

Boredom Eats the Soul

By Kenneth Francis (February 2018)



L'Ennui (Boredom), Gaston La Touche, 1893

The atheist Karl Marx—whose belief in moral autonomy and non-belief in Hell was his opium—said that religion was the opium of the people. But nowadays, it seems technology, consumerism and opiates have replaced that for many.

When we see more and more people today behaving like clones of one another, it's tempting to ask ourselves: Are we entering the darkest night in history? Just like the children in the movie *Village of the Damned*, most young adults, not all, seem to be in a trance, void of any spiritual dimension or intellectual philosophical worldview.

In the movie *The Ghost Breakers*, the actor Bob Hope learns about what a zombie is like when Richard Carlson tells him: "A zombie has no will of his own. You see them some times, walking around blindly with dead eyes, following orders, not knowing what they do, not caring." To which Bob Hope replies: "You mean, like Democrats?"

Democrats, Republicans, it's all the same; one often witnesses this lemming-like behaviour, especially with young adults, when in the company of a group of people at a dinner party or restaurant. And when they're not staring blankly into their iPhones, they send out the same bodily gestures, obedient PC views, vanity-signalling and contemporary clichés on popular culture. In a nutshell: Groupthink on skinny lattes and avocados. To quote Theodore Dalrymple, writing in [Taki's Magazine](#) last December:

I do not wish unduly to boast, but everyone I meet seems to be different from me; in fact, I never meet my clones, if there are any.

Many deeply reflective people feel the same way.

But one wonders are those who are overdependent on technology in danger of digitally rewiring their brains, while fixated and lost in the spiritually barren cyberspace of their smartphones. Many students even study for exams while simultaneously texting friends and listening to their mp3 players.

Writing in [Crisis Magazine](#), Headmaster of Gregory the Great Academy, Sean Fitzpatrick, points out: “To be without your cell phone is, for some, to be lost, to be naked, to be powerless. Prevalent dependence upon wireless devices is almost akin to a type of life-support—and certainly a lifestyle-support. Many people, if not most people, have developed such a reliance on their smartphones, both physical and psychological, that they have become an indispensable appendage for daily operations.”

But what lies behind all this is something that we all seem to share in common and is linked to techno-addiction: a fear and dread of boredom, regardless of how clone-like most people are. To avoid this dreaded state, the 21st century mind gravitates toward technological kicks, pain-killers and consumerism to alleviate the psychological angst of silent emptiness. Surprisingly, psychologists know very little about boredom. As Kirsten Weir reports in [Monitor on Psychology](#) (July/August 2013), “that’s precisely what’s initiated a lot of recent research into the subject”. And one of the leading researchers on the subject is psychologist [John Eastwood](#), from York University in Toronto. Eastwood and his colleagues came up with a definition of boredom: “In a nutshell, it boiled down to boredom being the unfulfilled desire for satisfying activity.”

According to the researchers, boredom is also connected with the overstimulation we experience in our technology-driven society, suggesting that the more gadgets we use to occupy our time, the less able we’ll be to engage our minds independent of technology, and the more likely we’ll be to become dissatisfied and bored. So it seems boredom was, and still is, an enormous problem for modern humans, especially technophiles.

Why else would a play infused with boredom themes be deemed by a [poll](#), conducted by the British Royal National Theatre, as the “most significant English-language play of the 20th century”? Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, either wittingly or unwittingly, is prophetic and just as relevant today as it was over 60 years ago. It reveals to us the existential agony, without God, of disordered souls craving mental stimulation by killing time to avoid boredom. The characters in this play don’t even have the ‘luxury’ of technology to mentally stimulate themselves.

Well over half a century since *Godot*, a recent poll by Interparcel listed the 50 most boring things in British life and many of the things were to do with waiting, particularly in train stations, post offices and doctors’ surgeries. It seems Beckett’s *Godot* was on to something.

C.S. Lewis [said](#):

If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.

And what could be more demoralizing and soulless than the Technological Consumer Age and decline of Western culture? Stroll along any shopping mall in suburbia and feel the nausea and emptiness of what French sociologist Emile Durkheim called *anomie* (and that was over 100 years ago before malls existed): the breakdown of social bonds between the individual and community, where such maladies lack a moral compass and

ultimate meaning. The consequences of this is a deep fear of boredom.

The author of *Boredom: A Lively History*, Peter Toohey, rightly [points out](#):

But boredom, unalleviated, can be bad for you. A recent publication by the University of Montreal's Kieron O'Connor and his team argued that a variety of harmful body-focused, repetitive behaviours such as 'chronic hair-pulling [trichotillomania], skin-picking disorder and nail-biting' can be produced from unresolved boredom. With boredom, I suppose, it's a matter of getting the balance right. Too little and you'll vegetate; too much and you'll trichotillomaniate.

Boredom can also be a proxy for other risk factors, leading to self-destructive behaviours such as drug/alcohol abuse, hardcore pornography addiction, unbridled promiscuity, crime, and, in the worst-case scenario, suicide. The problem here for most people who are spiritually lost is a lack of recognition of body and soul. Galatians 6:8 tells us: "For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting."

As humans, we seem to be way more prone to boredom than our fellow creatures in the Animal Kingdom. The Romanian pessimist philosopher, Emil Cioran, wrote in [The Trouble with Being Born](#):

A zoologist who observed gorillas in their native habitat was amazed by the uniformity of their life and their vast idleness. Hours and hours without doing anything. Was boredom unknown to them? This is indeed a question raised by a human, a busy ape. Far from fleeing monotony, animals crave it, and what they most dread is to see it end. For it ends, only to be replaced by fear, the cause of all activity. Inaction is divine; yet it is against inaction that man has rebelled. Man alone, in nature, is incapable of enduring monotony, man alone wants something to happen at all costs—something, anything . . . ”

(One wonders: did Cioran ever see a polar bear marching backward and forward in a small, zoo enclosure or a dog left alone for long hours in room? But in his defence, he's a philosopher, not a zoologist.)

Another philosopher, Martin Heidegger, renowned for his bleak writings, wasn't optimistic about boredom and the technological age. He believed we might be stuck in the darkest night for the rest of human history. But some of his solutions to this problem are weak if not transient and ultimately in vain.

He encouraged getting involved in local concerns and other meaningful events; things like friendship, backpacking into the wilderness, running, drinking the local wine with friends (he might've been onto something with the latter!), and dwelling in the presence of works of art. All these practices are marginal precisely because they are not efficient.

But without God, they are not only marginal, they are *ultimately* meaningless. Even Heidegger, deep down, seems to have been aware of this. In an [interview](#) with *Spiegel*, in 1966, he spoke of the dangers technology poses to our civilization: He said: “Philosophy will not be able to bring about a direct change of the present state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all merely human meditations and endeavours. Only a god can still save us.”

The Divine is written across our hearts and souls during our every sleeping and waking moments. Even the seemingly mundane can be utilised into something positive. Let the waiting in train stations, post offices or doctors’ surgeries be constructive moments of reflection, book reading, to-do-list writing, planning, or silent prayer for the religious. When boredom starts to devour the soul, eat it up and spit it out.

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