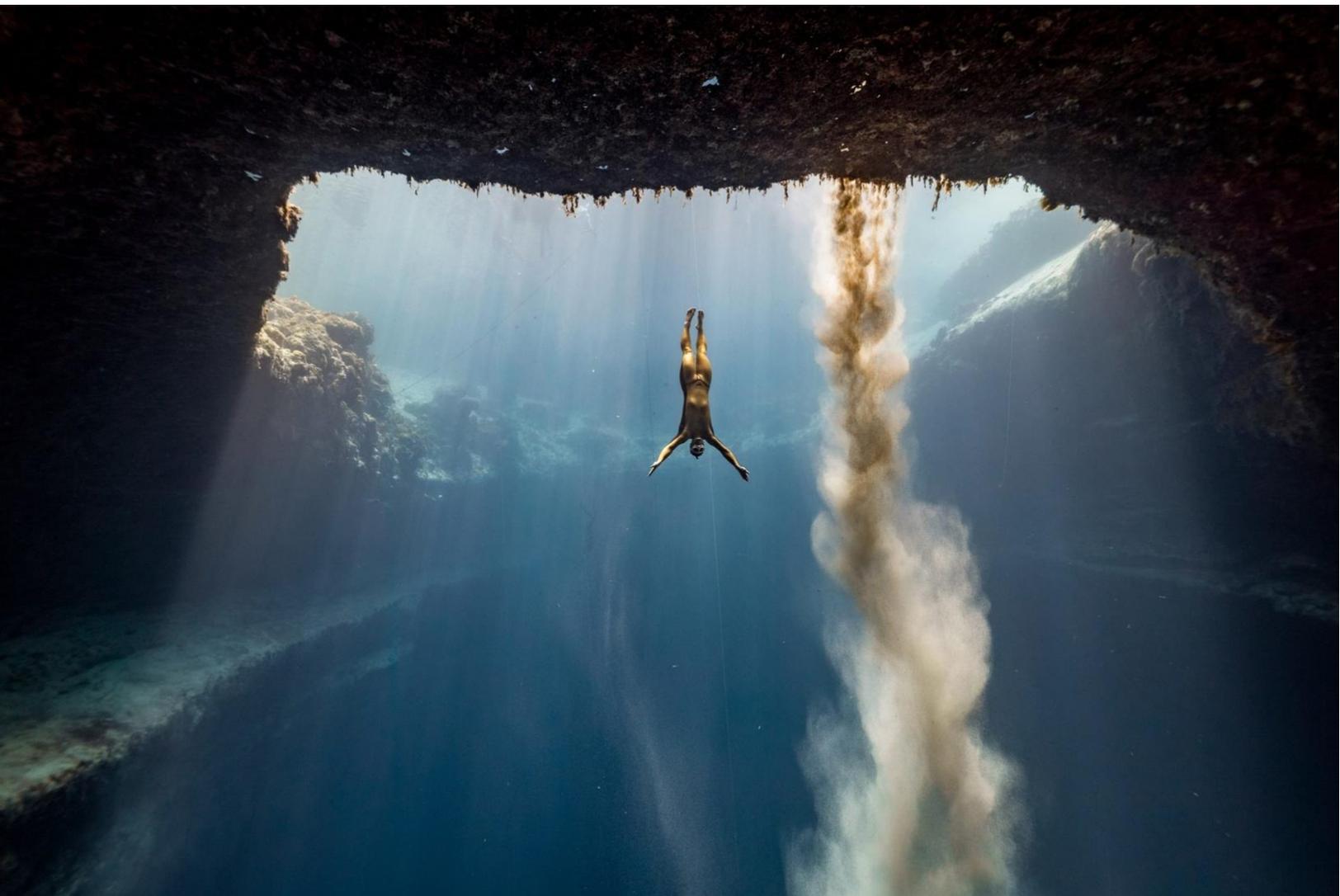


# “Flow”

by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi



EXCERPTS BY OLEKSANDR TERESHCHUK

I didn't waste my life. My life was filled with happiness and purpose. It is not the destiny of mankind to remain unfulfilled. What would really satisfy me is not getting slim or rich but feeling good about my life.

I strive to achieve control over psychic energy and invest it in consciously chosen goals. I then will grow into a more complex being. By stretching my skills, by reaching toward higher challenges, I will become an increasingly extraordinary individual.

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Flow — the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.

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It is crucial for me to learn to transform my job into a flow-producing activity.

The universe was not created to answer my needs. Frustration is deeply woven into the fabric of life. And whenever some of my needs are *temporarily* met, I immediately start wishing for more. This chronic dissatisfaction stands in the way of contentment.

Religions, philosophies, arts, and comforts—help shield me from chaos. They help me believe that I am in control of what is happening and gives me reasons for being

satisfied with my lot. These shields are effective only for a while; after a few centuries, sometimes after only a few decades, religion or belief wears out and no longer provides the spiritual sustenance it once did.

