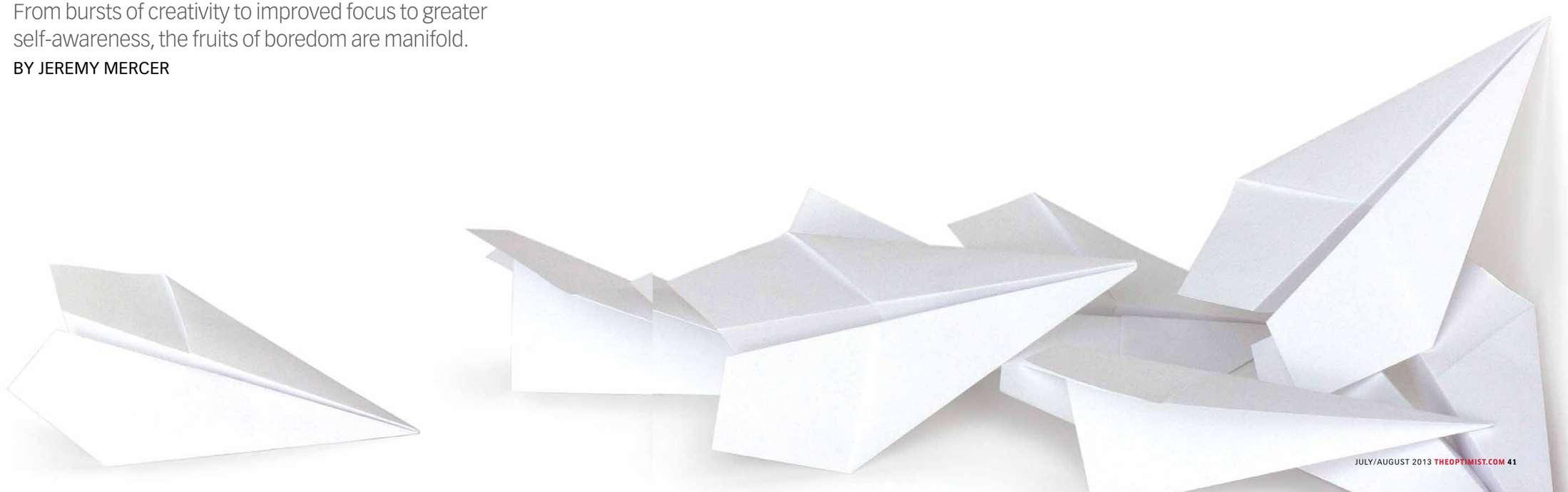
The unbearable lightness of boredom

From bursts of creativity to improved focus to greater self-awareness, the fruits of boredom are manifold.

BY JEREMY MERCER



EASTER MASS IS AN ELABORATE affair. Because it's the holiest event on the Christian calendar, the readings are more drawn out, the sermons are especially florid and the taking of the Eucharist crawls along because of all those extra people who fill the pews on major holidays. The whole while (for those in the Northern Hemisphere, at least) spring blooms outside the church windows, making it difficult to sit still through the service. To be blunt, it can be pretty boring.

And this is partly the point. Whether it be Judaism or Buddhism, Christianity or Wicca, every spiritual movement involves monotonous and tedious rituals that are meant to calm the mind. What's more, spiritual disciples are inevitably asked to take periodic retreats from the pageant of contemporary life and engage in quiet reflection. In a sense, enforced boredom is a major part of religion.

"Boredom can be a midwife to spiritual knowledge, resulting in a kind of peaceful indifference if properly cultivated," says Michael Raposa, the author of *Boredom and the Religious Imagination*. "A person cannot progress very far down a spiritual path without learning to listen to their boredom."

This embrace of boredom is as vital as it is rare. We live in a culture that loathes boredom and sees an admission of being bored as a weakness or intellectual shortcoming. To this end, we draw protective circles of diversion around ourselves: We have the Internet on our telephones; we stick novels in our pockets; and we book endless coffee dates, all in an attempt to fend off that dreaded instant when boredom might creep into our lives.

Alas, this is hopelessly wrongheaded. Boredom is one of our most valuable emotions. It triggers creative play and inspires charitable works. It can be a helpful sign that we need to change our ways or a trial we must overcome to reach our most cherished goals. What's more, many philosophers believe it is only in the face of profound boredom that we can know our true selves.

