this act of slackrilege is a self-correcting one. Do this enough, and you may not have a community at all.
2. Not using tree pro. Even worse if you post a picture of it on social media and especially SlackChat. Actions like these not only desecrate our sacred trees, but also desecrate the image of slackliners to the outside world. Punishment for this is lots and lots of trolling until you learn not to do it again.
3. Killing the stoke! NEVER, EVER, EVER KILL THE STOKE. Killing the stoke is considered an act of blasphemy AND desecration. If you are ever tempted to utter words that may kill the stoke...DON'T. Stoke is a sacred component of the Slacklife, and no one is allowed to shit all over it!

Canon of Saints and Heroes

The Church of Slacklife confers sainthood upon a person based on that person's special deeds and contributions.. Sainthood does not have to be bestowed posthumously as long as the living individual has dedicated themselves to the Slacklife for a minimum of 25 years and has had a significant impact on the community. Information on these Saints can be found in The Book of History. The current Saints and Heroes of the Slacklife are as follows:

Dean Potter

Birth: April 14, 1972

Death: May 16, 2015

Canonized: March 22, 2018



Chuck "Chongo" Tucker

Birth: 1953

Death: Still Alive

Canonized: March 22, 2018



Scott Balcom

Birth: January 16, 1963

Death: Still Alive

Canonized: March 22, 2018



Holy Days of Obligation

Holy days of obligation are very special historical anniversaries for those living the Slacklife. On these days, every Slacker is required to spend time on a line, meditate, think about those Slackers that came before them, and reflect on what the Slacklife means to them.

April 19 - (2016) Anniversary of the day Nathan Paulin and Danny Menšík broke the kilometer highline mark in Aiglun, France, on a 1020m long, 600m high, 50m sag line. Nathan onsighted in 1h10 and Danny walked it on his third try in 40 minutes. Before that no one was even sure if the kilometer mark was possible. The day they broke into the km range (with an onsight & third try no less!) was the day big lines became the norm. Slackers everywhere stopped questioning the limits of the sport and started thinking EVEN bigger-- to the elusive mile.

May 16 - (2015) Anniversary of the death of Saint Dean Potter.

June 9 - (2017) Anniversary of the day Pablo Signoret, Nathan Paulin, and Lucas Miliard sent a 1662m highline and broke the mile mark! Pablo crossed in 1:13, Nathan in 1:11, and Lucas in 1:06. Wow. Just wow.

July 13 - (1985) Anniversary of the very first crossing of the Lost Arrow Spire by Saint Scott Balcom.

October 22 - (2014) Anniversary of the day Jerry Miszewski sent a 1003 ft highline at Cosumnes River Gorge, Placerville, California, and became the first person to break into the 300m highline range. This day marked a huge shift in the mindset of the community. It showed us what was possible and made us all start thinking a little bigger. If you're like us, you remember this day well. We thought no one would EVER beat a 1000 foot highline. Fast forward a few years and now we are starting people on that length and lines are 5 times that size.

September 19 - (2017) Anniversary of the day Friedi Kuhne broke the 100m freesolo mark on a 110m line, 200m high, in Gorges du Verdon, France. Honestly, this felt the same as the day Alex Honnold free soloed Half Dome. People *thought* about it, but no one *really* thought it could be done.

Religious Dress

Slackers often live a life that conflicts with societal norms and expectations, and our religious dress code is no exception. It is imperative that slackers adhere to the following code. (In the US and many other countries, most dress codes at work or school have a disclaimer section saying something along the lines of: "In the event that the above policy causes religious

concerns or concerns based upon any other legally protected class, please contact the Human Resource Department to discuss an appropriate religious accommodation.” A.K.A., Don’t let them discriminate on you based on your religion ;) No one can make you cut your hair or change out of your yoga pants! It’s your religious right!)

Hair. Hair should be wild, dreaded, braided, or unbrushed for many days! Many of our men prefer to wear their hair in man buns. This is highly encouraged.



Clothing. - Clothing should be brightly colored, sparkly, sheer, or velvet! Neons, reds, oranges, and yellows are highly regarded as the best highlining colors as they stand out against most backgrounds and make for awesome photos ;)

Tops: T-shirts should be collected from each gathering you attend and worn as often as possible to show how #involved you are. Athletic shirts, sports bras, and no shirt at all are also acceptable. No shirt is fun because then you’re free to decorate yourself with pasties, body paint, or au natural (free the nipple!) Whatever you’re comfortable with.

Bottoms: Slackers must wear yoga pants or leggings (flashy is good, galaxy is better). If you are layering, add some ripped climbing shorts or pants on top of the leggings.

Shoes: No shoes and dirty feet are a must! If you absolutely HAVE to, then barefoot shoes, open toed sandals, or approach shoes are some acceptable alternatives. When walking on slacklines, heels are highly encouraged for both men and women (great training!).

Accessories: Faux fur coats, juggling objects of some sort, a buff (preferably from the last private event), soft shackle bracelets, hat leashes, glitter, jewelry, tattoos, body piercings....feel free to express yourself here.

Costumes: Costumes, bodysuits, onesies, unitards, or anything with spandex are all great options! Don't hold back.

OR

Screw clothes. Be naked. Ditch the clothes entirely. You can't beat the feeling of being naked and free! *P.S.A.: Do not take someone's nudity (woman or man) as an opportunity for you to comment, touch, stare, flirt, hit on them, or whatever else you may have an urge to do! Stop that shit, and let's all just enjoy being naked together, no pressure!*

Hygiene. There is no requirement to brush your hair, or clean your feet, or even shower much, but for SlackGods' sake, at least wet wipe occasionally and throw on some deodorant/use a lemon wedge. It's natural to have B.O., but don't force everyone else to smell it.

Code of Doctrine and Discipline

Members of the congregation of The International Church of Slacklife are expected to uphold our fundamental values, core tenets, and guiding principles. Members must live the Slacklife as much as possible. They should worship regularly, spread the stoke, get involved, and take safety meetings very seriously.

For any member failing to adhere to their spiritual duty, the only punishment you will receive is that of guilt and regret--of knowing you aren't living up to your full potential. When you are ready, Church leaders are available to guide you into repentance and restore you to the holy path of the Slacklife. It shall be the practice of this church to emphasize that the attitude of members toward one another shall be guided by a concern for redemption rather than punishment. Every reasonable measure will be taken to assist any troubled member. The High Priest/Priestess, pastors, ministers, and other members of the Church are always available for counsel and guidance. Please reach out if you need us.

Should some slackrilegious action occur or some serious condition exist which would cause a member to become a liability to the general welfare of the church, every reasonable measure will be taken by Church leaders to resolve the problem and determine how the congregation will best be served.

Worship Ceremonies

The Church of Slacklife has no official building and no designated place of worship. Instead, we pray by slacklining. Slacklifers believe that we each carry the power to worship whenever and wherever we can, simply by setting up our Slackline. We believe that the world is our church and the Slackline is our pew.

The Church of Slacklife has no forced meeting times, though we believe that our faith is strongest when practiced every single day. We have embraced this style of worship as it promotes personal responsibility, personal freedom, and a more genuine connection to the line. When no one is forcing you to practice your faith, every decision and every effort you make to rig, walk, and live the Slacklife becomes your own. Your faith is much stronger this way.

Yet solo worship is only one part of our Slacklife faith. You will feel even more fulfillment, connection, and community by supplementing your praise with a group worship session as well. At minimum, an effort should be made to attend a weekly gathering in your community, find a crew, or join an online group where you can discuss techniques, skills, rigging, ethics, gear, and the planning of your future missions. On the Church website, there is a list of active communities in areas all over the world. If you cannot find one in your area, then you will need to start one and recruit members into the slacklife.

Official Form of Worship

There are 8 steps in our meditation, with steps 5 and 7 being the most important. Do not neglect those.

1. FOREPLAY (OPTIONAL)
 - Foreplay is for those of you that are planning a big slack trip, a new line, or any kind of project. Just like good sex, the best trips have the best foreplay. Give everyone something to look forward to. Sit with your crew, smoke a bowl or a spliff, and while you are surrounded by the smoke, dream up something big or envision how the trip will go. Be sure to use the word “stoke” a lot.
2. THE CHOICE OF LOCATION
 - It can be anywhere! Your living room, the forest, a park, the ocean, a lake, the cliffs, the city...the possibilities are endless! If you have multiple options, try to choose the area where you feel most serene.
3. THE PACKING OF THE GEAR
 - The Meditation starts at home, your van, or wherever your gear closet is located. To begin, carefully pick out all the items you will need to set up your slackline.

- i. If you have a lot of gear, assess what kind of project you will be rigging and where. Are you going on an alpine project? You'll probably want to aim for as lightweight as possible. If you have more than one type of webbing, think about what you would like to focus on that day and what kind of webbing will best suit your needs. Are you going to be longlining in a flat park? Pick a lower stretch webbing. Bouncing a fat highline and trying new tricks? Choose something stretchy and bouncy.
- o Next, attentively sort, flake, and pack your ropes, webbing, and gear. Choose wisely and double check you have everything, because proper preparation may be the deciding factor in whether or not you succeed in your mission. The more prepared you are beforehand, the more time you will be able to spend in worship on the line.

4. THE HAULING OF THE GEAR

- o Hauling is an important part of the ritual, and sweat is a high form of praise. If you are rigging solo, this is on you. If you are going as a group, everyone should contribute! Make sure everyone shares an equal load, or what is designated as fair to the group. The Slackgods frown upon piggybackers and those that show up after the hauling and rigging is done (except for good reason and excused by the group). It is a nearly inexcusable sin to show up after rigging and hauling AND not stay to help de-rig and pack out. Help ya crew out!

5. THE BUILDING OF THE ANCHOR

- o When you get to your chosen location, unpack your bags and begin to meticulously set up your anchor. TAKE GREAT CARE IN THIS PROCESS. Though the actual act of slacklining is an important part of the prayer ritual, the building of the anchor is equally as important, if not more so. The anchor is the literal foundation of our faith. It is the anchor that makes slacklining possible. A broad knowledge of anchor building will enable you to think outside the box and rig anchors in even the most challenging of locations, thus it is important to educate and empower yourself and others in this area! A solid anchor creates solid peace of mind out on the line. Without proper knowledge and trust in your gear, you will never be able to attain the peace of mind that Flow State requires.
- o Learning to rig may feel overwhelming at first, but after enough practice and time, rigging shall become a methodical and meditative act -- this is a great thing! But always keep in mind, METHODICAL DOES NOT MEAN COMPLACENT! Don't ever get too comfortable in rigging! People's comfort zones are always where they make the most preventable mistakes. ALWAYS, always check the "little" things--those are where the biggest mistakes are often made! Double check that your carabiners and quicklinks are locked, that the

pins on your weblocks are pushed all the way through, that your angles are acute, that your carabiners aren't tri-loaded, that your tails are tied off, and all the other "small" things that you may have a tendency to overlook.

- If you are establishing a new line *with bolts*, consider these things before you drill:
 - i. Have you read The Bolting Bible? If not, stop where you are at, and go read it now.
 - ii. Done with that? Cool. Now think about these things:
 - iii. Is this a line that other slackers will enjoy now and in the future? Will people want to re-rig this line? If you are satisfied with the answer, take some time exploring anchor options and where the bolts will sit. Those bolts will be there for a long time to come, so do everyone a favor and put more than a little effort into choosing where they will go.
 - iv. The location of the highline: What is access like in the area? Will others want to re-rig this line? If the sport grows, will this area be able to handle a lot of activity, or will it cause harm to the area?
 - v. Try to pick a beautiful location with lots of area for growth. Slacklining is our prayer and our art, and it should be treated as such.

6. THE ADDING OF THE TENSION

- Once the line is rigged and pretensioned, you will then apply tension using some sort of pulley system (unless you are rodeolining). You are free to choose how tight or saggy you like it--there is no correct or holy number when it comes to this, though loose is widely regarded as easier if you are trying to walk long lengths. Either way, it is good to train yourself on both loose AND tight. It never hurts to learn more ways to navigate the line!

7. THE WALK

- Stretch out your body and prepare your mind. Breathe deeply and envision success.
- Once you step foot on line, your meditation begins and you will be catapulted into the depths of your mind--to your own personal place of worship.
- Once there, you can choose to walk, bounce, trick, surf, or any other form of prayer that calls to you at that moment, as long as it pushes you outside your comfort zone and promotes growth within yourself.
- Strive to clear your mind and focus on the present moment. Take this time to learn about yourself and recognize your weaknesses. You will likely feel resistance from the ego. This is normal. Analyze those negative feelings and

learn from them. Growth stems from discomfort. Recognize your shortcomings and improve upon them.

- Focus on the little things, as those will build the foundation for your entire practice.
 - i. For example: Are you comfortable and calm throughout every part of your sit start, or are you rushing through it to compensate for your lack of confidence and practice? If the answer is no, try to break it down into pieces. Mastery of each part of each skill will give you confidence and muscle memory later.
 - ii. Notice your form when you are relaxed and walking on a line in the park. How your weight shifts naturally from foot to foot. Where you hold your breath, how your arms move, and where you place your toes when you are relaxed and enjoying yourself. What's your body's neutral state? Then compare that to your form when you are lacking confidence on a highline or out of your comfort zone for any reason. When we are scared, we have a tendency to hold our breath, hunch our backs, and sabotage ourselves in a variety of ways. Observing the details of your relaxed state will help you to recall them later on when you need them. Focus on how you can get back to neutral.
- The goal of every session is flow state. Flow is a state of heightened being, or perfect meditation, where you are operating at your absolute best and your body and thoughts "flow" with ease. You will know if you have reached this state because it will be like nothing else you have ever experienced. [We explore flow state in great detail later on in The Book of Flow. You may skip to it now if you are interested in exactly what flow is and what happens in your body when you attain it.]
- You should come out of every prayer session feeling restored and refreshed, with a new sense of purpose, new goals for your Slacklife journey, and more connected to the Line, the Earth, and yourself than when you started. The luckiest and most focused of us will have experienced flow state during their session.
- If you didn't feel flow during your meditation or don't feel relaxed when you are done, this may be a signal that you either need to spend more time on the line, or you have not properly meditated with genuine focus on the here and now. Continue slacking until you work out what is bothering you and you feel balanced again.

8. THE DERIG

- When everyone is done crushing, you can then, and only then, de-rig the line. De-tension the line and pack up all your gear, methodically flaking the rope and webbings back into the bag.
- Go home and start the whole process over again tomorrow.

Other Designated Forms of Worship

Due to location, disability, weather, and a variety of other reasons, we recognize that not everyone is able to worship in the designated way or as often as recommended. Don't worry, you can still live the Slacklife without slacking regularly *or even being a slackliner*, as long as you wholeheartedly believe in our guiding principles. In lieu of getting on a line, there are many other valid and recognized ways to honor the SlackGods and all life itself, including, but not limited to:

- *MONKEY CALL AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE*
 - This one is a given. This ritual dates back to the earliest of days and is one of the core tenants of stoke in the community. Get back to your roots and get to hootin' and hollerin'.
- *MASSAGE CIRCLES, BACKRUBS, AND HUGS*
 - There is not enough touch in this world. CONSENSUAL, physical touch is an amazing way to connect with another human being and make someone else feel good. When you make others feel good, you make the SlackGods happy.
- *OM CIRCLES*
 - Grab some friends and get to OMin'g. Not only is it a great way to connect with your community, the SlackGods love hearing that sweet sweet sound of OM.
- *PRAISE BY DANCE*
 - Naked bonfires are a highly encouraged method of worship.
 - Or just dance your ass off fully clothed til your heart is happy. That makes the SlackGods happy.
- *MODEL YOUR LIFE ACCORDING TO THE TEACHINGS OF THE SLACKGODS*
 - Give up everything and live in a van in order to pursue the holiest forms of slacklife: the dirtbag, van dwelling hippie. Cost of living is low, so gear purchases will be high. Just make sure to buy a roof rack.
 - Pick the college you will attend based on a combination of how many cliffs and mountains there are nearby, how many people actively slackline in that community, and a climate that permits you to slack often.

- Pick your career based on the flexibility it will give you to go out and slackline throughout the day and the amount of time off you will be able to take. In fact, pick a career that doesn't require you to work at all because you will be slacklining so much. A great way to do this is to start yet another gear company and sponsor yourself.....because that doesn't take much work ;)
- *RECRUIT TO THE CAUSE WITH SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC TESTIMONIES*
 - Dedicated Slacklifers will make sure to post photos of themselves slacklining, tricklining, or highlining across all social media platforms as much and as often as possible. In the caption, be sure to share a lengthy description of how much the line meant to you, how much progress you made that day, what new thing you learned about yourself, or how the Slacklife has changed your life for the better. Make sure to tag it with #slacklife so others in the community can discover your testimony as well. Take great care to share only beautiful photos and inspiring captions, as this is our main source of recruitment to the outside world. Ask yourself: Would this give me FOMO?
 - Tell everyone you meet that you are a highliner or trickliner and immediately show them those said photos from above that you posted on social media. Talk about yourself A LOT. Tell them about all the amazing and extraordinary adventures you get to go on that most people will never experience. Don't stop until they are bitter and dissatisfied with their lives. This will ensure that they reevaluate their life goals and ultimately join the slacklife. Until then, make sure they follow you on all social media platforms to guarantee that they will be continuously bombarded with your photos and testimonies of the healing powers of the #slacklife.
- *GET A SLACKLIFE TATTOO*
 - One of the best ways to signify your devotion to the Slacklife is by getting a slack related tattoo. This is not required of course, but slacklife tattoos *are* pretty bitchin, and many, many of your fellow slackers have branded themselves with some really great ones. Check out the tattoo chapter for some inspiration.
- *ENJOY YOUR ABILITY TO MOVE AND PLAY*
 - The Slacklife isn't just about slacklining. It is about movement and play. So get out there and stretch, handstand, juggle, unicycle, climb, snowboard, surf, hula hoop, whatever!---just MOVE! And have fun doing it!
 - For an even greater connection to the spirits and the line, combine your favorite movement arts with slacklining and marvel in the flow-state that it will bring.

- *USE YOUR SPIRITUAL GIFTS*
 - Everyone is blessed with their own unique talents in life, and one of the biggest sins you can commit is letting your potential go to waste. Be the best you can be, every single day. Train as much as possible. Use your strengths to your advantage, discover control over your mind and body that you never knew you had, and constantly push your limits. Get out of your comfort zone and try new things. Honor your existence by LIVING!

- *PRAISE BY SONG*
 - Listen to, sing, and share designated hymns, such as all works by Andy Lewis (found in The Book of Hymnals), most notably “Slacklife” and “Freesoloco”.
 - Creating your own slack songs to add to the Book of Hymnals.
 - Create spiritual playlists that you can listen to on the line and get you deeper into your meditation. Be sure to share these playlists with other slackers to help them in their journey.

- *RECITATION OF PRAYER*
 - Show your dedication to the Slacklife by committing to memory the “Slacker’s Creed”, “Chongo’s Creed”, and “Our Slackline” prayers found in the beginning of this chapter.

- *PRAISE WITH ART*
 - Create slack related art to honor the Slacklife and the SlackGods. Photography, paintings, comics, podcasts, poetry...and whatever else you can dream up! Be sure to share it with the community and submit it to Slackademics so it can be documented for the rest of time. Be a part of history.

- *ASSESSMENT OF SELF*
 - Check your ego as much as possible. Analyze the reactions in your mind and all the emotions that go through it. It is okay to feel angry. It is natural to feel sad, or jealous, just try to understand why you feel that way so you can get ahead of it next time. Challenge yourself to live in the present moment.

- *OBSERVE HOLY DAYS OF OBLIGATION*
 - Slack holidays are an important part of your roots and are often celebrated with great communal gatherings. If you can’t attend a gathering, make sure you at least step foot on a slackline on these days and participate in spirit.

- *HONOR THE SAINTS, ELDERS, AND OG’S THAT CAME BEFORE YOU*
 - Accept their guidance and learn from their mistakes. Be grateful that you have shoulders to stand on---that you aren’t starting the Slacklife from scratch.

Recognize that you would not be where you are at now if it wasn't for the people that came first.

- GIVE THANKS
 - Build into your life the attitude of thankfulness. Thank the SlackGods everyday for your good fortune to live in a time and place where you are privileged enough to simply have a hobby! A hobby that brings you passion, joy, community, and adventure. A hobby where you walk on an expensive, wiggly rope, and learn so much about yourself in the process. Not everyone is so lucky, and most people will never attain this type of self-awareness or connection with the universe.

- CONSTANTLY EXPAND YOUR MIND
 - Obtain new knowledge. Learn new rigging techniques. Watch some Slack Science or How NOT To Highline. Watch some break tests by Slacktivity. Read some articles by the ISA. Learn the numbers and strengths of the gear you use and the gear that is available.

 - Read and honor the words of The Bolting Bible.

 - Get into the habit of checking Slackademics for updates on new slack related content.

 - Learn new tricks or poses on the line. Try to walk backwards. Now try walking blindfolded. The possibilities are endless.

- BE CHEERFUL TO HELP OTHERS
 - Introduce slacklining to someone who has never heard of it before. Take some time out of your life to help someone else change theirs. Show them the basics, answer their questions, teach them the slackways, and be patient. A fun goal is to share it with one new person every month. At the end of the year, you will have introduced TWELVE people to the Slacklife. Can you imagine if every single one of us did that?

 - Help out someone new in the community. Maybe they already slackline but want to learn more about rigging, tricklining, or highlining. Take them out with you on a trip and share the knowledge and love.

 - Have some specialized knowledge that is not widely known? Make a video or write an article about it, and share it with the community! Education is the key to progression and safety.

- BUILD DEEP RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER SLACKERS
 - The SlackGods designed us to live in community with other slackers. We bring the Slackgods pleasure by getting to know others and being known by them. One of the best ways to do this is by meeting up with locals in your area or building relationships online.
 - Give and receive support. - Struggling with life? I guarantee you are not alone. Rely on your slack family and ask them for help when you need it. I promise they will be there for you if you just ASK. You know how I know? Because I know you would be there for them if they needed it, and I know they would return the favor.
 - Listen and help wherever needed. Be the community you want to be a part of. This is only a community if everyone puts in the time and effort to make it one.
- BREATHE DEEPLY
 - Take time each day to examine your breath and calm your mind. With a calm heart, head, and spirit, only then can you truly live the principles of the Slacklife.
- JUST GET INVOLVED
 - It's not that hard. Pick something from all the activities listed above or think of others. Go above and beyond. Listen to your calling and take part in the community in the way you are most suited to help. Volunteer at a festival, or organize your own. Make your own weekly sermons for The Church of Slacklife and share them with the community. Work on access issues in your hometown. Whatever gets you stoked, do that!

Tattoos

One of the most holy ceremonies, and quite frankly, one of the raddest ways to honor the Slacklife is by branding yourself forever!

Below is a collection of various slack tattoos from our community. [We have done our best to track down each slacker they came from, but we were not able to find them all. If you see your slacklife tattoo in here and would like your name added, please let us know! On the flip side, if you don't want your tattoo in the Bible, please let us know that as well and we will remove it. OR, if you have a slack tattoo that you want added, please send it our way.]

Now sit back and get stoked on some sick slack art!





SLACKER: ALEXANDRE COSTA



SLACKER: LARYSSA RIBEIRO



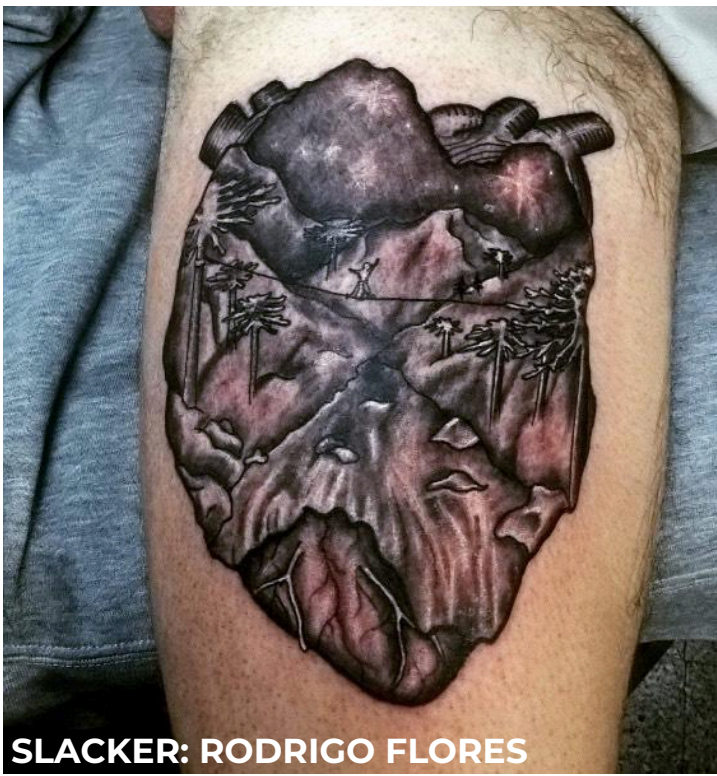
SLACKER: FABIANO NUNES



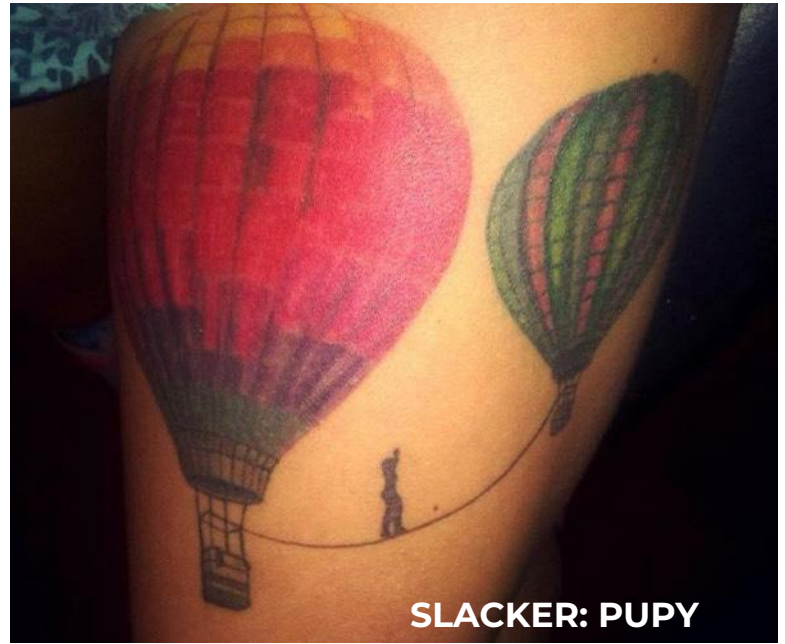
SLACKER: DOMENICO CAPOBIANCO



SLACKER: EZEQUIEL CAMUSSI



SLACKER: RODRIGO FLORES



SLACKER: PUPY



SLACKER: DANIELLE DROUET



SLACKER: RUBEN PEREZ



SLACKER: JAVIER MARTINEZ



SLACKER: MATHEUS MACHADO



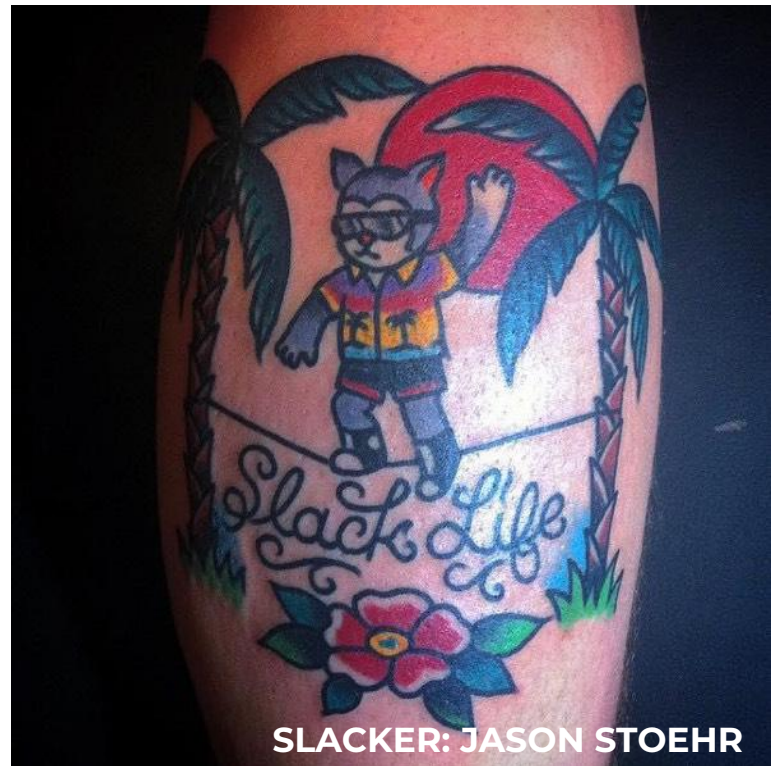
SLACKER: LUKE MILLER



SLACKER: MAXIME FTHNX



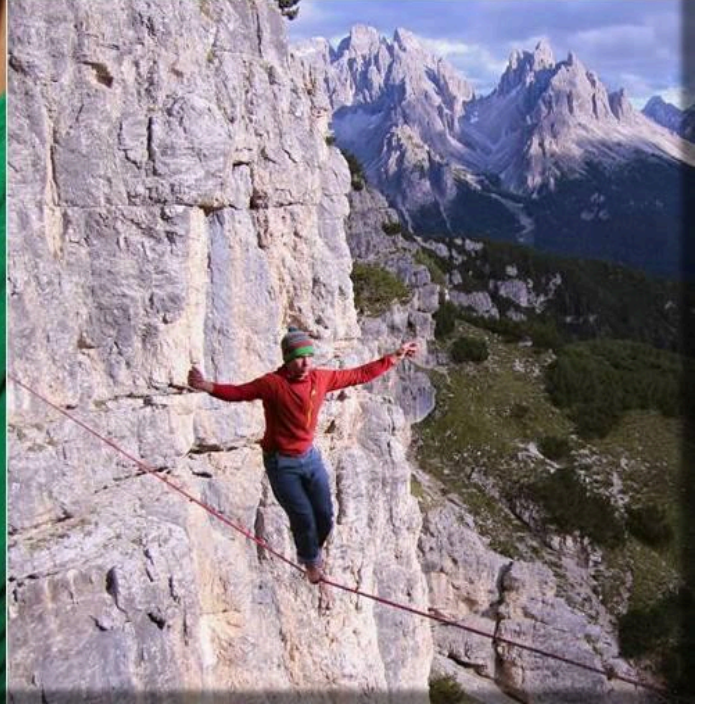
SLACKER: MATT STOLLING



SLACKER: JASON STOEHR



SLACKER: JAN GALEK





www.bouldering.ro / www.slacklining.ro / www.juggler.ro



SLACKER: CEDRIC CALMELS



SLACKER: ALINE REZENDE





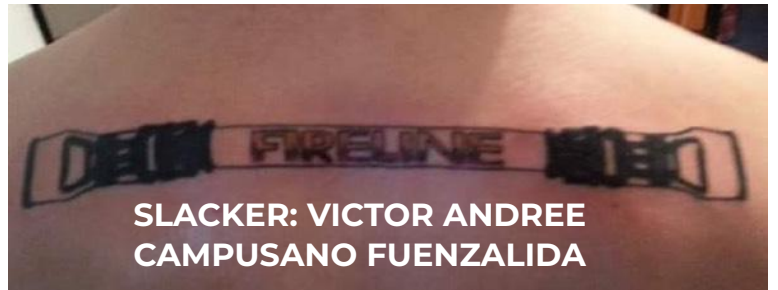
SLACKER: ARTHUR PERA



SLACKER: FRANCISCO AMORIN



SLACKER: MELODIE PREVOST



SLACKER: VICTOR ANDREE
CAMPUSANO FUENZALIDA



SLACKER: TOTH ANDRAS



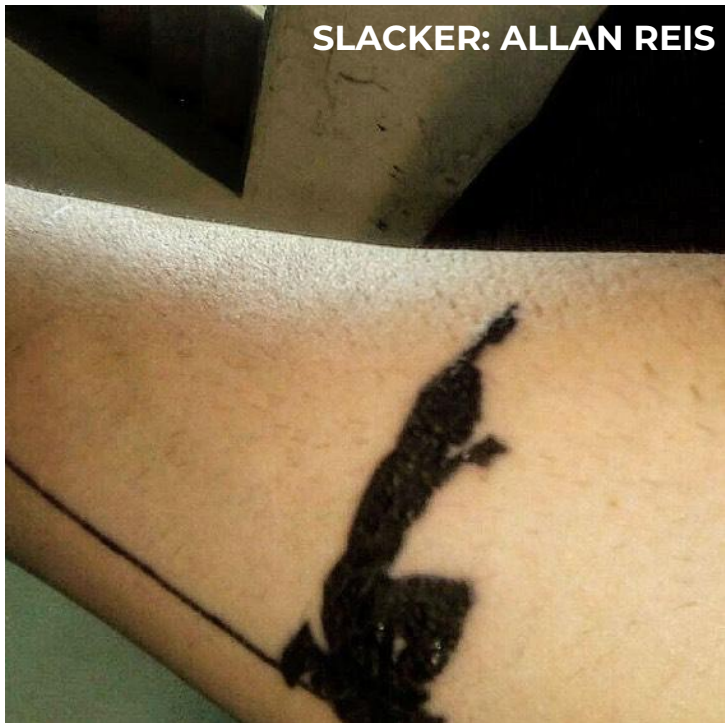
SLACKER: CRISTIAN REYES



SLACKER: ALLAN LAIO



SLACKER: JORDI ZH



SLACKER: ALLAN REIS



SLACKER: TAMAS ZSOGONY



SLACKER: CHRIS WALLACE



SLACKER: DIEGO FRANCO SANCHEZ



SLACKER: XAVIER STAGGS



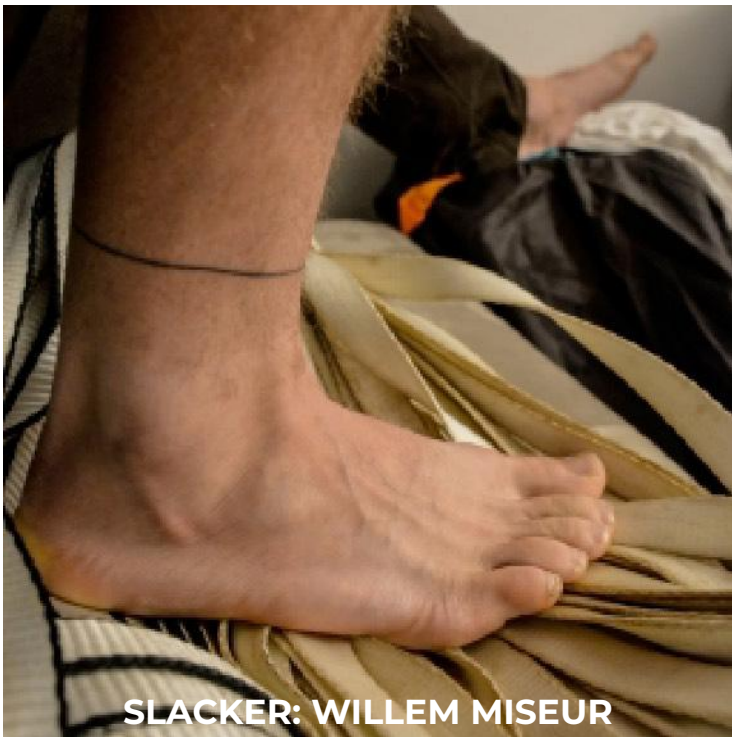


SLACKER: GABRIEL FARIA

SLACKER: CHRISLAINE CRICRI



SLACKER: LLERLIA VICENTA
BURGOS GAETE



SLACKER: WILLEM MISEUR

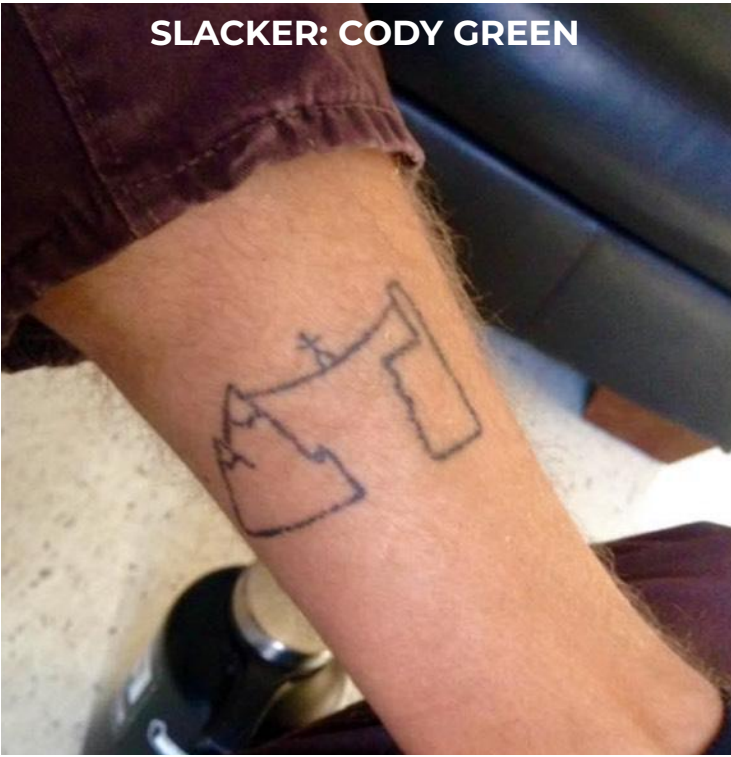


SLACKER: RODRIGO VALERIO



SLACKER: ROBERT KARL BOULTER

SLACKER: CODY GREEN



SLACKER: RJ ROUSH
"FUCK SENDING, ONSIGHT FUN"

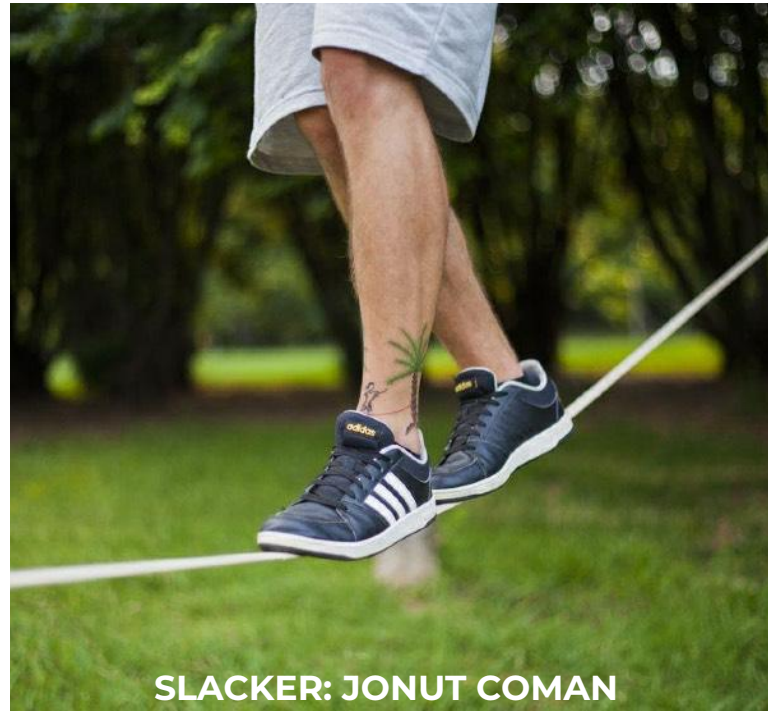
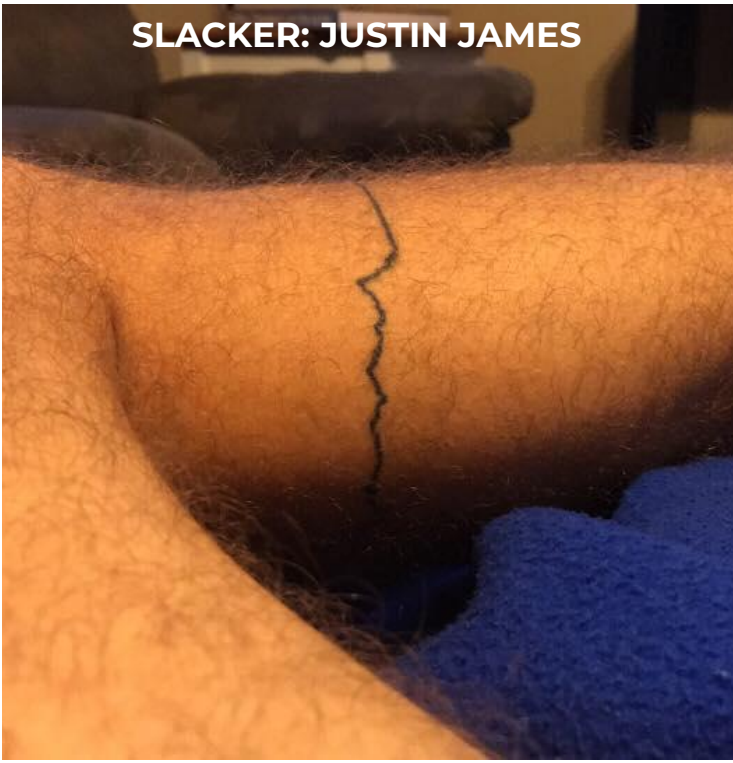


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SLACKER: TATA NAVAS

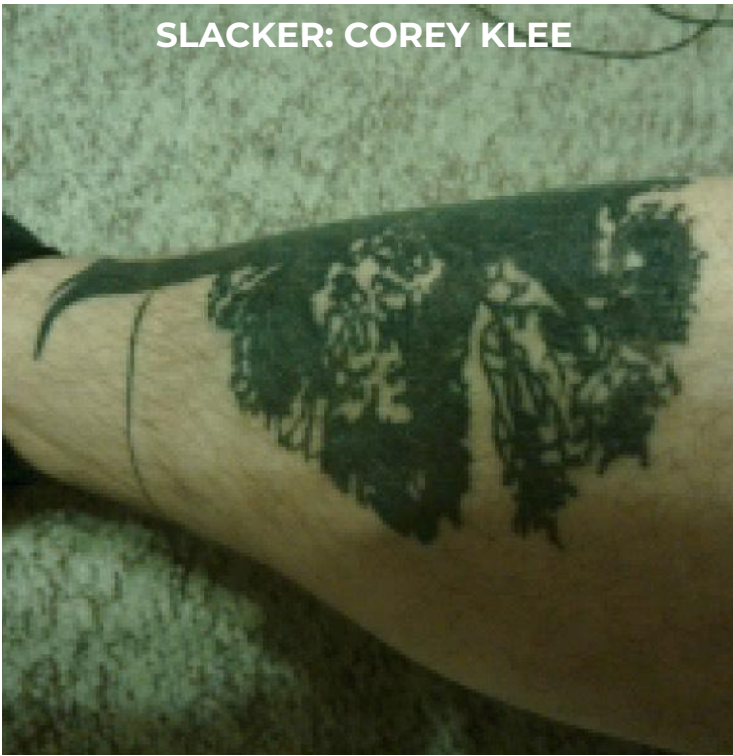


SLACKER: JUSTIN JAMES



SLACKER: JONUT COMAN

SLACKER: COREY KLEE



SLACKER: SUS UFERLOS



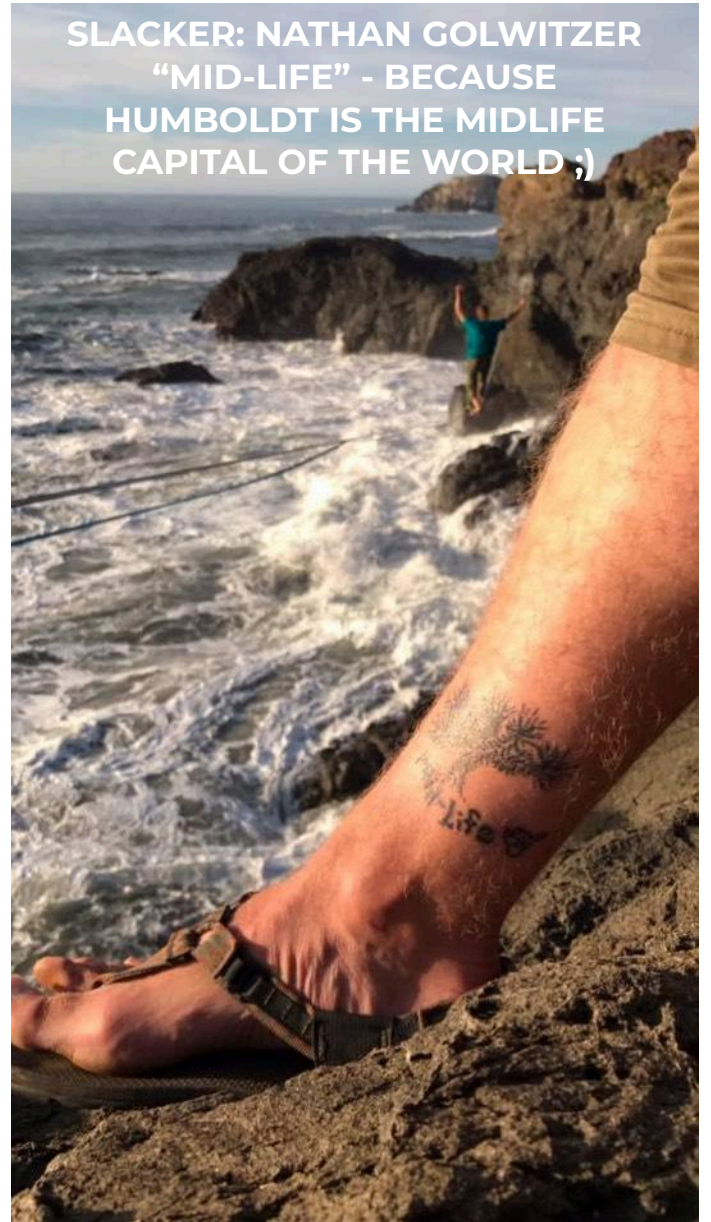
SLACKER: TROY HAMMERTON



SLACKER: FABRINI AS



SLACKER: JON LINDQUIST



SLACKER: NATHAN GOLWITZER
"MID-LIFE" - BECAUSE
HUMBOLDT IS THE MIDLIFE
CAPITAL OF THE WORLD ;)

