

EPISODE 049 -

THE BENEFITS OF BOREDOM

WITH NANCY RAY

Intro

Listen, I know, you are thinking, “What? What is this title of this episode: Boredom is the Worst? I’ll hit skip on this episode and come back another time when Nancy talks about productivity or is something else that will enhance my life.” I’m going to stop you right there and give you a big spoiler: boredom actually will enhance your life in more ways than you know.

This episode is coming from someone who despises being bored, so I get you. I have filled every nook and cranny of my life with productivity for the last 12 years, and I’m here to tell you that boredom isn’t necessarily fun, but it’s powerful, and I’ve learned that it’s necessary and beneficial when you welcome them. Today, I’m here to tell you how.

You’re listening to Work and Play with Nancy Ray, Episode 49.

Much of our daily lives can be divided into two categories: work and play. Simply put, that is where our life and our legacy take place. This is a podcast all about learning to work and play well, which leads to a healthy soul and a fulfilling life.

Let’s dive in.

Content

We are living in a totally anti-boredom culture. I live in anti-boredom life, if I can just be real. Why? Because boredom is boring. Nobody wants to be bored. Milly, my four-year-old, she already has learned the word bored and boredom and she’s learned the phrase, “I’m so bored, mama,” and she really can’t stand it. I mean, none of us can. It’s like it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to learn that boredom isn’t fun. My four-year-old gets it.

Now, the first thing you’re probably wondering with the title of this episode and what I’m about to dive into is, “Nancy, what’s so wrong with not wanting to be bored? I’ve got 10 minutes free. I’m waiting in line at the grocery store. I’m going to the bathroom. Let’s be real. I’m a little early to pick up my kids from preschool or school. What’s the big problem scrolling through Insta or listening to a podcast or reading?” There’s nothing wrong with those things, okay, but there’s also an opportunity there that you’re not aware of and I’m helping to make you aware of it today. You see, this is where the magic of boredom lies. It’s time to stop

viewing boredom as a negative thing and it's time to embrace boredom and view it for what it actually is, which is an incredible motivator.

I was inspired by this topic and kind of diving into my own research about boredom after listening to a podcast that someone sent me on Instagram. I'm going to leave a link to it in the show notes, and it's a podcast about real estate, and I'm not even in real estate, but it was an interview with Cal Newport who is one of my favorite authors, and I'm going to be pulling some examples from their interview in that podcast episode because it was so good, but like I said, if you want to go listen to the full thing, you will be able to find a link to that podcast episode in the show notes.

Today, I am going to talk about five benefits of boredom and simple ways that we can invite boredom back into our busy lives on a daily basis.

Number one, boredom is a great motivator. Uma Thurman said those exact words, that boredom is a great motivator, and it's true. It is. You felt that before. This, at its essence, is why boredom is so beneficial. It's a motivator. Now, the other day I already told you, Milly talks about, "I'm so bored, and I want to do this or do that," and she uses that phrase to get what she wants. The other day she was really wanting to watch more Doc McStuffins. So I told her no, I said, "Screen time is over," and I used my favorite line that I love to use on my kids, which is, "You are responsible for your own fun." I heard that somewhere. I don't know where I heard it from, but it's really one of my favorite lines to use. I want to speak that over them their entire childhood so that they can get used to the fact that they're responsible for making their own fun.

Now, it was straight turmoil for like 15 minutes with Milly. When she kept saying she was bored and she really wanted me to turn on the TV and I almost caved, but then I saw her mind do the most amazing little thing. I had laid out some arts and crafts, and she took construction paper of all different colors. She took her scissors. She took her little glue stick and she starts cutting these little triangles or little squares with the construction paper, and she's singing to herself, and then she starts to write different letters on the things that she's cutting out and she starts gluing them to another sheet of paper. Then she got stickers and put it on it. She just made this entire piece of art that was full of letters and colors and shapes. She came and brought it to me and said, "Mommy, I made this for you." She was so proud of it.

If I hadn't let her feel uncomfortable in that boredom, if I had just said, "Okay, sweetie, one more show," or if I hadn't let her get to that ... all the grueling part of being bored, like, "There's nothing to do, I'm so bored," she would have never pushed through and allowed it to motivate her to do something creative. Robert M. Pirsig said,

"Boredom always precedes a period of great creativity,"

and I saw that in my little four-year-old's life that afternoon, just a few days ago. I feel that in my own life.

