

FOBB

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It happens all over the country, as the end of the work week approaches, people, adults and children alike, start making plans: a dinner out, maybe a concert Friday night, some shopping Saturday morning, a ball game in the afternoon. Meeting up with friends in the evening. On Sunday, perhaps church in the morning, but definitely something in the afternoon, gardening or that home repair you've put off, but something for sure.

Then, on Monday, people talk about how busy their weekend was. And they're not exactly complaining about it. Indeed, for many, it's a point of pride. Busyness, after all, is typically worn as a badge of honor in our society. Indeed, the busier the better. No one wants to be the person who confesses, I didn't do or get anything done this weekend.

And not just the weekend.

Just a couple of weeks ago, the owner of an antiques shop shared with my husband and me that her daughter recently moved to New York City and had to give up her dog. The reason, the woman explained, beaming with pride, was her daughter's new, prestigious job regularly demands 12 hour days, sometimes more. And, as the woman noted with disquieting nonchalance, you just can't keep a dog alone in an apartment for 12 hours a day!

Even among those recently retired, or about to, it seems increasingly common to hear confessions of dread at the prospect of having to fill all that extra time.

Busyness is having quite a moment. But why?

One theory, to which we already alluded, is that busyness signals importance or high-status.

Fans of the television series *Downton Abbey* may recall in season 1 Violet Crawley, The Dowager Countess of Grantham, famously asked, "What is a 'weekend?'" Her humorous question reminds us there was a time not that long ago when high status was conferred upon those who found the concept of a week divided between work and leisure a cause for puzzlement.

Not so anymore.

Today high status is more often linked to landing an all consuming job that demands one sacrifice not only leisure time, but often time with family and friends...even of the canine variety. Further, the requisite indicator of that status is not material, emotional, or even spiritual abundance, but the humblebrag. Sharing in person or better yet, on social media, that one is so busy one averaged only a few hours sleep in a given week, hasn't taken a vacation in two years, or only takes ten minutes to eat lunch at their desk... between appointments, of course.

Okay, so busyness may signal high-status and be seen as an indicator of worth at work, especially among white collar workers, but what about busyness outside of work, filling every available hour not on the clock, so to speak, with activities and plans?

In the early 2000's, a student at Harvard Business School, Patrick J. McGinnis, coined the phrase FOMO in an op-ed he wrote for the school's magazine. FOMO or Fear of Missing Out is described as "the feeling of apprehension that one is either not in the know about or missing out on information, events, experiences, or life decisions that could make one's life better." (Wikipedia)

To alleviate FOMO, people seek constant connection, information, and involvement with people, places, and things wherever there is a concern not being connected, informed, or involved is the wrong decision and will cause one to miss out on an interaction, information, or experience that others are enjoying. The rise of social media has made FOMO a widely experienced phenomenon in modern culture.

Still, the perceived professional and social benefits of always being busy, aren't without risk. Science tell us the level of busyness that earns accolades at work and seeks to keep FOMO at bay is linked to negative psychological and physical effects including depression, anxiety, stress, frustration, anger, loneliness, fatigue, inflammation, cardiovascular disease, and more.

It's also a risk to your spiritual wellbeing.

"There was a thing called the soul and a thing called immortality.", wrote Aldous Huxley in Brave New World, his dystopian novel in which, as the quote hints, he examines and critiques the pursuit of happiness at the expense of authenticity. In the novel people escape discomfort and maintain happiness via soma, a drug which also keeps them in line. The price, naturally, is loss of individuality and

with it the depth of authentic human experience, both strongly associated with the needs and qualities of the soul.

While busyness itself can't always be likened to soma, some of what we busy ourselves with and the degree to which we keep ourselves busy can be likened to an external substance we "take" to escape discomfort and find or maintain happiness. Particularly when no amount of busyness seems to do the trick, which is a sure sign of disconnection from the soul's deeper needs for truth and genuine human experience.

When this happens, the best thing you can do for yourself is face your FOBB.

That is, your fear of being bored.

Interestingly, while the definition of boredom or being bored may vary somewhat from dictionary to dictionary and discipline to discipline, most definitions are inclusive of the qualities described in Merriam-Webster's definition, which defines boredom as, "The state of being weary and restless through lack of interest."

Meaning, even if being bored is not something you fear exactly, suffice it so most people find it generally unpleasant. Enough so that many, if not most would, if given the option, choose to avoid it.

Indeed the both the unpleasantness of the feeling and its tendency to show up unexpectedly prompt our little friend in "The Boring Book" from our Time for All Ages today to embark on a journey of inquiry as to the cause and nature of boredom.

