

CHOOSING RESTRAINT

We celebrate our freedom of choice. But in fact it is our options that control us – not the other way around. There are so many options available to us all the time, inviting us to choose them.

Go to any convenience store or supermarket. Go down any shopping street. Sit at your computer or take out your smartphone. Watch TV or go to the movies. In all of these places your attention will be guided. You will be reminded of all the options at hand, offering instant gratification:



These ever-present reminders of these options reinforce our use of them. They become habits. And so we indulge ourselves all the time: Why not have a sugar boost? A coffee fix? Check out the latest news or gossip? Or how about a quick look to see if your latest status update has received any likes?

The wealth of options available to us – choices to consume various products, mostly – all but paralyse us. For instance, the average American supermarket stocks 30-40 different kinds of breakfast cereal. And almost just as many different kinds of peanut

butter: Do you want smooth or chunky? Or extra chunky? Or do you prefer creamy? Or crunchy? Do you want regular, natural or organic? Or perhaps a reduced fat variety? And what if your preferred combination of natural and creamy isn't available? What is your second preferred option?

As we become unable to analyse all of the options on offer, we come to suffer from what psychologists call "decision fatigue" — as we have more decisions to make, our decisions become progressively worse. We can either agonise over every single choice we make to ensure that we pick the right option (and generally feel less satisfied because we are now acutely aware of all the options we didn't choose), or we can just pick the options that we have some sort of emotional or habitual connection to.

These are typically the options that address our weaknesses and vices rather than our strengths. These are the options that appeal to us on a habitual, subconscious level. And whenever there is a lapse in our awareness. Whenever the barrage of options overwhelm us and opens a chink in our mental armour, we follow the habitual impulse to give into these small temptations. And so we find ourselves choosing to buy things and do things that we know are bad for us. We pick options that we don't really want, but which are so alluringly easy to choose.

These options tempt us in ways that are so hard to avoid. They make us smaller and weaker than we really are. Than we can be.

And yet with every choice we make, we are constantly reminded that these are our own choices. And that we only have ourselves to blame when we make choices that are bad for us. It is our fault. Our weakness. Our addiction.

But that is a lie.

When everything we see is highlighting a certain set of options, urging and cajoling us to choose between them, it becomes fiercely difficult to choose something else.

It's very difficult to avoid having your train of thought hi-jacked by billboards and advertisements when you enter a public space. Most of us are probably so used to it by now that we don't really consider how ridiculously violating it is to have your personal, mental space flooded with unsolicited messages reminding you of your own weaknesses. The street artist Banksy [said it best](#):

People are taking the piss out of you everyday. They butt into your life, take a cheap shot at you and then disappear. They leer at you from tall buildings and make you feel small. They make flippant

comments from buses that imply you're not sexy enough and that all the fun is happening somewhere else. They are on TV making your girlfriend feel inadequate. They have access to the most sophisticated technology the world has ever seen and they bully you with it.

But it gets even worse if you make a conscious decision to avoid some of the things that talk to your weaknesses. For instance if you choose

That you don't want to watch TV because it makes you spend your time slouched, entertained and unaltered.

That you don't want to eat fast food because it makes you tired, fat and lazy.

That you don't want to use Facebook because it makes you care way too much about imaginary internet points and not enough about meeting people face to face.

No matter what reasons you offer, you will soon find yourself to be considered (and feeling) preachy and holier-than-thou.

Because if you choose to refuse something for reasons like this, then what does it say about the people who haven't made the same choice? Does it mean that they're *choosing* to be slouched, fat and unable to engage with other people face to face?

Of course not.