As Bertrand Russell wrote a half-century ago, the modern quest for entertainment is so pervasive that "every house maid expects at least once a week as much excitement as would have lasted a Jane Austen heroine throughout a whole novel." Yet, as Russell argued in *The Conquest of Happiness*, nobody is fulfilled or enlightened by this cornucopia of distraction. "A certain power of enduring boredom," he concludes, "is therefore essential to a happy life." So let us prepare to turn off our cellphones, unplug our televisions and, yes, push aside our glossy magazines. Then we can sit and stare and experience that fertile soul ache we have learned to call boredom.

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Boredom is among the most elusive of feelings. It can be experienced as restlessness or listlessness, or it can blur into depression or apathy. One reason it is hard to pin down is that there are several types of boredom. A first category is simple or situational boredom, a temporary sensation relating to your direct physical circumstances. It's what you feel during a dull wedding speech or a long wait at the train station, and it's accompanied by the wish to be someplace else or for something—*anything*—to happen. There is also a more complex state of boredom: the ennui that descends for days or weeks and renders life gray and drab. This profound boredom is at the center of existential classics such as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* and Alberto Moravia's *Boredom* and inevitably involves questions about the meaning of life and the pointlessness of social custom.

To understand boredom, it helps to recognize that it is a relatively recent phenomenon, though just how recent is a matter of some debate. Patricia Meyer Spacks, the author of *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind*, believes widespread boredom only emerged in the 18th century as wealthy, secular and democratic societies gave people both an abundance of leisure time and the false expectation that they would find happiness in that time. "The story begins in 18th century England because the concept of boredom begins there," writes Spacks.

Indeed, the word "boring" didn't even exist before the 18th century. The first known use came in 1768, when the Earl of Carlisle wrote that his friends had been "bored" by a group of dull Frenchmen. More tellingly, "boredom" only entered the language in 1853, with Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* and its interminably mundane court case *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*.

Of course, this raises the point that just because people didn't have a word for it didn't mean they weren't bored. In *Boredom: A Lively History*, Peter Toohey suggests that the sensation of boredom has been around since the dawn of civilization. According to Toohey, hunter-gatherer societies likely didn't know boredom because the constant search for food and shelter meant that life was intensely engaging. However, once cities were established and the basic needs of food, shelter and safety were met, people experienced what we now describe as boredom. As proof, Toohey cites Roman ruins near Naples where an inscription honors the governor Tanonius Marcellinus for rescuing people from endless *taedia*—the Latin term for tedium. "You don't have to say 'I'm bored' to say that you are bored," observes Toohey.

The important thing about these two chronologies is that they agree on one essential point: Boredom exists only when there is a certain level of human comfort. This state, wherein you are so well adapted to your environment that it is neither threatening nor challenging, is also known as "habituation." Just think of your first time on the subway in a foreign city: You definitely don't feel bored while figuring out what train takes you to your hotel and whether the stranger speaking in tongues is trying to help you or rob you. However, after 10 years in that city, once you become habituated to the subway system, the commute can become dreary and dull. As the playwright Eugène Ionesco noted, boredom is a "symptom of security."

This link between habituation and boredom is obvious in the animal kingdom. According to Françoise Wemelsfelder, an animal-behavior expert at the Scottish Agricultural College, animals exhibit boredom only in zoos and farms, where their needs are met and they risk losing survival instincts. "Bored people and animals start fiddling, restlessly moving, to try and keep their attention 'alive,'" Wemelsfelder says.

This touches upon a possible evolutionary root of boredom. When our unconscious brain notices we are being lulled into emotional or intellectual complacency, when an environment is either not stimulating enough or we haven't developed the

PHOTOGRAPH: REUTERS/BEAWIHARTA

A SCHOOLBOY YAWNS DURING A QURAN LESSON AT THE AL-MUKMIN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL IN INDONESIA. MICHAEL RAPOSA, A PHILOSOPHER OF RELIGION, SAYS RELIGION PREPARES PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND THEIR BOREDOM.

skills to decipher its stimulating aspects, our brain sends us a low-priority warning message that we experience as boredom.

IN THE LATE 1990S, MARCUS RAICHLE had a crazy idea. What if you put a person in an fMRI machine to monitor his brain activity? And then left him there. And left him there. And left him there.

Raichle, a neurologist at Washington University in St. Louis, was inspired by the fact that most neuroscientists were using imaging technology to examine the brain in action: which lobes lit and which neurons fired when a person sang a song or clenched a fist. But Raichle wondered about all the *inactive* time. What happened when a person was idle or bored?

