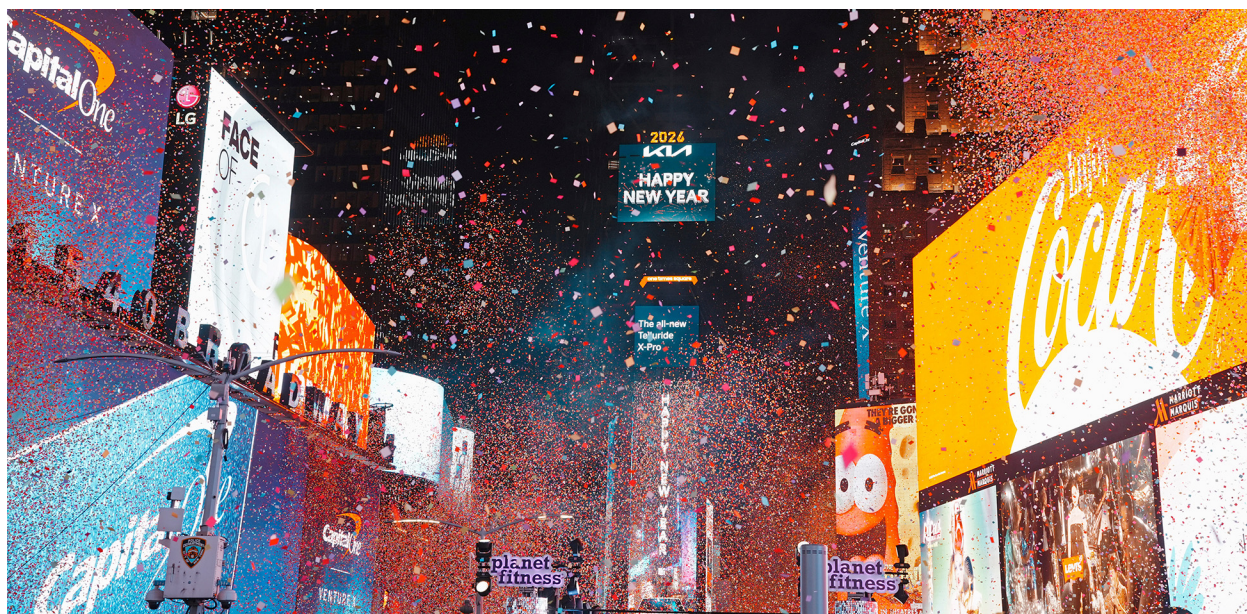


## 2026: the Year to Be Optimistic

By John Mauldin | January 03, 2026



2026: the Year to Be Optimistic  
Rational Optimist of the Year  
Innovator of the Year  
Breakout Success of the Year  
“Decel” of the Year  
Overachiever of the Year  
Craziest “Real” Tech of the Year  
Favorite Factory Tour of the Year  
Most Personally Useful Innovation of the Year  
Most Transformative Tech of the Year  
Most Groundbreaking Innovation of the Year  
Dallas, New York, West Palm Beach, And More

Every Sunday morning, I wake up to what has become my favorite newsletter: *The Rational Optimist Society Newsletter*. It generally highlights companies both large and small who are at the cutting edge - the very frontiers of knowledge in score of industries that are busy creating the future while the vast bulk of the media focuses on all the problems.

The original Rational Optimist was my friend Sir Matt Ridley, one of the greatest thinkers and writers of our age. He literally wrote the book on rational optimism. The author of many books, I believe his two most important are *The Rational Optimist* and [\*The Evolution Of Everything\*](#). (I put this in my top five of must-read books!).

One of the frustrations of the entire Mauldin Economic leadership team is that so little is written about the amazing transformational technologies happening right above our eyes. Many are not yet investable ideas, but they are going to impact everything in our future. We decided to form The Rational Optimist Society and every week highlight the amazing progress being made throughout the world. We reached out to Matt Ridley and not only did he agree to become the honorary founder, but he has also become very involved in working with our team to produce a weekly letter that is quite frankly my favorite Sunday read. It will always be free.

Over 20,000 people have already joined the community of thinkers at [The Rational Optimist Society](#). You can sign up at the link and also browse through past letters and research papers.

I want us to start off 2026 with an understanding of how all of the problems we will face (and sadly, there will be more than a few) are going to be overwhelmed in the future by the progress being made. Yes, we have to deal with those problems, but we also want to make sure that we are taking advantage of the revolutions all around us.

