

# BOREDOM

Root of Discontent  
and Aggression

*Edited by*  
FRANZ R. GOETZL

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GRIZZLY PEAK PRESS  
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 75-21753

ISBN: 0-916022-01-3

Designed by Michael Bass

Printed in the United States of America

760 Grizzly Peak Boulevard  
Berkeley, California 94708

To the memory of  
**Albert A. Ehrenzweig**

## Preface

The essays here assembled are based on lectures presented at a Conference on Boredom held in Berkeley, California, in June, 1973. The conference was arranged under the auspices of the Wright Institute and the Medical Staff of Herrick Memorial Hospital, both of Berkeley, and was supported in part by a grant from the Merck, Sharp and Dohme pharmaceutical company.

I wish to express my deep appreciation to my friend, the late Albert A. Ehrenzweig, formerly professor of law at the University of California, for his encouragement and counsel in organizing the conference. In addition, Professor Ehrenzweig, up to his untimely death in June, 1974, provided me with criticism and, at times, challenges in the preparation of my own manuscript. He was aware of the importance of the problem of boredom and interested in its exploration.

My thanks are due to my wife, Jean Howden-Goetzl, for her untiring assistance and sharing my anxieties and hopes throughout the project.

Thanks are due also to Dr. C. Fillmore Humphreys, president of the medical staff of Herrick Memorial Hospital and Dr. Nevitt Sanford, scientific director of the Wright Institute, for their cooperation in arranging the conference.

F. R. G.

# Contents

JOSIAH R. BARTLETT	
The Mythology of Creation	1
ANDREW L. BOWMAN	
Poor, Nasty, Brutish, and Short— But Seldom Boring	11
TIBOR SCITOVSKY	
The Lopsided Progress	34
RICHARD DEHLINGER	
The Yawning Student	44
FRANZ R. GOETZL	
Root of Discontent and Aggression	55
HAMLIN EMORY	
The Military Experience	110
LEONTI H. THOMPSON	
An Epidemiological Approach	123
Biographical Notes	141

*Josiah R. Bartlett*

## The Mythology of Creation

I see the problem of “boredom” as the emotional consequence of frustrated creative powers. When this frustration occurs, morale is eroded and violence explodes. Boredom is an affliction of the human spirit. It comes from an unworkable concept of creative energy, sustained and justified by a theology or, if you prefer, a mythology, about what man is and what his world is like.

This unworkable concept of creative energy splits our productivity into work that is meaningless because ordered for us by others; and leisure understood as relief from such work (such as packaged tours for passive tourists)—relief in which creativity is restricted to a playpen. Boredom is the result of both, generated by both.

Further, the mythology declares that work is merely a necessity or, worse, a punishment for human laziness, untrustworthiness, and irresponsibility. The way to get work out of people is to kick them or lure them with rewards.



The kick-and-lure approach, known as "Theory X" (so called by McGregor in *The Human Side of Enterprise*) does not work well today.

According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, money (the main "lure") is only fifth on the blue-collar worker's priority list of wanted things. He is more interested in work that is meaningful, in a chance to share in decision-making, and in putting his own ideas into action. The *Wall Street Journal* considers the four-day work week as being in trouble, because people will continue being unhappy if the work is dull and time off only an escape.

Instead, as the management consultant Chris Argyris said, the concept of human enterprise that articulates this mythology produces a bleak work world, in which persons are diminished because decisions are made for them: a lonesome world in which "little feedback is given the members about their impact on others, too much energy goes into behaving *against* the self, and mindless meaningless performance suppressing the self" (*The Management of Organizational Development*). So we get boredom, that is, withdrawal of engagement. (*If one is engaged, it is in "anti" forms: disruption, sabotage, violence.*)

What can we do about it?

First, reject the notion that work is boring and leisure is escape.

Half of my work is with a career-counseling firm. We believe that a person can get paid for what he wants to do and we try to help people wake up to this fact and dare to move with it—dare to change careers.

One of my friends is a general practitioner who got bored patching people up. So he went back to school,

studied public health, and is now medical officer for two big counties. At the moment he is directing the preparation of an honest manual on VD—something the high-school kids can believe, as opposed to the scary literature their schools have been feeding them. He is no longer bored.

We spend too much energy “adjusting” people to accept things and not enough encouraging them to be themselves. People spend enormous amounts of energy *not* being themselves. Yet we have the ability to make the system work for us if we dare to be ourselves and dare to take some risks.

