

THINK
CLEARLY



Annual Report 2018

**The way I want to
remember 4
Summer in Denmark 7
A work-home 13
Business with friends 17
A year of podcasting 20
Luxury or purpose 25
Just time to play 29
The next quest 31
Looking ahead 35**



The high school where I met my wife.

**The way I want to
remember things**



2018

On December 15th, 2017, just before the end of last year, I had started a new full-time job with a fancy title, a significant salary boost and permission to spend my Fridays teaching at Parsons. As I walked into 2018, I was feeling cautiously optimistic: this could be great. However, by the end of March it had become clear that this job was not the right fit for me. We arranged a mutually satisfactory transition agreement, which gave me a bit of time to wrap things up properly. I felt slightly scared and a bit disappointed, yet also proud that I had dared to let go. I was ready to plunge back into the uncertainty of freelancing, solo-consulting and job-searching, which had been my reality since I left Hyper Island in early 2016. Once again, everything was possible. What follows is the story of what happened.

Writing this report is part of my quest for personal freedom. I don't want to be limited to whatever experience I had of an event in the moment. By remembering and writing down my most important experiences of the past year, I give myself a chance to revisit, refocus and reframe. It's not about ignoring facts and inventing fictional memories. Rather, it is about intentionally making choices about what is more important, and thereby using the plasticity of our human memory to my own benefit. This report represents the way I *want* to remember the year.

With love
Mathias
— Chairman of my life



“People often ask me if I ever miss Denmark. I really don’t. But I frequently miss my Grandmother. She turned 93 this year, and while I try to call her on the phone as often as possible, it’s just not the same as being face to face.”

Summer in Denmark

It was the night of April 1st. Emboldened by my very recent decision (just a few days prior) to transition out of a stable, full-time job, and thus liberated from the constraints of a corporate vacation policy (“thou shall take no more than two consecutive weeks”) we decided to book flights to Denmark for the summer. The whole summer. Seven full weeks for the entire family. When we hit ‘confirm’ it felt crazy. In retrospect I don’t actually think we could fully comprehend how crazy this decision really was. It just seemed like something that we had to do, and now was the time. If not now, then when? My wife and I both grew up in Denmark, our families are there, yet Noah, our oldest had only been to Denmark when he was 9 months old. Uma, our middle child had never been. And Juno, our youngest had been with my wife when she was three months. This would be our first trip ever as a family of five. Exactly three months and one day later, two weary adults, three kids and a bunch of suitcases and backpacks were thrown into two taxis headed to JFK.

It’s probably the toughest thing I have ever done in my life. Not just the air travel, but the entire ‘vacation’ was more challenging both physically and emotionally than anything I can recall. However, the ways in which, and the reasons why, are not worth elaborating. What matters is that it was extremely meaningful.

People often ask me if I ever miss Denmark. I really don’t. But I frequently miss my Grandmother. She turned 93 this year, and while I try to call her on the phone as often as possible, it’s just not the same as being face to face. After we arrived in Denmark, one of the first things I did was to invite her to come and see her great grandchildren. She has already seen at least 4000 photos of the kids on her iPad, but the expression on her face, as she sat in a chair and observed them, was pure joy. She marveled at their physical presence. We had only just arrived and already the trip was worth it.

We spent five of the seven weeks living in my parents’ summer house in Begtrup Vig, an inlet in Aarhus Bay. It’s an old house, built by my grandfather in the 1960s, surrounded by trees and other summer houses, and close to a small and unglamorous beach. “It looks a bit different than Brooklyn NY” said Noah the moment we drove out of the



