

Time Out

By Neil J Hart

Stop.

As we grow older we begin to slow down. Merely and totally. Our appearance and our perceptions slow to a veritable halt. With the end so imminent, why do we disregard all that we have spent so long looking after?

Do we suddenly begin to slow or have we been slowing since the day we were born? And are we continually growing with boredom as the elusive expectance of life slowly ebbs away? Disappointment beyond measure.

Has our boredom been growing ever since inception? Did we spring from the womb and gaze around the room, filled with wonder, only to have the first sparks of boredom trigger inside our heads? Was our mere conception even remotely exciting? Did the writhing bodies, whose fluids induced our existence, even enjoy the experience or were they merely alleviating the boredom too?

I wonder about these things as I wander through my local town. It's not a very exciting town. I've yet to visit one that is. This one is filled with slow moving people. They plod from kerb to kerb, supermarket to supermarket, bank to bank. They withdrawn cash, they spend it, they go somewhere and earn it. Withdraw, spend, earn. The cycle of life spinning inexorably. The boredom smothered by actions to prevent it rising again into the forefronts of our minds. It's always there – boredom – lurking behind the façade of an enjoyable and fulfilling life.

There is a place in my town where the cycle has broken down. It's more like a full stop than anything else. Spherical but motionless. There's a place where all life has come to a halt.

The people in this place display signs of life because they talk, breathe and eat but that is seemingly all they do. They sit a lot too. They wait. They are always waiting. It's not just old people that I see in this place. There are all sorts of people here but somehow they all seem to have flipped on the pause button. They seem to have a common interest though. It's as if they have all seen the bigger picture and decided to sit in this place - talk, smoke and wait.

It's a bus shelter. Actually it more of a depot. About sixteen bays in all. I haven't actually counted though. Beside each bay is a selection of benches which are continually full with despondent travellers. Vending machines huddle up for warmth in dark corners of the depot as Dave's newsagent-come-café stinks eternally of fried food and satisfied dustbins. The wind rushes from end to end blowing magazine insertions up into obscure trajectories and helps polystyrene cups make their way between the on coming feet.

It's the kind of place you only want to visit if you absolutely have to. I'm convinced that most of the people here are doing just that. They sit looking uneasy as the trash wanders by, scanning the broadsheets to escape the stench of the frying gristle and avoiding the dirty looks of the permanent inhabitants of this dump. Yes, people live here. I'm sure of it.

Every time that I have visited the bus depot I have seen these people. They are there morning, noon and night. I've made myself pass through the bus depot to catch these people as they shift from bench to bench scavenging what they can. They don't dig

through the bins or anything. They merely sit. They seem to scavenge for information, for an essence of life, attention or entertainment. They seem to be there for no reason other than the presumption that they have nowhere better to be. Perhaps they do have somewhere else to go and perhaps I have just never seen them leave. Maybe they go home at the end of a long day sitting in the bus depot; eat, sleep and then go back to the bus depot once more. Perhaps they even take the bus to get there.

Maybe the depot has some kind of spirituality for them. A church for the unholy, the unwashed and the intolerable. Strangely, I feel at home here with these people. The longer I spend with them, no matter how impersonal our relationships are, the more I begin to see what they find attractive.

I'm beginning to stop too. Did I ever start? Did *we* ever really get going? Are we all just lined up waiting for the starting gun or have we actively set ourselves running, through the pressures and encouragements of society and the media? Perhaps we were never meant to get going and are missing out on all the wonders that life has to throw at us - consumed with deadlines, relationships, consumable items and cultural icons.

Turning on the spot to a blur. A sun drench sky that smells of fruit juice and freshly baked bread. The ground opens up and swallows us whole. A temporal idea disguising the vortex and confusion.

Look.

I can't say how many die-hard Bus Stoppers there are. They come and go. New becoming old. Used up and worn out. Am I still observing them? Perhaps they are all observing me? Observing everyone and everything? They sit on the benches next to each

bay and gaze around the depot as if it were the first time they had seen the place. They appear continually filled with amazement by people that sit next to them, people that walk by, talking, arguing, smoking or searching in their pockets for spare change.

Everything is a little miracle to them. Every sideways glance, raised eyebrow, sneeze or mumble. Every sound too turns their heads. Pushchairs squealing around the tight chicanes of waiting feet, the birds' shadows flash across the floor, the rain pours, the conversations mix with the blaze of Radio One. All of them appear as enchanting as magic.

They don't twitch but they seem to be connected somehow to it all – alert like a pack of wolves. They've obviously been here so long that they are aware of any change to their routine. I'm sure that they could dictate what will happen at any particular time on any given day. Perhaps the mundane nature of their lives is the only thing that makes them want to breathe.

I can think of little that makes me want to breathe any more. Being in the bus depot has given me a new hope. I new outlook on life that helps me picture myself as a seventy year old. Until now I have never been able to picture myself old and wizen, with greying hair and a furrowed brow. I simply can't get passed an image of a thirty year old me. I have always radiated unhappiness in these projections. My face bares the signs of a contented adult. My posture and appearance issue notions of a semi-detached house in Croydon or Sutton, pregnant wife, Vauxhall Vectra, fat Christmases, picnics in the south of France, pension plan, a treasured wedding album, memories so loving that a feel weak when I dwell on them, healthy, fit and raring to go. However, I'm always drawn to what's behind the skin and there I find nothing but a blank.