So what can we learn from this in our own lives, that boredom is a great motivator? Here's what Cal Newport had to say about it in that podcast interview I was talking about. He said, "Well, we need boredom. We need it. Like some boredom is an incredibly powerful drive, right? We do not like feeling bored. It's something that feels bad. Typically, any sensation that feels bad, there's a drive behind it. So what is boredom meant to do? It is meant to drive us to do productive work. It is meant to drive us to do the thing that is hard, that is going to require the expenditure of energy, which we otherwise try to conserve, but it is going to make some intention manifest in the world. It is boredom that got us to figure out how to make fire and how to make the spear and then go out after the mastodon.

Boredom is a driver of human ingenuity and production. What ubiquitous internet and algorithmically optimized entertainment on a phone does is it subverts the boredom drive. Now you can temporarily assuage this feeling of boredom by hitting this thing on the phone. Just like when you're hungry, you can eat a Big Mac and it's going to take away your hunger, but you're going to end up really unhealthy. If you subvert your boredom drive, you would get rid of all this boredom by looking at this phone all the time, you're left with this anxious, empty feeling. Why is that? It is because you have subverted the boredom feeling, but you're not getting that primal drive to actually make your intentions manifest in the world.

There's this existential void in your life where you know you want to be getting after it and doing something and making fire, and holding up the spear after you killed the mastodon. You want to be doing that. You know you want to be doing that, and you are not, but you have papered over this boredom just enough that it is barely tolerable. With some algorithms some guy in Silicon Valley put together that has reduced you to a data vector that is going to show you exactly the picture you need that is going to make you a little bit happy. Be bored. Do not feel like it. Be uncomfortable. Like let that be what drives you to say, "Okay, I'm getting out of the couch and I am going to do X, Y and Z." Like the real stuff that matters.

I love that excerpt from the interview with Cal Newport because I think it just put to words what I feel all the time, like, "Why is my phone leaving me feeling so empty?" It's because it subverts that boredom drive just enough to where I don't have the time and energy to actually get uncomfortable and then start thinking what I actually want to do with my time and with my life. Boredom is a great motivator. Boredom is an important drive of humanity that we are silencing by constantly picking up our phones.

Okay, let's move on to the second benefit of boredom: Boredom helps us do really good deep work. It enhances the quality of our work. Here's the deal. If we constantly reach for our phones or a book, doesn't have to be a phone, or a magazine, or anything to satisfy boredom, when we go to work, like long form writing or a project that takes an extensive amount of time and brain energy, our brain gets bored really fast. By not allowing ourselves to just sit in that boredom and do that deep work, we're actually affecting our ability to stay focused.

Cal Newport said in a totally different interview: If your brain gets trained in this Pavlovian response that every time I get a little bit bored and I get a really nice stimuli that gets rid of my boredom, the problem is when it comes to doing something hard, almost always the hard thing

is going to be boring in the technical sense that there's not a lot of stimuli. You're focusing on the blank page to try to write something, and your brain has learned that boredom means stimuli, boredom means stimuli, and your brain won't tolerate it. So when Cal was helping people in their business, be better at concentrating, he had to tell them, "You need to be bored way more often in your life outside of work, or your brain is never going to tolerate the type of concentration we all used to be used to. The boringness of just doing one hard, valuable thing."

I was talking to Will the other day, thinking about how I could study for hours on end when I was in college. I mean, I could study for two-, three-, four-hour chunks at a time. I looked at him and said, "Babe, I don't think I could do that right now." Granted, I've been out of school for a really long time, I guess it's been over 10 years now, so I'm out of that habit. But at the same time, it's sad because I think that it's my current habits and the culture we live in. That is exactly what Cal Newport just said: boredom equals stimuli. Boredom equals stimuli. It's really difficult to do this long form work or studying like it used to be easy in college.

So in a nutshell, choosing to be bored is an excellent exercise for our brains. It's highly uncomfortable, so it feels very counterintuitive, but it forces us to do a few things that forces us to be alone with our thoughts and it's like exercising this focus muscle. It forces us to be uncomfortable for a little while. It forces us to stick with something. When we choose on purpose to not be constantly entertained at the first thought of boredom, it's a practice of doing something uncomfortable and ultimately it helps us focus. John Cage said it this way: "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then 8. Then 16. Then 32. And eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all." Being bored helps us stick with the task when it counts.

The third benefit of boredom is that it inspires meaning. I think the worst part to me about being bored, the thing that really bothers me the most about being bored, is that it feels like there's no purpose to my life. Like I'm not doing anything worthwhile. Nothing to improve my life, nothing to improve the world, just being bored. Sucking wind. That's pretty much it. That's a terrible feeling, especially to stay in that place for a really long time.

