

2020. A space odyssey

 By [Damon Stapleton](#)

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Just put one f**king word down. It is a strange feeling to start writing without knowing what you are going to write. It is a feeling of absolute uncertainty. It is so powerful that it can cause paralysis. You can't do what you know you must but you also can't do anything else either. And, there is also this vague annoying terror mixed with an excitement kind of feeling as you stare at the white space in front of you. It is hard to describe and maybe that's why I have tried to put writing about a weird feeling at the bottom of my to do list. It's so much easier dealing with facts. Bullet points of complete certainty. The 19 lessons of 'somethingness'. The seven steps to whatever. Anyway, to stop my brain from killing me, I had to go the other way. Apologies in advance. You know what they say. Better out than in.



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Maybe, that's why I am writing this. It is my hushed and very ironic rebellion against filling beautiful empty blank spaces with bullsh*t. Words are not wisdom. And varnish is not the wood.

It's as if explaining something instantly is far more important than actually looking at or listening to it. Thousands of opinions online telling us what we should feel and take out of this. All of it taking up space. Toxic positivity, a need to eliminate the whiff of failure and a million plans to feel in control have been woven into a twisted mantra that tells you very little, but promises even less. To be clear, a month or two ago this new world didn't exist. Nobody knows very much. And that blank uncomfortable space is where we have to go to find real answers.

I remember reading a great line somewhere that said there is no such thing as failure. If you fail, you write a book about what you have learnt failing, and that becomes a bestseller. There is no failure. Only an unyielding, unstoppable momentum towards your next life affirming success.

And what is success? The notes or the spaces between them?

Space and time. Invisible and priceless. The two most valuable commodities in the world. In life BC (Before Corona), time and space were all we ever wanted. We wished we had had a bit more time to do the job properly. We dreamed about having a few more gaps in the day. We bitched and moaned about not ever having the time to do the good stuff. This is also true for all the stuff we want. The big boat or next-level house costs more because it has a bit more space. Space is the ultimate demonstration of value and luxury. I remember going to a gallery in New York to see Van Gogh's, *The Starry Night*. The painting is fantastic, but you know what else I noticed? The massive white wall that surrounded the painting. No clutter. No other paintings. Just space. Space to see. Space to focus. Space to show you what is important. Isn't it odd how you can only see the value of space when there is something right in the middle of it. I remember once doing a meditation exercise where our teacher said we had to imagine a block of space in space. Our brains exploded.

I digress. Right now, we have a lot more time and space on our hands than usual. The two most valuable commodities in the world. Remember? It is all we have ever wanted. And what are we doing? We try to eradicate time and space with stuff, explanations and activity. If you don't believe me, go and have a look online. It is a frenzy of shallow noise pretending it knows where true north really is. And one more time for luck. Nobody knows anything for sure.

The great Buddhist teacher Sogyal Rinpoche uses the expression 'Western laziness'. He describes Eastern laziness as sitting on your porch all day, doing nothing and drinking cups of tea. Western laziness is the opposite. It is cramming your day with compulsive activity so you don't confront what he calls real issues.

We replace understanding with activity. We create the illusion of certainty. To quote Arthur C. Clarke:

“ *If he was indeed mad, his delusions were beautifully organised.* ”

We tell ourselves we want to spend time on the important things in life, but there is never any time. But, when we have it, what do we do?

I have watched Kubrick's masterpiece, *2001: A Space Odyssey* at least a dozen times over a 20-year period. Nobody really knows what it's about. Even if you research its meaning, there are multiple theories, including the idea that you are not supposed to understand it because God is beyond our understanding.

What I do know is that it always gives me the same feeling. It is this mixture of awe and fear. It has a beautiful infinite emptiness. Arthur C. Clarke gets closest to it with these words.

“ *The thing's hollow— it goes on forever-and-oh my God!— it's full of stars!* ”

It is the same feeling I get staring at a blank screen before I start writing. And what do I do? I try and fill that space. What a bloody idiot. Well, everybody needs a hobby.

Perhaps, the last month has been a strange and beautiful gift for those of us who are not desperately trying to save millions of lives every day. Unlike those heroes, we have been lucky enough to be given some time and space. That can be scary. And when we are scared, we try to fill that void, right?

But, for a moment, maybe we shouldn't.

Because, here's the thing. That emptiness is where everything comes from. Every answer. Every idea. Every discovery. Every invention. And, all those wonderful invisible things we cannot yet see. Everything.

Instead of having an obsessive hair-trigger need to explain the world to ourselves, what if we listened to it for once? Imagine, instead of endless motion, the whole planet was still.

What if we, just for a moment, stopped trying to explain and looked into that perfect emptiness. That flawless uncertainty.

What would we see?

What would we understand?

"Music is the silence between the notes." – Claude Debussy

ABOUT DAMON STAPLETON

Damon is regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia. Before that, ECD at Saatchi and Saatchi Australia, before that, group ECD of TBWA Hunt Lascaris and global ECD of Standard Bank. He has won over 500 awards internationally, including a D&AD Black Pencil, Cannes Grand Prix, Grand Clio, ADC Black Cube and most effective ad in the world by Warc 100. Damon is now regional chief creative officer for DDB in New Zealand and Australia...

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