Staff and Student magazine for the School of Sociology and Social Policy

Featuring contributions from:

Andrew Murphy

John Lim

Murray Goulden

Emmanuele Lazzara

Nora Wikoff

Inside this issue:

Contents

What you can find in the sixth issue *2*

A Time and a Place *3-4*

Andrew Murphy

Hanging up on Mobile Phone Addiction *5*

John Lim

Home in the Machine *6-8*

Murray Goulden

My PhD Journey *9-10*

Emmanuele Lazzara

Spotlight on … Nora Wikoff *11-12*

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A note from the Editor:

Welcome to the sixth issue of *The Note*. This time, we showcase photos of the campus from PhD student Emmanuele Lazzara—who shares some thoughts on his PhD journey in the following pages. We also present here two articles on digital/tech life—one by third year student John Lim, and another by Senior Research Fellow Murray Goulden. On another note, as we head into a new academic year, it's always useful to take a look back at where we've come from; Assistant Professor in Social Work, Andrew Murphy, thus takes us on a reflective trip down memory lane. In the issue's final section, we feature an interview with Assistant Professor in Quantitative Methods, Nora Wikoff.

That wraps it up for now. Enjoy the issue, and good luck for the Autumn Semester!

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A Time and a Place

In 1993, the commute to my first 'graduate job' was a walk along the bleak Clifton Boulevard. As the road crested the railway, I could turn around and see, stretched out on a hill, my former university. There was the Trent Building, in 'grand and cakey style' (as DH Lawrence remarked). And here I was walking along a dual carriageway towards my workplace—a tin shed built on a disused rubbish dump. I remember a powerful feeling of dislocation: that I should be on campus, not on the A52, and that I had been ripped from my rightful place in Nottingham.

It took a while, but I'm back at the university—this time as a member of staff. Being back on campus has prompted many memories of my earlier self, of being a student here in the early 1990s and then again around the turn of the millennium. It's perhaps best not to overshare here, but I still have a powerful aversion to Pernod and Black. After two years of working here, what has really struck me is the importance of the campus as a place: both in my life experience and its somewhat uneasy relationship to the rest of Nottingham.

My return reminded me that it was the university campus that made me choose Nottingham to study. As a bookish, nature-loving adolescent brought up in the dreary mediocrity of a town I'll refer to as 'Luton', the campus appeared a bosky idyll, with Georgian buildings scattered in the landscape. Later, I realised those buildings were slightly fraudulent—most being no older than the 1950s, with the Engineering and Science horrors of modernity hidden in the dip of Science City.

Being a student 'in Nottingham' was geographically pretty narrow. My knowledge of the city extended from the campus, around Lenton, and into a tiny part of the city centre. The rest of it was pretty invisible to me—and I'm guessing to most of my peers, who came from outside Nottingham, often via public school. I remember sitting on the balcony of the Portland Building and idly wondering where the tower block was that loomed out of the plain beyond the Trent. I now know it's Clifton, but it could have been Derby for all I knew.

It was only when I worked in Nottingham that I really got to see the city and some of those places that had hitherto just been the termini of bus routes (Bulwell Hall, Top Valley, Balloon Woods, Arnold). As a social worker, my work took me into the homes of people who seemed a million miles away from the university: people with severe mental health problems, often experiencing financial hardship, in receipt of grudgingly awarded disability benefits. Into suburbs that looked and felt very different from the university and the glitz of the city centre. Areas where the average life expectancy was a decade less than the adjoining middle class suburb.

Photo by Emmanuele Lazzara.

Writing about this is awkward: I'm conscious that I could, and perhaps have, stereotyped those communities and the people who live there. For, when I visited them, it was as a form of tourist: a middle class professional paid to offer 'support' and, if statutory criteria was met, with the power to remove them from their homes under the Mental Health Act. And when my work for the state was done, I returned to my home in a more affluent, more comfortable part of the city. For there are many Nottinghams, and your experience of them depends on your class, ethnicity and income. In places like the city centre, the Nottinghams collide or slide over each other. But much of the time they feel starkly separate.