A whole lot, it turned out. A brain uses 95 percent as much energy in a supposedly inactive state as when it is in peak energy mode. More curiously, the activity takes place in different places in the brain. This was the discovery of what is now known as the brain's "default mode," and it represented a sea change in thinking: Idleness was transformed from a neurologically unproductive state to one that had a function.

According to Raichle, a whole cottage industry has sprouted up to determine exactly what this default mode does. Many neuroscientists believe it is involved in processing the data our brains are constantly collecting. Raichle, however, has an additional theory, perhaps motivated by the fact that he was reprimanded for daydreaming in chemistry class as a teenager: The disengaged, bored brain is the place where haphazard neural connections give rise to original thought. "People have these 'Aha!' moments that come out of nowhere," Raichle says. "I would submit that this ongoing internal conversation of one's brain is a vehicle to facilitate this."

Boredom, then, may be a simmering stage, where different thoughts and stimuli bubble together as the brain tries to create ways to keep itself engaged. The idea that boredom spurs creativity will come as no surprise to exhausted parents who have flung their child into the backyard with orders to find something to do. Tree forts, fairy gardens and ogre battles tend to materialize magically.

The inherent creative possibility of boredom is one reason Lenore Skenazy wrote the book *Free-Range Kids*. She saw a generation of overprotected children being shuffled from playdates to music lessons to dance class without any time for themselves. So Skenazy set out to teach parents how to raise more self-reliant and carefree children. One of the most important lessons? Let your children get bored.

"All your intelligence comes into play when you are so bored you can't stand it anymore," says Skenazy. "It makes children say, 'Let's play tag, let's do this.' It makes them happier and more resourceful, but it all starts with the pain of boredom."

PHOTOGRAPH: LENORE SKENAZY

LENORE SKENAZY BELIEVES PARENTS SHOULD LET THEIR KIDS GET BORED. "IT MAKES THEM HAPPIER AND MORE RESOURCEFUL."

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Poke around inside people's heads and you will probably discover an array of sporting and artistic fantasy. We all like to imagine the weight of the Olympic gold medal around our neck after winning the 400-meter freestyle or the goose pimples rising on our arms as we receive a thunderous ovation at Carnegie Hall. But what you'll never find is happy visions of the endless early-morning laps at the local pool or the deadening monotony of practicing the same few scales over and over again.

This is one of the paradoxes of the human condition. What we consider the pinnacle of achievement—feats of supreme athleticism or artistic brilliance that fill us with awe and ecstasy—can be reached only through thousands of hours of repetitive practice that sets our boredom signal buzzing. Even beyond the genius of sport or art, our society is organized in such a way that we must endure long bouts of mundane work to achieve anything of significance. You cannot earn a Ph.D. or learn to code HTML or master the intricacies of international trade law without overcoming what initially feels boring.

Boredom actually plays two roles when it comes to these sorts of ambitions. On a

How bored are you?

AFTER EACH STATEMENT, SCORE YOURSELF FROM 1 (IF YOU strongly disagree) to 7 (if you strongly agree). A rating of 4 is neutral. If a statement is marked by an asterisk, score it in the reverse direction: Give yourself 1 point if you strongly agree and up to 7 points if you strongly disagree. Sum the values from your reactions to all 28 statements.

The questions are derived from the Boredom Proneness Scale, developed by psychologists Norman D. Sundberg, of the University of Oregon, and Richard F. Farmer, of the Oregon Research Institute.

28-80 points: Bored? Never. You actually enjoy watching paint dry.
81-117 points: Waiting in line might test your focus, but you're not easily bored.
118-196 points: You are easily bored. Before reading this article about the benefits of boredom, you probably didn't like it, but now you might see the bright side of it.