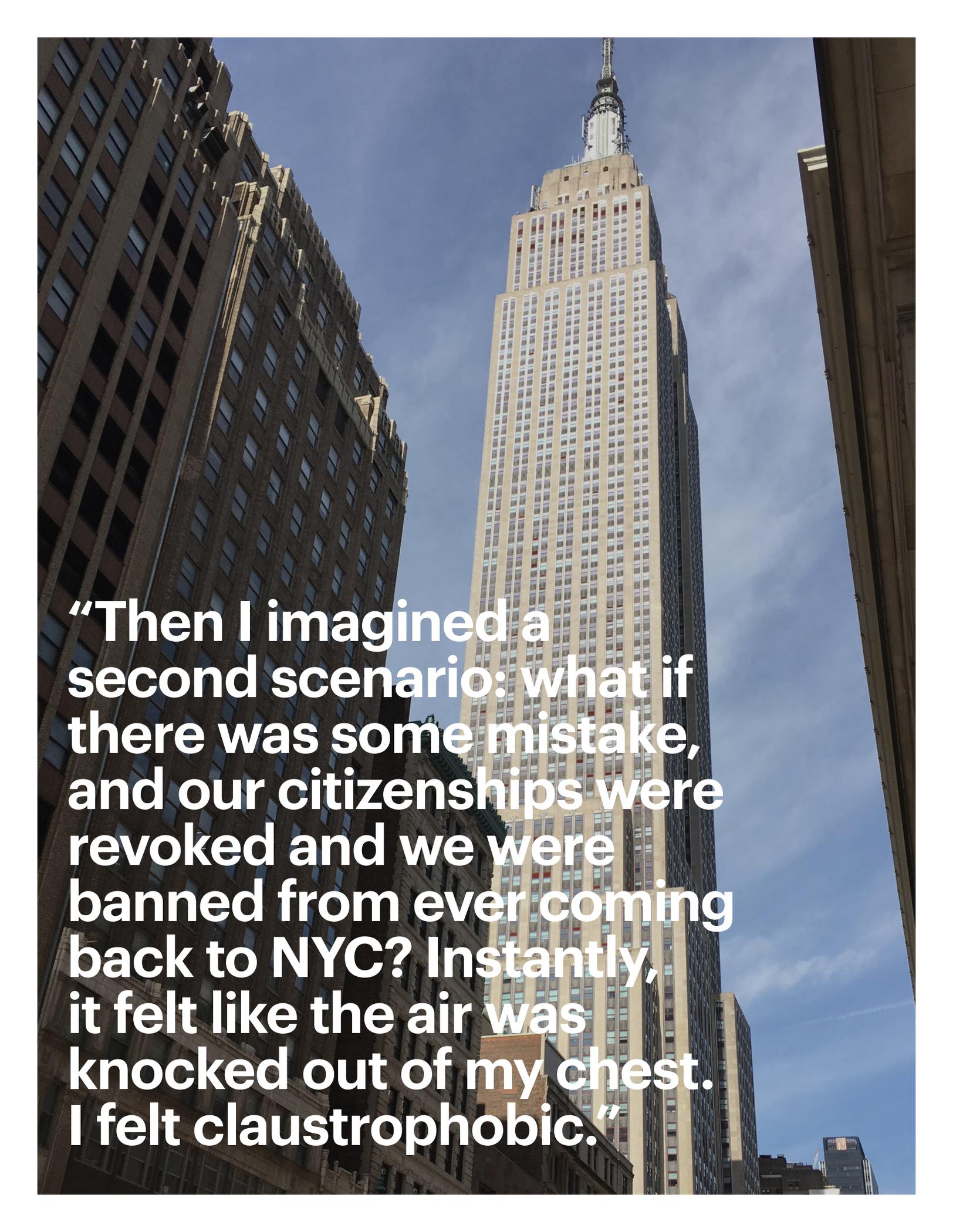
My brother and sister

airport parking lot and into the danish countryside. It was interesting to see the kids get familiar with something so vastly different from anything they have ever experienced before. Wild nature, thorny bushes, sticks, tall grass, sharp stones. Our kids normally prefer to run barefoot on the Brooklyn concrete, and we have taught them to look out for pieces of broken glass and other urban dangers for little feet. I had assumed that this instinct would translate easily to grass and stones, but I was wrong. The first few days the kids just didn't want to go outside because their feet hurt, and they hadn't yet realized that this problem could be solved with shoes or sandals.