So there is a whole study done on this, which is so interesting to me, but this study concluded that boredom actually motivates people to do meaningful work, not just work, but meaningful work, to engage in pro social tasks and in more meaningful behavior. Tilburg from the University of Limerick said, "Bored people feel that their actions are meaningless and so they're motivated to engage in meaningful behavior." So when you're bored, you think about your purpose in life because you feel so purposeless, which leads you to think about what you could do that would make your life more meaningful, and that's a good thing. So boredom inspires meaning.

The fourth benefit is that boredom draws inspiration out of you. So I have a question for you: Has there been a time in your life when a really big, new idea came to you? Where were you? A lot of times my ideas come when I'm bored or when I have space, like when I'm on vacation and my mental plate isn't full. There's a reason people have great ideas in the shower, right? Our minds aren't consumed with anything important or there's not a big deadline. We're just bored. We have space. Austin Kleon writes,

“Take time to get bored. One time I heard a co-worker say, ‘When I get busy, I get stupid.’ Ain’t that the truth? Creative people need time to just sit around and do nothing. I get some of my best ideas when I’m bored, which is why I never take my shirts to the cleaners. I love ironing my shirts. It’s so boring. I almost always get good ideas. If you’re out of ideas, go wash the dishes. Take a really long walk. Stare at a spot on the wall for as long as you can. Take time to mess around. Get lost. Wander. You never know where it is going to lead you.”

As I was studying and learning about boredom, one fascinating thing that I learned is that a lot of great thinkers planned time to just be bored. C.S. Lewis, for example, planned time in their work days to take walks in the woods. In other words, he took time as part of his work to be bored, to be alone with his thoughts. Boredom begets inspiration. Think about it this way. What is the cost of not being bored? I think the cost is losing the potential ideas that you could be having. Thinking about things in a new fresh way is impossible when you aren’t giving yourself the time to think.

In that interview with Cal Newport, it was interesting. He was going back and forth with David, the guy who was interviewing him. David said one time his daughter got sick and the only thing that would calm her down is driving around in the car, and he couldn’t listen to anything or do anything, and he drove in the car I think from like 2:00 AM to 6:00 AM. She was fussy and would go in and out of sleep, but literally he only had four hours in the middle of the night ... only, that’s a long time. He had four hours in the middle of the night just to be alone with his thoughts. He said that some of the biggest ideas for his real estate business came to him during that drive when there was no agenda, nothing to do. All he could do is drive and just let his thoughts wonder. I loved that. I love just letting your thoughts wander. They take you to a place that you wouldn’t go yourself. You can’t plan that kind of thing. You can’t plan inspiration like that.

Okay, lastly, the fifth benefit of boredom is that boredom allows you to process input. So we live in a constant state of consumption. I do it, too. Always consuming. If there’s a quiet moment in my house, which is really rare by the way, but if there is one, I get all excited because I’m like, “Okay, it’s mama time. It’s time for me to turn on my favorite podcast, to get inspired. Maybe to turn on some worship music. I might peruse Instagram or pick up a book,” and none of those things are bad, but I’m constantly taking things in. I’m consuming media, photos, messages, sermons, conversations. Many of them are life-giving and beautiful and inspiring, too. Again, I’m careful about what I’m putting in and what I’m taking and what I’m consuming. These are all good things, but I never give myself time to process those things. That’s what boredom can allow you to do. It just gives your brain the space to process your input.

Going back to that interview again, Cal said:

“When you’re not processing input, you’re just observing, and with your own thoughts. In addition to boredom driving you to do really big things, what you’re pointing out is something I talked about in-depth in the book, which is Your Mind Has Two Modes. There is the mode where it is processing input and then there is a mode where it is actually trying to do something with it, and those two modes are different. If you’re always consuming in-

formation, but you're never actually giving yourself hours of just being there alone with your thoughts, you're really going to be impoverished in terms of how much value you can extract from it, which is why many great thinkers historically, for example, are big walkers. They would just go out there and they would walk and this is a time for their brain to just bounce around thoughts, figure things out, make use of all this information. Yes, what you're talking about is absolutely common and backed up by research. Time alone with our thoughts is crucial. Boredom should be something that we try not to get rid of cheaply, but something that we should let drive us to real action. Both of those things are crucial."

