

Boredom & True Leisure

Kids often talk about being bored. It's often their complaint when there's something they want to do, but can't.

We too can get bored. Is it possible that it's from the same cause? That there's something that we really want to do, but for some reason can't or feel we shouldn't.

Years ago in our small group, we were going around the circle and describing where we were in our lives at that point. We called it our "red dot." Kind of like the maps you see at the mall or in an airport that shows a red dot and labels it "*You are here.*" I was describing some of my general frustrations with life and someone in the group suggested that it sounded like I was bored. I was a little surprised and responded rather quickly that I don't think I ever get bored. I'm way too busy to get bored.

Then later in the evening and after a bit of reflection, I openly admitted that for some reason their suggestion was starting to make sense to me. I mused, "*Maybe a person can stay busy and still be bored.*" I have since concluded that on that night, that friend had some precise insight about my condition.

You might wonder, "After more than 40 years in ministry, with nothing the same from week to week, how could you get bored?" Well, without getting too detailed, let me just say, I can.

According to self-proclaimed boredom expert, **Garfield the Cat** here's how to tell if you are really bored:

- a. You paint little faces on your nails, and pretend each finger is a person
- b. You spend hours watching bread mold
- c. You braid your eyebrows
- d. You watch a 3-hour documentary on sewage treatment
- e. You start playing the spoons

Boredom has also been attributed to...

- a. Unchallenging jobs
- b. Unfulfilled expectations
- c. Lack of physical activity
- d. Being too much of a spectator and too little of a participant in life

What exactly is boredom? Boredom has been defined in terms of its psychological processes as:

- "...An unpleasant, transient affective state in which the individual feels a pervasive lack of interest in and difficulty concentrating on the current activity."
- It can be characterized by a perception of one's environment as dull, tedious, and lacking in stimulation. Or one I particularly like...
- Boredom is a response to a moderate challenge for which the subject has more than enough skill.
- Boredom can also be traced to...
 - a. A lack of faith in God ("*Boredom: the consciousness of a barren, meaningless existence.*" - Eric Hoffer)
 - b. A pre-occupation with self to the neglect of what is around us

So, boredom is either too little of God, too much of self, or both.

Boredom has been considered as a door to drug abuse among teens and has been proposed as a cause of pathological gambling behavior.

I think most of us have times of boredom with our lives, our work, our marriages, our kids, as well as in the shallow entertainment we are regularly exposed to these days.

Boredom also plays a role in existentialist thought. In situations where someone is isolated, it is often suggested that boredom may be met with various religious activities. Boredom may be regarded as the essential human condition, and God and His wisdom, are the ultimate answers. Boredom is in fact taken in this sense by many existentialist philosophers. In fact, the philosopher Heidegger included about 100 pages on boredom in one of his "lectures", probably the most extensive

philosophical treatment ever of the subject – (*sounds like a perfect example of his message.*)

Blaise Pascal in the *Pensées*, which is a compilation of his thoughts that were intended to become a book before he died. In it he discusses the human condition in saying "we seek rest in a struggle against some obstacles. And when we have overcome these, rest proves unbearable because of the boredom it produces", and later states that "only an infinite and immutable object – that is, God himself – can fill this infinite abyss."

All this leads to an obvious question: What do we do about it? Now, some people feel that today's digital media are a chief cause of our boredom, so they have decided to limit their and their family's exposure. It's probably good that we all think about that. Others feel called to work within the medium and try to change it — or at least create alternatives to the useless trash that's available.

What we are called to do is use discernment and to not ingest this stuff mindlessly. Avoiding this problem requires thinking about boredom and leisure from a biblical point of view. Think about the situation.

Twenty years ago, Bruce Springsteen famously sang "*57 channels (and nothin' on).*" While an updated version would refer to "*300 channels and countless websites, and still there's nothin' on,*" the dissatisfaction would remain the same, if not worse.