The summerhouse was where I spent most of my own childhood summers, as far back as I can remember, and while the area has developed a bit over the past decade, it is still very familiar looking. I found that being there, and coming across old toys, tools and furniture evoked all sorts of memories, but they were rarely distinct events. It was more like images imposed on top of each other, each layer from a different time but all anchored in the same space. And now I got to see my own kids in it too. I hope they will also build some vivid memories from that place, and that we can keep returning to it again and again.

One weekend my younger sister and her boyfriend, and my younger brother and his girlfriend, all came to visit and stay until the next day. We had no plan, just a desire to spend time together. I can't recall ever being in a social situation with a group of nine people, where everything flowed like it did those days. There was none of the usual group dynamic hiccups where the full group can't agree on what to do together, and will hesitate to split in smaller groups (what will I miss out on?) or where a group will only split in certain ways because some individual bonds are stronger than others (then cliques develop and reinforce). There was none of that. It was all in flow. We would all be together in the summer house. Food would get made, deliciously, collaboratively. Kids and adults would play. We would fluidly split up into smaller groups, go for walks, catch crabs at the beach, clean up, come together again, pluck berries, have conversations. It was magical. And even if it was way too short, now that I know this is possible, I want to bring us all together again, some day, somewhere. And just see what happens.

Before we left NYC, my friends would say "you'll not want to come back." They seemed to believe that this trip would mark the beginning



“Then I imagined a second scenario: what if there was some mistake, and our citizenships were revoked and we were banned from ever coming back to NYC? Instantly, it felt like the air was knocked out of my chest. I felt claustrophobic.”

of the end of our seven year adventure in NYC. That the shift in needs of a growing family would eventually compel us to move to a more progressive, socialist welfare state, and that this realization, long overdue, would finally crystalize once we spent some time away from the city. I didn't believe them, yet I couldn't explain why. I still can't. But this is what I know: one warm and sunny summer day, while walking along the road with a sleeping child in a stroller, yellow fields to both sides and a view of the ocean, I thought to myself: this is really wonderful. It was as idyllic as anything Denmark can offer. I found myself enjoying it. Then I thought: what if someone told me that our trip would be extended. Due to an unforeseen event, we would have to stay an extra three months, and our travel insurance would cover our costs. It felt good. If our financial situation would be taken care of, I would have loved to stay longer. Then I imagined a second scenario: what if there was some mistake, and our citizenships were revoked and we were banned from ever coming back to NYC? Instantly, it felt like the air was knocked out of my chest. It felt claustrophobic.

I'm not sure exactly what it is. I have tried to come up with different explanations. One is about restrictive social norms. Another is about not feeling a sense of belonging. Maybe it's not so important to always explain why. Perhaps it's enough to notice that for some reason, whatever it is, I can fully enjoy being in Denmark, yet I don't want to live there, at least for now. And so, the trip was a double homecoming. First we came home to our mother country, to our families and to the places where we grew up. But for me, it was equally important that we came back. A long and deeply meaningful summer vacation in Denmark served as a strong reminder that my home is here in NYC.



Parsons graduate students, one of whom became a co-worker at SYPartners

A work-home

While we were still in Denmark I had a call with SYPartners, a consulting company in NYC, where I have worked as a contractor and freelancer in the past. It was supposed to be a casual conversation and mutual status update. I was hoping to hear that there might be some freelance work for me when we would come back, since by then the bank account would be empty. Cell reception is not great in the summerhouse so I put on a headset and went out into the evening. We exchanged casual small talk for a few minutes and then they said “we would like to offer you a full-time permanent position once you come back.”

This was the offer I had been hoping to get ever since I first applied back in early 2014, and throughout the times I had worked with them on contract and as a freelancer. I already knew the work and most of the people. There was just one little, tiny thing: they offered me a position and salary well below what I had decided for myself that I was entitled to. My ego was not excited. Why would I take a significant pay cut? Why don't they value my experience more? Shouldn't I be leading teams? What about my creativity? But all the rest of me knew that it didn't matter. This would be like coming home, and all I wanted was to sign the contract and get started. My ego reluctantly went along with it.