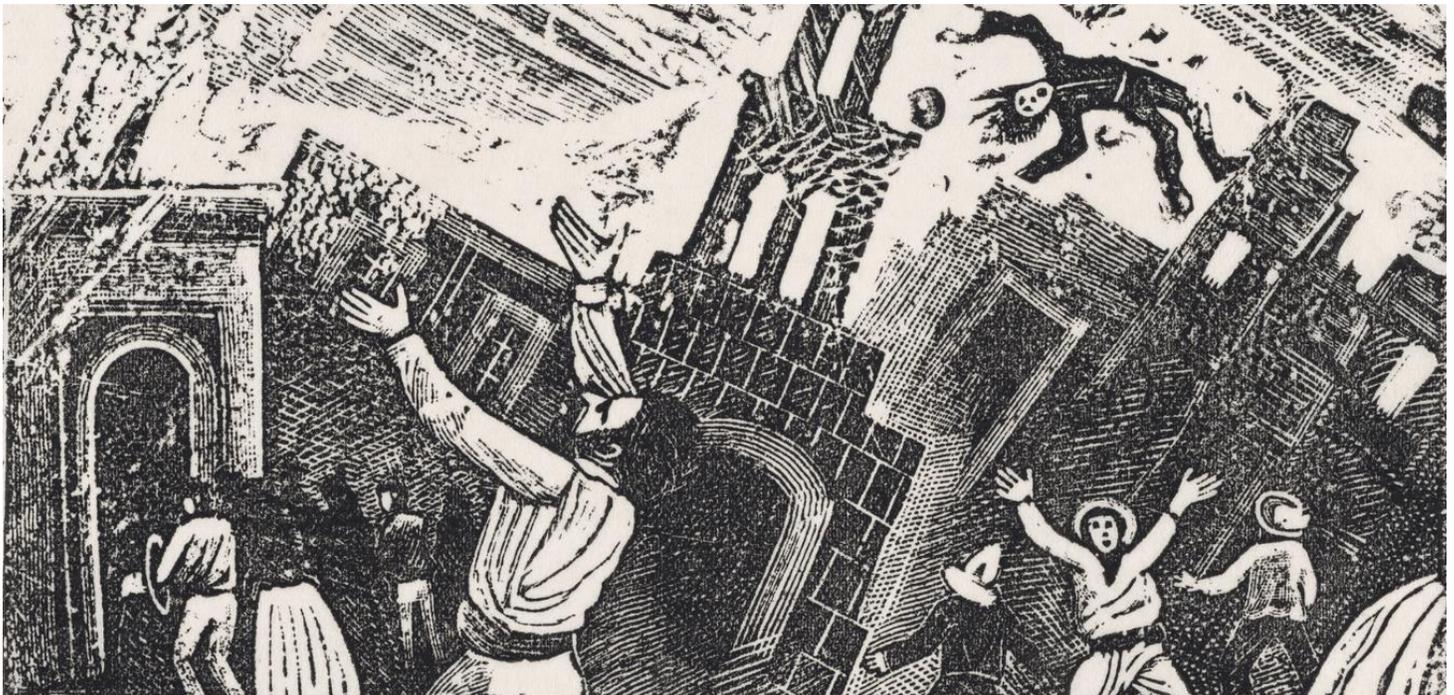
When I try to find happiness on my own, without the support of faith – I seek wealth, power, and sex. Those goals give direction to my strivings. However, I realize that the quality of life cannot be improved this way. Only direct control of the experience, the ability to derive moment-by-moment enjoyment from everything I do, can overcome the obstacles to fulfillment.

How I feel about myself, the joy I get from living, ultimately depend directly on how the mind filters and interprets everyday experiences. For the majority of people on this earth, life goals are simple: to survive, to leave children who will in turn survive, and, if possible, to do so with a certain amount of comfort and dignity. The unwarranted sense of security sooner or later results in a rude awakening.

If I start believing that progress is inevitable and life easy, I may quickly lose courage and determination in the face of the first signs of adversity. I will realize that what I believed in was not entirely true. I will abandon faith in everything else I have learned. Anxiety and apathy arise.

Genuinely happy individuals are rare. 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?

The shields that have worked in the past—the order that religion, patriotism, ethnic traditions, and habits instilled by social classes used to provide—are no longer effective for increasing numbers of people who feel exposed to the harsh winds of chaos.



The lack of inner order manifests itself in the subjective condition that some call ontological anxiety or **existential dread**. Basically, it is a fear of being, a **feeling that there is no meaning to life and that existence is not worth going on with**. Nothing seems to make sense. There no longer seems to be any point to the historical strivings of humankind. We are just forgotten specks drifting in the void. With each passing year, the chaos of the physical universe becomes magnified in the minds of the multitude. As people move through life, passing from the hopeful ignorance of youth into sobering adulthood, they sooner or later face an increasingly nagging question: “Is this all there is?” 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. Like waiters in a restaurant starting to place breakfast settings on the surrounding tables while one is still having dinner, 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?

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.

As this realization slowly sets in, different people react to it differently. Some try to ignore it and renew their efforts to acquire more of the things that were supposed to make life good—bigger cars and homes, more power on the job, a more glamorous lifestyle.

After each success, it becomes clearer that money, power, status, and possessions do not, by themselves, necessarily add one iota to the quality of life.



To overcome the anxieties and depressions of contemporary life, individuals must become independent of the social environment to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments. To achieve such autonomy, **a person has to learn to provide rewards to herself.** She has to **develop the ability to find enjoyment and purpose regardless of external circumstances.** Achieving control over experience requires a drastic change in attitude about 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. Parents teach children that if they learn good habits now, they will be better off as adults. Teachers assure pupils that the boring classes will benefit them later when the students are going to be looking for jobs. The company vice president tells junior employees to have patience and work hard because one of these days they will be promoted to the executive ranks. At the end of the long struggle for advancement, the golden years of retirement beckon. Realize that seeking pleasure is a reflex response built into our genes for the preservation of the species, not for the purpose of our own personal advantage. The pleasure we take in eating is an efficient way to ensure that the body will get the nourishment it needs. The pleasure of sexual intercourse is an equally practical method

for the genes to program the body to reproduce and thereby to ensure the continuity of the genes. When a man is physically attracted to a woman or vice versa, he usually imagines—assuming that he thinks about it at all—that this desire is an expression of his own individual interests, a result of his own intentions. In reality, more often than not his **interest is simply being manipulated by the invisible genetic code, following its own plans.**

The person who cannot resist food or alcohol, or whose mind is constantly focused on sex, is not free to direct his or her psychic energy.



