

Humanly Interesting
Moving from Boredom to Purpose
By
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I continue to believe one of our society's major problems is how thoughtlessly busy most of us are. According to Juliet Schor's book, *The Overworked American*, a third of our population feels rushed and stressed everyday of our lives,¹ a majority of us get one to one-and-a-half hours less sleep than we need each night,² and half of us report having too little time for our families,³ all of which is leading to increased instances of child neglect, marital distress, sleep deprivation, and stress related illnesses. Yet we have embraced the image and expectation of ourselves as "hardworking" Americans, driven by our Protestant work ethic. Indeed, the only western philosophy born in the U.S. is *pragmatism*, the idea that if something doesn't work, it's of no use. By extension, those of us who don't work are seen by many to be of no use.

It is my belief this need to remain almost compulsively busy has resulted in global warming, the impacts of which we are now experiencing. Global warming is the outcome of our resistance to winter, the season of quiet, stillness, and rest. We prefer endless activity and growth, including economic growth and more productivity and profit than we earned last year. Anything less is considered a loss. It is considered failure. In rejecting winter, those cold, dark, depressive months, the season in which nature is necessarily meant to rest and rejuvenate, we have gotten exactly what we've been asking for, perpetual summer, the season of harvest, heat, and activity.

Overdoing things is also a problem for our own wellbeing. This is why every major religion reminds us we can often accomplish more by doing less. Buddhists meditate, Jews observe the Sabbath, Taoists practice *wu wei* (doing without doing), and Christians teach us Grace, the principle that we don't have to do anything to be saved. Jesus taught his followers not to stress over the future by observing the effortless workings of nature. "Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them... Consider the lilies, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these."⁴ One mystic, author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, said, "The active life is troubled and busy about many things but the contemplative life *sits in peace with the one thing necessary*"⁵ The celebrated Trappist monk Thomas Merton went so far as to claim, "There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence... activism and overwork,"⁶ to which theologian Wayne Muller responds, "we do not have to stretch our perception very far to see that Sabbath time—effortless, nourishing rest—can invite a

¹ Schut, Michael, ed., *Simpler Living, Compassionate Life*, The Morehouse Group, Denver, CO, 1999, 2001, p. 35.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Luke 12:13-34.

⁵ Johnston, William, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing & The Book of Privy Counseling*, Image Books, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1973, 1996, p. 50.

⁶ Ibid.

healing from this violence.”⁷ No wonder *Ecclesiastes* says, “Better is one hand full of quietness than two hands full of toil and a striving after the wind.”⁸

In Taoism the term *wu wei* means to accomplish by “doing nothing.” As an old Chinese proverb says, “sitting quietly, doing nothing, spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.”⁹ same as the point Jesus made about the ravens and lilies. “Practice not-doing,” the *Tao te Ching* says, “and everything will fall into place.”¹⁰ “Tao never acts, yet nothing is left undone.”¹¹ These notions of *wu wei*, Grace, and Sabbath, have led to spiritual practices like meditation, prayer, contemplation, and Sabbath, all of which are accomplished by sitting still and keeping quiet: by doing nothing.

This principle, which among the ancient Greeks was called *kenosis*, meaning “emptying,” or, “letting go,” is something I’ve frequently spoken of often over the years and remain a big believer in. But to return to its analogy with winter, nature’s period of stillness, rest, and quiet; “for everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.”

I bring this up today because I recently read something while browsing Erich Fromm’s book, *The Sane Society*, which I often turn to when everything around me seems nuts. Fromm is good medicine. This time around, the line that caught my attention is one he attributes to American philosopher Lewis Mumford, “The most deadly criticism anyone could make of modern civilization is that apart from its man-made crises and catastrophes, it is not humanly *interesting*...”¹² that term, “not humanly *interesting*,” instantly enabled me to comprehend something about Fromm’s teachings that had been puzzling me.

