

Flow with Soul

An interview with **Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**
by Elizabeth Debold



Introduction

Creativity—his own, others', and that of life itself—has been the entry point into evolution for Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced "chick-sent-me-high-ee"). Truly an international renaissance man, born in Hungary, a graduate of the classical gymnasium "Torquato Tasso" in Rome, and an artist, Csikszentmihalyi earned his Ph.D. in psychology in 1965 from the University of Chicago, where he would eventually teach. Yet the bounds of psychology could contain neither his creativity nor his desire to find a greater order: "Somehow I always gravitated to the people in various disciplines—whether it's psychology, sociology, anthropology—who saw a certain unity in their field, who were not what later became known as postmodern reductionists," he explained, speaking on the telephone from his office at the Claremont Graduate University. Influenced by Carl Jung and reading widely in religion, Csikszentmihalyi found himself intrigued by "people who kind of stepped back and tried to say, 'What is it that's going on in this messy and confusing pattern of human behavior over time?' And I was influenced greatly, for instance, by Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit who developed this notion of evolution." Even his current position as a professor at Claremont's Drucker School of Management is a new evolutionary turn in a life lived with passion and curiosity.

Csikszentmihalyi is most well known for his bestselling 1990 book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. He defined and explored the concept of "flow"—as in "in the flow"—as our experience of optimal fulfillment and engagement. Flow, whether in creative arts, athletic competition, engaging work, or spiritual practice, is a deep and uniquely human motivation to excel, exceed, and triumph over limitation. Csikszentmihalyi describes his life's work as the effort "to study what makes people truly happy." The emphasis here is on the word "truly"—because to him, happiness is not simply flow nor an emotional state nor even the experience of pleasure. The happiness he points to involves the continual challenge to go beyond oneself as part of something greater than one's own self-interest.

What compelled us to speak to Dr. Csikszentmihalyi was his constantly evolving understanding of individual human development in the context of evolution. Ever the empiricist, he has systematically explored what it means to bring the laws of material evolution into both human and cultural development. In his books *The Evolving Self* and *Finding Flow*, he develops a moral and ethical perspective on flow as a force of evolution. Integrating the concept of flow with a contemporary understanding of ancient wisdom teachings, he offers a new paradigm for human living rooted in his recognition that human beings now have the unique opportunity—and obligation—to become conscious participants in evolution. In the following interview, Dr. Csikszentmihalyi invites us to join in creating an evolutionary psychology founded in a deeper understanding of human motivation and an attention to our inescapable interconnectedness.

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Interview

WIE: *In your books *The Evolving Self and Finding Flow*, you speak about evolution, particularly about human evolution. Could you define what you mean by "evolution"?*

MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI: At the most abstract level, what I mean by "evolution" is the increasing complexity of matter, which results in increasing possibility for consciousness. Here I'm differing from the view of [French Jesuit paleontologist] Teilhard de Chardin. He thought that rocks had a consciousness appropriate to their own material organization. I don't know whether they do or not, but his view was that whenever there is matter organized in some system, there is a commensurate level of consciousness, which reaches its apogee in the human nervous system being as it is the most intricate system, where you can code and store information of all different kinds. Smells, sights, inner feelings, and thoughts can all get stored because there is enough space, and the units are connected so that you can begin to draw parallels and see similarities and develop cause-and-effect relationships and so forth.

So you have this system that is very complexly organized, very intricately differentiated, and very integrated. Those are the two dimensions of complexity that you always see in evolution: differentiation and integration. Differentiation allows you to use different parts, for instance, different cells in your brain, different neurons to store information. And at the same time, these differentiated cells are connected to each other, or integrated, so that they can talk to each other, so to speak. Okay? They can exchange information. This is one way to talk about evolution: the process by which matter becomes more complex, allowing for more complex consciousness.

Then, of course, we see the results of humans becoming conscious begin to extend outside the body. And that's where we begin to see the evolution of culture, where we are able to store information not just in the brain but also in cave paintings and buildings, and then books and computers, etcetera. That begins to enlarge the amount of information about the universe that we can, in principle, deal with.

But I don't think the direction of evolution is laid down in any sense. We, having become aware of what is going on, have to decide for ourselves to what end this information should be directed and where it should be going. And I think that from the abstract level, the signposts for those decisions are again differentiation and integration. You want a future where people are free to develop whatever unique blueprints they carry in their genes, and you want that freedom to blossom as much as possible, but at the same time, you want each person to see that they are part of something much greater. That's where the integration comes in—it starts with feeling that you belong to a family, to an ethnic group, to a church and to a nation. But unless you realize that you're also part of all the living systems and the planet—that there is something beyond all of this that we can sense—unless you're part of that, then evolution would not be very successful, as far as I can tell.

