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SVEN FISSENEWERT

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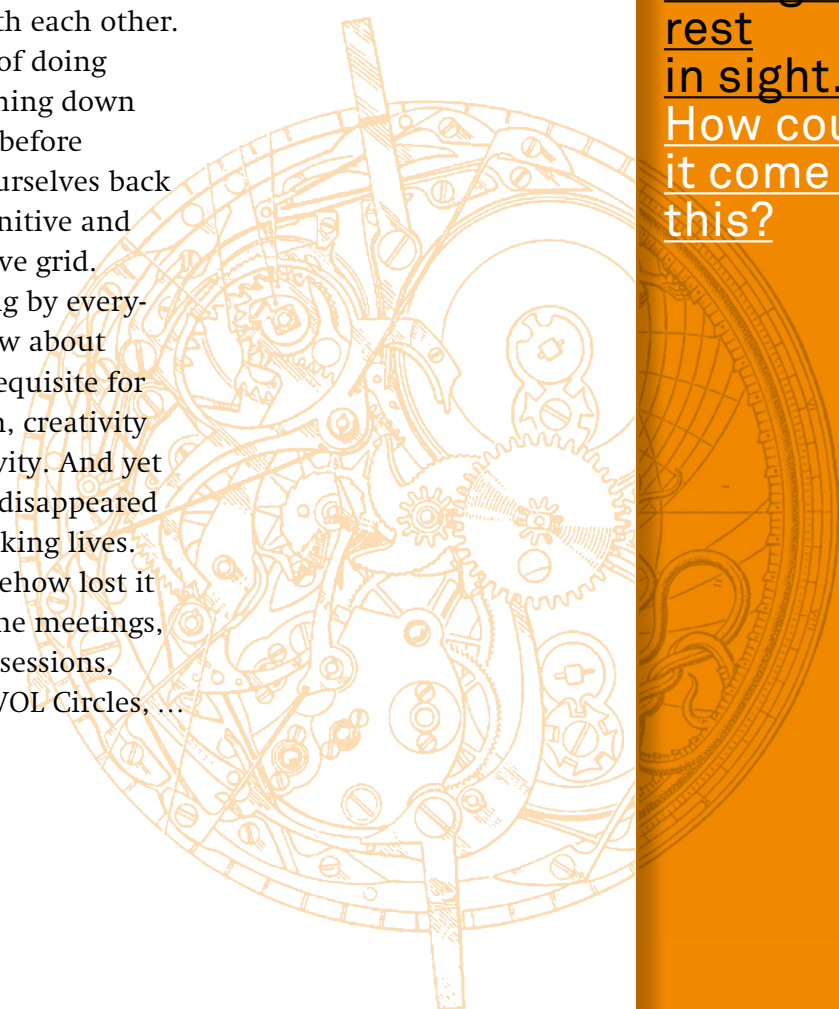
**SVEN FISSENEWERT**

Process One consultant, Sven Fissenewert, has realized that he leads an alarmingly non-stop life. Although he is well-versed in mindfulness and meditation techniques, he finds it difficult to just simply take a break. Getting into a state of far-reaching timelessness – just like what children experience or old people sitting in shared silence on a park bench. Inspired by the desire to address the topic of rest, he has decided to conduct practical research into the Dutch philosophy of purpose-free “niksen.”

Rest

Rest links two phases of activity with each other. It is a period of doing nothing, running down our batteries before connecting ourselves back up to the cognitive and communicative grid. It is – judging by everything we know about it – the prerequisite for concentration, creativity and productivity. And yet it has all but disappeared from our working lives. We have somehow lost it between all the meetings, calls, emails, sessions, workshops, WOL Circles, ...

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How could it come to this?