A person who cannot override genetic instructions when necessary is always vulnerable. Instead of deciding how to act in terms of personal goals, he has to surrender to the things that his body has been programmed (or misprogrammed) to do. One must particularly achieve control over instinctual drives to achieve healthy independence of society. For as long as we respond predictably to what feels good and what feels bad, it is easy for others to exploit our preferences for their own ends. A thoroughly socialized person is one who desires only the rewards that others around him have agreed he should long for—rewards often grafted onto genetically programmed desires. He may encounter thousands of potentially fulfilling experiences,

but he fails to notice them because they are not the things he desires. What matters is not what he has now, but what he might obtain if he does as others want him to do. Caught in the treadmill of social controls, that person **keeps reaching for a prize that always dissolves in his hands.**

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.

At certain times in history, cultures have taken it for granted that a person wasn't fully human unless he or she learned to master thoughts and feelings. Among the British upper classes of the Victorian era, people were held responsible for keeping a tight rein on their emotions. Anyone who indulged in self-pity, who let instinct rather than reflection dictate actions, forfeited the right to be accepted as a member of the community.

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Marcus Aurelius wrote:

“If you are pained by external things, it is not they that disturb you, but your own judgment of them. And it is in your power to wipe out that judgment now.”

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Consciousness has developed the ability to override its genetic instructions and to set its own independent course of action.

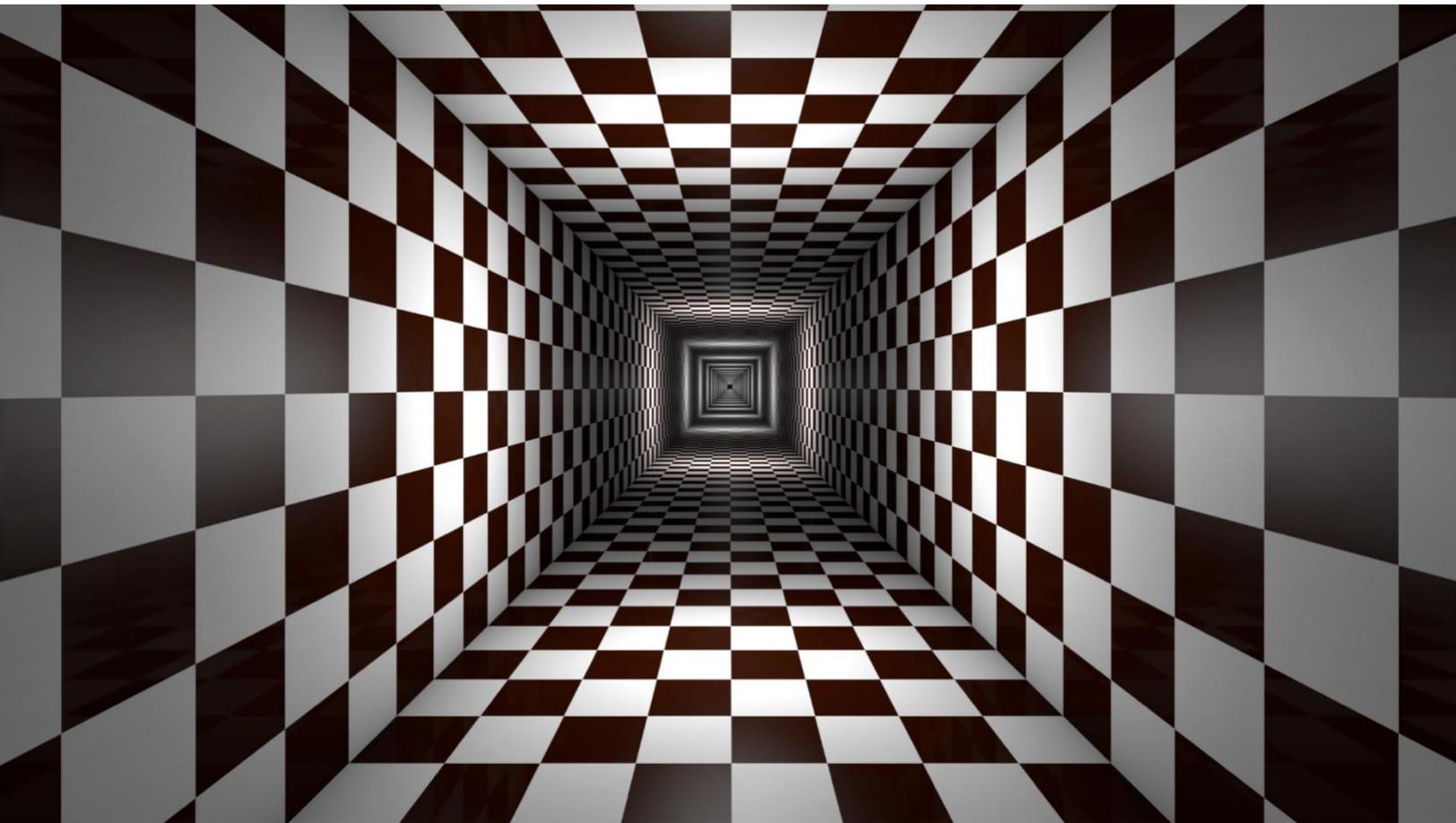
A person can make himself happy, or miserable, regardless of what is actually happening “outside,” just by changing the contents of consciousness. We all know individuals who can transform hopeless situations into challenges to be overcome, just through the force of their personalities. This ability to persevere despite obstacles and setbacks is the quality people most admire in others, and justly so; it is probably the most important trait not only for succeeding in life but for enjoying it as well. The mind has enormous untapped potential that we desperately need to learn how to use.