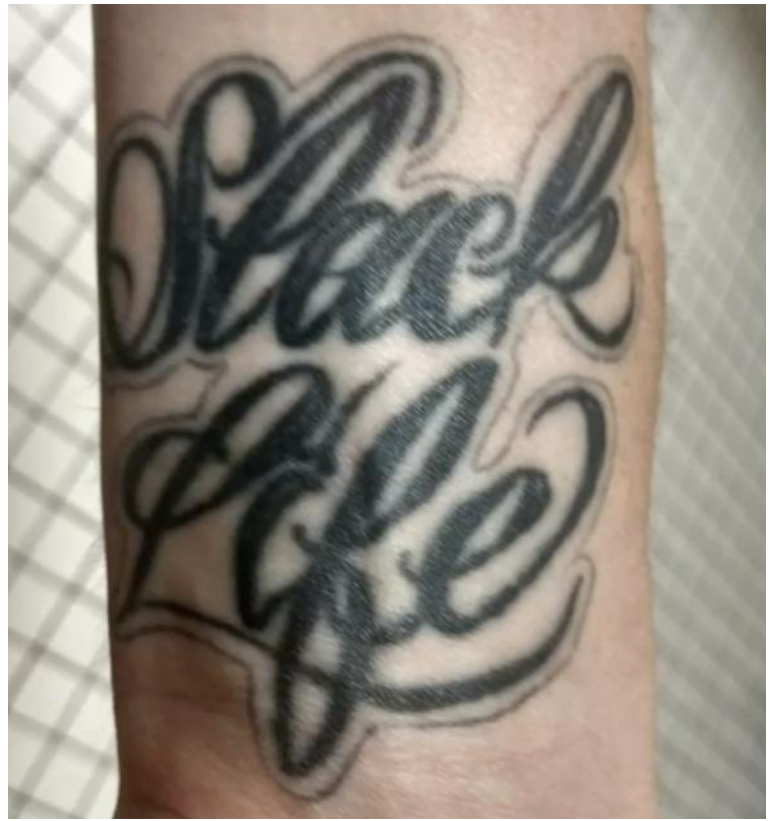
SLACKERS: MICHELLE GRIFFITH & SYLVAN CHRISTENSEN



SLACKER: ANDY LEWIS



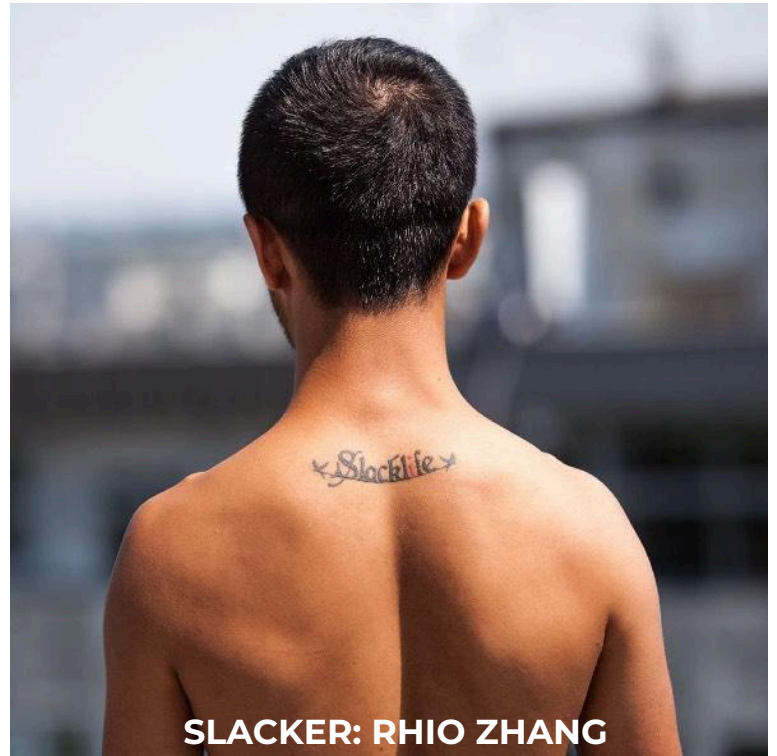
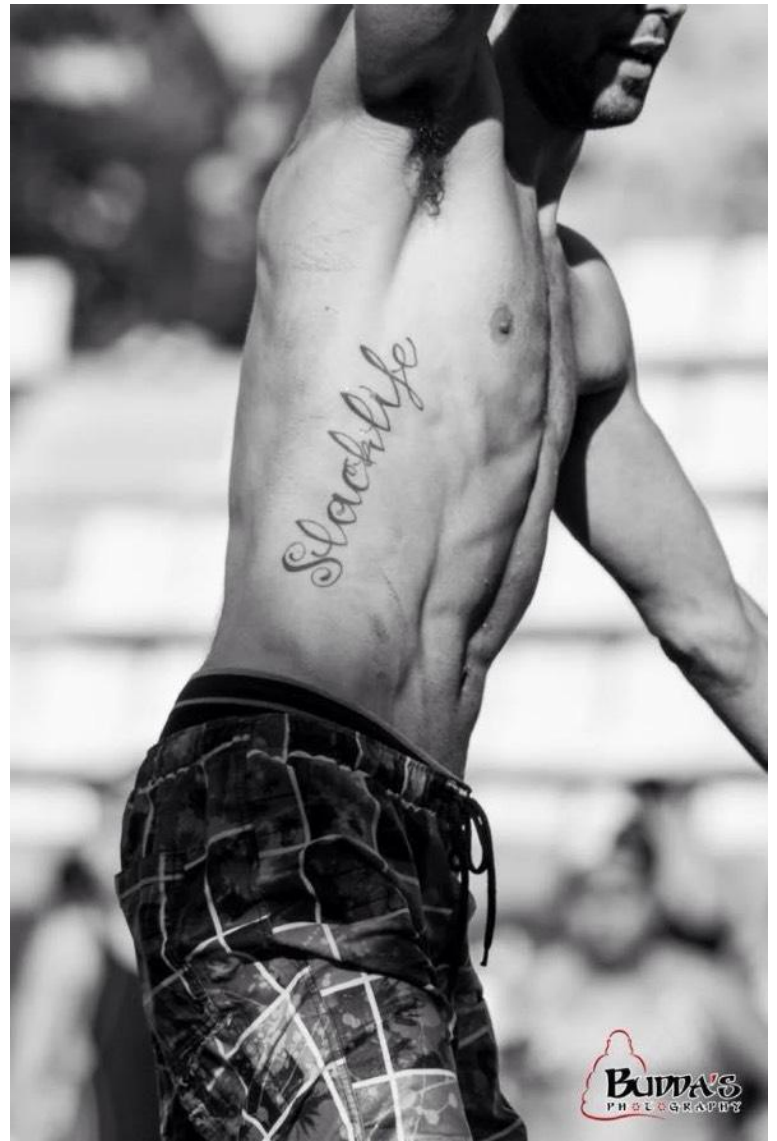
SLACKER: NERI BRASIL



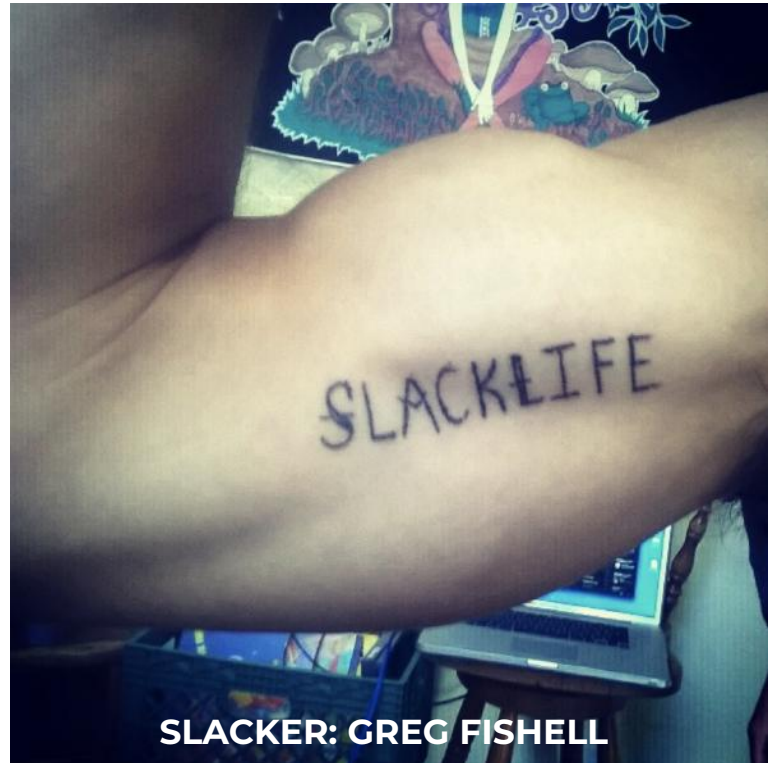
SLACKER: LUCA MARCHIORI



SLACKER: RUSSELL TINKLER



SLACKER: RHIO ZHANG



SLACKER: GREG FISHELL



THE BOOK OF HISTORY

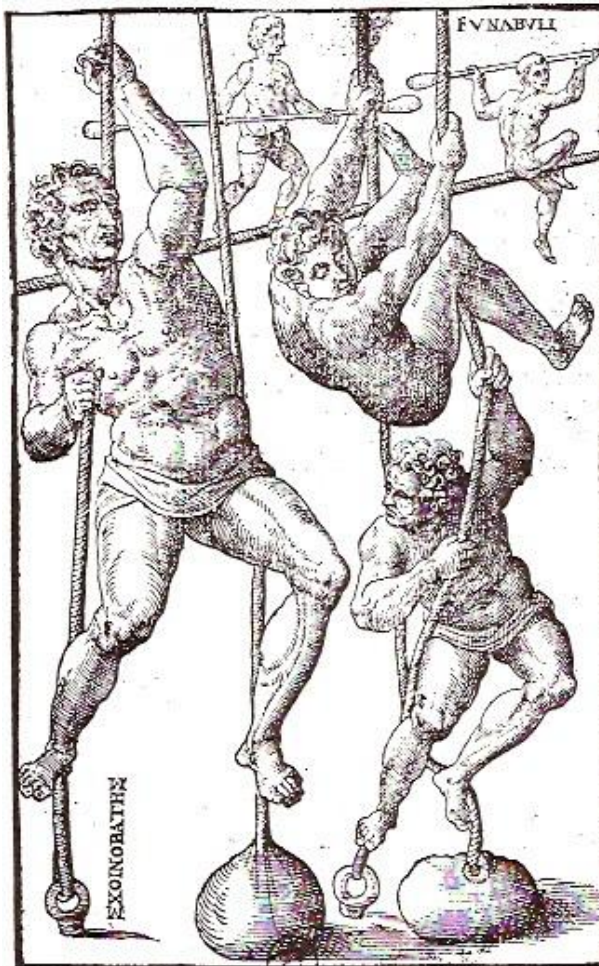
“We who walk the narrow line have stood for free thinking for thousands of years. Let us continue balancing within the world as we understand the space between.” - Dean Potter

The desire for balance dates back to ancient times and is firmly anchored in many different cultures. It seems that as long as there have been human beings and rope, there has been the urge to string that rope between two posts or trees or buildings or things of any sturdy sort and walk - heel to toe - across the span.

In order to explore the long history of our religion, we first have to start by exploring the predecessors of the slackline -- the slackrope and the tightwire-- and how these disciplines laid the foundation for our faith.

Ancient Greece and Rome

While our ritual form of prayer, slacklining, is a relatively new invention, the act of rope walking has been documented in some form or other since at least the time of ancient Greece and Rome. (And that’s just what we know of! It is theorized that ropes and fibers have been in existence since at least 32,000 BC, if not longer!)



Rope walking is the true mother of slacklining. Like slackliners, rope walkers used ropes simply anchored at each end, with no guy wires and no pole for stabilization. (This was the only way to perform aerial acts until 1800, when steel cable was invented.)

The ancient Greeks were fascinated by rope-walking (though they likely attributed the skills of rope walkers to magic more than technique), and had four different words for rope-walkers: *the Oribat* dances on the rope, *the Neurobat* sets his rope at great heights, *the Schoenobat* flies down the rope and, *the Acrobat* does acrobatics on the rope. In 260 BC Censor Messala did away with these distinctions, uniting them into a single word: *funambulus* [funambule], [from *funis*, a rope, and *ambulare*, to walk.] Many different kinds of balancing acts already existed, including aesthetic dance movements and satiric routines.

Rope-walkers, together with members of the Senate, wore white to indicate that they required the special protection of the Gods. Although they were highly respected, the Greek's fascination with rope walkers is the very reason why rope walking was excluded from the Olympics and other public games. Because of this, rope-walkers slowly started to fall into the classification of performers rather than gymnasts, and they often became the providence of jesters and other entertainers.

In Ancient Rome, tightrope dancers reportedly put on spontaneous performances high above the streets and even in the Coliseum. While Ancient Romans did not discourage the practice, they appear to have been much more reserved in their opinion of rope-walkers than the Greeks, brushing off rope-walking as more entertainment than sport.

In 165 BC, the Roman playwright Terence famously had to cancel the first staging of his play *Hecyra* after it was disrupted by a troupe of funambules that supposedly had just arrived in town. A rumor spread that a tightrope-walker and boxers were about to perform, and the inattentive audience lost their interest in his act. Terence himself refers to this failure in the prologues to two subsequent productions:

"ita populus studio stupidus in funambulo animum occuparat."



"The crowd dumb with desire wanted a tightrope walker." (Hec. 4-5)



"quom primum eam agere coepi, pugilum gloria (funambuli eodem accessit expectatio) comitum conventus, strepitus, clamor mulierum facere ut ante tempus exirem foras.

"As soon as I began the show, a love of boxers (hope of tightrope walkers also intervened) attracted such a crowd, clamor, women's shouts, that I had to exit prematurely." (Hec. 33-36)



In an excerpt from the *Historia Augusta*, reported by Julius Capitolinus, Marcus Aurelius apparently ordered that "mattresses should always be put underneath the ropes" of tightrope walkers (who were often young boys) after a little boy rope-walker fell at one of his celebrations. From this, we can reason that Roman tightropes were high enough to get hurt while falling, but not so high as to make safety precautions pointless.

Furthermore, Roman writers were already beginning to recognize the many principles and lessons that tightrope walking taught and how well those lessons could be applied to other areas of life. Tertullian, an early Christian author from Carthage, in the Roman province of Africa, uses rope walking as an analogy to demonstrate the challenges Christians face while trying to have faith in their willpower and find balance on the line of modesty and chastity, all the while staving off the constant threat of temptation to fall into sin:

“Come, you rope-walker upon modesty, and chastity, and every kind of sexual sanctity, who, by the instrumentality of a discipline of this nature remote from the path of truth, mount with uncertain footstep upon a most slender thread, balancing flesh with spirit, moderating your animal principle by faith, tempering your eye by fear; why are you thus wholly engaged in a single step? Go on, if you succeed in finding power and will, while you are so secure, and as it were upon solid ground. For if any wavering of the flesh, any distraction of the mind, any wandering of the eye, shall chance to shake you down from your equipoise..” - *De Pudicitia (On Modesty)*

Just like Greece, Rome disallowed ropewalkers to the Games, but for different reasons. Pausanias wrote, “Their activity didn’t improve the body or the mind, and could only be called violent and life-endangering.” The culture of the time was that it was all right for rope-walkers to appear at celebrations and other triumphs, yet they were denied licence to compete amongst themselves at public games.

These vastly different reactions to rope walkers throughout ancient Greece and Rome highlight a pattern in human thought that we continue to see even today. For some reason, rope walking seems to inspire strong and intense reactions in anyone that observes it. For as long as there have been rope walkers, opinions on the activity have been split in two: inspirational or reckless.

As the rope-dancers became alienated from the Roman world of sport and athletics, many found themselves among the attractions at circuses and sideshows along with the



magicians, jugglers, jesters, and mountebanks (tricksters and charlatans). Under the influence of these group, they started to supplement their show with satire, attacking the moral betrayals of politics and society with grotesque caricatures of its nuptial dances. (They would never have dared to do this in Greece, where the art of rope-walking was held in the highest regard as part of the education of the young.)

In more recent times, we have found further proof to corroborate these stories. Buried for 1700 years under the same volcanic ash that buried Pompeii, ancient plaster paintings dating as far back as AD 79 were discovered

that appear to depict what look like small demons walking on tightropes stretched over what some interpret to be A-frames, a structure slackliners continue to use today.

Rope walkers also began to find themselves at odds with the new found religion Christianity. Hell-bent on daring acts, they set up their ropes at great heights without the protection of a net or mattress. St. John Chrysostom is said to have described how “They could barely walk up and down on them, a blink of an eye or any loss in concentration would have been enough to consign them to the dust.’ Moreover, a few tightrope-walkers were attempting to pull the stunts of the rope-dancers at such heights: ‘They undress’, writes St John, ‘and then get dressed again, as though they had just got out of bed. Some of the audience daren’t watch out of modesty, others out of fear.’ Between the fear of some and the morals of others began a long battle for our faith.

Korea

Simultaneously, in another part of the world, Koreans may have been developing their version of rope-walking known as Jultagi. There is no hard evidence of when this practice originated, but many believe that it could date back to as early as 57 BC. Jultagi is now considered an integral part of South Korea’s culture and is even officially included and protected in their list of Important Intangible Cultural Properties.

Korea’s rope walking is far from simply walking on a rope. While most tightrope walkers focus on purely acrobatic skills, the traditional Korean performance of Jultagi is a unique art that distinctively combines music and witty dialogue to tell a story and entertain viewers. The performance generally includes a rope walker who executes a variety of acrobatic feats on the rope, along with jokes, mimicry, song, and dance, while an earthbound clown engages the tightrope walker in joking banter, and a team of musicians plays music to accompany the entertainment.



A ritual to the Gods for a successful rope walk takes place before the performance. After that, the clown will begin to create friendliness and familiarity by sharing food with the audience and lightening the atmosphere while the band heightens the ambience. The tightrope walker starts with simpler feats, gradually moving to more difficult acrobatics that can last several hours. There are more than 40 kinds of Jultagi techniques including leaping with one foot on the line, touching the nose with feet in the air, sitting and lying on the rope, jumping up after kneeling with one knee and then landing on the rope in a cross-legged sitting

position, and sometimes pretending to fall down. Only one who has mastered acrobatics, sound, witty talk, and dance through endless practice can walk on the rope.

When such various skills mix and find a balance, the tightrope walking performance becomes an art in and of itself, and the skills of the rope walker are evaluated by his ability to carry out such elements of the performance. While the rope walker performs in the sky, the partner clown rest on the ground. Depending on the atmosphere of the audience, the partner clown sings and dances. He not only facilitates communication between the rope walker and the musician, but also encourages the audience by actively participating in the performance. The main repertoire of the clown dialogue is criticizing and mocking corrupt monks and aristocrats. The rope walker expresses the emotions and sentiments of



commoners by performing on the rope and harshly satirizing the nobility on behalf of the commoners. For example, when the rope walker sits cross-legged on the line, it can be representative of the commoners pretending to sit like the fancy aristocrats.

At the climax of the performance, the rope walker begins the act of Salpan. The performer bounces high in the air, executes a complete turn in mid air before sitting cross-

legged on the rope. This is when he shows off his best, most demanding techniques. After the excitement dies down with the Salpan, the performance comes to an end.

Today, Jultagi performers are frequently invited to local festivals that take place throughout the country, particularly in spring and autumn. Transmission of tightrope walking in Korea is currently centred in the Jultagi Safeguarding Association in Gyeonggi Province. There are two types of training: apprenticeship education where masters educate practitioners and take on students, and public education which takes various forms such as school training, experience classes, and summer camps.

Fun Fact: A group of Gibbon athletes visited Korea in 2010 to appear on a television show about the similarities between slacklining and Jultagi, and were shocked to see traditional Jultagi performers doing many tricks very similar to those in slacklining. A between-the-legs butt bounce is now named "The Korean" out of respect for a culture that has been performing it for more than 2000 years.

Russia

Perhaps the most interesting of funambulists live in a tiny village on Russia's southern fringe. Though no one is quite sure why or when the tradition started, every able bodied person in the village of Tsovkra-1 is a tightrope walker.

The most popular theory holds that the young men of the village wanted shorter, faster access to the young women in a neighboring village. Bypassing the mountainous terrain by tightrope proved faster than foot travel, and so they strung a rope from one side of the valley to the other and hauled themselves across. To show off their bravado and the depth of their love, the most daring began to walk the rope and the skill became a prized test of manhood. Young women desired to reciprocate that travel convenience, and so a tradition was born.



The more likely explanation, however, is the tradition may have started due to poor weather in the region that often destroyed rickety footbridges across fast-flowing rivers. While the bridges were being repaired, villagers had to make do with a rope.

Either way, tradition dictates that training must start as soon as one starts walking-- hence, the craft of tightrope walking is passed from generation to generation at a very early age.



After-school games and extra-curricular activities mean only one thing in Tsovkra-1: balancing on a wire one story above the ground. Children practice in any weather and even during the winter when the temperature can drop to minus 10C. A villager named Tuti told *The Independent*, "I first walked the tightrope when I was about six-years old. I was scared at first. Now I'm never scared, not of the tightrope, and not of anything."

Because of this unique tradition, the village of Tsovkra-1 has produced many of the world's best tightrope walkers. Their glory days came in the decades

following World War II when Soviet Circuses rose in popularity. Circuses recruited the village's best performers and made the region famous for its people's unusual skills. The performers entertained crowds across the world with daredevil acrobatics and won the Soviet Union's highest award for artists.

Nowadays, times have changed and most people leave the village for an easier life in bigger cities. Because of this, the population of Tsovkra has fallen from about 3,000 in 1980 to a mere 400 today. Despite this, the village is doing everything it can to revive its reputation as a world tightrope walking centre.



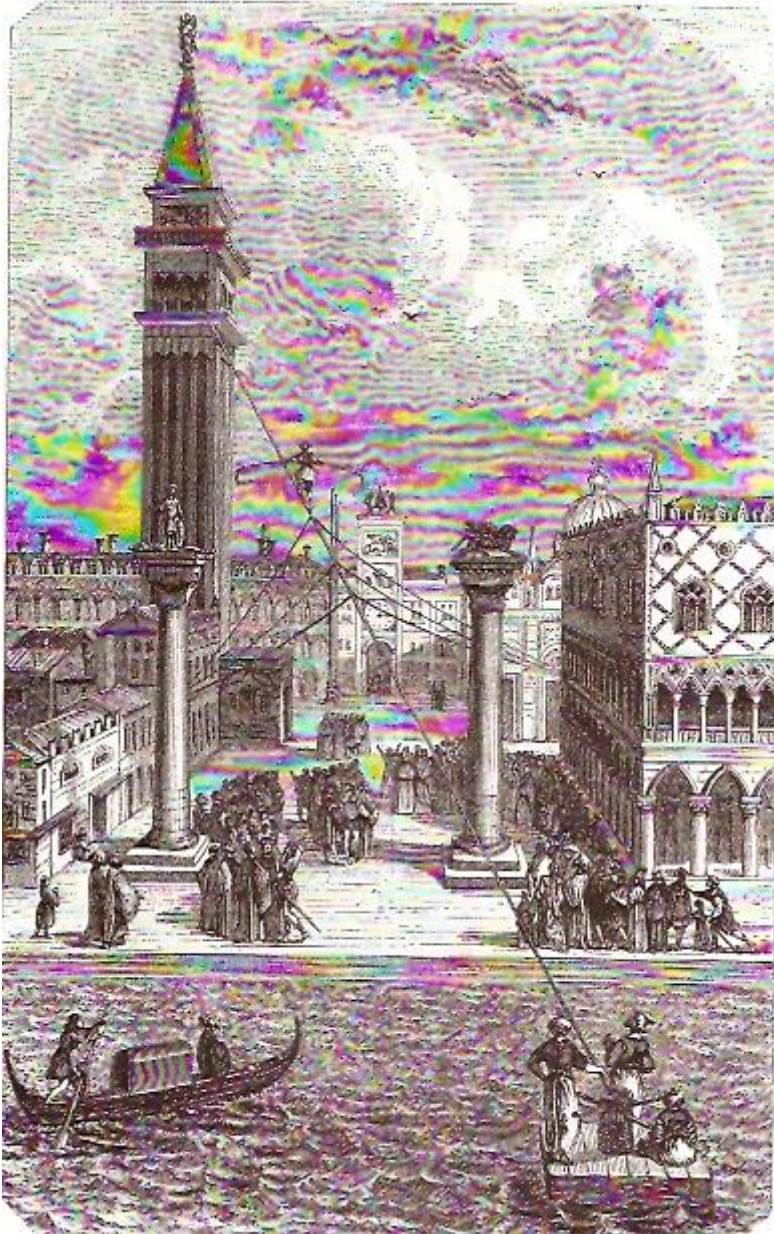
Europe

To understand the significance of gatherings to our people, we must first understand fairs-- what they were, where they were held, and how they were eventually used to oppress our people.

A fair is a temporary market where buyers and sellers gather to transact business. Historically, fairs were created to promote trade and solve the early problems of distribution. They provided an opportunity for the demonstration of skills and crafts, the exchange of ideas, and the bartering of goods. They concentrated supply and demand in certain places at certain times, and were usually developed or held at points of major caravan route intersections and wherever people congregated for religious festivals.

Festivals and fairs were so important to trade and commerce in ancient Rome that they became a primary feature of the Roman calendar and a fixture of Roman religious life during both the Republican and Imperial eras. The government encouraged Roman people to celebrate these state holidays or "Feriae" ("holidays" in the sense of "holy days") with public funding and days off of work. The Romans eventually introduced these markets and fairs all over northern Europe to encourage trade within their conquered provinces.

In every great cult, religion and commerce are inextricably linked. In the first centuries of Christendom, "The first fairs were formed by the gathering of worshippers and pilgrims in sacred places, and especially within or about the walls of abbeys and cathedrals on the Feast days of the Saints enshrined in them. ... Bishops and abbots, of course, never overlooked the reasonable source of profit to their shrines and the maintainers of them, which would be derived from tolls upon the trade occasioned by themselves, and carried on within the bounds of their own lawful jurisdiction." [Morley, "Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair"].



The fair is where the rope-walker made his living. Sometimes they would simply perform high above the fair, other times they would team up with other performers (bear tamers, contortionists, etc), and sometimes they would be sponsored by a merchant in advance who would put up a curtain and charge an entrance fee

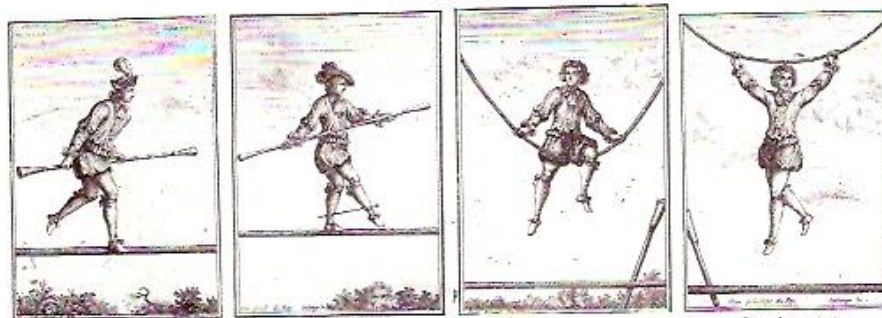
During the fifth century in France, a series of Councils of Bishops began to attack the mountebanks' companies (which rope-walkers were often a part of) and treat them as though they were evil on earth. At the time, rope-walkers generally practiced their craft exclusively at markets and fairs, which were always held near the Church or in the churchyard itself. So when the Châlon Council in 549 AD forbade them to come near the Church's property, what they were doing was virtually putting a ban on the 'profane' art of rope-walking. Moreover, around 554 AD,

Childbert, King of the Franks, was said to have forbidden the clerics from watching the mountebanks at all. Over the next couple hundred years, further French Councils continued to rule out any form of entertainment for the clerics which led to rope-walkers being seen as strangers apart from society. To make matters worse, Philippe Auguste, King of France from 1180 to 1223, kicked Mountebanks out of the French Court where for centuries they had been welcome.

While rope-walkers lost some huge privileges in 5th-century France, things seem to have got back on track by the 1300s. In the Middle Ages, a tightrope act was thought to be essential to give any public event its proper air of mystery, thus rope walkers started appearing in many grand displays. During the lavish coronation of Queen Isabeau in 1389 Paris, it is said that a

cord had been placed from the towers of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame to the roof of the highest house on the Pont St. Michel. A funambulist acrobat then went down the cord singing, with two lighted candles in his hands.

Christine de Pisan documented: 'There was a man in Paris, in the reign of good King Charles, who could tumble and jump and do such tricks on the rope that no one today would believe



*L'holandois
En sautant de tour de Breston
N'est bien sûr de son baston.*
*L'holandois
Qui se voit point d'atterrir
Qu'il n'a point de son pied.*
*L'holandois
Qui voit point de sa main
Lui représente son pied en vain.*
*L'holandois
C'est qui fait le tour de son pied
Et s'en divertit si bien.*

Engravings by Bellange (1575-1616), Paris,
after Cornelius Dankaerts, Holland.

had they not been witnessed at the time. He would stretch thin ropes from the towers of Notre-Dame to the Palace and on these ropes he would leap and perform such feats of agility that he seemed to be flying. Therefore he became known as 'Le Voleur'. I saw him myself as did many others. He

was said to have no equal in his art, which he performed many times before the King. One day however, he missed his footing on the rope and fell from such a height that he broke all his bones. "Surely," said the King when he learned of it, "bad luck must befall the man who presumes so much of his senses, his strength, his lightness or any other thing."

This trend continued at the coronation of Edward VI in Westminster in 1547. According to the "Archeologia Britannica":

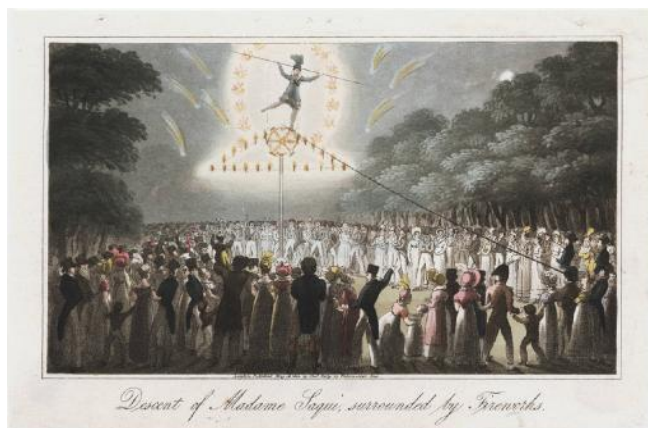
'There was a great rope, as great as the cable of a ship, stretched from the battlements of St. Paul's [London] steeple, with a great anchor at one end, fastened a little before the Dean of Saint Paul's house-gate; and when His Majesty approached near the same, there came a man, a stranger being a native of Aragon, lying on the rope with his head forward, casting his arms and legs abroad, running on his breast on the rope from the battlements to the ground, as if it had been an arrow out of a bow. Then he came to His Majesty, and kissed his foot; and so, after certain words to his Highness, he departed from him again, and went upwards upon the rope, till he came over the midst of the churchyard, where he, having a rope about him, played certain mysteries on the rope, as tumbling, and casting one leg from another. Then took he the rope, and tied it to the cable, and tied himself by the right leg a little space beneath the wrist of the foot, and hung by one leg a certain space, and after recovered himself again with the said rope and unknit the knot, and came down again.'

When Philip of Spain arrived in London to meet Queen Mary in 1554, a rope walker paid his respects to the occasion via rope. And in Venice in the mid-16th century, the annual Carnival gained a new opening tradition — Svolo del Turco (Flight of the Angel) — when a Turkish

acrobat walked on a rope strung between the bell tower of the St. Mark's Church and a boat docked on the Piazzetta.

In 1556, Hieronymus Cardanus praised rope walkers in *De Subtilitate*: "Those who dance on the rope, who call themselves Funambuli, are the most daring of all men, taming the laws of nature with artifice. Indeed rope-dancing has its origins in natural magic. For the art of magic depends on natural causes and what is admirable in it comes from the occult and the hidden."

Despite all these grand public performances and shows of praise and support around Europe, tightrope walkers in the late 1600s in England once again became associated with a disreputable element, including pickpockets, streetwalkers, and conmen. The people of Charing Cross complained that rope-dancer Jacob Hall's booth attracted so many rogues to the area that they constantly lose things out of their shops. They started a petition against him, and the Chief Justice told him in court that his booth is a nuisance to the parish. In his early-1700s song collection "Pills to Purge Melancholy," Thomas D'Urfey wrote: "In houses of boards men walk upon cords / An easy as squirrels crack filbords / The cut-purses they do bite, and rob away." And over in France, French Councils continued to target and persecute Mountebanks and Funambule, following complaints from the Paris priests that Sunday mass was being deserted for the rope-dancers show. The "trouble-makers" were thereafter confined to the fairs of Saint-Germain and Saint-Laurent.



One of the most famous funambulists of the late 1700s was Madame Saqui. She performed many times for Napoleon Bonaparte, often walking a wire with fireworks exploding all around her. She honored the celebration of the birth of his heir by walking between the towers of the Notre-Dame cathedral, performed at Vauxhall Gardens, and is mentioned in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*--to name a few of her incredible accomplishments;

Furthermore, she ran her own circus theater for some time and continued to perform well into her 70s.

The 1800s brought acrobats and other similar performers indoors as businesses and showmen opened more permanent circus venues. Pablo Fanque was the first nonwhite circus proprietor in Victorian Britain, and he began his performance career doing equestrian stunts and rope walking. He started the Pablo Fanque's Circus Royal, in which he continued to perform; it quickly became the most popular circus in the area, and remained so for 30 years. Fanque toured all around the UK for years and also held many circus benefits — one of

which, for circus performer William Kite, inspired the Beatles song “Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite.”

Ultimately, the teeter totter of public approval and lack thereof went back and forth for many, many centuries in Europe. Outlawed through history by government, organized sport, and religion, it is a wonder that line walking persisted at all.

United States

Rope walking was prevalent in many cultures all over the Eastern hemisphere for centuries, but didn't make it across the Atlantic until the first American circus in 1793.

Decades later, in 1859, Jean François Gravelet of France, known more famously as Charles Blondin, elevated rope walking to a high art when he made the first daring crossing of Niagara Falls on a 1000 foot long (305m), 270 ft high (82m), 3-inch hemp cord. It is estimated that Blondin made over 300 crossings of this incredible line...and he did it in style. With every crossing, he would put on a slightly different show--just because he could. He also understood the appeal of the morbid to the masses, and revelled when gamblers began to take bets on whether he would plunge to a watery death.



Once, he crossed it blindfolded. Another time he stopped midway to sit down and enjoy a beer that he hauled up on a rope from the Maid of the Mist tour boat below him. He crossed it while pushing a wheelbarrow, walking on stilts, riding a bicycle, and standing on a chair with only one of its legs balanced on the rope. He crossed at night, using a locomotive headlight affixed to either side of the cable to illuminate the way. He crossed carrying a table and chair, stopping in the middle to try to sit down and prop up his legs. The chair tumbled into the water and Blondin nearly followed, but was able to recover. He sat down on the cable and ate a piece of cake, washed down with champagne. On one his most famous crossings, he carried a stove and utensils on his back, walked to the center of the cable, started a fire, and cooked an omelette! When it was ready, he lowered the breakfast to passengers on the deck of the Maid of the Mist. He even carried his manager on his back! Blondin reportedly gave his manager these instructions: “Look up, Harry.... you are no longer Colcord, you are Blondin. Until I clear this place, be a part of me, mind, body, and soul. If I sway, sway with me. Do not attempt to do any balancing yourself. If you do we will both go to our death.”



For years after, many wirewalkers tried to outdo his performances. In 1860, the Great Farini (William Leonard Hunt), one of the most celebrated acrobats in Europe at the time, duplicated many of Blondin's stunts including carrying a man on his back, crossing with a sack over his entire body, doing somersaults, and hanging from his feet. His greatest achievement was crossing the Falls with a washing machine strapped to his back. He stopped midpoint to wash several handkerchiefs that he then autographed and gave out to his waiting admirers. (Damn, he's smooth!) In 1876, Maria Spelterini, a circus performer from the age of 3, became the first woman to walk a wire over Niagara Falls. She is most well known for crossing while her hands and feet were manacled, crossing with a paper bag over her

head, and crossing with peach baskets on her feet.

The difference between Blondin's and Farini and Spelterini's crossings were what they walked on: Blondin walked on a hemp rope, whereas Farini and Spelterini walked on highwires.

Technically, rope walking was the only way to perform aerial acts until the mid 1800s when steel cable was invented. Until then, the terms "tightrope", "ropewalker," and "rope dancer" were correct because artists used ropes tensioned between two points. Yet "tightrope" today is a very misused word. What most people mean when they refer to a "tightrope" walker is actually a "highwire" walker, as the "tightroper" is actually walking on a steel, cable wire. These cables are anchored not only at each end, but also with guy wires (cavalletti wires), attached at intervals along the wire, to stabilize the line and prevent most of the side-to-side movement.



Actual *rope* walking was much more difficult and dangerous than *highwire* walking. Furthermore, wires allowed performers to accomplish much more technically difficult tricks than they could on a rope, thus most circus performers switched to this style of rigging and walking. This was the beginning of the highwire era.

Highwire walking only grew more and more popular after that. From 1905 (when he was 39 years old) to 1948, Ivy Baldwin, a daredevil balloonist and funambulist, set up a permanent 635 foot long wire, 582 feet high above South Boulder Creek in Eldorado Canyon in Colorado.



He performed his act 86 times over the course of the 43 years it was up. His crossings took six and a half minutes, and he always wore cloth shoes with rosin soles and carried a 26-foot balancing pole. There were several occasions where the crowd feared he would fall to his death: Once, he was temporarily blinded and had to be guided across by the voices of his assistants. Another time, wind gusts of a quick-moving storm

caught him in the center of his act, and he hung by his knees for a half an hour until the storm subsided. Baldwin walked that line for the last time on his 82nd birthday. Apparently, he had wanted to continue doing it year after year, but members in his family essentially “grounded” him from continuing. The highwire was left up until 1974 when it was taken down so as not to tempt adventurous youth.

The name Wallenda is perhaps the most recognizable family name in the circus world. Karl Wallenda, the founder of the group, was an incredible and iconic wire walker. By the age of 16, he was doing handstands on the shoulders of a German wire walker 40 feet in the air. The Wallendas have been performing in circuses worldwide for many generations, some accounts claim a circus history as far back as 1780. The family's American circus history began in 1928 when Karl Wallenda and his troupe of high wire artist arrived in the United States to perform with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. In 1948, the Flying Wallendas debuted their most famous stunt--one of the most dangerous and thrilling acts ever performed in modern circuses--the seven-person chair pyramid. In recent years, the Wallenda family has split into several troupes, with some continuing to entertain crowds around the world.



One of the most recognized members of the family is Nik Wallenda. On October 15, 2008, Nik broke the world record for the highest and longest bike ride on a high wire live on NBC's Today. On June 15, 2012, he also became the first aerialist to walk directly over Niagara Falls (The previous crossings were made above the water near the location of the current Rainbow Bridge). Wallenda described the legal battle as the biggest challenge of his career and "probably more remarkable" than the walk itself. (Six previous high-profile wire walkers had failed in their attempts to gain approval to walk the Falls since 1971).The line was 2200 feet long (671m) and he crossed at the river's widest point. To train for that feat, he walked wires over water near his home in Florida while a caravan of airboats swarmed around him, blasting him with winds up to 78 mph to



approximate the winds and spray of the falls. Due to the location, the wire could not use supports and had to be custom made. As a result, the wire was able to sway significantly in the breeze, making the crossing more difficult than it would have otherwise been. It was the first time in Wallenda's career that he performed without guy wire stabilizers. The wire he performed on was two inches (five centimeters) in diameter, significantly wider than the 5/8 of an inch wire Wallenda typically uses, and weighed roughly 8.5 tons (7,700 kg).The extra width was necessary to make the cable strong enough to withstand the tension required. On June 23, 2013, Wallenda became the first aerialist to walk over the Little Colorado River Gorge



at the Grand Canyon. The event was broadcast live on the Discovery Channel, with a ten second delay....just in case. The line was approximately 1,400 feet (430m) long and 1,500 feet (460 m) high, making it the highest walk of his career (about 7 times the height of the Niagara crossing). He walked it in 22 minutes, 54 seconds, using a 2-inch-thick (5.1 cm) wire and carrying a 30-foot long (9.1m) balancing pole weighing 43 pounds (20 kg).

Wallenda faced a series of obstacles as he crossed including a slippery wire, dust in his eyes, and wind, ultimately claiming that the walk was unusually stressful and more difficult than he had anticipated. On November 2, 2014, Nik successfully crossed a wire between two

Chicago skyscrapers and set two new Guinness World Records: one for walking the steepest tightrope incline between two buildings (19 degrees) and the other for the highest tightrope walk while blindfolded.

Another extremely well known name in the realm of rope walkers is the great Philippe Petit.

In 1971, Petit rigged a line between the towers of the cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris and walked as priests were being ordained inside. On August 7, 1974, Petit became a household name when he executed his most famous stunt--what many called the "artistic crime of the century"-- walking a wire between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. This walk took him nearly six years of planning, during which time he had to learn everything he could about the buildings and their construction, how to accommodate such issues as the swaying of the high towers due to wind (which was part of their design), how to rig a 200 ft (61m) steel cable across the 138 ft (42m) gap between towers



(at a height of 1,368 ft (417m)), how to gain entry with his partners to scout and rig, and how to get heavy equipment to the rooftops. To gain entry, they made fake IDs based on one from a worker in the building and claimed they were construction workers. They carefully studied clothing that the construction workers wore and the tools they used. They observed the routines of employees--the times they arrived and left--to determine when they would have roof access. Petit pretended to be a journalist so that he could gain permission to interview the workers on the roof to collect even more observations. Since the buildings were still in construction, they even rented a helicopter to scout the rooftops and take photos. Using

these photos, drawings, and observations, Petit

meticulously constructed a scale model of the towers in order to design the needed rigging to prepare for the wire walk. When the day finally came, he performed for 45 minutes, making eight passes along the wire, 1,350 ft (411m) above the ground.

When NYPD officers learned of his stunt, they came up to the roofs of both buildings to



try to persuade him to get off the wire, but Petit only got off when it started to rain. There was extensive news coverage and public appreciation of his walk, and the district attorney even dropped all formal charges of trespassing in exchange for giving a free aerial show to children in Central Park. "He executed the perfect crime and the world loved him for it," confessed Guy F. Tozzoli, president of the World Trade Center Association. Mordicai Gerstein, the man who wrote the children's book *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers*, may have described it best when he wrote, "Petit looked not at the towers, but at the space between them." His walk was credited with bringing the Twin Towers much needed attention and affection as they initially had been unpopular due to their 'ugly and utilitarian' design; the building owners gave him a lifetime pass to the Twin Towers' Observation Deck and let him autograph a steel beam close to where he began his walk. Some years after that in 1989, mayor Jacques Chirac of France invited him to walk an inclined wire strung from the ground at the Place du Trocadéro to the second level of the Eiffel Tower, crossing the Seine, to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution.

Slack Chains

On the other side of the country, in the mid 1950s, the art of balance was slowly developing into our favorite activity out of the rich climbing culture of Yosemite Valley. Inspired by Ivy Baldwin's line in Eldorado Canyon (still hanging in place since 1905), Colorado climbers Pat Ament and Van Freeman began practicing on a short slack chain. When they brought their balance-trainer to Yosemite National Park in California in the mid 1960s, they were surprised to find that others, like climbing legend Chuck Pratt, had already been walking chains for two decades. In fact, Pratt was quite adept on the slack chain and was able to juggle three or four wine bottles at a time while standing on it. In an Alpinist article written by Dean Potter, TM Herbert, a Valley regular since the Golden Age, recalls, "Pratt was always into some sort of that circus stuff, juggling bottles or balancing on things. He used to walk the metal railings at Glacier Point [in the mid-1950s] and any other chains and cables he could find." John Gill, the father of modern day bouldering and training for climbing, was also well versed in the discipline, and he would frequently take a thirty-foot length of light chain for balance games when he toured the climbing campgrounds of the Black Hills and Tetons in the 1950s and 60s. The slack chain went on to become an important and revered tradition throughout the 70's in Camp 4 as a way for climbers to train, challenge their minds, improve their balance, and relax after long days of climbing. Remembers Ron Kauk of the era, "People were always doing some kind of balance thing, walking on top of beer bottles or running along the top of knife-edge boulders. We were kind of hippies grooving to Hendrix, wearing cool clothes, but we were also professionals. You'd do your 100 pull-ups [but] you also had to walk the flat chain." "It was a part of being in our gang," agrees Rick Cashner. Dean Fiddelman, the unofficial-official team photographer of the Stonemasters, the creator of Stone Nudes, and longtime Valley resident, echoes this sentiment in the *Adventure Sports Journal*, "If you were living a climbing lifestyle, you slack-chained. If you didn't, it meant you weren't part of our culture."

Outside Camp 4, line walking remained relatively rare in the climbing community. But that all changed in 1974 when Philippe Petit walked the Twin Towers and brought the art of the highwire back to the forefront of American consciousness. As said earlier, it was widely lauded as the “artistic crime of the century,” and Dean Potter believed that “Petit’s freedom of expression had connected with Americans, perhaps reminding them of their country’s founding values.”

Adam, Jeff, and Nylon

Synthetic nylon was invented in 1935, but it took a long time for climbers to discover its application as a balance apparatus. Dean Potter’s article, *The Space Between*, written for *Alpinist* magazine, accounts for what happened next: Not too much later, “In the early 1980s, Adam Grosowsky, a student at Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington, made one of his regular trips to Yosemite, where, he recalls, ‘I was getting the normal thrashing and thought, fuck this place, I’m getting hammered. As I was going through Camp 4, I saw this bronze god walking a slack chain. He was buffed as hell and I thought, is everybody in this place superhuman? Later I found out it was Ron Kauk.’ When Grosowsky went back to Evergreen, he set up his own line. [He couldn’t find a chain to walk on, so he stretched a piece of nylon webbing.] ‘At first I tried walking three-eighths-inch climbing rope but it rolled and didn’t feel right. There was some super tape [climbing webbing] laying there so I tried it...and was like, ‘oh my God, this is the bomb!’”

The flat, grippy surface of the webbing, along with its elasticity and lightweight properties, opened up a new universe of balance possibilities. Soon, Grosowsky hooked up with classmate Jeff Ellington, and the two found a way to rig tubular webbing and add tension with what is now called the “primitive system” or the “Ellington system.” A precursor to today’s pulley and ratcheting systems, the Ellington utilizes search and rescue techniques, replacing pulleys with climbing carabiners to create a mechanical advantage.



The two became inseparable, practicing “thousands of hours” on the tensioned, bouncy, webbing they called “the slack wire.” They both preferred to walk on 3/4 inch, flat, nylon lines at a length of about 20 feet. Adam became extremely skilled in performing handstands on the line, while they both

became skilled in surfing, juggling, and just about every other circus skill you can imagine. They even created a three-club passing (juggling) routine between themselves while balanced simultaneously on the same line.

As much as they loved practicing on the nylon, the two were fascinated with wire walking history and circus culture from the start. In 1981 they performed leashless on a 30-foot (9 m) highwire cable strung 25 feet (8 m) over a concrete floor as part of a project to recreate a traditional one-ring circus in The Evergreen State College's main performance auditorium. According to Scott Balcom, sometime after that, the two mentioned that they also set up a small highwire in Joshua Tree somewhere near the Real Hidden Valley, but it wasn't very high or long.

Dean continues: "They'd cruise to the Valley whenever possible, but on one extended trip in the summer of 1983, their longest lowline was confiscated by the Park Service, who considered it abandoned property. Ellington chuckles, 'We needed to let the Valley floor cool down... [So we] headed for the safety of the Lost Arrow Spire.'" [Instead of rigging on nylon, they attempted to rig the spire using a steel cable, and ended up breaking a bolt on the Spire tip in the process.] "Ellington recounts his first steps on the Lost Arrow highline: 'The anchor on the Tip was rusted [quarter-inch] bolts with ancient hangers. After we tensioned the line I went for it. I was just standing there a few steps out, when the line sharply twanged. One of the bolts had broken, shock loading the other crap!' The two were understandably done, but their attempt was a breakthrough. Yosemite locals, used to thinking of their lines in vertical terms, realized suddenly that another frontier existed in between the sheer walls."

Scott Balcom and Chris Carpenter

Adam and Jeff's attempt at the Spire was powerful in another way as well. Scott Balcom, Chris Carpenter, and Darrin Carter also happened to be in the Valley in the summer of '83, and just so happened to run into Adam and Jeff practicing on their nylon. After their failed attempt, in Scott Balcom's words, "my purpose was born." And with that, the Slacklife was born that day, too.

But let's back up a bit and explain a few things first.

Who is Scott Balcom, Chris Carpenter, and Darrin Carter? Why are they so important?

Well, we went straight to the source to find out. What follows is a direct account of events from the man himself, Scott Balcom, telling us all about it:

Scott Balcom, Chris Carpenter, and Darrin Carter were all childhood friends that grew up together. Darrin transferred to Scott's school in third grade, and Chris was three years younger, a kid that lived up the street.

Scott Balcom discovered rope walking at nine or ten (around 1973) when his older brother, Ric, came home one day with a hemp rope and said, "Let's stretch this between two points and walk on it. My friend Kurt does it and it's pretty cool." So they did, but no one could walk it very well. Nobody could really do more than four steps. But for some reason, Scott had this

feeling “that THIS is my thing. I’m good at this. Even though the neighbor kid across the street could run four steps, I could walk *slowly* four steps...and that made me way better than him.”

Scott continues the story: “All through my childhood I climbed on houses that they were building. Back then, they framed houses with diagonal braces and we’d climb all over those things and walk right on the edge of them... And I had a big tree house with big rope swings, and I used to walk on the railroad tracks. We did a lot of stuff like that...it was the 70's. We were the crash test dummies of the future. We did a lot of painful shit.... So by the time that balancing on parking lot chains and cables was a thing, I was already doing that.... I was already doing that when I met Chongo, who at that time was Chuck in Joshua Tree in May of '81.

Darrin Carter was with me, and we met Chuck, and he took us climbing and taught us how to climb. I had been itching for something like that. I really wanted to climb, but I figured, ‘How do you learn?’ There were no climbing gyms or anything back then. If you didn't know somebody that climbed, you did not learn to climb. Maybe you could learn to rappel on your own, but there was no internet...no books on it, I mean...there was nothing.

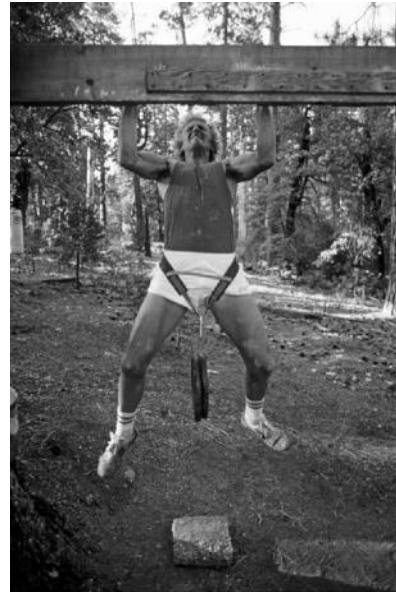
We ended up spending a couple more days with him and then we left. And he was 29 and we were...I don't even think Darrin was 18 yet. I was 18...and I thought that he was way older than us and we would never see him again. But then when we were leaving, Chuck said, “Oh! Here's my number. I work in Hollywood some of the time, and I don't have a car. You could come pick me up and we can go to the mountains.” And I'm like, “Alright.” So we became friends with him...and he wasn't completely homeless back then. He programmed computers and he worked for someone that actually did programming for other businesses, but he would camp at their place in Hollywood.

I would go out and pick him up, and we would drive to Joshua Tree...and a little later, Yosemite. And then one day Chuck's like, “Oh yeah! You gotta walk on parking lot chains! This is the thing in Yosemite.” And I'm like...I can do that. I've already been doing that. And that was something that I could walk all the way across without falling. I was really good at it.

And so...some time went by. And in 1983, Chris Carpenter, Darrin, and I show up in Yosemite, and Adam Grosowsky and Jeff Ellington have slacklines set up in this little strip...now it's part of the Lodge employee housing area in Yosemite. But that used to be a parking lot, and we used to camp there. Well, you weren't allowed to camp IN the parking lot, but people would picnic in there and there's a little strip of trees. Adam and Jeff were set up there, and they were walking back and forth on this narrow, nylon line, and they were doing crazy shit. Adam could do a handstand, and he could swing the line back and forth, and he was really good. They could pass clubs back and forth... and Chris and I were like, “Man, THAT is the shit.”

At that moment, when I met Adam and Jeff...it impacted my life A LOT. It impacted their life, a lot less. (I actually met Adam years later, they flew us to New York for some Saturday morning TV show in '06...NBC or Good Morning America or whatever...and he didn't remember me at all.)