The exponential growth in access to media hasn't reduced boredom — if anything the opposite has happened. We require more and more stimulation to stave off the sense of unease. As British theologian John Milbank has pointed out, our pre-occupation with novelty and variety has diminished our capacity for "sustained attention to detail and creative use" of the world around us.

Work banishes those three great evils: boredom, vice and poverty.
Voltaire

John Piper once said, "*Sin is what we do when we are not satisfied in God.*"

Or as philosopher Thomas Naughton put it: “Too much entertainment makes one bored, restless, and anxious.” I would add to that that today’s demand for immediate gratification, supposedly the solution for our pandemic boredom, actually is a chief cause of boredom. (Tell baseball example.)

We are bored, restless, and anxious because very little holds our attention for very long. Our whole society has become a little A.D.D. For the Christian, watching something on T.V. to simply stave off boredom should prompt some soul-searching. We should ask ourselves why we are bored and, more to the point, why we crave novelty and variety for their own sake.

I think one of the main reasons is because we have forgotten how to rest. For most people, “leisure” is synonymous with inactivity. It’s what we experience when we aren’t “doing something.” Since we think of leisure as being passive, it makes sense that we fill our “leisure time” with passive entertainments.

But that’s not how historic Christianity understands leisure. In his book, “Leisure: The Basis of Culture,” the Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper called leisure a “condition of the soul.” It’s not the same thing as inactivity or quiet. It is “The disposition of receptive understanding, of contemplative beholding, and immersion — in the real.”

Leisure, he writes, consists of “a celebratory, approving, lingering gaze of the inner eye on the reality of creation.” It’s about seeing the world as God made it, affirming its goodness, and thus transcending the hum-drum and cares of our everyday existence.

According to Pieper, “only someone who has lost the spiritual power to be at leisure can be bored.”

That doesn’t mean that entertainment is bad *per se*. The problem, as Naughton says, is that “leisure understood only in terms of entertainment lacks meaning that is satisfactory to the human heart and mind.” It can’t satisfy us no matter how much of it we shove down our throat.

Thus, we should ask ourselves *why* we watch a certain TV show or visit a certain website. Is it to relax or unwind, or is it because we are restless and afraid of being still or, even worse afraid of what's Real?

JESUS CHANGES OUR FOCUS IN LIFE...

1. Boredom is the result of an obsession with self or material possessions
2. Yet Jesus teaches us to:
 - a. Deny self - Lk 9:23-24
 - 1) People who are obsessed with self are never happy
 - 2) People who lose themselves in service to God are never bored!
 - b. Change the object of your affections - Mt 6:19-21
 - 1) The pleasure of earthly things is fleeting at best, followed by the inevitable letdowns - cf. *"the passing pleasures of sin"* - He 11:25
 - 2) The only permanent possession we have is in heaven, and our affections should be placed on it
3. His teachings are designed to give us great joy - Jn 15:11;
e.g., Ac 20:35

Why does entertainment fascinate the human spirit? Why do certain movies capture our imaginations? It's because there is something in our human fabric that longs to be transported beyond our mundane living. Hollywood tries to grab our dreams and passions through films-drama, adventure, romance-and does a fairly good job. But these are just counterfeits of the real drama, adventure, and romance that are a part of God's design.

One of the biggest problems the Church faces right now is spiritual boredom. Why? Because believers were never made for a program, an institution, or a weekly pew-warming ceremony. Christians were never made to be satisfied by a three-point outline that contains just enough advice to get over the "hump" of the week. The human heart was made for passion. It was created for relationship. It was designed to experience the fullness of God.

I have a friend who is a modern-day Indiana Jones. I've known him for years, and he's truly a hero. He lives in the jungles of Mexico. He has pioneered churches in uncharted areas, forged raging rivers, been beaten for the Gospel, and even seen people raised from the dead. But what's refreshing about him is that there isn't a religious bone in his body. He's in love with God, and that love is awesome.

