

2014

Climbing Into Flow: That State in which Nothing Else Seems to Matter

Christopher Johnson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Christopher (2014) "Climbing Into Flow: That State in which Nothing Else Seems to Matter," *Appalachia*: Vol. 65: No. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/appalachia/vol65/iss2/5>

This In This Issue is brought to you for free and open access by Dartmouth Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Appalachia by an authorized editor of Dartmouth Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dartmouthdigitalcommons@groups.dartmouth.edu.

Climbing Into Flow

That state in which nothing else seems to matter

Christopher Johnson



FINALLY! AFTER A TOUGH TWO-HOUR CLIMB, WE REACHED THE top of the mesa. My wife, Barbara. Our friend Paul. Me. We hauled ourselves up that last steep incline with collective grunts and gazed upon the azure sky that canopied over us like a painting. We were at Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument, which spread like a desert diamond across the American Indian Pueblo de Cochiti, some 40 miles south of Santa Fe, New Mexico. We'd climbed past hundreds of hoodoos—tall columns of rock that are commonly found in deserts of the American Southwest. Most hoodoos are thin, but the ones at Tent Rocks were bulky. The cylindrical bases of most of the formations tapered like cones into spear-like points, but some of these wide-bodied hoodoos were capped by globes of stone. In the distance to the south shimmered the Sandia Mountains, which border Albuquerque. The mountains floated in the distance like jagged-edge knives that the gods had thrust up through the crust of the earth.

We followed the trail that traversed the top of the mesa. The mesa gradually narrowed. On either side, its edges abruptly met the sky, falling away in appallingly sheer cliffs. I have always been a bit prone to vertigo, and as we made our way toward the tiny tip of the mesa, and the mesa grew thinner and thinner, my uneasiness quantum-leaped into fear.

I hesitantly approached the tip, which was separated from the main part of the mesa by a ditch about two feet deep. Paul must have had mountain goat in his blood. Without a moment's thought, he hopped across the ditch and seated himself on a boulder that perched about two feet from the edge of the cliff. Barbara was a couple hundred yards behind me, taking her time to drink in the extraordinary vista. I was on my own. As I approached the ditch, I saw how skimpy the tip of the mesa was and came to a standstill. My psyche felt as if it had been shattered like broken eggs. "Damn!" I muttered. I was disgusted with myself.

My feelings at this point were a complete reversal from what I had been experiencing through most of the climb up to the mesa on the Canyon Trail. I had been totally into the hike, captivated by the weird-shaped rock formations and energized by the sharp desert air. As often happens when I hike or climb, I had stepped outside myself and left my ego behind in the parked car at the trailhead. My senses were sharpened, and I had observed closely the tent-rock formations that gave the national monument its name.

The mesa at Kasha-Katuwe Tent Rocks National Monument affords an extraordinary view of the distinctive tent rocks and of the magnificent desert landscape of New Mexico.

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON

They were mostly gray, but I saw that the gray was intermixed with bands of pink and beige. The tapered cylinders ranged in height from a few feet to 100 feet. They had been formed 6 million to 7 million years ago by volcanic eruptions that left deposits of ash, pumice, and tuff reaching depths of 1,000 feet and more. Those intense volcanic explosions had shot off tiny fragments of rock that embedded themselves in the hoodoos.

During the climb, I'd noted to myself how completely I was into the flow of the experience. Time seemed to be suspended, and I felt extraordinarily alive to the natural world around me. It was no accident that I used the word *flow* to describe what I was feeling. Twice I had read the book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008), a bestseller that Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (me-HIGH chick-sent-me-HIGH-ee) wrote while he was a professor of psychology at the University of Chicago. (He is currently the distinguished professor of psychology at the School of Behavioral and Organizational Science at Claremont Graduate University.)

I'd read *Flow* when it had first been published and had responded immediately to Csikszentmihalyi's central theory, which he summarized as that "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." He posited that if we experience flow more regularly, we can improve our performances in all of our endeavors, from education to business, and if we learn to immerse ourselves in what we are doing and stay focused on the moment, we will feel a greater sense of fulfillment. The book also explained the origins of the concept of flow and the research and data that supported Csikszentmihalyi's ideas.