And that was the first time I had ever seen nylon webbing used for slacklining. Camp 4 at that time had a chain, and it was like a gym there. They had bar dips and pull up bars and finger tip bars and, of course, the slack chain. And that was there for a long time. If there is one now, it is not the same one that used to be there. Adam told us that he had shown up and seen the slack chain a few years earlier, and that he couldn't walk it. So he went home and he couldn't find a chain to walk on, and ended up stretching a piece of nylon webbing instead.



One of the first climbers to train with weighted pull-ups, John Bachar could pull up with nearly 140 pounds hanging from his waist! Here he trains with a "light" 50 pounds circa 1985.
PHIL BARD

Now, just before this, I had an old...well, Chuck had a bunch of old climbing gear. And some of it was useful, and some of it wasn't. And he even had a whole rack of Friends [cams]...back then the aluminum stem Friends was the best



you had... but he made us learn to lead trad climbs with our hexes. And he's like, "You need to use hex's because it's too easy with cams. You don't want to make it easy. Then you can climb hard."

So I had taken a rope-- it was the old goldline. I don't know if you've ever seen a piece of this rope, but it was twisted climbing rope. I don't know what it was like back in the 50s when this rope was from...I mean, this rope was older than me probably, and it was really, really stiff. It was more for like roping a cow or something. But I stretched it up and was walking on it. And it

was really difficult to walk because it would roll off your feet, so you had to be really careful with it. And this is before I had ever seen slacklining. I had considered walking on nylon webbing, but I thought it would just be too squirrely. But Adam...he had this mastery of the squirreliness that was mind blowing. I mean, he did different things than people do now, but he would be pretty good for now. Like he walked on a short line, but he was doing handstands and juggling and stuff.



Anyway... so Adam and Jeff had a cable set up in the forest out someplace away from camp. They were practicing on this cable to walk the Lost Arrow Spire, and then the rangers confiscated their cable so they kept on walking on nylon in camp. And then they went up to walk the Lost Arrow Spire on a cable, and they stepped off a couple times, and they broke a bolt on the spire tip. I think that scared the shit out of them and they packed up and left.

And when I met Adam and Jeff it wasn't like I just all of a sudden thought, "I want to walk slacklines." It was like, "OH! That looks like that would be fun to walk!" I was already walking other things, and it was just... the stuff they were doing--you couldn't do on a rope because it would roll off your feet. Like swinging the line really hard back and forth. And I don't mean like the whipping the line, where you keep your body straight, and you're whipping the line under you. I mean, like slowly surfing it, with more of a bounce in it. Where you actually are at a point where you are nearly weightless, and you come down with positive G force and you come back to where you are weightless. Surfing a rubber band was what Adam made it look like. And I just thought that that was just insane. And I tried to understand how he could do it. And when I thought about it mentally, it looked like a complete disaster--in the shortest split second, you could have that thing slapping you in the face. And then I tried to empathize with how he was able to do it, and I got the feeling in my body.

And when they first told me they were going to walk the Lost Arrow Spire, I had this weird, intuitional outburst like, "Wait a minute! I'M supposed to do that!" And I was like, "What?? Where did THAT come from?" As soon as it popped into my head, it didn't make ANY sense to me because I couldn't...ya know...! I could walk across the chain like three times and that was good. And these guys were walking back and forth on these nylon lines, surfing it like it's a rubber band in the air. It didn't make any sense to me. And it wasn't like I wished they wouldn't do it so I could it. I thought, "I wish them well because these guys are really skilled. These guys are awesome." And then they came back and they're like, "We broke a bolt and we took it down. It just seemed too dicey." And, I just... my purpose was born.

I was like, "This is it. I'm gonna walk it." I went home and Chris and I bought some nylon and we both started walking. And in just a month or two, I was able to get that down. It was such a liberating feeling! We were in the masters of stone apprenticeship program at University of Yosemite where everything is a self-directed course study. I climbed a little...I attempted some big walls when I was young, but I never graduated from the masters of stone program. I never got to that level. I liked the movement of climbing. I liked the standing on small holds. I liked going places on a rock. I liked...well, when I was younger, I liked more of the feeling of being up high. I still like it okay. But I don't like getting the shit scared out of me. And I don't like feeling like I'm gonna get cheese grated by the rock at Joshua Tree. But the slackline afforded just this pure flow-state that was....different. Like when I've been really focused leading [a climb], it's a different experience than the flow state in slackline. It's similar in that you shut everything else out...and you can really just be, but on the slackline, when I'm swinging the line back and forth and bouncing up and down...It's so...it is completely

spontaneous. It is more creative. I feel like I'm playing lead on an electric guitar. A one string electric guitar....and me and balance are dancing. And I swing the line. I take my hands, I direct the line, pushing on it with my hands, in this energetic way. And I would fall off when I would lose myself so completely that I would do something stupid and just like step off the line. And all of a sudden, SNAP. You just yank out of that state. But when I didn't fall, and when I'd ride the line until I popped off the line and landed on the ground, I felt like I was....you know, the feeling when you come back to the ground, when you feel like... "I HAVE MASTERED WALKING!" And it feels SO good.

So that was it. I was just completely sold."

The Bridge Line

"I was hanging out with Jeff and Adam in July probably...or maybe August. And by November '83, we walked the first high slackline, "The Arches," under a bridge in Pasadena, CA, near the Rose Bowl, with Chuck, my brother Ric, and Rob Slater, to train for the Lost Arrow Spire.

Rob Slater was a friend of Chucks, and we had met him in Yosemite that same summer we met Adam and Jeff. By the time we met him, he was already a badass. And we were just, kinda, kids. Rob was only a year or two older than me but he had already soloed the Pacific Ocean Wall and BASE jumped off of El Cap... he'd done all kinds of stuff. He BASE jumped into the Black Canyon in Gunnison....a jump that not everybody can survive. And he couldn't walk



Chris Carpenter, with Chongo,
about to walk the bridge line in '83

the slackline on the ground, but he just loved adventure. Rob was just an adventure junkie like so many people you know. Anyways, he was down in San Diego, and I told him that I wanted to go walk this bridge, and he said, "Well if you do it, let me know, and I'll come up." So he did.

Anyways, the line I bought was a piece of the old swami belt material--2 inch tubular nylon webbing, that was rated at 6600 pounds if you didn't tie a knot in it. We didn't have multi-strand threaded lines back then (those came a little later), so the first highline was actually a 2 inch highline, about 22 feet long, and 140 feet high.

We set up the line-- and this is in November--so it's getting dark early and I'm feeling like I'm sort of the one that is supposed to walk it. Well, me and Chris....but mostly me, because I'm the driving force in this and, well, I rigged it. But I'm

kind of scared to do it. And it's getting dark and I'm kind of happy it's getting dark because... "Yeah, I'll come back tomorrow". So none of us walk it and we go home (Ric, Chuck, and I were living in the same house at the time). And when we get back to the house... we were a group that talked a lot of shit and bickered a lot and, ya know... didn't always live up to our talk. But Rob is there, and Rob...we respect Rob.

So we go home, and Rob says, "Oh my god, I can't believe that I kind of chickened out. Tomorrow, I'm gonna go there, and first thing, I'm gonna step off." And I'm like... "GREAT! That'd be great!" Rob was a real psychological boost for us because he was somebody that just loved adventure. We brought him along because he could teach us how to love adventure. It's just that psychological boost of having somebody with an attitude of, "THIS IS GREAT! The scarier it gets, the greater it gets!"

So the next day we get there, and Rob, true to his word, takes a step out. He's kind of hanging on to part of the line we tied up high so you could grab onto it while you're standing there. And Rob takes a step, and for a brief moment, he's standing 140 feet above the gravel. And then he falls, grabs the line with both hands, and he jumps back on. And then he says, "Let's set up a hand line above us, just so we can walk out there and get used to it", and I was all for that. And Chris was like, "Nahhh... we should do it without it."

We end up setting a handline because Rob and I wanted to, and we could all walk it like that. And then Chris walked out to the middle, let go of the handline, and walked to the end. Then he tried from the end of the line and he fell, and I was like, "Well, this is my only chance. Next time he's gonna do it, so I better get out there." So I get out there and I make the first full crossing across the slackline. [The very first crossing on a nylon highline--not a cable or a wire or a rope.] Chris also completed a successful walk, but none of the other guys walked it without use of the guideline above. ["Actually, Chuck held on with two hands while being double belayed," claimed Chris in *The Evolution of Slacklining*.]

Chris and I went back and walked the bridge quite a few times. But when we set up the two inch line in the park at pretty long length, at about 80 feet, it would shake back and forth when the wind blew past. Just a breeze and it would start going up and down and shaking back and forth... I mean, just radically. It would go up and down so fast that when you try to catch it...it was so quick that it would just like flick out of your hand, ya know? And I was looking at this and thinking, "This will NOT do on the Lost Arrow Spire. It's ALWAYS windy up there." So I'm like, alright, that will never work. What can I do?

I'm a builder, and I had already started as an apprentice carpenter. I had seen how electricians use fish tape to pull wires through conduits, and I got the idea of pulling small lines through bigger pieces of webbing...pulling pieces of 9/16ths through a piece of 1 inch and making a stronger line. So I bought these lines, and I bent a clothes hanger into what I thought was the appropriate shape. I got Chris to help me, and we made the first threaded line. We stuffed a 1 inch piece of webbing with two pieces of 9/16ths and some 3 mil purlon.

The pieces of 9/16ths were sitting atop one another, and then there was just a little bit of space, so I had the piece of purlon running next to it. I originally had 2 pieces of purlon on the inside, but they didn't fit the way I thought they would. So we threaded this line and set it up in the park, and that one was way more stable in the breeze." According to Chris Carpenter's article on *The Evolution of Slacklining*, "The 9/16th super tape at a 45-foot length was our favorite. This line proved to be very springy and especially good for swinging on. We walked on and broke a 30-foot length of tubular bootlace. . . . We strung and walked a 118-foot length of one-inch webbing (very much like walking on the moon). And we also experimented with doubling up the lines. Scott strung bootlace within bootlace; we never did break this one. We also tripled the lines [using the process Scott described above]. This tripled line was our strongest slackline that we later used for highlining." They tested their tripled up line at the the bridge, and then in 1984, they went up to the Lost Arrow Spire for the first time and brought it along with them.

Lost Arrow Spire - First Attempt '84

"We had this plan that I would try first, and then Chris would try second, but we would be each other's photographer. So Chris is up on the rim, and we got Darrin and this other guy called Bob the Aid guy to climb the Spire for us. And Darrin is a hard headed guy that doesn't get along with anybody, and by the time they got to the top of the spire they were bickering at everything.

So I get out there...I wanted to start from the spire and walk back to the flake. So I had gone up there, I had rappelled off the tree that's now dead I guess. (There's another one that I actually clipped to in 1995 that has broken and fallen.) So anyways, I had already gone up and previewed the anchors. I had rappelled off, looked at the flake, and figured out what I thought would fit in there. I didn't want to use cams, so I used hexes...big opposing hexes, and then I also backed it up to the tree.

Then I'm all ready to go and I'm FUCKING scared out of my mind. And I was just thinking, "Wait a minute. Why am I here? I thought this is supposed to be fun. This is NOT fun." And nobody else has tried yet because Chris is up on the rim, sitting there with a camera, waiting for something to happen. And I'm waiting for the moment to get less scary, and it doesn't.

My mind was racing. My entire life was flashing before my eyes because I knew I was going to die. And when I step on the line, it slides down the rock, so I wrap it in nylon and I try to get Bob the Aid man to kind of sit on it in the already slipped position. I keep trying to step off and I just keep chickening out. I keep jumping back on, and then I'm like, "Okay, I really just have to try this time because I'm not trying hard enough." And so I go out and I try hard enough and by the time I realize that, "Yes, I am really falling this time," I look through my outstretched arms and I'm falling into the Lost Arrow Chimney.

I had read about the first people to explore the notch in that area...The first guy down the rope to rappel into the notch ended up rappelling off the end of the rope because it didn't have a knot in it. He fell into the Lost Arrow Chimney, and it ate him. So I'm falling into the Lost Arrow Chimney thinking, "I'm it's next meal, here it goes!" And I had my arms stretched out in front of me. I'm looking at sure death (though my leash is tied to my side, and I have a swami belt on with leg loops). And then I start to swing and I see the notch below me. And then I swing a little further and I see the Valley below me, and as I come towards the end of my swing I am able to just jump up. It was like throwing a cat in a bathtub. I mean, I was off the line, and on the arch of the swing, I just kept going and jumped back up on the spire somehow. I don't know if it was a one armed pull up or what, which I can't actually do, but it was just adrenaline. And then Darrin's like, "OH MY GOD. That was the raddest thing I've ever seen anybody do! That was so fuckin rad! You looked like you were superman flying through the sky with your arms out in front of you. You screamed like a girl!" And I'm like, "Wait a minute. I did? I screamed? I don't remember screaming." (THAT moment is what planted the seed for Darrin later on-- THAT moment is what is burned most deeply into his mind.)

I tried one more time and this time I think I jumped back to the rock. I bounced off and I ended up looking through my feet this time for the panorama... the dangly panorama. And then I was like, ya know, "I can't fucking do it." And so we went home and there was people up on the rim going, "Man, that was rad!" And I was like, "No. That was fucking stupid."

And they're like, "Well, it was rad though! You tried!" I'm like... "Yeahhh, that's not really how it was supposed to work." Chris didn't even get a chance to try because I burned up all the time, and then by the time I was done he didn't even want to try anymore after watching me flail around out there. It was scary enough for him just watching it happen.

So I went home and I was discouraged... you have probably had these sort of experiences at some point, and I realized that my training under the bridge had not been nearly scary enough. The bridge was different. It gives you almost an arc-ed field of exposure. When you're juggling next to a wall or just dangling nearby... even if you can't grab onto it, being next to the wall feels different than hanging free in space. There's something about the electromagnetic connection to ground, and rock is ground.

On the bridge walk, as soon as I stepped out I was scared out of my mind, until I stepped off. And when I got to the very end of the line, stepping off of the rim of the bridge was a little hard because we didn't have very tight lines either. It's not like the super slack stuff now, but not like the super tight stuff. So the first two steps are hard, but once I committed to stepping off the bridge and took another quick step, I was locked in. I was just all of a sudden....success was absolutely assured, and I just cruised to the other end of the line (though it was only like 20 feet long). After I committed to it then I just--boom. It clicked. And so I thought all I had to do was step off the highline on the Spire and it would be like that, but that wasn't the case at all. It was still scary. So I started trying to really mentally prepare myself for the next time. [“Scott changed his focus from pure balance, to a more holistic approach of mental

visualization, line and distance perception, and of course, a balanced regiment of practice." (Carpenter, *The Evolution of Slacklining*)] Before I'd go to bed and when I'd wake up in the morning I would imagine being out there, imagine being comfortable, and then imagine stepping onto the flake at the other side."

Lost Arrow Spire Crossing '85

By the time Scott made it back to the Lost Arrow Spire in the summer of '85, Chris didn't want to go back. Chris writes: "My passion for highline was beginning to wane at this time. I was a senior in high school with college knocking at my door. I was urged by Scott to return with him to Yosemite that summer of '85, yet I declined and moved to San Diego in pursuit of my own independence. As a slackliner, I had accomplished my goals. "Swing walking" close to the ground and riding the line were my specialties. Highlining, while extremely rewarding, just wasn't as fun for me as swinging. Scott, however, was driven. He returned to "The Spire" that summer and recruited his friends Matt Dancy and Ken Klis as the climbing crew. Another acquaintance, Paul Borne, showed much enthusiasm and was brought along to help rig the highline.

Scott and Paul rigged the line late in the afternoon July 12, 1985 [once again on the one inch tubular threaded with two 9/16ths and a piece of 3 mil purlon]. The day was very breezy and the wind continued to blow throughout the night. The next morning at 8:00 am the breeze died down. Now was the perfect time. Early morning, fresh and ready to go, Scott rappelled down to the highline. He traversed the line Tyrolean style so that he could walk from the spire to the Valley wall. Once in place and secured to the highline, Scott took his time to mentally prepare himself. He could feel the confidence swell within himself. This was not new to him. He had stood here before, and he was truly lusting to reach the other side. There were a number of false starts; but this year, he could nimbly jump back to the spire with ease. On two different occasions he got out as many as five steps only to fall, grasping firmly to the line with his hands. Hardly shaken from the events his determination pushed him. Again, being five steps out, he could feel himself loosing his balance. Yet this time something clicked within his mind. . . . He had now walked 45 of the 55 foot walk, and he was feeling pretty certain he would make it. From the gallery of viewers there was uncertainty and complete silence, except for the clicking of camera shutters. The smile on Scott's face grew. With calm resolution, he gracefully took his last step to the granite ledge that had eluded him the year before. The jubilation was enormous. Scott Balcom had successfully walked the Lost Arrow Spire on July 13, 1985, and with that walk inspired the growth of highlining on slacklines as we now know it." [*The Evolution of Slacklining*]

Scott talks about this "click"--that switch in his mindset--in our interview: "The real turning point for me was... I felt like I was lusting after the other side. Like I wanted to be over there, and I wasn't taking care of being...now. And it took me a few months to realize this. I was taking a shower and all of a sudden I thought "OMG, this is the ultimate be here now kind of scenario."



But I was out there about 4 or 5 steps and all of a sudden I'm like, you know what? I'm struggling, I'm struggling, and I'm like... okay, YES, it feels like you're jumping into cold water. YES, it's scary as fuck. *But just focus on balance.* What does it take to be balanced RIGHT now? Don't look at the other side---the other side doesn't matter. You're not there. Just BE. Right here. Right now! The conversation with balance, you are having NOW.

And I didn't just all of a sudden enter flow state. That didn't click. But the click was that now I had something to focus on to keep out the fear. To keep out the feeling of that tearing away as you step away from the rock. So now, I was just like, "Okay, step. Okay, balance. Balance, balance, step, balance, balance, step." And then I was maybe ten steps away...maybe like 3/4 of the way across... and I felt, "Okay! NOTHING is gonna knock me off this line now."

As you know, every line is different, so trying to figure out what a line is like when you're scared out of your mind is hard enough. But then, if it's in the neighborhood you've been walking, you start to get the feel of the line. You start to think, "Okay, okay, okay. We're slacklining! Right! I remember now!" Because when you initially go to step off of it, you're thinking, "HOLY SHIT. There's no way that thing is gonna hold me. It's gonna just...ya know..." You start to question everything.

And I chose to walk off that day because nobody had ever crossed the Spire before me, and I didn't want anyone challenging it. There are some who might say, "If you scoot really far out and then you walk part way across, then you didn't really walk the *whole* thing." I wanted to WALK from the spire TO the rim of the valley. In a very literal sense."

The Monkey Face

Dean continues the story: "Less than a year later, Grosowsky and Ellington teamed up with climbing master Brooke Sandahl for the Monkey Face Gap, in Smith Rock, Oregon.

'We didn't want any more bolts breaking, so we ran the calcs and...used three-quarter by seven-inch bolts and fabricated our own hangers out of ninety-degree angle steel,' Sandahl remembers. 'We started the walks out of the Monkey's mouth. Adam walked the line first. Jeff followed and onsighted it.' The humble Sandahl leaves his own walk out. 'A few years later, I think 1990, Adam went up there again and free soloed the cable!'



For the most part, though, slacklining remained hidden in the trees, practiced only by a few who were drawn to the silence and beauty of intuitive movement. Among them was Darrin Carter.” (*The Space Between*)

Darrin Carter

Watching Scott’s failed Spire attempt in ‘84 planted the seeds in Darrin’s mind that allowed him to prove himself

as a top highline contender over the next decade-- becoming the first slackline free soloist, and the second person to cross the Lost Arrow Spire.

Yet, for a while, Darrin just kind of hoped that feeling would go away. According to Scott, “You have to remember we grew up together... I’ve known Darrin since third grade. Chris and I picked up slackline right away. Darrin is kind of a ‘muscler’ guy; the kind of guy that doesn’t have very good footwork when he climbs because he is so reliant on his muscles. He’s the kind of guy that overhanging face is awesome, but slab climbing is like, ‘FUCK!’ For Darrin, it was really hard for him because he was so arm oriented. He kind of kept on hoping that it would go away, but after I successfully walked the Spire ‘85, it started to weigh heavily on him.

You know that feeling when you see somebody do something? Like if you watch somebody BASE jump and you’ve never seen BASE jumping, you’re like, ‘HOLY FUCK. That was unbelievable!’ And you think, ‘They can do that, but I couldn’t do that.’ But when your FRIEND does it, you’re like, ‘FUCK YOU! If you can do that, I can do that!’ So when him and Chuck saw me walk the Spire... that weighed heavily on those guys. And they started getting...well, I don’t even know how to describe it. If I tried to give Darrin any advice, he did NOT want any advice, but ya know, they were determined to go walk the Spire, and they continued to go to Yosemite every year until they did in ‘93.”

In that period of 8 years between Scott’s first crossing and Darrin’s second, Scott got married and moved to Tucson. Darrin started dating Chris Carpenter’s sister, so he also moved to Tucson for a few years. During that time, Darrin had never set up a slackline and never owned his own slackline, but he would go over and slackline with Scott all the time. Eventually he got pretty good and Scott told him, “‘You know what Darrin? You should buy a slackline. You’re pretty fucking good at it now.’ And he goes, ‘Yeah I keep on wishing it would go away.’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, but NOW you can do it.’ And he’s like, ‘Yeah..I guess.’” After that, Darrin

moved to Hawaii and started slacklining all the time, still visiting Yosemite every summer. He began to spend hours training obsessively for one goal: soloing the Lost Arrow Spire without a leash.

He first attempted the spire (wearing a leash) in the summer of '92, but it proved unattainable that first time around. In 1993, he returned and made the second crossing of the chasm with a leash, and he was now the only other person to walk the Lost Arrow Spire in Yosemite.

"Darrin's domination in the sport of highlining, however, didn't really come about until he moved to Tucson, AZ in 1995. His training ground was a rock formation in the Santa Catalina Mountains called the Fins.



Scott had attempted a walk at this location in 1987 with no success. Darrin returned to that same spot with Scott in April of 1995. With absolute determination and the intended domination of his goal to become the ultimate highliner, Darrin made eight consecutive one way crossings of this 65-foot span. Scott made one. A demon inside Darrin was born. He could feel within himself that his purpose in life now made sense. With

bold conviction, Darrin made multiple trips to the Fins over a number of weeks and made highlining his life's work. He was a machine. . . and his focus naturally shifted to mastering the Lost Arrow Spire. The 10th year anniversary of Scott's crossing of the Spire became Darrin's target date for his Spire mastery. Darrin made his training for this new goal a job. His highline technique truly became flawless. He built within himself this incredible ability to block out the majority of fear that is associated with walking up high. . . . Darrin made his return trip to the Spire in July of '95 with complete confidence and intensity. Scott accompanied Darrin's crew of friends that included Chuck Tucker and Tim Kirkwood. On the actual day of the walk, Darrin was like a caged animal waiting to be cut loose. Pacing, barking instructions, impatient and ready to go, Darrin had a unique way of psyching himself up. The brunt of his intensity was aimed at Chuck Tucker (also present to walk the Spire that day). Chuck, however, passively let Darrin do his thing while Scott Balcom and Tim Kirkwood assisted with the line setup. Once the line was ready to go, Darrin did just what he had set out to do. He walked the hell out of that line. Very confident and in the now, Darrin walked with smooth solid technique. First he made a number of one way crossings. Then he really got in the groove and started turning around, walking back and forth. On one occasion he even walked

for about 20 minutes without stopping. Scott made a crossing for old time sakes. Chuck Tucker also managed to get across, with his very unorthodox slacklining style, for the second time (He successfully walked the Spire in 1994 his first time). Now that Darrin had mastered the Lost Arrow Spire, he did take it one step further. It was the sort of thing one thinks about yet rarely tries." [*The Evolution of Slacklining*]

Scott tells the story this way: "In '95, we all went back up there on the 10th anniversary of the first walk, my first walk. We walked on Darrin's rig, and Darrin's rig was one piece of tubular nylon one inch, with one piece of half inch stuck inside--the half inch hero loop stuff. We argued about it up and down. Darrin and I...he's really hard headed and I'm...I prefer to think of myself as stubborn. And we would argue about it, but he was the guy then right? Because by then Darrin was getting really good. And now I've passed the torch to him. He's gonna walk back and forth and I'm gonna walk once, so I have to kind of relinquish the control. 'Okay, you weigh 50 lbs more than me. You walk it, I'll walk it. You weigh more than me. As long as it doesn't kill you, it won't kill me.'...But that line was embarrassingly light, and tied with a clove hitch... Anyway, Darrin walked it in '93, and Chongo walked it in '94, and then in '95 all three of us walked. I walked once. Chongo walked once, and tried to walk back, but was too drunk by then because he had been taking a little tequila to ease the burden of fear. And then that little bit of tequila ended up to be a little more tequila, and by the time he tried a second crossing, he was a little too buzzed for that. But Darrin broke out and walked back and forth and back and forth. But he would only turn one way, so eventually his leash...the only thing that would keep him from staying out there forever was his leash...was twisting into a knot and he would eventually have to stop because he didn't have a counter clockwise turn. But he would talk shit to himself to psyche himself up. His favorite thing to do would be to start yelling at Chongo...and start telling Chongo what a piece of shit he was."

"Carter had had a harsh past, and leashless highlining seemed a way to break free. As he stood on the rim of the Lost Arrow Gap in 1995, he psyched himself up with insults. "Shit, dude, you're trailer trash. You weren't supposed to be first at anything." But this time he pioneered the way, becoming the first to confront that wild air unprotected [and free solo the Lost Arrow Spire]. He went on to solo a sixty-two-foot gap across the Fins at Mount Lemmon, Arizona, as well as an eighty-foot gap between the two buildings, live on TV, for *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*. "I felt bulletproof!" he remembers. Slacklining stood still for a while after Carter's intense feats. There seemed no logical step forward." (*The Space Between*)

Dean Potter

Dean Potter was introduced to slacklining in 1993 in Joshua Tree by none other than Chuck "Chongo" Tucker. In the slackline community, Dean went on to become known for his many free solo ascents (including being the second person to free solo the spire in 2003, walking it both ways) and his invention of BASElining (walking a highline free solo and then BASE jumping off). Additionally, he is often referred to as the father figure of the new generation. The media attention he gave to slacklining inspired a new generation of slackers all around

the globe. As Scott Balcom puts it, “When Dean potter walked the Lost Arrow Spire, that was the end of the beginning.” It was the start of a new era.

I’ll let Dean give you the details himself.

The following is an excerpt from his article, *The Space Between*:

“White-throated swifts dart past as I stand on the Upper Rim of Yosemite Valley. Their whoosh makes me flinch, splintering my concentration on the Lost Arrow Spire. I check the rope around the tree, clip in with my sticht plate and rappel into the shadowed notch. My lucky red swami cuts into my lower ribcage, constricting airflow.

Sixty feet down I reach a ledge and stare at another strand of webbing. The one-inch ribbon flutters in the air, spanning the sixty-foot gap between myself and the Spire’s tip, half a mile



above the Valley floor. I can’t help thinking of blood as I unwrap myself from the crimson belt and let it drop to my bare feet.

I carefully rub chalk into the sole of each foot, then sit on the edge of the highline and focus my entire attention on my outward breath. My ears ring with my sharp exhalations. Tremors rush up my spine and into the base of

my skull. A wave moves across the line and into my flesh. I rock forward, stand up unattached and unleash everything within me.

My vision turns black and white except for the searing red line. Sounds fade. I feel faint, face flushed with heat. My muscles tense, but I hold calmness in my center and loosen my arms from the shoulders to my fingertips. The moment sickens me, and my mind tries to stop it, but I command myself to walk.

The line rattles in all directions, forcing me to lean aggressively sideways. Catching the line would be impossible if I slipped in this position, but I relax through the uncertainty.

Rational thought disappears. Midway across I find precision and begin to play, toying with the thin ribbon and immense air. I sway serenely, as if I could float to the end. With a few quick steps I spring forward, feet hitting the coarse white granite of the spire. My eardrums reverberate with my own raw scream.

My eyes turn back to the line. I want more! I face the gap, reaching out my right foot. Deep blues and varied greens shine into my eyes. Muffled vehicle noises from the Valley floor filter into my awareness. I'm halted by a clear voice in my head--the words of a friend who hit the deck and lived. 'The moment you feel unstoppable,' it says, 'is the time you need to say, 'I've had enough.' Golden light flickers through my eyelids. I sit down in disbelief and think back to my first experience on the line.

MY FIRST TIME:

My feet padded softly through Joshua Tree's warm gravelly sand. It was spring 1993; I was eight months into my first road trip out West, and finger injuries prohibited me from climbing. Depressed, completely uninspired and almost out of money, I cruised Hidden Valley campground, searching for a lift.

Rowdy voices caught my attention. I picked up my gaze to see a round figure silhouetted in the fading light, blissfully dancing. I stared: he was balancing on a line, swaggering forward with an exaggerated sensuality. Long, drawn-out "woahs" and "yeahs" whooped out of his mouth while his onlookers hollered, "Yah, Chongo!"



The line was pulled tight over a small boulder and stretched to a faded blue Chevy van. Chongo strutted, hips flowing in a manner not usually seen in men. He began bouncing violently, until, with a sharp twang, the line ejected him onto the ground. He landed upright, the webbing vibrating in the air behind him. Then his shape hunched a little and he slipped into the van, followed by an assortment of grungy climbers and desert junkies.

Too embarrassed to introduce myself, I lurked outside, peering in through the foggy windows. Finally, I strolled back to my tent absorbed with the bop of the line.

The next morning I gravitated back. Salty campers were taking turns getting tossed off the thin red ribbon. Chuck "Chongo" Tucker sat back in the shade, egging them on. I sat down beside him. Thick strands of oily brown hair hung over his perma-dirt tan. He grinned a smile of missing teeth.

'Try it!' he said. "It's bitchin'." I nodded and stared into his mesmerizing blue eyes. 'Just relax, man,' he said. I felt like he was hypnotizing me. "Keep your eyes fixed on a single point at the other side.'

Chongo strolled to the line, sat down on it and groaned, then lifted his body until he was standing. The flat webbing barely moved. He embellished his straight back and gaze, breathing calmly for us to catch what he was doing, then stepped gently back to the sand.

In a moment, I was staring down the line. Granite domes and springtime desert greens condensed down to the blue van on the other side. I focused on the ratty knot, which quaked as I stepped nearer. The line went berserk; my stomach muscles rapidly tensed. I threw full extension arm swings, crouched down and rocked out just enough to ride the spastic line to the Chevy bumper. Exultant, I lurched onto the van.

We spent the next weeks stretching nylon. Chongo showed me his styling moves, recounted slacklining's early days and exposed my weaknesses. 'You're learning the basics too quickly,' he said one evening. 'Those who have to really work become true masters. Naturals rarely learn to keep trying.' I took his words to heart, exhausting myself on the line.

Chongo lived in a cave, where he stitched "Chongo" brand clothing with a foot-pedal sewing machine. Though he owned only a few backpacks of possessions and scraped up just enough cash to exist, he seemed to share everything he had. I quickly came to admire him, as much for his slacklining as for his lifestyle. As my interest deepened, he talked of "highlining," mostly about the Lost Arrow Spire. Others, he told me, had mastered "slackin'" more than he had. Inspired, I started searching for whatever tales I could find. . . .

THE VALLEY

In the spring of 1993, I left Chongo in Joshua Tree and headed north toward Yosemite. Childlike dreams of flying and walking on air no longer seemed out of the question. Before splitting town, I spent more than half my remaining cash on tubular webbing for a 150-foot, double-threaded high line.



Fresh from the little crags of J-Tree, I found the Valley walls more daunting than I'd envisioned. I was also not ready for the law enforcement rangers. I quickly felt hunted. Fortunately, some savvy locals took me in. . . . Having survived my first week in the Valley, I needed to slack. I chose two huge sugar pines carefully, so I could see the Lost Arrow and

Yosemite Falls, thousands of feet above. After protecting the tree trunks with sturdy branches, my friends and I wrapped them with old climbing rope, leveled the line and started yankin'. Luckily even the climbing rifferaff could see that we didn't know what we were doing. After giving us some well-deserved shit, they joined in to pull.

Many attempts later the line came up without twists. Six feet atop the line, hovering in the trees, I stared at the Falls as the mist lit up. My thoughts went blank. I absorbed the line's wobble with my belly. I was the warm breeze, dappled light, swaying branches and deep sky. Even the vicious springtime mosquitos didn't deter me from the soft steps. Nothing else existed, not even the ranger prowling back and forth on the blacktop, glancing up at me as if some obscure rule were being broken.

That night I partied a little harder than I should have, then retired to the caves behind Camp 4. Late the following afternoon, mouth dry and vile, I went to the line. 'NO!' I yelled, clenching my teeth and growling. 'IT'S GONE!'

My friends Brian the Peasant and "The Pres" lurked nearby on their beater bicycles,

covering, ready to pedal hard if I came at them. 'What the fuck!' I stuttered, saying "fuck" over and over. Brian choked off more laughter, and burst out, 'We t-t-told him not to cut it, but the stupid t-tool wouldn't listen and it WHIP-SLAPPED HIS PAG ASS!'

My anger swelled, then dissipated with breaths of fresh spring air. I was, after all, not in handcuffs--and my world had a floating, soaring lightness that the ranger might never have experienced. At the same time, I was filled with curiosity: Why was he so quick to cut our line, when it wasn't illegal?

THE WIND

Before I could attempt Lost Arrow myself, Yosemite law enforcement made my life too stressful. It's forbidden to sleep under the stars without a permit in the Valley, and I was too broke to pay for camping. I was content to eat crackers and free condiments if it meant being free a little longer.

Eventually, I was drawn to the landscape of Moab, Utah. The desert stilled me. In its sparseness, I became more aware of the beauty of lines and of the spaces they created: the



hollows between canyon walls, the curves traced by the edges of a spire. All distractions submerged in a radical simplicity of form and emptiness, light and shadow, varnished red sandstone and deep blue sky.

I often tranced out beneath my favorite petroglyph, in a sort of landscape-induced meditation. Carved in a sandstone cliff centuries ago, a shaman walks a line, his hands outstretched to the great mystery. Native Americans have told me, 'He is traveling between the material and spiritual worlds.'



The leash held me to the earth, but I wanted to fly free. In Joshua Tree, I took my first steps onto Chongo's thirty-five foot Potato Head Gap line, no leash jiggling. Once, the space surrounding the line had been a void; now it was flowing liquid. I walked slowly, pressing against it.

One step from the opposite end, I spun, turning my back to my friends. The line hummed as a wind came up. In the center, immobile, I studied individual rock crystals near the far anchor. Something urged me to move, but I was locked in place.

Electricity shot through my body. I reached forward, gripping the thin ribbon with my toes, then almost ran to the safety of the other side as a violent gust of wind railed through the gap. Everything not tied down flew; the crash pad protecting the line from the edge soared away. My friends cringed and yelled.

I took a deep breath, remembering the last time I had felt such a bizarre wind: dusk, November 23, 1998, below the Leaning Tower. Less than a mile away, climbing legend Dan Osman lay dead on the ground, main line severed and sailing in the high wind above him.



Some Native Americans believe that when a warrior dies a powerful wind is released. Somehow, my death wind had come but I was still alive.

CONNECTING

Slacklining had allowed me to grow. Now, I wanted to help open the way for others. Back in the Valley, we started throwing slackline raves,

transforming the top of the Rostrum into a multi day outdoor party. We car-shuttled people to the drop-off point, trance rhythm thumping from the Crate amplifier. We'd ride the skyline, then pass my old red two-inch swami to the next walker, carefully tie him or her into the 20,000-pound-strong, double steel rings that slid along the triplicate webbing and rope, and watch, in full party mode, as dozens of first-time high-walkers broke through. Our foreign climber friends visiting the Valley brought the stoke home with them, and soon slacklining multiplied worldwide....

GOSSIP

The Three Gossips had called to me ever since I took my first drive into Arches National Park. I could almost hear those 300-foot sandstone ladies whispering, 'Join us.' After thirteen years I finally did. I couldn't resist being part of that landscape any longer.

During a few days, across spans similar to that of the Lost Arrow, I walked back and forth hundreds of times, leashless, nonstop. The three goddesses held me in a state of sharpened bliss.

For more than a month I relived the moments. Then I heard the soft beckoning again. This time, I chose to free solo a sandstone ribbon: Delicate Arch. Attached only by the tips of my fingers and toes, I felt soothing calmness absorb my entire being.

I was blindly consumed.

Though nothing I did was illegal, within two days, the Park Service forbade climbing on named arches and implemented a ban on slacklining within Arches and Canyonlands National Parks--the first ever in a National Park. The climbing community grew angry because my acts had affected their access. Their fears are valid; I'm gripped, too. Wild lands are diminishing, as are liberties. But I will never bow to unnatural restrictions. People are afraid of losing their access, but what good is a land where you are no longer free? Now the Gossips really have something to talk about.

THE BRIDGE



I thought my own mind was pretty open, but when I first heard of sightless “Death Walks,” I was in disbelief. But there they were, in the records: a blindfolded Rudy Omankowsky walked a 320-meter wire at Cheddar Gorge, England, 145 meters off the deck, on September 28, 1961. A year later, his son, Rudy Omankowsky, Jr., crossed Lake Gerardmer in France, blindfolded. The walk was 200 meters high; the length, 1,200 meters. I’ve tried to walk the slackline many years now without using my eyesight. The furthest I’ve gotten is a thirteen-meter garden line. The idea of stepping onto a highline, above a death fall, unprotected, darkened eyes burning with sweat, terrifies and eludes me. . . Funambulists through the ages have tried to share their insights, balancing everything on the line to demonstrate life’s possibilities. As our world drastically changes and hatred and war spread out of control, it’s clear to me that we must try to see connections across the gaps between us.

‘Life is being on the wire; everything else is just waiting,’ the legendary wirewalker, the Great Wallenda, once said. Cool webbing vibrates under my calloused feet; my breath calms and the mental chatter slows. For scattered moments I am Darrin Carter, unable to believe that a “trailer-trash” kid can walk above the world; I am Chongo, dancing with the roundness of my belly like the orbit of the earth. . . I am a Yosemite law-enforcement ranger pacing back and forth on an invisible blacktop line; I am the Great Wallenda, falling to my death from a wire stretched between two ten-story buildings in Puerto Rico as a forty-kilometer-per-hour wind howls; I am George W. Bush reaching out my trembling hands to sign on the line that sends men and women to die for oil. I am a sandstone shaman, traveling the line between the material and the spiritual.



We who walk the narrow line have stood for free thinking for thousands of years. Let us continue balancing within the world as we try to understand the space between.”

Andy Lewis

Another important figure in the history of slacklining in our very own Pastor, Andy motherfucking Lewis. Andy is known for an astounding amount of feats in the slackline world. He is known as the father of tricklining, one of the few practitioners of BASElining and free solo, the inventor of spacenets, the first to land a feet to feet backflip on slackline, the first to rig *and* walk the first 50m, 60m, and 100m long highlines in the history of the sport, and one of the founding organizers of the GGBY (Gobble Gobble Bitches Yeah) and THC (The Humboldt Classic) festivals in the United States. Andy, like Dean, helped spread our faith around the world with the media attention he gave to slacklining; most notably, when performing tricklining in the 2012 Superbowl Halftime Show, front and middle stage, live, with Madonna, and 120 million people watching. Furthermore, he is widely credited for the

creation of the term “Slacklife” and for religiously following the lifestyle it entails. In fact, it is his influence and use of this term that inspired Kimberly Weglin to formalize the Church under the eyes of the law and officially name our religion, “The Slacklife.” To this day Andy Lewis is the only slackliner in the world to have held the titles of freesolo world record, highline world record, and overall tricklining world champion--a feat that is unlikely to be repeated anytime soon. Perhaps, his most proud accomplishment---at least in the eye’s of the Church--is the day he free soloed a line, naked, with the leash attached to his balls. Epic.



And this isn't even everything he's done. Andy, himself, was gracious enough to write out some of the details of his long journey through the Slacklife for all of you to read:

“I was born October 7, 1986 in California. I was raised by two amazing parents, Roger and Lynn Lewis, who have been together for nearly 30 years and helped me embrace freedom of thought as well as the wonder of the outdoors from a very young age. My father will tell you stories of hiking “Andrew” (or “Drew”) around in a backpack through the redwood trees before I could even open my eyes. “I could see that he loved the smell of the trees and smiled when the sun hit his face,” says Roger Lewis.

I grew up as an athlete: a Boy Scout, a student, an artist, and always loved trying new things. I was never afraid to be in front of the class or volunteer to go on stage at rallies, and I loved to just participate in all activities. I took to many arts like drawing, painting, photography, woodworking, and ceramics. I also took to many school sports like Track and Field, Soccer, Basketball, Baseball, and many extra-curricular sports like mountain biking, surfing, rollerblading, skateboarding, unicycling, and eventually found my way into rock climbing.



Rock climbing gave me an even bigger purpose to be outdoors and explore new areas. The more that I ventured into rock climbing, the more I began to embrace and expand my ideas of what I could climb and access. I had always climbed trees as a kid and would always be found on the roofs of the school. Kids would cheer as I threw balls, frisbees, playing cards, and other

miscellaneous toys that were lost to the roof.

Climbing on school roofs and trees soon turned into scaling boulders. Boulders soon turned to cliffs, towers, buildings, and eventually huge walls of seemingly endless stone. Rock Climbing even became the theme of my first ever long road trip. With two of my best friends I embarked upon on a journey of freedom in lieu of my high school graduation in 2004, all based upon finding awesome places to climb. It was on this road trip that I stumbled upon "Slackline." It was also the first time I had really been exposed to the "Slacklife," even though that name or title didn't exist yet.

I first was exposed to Slacklines in Yosemite National Park. My friends and I passed by the loose lines in Yosemite on the way to climb boulders in the Valley, and we didn't even know what they were. We ended up never even trying the lines before leaving.

Shortly after the road trip, my good friend George Upton invited me and our mutual friend, David Gumbiner, out to teach us how to rig a basic slackline (which George's brother, Charles Upton, had taught George how to set up). Slacklines were still very rudimentary then, being rigged with just a piece of webbing and some carabiners. George, David, and I all set up the line, got it just tight enough to walk, and really experienced Slackline for the first time together.

I got on the line and immediately had to try over and over again until I could walk across. It took me almost half an hour to get across the nearly 30' foot loose orange nylon line, and that was it; I was hooked. The very next day I bought my own materials to rig a slackline: 65' of orange tubular nylon, and a single aluminum non-locking carabiner.

Day after day I couldn't and didn't stop slacklining. Slacklining provided a purpose for me that involved an all encompassing set of skills to accomplish. The search for locations, the adventure of accessing beautiful locations, an artistic outlet for visual and physical movement...and the skills even gave me the ability to "fly." Well, it was more like floating, but it was more air, and more exposure than I was ever used to.

Most importantly there was-- all of a sudden-- more of a reason than ever to climb, rig, balance, focus,



breathe, and eventually jump off the most beautiful points you can both find and access. To me, Slacklining wasn't a sport, it was a lifestyle. And I eventually deemed it that by naming it Slacklife. "One part Slack, one part Life," I would joke.

Technically, this statement originated from my mother, Lynn Lewis. I slacklined everyday for a long time and my Mom took pride in calling me a Slacker.

"Andy, where are you going?" She'd ask lovingly.

"I'm going slacklining MOM!" I would reply vaguely, running out of the front door on my way to my next adventure.

"Oh, the life of a slacker." I'd hear her reply chuckling as I closed the door behind me.

We had this exchange multiple times a week, for years. I eventually embraced it and it transitioned into what I deemed as "the Slacklife." This was because whenever I wasn't in school, or working, I would be Slacklining-- and pushing everyone else around me to try to do the same! It became a goal for me to show everyone I could what Slacklining was and furthermore-- convince everyone that they, too, could learn to Slackline. The Slacklife was a system based upon using the metaphors built from learning to walk a slackline to improve, advance, and motivate my life-- on and off the line.

Slacklife became a religion for me because it encompassed everything. It was synonymous with freedom; physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally-- and I embraced it fully. After starting slacklining in 2004, I began to train more and more, but I didn't really consider it training. I considered it playing. I started to be able to play on the line, creating poses and movements, and began to say "anything you can do on the ground, you can do on the line."

In 2005, I landed the first ever backflip on a slackline, feet to feet, less than 2 years after learning to walk...and I had learned it completely on the Slackline. No trampoline training. No gymnastics teacher. It manifested simply from playing on Slacklines. A year later, in 2006, I landed a squirrel backflip on the line. A squirrel backflip is a backflip but you grab your feet behind your head as you flip. I landed it perfectly and it gained incredible recognition. It got me much, much, more publicity than the other backflip because it was really clean and beautiful. I was all of a sudden known in the slackline and climbing communities. It was even purchased by NIKE to use in their 2008 world wide commercial show everyday during the Olympics.

I embraced Slackline as the medium for which I could learn and train. It became my mantra. "Anything you can do on the ground, you can do on the line." This outlook helped me create a massive amount of the foundational movements on the Slackline. Not only was I creating the movements, but my creativity allowed me to name each movement too. I would give unique names to each of these poses, jumps, spins, grabs, flips, and "combos." Maybe, most importantly, I began to post them online and share them with the world. I slowly became known as "Mr.Slackline," and started to gain worldwide recognition for the creativity and



sustenance I was giving to what would soon become a sport.

I was creating so much that it gave me an edge throughout every Slackline Contest from 2008-2011; winning ALL 4 overall world championships back, to back, to back, to back. My dedication to the sport went far enough that I even started titling the movements I was creating as a new style of Slackline; which I deemed as "Trickline." I released a slackline set up with Gibbon Slacklines in 2013, becoming the first set up in the world to ever be sold as a "Trickline." The way I saw it, competitive slacklining wasn't slacklining; it was completely unique and needed to be

embraced; embraced as "Tricklining." "Not all Slackliners are Trickliners, and most Trickliners... usually aren't very good slackliners," I would joke.

During my training and competitive circuits mastering Trickline, from 2008-2011, I also managed to rig and walk the first 50m, 60m, and 100m long highlines in the history of the sport. I also ended up snagging the world record free solo highline walk in 2010, and then shattered my own record in 2011-- breaking the world record by 60 feet. In 2011 alone, I walked 101 Highlines, 64 of them-- completely without protection; including the world record.

Day after day I woke up and my first thought was "I wonder if today is the day I'll die?" I was not having a continuous philosophical existential crisis, I was in training to break a world record. I wanted to become the "Best Slackliner in the World," and alongside of pushing acrobatics, technical body movement, rigging, and highlining-- I had become obsessed with the "Freesolo Record" set by Dean Potter; who at the time was unanimously considered the boldest adventure athlete on the planet. Without the use of a harness or leash, without the use of a parachute or any safety device, I wanted to successfully walk the longest highline in the world; I had to if I wanted to be considered the best. I would sacrifice my life willingly if I failed myself in doing so. I wanted to be the best, I needed to be, and I had to prove it, but not to anyone else--just to myself.

Do not mistake this as a death wish, for I only dreamt of using the consequence of death to reveal to myself the true motivation I had for life. Sacrificing my life for the progression of Slackline would only be honored if my mind and body faltered during my journey. For this reason I disallowed the assumption of failure, for nothing halts motivation more effectively. Assuming success distinctly empowered me-- it inspired and drove my training. Training I



needed to combat death from failure. The only way to push myself to a new level was by repeatedly executing my actions PERFECTLY, even in the face of horrific injury or death.

What I didn't expect was how much resistance I would be met with from EVERYONE-- the city, police, firemen, landowners, etc (obviously) and less obviously resistance from my community, friends and family. "Selfish" was the sentiment of most, and love was always the basis for concern. It was the strangest dichotomy to have a dream that drove your every waking moment and gave you the power that made you... you, yet literally everyone in your life simply WOULD NOT support you. More concerning, they honestly believed that people SHOULD NOT support it. What ended up happening was that everyone slowly realized the most important thing was that they COULD NOT stop me.

The Slacklife helped me analytically break down every goal in my life as if it were as simple and straightforward as a slackline. And let me tell you, I did not just one day say "...you know, I'm going to break the freesolo world record." This was a long long process of dreaming and completing goals. In 2006, my first real goal in highline was sending a single highline. My sights were set on walking the Lost Arrow Spire Highline; the first and most iconic highline ever rigged. Scott Balcom had established the line before I was born, and the line was instantly a right of passage for all slackliners.

Funny enough, I remember in 2007, my Mom asking me one very serious question before I left to Yosemite Valley to attempt to send the prestigious gap. My mother pulled me out of the car, hugged me with all her might, pulled back, held me with her strong, confident, comfortable hands, looked me right in the eyes and said, "Boo, do don't do this...?", with an obvious weakness in her voice. In which I responded " Mom, I have to do this. I won't be able to stop thinking about until I finish this." She was visibly upset, but responded, "Well, just promise me you will stay safe." Having never done anything like this, and not really knowing the dangers or risks, I boldface lied to my mother and said, "Don't worry mom, I will be safe," and I drove off with tears in her eyes. However, for some reason I could simultaneously feel

her encouragement and support; because I was doing what I loved. A mantra my mother would repeat to me daily for my entire childhood, "do what you love."

I took my dream of walking Lost Arrow and when I sent that line. MY stoke for slackline exploded into 100 new dreams. I was boosted with confidence from walking the Spire and I wanted to set the highline

record for longest highline walk, I wanted to "be the best Trickliner in the world," I thought-- even though the word trickline I still had to make up, into a dream of Free soloing Lost arrow, and when I stepped onto the summit after walking across the Lost Arrow Spire Highline free solo in 2009, my sights were taking aim at the Free solo record. I had spent so much focus on Lost Arrow that I got my walks down to 31 steps there and 27 on the way



back. I broke down the line literally step by step. That's when it hit me, all I had left to do to complete any task was use my Slacklife Philosophy to complete my dream by laying out how I would accomplish it (literally) step by step-- extrapolated over a timeline.

