

# *The Gifts of Boredom*

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*And we were never being boring. That's why we were never being bored.*

-- Pet Shop Boys

*There is, in a sense, no such thing as boredom. Boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration.*

-- Susan Sontag

1.

As I've travelled to foreign countries, sat for weeks in silence, pored over ancient mystical texts, and dabbled in indigenous shamanic practices, I've sometimes had the mistaken impression that real spirituality -- simply, being my real self, seeing clearly, and engaging directly with experience -- is something far away. But given the definition I've proposed, this is impossible. How can being "real," seeing "clearly," and engaging with "experience" require anything other than what happens to be around at any moment? If it has to be in a special time and place, it's not omnipresent, and if it's not omnipresent, it's a feature of experience, not experience itself. Great surfing waves are someplace; but the wetness of the water is everywhere.

And here's something they don't tell you in brochures: spiritual practice is often very boring. It's not like, when you sit for six weeks, you're asleep the whole time, or in an altered state, or visiting always with angels. Sometimes those things seem to happen, but a lot of times, you are just like you are now, only with absolutely... nothing... to do.

Fortunately, boredom is not a failure of character. It has many gifts. And it is a sign that you are very, very close to "getting it." This is because "it" cannot be gotten at all, and in that mind-emptying, vacuous state of boredom, you're really close to getting nothing. To pick up from last month's column, whether it's nothing or Nothing is really just a matter of perspective. There's no difference, really.

The only trouble is, the closer one gets to nothing, the more one wants to fill it with something. Because nothing is really boring. Get it?

2.

First, at the very least, boredom is a useful alarm bell. It lets us know that we've had enough of whatever it was we used to desire. This may not have much to do with God, the universe, and everything, but it is a really helpful thing to notice, and is probably a necessary preliminary to even thinking about those things: simple to see that at a certain point, the fascination we had with an object, person, sensation... disappears.

Probably it goes without saying that most of our lives are spent either desiring certain things or really not desiring others. These things may be material objects, or mental states, status, or love -- whatever. It's heartening, maybe even enlightening, to see that we can get bored of just about anything. The mind's had enough.

So, a little gratitude when you get bored. After all, boredom is a privilege, right? Your essential needs are taken care of; even your essential wants are taken care of. What percentage of people in the world even have the luxury of boredom? Aren't most too busy working?

Even among the small percentage of the world's population that reads online magazines, most of us make ourselves so busy, impelled by imperatives to achieve, outshine, succeed, enrich, that boredom itself becomes a luxury. That's true for me, anyway. When I feel bored, I'm thrilled that I've had the space to feel it.

3.

The essential point, though, is this: Normally, when we are bored, we'll do just about anything to make the boredom stop. Our minds and our bodies fight desperately to push the boredom away, sometimes restlessly, other times angrily, and sometimes with an apathy that makes life seem barely worth living. Then again, sometimes it's

just irritating. And this is exactly why we're bored: because we're trying so hard not to be.

In this way, and others, boredom is like enlightenment. What's needed is not an additive, but a subtractive. Here's the exercise: just surrender and let it happen. Drink in the boredom, taste it, come to know it, let it just wash over you in waves and waves of dullness. Let yourself get really, really bored. See what happens. Explore the sensation. Do not try not to be bored. Remember: boredom arises from the effort to stave off boredom.

Because boredom is really restlessness. What, after all, is the difference between "boredom" and "relaxation"? It's not what's going on outside; it's what's going on inside. Boredom is not about the lack of interesting things going on. With enough meditation, literally watching paint dry can be fascinating. Even if it's already dry. Trust me, I've done it. Boredom is about too much energy, not too little. Take a look next time you're bored. Is your mind too relaxed, or too tense? Maybe you can even check out your heart rate -- when I'm bored, my heart is almost always beating faster than I expected.