It just means that they are not willing to give up those options entirely. Either because they genuinely like them, and don't see them as all that problematic (there is always a balance to strike, it seems. *Soul food*, for instance, is supposedly good for the soul, but not necessarily good for the body). Or because they don't want to be seen as preachy and holy. Because they don't want to be forced to explain why they've opted out every time the topic is touched upon. As the carnivore joke goes:

- *"How do you know if someone is a vegetarian?"*

- *"Don't worry, she'll make sure to tell you."*

We don't like anybody else to remind us of our own weaknesses. We all fight that fight every day. And similarly, most of us don't like to remind others of their weaknesses. It's their choice, after all. We are all adults. We should be able to make our own decisions. We are all free to choose who we want to be.

But we only have freedom of choice to the extent that we are free to define our options. And we rarely consider all of the options that are available to us. Instead, the

options we tend to consider are guided by the norms and expectations of the society of which we are part. For instance, we don't really consider a life without advertisements — simply because of the vast social consequences that such a choice would entail. We would have to opt out of society altogether to avoid them.

And so, when we celebrate our freedom of choice, we gloss over the fact that this freedom of choice is shaped, to a large extent, by products, services and retailers that invite overindulgence, even addiction. That some options are indeed a lot easier to choose than others.

This raises the question: Which options are being left out? Which options do we come to ignore as our attention is guided towards indulgence?

We don't see the option that says "[None of the above](#)." We don't consider that we always have the option to withhold our choice or even pick something not on the list of available options. In this way, what is at stake here is more than the personal freedom to be who you want to be. It is an ideologically driven celebration of choice. And it doesn't allow us not to choose. Because at its very core is what the farmer and author Wes Jackson [calls](#) **a refusal to practice restraint**.

See, we have never had to worry about restraint before. As hunter-gatherers, we hunted and gathered as much as we could and as much as we needed. It is speculated that the first people in Northern America and Australia [killed off all of the megafauna](#) there within a few hundred years of their arrival — because they couldn't restrain themselves. It was just too easy pickings.

With the advent of agriculture, we have begun a trajectory of exploitation, where our only restraint has been the technology at our disposal. At present, we have optimised our technological exploitation of the Earth's resources in a way that seems certain to lead to the brink of depletion.

Simply put, we are running out of the stuff that is necessary to sustain us. It is a [tragedy of the commons](#) at a global scale. We cannot sustain infinite growth, infinite options, infinite freedom of choice on a finite planet. And so, it seems certain that the only way that we can prevent collapse is if we can learn restraint. We have to acknowledge [the limits of the planet](#) that we all share and depend upon.



We don't like to acknowledge these limits because that will force us to limit our freedom of choice. It will force us to recognize the fact that we can't have it all. We don't want to be told "No". Because, in the broad scale of history, we have never taken no for an answer.

That is why Wes Jackson sees this moment as the most important moment in human history, including our walk out of Africa: It is the moment where we have to learn restraint. Where we have to start living within our means — hopefully while retaining the knowledge that allowed human civilization and the exploitation of all those resources in first place.

In this way, we are faced with a fundamental challenge to the way we have come to see ourselves: Of all the options available to us, are we able to choose restraint?

Some people do opt out.

In 2011, Andrea Hejlskov, her husband Jeppe Juul and their four children moved from the busy life in Copenhagen to live [deep in the woods of northern Sweden](#). There they have built a log cabin from scratch, and live off the grid. No electricity, running water or central heating. But also without any bills, ads and distractions.

Their decision to make this drastic move arose from a frustration that their family wasn't thriving with modern life. They felt a "nagging sense of discomfort" that neither adults nor children were happy living this way. So they decided to quit.

Living in the woods has been an intense learning experience. As Andrea explains:

You have to be able to provide heat and food for yourself. It is a fundamental approach to life. Life is more hardcore out here. Sometimes it storms, and sometimes it's minus 30 degrees. It affects you.

Living in such an environment not only requires developing the skills necessary to sustain yourself. It also requires foresight and a certain toughness. If you fail to take something into account, you will face the direct consequences of that lack of foresight. So, you learn and adapt and take your bruises along the way.

