



Control. Alt. Delete

Over the next few months we are going to have to control our urge to travel, alter our working practices and try as best we can to delete negativity. Alain de - Botton - writing in the Financial Times has helpfully given us some philosophical perspective on how to achieve this.

I will endeavour to summarise his full article for our readers - The full article is available in The FT dated 17th March 2020. Alain tells us that in the 1650s, the French philosopher, Blaise Pascal jotted down that *“The sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he cannot stay quietly in his room.”* How does this sit with your current self isolation or anticipated self isolation?

What could be more opposed to the human spirit than to have to inhabit four walls when there is a whole planet

to explore? Pascal’s idea usefully challenges one of our most cherished beliefs: that we must always go to new places in order to feel and discover fresh and worthwhile things. What if, in fact, there were already a treasury inside us?

Perhaps our brains have already accumulated a sufficient number of awe-inspiring, calming and interesting experiences to last us 10 lifetimes? What if our real problem was not so much that we are not allowed to go anywhere — but that we don’t know how to make the most of what is already to hand?

Being confined at home gives us a range of curious benefits. The first is an encouragement to think. Whatever we like to believe, few of us do much of the solitary, original, bold kind of thinking that can restore our spirits

and move our lives ahead. The new ideas we might stumble upon if we did travel more ambitiously around our minds while lying on the sofa could threaten our mental status quo.

An original thought might, for example, alienate us from what people around us think of as normal. Or it might herald a realisation that we’ve been pursuing the wrong approach to an important issue in our lives, perhaps for a long time. If we took a given new idea seriously, we might have to abandon a relationship, leave a job, ditch a friend, apologise to someone or break a habit.

But a period of quiet thinking in our room of self isolation creates an occasion when the mind can order and understand itself.

Fears, resentments and hopes become easier to name; we grow less scared

of the contents of our own minds — and less resentful, calmer and clearer about our direction. We start, in faltering steps, to know ourselves slightly better.

Another thing we can do in our own rooms is to return to travels we have already taken. This is not a fashionable idea. Most of the time, we are given powerful encouragement to engineer new kinds of travel experiences. The idea of making a big deal of revisiting a journey in memory sounds a little strange — or simply sad. This is an enormous pity.

In our neglect of our memories, we are spoilt children, who squeeze only a portion of the pleasure from experiences and then toss them aside to seek fresh thrills.

Part of why we feel the need for so many new experiences may simply be that we are so bad at absorbing the ones we have had.

To help us focus more on our memories, we need nothing technical. We certainly don’t need a camera. There is one in our minds already: it is always on, it takes in everything we’ve ever seen. Huge chunks of experience are still there in our heads, intact and vivid, just waiting for us to ask ourselves leading questions, such as: “Where did we go after we landed?” or “What was the first breakfast like?”

Our experiences have not disappeared, just because they are no longer unfolding right in front of our eyes. We can remain in touch with so much of what made them pleasurable simply through recollection.

We talk endlessly of virtual reality. Yet we don’t need gadgets. We have the finest virtual reality machines already in our own heads. We can — right now — shut our eyes and travel into, and linger among, the very best and most consoling and life-enhancing bits of our pasts.

There’s a tragicomic irony at work: the vast labour of getting ourselves physically to a place won’t necessarily bring us any closer to the essence of what we seek. As we should remind ourselves, we may already enjoy the very best that any place has to offer us simply by thinking about it.

Rory Surtherland - The Vice Chair of Ogilvy advertising and The Spectator magazine columnist - says that his mentor David Ogilvy never wrote anything in the office.

“Too many distractions,” he explained. But that’s another article.