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# THE POWER OF BOREDOM

*Why boredom is essential for  
creating a meaningful life.*

**MARK A. HAWKINS**

The Power of Boredom

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# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my parents. How a person comes to be who they are is a mystery, but no doubt my mom and dad were pivotal in my creation. While a short dedication is not nearly long enough to begin acknowledging this fact, I will attempt to craft a few poignant words.

To my mom, Susanne Hawkins, whose strength through a string of personal tragedies has not withered her vitality and compassion for others. I can only hope I would be so brave and intrepid as you.

And to my dad, Lee Hawkins, who left us way too early. I truly think that you were a writer at heart, but never got the chance. So I write this book in honour of your memory and hope it makes you proud.

I love you both.



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# PREFACE

“Mr. Hawkins, I’m bored.” These were the few disheartening words spoken by one of my high school students that eventually led to the writing of this book.

It was a beautiful warm and sunny day in late spring and, as a break from the routine, I decided to reward my class for working hard by taking them outside to enjoy the weather. It had been one of the great pleasures of my childhood to just sit on the grass and stare at the sky, and I wanted our class to share the experience together.

My students jumped out of their seats in excitement the instant I announced that we would be going outside. Even the students who normally sat like zombies at the back of the class came alive with energy.

Walking past the other classes like a triumphant parade, we made our way outside to the field. I told them to relax and just stare at the clouds drifting by. I did the same thing myself.

Then it happened.

I sat up and looked behind me. Almost all the students were on their smartphones except for the one chatty girl who didn't have her phone with her that day.

I realized then and there that my students' diminishing tolerance for boredom was not only preventing them from learning effectively in class (as I'm sure my colleagues would attest to), but it was also preventing them from taking precious moments in their day to enjoy and learn about life. I also realized that I was part of the problem.

Teaching has changed in the past decade or so. Slowly, an unofficial requirement has developed for teachers: entertaining. If you struggle with finding a way to engage your class, it is indirectly suggested that there is something wrong with your teaching. But as teachers try harder and harder to keep classes exciting and fun, the worse the level of engagement gets. It is a never ending and deflating battle.

But my students were just the canary in the coalmine. Even I was not immune to my own growing intolerance for boredom. The ease of finding entertainment at our fingertips over the last two decades has almost imperceptibly been eroding our tolerance for sitting and doing nothing. We've all been sitting in a pot of hot water, slowly increasing the distractions and diversions in our lives, and we haven't realized that we're beginning to burn.

# INTRODUCTION

Never before in human history has it been more important to embrace boredom and never have we been less tolerant of it. This is the irony and tragedy of our times. The funny thing about life today is that we are all actually profoundly bored, but because there are so many distractions, we don't even know it. It's a nagging feeling that we need to be constantly doing something with our time. It's always bubbling below the surface ready to boil over the second our time is free. Since the world provides so much distraction in the form of technology, social media, 24 hour news, and "keeping up with the Joneses," it's easy to just pop that lid back on the pot and hold it down as tight as we can. In fact, the busier we are, the more bored we are likely to be. But all this distraction and busyness does is create the illusion of a satisfying and meaningful life.

## WHY LIFE IS FILLED BUT UNFULFILLING

You know what I'm talking about. Life is so busy and full of activity, yet we still feel lifeless, dissatisfied, and unfulfilled. The activities that fill our lives provide us with little satisfaction and fulfillment even though we try to convince ourselves otherwise. With a pay cheque as our only solace, the daily monotony reduces us to walking zombies on a giant hamster wheel. It is no wonder that we live for the weekend when we can go out for drinks with friends, indulge in some takeout, or chill out at home and binge-watch Netflix. Think about that phrase for a moment: "living for the weekend." If you are living for the weekend, then all the grueling hours at school or work are endured just so that you can have a few hours of relief. Your life revolves around a couple of fleeting hours!

Over time, even the few hours of leisure that provide momentary fulfillment are drained of their pleasure and we are forced to look for something else to make us feel good.

We know that there is something missing and we go about trying desperately to figure out what it is. We frantically fill up our lives with more and more stuff hoping that the next thing we do will finally give us lasting satisfaction. We believe that there is some sort of final state or destination that will provide us with endless bliss. Maybe when we have enough money to buy the perfect home in the perfect location we will be satisfied. Maybe when we have a spouse and a family of our own we will feel fulfilled. Perhaps when we reach a certain level of spiritual enlightenment, we will no longer feel like there is something missing from our lives. Unfortunately, none of the things we fill our lives with are guaranteed to give us the life satisfaction we desire. So why is it that we feel so lifeless, dissatisfied, and unfulfilled when we are busier than ever before?