This week's letter will be an edited version of last week's RSO letter: The Inaugural Rational Optimist Awards. It's the Oscars for optimists where we celebrate the most important breakthroughs of the year. Written by Stephen McBride, let it remind you of the fabulous future our children and grandchildren will live in. With that said let's jump in:

## 2026: the Year to Be Optimistic

**By Stephen McBride**

Having visited scores of companies all over the world done interviews with our team and especially Matt Ridley, we want to highlight what we think are the best of the best. These are our choices. But remember, ROS is a community. You will disagree with at least a few of my picks. So nominate alternative winners—or just tell me why I'm wrong—in the comments below.

If enough of you shout about the same topic, we'll turn it into a full deep dive in 2026.

Time to hand out some trophies!

## Rational optimist of the year...

**Winner: Zipline**

Rational optimism is believing the future can be better than the present, but only if you do the work to build it.

No company embodied that mindset in 2025 better than **Zipline**.

Zipline is an American company, but when it launched in 2016, regulators wouldn't let it operate in America. The FAA's "beyond visual line of sight" rule required operators to physically see their drones at all times.

Undeterred, Zipline went to Rwanda to prove itself, delivering blood and medical supplies to remote hospitals. *Regulators won't let us do business at home. No problem. We'll do it in the African bush!*

Zipline's drone network now ships 70% of Rwanda's national blood supply and has saved countless lives.

Recently a four-year-old girl in Ghana got bitten by a snake. Doctors had 45 minutes before paralysis set in. Zipline to the rescue. Minutes later its drone dropped the medicine by parachute to doctors. The girl lived.

Now Zipline is bringing its battle-tested tech back to America. After inking a deal with Walmart earlier this year, it announced a new partnership with Chipotle to deliver hot burritos through the air in Dallas.

We had the pleasure of visiting Zipline at its HQ in California last month. Very cool!



Source: Stephen McBride



## Innovator of the year...

### Winner: Valar Atomics

Isaiah Taylor, founder and CEO of **Valar Atomics**, is one of the most impressive entrepreneurs we met in 2025. He's a high school dropout who basically taught himself nuclear physics, then actually went and built a reactor.

This year Valar turned a bold idea into a real company with steel in the ground. What it achieved in merely one year makes me question my own ambition.

February: Valar completed Ward Zero, a non-nuclear thermal prototype that validated the tech. And Isaiah's team did it in just 10 months!



Source: Stephen McBride

September: Valar broke ground on its first full-scale reactor in Orangeville, Utah, with criticality targeted for July 4, 2026.

November: Valar became the first startup in history to split the atom. This helped it raise \$130 million in a Series A funding round.

This is what “0 to 100” looks like in an industry that usually moves in decades.

Congrats to Isaiah and the whole Valar team. I can't wait to see them again in early 2026.

## Breakout success of the year...

### Winner: Neros

If you want to understand modern warfare in one sentence, it's this...

A handful of \$2,000 drones can now destroy a \$10 million tank.

That's the world **Neros** is building for.

The El Segundo-based startup was founded by two kids who learned to build flying robots through competitive drone racing.

Neros makes small, cheap, disposable strike drones. These are the quadcopters dominating Ukrainian battlefields. They're flown with what looks like a PlayStation controller.

Neros went from cool startup to America's #1 drone maker... in just 12 months! And now it's winning major US defense contracts.

When we visited co-founder Olaf Hitchwa at Neros's factory in November, his small team was pumping out roughly 1,000 drones a month, by hand. In the warehouse, Olaf showed us \$20 million of inventory that sits waiting to be assembled:



Source: Stephen McBride

Olaf gave us the heads-up they were about to raise \$75 million from top VC firm Sequoia. Neros plans to scale up manufacturing so it can build 100,000 drones next year. That'll make it America's largest drone maker by an order of magnitude.

Next, our first "anti-award" ...

## **"Decel" of the year...**

### **Winner (loser): Europe**

"Decel" is short for decelerationist. It describes people who instinctively pull the handbrake on progress. They're the natural enemy of rational optimism.

Europe is the undisrupted champion of this category.

I'm Irish. I've never voted in a political election. But this year I voted with my feet and moved my family (wife and three kids) out of Europe.

One of my core beliefs is where a child grows up shapes how they see the world. I don't want my kids being poisoned by Europe's anti-innovation mind virus.

Three examples:

1. **Europe now rakes in more tax dollars fining US tech companies than it does collecting tax from its own tech firms.**
2. **Ireland's state-owned energy company plans to decommission its own wind farms.** All because it failed to file an environmental impact assessment back in 2003. Wait for the punchline...