It's been four months since I started. And it has been even better than I had imagined. It's been like coming home to a place where everyone knows my name. A place where I feel at ease. I can be confident and vulnerable. I feel broadly appreciated, both by the people I work with most closely, and from people I meet over coffee to exchange ideas. And while my ego is still occasionally grumpy, the answers to all those questions are obvious: of course I will accept a paycut relative to a job I didn't like, so long as we have enough to make ends meet (we do!). And my experience and creativity is appreciated (I can feel that!), and I will be leading teams some day, but there are also some things I still need to learn. And I can learn those things much faster from the position I'm in now. Instead of struggling to keep up with overwhelming demands and expectations, I can do work that isn't hard, and have plenty of



**It's not so much
about the
matching outfits.
It's the feeling of
belonging and being
appreciated.**

mental space to really observe and learn for myself. I'm learning how to do consulting as a team sport instead of solo. Many things are the same, but a few things look very different on the surface and I'm still getting used to that. I'm learning to adapt to other people's working styles and preferences, and yet maintain my own fresh perspective and share my opinions and reactions.

I notice how my mindset has changed as I have joined full time. I find incredible joy in mentoring and coaching other people, and it's liberating that I now get to do it without it being in the construct of a 'client', the way it was in my own business. And I can do all of this, while keeping reasonable family hours, that allow me to take Noah to school every morning, and be home in time for bedtime. I'm not stressed, worried or anxious. I am excited to go to work (almost) every single day. I don't think my ego will ever really 'get it'. It won't understand how all these things are so much more valuable than a payrise or fancier title. It will always want more status, money and power. And maybe that's ok. Perhaps the lesson is simply to acknowledge the ego, but not let it make important decisions alone.

**On a snow day we
gotta build. Even if it's
past bedtime.**



Rooftop of our building

Business with friends

One of my proudest moments this year was a work project that didn't go very well. The details and drama of how it went wrong are not particularly riveting or interesting. I made mistakes and so did the client, whom I considered to be a friend. Six months into it, they were unhappy with the result and I hadn't been paid a dollar.

I felt extremely vulnerable, but also angry and confused. I knew I hadn't done the greatest job of my life, but I had also accepted a lower budget, and I felt that it wasn't all my fault. When my friend asked if we could have a call to talk about payment I refused. I knew I would be too emotional to have a productive conversation. Instead I asked that he shared his views in writing so I knew where he stood and I'd be able to prepare myself in advance.

Luckily, my friend accepted. Two days later, just before I was going to bed, his response arrived. It was the wrong time to read such a letter, but I did anyway, and it was such a wonderful e-mail. It had clearly not been easy to write, but it was well written, considerate and precise. All my anger and frustration melted away, because I could feel the good intent. I felt cared for. And I could see clearly how my own approach had been insufficient. In the end he wrote: "Sadly it just simply didn't work out this time. I hold no ill feelings nor has my respect for you and what you do diminished in any way. This just wasn't the right match." We ended up with a compromise where we split the responsibility so that I still got paid a fair amount for my contributions.

I've met many people who say that you should never do business with friends. But I don't think that's necessarily good advice. In this case, no amount of contracts and expensive lawyers could have prevented the project from going bad. It was just a series of unfortunate circumstances. And once it had gone off the rails, those lawyers and contracts would only have helped establish the correct split of responsibility and payments. No contract would have given me the feeling of relief and sense of being cared for, that my friend's e-mail did.



Juno was sick but when she offered me a kiss I couldn't resist. Two days later I was in bed with high fever. I still think it was worth it.