As he soon discovers, it's not that easy a quandary to unravel. For one thing, once it hits, attempts to alleviate it only go so far. A feature which undoubtedly both frustrates and encourages the attention economy to keep churning out new and more alluring forms of distractions to "save" us from the throes of boredom. Yesterday it was 24/7 news and smart devices, today it's endless reels and AI generated content, tomorrow? Who knows!

The story gets more interesting when he moves from wondering how to alleviate boredom to its nature. Including where it originates and what, if any, use or purpose it might serve.

At one point he wonders, "Maybe it's boring when things don't go as planned."

According to her poem, things didn't go as planned for the Zen nun Teishin when she went to visit her friend, the Zen Master Ryokan.

Here again is her poem,

*One summer day I visited, but the master had gone
somewhere.
Only a lotus blossom
arranged in a vase
guardian of the hermitage,
its fragrance
filling the room.*

Now, the poem doesn't indicate whether this unexpected change in her plans caused Teishin to slip into boredom, but it's not hard to imagine that it could have. Many of us can relate to finding ourselves at risk of boredom when plans change unexpectedly or something we were looking forward to is unexpectedly cancelled. Indeed for Teishin, the scene described by her words, a single blossom in a vase, is not what she came for and seems hardly a match for the engaging conversation she was undoubtedly looking forward to with her friend. The lone flower in the vase seems to accentuate the absence of her friend and add to the sense that there's now nothing to do. An image curiously both restless and serene.

Then, in the tension of the moment, she notes the fragrance of the lotus filling the room. Her observation denotes a shift in attention, and with it the ability to "see" what is not visible. As Thomas Moore, author of Care of the Soul writes, "Plain eyesight can be misleading. Other senses may tell you more: intuition, memory, foresight, and imagination....pay attention to the invisibles." But we can't make use of these other senses if don't receive or accept the invitation to do so.

And this is a reason we might learn to let go of FOBB and welcome some boredom into our lives.

Walking around the great mosque Cordoba in Spain a couple of years ago I encountered a grand archway leading to a niche. Richly framed with intricate carvings and gold mosaics, it was clear this opening was meant to grab your attention. Turns out the opening was the mihrab or prayer niche, a feature of every mosque, that indicates the direction of Mecca towards which Muslims face when praying.

In a more subtle way, boredom, using a disquieting restlessness to attract our attention, frames an opening through which we might encounter and explore

things we typically miss or overlook in our ordinary, often busy way of engaging the world. Paradoxically, the apparent emptiness of boredom may be just the unexpected invitation you need to reconnect to the fullness of life.

The contemporary philosopher Alain De Botton notes, “Our societies are bad at framing what actually matters: they typically direct prestige away from what it genuinely important and towards what are often the most trivial or demeaning reference points.” De Botton points to advertising as an example of framing that, directs “prestige away from what actually matters.”

Nearly a century earlier, another philosopher, Bertrand Russell warned, “A generation that cannot endure boredom will be a generation of little men, of men unduly divorced from the slow process of nature, of men in whom every vital impulse slowly withers...” A warning that feels especially prophetic considering we live in a country governed by so many little people, many of whom happen to be male. Russell recognized when we lose the ability to endure boredom, we not only lose something of our humanity, we lose our connection to life itself.

Until relatively recently opportunities to be bored were everywhere: waiting rooms, airports, train and bus stations, restaurants, school, home, even work...and of course outdoors. In any of these spaces an opening might readily appear, framed in that familiar discomfort of boredom awaiting our attention.

Now, thanks to the attention economy, for which fear, both generating and alleviating it, is simply another opportunity to make money, we have 24hr. this and that, instant notifications, streaming, reels, piped in music, news, and advertisements, even at the gas pump! We have all kinds of ways we can be “connected” on all kinds of devices all of the time. Indeed, no one need be bored again if they don’t really wish to be.

Be careful what you wish for.

For as an old hymn asks, “What is this life, if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare?”

Boredom frames a unique opening into the depth of human experience. It is unique because unlike all the other frames that enclose exactly and only what we desire, see, want, or are told we must have, it encloses space that is blank or seems to be missing something- or empty, to use the spiritual term. It doesn’t proclaim what’s most important, it invites us, like the Zen nun Teishen, to pay attention to the invisibles and discern it for ourselves.

We can't make boredom happen, but we can make room for it by watching for and accepting its invitations: plans that fall through, an unexpected cancellation or closure, a no show for an event or appointment, a dead phone battery or lost signal. Any of these and more may prove your invitation to kiss FOBB good-bye and just be bored. Bored back to life.

May it be so.

Amen and Blessed Be