A CALL TO REST

The Rest Deficit

Picture a hammock – one of those multicoloured stripy ones. It sways back and forth gently in a light tropical breeze. The air is deliciously warm. Far below the hotel balcony, the sea (turquoise, of course) glints in the sunshine.

For many of us this is the classic image of rest, where no one requires anything from us. But it's not straightforward. Hammocks can be tricky. You have to get in without overbalancing and tipping out of the other side. You need to shuffle up or down the hammock to find a place where you can lie in comfort. You might need to get up to fetch a cushion for your head – and then go through the whole fuss and bother again. Finally, though, you achieve the right balance. A feeling of serenity washes over you. You can relax.

Or can you?

Even once you are comfortable in your hammock it can be hard to sustain the sense of restfulness. This feeling reflects our relationship with rest in general. We have an ambivalence towards it. We yearn for rest, but then feel anxious that perhaps we are being lazy. Perhaps we are not making the most of our lives.

One of the things that distinguishes us human beings from many other animals is our curiosity. Even now that many of us have everything we need to stay alive, we still want to see what is over the next hill or across the ocean or on a distant planet. We have an urge to explore, to discover more, to find meaning. Our curiosity has been key to our survival and our success as a species, but the downside of this curiosity is that it can make us restless. We always feel we must be doing something. And we have come to define 'doing something' very narrowly. It means, for most of us, being busy. And not just some of the time, but all of the time.

Yet Socrates told us to beware the barrenness of a busy life. If we're busy all the time, life lacks essential rhythm. We miss out on the contrasts between doing and not doing. This oscillation is natural and healthy. As if we are back in that hammock, we should swing back and forth between activity and rest, taking the latter as seriously as the former.

We need to rest more. And to rest better. For its own sake, of course, but also for the sake of our wider lives. Resting is good not just for well-being but for productivity. A quick search online reveals that this is the age of self-care. Whatever you think about the term, the concept is a good thing. And the best kind of self-care, I will argue, is rest.

Yet at the moment we suffer from a rest deficit. This was perhaps the most significant finding of the major survey that informs the structure of this book. The survey was called the Rest Test, and 18,000 people living in 135 different countries chose to take part. I will be returning to the Rest Test later in this introductory chapter, but, as I say, among its most important findings was that many of us feel we are not getting enough rest. Two thirds of respondents said this was

true of them and that they would like more rest. Women reported getting an average of ten minutes less time to rest each day than men, and people with caring responsibilities also had less rest. But it was younger people, both men and women, working either shifts or traditional full-time hours, who felt they rested the least.

This chimes with a general sense that younger people are stressed out and struggling to cope with life's pressures. In January 2019 a BuzzFeed article called 'How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation' went viral.[1] The journalist Anne Helen Petersen began by explaining how there were so many jobs on her to-do list that she had developed 'errand paralysis', leaving her unable to accomplish any of the tasks. Some older people are dismissive of this angst and label millennials derogatively as 'snowflakes'. But I think Petersen and her generation are on to something. Certainly, I can relate to her naming her backlog of emails her 'inbox of shame', as I currently have 50,449 emails in my inbox. The point is wider than this, though.

There's no doubt that being in your twenties today is challenging, with intense competition for university places and jobs, coupled with an all-too-real prospect, depending on where you live, that property prices might mean you will forever be forced to live the itinerant life of a tenant. On top of that, the prospect of this generation becoming more prosperous than their parents is vanishing and millennials can't expect to benefit from the generous pension schemes that still exist for some of the older generation today. But for every one of these pressures, Generation Xers and Baby Boomers have their own. Millennials might be more open about confessing it, but most, if not all, of us often feel

stressed out by a seemingly never-ending stream of tasks. Modern work practices, modern lifestyles and modern technology have combined and conspired to make life in the early twenty-first century ceaselessly demanding. Thanks to our clever phones, we feel forever on call, knowing that even when we do rest, that rest can be interrupted by anyone at any moment.

We want to rest more, we could rest more, we are perhaps resting more than we think we are – but we certainly don't feel rested.