The project might be saved because tearing down wind turbines also requires an environmental report. You can't make this stuff up.

3. **Regulators forced the UK's newest nuclear power plant to build multiple systems to prevent fish from getting into water intakes.**

Price tag £700 million. Forecasts expect the system to save 0.083 adult salmon per year. If I didn't laugh, I'd cry.

The smartest people I meet from Ireland, the UK, Italy and Germany have already left. That's what brain drain looks like in real time.

Speaking of where I escaped to...

## Overachiever of the year...

### Winner: UAE

I moved my family to Abu Dhabi earlier this year.

In *Arabian Sands*, Wilfred Thesiger writes about riding into Abu Dhabi on a camel circa 1948. It was a backwater with 2,000 people. A desolate desert landscape, unchanged for thousands of years.

To read that book and then stand in modern Abu Dhabi with gleaming glass skyscrapers and an airport so clean you could eat off the floor is to witness one of the most astonishing transformations in human history.

People in Abu Dhabi embrace innovation because they've experienced the benefits of radical transformation firsthand. For a people that watched a city rise from the desert, the idea of robotaxis, flying cars and nuclear power isn't frightening.

It's a society surging with optimism. I'm glad my children breathe that air.

While EU bureaucrats argue over paperwork for windmills, the UAE is:

- Building the world's largest AI data center
- The first country to give free ChatGPT subscriptions to every citizen
- Launching the world's first AI university
- Gene sequencing almost one million Emiratis
- Building the world's first 24/7 solar farm
- And constructing a 5.6-gigawatt nuclear plant, on time and under budget.

In the UAE, **Uber** is rolling out robotaxis. **Joby Aviation** is launching flying cars. Elon Musk's **Boring Company** is building a series of underground tunnels to solve traffic. And **Neuralink** just launched the first regional trial for its "brain chips."

In Silicon Valley speak the UAE is still in "founder mode."

## Craziest (real) tech of the year...

### Winner: Osmo Labs

First we digitized sight (photos). Then we digitized sound (music).

Now **Osmo Labs** is giving computers a sense of smell. Sounds like sci-fi until you see it in person.

We visited Osmo's lab in midtown Manhattan last month. As you walk through the rooms your nostrils awaken. One room smells like a whiskey distillery, another like a florist shop.

Osmo's founder Alex Wiltschko has been obsessed with smell since he was a kid. When I asked him his favorite smell, he said his daughter's hair.

He's already "bottled" that smell to keep forever. I'd pay good money to remember the smell of my little kids when they're grown. Would you?

This year Osmo Labs actually "teleported" a scent for the first time in human history. It analyzed a fresh summer plum on one side of a room, turned its scent into code, and printed the same scent on the other side. Like a fax, but for smell.

One way this changes the world: everyone becomes a perfumer, the same way the iPhone turned everyone into a photographer. Imagine sending smells the way you send photos today.

Osmo built a platform called Generation that lets you create a custom fragrance. You describe what you want, and a scent gets produced and shipped to you. We even created a "Rational Optimist" scent on the spot.



Source: Stephen McBride



This category deserves a runner-up. Second place goes to **AstroForge**, a startup building satellites to go mine asteroids for platinum-group metals. ROS cofounder Dan Steinhart and I were lucky enough to see a half-scale replica of these new satellites:



Source: Stephen McBride

Read our essay on AstroForge [here](#).

## Favorite factory tour of the year...

### Winner: The Boring Company

Dan and I toured dozens of factories in 2025. We saw everything from nuclear reactors to kamikaze drones to microchips with 1 trillion transistors to supersonic jets.

The one that'll stay etched in our brains is Elon Musk's **Boring Company** in Austin.

How we dig tunnels today is borderline insane. A traditional tunnel-boring machine costs hundreds of millions of dollars. And after it finishes digging operators steer it into a side chamber and bury it forever.

Imagine building a half-billion-dollar machine, using it once, and leaving it underground like a disposable coffee cup?

The Boring Co is doing for tunnels what SpaceX did for rockets: make them reusable so the cost falls and learning curves kick in.

Boring Co's giant digger, Prufrock, chews forward and builds the tunnel behind it, laying five-foot concrete rings as it goes. Look at the photo below, and you can literally see the rings snapped together like giant LEGO bricks:



*Source: Stephen McBride*

Prufrock can dig for roughly \$12 million to \$15 million per mile, versus traditional tunnel borers that can cost over \$1 billion per mile. It can also bore holes in months—work that used to take years.

And unlike a lot of moonshots, you can test this one out yourself.

