

## THE BIG IDEAS

### Flow

The what and why.

4% + 4% + 4% + 4% + ...  
= The how.

### M<sup>3</sup> + (M - M)

Mastery sans misery.

### Fear As a Compass

Reverse your desire.

### 3:59.4

Impossible? Not anymore.

### Impossible

= Challenge we've been waiting for.



# The Rise of Superman

Decoding the Science of Ultimate Human Performance

BY STEVEN KOTLER · NEW HARVEST © 2014 · 256 PAGES

“In other words, despite the unusual ‘them’ [extreme sports athletes] at the center of this story, this book is really about us: you and me. Who doesn’t want to know how to be their best when it matters most? To be more creative, more contented, more consumed? To soar and not to sink? As the deeds of these athletes proves, if we can master flow, there are no limits to what we can accomplish. We are our own revolution. ...

The great civil rights leader Howard Thurman once said, ‘Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive. Because what the world needs most is more people who have come alive.’

The data is clear. Flow is the very thing that makes us come alive. It is the mystery. It is the point. Put another way: There are difficult and dangerous activities described in the pages of this book. The people involved are highly trained professionals. So please, please, please try them at home. Because what the world needs most is Superman.

It is time to rise.”

~ Steven Kotler from *The Rise of Superman*

## [The Rise of Superman](#).

What an awesome title and vision.

[Steven Kotler](#) is one of the world’s leading authorities on the science of flow. He created [The Flow Genome Project](#) that is all about “decoding the peak performance state of flow.”

(<—Awesome.) He’s also an extraordinary (and award-winning) writer.

In this great book (get a copy [here](#)), Steven tells us the riveting stories of extreme athletes and how, over the last several decades, they’ve consistently done the impossible by systematically unlocking and tapping into the power of flow.

Most importantly, he tells us how WE can do the same.

And, as per the intro quote above, implores us to do so.

The world needs you to rise.

Here are some of my favorite Big Ideas on how we can go about doing that!

## THE WHAT AND WHY OF FLOW

“Flow is an optimal state of consciousness, a peak state where we both feel our best and perform our best. It is a transformation available to anyone, anywhere, provided that certain initial conditions are met. Everyone from assembly-line workers in Detroit to jazz musicians in Algeria to software designers in Mumbai rely on flow to drive performance and accelerate innovation.

*“This is our mystery: a rare and radical state of consciousness where the impossible becomes possible. This is the secret that action and adventure athletes have plumbed, the real reason ultimate performance has advanced nearly exponentially these past few decades. The zone, quite literally, is the shortest path toward superman. And this is a book about that zone.”*

~ Steven Kotler

"Where is the lightning to lick you with its tongue? Where is the frenzy with which you should be inoculated? Behold, I teach you the overman: He is this lightning; he is this frenzy."

~ Friedrich Nietzsche

"Flow is an optimal state of consciousness, a peak state where we feel both our best and perform our best. It is a transformation available to anyone, anywhere, provided that certain initial considerations are met."

~ Steven Kotler

And it's quite a driver. 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. World leaders have sung the praises of flow. Fortune 500 CEOs have built corporate philosophies around the state. From a quality-of-life perspective, psychologists have found that people who have the most flow in their lives are the happiest people on earth."

Flow.

It's the optimal state of human experience.

Everyone has access to it.

Those who access it the most frequently are the happiest among us.

Therefore, we'd be wise to learn how to structure our lives such that we can experience the flow state more often.

Of course, that's what the book is all about.

Kotler starts by walking us through the evolution of the scientific understanding of flow—from William James to his student Walter Bradford Cannon (who discovered the "fight-or-flight response") to Abraham Maslow (who described the "peak experiences" of the self-actualizers he studied) to [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) (who coined the word "flow" and wrote a book by the same name).

Here's how the father of flow, Csikszentmihalyi puts it: "The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This happens when psychic energy—or attention—is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable of their lives. A person who has achieved control over psychic energy and has invested it in consciously chosen goals cannot help but grow into a more complex being. By stretching skills, by reaching toward higher challenges, such a person becomes an increasingly extraordinary individual."

Check out the book + the Note on *Flow* for more.

For now, let's take a deeper look at the flow channel and how to ride that wave.

**4% + 4% + 4% + 4% + 4% + 4% + 4% + 4% + 4% + 4% + 4% + ...**

"And that brings us back to the 'challenge/skill ratio,' the last of our internal flow triggers, and arguably the most important. The idea behind this trigger is that attention is most engaged (i.e., in the now) when there's a very specific relationship between the difficulty of a task and our ability to perform that task. If the challenge is too great, fear swamps the system. If the challenge is too easy, we stop paying attention. Flow appears near the emotional midpoint between boredom and anxiety, in what scientists call the *flow channel*—the spot where the task is hard enough to make us stretch but not hard enough to make us snap.

How hard is that? Answers vary, but the general thinking is about 4 percent. That's it. That's the sweet spot. If you want to trigger flow, the challenge should be 4 percent greater than the skills. In technical terms, the sweet spot is the end result of what's known as the Yerkes-Dodson law—the fact that increased stress leads to increased performance up to a certain intensity, beyond which performance levels off or declines. In real-world terms, it's not much at all."