**Rasmus came to
visit from Zürich
and was eye-level
with everyone.**

A year of #reframes podcasting

In 2018 I recorded and published more than 60 short podcast episodes, each offering a fresh 5-10 minute perspective on a question or topic. You can listen to all of them on thnklrly.com/podcast

These are the titles of all the episodes:

- You are not obligated to worry
- Can you learn more if you amplify a painful mistake
- Should you start your own podcast? Learnings from one year of #reframes
- When commitment level affects the outcome
- Sans Forgetica, a font to help you remember
- Do you want an easier life?
- Freedom beyond the reasonable
- What does it mean to be alive
- The sound of a park in São Paulo, Brazil
- Gift or debt
- When people ask annoying questions
- Facing big mistakes
- How do you classify your self-work
- Shit and diamonds — the creator and the editor
- Too much success
- Why human and not a cow
- Can you teach people to think for themselves
- Inner cheerleader
- Quitting too soon or staying too long
- Why worry
- Swapping problems
- The effort is real
- Consume less and engage more with social media
- Pick yourself up
- Should you plan and rehearse or just wing it
- Balance between blue sky thinking and constraints
- Favorite song about bending the world
- Reality as a dream
- How rats handle fear
- One billion seconds and friendships

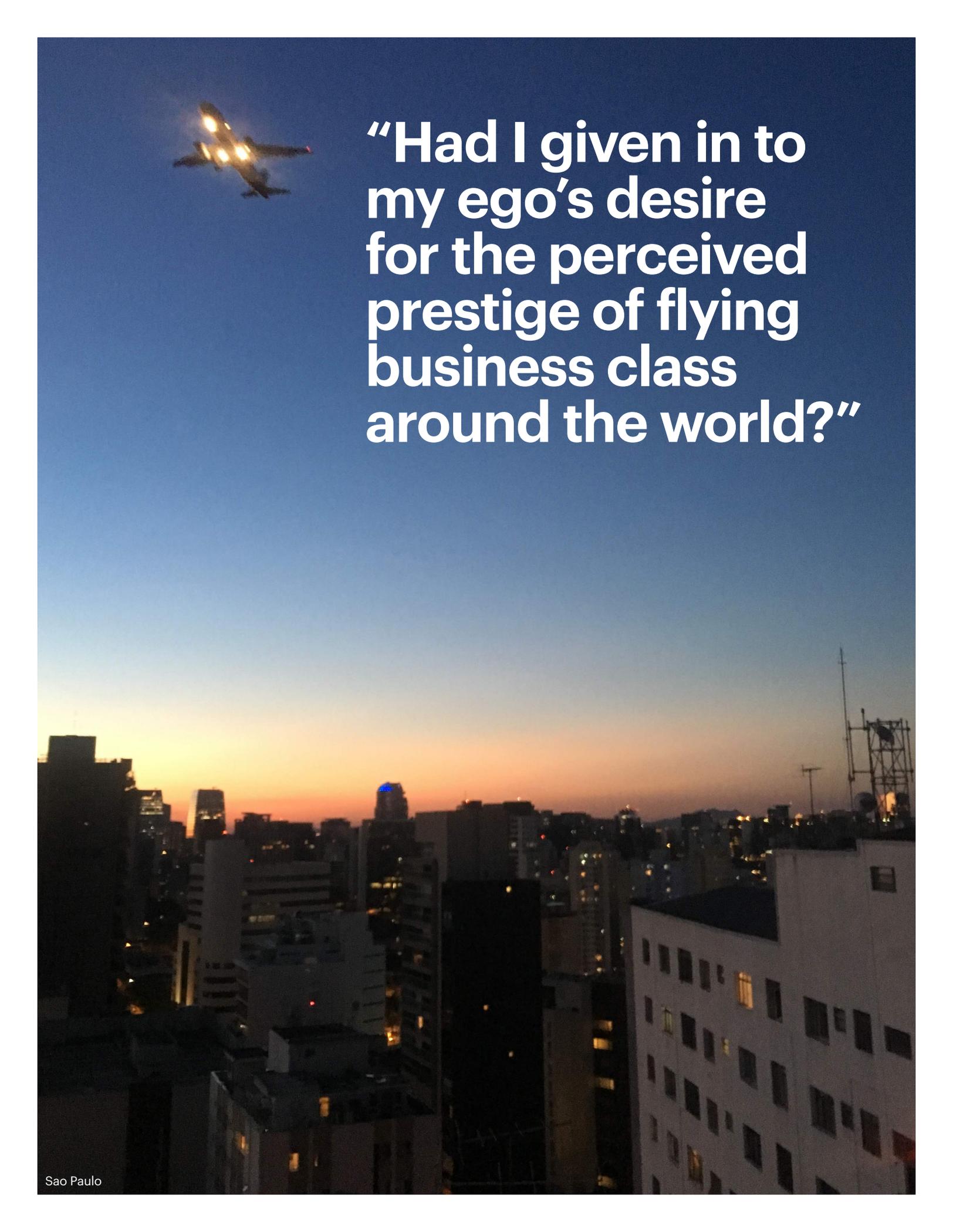


Chopping wood and making a fire. It's not about avoiding danger but learning to manage it.

- New York Skyline, reality and fiction
- Misunderstood or...
- Would you merge yourself with an AI
- Persona or essence
- The Power of Consistency
- A wonderful slap in the face
- Holding on to my own misery
- Bending to the world or bending the world to you
- Richard Watson and learning to hold a pen in a new way Feeling ashamed of being lazy
- What if this were the last day of your life
- Getting stopped by the cops
- Moving with the crowd at Grand Central Station
- Crowd source accountability
- The shadow side
- Ice skating
- Do you want to live forever?
- First class of the semester
- Facing the dragon
- Singing a song that I care about
- Intimacy in a recording
- Overwhelmed and feeling guilty for it
- My current note taking setup
- Bad habits in virtual meetings
- Priorities and hell yeah
- A frame around the page
- Beatboxer magic
- Goal setting
- Morning practice
- Lost Confidence and asking for help
- Where do you belong — part 2
- Where do you belong, take 1
- What's the best book you read in 2017?
- The sound of Broadway
- Non attachment with technology
- Overcoming fear
- Noticing patterns and letting go