I investigated the concept of flow further and came to realize that mountain climbing had been absolutely central to Csikszentmihalyi's formative experience—and the evolution of his ideas. He drew extensively on his own climbing experiences to illustrate his ideas, and described many climbers' experiences in reporting his research. The connections between climbing and the concept of flow grew out of the unusual circumstances of Csikszentmihalyi's life. He was born in 1934 in Fiume, Italy, where his father served as a member of Hungary's diplomatic mission to Italy. From an early age, climbing was an important part of his life. In a reflective voice during an interview in June 2013, he told me, "When I was a teenager, I climbed in the Dolomites, and this was when I first started to think about the experiences of climbing and how involved I became when I was climbing. One time when

I was in the Dolomites, by serendipity, I was introduced to 50 men who sang in a choir located in a town in the Alps. They met every week to sing Tyrolean songs, and several of them had tears in their eyes as they sang. I knew 80 percent of the songs from my childhood. The songs were beautiful.”

During his adolescence, though, World War II completely disrupted Csikszentmihalyi’s life. For a time, he was held in a prison camp in Italy. Tragically, a number of friends and relatives in Budapest lost their lives. One brother perished in battle, while another was imprisoned in a Russian labor camp. Csikszentmihalyi said, “During World War II, I learned to play chess. Everything in Europe was collapsing, falling apart. When I learned to play, I realized that I became completely absorbed and forgot about being killed. This was one of the experiences that made me think about the ideas that later became the flow experience.”

After the war, his family settled back in Italy. Csikszentmihalyi’s experiences had inspired an interest in psychology, particularly in the psychological attributes that had allowed some people to emerge from their harrowing war experiences with positive, life-affirming attitudes intact. Csikszentmihalyi had heard a lecture by the influential Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung and was deeply impressed. Csikszentmihalyi told *Omni* magazine, “As a child in the war I’d seen something drastically wrong with how adults—the grownups I trusted—organized their thinking. I was trying to find a better system to order my life. Jung seemed to be trying to cope with some of the more positive aspects of human experience.”

The quest to define these positive psychological attributes became his life’s mission. Because Europe offered few academic programs in psychology, Csikszentmihalyi migrated to the United States, where psychology was better established as a discipline. He arrived in Chicago in 1956 with only \$1.25 to his name, but he had one thing of great value—admission to the University of Chicago to study psychology.

At the same time, climbing remained central to his quest. He joined the Chicago Mountaineering Club, which had been established in 1940 to encourage mountaineering in the Midwest. Members forayed frequently to Devil’s Lake, Wisconsin, which featured some of the best rock climbing in the region. The Grand Tetons in Wyoming were another favorite destination. Csikszentmihalyi believed that climbers’ subjective experiences and mindsets perfectly captured what happens during the flow experience.

Csikszentmihalyi completed his PhD in psychology in 1965 and then taught at Lake Forest College, north of Chicago. He said, “I was teaching

a seminar, and we were discussing play. Not children's play, but adult's play. What do adults do? Why does play create that feeling of freedom and control? There were fifteen students. We talked about experiences, including climbing and chess. Students talked about hockey, soccer, and driving cars. We put cards up all around the classroom to create categories of these experiences. These became the basic elements of the flow experience—what made experiences enjoyable. I wrote papers about these experiences, and the University of Chicago invited me to return and join the faculty.”

When he came back to Chicago in 1969, he drew upon the resources of the university to conduct surveys in which people described the experiences and mental states that they associated with the flow experience. When people described themselves as happily absorbed, what were they doing? What were the characteristics of those activities? What were the mindsets of the people engaged in them?

In a succession of articles and books, he and his colleagues began to answer those questions. At first, he described highly absorbing experiences as “autotelic.” *Auto-* means “self,” and *telos* comes from the Greek word for “goal.” The word refers to any experience that a person pursues as an end in itself rather than for a utilitarian purpose, such as money. Later he would use the word *flow* to capture the essence of total absorption.

