

"Bored in the Pews"
Adam S. Miller

I.

Going on forty years now, I've spent three hours in church nearly every Sunday. That's close to 6000 hours. In all that dedicated time I've never seen or heard or felt anything supernatural. My experience seems to be more the rule than the exception. If the aim of a Sunday service is to open a live line to deep space, then religion is an epic failure. Either our songs and rituals don't work or we're doing them wrong. Neither scenario is encouraging.

But there may be something else. It may be that our sermons and sacraments do work but that they are successfully doing something, front and center, that we would decidedly prefer to avoid. The question is: if my weekly trip to that pine pew never convokes any FX-worthy theophanies, then what does it do? What does happen at church?

Let's begin with one obvious phenomenon: dependably, I'm bored.

My thesis is that *boredom* is a religious phenomenon of the first order.

II.

Say I'm in church singing a hymn.

I unshelve the hymnal. I clear my throat. I sing the opening lines. My pitch slides around. I wonder if I should have worn a different tie. I sing louder. Before the end of the second line of the first verse, I stifle a yawn. I remember that I'm supposed to be thinking about Jesus. Rather than thinking about Jesus, I think about how important it is to think about Jesus. I scratch the tip of my nose. I note who wrote the song. I remember a friend whose grandfather wrote some of the hymns in our hymnal. We used to have dinner together on Sundays. I wonder what we're having for dinner tonight.

Before the last line of the first verse, I let out a full, open-mouthed yawn. I wonder if we're going to sing all six verses. I wonder how many hundreds of times I've sung this song. I remember that I like this song. I check the clock: ten minutes in. We start the second verse. I'm barely following along.

I'm bored.

What does this mean: I'm bored?

My attention thins. It wavers like a candle in high wind. It lacks shape or definition. Bored, it founders between meaning and nonmeaning, between hope and hopelessness, between interest and collapse. My attention casts about objectless, untethered. It's a fish

out of water, flopping on dry ground. I'm not giving it the shiny lures it craves. I've come loose in the pew.

My thesis is that we've done something religious when, bored at church, we refuse to give consciousness what it wants.

We're religious when we run intentionality aground.

And then there, in that foundering of meaning and direction and recognition, we may be exposed, however briefly, to the free and terrible and bare ground of life itself.

III.

In her book, *My Stroke of Insight*, Harvard-trained neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor describes what it was like, from the inside out, to suffer a massive stroke in the left hemisphere of her brain.

Anatomically, the brain is composed of layered tiers that localize the processing of certain kinds of information in certain areas of the brain.

The brain's right hemisphere, for example, is tuned-in to subtle variations in sensations, emotions, and physiology. Its apprehension of information is holistic, synthetic, empathic, and relational. And it is narrowly focused on what's happening right now.

The left hemisphere, on the other hand, handles language. It is detail-oriented and analytic. It generates that nearly constant stream of "brain chatter" that evaluates, compares, categorizes, and differentiates phenomena. The left brain houses the "ego," sorts the self from the other and, with its endlessly looping stories, holds the present moment together with a remembered past and projected future.

For most of us, our experience of the world, while composite, is dominated by the left brain. That is, our conscious experience is dominated by ego, by self-concern, by goals and plans and regrets, by judgments, preferences, and comparisons, by looping stories, and by a lot of linguistic noise.

When, on December 10, 1996, Taylor suffered a massive stroke, her left brain was flooded with blood. She remained conscious but with her left brain largely off-line. All that remained was a right brain world and she was amazed at the character of her experience: even in the midst of this trauma, with her brain chatter stilled, an unconditioned peace and astonishing silence welled up inside of her.