I'm not especially good at resting myself, or I wasn't until I start focusing on the topic. When I told friends that after writing books covering emotions, time perception and the psychology of money I had started writing one on rest, their first reaction was usually, 'But you're always working. You never rest!'

If someone asks me how things are going, I tend to answer, 'Fine, busy, too busy really.' This feels true of my life, but how much is it also a claim to status? If you say you are busy then it implies you are wanted. You are in demand. As the time use researcher Jonathan Gershuny puts it, busyness has become 'a badge of honour'. In contrast to the nineteenth century, in the twenty-first century it is work, and not leisure, that gives us social status. Our busyness illustrates just how important we are, but at the same time we feel exhausted.

And yet, it is not true that I am working all the time, even when I am supposedly working. While I have been researching and writing this book, I have as often as not *not* been researching and writing it. I'm easily and often distracted by Facebook or Twitter. I constantly go downstairs to make a cup of tea. I've positioned my desk in my study upstairs so

that I look on to the street, and I'm always pleased to spot other freelance neighbours out in the road chatting. Naturally I can't resist going to join them; I hate to miss out on the news.

How much rest I get from these constant distractions is another matter. There is obviously a large element of displacement activity about them. Restlessly. I yearn to get to a place where I have done everything I need to do, where all the items on my 'to-do' list are neatly ticked off, and at last I can relax. Jobs done. Worries over. The problem is that I fail again and again to attain this blessed state, leaving me feeling unsettled and anxious even when I'm not actually doing any of the many tasks confronting me.

This rest deficit, both perceived and real, is damaging in many ways. Today, in the UK, half a million people are suffering from work-related stress.[2] In the US, 13 per cent of injuries sustained at work can be attributed to fatigue. More than a quarter of people have fallen asleep at work and 16 per cent have fallen asleep recently while driving.[3] When you add on caring responsibilities and housework and the general admin of modern life, it is no surprise perhaps that three quarters of us have been so stressed at some point over the last year that we have felt overwhelmed or unable to cope.[4]

Tiredness can have a serious impact on our cognitive abilities. A task which seems easy when you're fresh is rendered far more difficult when you are fatigued. Tiredness leads to memory lapses, a blunting of emotions, a lack of concentration, more frequent misunderstandings and impaired judgement. Not the state you want your pilot or your doctor to be in.

And the rest deficit is not only a problem for adults. In

the past two decades break times at school have been squeezed in order to accommodate more lessons. For instance, only 1 per cent of British secondary schools now have an afternoon break.[5] Yet there is good evidence showing that breaks aid concentration,[6] so cutting break times is likely to be counter-productive in maximising exam results, as well as depriving children of the opportunity to socialise or exercise.

The effects of a deficit of sleep are now well-understood and the list of problems it causes is long: an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, hypertension, pain, pro-inflammatory responses, mood disorders, memory difficulties, metabolic syndrome, obesity and colorectal cancer, most of which can shorten your life expectancy.[7] Rest has not, so far, received the same amount of attention as sleep, but there is evidence that spending time relaxing helps us to make better decisions, lowers our risk of depression, boosts our memories and means we catch fewer colds.

So I will argue that it is just as important to rest well as it is to sleep well. This book is a call to rest. We need to start valuing it, validating it, vaunting it. Rest is not a luxury, it's a necessity. It's essential.

But what is rest anyway?

The Essence of Rest

Free Fulfilling Warm Restorative Dark Recumbent
Dreamy Delicious Cool Clarifying Quiet Necessary
Mindless Sublime Safe Serene Healing Precious Private
Yearned for Unthinking Uplifting

These are some of the words the 18,000 people who took part in the Rest Test used in answer to the question 'What does rest mean to you?'

But here are some other words they used about rest.

Feeble Fragile Fidgety Challenging Aching Annoying
Guilty Unjustified Idle Irritating Indulgent Selfish
Elusive Worrying Waste of time

Rest clearly means different things to different people. Medical research papers often use the terms sleep and rest interchangeably. But rest is more complex than sleep because there are so many different ways of doing it. To be clear, the rest I'm talking about involves any restful activity that we do while we're awake. The list could, of course, be endless, so this book will only focus on some of the more popular forms of rest. As for sleep, you might drift off to sleep in the middle of resting. You might even fall asleep while reading this book, which is not necessarily a bad thing. But sleep and rest are clearly not the same.