WIE: *What kinds of things catalyze evolution?*

MC: That's a good question. In the past, of course, there have been random changes like asteroids hitting the earth, which killed off a certain type of species and then allowed another one to take over. There's also an explanation that would say that it's really entropy that runs evolution, in the sense that all species try to get as much out of the ecosystem as they can, with the least amount of effort. And that would fit with the second law of thermodynamics [that all systems tend to disorder over time]. If there

was no entropy, in other words, if things did not tend to decay and dissolve in competition with other forms, then a better form would not necessarily stand out and become widespread. Okay? You could claim, therefore, that it is because this constant competition for survival eliminates the worst forms that better forms are able to be recognized, endorsed, and developed.

For example, here comes someone who, instead of having to run after a deer, can go on a horse. They are expending much less energy getting their deer meat, so the horse becomes suddenly very popular. The Plains Indians in America adopted horses within a relatively short time of when the Spaniards introduced them. They saw how useful they were, how much energy they could save. And the same with rifles. This principle, I think, applies mostly to technological evolution, to the evolution of tools, the evolution of technologies that are adopted because they defeat entropy to a certain extent. They save you energy; that's why you adopt them. And then, if there is any species that can find a way of getting more energy out of the environment than others with less effort, then that is the species that will have an advantage for a certain period. This is probably the most reductionistic view—that evolution would be based on entropy itself.

I believe in Occam's razor* however, I'm not endorsing this view. I'm just saying this is one way that people have explained how evolution is catalyzed.

WIE: *Are there other views that you endorse more?*

MC: Well, I can see entropy as being the original impetus for adopting different things, but I think that when we come to humans, who have this consciousness, then a different set of rules begins to apply. And those are the rules that come out of actually reflecting on experience, reflecting on history, on what happens around humans. And that reflection tells you, "Wait a minute, this is not all we can be, this is not all we can do. There are better ways of doing it." And at that point, you have the possibility of getting beyond what you learned before. A lot of art, literature, religion, and philosophy is born out of this need to go beyond what you were before.

Some people say we have been able to reflect on our own thinking for only about three thousand years. Once that happened, the old rules of evolution began to change. We're no longer subject to the determining influence of the genes as much as we were. We are no longer subject to the determining influence of our social/cultural environment as much as we were before. We are no longer determined by entropy as much as we were before. This is a fairly recent step in evolution. *Very* recent, considering how long it took us to get, let's say, from Lucy [our early Cro Magnon ancestor] to Homer's writing of *The Odyssey*—it was millions of years. Then suddenly, bingo. So this is a very new game. And there are lots of mistakes that we made, that our species is making, but I think it's a tremendous opportunity, too.

WIE: *So this new catalyst for evolution is inherent in humans?*

MC: I think it's inherent in this particular being that has this way of processing information, that has this very complex brain. And so yes, it is inherent in humans. I don't think anybody put it in us. That's how I would differ from, let's say, a religious interpretation where the assumption is that we have been infused with some form of a soul from outside. Whereas I think what we call "soul" is generated by the complexification of our body, essentially our brain.

When you look at the pre-Christian version of "soul," you see that what they meant wasn't so much a soul that was a different substance infused or

injected into the body. It referred to a quality in a person who was able to use surplus energy for the benefit of others, not needing to get it all for himself. I came to the conclusion that "soul" is really our way of thinking about not devoting all of one's psychic energy to maximize oneself in any form, whether it's getting comfortable, rich, famous, or wealthy. Some of that energy is also devoted to somebody else's or something else's well-being, or advantage, or goal. So that kind of thing is "soul" as far as I'm concerned. That's the leading edge of evolution, where you don't need to consume all your energy for your own purposes, but you can devote some of that energy for something that will benefit others, including the planet.

Flow for Evolution

WIE: *In your research, you have explored what you call "flow," or optimal human experience, as having an important relationship to evolution. Could you explain this?*

MC: My hunch is—and, of course, there is no proof of this—that if an organism, a species, learns to find a positive experience in doing something that stretches its ability; in other words, if you enjoy sticking your neck out and trying to operate at your best or even beyond your best, if you're lucky enough to get that combination, then you're more likely to learn new things, to become better at what you're doing, to invent new things, to discover new things. We seem to be a species that has been blessed by this kind of thirst for pushing the envelope. Most other species seem to be very content when their basic needs are taken care of and their homeostatic level has been restored. They have eaten; they can rest now. That's it. But in our nervous system, maybe by chance or at random, an association has been made between pleasure and challenge, or looking for new challenges.