Just like a slackline, I identified my goal of the free solo record as the end of the line, but I had to learn to embrace every step across the line to reach my goal. But, the record was simultaneously (a.) the sign of the confidence to able to walk any highline unleashed, as well as (b.) an exit plan to certifiably have a goal that when I reach it, I would maybe be able to stop taking the risk of the consequence of death, to push my goals. However, I felt that the fire in my heart would never subside-- even with an exit plan. The most dark, daunting, whispers in the back of my mind was always, "You need an exit plan, otherwise, you will eventually draw an "X" out of the deck." So outside of everything, breaking the record was my way of hopefully tricking myself to quit. For there was one thing that I knew for sure. I would either break the record, or I was going to die trying.

When I started to break down how I would attempt the record I came to the conclusion that there are 52 weeks in a year and in 2009, I wanted to walk 1 highline a week to maximize my currency in balance and rigging, and forfeit as much of my time into the pragmatic exploration of every detail of Highlining. Finding a line, discovering anchors, rigging uniquely,

and sending the line in control, every step. This goal of 52 highlines a year became 100 lines in a year 2010, and then 100 lines AND 1 a week FREE SOLO by 2011; I ended 2011 with 64 free solos.

I figured that a total of 52 Free solos in a calendar year would keep my mind current enough for long enough, to be able to have a chance at the record. All of these High lines were supposed to be different and (hopefully) newly established Highlines. It seemed to me like all of a sudden I was free soloing a highline at least once a week, just to stay current. All so that I could continue my intimate relationship with the fear of death, consistently, all year round. Otherwise, I felt as if I would surely fail, paying the ultimate price of death.

Andy Lewis Journal Entry (unedited) - 11/18/2011

"Trusting myself was the challenge. Continuously fighting my thoughts. Questioning my intuition. "Dying would be so easy," I thought. Slip once off of any part of the line; and that's it. D.e.a.d. dead. I found myself sitting on the highline free solo; hovering hundreds of feet high. I backed off the line without even standing up. Beautiful. Endless. Magnificent. My confidence was shrunk by the massive red desert cliffs that fell away into the exposure. Enthralled; hypnotized by the idea of the solo walk. But, this was not just any free solo. This was THE free solo. 180ft long, 200 ft high. If I were to walk this line free solo, it would be longest in slackline history. No cavalleties. No net. No safety leash. Just me, my slackline, and the emptiness.

"All year," I thought, as I paced around our base camp. I have been soloing all year. Up until this moment I had wanted to walk 52 different highlines free solo; 1 for every week of the year. A couple days before I rigged this line, I finished my 52 solos, more than a month early! I had no need to solo this line. I had already achieved my goal. I had not been thinking about walking this line specifically. Nor, would I have ever dreamed that I could walk it solo. But then it hit me. I had been walking all these lines-- just for this moment. This wasn't time to think about goals, or numbers, or what my body would sound like when it hit the sandstone hundreds of feet below the line... It was time to be me. It was time to do what I do best. It was time to show myself what I had trained all year to accomplish. Even though I didn't know I was going to... I had to walk this line free solo.

After 7 hours I scooted out just past the edge like the many times I had done before, but this time I stood up. I gained control and

took step after step. My eyes locked on the anchor across the canyon. I was nearly halfway out on the line when it happened. I mis-stepped... I instantly lost control and all my worst fears came true as I fell. Being in mid air felt like slow motion. I was forced to catch myself! I screamed at the top of my lungs!~ not out of anger or frustration, but pure exhilaration. I had a smile from cheek to cheek and i couldn't believe where i was!~ Dangling, literally by a thread, in the middle of space. Bouncing in the exposure I felt so trapped and so free at the same time. I was alive, but couldn't stand up again; there wasn't enough control. I was 100ft from either cliff edge... with no rope. It took me a few minutes.. but, I scooted back safely.

I felt so relieved to be back on the cliff, but I was ready to try again. I felt so solid, the rig was perfect, and I just new I could walk it. I wasn't scared this time, but I also wasn't as focused. I started out stronger and faster than the last time, but O got about 15 steps out and I fell and caught again! I came back to the ledge noticeably peeking on adrenaline. I could feel my whole body pulsing with power. I kept pacing and my mind was racing. Everyone around me could see my eyes were glazed over with something powerful.

I was questioning whether or not I wanted to walk this line, but I couldn't stop thinking about the edge, the mount, the line, the tension, the focus, being in the exposure, being free, being perfect, being attentive, being alive.... I had to try again. I was being pulled by an outside force. I was going to send this line, i just knew it.

I scooted out about 3 ft and stood up on the line again. I forced myself to focus, take my time, and started walking. Then something started happening, something really strange.

My vision started to change and go crazy, and i couldn't do anything about it. I was literally losing control of my vision but at the same time I was accessing some other higher mental state. I couldn't focus on the end of the line like usual. I was having a hard time breathing smoothly, and everything started blurring out... slowly being banished from my focus.. everything except for the brilliant white of the highline beneath my feet vanished. The exposure, the background of the hills, even the sky was absorbed into this uncontrollable blur. i

felt as if I was not fully able to be control my own actions. I was being subconsciously controlled by my own brain. Like my heart and my lungs working without thinking, I felt as if I was being walked across this line by my subconscious. By the time i reached the end of the line i was so far gone into this mental state that i couldn't get back to normal for hours. I couldn't eat, or stop smiling. I felt like I could run miles, or climb everest. I wanted to scream across the valley. I have never felt so alive, so in tuned, so mentally and physically affected by only 2 minutes on the line. Even later that night I couldn't sleep.

"Something powerful walked me across that line," I thought laying in bed that night. I didn't know what it was, or how it worked... but I had never felt so potently in touch with myself. I kissed the back of my girlfriend's neck, closed my eyes, and tried to settle my mind to sleep."

Re-reading this reflection of my world record solo was a bit intense as the emotions I put into writing spilled back into my soul. Every word and every feeling is so memorable and so familiar. I remember it as if it were the day it happened and I love the fact that I took the time to put my experience into words, not knowing how meaningful the reflection of it would be later in my life.

I find it interesting to break down this literary experience I created as it is littered with emotion as well as valuable insight to the previous chapter. I gave examples of qualitative analysis: "Continuously fighting my thoughts," and "Dying would be so easy." I also gave examples of quantitative analysis: "Up until this moment I had wanted to walk 52 different highlines free solo; 1 for every week of the year. A couple days before I rigged this line, I finished my 52 solos, more than a month early!" I was literally balanced in my thoughts both qualitatively and quantitatively. I had obviously analyzed the risk I was taking, thoroughly, and it is VERY apparent that I was FULLY-- maybe DREADFULLY-- aware of the worse case scenario-- the ultimate consequence of a quick and probably painless death upon failure.

This is where I would like to make a point that my action to get on this line however rational I may have made it seem to my brain, was still completely irrational. To the public, to my friends, to my family, and even to the people at the highline with me at the time... there really was no apparent reason for me to risk walking this line without protection. They supported the idea simply because... they really had no choice but to try to help me have the confidence to SUCCEED. There was no point in supporting my failure because no one wanted to see me die.

The only real reason that I could come up with of why I got on the line that day was that I knew that I could. I knew that I had practiced. I knew that I had been waiting patiently for my time to come. I knew that this would complete my goal. I knew I was ready and if there

was anytime to get on this highline and attempt to walk it free solo.... The time was NOW. *“It was time to be me. It was time to do what I do best. It was time to show myself what I had trained all year to accomplish. “*

Now I hadn't labeled it yet, but this entry is maybe my oldest documented use of definition positive thinking. For all intents and purposes, yes, I am saying, even IRRATIONALLY, one benefits from disallowing the assumption of failure. Positive thinking, and confidence of success is the first step to inspire, promote, and drive forward progression. I can, I will, I want!

Never forget that this is a non-stop mental battle. Energy can be destroyed by letting yourself get caught in the merry-go-round of fearful, negative thinking. Sometimes it happens almost instantaneously. If you need progression, you will have to TRY YOUR HARDEST. You must focus your energy. You will also need to know when that moment comes, and you are afraid, you will have a choice on how to act. Choose a positive reaction. If you have the time, take the time to balance and analyze your risk vs consequence, but when it comes down to it.... You must embrace the moment with the power of positive thinking! For you will never succeed at ANYTHING, if you don't try; and when you assume failure... you will never even take a first step.

To this day, I am the only Slackliner in the world to have achieved the the Free solo World Record(2010 - 132ft / 2011 - 180') , The Highline World Record (2010 - 100m highline), and been Overall Trickline World Champion (in 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011).

During my quest for the records, I caught the eye of major filmmakers who captured, edited, and promoted a video called “ Sketchy Andy,” and my story was presented as a main feature movie in REEL ROCK 2011/12 (possibly the largest Outdoor Adventure Film Tour in the World.) It was a heartwarming movie dedicated to the Slacklife that won awards worldwide, toured through more than 20 countries, and was shown more than 350 times in that tour. It gained so much popular attention that it won me the coveted cover shot of the European Outdoor



Film Tour Poster. That cover shot was given to only the most legendary adventurers of all time--including Dean Potter, my hero--and it was a huge honor for me. I was completely shocked by the endless flow of positive attention... and then the phone rang.

I was invited to be on the Super Bowl HalfTime Show! I ended up solidifying a gig with Madonna, doing a duet, center stage, LIVE, in front of nearly 120 million people. I couldn't



believe it, but I knew that it was something I would love to do. I worked for 2 months rehearsing and designing my duet with Madonna and my dream of introducing the slackline to as many people as possible. It was attention I could not imagine...120 million people got to be exposed to Slacklining, INSTANTLY. I was ecstatic.

My performance threw me into the spotlight and gave me the ability to chase my dreams like I had never

imagined possible before. My Slacklines turned into Guinness Book World Records, TV recordings, Hot Air Balloons connected with Slacklines, LIVE shows in VEGAS, more contests, and more time to slack. I was literally blasted to a new level of sporting attention, giving me an unbelievable reach to a massive international community.

I started to plan bigger things. I wanted to bring the community together. I wanted to be able to share the experience, not by speaking, but by action. Since my college career at Humboldt State, where I graduated valedictorian of his class, I had been developing "tree nets." The jumbled platforms of tangled cords, knots, and ropes became more organized unique pieces of art. And then I had an idea that changed the sport yet again: Space nets.

I helped create a massive highline festival in the Moab desert with friend and adventurer photographer Scott Rogers and Terry Acomb (Father of the Fruit Bowl Highline Area in Moab, Utah.) By the time I had come up with the Space Net idea, the festival was in its 5th year. However, when the space net was first rigged for the eyes and hearts of the entire community, it gave something that everyone



needed: a universal connection. Part of the genius of the net was that without the help of MANY other people, it just wasn't possible.

The connection of the community was actually a prerequisite to share the experience of the Space Net to the community. Needless to say, the Space Net brought the community together on a platform (pun intended) of shared experience. Shared workload, shared responsibility, and provided a beautiful SHARED EXPERIENCE. An experience that will be shared yearly, indefinitely; surrounded by... you guessed it-- Slacklife.

The connection between the different groups of sports athletes was something profound. Climbers, Highliners, and BASE jumpers were ALL hanging out together. A first in the long history of Moab. But the real connection I was looking to help inspire was between the



Adventure Athletes and “Normal people.” I wanted to be able to give someone with limited exposure to these sports a safe and unique gift to the insight of why adventurers live the way they do. Funny enough, it worked.

The Pentagon Space net, without use of words or convoluted explanations, showed people WHY I did what

I did, and why there were full on communities of people who did what they did. It was a visceral, palpable, relatable, safe, repeatable way to SHARE the EXPERIENCE that moved me so much in my life. Jokingly, I would say, “Really, I got tired of trying to explain why I loved these sports, and the net gave me the ability to say, ‘Why do I do this? Well, go take a look for yourself!’”

Today, I continue to teach slacklining, train slacklining, pushing myself to learn, grow, build, and solidify the community around me. I have dealt with mitigating risks of the most dangerous sports in the world to help thousands of people safely enjoy and share the experience I have had. I have continued explain and share my exploration of studying, analyzing, testing, and creating all aspects of Slackline-- pushing the concept of Slacklife. To this day, I still believe anyone can Slackline and that it will improve everyone's life dramatically.”

The Slack Revolution

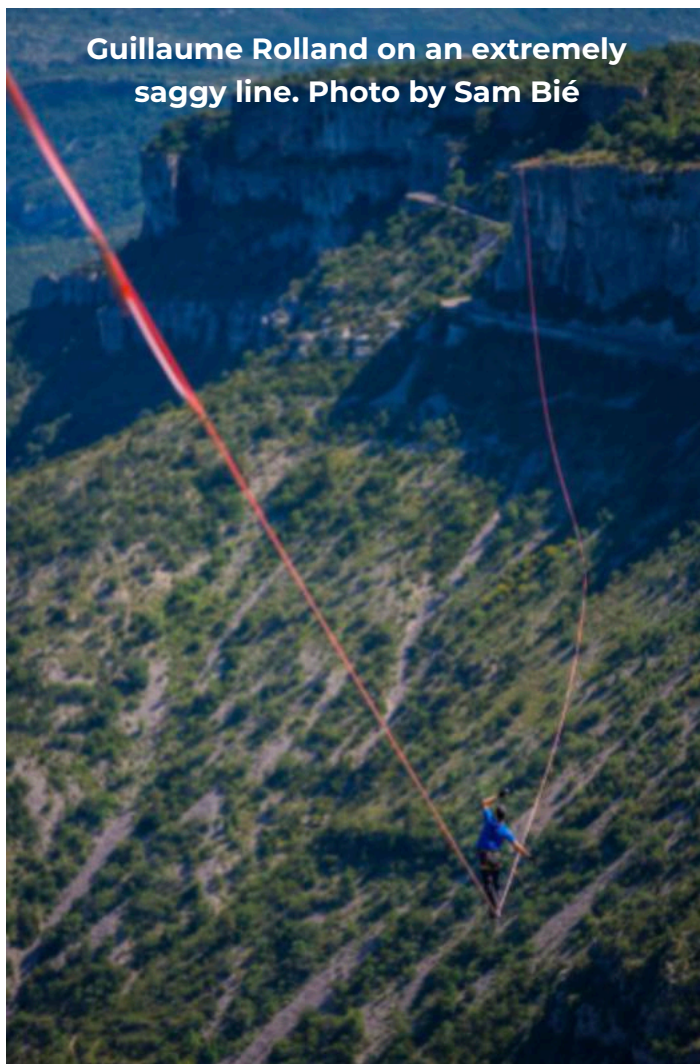
Between Dean and Andy's widely publicized feats, Gibbon Slackline's development of the simple ratchet-strap slackline setup in 2007, and the rise of the Internet, there was a worldwide explosion of the sport. People all over the planet could now easily set up a slackline and share their knowledge of tricks and rigging through forums and social media. There are now slackers, highliners, trickliners, festivals, and competitions in almost every country in the world. People are establishing and making first ascents of lines nearly every day. Gear innovation has shot through the roof; there are hundreds of types of webbings made from different materials with different weave patterns and stretch capabilities that all offer their own unique walk.

However, our sport had to go through one more revolution to get to where it is at today. As slackers started exploring the potentials of longlining and pushing bigger and bigger

highlines, we slowly started to realize that our style of rigging and walking may have to change to accomplish these feats. What happened next allowed us to push past into explored territories faster than anyone ever thought possible.

Ben Plotkin-Swing explains the phenomenon perfectly in his article *The Slack Revolution* written for the Balance Community Blog:

"We call it a slackline, but as recently as 2 or 3 years ago the future seemed to be in making lines tighter and tighter. Slackline discussion groups were saturated with talk on how to combine pulleys and brakes and multipliers to tension a slackline with as much mechanical advantage as possible. In all the talk of 9:1 this, and 15kn that, there was an implicit assumption that as lines got longer they would need to get tighter. Today, that assumption has been refuted, and possibly inverted. Online conversation is dominated by phrases like "hand tension" and "sag is swag". A few years ago, it was



commonly believed that a tighter line is an easier line. Now, it is an open secret that boundary-pushing lines are considered much harder to tame when they are tight. Low tension is seen as both cool and expedient. . . .

Slacklining wouldn't be what it is today without the dual influences of rock climbing culture combined with the new availability of webbing that is strong, light, flat, and affordable. Without this new material, it seems unlikely that the climbers' rest-day activity of balancing on chains between posts in the parking lot would lead to a new movement. But nylon webbing is a staple in rock climbing gear, and once it was discovered that webbing feels nice to walk on, a new kind of funambulism was born. The full significance of the change was probably not obvious at the time, since walking on a short rope or chain is not that different from walking on a short piece of webbing. In those early days, webbing was adopted because it is cheap, easy to carry around, and is flat so it doesn't roll under your foot like a rope. It took another 30 years for the new possibilities that webbing opened up to begin to be realized. . .

We can only speculate about the logic behind the choice of the name slackline. I've always thought it must have been chosen to be in opposition to the established concept of a "tightrope". That initial impulse towards difference is then immediately contradicted by the practice of making the line as tight as possible, which makes it easier to walk, at least in the short term.



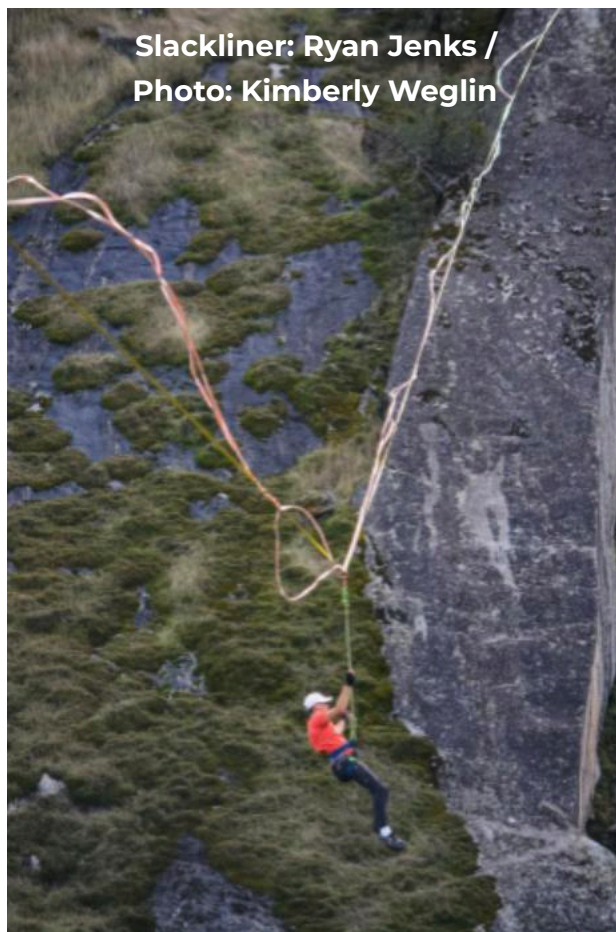
Slackliner: Antony Newton

The inversion of "tight" to "slack" was woven into the sport at the very beginning, even if it was initially more wordplay than action. . . .

Slacklining grew and styles proliferated, but the thread I want to follow is the attempt to walk longer and longer slacklines. Throughout the 90s and 00s, this project was synonymous with finding ways to make the line tighter. There are two main reasons for this: line height, and walkability. At this point slacklines were usually rigged between two trees with relatively flat ground in between. As the distance between trees gets larger, the slackline needs to either be tighter or higher in the trees in order to prevent the slackliner from touching the ground

in the middle of the line. Since there is a limit to how high one can safely dismount a line, eventually the line must be made tighter to be made longer. In the words of longline pioneer Jerry Miszewski:

“When I first started slacklining, people weren't walking giant lines yet. The only guy that was, Damian Cooksey, was using chain hoists and klemheist knots to tension the line. There was no thought about how much sag the line should have or how high the anchors should be. It was just thought that the line should be low enough to reach and tight enough to not touch the ground in the middle.”



In addition to this practical reason for high tension was the belief that the walk would be easier that way. This was probably true at the time, but it led the sport into a kind of cul-de-sac. . . . adding tension helps keep the wiggles under control as long as the line weight is not a big factor, but once the line gets long enough that it wiggles no matter what, high tension makes them heavier and more potent. The solution isn't just a little more or less tension, but a total change in walking style. But if your training progression has been to tighter and tighter lines, the big jump sideways to very loose and long lines may not be possible. You may have to backtrack, and start again along a different path.

In the background of the progression to longer and tighter lines there were some who preferred to walk looser lines. There were a certain amount of bragging rights associated with walking a looser version of a line, and while some claimed to prefer loose lines, a lot of people assumed they just liked

making things more difficult for themselves.

At the same time that Jerry Miszewski was developing and popularizing the rigging strategies and webbings needed for extremely high tension lines, he was also one of the early advocates for lower tensions. In his words:

“Once I started to get into lines that were longer than 400 feet, I started to realize that the difficulty changes with how much tension there is on the line. I played around a lot with

different tensions on different lengths and found a happy medium between keeping the anchor height reasonable and keeping the walkability high. . . .

So what is going on here? To complete this story using the concepts we've developed, the discovery here is that while loose means more wiggles, the wiggles have less mass to them. If the line hangs like a noodle, giving it a shimmy while trying to maintain balance doesn't set big sections of the line swinging together the way it can with a tighter line. In the context of highlines, another contribution to this effect is a loose backup that hangs in loops below the main line, but that is a topic for another day.

Learning this loose line style is more difficult and intimidating to begin with, but the road of progression it offers is longer than the tight line alternative. This has been definitively shown by the recent explosion of new slackline records, all at relatively low tensions. . . .

This progression towards big, loose lines is really the story of slacklining finding its true identity. Until recently, it had been kind of a dirtbag's version of tightrope walking. Slackliners kept track of their own

"world records", but they weren't truly significant because tightrope artists had previously done many bigger and more impressive things. And as slacklining progressed in the tighter lines direction, the amount of gear and infrastructure needed for a line was also starting to head in the direction of the tightrope: heavy and impractical.



In the new era of loose lines, slackliners are crossing gaps in a style that has never been pursued before. . . . And unlike a tightrope, a loose slackline can be rigged fast and light. Even the biggest lines can go up and down in a matter of a few days, and they can be put up in natural areas in a "leave no trace" style. The kind of minimalism that loose lines allow is also what is propelling new explorations into alpine highlining. Just a few years ago doing a highline in the mountains meant hauling a heavy pulley system to tension the line. We're now able to leave that behind, which is allowing us to consider more ambitious and remote projects."

Breaking Barriers

This transition from tight to loose lines is what helped Jerry Miszewski break into the 1000 ft highline range in 2014, Nathan Paulin and Danny Mensik to break the kilometer highline mark in 2016, and Pablo Signoret, Nathan Paulin, and Lucas Miliard to break the MILE in 2017. No one knows what will come next, but it seems as Ben Plotkin-Swing was correct in his assessment when he wrote: "This loose line revolution has changed slacklining from a rough copy of tightrope walking into a legitimately new human activity, and the frontiers it has opened up are being explored right now." [*The Slack Revolution*]



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THE BOOK OF FLOW

A Warning: The Current Condition of Society

“In this day and age,” says Micah Abrams, former ESPN.com senior editor for action sports, “the upper echelon of adventure sport athletes are grappling with the fundamental properties of the universe: gravity, velocity, and sanity. They’re toying with them, cheating death, refusing to accept there might be limits to what they can accomplish.” These athletes...well, that’s the great irony, right? Many people don’t even consider them that. They’re the poster children of the slacker generation, the ones marked with an X, who still, some two decades after the fact, continue to smell like teen spirit. But along the way, they have somehow become so much more: a force pushing evolution further, the tip of the spear, the ones charged with redefining what it means to be human.” (xv, *The Rise of Superman*, Steven Kotler)

Slacklining is not considered a sport by society, and we are often punished for our form of worship because it is different, unusual, and visually shocking. Many times, we are simply ignored, in hopes that we go away and take our slacklines with us, all because we participate in a lifestyle that challenges cultural values and preferred states of thought that don’t want to be challenged or interrupted. Historically, when we don’t go away, regulations tend to be imposed that attempt to hinder our spiritual practices. The default state of the law is to protect people from themselves, yet the wisdom of the Slacklife teaches us that our bodies and our decisions are our own, as long as they do not impede on another person’s rights to their own body and their own decisions.

It is this attitude towards our beliefs and this vilification of our passions that led to the existence of the Slacklife ideology. “Slackers” living the “slacklife” use seemingly trivial pieces of webbing, strung between trees, rocks, cliffs, or buildings, as an instrument of meditation to catapult themselves into an otherworldly experience and enlightened state of being that we call “Flow State”. Slackers believe in living in the moment, conquering your fears, finding balance in all pursuits, and experiencing the life-changing power of flow. We spend our time exploring the natural realm in search of the most inspiring places to practice slacklining with the hopes of shattering the self-imposed and falsely perceived limitations on our minds, bodies, and spirits--often giving up everything to live in a van or structure our lives, educations, and careers around this active form of meditation and pursuit of higher consciousness.

However, this decision to abandon cultural norms of how society tells us to live our lives does not come without slackrifice. Our society is indoctrinated in a “struggle now, salvation later” culture that exalts suffering and sacrifice, even when the victories they provide are hollow and unfulfilling. Steven Kotler says it best in his book *The Rise of Superman*: “We have traded the now for the later and in collectively making this switch may have missed the point: it doesn’t need to be so hard. With passion and play as the gateway to performance and possibility, we no longer have to mistrust ourselves. . . What’s painfully ironic here is that flow is a radical and alternative path to mastery *only* because we have decided that play -- an

activity fundamental to survival, tied to the greatest neurochemical rewards the brain can produce, and flat out necessary for achieving peak performance, creative brilliance, and overall life satisfaction--is a waste of time for adults. If we are hunting the highest version of ourselves, then we need to turn work into play, and not the other way round. Unless we invert this equation, much of our capacity for intrinsic motivation starts to shut down. We lose touch with our passion and become less than what we could be and that feeling never really goes away. (87, 162) Our society is starving for motivation, yet labels play as a hedonistic activity; a waste of time, or a 'luxury' for the lucky few, when it is really all that we've ever needed. Scientists are beginning to explore the flow state that play creates, and hard research is already showing that these peak experiences lift us above normal awareness and propel us further faster.

William James, philosopher and psychologist, declared, "Most people live in a very restricted circle of their potential being. They make use of a very small portion of their possible consciousness, and of their soul's resources in general, much like a man who, out of his whole organism, should get into a habit of using and moving only his little finger." This is no surprise, however, when from a young age we are taught to work, work, work, without rest or question, for other people's goals and victories; if we can't keep up, we are then told there is something physically wrong with us that we should seek to medicate. We are hardly given lessons in emotional control, bodily awareness, and nervous system fine-tuning, and are lucky if we have someone in our life that acknowledges our emotions or can share knowledge on these subjects at all. We aren't told stories about the possibilities of heightened states of consciousness; instead, we are warned against them. We are told only the stories that went wrong, and none of the stories that went right. Never told about all the people that made the impossible possible by disregarding everything they were told to do. "As children we are taught *not* to play with fire, not *how* to play with fire. On the flow path, we are drawn forward by fire; by powerful hedonic instincts; by our deep need for autonomy, mastery, and purpose deeply fulfilled; by dizzyingly feel-good neurochemistry; by a spectrum of joy beyond common ken; by the undeniable presence of our most authentic selves; by a cognitive imperative to make meaning from experience; by the search engine that is evolution and its need for innovation; and by the simplest of truths; life is long and we're all scared and, in flow, at least for a little while, we're not." (164-165, *The Rise of Superman*)

You can be sure that failing to live by the structure that society mandates, whether it is in the activities you do, the friends you keep, the way you express yourself, the lifestyle you live, or (especially) the risks you take, will put you in the way of a lot of judgement and resistance. This resistance will come from the mass of people who silently wish they could also manifest the courage to make a choice and walk away from that life they never really chose. Society as a whole is conditioned to keep as many people as they can living in state sanctioned states of consciousness, so don't be surprised when the unconscious attitudes of envy they harbor start to present themselves in a multitude of ways. Many will ridicule your beliefs and criticize your motives, writing you off as an adrenaline junkie, hippie, nomad, or a host of other words with negative connotations in their minds, despite not truly understanding what it is that we

seek. Others will treat you with a “must be nice” attitude and act like they can’t also make that same decision, when all you are doing is prioritizing what you value most. Oftentimes, they will heavily exaggerate the consequences of your decision to pursue a more fulfilling lifestyle, and will treat your choice as a make or break, life ending resolution. And they’re right. The decision to live outside the norm and pursue a heightened state of being IS the end of your old life, one that you won’t ever want to go back to, but it is also the beautiful start and rebirth of something new: Welcome to your new community. Welcome to the Slacklife.

What is Flow State?

Flow is a core tenet underpinning the Slacklife, but what exactly is it?

Flow is an optimal state of consciousness; a peak state where we both feel our best and perform our best; also known as “the zone.” It is a state of complete and total absorption that induces effortless and profound mental clarity and is always a positive experience. A state where we are so focused on the task in front of us that everything else falls away, action and awareness merge, time speeds up or slows down significantly, ego disappears, and you feel one with everything around you-- almost a psychic connection to the universe. Each decision is automatic, perfect, and “flows” fluidly to the next. Everything you do, you do better in flow.

Flow state gives you a glimpse at the inner workings of your mind-body connection and lets you taste your true potential. It makes you significantly more creative, helps you recognize patterns faster, and solve problems more quickly. You are no longer weighed down by feelings of detachment, boredom, and dependency. Rather, you feel stoked to get involved, enraptured with the task at hand, and empowered to do what you have to do to accomplish your goal. These feelings are exactly why psychologists describe flow as “autotelic,” from the Greek auto (self) and telos (goal). When experiences are autotelic (intrinsically motivating), they are their own reward and they are done for their own sake. Yet flow does more than just motivate. As Csikszentmihalyi explains in *Good Business*, “Because flow involves meeting challenges and developing skills, it leads to growth. It is an escape forward from current reality, whereas stimulants like drugs lead backward.”

Autotelic experiences also give you a sense of purpose. And the feeling of flow is so fulfilling that nearly everyone who experiences it soon comes to believe that flow is the meaning of life itself. It is the reason why we are put on this earth. “Scientists who study human motivation have lately learned that after basic survival needs have been met, the combination of autonomy (the desire to direct your own life), mastery (the desire to learn, explore, and be creative), and purpose (the desire to matter, to contribute to the world) are our most powerful intrinsic drivers -- the three things that motivate us most. All three are deeply woven through the fabric of flow. Thus toying with flow involves tinkering with primal biology: addictive neurochemistry, potent psychology, and hardwired evolutionary behaviors.” (158, *The Rise of Superman*, Kotler). “Researchers now believe flow sits at the heart of almost every athletic championship, underpins major scientific breakthroughs, and accounts for

significant progress in the arts.” (viii) “In many ways, one might say that the *whole effort of humankind through millennia of history* has been to capture these fleeting moments of fulfillment and make them part of everyday existence.” (21)

Looked at objectively, flow is a paradox of the mind. Intense moments where you feel focus and fear and peace all at the same time, yet you are not afraid of anything. You are hyper aware, yet completely unresponsive-- thinking about everything and absolutely nothing. You hear every sound, but also tune everything out. You feel every sensation, yet feel no pain. You are filled with pleasure, but only in retrospect. You see everything around you, yet only exactly what is in front of you. Exactly what you need to see. You are certain of your next action, yet are living perfectly in the moment. Timing is critical, yet time is irrelevant. You are giving it your all, yet the work feels effortless. You are confident in the face of uncertainty, and you risk your life so that you may LIVE. You lose your sense of self, yet your self emerges stronger than ever. You have control over the uncontrollable. You know everything, and nothing at all. You feel greater than life itself, but also one with everything; humbled at your own insignificance. Everything is, somehow, just as it needs to be. Maybe, flow isn't a paradox at all.

By definition, flow makes no sense. Yet when looked at through the scientific lens, there is an explanation for it all. In flow, your subconscious mind takes over. Your brain is shutting down, but also powering up. To understand why flow feels paradoxical, we have to start by briefly discussing the difference between our conscious and unconscious minds, the five major types of brain-waves, the neurochemicals of flow, and the conditions and components flow requires.

Conscious vs. Unconscious Mind

Over time, humans have evolved to process information through two distinct systems: the explicit system (also known as the 'conscious mind' or the 'left brain') and the implicit system (the 'unconscious mind' or the 'right brain'). The explicit system is rule based, logical, and thoughts can be expressed verbally, while the implicit system is based on your gut sense of intuition, your past skills and experiences that are not consciously accessible and cannot be described verbally, like a hunch. “The reason has to do with the structure of neural networks. When the explicit system (mostly on the left side of the brain) handles a problem, the neurons involved are very close to one another. This much proximity leads to linear connections, logical deductions, and all the other keystones of standard reasoning. When the implicit system is at work, its reach is much broader.” (39, *The Rise of Superman*). When the implicit system is activated, parts of the brain that can't normally communicate with each other suddenly can. This is known as lateral thinking, or “thinking outside the box.” Incoming stimuli can now combine with stray thoughts and hazy memories to create a new idea, in a way that wouldn't be possible in the conscious mind.

While the conscious mind is a powerful tool, it is very slow. It can only handle and process 120 bits of information at once, which is not much at all. Listening to someone speak takes

almost 60 bits, and if we dare listen to two people talk at once, there goes the entire processing power of our conscious minds. Compare that to the subconscious mind which can handle billions of bits at once, and it becomes obvious how much faster and more efficient this system is. "We have terabytes of information available to us; we just can't tap into it in our normal state. *Umwelt* is the technical term for the sliver of the data stream that we normally apprehend. It's the reality our senses can perceive. And all umwelts are not the same. Dogs hear whistles we cannot, sharks detect electromagnetic pulses, bees see ultraviolet light--while we remain oblivious. It's the same physical world, same bits and bytes, just different perception and processing. But the cascade of neurobiological change that occurs in a non-ordinary state lets us perceive and process more of what's going on around us and with greater accuracy. In these states, we get upstream of our umwelt. We get access to increased data, heightened perception, and amplified connection." (45-46, *Stealing Fire*, Kotler & Wheal).

In summary, "there are two advantages to the brain using the implicit system. The first is speed. 'When the brain finds a task it needs to solve,' writes Baylor neuroscientist David Eagleman in *Incognito*, 'it rewires its own circuitry until it can accomplish this task with maximum efficiency. The task becomes burned into the machinery. . . . Automatization permits fast decision making. Only when the slow system of consciousness is pushed to the back of the queue can rapid programs do their work. Should I swing forehand or backhand at the approaching tennis ball? With a ninety-mile-per-hour projectile on its way, one does not want to cognitively slog through the different options.' *Efficiency* is the second advantage. Our brain is 2 percent of our body by weight, yet consumes 20 percent of our energy. As a result, it's always looking for ways to conserve. Using the explicit system to think through decisions burns a lot of calories, but switching to the implicit minimizes the energy required to solve problems." (34, *The Rise of Superman*).

Brainwaves and Their Functions

Whenever you encounter stimuli or have a thought, there is a corresponding electrical pulse in the brain. Scientists track and record these brain-wave patterns using an electroencephalogram (EEG) test where small, flat metal discs called electrodes are attached to the scalp with wires that measure brain waves down to the 1/1000 of a second range. This tool allows scientists to track how the brain changes over time and analyze the decision making process. EEG allows them to see everything that leads up to a decision, the decision itself, and everything that happens as a result. There are five major types of brain-waves that all correspond to a different state of consciousness:

Delta (1 Hz to 3.9 Hz): Delta brainwaves are slow, loud brain-waves (low frequency and deeply penetrating, like a drum beat). It is the slowest of the brain-waves, meaning it has the longest pauses between bursts of electricity. Delta is generated in deep, dreamless sleep and the deepest meditations. Delta waves suspend external awareness and are the source of

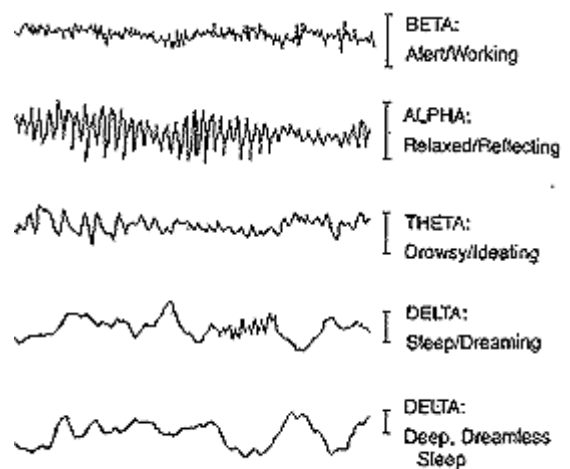
empathy. Healing and regeneration are stimulated in this state, and that is why deep restorative sleep is so essential to the healing process.

Theta (4 Hz to 7.9 Hz): Theta correlates to REM sleep, deep meditation, insight, and the processing of novel incoming stimuli. Theta is our gateway to learning, memory, and intuition. In theta, our senses are withdrawn from the external world and focused on signals originating from within. It is that twilight state which we normally only experience fleetingly as we wake or drift off to sleep. In theta we are in a dream; vivid imagery, intuition and information beyond our normal conscious awareness. It's where we hold our 'stuff', our fears, troubled history, and nightmares.

Alpha (8 Hz to 13.9 Hz): Alpha is the brain's basic resting state--waves that are dominant during quietly flowing thoughts. Alpha is 'the power of now', being here, in the present. People in alpha are relaxed, calm, and lucid, but not really thinking. Alpha aids overall mental coordination, calmness, alertness, mind/body integration and learning.

Beta (14 Hz to 30 Hz): Beta brain-waves dominate our normal waking state of consciousness when attention is directed towards cognitive tasks and the outside world. Beta is a 'fast' activity, present when we are alert, attentive, engaged in problem solving, judgment, decision making, or focused mental activity. Beta is divided into three bands: Lo-Beta, Beta, and Hi-Beta with learning and concentration at the low end, fear and stress at the high. Lo-Beta can be thought of as a 'fast idle', or musing. Beta is high engagement or actively figuring something out. Hi-Beta is highly complex thought, integrating new experiences, high anxiety, or excitement. Continual high frequency processing is not a very efficient way to run the brain, as it takes a tremendous amount of energy.

Gamma (30 Hz +) : Gamma is a fast moving wave which only shows up during "binding." when different parts of the brain are combining disparate thoughts into a single idea. Gamma brainwaves pass information rapidly and quietly. The most subtle of the brainwave frequencies, the mind has to be quiet to access gamma. Gamma was dismissed as 'spare brain noise' until researchers discovered it was highly active when in states of universal love, altruism, and the 'higher virtues'. Gamma is also above the frequency of neuronal firing, so how it is generated remains a mystery. It is speculated that gamma rhythms modulate perception and consciousness, and that a greater presence of gamma relates to expanded consciousness and spiritual emergence.



“Since low alpha/high theta is the dominant brain wave produced by the implicit system, this frequency has long been considered the signature of both high performance and flow states. But this idea is now starting to change. When any of us make decisions, our brains go through a six-stage cycle:

1. Before the novel stimuli shows up (which is what starts the whole process), we’re in a **baseline state.**
2. Then we move to **problem-solving analysis,**
3. **Pre-action readiness,**
4. **Action,**
5. **Post-action evaluation,**
6. And back up to **baseline**

Each of these stages requires different parts of the brain and produces different brain waves: theta for processing novel stimuli, beta for analysis, alpha for action, etc.

Leslie Sherlin, one of the world’s leading experts in the neuroscience of high performance, found that the best athletes move through this entire cycle fluidly, seamlessly transitioning from step to step. ‘That’s the secret,’ says Sherlin, ‘extremely fluid brain control. Most people can’t make it through the whole cycle. They get hung up somewhere. They either can’t generate all the necessary brain states or they can’t control them. Elite performers can produce the right brain wave at the right time, vary its intensity as needed, then smoothly transition to the next step. Mentally, they just take total charge of the situation.’

Flow states, which can be considered elite performance on overdrive, take this process one step farther. ‘In the zone,’ says Sherlin, ‘you still see this same fluidity in the transitions between states, but you also see even more control. Instead of producing all these other brain waves, really great athletes can transition smoothly into the zone, creating that low alpha/high theta wave, and then hold themselves there, sort of in suspended animation, shutting out the conscious mind and letting the implicit system do its stuff.’” (35-36, *The Rise of Superman*)

Chemicals of Flow

Now that we understand the five basic brain-waves, let’s discuss the chemicals of flow state. “There are dozens of neurochemical systems involved in flow, but our focus here is on the real MVPs. The powerful substances that set flow apart from all other states of consciousness, altered or otherwise. Flow’s two defining characteristics are its feel-good nature (flow is always a positive experience) and its function as a performance enhancer. The chemicals described herein are among the strongest mood-boosters and performance-enhancers the body can produce.

At a very simple level, neurochemicals are “information molecules” used by the brain to transmit messages. Mostly, these messages are either excitatory or inhibitory: *Do more of what you’re doing or Do less of what you’re doing*. But these small signals add up quickly, changing emotions, altering thoughts, fine-tuning reactions -- essentially shaping our response to external events. Flow state is an extremely potent response to external events and requires an extraordinary set of signals. The process includes:

Dopamine (~ cocaine): Emotionally, we feel dopamine as engagement, excitement, creativity, and a desire to investigate and make meaning out of the world. Evolutionarily, it serves a similar function: It is why learning happens. Human beings are hardwired for exploration, hardwired to push the envelope and dopamine is largely responsible for that wiring. This neurochemical is released whenever we take a risk, encounter something novel, or recognize a pattern. It rewards exploratory behavior. It also helps us survive that behavior. By reducing noise in neural networks and increasing attention, information flow, and pattern recognition in the brain, and heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle firing time in the body, dopamine serves as a formidable skill-booster as well. “It’s why creative insights tend to snowball. Once we do the hard work of identifying that first pattern, the dopamine dumped in our system primes us to pick out the next. And the next. Neurons that fire together wire together. The more times a particular pattern fires, the stronger the connection between neurons becomes, and the faster information flows along this route. This is learning and it leads to “chunking.” When the pattern recognition system correctly identifies a pattern, it’s stored not as a series of steps, rather as a whole--a chunk. Chunks get added to chunks get added to chunks, until seeing the front edge of a tiny pattern allows us to make very complicated predictions about the future.” (63-65, *The Rise of Superman*) Dopamine’s drug analog is cocaine.

Norepinephrine (~ speed): In the body, it speeds up heart rate, muscle tension, and respiration, and triggers glucose release so we have more energy. In the brain, norepinephrine increases arousal, attention, neural efficiency, and emotional control. In flow, it keeps us locked on target, holding distractions at bay. Norepinephrine’s drug analog is speed.

Endorphins (~ opiates): These natural “endogenous” (meaning naturally internal to the body) opiates relieve pain and produce pleasure much like “exogenous” (externally added to the body) opiates like heroin. Potent too. The most commonly produced endorphin is ~ 100 times more powerful than medical morphine.

Anandamide (~ weed): Takes its name from the Sanskrit word for “bliss”. Anandamide is an endogenous cannabinoid, and similarly feels like the psychoactive effect found in marijuana. Known to show up in exercise-induced flow states (and suspected in other kinds), this chemical elevates mood, relieves pain, dilates blood vessels and bronchial tubes (aiding respiration), and amplifies lateral thinking (our ability to link disparate ideas together). More

critically, anandamide also inhibits our ability to feel fear, even, possibly, according to research done at Duke, facilitates the extinction of long-term fear memories.

Serotonin (~ antidepressants): At the tail end of a flow state, it also appears (more research needs to be done) that the brain releases serotonin, the neurochemical now associated with SSRIs like Prozac. “It’s a molecule involved in helping people cope with adversity.” Oxford University’s Philip Cowen told the *New York Times*, “to not lose it, to keep going and try to sort everything out.” In flow, serotonin is partly responsible for the afterglow effect, and thus the cause of some confusion. “A lot of people associate serotonin directly with flow,” says high performance psychologist Michael Gervais, “but that’s backward. By the time the serotonin has arrived the state has already happened. It’s a signal things are coming to an end, not just beginning.

These five chemicals are flow’s mighty cocktail and among the most addictive drugs on Earth. Alone, each packs a punch, together a wallop.

If you want grounds for comparison, consider how many people use and abuse mood-altering, mind-altering, and performance-enhancing drugs. Now consider what these drugs do. Marijuana triggers the release of anandamide. Antidepressants are some combination of dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin. Tobacco and ADHD drugs affect dopamine and norepinephrine. And many prescription drugs of abuse are opioids like Oxycontin, meaning they affect the endorphin system. In other words, people are literally killing themselves trying to achieve artificially the same sensations that flow produces naturally. But unlike the dead-end highs currently plaguing public health, flow doesn’t sidetrack one’s life; it revitalizes it. Flow is the rush of possibility: a product of radical neurochemical, neuroelectrical, and neuroanatomical function triggering whole-body transformation.” (66-74, *The Rise of Superman*)

Our Brains on Flow

Now that you are equipped with the basics, it is time to put it all together. But before we start, let’s clear up the two common misconceptions about flow: “The first is that the state works like a light switch -- on or off. You’re either in flow or out. Yet flow is not binary. The state is just one *step* in a four-part flow cycle. It’s impossible to experience flow without moving through this entire cycle. The second critical misconception is that flow always feels flow.” (120, *The Rise of Superman*)

To illustrate how flow works and solve the paradox, we are going to take you through the four steps of the flow cycle (struggle, release, flow, and recovery) and explain the neurological and physiological changes that happen at each step:

In order to reach flow, we first have to struggle. When we overload our brain with information, tensions and frustrations will rise. Our problems will seem unsolvable, the task impossible,

our efforts futile, and as far from flow as one can get. How we handle these negative feelings is critical and determines whether or not we will experience flow at all. In struggle, we're using the conscious mind to identify patterns, then repeating those patterns enough times that they become chunks. Until that happens, we are awkward and uncomfortable. To move through struggle takes a leap of faith that the effort will really result in the skill acquisition.

Frustration and fatigue will often get worse up to a certain critical point, when gradually or suddenly it passes away, and we are fresher than before. To move out of struggle and into flow, you must first pass through the second stage: release. Release means to take your mind off the problem and completely sever prior thought and emotional patterns. AKA Relax! Relaxation is flow's real trigger. When you relax, the body is flooded with high quantities of nitric oxide (NO) - an endogenous gaseous signaling molecule. NO counteracts the norepinephrine and other stress secretions and causes feel-good neurochemicals like dopamine and endorphins to rise in their place. As a result of these secretions, the blood vessels dilate, the heart rate decreases, the stress response fades, and you feel inner tranquility take over. (There may be layer after layer of this experience. A third and a fourth "wind" may supervene.) It is important to note that without a calm, relaxed frame of mind, the brain is incapable of switching from beta-dominant localized networks to alpha-drive widespread webs.

Once you give way to release, release will give way to flow:

In flow, parts of the prefrontal cortex (PFC), the part of your brain responsible for thinking -- or taking simple ideas and adding complexity to them--begin to deactivate. People often describe flow as fluid, easy, automatic, and 'the opposite of thinking.' Many have testified that all complexity in the decision making process is gone...And that's because it is. Instead of your brain eliminating the complexity of a task, it simply eliminates the part of your brain that creates complexity to begin with (trippy, I know) and heightens your attention and awareness, instead. In doing this, your brain just switched from its explicit system (or conscious mind), to its implicit system (or its unconscious mind). On an EEG, this switch registers as a slowdown in our brainwaves from beta (the signature of normal consciousness) to low alpha/high theta (the signature of the unconscious mind). This switch shifts us into daydreaming mode: relaxed, alert, and able to flit from idea to idea without as much internal resistance. The technical term for this process is known as 'transient hypofrontality.'

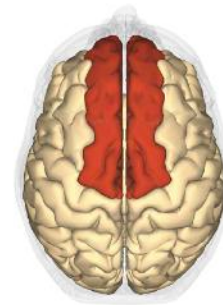


This process of hypofrontality also distorts our sense of time. Typically, we measure the passing of time through objective, external events like night and day or the ticking of a clock. "In a series of elegant fMRI experiments, Baylor neuroscientist David Eagleman, found that

temporal awareness is not centralized in any one location in the brain; rather, it is calculated by multiple areas working together. This means that time, much like self, is a summary judgement, a democratic conclusion reached by a vast prefrontal caucus. But this also makes temporal awareness vulnerable to interruption. 'Because flow deactivates large parts of the neocortex,' says Eagleman, 'a number of these areas are offline- thus distorting our ability to compute time.' Underlying this loss of time is another efficiency exchange. As focus tightens, the brain stops multitasking. Energy normally used for temporal processing is reallocated for attention and awareness. Instead of keeping time, we are taking in more data per second, processing it more completely, and, perhaps--though great debate rages around this point--processing more of it per second. It is all this data that actually elongates the current moment. Our sense of how long "the now" lasts is directly related to information processing: The more stuff we're processing, the longer the moment appears to last. And the longer the moment lasts, the better quantity and quality of information we have at our disposal. More data gives us a shot at sudden insights. Better data leads to more creative solutions. Both allow us to fine-tune our reactions. (54-55, *The Rise of Superman*). This phenomenon explains why time may feel irrelevant or subjective to whatever you are doing, despite how it truly moves when measured with a clock.

Simultaneously, the brain begins to release norepinephrine and dopamine into our system. These neurochemicals raise our heart rate, tighten focus, and help us sit up and pay attention. Thus when the brain is tasked with a clear goal, focus narrows considerably and disregards unimportant information. We also notice more of what's going on around us, so information normally tuned out or ignored becomes more readily available. Besides simply increasing focus, these chemicals amp up the brain's pattern recognition abilities, helping us find new links between all the incoming information.

