

Stealing Fire for Peak Performance

by Andy Gorman

There is a movement happening in the shadows of humanity. Globally, people everywhere are turning toward altered states of consciousness to unlock boosted focus and creativity in their daily lives. This is not strictly a modern concept, however. Throughout history, there have been stories of rebels harnessing the power of these altered states to achieve greatness, and later paying the consequence of their actions at the hands of the powers that be. Prometheus, the titan of Greek Mythology who stole fire from the gods to give to the mortals, is at the center of this idea. Prometheus was punished by Zeus for his rebellion, and this cycle has continued on.

The plot of the Prometheus myth is the namesake of *Stealing Fire* by Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal, an enlightening book that outlines the history of altered states and shows that a new ending to the cycle of “Prometheans” is not only possible but likely to happen. Kotler and Wheal are professionals who study the relationship between altered states and peak performance, and it is their belief that “we are witnessing a groundswell, a growing movement to storm heaven and steal fire.”

The Greeks called this flow state *ecstasis*, the act of “stepping beyond oneself.” It’s sometimes described as being in the zone. The authors say that “in *ecstasis*, the conscious mind takes a break, and the subconscious mind takes over.” In these altered states, humans are able to do extraordinary things: Navy SEALs can instantly spot hostiles in a room full of civilians, monks can meditate into a painless state, and Google engineers can solve complex problems quickly. What’s really happening is a shift in brain chemistry, the activation of multiple systems that increase focus, creativity, and cooperation. No matter the method used to achieve *ecstasis*, the chemistry is the same.

Flow states can be reached through various means, from meditation to music to mind-altering drugs. On their journeys, Kotler and Wheal “met military officers going on monthlong meditation retreats, Wall Street traders zapping their brains with electrodes, trial lawyers stacking off-prescription pharmaceuticals, famous tech founders visiting transformational festivals, and teams of engineers microdosing with psychedelics.” Navy SEALs have an entire tech lab dedicated to training what they call “the switch.” CEOs like Vegas’ own Tony Hsieh of Zappos,

founder of the Downtown Project, attend the Burning Man Festival in Northern Nevada in hopes of reaching this “feeling of unity,” a mindset that Hsieh has embedded deep into the culture of his company.

With modern advances, reaching a flow state has never been easier. Professionals agree that even “brief moments spent outside ourselves produce a positive impact.” The authors of *Stealing Fire* say that the ecstatic movement is spreading rapidly through various fields, and that there are multiple ways for anyone to harness the power of ecstasis:

Meditation

A new generation of positive psychologists has been “repackaging meditation” mindfulness, stripping away the spiritual/mystical aspects. Increases in workplace productivity have outpaced the cost of providing mindfulness training. We don't need to become monks to reap the benefits. Psychologists at the University of North Carolina discovered that “even four days of meditation produced significant improvement in attention, memory, vigilance, creativity, and cognitive flexibility.”

Exercise

Once a countercultural pastime, yoga has become one of the most popular indoor activities. Studies have shown its ability to do everything from “improve cognitive function to decrease blood pressure.” Similar exercises like tai chi and qigong also have the ability to transform your mind-state.

Technology and Drugs

Kotler and Wheal have also found upward trends in the fields of technology and pharmacology when it comes to non-ordinary states. Wearable tech and brain-imaging devices are becoming increasingly accessible. Data from these devices allows us to “shortcut our way not only to better health, but to deeper self-awareness.” Likewise, with the use of marijuana now recreationally and medically legal in more states than not, including Nevada, “mind-altering drugs are more popular than at any other time in history.” The economy of the ecstatic state is growing, and this is good news for consumers.

All of this is to say that we are in the midst of a new rebellion, very similar to the free-thinking revolutions that have risen and have been shut down repeatedly throughout history. But this time, it's different. The odds are now in favor of the harbingers of unleashed thought and ability, rather than the holders of the keys.

The message presented by Kotler and Wheel is a hopeful one: "We no longer have to rely on someone stealing fire for us. Finally, we can kindle that flame ourselves."