Boredom

Someone at a meeting said that he had just gotten out of a rehab and that he was bored because he had nothing to do. One of my friends responded, “if you’re bored, you’re not ready for freedom.”

Boredom is an ancient malady, as old as mud, as they say. Being bored is not because I have nothing to do, it is because I have allowed something dissonant to absorb me—a negative remark, a slight, somebody’s indifference or anger,
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a resentment, lust, an injustice, a letter in the mail, a deadline I haven’t met, fatigue, fear. Or I become listless with chronic physical pain.

In a state of boredom, the body and the mind shut down. If I allow a person, place, or thing to get of control in my life, I usually crash into a state of utter exhaustion and restlessness. Nothing can satisfy me, and I sometimes try even harder to make something work in my life as a substitute for the boredom. It never seems to work (not even physical exercise for me which gives me an almost artificial kind of high, even though I still feel washed out).

I was particularly prone to boredom during my hangover days when my body and mind were on pause. I couldn’t concentrate. The world seemed covered with gauze. My body temperature felt like a muggy August night in Miami, my eyes like warm putty. I was listless. I would lay on the couch, go to the refrigerator, rearrange the books on my book shelf, wash the floors, anything that would keep me either a temporary relief or keep my body moving at a low level of intensity.

Even in sobriety, when I am bored, I drift into a free-fall. One activity has the same intensity as the other. I either move with the spastic energy of a fox to dodge the bullets of my anger or fears, or the lethargic, I-just-wanna-sit-in-front-of-the-television-screen mode munching on chocolate and double-buttered popcorn.

When I steep myself in negativity, boredom is the easiest emotional state to fall into. I don’t want to do anything. I wander around my mind and my apartment. I search out activities on the Internet that
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tare into my productivity and drain my energy. I delude myself into believing I’m taking a break and relaxing. In reality, I’m putting anything important on the back burner as I hold time hostage with my meanderings.

When I am truly free of my ego (and I can usually tell how free I am when a negative remark bounces off me like mushroom rain), I have the energy of an industrial generator and the concentration of a Web site designer. If I’m bored and restless, on the other hand, I can’t concentrate. My psyche is in splinters, and I am inclined to have a tight, cutting edge to my remarks without much sensitivity to others (boredom places me in a cage of ego-driven carelessness).

Although silence has sometimes served me well in my state of boredom—unless

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I’m flatlined in front of my television set watching a movie—when I am feeling emotionally fragmented and listless, I have to be on my guard in making sure I don’t steamroll over somebody else’s sensitivities.

If I believe American advertising, no one in the culture ever gets bored; all of the participants in the ads seem to be ecstatic at the possibilities of a product or a service satisfying a variety of needs. If I am given the illusion that boredom can be ended with a new watch or shirt, then I am equally prone to believe that boredom can be alleviated from the outside, from some new acquisition. It is all part of the pop-a-pill mentality that hovers over the culture like a bad memory. That elusive next item—a vacation, a new car, a piece of jewelry, a new cell phone, a high-definition television set—is going to do it.
At one time in Western culture, boredom was a philosophical stance against the establishment (the university, government, corporate America, church, the family). Like the central character, Michel, in the movie, *Breathless*, the bored dropout and criminal became the existential prototype of authenticity, the rebel who had no obligation to justify anything to anyone.

In Michel’s passionlessness and arbitrary life-style, he avoids all the trappings of an overly acquisitive society. His life is pretty much reduced to a small hotel room he shares with a woman he meets on the street after he has fatally shot a policeman. He is a kind of romantic anti-hero rebelling against all of the prescriptions for appropriate social behavior. But in that rebellion, like the existential anti-hero, Meursault, in Camus’ *The Stranger*, Michel responds to the world with no specific plan or order.

At one point in the novel, Meursault describes the world as beautifully indifferent, a response of someone who wants to idealize their own listless indifference (I readily admit that there is an ongoing battle among literary critics about whether or not Meursault’s responses are genuinely authentic or a result of sociopathic behavior).

Meursault’s reaction comes close to the Buddhist and AA notion that nature and reality are not the villains in our lives. It is our reaction to what we are presented that is the telling difference in our engagement with the world. If the existential heroes react to the world with ennui, they see their behavior as a conscious choice to avoid engaging in socially prescribed
behavior. However, I believe that existential boredom, as a form of rebellion, is often a cop out, a ruse to avoid commitment and intimacy. When it becomes an in-your-face reaction, it has too much negative energy to be life-growing. That kind of boredom has a flavor of postmodern irony, the stance of those who want to live in a constant state of cool, descending detachment.

Most of us, I believe, can identify with the occasional dry bouts of lethargy that afflict us all when we are drained because of a choice we make to sit in our own negative stuff (I exclude physical pain from this choice since it is not something a victim always has a choice over). Sometimes our bodies and minds shut down because we have no resources left to cope with a divorce, an illness, rejection, abandonment, and all the other cruelties we’re bombarded with in our lifetimes.

Sobriety is not always a continuous walk through serenity and productiveness. I believe we all regress into torpor. If we recognize it for what it initially is—a reactive state—then we have some awareness of its potency as a socially constructed effect.

Boredom, of course, can also cause us to do very stupid things after it has ravaged us with its toxic power. I am more apt to climb into my car in order to go to a store to buy something as a way of “filling in” the time of my boredom or wander aimlessly through the internet Web sites, or search out the refrigerator for something I shouldn’t be eating.
Sobriety doesn’t come in neat, we’re-all-through-with-that packages. There is still work to do.

Boredom is an exhaustive psychological state drained of energy, a state that blocks our perception of the world coming in at us. If there is a dullness to even those things we like, it is because we are not open. We are mentally closed down. We have already decided to withdraw from the world.

I don’t have any instant cures for boredom. All I know is that it is important to recognize that it as a normal reaction to a larger pain. Sobriety, of course, doesn’t eliminate the pain of sickness, financial loss, job insecurity, problems with our family, our need to pay the rent or the mortgage, or our own mortality. When any of these crises hit us, there is bound to be a period of emotional lethargy when the body just can’t lift itself from its listlessness.

If we acknowledge our restlessness or discuss it with a friend, it lessens the guilt we may feel for violating our need for productivity. Wanting to be a perfectionist can often intensify our need to get everything right in our lives—leading, of course, to extreme crashes of boredom and listlessness when we fail. The need to always be productive can make us pursue perfection with a vengeance, usually at the expense of others and our own serenity. And this just adds another layer onto the negative spin of lethargy we eventually whirl into (someone once described this state as “the fuckits”).

The important thing is that we be transparent, honest, and forthright about our
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indifference and emotional lethargy. Too many of us, however, want to handle this on our own believing that there is nothing significant about being bored, that it would just be a waste of time to discuss it with anyone. Our reluctance stems from the fact that our flatlined selves are already disengaged and we view talking about it as an expense of too much energy.

But just admitting it to someone is a start. If we don’t try to push it away but walk with it, it eventually rides itself out. If we’re lucky, it may turn into grief, something that softens our hearts and brings us back to our humanity and our connection to others.

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