

On Being Bored

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Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so. — John Berryman, "Dream Song 14"

CHILDREN ARE NOT oracles, but they ask the great existential question with persistent regularity: "what shall we do now?" Every adult remembers, among many other things, the great ennui of childhood, and every child's life is punctuated by spells of boredom, states of suspended anticipation in which things are started and nothing begins, moods of diffuse restlessness which contain that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire.

As psychoanalysis brought to our attention the passionate intensity of the child's internal world, it has tended to equate significance with intensity and so has rarely found a place, in theory, for all those less vehement, vaguer, often more subtle feelings and moods that much of our lives consist of. It is part of D. W. Winnicott's contribution to have alerted us to the importance, in childhood, of states of relative quiescence, moods that could never figure, for example, in Melanie Klein's Gothic melodrama of emotional development. There are several references in the psychoanalytic literature to the project of the boring patient (most notably Khan, 1986) and a few to the seemingly common adult fear of being boring, but very little has been written about the child's ordinary experience of being bored, a mood that by definition seems to preclude elaborate description. As any child will tell us, it's just having nothing to do.

But clinically one comes across children unable to be bored and, more often, children unable to be anything else. In any discussion of waiting, at least in relation to the child, it makes sense to speak of boredom because the bored child is waiting unconsciously for an experience of anticipation; in ordinary states of boredom the child returns to the possibility of his own desire. His boredom is actually a precarious process in which he is both waiting for something and looking for something; and in this sense boredom is

akin to free-floating attention. One could, in fact, describe the "analytic attitude" as an attentive boredom. In the muffled, sometimes irritable confusion of his boredom, the child is reaching to a recurrent sense of emptiness out of which his real desire can crystallize. But to begin with, of course, the child needs the adult to hold, and hold to, the experience—that is, to recognize it as such rather than sabotage it by distraction. The child's boredom starts as a regular crisis in his developing capacity to be alone in the presence of the mother. In other words, being able to be bored can be a developmental achievement for the child.

In that frustrating pause in his usually mobile attention and absorption, the bored child quickly becomes preoccupied by his lack of preoccupation. Not exactly waiting for someone else, he is, as it were, waiting for himself. Neither hopeless nor expectant, neither intent nor resigned, he exists in a dull helplessness of possibility and dismay. If we say that in simple terms the child always has two concurrent, overlapping projects—the project of self-sufficiency, in which he interprets his use of, and need for, the other as a concession, and a project of mutuality that owns up to a dependence—then in the banal crisis of boredom the conflict between the two projects is once again renewed. Is it not indeed revealing to observe what the child's boredom evokes in adults? Heard as a demand, sometimes as an accusation of failure or disappointment, it is rarely agreed to or simply acknowledged. How often, in fact, the child's boredom is met by that most perplexing form of disapproval, the adult's wish to distract him, as though adults have decided that the child's life must be, or be seen to be, endlessly interesting. It is one of the most oppressive adult demands that the child should be interested, rather than taking time to find what interests him. Boredom is integral to the process of taking one's time.

While the child's boredom is often recognized as an incapacity, it is usually denied as an opportunity. A precociously articulate eleven-year-old boy was referred to me because, in his mother's words, he was "more miserable than he realized" and had no friends because of his "misleading self-presentation." For several weeks, while we got to know each other, he chatted fluently in a quite happy, slightly dissociated way about his vast array of interests and

occupations. The only significant negative transference occurred when he mentioned, in passing, that sometimes he might be too busy to come and see me. He was mostly in a state of what I can only describe as blank exuberance about how full his life was. As he was terrified of his own self-doubt, I asked him very few questions, and they were always tactful. But at one point, more directly than I intended, I asked him if he was ever bored. He was surprised by the question and replied, with a gloominess I hadn't seen before in this relentlessly cheerful child, "I'm not allowed to be bored." I asked him what would happen if he allowed himself to be bored, and he paused for the first time, I think, in the treatment and said, "I wouldn't know what I was looking forward to," and was, momentarily, quite panic stricken by the thought. This led us, over the next year, into a discussion of what in one language would be called this boy's false self. Being good, in terms of maternal demand, was having lots of interests, interests, that is, of a respectable, unembarassing sort, nothing that could make him feel both awkward and strong. In the course of the treatment he gradually developed in himself a new capacity, the capacity to be bored. I once suggested to him that being good was a way of keeping people from knowing him, to which he agreed but added, "when I'm bored I don't know myself!"

