

Boredom

Boredom has two faces. On the one hand it is an actively unpleasant state of mind. On the other hand it is a passive mindset, with almost no affective color. What are these two opposite faces? Two examples may help to explain.

You planned to drive to Texas from Seattle, so you could visit your brother in Amarillo. But at the last minute, just before you were about to start next day, there was a freak snowstorm in the mountains of northern California, and you had to change your plans and go by air. This meant getting to the Seattle Airport early the following morning, queuing up with a large crowd hustling to make morning appointments in San Francisco. And that wasn't the worst of it. It turns out that, because of the crowd, two flights had to be scheduled, one leaving at 7 15, one at 8. You were put on the later one, which meant you had to wait in the Speedy Start Breakfast Lounge, and gulp down a coffee with a sweet roll, as though you were in fact in a rush. The real fact, of course is that you were not in a rush—you had plenty of boredom ahead-- for it was exactly six hours later, after consuming any number of rolls, reading *The Times* twice, and calling your wife until she begged you to stop, in short eaten the horror of urban boredom-- it was only after all this that you recognized the overpowering power of boredom. Later that night, you tried to describe it to your son, but to your astonishment you broke down in tears.

There's another kind of boredom that eats at you quietly, and leaves no scars. Prof. JRZ, a visiting luminary from Harvard, was offering courses in the Yale Graduate School, during my first year there as a student. He was offering a course on mediaeval kingship, a topic on which he had written widely. But of course you know where this tale is going; from the lectern this prof was a slow kill bore. He muttered er-uh between every pair of sentences, he wove complex trains of thought that bewildered a student listening audience, and he droned on in a monotone. After a half hour, boredom had taken the field, and not an eye was open.

We have profiled two kinds of boredom. One faces you with the chaotic confusion of contemporary industrialized society, the other with the case of an affectless narcotic. Neither condition makes for life or its values. Is there any formula for minimizing the input of boredom into our lives? Walter Pater, in *The Renaissance*, says that 'the art of life is to burn always with a hard gemlike flame.' Sounds hopelessly Victorian, no? An antiquated adage? Try it. Keep it to yourself, go for it, and let me know the results.