## **OUR LIVES LACK MEANING**

We feel this way because the activities we fill our lives with are not providing the meaning that we crave, but we can't deny that we need meaning in our lives as much as we need food or air. We perform our jobs simply to continue the cycle of making money, paying for leisure activities to escape the stress of the job, and do this over and over again. The thing is, for many of us, neither our careers nor our leisure activities mean anything immensely compelling to us. Even though we may try to convince ourselves that our jobs are meaningful, our need to take extreme measures to “unwind” tells a different story.

We need a compelling reason for our lives. It is something that is just built into us. So we tirelessly search for the best way to live. We search for a profound, universal meaning that will guide us, and provide certainty and satisfaction. We flock to yoga studios, and meditation retreats that promise meaning and enlightenment. We convince ourselves that our work has a great purpose in the world, or that family is all we need. Yet, these methods fall short of providing the constant satisfaction and fulfillment we expected them to provide, so we busy ourselves again looking for something new to fill our time.

## **BUSYNESS KILLS LIFE SATISFACTION**

In today's world, our attempts at living a meaningful life are stopped in their tracks because our time filling prevents us from discovering our own compelling personal meaning by truly examining our lives. We learn how to live a satisfying and fulfilling existence by closely examining our world and our own lives, yet we are so busy that we do not have the time to properly do this. Almost every spare minute we have is filled with either tasks to satisfy the increasingly demands of the world, or with leisure activities to escape the world. Our desperate need for meaning has led to a thriving industry based on “McEnlightenment”

which, rather than helping us to explore our personal meanings and existence, scratch the surface of spirituality while promising inner peace and fulfillment after ten sessions. Of course, we flock to these places wondering if it is “the answer.” Life is filled to the brim, but it’s unfulfilling.

Our attempts to live satisfying lives are made even harder because we live at a time when there are endless distractions. As soon as we have a spare moment, we scroll through our facebook feed, turn on the TV, or surf the internet. Such distractions play right into our desperate and endless search for meaning, but what we don’t realize is that distraction is the death of meaning! This is because what we are really doing is avoiding boredom.

Avoiding boredom not only kills life satisfaction, it also leads to negative behaviours. We fill our down time with food, drink, drugs, and drama just so there is something (rather than nothing) going on.

Since we are constantly distracted with activities that provide pseudo-satisfaction, we never truly examine our lives. When we don’t think about life, we passively live out the default version of life, whether or not it’s right for us. We conform to a certain way of living that provides little to no personal meaning because we didn’t consciously choose it. It’s the default, dominant idea of a satisfying and meaningful life. We assume there is no other way to live because, if we’re honest with ourselves, we haven’t really thought about it. Even if we realize there are alternative ways to live, our modern world provides so many choices, options, and paths that it becomes dizzying and nearly impossible to choose. So how can we discover our own, personal compelling reason to live? We must allow ourselves to be bored.

## **YOU NEED TO GET REALLY, REALLY BORED**

We are prevented from properly examining our lives because we are terrified of boredom. Boredom has become so intolerable in modern

life that we will do almost anything to avoid it. Ironically, the boredom that we find so painful and that we will do anything to avoid is the very thing that we need to begin to live a satisfying, fulfilling, and zestful life. It is by embracing boredom and using it to learn about the truths in our lives that we can finally create a meaningful existence. Despite its horrible reputation, boredom carries the potential to help us create the most compelling life any human can expect to live.

Some of you might be thinking, "I wish I had time to be bored!" There is so much busyness and distraction that we have actually convinced ourselves of our lack of time. Sometimes we even glorify it. But we all have times in our day when there is nothing that we *must* do, or *want* to do. Much of our busyness and distraction has actually become a way for us to avoid times of boredom under the guise of getting ahead, or getting things done. We may convince ourselves that all of the activity and busyness in our lives is necessary because we need to keep up, or get ahead. When we are alone in the evening with nothing much to do we probably flip on the TV, surf the net, or mentally organize our schedule for the next day. These are the times that are crucial. Will you fill them up with trivial activities that add nothing to life, or will you use these times to begin to create an amazing life? These times of boredom are the perfect spaces to examine and change our lives.

When we learn to use boredom properly, it is a powerful vehicle for meditation and the ideal space to begin to create a satisfying life. During times of boredom, when we are not distracted by the world, we can begin to see and feel the truths of life, and the things that are holding us back from living a fulfilling life. Socrates said that an unexamined life is not worth living and, as you will see, boredom is the best time in our lives to begin that examination. Boredom is a special space in time that provides us with a bird's eye view of life. The examination that boredom allows helps us steer our lives toward the best road possible. Just as we would never begin a road trip with a muddy windshield, we should not live our lives before we have cleansed the space

of boredom of what is preventing us from living meaningfully. Once we embrace boredom and learn how to harness its power, we can create our own compelling personal meaning—the key to a life of satisfaction and fulfillment.