But this immediate link between an action and its consequences is also incredibly rewarding, as Andrea notes:

It may sound pretty banal but it has had an incredibly positive effect on all of us that there's meaning in every single thing we do. There is a clear chain of events, and you SEE the consequences of your labour. If you chop wood, you can cook. If you fetch water from the well, you can drink squash. Everything has a logical order.

It does sound like a banal point to emphasise, but it is also remarkable how far from modern life you have to be in order to notice it: Most of the time, we don't see the consequences of our actions.

We live our lives in a way where the intimate connections between what we do and how we live have been severed. We don't have to worry whether there'll be water in the tap, heat in our radiators, electricity in our outlets, or food in the supermarket. Whether someone will take away our rubbish each week. We can take all of these things for granted. We don't have to worry about the chain of events through which these things come about. We only have to worry about earning the money necessary to buy them.

This means that our chief responsibility has been reduced to just one thing: To earn money. Not to cut firewood, fetch water or grow vegetables. But to earn money. And that is a subtle, yet very important change in how we perceive what it means to be responsible.

When responsibility is reduced to your ability to earn money, it doesn't really matter whether you earn your money through teaching, gardening, programming video games, waiting tables, building houses, trading stocks or selling guns. It doesn't matter if you sit at work and twiddle your thumbs all day, as long as you get paid. You can still pay your bills. You will still have hot water and heat and food in your fridge. You are still responsible.

Now, this doesn't mean that we don't have any other kinds of responsibilities or that we can't find any other meaning in the work we do apart from the economic incentive. Of course, most of us still do. And there is great meaning, purpose and responsibility in many lines of work such as teaching, medicine, counselling and physical labour where you can see the direct consequences of the work you do. The difference you make through your work.

But such meaning and purpose is immaterial and unquantifiable. It's not how we are used to seeing responsibility defined in a society that tend to focus solely on our economic responsibilities. And in that economic perspective, all ways of earning money are equal. Which in turn means that all ways of earning money are equally valid — and thus equally unimportant. This makes it very easy for us to lose track of the logical order of things. There is no immediate link between the work you do and the rewards you receive. So we can only measure the importance of a given job by the amount of money we can earn doing it. If you make more money working in a bank will earn than if you are growing vegetables, it follows that working in a bank is more important.

Similarly, there's no immediate link between the value of the things you buy and the chain of events that brought them to you. And so, it is easy just to take it all for granted. The water, the heat, the electricity, the food... We've never experienced life

any other way. How could it be any different? It just seems like there's an endless supply, so we feel no direct incentive to limit ourselves. We are surrounded by constant suggestions to indulge ourselves. Why would we ever choose restraint unless we were forced to do it?

Perhaps that is why so many people are so provoked by Andrea and her family's decision to opt out: Because they have chosen restraint in such a drastic fashion.

Their critics focus on all the ways they are still connected to and dependent on society: How they're still on the internet and on Facebook. How part of their income is from welfare benefits (the rest comes from Andrea's work as a freelance writer). How they still depend on roads and hospitals and other infrastructure maintained and made possible through modern society. How they are spoiled children of a rampant welfare state. How they're taking way too much for granted.

But really, it's not about what Andrea and her family still take for granted. It's really about us. They remind us of how vulnerable we all are. Of all the systems we depend on. Of all the chain of events that have to function like clockwork every day to make our lives possible. Of all the things that we take for granted. So, instead we focus on the things that make their way of life possible, on their continuing dependence on society, on us! Because we don't like to think about the logical order of things. On where our water, heat, electricity and food comes from. On what life would be like without it.

And because of this, we don't really pay attention to the things that Andrea and her family have learned since they moved to their cabin in the woods: How tough it is to give up all of our modern comforts. How honest and meaningful it is to be able to see the consequences of your labour. How aware you become as you grow more attuned to the changes in nature. And perhaps most of all: How much you depend on the people around you.

