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A Car Crash, Phineas Gage, and How I Came to Love Boredom

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This won't involve a radioactive spider or witnessing the horrific murder of my parents in a back alley somewhere, but it is an origin story of sorts.

I am often asked what brought me to the study of boredom, and sometimes whether I ever get bored of studying boredom. The answer to the latter question is a simple no, but the former requires a little more probing. This is, admittedly, self-indulgent. But in celebration of 20 years of the field of boredom studies I was given the room to be a little self-reflective on my journey to the center of boredom. Hopefully, this does not make you somnolent!

I don't recall being bored a lot as a kid. In fact, my mum described me and my brothers to a friend she met at the grocery store in this way: "Luke (my oldest brother) is in Engineering, Paul (my middle brother) is studying marketing at college, and James, well James just occupies himself."

I was miffed at the time (still am a little). My brothers both had titles and goals, a purpose in life that they were working towards. But me? I was just meandering around aimlessly according to mum.

When I asked her about this many years later, she was shocked that I might have taken offence. She meant it as a compliment. She thought it was an asset (a superpower even!) to be able to find things to do that fully occupied my mind and my talents. And she was right. It took me a long time to realize that this too was what meant I was only very rarely bored. I drew a lot (still do but not nearly as often as I should), I wrote stories (my first was written when I was about 8 and was a highly derivative pirate story—I'd just read Treasure Island!), and I played music (this I still do a lot—it is my go-to boredom buster). I also played a ton of sports, even if it had to be solo. Going to the local primary school with a tennis racket and a ball to bash against the cinder block wall was a common pastime for me. So yeah, I occupied myself well as a child.

And then something changed. In my late teens and early twenties boredom descended on me hard. I decidedly do not fit the statistics here. This period of time is when your frontal cortex is finally coming fully online, your capacity for self-control should be hitting its heights, and all the data tells us, boredom should be on the decline. Not for me, and I hated it. Perhaps because it took so long to show its face to me, boredom felt unbearable.

My friend and colleague John Eastwood has told me of the young men he saw in his clinical practice who told him they were bored, which I think ultimately led him to adopt the phrase, the 'failure to launch.' They'd had big goals, big ideas, they were going to take on the world and conquer it. And now, with those goals and dreams fading or seemingly unattainable, everything was colored with the same shade of grey and nothing seemed worth doing (cf. Bargdill, 2000). Maybe there was some of that in me too. I had friends who were cutting CDs and getting airplay on radio (and on a famous Australian soap opera—Home and Away!). I had friends taking a gap year that I had eschewed, galivanting around the Canadian Rockies, living their best lives. And my brothers would be engineers and marketers. What would I become?

Around this time two things happened in my life. My brother Paul crashed his car into a tree at very high speed. A few short months later I was exposed, as all psychology undergraduates are, to the man and the myth that is Phineas Gage. Paired with my burgeoning hatred of being bored, these events put me on the path to becoming a boredom researcher.

Paul and I were thick as thieves. He was witty, generous, an enormously talented musician, and a person who seemed determined to extract everything he could from life. He was a voracious reader, and whether it was James Ellroy or Oscar Wilde mattered little to Paul. It simply had to entertain, to stimulate his own thrumming mind. As little brothers are wont to do, I idolized him. I was 19 when he crashed his car.

Paul was put in a medication induced coma for close to two weeks, spent several weeks in intensive care and a high dependency unit, and then endured months of rehab, both inpatient and outpatient. The litany of body parts broken and mended was long. But it was his brain that mattered most.

And then came Gage. Professor Michael Saling gave the second-year lecture on executive functions and the infamous Phineas Gage. Hardly bears summarizing the details, but in doing so perhaps I can stick to facts. Gage was a railroad worker who suffered an accident in which a tamping iron, set off by an errant charge, pierced his skull just under his left eye socket, exiting the top of his head. Even now this would be an injury that would kill most. In Gage's day, having survived the rod through his head, he needed to then survive the infection. Survive he did and that's where the myth building began.