WIE: *So we have a relationship between pleasure and the desire to be challenged further?*

MC: Yes. Like most species, we have developed connections in our nervous system between eating and pleasure and between sex and pleasure. If we didn't have these connections, we probably wouldn't eat as much or reproduce as much. Survival to a certain extent depends on finding pleasure in those things that are necessary for survival. But when you begin to enjoy things that go beyond survival, then there's more of a chance to transform yourself and to evolve. And since the state that I call "flow" depends on increasing skill and increasing challenge, then it leads toward complexification, which means greater differentiation and integration, of the organism.

WIE: *Let's go back to "flow." Could you explain what it is?*

MC: I did my doctoral dissertation, back in the early sixties, on young students at the Chicago Art Institute. One thing that I noticed—and I knew also from my own experience—is that when they started painting, they almost fell into a trance. They didn't seem to notice anything, and they just moved as if they were possessed by something inside themselves. When they finished a painting, they would look at it, and they'd feel good for about five or ten minutes and then they'd put the painting away and not look at it much after that. What became important was the next canvas.

And so, obviously, there is something in the process of getting involved with the painting that is so attractive that it overrides almost everything else, except maybe the need to eat and sleep and go to the bathroom. So I tried to understand what psychologists have written about this kind of thing, this state of complete involvement. And there really wasn't much. So I saw that

this was something about human behavior that psychologists have largely neglected. And when they have studied it, they have essentially interpreted it as a means to an end, without looking at it as a motivation in itself.

In the early seventies, I spoke with chess players, rock climbers, musicians, and inner-city basketball players, asking them to describe their experience when what they were doing was really going well. I really expected quite different stories to emerge. But the interviews seemed in many important ways to focus on the same quality of the experience. For instance, the fact that you were completely immersed in what you were doing, that the concentration was very high, that you knew what you had to do moment by moment, that you had very quick and precise feedback as to how well you were doing, and that you felt that your abilities were stretched but not overwhelmed by the opportunities for action. In other words, the challenges were in balance with the skills. And when those conditions were present, you began to forget all the things that bothered you in everyday life, forget the self as an entity separate from what was going on—you felt you were a part of something greater and you were just moving along with the logic of the activity.

Everyone said that it was like being carried by a current, spontaneous, effortless like a flow. You also forget time and are not afraid of being out of control. You think you can control the situation if you need to. But it's hard because the challenges are hard. It feels effortless and yet it's extremely dependent on concentration and skill. So it's a paradoxical kind of condition where you feel that you are on a nice edge, between anxiety on the one hand and boredom on the other. You're just operating on this fine line where you can barely do what needs to be done.

Since then, colleagues have interviewed by now ten thousand people around the world—women who weave tapestries in the highlands of Borneo, meditating monks in Europe, also Catholic Dominican monks, and so forth. They all said these same things. So "flow" seems to be a phenomenological state that is the same across cultures. What people do to get into that state varies enormously, but the experience itself is described in very similar ways.

WIE: *So do you see flow as a positive force for evolution?*

MC: From the point of view of the individual, it's a very positive experience because it does provide the most memorable, intense enjoyment in life. But, it's not a simple story because there are two dangers with flow in terms of development or evolution. One is that at the individual level it can become addictive to the point that a person becomes increasingly dependent on one set of challenges, and when those challenges are exhausted, the person is left helpless. For instance, one thing that has always struck me is how many of the great chess masters broke down into various forms of neurosis after they beat everybody else in the world and there was nowhere else to go. So that's one danger, at the individual level—that you stunt your development as a person.

At the social level, the danger is that you end up finding flow in challenges that are zero sum, that is, that somebody has to lose for you to win. For instance, war can produce flow if you are on the front line, and everything is clear, everything is focused, and you know exactly what you want to do, and so forth. So many people come back from war to find civilian life very boring and dull compared to their front line experience.

WIE: *So how does flow work to further evolution?*

MC: In a sense, flow is what drives this human need for going beyond what

we have. In creativity or optimal experience, I have found that it is always a struggle, and the struggle has to do with essentially opening yourself up and yet delving deeply into yourself. Here are these two processes—differentiation and integration—which have to go hand in hand for complexity to evolve. So I see flow as a very important dynamic in the evolution of complexity. It gives you the incentive, the motivation, the reward for going beyond what you have. But it does not give you an ethical direction, so I would say it has to be flow with soul.