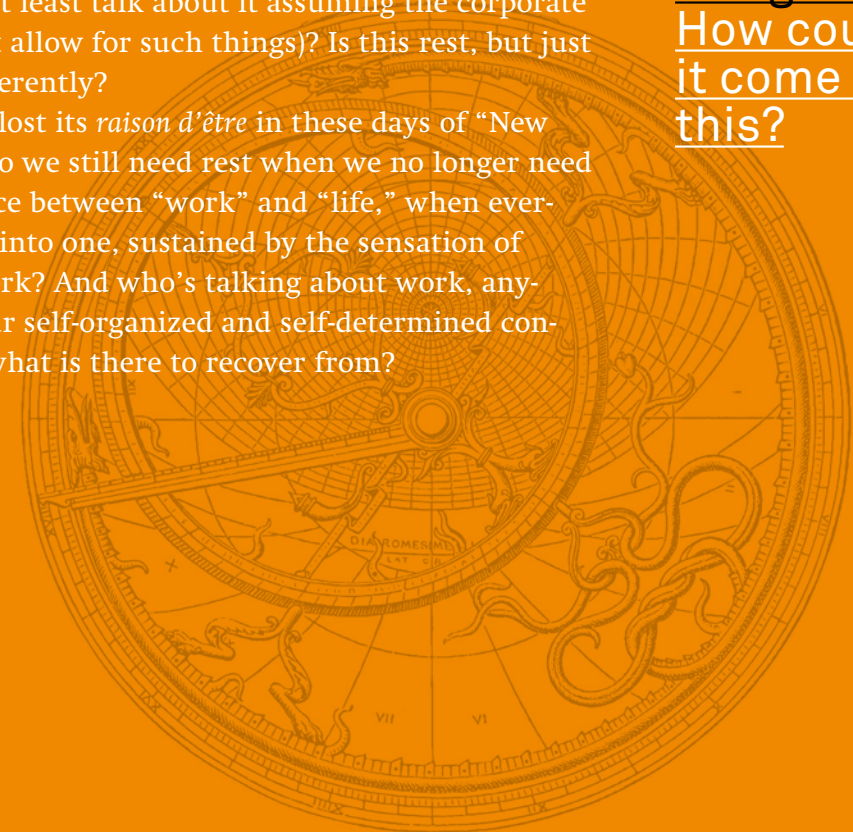
Rest

Even if we write our periods of rest into our schedules (probably simply because we have to drive a long distance between the end of one meeting and the start of the next), we do not, by any stretch of the imagination, take a break. We check new emails. We quickly reschedule an appointment, because yesterday's plans have once again been torpedoed by the new developments of today. We take a quick walk and talk.

But wait! What has happened to all those new age, zen-inspired modern managers? What are digital detox weeks and mindfulness retreats all about? Why do we take a sabbatical (or at least talk about it assuming the corporate culture doesn't allow for such things)? Is this rest, but just dressed up differently?

Or has rest lost its *raison d'être* in these days of "New Work"? Why do we still need rest when we no longer need to find a balance between "work" and "life," when everything merges into one, sustained by the sensation of meaningful work? And who's talking about work, anyway? This is our self-organized and self-determined contribution. So, what is there to recover from?

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It's high time to take a break here.

Time: Time is one of the fundamental principles of social order. And it is precisely for this reason that, through the significance attached to it and the way it is dealt with, we can gauge how social patterns, conventions and values change. Let's take a trip back into the past.

In Greek mythology, time was personified through the Hellenic deities of Chronos, Kairos and Aion. While Chronos, neither male nor female, but neutral, created measurable, linear time, Kairos is of human form. He has hair hanging down the sides of his head, is sometimes here, sometimes there and Kairos stands for acting in the right, or opportune, moment. Anyone who draws level with Kairos can experience this. This is when one can grab hold of the locks of his hair.

Anyone who does not seize the opportunity will only get to see the hairless back of Kairos' head. Eternity is symbolized by Aion (Eon under the Romans), the third god of time, with wings on his back and the face of a lion. Kairos and Aion can merge into each other when the moment turns into eternity, or at least suggests this. By contrast, this link between Kairos and Aion has always been impossible for Chronos.

Nevertheless, at the latest since the beginning of modernity, Chronos has vanquished Kairos – the race has been decided in favor of measurable, chronological time. Without it, all forms of social and economic coordination would ultimately be unthinkable.

The pendulum has swung so much in favor of Chronos that even Goethe describes his character of Time as “*velociferous*,” an ingenious combination of the words *velocitas* (= haste, restlessness) and *Lucifer*. Under the influence of the Devil, his Faust willingly subjects himself to the yoke of haste.