The *flow channel*.

It's that magic sweet spot where our challenges stretch our abilities enough to get us focused but not so much that we snap.

*"This means that flow doesn't just provide a joyful, self-directed path toward mastery—it literally shortens the path."*

~ Steven Kotler

We come back to this idea a lot. [Daniel Coyle](#) also describes it as a "sweet spot" in [The Little Book of Talent](#). See those Notes and check out this Micro Class where we unpack his Idea. [George Mumford](#) describes the same process as "incremental improvement" in [The Mindful Athlete](#).

How far is that sweet spot outside of our comfort zone of current abilities?

4%!!

Not 40% Not 400%. Not 4,000% and *definitely* not 40,000%

Remember: STRETCH but don't snap.

It doesn't take a whole lot to get the optimal dynamic tension stretch going.

But you know what it DOES take?

Consistency. Over an extended period of time.

As Kotler advises: "This is why the challenge/skills ratio is so important. If we want to achieve the kinds of accelerated performance we're seeing in action and adventure sports, then it's 4 percent plus 4 percent plus 4 percent, day after day, week after week, months into years into careers. This is the road to real magic. Follow this path long enough, and not only does impossible becomes possible, it becomes what's next—like eating breakfast, like another day at the office."

Sounds a lot like [The Compound Effect](#) + [The Slight Edge](#), eh?

It's time to get our 4% on.

P.S. Here's another quick little [Micro Class on Anxiety + Boredom + Flow](#) to learn more about the basic parameters of entering the flow state—where our skills match our challenges!

P.P.S. The same rules apply to improving every aspect of our lives, of course. Check out this Micro Class on the power of 5% for more goodness.

## M<sup>3</sup> + MASTERY SANS THE MISERY

"When doing what we most love transforms us into the best possible version of ourselves and that version hints at even greater future possibilities, the urge to explore those possibilities becomes feverish compulsion. Intrinsic motivation goes through the roof. Thus flow becomes an alternative path to mastery, sans the misery. Forget 10,000 hours of delayed gratification. Flow junkies turn instant gratification into their North Star—putting in far more hours of 'practice time' by gleefully harnessing their hedonic impulse. In other words, when it comes to time perspectives, flow allows Presents to achieve Futures' results.

On the other side of the coin, flow pulls Futures into the present. Because there is no time in the zone, there's no way to worry about tomorrow. There's literally no tomorrow. Flow provides Futures with blissful release from all that endless striving. And since the release is autotelic, Futures who find themselves in flow don't need to find new ways to slog toward the future. The state is intrinsically motivating so the slogging takes care of itself."

First, let's do a quick review of how Kotler challenges the various paths to mastery.

He tells us that the traditional hypotheses explaining the various paths to mastery can be summed up with three M's: Mothers + Musicians + Marshmallows.

In (very) short: The Mothers theory tells us mastery is all about a nurturing environment. The Musicians theory tells us we need to put in 10,000 hours of (structured, deliberate) practice. The Marshmallows theory tells us we need to delay gratification in pursuit of long-term goodness.

Kotler tells us his extreme sport athletes flip these approaches on their heads (pun not intended but I'll take it!) as they take an alternative path to their Superhuman abilities—FLOW.

*"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.'"*

~ Steven Kotler

He tells us a lot of these athletes came from broken families (sorry, Mothers), didn't have the "deliberate, well-structured practice" at the heart of the 10,000 hour hypothesis (sorry, Musicians) and were the kind of impulsive kids who DEFINITELY would have snatched the one marshmallow rather than wait for two (sorry, Marshmallow).

What they *did* have was an absolute LOVE of what they did and the feeling they got when they entered flow. So, that's the first half of his alternative theory for superman awesomeness. Now for the second.

Kotler tells us that there are Presents and there are Futures.

Presents are the people who WANT.IT.ALL.NOW! They're the ones who snatch the one marshmallow for immediate gratification. They tend to impulsiveness and have a tough time with long-range planning, etc.

Futures, on the other hand, are the people who are able to delay gratification. They can make long-range plans and commit to mastery but because they're so future-oriented they can tend to burn themselves out by not enjoying the process.

Enter the power of Flow to help BOTH of those orientations: "After three decades of research, **Zimbardo found that the healthiest, happiest, highest performers blend the best of both worlds. The optimal time perspective combines the energy, joy, and openness of Presents, with the strength, fortitude, and long-term vision of the Futures.**"

Reminds me of [Seneca](#) who tells us: "How much better to pursue a straight course and eventually reach that destination where the things that are pleasant and the things that are honorable finally become, for you, the same."

In other words, how AWESOME is it when what you MOST love to do is what is the best for you?! Answer: Very awesome.