So, 25 years on from my A52 epiphany, I'm back on campus. It looks glossier and more manicured than I remember. (Arguably I'm glossier and more manicured too.) The wartime huts used as classrooms have gone, replaced mainly by gardens (Theatre, Millennium,

Walled, Drought). Perhaps herbaceous borders and an amphitheatre make £9,000 fees more palatable. But Clifton Boulevard doesn't seem that different, as cars speed on to other Nottinghams.

Andrew Murphy

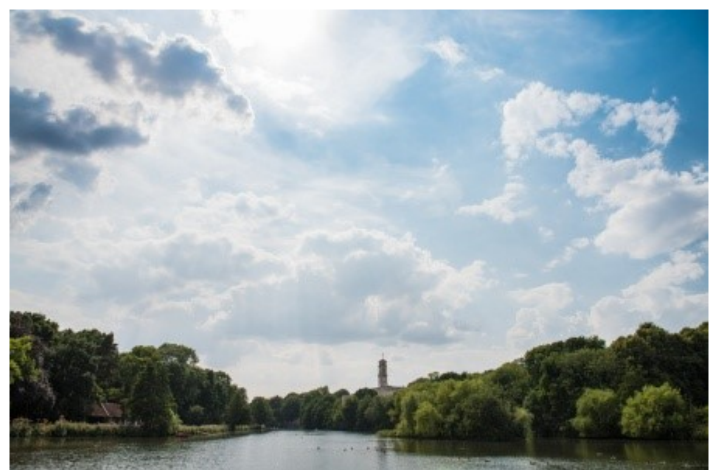
Assistant Professor in Social Work, School of Sociology and Social Policy

Photo supplied by the author.

Trent Building in the sun, University Park. Image supplied courtesy of The University of Nottingham ©.

Editor's note: some pictures of the campus as we find it today...

Highfields lake with a view of Trent Building. Image supplied courtesy of The University of Nottingham ©.



Hanging up on Mobile Phone Addiction

We wake up. Within the first five minutes, we're checking the latest pictures that have been posted on Instagram. We're checking our social circle's latest updates on Facebook. We're checking the photos taken by our friends on Snapchat.

We're addicted to our mobile phones, but the problem is that we do not even realize it. I was once a mobile phone addict. At every buzz, I would unlock my phone with my fingerprint, and type off a quick response. Sometimes, I would feel a buzz in my pocket, but after unlocking it, realise that it was only my imagination.

One day, when I was sitting on the train, I noticed a mother talking with her son. It was rather personal, and I heard snatches of the difficulties the mother was sharing with him. Her son, dressed in a smart suit, had clearly heard enough. He started looking at his phone, typing away.

That brief incident startled me, for I suddenly realised that had been a regular scene which had played out in my own home. Instead of speaking to my mother, I had been more interested in speaking with my friends through WhatsApp. Instead of enjoying meals around the table with my family, I had been more interested in the pictures of meals my friends had posted on Instagram. Instead of having face-to-face conversations with my sisters, I had been more content being updated about them through Twitter.

Today, we might feel that our phones are inseparable extensions of our bodies. But I would like to challenge you to think again by debunking three myths about our relationships with mobile phones. Then, I would like to show how we can have a healthier relationship with them.

Myth: I need my smartphone to stay updated.
Reality: People used to call or meet each other, and updated each other that way. They did not use Snapchat, Facebook, or Instagram. We don't always have to use them, either.

Myth: I need my smartphone to communicate with others.
Reality: Prior to the introduction of the iPhone in 2007, do you remember what people used to communicate? It was through letters, pagers, and landlines.

Myth: I need my smartphone to survive.
Reality: The smartphone is a relatively new phenomenon, having been introduced only 10 years ago by Apple. Prior to that, people still survived.

So, how can we have a better relationship with our mobile phones?

Firstly, we can start by putting them aside. Each day, instead of checking your phone after every alert, why not check it at set times—such as after breakfast, lunch and dinner? During meals with our friends or family, set them aside in your bag, instead of the table, where the temptation can be to look at every notification.

Secondly, we can start by setting aside tech-free zones within our homes. Instead of sleeping with your phone beside you, you can put it in the hall. Instead of using your phone as an alarm, you can use a real alarm clock.

Lastly, we can start building stronger relationships with those around us. Instead of looking at our phones in the middle of a conversation, why not listen intently? Instead of being updated about their lives through social media, why not pick up the phone to give them a call? Instead of sending them a birthday greeting on Facebook, why not write them a birthday card?