*Occam's razor: The philosophical and scientific rule stating that the simplest of two or more competing theories or explanations is preferable.

Evolving Complexity

WIE: *You speak about the goal of evolution as greater complexity. Can you say more about what that means?*

MC: Yes. That's a very contested point because some people say, "Wait a minute. Yes, it's true that complexity does increase with time, but then so do a lot of simple things, and maybe in the next turn of the dice it will be cockroaches that will survive, because we will annihilate ourselves," and so forth.

WIE: *Yes, that's the view presented by paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould and others—*

MC: Right. I'll make two points. First, it's certainly not the case that complexity across the board is necessarily increasing because complexity is not like a tide that lifts everything up. But if you take a cross section of life on this earth, let's say every few hundred thousand years, the more recent the slice is, the more you will find some complex animals or organisms there. So you ask: What is the pattern of change over time? Looking at these cross sections, the only thing that you can clearly say is that you find more complex organisms at each cross section. Not that every organism is more complex, not that every organism is always successful, but somehow, over time, you find that this type of complexity is evolving.

But there is a second point that is probably the more important one. Now that we are conscious of evolution, now that we are aware of what the heck is going on, and we know what entropy is like and we know what complexity of consciousness is like, then we naturally have to make a choice. If we had to determine a goal for our evolution, I think that complexity would be the goal that we would endorse. And by virtue of this very fact, complexity would be the goal of evolution.

WIE: *Why do you have faith in complexity as being the way to evolve?*

MC: Because I like Mozart, I like Villard's sketches of Chartres, I like to understand what the scientists are finding out about the world, I like hot and cold running water. I may be wrong, but for whatever reason, through all experience, and through looking at the alternatives, this seems to me a more exciting way to go, more interesting, more satisfying—or maybe not more satisfying, but more enjoyable. I spend four months a year in Montana. We don't have television; we don't have newspapers. It took us three weeks to find out that Princess Diana died. So I'm very aware of the beauty of simplicity, of being able to live with the bare minimum and with none of the excitements of living in the big city, of not being in the swim of

information constantly. But at the same time, I don't think I would ever give up what humanity has accomplished. I just want to make sure that it's going to be improving rather than falling. I mean, there is still brutality going on that is unprecedented, partly because our technology allows what, in the past, would have been just a scuffle among people to become a possibility of destroying thousands and thousands. So all of this is scary, but at the same time, if I had a choice, I don't think I would want to go back to anything less complex.

WIE: *And what kinds of things impede evolution?*

MC: Well, I think the great religions were all pretty good at pointing this out, whether we're talking about the five precepts of Buddhism or the capital sins of Christianity. You find that those are pretty much on target, in the sense that they all have to do with things like greed—whether it's gluttony or envy—with wanting things for yourself, trying to get things for free from others by stealing, robbing, cheating, or depriving others of their opportunity to lead a good life. So all these things psychologically go against the development of the soul or the development of complexity because they reduce the person back to his or her biological needs or the conventions of the culture, and they don't allow growth.

WIE: *In The Evolving Self, you introduce, in a contemporary context, what you called the "veils of Maya" as an impediment to our individual evolution because these "veils" distort our sense of reality. Could you speak about that?*

MC: Well, we all tend to take our experience, the surface experience that's presented to consciousness, as essentially being ultimate reality. There's a good reason for that. I mean, we can't examine every experience we have and ask, "Is this right or wrong? Is this good or bad?" But there has to be a certain ability to distance yourself, for instance, from your needs. If every time you're hungry you have to eat, if every time you feel sexual stimulation you want to act it out, if every time somebody tells you to do something you say, "Yes, sir" without thinking about it, then you live a tremendously restricted life. Suppose you are a Nazi, and you're told to take Jews to camp or to do something else like that—and you say, "Yes, sir" because this is what you're told, and this is reality and you feel you cannot do anything about it. If that's how you live, you'll never break out from these conditions, these programs that genes set up over millions of years, or that the culture sets up for us before we were born, or before we grow up. We are born with certain instructions to act, and then we are told by the culture how to act. And while we have to honor the reality of these things, at the same time, we have to reflect on the implications that carrying out these instructions would have.

There is the Hindu notion of karma, which should also be translated in modern terms, because it's true that everything you do, in a sense, has an impact on everything else. We are part of a system, and if we act in a certain way, it doesn't stop there. It will have an effect both now and through time. It will have an effect. So once you realize both that you're part of a system and that you are all these instructions, then you recognize that you have the responsibility of either endorsing all these instructions or trying to break out from them. And that way, you have to begin to pull away these veils of Maya.