Taylor says:

[QUOTE]

As the language centers in my left hemisphere grew increasingly silent and I became detached from the memories of my life, I was comforted by an expanding sense of grace. (41)

I could no longer clearly discern the physical boundaries of where I began and where I ended. I sensed the composition of my being as that of a fluid rather than that of a solid. (41)

With this shift into my right hemisphere, I became empathetic to what others felt. (76-77)

Instead of a continuous flow of experience that could be divided into past, present, and future, every moment seemed to exist in perfect isolation. (49)

My perception was released from its attachment to categorization and detail. (50)

I understood clearly that I was no longer a normal human being. My consciousness no longer retained the discriminatory functions of my dominant analytical left brain. Without these inhibiting thoughts, I had stepped beyond my perception of myself as an individual. (63)

In a compelling sort of way, it felt like the good road home and I liked it. (41)

[END QUOTE]

Now, brain trauma is bad. But Taylor claims that her wound wasn't all bad because it allowed her to see an aspect of human experience that, while *always* a constitutive part of consciousness, is typically drowned out by the ceaseless, analytic chatter in our heads. It allowed her right brain consciousness to step into the foreground and it revealed the local contingency of the left brain's laws and symbolic orders.

What does Taylor's stroke have to do with being bored at church?

My thesis is that boredom is a pathology that, without the physiological trauma of a stroke, can open a door in the floor of experience. Boredom is an potential exit, not from experience, but from the illusion that the clenched left brain is all there is.

Boredom is a religious phenomena of the first order because it involves a foundering of the left brain that can be leveraged to fundamentally shift our position in relation to the demands of its judgments and laws.

IV.

Let's use Taylor's account as a physiological shorthand for what we might more confidently describe as a phenomenological difference between the two faces of experience. Left brain, right brain. Temporal extension, temporal contraction. Law, grace. Or, as Buddhists say: sila, panna.

Buddhists divide the eight-fold path of religious practice into three parts: sila, samadhi, and panna.

These parts are linked like rings. You can pass from one ring to the next, but the rules that govern them, the practices appropriate to them, and the measures for them are not the same. You can't mix and match the rules and expectations that belong to one part with those that belong to the others. All three are needed and all three are irreducible.

Sila teaches you how to navigate the conventional world by acting right, speaking right, and working right. Panna teaches you how, with right wisdom and right insight, to see what makes that conventional world possible.

Sila is the part of the path that traverses vocation, politics, morality, and obligation. It addresses our left-brained work in the ordinary world. It deals with ordinary people, ordinary problems, and ordinary needs within the framework of ordinary time. Sila addresses the weight and reality and conditions of the conventional world. Success depends on will, good fortune, and persuasion.

But the world has a second face and it is this second face, beautiful and awful, that boredom threatens to show. Panna is a name for the right-brain-powered part of the path that looks this second face in the eye. Panna practices life shorn of its phenomenological horizon. It addresses the empty core of non-sense and worklessness and selflessness at the temporal center of every experience. Here, success depends instead on surrender, failure, loss.

Enmeshed in purpose and project, time is thick. Past and future congeal, rounding out the substantial present. But, bored, the left brain loses traction, time thins, and worlds fail to stick.

Sila is the part of religion that cares for the thick span of time's meaningful line. Panna is the part of religion that cares for the present as a spanless point punctuating that line.

Samadhi, the skill of concentration, is the pass-between. It is the part of religion that, in prayer or worship or meditation, practices maintaining attention beyond the failure of interest and intention. When attention to the present endures beyond uses and plans, panna comes into view. Samadhi is the door that swings from that first face of experience to the next.

On the one hand, *sila* cares for the present as rooted in a past that is gone and a future that is coming. All work and meaning and identity depend on our embedding the present in this temporal horizon. Without them, the present is an empty set, a location without extension. In ordinary time, we don't live in the present but in its penumbra. At its asymptotic peak, the present is too thin, its air too heady, its light too bright. We can visit but we can't stay. Normally, we live in the shadow of this mountain. We live in time's outer rind. We think and judge and act in the temporal halo that diffuses and then purposes the present's shining light.