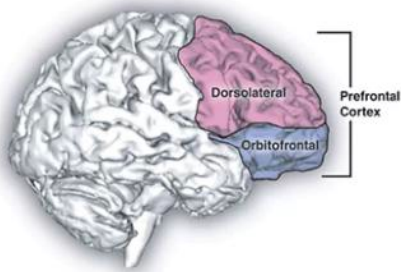
These neurochemical and physiological changes work together to explain why, in flow, you hear every sound, but also tune everything out. Why you see everything around you, yet only exactly what is in front of you. Why you are hyper aware of everything, but unresponsive to anything that doesn't further your goals.



Superior Frontal Gyrus

Furthermore, the superior frontal gyrus, the part of the brain that helps produce your sense of self (that introspective feeling of self-awareness), and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain known for self-monitoring and impulse control, also go offline. This is advantageous to those of us in flow as these parts of your brain are not always very helpful: If there is a sudden danger, it is helpful not to stand around wondering how one feels about the situation or second guessing yourself. The shutdown of these regions of the brain, along with multiple other parts of the prefrontal cortex, explain why we often lose ourselves in a task and why our sense of self and self-doubt go along with it. When we lose our sense of self, we lose our risk assessor, our

Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex



future predictor, and our inner critic that normally oversee a situation and warn us of our limits. With no second guessing, we are free from hesitation, free to follow our impulses, free to take risks, and free to create. We are liberated from insecurity and bestowed with all the confidence we need to follow our gut instinct and trust the Voice inside our heads.

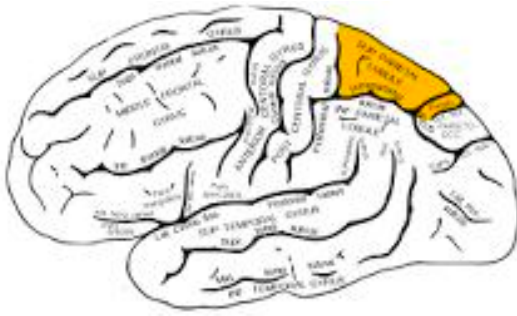
But what is that Voice? Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology, defined intuition as: “‘perception via the unconscious’

and the Voice is the end result of that perception -- the unconscious mind broadcasting its perceptions to the conscious mind. Of course, it's not always a voice. Some people see images; others get strong feelings. Occasionally, the information arrives by multiple channels. And that information arrives constantly. Intuition is a permanent feature of standard brain function--meaning the Voice is always communicating with us--yet we can rarely hear it. The data is diluted and distorted by everything else the mind is considering. But in flow, the signal is stronger, the message clearer, and for those on the receiving end, the feeling accompanying that broadcast is often one of profound relief--a sense that finally, at long last, someone else is driving this bus. “ (44, *The Rise of Superman*)

“Although the flow experience appears to be effortless, it is far from being so. It often requires strenuous physical exertion, or highly disciplined mental activity. It does not happen without the application of skilled performance. Any lapse in concentration will erase it. And yet while it lasts consciousness works smoothly, action follows action seamlessly. In normal life, we keep interrupting what we do with doubts and questions. “Why am I doing this? Should I perhaps be doing something else?” Repeatedly we question the necessity of our actions, and evaluate critically the reasons for carrying them out. But in flow there is no need to reflect, because the action carries us forward as if by magic.” (54, *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*, Csikszentmihalyi)

This occurrence--the loss of our inner critic--also explains the paradoxical relationship between losing your sense of self and having it emerge stronger afterward. In flow, we are challenged to do our best and to constantly improve our skills. With the sense of self gone, we can't reflect on what these challenges and improvements mean in terms of the self. Yet when that flow state ends and self-consciousness resumes, the self that we now feel and analyze is not the same self that existed before we entered flow. It is a new self, enriched by more advanced skills, fresh achievements, and new thoughts. Ironically, the key to building a strong self-concept is occasionally giving up self-consciousness.

Next up: The superior parietal lobe, the part of the brain that helps orient ourselves in space by judging angles and distances, mapping trajectories, and keeping track of our body's exact location, goes hypofrontal as well. When our sense of space disappears, so do physical



Superior Parietal Lobe

consequences. Normally, this part of the brain draws a boundary line, a border of self, between us and the rest of the world. When it shuts down and stops performing its calculations, it can no longer draw a line between ourselves and the rest of the world and thus concludes, for a short period of time, that you are one with everything. "When a person invests all her psychic energy into an interaction--whether it is with another person, a boat, a mountain, or a piece of music--she in effect becomes part of a system of action greater than what the individual self had been before.

This system takes its form from the rules of the activity; its energy comes from the person's attention. But it is a real system--subjectively as real as being part of a family, a corporation, or a team--and the self that is part of it expands its boundaries and becomes more complex than what it had been." (65, Flow) Turns out oneness doesn't result from opening the doors of perception; rather, it results from closing them.

While parts of the PFC shut down, other parts start to fire up. The medial PFC, the part of the brain that governs creative self expression, becomes hyperactive and ensures that our unique ideas and preferences, our personal touch, still shine through. This explains why two realist painters could both be in flow, looking at the same scene, yet not paint the same exact thing. What they paint and what details they choose to focus on is a result of their personal preferences and how they interpret the world.

If we continue to move deeper into flow, the brain can release endorphins and anandamide. Both of these neurochemicals decrease pain and allow us to pay even more attention to our surroundings. Our conscious mind usually limits the amount of strength we can physically access to prevent us from overextending ourselves and causing damage, but flow changes this. Hypofrontality lets us access more of our strength reserves than we are normally able, while the brain releases a number of endorphins that act as powerful painkillers and numb us to the damage we are doing. This lack of awareness for our bodily needs is what allows us to push our maximal strength closer to our absolute boundary.

The anandamide plays another important role here in boosting lateral thinking. Lateral thinking allows our brains to make far flung connections between dissimilar ideas. It is what gives us those powerful moments of creative, sudden insight, and explains why flow makes these happen so frequently.

Researchers have found that our creativity lies deeply rooted in the right side of the brain, or the implicit system, which dominates during a flow experience. Even more interesting, it turns out creativity has a measurable and distinct brain wave signature as well:

“alpha waves pulsing out of the brain’s right hemisphere. This is considered the readiness state for sudden insight--meaning not the revelation itself, rather the precursor condition. . . . [And] that moment of sudden insight comes with a different brain wave signature. Exactly thirty milliseconds before the breakthrough intuition arrives, EEG shows a burst of gamma waves. These ultrafast brain waves appear when a bunch of widely distributed cells--i.e., novel stimuli, random thoughts, and obscure memories--bind themselves together into a brand-new network. It is the brain-wave signature of the “Aha!” moment.

‘But the interesting thing about a gamma spike,’ explains Leslie Sherlin [one of the world’s leading experts in the neuroscience of high performance], “is that it always happens inside of theta oscillations. The two waves are coupled. It makes sense. Theta processes novel incoming stimuli; gamma is what happens when those stimuli snap together into new ideas. But it’s hard to do any of this on command. It takes meditators a long time to get that kind of control. This is where athletes in flow have a huge edge--their brain is already in alpha/theta. They’re holding themselves in the only state that can produce that gamma spike.’

When you add these elements together it’s easy to see why flow is such an effective decision-making strategy. Not only does it elevate our problem-solving abilities, but-- by holding themselves in low alpha/high theta needed to produce that gamma spike--people in the zone are already “neurologically” poised on the brink of breakthrough. This means flow packs a double punch: it doesn’t just increase our decision-making abilities--it increases our *creative* decision-making abilities.

Dramatically.

In flow, we are our resourceful, imaginative, ingenious best. Better still, the changes stick. According to research done by Harvard Business School professor Teresa Amabile, not only are creative insights consistently associated with flow states, but that amplified creativity outlasts the zone. People report feeling extraordinarily creative *the day after* a flow state, suggesting that time spent in the zone trains the brain to consistently think outside the box.

This is why . . . we’re seeing accelerated growth in ultimate performance in action and adventure sports. Pushing the limits of human potential requires considerable innovation and imagination. By spending so much time in the zone, these athletes have found a way to amp up these abilities. Moreover, by consistently using that creativity to push limits, these athletes have taken things even farther.

‘Everybody who has ever spent any time in flow,’ explains NBC action sports commentator and professional skateboarder Chris Miller, ‘knows it’s a deeply creative place. You’re just tapped into that creative force on such a larger scale. But there’s a difference between when it happens in an artist’s studio or on the tennis court versus inside the barrel of a fifty-foot wave. When you tap into that much force while pushing the absolute limits of human performance, that’s more just an imaginative breakthrough--that’s bending reality to your will. And when you do that frequently . . . imagine what that does for your confidence.’ (40-41, *The Rise of Superman*)

If we go really deep, our brainwaves shift once again toward quasi-hypnotic theta, a wave we normally produce only during REM sleep that enhances both relaxation and intuition. And as flow comes to an end, we start to experience the afterglow of serotonin--great amounts of peace, trust, and sociability--as our bodies begin to integrate all the information that has just been revealed.

This leads us to the last state in the flow cycle: recovery. Flow is an extremely expensive state in terms of energy and neurochemistry, and it will take the body a bit of time to replenish all that it has used. In addition to doing a little restocking, your body is consolidating memories and moving information from short-term holding to long-term storage. Just like struggle, it is important to note that recovery is another step that doesn't feel "flowy." Going back to the utterly ordinary, slow-moving, all too human reality of the real world with no more addicting neurochemicals rushing through your body and no more perceived "superpowers" can get the best of anyone. It is helpful to remember that navigating this stage will take a lot of resilience and positivity.

Most everyone is aware of how important rest and recovery is in anything we do, yet most of us still choose to disregard this knowledge and push ourselves harder while ignoring all the signs telling us to slow down. These days, it can often feel like rest is impossible. The reward for finishing a project at work or school is usually more work, more deadlines, more responsibilities, and less time to meet them all. And all the joy you get from accomplishing an incredible slack project fades quickly to the (often self-inflicted) expectation to outdo yourself and the pressure of "What's next?"

Here, action and adventure sport athletes are blessed with another advantage compared to most others experiencing flow--recovery comes built in. Unless we are able to travel at whim and chase the seasons, most of the sports we do are weather dependent and conditions are rarely perfect. You can't highline in a thunderstorm (well, technically you CAN, but it is not advised), snowboard in the hot summer, or surf big waves when there aren't any. As much of a bummer as this may seem when all you desperately want is to get outside and play, try to look at it as a blessing: This time of rest and recovery will help you build up your reserves and prepare for the next round of struggle... the next round of flow. Try to remember that on the flow path "you have to go slow to go fast. . . And sometimes, you don't just have to go slow. . . sometimes you have to go sideways." (122-123, *The Rise of Superman*)

To summarize: "Since flow is a fluid action state, making better decisions isn't enough: we also have to act on those decisions. The problem is fear, which stands between us and all our actions. Yet our fears are grounded in self, time, and space. With our sense of self out of the way we are liberated from doubt and insecurity. With time gone, there is no yesterday to regret or tomorrow to worry about. And when our sense of space disappears, so do physical consequences. But when all three vanish at once, something far more incredible occurs: our fear of death--that most fundamental of all fears--can no longer exist. Simply put: if you're infinite and atemporal, you cannot die." (57, *The Rise of Superman*)

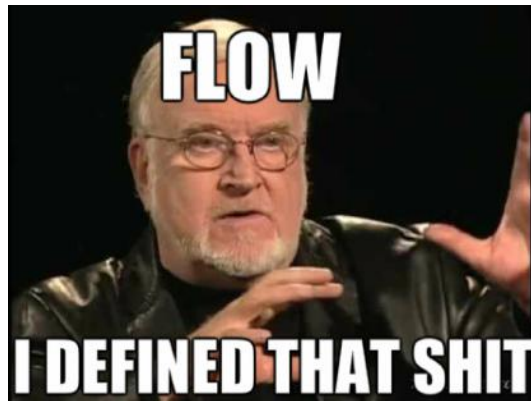
Now think back to that "paradox" at the beginning of this chapter. Looks like flow isn't really a paradox after all.

Components of Flow

Whether or not you have been lucky enough to feel this ecstatic state of flow, there are absolutely ways that every single person can create more of it in their life.

The happiest people on earth, the ones who felt their lives had the most meaning, were those who had the most peak experiences.

“Moreover, this did not come down to chance or luck. The happiest people on earth worked hard for their fulfillment. They didn’t just *have* the most peak experiences, they had devoted their lives to *having* these experiences, often . . . going to extreme lengths to seek them out: It was clear from talking to them, that what kept them motivated was the quality of the experience they felt when they were involved with the activity. The feeling didn’t come when they were relaxing, when they were taking drugs or alcohol, or when they were consuming the expensive privileges of wealth. Rather, it often involved painful, risky, difficult activities that stretched the person’s capacity and involved an element of novelty and discovery.” (20, *The Rise of Superman*)



Flow, they tell us, is the gateway to impossible, but this has never been take two pills and climb Everest in the morning. Committing to this path demands a radical restructuring of our days and our ways. It demands a considerable tolerance for risk and a considerable shift in culture. We must learn how to play with fire. We must learn to learn faster. We must learn to live thousands of lives in our lifetime--and not lives of quiet desperation, rather of raucous innovation (though naked spread-eagles are optional). But what those naked spread-eagles represent a relentless challenging of the status quo, an everlasting belief in our own possibility, a playful excellence in the face of mortal consequences.... To put this in different terms, the most interesting thing about an acorn is that it contains a whole oak. But the most interesting thing about a human--well, we’re not exactly sure. We do not know the full measure of what we might contain. We cannot yet leap tall buildings in a single bound, but the boldest among us are already throwing backflips off them. And when he was hurtling through the vacuum of space, Felix Baumgartner was flying faster than a speeding bullet. So does catching the wave of abundance still sound impossible? Perhaps. But like all [extreme] athletes. . . perhaps impossible is just the kind of challenge we’ve been waiting for. (193-194, *The Rise of Superman*)

To understand how to cultivate a life of flow, we will next discuss the overarching components of flow and its triggers so that you can understand how to structure even the most mundane of activities to induce this state. Despite its ephemeral nature, there have been thousands upon thousands of anecdotal reports on flow with features so consistent

that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced Me-high, Chick-sent-me-high), the psychologist who recognized and named the concept of flow, and other researchers, have been able to isolate the following core components that outline the state. Identifying these components is the first step in helping you restructure any activity so that you can find flow.

Conditions For Flow

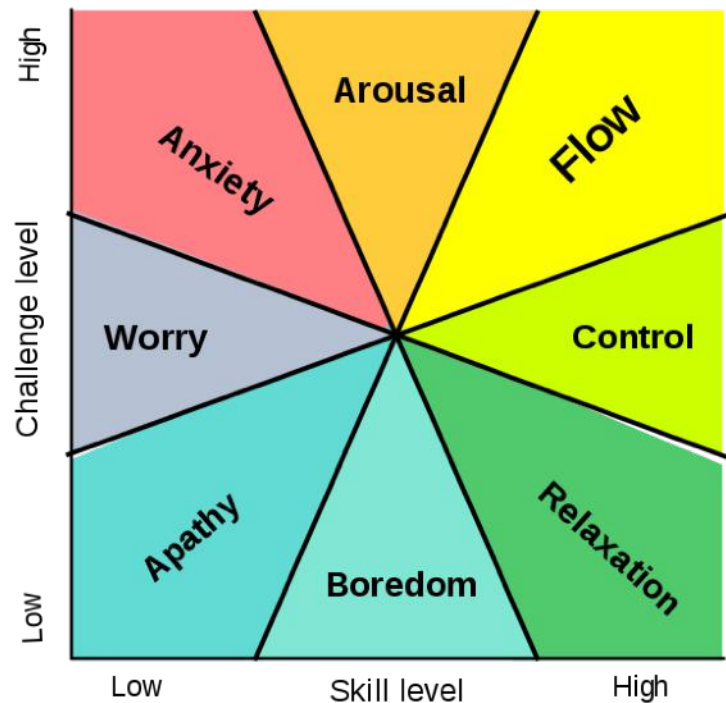
These first three components are considered conditions or triggers for flow state and do not actually describe the state itself. Flow state is a transformation available to anyone, anywhere, of any age, culture, gender, or occupation, provided that these initial conditions are met:

- **A Challenging Activity That Requires Skill:** There should be a balance between ability level and challenge (a.k.a the challenge/skill ratio), and it should be a task that we feel we have a chance of completing. If the activity is too simple, we will feel bored, and if it is too complex, we will feel frustrated. When someone does not have the right skills at all, the activity is not challenging; it is simply meaningless.

Thus, the ideal scenario is one in which the challenge level and skill level are both high.

"This emotional midpoint

between boredom and anxiety is called the *flow channel*--the spot where the task is hard enough to make us stretch, but not hard enough to make us snap. But how hard is that exactly? Answers vary, but the general thinking is that the challenge should be about 4 percent greater than the skills. That's it. . . .In real world terms, it's not much at all. In most situations, we blow by 4 percent without even noticing. But this is not the case in extreme sports. In the big waves, big rivers, and big-mountains, a half degree of difficulty can mean the difference between home for dinner and never home again. Under these conditions, the desire for improvement keeps athletes from under stepping and the need for survival from overstepping. This sweet spot keeps attention locked in the present. When the challenge is firmly within the boundaries of known skills--meaning I've done it before and am fairly certain I can do so again--the outcome is predetermined. We're interested, not riveted. But when we don't know



what's going to happen next, we pay more attention to the next. Uncertainty is our rocket ride into the now. It's also for this reason that uncertainty causes the brain to release dopamine. A lot of dopamine. When anything can happen, survival could be at stake. Dopamine heightens attention and pattern recognition--two things that are absolutely essential to dealing with the unknown. Of course, being dopamine, this is all exceptionally pleasurable. Or, as Stanford neurologist Robert Sapolsky likes to say: '*maybe* (meaning uncertainty) is addictive like nothing else out there.' And maybe is also the only road to impossible." (116-117, *The Rise of Superman*)

- **Clear Goals:** The activity should be goal-directed, bound by apparent rules or expectations, and should align appropriately with one's skill set and abilities. When considering these 'clear goals,' we must be careful to not skip over the adjective, *clear*, to get to the noun, *goals*.

"When told to set clear goals, we immediately visualize ourselves on the Olympic podium, the Academy Award stage, or the Fortune 500 list saying, 'I've been picturing this moment since I was fifteen,' and think that's the point. It's not the point. Those podium moments can pull us out of the present. Even if success is seconds away, it's still a future event subject to hopes, fears, and all sorts of now-crushing distraction. . . . In those moments, the gravity of the goal pulled the participants out of the now; when, ironically, the now was all they needed to win. If creating more flow is our aim, then the emphasis falls on "clear" and not "goals." Clarity gives us certainty. We know what to do and we know where to focus our attention while doing it. When goals are clear, metacognition is replaced by in-the-moment cognition, and the self stays out of the picture. . . . Applying this idea in our daily life means breaking tasks into bite size chunks and setting goals accordingly. . . . Think challenging, yet manageable -- just enough stimulation to shortcut attention into the now, not enough stress to pull you back out again." (115, *The Rise of Superman*)

- **Direct and immediate feedback:** A direct, in-the-moment coupling between cause and effect where successes and failures are immediately apparent, so behavior can be adjusted as needed. The *kind* of feedback is unimportant as long as it symbolizes to you whether or not you are succeeding in your goal.

"When feedback is immediate, the information we require is always close at hand. Attention doesn't have to wander; the conscious mind need not get involved. Of course, for action and adventure athletes, getting the information they require is automatic... In the mountains, feedback is instant. Same with the rivers, rocks, and oceans. In these environments, the laws of physics deliver instantaneous, unmediated feedback. No judges, no scorecards, no review in the *New York Times*. Just cause and effect." (115-116, *The Rise of Superman*)

Properties of Flow

While flow is always a peak satisfying experience, it does not necessarily mean that you will operate at your peak performance on every occasion. Flow exists on a continuum, so not all of these elements need to be present at the same time.

The terms microflow and macroflow explain these variations. In microflow, only a few categories are fulfilled at once. "Everyone develops routines to fill in the boring gaps of the day, or to bring experience back on an even keel when anxiety threatens. Some people are compulsive doodlers, others chew on things or smoke, smooth their hair, hum a tune, or engage in more esoteric private rituals that have the same purpose: to impose order in consciousness through the performance of patterned action." (52, Flow). In macroflow, all of the following conditions arrive at once. The more parts of your brain that deactivate, the more radical and significant that flow will feel.

The following components describe the general state of flow itself. You've probably noticed some, if not all of these, so far throughout the chapter:

- **Concentration:** A high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention. This complete focusing of attention on the task at hand leaves no room in the mind for irrelevant information.
- **A loss of the feeling of self-consciousness (or the loss of the consciousness of the self):** The merging of action and awareness. "What slips below the threshold of awareness is the *concept* of self, the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are. . . .When not preoccupied with ourselves, we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are. Loss of self-consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward." (64, Flow)
- **Distorted sense of time:** One's subjective experience of time is altered.
- A sense of personal **control** over the situation: Or more precisely, as lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life.
- The activity is **intrinsically rewarding**, so action is effortless.
- A **lack of awareness** of bodily needs.
- **Absorption:** narrowing of awareness down to the activity itself.
- **Creative, problem-solving nature** of the state : Flow is an extremely efficient and effective decision-making strategy. Because flow requires action--otherwise action and awareness cannot merge--there's decision making involved at every step. This is not a consistent feature of any other state of consciousness, altered or otherwise.

Psychedelics, meditation, and dreams may bring fresh insight, but none requires that knowledge be immediately acted upon. Even in those waking states where decision making occurs, the process is not consistent enough to be considered part of the state's definition. (29-31, The Rise of Superman)

Flow Triggers

There are four types of flow triggers: external, internal, social, and creative.

External triggers are qualities in the environment that drive people deeper into the zone. These include risk, rich environment, and deep embodiment:

- **Risk** - Evolution ensured that nothing quite catches our attention like danger. Because focus is a prerequisite to flow, action and adventure athletes rely on risk to drive focus and hack the process using fundamental biology. Since nothing is more important than survival, the first stop for all incoming data is with an almond-shaped sliver of the temporal lobe called the amygdala. The amygdala is the organ responsible for primal emotions like fear, anger, and hate; it is our early warning system that is always on high alert looking for dangers in the environment. The amygdala protects you from harm by interpreting subconscious hints of danger to trigger lightning fast responses. Thus risk, and its consequences, catch our attention big time. The bodies response is to trigger the release of norepinephrine and dopamine, the feel-good neurochemicals that the the brain uses to amplify focus, enhance performance, and jump start flow.

Because these chemicals feel *really* good, "playing with this trigger often produces long lasting effects: risk takers are transformed into risk seekers. . . .Once danger becomes its own reward, risk moves from a threat to be avoided to a challenge to be risen toward. An entirely new relationship with fear begins to develop. When risk is a challenge, fear becomes a compass--literally pointing people in the direction they need to go next (i.e. the direction that produces more flow). 'If you're interested in mastery,' says University of Cambridge, England, neuropsychologist Barbara Sahakian, 'you have to learn this lesson. To really achieve anything, you have to be able to tolerate and enjoy risk. It has to become a challenge to look forward to. In all fields, to make exceptional discoveries you need risk--you're just never going to have a breakthrough without it.'" (101-102, The Rise of Superman)

However, there is some good news for those of you that don't want to confront your own mortality or simply don't enjoy gambling on your physical well-being: risk is relative. Although some 'danger' must be pursued to induce flow, there are a lot of 'dangers' in this world that trigger this reaction in your body. Literally, just talking to someone new, telling the truth, reaching out to someone for help, or sharing something you created with the world are all scenarios where you have to be willing

to fail, risk rejection and humiliation, or look foolish--and still be willing to dust yourself off and push on through.

- **Rich Environment** - In an environment where anything can happen at a moments notice, a wandering mind is a dangerous one. Thus, rich environments automatically tighten focus and drive flow.

The three specific elements of these environments that catch and keep our attention much like risk are novelty, unpredictability, and complexity. "Novelty means both danger and opportunity. To our forebears, a strange scent in the wind could be prey or predator, but either way it paid to pay attention. Unpredictability means we don't know what happens next, thus we pay extra attention to what happens next. Complexity, when there's lots of salient information coming at us at once, does more of the same.

Most of us have some familiarity with complexity triggering flow. If you've ever looked at a vast landscape and felt awe--well, awe is a state of total absorption and the front end of flow. When sucked in by the incomprehensible complexity of geologic timescales and epic beauty, reality pauses if only for a moment. And in this moment, we taste the pinpoint focus, loss of self-consciousness, and time dilation that are deep zone companions. Action and adventure athletes taste these experiences so often because nature is jam packed with novelty, unpredictability, and complexity." (104, The Rise of Superman)

For those of you who want to live a less extreme life, yet still take advantage of these triggers, there are many ways to seek out rich environments all around you. Whether it is in nature, technology, or some other medium, you can find complexity by staring at the night sky, walking in the woods, seeing an IMAX movie, or surfing the world with Google Earth. To increase novelty and unpredictability, try varying your routine: drive a different way to work every day or brush your teeth with the wrong hand. The possibilities are endless. These small changes will demand focus and pattern recognition, and you'll be lighting up the same area of your brain that releases dopamine and norepinephrine, the part of your brain that extreme athletes activate regularly.

- **Deep Embodiment** - Deep embodiment means full body awareness; it means paying attention to all of the vast sensory inputs that make up the human body. We have 50% of nerve endings in our hands, feet, and face, proprioception to detect position in space, and vestibular awareness for balance. We even have as many neurons in the gut and heart as in the brain: "The heart has about 40,000 neurons that play a central role in shaping emotion, perception, and decision making. The stomach and intestines complete this network, containing more than 500 million nerve cells, 100 million neurons, 30 different neurotransmitters, and 90 percent of the body's supply of

serotonin. This 'second brain,' as scientists have dubbed it, lends some empirical support to the persistent notion of gut instinct." (97, *Stealing Fire*)

This vast network of inputs means there is a lot of sensory information constantly coming at you. When you are in a situation where you are being flooded with data, the conscious (explicit) mind can't process it all; it is too slow and it is simply dangerous. So the unconscious (implicit) mind takes over and handles the situation, leaving no time for you to mentally debate yourself on what to do next. In this way, deep embodiment is a shortcut into transient hypofrontality, and another reason extreme athletes find flow so frequently--because their sports DEMAND it.. Take this quote from Doug Ammons, one of the most revered kayakers in history: "Big rivers accelerate you in every direction at once. This puts the vestibular system into overdrive. This isn't just your mind paying more attention--suddenly your entire body is paying attention. When this happens, it's outside our conscious capabilities. There are no words. Our language becomes that of the river. All the features of the river speak to you and you to them through motion. There is tension, threat, there is joy and release, and overall, a deep, deep sense of flow. You are literally part of the flow of the world." (106, *The Rise of Superman*)

For those of us living in less extreme environments, all you have to do to experience deep embodiment is to start paying attention to your body and all of its input streams. Balance and agility training, meditation, yoga, playing hopscotch, running ladder drills, doing martial arts, even playing video games on motion sensing devices like the Nintendo Wii, all help open the senses and enhance proprioception and vestibular awareness.

Internal triggers are conditions in our *inner environment* that create more flow. These internal triggers are the same three conditions for flow that were discussed earlier on: Clear goals, immediate feedback, and the challenge/skill ratio. If you need to review, you can find a more detailed description of these triggers at the beginning of this chapter.

Social triggers, if you haven't guessed yet, arise from being social and interacting with other humans. When other people are around, we tend to pay more attention to the present moment--to the elusive now. Surrounding yourself with a crew of motivated people has the added benefit of keeping you on track to your goals when all you want to do is give up. "Collective momentum fights hard against the individual inertia. In any action and adventure community, when one member's in struggle, another's in flow--and probably using that state to do something amazing. Amazing energizes. Whether it's cooperative excitement or competitive jealousy, one person's triumph becomes another's motivation." (136, *The Rise of Superman*) This should all be very good news to you, because community is arguably the simplest flow hack in the world.

Yet people don't always flow separately from one another. When individuals in a group are in

the right state of mind, there is a phenomenon that occurs called 'group flow.' Keith Sawyer, a professor of psychology, education, and business at the Washington University in St. Louis, was the first to discover this unique flow state among groups. "After fifteen years of research, Sawyer realized that Csikszentmihalyi hadn't taken things far enough. 'When performance peaks in groups,' he says, 'this isn't just about individuals in flow--it's the group entering the state together, a collective merger of action and awareness, a 'group flow'.'. . . Everywhere people gather, group flow can arise. If you've ever sung with a church choir, played in a band, played a team sport, taken part in a play, taken part in a brainstorming session, gone dancing, gone to a rock concert, joined a startup, joined a drum circle, done improvisational anything--those highlight moments forever seared in your memory: that too is group flow in action." (131, *The Rise of Superman*) In fact, some of the most commonly reported instances of group flow occur when people are having a simple conversation--those times when hours seem to pass like minutes.

The same feel-good neurochemicals that make individual flow so powerful also arise in groups, except people seem to like them a lot more. Norepinephrine and dopamine typically underpin 'romantic love,' endorphins link mother to child and enhance social bonding in adults, and anandamide and serotonin deepen feelings of trust, openness, and intimacy. When combinations of these chemicals flow through groups at once, you get tighter bonds and heightened cooperation. In comparison studies run by St. Bonaventure University psychologist Charles Walker, "coactive flow" states (individual activities done in groups, like slackers sharing a line) and "interactive flow" states (where interaction is inherent to the activity, like rock climbing with a partner) were compared to individual, "solitary" flow states. "Walker discovered that the more social an activity, the higher 'flow enjoyment'--the level of joy experienced in flow--was for participants. Higher enjoyment correlates to higher motivation, of course, but these same chemicals also enhance performance and improve social bonding. As a result, in group flow, spontaneity, cooperation, communication, creativity, productivity, and overall performance all go through the roof." (131-132, *The Rise of Superman*)

Group flow creates a deep solidarity and togetherness resulting from shared transcendent experiences that anthropologists call *communitas*. That feeling of *communitas* turns out to be very useful for those that experience the surreal effects of flow. When you feel that special state of consciousness, it can be hard to trust your abilities and truly believe you will be able to do it again. If someone is there to reassure you that it happened, and better yet, that they felt it too, it makes it more real and significantly increases your chances of reaching flow once more.

The following ten triggers are ways to alter social conditions to produce more group flow (the first three should look familiar):

- **Serious Concentration**
- **Shared, Clear Goals**
- **Good Communication** (i.e. lots of immediate feedback)

- **Equal Participation**
- **Element of Risk**
- **Familiarity** : Meaning the group has a common language, a shared knowledge base, and a communication style based on unspoken understandings. Everybody should always be on the same page--so much so that no explanation will be needed when novel insights arise.
- **Blending Egos**: A sort of humility in the group where no one is hogging the spotlight and everyone is thoroughly involved.
- **Sense of Control**: Everyone should be able to choose their own challenges and have the necessary skills to accomplish them. Combines autonomy (being free to do what you want) and competence (being good at what you do).
- **Close Listening**: When everyone is generating real-time, in the moment, unplanned responses to dialogue as it unfolds. No one is thinking about what witty thing to say next.
- **Always Say Yes**: A trigger based on the first rule of improv. Instead of shutting people down and killing their stoke with words like "no," you always something along the lines of "Yes, or... ". The goal is to be more additive than argumentative. To create a feeling of togetherness and innovation, and increase the momentum that comes from ceaselessly amplifying each other's ideas and actions.

Creative triggers are the risks associated with creating something new and sharing it with the world. Coming up with original, valuable ideas scares the shit of most people, and sharing them with others scares them even more. That's because there is a lot of potential, significant risk in this process: Every time we have a creative insight and share it with the world, we come up against some very primal terrors: fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of social ridicule, fear of loss of resources (time, money, access, etc.). . . .Drilling down deeper, beyond the risk taking involved in idea generation, there is a second mechanism at work: pattern recognition. . . . When coming up with a new idea, we always have to find patterns. . . . At a fundamental level, then, coming up with original valuable ideas always requires risk taking and pattern recognition--and this means dopamine." (144, The Rise of Superman). Basically, flow appears when you can no longer proceed on autopilot and have to actually challenge yourself to concentrate on something that matters. And the best part? The flow state itself acts as a force multiplier for creativity. Creativity triggers flow and then flow enhances creativity, and on and on it goes, leading to constant innovations and greater ideas.

"The greatest athletes aren't interested in the greatest risks. I mean, sometimes they are taken, sometimes not, but those physical risks are a by-product of a much deeper desire to take creative risks. Don't be fooled by the danger. In action and adventure sports, creativity is always the point. " - Jimmy Chin

The Flow Equation

What's the *best* way to get in the zone? The International Church of Slacklife obviously endorses slacklining for this purpose, but ultimately, *it depends*.

"It depends on your tolerance for risk, and how far over the edge you're willing to hang. It depends on your sense of urgency, and whether your goals can be reached in minutes or decades. And it depends on how reliably your preferred approach delivers actionable information and insight. Those three parameters -- risk, reward, and time-- provide a way to compare [flow] states. This sliding scale lets you assess otherwise unrelated methods--from meditation to psychedelics to action sports, to any others you can think of:

$$\text{VALUE} = \text{TIME} \times \text{REWARD} / \text{RISK}$$

- Time refers to the learning curve, or how long you need to invest in a particular technique until it can reliably produce the experience of flow.
- Reward refers to how well we retain the insights that arise and how consistently they drive positive change.
- Risk refers to the potential dangers. If there's a chance that you could lose your life or your mind, that's something to consider well in advance.
- Put them all together and you get an approximate Value for each pursuit.

How you rank each variable is highly subjective--dependent on your abilities, responsibilities, and ambitions. But the final analysis is simple: are any of these pursuits worth the time, effort, and money we invest in them? Are we more energetic, empathetic, and ethical afterward? If not, they're just distractions or diversions from our lives. 'I care not a whit for a man's religion,' Abraham Lincoln once quipped, 'unless his dog is the better for it.' And that goes double for techniques of ecstasy." (p 211-212, *Stealing Fire*)

Yes, I know just a few paragraphs ago we said that *it depends*, but by this logic, highlining is objectively the best way to get into the zone. Let's take a look:

Time: Slacklining is a forced meditation, thus the time you need to invest in it until it reliably produces flow is almost non-existent. Granted it will take some time to learn how to simply walk without falling, and your journey to master the line will be never ending--but the key point here is how long until it *reliably* produces flow. Many people will experience flow almost immediately-- especially in the learning process itself. As long as you are able to make a challenge out of balancing in some form, whether on your feet, hands, or butt, you technically don't even have to be able to walk to experience it. And the same goes for highlining. Even if

can't do much more than slide out or sit on top of the line, most people will STILL experience flow. Why is that?

You simply cannot learn to slackline without being totally present in the moment, without having a clear mind, without connecting to the line, connecting to your breath, and putting your ego aside. You have to work with the environment, instead of against it. You have to become one with everything. Furthermore, it is easy to completely lose track of time as you become obsessed with trying again and again to beat your last attempt and operate at your full potential.

When evaluated by the definitions of flow described earlier in this chapter, slacklining meets every single condition and trigger for flow: It is *challenging activity*, directed by *goals* and *rules*, that *requires skill*. The slackline itself provides *direct and immediate feedback* to give you clues as to how you are performing. *Concentration* is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. *Self-consciousness disappears*, and the *sense of time becomes distorted*. There is a substantial *risk* of falling and hurting yourself. Slacklining generally happens outside in *rich environments* and requires *deep embodiment* to succeed. It can be practiced alone, but most people choose to slackline with their friends as we tend to challenge ourselves more, slackline longer, and have a greater overall experience when other people are around (a.k.a. *social triggers*). Occasionally, slacklining/highlining even offers the opportunity to experience *group flow*: you can bet that a long, hard hike while carrying big, heavy bags to go rig something new and challenging in an unknown environment while hanging over a cliff edge or chasm is going to create lots of group bonding. We see this all the time. The most smooth, successful projects are the ones where everyone on the team is on the same wavelength. Finally, there are plenty of *creative triggers* as well: whether you are inventing a new trick, learning a new technique, pushing your limits, inventing new ways to rig, tinkering with innovative gear designs, establishing a new line, or even sharing your progress on social media.... Everything about slacklining requires you to recognize patterns, take creative risks, and be willing to face rejection, failure, and the unknown. "An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous." (71, Flow) Sound like slacklining to you?

Reward: The rewards experienced in slacklining are extremely high. All the benefits you typically see from meditation, movement, community, nature, and facing your fears are all combined into one extremely powerful activity. Slacklining increases balance, breathing, peace of mind, happiness, concentration, focus, attention to detail, acceptance, self-awareness, and control over one's life and consciousness. It encourages getting out into nature and living a healthy lifestyle. It improves muscle strength, joint stability, reaction time, and proprioception. It decreases the ego, stress, and negative energy, and lessens your chances of getting hurt from other common sports injuries.

Furthermore, it is a fact that training in high stress situations increases situational awareness.

Situational awareness is “defined as the ability to absorb information accurately, assess it calmly, and respond appropriately. [It] is essentially the ability to keep cool when all hell breaks loose. Because attention and pattern recognition are so heightened by flow, training in the state radically increases situational awareness.” (72, *The Rise of Superman*) If the definition of situational awareness is the ability to absorb information accurately, and if we assume that most slackers are consistently training while in flow, slacklining must therefore greatly increase our ability to retain insights and allow them to consistently drive positive change.

Risk: When you slackline there is a substantial risk of falling onto the ground or hitting the slackline in the wrong way and hurting yourself, but even those risks can be mitigated by learning how to fall correctly, putting a crash pad under your line, practicing over water or foam, learning how to catch properly, etc. The even better solution to mitigate this risk seems counterintuitive at first: take it waaay up high! (and be tied in!) **When rigged correctly**, highlining is the safest form of slacklining (in contrast to tricklining or simply slacking in the park) as it takes the ground out of the equation. Up high when you fall, you dangle in the air instead, and that takes away a lot of the risk in the sport.

And that is why highlining shines above the rest. Highlining is pretty reliable when it comes to producing flow. The higher you take it, the more you are increasing your external, internal, creative, and social triggers. If you get used to a specific line and find it hard to reach flow, all you have to do to reach flow again is increase the height or the length of the line (or both), and there’s a good chance you will be scared/shoot right into flow all over again. Initially, it requires very little time commitment, assuming you will go with someone who knows what they are doing and they are willing to set it up for you. (Eventually it will require more of a time input to learn proper rigging, but as that knowledge increases, so should your reward.) Risk is fairly low (once again, **when rigged correctly**). Despite *feeling* like you are going to die, it is more than likely that you will come out of the experience just fine--with only a couple of bruises on your thigh to account for what felt like the most intense moment of your life. Once accomplished, the reward for most people is a highly satisfying sense of accomplishment. Facing one’s fears and doing something extraordinary at the same time? Can’t beat it. Not to mention that the lessons you retain increase greatly in a *high stress environment*. With low time, low risk, and extremely high reward, I can’t think of many other activities that give you as much value as highlining.

It’s just simple math... you can’t argue with numbers ;)

The Dark Side of Flow

One thing that will become very clear once you experience flow for the first time is how hard it will be to go back to normal life. As incredible as flow is, it is addictive like nothing else. Once you feel it, you can be sure that you are going to want to feel it again. When you feel it

enough, it can be hard to get excited again. Ever. And it is for this reason that flow can be so dangerous: "It gives you reason to live-- but live this way long enough and those reasons become more important than dying. This is what the self-help books don't tell you. Fully alive and deeply committed is a risky business. Once you strip away the platitudes, a life of passion and purpose will always cost, as T.S. Eliot reminds us, "Not less than everything." (160, *The Rise of Superman*)

The following warning is not intended for those of you who get your flow fix by taking creative risks as an artist, by pushing your mental limits playing chess, or by doing any other activity where you can find flow without much physical consequence. This warning is especially relevant, however, for those of you who are risking your *life* to reach that perfect state of consciousness--for those of you that find their flow in the realm of action and adventure sports.

Sure, flow doesn't quite sidetrack your life to the same extent that hardcore drugs like heroin and meth are certain to do. Even if your family doesn't approve of your sport, they probably won't disown you for it. Your state of mind will get stronger, not weaker. You'll feel in control, not out of control. There's no risk of overdose. In fact, you'll probably live a healthier and more active lifestyle because of it.

But it will cause you to take more risks than you ever anticipated. Just like drugs, many of you will have an urge to prioritize this newfound addiction and restructure your whole life around that incredible feeling. You will upend your routines and your way of life. Many of you will willingly quit your job, give up everything you own to live out of a van, and spend all your money on gear and plane tickets. Even more of us will truly believe that it is worth dying for.

And you'll do all of this happily--which is the real difference between drugs and flow. While drugs eventually make most people feel pretty miserable, everything you do to attain flow while living the slacklife will give you a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. So fulfilled you won't even care when your decisions begin to get riskier and riskier. Just like drugs, the more times you reach the state, the more you will want to go back; yet the more you reach it, the harder it will be to attain. The more you do the impossible, the more cocky you will get, and flow makes you feel invincible, right up the moment you're not. Getting a bigger fix in the world of action and adventure sports generally requires taking more physical risks and testing more limits. Maybe you start experimenting with swamis. And then ankle leashes. And then free solos. Or maybe you start establishing lines off sketchy climbing routes. Or maybe you just start throwing yourself into situations where it's "flow or die". "Seriously, what could go wrong? And that's part of the problem--even when everything goes right, things go wrong. Walking this path demands constantly increasing the challenges we face. We are climbing a ladder of escalating risk. . . . Continuously pushing on the challenge/skill ratio means it's scary here, and it's going to get scarier." (158, *The Rise of Superman*)

Furthermore, just like with drugs, you may start to feel an unbearable depression when you experience the enormous gap that sits between the ecstasy of the zone and the all-too-familiar daily toil waiting for you on the other end. As Saint Potter once elegantly described, these periods are true trial by fire: “When I feel that really draining side of not being able to enter into the flow, it’s horrible. I feel helpless, lethargic, restless, disturbed. The positive here is I hate that feeling so much it makes me more focused. I take all the necessary steps to get out of it as soon as I can. Sometimes, though, I end up sunk in a really bad place. True depression, trapped for quite some time. But even here there’s an upside. At those times, doing anything hurts so much, I can only do what truly inspires me. Otherwise, I have no power. This allows me to lock onto ideas that are authentically mine--so the dark side of flow, for all its torment, keeps me being exactly who I am”. (160-161, The Rise of Superman)

Not that testing your limits, or free soloing, or #vanlife, or quitting your job to do what truly inspires you are particularly bad things. Of course we, at The International Church of Slacklife, want you to live the slacklife to the fullest extent! We just hope that you will find a **balance** in everything you do: Find multiple hobbies that you enjoy; don’t rely too much on one discipline. Try working a job AND doing slacklife. Don’t live so much in the moment that you forget to plan for your future. Have a retirement plan AND go play. Planning for the future will help you *remember* that you have one. When you have something to lose, you will have a tendency to be more careful. Make sure that your decisions are your own; that you are truly weighing the risks before executing.

Ultimately, there’s no way to avoid the dark side of flow. You will feel depressed at times. You will want to take huge risks and feel the pressure to be better and do better. You will suffer. But you can mitigate all these things by living a balanced lifestyle and remembering these tips to avoid the predictable ways in which flow goes wrong:

- **IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU**

- A key component of flow state is selflessness. Selflessness is an incredible feeling that is often so new and compelling it feels like no one else has ever felt this way before. Ironically, the experience of selflessness can lead to extreme ego inflation if you don’t check yourself. “When the prefrontal cortex shuts down, impulse control, long term planning, and critical reasoning faculties go offline, too. We lose our checks and balances. Combine that with excessive dopamine telling us that the connections we’re making are radically important and must be immediately acted upon-- that *we’re* radically important and must be listened to -- and it’s not hard to imagine how this goes wrong. So no matter what comes up, no matter how fantastical your experience, it helps to remember: *It’s not about you*. Take an encounter with selflessness for all the possibility it suggests, but fold those lessons back into your everyday roles and responsibilities. (203, Stealing Fire)

- **IT’S NOT ABOUT NOW**

- When we reach flow state, our minds and bodies experience a sense of timelessness. We are living perfectly in the immediacy of the deep now, and this can bring an added sense of gravitas to the moment. “Anyone who experiences the clarity and immediacy of [flow] and tries to bring those insights back to reality has to account for the time lag. . . . Which is fine if we anticipate it, but demoralizing if we don’t. **‘Most people overestimate what they can do in one year, ‘ Bill Gates once said, ‘and underestimate what they can do in ten.’** . . . [Thus] it’s critical to calibrate the difference between the reach-out-and-touch-it immediacy of the ‘deep now’ with the frustratingly incremental unfolding of the day-to-day. . . . Remember: *It’s not about Now.*” - (204-205, Stealing Fire)

- **DON’T BE A BLISS JUNKIE**

- Especially relevant for slackliners, the following warning pretty much describes the unchecked and unbalanced Slacklife. I’m sure you all know someone who fits this description: “Once people taste the fleeting effortlessness of [flow], some decide that’s how life is always supposed to be: a state of perpetual ease. They become bliss junkies, state chasers, refusing to do anything unless they can ‘go with the flow.’ (205, The Rise of Superman)

Don’t get me wrong, living this way for a time can be a great experience. Going with the flow and chasing the slacklife can bring adventure, community, passion, and love into your life, amongst other things. But most people that live this way for too long, start to feel anxious, unfulfilled, and stagnant. The lifestyle of going with the flow is fun, but it isn’t necessarily conducive to cultivating your best self and reaching your fullest potential. You NEED the lows to appreciate the highs. Everything is relative, and when you have nothing to compare your high too, it doesn’t really feel like a high anymore....it just becomes your new normal....And eventually we always take normal for granted.

Without work to balance your vacation time, travel soon starts to feel like a burden (“Ugh, I have a 15 hour flight ahead of me.” “My layover is so long! I’ve been sitting in the airport for hours.” “I’ve been in the car ALL day.” “I feel like all I do is pack”... any of these sound familiar?) instead of a mysterious adventure full of possibilities like it once used to. Constantly meeting new people and cultivating new relationships is exciting, until you realize that you have a bunch of acquaintances and no close friends to talk to. A day of lying in the warm sun that once brought you great relief to stress, soon starts to feel like a bore. This is because your mind and body crave CHALLENGE. Everything in life needs BALANCE, and when life is too easy for too long, you can bet it won’t be satisfying. There’s a reason some of the hardest moments in our life stand out as the most memorable. The moments where we had to work our ass off to accomplish something.

A helpful analogy to contemplate why this lifestyle isn't necessarily the best way to live is to think of yourself as a colander (a bowl filled with holes). "When you experience a peak state, it's like turning on the kitchen faucet and flooding that colander with water. If there's enough volume, the colander fills up despite the leaks. As long as water keeps flooding in, you will, for a moment, experience what it's like to be a cup. You'll feel whole; if you're really inspired, holy. Then the faucet turns off, the peak experience ends, and all that water leaks back out. In a matter of moments, you'll settle back to where you started. The information recedes. The inspiration that was so easy to grasp moments ago slips away. And now you've got a decision to make. Do you engage the dull and repetitive work of plugging your leaks or do you go hunting for the next ecstatic faucet to tap? The notion that hard work and persistence in the face of struggle might have a role in all of this often gets lost. . . .All of that "effortless effort" [actually] takes a lot of work. So do the hard thing and the rest becomes much easier: Enjoy the state, but be sure to do the work. And no matter how tempting it is: *Don't become a Bliss Junkie.*" (205-206 Stealing Fire)

- **DON'T DIVE TOO DEEP**

- It is so difficult for humans to attain happiness because frustration is deeply woven into the fabric of life, and whenever some of our needs *are* temporarily met, we immediately start wishing for more. Unfortunately, flow has a tendency to magnify this discontent.

It doesn't matter if we just accomplished the impossible, flow would still leave us with a voice whispering in our ear to go further, be better, and take more risks: "return too soon, and you'll always wonder if you could have gone deeper. Go too far, and you might not make it back. . . . It really doesn't matter what we find down there, out there, or up there, if we're unable to bring it back to solid ground. So take it all in, but hold it loosely. And most critically, *Don't Dive Too Deep.* (207-208, Stealing Fire)

So, is this *everything* that could go wrong? Absolutely not! Not even close. But these four cautions tie directly to the most important qualities of flow and help us combat the side effects of the ever so persistent ego. "They're nonnegotiable. If you put it in the ditch with one of these, you've got no one to blame but yourself. 'No sympathy for the devil,' Hunter S. Thompson once wrote. 'Buy the ticket, take the ride. . . and if it occasionally gets a little heavier than what you had in mind, well . . . maybe chalk it off to forced consciousness expansion.'" (209, Stealing Fire)

Dealing with Death

“The theory of evolution says we exist to pass along our genes. Fundamental biology tells us that survival is the name of the game....Right now, more people are risking their lives for their sports than ever before in history, and as Thomas Pynchon wrote in *Gravity's Rainbow*, “It is not often that Death is told so clearly to fuck off.” ... This, then, is the gauntlet thrown, the very far frontier, the razor's edge of our knowledge, the uneasy and somewhat spiritual truth that for an ever-burgeoning segment of the human population, these sports really are worth dying for.” (xxi-xxii, *The Rise of Superman*)

What do we do when our worst nightmare happens? When someone you love and care about, a friend, a lover, a family member, succumbs to this lifestyle? When they make one wrong split second decision, and now they're gone from this realm? How do you handle that?