Most people, however, adopt “sensible” goals based on the needs of their body—to live a long and healthy life, to have sex, to be well-fed and comfortable—or on the desires implanted by the social system—to be good, to work hard, to spend as much as possible, to live up to others’ expectations. But there are enough exceptions in every culture to show that goals are quite flexible. Individuals who depart from the norms—heroes, saints, sages, artists, and poets, as well as madmen and criminals—look for different things in life than most others do.

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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.

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In any case, an individual can experience only so much. Therefore, the information we allow into consciousness becomes extremely important; it is, in fact, what determines the content and the quality of life.

The mark of a person who is in control of consciousness is **the ability to focus attention at will, to be oblivious to distractions, to concentrate for as long as it takes to achieve a goal, and not longer**. And the person who can do this usually enjoys the normal course of everyday life.

European woman who is one of the best-known and powerful women in her country. A scholar of international reputation, she has at the same time built up a thriving business that employs hundreds of people and has been on the cutting edge of its field for a generation. E. travels constantly to political, business, and professional meetings, moving among her several residences around the world. If there is a concert in the town where she is staying, E. will probably be in the audience; at the first free moment, she will be at the museum or library. And while she is in a meeting, her chauffeur, instead of just standing around and waiting, will be expected to visit the local art gallery or museum; for on the way home, his employer will want to discuss what he

thought of its paintings. Not one minute of E.'s life is wasted. Usually, she is writing, solving problems, reading one of the five newspapers or the earmarked sections of books on her daily schedule—or just asking questions, watching curiously what is going on, and planning her next task. Very little of her time is spent on the routine functions of life. Chatting or socializing out of mere politeness is done graciously, but avoided whenever possible. Each day, however, she devotes some time to recharging her mind, by such simple means as standing still for fifteen minutes on the lakeshore, facing the sun with eyes closed. Or she may take her hounds for a walk in the meadows on the hill outside town. E. is so much in control of her attentional processes that she can disconnect her consciousness at will and fall asleep for a refreshing nap whenever she has a moment free.

E.'s life has not been easy. Her family became impoverished after World War I, and she herself lost everything, including her freedom, during World War II. Several decades ago she had a chronic disease her doctors were sure was fatal. But she recovered everything, including her health, by disciplining her attention and refusing to diffuse it on unproductive thoughts or activities. At this point, she radiates a pure glow of energy. And despite past hardships and the intensity of her present life, she seems to relish thoroughly every minute of it.



Attention determines what will or will not appear in consciousness, and because it is also required to make any other mental events—such as remembering, thinking, feeling, and making decisions—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 them. 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.

The outside event appears in consciousness purely as information, without necessarily having a positive or negative value attached to it. It is the self that interprets that raw information in the context of its own interests and determines whether it is harmful or not. Every piece of information we process gets evaluated for its bearing on the self. Does it threaten our goals, does it support them, or is it neutral? News of the fall of the stock market will upset the banker, but it might reinforce the sense of self of the political activist. A new piece of information will either create disorder in consciousness, by getting us all worked up to face the threat, or it will reinforce our goals, thereby freeing up psychic energy.

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. Even the usually boring routines of work will become purposeful and enjoyable.

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“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.”

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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.

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. As the rock climber said, “You look back in awe at the self, at what you’ve done, it just blows your mind.” After each episode of flow, a person becomes more of a unique individual, less predictable, possessed of rarer skills.



The self becomes complex as a result of experiencing flow. Paradoxically, it is when we act freely, for the sake of the action itself rather than for ulterior motives, that we learn to become more than what we were. **When we choose a goal and invest**

**ourselves in it to the limits of our concentration, whatever we do will be enjoyable.** And once we have tasted this joy, we will redouble our efforts to taste it again. This is the way the self grows. Flow is important both because it makes the present instant more enjoyable, and because it builds the self-confidence that allows us to develop skills and make significant contributions to humankind.

There are **TWO MAIN STRATEGIES** we can adopt to improve the quality of life.

1. Try making external conditions match our goals.
2. Change how we experience external conditions to make them fit our goals better.

The reality is that the quality of life does not depend directly on what others think of us or on what we own. The bottom line is, rather, **how we feel about ourselves and about what happens to us.** To improve life one must improve the quality of experience. This is not to say that money, physical fitness, or fame are irrelevant to happiness. They can be genuine blessings, but only if they help to make us feel better. Otherwise, they are at best neutral, at worst obstacles to a rewarding life. Research on happiness and life satisfaction suggest that in general there is a **mild correlation between wealth and well-being.** Instead of worrying about how to make a million dollars or how to win friends and influence people, it seems 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.

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Pleasure is a feeling of contentment that one achieves whenever information in consciousness says that expectations set by biological programs or by social conditioning have been met.

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Pleasure is an important component of the quality of life, but by itself, it does not bring happiness. Sleep, rest, food, and sex provide restorative homeostatic experiences that return consciousness to order after the needs of the body intrude and cause psychic entropy to occur. But they do not produce psychological growth. They do not add complexity to the self. Pleasure helps to maintain order, but by itself cannot create a new order in consciousness.