In his writings, Fromm often makes a big deal of *boredom*. “Man is the only animal that can be bored,”¹³ he says. Although he doesn’t see this as our defining quality, the thing that makes us human, he does see boredom as an exclusively human problem. Indeed, as the major problem of our individual existence which we “have to solve and from which [we] cannot escape.”¹⁴ All of us, he suggests, must work to overcome boredom. “I am convinced that boredom is one of the greatest tortures,” he says. “If I were to imagine Hell, it would be the place where you were continually bored.”¹⁵

It sounds like Erich Fromm really didn’t like being bored. Now I have to admit, I’m a little dense sometimes. As much as I love Fromm, I haven’t understood his issue with boredom. Like most people, I don’t like being bored either, but I don’t think it’s the end of the world when I am. I can always turn on the TV, read a book, go for a walk, call a friend, and so on.

⁷ Ibid. p. 5.

⁸ Ecclesiastes 4:6

⁹ Watts, Alan, *The Way of Zen*, Pantheon Books, Inc., U.S.A, 1957, p. 141.

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¹² Fromm, Erich, *The Sane Society*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1955, p. 222.

¹³ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 40.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Fromm, Erich, *The Dogma of Christ*, A Fawcett Premier Book, Greenwich, CT, 1955, 1963, p. 104.

But this phrase, “not humanly interesting,” quickly helped me tie boredom to everything I do understand about Fromm. By boredom, he doesn’t mean simply having nothing to do at any given moment, but nothing meaningful to do with our entire lives. Boredom, in this sense, is the opposite of *meaning*, and when our lives are meaningless, we are “not humanly interesting.” We are as boring as we are bored.

So how do we solve this problem? How do we become humanly interesting? To answer this, we first have to understand what makes our lives boring to begin with. Given that Fromm spent most his career trying to explain the psychological and sociological conditions that led to the Holocaust and Nazi Germany, and to fascism and groupthink in general, you can guess what he concluded the nature of the problem is. He said it’s to be “governed by the anonymous authority of conformity.”¹⁶ In other words, we’re bored and boring, our lives become meaningless, because we have fallen into line with everyone else. As a result, there’s nothing interesting about us. Nobody is overtly forcing us to do so. We’ve just decided to go along with the crowd, to engage in tedious, unremarkable, not humanly interesting groupthink. “We do not submit to anyone personally; we do not go through conflicts with authority,” he says, “but we also have no convictions of our own, almost no individuality, almost no sense of self.”¹⁷

Can you imagine being part of such a society: wherein the idea of having a successful community means nobody disagrees: wherein nobody is allowed to disagree? That sort of existence really does sound boring, if not hellish. As Mumford, who coined this phrase, “not humanly interesting,” and whom Fromm said he shares many points in common with, went on to say:

In the end, such a civilization can produce only a mass [person]; Incapable of choice, incapable of spontaneous, self-directed activities: at best patient, docile, disciplined to monotonous work to an almost pathetic degree, but increasingly irresponsible as [one’s] choices become fewer and fewer: finally, a creature governed mainly by [one’s] conditioned reflexes—the ideal type desired, it never quite achieved, by the advertising agency and the sales organizations of modern business, or by the propaganda office of the planning bureaus of totalitarian and quasi-totalitarian governments. The handsomest encomium for such creatures is: “They don’t make trouble.” Their highest virtue is: “They do not stick their necks out.”¹⁸

I think I’d rather stick my neck out and have my own convictions than to willingly submit myself to such a boring, meaningless existence. I’d rather suffer the wrath and disappoint of my community than mindlessly conform to that which Fromm likens to torture and hell. So now I get it. Now I understand why Fromm makes so much of boredom and why he considers it the central problem of our existence.

So, what’s the solution? How do we overcome being bored and boring? How do we become humanly interesting? For Fromm the answer is to be productive, not in the mindless sense

¹⁶ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, *ibid.*, p. 102.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

of busying ourselves with meaningless activities that distract us from becoming truly interesting. Being productive in the Frommian sense isn't about going to a job we don't care about and making as many widgets as we possibly can, unless doing so is what we're passionate about. Being productive means working to fully unfold as human beings. Fromm says the whole meaning of life is to "develop into the individual one potentially is,"¹⁹ and "The duty to be alive is the same as the duty to become oneself."²⁰

For Fromm, this is the exclusive definition of what it means to be productive as human beings. If we are not busy unfolding and becoming ourselves, we are unproductive no matter how busy we are or how hard we work. "There is no meaning to life," he says, "except the meaning [you give] to [your] life by the unfolding of [your] powers."²¹ And we cannot do this if we succumb to groupthink and conformity. "If we say [one] must use [one's] powers," Fromm continues, "we imply that one must be free and not dependent on someone who controls [one's] powers."²²