For a start, rest can involve physical exertion, sometimes of a strenuous kind, such as playing football or running. For some people, it is the tiring out of the body through vigorous exercise that allows the mind to rest and it is during physical activity that restfulness is achieved.

That said, for many others the feeling of restfulness tends to come after the physical activity has been completed. We must all have enjoyed the delicious satisfaction that comes from resting after hard work or the achievement of a goal. Just as 'the sleep of the labouring man is sweet', as it says in Ecclesiastes, so, I like to say, is the rest of the energetic woman.

But while rest can be animated, it can also be sedentary. Sitting in a comfy chair or lying in a hot bath are popular ways to rest, as we shall see. And it isn't just the physical relaxation that is so valued; many people feel that it is not until their bodies are fully rested that their minds are able to rest. But here again, views differ. For some people, rest involves expending no mental effort, while other people relax by reading *Finnegans Wake* or doing cryptic crosswords.

For most of us, another thing rest is not, is work. Two thirds of people believe that rest is the opposite of work. But this view might depend on how you define work. It's possible that you would prefer a day in the office or on the shop floor if the alternative were spending the day looking after young children at home or caring for an ill relative. And then there are those people who seem to find weekends and holidays away from the buzz of their jobs anything but restful. Many of us might wonder whether such people need a better work/life balance, but exactly where the right balance lies will always be a subjective matter. Certainly, enforced rest through unemployment or illness, when the balance tips too much into inaction, leaves us not restful but restless. We want to be up and out, but we are trapped by circumstance in miserable inactivity. And think of the pain of depression, which can leave people unable to get out of bed, sunk in a physical lassitude that is both relentless and exhausting. Or consider prisoners, lying on their bunks in their cells for hour after hour. There is no real rest in such a condition.

In getting to the essence of rest it is worth considering its origin as a word. The Old English word ræste is derived from the Old High German word rasta and the Old Norse word rost, which in addition to 'rest', in the sense we understand

it, also meant 'league of miles', or 'distance after which one rests'. So the etymology strengthens the notion that rest comes after or through activity. If all you do is rest you will not feel rested, but after a certain point rest is needed and deserved. You are then in a state of proper restfulness.

The research I'm featuring in this book bears this out. People who told us they felt fully rested had well-being scores twice as high as those who say they needed more rest. But there is, it seems, an optimal amount of rest that is good for us. Above this point, well-being levels begin to drop again. And, as I have discussed already, the nourishing effect of rest seems to disappear completely once it's enforced. It's all a matter of achieving the right balance.

It might help if we could all have a personalised prescription for the right dose of rest for our individual needs, but though doctors often do prescribe rest, they are vague about the type and amount. 'Get some rest,' they say. But does that just mean staying in bed? Or should we do our favourite hobby or go out to see our friends, if that's what we consider restful?

The fact is we are all on our own on this one. It is a case of self-diagnosis and self-prescription. But that doesn't mean we can't learn from others. Everybody rests in their own way, but there are many common elements to the different ways we choose to rest.

The Rest Test

I've referred to it already, but underlying some of my thinking in this book are the results of a major survey called the Rest

Test. It stemmed from two years I spent as part of a multi-disciplinary team, many of whose members were from Durham University, studying rest. That'll be easy, friends joked, on hearing that we had been lucky enough to win a grant to become the first residents on the fifth floor of the Wellcome Collection in London. You can just sit around and laze about.

We didn't, of course (although we did obtain a hammock which proved popular with visitors). In our group there were historians, poets, artists, psychologists, neuroscientists, geographers and even a composer – all talented, driven, high-energy people. We threw ourselves into the project and over the two years produced an exhibition, a book, many public events, academic papers, poems and original musical compositions, one of which was premiered on BBC Radio 3. Our home was on the constantly busy Euston Road in the middle of London. We called our team Hubbub.

