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When We Say We're Bored, What are We Really Saying About Ourselves?

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When We Say We're Bored, What are We Really Saying About Ourselves?

By Nathan Holic

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In late August, three teenagers in Oklahoma targeted and murdered a random jogger for no other reason than because they were bored. The story is heartbreaking, maddening, and chilling, and it's made even more so by their explanation: *boredom*.

Were these kids *really* saying that their own entertainment was the most important thing in the world, more important than other lives?

The more I thought about the story, the more I moved beyond my repulsion at just these three teens and considered the word "boredom" itself, how quickly we *all* employ it, but how little we deserve to use it. Boredom is a state of mind that should be impossible in our current culture. The entertainments and amusements surrounding us, beckoning us no matter where we live or what we're doing, are insurmountable.

Our televisions have more channels than we even bother counting, allowing us—at any moment—to see high-def superheroes saving planets, or watch our favorite sitcoms from 1987, or view life beneath the ice at the bottom of the world. And the Internet, which we can access on no less than a dozen devices always within reach, is a landscape even more expansive, billions of articles and books and movies and games, and even a child knows how to push a button and get a close-up view of his/her *own house*.

But, while few of us are sick enough to jump from "boredom" to "murder," almost all of us make daily excuses based on boredom: we make rude comments, or we give up on books/conversations/relationships, or we choose (as many teenagers do) to get sucked into dangerous activities.

We all do it, but why? Why do we blame so much on boredom in a world that is decidedly not boring?

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I remember a conversation with a colleague a few months back: we were discussing how often our students grumbled this very complaint. Assignments and lectures and readings (no matter how much students might later admit they'd learned) were "boring." The subject itself—"writing"—was declared before the class even started to be "boring." Everything they didn't enjoy...everything that didn't entertain them ...was boring.

These were smart kids, too. Dedicated students.

"You know," Laurie said eventually, "I can't recall a time in the last fifteen years that I've been bored."

Laurie is married, the mother of three children now in three different schools; she's also a college professor, a writer of incredibly thoughtful nonfiction, and a voracious reader. I understood her point immediately: she didn't have *time* to be bored.

I nodded and agreed with her, mostly because I wanted to be perceived as "busy" and "productive," too, but certainly I'd watched movies in the last few months that had been formulaic to the point of line-by-line predictability. And books so dense I'd gone cross-eyed? Certainly I'd rattled off the words "I'm bored" more than my own share?

But was "bored" the right word, or was it an example of what comedian Louis CK calls "going for the top shelf with our words" (i.e. proclaiming a barely-funny anecdote to be "hilarious"), an easy word, but wrong?

When my students read those assigned articles, for instance, was the material itself *boring*? It'd been labored over by authors who cared deeply, then scrutinized by editors; experts in the field had deemed it important and necessary. Was it *boring*, or were my students simply encountering ideas they'd never before encountered, voices to which they were unaccustomed? As they sat in their dorm rooms, trudging through difficult readings at a page-every-five-minutes pace, did they hear their roommates playing [Insert Popular Video Game] or watching [Insert Popular Movie], and think: *When the hell is this article going to be finished?* "Tough" doesn't mean "boring."

When we say we're bored, we're often concealing our own deficiencies. Maybe we're overwhelmed by difficulty. Maybe we don't have the knowledge or expertise to move

through a task as easily as we'd like (as is the case in education, where we're building knowledge); or maybe we forget to search for purpose in a situation, and so we declare it "boring" or "useless." Saying "I don't have patience" or "I'm a bad problem-solver" is an admission of your *own* failure; saying "I'm bored" makes it into someone else's.

Other times when we say we're bored, we're just seeing flashier options elsewhere, and we're disappointed with our current option. But these days, no matter what we're doing, there are always flashier options. As I sit writing this, the TV across the café is showing coverage of a thwarted school shooting; my phone is dinging with new emails and Words With Friends updates; even as you read this, you have five other internet tabs open, one of which contains funny cat memes (how can I compete?), and hell, the comment board below this—with all its overblown passion and grammatical creativity—begs you to scroll down. Always something more exciting...

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Sometimes our boredom is legitimate. Sometimes tasks are indeed tedious.

But it in a world where we have everything at our fingertips always, we need to remember that it is always our choice to utter those words, our choice how to view the world around us. Those words suggest that *everything* is not enough, that it isn't our own responsibility to make the most of a situation, or to be patient, or to find purpose; those words suggest that entertainment is the most important thing, and that someone/something else *should be responsible for our constant entertainment*.

Let's be honest: we all—every one of us—have to work to find purpose in the everyday. It's often difficult. But all around us, there are positive, enriching, productive experiences stretching in every direction like the hovering and spinning gold coins in the 3-D landscape of a Mario game, if only we'd jump to grab them, if only we wouldn't surrender so quickly to the temptation to tell the world it needs to be something more.

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