- Therapy sessions with myself
- Time travel to 2005
- A statistic that changed my view of the world
- On love letters and interplanetary travel



Beach near the summer house

A photograph of a city skyline at dusk. The sky is a deep blue, and the city lights are visible. An airplane is flying in the upper left corner of the frame. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

“Had I given in to my ego’s desire for the perceived prestige of flying business class around the world?”

Luxury or purpose

In 2016 I travelled the world teaching my own one day class in visual thinking. Since then I have kept coming back to Sao Paulo to teach the class, and this year they asked me to come back again. I said yes.

However, as we got closer to the date, I began wondering. I knew that this trip felt important to me. But I wasn't sure why. Had I given in to my ego's desire for the perceived prestige of flying business class around the world? the absurdity of going to Sao Paulo for 40 hours?

However, all my doubts evaporated once the workshop started. It was like standing in the middle of a wonderful river of purpose, speaking my deepest truth, and experiencing first hand how others respond, open up, share and grow in themselves. It's a high. But it also feels so meaningful. And I have felt it before. Yet, I can't really recall the feeling afterwards. Already on the plane back, it was like a faded memory. But I know it was there.

This raises an obvious question: if this work really is so special to me, why am I not doing this ALL the time? Is it that I can't? Or is there something else? My conclusion is that as great as it is, I'm actually not up for a life of that much thrill right now. I know it could be possible. I could fly out somewhere every week and do a class or two, and then come back. I've done that, and it's intense. Too intense. Going to Brazil is like an occasional reminder of how it feels. And I know that I will do it again in the future. But right now I want to be a father. I want to do work that is meaningful, but in a more down-to-earth way.



In 2018 I baked 98 loaves of bread, just a batch short of 100. On January 1st I baked loaf 582 and 583 and by December 27th I baked 679 and 680. However, I also baked a lot of unnumbered breads while we were in Denmark. Because I didn't have my usual tools, I felt liberated to pause the strict methodology and numbering scheme, and use my accumulated experience of the past six years to be a bit more flexible. Deviating from the script helped me understand a few nuances of the process a little bit better, as I could more clearly see the results of my variations.