It's a struggle. It can be a fight. Becoming authentic, by definition, isn't popular. It's a lot easier and safer just to conform. But conformity doesn't solve the existential problem of our lives. It doesn't prevent us from being bored and boring, from being "not humanly interesting." This is one of the reasons I became a Unitarian Universalist thirty years ago, because, up until recently, it was a religion based upon this humanistic ethic, the conviction we need not think alike to love alike. We don't have to simply go along to get along. Until now a healthy congregation wasn't thought of as a group of people who all believe the same thing, who can't speak their own minds, nor offer dissenting views. When I hear it suggested that those saying things some disagree with are being divisive, or that our disagreements are proof we need healing, I'm baffled. I always thought our ability to freely disagree epitomizes what it means to be Unitarian Universalist; and is what makes us unique and beautiful. I sure don't want to be part of a boring church where everyone thinks alike. Our religion is going through a bit of rough patch right now, but I think our enduring values will prevail and we'll get through it. We'll see.

This gets us back to the soul of summer, and how it can be just as spiritually valuable to us as the winter of the soul, when we practice stillness and quite and letting go. The summer, by contrast, is the season of productivity, and being productive, again, means unfolding in the sun. It means entering into the light where we can be seen for who we truly are. It means shining. It means being energized by our purpose. It means actively pursuing what's meaningful. It means being humanly interesting rather than boring. "Boredom," Fromm says, "is nothing but the experience of a paralysis of our productive powers."²³ Boredom is what we experience when we feel powerless, or when others are overpowering us, preventing us from being seen for who we are, from saying what we mean, from fully unfolding as authentic individuals.

¹⁹ Fromm, *Man for Himself*, p. 20.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 45.

²² Ibid., p. 84.

²³ Ibid., *The Sane Society*, p. 202.

Upon hearing this phrase, “not humanly interesting,” and finally getting what Fromm means by boredom, I immediately connected it to another term I recently discovered, *ikigai*. While watching an online conference, one of the presenters described it as the Japanese secret of happiness. “Find out what you love, find out what you're good at, find out what the world needs. At the intersection of those three is your life's purpose...” After mentioning it to my daughter, who found the concept particularly meaningful, I happened upon a book entitled, *Ikigai*, just in time for Christmas. After glancing at her stocking stuffer, I was so enthralled I went back and got a copy for myself. Its authors say *ikigai* translates roughly as, “the happiness of always being busy.”²⁴

This concept has been foreign to my thinking until recently, although I’ve been contemplating it a lot in recent weeks. The book’s authors confirm that *ikigai* is what lies at the intersection of four things: what you’re good at, what you can be paid for, what the world needs, and what you love. The place where they meet is your *ikigai*, your purpose, the thing that give your life so much meaning that pursuing it makes you happy, no matter how hard it is to achieve or how busy it keeps you.

Maybe that sound like a recipe for burnout and exhaustion. But guess where *ikigai* is practiced most: Okinawa. Okinawa is the number one *blue zone* in the world, meaning it’s the place where there is a higher percentage of centenarians living than anywhere else. “in addition to a healthful diet, a simple life in the outdoors, green tea, and the subtropical climate,” the book’s coauthors say, “is the *ikigai* that shapes their lives.”²⁵

As we conducted our interviews with the eldest residents of the town, we realized that something far more powerful than just these natural resources was at work: an uncommon joy flows from its inhabitants and guides them through the long and pleasurable journey of their lives.²⁶

In Okinawa, residents not only live longer on average, they have fewer age-related illnesses, like cancer and heart disease; remain active and vital throughout their long lives, including sexually; have fewer age-causing free radicals in their blood; and fewer cases of dementia than the global average. So staying busy doesn’t seem to wear them out. The secret of *ikigai*, however, isn’t staying busy, but staying happy by doing what gives one’s life its meaning. It means creating that place in your life where what you love, what you do, and what the world needs all converge, and you get up everyday for as long as you can excited to get busy because your life has authentic meaning. That’s the “happiness of always being busy,” of being productive by becoming who you are meant to be. It’s the happiness of becoming humanly interesting.

²⁴ Garcia, Hector and Miralles, Francesc, *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2016, p. 2.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 4.