Kotler features an extraordinary athlete named Shane McConkey—one of the best extreme sports athletes ever—throughout the book. Here's how he brings the wisdom home: "But once the sensation seekers jump on the flow path, they don't need to delay gratification to achieve success—gratification becomes their path to success. 'I'm doing what I love,' explains McConkey. 'And if you're doing what you want to do all the time, then you're happy. You're not going to work everyday wishing you were doing something else. I get up and go to work everyday and I'm stoked. That does not suck.'"

Precisely.

Sounds like writer James Michener who told us: "The master in the art of living makes little distinction between his work and his play, his labor and his leisure, his mind and his body, his information and his recreation, his love and his religion. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence at whatever he does, leaving others to decide whether he is working or playing. To him, he's always doing both."

## FEAR AS A COMPASS

"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.'"

*"This is who we are and how we're wired. Flow is our birthright. But what do we do with that knowledge? As always, that part is up to us."*

~ Steven Kotler

When we really get the fact that our growth exists on the other side of our comfort zone (but not that far outside of it!!), we make a very important shift.

As Kotler tells us: "Risk moves from a threat to be avoided to a challenge to be risen toward."

In fact, "Fear becomes a compass—literally pointing people in the direction they need to go next."

<— Wow.

Reminds me of *The Tools* by [Phil Stutz and Barry Michels](#). The first tool? Essentially: How to make fear our compass.

They tell us that we need to REVERSE our desire to avoid pain and see that pain/fear/etc. as a sign we have a chance to grow. When we clearly see that our infinite potential exists on THE OTHER SIDE of that pain, we look down at our compass and say, "BRING IT ON!!!"

Check out this Micro Class on it. And check out my interviews with [Phil and Barry](#). They both go off on how powerful this tool has been in their lives and I'm constantly chanting, "Bring it on!" to myself every time I feel a little wave of doubt/fear/whatever.

Huge.

#fearisourcompass

### 3:59.4

"It was Englishman Roger Bannister who—*nine* years after Hagg's near miss—finally broke this mental barrier and accomplished the feat, running 3:59.4 on May 6, 1954. And when we retell this tale, this is typically the point where the story stops, yet two months after Bannister did the impossible and lived, Australian John Landy did it again and then some—cutting 1.4 seconds off Bannister's time with 3:58 flat. Within five years two other runners had bested that mark; within ten years the first sub-four mile had been run by a high school student. Think about this for a moment. Thirty years of collective running effort were required to do the impossible, yet it took less than a month for someone to better the feat? And less than a decade for five more people—including a teenager—to do the same?"

How did this happen? The physical challenge didn't get any easier. Running a sub-four-minute mile still required running a sub-four-minute mile. All that changed was thought, assumption, the mental frame around the challenge."

As most of us know by now, at one point the 4 minute mile was supposed to be physically IMPOSSIBLE. As in: You might die if you tried to do it.

No one could break the barrier.

Until someone did.

Then the impossible suddenly became very possible and a number of people broke the mark shortly thereafter—including a high school runner!

The moral of this story for us?

We need to reframe what we're telling ourselves is impossible.

Remember our *Spartan Up!* story about the guy who rode his bike from Sweden to Mt. Everest, hopped off, summited (without oxygen or a sherpa, btw), and then rode back to Sweden? That was really really hard. But not impossible.)

What story do you need to reframe?

## IMPOSSIBLE = THE KIND OF CHALLENGE WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR

"To put it another way: flow is the telephone booth where Clark Kent changes clothes, the place from where Superman emerges."

~ Steven Kotler

"To put this in different terms, the most interesting thing about an acorn is that it contains the 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 of 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 the athletes in this book—perhaps impossible is just the kind of challenge we've been waiting for. What the world needs is Superman. What the world needs most is us."

Acorns and oak trees. Humans and our potential.

Reminds me of [Rollo May](#)'s wisdom in *The Courage to Create* (see Notes) where he tells us: "The acorn becomes an oak by means of automatic growth; no commitment is necessary. The kitten similarly becomes a cat on the basis of instinct. Nature and being are identical in creatures like them. But a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices and his or her commitment to them. People attain worth and dignity by the multitude of decisions they make from day by day. These decisions require courage."

Then there's [James Allen](#)'s poetic wisdom in *As a Man Thinketh* (see Notes): "The greatest achievement was at first and for a time a dream. The oak sleeps in the acorn; the bird waits in the egg; and in the highest vision of the soul a waking angel stirs. Dreams are the seedlings of realities."

What's your dream? What's your impossible? The world needs you (and me and all of us) to rise. Here's to the 4% improvements as we stretch our wings and fly.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
Chief Philosopher

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### About the Author of "The Rise of Superman"

STEVEN KOTLER



Steven Kotler is a bestselling author and an award-winning journalist. His books include the non-fiction works: *Abundance*, *A Small, Furry Prayer*, and *West of Jesus*, and the novel *The Angle Quickest for Flight*. His articles have appeared in over 60 publications, including: *New York Times Magazine*, *Wired*, *Discover*, *Popular Science*, *Outside*, *GQ*, and *National Geographic*. Connect: [riseofsuperman.com](http://riseofsuperman.com).

### About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](http://brianjohnson.me).