Almost one hundred years later, in *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche writes: “For lack of rest our civilization is turning into a new barbarism. At no period have the active, that is, the restless, been of more importance. One of the necessary corrections, therefore, which must be undertaken in the character of humanity is to strengthen the contemplative element on a large scale.”

So, complaints about ever-greater acceleration, about our restlessness, tirelessness and breathlessness, are not as new as we think.

Where do we stand today?

In two of his works, the sociologist, Hartmut Rosa, exhaustively examined the modern-day concept of time and the phenomenon of acceleration. In his view, having time has become a form of prosperity. We are running out of time today just we are running out of oil. We have reached the brink of exhaustion, of meaningfulness, says Rosa.

And once again: How did it come to this?

Aristoteles dismissed work as being a mere thing of necessity, unworthy of a free man. By contrast, he saw leisure as a state in which one is relieved of all worries, all necessities, all compulsions. Only in leisure was the classical man truly a man. The source of greatest joy sprang from the *bios theoretikos*, the contemplative pondering of beauty.

Right up until the Middle Ages, the *vita contemplativa* held sway over the *vita activa* – until, in the course of the Reformation, work as a vocation was linked to God's calling to the people. Through Calvinism, work then acquired the significance of economic salvation. The Calvinist was uncertain as to the question of whether he was one of the chosen people. He found salvation only in the success of his work and through the accumulation of wealth. Resting on one's laurels was considered reprehensible; only through the ceaseless pursuit of more could one earn the grace of God.

Max Weber considered this Protestant doctrine, in which wasting time was seen as one of the deadliest sins, to be the precursor to the spirit of capitalism.

Caught up in dialectics

In a culture so characterized by the work ethic, rest – this interruption to the continuity of gainful employment – was highly improbable and could be won only through struggle. Whereas in the early days of industrialization 80 (!) hours of work per week were still generally the rule, the formation of trade unions saw the start of the struggle for a sensible balance between work time and leisure time.

From then on, the right to rest was a legal right and, since then, a huge effort has been made to define and set down what is work and what is not.

Today, we now have flexible working hours models. With trust-based working hours, the responsibility for coordinating work and rest is transferred from the company to the employee, with the bottom-line effect – as numerous studies have shown – that employees work longer hours, take fewer vacations and shorter breaks.

Somehow, you get the impression that the long arm of Max Weber's fixation on the equation of "life equals work" is reaching into the Now time, as if this imperative encourages a continuous inner self-discipline, which causes us to push our breaks further and further back.

All of the aspects of rest described so far have one thing in common – the dialectics of work and rest. Rest helps us recover from work and completely restore our capacity for work, so that we can then perform (even) better when back in work ("How was your vacation?" – "Oh, amazing, I've really recharged my batteries ..."). From this point of view, rest is not non-work, but nothing more than an admission of the still flawed set-up of the human body and mind – that is, the need for rest.

Rest as non-work

What, then, could non-work rest look like? Our Dutch neighbors have a word for it: "niksen." *Niksen* does not mean more mindfulness or a specific form of exercise, but simply to do nothing: looking out the window or sitting without moving, for example – mindlessly and aimlessly.

Our constant, almost compulsively focused awareness of time – thinking about the past, worrying about the future – take a back seat and we create space for the present, the Now, which, by its very nature, is intention-free.

Accordingly, it is possible to infer that rest is only real if it occurs outside the logic of economic exploitation, if it happens without reason and without a "Why?" This would be what makes it so special. And if something useful were also to come out of it, we could be all the more happy about it.

How do we get to the point where rest is self-evident?

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Inner permission, a supportive corporate culture – yes, sure, that would all be very beneficial. But, maybe, still also not enough. Instead, the breeding ground could be provided by developing an economy that strives for cooperation not competition and counteracts the dominant logic of eternal growth with the principle of sufficiency.

We would then find ourselves heading towards utopia. It is commonly known that the value of such a utopia lies in the fact that we align the way we act towards going there – and less towards actually getting there. Maybe this is a nice topic for a future issue of the Quarterly.

But now, time for that break.

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