Panna, on the other hand, cares for the present unhinged. It cares for the present as given when past and future collapse like an imploded star. It cares for what is given when time recoils and intentionality fails to preemptively embed the present.

Retaining the past and projecting the future, we stabilize our experience of the present and, in this stability, we're empowered to judge which parts are meaningful, which parts are good, and which parts work.

But the present is, in itself, a perpetual occasion. The present is, eternally, a rolling event, a phenomenological null point, a black hole that in its terrible, contracted simplicity, perpetually births and devours the swirling mass of all of our pasts, all of our futures, and all of the meanings and values and purposes that these pasts and futures jointly condition.

To summarize: where the conventional face of experience compasses left-brained vocation, the second face of experience names the right-brained avocation that both grounds and ungrounds such vocation.

In boredom, we waver between sense and non-sense, between the workaday and the workless, between the useful and the useless, between the conditional and the unconditioned. Faced with boredom's blank stare, the left brain may stammer and avocation may show itself. This phenomenological stutter is a gift because, in boredom, the possibility of freely and deliberately passing from one ring to the next, from one face of experience to the other, opens.

Religion, as grounded in a practiced exposure to avocation, can save us from convention, ruin our work, rewrite our histories, resurrect our flesh, and then beach us back again, with tidal insistence, on those same obligations that our everyday conventions continually reimpose.

V.

David Foster Wallace died in 2008. His final, unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, is a book-length study of boredom. Set circa 1985, the

novel loosely tracks the nonadventures of a group of IRS tax return examiners at a regional processing center in Peoria, Illinois.

Their work is complex, tedious, and repetitive. It models that taxing brand of monkish labor that simultaneously demands high levels of concentration while offering low levels of stimulation. By writing at length about the boredom that so palpably shapes the working lives of these acolytes, Wallace hopes to show more clearly what's at stake in our modern, mobile, on-demand, high-definition, 24/7, entertainment-fueled flight from silence and stillness.

The novel concludes with a selection of Wallace's working notes. One clipped note is striking because of what it reveals about the book's ambitions and because of how baldly it invests boredom with an extraordinary power:

[QUOTE]

Ability to pay attention. It turns out that bliss - a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious - lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom. (PK 546)

[END QUOTE]

Wallace locates "a second-by-second joy + gratitude" - the same kind of atomic-level bliss generated by the raw gifts of life and consciousness that Taylor described - on the far side of crushing boredom.

On this account, boredom is an ascesis, a pathology, a sickness unto death, a preparatory gospel, that will "just about kill you." But ride boredom out until its pounding waves disabuse you of purpose and control and identity and the lights will come on. Here, something else will show itself: a world grounded in stillness but shining in vibrant color. On the other side of boredom and convention, we're treated to the liberating sight of naked time.

In the body of the novel, Wallace describes one tax examiner's ability to wait out the waves of boredom and (literally) play dead without blinking.

[QUOTE]

Both the girl and the grandmother had been given to catatonic/cataleptic states, which as far as I can tell is a symptom of a certain kind of schizophrenia. The girl, ever since young, had amused herself by trying to imitate this state, which

involved sitting or lying extremely still, slowing your pulse, breathing in such a way that your chest doesn't even rise, and holding your eyes open for long periods, such that you're blinking only every couple minutes. It's the last that's hardest - the eyes start to burn as they dry out. Very, very, hard to push through this discomfort . . . but if you do, if you can resist the almost involuntary urge to blink that comes when the burning and the drying is the very worst, then the eyes will start lubricating themselves without blinking. They will manufacture a kind of false or ersatz tears, just to save themselves. Almost no one knows this, because the incredible discomfort of having your eyes open without blinking stops most people before they hit the critical point. (PK 440)

[END QUOTE]

When playing dead, not blinking is the hardest part. The reflex is so involuntary. But there is that critical point, that critical point beyond which the desperation of boredom lifts and attention continues of itself, unfettered for the moment by horizons of regret or expectation, contracted to a point, open and unblinking and exposed.