The summer house

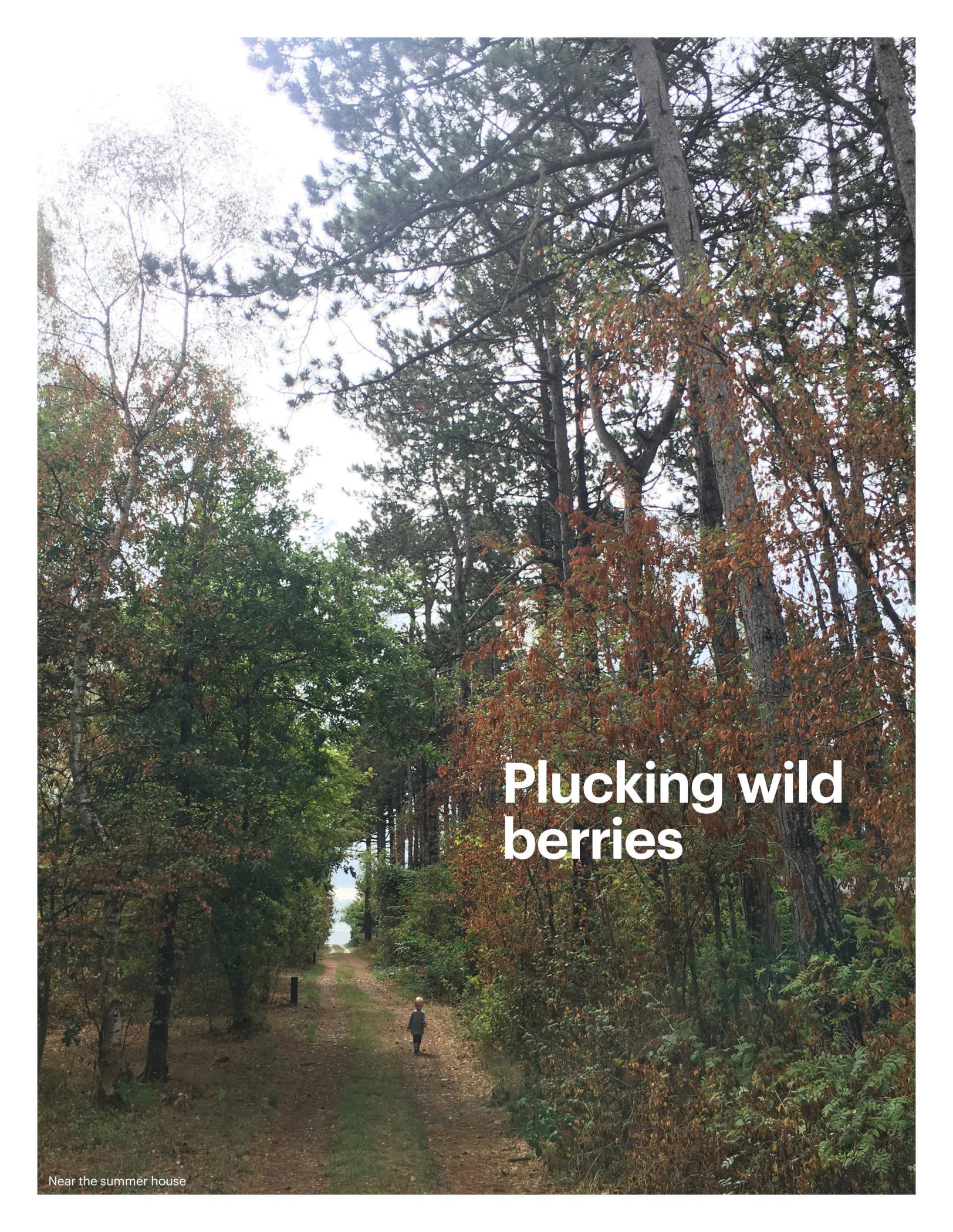


**My grandmother
feeding the kids
ice cream.**

Just time to play

While we were in Denmark, my mother-in-law gave me a pack of 'flødebolle' — a danish sweet treat made of chocolate with a light, fluffy filling. And she said "these are for you! You may share them if you want to, but they are yours." She said it with a seriousness that struck me. At first I shrugged it off. But later that night I realized how much of my life is shared by default. When I spend two hours in the kitchen cooking dinner, it's shared with everyone. I don't even say "my paycheck", I say "our paycheck" because the money is for both of us, and is deposited into our shared bank account. Suddenly these chocolate treats took on a much more profound meaning. They were something that was just for me. And if I wanted to eat every single one of them, without sharing, I could. It suddenly felt important to have something like that in my life, and when my brother, who currently works at LEGO, asked me if I wanted to buy any LEGO sets on his employee discount I said yes.

I don't want my personal happiness or meaning in life to be derived from the joy of a new fancy toy. But since my life already feels meaningful, I also don't think that this should preclude me from occasionally doing something special for myself. That was how it felt to build my new toys. No compromise. Just time to play.

A photograph of a forest path. A person is walking away from the camera down a dirt path. The path is flanked by tall trees, some with green leaves and some with autumn-colored leaves. The sky is visible through the trees.

Plucking wild berries

Near the summer house

The next quest

Looking back on my life since I was a teenager, it seems to me that I've gone through phases in my life, each with a singular overall focus that has aligned many of my activities. I've not always been diligent about articulating them, but looking back I can see a progression.

When I started doing business as a teenager, what excited me was a sense of being able to unlock vast amounts of money (at least from a teenager's perspective) by doing 'work' that felt mostly like a form of play. In high school, a very kind teacher (whom I am still in touch with today), helped me see that my behavior of constantly and eagerly demonstrating how smart, clever and knowledgeable I was, perhaps was not a great strategy for making friends. It set me off on a new path of trying to show up differently. To figure out how to build new and strong social relationships. This came in handy as I started university, and some of my best friends today are people I met during those years. After that came the obsession with moving to New