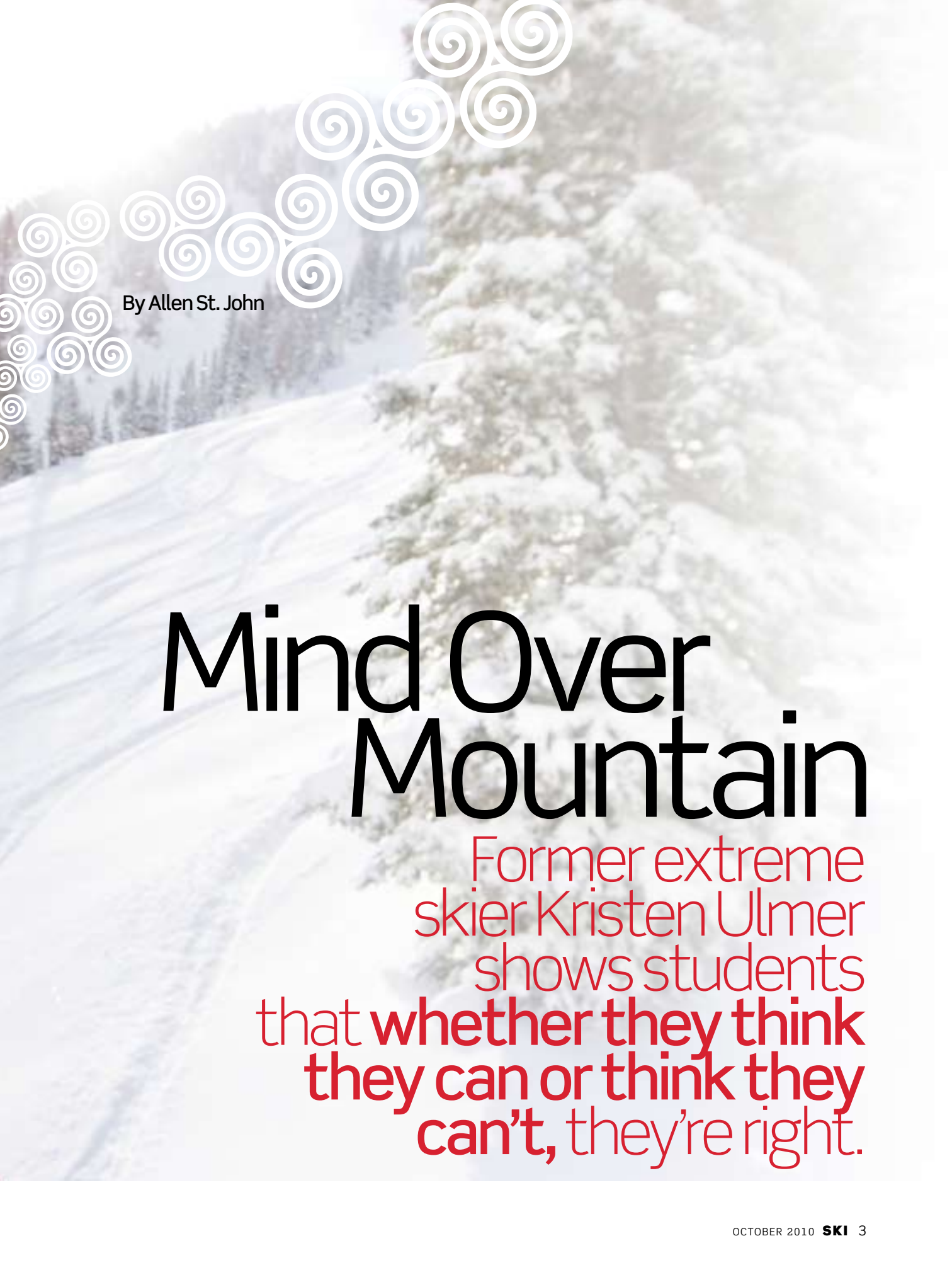




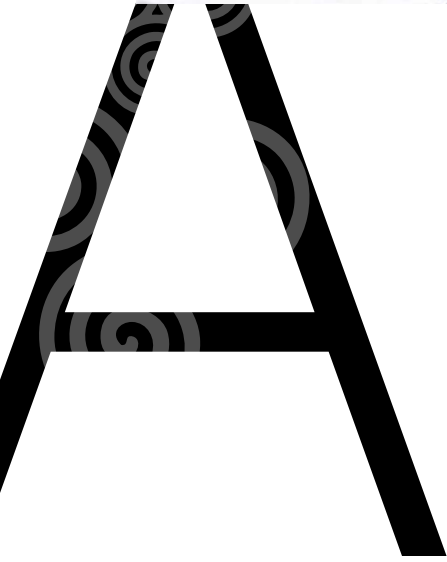
Photographs by  
Lori Adamski-Peek



By Allen St. John

# Mind Over Mountain

Former extreme skier Kristen Ulmer shows students that **whether they think they can or think they can't, they're right.**



**“Allow me please to speak to your Voice of Fear.”**

When Kristen Ulmer says that in her wide-eyed, animated way, I shift a little, fold my arms and cautiously lean back in my chair. It’s a near-whiteout outside, but Alta’s lifts are already closed for the day. A dozen other skiers and I are having a Socratic conversation of sorts inside the

Alta Community Center. It’s the opening session of Ulmer’s Ski to Live clinic.

