

Be Free Where You Are

The feet know best.

They will be the first to detect signs of restraint and the lack of freedom when cooped up within closed-in shoes, especially when it comes to bunions like mine. A bunion is a bony bump formed on the part of the foot where the big toe is. In my case, I was born with them. Feet with bunions long to be free. So out goes those elegant tight, narrow shoes and heels. Not even a comfortable pair of closed-in shoes made of stretchable materials does the trick for me. Just a few hours in them and the feet will make their protests heard. I hear their calls to get out of their confined state into the embrace of freedom.

In a parallel universe, I would prefer to wear my Vibram Five-fingers running shoes wherever I go. Where my toes on each foot can return to my ancestors' days, with every muscle strongly stretching out and feeling the ground solidly. I would pair them even with formal workwear if I could!

I shudder to think what would have become of me had I existed in the time of foot-binding during the Tang Dynasty in China where small feet were a hallmark of elegance. Freedom is no less important for the feet.

So too is that for my 20-month-old-nephew. The day he learned to walk marked his first taste of mobility; the appetizer *freedom* which came alongside indeed whet his appetite further. Any efforts to restrain him from using the baby carrier only served to provide a

fertile training ground for developing a wily mind as he thought up various ways to get out of his confined state.

"Want to go into the pram?" his grandma would ask lovingly, noticing him wriggling uncomfortably inside the baby carrier that held him to her. He nodded, not yet grasping speech but understanding very well the ways of the world - and the sympathy of adults around him.

Once he was released from his cloistered state, he wriggled out of his grandma's feeble attempts to place him into the pram, and out he went onto the ground; sprinting away along the shopping mall's corridor stretch like an Olympian sprinter, albeit a less steady one. He left Grandma panting to catch up with him.

Freedom, once tasted, will forever be cherished.

Space on a page, or white space, as the world of educational therapy likes to call it, is important too for individuals with learning difficulties such as dyslexia or visual processing difficulties. They often experience something called visual crowding when letters and words crowd on a page, making the act of reading laborious. To help them overcome this problem, ensuring there is sufficient space between the letters, between the words, and between the lines along with having bigger margins helps greatly.

The page too needs to breathe.

Space hence, from time immemorial, is the cherished small prize that leads to the ultimate gigantic grand trophy called freedom which when embraced in one's arms, reaches beyond the height of the average Joe.

The sense of unshackled space often provides that awe-struck element that silences me as I sit on a train during my travels. The sight of vast horizons of grasslands interspersed with shimmering rivers and the generous dosage of blue sky outside the window is often surreal. After all, where I come from, I am more accustomed to seeing sandwiches of stories of buildings generously stacked up over the years.

I used to think that a generous dosage of physical space is the necessary corollary for a vast enough headspace to think, and to imagine. Yet it seems that is not necessarily so.

At my last stop at Tokushima Prefecture in Japan, my Japanese Airbnb host, Sachi, lamented the cramped Japanese educational system which leaves elementary school-going children with little time to play and explore the wonders of nature that abound all around them. Located on the eastern side of the island of Shikoku, Tokushima Prefecture possesses beautiful natural scenery in abundance. It seems crazy indeed not to have the time to play in such a grandiose space. Looking at how Sachi consciously carves out space and time for her three children to grow to be the creative beings they are capable of, it seems physical space is not enough to guarantee headspace. Freeing up space in one's head takes effort.

The antidote to a lack of (mental) space could jolly well be a generous amount of time. With the luxury of time, many things seem possible. When time can afford to take a slow walk, you are able to discover thoughtfulness and kindness at all the little corners. For example, the cashier at the convenience store noticed the drizzle outside and asked

if I needed the plastic tag attached to the umbrella I just bought removed so that I could use it immediately.

On my first day in Tokushima Prefecture, I brought my luggage to Sachi for her help to hack away the lock to my luggage, for I had performed an impressively clever feat of locking up the only key I brought for the lock in the luggage. Her attention focused on simply the rock and hammer in her hands and the lock on my luggage. As I marveled at how present she was even when her well-stacked unwashed plates were beckoning her at the sink and her three children were waiting for dinner, the lock broke and my luggage was freed.

We often discover what we *can* do when we give ourselves enough time.

Mohammad Abdillah, 25, a former graduate of Northlight School and now a motion graphics artist at a local advertising agency summed it up well (NorthLight is a school dedicated for 13-year-olds in Singapore who failed the national exams and was where I used to teach). In an interview he once did with our national newspaper, he said that what liberated him and allowed him to gain hope and confidence in life was when he realized he is capable of learning - he just takes more time. "One thing I've realized from life is that it's okay to take your time, as long as you don't give up," he said.

I too came to discover over the years that solo travelling is possible even for someone like me who possesses limited visual spatial skills (I can get lost even within a shopping mall or a housing estate) as long as I am willing to give myself sufficient time. Time to get lost and forgive myself even when I missed that bend. Time to think and

consider the next best course of action when I take the wrong bus. Time to gather myself and find my center when feeling overwhelmed in a crowded train station where the sight of the city folks rushing and their harried footsteps could have the effect of immediately jolting up one's heart rate.

In Swedish physicist and author Bodil Jonsson's book, *Ten Thoughts about Time: A Philosophical Enquiry*, she distinguishes between the concepts of *clock-time* and *lived-time*. *Clock-time* is the objective timekeeping we all live by, and *lived-time* is one's perceived sense of time. She writes of how when we become more conscious of our *lived-time* and realize that the *clock-time* is not all-important, we will start to discover how to make use of our limited timespan in this world meaningfully. In other words, when you *believe* you have time, you get more out of life.

Indeed when you give yourself the luxury of time, you find that even though you can't really read a map perfectly, you can still figure out the general direction to a destination by using common sense and chatting to strangers along the way.

When you choose to believe you have time, you stop to make conversations -- one using Google Translate, the other using an electronic translation dictionary. You find time to be immersed in a sing-song journey with others as hand gestures are indulged in and efforts are made to correct words lost in translation.

And then, you discover stories of passion and bravery. Of how a middle-aged chap switched from being an engineer of trains to an engineer of *wagasa*, or Japanese oil-paper umbrellas because he wanted to play a part in keeping this age-old Japanese tradition alive.

These days, I stop to breathe in deeply the faint scent of jasmine flowers in my neighborhood, which I'd never smelt before this time of the year. I'd like to see that as a small victory, that I manage to slow down my *lived-time* and create a headspace that is no longer so cloistered and is freer at the start of a new decade.

Let's hope it sustains.

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