As Andrea reflects:

The local community is vital. I learned that last winter when our car broke down, we were snowed in, we didn't have enough food and we were extremely exposed and afraid. Plus there were wolves outside. In the reality we live in now "other people" aren't unimportant. I make a big effort to contribute to the local community and we make a priority of drinking coffee with people and building social relations. It's something that I hadn't expected would be a big part of my everyday life. Out here in the wild. Far away from everything and everybody.

In a way, it is remarkable that you have to move to the northern reaches of the Swedish wild, far away from everything, to realise how much we depend on each other. It is humbling. And very far from the typical Robinson Crusoe fantasies of being self-reliant somewhere on your own. As Andrea quietly concludes after describing how her neighbours helped her recover her car after an accident on a slippery winter road:

I don't know what we would have done without them.

The farmer and author Wendell Berry [relates the story](#) of an Amish farmer who was asked, “what does *community* mean to you?” He said, “when my son and I rest our horses from plowing in the spring, we usually stop them at the highest point of our farm. From that standpoint we can see thirteen other teams at work. And I know that if I get sick or debilitated or die, those thirteen teams will be at work on my farm.”

This is the realisation that we need to make: That we're all in this together. That we depend on one another – not just from time to time, but all the time. And not only do we depend on each other for help in times of need, we also depend on each other to restrain ourselves for the sake of the whole community.

Small communities have always been defined by such social restraints: Traditions, institutions, norms and expectations. Marriage is a good example, as Berry explains: “Just because you have the capacity to look with desire on every desirable woman doesn't mean that you ought to try to sleep with every one of them.”

In fact, Berry sees the institution of marriage as a kind of communal generosity. Marrying one person indicates fidelity – not just to your chosen partner, but to the whole community. It's an indication of restraint that sets others free. They may look upon you with desire, and they may be tempted to seduce you – but they will restrain themselves because of their respect of the vow of restraint that you have taken. Or perhaps because of their respect of the institution through which you took that vow.

Now, I don't think that we should return to all of the social and religious restraints of medieval village life. But I do think that we have to develop some new communal

institutions and restraints in order to maintain the stocks of resources that we all depend upon. The ecologist [Garrett Hardin](#) suggests that one solution to the Tragedy of the Commons is to make a shared agreement to limit our individual use of our shared resources. He calls it “mutual coercion mutually agreed upon.” But what might such communal restraints look like?

One example is the city of São Paulo, which [banned all outdoor advertisements](#) in 2007. Just think about that: The more than 20 million inhabitants of the world’s fourth-biggest city have agreed to restrain themselves from advertising in order to defend the commons that is the city’s public spaces. And they appear happier because of it. A 2011 study showed that more than 70 percent of city residents find the ban to be beneficial.

In a similar vein, Wikipedia, the world’s fifth-biggest website, leaves hundreds of million dollars in potential ad revenue on the table each year. They believe that advertising would cheapen the encyclopedia and threaten the neutrality and impartiality of the content. Instead, it is funded solely through donations from its millions of users worldwide.

Another example is the Israeli kibbutz Ne’ot Semadar [where I spent two months in the spring of 2011](#). In this small, tightly knit community there are no advertisements, no newspapers, no TV, no sweets, no fast food, very little alcohol, no mobile phones in the public space, and internet access was limited to the private homes or the communal internet room. And there was no need for money since there were no shops, and thus nothing to spend money on.

Going as far as they have at Ne’ot Semadar may sound draconian. But since everybody there have agreed to these restraints, it doesn’t feel that way. I didn’t feel deprived at all. Instead, I felt that I had been given more space. To meet people. To learn.

For instance, since none of us received any money for our work, we all had to consider the true importance and value of our work. Both in terms of the part our labour played in the logical order of things, but also the moral implications of it: How others depended on it. What the consequences would be if we failed to do our job properly. Working in the goat yard, I had part of the responsibility for more than 200 goats. The goats depended on me. To feed them and bring them water. To milk them. To keep them alive. If I overslept and didn’t get up in time for the milking and feeding, the goats would suffer. The consequences would be immediate. It was a very tangible sense of responsibility.