“What are you afraid of?” Ulmer posits.

“The state of our planet,” suggests Hayden Price, one of the other coaches in the clinic, to get the conversation started.

“Volkswagen-size moguls,” offers Katie Boone, a skiwear rep from Vail.

ing and Western psychology, each voice plays a role and has a job description.

Ulmer’s Ski To Live clinic aims to introduce us to and acquaint us with a few of our 10,000 voices. The Voice of Fear, we’ll learn, is one of the most misunderstood.

“What does the Voice of Fear do for The Self?” Ulmer prods.

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**ACCORDING TO BIG MIND THEORY, EVERYONE HAS A VOICE OF FEAR AND SOME 10,000 OTHER VOICES THAT MAKE UP THE SELF.**

“Orthopedic surgeons?” I add timidly.

But what does Kristen Ulmer know about fear, I think to myself. The former U.S. Ski Team mogul specialist-turned extreme skier was once considered the world’s best female big mountain athlete. Her Voice of Fear must be mute, I muse.

In fact, she’ll explain, everyone—herself included—has a Voice of Fear and some 10,000 other voices that make up The Self. According to Big Mind theory, a philosophy that marries Eastern teach-

**HEAD CASE** Kristen Ulmer’s Ski To Live clinics are less about perfecting your skiing technique and more about adjusting your attitude and perspective—about the mountain and the world.



**THE VOICES IN YOUR HEAD** As part of the Ski To Live clinic, Ulmer invites her clients to portray the different voices that makeup The Self, including Fear, Doubt, Anger, Happiness and Excitement.





"Keeps it safe," replies Lexie Wallace, a 20-something museum curator from Telluride, very much in character.

"Bingo!" Ulmer, who was once the poster girl for fearlessness as she dodged avalanches and hucked 40-foot cliffs, has guided us to an important, improbable truth: Fear is a good thing. That which keeps you from skiing with reckless abandon, also keeps you out of trouble.

Ski to Live is Ulmer's second incarnation as a skier. I skied with Kristen 1.0, and, while her intensity was infectious, she could be, well, scary. I recall the time during an extreme skiing clinic at Squaw when she led my group into a tight, steep chute and simply goaded us to ski it. Needless to say, my Voice of Fear spoke to me that day.

Then a decade ago, things changed for Ulmer. "I got to the end of my competitive career, and I didn't feel like I had learned anything," she explains of the epiphany that led her to study Zen and ultimately to combine it with teaching skiing. She met Zen Master Genpo Roshi, the creator of Big Mind, a Westernized offshoot of traditional Zen practice. Ulmer recalls that she learned as much about her skiing—and herself—in five minutes with Roshi as she had in the previous 15 years. She created Ski To Live to share with others what she had

learned from Roshi, and has since started a private mind-set coaching practice with clients ranging from professional poker players to circus aerialists to Olympic gold and silver medalist Julia Mancuso. "We don't learn from experience," Ulmer explains. "We learn from reflecting on experience."

I knew when I signed up that this wouldn't be a typical bend-your-knees, plant-your-pole ski clinic. But can thinking about skiing well really make it happen? On one hand, I'm a card-carrying cynic; my only spiritual practice is the occasional yoga class to help my aching back. On the other hand, I've learned through experience—and reflecting on it—that great ski days often live and die on one square foot of terrain—the one that lies between my ears.

enough about skiing to spend the 50 bucks," she announces with the flair that once made her a ski movie star. "By the time I was 23, I was on the U.S. Ski Team, and I was considered the top female big mountain skier in the world. How'd that happen in three years?"

We lean in, waiting for the punch line. "May I speak to the Voice of The Show Off?"

And with that, Ulmer pops over the lip of a steep black diamond bowl called Stimulation. It's time for a ski off. Some of my fellow Ski to Livers follow her lead. Guided by their Show Off Voices, they make exhibitionist turns. Me? My Show Off voice was locked in a basement storeroom, held hostage by the Voice of Fear. Last night's fresh snow has firmed up; now it's closer to untracked crud.



