

THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

*Please join us for a discussion on Boredom (and other thoughts).
We will meet in Gamble 101 on Thursday, April 19th at 4:00 pm.*

In Defense of Boredom

By Chris Dunn

About three years ago I was driving through rural Oregon in a 1992 Toyota pickup. I had been in San Francisco a few days before where my truck was broken into and about everything I had was stolen including my bike, camping equipment, and all my CD's. So I ended up driving eight hours music-less. That was the day I discovered silence. I tell this story as an example of a time when I was forced to confront and in fact embrace boredom.

Boredom is generally thought of as a negative experience, like a disease to be avoided at all costs, but I want to challenge that notion by exploring boredom and presenting you with an alternative understanding of boredom as an essential aspect of human existence which must be confronted and accepted as meaningful and worthwhile.

What is boredom?

This is a question worthy of long and serious inquiry but for these reflections I will be brief.

Søren Kierkegaard called boredom "the root of all evil". What Kierkegaard is suggesting is that boredom is a moment which lacks all meaning (Svendsen). I, however, want to persuade you that the attempt to avoid boredom is the root of all evil and that meaning must be created from boredom. Within the state of boredom, it is difficult to think of a past that wasn't boring or a future that won't be boring as time moves so slow that the present becomes the sole focus.

Where does boredom come from?

I don't know the precise answer, but what is interesting is that as in the case of my Oregon trek, nobody chooses to be bored, it just happens. Another interesting note is that until relatively recent history, boredom was reserved for the aristocracy, but has now become more democratically distributed as the middle class and individualism were born, religion lost its grip, and industry altered the world. (Svendsen).

The first record of the word "boredom" is in the novel *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens written in 1852 (OED).

What are some other ways of thinking about boredom?

One morning a week, all the 268 pre-kindergarten through eighth grade students at the Cambridge Friends Quaker School sit in a circle on the floor in dead silence for a half hour. They believe this time allows them to cultivate their faith, solidify their community, and seek personal truth. Another way of interpreting this ceremony is allowing the young to integrate boredom into their lives (Meltz).

The child that is left without continuous stimulation has to learn how to entertain himself and therefore is also developing the capacity to solve his own problems and think for himself. This in turn gives the child a sense of inner power. More children today are restless, agitated, and unhappy because they are dependent on instant gratification. They are bored because they haven't acquired the basic ability to fill their own time (Meltz).

According to Nielsen Media Research, American children spend about 24 hours a week in front of the tube. "As the process for interacting with the world becomes more passive [as in the case of TV viewing]

children are robbed of the process of being an active agent in their own lives"(Meltz).

Creativity nearly always blossoms out of boredom. Children today are busier than ever before. "A survey by the University of Michigan revealed that in 1997, children between the ages of 3 and 12 had nearly eight hours less free time each week than they did in 1981" (Mlyniec). As children have their days packed more tightly and as the pace of their lives quickens, they aren't able to be alone with their thoughts and feelings; they have little time for reflection. Not only is reflection, imagination, and critical thinking hindered, but social development suffers. Bored children are more likely to attempt to connect with others (Mlyniec).

How does boredom affect the world?

The attempt to evade boredom is obvious in our society. The entertainment industry is one of the largest industries on the planet.

For our ancestors, repetitive, mindless activities like plowing a field was what constituted most of their lives. In the present day, outside of work, our daily activities are highly stimulating and highly skilled, but we are so accustomed to these that they become absorbed into the unconscious and thus becoming boring. Consider driving on the interstate at 75 mph. Our ancestors would have found this to be a blast, but for us it has become ordinary.

As a supporting illustration, consider driving a car across town and not remembering how you got there. The activity has become so ordinary that you no longer need be cognizant of it and you can simply run on automatic pilot (Peña).

Constant habituation requires constantly greater stimulation to overcome boredom, thus we are always ratcheting up the intensity of experience (Peña). As an experiment, the next time you watch TV try to notice how quickly it moves and how much flashing is involved.

Augustin de la Peña , a psychophysicologist who has written extensively on boredom, has postulated that wars are started out of sheer boredom, making war the ultimate form of entertainment. It seems that humans crave conflict, anything to make life interesting.

Consider our video games and movies which are nothing more than manufactured conflicts. An enemy gives us something to overcome, thus an aim which alleviates boredom. Peña also didn't find it unrealistic that our boredom threshold could become so high that we would nuke ourselves for want of anything else to do, thus we are simultaneously boring and amusing ourselves to death.

I don't want to end on such a dreary note. I believe there is a way out of this cycle. Religious meditation, sensory deprivation, and philosophical contemplation are attempts to live with boredom without the need for endlessly increasing external stimulus.

Perhaps the next time you are bored you will use it as an opportunity to explore some new aspect of your life and existence.

Hopefully you were not too bored by my musings on boredom.

Works Cited

Meltz, Barbara F. "There are benefits to boredom". The Boston Globe. 22 January, 2004.

Mlyniec, Vicky. "'Mom, I'm Bored': The Upside of Downtime". Family Circle. 2007.

Peña, Augustin de la. "Knowledge, Automatization, and Boredom: A Seminal Dynamic Modulating Behavior, Cultural Change, and Our Enormous, Always-Growing Need for Entertainment, Community, and Spiritual Experience". <<http://www.boredominterest.net/2007>>.

Svendsen, Lars. A Philosophy of Boredom. Trans. John Irons. Chicago, IL: Reaktion Books. 15 April, 2005.

If you have any questions, criticisms, comments or are interested in writing a thoughtful article for *The Philosopher's Stone*, please contact Dr. Nordenhaug.

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Note from the faculty advisor: Chris Dunn is graduating this Spring and I wish to thank him for his years of service to *The Philosopher's Stone*. More importantly, I thank him for embracing the years of boredom I must have inflicted on him to trigger the creativity that has bloomed in his reflections. It is gratifying when a student finally sees the wisdom of his teachers' uses of boredom for pedagogical and existential benefits.

For a look at past *Stones*, visit:
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