

State of the Day

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Imagine Your Island

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DAWN

Good morning,

Seated opposite to me is my sister. We're on an island, an island right next to Terschelling. She's snooping around Delpher, an online archive. From time to time, she excitedly reports about her findings: '1832, cholera outbreak. Stay calm.'; 'Spanish flu, 1 child at school in Baarn'; '1918, cinema main source of contagion', '1877. No more nose picking.'

I've never heard of this search engine before, but the exhilarated cries make it clear that it is full of goodies for historians who - and that's a good thing during a pandemic - no longer have to leave the house to dig for parallels with the present. For this occasion, I have been asked to write about the future, it must be imaginary, looking for new kinds of "shared experiences". Delpher is useless to me, I want a crystal ball. Although?

In an online quote carousel, I scatter my time by reading statements about the connection between past, present, and future. 'The pearls of tomorrow are found in the ruins of the past.'; 'If you don't learn from the past, you will get new lessons in the future.' 'The present is pregnant with the future,' Denis Diderot. Another Frenchman, Flaubert: "The future torments us, the past stops us, that's why the present escapes us."

Aha! He who wants to read the future needs to understand the present. He who wants to understand the present needs to embrace the past. He who learns from that does not need to design a utopia or become a visionary. Delpher is my crystal ball.



I scatter time, type *Oerol* in Delpher. Keywords from newspaper headlines from the last century reveal that Oerol has been an endangered species for a long time. Shortage, subsidies, discount, free artistic performances, disappear. I type *islands*. People are isolated on islands, alone together. After that *Alone together*. In 1895 an article headline in the *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* talks about the danger of cycling for women. First she went on a bicycle ride with her husband. Then by herself for a while. Now she's not going any more. At least not *alone, together* sometimes for short rides. I note: some things remain the same for a long time (artists threatened), others advance (women can ride bicycles perfectly well, together and alone, that wheel does not have to be reinvented).

'Alone together!' has also changed substantially. As a reminder, it was converted into THE slogan for solidarity for this pandemic. It means that we can do it by ourselves *together*. But also that we are alone *together*. It appeals to humanity as one large collaborative group during our solitude. For a while, the slogan worked as well as it sounds. All together in the same boat. There was something blissful and comforting about the anxious situation: during the first existential experiences of the virus, we were all truly equal, because we are mortal. The British philosopher Alain de Botton once expressed this beautifully in *Status Anxiety*: once face to face with death, status differences disappear: bohemian and bank manager immediately become equals. Face to face with the pandemic, we were freed from political identity battles and forced to work together as one group. With a common enemy (the virus) on our doorsteps, differences immediately disappeared.

It did not last long. It quickly became clear that certain groups in poor conditions were hit harder than others - Afro-Americans, labour migrants - and that one group made large - perhaps too large - sacrifices for the other groups: vital young people, children, students, entrepreneurs, for the vulnerable, the elderly, the overweight. One's boat was not the other's boat.

I'm not an entrepreneur, nor a hairdresser, and don't work in the events industry either. So I prefer to whisper it softly. I miss the quarantine sometimes - meaning: the strange existential sensation of the very first week, when all social layers were shaken off, the word 'surreal' was mentioned constantly as if we had ended up in an imaginary space, re-sorting who was crucial, who was not, everything grunted to a halt and I looked out the

window and didn't know what the future would bring. Thrown back on the smallest group to which I belong: myself. With the greatest mystery of life as experience: existence.

The group trouble has started again. It's not corona that's trending, but a fight between a mayor and a minister is. And if that discussion is leading the focus away from the discussion about racism. And whether the discussion is the right discussion about the discussion. The old normal.

I'll just keep scattering time for a while longer, the quote carousel is turning. One Eastern wisdom teaches us that "Whatever difficulties you may have had in the past, you can make a new start today.'

If we want to achieve a shared experience, or group solidarity, then the daily imaginary philosophical exercise of a common existential threat - from our recent past - offers a solution.

History is knocking on the door, the future is already here.