		POINT
1	It is easy for me to concentrate on my activities.*	
2	When I am working, I frequently find myself worrying about other things.	
3	Time always seems to be passing slowly.	
4	I often find myself at "loose ends," not knowing what to do.	
5	I am often trapped in situations in which I have to do meaningless things.	
6	Having to look at someone's home movies or travel slides bores me tremendously.	
7	I have projects in mind and things to do all the time.*	
8	I find it easy to entertain myself.*	
9	Many things I have to do are repetitive and monotonous.	
10	It takes more stimulation to get me going than most people.	
11	I get a kick out of most things I do.*	
12	I am seldom excited about my work.	
13	In any situation, I can usually find something to do or see to keep me interested.*	
14	Much of the time I just sit around doing nothing.	
15	I am good at waiting patiently.*	
16	I often find myself with nothing to do, time on my hands.	
17	In situations where I have to wait, such as in a line, I get very restless.	
18	I often wake up with a new idea.*	
19	It would be very hard for me to find a job that is exciting enough.	
20	I would like more challenging things to do in life.	
21	I feel that I am working below my abilities most of the time.	
22	Many people would say that I am a creative or imaginative person.*	
23	I have so many interests, I don't have time to do everything.*	
24	Among my friends, I am the one who keeps doing something the longest.*	
25	Unless I am doing something exciting, even dangerous, I feel half dead and dull.	
26	It takes a lot of change and variety to keep me really happy.	
27	It seems that the same things are on television or at the movies all the time; it's getting old.	
28	When I was young, I was often in monotonous and tiresome situations.	
	TOTAL SCORE	

Source: Boredom Proneness—The Development and Correlates of a New Scale, by Richard F. Farmer and Norman D. Sundberg, in *Journal of Personality Assessment* 50 (1986): 1

basic level, it serves as a gut check, asking if we are truly committed to our goals. The boredom that third-year students feel in economics class might cause them to reconsider their plan to work at the Federal Reserve, or it might inspire them to delve deeper into the subject so they can discover the same passion for prospect theory shown by their professor. At the second stage, boredom is similar to the muscle ache joggers suffer while training for their first marathons. Just as the runner must build endurance by extending training sessions from one mile to five miles to 10 miles, a student must increase his or her tolerance for what feels tedious and repetitive. The freshman whose eyes glaze over at *The Wealth of Nations* should find the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* utterly riveting by the time graduate school starts.

This is one reason boredom is creeping back into our education systems. After years of trying to ensure that every school lesson sizzled with excitement, many educators are now providing quiet space or rote work so children gain experience dealing with mundane routine. Early-childhood experts Teresa Belton and Esther Priyadharshini even issued a rallying cry on behalf of boredom in the pages of the *Cambridge Journal of Education*. They call boredom "a legitimate and necessary experience" and insist it has a "critical reflective potential." A child who can't deal with boredom, says Belton, is more likely to become flustered by the demands of higher education.

Besides achievement and success, there is also a poetic benefit to welcoming what might first seem boring. Just as the stars of the night sky are visible only when the bright lights of the city are left behind, the intricate beauty of everyday life often surfaces only after the din and dazzle of entertainment recede. This idea was central to David Foster Wallace's final novel, *The Pale King*. Set in the lackluster world of the IRS, the book is about tax specialists who reach nirvana through painstakingly tedious work. As Wallace revealed in his working notes, "It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing boredom."

Just think of children who are fed a steady diet of television and video games. When they are taken on a walk in the woods for the first time, they will cry, 'I'm bored' after 20 minutes. But if they persevere and learn to recognize the glory of flora and fauna before them, those same boring woods suddenly become a place of infinite splendor.

Take a moment to consider the following statements:

* *I am seldom excited about my work.*
* *Among my friends, I am the one who keeps doing something the longest.*
* *I often wake up with a new idea.*
* *Having to look at somebody's home movies or travel slides bores me tremendously.*

Which do you agree with? Your answer is telling, because this is part of the Boredom Proneness Scale, a tool developed in 1986 by psychologists Norman Sundberg and Richard Farmer to evaluate what they considered a neglected aspect of human behavior. And the bad news is, according to this seminal test, if you are prone to boredom, you might also be prone to depression, hopelessness and loneliness.

That's not all. For decades, most psychologists studied boredom as a possible trigger for dangerous or unhealthy behavior. According to this research, bored people are more likely to develop gambling problems, conduct extramarital affairs and overeat. Studies also show that boredom is a leading indicator of a drug addict's likelihood of relapse. "There was a belief that boredom was central to a number of problematic behaviors or personal problems," says Richard Farmer. "Substance abuse, vandalism, overeating, a sense of alienation from yourself and others."

This negative behavior is easy enough to explain. Boredom is, after all, an unpleasant sensation. People often seize the most convenient methods of chasing it away, and alcohol, sex and Häagen-Dazs are reliably quick fixes for short-term boredom. However, over the past few years, a new theory has surfaced: What if boredom could also trigger good behavior?

The researchers Wijnand van Tilburg and Eric Igou are asking just this question. They ran a series of studies and experiments at Tilburg University in the Netherlands and the University of Limerick in Ireland, where they purposely bored students by making them copy out bibliographic material or perform mundane counting exercises. These bored students were then more likely to give money to a charity that built schools in Zambia or to sign up for a blood-donation drive than a control group of students were.