In other words, we have boredom exactly backwards. Our minds are so conditioned to be always busy and interested, that when there's nothing interesting (we think), we get really irritable. Sometimes maybe even nervous. Personally, my next step is try to find something interesting to do, or watch, because who wants to be worried, bored, or irritable? So I'll put more information into my head "in order to relax." Sometimes it's not even pleasant information; I find there are times when I'd rather get stressed out about some future plan than just be bored with the present. In any case, the usual response to boredom is to put in something interesting, to get rid of it.

But this has it exactly backwards.

4.

Okay, so you've let yourself get really bored, and nothing has happened. What next?

Here is an intermediate step, if you can't just be bored. Try insight meditation. Notice the sensations of the body; if you are tense, allow the tension, and then allow the tension to relax. If you're like me, you'll probably find all kinds of tension you didn't even know was there. Maybe you're unconsciously contorting your ankles; maybe your back is hunched. Whatever it is, gently let it go -- hopefully without judging yourself -- and the thoughts will slowly follow. Just breathe. Give your mind a bubble bath. Relax.

A lot of times, when people are bored, they'll start to fidget, moving their bodies around to try to somehow stimulate something for the mind to be interested in. You know, you'll crack your knuckles, or roll your tongue around your mouth -- movements that are usually quite silly, really, but remember -- you're desperate. And yet, this just makes it worse.

Try this. Come to a still position, and really promise yourself that, whatever comes up, you're not going to move for a few minutes. Maybe you want to set the time in advance, or maybe just a few minutes will do. The first couple of minutes may be nearly unendurable. But, you know you can endure them, right? It's just your mind that doesn't want to. You're not going to die. Then, instead of moving your body to try to interest your mind, move your mind through your body. Check out your toes -- don't wiggle them, just see if you can feel each one. I bet you can't, unless you get very quiet inside. Move up each leg, being as precise as you can -- shins, calf muscles, front of knee, back of knee. Go through your whole body this way (you can start at the top and move down if you want). As a game, see how precise you can actually get. Can you feel individual muscles in your arm? How about your back?

Probably, as you do this "body scan," a lot of thoughts will come up, including some which say things like "this is stupid." Whatever. There are several replies.

One is that using boredom in this way is actually very helpful for the rest of life. What you're doing, practicing vipassana with boredom, is relating to something unpleasant in a different way than usual. According to the neuroscientists, you're actually forming new neural pathways, which in "mind" terms allows you to relate to unpleasant stimuli -- like your boss, driving in city traffic, or coping with actual illness or pain -- in new ways, like not being as reactive as you might usually be. Boredom is a pretty moderate form of unpleasantness, so it's the perfect place to practice and build these new relationships. Use it as a training ground for later, when these skills will count a lot more.

This is part of the maturing of spiritual practice. Early on, it's very important to have amazing things happen. I have experienced Divine love, mystical union, full-body energetic phenomena that resemble orgasms of light -- and, believe me, these are all great. But at a certain point, getting spiritually high turns into a sort of dead-end. Unless you're very fortunate, you can't stay high all the time. "After the ecstasy, the laundry," as Jack Kornfield says. So, spiritual practice starts to be about the rest of the time -- the laundry time. The question shifts from "How can I get this over with, so that I can go back to the full-body orgasm part?" to "How can the laundry also be part of God?" So, allow the boredom. Learn to feel completely content, happy, and bored, all at the same time.

Second, while boredom itself is boring, the long-term effects of getting to know your body this closely are anything but boring. All of life gets better: moving, resting, eating, having sex. You spend your whole life in your body. So, the closer you know it, the closer you can know life itself. Try to feel boredom in the body, really. Just as anger, say, is usually associated with a clenched jaw, a faster heartbeat, tensed muscles throughout the body, or sadness carries a "lump in the throat," boredom, too, is a subtle phenomenon of the body. Learn it. You can become a connoisseur of these sensations, riding along with just about any one of them. Like the flavours and notes of sadness, which I wrote about last month, the particular contours of boredom can become beautiful, as long as they're not forced to be something else. Just try it: just get to know the sensations for what they are, instead of what your mind tells you they are.

