



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"A World Without Static"
Delivered 27 August 2023
Rev. Jen Raffensperger

In 1996, a good friend of mine and I took it upon ourselves to drive from College Park, Maryland - where we lived and went to school - to Minneapolis, Minnesota. We did this to attend a Mystery Science Theater 3000 convention, which may well tell you much of what you need to know about 24-year-old me. (If you aren't familiar, this is a very silly show where a human and two robots - puppets - watch terrible movies together because evil scientists are trying to break their spirits, but they laugh their way through and remain unbroken!) This was the longest drive either of us had taken at that point, and we made careful plans. I got TripTiks from AAA to make sure we would have accurate maps. We shopped for snacks to pack for the road to save money. And perhaps most importantly, we picked music. We had chosen to take my friend's car, which was much newer than mine, and which had something mine did not - an in-dash compact disk player! So we each loaded up a big pile of CDs to bring, to while away the long hours on the road.

We were ready. The morning we left, my friend drove to my house and we loaded up her car. She was driving the first leg, and so I was in charge of our music selections. The driver, of course, gets to choose, but my task was to put the CDs in the machine and get ready to switch them out when it was time for a new one.

We pulled out onto the road. I read from our TripTik the first part of the directions. I put in a CD.

Silence.

Oh...no.

We tried another one - nothing. We tried the radio, which was fine. We tried a cassette tape, which was also fine, but we hadn't packed cassettes! There happened to be one still in the tape player but we had no others with us.

We were already late getting on the road. Going home to stock up on tapes wasn't an option. We resigned ourselves to the radio. Which was fine...until it wasn't.

Driving from Maryland to Minnesota in the mid-1990s took us through a dizzying array of radio markets - and an occasionally dismaying lack thereof. At one point, as we drove across Wisconsin at 4 a.m., we had the windows down and were blaring the farm report off the AM dial at full blast. "CORN FUTURES!" we shouted out the windows, near giddy with lack of sleep and the shared absurdity of our experience.

I tell this story this morning precisely because it's become a *Story*, something I have told again and again. It's so memorable because it was such a time of bonding through a challenging shared experience, that we were ultimately able to laugh at. (For the curious, before our trip home we bought a few cheap blank tapes and made copies of CDs that we had brought with us so we would at least have a few more choices on the way home.)

In our [reading](#) this morning (Thanks, Carol!) we heard a list of "Places with Terrible Wi-Fi," which is the modern equivalent of driving through a radio wasteland. Human signals diminish, become something almost forgotten. The poet asks us to consider not only places but times; the distant past as well as a future where humanity is only a memory, a stratum on a geologic scale. "My favorite cemetery, where I can touch the white noise distorting memory. What is static if not the sound of the universe's grief?"

Static is something we don't hear much anymore. Our radios are often discarded for streaming music from our devices, always perfect reception,

always playing exactly what we want, or what the algorithms think we want. The sound of static has come to mean something is wrong.

At the same time, we use white noise machines and meditation apps to soothe us to sleep, to encourage us to focus, to clear our minds of the persistence of our own thoughts.

If static is the sound of the universe's grief, if the white noise of unknowing can be a calm and a comfort to us, then what does it mean that humanity has created a world designed so that we rarely if ever stumble upon that static - that grief?

What is the spiritual value of boredom? Of not always being able to fill our ears or our minds with the precise content we desire, of not always having something to distract us from our grief or our other concerns?

There certainly is a known physiological and neurological value to boredom, to empty space on the dial, to down-time when we are uncertain how to pass the time.

In an article on the Mayo Clinic's website titled "[Boost Your Brain with Boredom](#)," there's more about these benefits:

"People's brains rarely are bored while focused on taking part in demanding tasks, like work or school, or while taking part in a good conversation. When your brain is focused on an intense activity, it exerts a lot of energy.

"When you finish the activity, your brain returns to a default or resting state. This is normal and the way that brains restore. Several interconnected brain regions are active during this time.