The first step in the Alcoholics Anonymous program reads: 'We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.' Today, to build a better relationship with our mobile phones, we can first admit that for some of us, this relationship has become unmanageable. Only then can we begin to see a deep and lasting change in our lives.

John Lim
3rd year social work student, School of Sociology and Social Policy.

Home in the Machine

On a sunny Saturday afternoon, in the summer of 2017, I entered my neighbour's house without their permission, took control of their TV, and interrupted their four-year-old daughter's cartoon, subjecting her instead to the YouTube stream of a violent game called *Battlegrounds*, in which 100 players shoot at each other until 99 are dead. Her mum was pretty annoyed. My reaction was one of surprise—because I did all of this from my own couch, accidentally.

The blame for this rather grievous transgression lay with Google's 'Cast' function, which allows you to share your screen from one device to another. I'd shifted in my seat and unwittingly activated it. I only found out the result when a text arrived from my neighbour a couple of minutes later.

Cast is one function amongst a multitude of devices and software tools that comprise the 'smart home', a marketing label for the tech giants' efforts to embed the 'Internet of Things' (IoT) into our homes. The IoT basically seeks to dissolve the remaining distinctions between online and offline, by filling the world around us with pervasive computing—sensors collecting data, processors working on it, and actuators turning the results into actions.

But how did my YouTube viewing end up in front of poor Rosie, and why should this be of interest to social scientists? My home invasion turned out to have only required that I had my neighbour's WiFi password on my phone. I, as is not uncommon amongst neighbours, have babysat for Rosie, and in the Internet Age, after welcoming a guest into your home and offering them a cup of tea, the next ritual is often to get them onto your WiFi. So, when I accidentally pressed that Cast button, Google's technology took a look at the world around it, identified access to a WiFi network with a 'smart' (read: Internet-connected) TV, and put two and two together to get five. As far as it was concerned, a shared network meant a shared home—WiFi became a proxy for intimacy. This highlights something important: 'smart' technologies are *socially stupid*.

This leads us to the second question, which is of sociological interest. Homes have long been a subject of sociological fascination. As the sites of many of our most intimate relationships, where we spend a great deal of our everyday existence, this is where much of our shaping as social beings takes place. The mundanity of our domestic experience belies the complexity of these spaces. The home is a deeply variegated site, criss-crossed by walls both physical and social, which compartmentalise the life which takes place within.

For example, in every room in a shared home, there exists a set of moral codes about who can enter, under what circumstances, and what they can do whilst there. These rules are informed by multiple, intersecting hierarchies, the most prominent of which are generational (primarily between adults and children), and gendered. In the social worlds we experience, the practices and relations we associate with home often extend outwards—into our street, our community, and our kin's homes—this is how I came to have my neighbour's WiFi password. *Between* homes the division of space is even more marked—doors and windows are reinforced with locks and alarms, and entry is restricted by injunctions—legal as well as moral.

The digital world operates very differently. The World Wide Web is a construct of seamless space and frictionless action—its transformative power, particularly in its early days, allowed the individual to go almost anywhere, be anyone, and do almost anything. This celebration of personal agency has little appetite for traditional hierarchies, which are seen to constrain the sovereign user. The design of smart home technologies—by the same class of software engineers behind the modern web—is informed by this ideology, seeking to liberate the user from their routines by rendering domestic practices as effortless as loading a webpage. Accordingly, all that was required to collapse the many walls between my sofa and my neighbour's TV was a single saved password, and the press of a button.

Sociologically, we can see some very sharp tensions between the home as experienced, and the flat

social topographies of these technologies. The designers of these technologies, most of them inhabitants of California's Silicon Valley, are steeped in a libertarian tradition that is perhaps most famously captured in John Perry Barlow's 'Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' (1996), a manifesto for a digital world free of hierarchies, in which individuals—freed of the constraints of space and society—interact as equals. These ideals are present in the peer-to-peer model of 'Web 2.0' (Gere, 2008: 212), and live on in bastardised form in the design of today's dominant social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, which compress all relations to 'Friend' or 'Follower' respectively.

