



The Phenomenon of Boredom, by MJ Ryan

The labeling of a huge part of human experience as boring is a relatively new phenomenon. The concept of boredom -- a sense of emptiness and a lack of stimulation -- didn't even exist until the nineteenth century. Before that, it was used only in the context of a person who spoke too long or rambled off the topic: "Oh, she's such a bore!" Now it is a state of being that is a fate worse than death.

Psychologists say that the problem we think is "out there" -- in the book, movie, job, relationship -- is actually in us. Boredom, they say, is created by an inability to delay gratification and a low tolerance for frustration, both of which have serious implications for our success in life and in love.

Any time we proclaim something boring, what we really are saying is that we don't have patience for it. Rather than looking at ourselves for the source of the problem -- and therefore the solution -- we look at whatever is provoking the feeling and label that the problem.

A lot of human experience can be considered boring. There are huge stretches of parenting, in relationships, in work, where "nothing" is happening, or at least nothing obvious. We can consider those moments boring and seek to alleviate that boredom with any distraction available. Or we can see such occasions as opportunities to tap into our patience and look more deeply.

Try it yourself. Go on a fast for a week in which you refuse to consider any experience boring. When your mind begins to use that label -- in traffic, say, or on hold -- challenge yourself to find something of interest in what is going on, either in yourself or the world around you. How does that change your experience?

With attention, nothing is boring, even the most routine tasks. If you tune in to how the warm soapy water feels as you wash the pots and pans, how does that change the experience for you? Or weeding the garden, how does it feel to bend and stretch in the sunlight? What is the name of that gray bird with the crested head that suddenly appeared? This level of experiencing life isn't one that we tune in to, but it is one that can bear many riches of wonder at the very fact of being alive in this amazing world.

Â

--MJ Ryan