- First, the experience usually occurs when we confront tasks we have a chance of completing.
- Second, we must be able to concentrate on what we are doing.
- Third and fourth, concentration is usually possible because the task undertaken has clear goals and provides immediate feedback. Fifth, one acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life.
- Sixth, enjoyable experiences allow people to exercise a sense of control over their actions.
- Seventh, concern for the self disappears, yet paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over.
- Finally, the sense of the duration of time is altered; hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours.

The combination of all these elements causes a sense of deep enjoyment that is so rewarding people feel that expending a great deal of energy is worthwhile simply to be able to feel it.

In many ways, competition is a quick way of developing complexity:

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“He who wrestles with us,” wrote Edmund Burke, “strengthens our nerves, and sharpens our skill. Our antagonist is our helper.”

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The challenges of competition can be stimulating and enjoyable. But when beating the opponent takes precedence in the mind over performing as well as possible, 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.

It would be a mistake to assume that only art and leisure can provide optimal experiences. In a healthy culture, productive work and the necessary routines of everyday life are also satisfying.

The reason it is possible to achieve such complete involvement in a flow experience is that **goals are usually clear, and feedback immediately**. The goals of an activity are not always as clear as those of tennis, and the feedback is often more ambiguous than the simple “I am not falling” information processed by the climber. A composer of music, for instance, may know that he wishes to write a song, or a flute concerto, but other than that, his goals are usually quite vague. And how does he know whether the notes he is writing down are “right” or “wrong”? The same situation holds true for the artist painting a picture, and for all activities that are creative or open-ended in nature. But these are all exceptions that prove the rule:

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Unless a person learns to set goals and to recognize and gauge feedback in such activities, she will not enjoy them

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In some creative activities, where goals are not clearly set in advance, a person must develop a strong personal sense of what she intends to do. The artist might not have a visual image of what the finished painting should look like, but when the picture

has progressed to a certain point, she should know whether this is what she wanted to achieve or not. And a painter who enjoys painting must have internalized criteria for “good” or “bad” so that after each brush stroke she can say: “Yes, this works; no, this doesn’t.” Without such internal guidelines, it is impossible to experience flow. The reason why flow improves the quality of experience: the clearly structured demands of the activity impose order, and exclude the interference of disorder in consciousness. One of the most frequently mentioned dimensions of the flow experience is that, while it lasts, one is able to forget all the unpleasant aspects of life. This feature of flow is an important by-product of the fact that enjoyable activities **require a complete focusing of attention** on the task at hand—thus leaving no room in the mind for irrelevant information.



Enjoyable activities that produce flow have a potentially negative aspect: while they are capable of improving the quality of existence by creating order in the mind, they can become **addictive**, at which point the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life.

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## Preoccupation with the self-consumes psychic energy because in everyday life we often feel threatened.

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Whenever we are threatened, we need to bring the image we have of ourselves back into awareness, so we can find out whether or not the threat is serious, and how we should meet it. For instance, if walking down the street I notice some people turning back and looking at me with grins on their faces, the normal thing to do is immediately to start worrying: *“Is there something wrong? Do I look funny? Is it the way I walk, or is my face smudged?”* Hundreds of times every day we are reminded of the vulnerability of our self. And every time this happens psychic energy is lost trying to restore order to consciousness.

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.

The term “**autotelic**” derives from two Greek words, auto meaning self, and telos meaning goal.

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## Autotelic activity is a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward.

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Playing the stock market in order to make money is not an autotelic experience, but playing it in order to prove one’s skill at foretelling future trends is—even though the outcome in terms of dollars and cents is exactly the same. Teaching children in order to turn them into good citizens is not autotelic, whereas teaching them because one enjoys interacting with children is. What transpires in the two situations is ostensibly identical; what differs is that when the experience is autotelic, the person is paying attention to the activity for its own sake; when it is not, the attention is focused on its consequences.

Many people feel that the time they spend at work is essentially wasted—they are alienated from it, and the psychic energy invested in the job does nothing to strengthen their self. For quite a few people free time is also wasted. Leisure provides a relaxing respite from work, but it generally consists of passively absorbing information, without using any skills or exploring new opportunities for action. As a result, life passes in a sequence of boring and anxious experiences over which a person has little control.

We should reconcile ourselves to the fact that nothing in the world is entirely positive; every power can be misused. Love may lead to cruelty, science can create destruction, technology unchecked produces pollution. An optimal experience is a form of energy, and energy can be used either to help or to destroy. Fire warms or burns; atomic energy can generate electricity or it can obliterate the world. Energy is power, but power is only a means. The goals to which it is applied can make life either richer or more painful.



Much of what we label juvenile delinquency—car theft, vandalism, rowdy behaviour 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.

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.

In our studies, we found that every flow activity, whether it involved competition, chance, or any other dimension of experience, had this in common: **It provided a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality.**

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Desire to enjoy ourselves again pushes us to stretch our skills, or to discover new opportunities for using them.

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Cultures are defensive constructions against chaos, designed to reduce the impact of randomness on experience. They are adaptive responses, just as feathers are for birds and fur is for mammals. Cultures prescribe norms, evolving goals, build beliefs that help us tackle the challenges of existence. In so doing they must rule out many alternative goals and beliefs, and thereby limit possibilities, but this channelling of attention to a limited set of goals and means is what allows effortless action within self-created boundaries.



Although average Americans have plenty of free time and ample access to leisure activities, they do not, as a result, experience flow often. In fact, working people achieve the flow experience—deep concentration, high and balanced challenges and skills, a sense of control and satisfaction—about four times as often on their jobs, proportionately, as they do when they are watching television. One of the most ironic paradoxes of our time is this great availability of leisure that somehow fails to be translated into enjoyment.