WIE: *You also use the term "transcendence" in your work. What do you mean by that?*

MC: Essentially I think it follows on from your prior question. I think transcendence basically means being able to pull aside these veils and say,

"Okay. These are the conditions under which I am operating. These are my genetic instructions. These are my cultural instructions, programs. Now, what do I do?" When someone comes out and says, "Yes, everything pushes me in these directions, but given that, I try to understand the consequences of my action to the whole system I live in, including animals, plants, water, air, and all that—and given all that, I'm not going to go along with this program. I'm going to try to take a stand," to me that's transcendence, because it goes beyond the determining forces that the person is seemingly controlled by.

The Cutting Edge

WIE: *You seem to imply in what you write that we need to make an evolutionary shift, collectively and as individuals. Could you talk more about that shift?*

MC: Yes. You know, I see parts of it. I can't see the whole thing. I don't know what will be there. I don't like top-down pronouncements like "Everyone should do this" or "Everyone should do that." I think we each should reflect on what we can do individually, what our responsibility may be for our community, for our family, or just for ourselves personally—all the way from personal responsibility to what we can do for the nation or the planet. There are so many levels on which one could make a choice that would either enhance or derail evolution. And so my attempt is just to make people aware that they are responsible—they are at the cutting edge of evolution. We all are at the cutting edge of evolution. By our actions we are going to implement the future. And that is where your responsibility is. And let's forget huge plans—let's each think of ourselves as being an instrument, or not an instrument but, in a sense, almost a pseudopod of evolution. We are the evolution to ourselves.

WIE: *Can you say a little more about what it means to be on the cutting edge of evolution?*

MC: Stretching back to this notion of karma, it means that your actions have repercussions all over. You can act in a way that makes evolution more likely to proceed toward complexity, whether by being nice to your spouse or to your children, by trying to teach people, by being a better worker, by getting people to see that good work is more important than what you get for it. By essentially endorsing complexity—looking for ways to enhance differentiation or uniqueness and to encourage integration or connection with something greater—at each choice point that you encounter in your life, you become evolution. You are then the embodiment of complexity advancing into the future.

WIE: *And all those things that you mentioned—taking responsibility for each other, for our work, for the earth—are very life-affirming. So, does evolution have a purpose?*

MC: Evolution doesn't have a purpose in the human sense, as far as I know. But because we are human, we can give it a purpose. We are now in the position of being responsible for evolution, for life. It's no longer just a mindless universe. I mean, it *is* a mindless universe, which has generated through complexity a mind that now has to decide where we want to go.

So, in that sense, now it has a purpose, it seems to me. It's *our* purpose. And we have to decide what that purpose is. What I'm trying to claim is that complexity, which in the past was what evolution generated—whether intentionally or not—has given us the opportunity to say, "Yes. This is what we want to make happen, this is what we want to become the conscious

agents of."

WIE: *Two leading spiritual thinkers of the mid-twentieth century, Sri Aurobindo, the Indian spiritual master, philosopher, and poet, and Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit paleontologist, spoke about the purpose of evolution from a spiritual perspective. Aurobindo saw evolution's purpose as divine, already "involved" in matter as well as in human consciousness. God is gradually realized or manifested through evolution. He wrote:*

The animal is a living laboratory in which Nature has, it is said, worked out man. Man himself may well be a thinking and living laboratory in whom and with whose conscious cooperation she wills to work out the superman, the god. Or shall we not say, rather, to manifest God? For if evolution is the progressive manifestation by Nature of that which slept or worked in her, involved, it is also the overt realization of that which she secretly is. . . . If it be true that Spirit is involved in Matter and apparent Nature is secret God, then the manifestation of the Divine in himself and the realization of God within and without are the highest and most legitimate aim possible to man upon earth.

MC: Yes. Yes, I think that is essentially very well said. I also like the fact that he seems to be putting most of this in a kind of questioning form—is it not? should it not? Because it's true that there is no reason not to look at things that way. In fact, maybe that is the best way to look at it. I find my own responsibility at the edge of what can be known within the terms of my understanding at the moment. And I can posit that there is a lot more beyond that. But what may be there, and what is likely to be there, is not revealed to me. So I don't see positing that as my task. If I were to do that, I would become a religious seer or a guru or something like that. And that's not what I am. So, I don't do that, even though I think it's probably true.