Boring has tunnels operating under Las Vegas's Convention Center. You walk up, hail a ride, and a Tesla glides into a one-way tunnel. It already carries tens of thousands of passengers per day with near-zero wait times.

The Boring Co will transform transportation. I can't wait until it opens the Dubai Loop!

## Most personally useful innovation of the year...

### Winner: AI

I love supersonic jets, nuclear reactors and skyscraper-sized rockets more than a grown man should.

But AI takes this trophy because it's something you can and should use every day. It gives anyone with an internet connection the ability to "just do things."

For the price of a nice lunch, you get an army of tireless interns: researcher, editor, analyst, translator, tutor, brainstorming partner and project manager, all in one.

We've never had a technology this powerful, this cheap, and this available.

Computers and the internet made it possible to build a \$10 million business with only a handful of employees. It's only a matter of time until AI enables the first one-person, \$1 billion company.

This year AI became part of my workflow the way Google did in the 2000s. And as we like to say, this is the worst it will ever be.

We wrote several "how to use AI" guides. I encourage you to read them and more importantly, start using these tools if you haven't already.

- [How to use AI daily.](#)
- [How to gain agency through AI.](#)
- [How to learn faster with AI.](#)
- [How to use AI like a super-doctor.](#)

AI fluency is the most important skill to learn and teach your kids and grandkids in 2026.

## Most transformative tech of the year...

### Winner: GLP-1s

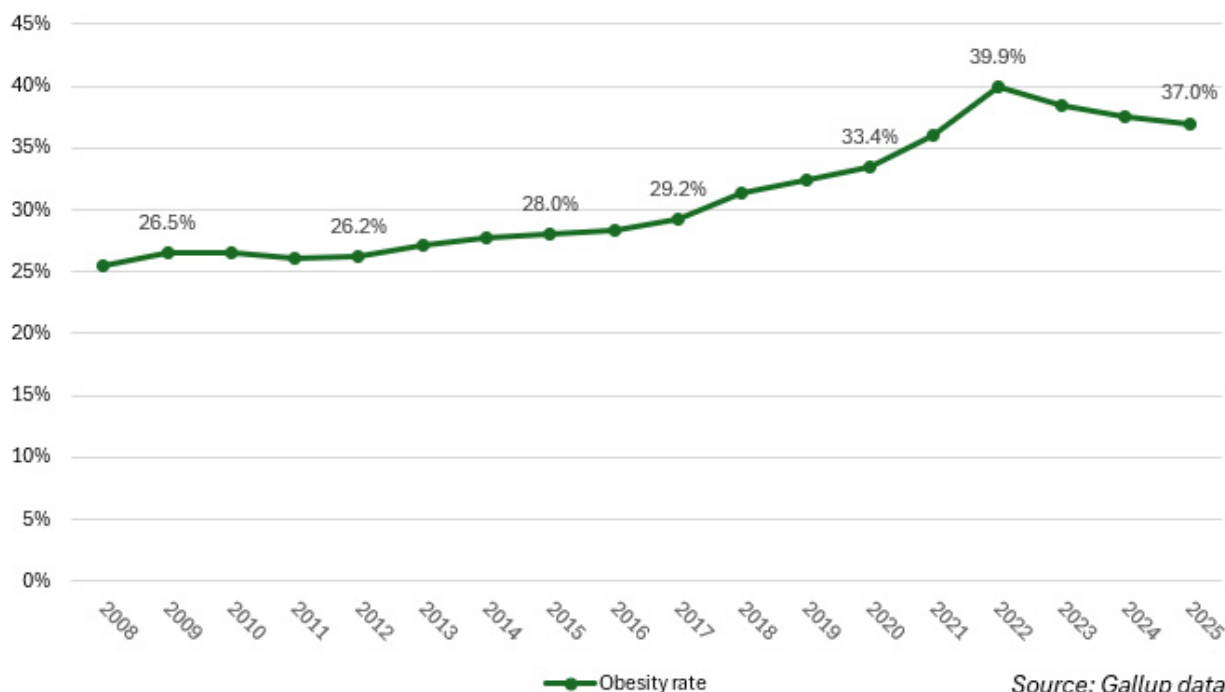
In the 1990s, scientists studying the Gila monster discovered it can survive on one meal per month. They created a synthetic version of this lizard's spit and turned it into the most important drug of the 21st century: GLP-1s, aka Ozempic or Wegovy.

GLP-1s were originally invented as a diabetes treatment. But they've morphed into a medical Swiss Army Knife tackling every modern health nightmare.