"When people are in a resting state, many important things are happening in the brain. It is consolidating memories and reflecting on lessons learned. The

brain plays through scenarios and applies what was learned and how it could be used in the future. People spend time thinking about themselves and others. They reminisce about the past and daydream about the future.

“The resting state also can be a creative time, and it can lead to finding creative solutions to problems that are bothering people. For example, many people claim to come up with great solutions to problems they are grappling with while in the shower. This is because their minds are free to wander while their bodies are engaged in mindless tasks and captive to the tasks.”

We have started to learn to use the language of “rest as spiritual practice,” and I would like to encourage us to take up the same idea with boredom - with static - with all those places in our world with terrible wifi, even the inside of our own brains.

This is not a simple plea to put down your devices - though goodness knows that’s advice that I could stand to take, myself. No, it’s more. This is a plea to examine what is happening inside your brain, inside your body, and within your spirit when you do choose to disconnect. To simply be, even for a few stolen moments in an otherwise busy day.

To return to our reading, let’s consider this part of our list of places with terrible wi-fi: “A den of worms beneath the frozen grass. Jesus’s tomb. The stretches of highway on the long drive home after burial. The figurative abyss. The literal heavens. The cheap motel room in which I thought about praying despite my disbelief.”

A tomb. The drive after a burial. The abyss, the heavens, and a place where one is driven to prayer. Belief is no part of the decision - in the next line we hear, breaking just enough from the listing exercise of the rest of the poem for us to give our particular attention: “What I thought was a voice was simply a recording playing from another room.”

In the silence, we might hear things we otherwise would not. In our boredom, we might notice what we are seeking to distract ourselves from.

And most importantly, as the Mayo Clinic reminds us and as I'm sure many of us recognize within our own lives - boredom can be generative. Our brains rest and restore in their downtime. How many of you here have had great ideas while you are sleeping? You wake up suddenly with the answer to a dilemma, or a new idea to try with a problem that has stumped you? This happens to me sometimes. And sometimes, I wake at 4 a.m. and there is no sound at all except the busy sound of my crowded thoughts, struggling for attention. Sometimes, I wish for boredom - for static - for silence. And heck yes, this is when I queue up that meditation track, the white noise that will remind me of the generative spaces between our ideas and our actions.

Boredom can be hard. It can bring feelings of anxiety in the body - what am I doing? Surely I am not doing enough. Surely there's something I should be able to do other than sit here within my own thoughts!?

It strikes me that it is almost certainly not a coincidence that as we have built a world that provides us with less and less static - that has strong wi-fi in more and more places - we have also needed to start building that static back in.

At this point it's important to note that the ways in which the world has shifted to less static, less boredom, less time alone with our own thoughts - that this is also a world of privilege. There are still places in the world without access to the internet, which is a vital tool in our world, and that the discussion of needing to put it aside in a world where it is plentiful is a position of privilege. This doesn't negate our lived experience; it is simply an invitation to consider those experiences unlike our own.

Boredom is also beneficial in reasonable doses but can be detrimental in large ones - witness the real emotional, spiritual, and physical struggles brought about by such inhumane practices as solitary confinement, for instance.

What is the sweet spot? How much silence should we seek to find that it is easier for us to perceive that which we might not otherwise notice? How much time of rest and restoration for our brains is generative, and how much is harmful? These answers will be different for each of us, and they will not stay constant across our lifetimes - or even necessarily day to day.

When presented with boredom - when there's nothing on the radio, when all you have is static, when there's no wi-fi here or your battery is near dead - what I ask is for you to think about the fact that this can be a gift. Within the spaces between our thoughts and our actions, we can not only restore ourselves, we can bear witness to the grief of the universe. We can experience a deeper sense both of ourselves and of the world around us. We can learn to accept gifts that are not as easily identified as such. And we can emerge spiritually renewed and restored, prepared to reengage with the world.

So may it be.