

What Can I Do? (Boredom And The Thinking Self)

This is a slightly revised excerpt from a talk given by George Blair in 1998 to the AChP Annual General Meeting on the subject of boredom as a natural phase in a healthy maturational process.

I shall not be able to delve as deeply and delightfully into the mystery of the self as does Christopher Bollas in a chapter entitled 'What Is This Thing Called Self?: 'Simple yet identifiable, "self" is the word we use to designate our way of being' (Bollas, 1995, p. 179). I simply want to reflect on an aspect of the process in which my thinking becomes authentically me. The late Nina Coltart describes the therapist's job nicely— 'Above all, we assist in the removal of fear that arises from *the failure to find a voice* for the Self and in finding "some way, often through silences, to live with that section of the library of consciousness marked 'unknown', which this word, Self, signifies'" (Coltart, 1996, p. 89). That last phrase of hers is a quote from the Bollas chapter (Bollas, p. 159). That 'assistance' she attributes to the 'rapport of our own Selves with those of our analysands and the skilled and/or intuitive interactions that rapport may produce' (Coltart *ibid.*).

Enshrined for me in the concern of these two writers with the enigma of the self is the posture of waiting: waiting for meaning to come into being. Now, waiting and doing can be seen as polar opposites; and in the shadow of the need to be doing lies boredom. The trouble with that thought is that it is easy to miss boredom as a thing in itself, not as a bugbear, but something natural and productive.

It is, of course, established that boredom does very often stand for disallowed impulses. As a child, I became notorious because of how often I said, in a whining voice: 'What can I do?' My mother, for her part, played along with her bored child by offering suggestion after suggestion, none of which ever took my fancy. When her ingenuity ran out, she would resort to: 'Well, you could always help me with the dishes', just proving how very far she was from understanding my plight. Well, was it that I wanted her to say: 'Why don't you smash a few dishes?' I don't think so. I don't know what I wanted to hear. I needed to discover something about myself in a way that was beyond my imagining.

What I want to suggest is that boredom is an inalienable component of waiting. Boredom is not anticipation, but rather, waiting for anticipation to dawn, for desire and meaning to be born, for the constellation of a creative thought. In this sense, boredom is a real enough emptiness, a diffuse restlessness, an *ennui*, but, as such, not a sickness, whereas constitutional boredom is – a sickness.

Winnicott, in observing children, referred to states of 'relative quiescence', states perhaps not definite enough to be noticed, a pause after something has ended and before something else has begun. The question then arises: can it be endured pending a fruitful outcome? It would be quite unendurable were it just to go on and on? And isn't it that very 'situation of hesitation' that is in danger of being avoided because of the anxious pressure to be doing. What is under threat here is the formation of a kind of faith, but how is that faith to be gained?

Therefore boredom may either be the resultant of unconscious, and more or less effective, disposal of intense feelings of disappointment, when free exploration is interrupted or it may be the natural, unavoidable concomitant of a situation, vital to the development of a person's individuality, their authentic way of being, their thinking self. This state of non-arousal may seem like the other sort of boredom, but is essentially quietude. Walker Percy's in his novel: [*The Moviegoer*](#). touches on the predicament. He contrasts being 'sunk in everydayness' with being 'on to something'. The latter he calls 'the search', an ineffable sense of curiosity, desire and creativity. The way he writes about it makes the concept itself intriguing.

The problem faced by the child becomes the parent's problem, especially if their own boredom was sterile. Or to put it the other way round - the primary parent's problem becomes the child's, and so on. Since, confronted with the task of deflecting the bored child, a parent may fail to perceive the sacredness of the moment and rush in to parry the dreaded

emptiness - where angels fear to tread. But when such *ennui* is recognized and patiently attended by the other, as Coltart suggests, 'perhaps in silence', doing something becomes irrelevant. This only becomes an endurance if there is an inherent anxiety about leaving someone to 'stew in their own juice'. For such a barren patch or awkward silence may be a time of conception – a fallow state (notice that the word 'fallow' contains that word: 'allow'). 'What can I do!' may best be answered by: 'There is nothing to be done for the moment.' For this early state of boredom to be fruitful entails the empathetic presence of the (m)other.

Adam Phillips rather archly describes the 'analytical attitude' as an attentive boredom. – 'In the muffled, sometimes irritable confusion of his boredom', he writes, 'the child is reaching to a recurrent sense of emptiness out of which his real desire can crystallise'. 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'. (Winnicott's term is *impingement*.)

Where this 'holding to' has not been the case in early life, or where it has been continually interrupted through the anxiety or depression of the mother, the psyche will have had to deal with the never-ending present by killing time or fitting in. 'After all', Phillips comments, 'who can wait for nothing?' Partying, promiscuity and perversion are examples of pastimes traded off against a potentially truer desire, something worth waiting for. And of course, in time, these three *-ps* will be revealed to be only thinly veiled forms of boredom.

