

HELP !!!! I Need A Break

With traffic jams on the city roads continuing without any let up, this is the third day in a row on which I have been late. It's 10:30 am, only two hours more for the lunch at Delimarket. Or should it be the 'Alt Heidel Berger the German restaurant?. A ping of guilt eats through me like a knife as catch myself thinking about lunch when there are executives in this building who have been here for five hours already. Well, may be four. Anyway, they have been productive for nearly all the time I have been snailing through traffic, listening to inanities sprouted by radio disc jockeys, who always seem to have that extra flush of adrenalin activating their vocal chords in the mornings.

Look at all the serious activity going on in the office with only the sounds of the airconditioner fans humming, a solemnity one can only expect to find in a church or temple. But, this is an office. The sudden sharp ring of a telephone breaks the silence, laughter is heard from one corner of the office and the muted whispers of office staff over tea and mid-morning sandwiches from another corner. And to think that I haven't had my morning coffee yet. Actually, I am lying Last night a little past midnight to be precise - I decided to have all the coffee I would need for the morning, to sort of get it out of the way. So, I am sort of ahead, if you look at it that way. I didn't sleep well, but then I didn't expect to. I never sleep well anymore, but I am not at that stage where I'd want to pop valiums at odd times in the nights. The issues I am dealing with are so important, I need to use the crucial quality time between mid-night and pre-dawn to think about things. Trouble is, I have difficulty remembering the things I came up with, then. For a while I tried to write them down, but then I'd get up several hours later and read them, they would read like "Pararajasinghem to quantify liquidation issues", which meant nothing to me.

insight that did survive the morning would be a great one indeed, having been thought up in the deepest reservoirs of night, when all minimum distractions are burned away. Since then, I've remembered very little. It's just as well. I have too much to remember anyhow. The other day I sent my boss a voice mail that went this way: "Stanley, I have to talk to you about that Embilipitiya thing. Call me at home. My number is 681...er... 618...er...518...er...612...er...9...8.. I have to call you back". I had forgotten my home phone number. That's how busy I am. I'll tell you what it feels like. Just imagine me in my friend Haren's turbocharged Toyota Starlet, whizzing downsouth on a starry night, on the Hikkaduwa coastal stretch, headed for

who knows where. To an onlooker, I am just a blur, a point of light vanishing into the night, another star between here and there. That's what I am, no slowing down on the thrilling ride this side of life.

My desk looks natty, cleaned to shine by the diligent office peon, papers piled up as if it's in some sort of order. It's not. Innumerable memorandums mandating action, reaction, filing, smiling, dialling, piling. Here's one dating from last year (early last month really), from Administration in which I am required to go thoroughly into the question of travel claims to the Finance which has hit the limit and is going on turbocharge. I have been told to put the breaks on that one. Some action is required. But what?

The phone is ringing. It's Sanath. He's in his new office and wants to say hello. I say hello. I'm reading while I say hello. He's reading while he says hello too. After a while we both realize that we are reading while we are saying hello and we give up this charade of hail fellow.

Three memos announcing dealer conferences at hotels, meetings with local and foreign buyers with luncheons thrown in that I may or may not get to, even though I should, and invitations to events I would like to be invited to but not attend. Now, the phone rings again and this time it's Connie from the Kahawatha group, who is dealing with transitional issues, and it takes me a little time to figure out what he is talking about, finally I get it and so we both grab our books and set up a meeting next week to talk about potential synergies which in another context means the combined effects of drugs on organs that exceed the limit of their individual effects.

While I was on the phone, more calls come in. There are more reams of fax messages all folded up but still occupying a good part of my desk, and my voice mail light on my brand new Suntel is on. I look over my fax messages. They all stink. I hate these messages. Not one of them is a happy message. I call my friend Gabadamudalige in order to talk to somebody unrelated to anything serious, but while the phone is ringing in his private office I see Douglas standing in my doorway in need of some kind of guidance. A wave of guilt hits me and I hang up on my friend and attempt to be managerial. While I do, I watch the Suntel voice-mail wink at me like some obsessive intrusion on my time management scenario.

When Douglas is gone, I listen to my voice-mail. One message brings news that sales are down in the provinces, a fact that will have to be dealt with the dealers. A lot of what I do is dealing, with dealers occasionally going berserk on hotel dance

floors after a hectic morning meeting, an equally hot tie booze session and a heavy lunch with drinks following again. I get Mangalika down to the hall to draft out a quick circular to the guys, plan out arrangements for a few more meetings and let the issue at hand dance away for later.

The other call is from a former shareholder, who wants to chat about Kattadiyas whom he fears are directing psychic vibes across at him. A third seems to be from someone who thought it amusing to use up all the space on my message timer talking inconsequential gibberish. I have to listen to the entire thing in order to erase it.