First, we discovered they melt fat off waistlines. When future historians write about 2025 they might mark it as the year humanity gained control over obesity.

A recent Gallup study found the US obesity rate fell in 2025. Even that small tick down represents roughly 7.5 million fewer obese adults. Coincidence? I think not.

## GLP-1s changed healthcare forever



Source: Stephen McBride

That alone would qualify GLP-1s for “breakthrough of the decade.” But in a slew of recent trials doctors discovered they also:

- Treat Alzheimer's
- Stave off arthritis
- Lower dementia risk
- Reduce heart attacks and strokes
- Curb addiction
- And lower the risk of developing kidney, pancreatic, ovarian, liver and colorectal cancers

Along with slashing obesity it looks like GLP-1s contributed to the unprecedented 27% drop in overdose deaths last year.



This “miracle in a syringe” will reshape entire societies. Imagine what America would look like if it were thinner and less diabetic. How might communities change if addiction could be solved with a pill? (JM: GLP’s in a pill form will be here soon!)

We may well find out.

## Most groundbreaking innovation of the year

### Winner: Alpha School’s two-hour school day

This award goes to an innovation that was *proven* in 2025 but whose full impact probably won’t be felt for years.

Ask your kid: “*Would you rather go to school... or go on vacation?*” For me that would’ve been the easiest question of all time.

But at **Alpha School** in Austin six out of 10 kids say they’d rather go to school than vacation. After visiting Alpha last month and meeting founder MacKenzie Price and the school’s billionaire backer and principal, Joe Liemandt, I can see why.

Alpha pioneered the two-hour school day. Academics get squeezed into four 25-minute “Pomodoro” sprints in the morning. All with an AI tutor on an iPad.

Then the afternoon is freed up for the things school *claims* to teach but doesn’t: public speaking, entrepreneurship, leadership, teamwork, creativity and grit.

At Alpha you have teens running Airbnbs and food trucks. Some even flew to Poland to help teach Ukrainian refugee kids will math. They spend their afternoons becoming the kind of person AI can’t replace.

The students we chatted with at Alpha were the most impressive teens I’ve ever met. One helped create the first all-teen Broadway musical. Another 16-year-old submitted a paper to top science journal *Nature*. Another launched what’s basically a startup accelerator for teen influencers.

As a dad I asked the only question that matters: “Does it work?” Oh boy does it work...

K–8 students score in the top 1% nationally. Average SAT scores are around 1535 for 11th graders and 1410 for 9th graders.

Once you “see” the two-hour school day, it’s hard to send your kids back to the old model. You realize there’s no second-best way to teach children.

—Stephen McBride

You can read that next letter and join the community of thinkers at [The Rational Optimist Society](#). You can sign up at the link and also browse through past letters and research papers.

## Dallas, New York, West Palm Beach, And More

I have not booked any actual flights, but I know I will need to be in Dallas, New York, and West Palm Beach. Other ports of call are beckoning. Shane and I had almost 400 people for our annual Texas chili and black-eyed peas brush yesterday. It was a fabulous if exhausting time. We spent all New Year's Eve cooking.

My one New Year's resolution is to transfer the management of Lifespan Edge to seasoned operators who can take the vision that Mike and I have and execute it. Then my main plan is to finish my book on cycles in the coming crisis. I know, I know. I need to finish the book before the crisis.

Dr. Mike Roizen and I are launching Lifespan Edge as our personal forays into rational optimism and longevity. We start with the basic premise that the start of your longevity journey should be to get rid of mis-folded proteins, senescent cells, micro-plastics and other junk in your blood that create inflammation and a host of aging issues. Mike Roizen says TPE is the only true therapy for Alzheimer's disease if you catch it early enough.

You can learn more at [Lifespan-Edge.com](https://Lifespan-Edge.com) (note the dash). If you have not, you really need to read the [main research report](#) we have.

Our clinic in Dallas is getting busier and busier, and we hope to have Puerto Rico open January 19. Then we will begin adding other clinics around the country but frankly, you shouldn't wait until it's "convenient." This is your health and a trip to Dallas is not that unpleasant. I know it is not cheap, but we are THE low-cost provider. Schedule a discovery call with Dr. Allen Green. Let's make 2026 the year we all get healthier.

Next week I will share my thoughts on 2026, as well as some forecasts from my friends. And with that I will hit the send button. You have a great week and holidays and thank you so much for being with me over the years. It means more to me than you know.

Your seeing a bright future through the fog analyst,

John Mauldin



John Mauldin

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