David then responds to Cal and says,

"I've never ever heard anyone make that argument, but you sound so smart saying that. I mean, that's like the most incredible thing I've heard is that boredom has a use, right?" Then he goes on to talk about C.S. Lewis and how he's one of his favorite authors. He's a brilliant thinker and he used to take walks all the time. David says, "Cal, you have me thinking of all the people that are constantly attending seminars and conferences and listening to podcasts and going to meet-ups, and they are always around real estate investors listening to what they're saying, but they're never actually making any progress. And I will bet you it's because they don't ever just sit down and let what they have been learning sink into their brain and actually say, 'Of the 400 things that I just heard, what are the two that I might actually do something with and put a plan together and go do that?'" Cal responds, "Yes. Well, like, I love podcasts, but I think the right rule for podcasts is the one to one rule: one hour of nothing in my ear for every hour of listening, right? I listened to this go-minute interview, like, should I plan at some point to have another go minutes where nothing is in my ear? You expose yourself to information. We're giving yourself about one to one ratio of thinking to consumption time. That works really well."

Okay, so that's the end of that excerpt from the interview that I was listening to. I know this can be confusing because I'm quoting a lot from another interview from another podcast, but I know you're smart and you're hanging with me. So I listened to that podcast, I listened to that interview, and, honestly, just to give you a picture, I was driving to photograph a bridal session at the beach. So I had like three hours in front of me, and I listened to this podcast and was so inspired I ended up just turning off everything and driving the rest of the way in silence. I think it was about another hour. I just let my mind wander.

Now, I didn't have any epiphanies or grand ideas, but it did me some good to practice boredom, to allow my thoughts to wander, to process it all, and, clearly, this idea has stayed with me. This practice has stayed with me because that happened over a year ago and I'm still mulling over boredom in my life. So I encourage you, take some time to be bored. I usually practice this in really small ways throughout my day, and I think you can too. When I'm waiting in line, when I don't have something planned, and I want to reach for my phone, I think, "No, I'm just going to set it down." At least once a day, I try to not pick up my phone or pick up a book or a magazine. I just try to be uncomfortable and to be bored. Honestly, it's hard, but I know it's good for me and my brain, which is why I do it. Oftentimes, what I find is that at the end of five minutes of being really bored and uncomfortable, I gained some clarity. I gained clarity about something, whether it's big or small, whether it's prioritizing what I should be doing right in this moment.

Boredom gives me clarity and that's a good thing.

So I hope this podcast episode has helped you think. I hope that maybe you'll even consider turning this off and giving yourself the gift of boredom. Just some time to process the things that you learned about being bored and to process whatever other information you are gathering and consuming in your life. I'm sure it's going to bring you clarity and motivate you to do good things, too.

All right, it's time for the Work and Play Cornerstore where I have some fun and draw from my personal life and experiences to bring you a book I'm loving and a thing I'm loving. It might be funny, random, serious. I hope it's always helpful, that's really what it is. I want it to always be something I personally use and recommend and I might get a small commission from it, but that will help me keep bringing this podcast to you every week.

Today, I'm going to be adding Cal Newport's book Deep Work as well as my glasses to the Cornerstore.

So first let's talk about the book Deep Work. I know I've mentioned Cal Newport a lot in this episode, and we're actually going to be reading one of his newer books in the Nancy Ray Book Club in October of this year. I'm really excited. That book is called Digital Minimalism, but I can't recommend it yet because I haven't read it, but I have read Deep Work. Cal is an author and blogger. He's completely off social media. He wrote the book Deep Work, and in it he talks about boredom and the importance of it, which is fascinating and it started getting me thinking about all this, and it's really helpful in today's world. This is just an aside and kind of a fun fact. He said that after that podcast interview I've been talking about, the next thing on his agenda that day was a one-hour walk, to simply think about the title of his next book. Man, I feel like I could learn a lot from him and I can't wait to see what the next book is going to be.

Next, I thought I would add my glasses from Warby Parker to the Cornerstore. I don't know if I can actually add them to the Cornerstore, but I'll at least add them as a link in the show notes here because I get asked about them all the time on social media. It's probably one of the top things people ask, "Where are your glasses from? Where are your glasses from?" Well, they're from Warby Parker and I love them. I think that they're the Baker style, but I'll be sure to double check that and leave a link to the style in the show notes as well.

Thanks so much for listening to Episode 49 of Work and Play with Nancy Ray.

Everything I've mentioned today can be found in the show notes at NancyRay.com/podcast/49. You can find me at NancyRay.com, or follow me at Nancy Ray on Instagram or Facebook almost daily. Here's a quote by Albert Einstein:

"Creativity is the residue of time wasted. The trouble is that we live in an age in which we never give ourselves the chance to be bored."

Thanks so much for listening and I'll see you next time.