If the bored child cannot sufficiently hold the mood, or use the adult as an unimpinging auxiliary ego, there is a premature flight from uncertainty, the familiar orgy of promiscuous and disappointing engagements which is also a trial action in action, a trying things out. At its worst there is what the adult will come to know, from his repertoire of displacements, as the simulation of his desire, which in the child often takes the form of a regressive fabrication of need. A boy of eight referred for being "excessively greedy and always bored," said to me in the first session, "if I eat everything I won't have to eat anymore." This could have meant several things, but for him it meant that if he could eat everything he would no longer need to be hungry. One magical solution, of course, to the problem of having been tantalized is to have no desire. For this boy greed was, among other things, an attack on the desiring part of the self, a wish to get to the end of his appetite and finish with it once and for

all. Part of the total fantasy of greed is always the attempt to eat up one's own appetite. But for this desolate child greed was a form of self-cure for a malign boredom that continually placed him on the threshold of an emptiness, a lack, that he couldn't bear, an emptiness in which his own idiosyncratic, unconscious desire was inscribed. When I asked him if he was ever lonely, he said that he was "too bored to be lonely."

The child is dependent not only on the mother but also on his desire. Both can be lost and refound. So perhaps boredom is merely the mourning of everyday life? "It is really only because we know so well how to explain it," Freud wrote of mourning, "that this attitude does not seem to us pathological." But the child's boredom is a mood that seems to negate the possibility of explanation. It is itself unexplaining, inarticulate—certainly not pathological but nevertheless somehow unacceptable. Some of the things Freud says about the melancholic in "Mourning and Melancholia" can easily be said of the bored child. "One feels," he writes, ". . . a loss . . . has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either." What the bored child perceives himself as losing is "something to do" at the moment in which nothing is inviting. "The inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us," Freud writes, "because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely." In a sense, the bored child is absorbed by his lack of absorption, and yet he is also preparing for something of which he is unaware, something that will eventually occasion an easy transition or a mild surprise of interest. "In mourning it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself." And in boredom, we might add, it is both. The brief but intense boredom of childhood are reactive to no great loss, but are merely an interruption: after something and before something else. Like all genuine transitional states their destination is unclear. When bored as an adult, one cannot, in Freud's words, "hide the weakness of one's own nature." But we might ask, following Freud's approach in this extraordinary paper, what is the work which boredom performs for the child?

Winnicott, who often refers to instinctual life as a "compli-

cation," provides a way of looking at this in his paper "The Observation of Infants in a Set Situation" (1941), particularly with his notion of the period of hesitation. In the set situation of Winnicott's consultation he asks "the mother to sit opposite me with the angle of the table coming between me and her. She sits down with the baby on her knee. As a routine I place a right-angled, shining tongue depressor at the edge of the table and I invite the mother to place the child in such a way that, if the child should wish to handle the spatula, it is possible." This sets the scene for the three stages of the infant's behavior that are to become for Winnicott a paradigm of the analytic process. The spatula, like the "good" interpretation and even the analyst himself, is what the patient is ready to use, what it makes sense to him to use; and the setting is one in which the child "only becomes able to find his desire again in so far as his testing of the environment affords satisfactory results." The bored child is waiting, without the conscious representation of the object, to find his desire again. Once again he does not know what he is looking forward to.