Turner's (2006) cultural history of Silicon Valley provides a salient account of how these ideas can influence domestic groupings. He locates the origins of this flat ontology in the American counterculture of the 1960s. Some of the most prominent figures in this movement, including Barlow, later became deeply enmeshed in the emergence of Silicon Valley, perhaps most visibly through their involvement in *Wired* magazine. This movement, distinct from the New Left emerging at the same time, explicitly rejected traditional politics and its hierarchical forms. Instead, it sought to turn its back on contemporary society (though notably not its technologies). By the late 1960s, these 'New Communalists', in Turner's terminology, had retreated in their *hundreds of thousands* to self-sufficient communes where they could fashion their own societies. Turner highlights how patriarchal these ostensibly non-hierarchical communities became, following a 'neoprimitive, tribal ideal in which men made "important" decisions while women tended to the kitchen and the children' (2006: 76). Turner concludes that in rejecting politics and hierarchies, the New Communalists left themselves without the means of negotiating the distribution of resources, instead inadvertently defaulting to the received norms of the world they were rejecting (Logic, 2017). They were trapped by the very thing they sought to escape.

For us, as social media users today, the problematic outcomes of this flattening have been labelled 'context collapse' (Marwick & boyd, 2011), in which our many social worlds are thrown together. Here, though, it is not the New Communalists imposing a flat ontology on themselves, but rather their ideological descendants imposing it upon the users of their technology. Users not subscribed to this culture hence respond with strategies to reinstitute social demarcations (boyd, 2014).

['Road to Google'](#) by [384](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0.](#)

The resolution of these tensions within the smart home calls for sociological engagement. In their hunt for personal data, and the profits that accrue with it, the tech giants are pushing their technologies into spaces they seemingly have little understanding of, or care for. Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg famously instilled a design ethos in the company of 'move fast and break stuff'. The consequences of this fetishization of disruption have played out in recent months through the Cambridge Analytica scandal, when Facebook's history of aggressively breaching privacy norms came back to bite it. Whether or not we see a similar outcome with the smart home, its implications for domestic life demand our attention, for they are potentially profound.

Perhaps what is most troublesome, from the perspective of those of us who seek to understand what is underway, is that the nature of much of what is implicated—the local, the secret, the mundane—risks rendering it invisible to the broader viewer. When it became apparent that the fitness app 'Strava' had, in its publicly available dataset of billions of users' exercise routines, revealed the location of secret military installations around the world, it was international news. Operating at such

an intimate resolution, the smart home may fracture such unintended outcomes in a million personal anecdotes that remain untold, or if publicised, treated as no more than isolated curios. Sociology has the tools to tell these stories from the homes in the machine, and connect them to the worlds which created them.

This space will be one of many digital worlds Dr Elena Genova and myself will be exploring this year in our new module *#Sociology: Identity, Self and Others in a Digital Age*.

Murray Goulden
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Photo by Emmanuele Lazzara.

My PhD Journey

So here I am, writing about my PhD—again. Jokes aside; it's not like I have been coerced. Quite the opposite; I was told I could write about anything, so long as it was somehow connected with our school. At first, the temptation to pick any topic other than my PhD was strong, since I thought that, surely, coming up with an original angle for a PhD-related piece would have been near to impossible at this stage. Because, you see, I have reached what is commonly known as the 'thesis pending period'. In reality, that is a rather euphemistic name, as it does not feel like it's only my thesis that is pending, but rather, my entire life. And sure enough, it is also that stage at which many of us feel like having to write or read yet another paragraph about the topic you have been reading and writing about incessantly for the past three years is a herculean task.

But life truly is full of surprises, and eventually I did come up with an idea one evening while I was on my way to Tesco to buy some Medjool dates, as you do... Therefore, if I haven't put you in a coma yet, I would like to engage in some brief existential reflection, by considering the reason why, four years ago, I decided to undertake this journey, and what I think I have learnt from this whole experience. This might get rather philosophical at some point, so I do apologise to those readers who are not especially keen on this sort of stuff.

In the summer of 2012, I had just come back from China. A small number of us students then saw it as a plump, juicy orange to be savoured while still at its best—a country full of promises and anachronistic, surreal experiences. Others could not, for the life of them, understand what on earth we saw in it. Regardless, the feeling that at some point I would have to go back to 'real life', as some insist on calling it, eventually brought me back to the UK. That was when I decided to pursue my aspiration to take something I was passionate about and study it in depth, by applying for a master's degree, followed by a PhD.