## 2010/11 CLINICS

### SKITOLIVE

Alta, Utah  
January 14–16, 2011  
February 11–13, 2011  
April 1–3, 2011  
\$520

### SKITOLIVE 2

Alta, Utah  
March 11–13, 2011  
\$390

Jackson Hole, Wyo.  
March 3–6, 2011  
Price TK (This is the only STL clinic open to snowboarders)

### HELISKI TO LIVE WITH POINTS NORTH

Cordova, Alaska  
April 9–16, 2011  
April 16–23, 2011  
Price TK (expert skiers and snowboarders only)  
kristenulmer.com

MY SHOW-OFF VOICE WAS LOCKED IN A BASEMENT STORE-ROOM, HELD HOSTAGE BY THE VOICE OF FEAR. LAST NIGHT'S FRESH POWDER IS NOW UNTRACKED CRUD.

### GUIDED BY VOICES

#### The next morning it's time to try out

Big Mind on the slopes. Ulmer's posture as she addresses the group, athletic and even a little imposing, suggests that she's totally in her element. As usual, she's smiling, but it's not a relaxed smile. Her teeth are clenched just a little, as if she's got something to prove.

"When I was 20 years old, I was skiing in jeans," she tells us. "I didn't even own a pair of snow pants. I didn't care

**ALTA EGO** Left: Hello, this is 500 annual inches of powder calling, may I please speak to The Voice of The Powder Pig? Above: Ulmer doesn't teach clients to ski better; she teaches them how to think better.





**EARLY BIRDS** As the morning sun rises over the Bear Paw trail, Ski To Livers see whispers of yesterday's tracks, freshly dusted with a blower layer of Wasatch fluff.





Seeing one of the group's strongest skiers almost take a header reinforces my feelings of dread. I'm paralyzed by the thought of my skis getting buried in the muck and my body careering violently down the fall line. The movie in my head ends with a toboggan ride and a trip to the orthopedic surgeon. I hang back until everyone else skis, but the extra time to ponder only makes things worse. When I can't stall any longer, I just hack my way down. The best I can say about this run: I survived. I can be a Show Off. But not here. Not now. Not in this snow. Fear 1, Show Off 0.

On our next run, we beckon a new voice. "No ski racer can be successful without it," Kristen confides. "Can I speak to the Voice of Anger? What is Anger's job?"

"To be angry," someone responds.

"And what are you angry about?"

"Everything!" I almost spit out the word. That last run, especially.

This I can relate to.

"And what does Anger provide for The Self?"

"Release," says Phil Holbert, a 50-year-old financial analyst from Denver.

"The civil rights movement," says Price. His long blonde locks and his baby face make him seem like he's 13, not his actual 23, and his loud, multicolored ski jacket only enhances the effect.

Point taken, but don't feel like Rosa Parks this morning. My anger isn't particularly noble, though it's very accessible. I am simply pissed off. As I head away from the huddle and down the cat-

Water Horizon and, well, everything.

I'm skiing faster than I should. My Salomon Czars are hooking up early and riding clean, fast arcs, accelerating through the now chopped-up snow like a Manhattan cabbie who just got stiffed on a tip. My Voice of Anger is spewing profanities. I make 20 aggressive, purposeful turns, each one stronger, bolder, more athletic than the last. My anger has found an outlet. There's a new sheriff in town.

"It's hard to be angry on a day like

**I'M CHANNELING GLEN BECK, DENNIS LEARY AND CLINT EASTWOOD. IS IT PERSONAL? DAMN RIGHT IT IS. I'M PISSED OFF ABOUT MY SKIING.**

walk, I ski up behind a little kid and his dad. I bark at them. They jump.

I am channeling Glen Beck, Dennis Leary and Clint Eastwood. I'm attacking each snowflake like it stole my lunch money. Is it personal? Damn right it is. I'm pissed off about my skiing. But I'm also pissed off the Lloyd Blankfein, the Deep

**DEEP THOUGHTS**

Ulmer doesn't like to lecture. With the exception of short lunchtime pow wows, group learning and individual reflection happens on snow.



this,” says Chris Chouinard, a good-natured stockbroker from New York, as we wait for a hamburger at lunch.

“No, it’s not,” I growl back, surprising even myself. The Voice of Anger isn’t so easy to shake.

#### HOW’S THE WATER?

#### “Can I speak to Big Mind?” Kristen

asks before the last run of the afternoon. Anger? That I understand. But what on

earth is Big Mind? By way of explanation, Kristen segues with a Zen koan.

“Two fish are swimming in the ocean. A third fish swims past and says, ‘How’s the water, guys?’”

“After he’s gone, the first fish looks at the second fish and says ‘What’s water?’”