Eventually, this is going to happen. When it does, remember that it is okay to suffer. It is okay to cry and grieve and feel sad. You'll never truly be prepared for it, but you *can* choose how you want to look at it. Whenever someone dies, especially in the adventure world, it raises the proverbial question: Why do we do this?

We do this because most people are so afraid of dying that they never live. Once we realize that the opposite of life isn't death, it's stagnation, and the true opposite of death is birth, we are able to embrace our full potential. When we live our lives to the fullest, we inspire others around us to live theirs. We change thousands of lives just by doing what we love. And isn't that what really matters?

BASE Jumper Matt Blank said it best: “It's not about jumping off buildings or cliffs. It's just about living life to the limit of your human experience. . . Once you refuse to be intimidated by the consequences of your actions, anything is possible. BASE jumpers...they're more afraid of getting to the end of their life and finding that they haven't lived than they are living a stable life. So it's no decision at all to drop everything and go live life to the fullest. . . . If somebody tells you that they don't fear death, to me, it tells me that they don't love anything...because they're not scared of leaving it behind. I'm absolutely scared of leaving things behind. Especially before I've been able to share as much and learn as much from these things that I love.”

Whenever a comrade dies, it inspires all of us to live a little fuller. To push into uncharted territory and to bring a little of that magic back to the rest of the world.

“There's long tradition here--the tradition of honoring someone who has died trying to live their life to the fullest by, in turn, living your own life to the fullest.... “At the root of all fear is separation,” says Travis Rice. “That's especially true for mortal fears. But in flow, that's gone completely. It's the most comforting truth--that there's no separation, no death. So when you talk about the tradition of honoring fallen comrades by pushing harder, well most of us have

had these spiritual experiences, so part of that tradition involves this other invisible legacy-- this shared exploration of the mystery."... It means that at the center of the action and adventure brotherhood there's a bit of a mystery cult. It means, as it always has, that if you want to probe the mystery, sacrifice is required. In simpler terms, these athletes have taken the radical step of turning mortality into motivation and have fundamentally rearranged their lives and their values to accommodate this change....Here--in perhaps the surest sign of a culture of innovation--we're seeing a social extension of this same principle: When innovation leads to death, powerful tradition ensures that death leads to more innovation." (166-167, *The Rise of Superman*)

THE BOOK OF REAL LIFE SHIT

Luckily you don't have to be an extreme athlete to reach flow. Though most slackers find movement, play, and facing your fears to be excellent sources of flow, there are many other paths to experiencing this optimal state of mind and all of its performance enhancing benefits. Once you learn how to take control of your consciousness and restructure any activity to reliably produce flow, you will be able to accomplish a healthier, happier, more fulfilling life.

Keep in mind, however, that there is no exact formula for happiness, and this book does not promise that. A joyful life is an individual creation that cannot be copied from a recipe. Optimal experiences depend on the individual ability to create and control what happens in consciousness moment by moment.

Instead of providing a list of do's and don'ts, what follows are general *principles* you can use to transform boring and meaningless lives into ones full of enjoyment. This will be a voyage through the realms of the mind, chartered with the tools of science. What I can promise you, is that this won't be easy and it *will* take time. You're going to have to put in the work, and there are no shortcuts you can take to speed up the process. Many forces within yourself and within the environment will stand in your way. "It is a little like trying to lose weight: everyone knows what it takes, everyone wants to do it, yet it is next to impossible for so many. The stakes here are higher, however. It is not just a matter of losing a few extra pounds. It is a matter of losing the chance to have a life worth living." (7)

If you feel discouraged, just remember that the rules are clear and within everyone's reach, and all things that are worth a damn require hard work. For those of you who care about such things, this book should provide enough guidance to make possible the transition from theory to practice. Though without some mental effort and a commitment to reflect honestly on your own experiences, you will not gain much from what follows.

Let's Get Some Things Straight

Let's start off by getting some things straight: *Every single one of us has the ability to control our reality, control our emotions, and decide what our lives will be like. Happiness is simply how we interpret events; it is a CHOICE. You are only a victim if you choose to be. Thus, we all have the ability to be happy. . . most of us just need some help learning how to find it.*

I know what you're thinking: those are some pretty bold claims. I get it. If you would have told me this just a few years ago I would have been like NOPE. Hell no. Nah. Say this outloud to nearly anyone and you'll get a lengthy list of rebuttals: What about people born severely disabled or born into poverty? What about mental patients? What about prisoners and slaves and people put in concentration camps against their will? What about all the people that are simply born unlucky?

But think about this: Many people are born into the right country, at the right time, in the right family, with plenty of love, perfect looks, a good job and ample opportunities, yet even they struggle to find happiness. “Despite the fact that we are now healthier and grow to be older, despite the fact that even the least affluent among us are surrounded by material luxuries undreamed of even a few decades ago . . . and regardless of all the stupendous scientific knowledge we can summon at will, people will often end up feeling that their lives have been wasted, that instead of being filled with happiness their years were spent in anxiety and boredom.” (1)

When the luckiest of us are unhappy, what chance do the rest of us have?

The following chapters will show you that EVERYONE can be happy, regardless of their situation, as long as they are willing to put in the work.

***DISCLAIMER:** *I can't take much credit for most of what follows as it is mainly a series of excerpts from the book "Flow: the psychology of optimal experience" by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. I have organized many excerpts and summarized much of the rest in the best way I saw fit for the spiritual purposes we are attempting to attain within this BOOK OF REAL LIFE SHIT. Thus, all the numbers in parentheses from here on out will be references to "Flow" unless otherwise specified. If any of this fascinates you, I highly recommend that you buy his book for yourself (and all his others!) to read more in depth about each topic. There is a lot I left out!**

The Anatomy of Consciousness

The only way we will be able to master our minds is if we understand the way subjective states are shaped, so let's start by understanding how consciousness works and how it is controlled.

Every single emotion we experience from love to hate, curiosity to boredom-- initially comes into the mind as *information only*. This information represents what is happening outside and inside the body and is presented to us in such a way that it can be analyzed and acted upon. We use *attention* to select the relevant information from the potential millions of bits available. Attention is what helps us retrieve the appropriate references from our memories in order to evaluate an event and then choose how to handle it. Despite its great powers, attention cannot observe or hold in focus more information than can be processed simultaneously. “Because attention determines what will or will not appear in consciousness, and because it is also required to make any other mental events. . . happen there, it is useful to think of it as *psychic energy*. Attention is like energy in that without it no work can be done, and in doing work it is dissipated. We create ourselves by how we invest this energy. Memories, thoughts, and feelings are all shaped by how we use it. Entirely different realities will emerge depending on how it is invested. And it is an energy under our control, to do with

as we please; hence, attention is our most important tool in the task of improving the quality of experience.” (33)

Therefore, consciousness is essentially a sorting station that sets priorities among all of our sensations, perceptions, feelings, and ideas. Consciousness is what makes us different from wild animals. It allows us to deliberately weigh what the senses tell us and respond accordingly. Without it, we would still “know” what is going on, but we would act on reflex and instinct instead.

Another reason consciousness is so fascinating is because it is not entirely controlled by its biological programming--meaning it is self-directed. Throughout centuries of evolution, the human nervous system has become so complex that it is now able to affect its own states. Consciousness has developed the ability to override its genetic instructions and set its own independent course of action regardless of its genetic blueprint and its objective environment. It can straight up *INVENT* information that did not exist before! It is the reason we can create stories, make up lies, daydream, contemplate the universe, be in denial, and invent scientific theories, among other amazing feats.

This is why people have the ability to make themselves happy, or miserable, regardless of what is actually happening around them, just by changing the contents of their consciousness. We all know people who can turn impossible circumstances into a fun challenge to overcome, just through the force of their personalities. On the flip side, we all know someone who can turn the best situation into a nightmare with their negativity. And there's a good chance that every one of you reading this has been on *both* sides of the coin at some point in your lives. Deep down, I'd say most of us KNOW what we have to do to change a dire or boring situation into something we can enjoy. What it comes down to is whether or not we want to keep feeling sorry for ourselves and expend the energy to do so.

Once we know and understand how consciousness works, we start to realize that happiness is not something that just happens. It is not the result of good luck or being born to a rich family. It is not something we can buy or demand or require. It is not a result of outside events, but, rather, *how we interpret them*. There are many *states* of the mind, and happiness is simply *one* of them. It “is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person. People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy. Yet we cannot reach happiness by consciously searching for it. . . . It is a circuitous path that begins with achieving control over the contents of our consciousness.” (2)

So what does it mean to *be* conscious?

“It simply means that certain specific conscious events (sensations, feelings, thoughts, intentions) are occurring, and that we are able to direct their course. . . . The events that constitute consciousness--the things we see, feel, think, and desire--are information that we

can manipulate and use. Thus we might think of consciousness as *intentionally ordered information*. . . . Since for us outside events do not exist unless we are aware of them, consciousness corresponds to subjectively experienced reality. While everything we feel, smell, hear, or remember is potentially a candidate for entering consciousness, the experiences that actually do become part of it are much fewer than those left out. Thus, while consciousness is a mirror that reflects what our senses tell us about what happens both outside our bodies and within the nervous system, it reflects those changes selectively, actively shaping events, imposing on them a reality of its own. The reflection consciousness provides is what we call our life: the sum of all we have heard, seen, felt, hoped, and suffered from birth to death. Although we believe that there are 'things' outside consciousness, we have direct evidence only of those that find a place in it. . . . consciousness can contain a famine in Africa, the smell of a rose, the performance of the Dow Jones, and a plan to stop at the store to buy some bread all at the same time. But that does not mean that its content is a shapeless jumble.

We may call *intentions* the force that keeps information in consciousness ordered. Intentions arise in consciousness whenever a person is aware of desiring something or wanting to accomplish something. Intentions are also bits of information, shaped either by biological needs or by internalized social goals. They act as magnetic fields, moving attention toward some objects and away from others, keeping our mind focused on some stimuli in preference to others. We often call the manifestation of intentionality by other names, such as instinct, need, drive, or desire. But these are all explanatory terms, telling us *why* people behave in certain ways. Intention is a more neutral and descriptive term; it doesn't say *why* a person wants to do a certain thing, but simply states *that* he does.

For instance, whenever blood sugar level drops below a critical point, we start feeling uneasy. . . . Because of genetically programmed instructions to restore the level of sugar in the blood, we might start thinking about food. We will look for food until we eat and are no longer hungry. In this instance we could say that it was the hunger drive that organized the content of consciousness, forcing us to focus attention on food. But this is already an interpretation of the facts--no doubt chemically accurate, but phenomenologically irrelevant. The hungry person is not aware of the level of sugar in his bloodstream; he knows only that there is a bit of information in his consciousness that he has learned to identify as 'hunger.'

Once the person is aware that he is hungry, he might very well form the intention of obtaining some food. . . . alternatively, he could disregard the pangs of hunger entirely. He might have some stronger and opposite intentions, such as losing weight, or wanting to save money, or fasting for religious reasons. Sometimes, as in the case of political protesters who wish to starve themselves to death, the intention of making an ideological statement might override genetic instructions, resulting in voluntary death. . . . there are enough exceptions in every culture to show that goals are quite flexible. . . . The existence of people like these shows that consciousness can be ordered in terms of different goals and intentions. Each of us has the freedom to control our subjective reality." (26-28)

Despite all the incredible feats the conscious mind is able to accomplish, there are many forces that constantly attempt to work against it. One of the main forces that affects consciousness negatively is psychic disorder. Psychic disorder is information that conflicts with existing intentions and distracts us from carrying them out (i.e. pain, fear, rage, anxiety, jealousy, etc.), which in turn causes a condition called *psychic entropy* within the self. All of the aforementioned feelings render our attention ineffective. Instead of choosing what to focus on, our attention is forced onto undesirable objects. How this happens is always the same: "some information that conflicts with an individual's goals appears in consciousness. Depending on how central that goal is to the self and on how severe the threat to it is, some amount of attention will have to be mobilized to eliminate the danger, leaving less attention free to deal with other matters. . . . Prolonged experiences of this kind can weaken the self to the point that it is no longer able to invest attention and pursue its goals." (37)

Yet these outside events that cause so much strife, initially only appear in your consciousness as information. The event is not necessarily negative or positive until the self interprets that raw information in the context of its own interests and determines whether or not it is harmful. Meaning you, and only you, have the power to decide to let that negativity into the equation.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from psychic entropy is the optimal experience we all know and love: flow! In other words, the optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is *order in consciousness*. In flow state, there is no disorder to straighten out, no threat for the self to defend against. "When the information that keeps coming into awareness is congruent with goals, psychic energy flows effortlessly. There is no need to worry, no reason to question one's adequacy. But whenever one does stop to think about oneself, the evidence is encouraging: "You are doing all right." The positive feedback strengthens the self, and more attention is freed to deal with the outer and the inner environment." (39)

"When a person is able to organize his or her consciousness so as to experience flow as often as possible, the quality of life is inevitably going to improve because even the usually boring routines of work become purposeful and enjoyable. In flow we are in control of our psychic energy, and everything we do adds order to consciousness. One of our respondents, a well-known West Coast rock climber, explains concisely the tie between the avocation that gives him a profound sense of flow and the rest of his life: 'It's exhilarating to come closer and closer to self-discipline. You make your body go and everything hurts; then you look back in awe at the self, at what you've done, it just blows your mind. It leads to ecstasy, to self-fulfillment. If you win these battles enough, that battle against yourself, at least for a moment, it becomes easier to win the battles in the world.'

The 'battle' is not really against the self, but against the entropy that brings disorder to consciousness. It is really a battle for the self; it is a struggle for establishing control over attention. The struggle does not necessarily have to be physical, as in the case of the climber.

But anyone who has experienced flow knows that the deep enjoyment it provides requires an equal degree of disciplined concentration.” (40-41)

“Following a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex than it had been before. It is by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow. Complexity is the result of two broad psychological processes: *differentiation* and *integration*. Differentiation implies a movement toward uniqueness, toward separating oneself from others. Integration refers to its opposite: a union with other people, with ideas and entities beyond the self. A complex self is one that succeeds in combining these opposite tendencies. The self becomes more differentiated as a result of flow because overcoming a challenge inevitably leaves a person feeling more capable, more skilled.... After each episode of flow a person becomes more of a unique individual, less predictable, possessed of rarer skills. Complexity is often thought to have a negative meaning, synonymous with difficulty and confusion. That may be true, but only if we equate it with differentiation alone. ... Flow helps to integrate the self because in that state of deep concentration consciousness is unusually well ordered. Thoughts, intentions, feelings, and all the senses are focused on the same goal. Experience is in harmony. And when the flow episode is over, one feels more “together” than before, not only internally but also with respect to other people and to the world in general.

A self that is only differentiated--not integrated--may attain great individual accomplishments, but risks being mired in self-centered egotism. By the same token, a person whose self is based exclusively on integration will be connected and secure, but lack autonomous individuality. Only when a person invests equal amounts of psychic energy in these two processes and avoids both selfishness and conformity is the self likely to reflect complexity.” (41-42)

The Roots of Discontent

More than anything else, all humans seek happiness. At the root of every goal -- success, beauty, health, love, money, power -- is the expectation that it will make us happy.

Yet it is so difficult for us to achieve happiness. Why do we always feel so discontent?

For starters, one of the greatest myths that humankind has developed to reassure itself of its importance is that the universe was created to answer our needs. Sorry (not sorry) to burst your bubble...but it wasn't.

One of the major functions of every culture has been to shield its members from the all the chaos: the enormity of our isolation in the cosmos, how precarious our hold on survival actually is, and the randomness of it all. Myths, beliefs, stories, patriotism, ethnic traditions, social classes, and religions (including this one) all attempt to transform the random, crushing forces of the universe into manageable, or at least understandable, patterns. Life is hard enough without our consciousness constantly analyzing every single thing we do and

think and feel. And since humans are wired to always assume the worst (it's what keeps us alive), facing the odds of existence would be even more difficult without such trust in the exclusive privileges that culture and religion provide.

But the universe was not designed with the comfort of human beings in mind. "It is almost immeasurably huge, and most of it is hostilely empty and cold. It is the setting for great violence, as when occasionally a star explodes, turning to ashes everything within billions of miles. The rare planet whose gravity field would not crush our bones is probably swimming in lethal gases. Even planet Earth, which can be so idyllic and picturesque, is not to be taken for granted. To survive on it men and women have had to struggle for millions of years against ice, fire, floods, wild animals, and invisible microorganisms that appear out of nowhere to snuff us out. It seems that every time a pressing danger is avoided, a new and more sophisticated threat appears on the horizon. No sooner do we invent a new substance than its by-products start poisoning the environment. . . . The earth may be our only home, but it is a home full of booby traps waiting to go off at any moment. . . . It is not that the universe is random in an abstract mathematical sense...But natural processes do not take human desires into account. They are deaf and blind to our needs, and thus they are random in contrast with the order we attempt to establish through our goals. ... "The universe is not hostile, nor yet is it friendly," in the words of JH Holmes. "It is simply indifferent."(8-9)

This cultural hubris of assuming we are entitled to a universe that is insensitive to human needs is problematic in the sense that it grants an unjustified sense of security. An unrealistic trust in the shields of cultural myths can lead to equally extreme disillusion when they fail. When people start taking innovation for granted and believing that life is always going to easy, they are stripped of their ability to face adversity with courage and determination. As soon as something goes wrong, they quickly realize that what they had believed in is not entirely true and abandon faith in cultural values and everything else they have learned to trust. They find themselves struggling with the chaos of unease and lethargy, and use that struggle as a reason to give up hope and stop trying.

"This tends to happen whenever a culture has had a run of good luck and for a while seems indeed to have found a way of controlling the forces of nature. At that point it is logical for it to begin believing that it is a chosen people who need no longer fear any major setback. The Romans reached that juncture after several centuries of ruling the Mediterranean, the Chinese were confident of their immutable superiority before the Mongol conquest, and the Aztecs before the arrival of the Spaniards. . . .

Such symptoms of disillusion are not hard to observe around us now. The most obvious ones relate to the pervasive listlessness that affects so many lives. Genuinely happy individuals are few and far between. How many people do you know who enjoy what they are doing, who are reasonably satisfied with their lot, who do not regret the past and look to the future with genuine confidence?" (11)

An even more common symptom is the feeling of existential dread--essentially, the fear of being. It is a feeling that arises from the experience of human freedom and responsibility. The feeling that life has no meaning, nothing makes sense, and there is no point in existing. All of the historical strivings of humankind have been for nothing; we are just forgotten specks drifting in the void of space.

How many of you have ever wondered, "Is this all there is?"

Well, don't worry. You're far from alone.

"Childhood can be painful, adolescence confusing, but for most people, behind it all there is the expectation that after one grows up, things will get better. During the years of early adulthood the future still looks promising, the hope remains that one's goals will be realized. But inevitably the bathroom mirror shows the first white hairs, and confirms the fact that those extra pounds are not about to leave; inevitably eyesight begins to fail and mysterious pains begin to shoot through the body. . . .these intimations of mortality plainly communicate the message: Your time is up, it's time to move on. When this happens, few people are ready. 'Wait a minute, this can't be happening to me. I haven't even begun to live. Where's all that money I was supposed to have made? Where are all the good times I was going to have?'

A feeling of having been led on, of being cheated, is an understandable consequence of this realization. From the earliest years we have been conditioned to believe that a benign fate would provide for us. After all, everybody seemed to agree that we had the great fortune of living in the richest country that ever was, in the most scientifically advanced period of human history, surrounded by the most efficient technology, protected by the wisest Constitution. Therefore, it made sense to expect that we would have a richer, more meaningful life than any earlier members of the human race. . . .Yet despite all these assurances, sooner or later we wake up alone, sensing that there is no way this affluent, scientific, and sophisticated world is going to provide us with happiness. . . . While humankind collectively has increased its material powers a thousandfold, it has not advanced very far in terms of improving the content of experience. " (12-16)

Unfortunately, there is not much we can do to change the way the universe operates, and we will always have little-to-no influence on the forces that disrupt our well-being. Our sense of self-worth, the joy we feel in life, is entirely dependent on how the mind filters and interprets our everyday life. It is not the result of the controls we are able to exert over the forces of the universe. This isn't to say we shouldn't keep learning how to master the external environment, as the survival of the human race will certainly depend on it, but it will not add one bit to how good we personally feel, or even reduce the chaos of the world as humans experience it. To do that, we have to master our consciousness itself.

The second reason we are always so discontent is because humans are chronically dissatisfied. Whenever some of our needs are temporarily met, we immediately start wishing

for more. For the majority of people on this earth, life goals are simple: survive, have children (who will also survive), and do so with as much comfort and dignity as is possible. Yet as soon as our survival needs are met, we grow anxious. The basics are no longer enough. As our money and comfort rise, the sense of satisfaction we hoped we would achieve with it generally decreases. Even though we know that material success may not bring happiness, we continue to engage in an endless struggle to reach external goals, expecting they will improve life. Yet with more wealth and more power comes more responsibilities, and all we end up feeling is stressed: stressed to maintain our life-style, stressed to keep improving it, and stressed about losing everything we've worked for. Stress. Stress. Stress. "This paradox of rising expectations suggests that improving the quality of life might be an insurmountable task. In fact, there is no inherent problem in our desire to escalate our goals, as long as we enjoy the struggle along the way. The problem arises when people are so fixated on what they want to achieve that they cease to derive pleasure from the present. When that happens, they forfeit their chance of contentment.

Though the evidence suggests that most people are caught up on this frustrating treadmill of rising expectations, many individuals have found ways to escape it. These are people who, regardless of their material conditions, have been able to improve the quality of their lives, who are satisfied, and who have a way of making those around them also a bit more happy.

Such individuals lead vigorous lives, are open to a variety of experiences, keep on learning until the day they die, and have strong ties and commitments to other people and to the environment in which they live. They enjoy whatever they do, even if tedious or difficult; they are hardly ever bored, and they can take in stride anything that comes their way. Perhaps their greatest strength is that they are *in control of their lives.*" (10)

Clearly, it appears to be more beneficial to find out how everyday life can be made more harmonious and more satisfying, and thus achieve by a direct route what cannot be reached through the pursuit of symbolic goals. (44-45)

Reclaiming Experience

Above all else, achieving control of your inner experience will require a drastic change in attitude regarding what is important and what is not.

"We grow up believing that what counts most in our lives is that which will occur in the future. . . .Of course this emphasis on the postponement of gratification is to a certain extent inevitable. As Freud and many others before and after him have noted, civilization is built on the repression of individual desires. It would be impossible to maintain any kind of social order, any complex division of labor, unless society's members were forced to take on the habits and skills that the culture required, whether the individuals liked it or not. Socialization, or the transformation of a human organism into a person who functions successfully within a particular social system, cannot be avoided. The essence of socialization

is to make people dependent on social controls, to have them respond predictably to rewards and punishments. And the most effective form of socialization is achieved when people identify so thoroughly with the social order that they no longer can imagine themselves breaking any of its rules.

In making us work for its goals, society is assisted by some powerful allies: our biological needs and our genetic conditioning. All social controls, for instance, are ultimately based on a threat to the survival instinct. The people of an oppressed country obey their conquerors because they want to go on living. Until very recently, the laws of even the most civilized nations (such as Great Britain) were enforced by the threats of caning, whipping, mutilation, or death.

When they do not rely on pain, social systems use pleasure as the inducement to accept norms. The 'good life' promised as a reward for a lifetime of work and adherence to laws is built on the cravings contained in our genetic programs. Practically every desire that has become part of human nature, from sexuality to aggression, from a longing for security to a receptivity to change, has been exploited as a source of social control by politicians, churches, corporations, and advertisers." (16-17)

It is important to clarify here the difference between pleasure and enjoyment. Seeking pleasure is simply a feeling of contentment-- a reflex response-- wired into us to ensure preservation of the species. Eating is pleasurable in order to ensure our bodies get the nourishment we need. Sex is pleasurable to ensure we have children and continue the human race. Pleasure is an important ingredient to the quality of life, but by itself it does not bring happiness. It does not add complexity to the self because when something is pleasurable, our conscious plans play a minimal role. Pleasure helps to maintain order, but by itself cannot create new order in consciousness. There is nothing wrong with following your genetic programming and seeking pleasure, as long as you are able to retain control over them when necessary, prioritize other things, and pursue other goals.

Enjoyable events, on the other hand, are quite different. They *do* add a level of complexity to the self. "Enjoyable events occur when a person has not only met some prior expectation or satisfied a need or a desire but also has gone beyond what he or she has been programmed to do and achieved something unexpected, perhaps something even unimagined before. Enjoyment is characterized by this forward movement: by a sense of novelty, of accomplishment.... After an enjoyable event we know that we have changed, that our self has grown: in some respect, we have become more complex as a result.

Experiences that give pleasure can also give enjoyment, but the two sensations are quite different. . . . we can experience pleasure without any investment of psychic energy, whereas enjoyment happens only as a result of unusual investments of attention. A person can feel pleasure without any effort, if the appropriate centers in his brain are electrically stimulated,

or as a result of the chemical stimulation of drugs. But it is impossible to enjoy a tennis game, a book, or a conversation unless attention is fully concentrated on the activity.

It is for this reason that pleasure is so evanescent, and that the self does not grow as a consequence of pleasurable experiences. Complexity requires investing psychic energy in goals that are new, that are relatively challenging. . . . But if one gets to be too complacent, feeling that psychic energy invested in new directions is wasted unless there is a good chance of reaping extrinsic rewards for it, one may end up no longer enjoying life, and pleasure becomes the only source of positive experience. . . .

Without enjoyment life can be endured, and it can even be pleasant. But it can be so only precariously, depending on luck and the cooperation of the external environment. To gain personal control over the quality of experience, however, one needs to learn how to build enjoyment into what happens day in, day out.” (46-48)

“The “liberated” view of human nature, which accepts and endorses every instinct or drive we happen to have simply because it’s there, results in consequences that are quite reactionary.” (18, flow). When we seek pleasure obsessively, without question, we give up that control over our consciousness. We become helpless and vulnerable. If you can’t resist food, alcohol, sex, or any other form of pleasure, you are not free to direct your psychic energy. Instead of doing activities you actually want to do, things that meet your goals, you end up surrendering to the pleasures that your body has been programmed (or misprogrammed) to seek. In order to achieve a healthy independence of society, you must regain this control over your instincts. As long as you respond predictably to what feels good and what feels bad, you are an easy target to the endless people willing to exploit your pleasures for their own ends. Furthermore, when the rewards you desire are not of your own conscious choosing, or are chosen as a result of what other people say they should be, you miss out on potentially thousands of fulfilling experiences. You fail to notice them because they are not your desires.

“There is no question that to survive, and especially to survive in a complex society, it is necessary to work for external goals and to postpone immediate gratifications. But a person does not have to be turned into a puppet jerked about by social controls. The solution is to gradually become free of societal rewards and learn how to substitute for them rewards that are under one’s own powers. This is not to say that we should abandon every goal endorsed by society; rather, it means that, in addition to or instead of the goals others use to bribe us with, we develop a set of our own.

The most important step in emancipating oneself from social controls is the ability to find rewards in the events of each moment. If a person learns to enjoy and find meaning in the ongoing stream of experience, in the process of living itself, the burden of social controls automatically falls from one’s shoulders. Power returns to the person when rewards are no longer relegated to outside forces. It is no longer necessary to struggle for goals that always seem to recede into the future, to end each boring day with the hope that tomorrow,

perhaps, something good will happen. Instead of forever straining for the tantalizing prize dangled just out of reach, one begins to harvest the genuine rewards of living. But it is not by abandoning ourselves to instinctual desires that we become free of social controls. We must also become independent from the dictates of the body, and learn to take charge of what happens in the mind. Pain and pleasure occur in consciousness and exist only there. As long as we obey the socially conditioned stimulus response patterns that exploit our biological inclinations, we are controlled from the outside.” (19)

Learning to find enjoyment and reward in each moment is the only consistent way we are able to improve our life experience. Therefore, every flow experience must be made up of activities we *enjoy*. We discussed the elements of enjoyment (aka the elements of flow) in detail earlier on in THE BOOK OF FLOW, but we will provide a brief summary here. The common characteristics of optimal experience are: “a sense that one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous.” (71). What this means is that the psychological conditions that make flow possible, seem to be the same the world over. No matter the activity, the *reasons* are the same. With this knowledge of what makes an experience enjoyable, we can now provide examples that all of us can use to enhance the quality of life.

Finding Flow in Everyday Life

Most people, children AND adults, “need external incentives to take the first steps in an activity that requires a difficult restructuring of attention. Most enjoyable activities are not natural; they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make. But once the interaction starts to provide feedback to the person’s skills, it usually begins to be intrinsically rewarding. An autotelic experience is very different from the feelings we typically have in the course of life. So much of what we ordinarily do has no value in itself, and we do it only because we have to do it, or because we expect some future benefit from it. . . . [But] because flow activities are freely chosen and more intimately related to the sources of what is ultimately meaningful, they are perhaps more precise indicators of who we are.” (68, 77)

It is now time to further explore the ways in which we can better direct our purpose, extract our best self in every circumstance, discover new opportunities for action, and disregard external threats. To achieve control over what happens in the mind, one can draw upon an almost infinite range of opportunities for enjoyment --for instance, through sports, games, art, and hobbies, through the use of physical and sensory skills-- ranging from athletics to music to Yoga, through the development of symbolic skills such as poetry, philosophy, or mathematics, through work and through your career, through relationships with family,

parents, spouses, children, and friends, and, yes, even through adversity, tragedy, and suffering.

Flow Through the Body

“When we are unhappy, depressed, or bored we have an easy remedy at hand: to use the body for all it is worth.

Few learn to move with the grace of an acrobat, see with the fresh eye of an artist, feel the joy of an athlete who breaks his own record, taste with the subtlety of a connoisseur, or love with a skill that lifts sex into a form of art. Because these opportunities are easily within reach, the easiest step toward improving the quality of life consists in simply learning to control the body and its senses.” (94)

There has been an everlasting debate on the worth of the human body. Many scientists have attempted to value the body based on its parts, its chemical ingredients, the capacity of the mind, and its neural wiring. Yet none of these consider how priceless the body truly is: “without it there would be no experiences, and therefore no record of life as we know it. Trying to attach a market value to the body and its processes is the same as attempting to put a price tag on life: By what scale can we establish its worth?

Everything the body can do is potentially enjoyable. Yet many people ignore this capacity, and use their physical equipment as little as possible, leaving its ability to provide flow unexploited. When left undeveloped, the senses give us chaotic information: an untrained body moves in random and clumsy ways, an insensitive eye presents ugly or uninteresting sights, the unmusical ear mainly hears jarring noises, the coarse palate knows only insipid tastes. If the functions of the body are left to atrophy, the quality of life becomes merely adequate, and for some even dismal. But if one takes control of what the body can do, and learns to impose order on physical sensations, entropy yields to a sense of enjoyable harmony in consciousness. . . .

Before exploring further how physical activity contributes to optimal experience, It should be stressed that the body does not produce flow merely by its movements. The mind is always involved as well. . . . Flow cannot be a purely physical process: muscles and brain must be equally involved.” (95-96)

The senses offer an almost unlimited amount of enjoyment, but only to those who work hard to develop the skills they require. “To those who do not, the body remains indeed a lump of rather inexpensive flesh.” (96)

Flow Through Movement

Sports, athletics, and movement in general provide a great way to break through the limitations of what a person and a body believe they can accomplish. Countless activities,

including dancing, miming, acting, yoga, and the martial arts, rely on rhythmic or harmonious movements to transform the body into an instrument, a form of expression, and a source of enjoyment. "The popularity of charades as a parlor game is due to the fact that it allows people to shed for a time their customary identity, and act out different roles. Even the most silly and clumsy impersonation can provide an enjoyable relief from the limitations of everyday patterns of behavior, a glimpse into alternative modes of being." (100). And the best part? It is something available to everyone! No matter how fit or unfit, every single person ALWAYS has room for a little improvement. You can *only* benefit from getting a little stronger, going a little faster, feeling a little healthier, and pushing yourself a little further.

"However unimportant an athletic goal may appear to the outsider, it becomes a serious affair when performed with the intent of demonstrating a perfection of skill." (98) When looked at through this lens, even the simplest physical acts can be transformed into an enjoyable, flow experience. "The essential steps in the process are:

- (a) to set an overall goal, and as many subgoals as are realistically feasible;
- (b) to find ways of measuring progress in terms of the goals chosen;
- (c) to keep concentrating on what one is doing, and to keep making finer and finer distinctions in the challenges involved in the activity;
- (d) to develop the skills necessary to interact with the opportunities available; and
- (e) to keep raising the stakes if the activity becomes boring.

Take, for example, walking: It is one of the most trivial physical activities imaginable, yet it can be profoundly complex and enjoyable, almost an art form, if a person sets goals and takes control of the process.

- (a) A great number of different goals might be set for a walk. For instance, the choice of the itinerary: where one wishes to go, and by what route. Or developing a personal style, a way to move the body easily and efficiently. An economy of motion that maximizes physical well-being is another obvious goal. Within the overall route, some subgoals might be to select places to stop or landmarks to see.
- (b) For measuring progress, the feedback may include how fast and how easily the intended distance was covered; how many interesting sights one has seen; and how many new ideas or feelings were entertained along the way.
- (c) The challenges of the activity are what force us to concentrate. The challenges of a walk will vary greatly, depending on the environment. For those who live in large cities, flat sidewalks and right-angle layouts make the physical act of walking easy. Walking on a mountain trail is another thing altogether: for a skilled hiker each step presents a different challenge to be resolved with a choice of the most efficient foothold that will give the best leverage, simultaneously taking into account the momentum and the center of gravity of the body and the various surfaces--dirt, rocks, roots, grass, branches--on which the foot can land.
- (d) In the city the terrain itself is not challenging, but there are other opportunities for developing skills. The social stimulation of the crowds, the historical and architectural references of the urban milieu can add enormous variety to a walk. There are store

windows to see, people to observe, patterns of human interaction to reflect on. Some walkers specialize in choosing the shortest routes, others the most interesting ones; some pride themselves in walking the same route with chronometric precision, others like to mix and match their itinerary. In winter some aim to walk as long as possible on the sunny stretches of the sidewalk, and to walk as much in the shade as possible in the summer. There are those who time their crossings exactly for when the traffic lights change to green.

- (e) Of course these chances for enjoyment must be cultivated; they don't just happen automatically to those who do not control their itinerary. Unless one sets goals and develops skills, walking is just featureless drudgery. " (97-98)

Another simple way to cultivate more challenge in your life is to enter a competitive situation. Competition is a quick way to develop complexity, stimulation, and enjoyment. "What each person seeks is to actualize her potential, and this task is made easier when others force us to do our best. Of course, competition improves experience only as long as attention is focused primarily on the activity itself. If extrinsic goals--such as beating the opponent, wanting to impress an audience, or obtaining a big professional contract--are what one is concerned about, then competition is likely to become a distraction, rather than an incentive to focus consciousness on what is happening." (73) When beating your opponent becomes more important than performing your best, enjoyment tends to disappear. "Competition is enjoyable only when it is a means to perfect one's skills; when it becomes an end in itself, it ceases to be fun." (50)

Keep in mind that NO activity is going to be enjoyable if you approach it with the bad attitude that you *must* do it because it is good for you, or fashionable, or because all your friends are doing it. So many people get burnt out on trying to get in shape because they feel it is what they *have* to do and then end up hating every second of it: "They have made the usual mistake of confounding form and substance, and assume that concrete actions and events are the only "reality" that determines what they experience. For such individuals, joining a fancy health club should be almost a guarantee that they will enjoy themselves. However, enjoyment, as we have seen does not depend on what you do, but rather on how you do it." (99)

Flow Through Sex

When you have sex, is it always an enjoyable experience? Be honest with yourself.

Did you answer no? Great! Because for most people, sex is dull and boring.

"Historically, romance seems to have been restricted to youth and to those who had the time and the money to indulge in it; the vast majority in any culture appear to have had a very humdrum sex life. 'Decent' people the world over do not spend too much energy on the task of sexual reproduction, or on the practices that have been built on it. Romance resembles sports in this respect as well: instead of doing it personally, most people are content to hear

about it or watch a few experts perform it.” (102) And for those of you in relationships... you probably know where I am going with this. When you first met your partner, I’m sure it was extremely easy to obtain pleasure from sex--and truly enjoy it. But over time it gets increasingly difficult to keep enjoying sex with the same person as it is probably true that humans, like the majority of mammalian species, are not monogamous by nature.

So what can you do about this? How can you spice up your love life and keep it spiced up? Fortunately, there are many ways to make sex more enjoyable:

First off, let’s start by acknowledging that enjoyable sex depends entirely on what happens in the consciousness of those involved: “The same sexual act can be experienced as painful, revolting, frightening, neutral, pleasant, pleasurable, enjoyable, or ecstatic--depending on how it is linked to a person’s goals. A rape may not be distinguishable physically from a loving encounter, but their psychological effects are worlds apart.” (101)

Make sure you take that fact into consideration--truly think about it and remember it--before focusing on anything else in this chapter.

“To take pleasure in sex one needs only to be healthy and willing: no special skills are required, and soon after the first experiences, few new physical challenges arise again. Like all pleasures, sex will become boring with time; It can turn from a genuinely positive experience into either a meaningless ritual or an addictive dependence, unless you transform it into an enjoyable activity.

Eroticism is one form of cultivating sexuality that focuses on the development of physical skills. In a sense, eroticism is to sex as sport is to physical activity. The Kama Sutra and The Joy of Sex are two examples of manuals that aim to foster eroticism by providing suggestions and goals to help make sexual activity more varied, more interesting and challenging. . . .

But the real cultivation of sexuality begins only when psychological dimensions are added to the purely physical. . . .Romance -- the rituals of wooing first developed in the Romance region of southern France -- provides an entire new range of challenges to lovers. For those who learn the skills necessary to meet them, it becomes not only pleasurable, but enjoyable as well. . . .

A third dimension of sexuality begins to emerge when in addition to physical pleasure and the enjoyment of a romantic relationship the lover feels genuine care for his partner. There are then new challenges one discovers: to enjoy the partner as a unique person, to understand her, and to help her fulfill her goals. With the emergence of this third dimension sexuality becomes a very complex process, one that can go on providing flow experiences all through life. . . . It is impossible for partners not to grow bored unless they work to discover new challenges in each other’s company, and learn appropriate skills for enriching the relationship. Initially physical challenges alone are enough to sustain flow, but unless

romance and genuine care also develop, the relationship will grow stale.

How to keep love fresh? The answer is the same as it is for any other activity. To be enjoyable, a relationship must become more complex. To become more complex, the partners must discover new potentialities in themselves and in each other. To discover these, they must invest attention in each other -- so that they can learn what thoughts and feelings, what dreams reside in their partner's mind. This in itself is a never-ending process, a lifetime's task. After one begins to really know another person, then many joint adventures become possible . . . What is important is the general principle: that sexuality, like any other aspect of life, can be made enjoyable if we are willing to take control of it, and cultivate it in the direction of greater complexity." (101-103)

Flow Through Sight

It is easy to understand why physical activity can be enjoyable, "but few people step beyond these physical activities to explore the almost unlimited capacities of the other organs of the body, even though any information that the nervous system can recognize lends itself to rich and varied flow experiences.

Seeing, for instance, is most often used simply as a distant sensing system, to keep from stepping on the cat, or to find the car keys. Occasionally people stop to "feast their eyes" when a particular gorgeous sight happens to appear in front of them, but they do not cultivate systematically the potential of their vision. Visual skills, however, can provide constant access to enjoyable experiences." (106)

Great works of art and mundane sights alike can all be delightful with enough training. As is true of all flow activities, one cannot expect to take true enjoyment in a pursuit without cultivating the necessary skills. "Compared to several other activities, however, seeing is immediately accessible . . . so it is a particular pity to let it rest undeveloped." (108)

Flow Through Music

Music is an incredibly easy and accessible way to experience flow, and there are a variety of ways to do so. Simply listening to music helps organize the mind and reduce psychic entropy, while making music is not only enjoyable but requires incredible complexity in learning how to produce harmonious sounds. Like the mastery of any complex skill, making music also helps strengthen the self.

"Listening to music wards off boredom and anxiety, and when seriously attended to, it can induce flow experiences. . . . It is not the *hearing* that improves life, it is the *listening*. We hear music, but we rarely listen to it, and few could have ever been in flow as a result of it.

As with anything else, to enjoy music one must pay attention to it. To the extent that recording technology makes music too accessible, and therefore taken for granted, it can

reduce our ability to derive enjoyment from it. Before the advent of sound recording, a live musical performance retained some of the awe that music engendered when it was still entirely immersed in religious rituals. . . . One approached the event with heightened expectations, with the awareness that one had to pay close attention because the performance was unique and not to be repeated again.

The audiences at today's live performances. . . . continue to partake in some degree in these ritual elements; there are few other occasions at which large numbers of people witness the same event together, think and feel the same things, and process the same information. . . . The very conditions of live performance help focus attention on the music, and therefore make it more likely that flow will result at a concert than when one is listening to reproduced sound. . . . [Yet] any sound can be a source of enjoyment if attended to properly. . . . even the intervals of silence between sounds, if listened to closely, can be exhilarating.

Those who make the most of the potential for enjoyment inherent in music. . . . have strategies for turning the experience into flow. They begin by setting aside specific hours for listening. When the time comes, they deepen concentration by dousing the lights, by sitting in a favorite chair, or by following some other ritual that will focus attention. They plan carefully the selection to be played, and formulate specific goals for the session to come.

Listening to music usually starts as a *sensory* experience. At this stage, one responds to the qualities of sound that induce the pleasant physical reactions that are genetically wired into our nervous system. . . . We are particularly sensitive to the rhythm of the drums or the bass. . . . which some contend is supposed to remind the listener of the mother's throbbing heart first heard in the womb.

The next level of challenge music presents is the *analogic* mode of listening. In this stage, one develops the skill to evoke feelings and images based on the patterns of sound.

The most complex stage of music listening is the *analytic* one. In this mode attention shifts to the structural elements of music, instead of the sensory or narrative ones. Listening skills at this level involve the ability to recognize the order underlying the work, and the means by which the harmony was achieved. They include the ability to evaluate critically the performance and the acoustics; to compare the piece with earlier and later pieces of the same composer, or with the work of other composers writing at the same time; and to compare the orchestra, conductor, or band with their own earlier and later performances, or with the interpretation of others. . . . Having set such goals, a listener becomes an active experience that provides constant feedback (e.g. 'von Karajan has slowed down,' 'the Berlin brasses are sharper but less mellow'). As one develops analytic listening skills, the opportunities to enjoy music increase geometrically. " (109-111)

If we really want to go deep into flow, we can try making music for ourselves and experience even greater rewards than we would from listening alone. There is a connection between the

ability to create harmony in sound and the more general and abstract harmony that underlies the kind of social order we call a civilization. "Mindful of that connection, Plato believed that children should be taught music before anything else; in learning to pay attention to graceful rhythms and harmonies their whole consciousness would become ordered.

Our culture seems to have been placing a decreasing emphasis on exposing young children to music skills. Whenever cuts are to be made in a school's budget, courses in music (as well as art and physical education) are the first to be eliminated. It is discouraging how these three basic skills, so important for improving the quality of life, are generally considered to be superfluous in the current educational climate. Deprived of serious exposure to music, children grow into teenagers who make up for their early deprivation by investing inordinate amounts of psychic energy into their own music. They form rock groups, buy tapes and records, and generally become captives of a subculture that does not offer many opportunities for making consciousness more complex.

Even when children are taught music, the usual problem often arises: too much emphasis is placed on how they perform, and too little on what they experience. Parents who push their children to excel at the violin are generally not interested in whether the children are actually enjoying the playing; they want the child to perform well enough to attract attention, to win prizes, and to end up on the stage of Carnegie Hall. By doing so, they succeed in perverting music into the opposite of what it was designed to be: they turn it into a source of psychic disorder. Parental expectations for musical behavior often create great stress, and sometimes a complete breakdown. - (111-112)

Just remember, music is meant to be enjoyed. And although learning to play an instrument is *easiest* while young, it is really never too late to start!

Flow Through Taste

As we all know, eating is one of the most basic pleasures built into our nervous system. In every culture, the simple process of consuming calories has been transformed into an art form that provides enjoyment in addition to pleasure.

"The preparation of food has developed in history according to the same principles as all other flow activities. First, people took advantage of the opportunities for action (in this case, the various edible substances in their environment), and as a result of attending carefully they were able to make finer and finer distinctions between the properties of foodstuffs. . . . Once aware of these properties, people could experiment with them and then develop rules for putting together the various substances in the most pleasing combinations. These rules became the various cuisines; their variety provides a good illustration of the almost infinite range of flow experiences that can be evoked with a relatively limited number of edible ingredients.

In our culture, despite the recent spotlight on gourmet cuisine, many people still barely notice what they put in their mouths, thereby missing a potentially rich source of enjoyment. To transform the biological necessity of feeding into a flow experience, one must begin by paying attention to what one eats. It is astonishing- as well as discouraging -- when guests swallow lovingly prepared food without any sign of having noticed its virtues. What a waste of rare experience is reflected in that insensitivity! Developing a discriminating palate, like any other skill, requires the investment of psychic energy. But the energy invested is returned many times over in a more complex experience. The individuals who really enjoy eating develop with time an interest in a particular cuisine, and get to know its history and its peculiarities. They learn to cook in that idiom, not just single dishes, but entire meals that reproduce the culinary ambience of the region." (114)

"Like all other sources of flow related to bodily skills . . . the cultivation of taste only leads to enjoyment if one takes control of the activity. As long as one strives to become a gourmet or a connoisseur of wines because it is the "in" thing to do, striving to master an externally imposed challenge, then taste may easily turn sour. But a cultivated palate provides many opportunities for flow if one approaches eating--and cooking--in a spirit of adventure and curiosity, exploring the potentials of food for the sake of the experience rather than as a showcase for one's expertise. The other danger in becoming involved with culinary delights--and here again the parallels with sex are obvious--is that they can become addictive. . .given a taste of what they are genetically programmed to desire, people will want more of it, and will take time away from the necessary routines of everyday life in order to satisfy their craving.

But repression is not the way to virtue. When people restrain themselves out of fear, their lives are by necessity diminished. They become rigid and defensive, and their self stops growing. Only through freely chosen discipline can life be enjoyed, and still kept within the bounds of reason. If a person learns to control his instinctual desires, not because he has to, but because he wants to, he can enjoy himself without becoming addicted. A fanatical devotee of food is just as boring to himself and to others as the ascetic who refuses to indulge his taste. Between these two extremes, there is quite a bit of room for improving the quality of life." (115)

Flow in the Mind

Optimal experiences do not come exclusively through the senses. Some of the best experiences of our lives are generated inside the mind, triggered by information that challenges us to think (reading, writing, creating scientific theories, solving mental puzzles, interpreting musical notation, analyzing art, etc) "These activities are primarily symbolic in nature, in that they depend on natural languages, mathematics, or some other abstract notation system like a computer language to achieve their ordering effects in the mind." (118)

“It is useless to remember facts unless they fit into patterns, unless one finds likenesses and regularities among them. The simplest ordering system is to give names to things; the words we invent transform discrete events into universal categories. The power of the word is immense. . . . The building blocks of most symbol systems, words make abstract thinking possible and increase the mind’s capacity to store the stimuli it has attended to. Without systems for ordering information, even the clearest memory will find consciousness in a state of chaos. After names came numbers and concepts, and then the primary rules for combining them in predictable ways. By the sixth century BC, Pythagoras and his students had embarked on the immense ordering task that attempted to find common numerical laws binding together astronomy, geometry, music, and arithmetic. Not surprisingly, their work was difficult to distinguish from religion, since it tried to accomplish similar goals: to find a way of expressing the structure of the universe. . . . Besides stories and riddles all civilizations gradually developed more systematic rules for combining information, in the form of geometric representations and formal proofs. With the help of such formulas it became possible to describe the movement of the stars, predict precisely seasonal cycles, and accurately map the earth. Abstract knowledge, and finally what we know as experimental science, grew out of these rules.

It is important to stress here a fact that is all too often lost sight of: philosophy and science were invented and flourished because thinking is pleasurable. If thinkers did not enjoy the sense of order that the use of syllogisms and numbers creates in consciousness, it is very unlikely that now we would have the disciplines of mathematics and physics. This claim, however, flies in the face of most current theories of cultural development. . . . [where] every creative step is interpreted as the product of extrinsic forces, whether they be wars, demographic pressures, territorial ambitions, market conditions, technological necessity, or the struggle for class supremacy. External forces are very important in determining which new ideas will be *selected* from among the many available; but they cannot explain their *production*. . . . Great thinkers have always been motivated by the enjoyment of thinking rather than by the material rewards that could be gained by it.” (125-126).

“To enjoy a mental activity, one must meet the same conditions that make physical activities enjoyable. There must be skill in a symbolic domain; there have to be rules, a goal, and a way of obtaining feedback. One must be able to concentrate and interact with the opportunities at a level commensurate with one’s skills.

In reality, to achieve such an ordered mental condition is not as easy as it sounds. Contrary to what we tend to assume, the normal state of the mind is chaos. Without training, and without an object in the external world that demands attention, people are unable to focus their thoughts for more than a few minutes at a time. . . . Entropy is the normal state of consciousness--a condition that is neither useful nor enjoyable.