Now it's time to meet up with the executives at Investor Relations. I realized I haven't been to the bathroom for four hours. On my way out of the door, my phone on the direct line rings and in next-to-no-time it's the internal and still another from the main office exchange. I summon Roshini to help. I know each of them are important enough not to be ignored. But how to manage even with Roshini's help? I keep hopping on one foot hoping this will make the calls 20 faster. They don't. Each call is about something very large. One is about a hefty buffalo wallowing in the mud and refusing to move out to fresher herbage. Another is about a stag with its antlers stuck in the branches and needing rescuing. The last call had something to do with Sleczy Sambo personal affair, but serious enough to merit attention. When I hung up, Murad and Maya from Investor Relations turned up. They are nice, and I am glad to see them.

During the meeting. I realize that I have moved beyond the area where bodily needs interject themselves. I am too busy to have a body. I am pure spirit. It's an interesting experience. I am nothing but action. I am making decisions.

**I have no idea
what to think
about that!**

**I need to
figure it out
quickly!**

But how can I?

**My phones
are ringing!**

My ears are ringing!

My mind is reeling!

**There aren't
enough of me!**

i am implementing plans. I am making things happen. Intention passes through me. I am a transparent vector giving directions to the will of the corporation. But I am no angel, so I am thirsty too.

The phone is ringing. Now, I've got to go to a staff meeting. During the meeting, I am inundated with calls, including one from a footloose old college mate who wants me to join him for a drink. I tell him firmly I just wouldn't be able to manage it today or in a long time. When I return to my room I have an umpteen number of voice mail messages, each of which must be listened to in its entirety before it is erased. While I'm listening, I get even more messages. The phone is ringing, two phones are ringing. Four phones are ringing. All the phones are ringing. All the phones in the world are ringing. and I answer them. Now it's no joke. I have to get away. But I can't get away. I am afraid of what I find when I get back. I get up, but the phone is ringing again. I answer it. There's another meeting up on the fourth floor Must go

to the 4th even if it means having to jump out! I go to the elevator, go up and realise I have overshot six floors. Must get off fast. Can't do when the blessed elevator is still on the move and time for me stands still. Only for a moment...

In the elevator I realise My God! It's 3 o'clock. I didn't have lunch! Should I go across to the Delimarket where they switch from lunch to dinner? Should I have a late lunch or early dinner?

The phone is ringing. It's Fathima our office manager, and she wants to talk about my budget. What about my budget? I need assistance. Must have a meeting about it. Later. Meet later. While I talk, the phone is ringing. I switch back to listen to a message. It was Bandula, now a planter at Bandarapola. He's hit town. Would I like a drink? Damn right I would!

Dilhani pops in. There's a party for Kristal. Liked Kristal. She's leaving because she got a better job. I am Love to say bye to Kristal. Can't. Too busy. Look! A call from Miki Abeysekera who wants me to formulate an opinion on personal relations in business, to be used in an article for 'Business Today' on the ethical implications of strikes. I have no idea what to think about that! I need to figure it out quickly! But how can I? My phones are ringing! My ears are ringing! My mind is reeling!

There aren't enough of me! I need one of me in my office, one in a meeting, one on the phone, one at drinks with frivolous people, one dealing with politicos in business, one at home in bed with my wife. I return calls on the cellular on the long, slow drive to my suburban home. I am making my way through traffic in two lanes, three lanes, four lanes, five lanes.

Now, I am behind a packed bus with tired office workers clinging on to hand rails looking like some weird creatures from another world, crouching and falling over each other, some asleep on their feet. A car, chauffeur-driven with an executive or company boss asleep too, whizzes past me on my left. I follow, only to get lost in the maze with other drivers honking and making obscene gestures at me. Exhaustion is plainly visible on the faces of female office workers in vans specially meant for them. They are either asleep, or yakking about the day's events in their respective dens or what will happen on the next day, the next and the next ad infinitum.

All of them deserve a break. I deserve a break. I have my break at last. Finally, I am home. My dog Bingo does a happy welcome dance barking around me in circles. My

children surround me too trying to get in a word edgewise while I talk some more on my cellular phone. At 11 o'clock I fall asleep only to be awakened by Madugalle who wants to update me on the Chanaka issue, in which this sterling employee is reputed to have misbehaved with a female employee and was rewarded with a punch in the stomach and a letter announcing the woman's intention to sue. He says he didn't do it. The call ends at midnight, and I fall asleep and dream that my office floor has been completely transformed to appear like the confused pieces in some gigantic jigsaw.

Hey. Where am I? My wife is fast asleep beside me. It is 3 o'clock in the morning again. Good thing I've got three hours until I have to get up. Plenty of time to dispel bad memories and dreams. Even to catch a small snooze. Then, it's time to get into my suit and do it all over again.

Man what a life.



by Arthur Hadley

Kind of fun, isn't it, machchan?