Embrace Boredom

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The Signal Within Boredom: Why We Must Relearn to Listen

I bought three books on boredom the other day. It was a move born not of idle curiosity but of anxious avoidance. My book launch was looming, the pandemic had scrambled every expectation, and I needed something else—something absorbing and cool—to occupy my mind so I wouldn't spiral into worry. That intellectual escape hatch turned out to be a deep dive into the very topic I'd once treated with only passing pragmatism: boredom. In the process, I stumbled into a theory that has shifted not just how I think about focus, but how I understand human nature itself.

If you've read *Deep Work*, you'll remember a chapter called "Embrace Boredom." At the time, my treatment of the subject was deliberately superficial. The argument was functional: if you don't build pockets of boredom into your daily schedule, your brain will form a Pavlovian connection between the first hint of emptiness and the instant gratification of a digital stimulus. Once that loop is wired in, your mind will never tolerate the protracted, distraction-free concentration that serious work demands. You can't write for three hours if your brain has been conditioned to flee the moment things get quiet. That insight remains true, but it's only the surface layer. Lately, I've been drawn toward something deeper: boredom as a fundamental human drive, something as essential and instructive as hunger or thirst.

Think about it. The experiences that feel truly distressing usually carry a vital purpose. Pain exists because we need to worry about injury. Thirst compels us to seek water or die. Hunger is so uncomfortable precisely because it prods us to find sustenance. So why is boredom so viscerally unpleasant? The answer I'm now exploring is that boredom is our built-in propulsion toward productive action. It's the internal nudge that made early humans do more than just survive—that pushed us to master fire, to shape stones into hand axes, to sharpen sticks into spears capable of bringing down a mammoth. Boredom says, *Do not sit still. Create, build, explore, improve.* Without that restless signal, we might never have taken full advantage of the brains evolution gave us. Boredom is the engine that drives us toward meaningful activity.

But here’s where modern life short-circuits that ancient instinct, and the parallel with hunger becomes chillingly precise. We have a natural drive for food, but we invented junk food—a hyperpalatable, calorie-dense substitute that hijacks our appetite and leaves us overfed yet undernourished. We have a natural drive for action, but we now live in an environment saturated with hyperpalatable mental stimulation. Social media feeds, bite-sized video, infinite scrolling, and 24/7 digital chatter are the cognitive equivalents of candy and fried starch. They satisfy the itch of boredom so instantly and completely that the deeper urge—the one meant to push us toward effort, craft, and creation—never gets a hearing. The result is a kind of cognitive action obesity: we feel constantly busy yet perpetually frustrated, overstimulated but never truly fulfilled. We have so many tasks and distractions put before us that the system that evolved to guide us toward doing meaningful things is now overwhelmed and short-circuited.

This brings me to the question I’m now obsessed with: What would the ideal, ancestrally congruent approach to work and action look like? If we could strip away all the digital noise and design a life from scratch—much as the paleo movement attempted to reconstruct a pre-industrial diet—what would a “paleo action” protocol look like? How much should we do, and of what kind? It’s a puzzle I’m building from scratch, and I’m digging into everything from animal boredom studies to the history of human productivity. The point is to figure out what it would mean to be truly in sync with this fundamental drive, so that we’re not constantly overfed on empty stimuli and starved of genuine accomplishment.

One listener sent me a fascinating article from an animal behavior journal comparing human and animal boredom, and that line of inquiry has become a high wave I can ride while the pandemic book launch anxiety churns in the background. But the real turn came when I noticed that the solution I was pursuing intellectually mirrored a physical practice I’d already adopted: fasting.

I’ve been eating one meal a day for more than a month now, mostly meat. The effect has been remarkable for my focus and well-being, but the most unexpected gift has been a new relationship with the signal of hunger. Fasting forces you to sit with that discomfort and listen to it. You learn that hunger can be a gentle notification, not an emergency. You discover how different foods quiet the signal—how steak and green beans leave you focused, clear, and calm, while the same caloric load of cherries can leave you, as I’ve half-jokingly described, “waking up behind a dumpster, crying, naked, and bloated,” with mood swings that ricochet for days. Fasting reintroduced me to the language my body had been speaking all along.

And I wonder: Can we do the same with boredom? If fasting is a mechanism for listening to physical hunger, perhaps deliberate boredom is a mechanism for listening to our cognitive and creative hunger. That might be what meditation edges toward, but it's also something simpler and more direct. It's choosing to sit with the restless ache to *do something* without immediately reaching for a phone, and then noticing what kind of action that ache is actually pointing toward. Does it want shallow novelty, or does it want the harder, deeper satisfaction of shaping an idea, building a skill, or solving a problem? Just as fasting helps you distinguish between needing nutrients and wanting a sugar hit, embracing boredom might train you to distinguish between needing distraction and needing meaningful work.

You could chart what makes you feel good—not just in the moment, but in the sustained, calm-boat-ride-along-the-Amazon sense rather than the roller-coaster crash. For me, fasting and a low-carb diet produce that stable, fulfilled state. The intellectual equivalent might be a life structured not around constant stimulus, but around a rhythmic, seasonally varied engagement with hard, meaningful action—and enough empty space to hear the signal clearly. When we mute boredom with digital junk food, we not only weaken our capacity for deep work; we might also be silencing the very voice that tells us what we most need to do next.

In the end, this isn't just about productivity hacks. It's about recalibrating a relationship that's been out of whack for centuries. Boredom isn't a glitch in the system. It's the system asking you a question. The problem is that we've filled our ears with so much noise we can no longer hear the answer. The first step is simple, if uncomfortable: be still, be bored, and listen.