I have come to be able to make this claim for boredom as a fertile interval in two ways. First, the possibility that it may be therapeutic even just to *think the patient* (as opposed to rationalise or intervene) led to the conviction that, from time to time, I was sitting opposite a person who had never been conceived of; conceived, yes, but not yet *conceived of*. That thought in itself did not dispel that certain anxiety, and the question persisted: what was to be done? By 'thinking the other' I mean a reserved attentiveness, or the 'assistance', which Coltart calls 'rapport' or Wilfred Bion terms a mother's 'reverie', by which a person, simply, is borne (born) in mind, held mindfully and expectantly conceived of, what Anne Alvarez (1992) calls 'anticipatory identification' (and very different from having premature expectations for how someone *should* turn out), and thus comes to recognize his or her individual meaning. Thinking the other is itself a form of waiting. (Note that in French 'assister' = 'to be present'.)

The second factor leading to the formation of this belief lay in my experience of the inadequacy of any therapeutic method or move which does not arise as a response by the authentic self of the therapist to the struggle of the other to remove the fear that lies behind the failure to find a voice for the self and to persevere in this collaboration to that end.

A number of years ago now, when I was setting out as a therapist, I saw an attractive young Latin woman over a period of some fifteen months who persistently thwarted my every offering by her absolute agreement. 'Of course!' she would say, smile and shrug, 'So?!' Was it that she could not allow me to have a separate existence by according me originality? Possibly so, in other words, having no sense of a separate existence yet herself, she continually experienced my ability to think about her as intolerable so that, involuntarily, she set out systematically to undermine my person and dispose of my interest. But I think there was another reason.

She lived a life of pleasure-seeking yet never gave the impression of gusto or having felt renewed in it. She seemed like a stranger, apart and jealously on the lookout, wandering from room to room in which a never-ending party was going on. It reminded me of the desperate atmosphere created by Alain Resnais in his film [Last Year at Marienbad](#). Meditating on the film, Thomas Beltzer, in his article, makes the following thought-provoking conjecture which could be taken as an analogy with the predicament I am presenting, and which Winnicott confronts in his treatment of the 'false self': 'Understanding that "A" and "M", and perhaps "X", in Marienbad are all holographs would enrich our enjoyment of an otherwise incomprehensible film. "A", the woman, and "M", her husband, are cycling endlessly in a film that never ends. "X" offers her a way to freedom. Though he also seems strangely caught in their world, he is able to alter the scenarios through the power of suggestion. Maybe he is also a holograph and none of them can leave the resort, but he has at least achieved some self-awareness of what they all are'.

Returning to that young patient of mine, the only thing in the curtailed and closed system of her psyche that would do was in fact inconceivable, not only to her, to me also, namely, somehow for her to gain a sense of being conceived of. It did not seem to be what was asked for, and I was not able to frame the situation in terms of a terror of conception. In hindsight, I understand the dread to reside in the *gap* in which desire fails to materialise, the apathy (and desperation) of never getting 'on to something', and in touch with one's authentic self, instead to be 'sunk in everydayness', living out a false self.

Then, in one session, there fell an unusual silence between us, not, for a change, full of fretful clock-watching. Then she spoke: 'I discovered there is a me', she said, and, after a while I broke the silence to ask: 'Who is me?' and after another pause, she said the one word: 'Waiting'.

Bollas mentions the archaic expression 'me thinks' and comments 'how it was a rather wonderfully simple voice, rather dumb, which spoke for a type of experience deep inside the self. In fact, the near muteness of "me thinks" seems its voice, seems saturated with the residues of vast unconscious experiences' (Bollas, 1995, p. 151).

As my own mother tried to fill the gap with her unimaginative menu, her son, as anxious therapist in reaction to that, with his constantly generating list of 'imaginative' interventions, found he was actually doing the same thing ("why don't you..."). No doubt my patient's mother, brought up in a paternalistic culture, had no knowledge herself of being held to that awkward moment of conception, so that in turn her daughter's self-exploration was aborted and the waiting - for the unfolding of a sure womanhood - went on forever.

It was a rare moment, that. Whatever else I have forgotten about this attractive young Latin woman, I remember that moment when I witnessed the emergence – shy, but sure – of the thinking self. Her wording I remember, and her tone of voice - like that of a child making a new discovery. In this case it was a sad discovery, but a genuine one, and one that might lead to who knows what authenticity in herself. A couplet from T.S Eliot's East Coker comes to mind:

*Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.*

But perhaps the waiting would be too much. Shortly after this, she decided not to continue her therapy. So the fortunes of that moment of meeting with her self I am unable to chronicle.

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