In a way, this sense of responsibility was the most important restraint of all at Ne'ot Semadar. I knew that the kibbutz depended on me to do this work. And being part of this community, I was depending on them, too. But what were the limits of this responsibility? In the beginning I was constantly fretting: Am I working hard enough? Is this acceptable? What do the others think? Having no external measure of the value of my work, I was constantly badgering myself to work harder. The only way I could know for sure would be to be done. But on a farm there's always work to do and rushing it rarely helps.

It took me a couple of weeks to realise that nobody was checking up on me. Nobody worried whether I was working hard enough. If anything they thought I was crazy to work so hard. So I stopped fretting. And I started to spend time with my own thoughts, dreams and longings. It gave me room to grow. To be – or become – me.

In a way, that was the real surprise: That living in a community with so many restraints actually made me feel more free. That I felt more free than I feel here in Copenhagen – where I have so many more options, but only under the constant intrusion of people, products and companies that are trying to influence the decisions I make. That choosing restraint, paradoxically, [made me happier](#).

How can we develop such communal restraints on a global scale?

In the long run, such restraints may well become law. But it is not likely something that will be imposed on us from above any time soon, since there seems to be very little political will to introduce restraints that break with the status quo. As the politicians would argue, it makes no sense to try and introduce laws that the majority of their constituency doesn't appear to want. You can't make legislation without popular support (well, and expect to be re-elected, anyway).

But as [Aldo Leopold](#) said, only the most naïve student of history actually believes that Moses wrote the Ten Commandments. What he did was to summarise an already existing ethic. Such an ethic of sustainability is already forming. It is a new set of social norms and practices for sustainable living that we are developing as we become more aware of how our way of living is affecting the planet.

It is an ethic we are developing by choosing restraints to limit the choices we can make, freeing us, in turn, to focus on the things that we cannot do without. But the

challenge is, as I've described above, that we are choosing these restraints individually, which weakens our resolve. We need to find new ways of articulating our choice of such restraints that makes our resolve stronger. And which makes them easier to commit to.

I am an atheist. But I agree with Alain De Botton who argues [that religions have important things to teach the secular world](#). Religious rules and vows may seem are well-respected means of communal restraint. Even though they may seem medieval and antiquated toady, most of them made good sense at their time of origin. As an anthropologist friend of mine explained, the dietary and clothing restrictions of Islam is actually very sensible practical advice for living in the desert (with the technology available in the 7th century), And so, it is quite similar to the recommendations we get from the Department of Health.

Similarly, the [ban of usury](#) once found in Judaism, Christianity and Islam was originally instituted to prevent exploitation of the poor through [debt peonage](#), which was rampant at the time (this was back when slavery was a part of everyday life). Indeed, the anthropologist [David Graeber](#) has argued that the religious restraints of Christianity were vital in changing perceptions of slavery, leading to its eventual abolition.

Now, I'm definitely not advocating starting a new religion. But I do think that we can benefit by adopting some of the same practices used by religions in order to develop and strengthen a new ethic of sustainability based on communal restraint. In fact, I think that some of these practices will make it easier to make the choices we know we need make. As the rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote:

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Humankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation.

We already have plenty of information. Plenty of facts about soil degradation, peak oil and carbon emissions. But we cannot use these facts to scare people towards sustainability. That will only lead to them to refuse acknowledging the need for restraint even more. Instead, we need to develop *an ethic of appreciation*.

Some of the most beautiful and intensely poetic religious rituals and ceremonies revolve around appreciation: Wedding ceremonies, naming ceremonies, funerals are all about appreciating love and life. That is why they move us so.

But there are also beautiful celebrations of the seasons, the Earth and the passage of

time. Like the [Jewish harvest holiday of Shavuot](#), or the Japanese festival of [Tsukimi](#) where people stand together in the autumn night, celebrating the harvest moon, reflecting on the passage of time and the frailty of life whilst drinking tea and eating rice cakes.