A big fat zero. Like a vacuum coated in Versace and DKNY.

I'm sure there are emotions beyond the flesh, something pumping through the veins, something human lurking in the depths of this shell. This ideal of my future has haunted me for the last five years and it will soon be coming true. *Would* be coming true. The depot has given me a new insight of the external and more importantly the internal.

Instead of seeing myself I now see everyone else. I watch them as they pass by. The emotionless vacuums circle me; ask the time, bitch and moan, comment of the weather, rustle their papers and fidget in their seats. During their stay at the depot they are hollow shells like I was, making their way to the arenas where they can find contentment, recognition and affection. Home. Job. Family.

Does this bus depot just suck out all of the humanity that these people possess? Do they turn in on themselves whilst waiting in line, concealing their resentment for everyone and everything that they see and feel? It's as if there's not enough time to get to know anyone in their short term at the depot and they release a cold absence in defence.

People only seem to bother with what they need to propel themselves to the next steak house or gas station on the highway of their little lives. "If it's not going to aid us then why burden ourselves with it?" What concerns me is that we could be missing out on the most pivotal person in our lives.

It's impossible to comprehend how fate and destiny ever come along. The theory is no longer relevant – unless our fate and destiny is to ignore everyone except those who we are forced too or deem relevant. What a thoroughly depressing thought. The need to breathe escapes me once more.

Listen.

They never speak. Sure, they make noises, but they never utter anything that can be construed as language. Perhaps language has become as irrelevant as fate and destiny to them. I guess they don't need it anymore. I'm sure I don't.

They do like to listen however. I've watched them all. Tuning themselves into every snatch of conversation, every bus engine, every lip smacking bite of a pre-packaged sandwich and every silence. It's part of the scenery to them. I can hear it too. It's so definitive. The clarity becomes immense after you really sit and listen. There's so much more here than merely sound. So much beyond the obvious, the clear and the presumed.

I watch people having conversations, paying attention to their eyes and seeing if any of them are really listening. Most of the time they are talking to avoid feeling uncomfortable. They show off, trying to impress each other with their intellect or humour. Isn't it sad that they aren't really listening to each other? They're all just trying to figure out where this person stands in relation to them - above, below or on a par. Nobody really believes in being on a par with anyone else despite saying that they do. It's above or below. People you know are below. Icons and Heroes are above. It's black and white. You can hear it in their voices, all talking down to each other and counting the points as they win their intellectual battles.

Of course they don't even talk to us. The ultimate 'below'. We're not worth a single word. Those who do speak to us are the lowest intellectual points scorers. They have simply lost to every battle and we are merely the last hope for their self-esteem.

I sit here and contemplate my own arrogance too. I believe that I see and hear everything that they do and everything that they do not. I can hear the sounds between the sounds, behind them, underneath them and through them. The sounds that are not listed in any manual. The words between words. The real meaning and direction of their language. They wield it like toy to humiliate and impress – I use it to read the truth. I see what they do not and all that they do. I see what they want to see and what they hate to look at. It's easy when you try. We all need to try a little. Make that connection. Believe in ourselves. Construct an opinion and an ideal for the way we are and the way we want to be viewed. For too long now people just inspire one another and nothing more. There's no originality left. It's all just a food blender of the same ideas and concepts swishing around, changing colour, changing shape and altering perception. With this clarity all I see is the same dull void dressed up as a unique personality. Once in a while I may see someone that glows. They stand out like a sequin clad ballet dancer in a performance of MacBeth. They are truly unique, as with all unique people, they are totally unaware. It does make me sad to see them almost floating by, mildly contented, unassuming, clear thinking and care free. They are normally misread as lazy, rude and obnoxious. People feel threatened by them but they don't know why. It's easier to label them as misfits and cast them aside than it is to understand. Clumsy, empty and forever hopeful.

Time.

At night the bus depot is quiet. It's cold and bleak. This is the best time. It's our bus depot once again. It's as if we have regained the territory from the evil invaders that purge it from us every morning. This is our cycle. Invasion and recapture.

Learning anything takes time and that is what I am running out of. I have mastered it all now as you have heard. From the beginning to the end I have encountered a million lives, a billion sounds and the occasional angel. My boredom has never reared its' head throughout my life in the depot. I have found my nirvana. My Elysian fields. I too should stop soon and allow the sounds and the people to live on without me. I will take the essence of them with me when I go, for these sounds and these people are the non-digitised map of my existence. Perhaps people will find a new way like I have. Perhaps some of them will come to the bus depot and never leave. Perhaps they will find their own bus depots in friends or alcohol or sin. I guess we all have a place that we need. This was mine. I loved this place. It made me smile. It kept me warm. It kept me breathing. Sadly, the breathing ended and all I had to show for my life was happiness, fulfilment and enthusiasm for the next step. I watched too many people worry about these things. Concerned that death would come along before flares were back in fashion. Mixing their minds up with solving life's little games and not going and enjoying the puzzle. Futile exercises. Misplaced trust. Unavoidable misery.

Time Out.

So short. We fade. We forget. Forgotten.