Choosing to Spend Vacation… Behind Bars

South Korea has a unique kind of prison problem. Unlike their neighbors to the north, they don't have camps full of starving political dissenters. And they don't have the same epidemic levels of mass incarceration found in America. The problem in South Korea is that people go to prison voluntarily as a way of escaping the soul-deadening frenzy of everyday life.

As the BBC reported last summer, "After working nearly 100 hours a week every week for six months, lawyer Kwon Yong-suk started wondering if solitary confinement in prison might be a better alternative to his situation. A prison warden friend told him volunteering to stay in a real jail cell would involve too much red tape, so in 2002 Kwon set the wheels in motion to create a jail-like retreat where people like him could find some peace and solitude."

Even though it's not actual prison, Kwon Yong-suk's camp replicates the solitude of confinement. Visitors come for stays of two days at a time and are locked in their cells for 20 hours a day with no access to phones, computers, or the internet. As the website *Travel & Leisure* reports, in the camp, evocatively called "Prison Inside Me," visitors "wear matching uniforms, sleep in spartan 54-square-foot cells, and are forbidden from speaking to each other. Minimal meals—a steamed sweet potato and banana shake for dinner, rice porridge for breakfast—are fed through a slot in their cell doors. Cell phones and clocks are prohibited inside the walls of the prison. Accommodation kits include a yoga mat, tea set, pen, and notebook. Everybody sleeps on the floor." In other words, it's nearly the opposite in every way of our pseudo-individualized and technologically saturated modern consumerscape. People prefer a monastic minimalism to the dehumanizing demands of their work and the empty frenzy of

leisure pursuits that more often resemble addictions than sources of solace.

The problem might be more widespread than in just South Korea, but that's also where it seems most acute. There's a reason why "The Prison Inside Me" was created there and not in, say, Mexico, for example. Kwong Yong-suk's wife and "Prison Inside Me" co-founder Noh Ji-Hyang told *The Atlantic Monthly*, "After a stay in the prison, people say, 'This is not a prison, the real prison is where we return to.'" "The Prison Inside Me" appears to be a kind of coping mechanism for a society pierced by the bleeding edge of rampant technological connectivity and the exhaustion that attends it.

South Korea is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world. It's also one of the most overworked. As the CBC reports:

> *The Land of the Morning Calm is the most overworked nation in Asia. It has the second-longest work hours in the 35-nation Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, after Mexico. South Koreans work 2,069 hours a year, compared to the average of 1,764 hours among OECD countries.*
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> *Fourteen-hour days are not uncommon here, nor are six-day workweeks. Small wonder, then, that professionals like Kang seek ways to alleviate burnout.*

Seen in that light, a controlled, prison-like environment almost makes sense as an alternative to the empty freneticism of daily life in South Korea. It might help to think of the faux-jail alternative as more of a monastic experience than a penal one. The community that networked lives offer, besides being a simulacrum of the real thing, comes at the cost of anxiety, addiction, the cultivation of shallowness, and total burnout. The reassuring silence of a concrete cell seems like a welcome alternative to an artificial, technology-addled paradise.

One of the interesting aspects of this story is that it's an example of technological saturation having the opposite effect on culture as what was promised last century. More and better technology, particularly the social networking kinds of tech that so intimately penetrate our daily lives, were supposed to, at a minimum, make us feel less lonely and give us more and better leisure time. The results have been the opposite. We've never been lonelier. And never before have the most intimate parts of our lives been so thoroughly measured, recorded, and curated for profit.

As Columbia professor Jonathan Crary writes in his book *24/7*, the most cutting-edge global corporations depend in large part on how many "eyeballs" they can "engage and control." We're now living in what he calls an "attention economy" in which corporations vie for the most efficient modes of quantification, prediction, and control of our moment-to-moment whims. This process is constant and unrelenting. "Of course, there are breaks," Crary writes, "but they are not intervals in which any kind of counter-projects or streams of thought can be nurtured and sustained. As the opportunity for electronic transactions of all kinds becomes omnipresent, there is no vestige what used to be everyday life beyond the reach of corporate intrusion. An attention economy dissolves the separation between the personal and the professional, between entertainment and information, all overridden by a compulsory functionality of communication that is inherently and inescapably 24/7."

The result of this cannibalization of our attention, of our very lives, is a word that's been used a few times already: burnout. The German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han begins his masterpiece of contemporary social diagnosis, *The Burnout Society*, with the evocative phrase "Every age has its signature afflictions." If the Cold War was marked by an emphasis on the immunological—discerning the self from the other and the pure from the impure—then our moment, Han

argues, is marked by “[n]eurological diseases such as depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), borderline personality disorder (BPD), and burnout syndrome….”

Han categorizes our moment as one marked by hyperactivity and an excess of positivity. Rather than strong and hard demarcations between parts of our lives and aspects of our personalities—a strong distinction between work and family, for example—everything bleeds into one another. Think of “mom bloggers” monetizing the experiences of their children, for instance. This is a perfect example of what Han refers to as “the achievement society,” a world in which we’ve internalized the desire to maximize the very sort of quantifiable data that corporations like Google use to coerce and shape society as a whole. In the mom blogger’s drive to cultivate the attention of viewers by tweaking the presentation of her family, she not only mimics the algorithmic curation control of digital companies but internalizes her own exploitation. The only thing left to do is *more*. As Han writes in his typically evocative style, “In this society of compulsion, everyone carries a work camp inside…one is simultaneously prisoner and guard, victim and perpetrator. One exploits oneself.” From this vantage point, “The Prison Inside Me” seems like an eerily appropriate response to the hyperactive and hyper-quantified lives of modern South Koreans.

South Korea is of course a unique example. But America isn’t immune to the affliction of the age. We might not have fake jails (yet), but we have programs that tap into the desire for escape from the digital. Sleep-away summer camps for adults where folks can have a “digital detox” approximate the South Korean option while adding a dash of American nostalgia and infantilization. It’s different, for sure, but it suggests the same sort of desire for something more. What the jail and the camp share in common is that both provide opportunities for contemplation—for boredom even. “If sleep represents the high point of bodily relaxation,” writes Han, “deep boredom is the

peak of mental relaxation." Boredom is important. Walter Benjamin called it "the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience." It's what one passes through on the way to deep focus and contemplation, and without it, neither culture nor spirituality are possible.

With that in mind, voluntary prison seems a little less silly and perhaps a little bit noble. Following the impulse to, using a turn of phrase Han might approve of, thicken life with delay, might teach us something about the requirements for human flourishing—or at least the necessities of the contemplative life.

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