

In Defence of Boredom

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There are two kinds of people in the world: those who flee boredom as though it were a burning building, and those, considerably fewer, who have learned to pull up a chair and watch it burn. I belong, candidly, to the second party, and I have come to think of boredom as the last private club in America: membership free, benefits enormous, applicants none. It is arguably the most maligned state of mind available to us, decried from every pulpit and podcast as a failure of imagination, when in truth it is precisely the reverse. Boredom is not the absence of thought. It is thought's anteroom, its waiting room, its long unpadded bench.

Consider the modern citizen at rest, if rest is the word. Beside every plate at dinner lies a small glowing screen, in every pocket sits a casino, and on every wrist throbs a tiny foreman, counting. The cacophony attends us incessantly: the buzz, the chime, the banner sliding down like a curtain at a badly run theater. We have banished silence with the thoroughness of a people ridding a house of mice, and we have succeeded to a degree that ought to alarm us more. The average American, the surveys assure us, now consults his telephone more often than his own thoughts, and however improbable the figure, it does not feel improbable by much.

Productivity, meanwhile, has become our national religion, complete with scriptures, saints, and a clergy of efficiency experts. We decry idleness as vehemently as our forebears decried sin, and we flout the oldest rhythm our species knows, honest work and honest rest, with the pride of reformers rather than the shame of heretics. Busyness is the new finery, ostentatious and joyless, worn to every party. "How are you?" we ask, and the only decent answer is "Busy." To reply "Idle, and thriving" would be an indecency roughly equal to arriving without trousers.

Admittedly, the case against boredom is not nothing, and however fondly I regard my subject, I concede its perils. There is a boredom that curdles, a gray and stagnant boredom that is first cousin to despair, and I do not propose it as a hobby. Between that foul pond and the rushing river of distraction lies a broad, sunlit meadow, and it is this meadow I have risen to defend. However unfashionable the cause, however quaint the counsel, the meadow deserves its advocate.

Consider what boredom has done for us. But for long, empty afternoons, were it not for the sheer unbearable flatness of a wet Sunday in a small town, we should have fewer novels, symphonies, crackpot inventions and grand theories than we do. Newton did his finest thinking with the theaters closed, a plague abroad, and not a single notification to his name. The enigma of gravity yielded to a man with time on his hands. Admittedly, an apple helped. But an apple falls on a busy man, and he eats it without ceremony, still scrolling.

My education in boredom came early, one August at my grandfather's house in Ohio, a place so quiet that the corn could be heard growing, or so my grandfather claimed, and he was not a fanciful man. The chores done by nine, the radio broken, my cousins gone home, there remained, each day, a vast lake of hours, and I was set adrift without a paddle. Would that I could recover one of those afternoons now. At first I raged. Then I sulked. Then, the sulking exhausted, I began to notice things: the dust leaning in the stairwell light, the exact hour the locusts started up, the slow theology of clouds. By September I had read one very long novel, taught myself to whittle, and composed, on the flyleaf of an old atlas, a poem so breathtakingly banal that I keep it still, to remind me where we all begin.

Lest anyone suppose I am preaching sloth, let me be precise, because precision is my whole case. Boredom is not apathy. Apathy is boredom that has surrendered; boredom is apathy that has not. The one is a swamp, the other a frontier. Nor is boredom the same as leisure, that industrious American institution with its gear, its fees, and its continuous improvement. Leisure is work in a costume. Boredom, true boredom, asks nothing and costs nothing, and it is the antithesis of consumption, which is precisely why the market cannot abide it, and why it will sell you, at a fair price, a thousand ways to escape it.

And it will. The marketplace, astute as ever, has lately discovered that we miss the very stillness we destroyed, and so it sells the stillness back to us by subscription: quietude as a commodity, the new panacea at nine dollars a month. There are applications that teach us to breathe, an accomplishment I had believed our species had already mastered. There are evening courses in doing nothing, and they assign homework. A friend pays a service to remind him, by means of a pleasant chime, to sit quietly for ten minutes, and describes the arrangement without embarrassment, as though the chime were the achievement and the quiet a bonus. Were it not Tuesday, it would be satire. Debunking such absurdities almost writes itself, and yet they flourish, superfluous and serene.

It could be argued, and by persons of discernment it frequently is, that what we call boredom is merely the mind unclenching, and that we fear it as we fear any unfamiliar room: we do not know what is in it. Something is in it; that is the open secret of the matter. In the unguarded hour the mind brings out its contraband: the remembered face, the unsent letter, the small unacted kindness, the question we have spent a decade avoiding. We do not fear emptiness. We fear what rushes in to fill it. The allure of distraction is not pleasure but anesthesia, and it is prized, I submit, in exact proportion to what it helps us not to think about.

So here is my program, offered with the brevity it deserves. Do nothing, now and then, on purpose. Sit on a bench without a telephone and let the hour happen to you. Stare from a train window and decline to be informed. When the itch comes, and it will, observe it with the detachment of a naturalist and let it pass. Lest the practice sound arduous, I add that it requires no equipment, no instructor, and no chime, pleasant or otherwise. The whole curriculum fits into one sentence: stay.

I do not expect converts; the tide, it must be admitted, is winning. But on a good evening, the dinner over, the dishes drying, the house settling into its noises like an old dog arranging itself on a rug, I feel the great wheel of distraction slow for a moment, and in that gap, small as a doorway, stands everything that makes a life worth examining. However fiercely the world beckons, I shall be in that doorway, doing nothing, unrepentant and, by modern standards, gloriously vacant of mind. Should anyone care to join me, the bench is long, the membership is free, and there is, I promise, absolutely nothing going on.