York City (see my Annual Report from 2015), and for six years all I could think about was how to make it happen. New York is a place that gives me access to amazing people and opportunity. It's also a challenge on many levels, like a constant gym for the body, mind and soul. After we moved, I eventually had to reinvent myself and figure out more precisely what kind of work I truly wanted to do (see my 2012 report for this story). This gave me a much better understanding of myself and my preferences, and helped me see the choices I get to make. Regardless of the practical constraints, I feel that I have much more agency. More freedom.

A photograph of two young children sitting on a wooden bench in a garden. The child on the left is wearing a brown and white striped shirt, and the child on the right is wearing a white sleeveless top. They are both looking towards a dark, teardrop-shaped wasp nest hanging from a tree branch. The background features a grey house, a large tree, a green hedge, and a garden bed with red and purple flowers. The text "I love that they are best friends." is overlaid in white on the left side of the image.

**I love that they are
best friends.**

Most recently my quest has been all about how to grow a family in NYC, and be a father the way I want to, while doing work I enjoy and care about and earning enough to provide the right conditions for myself, my wife and our kids. For the past five years I've tried to calibrate and recalibrate between these four priorities. Making more than enough money, but not enjoying the work or being the father I want to be. Doing work I love, making just enough, traveling constantly. Being home, flexible, doing work I love but just not making enough. However, with my new job, I begin to feel that this quest has also been accomplished. For the past eight months, I have loved the work, been the father I want to be and made enough money (I'm even saving for retirement!).

Heading into 2019, it's time to investigate what might emerge as the next quest. There's no rush to figure it out.



**Putting on a tail
can make all the
difference**

In 2019 I want to expand our operational radius as a family by acquiring an electric cargo bike and (finally) getting a US driver's license. I want to invest time in writing a book, putting my ideas into a coherent narrative. And I want to invest effort in the relationships that matter most.



Juno & Uma

**Thank you for being part
of my life.**



Annual Report 2018 by Mathias Jakobsen is
licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0
International License.

Published by
Ideas Are Nothing LLC
Mathias Jakobsen
114 Troutman St Apt 423
Brooklyn NY 11206

www.thnklrly.com

m@thnklrly.com
+1 347 987 5090