To me, that has always been what a PhD is primarily about; having the opportunity to explore a field of knowledge further than anybody has ever explored it. Luckily, I never really saw it as a means to an end. And, as I approach the end of this journey, I realise how beneficial this has been. I will most likely not pursue a career in academia and, despite what some might say, I am not even sure about the benefits of having a PhD when trying to pursue other careers. Sure, I could now write about how unfair the system has become, how much less value a doctoral degree holds compared to the past, and how competitive and precarious academia has become for those starting out, but this is not the place for me to do that. It sure is fair and, to an extent, helpful to denounce the flaws of the system, but we also must be mindful; complaints can quickly create bitter echo chambers in which further complaints are created with the sole purpose of feeding the negativity of those who produce them, so that more complaints can be produced in turn. So, this won't be the place where I point out the wrongs of the system. Ultimately, life always finds a way, despite the apparent obstacles which may stand before us. To quote one of my favourite proverbs, 'The snow falls, each flake in its appropriate place.' It is truly liberating to realise this, and to see that nothing truly matters.

In the ultimate analysis, the past four years have been truly remarkable. Firstly, I have had the chance to meet a sheer number of people (those who took part in my research) and to listen to their unique stories; fragments of humanity which all differ from one another and which, yet, made me realise how we are all connected, and how this apparent multitude of lives is but the ever changing yet essentially still manifestation of one true phenomenon: the human condition. This wonderful experience has, in turn, helped me confirm that all human fears, different as they may seem, are reflections of the same innate fear, which is ultimately but a figment of our own imagination.

Alongside all of this, doing a PhD has represented the opportunity to 'study'. I think I belong to one of several generations who were brought up listening to the mantra, 'get an education and become somebody'. And, true enough, getting an education has indeed been a transformative experience, but not in the way in which people would expect it to be. It certainly is not about the piece of paper you acquire, and even less so about who you 'become'. It is not about what you learn, either. It is, rather, quite the opposite. In reality, I do not think that academia or any other form of learning can be truly considered transformative unless it is a destructive process—that is, unless it wipes out everything you thought you knew about most things in existence, for a true state of ignorance does not imply lack of knowledge, but

rather dogmatising knowledge which is ultimately rootless and illusory. Certainly, before undertaking my master's course and, eventually, the PhD, I used to see knowledge as a horizon to be reached—the answers to all questions. Therefore, I would claim without a doubt that the main advantage of education is to demystify this notion. It goes without saying that one must discover this for oneself, or else they will always be enslaved by another human being's 'knowledge'.

The last thing I have learnt in the past few years, quite possibly the most valuable one of all, is not to become attached to the fruits of my actions. As I approach the end of my PhD, I often hear questions such as: 'So, what can you do with this? What will it enable you to pursue?' While I don't think there is anything wrong with making more or less systematic plans, I also believe this type of question betrays a deep-seated attitude which most of us have towards life, an endlessly chasing process: the never-ending attempt to become something or someone.

Often, it does not matter what this is, so long as it is a goal projected into the future. Thus, we encourage young people to 'become' somebody and we praise those who join this quest. The key word is, then, 'ambition', and to have none equates to failure. Stillness is hardly even considered an option, let alone valued. In embracing this style of life, we implicitly convey the message that the current status of things, including what one is, is undesirable or simply not good enough.

In recent years, as I have started paying more attention to these patterns, I have seen many, myself included, who found themselves in a deep state of pain or unhappiness but who nonetheless decided to 'plough through' for the sake of a future goal. This would not be as saddening, in and of itself, if it was not for the fact that the goal was often nothing more than a phantom, for our tendency to treat the present as a mere means to a future end has become so entrenched that, as soon as that goal is attained, it is immediately replaced by another illusory future aim.

In light of this, I see the fact that I have learnt to enjoy and benefit from my PhD as an ongoing experience to be savoured and appreciated, as opposed to a mere tool to get me somewhere in a hypothetical future, as an invaluable gift, and I would like to encourage ongoing or future PhD students to do the same. And if often the future may seem bleak, it is perhaps a good opportunity to shake ourselves out of our self-created mental projections and question that very notion of 'the future' which we so take for granted. I do not believe my life will start after my graduation, or after getting my 'dream job', nor will it start next year, or tomorrow, or in an hour. I believe all human life is taking place right now.