"In terms of the experience, boredom is clearly negative, people don't like it, but in terms of the consequences it really depends if it is positive or negative," says Van Tilburg. "If people are given the opportunity to engage in meaningful behaviors, such as donating to charity, then the consequences of boredom can be very positive."

Not only are bored people more likely to engage in prosocial behavior; there is also evidence that merely being confronted with social need is an antidote to ennui. Jean-Paul Sartre recognized this once he became involved in humanitarian work. Thirty years after writing the most influential novel on existential boredom, Sartre told an interviewer, "Next to a starving child, *Nausea* is nothing."

All this raises a rather urgent question: If boredom can be good or bad, how do we channel it toward positive change?

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WHICH BRINGS US BACK TO Michael Raposa. If neuroscientists, psychologists, and educators are only now grasping boredom's possibilities, religion has been exploring its potential for millennia. Most make a distinction between unhealthy and healthy boredom. Within Christianity, for example, one of the seven deadly sins is *acedia*, a state of passive indifference in which you no longer care about yourself or God and don't contribute to your community. However, *apatheia*, a state free of unnecessary stimulation, is considered virtuous because it fosters spiritual calm. Similarly, in Buddhism, sloth and torpor are among the five hindrances on the path to inner peace, yet *sunyata*, a vision of emptiness, is to be sought because of the serenity and perspective it endows.

Raposa, a philosopher of religion at Lehigh University, says religion prepares people to understand their boredom and use it in a productive manner. "My boredom can lead to distraction or I can choose to attend to it," he says. "The inability to sit with and listen to those feelings is a roadblock to spiritual progress." If, for example, during that Easter Mass you begin calculating the winnings of your NFL bets at the first hint of boredom, the spiritual opportunity of the moment is lost. However, if you acknowledge your boredom and examine it like a peculiar rock you've found on the beach, it can reveal hidden truths about your spiritual vocation.

The tools used to cultivate a healthy relationship with boredom are somewhat surprising: mundane, repetitive rituals. These rituals—prayer and incantations, for example—are designed to quiet the distracting noise that clutters the mind and allow the subtle voice of the soul to be heard. Removing unnecessary stimuli this way is akin to turning out the lights in a room: If you are patient, your eyes gradually adapt to the darkness and you experience the space in an entirely different way. "The extreme redundancy of certain religious practices," observes Raposa, "is intended to empower the imagination by first reducing it to silence."

Of course, the belief that boredom can be revelatory isn't unique to religion. After all, Friedrich "God is dead" Nietzsche wrote, "He who completely entrenches himself against boredom also entrenches himself against himself: he will never get to drink the strongest refreshing draught from his own innermost fountain." However, it was another German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, who was history's most ardent proponent of boredom. Granted, many people dismiss Heidegger because of his allegiance to Nazism, but *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* contains the most thoughtful exploration of boredom ever written. He concludes that the essence of human existence can only be distilled from deep boredom, because this is the sole time we are free from the emotional extremes and animal urges that warp our judgment. The ultimate purpose of boredom, he writes, is "to liberate the humanity in man, to liberate the humanity of man."

In retrospect, this wisdom seems obvious. We do not confront the major questions of life while watching the season finale of *Breaking Bad* or gliding off the chairlift at Vail. And things are never as bad as they feel after a major breakup or as good as they seem when you are hired for a new job. Boredom scrapes away the husk of temporary, superficial sensation and allows the kernel of truth to be seen.

From bursts of creativity to improved focus to greater self-awareness, the fruits of boredom are manifold. And this is why, just as farmers allow their fields to lie fallow for a season to let the soil regenerate, we must carve out time and space where we are not beset by diversions or duties. This way, boredom might rise up within us. And when it does, we must be ready to embrace its insights and inspirations. ■

U.S. PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA YAWNED DURING THE EAST ASIAN SUMMIT IN PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA, LAST YEAR. COULD HE HAVE BEEN BORED? MANY PHILOSOPHERS BELIEVE IT IS ONLY IN THE FACE OF PROFOUND BOREDOM THAT WE CAN KNOW OUR TRUE SELVES.

PHOTOGRAPH: JEWEL SAMAD/GETTYIMAGES.COM

JEREMY MERCER *is eager to return to a state of profound boredom but fears his 3-year-old son and 4-year-old daughter will postpone that trip indefinitely.*