To avoid this condition, people are naturally eager to fill their minds with whatever information is readily available, as long as it distracts attention from turning inward and

dwelling on negative feelings. This explains why such a huge proportion of time is invested in watching television, despite the fact that it is very rarely enjoyed. . . . While people watch television, they need not fear that their drifting minds will force them to face disturbing personal problems. It is understandable that, once one develops this strategy for overcoming psychic entropy, to give up the habit becomes almost impossible." (118-120)

People without an internalized symbolic system can all too easily become captives of the media. They are easily manipulated by demagogues, pacified by entertainers, and exploited by anyone who has something to sell. If we have become dependent on television, on drugs, and on facile calls to political or religious salvation, it is because we have so little to fall back on, so few internal rules to keep our mind from being taken over by those who claim to have the answers. (128)

The better route for avoiding chaos in consciousness, of course, is through habits that give control over mental processes to the individual, rather than to some external source of stimulation. . . . To acquire such habits requires practice, however, and the kind of goals and rules that are inherent in flow activities. For instance, one of the simplest ways to use the mind is daydreaming: playing out some sequence of events as mental images. But even this apparently easy way to order thought is beyond the range of many people. . . . daydreaming is a skill that many children never learn to use. Yet daydreaming not only helps create emotional order by compensating in imagination for unpleasant reality--as when a person can reduce frustration and aggression against someone who has caused injury by visualizing a situation in which the aggressor is punished--but it also allows children (and adults) to rehearse imaginary situations so that the best strategy for confronting them may be adopted, alternative options considered, unanticipated consequences discovered--all results that help increase the complexity of consciousness. And, of course, when used with skill, daydreaming can be very enjoyable." (120)

"The point is that playing with ideas is extremely exhilarating. Not only philosophy but the emergence of new scientific ideas is fueled by the enjoyment one obtains from creating a new way to describe reality. . . . When a person has learned a symbolic system well enough to use it, she has established a portable, self-contained world within the mind." (127)

"Just as the use of the limbs and of the senses is available to everyone without regard to sex, race, education, or social class, so too the uses of memory, of language, of logic, of the rules of causation are also accessible to anyone who desires to take control of the mind. Many people give up on learning after they leave school because thirteen or twenty years of extrinsically motivated education is still a source of unpleasant memories. Their attention has been manipulated long enough from the outside by textbooks and teachers, and they have counted graduation as the first day of freedom. But a person who forgoes the use of his symbolic skills is never really free. His thinking will be directed by the opinions of his neighbors, by the editorials in the papers, and by the appeals of television. He will be at the mercy of "experts." Ideally, the end of extrinsically applied education should be the start of an

education that is motivated intrinsically. At that point the goal of studying is no longer to make the grade, earn a diploma, and find a good job. Rather, it is to understand what is happening around one, to develop a personally meaningful sense of what one's experience is all about. From that will come the profound joy of the thinker." (141-142)

Flowing With Memory

Memory is one of the oldest mental skills from which all others derive. Without it, we wouldn't be able to remember and we couldn't follow the rules that make all other mental functioning possible. When a person has nothing to remember, life can become severely impoverished.

"A person who can remember stories, poems, lyrics of songs, baseball statistics, chemical formulas, mathematical operations, historical dates, biblical passages, and wise quotations has many advantages over one who has not cultivated such a skill. The consciousness of such a person is independent of the order that may or may not be provided by the environment. She can always amuse herself, and find meaning in the contents of her mind. While others need external stimulation -- TV, reading, conversation, or drugs -- to keep their minds from drifting into chaos, the person whose memory is stocked with patterns of information is autonomous and self-contained. Additionally, such a person is also a much more cherished companion, because she can share the information in her mind, and thus help bring order into the consciousness of those with who she interacts. -

How can one find more value in memory? The most natural way to being is to decide what subject one is really interested in . . . If you decide what you would like to have in memory, the information will be under your control, and the whole process of learning by heart will become a pleasant task, instead of a chore imposed from the outside. . . . Of course there is always a danger that the person who has mastered a domain of information will use it to become an overbearing bore. We all know people who cannot resist flaunting their memory. But this usually occurs when someone memorizes only in order to impress others. It is less likely that one will become a bore when one is intrinsically motivated--with a genuine interest in the material, and a desire to control consciousness, rather than in controlling the environment. - (123-124)

Flowing With Words

From crossword puzzles to writing poetry, to solving riddles, reading a book, recording your thoughts in a journal, and having a good conversation--all of these are great opportunities for us to enter flow and enhance our lives with words.

"And again, there is no reason to stop at being a passive consumer. . . . Writing is an easily accessible skill that gives the mind a disciplined means of expression. If the only point to writing were to *transmit* information, then it would deserve to become obsolete. But the point of writing is to *create* information, not simply to pass it along. [Writing] allows one to record events and experiences so that they can be easily recalled, and relived in the future. It

is a way to analyze and understand experiences, a self-communication that brings order to them.

Like any other flow activity, however, writing that becomes addictive becomes dangerous: it forces the writer to commit himself to a limited range of experiences, and forecloses other options for dealing with events. But when writing is used to control experience, without letting it control the mind, it is a tool of infinite subtlety and rich rewards." (131-132)

Flowing With History

"Although history lacks the clear rules that make other mental activities like logic, poetry, or mathematics so enjoyable, it has its own unambiguous structure established by the irreversible sequence of events in time. Observing, recording, and preserving the memory of both the large and small events of life is one of the oldest and most satisfying ways to bring order to consciousness.

In a sense, every individual is a historian of his or her own personal existence. Because of their emotional power, memories of childhood become crucial elements in determining the kind of adults we grow up to be, and how our minds will function. . . . The task of making sense of the past again becomes important in old age. Erik Erikson has held that the last stage of the human life cycle involves the task of achieving 'integrity,' or bringing together what one has accomplished and what one has failed to accomplish in the course of one's life into a meaningful story that can be claimed as one's own.

Remembering the past is not only instrumental in the creation and preservation of a personal identity, but it can also be a very enjoyable process. People keep diaries, save snapshots, make slides and home movies, and collect souvenirs and mementos to store in their houses to build what is in effect a museum of the life of the family.

Having a record of the past can make a great contribution to the quality of life. It frees us from the tyranny of the present, and makes it possible for consciousness to revisit former times. It makes it possible to select and preserve in memory events that are especially pleasant and meaningful, and so to 'create' a past that will help us deal with the future.

Most of us don't think of ourselves as having been amateur historians all along. But once we become aware that ordering events in time is a necessary part of being a conscious being, and moreover, that it is an enjoyable task, then we can do a much better job of it." (132-133)
There are several ways to practice turning history into a flow experience including: keeping a journal, writing a family chronicle, focusing on a particular aspect of the past and then researching and collecting relevant books and memorabilia, learning the history of the community in which you live by visiting museums, reading books, and joining historical associations, or even researching as far back as possible into the ethnic group you belong to.

“All too often we are inclined to view history as a dreary list of dates to memorize . . . Knowledge that is seen to be controlled from the outside is acquired with reluctance, and it brings no joy. But as soon as a person decides which aspects of the past are compelling, and decides to pursue them, focusing on the sources and the details that are personally meaningful, and recording findings in a personal style, then learning history can become a full-fledge flow experience.” - 134

Flowing With Science

“What concerns us here is amateur science, the delight that ordinary people can take in observing and recording laws of natural phenomena. It is important to realize that for centuries great scientists did their work as a hobby, because they were fascinated with the methods they had invented, rather than because they had jobs to do and fat government grants to spend.

Nicolaus Copernicus perfected his epochal description of planetary motions while he was a canon at the cathedral of Frauenburg, in Poland. Astronomical work certainly didn't help his career in the Church, and for much of his life the main rewards he had were aesthetic, derived from the simple beauty of his system compared to the more cumbersome Ptolemaic model. Galileo had been trained in medicine, and what drove him into increasingly dangerous experimentation was the delight he took in figuring out such things as the location of the center of gravity of various solid objects. Newton formulated his major discoveries soon after he received his B.A. at Cambridge, in 1665, when the university was closed because of the plague. Newton had to spend two years in the safety and boredom of a country retreat, and he filled the time playing with his ideas about a universal theory of gravitation.” (136-137) The list goes on and on.

“Is the situation really that different these days? Is it really true that a person without a Ph.D., who is not working at one of the major research centers, no longer has any chance of contributing to the advancement of science?

. . . There is no doubt that a layman cannot contribute, as a hobby, to the kind of research that depends on multibillion-dollar supercolliders, or on nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy. But then, such fields do not represent the only science there is. The mental framework that makes science enjoyable is accessible to everyone. It involves curiosity, careful observation, a disciplined way of recording events, and finding ways to tease out the underlying regularities in what one learns. It also requires the humility to be willing to learn from the results of past investigators, coupled with enough skepticism and openness of mind to reject beliefs that are not supported by facts.

Defined in this broad sense, there are more practicing amateur scientists than one would think. Some focus their interest on health. . . some learn whatever they can about breeding domestic animals, or creating new hybrid flowers. Others diligently replicate the observations of early astronomers with their backyard telescopes. There are closet geologists who roam

the wilderness in search of minerals, cactus collectors who scour the desert mesas for new specimens, and probably hundreds of thousands of individuals who have pushed their mechanical skills to the point that they are verging on true scientific understanding.

What keeps many of these people from developing their skills further is the belief that they will never be able to become genuine, 'professional' scientists, and therefore that their hobby should not be taken seriously. But there is no better reason for doing science than the sense of order it brings to the mind of the seeker. If flow, rather than success and recognition, is the measure by which to judge its value, science can contribute immensely to the quality of life." (137-138)

Flowing With Philosophy

"Amateur philosophers, unlike their professional counterparts at universities, need not worry about historical struggles for prominence among competing schools, the politics of journals, and the personal jealousies of scholars. They can keep their minds on the basic questions. What these are is the first task for the amateur philosopher to decide. Is he interested in what the best thinkers of the past have believed about what it means to 'be'? Or is he more interested in what constitutes the 'good' or the 'beautiful'?"

As in all other branches of learning, the first step after deciding what area one wants to pursue is to learn what others have thought about the matter. By reading, talking, and listening selectively one can form an idea of what the "state of the art" in the field is. Again, the importance of personally taking control of the direction of learning from the very first steps cannot be stressed enough. If a person feels coerced to read a certain book, to follow a given course because that is supposed to be the way to do it, learning will go against the grain. But if the decision is to take that same route because of an inner feeling of rightness, the learning will be relatively effortless and enjoyable. . . . specialization is for the sake of thinking better, and not an end in itself. Unfortunately many serious thinkers devote all their mental effort to becoming well-known scholars, but in the meantime they forget their initial purpose in scholarship.

In philosophy as in other disciplines there comes a point where a person is ready to pass from the status of passive consumer to that of active producer. To write down one's insights expecting that someday they will be read with awe by posterity would be in most cases an act of hubris. . . . But if one records ideas in response to an inner challenge to express clearly the major questions by which one feels confronted, and tries to sketch out answers that will help make sense of one's experiences, then the amateur philosopher will have learned to derive enjoyment from one of the most difficult and rewarding tasks of life." (138-139).

Finding Flow in Work

"Like other animals, we must spend a large part of our existence making a living: calories needed to fuel the body don't appear magically on the table, and houses and cars don't

assemble themselves spontaneously. There are no strict formulas, however, for how much time people actually have to work. . . [But we do know that] work requiring great skills and that is done freely will refine the complexity of the self; and, on the other hand, there are few things as entropic as unskilled work done under compulsion. . . . Because work is so universal, yet so varied, it makes a tremendous difference to one's overall contentment whether what one does for a living is enjoyable or not.

It does not seem to be true that work necessarily needs to be unpleasant. It may always have to be hard, or at least harder than doing nothing at all. But there is ample evidence that work can be enjoyable, and that indeed, it is often the most enjoyable part of life." (143-144)

"Work not only transforms the environment by building bridges across rivers and cultivating barren plains; it also transforms the worker from an animal guided by instincts into a conscious, goal-directed, skillful person. . . . One might argue here that endorsing the [autotelic's] lifestyle over that of his fellow workers is reprehensibly 'elitist.' After all, the guys in the saloon are having a good time, and who is to say that grubbing away in the backyard making rainbows is a better way to spend one's time? By the tenets of cultural relativism the criticism would be justifiable, of course. But when one understands that enjoyment depends on increasing complexity, it is no longer possible to take such radical relativism seriously. The quality of experience of people who play with and transform the opportunities in their surroundings is clearly more developed as well as more enjoyable than that of people who resign themselves to live within the constraints of the barren reality they feel they cannot alter." (149)

"Individuals that are able to transform their jobs into complex activities do this "by recognizing opportunities for action where others did not, by developing skills, by focusing on the activity at hand, and allowing themselves to be lost in the interaction so that their selves could emerge stronger afterward. . . .Despite severe limitations of the environment, these people are able to change constraints into opportunities for expressing their freedom and creativity. Their method represents one way to enjoy one's job while making it richer. The other is to change the job itself, until its conditions are more conducive to flow, even for people who lack autotelic personalities. The more the job inherently resembles a game--with variety, appropriate and flexible challenges, clear goals, and immediate feedback--the more enjoyable it will be regardless of the worker's level of development. Thus transformed, work becomes enjoyable, and as the result of a personal investment of psychic energy, it feels as if it were freely chosen, as well." (151-152).

"One of the most interesting examples of how the phenomenon of flow appeared to thinkers of earlier times is the concept of Yu referred to about 2300 years ago in the writings of the Taoist scholar Chuang Tzu. Yu is a synonym for the right way of following the path, or Tao: it has been translated into English as "wandering"; as "walking without touching the ground"; or as "swimming," "flying," and "flowing." Chuang Tzu believed that to Yu was the proper way to live -- without concern for external rewards, spontaneously, with total commitment -- in

short, as a total autotelic experience. . . . "Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. In other words, the mystical heights of the Yu are not attained by some superhuman quantum jump, but simply by the gradual focusing of attention on the opportunities for action in one's environment, which results in a perfection of skills that with time becomes so thoroughly automatic as to seem spontaneous and otherworldly. . . . it is also remarkable that over twenty-three centuries ago the dynamics of this experience were already so well known." (150-151)

"So work can be either brutal or boring, or enjoyable and exciting.... The sooner we realize that the quality of the work experience can be transformed at will, the sooner we can improve this enormously important dimension of life. Yet most people still believe that work is forever destined to remain "the curse of Adam.

In theory, any job could be changed so as to make it more enjoyable by following the prescriptions of the flow model. At present, however, whether work is enjoyable or not ranks quite low among the concerns of those who have the power to influence the nature of a given job. Management has to care for productivity first and foremost, and union bosses have to keep safety, security, and compensations uppermost in their minds. In the short run these priorities might well conflict with flow-producing conditions. This is regrettable, because if workers really enjoyed their jobs they would not only benefit personally, but sooner or later they would almost certainly produce more efficiently and reach all the other goals that now take precedence.

At the same time, it would be erroneous to expect that if all jobs were constructed like games, everyone would enjoy them. Even the most favorable external conditions do not guarantee that a person will be in flow. Because optimal experience depends on a subjective evaluation of what the possibilities for action are, and of one's own capacities, it happens quite often that an individual will be discontented even with a potentially great job. . . Well-paid but repetitive routines soon begin to feel their tedium. . . . Specialization can be lucrative, but it makes enjoying the job more difficult. . . . Pioneers burn out for the opposite reason of the routine specialist: they have accomplished the impossible once, but they haven't found a way to do it again." (154-155)

"What this indicates is that important as the structure of a job is, by itself it won't determine whether or not a person performing that job will find enjoyment in it. Satisfaction in a job will also depend on whether or not a worker has an autotelic personality. . . . To improve the quality of life through work, two complementary strategies are necessary: On the one hand jobs should be redesigned so that they resemble as closely as possible flow activities. . . . But it will also be necessary to help people develop autotelic personalities. . . . by training them to recognize opportunities for action, to hone their skills, to set reachable goals. Neither one of these strategies is likely to make work much more enjoyable by itself; in combination, they should contribute enormously to optimal experience." (157)

Yet for many of us, no matter how much flow we experience at work, we still report feeling discontent. We would still rather be doing something else. This phenomenon brings us to the strange paradox of work: "In our studies we have often encountered a strange inner conflict in the way people relate to the way they make their living. On the one hand, our subjects usually report that they have had some of their most positive experiences while on the job. From this response it would follow that they would wish to be working, that their motivation on the job would be high. Instead, even when they feel good, people generally say that they would prefer not to be working, that their motivation on the job is low. The converse is also true: when supposedly enjoying their hard-earned leisure, people generally report surprisingly low moods; yet they keep on wishing for more leisure.

As expected, the more time a person spent in flow during the week, the better was the overall quality of his or her reported experience. People who were more often in flow were especially likely to feel 'strong,' 'active,' 'creative,' 'concentrated,' and 'motivated.' What was unexpected, however, is how frequently people reported flow situations at work, and how rarely in leisure.

[When asked if people would rather be doing something else], the results showed that people wished to be doing something else to a much greater extent when working than when at leisure, and this regardless of whether they were in flow. In other words, motivation was low at work even when it provided flow, and it was high in leisure even when the quality of experience was low." (157- 159)

Thus we have the paradoxical situation: On the job people feel skillful and challenged, and therefore feel more happy, strong, creative, and satisfied. In their free time people feel that there is generally not much to do and their skills are not being used, and therefore they tend to feel more sad, weak, dull, and dissatisfied. Yet they would like to work less and spend more time in leisure. . . . [Clearly], when it comes to work, people do not heed the evidence of their senses. They disregard the quality of immediate experience, and base their motivation instead on the strongly rooted cultural stereotype of what work is supposed to be like. They think of it as an imposition, a constraint, an infringement of their freedom, and therefore something to be avoided as much as possible.

It could be argued that although flow at work is enjoyable, people cannot stand high levels of challenge all the time. They need to recover at home, to turn into couch potatoes for a few hours each day even though they don't enjoy it. But comparative examples seem to contradict this argument. As these findings suggest, the apathy of many of the people around us is not due to their being physically or mentally exhausted. The problem seems to lie more in the modern worker's relation to his job, with the way he perceives his goals in relation to it.

When we feel that we are investing attention in a task against our will, it is as if our psychic energy is being wasted. Instead of helping us reach our own goals, it is called upon to make someone else's come true. The time channeled into such a task is perceived as time

subtracted from the total available for our life. Many people consider their jobs as something they have to do, a burden imposed from the outside, an effort that takes life away from the ledger of their existence. So even though the momentary on-the-job experience may be positive, they tend to discount it, because it does not contribute to their own long-range goals.(159-160)

“It should be stressed, however, that ‘dissatisfaction’ is a relative term. . . In our studies we find that American workers tend to mention three main reasons for their dissatisfaction with their jobs, all of which are related to the quality of experience typically available to them at work-- even though, as we have just seen, their experience at work tends to be better than it is at home. (Contrary to popular opinion, salary and other material concerns are generally not among their most pressing concerns.) The first and perhaps most important complain concerns the lack of variety and challenge. This can be a problem for everyone, but especially for those in lower-level occupations in which routine plays a major role. The second has to do with conflicts with other people on the job, especially bosses. The third reason involves burnout: too much pressure, too much stress, too little time to think for oneself, too little time to spend with the family. This is a factor that particularly troubles the higher echelons-- executives and managers.

Such complaints are real enough, as they refer to objective conditions, yet they can be addressed by a subjective shift in one’s consciousness. Variety and challenge, for instance, are in one sense inherent characteristics of jobs, but they also depend on how one perceives opportunities. Some people see challenges in tasks that most people would find dull and meaningless. Whether a job has variety or not ultimately depends more on a person’s approach to it than on actual working conditions.

The same is true of the other causes of dissatisfaction. Getting along with co-workers and supervisors might be difficult, but generally can be managed if one makes the attempt. Conflict at work is often due to a person’s feeling defensive out of a fear of losing face. To prove himself he sets certain goals for how others should treat him, and then expects rigidly that others will fulfill those expectations. This rarely happens as planned, however, because others also have an agenda for their own rigid goals to be achieved. Perhaps the best way to avoid this impasse is to set the challenge of reaching one’s goals while helping the boss and colleagues reach theirs; it is less direct and more time-consuming than forging ahead to satisfy one’s interests regardless of what happens to others, but in the long run it seldom fails.

Finally, stresses and pressures are clearly the most subjective aspects of a job, and therefore the ones that should be most amenable to the control of consciousness. Stress exists only if we experience it; it takes the most extreme objective conditions to cause it directly. The same amount of pressure will wilt one person and be a welcome challenge to another. There are hundreds of ways to relieve stress, some based on better organization, delegation of responsibility, better communication with co-workers and supervisors; others are based on factors external to the job, such as improved home life, leisure patterns, or inner disciplines

like transcendental meditation. " (160-161)

"These piecemeal solutions may help, but the only real answer to coping with work stress is to consider it part of a general strategy to improve the overall quality of experience. Of course this is easier said than done. To do so involves mobilizing psychic energy and keeping it focused on personally forged goals, despite inevitable distractions." (162)

The Waste of Free Time

"Now it may be useful to consider how the use of leisure time contributes--or fails to contribute--to the overall quality of life.

Although, as we have seen, people generally long to leave their places of work and get home, ready to put their hard-earned free time to good use, all too often they have no idea what to do there. Ironically, jobs are actually easier to enjoy than free time, because like flow activities they have built-in goals, feedback, rules, and challenges, all of which encourage one to become involved in one's work, to concentrate and lose oneself in it. Free time, on the other hand, is unstructured, and requires much greater effort to be shaped into something that can be enjoyed. Hobbies that demand skill, habits that set goals and limits, personal interests, and especially inner discipline help to make leisure what it is supposed to be -- a chance for re-creation. But on the whole people miss the opportunity to enjoy leisure even more thoroughly than they do with working time.

The tremendous leisure industry that has arisen in the last few generations has been designed to help fill free time with enjoyable experiences. Nevertheless, instead of using our physical and mental resources to experience flow, most of us spend many hours each week watching celebrated athletes playing in enormous stadiums. Instead of making music, we listen to platinum records cut by millionaire musicians. Instead of making art, we go to admire paintings that brought in the highest bids at the latest auction. We do not run risks acting on our beliefs, but occupy hours each day watching actors who pretend to have adventures, engaged in mock-meaningful action.

This vicarious participation is able to mask, at least temporarily, the underlying emptiness of wasted time. But it is a very pale substitute for attention invested in real challenges. The flow experience that results from the use of skills leads to growth; passive entertainment leads nowhere. Collectively we are wasting each year the equivalent of millions of years of human consciousness. The energy that could be used to focus on complex goals, to provide for enjoyable growth, is squandered on patterns of stimulation that only mimic reality. Mass leisure, mass culture, and even high culture when only attended to passively and for extrinsic reasons--such as the wish to flaunt one's status --are parasites of the mind. They absorb psychic energy without providing substantive strength in return. They leave us more exhausted, more disheartened than we were before.

Unless a person takes charge of them, both work and free time are likely to be disappointing.

Most jobs and many leisure activities--especially those involving the passive consumption of mass media--are not designed to make us happy and strong. Their purpose is to make money for someone else. If we allow them to, they can suck out the marrow of our lives, leaving only feeble husks. But like everything else, work and leisure can be appropriated for our needs. People who learn to enjoy their work, who do not waste their free time, end up feeling that their lives as a whole have become much more worthwhile. "The future," wrote CK Brightbill, "will belong not only to the educated man, but to the man who is educated to use his leisure wisely."(162-163)

Enjoying Solitude *and* Other People

"More than anything else, the quality of life depends on two factors: how we experience work, and our relations with other people. . . .We are biologically programmed to find other human beings the most important objects in the world. Because they can make life either very interesting and fulfilling or utterly miserable, how we manage relationships with them makes an enormous difference to our happiness. If we learn to make our relations with others more like flow experiences, our quality of life as a whole is going to be much improved.

On the other hand, we also value privacy and often wish to be left alone. Yet it frequently turns out that as soon as we are, we begin to grow depressed. It is typical for people in this situation to feel lonely, to feel that there is no challenge, there is nothing to do. For some, solitude brings about in milder form the disorienting symptoms of sensory deprivation. Yet unless one learns to tolerate and even enjoy being alone, it is very difficult to accomplish any task that requires undivided concentration. For this reason, it is essential to find ways to control consciousness even when we are left to our own devices." (164-165)

"Of the things that frighten us, the fear of being left out of the flow of human interaction is certainly one of the worst. There is no question that we are social animals; only in the company of other people do we feel complete. In many preliterate cultures solitude is thought to be so intolerable that a person makes a great effort never to be alone. In many different human societies, the worst sanction the community can issue is shunning. The person ignored grows gradually depressed, and soon begins to doubt his or her very existence. In some societies the final outcome of being ostracized is death: the person who is left alone comes to accept the fact that he must be already dead, since no one pays attention to him any longer; little by little he stops taking care of his body, and eventually passes away.

The Latin locution for "being alive" was *inter hominem esse*, which literally meant "to be among men"; whereas "to be dead" was *interim hominem esse desinere*, or "to cease to be among men." Exile from the city was, next to being killed outright, the most severe punishment for a Roman citizen; no matter how luxurious his country estate, if banished from the company of his peers the urban Roman became an invisible man. . . . The density of human contacts that great cities afford is like a soothing balm; people in such centers relish it even when the interactions it provides may be unpleasant or dangerous. The crowds

streaming along Fifth Avenue may contain an abundance of muggers and weirdos; nevertheless, they are exciting and reassuring. Everyone feels more alive when surrounded with other people.” (165)

“There is no question that we are programmed to see out the company of peers . . . Animals that develop a competitive edge against other species through cooperation survive much better if they are constantly within sight of one another. . . . As human adaptation began to rely increasingly on culture, additional reasons for sticking together became important. For instance, the more people grew to depend for survival on knowledge instead of instinct, the more they benefited from sharing their learning mutually; a solitary individual under such conditions became an *idiot*, which in Greek originally meant a “private person” -- someone who is unable to learn from others.

At the same time, paradoxically, there is a long tradition of wisdom warning us that “Hell is other people.” . . . And when we examine the most negative experiences in the life of average people, we find the other side of the glittering coin of gregariousness: the most painful events are also those that involve relationships.

How is it possible to reconcile the fact that people cause both the best and the worst times? This apparent contradiction is actually not that difficult to resolve. Like anything else that really matters, relationships make us extremely happy when they go well, and very depressed when they don’t work out. People are the most flexible, the most changeable aspect of the environment we have to deal with. The same person can make the morning wonderful and the evening miserable. Because we depend so much on the affection and approval of others, we are extremely vulnerable to how we are treated by them. Therefore, a person who learns to get along with others is going to make a tremendous change for the better in the quality of life as a whole.

It is the very flexibility of relationships that makes it possible to transform unpleasant interactions into tolerable, or even exciting ones. How we define and interpret a social situation makes a great difference to how people will treat one another, and to how they will feel while doing it.” (166-167)

“A social situation has the potential to be transformed by redefining its rules....Human relations are malleable, and if a person has the appropriate skills their rules can be transformed.”(168)

Loneliness + Learning to Love Alone-Time

“The average adult spends about one-third of his or her waking time alone, yet we know very little about this huge slice of our lives, except that we heartily dislike it.

Most people feel a nearly intolerable sense of emptiness when they are alone, especially with nothing specific to do...Almost every activity is more enjoyable with another person around,

and less so when one does it alone... But the most depressing condition is not that of working or watching TV alone; the worst moods are reported when one is alone and there is nothing that needs to be done.

Why is solitude such a negative experience? The bottom-line answer is that keeping order in the mind from within is very difficult. We need external goals, external stimulation, external feedback to keep attention directed. And when external input is lacking, attention begins to wander, and thoughts become chaotic--resulting in the state of psychic entropy.

With nothing to do, the mind is unable to prevent negative thoughts from elbowing their way to center stage. . . . Worries about one's love life, health, investments, family, and job are always hovering at the periphery of attention, waiting until there is nothing pressing that demands concentration. As soon as the mind is ready to relax, zap! The potential problems that were waiting in the wings take over. It is for this reason that television proves such a boon to so many people. . . .at least the flickering screen brings a certain amount of order to consciousness. ... Of course, avoiding depression this way is rather spendthrift, because one expends a great deal of attention without having much to show for it afterward. More drastic ways of coping with the dread of solitude include the regular use of drugs, or the recourse to obsessive practices, which may range from cleaning the house incessantly to compulsive sexual behavior. While under the influence of chemicals, the self is relieved from the responsibility of directing its psychic energy; we can sit back and watch the patterns of thought that the drug is providing for--whatever happens, it's out of our hands. And like television, the drug keeps the mind from having to face depressing thoughts. While alcohol and other drugs are capable of producing optimal experiences, they are usually at a very low level of complexity. Unless consumed in highly skilled ritual contexts, as is practiced in many traditional societies, what drugs in fact do is reduce our perception of both what can be accomplished and what we as individuals are able to accomplish, until the two are in balance. This is a pleasant state of affairs, but it is only a misleading simulation of that enjoyment that comes from increasing opportunities for actions and the abilities to act. . . . The danger is that in becoming dependent on chemicals for patterning the mind, he risks losing the ability to control it by himself.- (168-170)

"The same argument that holds for what might at first sight seem the opposite of pleasure:masochistic behavior, risk taking, gambling. These ways that people find to hurt or frighten themselves do not require a great deal of skill, but they do help one to achieve the sensation of direct experience. Even pain is better than the chaos that seeps into an unfocused mind. Hurting oneself, whether physically or emotionally, ensures that attention can be focused on something that, although painful, is at least controllable -- since we are the ones causing it." (170-171)

"The ultimate test for the ability to control the quality of experience is what a person does in solitude, with no external demands to give structure to attention. ... To fill free time with activities that require concentration, that increase skills, that lead to a development of the

self, is not the same as killing time by watching television or taking recreational drugs. Although both strategies might be seen as different ways of coping with the same threat of chaos, as defenses against ontological anxiety, the former leads to growth, while the latter merely serves to keep the mind from unraveling. A person who rarely gets bored, who does not constantly need a favorable external environment to enjoy the moment, has passed the test for having achieved a creative life. Learning to use time alone, instead of escaping from it, is especially important in our early years." (171)

"Adolescents who never learn to control their consciousness grow up to be adults without a 'discipline.' They lack the complex skills that will help them survive in a competitive, information-intensive environment. And what is even more important, they never learn how to enjoy living. They do not acquire the habit of finding challenges that bring out hidden potentials for growth.

But the teenage years are not the only time when it is crucial to learn how to exploit the opportunities of solitude. Unfortunately, too many adults feel that once they have hit twenty or thirty--or certainly forty--they are entitled to relax in whatever habitual grooves they have established. They have paid their dues they have learned the tricks it takes to survive, and from now on they can proceed on cruise control. Equipped with the bare minimum of inner discipline, such people inevitably accumulate entropy with each passing year. Career disappointments, the failure of physical health, the usual slings and arrows of fate build up a mass of negative information that increasingly threatens their peace of mind. How does one keep these problems away? If a person does not know how to control attention in solitude, he will inevitably turn to the easy external solutions: drugs, entertainment, excitement--whatever dulls or distracts the mind." (172)

"The way to grow while enjoying life is to create a higher form of order out of the entropy that is an inevitable condition of living. This means taking each new challenge not as something to be repressed or avoided, but as an opportunity for learning and for improving skills. When physical vigor fails with age, for example, it means that one will be ready to turn one's energies from the mastery of the external world to a deeper exploration of inner reality. ... But it is difficult to accomplish this unless one has earlier acquired the habit of using solitude to good advantage. It is best to develop this habit early, but it is never too late to do so. In the previous chapters we have reviewed some of the ways the body and the mind can make flow happen. When a person is able to call upon such activities at will, regardless of what is happening externally, then one has learned how to shape the quality of life." (172-173)

Of course every rule has its exceptions, and even though most people dread solitude, there are some individuals who live alone by choice. The individuals that choose this willingly and thrive, do it by structuring their space and, most importantly, their time. "One can survive solitude, but only if one finds way of ordering attention that will prevent entropy from destructuring the mind." (174)

"[But] is coping with loneliness by letting unnecessary yet demanding rituals give shape to the mind any different from taking drugs or watching TV constantly? ... Yet how one copes with solitude makes all the difference. If being alone is seen as a chance to accomplish goals that cannot be reached in the company of others, then instead of feeling lonely, a person will enjoy solitude and might be able to learn new skills in the process. On the other hand, if solitude is seen as a condition to be avoided at all costs instead of as a challenge, the person will panic and resort to distractions that cannot lead to higher levels of complexity. Breeding furry dogs and racing sleds through arctic forests might seem like a rather primitive endeavor, compared to the glamorous antics of playboys or cocaine users. Yet in terms of psychic organization the former is infinitely more complex than the latter. Lifestyles built on pleasure survive only in symbiosis with complex cultures based on hard work and enjoyment. But when the culture is no longer able or willing to support unproductive hedonists, those addicted to pleasure, lacking skills and discipline and therefore unable to fend for themselves, find themselves lost and helpless. ... A person can master flow activities in almost any environment... Unless a person learns to enjoy it, much of life will be spent desperately trying to avoid its ill effects." (175)

Marriage + Family

"Some of the most intense and meaningful experiences in our lives are the result of family relationships." (175)

"It is clear that the family can make one very happy, or be an unbearable burden. Which one it will be depends, to a great extent, on how much psychic energy family members invest in the mutual relationship, and especially in each other's goals.

Every relationship requires a reorienting of attention, a repositioning of goals... When two people choose to focus their attention on each other, both will have to change their habits; as a result, the pattern of their consciousness will also have to change. . . . All this can be very hard work, and it can also be very frustrating. If a person is unwilling to adjust personal goals when starting a relationship, then a lot of what subsequently happens in that relationship will produce disorder in the person's consciousness, because novel patterns of interaction will conflict with old patterns of expectation." (177) So as long as you hold onto your old, conflicting desires, goals, wants, and wishes, you will feel frustrated and uneasy. If you change your goals, you have to recognize and accept that your self, being the sum and organization of your goals, will change as a result. What this means is that entering *any* relationship entails a transformation of the self.

"Until a few decades ago, families tended to stay together because parents and children were forced to continue the relationship for extrinsic reasons. If divorces were rare in the past, it wasn't because husbands and wives loved each other more in the old times, but because husbands needed someone to cook and keep housewives needed someone to bring home the bacon, and children needed both parents in order to eat, sleep, and get a start in the world. The "family values" that the elders spent so much effort inculcating in the young were

a reflection of this simple necessity, even when it was cloaked in religious and moral considerations. Of course, once family values were taught as being important, people learned to take them seriously, and they helped keep families from disintegrating. All too often, however, the moral rules were seen as an outside imposition, an external constraint under which husbands, wives, and children chafed. In such cases the family may have remained intact physically, but it was internally riven with conflicts and hatred. The current "disintegration" of the family is the result of the slow disappearance of external reasons for staying married. The increase in the divorce rate is probably more affected by changes in the labor market that have increased women's employment opportunities, and by the diffusion of labor-saving home appliances, than it is by a lessening of love or of moral fiber. ... If the trend of traditional families keeping together mainly as a convenience is on the wane, the number of families that endure because their members enjoy each other may be increasing. Of course, because external forces are still much more powerful than internal ones, the net effect is likely to be a further fragmentation of family life for some time to come. But the families that do persevere will be in a better position to help their members develop a rich self than families held together against their will are able to do.

There have been endless discussions about whether humans are naturally promiscuous, polygamous, or monogamous; and whether in terms of cultural evolution monogamy is the highest form of family organization. It is important to realize that these questions deal only with the extrinsic conditions shaping marriage relationships. And on that count, the bottom line seems to be that marriages will take the form that most efficiently ensures survival. Even members of the same animal species will vary their patterns of relationships so as to adapt best in a given environment.... The form the human family takes is a response to similar kinds of environmental pressures. In terms of extrinsic reasons, we are monogamous because in technological societies based on a money economy, time has proven this to be a more convenient arrangement. But the issue we have to confront as individuals is not whether humans are "naturally" monogamous or not, but whether we *want* to be monogamous or not. And in answering that question, we need to weigh all the consequences of our choice. It is customary to think of marriage as the end of freedom, and some refer to their spouses as "old ball-and-chain." The notion of family life typically implies constraints, responsibilities that interfere with one's goals and freedom of action. While this is true, especially when the marriage is one of convenience, what we tend to forget is that these rules and obligations are no different, in principle, than those rules that constrain behavior in a game. Like all rules, they exclude a wide range of possibilities so that we might concentrate fully on a selected set of options." (178-179)

By now, it should seem pretty obvious that all this church ultimately cares about is that you live a healthy, happy, and conscious life. Therefore, we highly encourage you to think about what you *WANT* in a relationship, not what society tells you you should want. The International Church of Slacklife condones all types of relations from gay to straight, from monogamy to polyamory, polygamy, and anything else in between. It doesn't even have to

have a name! Figure out what you're into, and then structure your relationships around it. Whatever floats your boat!

"Cicero once wrote that to be completely free one must become a slave to a set of laws. In other words, accepting limitations is liberating. For example, by making up one's mind to invest psychic energy exclusively in a monogamous marriage, regardless of any problems, obstacles, or more attractive options that may come along later, one is freed of the constant pressure of trying to maximize emotional returns. Having made the commitment that an old-fashioned marriage demands, and having made it willingly instead of being compelled by tradition, a person no longer needs to worry whether she has made the right choice, or whether the grass might be greener somewhere else. As a result a great deal of energy gets freed up for living, instead of being spent on wondering about how to live.

If one decides to accept the traditional form of the family, complete with a monogamous marriage, and with a close involvement with children, with relatives, and with the community, it is important to consider beforehand how family life can be turned into a flow activity. Because if it is not, boredom and frustration will inevitably set in, and then the relationship is likely to break up unless there are strong external factors keeping it together." (179-180)

"To provide flow, a family has to have a goal for its existence. Extrinsic reasons are not sufficient: it is not enough to feel that, well, 'Everybody else is married,' 'It is natural to have children,' or 'Two can live as cheaply as one.' These attitudes may encourage one to start a family, and may even be strong enough to keep it going, but they cannot make family life enjoyable. . . . Positive goals are necessary to focus the psychic energies of parents and children on common tasks:

Some of these goals might be very general and long-term, such as planning a particular lifestyle-- to build an ideal home, to provide the best possible education for the children, or to implement a religious way of living in a modern secularized society. For such goals to result in interactions that will help increase the complexity of its members, the family must be both differentiated and integrated. [In the family context], *differentiation* means that each person is encouraged to develop his or her unique traits, maximize personal skills, set individual goals. *Integration*, in contrast, guarantees that what happens to one person will affect all others. If a child is proud of what she accomplished in school, the rest of the family will pay attention and will be proud of her, too. If the mother is tired and depressed, the family will try to help and cheer her up. In an integrated family, each person's goals matter to all others.

In addition to long-term goals, it is imperative to have a constant supply of short-term objectives. These may include simple tasks like buying a new sofa, going on a picnic, planning for a vacation, or playing a game of scrabble together on Sunday afternoon. Unless there are goals that the whole family is willing to share, it is almost impossible for its members to be physically together, let alone involved in an enjoyable joint activity. Here

again, differentiation and integration are important: the common goals should reflect the goals of individual members as much as possible. If Rick wants to go to a motocross race, and Erica would like to go to the aquarium, it should be possible for everyone to watch the race one weekend, and then visit the aquarium the next. The beauty of such an arrangement is that Erica is likely to enjoy some of the aspects of bike racing, and Rick might actually get to appreciate looking at fish, even though neither would have discovered as much if left to his or her own prejudices.

As with any other flow activity, family activities should also provide clear feedback. In this case, it is simply a matter of keeping open channels of communication. . . . Unless the partners invest psychic energy in the relationship, conflicts are inevitable, simply because each individual has goals that are to a certain extent divergent from those of all other members of the family. Without good lines of communication the distortions will become amplified, until the relationship falls apart.

Feedback is also crucial to determine whether family goals are being achieved. . . . It is a fact of life that sooner or later all children will express the opinion that common family activities are “dumb.” At this point, forcing them to do things together tends to be counterproductive. So most parents just give up and abandon their teenagers to the peer culture. The more fruitful, if more difficult, strategy is to find a new set of activities that will continue to keep the family group involved.

The balancing of challenges and skills is another factor as necessary in enjoying social relationships in general, and family life in particular, as it is for any other flow activity. When a man and a woman are first attracted to each other, the opportunities for action are usually clear enough.... With time one gets to know the other person well, and the obvious challenges have been exhausted. All the usual gambits have been tried; the other person's reactions have become predictable. Sexual play has lost its first excitement. At this point, the relationship is in danger of becoming a boring routine that might be kept alive by mutual convenience, but is unlikely to provide further enjoyment, or spark a new growth in complexity. The only way to restore flow to the relationship is by finding new challenges in it.

These might involve steps as simple as varying the routines of eating, sleeping, or shopping. They might involve making an effort to talk together about new topics of conversation, visiting new places, making new friends. More than anything else they involve paying attention to the partner's own complexity, getting to know her at deeper levels than were necessary in the earlier days of the relationship, supporting him with sympathy and compassion during the inevitable changes that the years bring.” (180-182)

Raising Children

“Early childhood influences are also very likely factors in determining whether a person will or will not easily experience flow. There is ample evidence to suggest that how parents interact with a child will have a lasting effect on the kind of person that child grows up to be.” (88)

“There is no need to visit far-off lands to see how flow can be a natural part of living. Every child, before self-consciousness begins to interfere, acts spontaneously with total abandon and complete involvement. Boredom is something children have to learn the hard way, in response to artificially restricted choices. Again, this does not mean that children are always happy. Cruel or neglectful parents, poverty, and sickness, the inevitable accidents of living make children suffer intensely. But a child is rarely unhappy without good reason. It is understandable that people tend to be so nostalgic about their early years. Many feel that the wholehearted serenity of childhood, the undivided participation in the here and now, becomes increasingly difficult to recapture as the years go by.” (229)

“[Thus] the same need to constantly increase challenges and skills applies to one’s relationship with children. During the course of infancy and early childhood most parents spontaneously enjoy the unfolding of their babies’ growth: the first smile, the first word, the first few steps, the first scribbles. Each of these quantum jumps in the child’s skills becomes a new joyful challenge, to which parents respond by enriching the child’s opportunities to act. From the cradle to the playpen to the playground to kindergarten, the parents keep adjusting the balance of challenges and skills between the child and her environment. But by early adolescence, many teenagers get to be too much to handle. What most parents do at that point is to politely ignore their children’s lives, pretending that everything is alright, hoping against hope that it will be.

Teenagers are physiologically mature beings, ripe for sexual reproduction; in most societies (and in ours too, a century or so ago) they are considered ready for adult responsibilities and appropriate recognition. Because our present social arrangements, however, do not provide adequate challenges for the skills teenagers have, they must discover opportunities for action outside those sanctioned by adults. The only outlets they find, all too often, are vandalism, delinquency, drugs, and recreational sex. Under existing conditions, it is very difficult for parents to compensate for the poverty of opportunities in the culture at large. In this respect, families living in the richest suburbs are barely better off than families living in the slums. What can a strong, vital, intelligent fifteen-year old do in your typical suburb? If you consider that question you will probably conclude that what is available is either too artificial, or too simple, or not exciting enough to catch a teenager’s imagination. It is not surprising that athletics are so important in suburban schools; compared to the alternatives, they provide some of the most concrete chances to exercise and display one’s skills.

But there are some steps that families can take to partially alleviate this wasteland of opportunities. In older times, young men left home for awhile as apprentices and traveled to distant towns to be exposed to new challenges. Today something similar exists in America for late teens: the custom of leaving home for college. The problem remains with the period of puberty, roughly the five years between twelve and seventeen: What meaningful challenges can be found for young people that age? The situation is much easier when the parents themselves are involved in understandable and complex activities at home. If the parents

enjoy playing music, cooking, reading, gardening, carpentry, or fixing engines in the garage, then it is more likely that their children will find similar activities challenging, and invest enough attention in them to begin enjoy doing something that will help them grow. If parents just talked more about their ideals and dreams--even if these had been frustrated--the children might develop the ambition needed to break through the complacency of their present selves. If nothing else, discussing one's job or the thoughts and events of the day, and treating children as young adults, as friends, help to socialize them into thoughtful adults. But if the father spends all his free time at home vegetating in front of the TV set with a glass of alcohol in his hand, children will naturally assume that adults are boring people who don't know how to have fun, and will turn to the peer group for enjoyment.... Most activities, including school, recreation, and employment, are under adult control and leave little room for the youths' initiative. Lacking any meaningful outlet for their skills and creativity, they may turn to redundant partying, joyriding, malicious gossiping, or drugs and narcissistic introspection to prove to themselves that they are alive." (182-184) "Much of what we label juvenile delinquency--car theft, vandalism, rowdy behavior in general--is motivated by the same need to have flow experiences not available in ordinary life. As long as a significant segment of society has few opportunities to encounter meaningful challenges, and few chances to develop the skills necessary to benefit from them, we must expect that violence and crime will attract those who cannot find their way to more complex autotelic experiences." (69-70)

"People who as adults develop coherent life themes often recall that when they were very young, their parents told them stories and read from books. When told by a loving adult whom one trusts, fairy tales, biblical stories, heroic historical deeds, and poignant family events are often the first intimations of meaningful order a person gleans from the experience of the past. In contrast, we found in our studies that individuals who never focus on any goal, or accept one unquestioningly from the society around them, tend not to remember their parents having read or told stories to them as children. Saturday morning kiddie shows on television, with their pointless sensationalism, are unlikely to achieve the same purpose." (236) "Instead of seeking the complexity of enjoyment, an ill-treated child is likely to grow up into an adult who will be satisfied to obtain as much pleasure as possible from life." (90)

"How to restructure such an environment so as to make it sufficiently challenging is certainly one of the most pressing tasks parents of teenagers face. And it is of no value simply to tell one's strapping adolescent children to shape up and do something useful. What does help are living examples and concrete opportunities. If these are not available, one cannot blame the young for taking their own counsel.

Some of the tensions of teenage life can be eased if the family provides a sense of acceptance, control, and self-confidence to the adolescent. A relationship that has these dimensions is one in which people trust one another, and feel totally accepted. One does not have to worry constantly about being liked, being popular, or living up to others'

expectations... Being assured of one's worth in the eyes of one's kin gives a person the strength to take chances; excessive conformity is usually caused by fear of disapproval. It is much easier for a person to try developing her potential if she knows that no matter what happens, she has a safe emotional base in the family.

Unconditional acceptance is especially important to children. If parents threaten to withdraw their love from a child when he fails to measure up, the child's natural playfulness will be gradually replaced by chronic anxiety. However, if the child feels that his parents are unconditionally committed to his welfare, he can then relax and explore the world without fear; otherwise he has to allocate psychic energy to his own protection, thereby reducing the amount he can freely dispose of. Early emotional security may well be one of the conditions that helps develop an autotelic personality in children. Without this, it is difficult to let go of the self long enough to experience flow.

Love without strings attached does not mean, of course, that relationships should have no standards, no punishment for breaking the rules. When there is no risk attached to transgressing rules they become meaningless, and without meaningful rules an activity cannot be enjoyable. Children must know that parents expect certain things from them, and that specific consequences will follow if they don't obey. But they must also recognize that no matter what happens, the parents' concern for them is not in question.

When a family has a common purpose and open channels of communication, when it provides gradually expanding opportunities for action in a setting of trust, then life in it becomes an enjoyable flow activity. Its members will spontaneously focus their attention on the group relationship, and to a certain extent forget their individual selves, their divergent goals, for the sake of experiencing the joy of belonging to a more complex system that joins separate consciousnesses in a unified goal." (184-185)

Thus "the family context promoting optimal experience could be described as having five characteristics. The presence of these five conditions makes possible the AUTOTELIC FAMILY CONTEXT - they provide an ideal training for enjoying life. The five characteristics clearly parallel the dimensions of the flow experience. Children who grow up in family situations that facilitate clarity of goals, feedback, feeling of control, concentration on the task at hand, intrinsic motivation, and challenge will generally have a better chance to order their lives so as to make flow possible.

1. *Clarity*: The teenagers feel that they know what their parents expect from them--goals and feedback in the family interaction are unambiguous.
2. *Centering*: The children's perception that their parents are interested in what they are doing in the present, in their concrete feelings and experiences, rather than being preoccupied with whether they will be getting into a good college or obtaining a well-paying job.

3. *Choice*: Children feel that they have a variety of possibilities from which to choose, including that of breaking parental rules--as long as they are prepared to face the consequences.
4. *Commitment*: The trust that allows the child to feel comfortable enough to set aside the shield of his defense and become unselfconsciously involved in whatever he is interested in.
5. *Challenge*: The parents' dedication to provide increasingly complex opportunities for action to their children.

Families that provide an autotelic context conserve a greater deal of psychic energy for their individual members, thus making it possible to increase enjoyment all around. (88-89)

"One of the most basic delusions of our time is that home life takes care of itself naturally, and that the best strategy for dealing with it is to relax and let it take its course... the family, like any other joint enterprise needs constant investments of psychic energy to assure its existence.

To play the trumpet well, a musician cannot let more than a few days pass without practicing. An athlete who does not run regularly will soon be out of shape, and will no longer enjoy running. Any manager knows that his company will start falling apart if his attention wanders. In each case, without concentration, a complex activity breaks down into chaos. Why should the family be different? Unconditional acceptance, the complete trust family members ought to have for one another, is meaningful only when it is accompanied by an unstinting investment of attention. Otherwise it is just an empty gesture, a hypocritical pretense indistinguishable from disinterest." (185)

Enjoying Friends

"Compared to familial relationships, friendships are much easier to enjoy. We can choose our friends, and usually do so, on the basis of common interests and complementary goals. We need not change ourselves to be with friends; they reinforce our sense of self instead of trying to transform it. While at home there are many boring things we have to accept, like taking out the garbage and raking up leaves, with friends we can concentrate on things that are 'fun.' (185)

"Because a friendship usually involves common goals and common activities, it is 'naturally' enjoyable. But like any other activity, this relationship can take a variety of forms, ranging from the destructive to the highly complex. When a friendship is primarily a way of validating one's own insecure sense of self, it will give pleasure, but it will not be enjoyable in our sense--that of fostering growth. For instance: [drinking buddies] . . . This type of interaction keeps at bay the disorganization that solitude brings to the passive mind, but without stimulating much growth. It is rather like a collective form of television watching, and although it is more complex in that it requires participation, its actions and phrases tend to be rigidly scripted and highly predictable.