Opportunities alone, are not enough. We also need the skills to make use of them. And we need to know how to control consciousness—a skill that most people have not learned to cultivate. Surrounded by an astounding panoply of recreational gadgets and leisure choices, most of us go on being bored and vaguely frustrated.

What is important to realize is that attentional disorders not only interfere with learning but effectively rule out the possibility of experiencing flow as well. When a person cannot control psychic energy, neither learning nor true enjoyment is possible. A less drastic obstacle to experiencing flow is excessive self-consciousness. A person who is constantly worried about how others will perceive her, who is afraid of creating the wrong impression, or of doing something inappropriate, is also condemned to permanent exclusion from enjoyment. So are people who are excessively self-centred. A self-centred individual is usually not self-conscious, but instead evaluates every bit of

information only in terms of how it relates to her desires. For such a person everything is valueless in itself. A flower is not worth a second look unless it can be used; a man or a woman who cannot advance one's interests does not deserve further attention. When the now extinct natives of the Caribbean islands were put to work in the plantations of the conquering Spaniards, their lives became so painful and meaningless that they lost interest in survival, and eventually ceased reproducing. It is probable that many cultures disappeared in a similar fashion because they were no longer able to provide the experience of enjoyment.



Just as some people are born with better muscular coordination, it is possible that there are individuals with a genetic advantage in controlling consciousness. Such people might be less prone to suffer from attentional disorders, and they may experience flow more easily.

The traits that mark an autotelic personality are most clearly revealed by people who seem to enjoy situations that ordinary persons would find unbearable. 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 experiences.** 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 their precarious situation and closely monitored progress through the feedback they received. Whenever they reached their goal, they upped the ante, setting increasingly complex challenges for themselves.

When adversity threatens to paralyze us, we need to reassert control by finding a new direction in which to invest psychic energy, a direction that lies outside the reach of external forces.

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When every aspiration is frustrated, a person still must seek a meaningful goal around which to organize the self. Then, even though that person is objectively a slave, subjectively he is free.

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When we are unhappy, depressed, or bored we have an easy remedy at hand: to use the body for all it is worth. Most people nowadays are aware of the importance of health and physical fitness. But the almost unlimited potential for enjoyment that the body offers often remains unexploited. 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.

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“A man possesses nothing certainly save a brief loan of his own body,” wrote J. B. Cabell, “yet the body of man is capable of much curious pleasure.”

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The purest form of athletics, and sports in general, is to break through the limitations of what the body can accomplish.

Not so long ago, it was acceptable to be an amateur poet or essayist. Nowadays if one does not make some money (however pitifully little) out of writing, it's considered to be a waste of time. It is taken as downright shameful for a man past twenty to indulge in versification unless he receives a check to show for it. And unless one has great talent, it is indeed useless to write hoping to achieve great profit or fame. But it is never a waste to write for intrinsic reasons. First of all, writing gives the mind a disciplined means of expression. It 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. 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.

Thomas Carlyle was not far wrong when he wrote:

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“Blessed is he who has found his work; let him ask no other blessedness.”

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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.

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.

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 channelled 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.

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.

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.

The quality of life depends on two factors: how we experience work, and our relations with other people.

There is no question that we are social animals; only in the company of other people do we feel complete.



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.

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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.

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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. 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.

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.

Subjective experience is not just one of the dimensions of life, it is life itself. Material conditions are secondary: they only affect us indirectly, by way of experience. 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.



Everyone has his own fate, and we should be like the lion in the proverb.

The lion, when he runs after a pack of gazelles, can only catch them one at a time. I try to be like that, and not like Westerners who go crazy working even though they cannot eat more than their daily bread.... If I am to live twenty more years, I will try to live enjoying each moment, instead of killing myself to get more.... If I am to live like a free man who does not depend on anyone, I can afford to go slowly; if I don't earn anything today, it does not matter. It means that this happens to be my fate. The next day I may earn 100 million—or get a terminal illness. Like Jesus Christ said, what does it benefit to a man if he gains the entire world, but loses himself? I have tried first to conquer myself; I don't care if I lose the world.

I set out on this journey like a baby bird hatching from its egg; ever since I have been walking in freedom. Every man should get to know himself and experience life in all its forms. I could have gone on sleeping soundly in my bed and found work in my town because a job was ready for me, but I decided to sleep with the poor because one must suffer to become a man.

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One does not get to be a man by getting married, by having sex: to be a man means to be responsible, to know when it is time to speak, to know what has to be said, to know when one must stay silent.

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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.”

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.

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 defences and vegetates in a state of continuous suspicion.



... 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.**

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... 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.

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People who know how to transform stress into an 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.

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, like the painter who watches with care what is happening on the canvas, 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.

A person who is healthy, rich, strong, and powerful has no greater odds of being in control of his consciousness than one who is sickly, poor, weak, and oppressed. The difference between someone who enjoys life and someone who is overwhelmed by it is a product of a combination of such external factors and the way a person has come to interpret them—that is, whether he sees challenges as threats or as opportunities for action.

The “autotelic self” is one that easily translates potential threats into enjoyable challenges, and therefore maintains its inner harmony. A person who is never bored, seldom anxious, involved with what goes on, and in flow most of the time may be said to have an autotelic self. The term literally means “**a self that has self-contained goals,**” and it reflects the idea that such an individual has relatively few goals that do not originate from within the self. For most people, goals are shaped directly by biological needs and social conventions, and therefore their origin is outside the self. For an autotelic person, the primary goals emerge from experience evaluated in consciousness, and therefore from the self proper. The autotelic self transforms the potentially entropic experience into flow.