In 1975, he published *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play* (Jossey-Bass), coauthored with several colleagues who had collaborated with him. In the chapter, “Deep Play and the Flow Experience in Rock Climbing,” he and colleague John MacAloon reported on rock climbers’ descriptions of their mental states while climbing. The authors identified two aspects of climbing that drew outdoor adventurers: It presented physical dangers and it had no utilitarian rewards. People pursued climbing for rewards inherent in the activity, such as meeting physical challenges and enjoying extraordinary vistas.

To delve deeper into the intrinsic rewards of climbing, Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues interviewed 30 rock climbers in Chicago; Boulder, Colorado; and Devil’s Lake. Five were women, 25 were men, and they ranged in age from 19 to 53, with a mean age of 28. The subjects averaged eight years of mountaineering experience and five years of technical rock climbing experience. After Csikszentmihalyi and MacAloon conducted the interviews, they categorized the responses, which provided a foundation for defining six characteristics of the flow experience.

Fundamental to the experiences described by the 30 climbers was that climbing provided *ample chances and challenges for action*. It presented an endless variety of challenges based on route, length, geological formations, weather, and the protection offered by the route. Equally important, the climbers themselves chose the degree of challenge they wanted to face. Because of the nature of the challenges, they found themselves totally absorbed physically and mentally.

In addition, the climbing experience was, in the words of Csikszentmihalyi and MacAloon, *narrow, simplified, and internally coherent*, freeing participants to focus completely on the activity without distraction or interruption. As one climber explained, "When I start on a climb, it's as if my memory input had been cut off." The researchers quoted another climber, Doug Robinson, who described how, after an arduous climb, he returned to the ordinary world as "a fresh experience, strange and wonderful in its newness."

Climbers reported that the activity augmented their feelings of *competence and control*. They perceived obstacles not as dangers but as challenges to be overcome and problems to be solved. Accordingly, they selected their routes and level of risk to further develop their skills. As one climber said, "You get so absorbed in the climb that you no longer think about danger."

In addition to developing confidence in their competence, climbers reported that climbing provided *instant and unambiguous feedback*. They realized that although they might be in control of their decisions, they were not in control of the weather, geological formations, or other obstacles that nature inevitably presented. The key, experienced climbers contended, was to stay attuned to their own feelings of fear or being out of control. Skilled climbers used these feelings as a feedback loop to make adjustments, such as modifying their routes or turning back. Csikszentmihalyi characterized such perceptions as "deep-flow channels," which took climbers to a deeper level and restabilized their feelings of control.

The fifth characteristic that Csikszentmihalyi and MacAloon identified was the *transcendence of ego*. Climbers found that as they became lost in the moment, awareness and action merged, and they entered a state of "egolessness." They concentrated so intensely on the physical challenges that, according to one climber, "You don't feel like you're doing something as a conscious being; you're adapting to the rock and becoming part of it." Another climber said, "It's the Zen feeling, like meditation or concentration."

Integral to the climber's sense of flow was an *altered sense of time*. While absorbed in the ascent, the climber lost the sense of time completely. Csikszentmihalyi and MacAloon quoted climber Robinson, who wrote, "It is said to be only a moment, yet by virtue of total absorption, he is lost in it, and the winds of eternity blow through it."

Although most of the climbers reported the six characteristics of the flow activity just described, nine of the thirty climbers talked about something deeper: *feelings of transcendence*—of entering a different level of consciousness. One climber reported, "The only religious feelings I ever have stem from the mountains. I feel that the mountains make one aware of spiritual matters." Csikszentmihalyi said that this state of consciousness was another aspect of the deep-flow experience, during which some climbers attained an extraordinary depth of concentration and transformation.