Socializing of this kind mimics friendship relations, but it provides few of the benefits of the real thing. Everyone takes pleasure in occasionally passing the time of day chatting, but may people become extremely dependent on a daily 'fix' of superficial contacts. This is especially true for individuals who cannot tolerate solitude, and who have little emotional support at home. Teenagers without strong family ties can become so dependent on their peer group that they will do anything to be accepted by it. ... If the young person feels accepted and cared for at home, however, dependence on the group is lessened, and the teenager can learn to be in control of his relationships with peers." (186-187)

"The company of peers, like every other activity, can be experienced at various levels: at the lowest level of complexity it is a pleasurable way to ward off chaos temporarily; at the highest it provides a strong sense of enjoyment and growth. It is in the context of intimate friendships, however, that the most intense experiences occur. . . . To enjoy such one to one relationships requires the same conditions that are present in other flow activities. It is necessary not only to have common goals and to provide reciprocal feedback, which even interactions in taverns or at cocktail parties provide, but also to find new challenges in each other's company. ... There are few things as enjoyable as freely sharing one's most secret feelings and thoughts with another person. Even though this sounds like a commonplace, it in fact requires concentrated attention, openness, and sensitivity. In practice, this degree of investment of psychic energy in a friendship is unfortunately rare. Few are willing to commit the energy or the time for it." (187-188)

"Friendship allow us to express parts of our beings that we seldom have the opportunity to act out otherwise. One way to describe the skills that every man and woman has is to divide them into two classes: the *instrumental* and the *expressive*. Instrumental skills are the ones we learn so that we can cope effectively with the environment. . . . People who have not learned to find flow in most of the things they undertake generally experience instrumental tasks as extrinsic--because they do not reflect their own choices, but are requirements imposed from the outside. Expressive skills, on the other hand, refer to actions that attempt to externalize our subjective experiences.... When involved in an expressive activity we feel in touch with our real self. A person who lives only by instrumental actions without experiencing the spontaneous flow of expressivity eventually becomes indistinguishable from a robot who has been programmed by aliens to mimic human behavior.

In the course of normal life there are few opportunities to experience the feeling of wholeness expressivity provides. ... It is only with friends that most people feel they can let their hair down and be themselves. ... It is in the company of friends that we can most clearly experience the freedom of the self and learn who we really are." (188-189)

"Friendship is not enjoyable unless we take up its expressive challenges. If a person surrounds himself with "friends" who simply reaffirm his public persona, who never question his dreams and desires, who never force him to try out new ways of being, he misses out on the

opportunities friendship presents. A true friend is someone we can occasionally be crazy with, someone who does not expect us to be always true to form. It is someone who shares our goal of self-realization, and therefore is willing to share the risks that any increase in complexity entails." (189)

"Unfortunately, few people nowadays are able to maintain friendships into adulthood, We are too mobile, too specialized and narrow in our professional interests to cultivate enduring relationships. We are lucky if we can hold a family together, let alone maintain a circle of friends. ...[But] just as with the family, people believe that friendships happen naturally, and if they fail, there is nothing to be done about it but feel sorry for oneself. In adolescence, when so many interests are shared with others and one has great stretches of free time to invest in a relationship, making friends might seem like a spontaneous process. But later in life friendships rarely happen by chance: one must cultivate them as assiduously as one must cultivate a job or a family." (189-190)

The Wider Community

"A person is part of a family or friendship to the extent he invests psychic energy in goals shared with other people. In the same way, one can belong to larger interpersonal systems by subscribing to the aspirations of a community, an ethnic group, a political party, or a nation.... In the ancient Greek usage, "politics" referred to whatever involved people in affairs that went beyond personal and family welfare. In this broad sense, politics can be one of the most enjoyable and most complex activities available to the individual, for the larger the social arena one moves in, the greater the challenges it presents. A person can deal with very intricate problems in solitude, and family and friends can take up a lot of attention. But trying to optimize the goals of unrelated individuals involved complexities an order of magnitude higher....The greater challenge is not only to benefit oneself, but to help others in the process." (190)

"Any involvement in the public realm can be enjoyable, provided one structures it according to the flow parameters. . . . What counts is to set a goal, to concentrate one's psychic energy, to pay attention to the feedback, and to make certain that the challenge is appropriate to one's skill. Sooner or later the interaction will begin to hum, and the flow experience follows." (190-191)

"The concept of flow is useful not only in helping individuals improve the quality of their lives, but also in pointing out how public actions should be directed. Perhaps the most powerful effect flow theory could have in the public sector is in providing a blueprint for how institutions may be reformed so as to make them more conducive to optimal experience. In the past few centuries economic rationality has been so successful that we have come to take for granted that the 'bottom line' of any human effort is to be measured in dollars and cents. But an exclusively economic approach to life is profoundly irrational; the true bottom line consists in the quality and complexity of experience. A community should be judged good not because it is technologically advanced, or swimming in material riches; it is good if

it offers people a chance to enjoy as many aspects of their lives as possible, while allowing them to develop their potential in the pursuit of ever greater challenges. Similarly the value of a school does not depend on its prestige, or its ability to train students to face up to the necessities of life, but rather on the degree of the enjoyment of lifelong learning it can transmit. A good factory is not necessarily the one that makes the most money, but the one that is most responsible for improving the quality of life for its workers and its customers. And the true function of politics is not to make people more affluent, safe, or powerful, but to let as many as possible enjoy an increasingly complex existence.

But no social change can come about until the consciousness of individuals is changed first. When a young man asked Carlyle how he should go about reforming the world, Carlyle answered, "Reform yourself. That way there will be one less rascal in the world." The advice is still valid. Those who try to make life better for everyone without having learned to control their own lives first usually end up making things worse all around." (191)

Suffering

"Many lives are disrupted by tragic accidents, and even the most fortunate are subjected to stresses of various kinds. Yet such blows do not necessarily diminish happiness. It is how people respond to stress that determines whether they will profit from misfortune or be miserable." (192)

"It would be naively idealistic to claim that no matter what happens to him, a person in control of consciousness will be happy. There are certainly limits to how much pain, or hunger, or deprivation a body can endure. . . . The relevant point to be made here is that a person who knows how to find flow from life is able to enjoy even situations that seem to allow only despair" (193)

"A major catastrophe that frustrates a central goal of life will either destroy the self, forcing a person to use all his psychic energy to erect a barrier around remaining goals, defending them against further onslaughts of fate; or it will provide a new, more clear, and more urgent goal: to overcome the challenges created by the defeat. If the second road is taken, the tragedy is not necessarily a detriment to the quality of life." (198)

Whether you are in the most ordinary of circumstances or the worst of circumstances, try thinking about this: "Lost in Antarctica or confined in a prison some individuals succeed in transforming their harrowing conditions into a manageable and even enjoyable struggle, whereas most others would succumb to the ordeal. Richard Logan, who has studied the accounts of many people in difficult situations, concludes that they survived by finding ways to turn the bleak objective conditions into subjectively controllable experience. They followed the blueprint of flow activities. First, they paid close attention to the most minute details of their environment, discovering in it hidden opportunities for action that matched what little they were capable of doing, given the circumstances. Then they set goals appropriate to the

precarious situation, and closely monitor progress through the feedback they received. Whenever they reached their goal, they upped the ante, setting increasingly complex challenges for themselves. . . .

Essentially the same ingenuity in finding opportunities for mental action and setting goals is reported by survivors of any solitary confinement, from diplomats captured by terrorists, to elderly ladies imprisoned by Chinese communists. Eva Zeisel, the ceramic designer who was imprisoned in Moscow's Lubyanka prison for over a year by Stalin's police, kept her sanity by figuring out how she would make a bra out of materials at hand, playing chess against herself in her head, holding imaginary conversations in French, doing gymnastics, and memorizing poems she composed. Alexander Solzhenitsyn describes how one of his fellow prisoners in the Lefortovo jail mapped the world on the floor of the cell, and then imagined himself traveling across Asia and Europe to America, covering a few kilometers each day. The same 'game' was independently discovered by many prisoners; for instance Albert Speer, Hitler's favorite architect, sustained himself in Spandau prison for months by pretending he was taking a walking trip from Berlin to Jerusalem, in which his imagination provided all the events and sights along the way.

An acquaintance who worked in United States Air Force intelligence tells the story of a pilot who was imprisoned in North Vietnam for many years, and lost eighty pounds and much of his health in a jungle camp. When he was released, one of the first things he ask for was to play a game of golf. To the great astonishment of his fellow officers he played a superb game, despite his emaciated condition. To their inquiries he replied that every day of his imprisonment he imagined himself playing eighteen holes, carefully choosing his clubs and approach and systematically varying the course. This discipline not only helped preserve his sanity, but apparently also kept his physical skills well honed. " (90-91)

As crazy as this sounds, this actually makes sense. Turns out visualization is an essential flow hack that is backed by science. "Back in the 1930s, [Edmund] Jacobson, [Harvard physiologist], found that imagining oneself lifting an object triggered corresponding electrical activity in the muscles involved in the lift. Between then and now dozens and dozens of studies have born this out, repeatedly finding strong correlations between mental rehearsal-- i.e. visualization-- and better performance. . . . We also know that the benefits extend beyond the psychological (increased confidence and motivation) and into the physiological.

In 2004, for example, Cleveland Clinic physiologist Guang Yue wanted to know if merely thinking about lifting weights was enough to increase strength. Study subjects were divided into four groups. One group tried to strengthen their finger muscles with physical exercise; one tried to strengthen their finger muscles by only visualizing the exercise; another tried to increase arm strength through visualization; while the last group did nothing at all. The trial lasted twelve weeks. When it was over, those who did nothing saw no gains. The group that relied on physical training saw the greatest increase in strength--at 53 percent. But it's the

mental groups where things got curious. *Folks who did no physical training but merely imagined their fingers going through precise exercise motions saw a 35 percent increase in strength, while the ones who visualized arm exercises saw a 13.5 percent increase in strength. How tightly are imagination and physiology coupled? Strength is among the most baseline of all performance measures and we humans can get stronger simply by thinking hard about it. [!!!!!!! - emphasis, mine]*

[Furthermore,] neuroscientists found no difference between performing an action and merely imagining oneself performing that action--the same neuronal circuits fire in either case. This means that visualization impacts a slew of cognitive processes--motor control, memory, attention, perception, planning--essentially accelerating chunking by shortening the time it takes us to learn new patterns. Since the first stage of the flow cycle--the struggle state--involves exactly this learning process, visualization is an essential flow hack: it shortens struggle. Visualization also firms up aims and objectives, further amplifying flow." (175-176, rise of superman)

So when every hope and dream are exhausted, when misfortune and hardship threaten to cripple us, we need to re-establish control over our our consciousness by seeking a new and meaningful goal in which to invest our psychic energy and organize the self. A goal that lies outside the reach of external forces. "Then, even though that person is objectively a slave, subjectively he is free. Solzhenitsyn describes very well how even the most degrading situation can be transformed into a flow experience: 'Sometimes, when standing in a column of dejected prisoners, amidst the shouts of guards with machine guns, I felt such a rush of rhymes and images that I seemed to be wafted overhead. . . . At such moments I was both free and happy. . . . Some prisoners tried to escape by smashing through the barbed wire. For me there was no barbed wire. The head count of prisoners remained unchanged but I was actually away on a distant flight.'"

Okay, so if it IS possible to transform hopeless situations into ones of meaning, then why don't more people do it? Why can some people achieve this while others can't?

"Basically the answer is simple: those who know how to transform a hopeless situation into a new flow activity that can be controlled will be able to enjoy themselves, and emerge stronger from the ordeal. There are three main steps that seem to be involved in such transformations:

1. **Unselfconscious self-assurance:** As Richard Logan found in his study of individuals who survived severe physical ordeals . . . one common attitude shared by such people was the implicit belief that their destiny was in their hands. They did not doubt their own resources would be sufficient to allow them to determine their fate. In that sense one would call them self-assured, yet at the same time, their egos seem curiously absent: they are not self-centered; their energy is typically not bent on dominating their environment as much as on finding a way to function within it harmoniously.

This attitude occurs when a person no longer sees himself in opposition to the environment, as an individual who insists that *his* goals, *his* intentions take precedence over everything else. Instead, he feels a part of whatever goes on around him, and tries to do his best within the system in which he must operate. Paradoxically, this sense of humility--the recognition that one's goals may have to be subordinated to a greater entity, and that to succeed one may have to play by a different set of rules from what one would prefer--is a hallmark of strong people. . . . Basically, to arrive at this level of self-assurance one must trust oneself, one's environment, and one's place in it. (203-204)

2. **Focusing attention on the world:** It is difficult to notice the environment as long as attention is mainly focused inward, as long as most of one's psychic energy is absorbed by the concerns and desires of the ego. People who know how to transform stress into enjoyable challenge spend very little time thinking about themselves. They are not expending all their energy trying to satisfy what they believe to be their needs, or worrying about socially conditioned desires. Instead their attention is alert, constantly processing information from their surroundings. The focus is still set by the person's goal, but it is open enough to notice and adapt to external events even if they are not directly relevant to what he wants to accomplish.

An open stance makes it possible for a person to be objective, to be aware of alternative possibilities, to feel a part of the surrounding world. . . . In a threatening situation it is natural to mobilize psychic energy, draw it inward, and use it as a defense against the threat. But this innate reaction more often than not compromises the ability to cope. It exacerbates the experience of inner turmoil, reduces the flexibility of response, and, perhaps worse than anything else, it isolates a person from the rest of the world, leaving him alone with his frustrations. On the other hand, if one continues to stay in touch with what is going on, new possibilities are likely to emerge, which in turn might suggest new responses, and one is less likely to be entirely cut off from the stream of life. (204 - 207)

3. **The discovery of new solutions:** There are basically two ways to cope with a situation that creates psychic entropy. One is to focus attention on the obstacles to achieving one's goals and then to move them out of the way, thereby restoring harmony in consciousness. This is the direct approach. The other is to focus on the entire situation, including oneself, to discover whether alternative goals may not be more appropriate, and thus different solutions possible. . . . But these transformations require that a person be prepared to perceive unexpected opportunities. Most of us become so rigidly fixed in the ruts carved out by genetic programming and social conditioning that we ignore the options of choosing any other course of action. Living exclusively by genetic and social instructions is fine as long as everything goes well. But the moment biological or social goals are frustrated--which in the long run is inevitable--a person must formulate new goals, and create a new flow activity for himself, or else he

will waste his energies in inner turmoil. . . .But how does one go about discovering these alternative strategies? The answer is basically simple: if one operates with unselfconscious assurance, and remains open to the environment and involved in it, a solution is likely to emerge.

We all start with preconceived notions of what we want from life. These include the basic needs programmed by our genes to ensure survival--the need for food, comfort, sex, dominance over other beings. They also include the desires that our specific culture has inculcated in us--to be slim, rich, educated, and well liked. If we embrace these goals and are lucky, we may replicate the ideal physical and social image for our historical time and place. But is this the best use of our psychic energy? And what if we cannot realize these ends? We will never become aware of other possibilities unless . . . we pay attention to what is happening around us, and evaluate events on the basis of their direct impact on how we feel, rather than evaluating them exclusively in terms of preconceived notions. If we do so we may discover that, contrary to what we were led to believe, it is more satisfying to help another person than to beat him down, or that it is more enjoyable to talk with one's two year old than to play golf with the company president. (207- 208)

In summary, "The most important trait of survivors is a "non self-conscious individualism," or a strongly directed purpose that is not self-seeking. People who have that quality are bent on doing their best in all circumstances, yet they are not concerned primarily with advancing their own interests. Because they are intrinsically motivated in their actions, they are not easily disturbed by external threats. With enough psychic energy free to observe and analyze their surroundings objectively, they have a better chance of discovering in them new opportunities for action. . . . Narcissistic individuals, who are mainly concerned with protecting their self, fall apart when the external conditions turn threatening. The ensuing panic prevents them from doing what they must do; their attention turns inward in an effort to restore order in consciousness, and not enough remains to negotiate outside reality.

Without interest in the world, a desire to be actively related to it, a person becomes isolated into himself. Bertrand Russell, one of the greatest philosophers of our century, described how he achieved personal happiness. 'Gradually I learned to be indifferent to myself and my deficiencies; I came to center my attention increasingly upon external objects: the state of the world, various branches of knowledge, individuals for whom I felt affection.' There could be no better short description of how to build for oneself an autotelic personality.

In part such a personality is a gift of biological inheritance and early upbringing. Some people are born with a more focused and flexible neurological endowment, or are fortunate to have had parents who promoted unselfconscious individuality. But it is an ability open to cultivation, a skill one can perfect through training and discipline." (92-93, flow)

So how can we cultivate this trait and deal with stress?

"In trying to sort out what accounts for a person's ability to cope with stress, it is useful to distinguish three different kinds of resources. The first is the external support available, and especially the network of social supports. . . . The second bulwark against stress includes a person's psychological resources, such as intelligence, education, and relevant personality factors. . . . And finally, the third type of resource refers to the coping strategies that a person uses to confront the stress. Of these three factors, the third one is the most relevant to our purposes. External supports by themselves are not that effective in mitigating stress. They tend to help only those who can help themselves. And psychological resources are largely outside our control. It is difficult to become much smarter, or much more outgoing, than one was at birth. But how we cope is both the most important factor in determining what effects stress will have and the most flexible resource, the one most under our personal control. There are two main ways people respond to stress. The positive response is called a 'mature defense' or 'transformational coping.' The negative response to stress would be a 'neurotic defense' or 'regressive coping.'" (198-199)

". . . Few people rely on only one or the other strategy exclusively. [When Jim gets fired from his comfortable job at age forty], it is more likely he would get drunk the first night ; have a fight with his wife, who had been telling him for years that his job was lousy [immature, regressive coping]; and then the following morning, or the week after, he would simmer down and start figuring out what to do next [mature, transformational coping]. But people do differ in their abilities to use on or the other strategy. [Some] are masters at transformation coping. Others, however, when confronted by much less intense levels of stress, might give up and respond by scaling down the complexity of their lives forever.

The ability to take misfortune and make something good come of it is a very rare gift. Those who possess it are called "survivors," and are said to have "resilience," or "courage." Whatever we call them, it is generally understood that they are exceptional people who have overcome great hardships, and have surmounted obstacles that would daunt most men and women. . . . It makes sense, of course, that people should look up to this one quality more than to any other. Of all the virtues we can learn no trait is more useful, more essential for survival, and more likely to improve the quality of life than the ability to transform adversity into an enjoyable challenge. To admire this quality means that we pay attention to those who embody it, and we thereby have a chance to emulate them if the need arises. Therefore admiring courage is in itself a positive adaptive trait; those who do so may be better prepared to ward off the blows of misfortune." (200-201)

"The integrity of the self depends on the ability to take neutral or destructive events and turn them into positive ones. . . . In each person's life, the chances of only good things happening are extremely slim. The likelihood that our desires will be always fulfilled is so minute as to be negligible. Sooner or later everyone will have to confront events that contradict his goals: disappointments, severe illness, financial reversal, and eventually the inevitability of one's death. Each event of this kind is negative feedback that produces disorder in the mind. Each

threatens the self and impairs its functioning. If the trauma is severe enough, a person may lose the capacity to concentrate on necessary goals. If that happens, the self is no longer in control. If the impairment is very severe, consciousness becomes random, and the person “loses his mind” -- the various symptoms of mental disease take over. In less severe cases the threatened self survives, but stops growing; cowering under attack, it retreats behind massive defenses and vegetates in a state of continuous suspicion.

It is for this reason that courage, resilience, perseverance, mature defense, or transformational coping--the dissipative structures of the mind--are so essential. Without them we would be constantly suffering through the random bombardment of stray psychological meteorites. On the other hand, if we do develop such positive strategies, most negative events can be at least neutralized, and possibly even used as challenges that will help make the self stronger and more complex.” (202)

Creating A Unified Life of Flow

Most of us are able to find flow and true enjoyment in at least one aspect of our lives, but what about the others? Many of us are only truly happy while doing the one thing we are passionate about, and revert to an unpleasant, unfriendly, or awkward version of ourselves in the rest of our activities. Where did all that grace and fluidity go?

This is where it is important to recognize that having achieved flow in one activity does not guarantee that it will carry over to the rest of your life. “If we enjoyed work and friendships and faced every challenge as an opportunity to develop new skills, we would be getting rewards out of living that are outside the realm of ordinary life. Yet even this would not be enough to assure us of optimal experience. As long as enjoyment follows piecemeal from activities not linked to one another in a meaningful way, one is still vulnerable to the vagaries of chaos. Even the most successful career, the most rewarding family relationship eventually runs dry. Sooner or later involvement in work must be reduced. Spouses die, children grow up and move away. To approach optimal experience as closely as is humanly possible, a last step in the control of consciousness is necessary.

What this involves is turning all life into a unified flow experience. If a person sets out to achieve a difficult enough goal, from which all other goals logically follow, and if he or she invests all energy in developing skills to reach that goal, then actions and feelings will be in harmony and the separate parts of life will fit together--and each activity will “make sense” in the present, as well as in view of the past and of the future. In such a way, it is possible to give meaning to one’s entire life.” (214-215)

The Meaning of Life

“But isn’t it incredibly naive to expect life to have a coherent overall meaning?

It *is* true that life has no meaning, if by that we mean a supreme goal built into the fabric of nature and human experience, a goal that is valid for every individual. But it does not follow that life cannot be *given* meaning. Much of what we call culture and civilization consists in efforts people have made, generally against overwhelming odds, to create a sense of purpose for themselves and their descendants. It is one thing to recognize that life is, by itself, meaningless. It is another thing entirely to accept this with resignation. The first fact does not entail the second anymore than the fact that we lack wings prevents us from flying.

Creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one's actions into a unified flow experience. . . . People who find their lives meaningful usually have a goal that is challenging enough to take up all their energies, a goal that can give significance to their lives. We may refer to this process as achieving *purpose*. To experience flow one must set goals for one's actions. . . . The goal in itself is usually not important; what matters is that it focuses a person's attention and involves it in an achievable, enjoyable activity. In a similar way, some people are able to bring the same sharp focus to their psychic energy throughout the entirety of their lives. The unrelated goals of the separate flow activities merge into an all-encompassing set of challenges that gives purpose to everything a person does.

In this sense the answer to the old riddle "What is the meaning of life?" turns out to be astonishingly simple. The meaning of life *is* meaning; whatever it is, wherever it comes from, a unified purpose is what gives meaning to life." (214-217)

"There are very different ways to establish this directionality. Napoleon devoted his life, and in the process gladly led to death hundreds of thousands of French soldiers, to the single-minded pursuit of power. Mother Teresa has invested all her energies to help the helpless, because her life has been given purpose by an unconditional love based on the belief in God, in a spiritual order beyond the reach of her sense. From a purely psychological point of view, Napoleon and Mother Teresa may both have achieved equal levels of inner purpose, and therefore of optimal experience. The obvious differences between them prompt a broader ethical question: What have the consequences of these two ways of giving meaning to life been? We might conclude that Napoleon brought chaos to thousands of lives, whereas Mother Teresa reduced the entropy in the consciousness of many. But here we will not try to pass judgement on the objective value of actions; we will be concerned instead with the more modest task of describing the subjective order that a unified purpose brings to individual consciousness." (216-217)

Cultivating Purpose

It is not enough to find a purpose that unifies one's goals; one must also carry through and meet its challenges. The purpose must result in strivings; intent has to be translated into action. We may call this *resolution* in the pursuit of one's goals. What counts is not so much whether a person actually achieves what she has set out to do; rather, it matters whether effort has been expended to reach the goal, instead of being diffused or wasted." (216-217)

“Purpose gives direction to one’s efforts, but it does not necessarily make life easier. Goals can lead into all sorts of trouble, at which point one gets tempted to give them up and find some less demanding script by which to order one’s actions. The price one pays for changing goals whenever opposition threatens is that while one may achieve a more pleasant and comfortable life, it is likely that it will end up empty and void of meaning.

No goal can have much effect unless taken seriously. Each goal prescribes a set of consequences, and if one isn’t prepared to reckon with them, the goal becomes meaningless. The mountaineer who decides to scale a difficult peak knows that he will be exhausted and endangered for most of the climb. But if he gives up too easily, his quest will be revealed as having little value. The same is true of all flow experiences: there is a mutual relationship between goals and the effort they require. Goals justify the effort they demand at the outset, but later it is the effort that justifies the goal.” (223-224)

“But as the complexity of culture evolves, it becomes more difficult to achieve this degree of total resolve. There are simply too many goals competing for prominence, and who is to say which one is worth the dedication of an entire life? A woman used to be content with being a housewife, partly because she didn’t have other options, now she can be anything and it is no longer ‘obvious’ that being a wife and mother should be a woman’s first priority. . . .Mobility has freed us from ties to our birthplaces: there is no longer any reason to become involved in one’s native community, to identify with one’s place of birth. If the grass looks greener across the fence, we can simply move to the other field-- How about opening that little restaurant in Australia? Life-styles and religions are choices that are easily switched. In the past a hunter was a hunter until he died, a blacksmith spent his life perfecting his craft. We can now shed our occupational identities at will: no one needs to remain an accountant forever.

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story.

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.

-Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

The wealth of options we face today has extended personal freedom to an extent that would have been inconceivable even a hundred years ago. But the inevitable consequence of equally attractive choices is uncertainty of purpose; uncertainty, in turn, saps resolution, and

lack of resolve ends up devaluing choice. Therefore freedom does not necessarily help develop meaning in life--on the contrary. If the rules of a game become too flexible, concentration flags, and it is more difficult to attain a flow experience. Commitment to a goal and to the rules it entails is much easier when the choices are few and clear." (224-225)

"The forms of psychic entropy that currently cause us so much anguish--unfulfilled wants, dashed expectations, loneliness, frustration, anxiety, guilt--are all likely to have been recent invaders of the mind. They are by-products of the tremendous increase in complexity of the cerebral cortex and the symbolic enrichment of culture. They are the dark side of the emergence of consciousness.

The psychic entropy peculiar to the human condition involves seeing more to do than one can actually accomplish and feeling able to accomplish more than what conditions allow. But this becomes possible only if one keeps in mind more than one goal at a time, being aware at the same time of conflicting desires. It can happen only when the mind knows not only what *is* but also what *could be*. The more complex any system, the more room it leaves open for alternatives, and the more things can go wrong with it. This is certainly applicable to the evolution of the mind: as it has increased its power to handle information, the potential for inner conflict has increased as well. When there are too many demands, options, challenges, we become anxious; when too few, we get bored." (227-228)

"The complexity and freedom that have been thrust upon us, and that our ancestors had fought so hard to achieve, are a challenge we must find ways to master. If we do, the lives of our descendants will be infinitely more enriched than anything previously experienced on this planet. If we do not, we run the risk of frittering away our energies on contradictory, meaningless goals. . . . Because there is no absolute certainty to which to turn, each person must discover ultimate purpose on his or her own. Through trial and error, through intense cultivation, we can straighten out the tangled skein of conflicting goals, and choose the one that will give purpose to action.

Self-knowledge--an ancient remedy so old that its value is easily forgotten--is the process through which one may organize conflicting options. "Know thyself" . . . The reason the advice is so often repeated is that it works. We need, however, to rediscover afresh every generation what these words mean, what the advice actually implies for each individual. And to do that it is useful to express it in terms of current knowledge, and envision a contemporary method for its application." (225)

"Inner conflict is the result of competing claims on attention. Too many desires, too many incompatible goals struggle to marshal psychic energy toward their own ends. . . . Two ways to reduce conflict and sort out essential claims:

- 1.** Vita activa: A person achieves flow through total involvement in concrete external challenges. In this way harmony is restored to consciousness indirectly--not by facing

up to contradictions and trying to resolve conflicting goals and desires, but by pursuing chosen goals with such intensity that all potential competition is preempted. . . .Action helps create inner order, but it has its drawbacks: . . . often at the price of excessively restricting options. . . .Sooner or later, postponed alternatives may reappear again as intolerable doubts and regrets. . . .Was it worth the price I paid? In other words, the goals that have sustained action over a period turn out not to have enough power to give meaning to the entirety of life.

2. Vita Contemplativa: Detached reflection upon experience, a realistic weighing of options and their consequences, have long been held to be the best approach to a good life. . . . Activity and reflection should ideally complement and support each other. Action by itself is blind, reflection impotent.

If the habit of reflection is well developed, a person need not go through a lot of soul-searching to decide whether a course of action is entropic or not. He will know, almost intuitively, that this promotion will produce more stress than it is worth, or that this particular friendship, attractive as it is, would lead to unacceptable tensions in the context of marriage.” (225-227)

“It is relatively easy to bring order to the mind for short stretches of time; any realistic goal can accomplish this. . . .But it is much more difficult to extend this state of being through the entirety of life. For this it is necessary to invest energy in goals that are so persuasive that they justify effort even when our resources are exhausted and when fate is merciless in refusing us a chance at having a comfortable life. If goals are well chosen, and if we have the courage to abide by them despite opposition, we shall be so focused on the actions and events around us that we won't have the time to be unhappy.”(227)

When an important goal is pursued with resolution, and all one's varied activities fit together into a unified flow experience, the result is that *harmony* is brought to consciousness. Someone who knows his desires and works with purpose to achieve them is a person whose feelings, thoughts, and actions are congruent with one another, and is therefore a person who has achieved inner harmony. . . . Someone who is in harmony no matter what he does, no matter what is happening to him, knows that his psychic energy is not being wasted on doubt, regret, guilt, and fear, but is always usefully employed. Inner congruence ultimately leads to that inner strength and serenity we admire in people who seem to have come to terms with themselves.” (217)

“Purpose, resolution, and harmony unify life and give it meaning by transforming it into a seamless flow experience. Whoever achieves this state will never really lack anything else. A person whose consciousness is so ordered need not fear unexpected events, or even death. Every living moment will make sense, and most of it will be enjoyable. This certainly sounds desirable. So how does one attain it?” (217-218)

“... building a complex meaning system seems to involve focusing attention alternately on the self and on the Other.

1. First, psychic energy is invested in the needs of the organism, and psychic order is equivalent to pleasure.
2. When the first level is temporarily achieved, and the person can begin to invest attention in the goals of a community, what is meaningful corresponds to group values--religion, patriotism, and the acceptance and respect of other people provide the parameters of inner order.
3. The next movement of the dialectic brings attention back to the self: having achieved a sense of belonging to a larger human system, the person now feels the challenge of discerning the limits of personal potential. This leads to attempts at self-actualization, to experimentation with different skills, different ideas and disciplines. At this stage enjoyment, rather than pleasure, becomes the main source of rewards. But because this phase involves becoming a seeker, the person may also encounter a midlife crisis, a career change, and an increasingly desperate straining against the limitations of individual capability.
4. From this point on the person is ready for the last shift in the redirection of energy: having discovered what one can and, more important, cannot do alone, the ultimate goal merges with a system larger than the person--a cause, an idea, a transcendental entity.

Not everyone moves through the stages of this spiral of ascending complexity. A few never have the opportunity to go beyond the first step. When survival demands are so insistent that a person cannot devote much attention to anything else, he or she will not have enough psychic energy left to invest in the goals of the family or of the wider community. Self-interest alone will give meaning to life. The majority of people are probably ensconced comfortably in the second stage of development, where the welfare of the family, or the company, the community, or the nation are the sources of meaning. Many fewer reach the third level of reflective individualism, and only a precious few emerge once again to forge a unity with universal values. So these stages do not necessarily reflect what does happen, or what will happen; they characterize what *can* happen if a person is lucky and succeeds in controlling consciousness.” (222)

Though there are a number of different models describing the emergence of meaning along a gradient of complexity, this is the simplest. “The number of steps is irrelevant; what counts is that most theories recognize the importance of this dialectic tension, this alternation between differentiation on the one hand and integration on the other. From this point of view, individual life appears to consist of a series of different ‘games,’ with different goals and challenges, that change with time as a person matures. Complexity requires that we invest energy in developing whatever skills we were born with, in becoming autonomous, self-

reliant, conscious of our uniqueness and its limitations. At the same time we must invest energy in recognizing, understanding, and finding ways to adapt to the forces beyond the boundaries of our own individuality. Of course we don't *have* to undertake any of these plans. But if we don't, chances are, sooner or later, we will regret it." (222-223)

"Instead of accepting the unity of purpose provided by genetic instructions or by the rules of society, the challenge for us is to create harmony based on reason and choice. Philosophers . . . have recognized this task of modern man by calling it the *project*, which is their term for the goal-directed actions that provide shape and meaning to an individual's life. Psychologists have used terms like . . . *life themes*. In each case, these concepts identify a set of goals linked to an ultimate goal that gives significance to whatever a person does. . . . With a life theme, everything that happens will have a meaning--not necessarily a positive one, but a meaning nevertheless. If a person bends all her energies to making a million dollars before age thirty, whatever happens is a step either toward or away from that goal. The clear feedback will keep her involved with her actions. Even if she loses all her money, her thoughts and actions are tied by a common purpose, and they will be experienced as worthwhile.

When a person's psychic energy coalesces into a life theme, consciousness achieves harmony. But not all life themes are equally productive. Existential philosophers distinguish between two types of life themes:

- 1. Authentic or Discovered Life Themes:** Authentic projects, or discovered life themes, describe a person who realizes that choices are free, and writes the script for their actions based on personal based on a rational evaluation of his experience. It does not matter what the choice is, as long as it is an expression of what the person genuinely feels and believes. Authentic projects tend to be intrinsically motivated, chosen for what they are worth in themselves.
- 2. Inauthentic or Accepted Life Themes:** Inauthentic projects, or accepted life themes, are those a person chooses because they are what she feels ought to be done, because they are what everybody else is doing, and therefore there is no alternative. A person is motivated by external forces and simply takes on a predetermined role from a script written long ago by others.

Both types of life themes help give meaning to life, but each has drawbacks. The accepted life theme works well as long as the social system is sound; if it is not, it can trap the person into perverted goals. Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi who calmly shipped tens of thousands to the gas chambers, was a man for whom the rules of bureaucracy were sacred. He probably experienced flow . . . [and] he never seemed to question whether what he was asked to do was right or wrong. As long as he followed orders, his consciousness was in harmony. For him the meaning of life was to be part of a strong, organized institution; nothing else mattered. In peaceful, well-ordered times a man like Adolf Eichmann might have been an esteemed pillar of the community. But the vulnerability of his life theme becomes apparent when

unscrupulous and demented people seize control of society; then such an upright citizen turns into an accessory to crimes without having to change his goals, and without even realizing the inhumanity of his actions.

Discovered life themes are fragile for a different reason: because they are products of a personal struggle to define the purpose of life, they have less social legitimacy; because they are often novel and idiosyncratic, they may be regarded by others as crazy or destructive." (230-231) Many of us living the Slacklife struggle with this exactly. Looking in from the outside, the general society sees us only as dirty hippies, circus freaks, nomads, or adrenaline junkies. Yet many of us Slackers simply want to help others discover their life theme and create a more complex purpose. We aim to share slacklining with the world in order to help others discover their confidence, find their resolve, and push the limits of their mind, but the method--the activity itself-- is still so novel that few can comprehend it.

So how do people forge these discovered life themes? What kind of explanations for one's suffering lead end up leading to lives of order and flow?

There are several common characteristics of how people find their authenticity:

1. This type of theme is in many cases a **reaction to a great personal hurt suffered in early life**--to being orphaned, abandoned, or treated unjustly. But what matters is not the trauma per se; the external event never determines what the theme will be. What matters is the interpretation that one places on suffering.

If a father is a violent alcoholic, his children have several options for explaining what is wrong: they can tell themselves 1) that the father is a bastard who deserves to die; 2) that he is a man, and all men are weak. 3) that poverty is the cause of the father's affliction, and the only way to avoid his fate is to become rich; 4) that a large part of his behavior is due to helplessness and lack of education. Only the last of these equally likely explanations leads in the direction of a discovered life theme.

2. To find purpose in suffering one must interpret it as a **possible challenge**.

If a child abused by a violent father concluded that the problem was inherent in human nature, that all men were weak and violent, there would not be much he or she could do about it. How could a child change human nature? Instead, formulating his problem as being due to the helplessness of disenfranchised minorities subsequently provides the child with a challenge to meet.

3. Then, one must **develop appropriate skills** to confront the challenges at the root of what was wrong in the personal life. What transforms the consequences of a traumatic event into a challenge that gives meaning to life are dissipative structures.

Now that the child has a problem to be solved, he is able to develop skills to confront the challenges he sees at the root of what had been wrong in his person life (like legal training and education).

4. Finally, **the challenge becomes generalized to other people, or to mankind as a whole.** (Discovered life themes are rarely formulated as the response to just a personal problem.) In this way, whatever solution is found to his own problems will benefit not only himself, but many others besides.. This altruistic way of generalizing solutions is typical of negentropic life themes; it brings harmony to the lives of many." (233-234)

"There are so many examples of [people who have made the most out of the worst situations] that one certainly cannot assume a direct causal relation between external disorder in childhood and internal lack of meaning later in life. . . .All these people ended up inventing powerful and useful lives for themselves. . . . If there is a strategy shared by these and by other people who succeed in building meaning into their experience, it is one so simple and obvious that it is almost embarrassing to mention. Yet because it is so often overlooked, it will be valuable to review it. The strategy consists in extracting from the order achieved by past generations patterns that will help avoid disorder in one's own mind. There is much knowledge-- or well-ordered information-- accumulated in culture, ready for this use. Great music, architecture, art, poetry, drama, dance, philosophy, and religion are there for anyone to see as examples of how harmony can be imposed on chaos.. Yet so many people ignore them, expecting to create meaning in their lives by their own devices.

To do so is like trying to build up material culture from scratch in each generation. No one in his right mind would want to start reinventing the wheel, fire, electricity, and the million objects and processes that we now take for granted as part of the human environment. Instead we learn how to make these things by receiving ordered information from teachers, from books, from models, so as to benefit from the knowledge of the past and eventually surpass it." (235)

"At its best, literature contains ordered information about behavior, models of purpose, and examples of lives successfully patterned around meaningful goals. Many people confronted with the randomness of existence have drawn hope from the knowledge that others before them had faced similar problems, and had been able to prevail. And this is just literature; what about music, art, philosophy, and religion?" (236)

Now What?

Now that you are equipped with all these incredibly powerful new thoughts, tools, and ideas, get out there and turn your mundane existence into an awesome one! If you are struggling, just remember: it's all in how you look at it, and this book is always here if you need it :)

THE BOOK OF HYMNALS

All of Andy Lewis's holy musical hymns can be downloaded for free on soundcloud.
<https://soundcloud.com/slacklife/tracks>

Have you created some slack songs that should be added to the Bible? Let us know!
All holy hymnals are welcome!

Slacklife

<https://soundcloud.com/slacklife/slacklife>

say hello to my slacklife concept
let me introduce you to my feeling good mindset
I got your hands up in the air I see you smiling
I'd love to welcome you into the California stylin'
and you feel the tension rising
got you off the ground you're glidin'
it's an inch away from flyin'
now, why you runnin' hidin'?

you've gots to be fearless
use your mind to conquer it
if you need your slackline fix
come take a hit of this

[CHORUS]:

you gonna feel it
in the trees of gap and cliffs
see yes that slacklife is my love
I'd like to welcome you to it
yes you feel it
you feel it
I know you feel it
I hope you feel it
I know you feel it
I hope you feel it
I know you feel it
I know you feel it

now how nervous do you get
at the brink of emptiness
are you chained down by the fact
you could make one false slip
get a grip
live in the moment
breath and body interwoven
the beauty of slacklife is getting outside that moanin' and groanin'

so leave it all behind let slacklife open your eyes
there is more to this life than just the daily grind

[REPEAT CHORUS]

[OUTRO x 2]:

feel it
you feel it
I know you feel it
I hope you feel it
I know you feel it
I hope you feel it
I know you feel it
I know you feel it

feel it
you feel it
I know you feel it
I hope you feel it
I know you feel it
I hope you feel it
I know you feel it
I know you feel it

Freesoloco

Original Version w/ Intro: <https://soundcloud.com/slacklife/freesoloco>

Master Version: <https://soundcloud.com/slacklife/freesoloco-master>

[INTRO - ORIGINAL VERSION ONLY]:

Hey man, are you gonna, are you gonna keep doing all that freesolo shit?
I mean, seriously, that just sounds like a dumb idea.
Well. You know what, I AM gonna free solo. Probably til the day I die. I'll be...

walkin solo
I'm walkin solo
I'm walking solo
I'm walking freesoloco

[CHORUS]:

solo
I'm walking solo
I'm walking solo
freesoloco

today is a good day to die
and if i'm gonna go
it's freesoloco
if i fall off
and i just might
I better catch
cuz I'm freesoloco

[REPEAT CHORUS x 2]

I'm walking so
So loco
(REPEAT x 3)

Sososososolololololoco

angel on my left
devil on my right side
both tellin' me I should freesoloco
mama cried
daddy cried
both askin' why i got to freesoloco

[REPEAT CHORUS x 2]

if you're on a line
ten feet high
that's definitely not
a freesoloco
if you fall off and may not die
that's definitely borderline
freesoloco
if you fall off
it takes your life
welcome to the game of that freesoloco
and like a bass
imma go crazy if i don't go oh oh oh
Solo

echoes freesoooooooooooo

solo
I'm walking solo
I'm walking solo
I'm walking
freesoloco

[REPEAT CHORUS x 3]

I'm walkin so (x 4)

so loco

Slacklife vs. Society

<https://soundcloud.com/slacklife/slacklife-vs-society>

hey hey hey
what, yeah

it's S to the L
A to the C
K to the L-I-F-E
that slacklife
is the only way for me
and the dirtbag livin's only way you'll find me

it's S to the L
A to the C
K to the L-I-F-E
that slacklife
is the only way to be
and the dirtbag livin's only way you'll find me

so why don't we take this life back to basics
you can't beat me but you can try and fake it
I've been portrayed as an innovator
and oh so fresh and guaranteed creative
I see you at the edge now try levitating
as a kid I caught the gingerbread man
I ate him
I'll bust your face in no hesitatin'
now you can tell your friends that you fell down skatin'
Cuz I think quick
like im lickity sickity slick
if you slip you catch a fist or stitches
Blauw
straight to your mouth
jaw drop to the ground
hey, how many fingers am I holding up now?
Are you sick of getting spit on?
black bruises and blisters
Park rangers and the police warning keep your distance
they say, "what the hell is this?
it doesn't matter. tear it down."
you're gonna kill yourself,

you're gonna hurt this town.
hell no!
all I wanna do
is live my slacklife
freestyle
away from the politicians world of crime
away from the religious world defined
yes, I chose my own ride
and it's called slacklife
now i'm getting fired up
you got that send in your eyes
it's one less step til the end of the line
and it's so easy to slip
when fear tightens its grip
oh I bet you're souls still shaking after that last whipper
well california's happenin
everywhere
and the people slackin round the world
Everyday
and everyone's looking for their own way
to break apart the stress
and make it fade away

[CHORUS]:

so I hip hop up at the break of dawn
and I'll slack all day til the suns long gone
if i'm not living right,
cheers to living wrong
hold your hands high
help me sing this song

gotta give me that
gimme that
slack

[REPEAT x 7]

give me that
gotta give me that
Slack
gotta to wake up early
got to be on time
almost no one takes the risk
To try to cross that line

everybody reachin for their own piece of the pie
does a bigger slice really bring a bigger smile?
no!

Trapped beneath society's mentality
they never travel further than they want you to be
workin 7 to 3

Fifty out of fifty two weeks
spending all your damn nights in front of the TV
yo it sounds like a dream to me

one more please
life goes on forever
it's not important or unique
time is growin' on trees
cuz nothin's better than free
grab a year or two now
cuz these people look greedy
don't get left behind
watch where your sun don't shine
Live your life, soft eyes
open mind
loose spine

likewise living every day and every night
just right with enough slack in life

[REPEAT CHORUS]

Gotta give me that
Gotta give me that
Slack

[REPEAT x 3]

Gotta give me that
Gotta give me give me that

Gotta give me that
Gotta give me that
Slack

[REPEAT x 3]

Gotta give me that
give me that

[REPEAT CHORUS]

Slacklife Forever Dance

<https://soundcloud.com/slacklife/slacklife-forever-dance>

it goes

[CHORUS]:

slacklife forever man
that slacklife forever dance
it's so glorious
it goes slacklife forever man
we got dealt the better hand
so roll with us

yeah,
slacked a lot
I slacked some more
I slacked so long I grew a funky afro
I slacked in the morning
and I slacked at night
you never see me out my house
without my slackline
24 hour slacklife diet
you'll be sellin out
but I aint buyin
slacklife forever man
without even tryin
the sun on my back
eyes on the horizon

[REPEAT CHORUS]:

it's that
illusion of institution
coming at you corrupt as a mothufunn
interruptor
disruptor
still gonna get my kicks
I just might have to run first
that Monkey on my back
it's chill cuz he rigs
he always helps me out
and remembers the rings

he's always at the trickline
helping me go big
yeah that monkey on my back
is the funky shiznits
[REPEAT CHORUS]:

oh my mind is long gone
far away like hong kong
I'm on the moon
backflippin' neil armstrong
I flipped out of orbit
my takeoff was too strong
I slacklified the universe
and come back around
singing

[REPEAT CHORUS]

It goes
Slacklife forever man
The slacklife forever dance
It's so glorious (oh man, it's so glorious,man)
(It's just so good)

Living the Slackers Life

<https://soundcloud.com/slacklife/living-the-slackers-life>

I'm bettin on a california clear blue sky
To the top of the redwood trees I'll climb
I'm safely immersed in setting a slackline
Just wave to time as he climbs by
a life up here is a narrow bridge
just shaking left and right
you are gonna catch the best of it
so shed your blood and tears
sitting here sweatin fears
or maybe it's time to downshift your gears, yes

[CHORUS]:

I'm living the slackers life
the slackers life
yes I'm living the slackers life
the slackers life
yes I'm living the slackers life
the slackers life
yes I'm living the life

and it's a very simple concept
you start with baby steps
the real task is getting past your own damn head
it's holding you back or trying to save your ass
though it doesn't even matter if you're attached
cuz in this world
everybody seems to fall down
but some people catch themselves
some people hang around
some people call it a crazy nonsense
and other people don't know what they're missing

[REPEAT CHORUS]

and the easiest things become complexities
yes, just count to three and remember to breathe
or if you focus your mind and walk the skylines
the space in between has never felt so wide

[REPEAT CHORUS]

Keep on Riding

<https://soundcloud.com/slacklife/keep-on-riding-1>

you gotta have that slack sensation
breathe in that relaxation
it's going down and I don't mean basement
are you in or are you trapped on pavement
I'm living life like a protest statement
been a few times I probly should have just caved in
humour so dark you'd think I'm caving
for god damn sure you won't find me job slaving

[CHORUS x 2]:

I'm gonna keep on ridin'
and I'm gonna keep on fightin'
I'm always gonna live free yeah
I'm always gonna be me yeah

cant stop me
I'm magnetism
slacktivism
yeah that's my religion
I'm just part of a global decision
they say life's a bitch
man I think that needs revision
I took out the blades
made the incisions
turned on the lights
you can call it vision
no matter what you do
the world keeps on spinning
no matter what you say to me
you'll see me grinnin'

[REPEAT CHORUS x 2]

gonna be me yeah

[REPEAT CHORUS x 2]

Always gonna be me
Be me, yeah

Always gonna live free
Live free, yeah

Always gonna be me
Be me
Be me, yeah

Always gonna live free
Live free
Live free, yeah

Always gonna be me

Always gonna live free

Do or Do Nada

<https://soundcloud.com/slacklife/do-or-do-nada>

hahaha... people ask us why we live like this,
here we go:

I'm addicted to the caffeine
I gotta have my coffee and that THC
that spliff in the morning
and that gasoline
because I gotta keep going
Imma slack king
cuz i do what I wanna

[CHORUS]:
in this life
gotta to do what you wanna
don't try
it's do or do nada

well, rigged up so lets throw down
in the throne room
with the gold crown
yeah I crack jokes cuz I'm so clown
and ya'll can kiss my ass
get that nose brown
and you know the score
you get what you paid for
better save for something to savor, i'll say more
carnivores eat me for the flavor
when she shows me her teeth no need to say more, but

[REPEAT CHORUS]

I'm addicted to caffeine
I gotta have my coffee
and that THC
that spliff in the morning
and that gasoline
because I gotta keep going
and Imma slack king
cuz I do what I wanna

taking names
kicking ass
lay back
relax
why you so mad
cuz you so sad
watch my soul laugh
cuz I roll rad
yeah I'm so bad
give no fucks
man I hope you understand that

[REPEAT CHORUS]

there's only one thing on my mind
it's the slacklife all the time
there's only one thing on my mind
it's the slacklife all the time, and

[REPEAT CHORUS x 2]

Top Of the World

<https://soundcloud.com/slacklife/top-of-the-world>

I was surprised when life took me for a ride
I couldn't see where we were going, but I didn't mind
insane to crazy
crazy got hectic
then it all ended up messy and I still don't get it
how things can change in just a couple of days
you know it blows me away
I guess all I can say is

[CHORUS]:

that's what happens at the top of the world
only place you can go is down
when you live like a king
and end up with everything
make the best of it while it's around

and it's not all bad
cuz it was pretty good at first
and I guess we were flirts
but it could have been worse
I just keep imagining
scene after scene
I was literally
looking like reality TV
when reality, dreams, and fantasy
come too close for comfort
comfort shows its teeth, and

[REPEAT CHORUS]:

and it was great while it lasted
and we'll all still survive
cuz time is on our side
and I'll just still smile because

[REPEAT CHORUS]

cuz that's what happens at the top of the world
only place you can go is down