We often underestimate the profound love that is at the core of all religions. It is a deep, honest and humble appreciation of the world and the forces that have created it. And from that springs a deep gratitude and a great sense of moral obligation. An obligation to nurture and cherish that world.

It is through such love that we become willing to choose restraint.

How can we find this love? How can we come to feel this kind of appreciation?

I believe that all paths to such feelings are deeply personal. What affects one will not necessarily affect another. But there are some commonalities. The most fundamental of these are related to life and death. To the wondrous, unfathomable depth and richness of the many forms and shapes of life around us. And to the awareness of our own mortality and frailty. Talking of such things can easily become very abstract. So I will try to illustrate what I mean through two very concrete examples.

When the artist Frances Whitehead moved to Chicago, she started a vegetable garden behind her house. One year she planted bottle gourds — one of the first plants domesticated by man. These plants have flowers that only bloom at night and wilt in the morning. So they require nocturnal insects to pollinate them. But there aren't adequate pollinators in the Chicago area because the climate is too cold. So Frances did what all of her garden books recommended: She went out every evening and pollinated the flowers herself with a paint brush in order to get the gourds that she wanted.

But one night, she came out to find an enormous sphinx moth among the flowers. It was going from flower to flower, quietly and affectionately pollinating each in turn. Frances was awestruck: Here in this bombed-out neighbourhood of vacant homes in the middle of the city with hardly any trees — let alone nocturnal bottle gourd flowers — this moth showed up because she had planted the plant that it wanted. The plant that it had co-evolved to pollinate. Where did it come from? How did it find its destination?

Frances [recalls](#):

I became like this child. And what was revealed to me was the closest I have ever come to a mystical or theological moment. So, I guess I am now officially a nature worshipper. But what I believe that I came to worship was not nature in that kind of tree-hugging kind of way. Actually, I got a glimpse of the complexity, of inter-connectivity that was beyond my comprehension up until that point.

She saw the magical complexity of life in that moment: Something bigger than herself. And she felt like she was stepping outside of herself, and feeling a deep sense of wonderment. She came to appreciate the interconnectedness, the interdependence, of every living thing.

But just as appreciation can build on the wonderment of everything living, it is also intimately linked with death. We don't like to think about it, but with every passing day, we are one step closer to death. And it should give us pause to think.

All that we know will die. As will we. Knowing this, do we pay attention to what really matters? Do we pay enough attention to the people around us? Do we pay enough attention to what matters to them? Do we pay enough attention to ourselves? Are we making the most of it? Are we appreciating the lives we have?

In David Fincher's film *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden (the dark, anarchic club founder) [holds up a convenience store](#). Durden pulls the clerk, a poor fellow named Raymond K. Hessel, out into the alley behind the store and puts a gun to his head and tells him that he is going to die. Does he realise that? Does he want to work in a convenience store for the rest of his life? Doesn't he more from life?

Shocked and sobbing, Raymond admits he once wanted to be a veterinarian.

Durden says that he'll be watching him. That if Raymond's not on his way to become a veterinarian in six weeks, Durden will find him and kill him. Then he lets Raymond go.

Why did he do this?

To make Raymond consider his life. To make him appreciate being alive. As Durden reflects:

Tomorrow will be the most beautiful day in Raymond K. Hessel's life. His breakfast will taste better than any meal you and I have ever tasted.

Putting a gun in someone's face is a very drastic way to make your point, but it is a point worth making: What would you appreciate after somebody had put a gun to your head and threatened to kill you?

There are so many things we don't seem to appreciate. So many things we take for granted. We get caught up in churn of everyday life. We are often so busy just keeping everything rolling that we forget to enjoy it. Sometimes, we get so caught up in our goals and ambitions that we forget to appreciate all the wondrous things that happen along the way.