In church, we sit still and play dead. We sit still and wait to be reborn. Bored at church, we're called to continue with our eyes wide open, unblinking, and surrender for a time to the loss of our pasts and plans. Sundays give us room to practice death and rest.

You know what it's like when your eyes dry and start burn in the middle of another wooden sermon. The trick is to treat this as an occasion for revelation rather than retreat. Don't blink and check your phone. Don't step into the hall. Now is the time to keep looking. Boredom is a pass-between.

In this same vein, Wallace has another tax examiner recount a description of the play he intends to write about what it's like to spend all day at a desk examining an endless flow of tax returns.

[QUOTE]

It would be a totally real, true-to-life play. It would be unperformable, that was part of the point. This is to give an idea. The idea's that a wiggler, a rote examiner, is sitting poring over 1040s and attachments and cross-filed W-2s and 1099s and like that. The setting is very bare and minimalistic - there's nothing to look at except this wiggler, who doesn't move except for every so often turning a page or making a note on his pad He sits there longer and longer until the audience gets more and more bored and restless, and finally they start leaving, first just a few and then the whole audience, whispering to each other how boring and terrible the play is. Then, once the audience have all left, the real action of the play can start.

(106)

[END QUOTE]

The real action of this play starts only once the audience has gone. On the other side of boredom, having sheered through the discomfort of a restless and floundering left-brain-fueled intentionality, the audience that watches and weighs and judges what we're doing gets up and goes, leaving us innocent and free to act. The disappearance of this audience - and especially this disappearance of my "self" as jury - is a consistent feature of a practiced exposure to avocation.

Time's phenomenological implosion consistently collapses the distance between subject and object, between self and other, between actor and audience, and leaves in its wake an astonishing intimacy.

But avocation, while liberating, is frightening. We're afraid to be bored. Like fearsome ghosts, dullness and boredom haunt our days. They threaten our fragile plans with futility. It is doubtless true that busyness and accomplishment and spectacle are grade-A vocational goods, but we also value them because we can use them to keep a lid on fear and we can use them to keep God at bay.

The Pale King plots a series of dramatic changes in the mid-eighties in the structure and mission of the IRS, changes that reposition the Service at the bureaucratic heart of our post-industrial nation. Trying to account for how these pivotal changes could go unnoticed, one administrator suggests that no elaborate ploys or TOP SECRET dossiers were needed because the changes were hidden in plain sight. In fact, the IRS went to the expense of publishing and distributing all the crucial materials themselves. But who could be bothered to read such a phalanx of 1000-page documents, written in a stultifyingly precise and technical prose? Dry and tedious, the changes were, like God's own revelations, cloaked in dullness and shielded by boredom.

On this point, the administrator continues:

To me, at least in retrospect, the really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull. Maybe it's because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that's where phrases like 'deadly dull' or 'excruciatingly dull' come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient, low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention.

Is dullness itself painful? Or do we run from dullness because it allows some other ambient, third-party, low-level pain to show itself?

Without sufficient fuel and stimulation, it's hard to keep time thick and distended. It's hard to keep up enough speed to stay in orbit at the lip of time's gravity well and not slide down into that singularly simple hole that is the present moment. The beauty of the information age is that, with each passing day, we're given more and better fuel for projection and distraction. If we keep the TV loud enough, we don't have to hear, from beneath the sofa, the sound of time's persistent, first-person, and present-tense sucking.

Novice tax examiners aren't acclimated to the thin air at boredom's peak. For them, it's especially hard. Rather than aiming to pass through the dry eye of boredom, they try to mitigate and manage it. One novice tries to stay attentive checking tax returns by alternately remembering the wife and baby that need him to bring home a paycheck and taking breaks where he fantasizes about being on a tropical beach.