This is Winnicott's description of part of the process:

Stage 1. The baby puts his hand to the spatula, but at this moment discovers unexpectedly that the situation must be given thought. He is in a fix. Either with his hand resting on the spatula and his body quite still he looks at me and his mother with big eyes, and watches and waits, or, in certain cases, he withdraws interest completely and buries his face in the front of his mother's blouse. It is usually possible to manage the situation so that active reassurance is not given, and it is very interesting to watch the gradual and spontaneous return of the child's interest in the spatula.

Stage 2. All the time, in "the period of hesitation" (as I call it), the baby holds his body still (but not rigid). Gradually he becomes brave enough to let his feelings develop, and then the picture changes quite quickly. The moment at which this first phase changes into the second is evident, for the child's acceptance of the reality of desire for the spatula is heralded by a change in the inside of the mouth, which becomes flabby, while the tongue looks thick and soft, and saliva flows copiously. Before long he puts the spatula into his mouth and is chewing it with his gums, or seems to be copying father smok-

ing a pipe. The change in the baby's behaviour is a striking feature. Instead of expectancy and stillness there now develops self-confidence, and there is free bodily movement, the latter related to manipulation of the spatula.

I have frequently made the experiment of trying to get the spatula to the infant's mouth during the stage of hesitation. Whether the hesitation corresponds to my normal state or differs from it in degree or quality, I find that it is impossible during this stage to get the spatula to the child's mouth apart from the exercise of brutal strength. In certain cases where the inhibition is acute any effort on my part that results in the spatula being moved towards the child produces screaming, mental distress, or actual colic.

The baby now seems to feel that the spatula is in his possession, perhaps in his power, certainly available for the purposes of self-expression.

For the bored child, clearly, nothing "is available for the purposes of self-expression." Instead of "expectancy and stillness," there is a dreary agitation; instead of "self-confidence and . . . free bodily movement," there is a cramped restlessness. Boredom, one could say, is the set situation before there is a spatula to be found; or perhaps, more absurdly, a set situation full of spatulas in which the child has to find one that really appeals to him. The bored child, a sprawl of absent possibilities, is looking for something to hold his attention. He is like a man who walks as quickly as possible through a gallery until a picture arrests his attention, until he is stopped — and at that point, we might add, the transference has taken. For the child to be allowed to have what Winnicott calls "the full course of the experience," the child needs the use of an environment that will suggest things without imposing them, without preempting the actuality of his desire by force-feeding or distracting him by forcing the spatula into his mouth. It is a process, Winnicott is saying, that is easily violated — though I would say that in growing up one needs a certain flair for distraction — and analogous to the analytic situation in which the analyst's interpretations offer views rather than imposing convictions. In psychoanalysis, by definition, a militant or moralistic competence is inappropriate, merely a distraction.

To facilitate the child's communication in a consultation, Winnicott would often do an initial scribble, which he called a

"squiggle," on a piece of paper and suggest that the child turn it into something recognizable, and shareable. The shining spatula, like Winnicott's initial squiggle is, of course, an invitation to the child, an offering. What Winnicott calls the environment, though not exactly asserting itself, is at least tentatively promising; hinting, as it were. Gradually gaining interest in something that has attracted his attention, the infant, in his period of hesitation, "becomes brave enough to let his feelings develop." The period, wonderfully observed and imagined by Winnicott, in which the infant begins to experience his desire is intrinsically a problematic, difficult time. A child described later in the paper got asthma during the period of hesitation. "For this child," Winnicott writes, "asthma was associated with the moment at which there is normally hesitation, and hesitation implies mental conflict." One can ask then, adapting Freud's phrase, What are the individual's preconditions for desire, for letting his feelings develop? What are the situations he sets to make desire possible? Boredom, of course, is prehesitation; but in each period of boredom the child returns to these questions.

The ordinary boredom of childhood is the benign version of what gets acted out, or acted out of, in what Winnicott calls the antisocial tendency. But as adults, boredom returns us to the scene of inquiry, to the poverty of our curiosity, and to the simple question, what does one want to do with one's time? What is a brief malaise for the child can become for the adult a kind of muted risk. After all, who can wait for nothing?