## 1. Setting goals.

To be able to experience flow, one must have clear goals to strive for. A person with an autotelic self learns to make choices—ranging from lifelong commitments, such as getting married and settling on a vocation, to trivial decisions like what to do on the weekend or how to spend the time waiting in the dentist’s office—without much fuss and the minimum of panic. One of the basic differences between a person with an autotelic self and one without it is that the former knows that it is she who has chosen whatever goal she is pursuing. What she does is not random, nor is it the result of outside determining forces. This fact results in two seemingly opposite outcomes. On the one hand, having a feeling of ownership of her decisions, the person is more strongly dedicated to her goals. Her actions are reliable and internally controlled. On the other hand, knowing them to be her own, she can more easily modify her goals

whenever the reasons for preserving them no longer make sense. In that respect, an autotelic person's behaviour is both more consistent and more flexible.

## 2. Becoming immersed in the activity

After choosing a system of action, a person with an autotelic personality grows deeply involved with whatever he is doing. Whether flying a plane nonstop around the world or washing dishes after dinner, he invests attention in the task at hand. To do so successfully one must learn to balance the opportunities for action with the skills one possesses. Some people begin with unrealistic expectations, such as trying to save the world or to become millionaires before the age of twenty. When their hopes are dashed, most become despondent, and their selves wither from the loss of psychic energy expended in fruitless attempts. At the other extreme, many people stagnate because they do not trust their own potential. They choose the safety of trivial goals and arrest the growth of complexity at the lowest level available. To achieve involvement with an action system, one must find a relatively close mesh between the demands of the environment and one's capacity to act. Involvement is greatly facilitated by the ability to concentrate. People who suffer from attentional disorders, who cannot keep their minds from wandering, always feel left out of the flow of life. They are at the mercy of whatever stray stimulus happens to flash by. To be distracted against one's will is the surest sign that one is not in control. Yet it is amazing how little effort most people make to improve control of their attention. If reading a book seems too difficult, instead of sharpening concentration we tend to set it aside and instead turn on the television, which not only requires minimal attention, but in fact tends to diffuse what little it commands with choppy editing, commercial interruptions, and generally inane content.

## 3. Paying attention to what is happening

Concentration leads to involvement, which can only be maintained by constant inputs of attention. Having an autotelic self implies the ability to sustain involvement. Self-consciousness, which is the most common source of distraction, is not a problem for such a person. Instead of worrying about how he is doing, how he looks from the outside, he is wholeheartedly committed to his goals. In some cases it is the depth of involvement that pushes self-consciousness out of awareness, while sometimes it is the other way around: it is the very lack of self-consciousness that makes deep involvement possible.

## 4. Learning to enjoy the immediate experience

The outcome of having an autotelic self—of learning to set goals, to develop skills, to be sensitive to feedback, to know how to concentrate and get involved—is that one can enjoy life even when objective circumstances are brutish and nasty. Being in

control of the mind means that literally, anything that happens can be a source of joy. Feeling a breeze on a hot day, seeing a cloud reflected on the glass facade of a high-rise, working on a business deal, watching a child play with a puppy, drinking a glass of water can all be felt as deeply satisfying experiences that enrich one's life. To achieve this control, however, requires determination and discipline. Optimal experience is not the result of a hedonistic, lotus-eating approach to life. A relaxed, laissez-faire attitude is not a sufficient defence against chaos. As we have seen from the very beginning of this book, to be able to transform random events into the flow, one must develop skills that stretch capacities, that make one become more than what one is. Flow drives individuals to creativity and outstanding achievement. The necessity to develop increasingly refined skills to sustain enjoyment is what lies behind the evolution of culture. It motivates both individuals and cultures to change into more complex entities. The rewards of creating order in experience provide the energy that propels evolution—they pave the way for those dimly imagined descendants of ours, more complex and wise than we are, who will soon take our place. But to change all existence into a flow experience, it is not sufficient to learn merely how to control moment-by-moment states of consciousness. It is also necessary to have an overall context of goals for the events of everyday life to make sense. If a person moves from one flow activity to another without a connecting order, it will be difficult at the end of one's life to look back on the years past and find meaning in what has happened. To create harmony in whatever one does is the last task that the flow theory presents to those who wish to attain optimal experience; it is a task that involves transforming the entirety of life into a single flow activity, with unified goals that provide a constant purpose.



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 is outside the realm of ordinary life.

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, the 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.

From the point of view of an individual, it does not matter what the ultimate goal is—provided it is compelling enough to order a lifetime’s worth of psychic energy. The challenge might involve the desire to have the best beer bottle collection in the neighbourhood, the resolution to find a cure for cancer, or simply the biological imperative to have children who will survive and prosper.

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**As long as it provides clear objectives, clear rules for action, and a way to concentrate and become involved, any goal can serve to give meaning to a person’s life.**

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I have come to be quite well acquainted with several Muslim professionals—electronics engineers, pilots, businessmen, and teachers, mostly from Saudi Arabia and from the other Gulf states. In talking to them, I was struck by how relaxed most of them seemed to be even under strong pressure. “There is nothing to it,” those I asked about it told me, in different words, but with the same message: “We don’t get upset because we believe that our life is in God’s hands, and whatever He decides will be fine with us.” Such implicit faith used to be widespread in our culture as well, but it is not easy to find it now. Many of us have to discover a goal that will give meaning to life on our own, without the help of traditional faith.

Creating meaning involves bringing order to the contents of the mind by integrating one’s actions into a unified flow experience. The three senses of the word meaning noted above make it clearer how this is accomplished. 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 a purpose. To experience flow one must set goals for one’s actions: to win a game, to make friends with a person, to accomplish something in a certain way. 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.