[QUOTE]

Lane Dean Jr. with his green rubber pinkie finger sat at his Tingle table in his Chalk's row in the Rotes Group's wiggle room and did two more returns, then another one, then flexed his buttocks and held to a count of ten and imagined a warm pretty beach with mellow surf as instructed in orientation the previous month. Then he did two more returns, checked the clock real quick, then two more, then bore down and did four without looking up once except to put the completed files and memos in the two Out trays side by side up in the top tier of trays where the cart boys could get them when they came by. After just an hour the beach was a winter beach, cold and gray and the dead kelp like the hair of the drowned, and it stayed that way despite all attempts. (376)

[END QUOTE]

Lane Dean Jr. is pinned and there is nowhere to hide. It doesn't take long for time to contract and for Lane's ability to aim beyond the present and into the solace of some future reward to be stifled by that contraction. One hour is enough. Two is plenty.

Gathering determination, Lane Dean Jr. buckles down and does another tax return, then

[QUOTE]

"another one, then a plummeting inside of him as the wall clock showed that what he'd thought was another hour had not been. Not even close. 17 May 1985. Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a poor sinner." (377)

[END QUOTE]

A plummeting inside of him. Call it: on 17 May 1985, time stopped for Lane Dean Jr. Boredom had just about killed him. Stuck in the present, our tax examiner is abandoned to it. His plans and projects and stories are too frail to withstand the mighty centrifugal pull of time's center without the support of diversions and distractions.

In that room now, at that desk, with that pencil and those taxes, it is just Lane Dean Jr. and raw avocation. He can turn away or he can pray. That he instinctively does the latter - shading in his plea from satire to sincerity as he breathes, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me a poor sinner" - is an indication of the authentically religious character of what's at stake in the face of boredom. Time's contraction brings him to his knees.

V.

Allow me to finish with just a word about the Sermon on the Mount.

This sermon is famously full of profoundly impractical advice: blessed are the poor, love your enemies, be perfect, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, don't act for an audience, lay not up treasures upon the earth, take no thought for the future, judge not, etc.

This is poor advice with respect to the ordinary work of our left-brained, vocational world. This advice won't help us care for our families, protect our children, condemn evil, plan responsibly, or avoid unnecessary pain and suffering. Were we to adopt these prescriptions as straightforwardly applicable to vocation, we would not fulfill the law but destroy it.

Jesus, however, aims to fulfill rather than destroy.

It is my thesis that, in order to make sense of the Sermon on the Mount, we must assume that the sermon is organized by an implicit distinction between the two halves of our brains, between the two faces of experience, between vocation and avocation.

Read in this light, part of what Jesus says in the sermon is sound, practical advice meant to enable efforts at keeping the law and obeying God. But part of what Jesus says is about how to shift, in a fundamental way, our relation to the left-brained law, to unmoor and reground this law and this vocation in something other than itself, to show us what is already silently given beneath the fearful and judgmental chatter running constantly through our heads.

Note the distinction. Being poor is bad for vocation, but good for avocation. Accepting with open arms what you normally fear is bad for vocation, but good for avocation. Recognizing the perfection of what is given is bad for vocation, but good for avocation. Contracting your attention to the present moment and forgetting about yesterday or

tomorrow is bad for vocation, but good for avocation. Suspending judgment is bad for vocation, but good for avocation.

Vocation and avocation are two separate but interlocked rings. The measures and practices appropriate to one are not appropriate to the other.

Abandoned just to vocation, our work enslaves us rather than liberates us. We are beached in profane time with no Sabbath to save us. But, in boredom, vocation founders and its limits are revealed. And, persisting beyond the limit of self-interest, we may pass, right here and now, into the intimacy and full-bodied, right-brained peace of the present moment's vibrant and undivided perfection.

If you want only to avoid trouble, you will have to constantly scheme and keep your left eye moving, scanning the horizon. But if, bored, you let your gaze settle without object on what's right in front of you, then you'll find that your right eye is already single and your whole body is already full of light (cf. Matt 6:22).