Young men are drawn to this man. He gets countless letters from guys around the world asking him to mentor them. Why do they seek him? Because many of these men have an unanswered longing for adventure. They crave it. And when they see someone living the life they dream about, they want to be a part of it.

I believe there is an insatiable desire for adventure in most men. Some women have it too. This desire was placed there by God and was designed to be fulfilled by Him. But instead of letting Him fulfill their deepest desires, most believers try to bury them and just survive. They settle for a lifestyle that falls far short of Raiders of the Lost Ark. Their lifestyle often involves a cubicle, a nine-to-five job, and a commute back and forth to work.

Left unsatisfied, the hunger for adventure manifests itself in different forms. Men become sports enthusiasts in their quest for adventure. They track the statistics of major league baseball players, follow the March Madness of college basketball, and with pride wear jerseys bearing the numbers of celebrity athletes. Some

become biking enthusiasts or acquire all the latest camping gear for a weekend getaway in the mountains. In essence, they live out their craving for adventure in their off time or through the lives of others. That's one reason stadiums are packed, Monday Night Football has such a huge following, and the Super Bowl is, well, the Super Bowl.

Just as men were made for adventure, women were made for romance. They long for deep, intimate, heart-dancing relationships. Thus, women read romantic novels, watch romantic movies, and wait for their knight in shining armor to appear. Whether watching a "chick flick" or reading a best-selling novel about the undying love between hero and heroine, most women have a soft spot for story and intrigue. They long for true love and passionate expression. Something deep within women's hearts craves romance.

Some men enjoy romance, and some women seek adventure-so the lines are not hard and fast-but the general stereotypes reverberate loudly. Whether you long for romance or adventure or both, God created those desires. They were instilled within you from the time you were born. The secret is to unleash them in your pursuit of God. Whether it's a desire for challenging experiences or intimacy-whatever that Spirit-driven desire is-it's meant to be awakened and answered in your relationship with God.

The Creator of the universe-the one who created things that man has yet to discover-never wanted you to live a life of perpetual boredom. Religion is boring. Living with a holy, "wild" God is exciting. He's out there. I mean, out there. And He doesn't do things you expect Him to. Knights in shining armor don't exist, but God does. And He provides you with enough awesome promises, hope, and strength to endure anything and take you anywhere.

If I were God, I would have had a major light show to usher my Son to the planet. It would have been complete with a booming voice, flashing lights, and sound effects-a show that only God could pull off. And yet our God is so out there that He showed up as an innocent baby!

God is often unpredictable. He loves to invade everyday life. He's passionate and jealous for you and your time. Sometimes He comes to you when you least expect it-when you're taking out the trash, changing diapers, driving down the highway, sitting in a class, or watching a movie.

He doesn't reveal Himself because you do things the right way or you're a super-saint. He does this to remind you that His love and desire for you aren't based on what you do for Him but on who He is. He's deeply moved by you. His unpredictable love is meant to fascinate you and captivate your heart with His passion for you. He's not boring. He's adventuresome. He's romantic.

One of the main reasons that the world and the church are awash in lust and pornography (by men and women—30% of internet pornography is now viewed by women), fornication, adultery, masturbation, exhibitionism, homosexuality, bestiality, rape, and endless sexual innuendo in all media—one of the reasons we are awash in all this is that our lives are intellectually and emotionally disconnected from infinite, soul-staggering grandeur. Inside and outside the church we are drowning in a sea of triviality, pettiness, banality, and silliness.

- Television is trivial.
- Radio is trivial.
- Conversation is trivial.
- Education is trivial.
- Christian books and music are trivial.
- Worship styles are trivial.

It is inevitable that the human heart, which was made to be staggered with terrifyingly joyous dread and peace by an infinitely untouchable, embracing God—it is inevitable that such a heart, drowning in the all-pervasive, blurry boredom of banal entertainment, will reach for the best buzz that life can give.

Don't settle. Find life, love, meaning and purpose in God or die trying.