As Nietzsche said, "not every end is a goal. The end of a melody is not a goal." Or put in another way: You don't have to wait for the music to finish before you can enjoy it. If that was the case, all musicians would play as fast as humanly possible so that they could reach the end, and allow people to appreciate it. Life is a process. A perpetual state of becoming. An endless now. We can only appreciate it as we live it. Sometimes, we just need a little reminder.

So, where does that leaves us?

I would like to end this essay with a few concrete suggestions. But since I doubt that most people are willing to build their own an off-the-grid log cabin or to live in a kibbutz in the Arava desert, or want to go out and have somebody threaten to kill them, I thought I'd aim for something a little less radical, but perhaps even more important. Something more akin to that little magical moment that Frances Whitehead shared with the sphinx moth.

I call them *appreciative reminders*. They are humbly re-appropriated rituals that may help to remind us to appreciate our life, the world, the forces that have created it, and on which we continue to depend. And by helping us to such appreciation, they may, by extension, help us towards choosing restraint. I should note that many of these reminders are specific to the local climate and vegetation where I live. Other,

quite different reminders may be required in other parts of the world.

Breathing

Breathing is our most fundamental relationship with the world. With every breath we draw, we reaffirm our continuing dependence on the world around us. It reminds us that we do not, cannot, live in separation from the world around us. We can't appreciate every breath equally, but once in a while, take the time to savour it. Hold your breath for as long as you can and feel the thrill of life when you finally inhale. In this way, breathing can be a sacrament. That is, a metaphor that has come alive with meaning. Similar to how the bread and wine at the altar can come alive as the body of a saviour in the mouths of some (or just remain bread and wine for the mouths of others), a breath of air can come alive as the direct and immediate connection between you and the world. You are not separate from it, nor it from you. Part of it is always in you. Appreciate it as you would any other part of yourself.

Sun salutation

In yoga, the sun salutation is a sequence of poses. One of the most wellknown and widely used sequences around. Traditionalists contend that it is at least 2,500 years old, and originated as a ritual prostration to the rising sun. The sun, of course, is the source of all energy on the planet. Without the sun, Earth would be a frozen, dark lump floating through space. The flow of energy from the sun is what makes life possible. It flows through all of us every day. Greeting and celebrating it every morning seems appropriate. Just imagine what a day would be like if the sun didn't rise. So, take your time to appreciate the morning sun with a sun salutation. And you'll get a good set of stretches with which to start the day, too.

Grace

Saying grace is mostly associated with the three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But it is used in many cultures and contexts, both religious and secular. It is simply a short moment of gratitude and appreciation for all the wonder and work that has made a meal possible. From the forces of nature to all people who played a role in preparing, cultivating or hunting the food. In Japan, for instance, it is customary to put one's hands together and say "Itadakimasu" before eating a meal. It translates as "I humbly receive" — and that is pretty much all that needs to be said. It doesn't have to be a moment of great fanfare or pathos. Rather, it's a moment of quiet reflection. Saying grace is a just a simple way to remind ourselves that every meal is a gift for which we should be grateful. A reminder that we should never take our food, nor the forces that we depend on to make it, for granted.

Grace in reverse

I don't know there is any culture or religious practice where anybody actually does this, but it occurred to me that it might be appropriate. All the waste that we produce — both the organic matter such as peels, roots, stems, bones and shells that we discard when cooking as well as the urine and shit that leave our bodies — is also food. Food which other organisms in the biosphere consume with relish, turning it into nutrients that allow new plants to grow. Just as we say “Grace” when we receive food, we should say it when we pass our waste on, for it, too, is food. Every time you empty your compost bin or flush your toilet, take the time to draw a little circle in the air. A little reminder of the intimate connection between the food you eat and the waste you give. A reminder that waste is food.