I look over at Anne Long, a young schoolteacher from New Mexico. She smiles a half-smile that says, “I get it. I think.”

for the chairlift. But I go with it. And *it gets me*. My normal chatter-free run is just a casual silence. This silence is deliberate. I look up at the mountains, from the almost abstract Wasatch whiteness to a few scattered ski tracks on a distant peak, and it dawns on me that it’s all part of a continuum that includes the snow beneath my skis. It’s awesome in the most literal sense of this overused word.

A third of the way down, I see The Swede. I call him that because he’s wearing an electric blue parka and neon yellow pants that he could have bought at a ski swap for the Swedish Ski Team.

I don’t follow his tracks, nor do I mimic his turns. I just channel him for a while. Just like these mountains and the bumplet I’ve just skied over, The Swede becomes a part of Big Mind. And as clearly as if I heard it on my iPod, that old Replacements song pops into my head. “You be me for a while... and I’ll be youuuuu.”

I try to shoo it away. It seems too trivial for this solemn head space, and then I

**I’M NOT COMPLETELY SURE I GET IT. I DON’T NORMALLY TALK WHEN I’M SKIING. CHATTING’S FOR THE CHAIRLIFT. BUT I GO WITH IT. AND IT GETS ME. THIS SILENCE IS DELIBERATE.**

**UTAH STATE OF MIND** The Voice of Big Mind echoes off the walls above Alta’s Ballroom and invites STLer Katie Boone to dance. She accepts.

But before we can start bombarding her with questions, Kristen hushes us. “Don’t think about it. Just do it. Be the third fish. Be the water, too.

“Let me ask you to take this run in total silence,” she says before sending us off to explore Big Mind on our own.

I’m not completely sure I get it. I don’t normally talk when I’m skiing. Chatting’s

STORY CONTINUED ON **PAGE 00**



## ○ MIND OVER MOUNTAIN

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 00

realize that a Little Koan is part of Big Mind, too. When The Swede peels off to take the Collins lift to the top again, I just continue on. Fear. Anger. Big Mountain. Little Flakes. Big Mind. Little Fish. It's all there, and, for a few blissful moments anyway, I'm okay with all of it.

### BLEEP THE BUNNY

**"How do you ski straight down the mountain making 99 turns?"** That's what Kristen had left us to ponder for the last morning of the clinic, recasting a classic Zen koan in terms we could relate to. My Small Mind had a feeling the answer somehow involved upper and lower body separation, but before I could blurt anything out, she preempted me.

"You don't solve a koan," Ulmer warned us. "You live it."

And so I try. It's Easter Sunday, the sun is bright and clear, and the mountain is blanketed with an unexpected foot of fresh powder. On the traverse to Ballroom, a wide-shouldered bowl that's open for the first time since the beginning of the storms cycle, I pass Katie Boone.

"Happy Easter," she says cheerfully.

"Bleep the bunny," I blurt back. Or something much like it.

It's nonsense. One part Voice of Anger, two parts Voice of Robin Williams. And yet when I point my skis down the fall line through the untracked snow, I find myself spontaneously shouting, "Bleep the Bunny!" I hear the Voice of the Show Off and all the other voices we spoke with this week. The Voice of Fear, which usually monitors every turn—telling me not to ski too fast or too slow—I hear him too. But he's not so loud now; he's sitting back and enjoying the ride.

Sure, the featherbed of fresh snow helps. But it's this different voice, this dif-

ferent Self, that's allowing me to ski with a freedom and focus I'd never experienced before. I'm the living, breathing embodiment of the 99 Turns koan. I'm going straight down the mountain, yet turning all the way. And whether it's a line of untracked fresh or a slough of avalanche debris; whether I'm skiing perfect powder 8s or linking a series of recoveries, I'm skiing in the moment, and all that matters is this turn and the next. Bleep the Bunny? Maybe I found my mantra.

As I'm standing in the lift line afterwards, I'm literally quivering with excitement. Best. Run. Ever.

Kristen gathers us again at the top and talks about those precious moments, like the one I just had, when The Self manages to get out of its own way. "Please allow me to speak to the Voice of No Self," she says. "What's another name for

WHETHER I'M SKIING  
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**THE MOMENT. ALL THAT  
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AND THE NEXT.**

No Self?" By now the responses come fast and furious.

"Big Mind."

"Ommmm."

"Enlightenment."

"Bleep the Bunny," I'm about to say, but I decide to keep it to myself.

Kristen leans in, the way she does when she's about to say something important.

"Another name for No Self is... The Zone."

So that's where I've been.

"Zen is really important," Ulmer confides, sensing that it's time to change the mood. "But the minute you take something too seriously, you're stuck. So let's just throw up our hands and laugh."

And so we do.

We laugh about the snow, we laugh about the voices, and we laugh in anticipation of another visit to The Zone. I think about The Bunny and laugh loudest of all. Kristen slips her wrists into her pole straps and pulls down her goggles.

"Now let's go skiing."

So we do. All bleeping day.