

Ennui and the Still, Small Voice

“I’m so bored” a six year old said to his mother in the grocery store line the other day. I was waiting behind them and I had to agree; we had been waiting quite a long time. Later that day, I went to a class that I am taking called, “East Meets West: Buddhism in America” at the Pacific School of Religion. As our professor shared stories from his summer in a remote cabin with family but without running water or electricity, he bemoaned the children in his extended family who, he observed, do not know how to play without electronics. But, then, he is a Buddhist monk!

Maybe you saw the same article I did a few weeks ago in the New York Times, which reported that using electronic media (computers, games, iPods, etc.) seems to trigger the same areas in the brain that addicts have triggered with repeated use of certain drugs or other addictive behaviors like gambling. It really comes as no surprise to me; I can barely finish a chapter of assigned reading or even pleasure reading without checking my phone for new emails, texts, or calls. Knowing that this is lighting up the addictive portion of my brain is no comfort, that’s for sure.

Equally as troubling is the pace of things and just how busy each day is. Some of us even feel guilty when we admit to NOT being stressed out from too many things to do. When I was growing up, the typical response to the question, “How are you?” was something like, “Fine thanks. How are you?” Today, the more typical response to the same question is, “Busy, “ or “Crazy busy. And you?” Sometimes I feel like I need to be really busy and look like I am tearing my hair out to be on par with everyone else.

But how does all this stimulation affect our children? I am sure that there is a lot of research on this but most of what I found (and I am serious) when I googled 'boredom and children' were lists and suggestions ("100 Things to Do If Your Kids Say They Are Bored" ...) of what to do for your children when they are bored. Boredom, popular culture seemed to say, was unacceptable and needed to be fixed by parents and teachers.

For our short 45 minutes a week in Godly Play, our program heartily and humbly disagrees. A little space in your day, between your thoughts, and between your scheduled events is a good thing. Perhaps the issue is more the meaning of the word. When children say, “I am bored,” they may, in fact be bored. That is an opportunity for that person to figure out what works best to

solve their sense of boredom. The old “give a man a fish versus teach him to fish” story.

Alternatively, I wonder if maybe the issue is with our current lexicon. “Boring” from a child’s perspective may not mean boring at all; rather, it may be the only word a child knows to describe the sense of not being completely absorbed or engaged. The dopamine and adrenaline surge that floods all our brains with hyper-stimulation has eased off a little and leaves you feeling uneasy. (How often do you say to yourself, “I should be doing something!”) Perhaps, that in-between ‘bored’ place is actually a gift. A time where one’s mind, heart, and spirit can slow down enough to really, deeply pay attention to what is around them and just wonder. For wonder invites a deeper wisdom (to paraphrase Walt Whitman) and I think we are too busy being busy to notice that we, in fact, are not ‘bored’ enough. Without a quiet heart, how can we hear “that still small voice” that so often is God’s reaching out to us?

Next time a child moans that they are bored, consider not fixing the situation right away. Instead try, “I know when that boring feeling happens, if I wait just a few moments usually something really cool happens.” I bet it might. And in that in-between time, maybe that still, small voice can be heard.

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