Third, beside the practicing of non-reactivity, beside the connoisseurship, seeing things as they actually are has the benefit of relieving you of a kind of mental slavery, in which everything is evaluated according to how well they cater to your desires. Slavery, and myopia. It's like we're wandering in a phantasmagoria of the senses, and blocking out everything except the narrow band that pleases us. As R. Nachman of Bratzlav says in Likutei Moharan #133, "Woe is us! The world is full of light and mysteries both wonderful and awesome, but our tiny little hand shades our eyes and prevents them from seeing." The tiny hand may be our perceptive faculties, or it may be our yetzer hara, the self-centred inclination that leads to separation, evil, and missing the point of it all.

Fourth is the point of it all, and it gets a new section.

5.

The point of it all is to use boredom as a gateway to pure awareness. This is it, the nondual be-all and end-all, the whole shebang, the end of suffering, the path into enlightened consciousness, what the dzogchen teachings call the "old man basking in the sun," and the Jewish ones call "devekut," that shift in consciousness after which everything is exactly the same, and yet it is also God, rigpa, Being, the whole thing -- and it is delightfully boring.

Truthfully, I am not trying to talk in riddles. It's just that when you learn to subtract something so familiar as wanting-not-to-be-bored, it looks like you've passed through the looking glass.

One way in is this: Zen teacher Genpo Roshi likes to ask his students to act from their "non-seeking, non-desiring minds." Try it now -- play-acting is fine. Stop seeking anything, stop desiring anything. Just pretend as if you couldn't care less -- but without the anger that expression sometimes hides. Just, really, you don't care, you're happy as is, you're not looking for anything. Now, you can't really fake it for long. You have to actually let go of any desire for this moment to be any different from what it is. The desire to be excited, happy, enlightened, more comfortable, whatever. Let it go. Just stop seeking.

Life suddenly gets very boring. Nothing to do, nowhere to go. Stay with it; don't get too excited. It's nothing special. Just boredom... only, since you've let go (faking or not) of any desire for it to not be boredom, it is what it is, which is what God said back there at the burning bush, and the Buddha said under the bodhi tree, and wise people have said around foliage for thousands of years.

Again: Non-seeking, non-desiring mind. Ask that mind what's wrong, what needs fixing, what it's looking for, what problem it's trying to solve. And give up. Just for a little bit.

The dzogchen texts speak of this as "old man, basking in the sun" because it's just gaping, stupid awareness, with no agenda. It's where you go when you stay bored, and get more bored, and then finally allow yourself to get so bored that you don't want

anything other than this lovely blissful boredom, peaceful, quiet, radiant awareness, mirror-like mind, gazing, gaping, just hanging there, doing nothing, non-seeking, non-desiring.

What's most liberating about this kind of enlightenment is that it is available in the midst of social life; work, making the world a better place, and all of the other activities which comprise most of our daily lives. Awareness is always there, if you can just give yourself the gift of boredom, in small instants, whenever. It's like taking a vacation to Aruba, lying on the beach just like the old man basking in the sun, zoning out, and not having to worry about the flight plans back, all in about three seconds. And, unlike the indulgence in Aruba, it can be done all the time, in the midst of important obligations, moral imperatives, and the rest of life. And at much lower cost than a plane ticket.

One important difference between Awareness and Aruba is that miraculously, at least for me and everyone else I've ever heard talk about the subject, simply from naked awareness flows a natural lovingkindness, more genuine than anything cultivated by oughts and shoulds. Helping others, and other beings, becomes natural; this is not narcissism, after all, since self-centred desires are precisely those which are surrendered. Sounds resonate. Nature vibrates. Even the mechanical dystopias of modern society are somehow, mysteriously fascinating. Boredom liberates.

I wish someone would have told me this years ago: Stop trying to have special experiences, be more virtuous, speak in a spiritual tone of voice. Stop beating yourself up, stop achieving, stop working so hard, and stop worrying. Kicking your own ass is not the way to liberation.

It's simple: boredom plus surrender equals enlightenment. Did I just miss the memo?

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*This essay is part of a larger work, "The Gifts of Boredom," which is searching for a publisher.*