

Letter from . . . Chicago

Boredom

George Dunea

"All men are bores," wrote Kierkegaard, somewhat condescendingly, from the perspective of a gloomy climate and temperament. He further suggested, during his early aesthetic period, that nobody would be so great a bore as to bother to refute his statement; and he divided humanity into those who bore themselves and those who bore others. Those who bore themselves, among whom he apparently included himself, he considered the aristocrats. Of the others, "the mob, the crowd, the infinite multitude of men in general," he had little good to say. They, like the poor, will always be with us. They are the grown ups whom the children find so exceedingly boring; the professors who bore their pupils; the pupils who in their turn drive their teachers to distraction. They are the attending physicians who bore their students and residents on ward rounds. One of ours, when I was a medical student, was an excellent doctor of the old school but a dull teacher. His rounds lasted for ever as he spent hours examining patients and talking to them instead of talking to us. Sometimes he would even send us out of the room so that he could discuss delicate matters in private. He prescribed placebos such as kaolin and gentian, claiming that most illnesses were self limiting. He gave us no little lectures on specific topics but went on and on from patient to patient while we daydreamed, wishing that we were on the rounds of the brilliant young teacher who had everything so nicely worked out and systematised.

We now learn that the dull eyed monster of boredom also spreads his mean tentacles into the world of business. He does, however, exert discrimination in selecting his victims. Entrepreneurs are affected most, we read in Mr Harvey Mackay's *Swim with the Sharks*, a manual on getting wet without being eaten. Plodding professional managers, on the other hand, seem able to contentedly repeat the same task, presumably like our attending physician. In order to "outsell, outmanage, and outmotivate your competition" you need both types working harmoniously as a team, each member respecting his own and the other's limitations. But the distinction remains; and we read that the entrepreneurs "scratch before they itch," soon becoming restless and needing to move into action, always seeking new challenges and new worlds to conquer, setting the pace and determining the agenda. But they lack an eye for detail, administer poorly, and dislike bureaucracy, organisation charts, and operating manuals.

In medicine, a discipline requiring a compulsive

attention to detail, managerial types are likely to be in the majority. But we also find the entrepreneurial types. We see them as the easily bored students who never came to the dissecting room but learnt their anatomy from Boileau Grant's coloured plates. Bored by lectures, they studied from a set of notes often illicitly purchased. Bored by rounds, they stayed away while future managerial types wrote down every word and picked up every dropped pearl. Later they became flamboyant surgeons, innovators, sometimes television personalities. Eventually, however, they were joined in boredom by many a managerial type who also became tired of lectures, seminars, committees, working parties, airy theories, abstract speculations, algorithms, reorganisations, criteria for promotion, and budgetary considerations.

Nothing but dress, undress, dream, and gaze

But now we must imagine ourselves not as plodding managers or flamboyant entrepreneurs but of the appropriate gender and time in history to be transported through Ms Croutier's "harem" to the seraglio at Topkapi in Constantinople. Again boredom is the order of the day. For there is nothing to do for the young women but to dress and primp and undress, to dream and bathe and play games, to gaze at the Bosphorus with its ships coming and going, to write, to jockey for better positions like some university professors. But oh—never to walk alone on a deserted country road, not even to go out in the sun. "My skin is like marble," says one of the Circassian odalisques, "it has never been touched by the sun." What medical problems they had we shall never know, nor have the psychologists studied the effects of the boredom and loneliness of being forever locked up in the palace. But there seems to have been quite a bit of mixing of genes, the supply of wives and concubines being constantly replenished from the slave markets of all parts of the empire, especially by fair, doe eyed beauties from the Caucasus, Circassia, Georgia, and Abkhasia. And if the sultans after Süleyman the Magnificent turned out to be imbeciles it must have been from environmental causes, from being confined for years in the notorious kafes or cages to avoid the possibility of wars of succession.

But no harem would be complete without its eunuchs, black and white, a testimony of man's inhumanity to man. We read that the practice of

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castrating slaves goes back to Mesopotamia and to Queen Semiramis of Assyria, being later transmitted to the Persians, the Greeks, and finally from the Byzantine empire to the Turks. The slaves were often captured at the upper reaches of the Nile and became objects of a flourishing trade. They were operated on in transit, with a curved, sharp knife, and buried up to the neck because desert sand was regarded as balm to induce healing. Many of the slaves died, perhaps as many as 5%, largely from infection or anuria due to local oedema, depending on how extensive an operation was performed. The survivors became an expensive merchandise, growing up hairless, fat, flabby, often mean, with beautiful voices. Some became exceedingly powerful, in charge of the seraglio or even of the empire. Most powerful was the chief black eunuch, the highest officer in the empire after the grand vizier, powerful, wealthy, most bribed of all functionaries. Splendidly dressed, often concealing a silver quill in their turbans to relieve urinary retention, the eunuchs guarded the sultans' wives and concubines as they bathed and intrigued and lived a life of inactivity and boredom.

Relief from the waltz and the tango

But what is this boredom? A disease, like syphilis, that has been attributed to different nations? A North American epidemic, according to the American Psychological Association, of assembly workers pushing the same button day after day, of people staring blankly at television screens and wondering if this is all there is to life? An English disease of the traditional novel in which a lord in chequered coat crisscrosses the continent with his butler to relieve his ennui? A morbus gallicus that may have afflicted

Stendhal, Flaubert, and Baudelaire, and earlier may have even provoked the bored provincials to rise because the king had forced all the non-boring people to move to Versailles? The "taedium," as the Romans called it? A Russian illness, temporarily relieved when the boring Lenin, who had written so many boring pamphlets, made an exciting revolution that Trotsky promised would be permanent, until the boring Stalin killed it with terror and more boredom? A problem, too, for the Chinese, so bored during their revolution that Chairman Mao had to bring back the waltz and the tango. And it was boredom that drove Kierkegaard to the rotation method, a perpetual and capricious changing of relationships and occupations. For he deemed boredom to be the root of all evil, it rather than idleness being the devil's pillow.

But the ever optimistic popular magazines recommend thousands of remedies for boredom. Make friends, get a dog, gamble, take a genuine interest in people, try new hobbies, work in the garden, or learn to knit. Don't try to sleep it off or you will merely wake up bored. Magazines for retired doctors suggest buying a foreign car for which spare parts are hard to find, or a condominium in Florida that will open up the world of lawyers, decorators, plumbers, lawn committees, and condominium associations. We learn that boredom makes successful men suddenly sell their business or inexplicably resign from successful positions. Boredom, like Latin, may be good for you if it throws you into a library where you acquire a liking for the smell of old leather and company of great authors.

The less introverted, and those who score high in the sensation seeking test, however, may have to try skiing, scuba diving, mountain climbing, or insider trading, all of which promise an exciting but not necessarily long life.