Breathing together

Before initiating some shared task, it can be a great help to have a shared way of checking in and leaving your thoughts and worries behind. Breathing together is a very powerful to do just that. I've experienced it in yoga, where we begin by sitting in the lotus position and then singing three Om's together. Om is a mystical Sanskrit sound of Hindu origin, which you can chant, sing, hum or drone as a mantra. Singing it together gives a deep sense of reverberating togetherness. You can hear everybody's voices together at once, but you can't easily separate them into individual voices. It is one shared voice singing from multiple throats. Singing together means breathing together. You flow together, circulating, sharing and taking in part of each other. Tuning in to whatever you're about to do together. Through the singing and the breathing, you become present, your mind calm, reminded to appreciate this moment.

Planting

In the spring, when soil temperature reaches 6°C, the micro-organisms will wake up, and the seeds in the ground will begin to sprout. This is the time of the planting. This is when you plant the seeds that will define this year's crops. For everyone who has a garden or a plot of land (or at least has access to a garden), this should be a time for getting together. Invite your friends and family for a planting. A dig-in, a garden day, call it what you will. It will be a lovely day with good food and lots of hectic activity: Digging the garden, turning the compost, sharing seeds and seedlings, spreading the love from one garden to the next. Afterwards, take the time to visit and help others in their gardens. The planting is a reminder of the magic that is the sprouting seed. And a reminder that even a tiny seed can need a little help to grow.

Budburst

Budburst is the beautiful spring day when the buds of the trees finally burst and cascades of green begin to appear. It is the most vulnerable time of the year for the trees. They marshal their remaining strength saved up over the winter and burst

forth with fresh green leaves so that they can begin growing anew through the wonder of photosynthesis. The trees depend on these first, few weak leaves to generate enough energy to allow more buds to burst, reinforcing the process. Budburst is an occasion to celebrate spring, the resilience of life, the overcoming winter, the rising sap and the sprouting anew. So take the time to go for a long walk in a forest or wooded area. Smell the changing air, listen to hopeful chirping of the birds. Take a long, deep breath and let the spring inside.

Summer Solstice

The longest day and the shortest night. The height of summer. Build a bonfire and let it burn through the short night, marking the turning point towards shorter days and longer nights. A reminder that we get light and dark in equal measure, and that we should appreciate both equally.

Harvest

All of the crops have been gathered. All the seeds have been collected. The summer is over, and autumn is nigh. And it is time for the most important party of the year. Celebrating not only the end of all the hard work that went into producing this year's harvest, but also the bounty that we have gathered. That which will sustain us all through the winter, but which is at its ripest and brightest right now. It's time to have a feast and a dance.

Fall

The days are growing darker. The leaves are turning, and slowly falling to the ground. What was once bright green is now yellow, brown or red. It is an occasion for reflecting on the frailty of life. What grew so powerfully, so irresistibly short months ago, is already spent. Take a loved one by the hand and go for a long walk in a forest or wooded area. Maybe even the same one that you visited for Budburst. Smell the changing air, listen to the cold wind rustling through the leaves. Remember all the people who are no longer here. All that you have lost along the way. Remember that one day you won't be here either. Take a long, deep breath and let the autumn inside.

Winter Solstice

The shortest day and the longest night. The depth of winter. Stay up throughout the night with friends and family with candles and sweets. Stay awake, sing, tell stories, and play games to mark the turning point towards longer days and shorter nights. A reminder that we get dark and light in equal measure, and that we should appreciate both equally.

Depending on your sentiment, some or all of these reminders may come across as new age pseudo-spiritual babble. I invite you to find other reminders that suit you

better.

But no matter which ones you choose, I hope that they will help remind you.

Remind you to be appreciative, humble and grateful for all the wonders of life we all receive every day.

Remind you of this, perhaps the most important, moment in human history. The moment when we need to realise that we're all in this together, and that we need to develop new forms of communal restraint that allows us to take care of each other and the planet we share.

Remind you to opt for fewer, but better options. Options that don't tempt us and make us smaller and weaker than we are. Options that help us find the things that we cannot do without. Options that give us space to grow, and to become. Options that make us happier, in spite of all.

Remind you that your choice matters.