Duke Ellington, the jazz musician (and, incidentally, a very religious person), was asked: “Don’t you get tired doing what you’re doing, year in and year out?” Ellington replied: “You’re talking from the perspective either of someone who doesn’t love music, or who doesn’t do what he most enjoys for a living. . . . Some people have sensitivities they never use, because they have been drawn away from them for monetary reasons. They would be surprised to discover how rewarding it is to pursue their natural tendencies and become a Number One yourself instead of a Number Two somebody else. Heaven is a place where you get to use all the millions of sensitivities you never knew you had before” (*Esquire*, June 1973).

To become a Number One yourself instead of a Number Two somebody else is a more effective medicine than pills or a vacation or accepting the situation. It is in our power to encourage people thus to accept themselves.

Besides, we can refuse to consider work as dull and people as powerless.

It is my task to “demythologize” the view that work and leisure are split apart, and that work is a mere necessity. I suggest that they belong together; if they are together, they are creative, so that boredom is banished. This view is in the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi. He worked sixteen hours a day. Somebody asked him when he was going to take a vacation. “I am always on vacation” was his reply.

### *Genesis*

Western mythology finds the dramatization of its ideas about work and play in the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden. That story explains how the world was created and how man got into his perennial situation: God did not intend that work should be as hard and dull as it is; God simply created man to be busy; but when God saw that Adam had eaten the forbidden fruit, he declared that, as a punishment, work would henceforth be a burden: “Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life” (Genesis 3:17).

Official church doctrines concerning work, in general, support the notion that work is accursed. Even more important than any official theology is the popular, secular, “working mythology.” According to this mythology employment, in addition to being a burden, is a prerequisite to man being recognized as a human being. The results of this mythology, by which the person not gainfully employed is a nonperson, are devastating.

However, if we back off from this mythology and ask whether, coming down to us from ancient times, it is appropriate to the present situation, some light begins to dawn.

Mythology is culturally conditioned. The Biblical theology (or mythology) that governs so many people today is inherited from an ancient social situation. The Genesis story was shaped by the hardscrabble world of the ancient Hebrews, a world totally different from our affluent industrial society, where the problem is not how to produce things but how to find customers for them.

The Transactional Analysis people talk much about “scripting”—the notion that each of us has his own, semiconscious myth about himself and his fate, so that without being aware of it he tends to act it out. So I might say that it is bad for an individual, or a society, when script becomes scripture—when the way we are supposed to be is written into the stars. But that is what has happened to the ancient Hebrew notion of work. David Tiedman of the Institute for Research in Education, Palo Alto, defines career as the development of a person through a series of engagements with life. We therefore had better pay attention, as the Transactional Analysis people do, to what our script is—or in every engagement we may be acting out a self-depreciating notion of who we are and what we are capable of being and doing. In my career-counseling work, I find that people belittle themselves because in this culture they are told to accept, in Duke Ellington’s words, “being a Number Two somebody else”—that is, accepting the slots and other-direction of our whole “placement” system, rather than daring to be a “Number One yourself.” When Ellington was asked what human shortcoming irritated him the most, he answered “under-estimation.”

Genesis is in trouble today. The ecology people don’t like that bit about “subdue the earth.” The Zero

Population movement has rejected the injunction "to replenish" it. Women's Lib will have none of justifying male lordship on the basis of Eve's being the Cause of It All. And now, we cannot go along with the notion that work is a curse.

Work, leisure, and boredom are peculiarly contemporary and Western industrial problems. That is, these problems scarcely occurred to yesterday's peoples, or even to most human beings today. How could they occur to us?

Primitive people, hunters or low-level agrarians, lived too close to the margins of survival to have leisure. They had days when they did not work and when it was too miserable outside. They had holidays, too—but these were in the original sense of the word holy days. There was no separation of work and life and religion.

The ancient classical world idealized working with one's head, not one's aching back. The Greek word *scholē* means leisure. But it was not really leisure because the philosopher depended on the slave—a kind of displacement. Today, much scholarship has a similar but more acceptable dependency: that is, you have leisure to study because of a grant from a working stiff like Henry Ford.

In the Middle Ages, they had about eighty non-work holy days a year, but you had to go to church so they did not really offer leisure.

In brief, the prevailing work situation up to 1800 was such that the people's attitudes, enshrined as theology, can scarcely be a model for us.