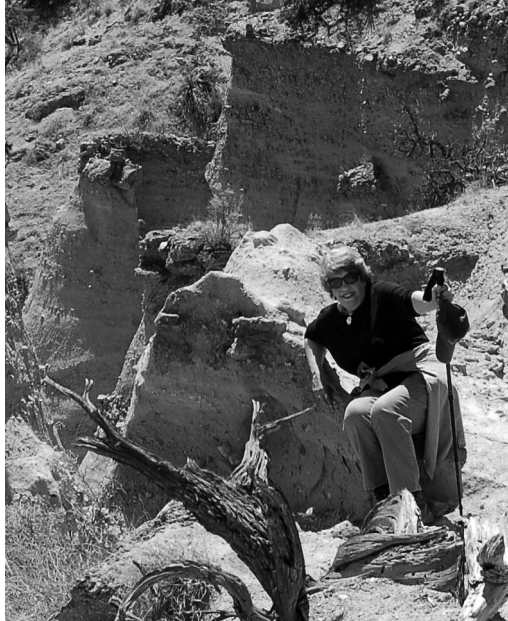
Csikszentmihalyi's research, combined with the unusual struggles of his childhood and adolescence, led him to perceive a larger social significance to the flow experience. When he arrived in the United States in 1956, he observed widespread boredom, alienation, and anomie among young people. To counteract these societal tendencies, he thought it was imperative to engage young people in activities that would engender the sense of flow—activities such as climbing, dancing, hiking, and chess. Naturally, the specific activities that engender flow will vary from person to person. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the important thing was to expose young people to a "variety of graduated activities" that would invite their total immersion and absorption.

WHEN I READ *FLOW AND BEYOND BOREDOM AND ANXIETY*, Csikszentmihalyi's research and the originality of his ideas resonated deeply with me. I'm not a technical climber, but even so, I realized that I'd experienced the feeling of flow numerous times as I had hiked and climbed in the White Mountains, the Rockies, and other mountain ranges. I recalled perceiving my surroundings with an intensity that I did not enjoy in my day-do-day existence. These experiences presented a pathway for me to deal more effectively with negative moments in my life. While I was in my 40s, for example, I was a supervising editor for a publishing house in Boston, and I worried constantly about budgets and schedules. While experiencing flow during hiking and climbing expeditions throughout New England, such negative feelings seemed to fade away like unnecessary gear that I had jettisoned, and I found that my problem-solving abilities improved dramatically.

As we had started climbing on this day at Tent Rocks, I had quickly fallen into the flow of the hike. The national monument ranges in altitude from 5,570 feet to 6,760 feet, and we wended our way through slot canyons and climbed up boulder steps toward the distant mesa that topped Tent Rocks. I had, in a strange way, lost consciousness, and at the same time, my senses of sight, hearing, and touch had sharpened. It was as if my boot-laden feet had integrated with the rock and the sand—as if I were part of this landscape, and the barrier between subject and object had been sundered. I stood only feet away from three of the tent rocks. They were thick around like pillars that narrowed gradually to the capstones that topped them off, coming as near to perfect symmetry as was possible.

The landscape was interspersed with yucca plants and cholla cactus, which painted splashes of green on top of the omnipresent desert brown. Barbara and I stopped to catch our breath, and we bent over to observe several of the yucca plants that lined the trail. In the flow of the hike, I had the patience and clarity of vision to observe more closely. The yucca spread its leaves like swords, showing the sharp tips and strong fiber that American Indians had used for rope, clothing, and other uses. It was a simple and beautiful plant that had adapted magnificently to its desert environment.

We continued on and encountered students from the University of New Mexico who were studying rock fragments in the large boulders to learn more about how volcanic eruptions had shaped this beautiful place. They all were examining the layers of rock and the tiny obsidian fragments embedded in the vertical sides of the canyon. Each student had a little patch of canyon wall to examine. In their notebooks, they were drawing sketches showing the layers of rocks and the tiny fragments of obsidian. The students appeared to be focused with every ounce of their consciousness on their observations. They had achieved flow.



Barbara Johnson rests between rock formations at Tent Rocks. The formations resulted from volcanic eruptions that shook the region between 6 million and 7 million years ago.

CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON

We reached the top of the mesa, completing a glorious climb. But as I progressed along the top of the narrowing mesa and saw the empty blue of the sky draw closer to me on either side, the feeling of flow disintegrated into anxiety caused by my vertigo. By the time I reached that ditch that separated me from the final little patch of mesa, I was in the throes of fear.