Anything else is but an illusion.

Emmanuele Lazzara
PhD student, School of Sociology and Social Policy

Photo by the author.

Spotlight on...Nora Wikoff

What is your role in the School?

I'm officially an Assistant Professor in Quantitative Methods, which means boosting the use and enjoyment of Quant Methods is almost literally in my job description.

What do you teach?

I teach the 'hard' stuff that students tend not to like :-) but which offers immensely rewarding skills: research methods, statistics, etc. The main classes I teach at Nottingham are on the Q-Step pathway. In particular, I'm responsible for the Year 2 Q-Step modules, which focus on advanced quantitative methods and research design. I also convene the quantitative section of Research Design and Practice, and lead seminars on Research Design for postgraduate criminology students.

Before coming to the UK, in addition to teaching research methods and stats, I also taught programme evaluation, which I really enjoyed because it provided students an opportunity to apply these skills in real-world settings (the agencies in which they were completing placements). Even those students who were most opposed to quantitative research at the beginning tended to come around by the end of the semester, once they realised that they had designed and implemented a real study on their own, whose findings could be used to improve practices within the agency they worked.

Describe your research, and how you go about it.

In line with my teaching interests, my research tends to focus on the implementation and evaluation of programmes to improve individual and social wellbeing. The general strands linking my research interests relate to financial capability: addressing financial needs, understanding household saving and consumption behaviours, and designing interventions to help build individuals' financial capability.

Given my methods training and interest in quantitative methods, I tend to focus on large-scale experimental and quasi-experimental designs. While a PhD student, I contributed to a large-scale, randomised experiment testing the effects of individual savings accounts from birth (SEED OK). My doctoral thesis examined the effects of custodial education and post-release employment on serious and violent former prisoners' risk of recidivism.

What led you to academia?

It was a circuitous route: I was a History/Art History major as an undergrad, and I remember being violently opposed to numbers and to all disciplines that seemed dedicated more to numbers than to text. This had its origin in my high school hatred of maths and of maths teachers, which is admittedly ironic given my transition to quant methods over time.

Photo supplied by the author.

After finishing a Master's degree in Library Science, I worked for a few years as a reference librarian, fully expecting to go back eventually to get a PhD in that. However, I soon discovered that while I loved reference librarianship, I found myself drawn to research on topics that felt more socially relevant: dealing with the US housing crisis, financial deprivation, and mass imprisonment. As a result, I took the plunge and applied to Washington University

in St. Louis to get a degree in Social Work.

When I entered Wash U's Master's programme, as a prelude to entering the PhD programme, I quickly learned that research on these topics required mastery in statistics, and that if I were serious about going back to academia, I needed to grasp quantitative methods. And so I somewhat begrudgingly took my first 'real' stats class. To my shock and surprise, I kind of enjoyed it! And each additional class brought additional challenges and additional opportunities.

What interests you most about your work?

At the moment, trying to find ways to help students grasp the value and importance of quantitative methods, and to find ways to make the content as engaging as possible while still hitting the essential concepts.

What do you do in your spare time?

All the clichés: I spend most of my free time puttering about in the garden, listening to Radio 4, and tromping through the countryside with our two terriers. The great thing about living and working in a foreign country is that everything is new, and every place is novel.

What achievement are you most proud of in your life?

Landing a challenging job that I enjoy at a great university, which happens to be the same great University in which my husband had secured a similarly enjoyable, and challenging, position only two years previously. Also, not ever getting shot at during the 10 years that we lived in St. Louis, MO. I'm being slightly facetious about the latter . . . but only slightly.

What advice do you have for students?

Do not be afraid of quantitative methods, or of any class that seems challenging at first glance. I got far more out of the 'hard' classes that I took than I did the easy ones, and it can be a transformative experience to realise that you can do something that you had once believed to be not your thing.

Also, don't be afraid to fail. You cannot grow if you do not step outside your comfort zone, and now is the best time in your life to take risks.

Photo by Emmanuele Lazzara.