The work-leisure-boredom problem was produced by the technological revolution; also, by a loosening of the organic social bonds so that labor could become a

dehumanized commodity. Work became disconnected from the rest of life. Leisure became “free” time: the time opposed to that required to get bread. Leisure became a problem because it, too, is disconnected.

### *A New Mythology*

Our problem, then, is to create a new mythology of work, leisure, and boredom recognizing that the prevailing mythology is unhealthy and dehumanizing.

Let me offer a few suggestions.

The first comes from Eastern religions, especially from Hinduism. Most Eastern peoples are at the border of starvation, so that leisure and work, as we know them, are exotic concepts. Yet the Eastern tradition provides a provocative creation metaphor.

As the comparative-religions scholar Huston Smith points out, a major strand of the Hindu tradition understands creation as *play* rather than as work: “The world is *lila*, God’s play. Children playing hide and seek assume various roles that have no validity outside the game. . . . The game is its own point, it is fun in itself, a spontaneous overflowing of creative energy. So too in some mysterious way it must be with the world—like a child playing alone, God (Shiva) is the lonely cosmic dancer whose routine is all creatures and all worlds” (*Religions of Man*, p. 84).

Consider the value of “play” as a metaphor.

“Play” unites work and leisure, instead of sundering them as does our Western tradition. Furthermore, it *rehumanizes* them. Play is both work and leisure. It is often hard work but it is also leisure: it takes place apart from required duties and drudgery. Play is active work,

freely chosen; something in which we decide the rules and engage our full powers. It leaves us exhausted but not drained, and paradoxically *recreated*.

This characterization of play happens also to describe what a fortunate "creative minority" among us actually do. Abraham Maslow, Donald W. MacKinnon, and others have studied such "creative" or "realized" persons. Such people are in charge of their own lives; they shape their lives by and according to their own values; they are not bored; they do what they choose to do, and what they do fully engages them; they create their own life styles, which become "models" for the rest of us. Bored persons are the opposite: they are forced into what they don't want, therefore are disengaged and smothered.

"Play," then, is a liberating metaphor for "life."

My second suggestion ties in directly with this metaphor: we have come to the point in our world where, if to play means to choose what we shall be, then we are all players. Popular talk is filled with theatrical words like "role" and "scene." We can take none of the old "given" relationships or role assignments for granted: we have to decide who and what we shall be.

If humanness *is* valuing, deciding, then we are forced to be human. For many, this is frightening: they would, as Erich Fromm said, "escape from freedom." Yet beyond the frightening responsibility there is the exhilaration of releasing our humanness.

We can see the affirmation of humanness in the growing demand, everywhere, for "good work"—meaningful, creative work which is like play in that it is "fun": something we choose because we like it and find it fulfilling, not something we put up with because we have to eat.

We can see this affirmation, positively and negatively, with respect to the basic form of work: work with one's hands. Consumers Union finds that the new automobiles they test come off the assembly lines with many defects. The reason is not that the auto workers are unable to do a first-class job; but they have so little scope for their creative ability that they take out their boredom in "lousing things up." Craftsmanship is not dead: to confine my example to autos, go to any class car or hot-rod show, and see what creative artistry can produce, even if confined to an effort that is not recognized as "real" work. What is happening here? Thousands of people are mastering new materials and techniques. We may deplore our being in a plastic, artificial age, but these handcrafters are experiencing a primal, first-hand relationship to materials and methods born of depth "feel" for a world that is the joint creation of man and nature.

All current attempts to insist that people must accept work as "boring," that people who cannot work or refuse work are "nonpersons" and do not deserve to eat, must fail. Such attempts are generally justified by the old mythology which, as I have tried to show, came from a different world and inhibits genuine humanness. No doubt, if we remove the spur of necessity, many people will not do their assigned work. However, the findings of research in the psychology of work strongly indicate they will not persist in such negative behavior. The truth is that people want to be useful, creative, and responsible. They are more insistent on meaningful, fulfilling work. They *want* to work—but at "good" work.

Historically, the myth grew out of and was shaped by the culture. No wonder then that we do not yet have



the new myth of how things “really are” in the present world, whose technology makes possible man’s release into fuller humanity.

However, those of us in the healing professions are alert to dehumanizing mythical assertions about some people’s laziness and passivity, about accepting work as having to be boring. Nothing is physically wrong with bored people; they need no medication but an understanding of the cause of their condition.