I knew that I needed to summon back the feeling of flow to make my way to the tip of the mesa. As I stood there in my hiking boots, I suddenly had an impulse. I closed my eyes and listened as closely and alertly as I possibly could, trying to step outside my ego. Gradually, I was absorbed by the subtle sounds: the hiss of the dry desert air as it scuttled along the mesa, the distant shouts of children as they clambered along the trail atop the mesa, the subtle stir of manzanita bushes as the wind swept through the leaves and sang a melancholy ode. Then I felt the wind, dry and incessant, against every inch of my skin, and it blew strongly enough to stir the tiny hairs on my forearm and wrist.

The wind brought back that feeling of flow, of being immersed in the moment, and I opened my eyes and slowly moved forward, carefully planting one foot into the ditch and grasping a boulder that lay within reach. Not looking at the empty blue sky that surrounded me, I cautiously pulled myself across the ditch and onto the tip of the mesa and then tiptoed slowly to where Paul was sitting. I seated myself next to him. By now, Barbara was behind me. I had not revealed my fears to her. And there we sat, drinking much-needed water from our canteens, and I felt like a hawk perched on a cliff, ready to take off and soar above the earth. I was immersed in the feeling of flow.

Evening was approaching, and the three of us clambered down through the dark-and-light slot canyons, picking our way among the unevenly spaced boulders and passing the column-shaped tent rocks. For me, the gulf between subject and object was obliterated. The feeling was almost mystical—a feeling of acute aliveness. I felt as though I had lost consciousness of my ego as a separate self. We passed those extraordinary tent rocks that were thousands of years old, and they stood stark and defiant against the sky. The feeling of flow had brought the promise of renewal: of new energies; of new confidence; of the unity of thought, feeling, and senses; of complete integration; of absorbing for one brief moment the fantastic beauty of the earth.

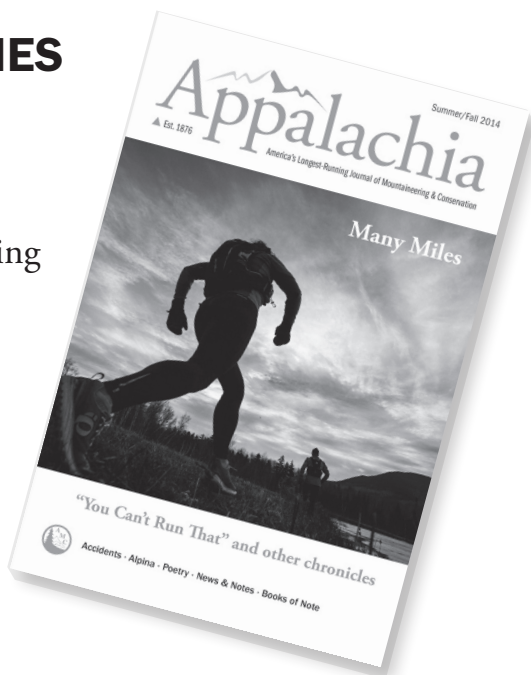
CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON is the coauthor, with David Govatski, of *Forests for the People* (Island Press, 2013), which includes reporting they did for *Appalachia*. Johnson writes often about the history of the Eastern mountains. He lives in Evanston, Illinois. Visit him at www.chrisjohnsonwrite.com.

"I started reading Appalachia for the accident reports, but I kept reading for the great features."—Mohamed Ellozy, subscriber

SUPPORT THE STORIES YOU LOVE!

Start or renew your *Appalachia* subscription today, and keep reading America's longest-running journal of mountaineering and conservation.

Visit outdoors.org/appalachia for a special offer: 36% off the journal's cover price. That's three years of *Appalachia* (6 issues) for only \$42. Or choose a one-year subscription (2 issues) for \$18—18% off the cover price.



Inside every issue, you'll find:

- inspired writing on mountain exploration, adventurers, ecology, and conservation
- up-to-date news and notes on international expeditions
- analysis of recent Northeastern mountaineering accidents
- book reviews, poetry, and much more

Subscribe today at outdoors.org/appalachia or call 800-372-1758.