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What counts is not so much whether a person actually achieves what she has set out to do; rather, it matters whether the effort has been expended to reach the goal, instead of being diffused or wasted.

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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. **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.



There is a consensus among psychologists who study such subjects that **people develop their concept of who they are, and of what they want to achieve in life, according to a sequence of steps.**

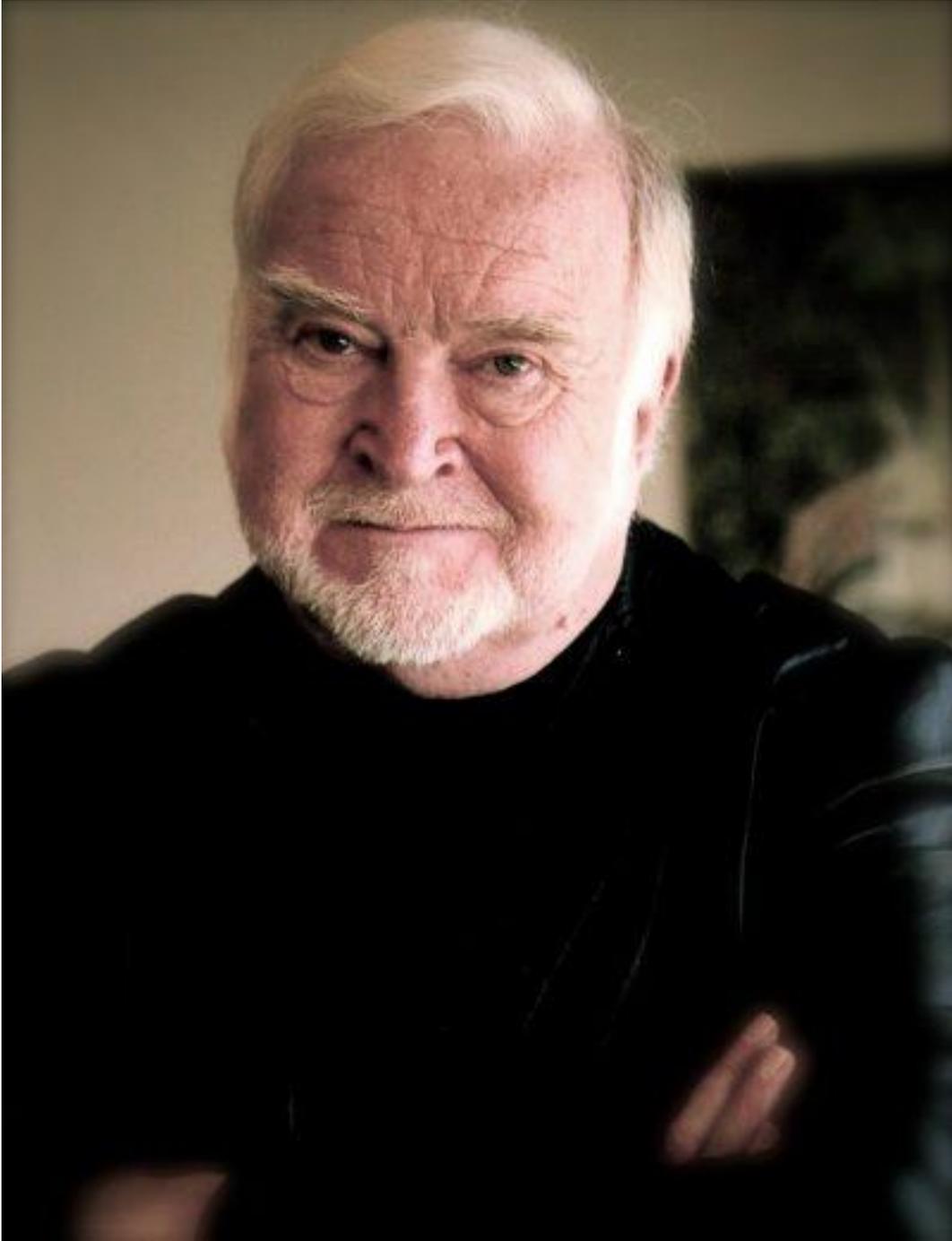
1. Each man or woman starts with a need to preserve the self, to keep the body and its basic goals from disintegrating. At this point the meaning of life is simple; it is tantamount to survival, comfort, and pleasure.
2. When the safety of the physical self is no longer in doubt, the person may expand the horizon of his or her meaning system to embrace the values of a community—the family, the neighbourhood, a religious or ethnic group. This step leads to the greater complexity of the self, even though it usually implies conformity to conventional norms and standards.
3. The next step in development involves reflective individualism. The person again turns inward, finding new grounds for authority and value within the self. He or she is no longer blindly conforming but develops an autonomous conscience. At this point, the main goal in life becomes the desire for growth, improvement, the actualization of potential.
4. The fourth step, which builds on all the previous ones, is a final turning away from the self, back toward integration with other people and with universal values. In this final stage the extremely individualized person—like Siddhartha letting the river take control of his boat—**willingly merges his interests with those of a larger whole.**

First, psychic energy is invested in the needs of the organism, and psychic order is equivalent to pleasure. When this 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. 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. From this point on the person is ready for the last shift in the redirection of energy: having discovered what one can and, more importantly, 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 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.** Goals can lead to 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.

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.** And then we shall directly feel a sense of order in the warp and the woof of life that fits every thought and emotion into a harmonious whole. When there are too many demands, options, challenges we become anxious; when too few, we get bored.



**Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**