We know very little about Gage, but we say a helluva lot. Gage was supposedly 'changed' by his brain injury. What was once a polite and deferential man, became a surly and inappropriate manchild. He had trouble with alcohol, couldn't maintain employment or a relationship. Sure, he could walk and talk, and seemed 'normal,' but everything that made Gage who he was had now changed. He was somehow, different. I won't litigate all of the aspects of his myth (for more see MacMillan, 2002),[1] suffice to say, I was hooked.

And Gage felt acutely pertinent to Paul's struggles post-crash. Struggles to re-establish life as it was before everything changed.

It all came back to boredom months after Paul's crash. I've already said he was a talented musician. His instrument of choice was the drums, but he could pick up just about anything and make it sound good. Music was simply in him.

Part of the long list of things he had injured was a broken wrist. Anyone who has suffered that knows how long the rehab can be to get it to feel 'right.' For many it never does. So, getting back to drums was always going to be hard for Paul. And maybe that rehab challenge influenced unduly what he told me next, but it has stuck with me a long time.

Unprompted, Paul told me one day "I'm just so fucking bored."[2]

[1] We actually know very little about Gage's life, particularly things like his ability to maintain employment or relationships. For the former we know he worked a mail carriage for a time and was briefly part of Barnum & Bailey's circus where you could pay money to see the man who survived an iron rod through the head (bizarre employment perhaps, but employment nonetheless). And as for the 'manchild' behavior, this rests almost solely on a single anonymous letter to a journal—hardly, strong evidence. So while Gage undoubtedly experienced changes as a result of his injury, we tend to ascribe a lot to his case, without much to base it on—as the title of one of MacMillan's article's (2004) hints at, Gage became a "case for all reasons"!

[2] He was out of rehab by this time, so we can't just blame what is a monotonous and repetitive experience on his feelings of boredom.

We have no idea if Gage suffered from boredom post the iron rod incident, but to me the links were there. Damage to the frontal cortex changed the way you engaged with the world. Made it harder to find pleasure even for things that used to effortlessly satisfy.

Whatever the truth, Paul's brain injury had robbed him of something he loved, replacing it with suffocating boredom.[3] Now something that I hated experiencing myself, might just have a biological origin, an explanation that I could interrogate, and naively perhaps, conquer.

That desire to overcome boredom, to eradicate it from my life, smacks just a little of the hubris of youth. I think I genuinely believed that I could eliminate boredom given how it made me feel and what it robbed my brother of. But over the journey I have come to understand that boredom can not and should not be eradicated in our lives. It serves an important role, pushing us to engage with the world in ways that fully utilize our skills and talents. In many ways, I have my brother and an overblown myth of Phineas Gage to thank for my appreciation of boredom.

All this makes me think of the octopus.

The octopus has an extraordinary nervous system, distributed between a central 'brain' and peripheral 'brains' in their tentacles, this system likely evolved to accommodate their complex body plan. A body that has only two hard parts (their beak and to an extent their eyes) and is capable of changing shape and color in extraordinary ways.

The octopus is notoriously neophilic, curious about everything in their surroundings (see Godfrey-Smith, 2017). You can see this in the behavior of one species that has been shown to pick up coconut shells that have fallen to the ocean floor. Ostensibly using them as hiding spots to avoid predators or surprise prey, there is vision of them rolling down a slope on the sea floor, tucked inside two halves of a coconut.[4] Maybe this is simply the easiest way to carry their shells, or maybe they are doing this for nothing more than shits and giggles. Occupying their complex minds so that they never sit idle, exposed to boredom. Engaging well with the world around them.

Our minds are just as complex as the octopus' and when they are disrupted, through iron rods or car crashes, it becomes difficult to engage well with the world. Boredom is both the outcome and the sign of this challenge.

So that's how I came to love boredom. And I am immensely grateful to the people (Mariusz, Josefa, Wijnand and many others) who have made the International Society of Boredom Studies possible. I once had a journalist remark to me that she had always thought of boredom as merely "part of the furniture of life." Something that is just there. All the wonderfully disparate scholars brought together by the International Society of Boredom Studies would suggest otherwise.

Boredom is fascinating, puzzling, and vitally important to our lives.

[3] He regained his love of playing the drums and music more generally with time, although maybe never to the level of intensity it had for him pre-crash.

[4] You can see this on this YouTube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2EboVOcikI&ab_channel=NatureonPBS.

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