

William Gurstelle: Take Smart Risks By William Gurstelle ✉09.21.09



Photo: Matt Blum, Illustration: Andrew Zbihlyj



Among our primitive ancestors, those who ventured farthest from their caves in search of better food or who overcame their fear of fire accrued significant advantages over their meeker kin. That's why a lot of us like the idea of living on the edge: It's in our DNA to take risks.

[Hunter S. Thompson](#) called his version of living dangerously "edgework." Sure, Thompson crossed the line with the LSD and shotguns, but a more disciplined brand of edgework can be a good thing. Done artfully and wisely, living dangerously engages our intellect, advances society, and even makes us happier.

A 2005 German study concluded that people who take above-average risks have a higher-than-average index of life satisfaction. Researchers at the University of British Columbia found that among business managers in the US and Canada, those who take greater risks are the most successful. More risk, more reward—not to mention livelier cocktail-party conversation.

On a bell curve, the timid and the reckless are the outliers. The one-third who are slightly more likely to take risks I call the golden Third.

It is possible to work consciously toward joining the golden Third: Just get in there and start pitching. As with knife-throwing, unicycle-riding, and whip-handling, one gets better mainly by practice. Make your choices smart ones. It's not difficult to discriminate between a good, soul-enriching risk and one that's just plain nuts.

- Driving a Porsche 911 at 148 mph on the autobahn... golden
- Driving on the interstate with a Friday-night buzz... nuts
- Building a propane-accumulator flame cannon... golden
- Building a pipe bomb filled with match heads... nuts
- Imbibing a properly prepared absinthe at *l'heure verte*... golden
- Imbibing for hours at any hour... nuts
- Eating fugu (e.g., tiger puffer fish) sushi in a fine Yokohama restaurant... golden
- Eating egg salad that's spent an afternoon in the sun... nuts

The most successful adventurers take the high road of risk-taking without falling off the mountain. They channel neither Evel Knievel nor Caspar Milquetoast, neither lion tamer nor monk. That's the golden art of living dangerously.

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