Our name was carefully chosen. It acknowledged that for many of us the hub and bub of life, the hurly-burly, drowns out peace and quiet and the chance to rest. It also alluded to the fact that in the modern world meaningful rest comes not from abandoning our busy lives but through making adjustments and achieving a better balance between work, rest and play.

It was halfway through our residency, that the Hubbub team launched our online survey called the Rest Test on the two BBC radio shows I present – *All in the Mind* on Radio 4 and *Health Check* on the World Service. In the first part of the survey people answered questions about how much rest they get, how much they would ideally like and which activities they find most restful. In the second they filled in

questionnaires measuring personality, well-being and the tendency for the mind to wander.

When we launched the survey, we were taking a gamble. We had no idea how many people would be interested enough in the topic of rest to spend up to forty minutes completing the questionnaire. But it turned out that rest was a pressing issue for a large number of people all around the world. As I've mentioned already, 18,000 people living in 135 different countries took part. We were astonished and delighted by this level of response.

For this book, what I've done since is to investigate in detail each of the top ten activities which people who took part in the survey told us they considered restful. There were some surprises. Spending time with friends and family, for example, didn't make it into the top ten. It came in at number 12. This might seem strange, considering that many people say connecting with others is what human life is all about. Decades of research in positive psychology has shown that it is not success at work, health, money or intelligence that the happiest people have, but enjoyable relationships with other people. William Morris said, 'Fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death.' But bear in mind that we were not looking for the activities which people found most enjoyable or that made them happiest or that they most valued, we were after what they found most restful. And it is notable in that context, that the top five most restful activities are all often done alone. It seems when we rest, we very often want to escape from other people.

Another activity that didn't make the Rest Test top ten is my personal favourite, gardening. While not physically restful,

gardening allows my mind to switch off like no other activity and it is how I rest best. Through gardening I get to spend time in the open air, and to feel the soil between my fingers, and – sometimes – the sun on my back. I like the fact that while I put a lot of thought and effort into my garden, most of the work is done by nature when I'm not there. And I get to enjoy the beautifully satisfying results. Though not every time. The weather makes gardening ever unpredictable. Experience helps, of course. Over time you gradually learn what works in your soil and what doesn't. Experts can advise you, but a hot spell or a cold spell or a wet spell – or slugs or snails or squirrels or foxes – can mean your effort is wasted. You never quite get your garden to be perfect, but it always feels as though, if everything aligns – and it might – then there is a chance of near perfection. This is what makes it so compelling; like all the best games, it's the exquisite combination of skill (right plant, right place) and luck (right weather, right time).

But, as I say, gardening didn't get into the top ten, and neither did arts and crafts, nor having pets. And there is one other omission which might surprise you. When people were free to put down any activity at all, in their own words, spending time online or on social media didn't come high on the list as restful. We may spend increasing amounts of time browsing the internet, uploading selfies or checking social media. But although we do it a lot, and often enjoy it, we seem to know it doesn't make us feel rested. In the following chapters you will see what did make the cut.

I hope I will provoke you to rethink rest and to consider its place in your own life. By the end of the book, I'd like

each individual reader to have taken away a prescription or a fresh way of thinking about how they use their time.

So, in the rundown of our worldwide top ten activities, I'll be looking hard at the evidence. Spending time out in nature among the trees may sound lovely, but can we prove it is restful? And by prove it, I mean somehow measure the positive benefits in a robust scientific way. Along the way, the book will overturn a few contemporary assumptions – that mindfulness can help most people with depression, that watching TV is a waste of time or that daydreaming is something we should always fight.

The same activities won't work for everyone, but this book will, I hope, help you see which might work for you. Not every activity will appeal to all of us, but every one has something to teach us about how to achieve restfulness. And the more you know about how important restful activities are, I find, the easier it is to do them deliberately and without guilt. Like the music charts, the Rest Test top ten is counted down in reverse order, starting with the tenth most popular restful activity, and ending with number one. I'm happy to tell you from the outset that the most popular activity turned out to be reading. You know what they say about the wisdom of crowds: 18,000 people can't be wrong. Enjoy the book, things don't get any more restful than reading, it seems, and what could be more restful than reading a book about rest?