**The Men's Group Seminar: Adam Phillips "On Being Too Much for Ourselves" and "Why a Capacity for Boredom Is Essential for a Full Life"**

Adam Phillips is a British psychoanalyst and writer whose most well-known books include On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life (1993), On Flirtation: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Uncommitted Life (1994), Promises, Promises (2000), On Balance (2010) and, most recently, Attention Seeking (2019). His particular interest and skill centers on applying Freud's ideas to modern dilemmas in a way that is both unexpected and insightful. In the next meeting of the Men's Group Seminar on Saturday, January 4, 2020 (10:15 to 11:30 AM), we will review segments from two of his works. "On Being Too Much for Ourselves" addresses how early child development organizes a view of ourselves, and ourselves in relation to others, as being "excessive"; for Phillips, this occurrence is responsible for our tendency to be self-critical. A YouTube presentation of "On Being Too Much" is available. "Why a Capacity for Boredom Is Essential for a Full Life" offers a unique perspective on the origins of our departure from the here and now.

#1) Adam Phillips (psychologist)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

**Adam Phillips** (born 19 September 1954[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-autogenerated2-1)) is a British [psychotherapist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychotherapist) and essayist.

Since 2003 he has been the general editor of the new [Penguin Modern Classics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penguin_Modern_Classics) translations of [Sigmund Freud](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigmund_Freud). He is also a regular contributor to the [*London Review of Books*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_Review_of_Books).

Joan Acocella, writing in [*The New Yorker*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_Yorker), described Phillips as "Britain's foremost psychoanalytic writer",[[2]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-2) an opinion echoed by historian [Élisabeth Roudinesco](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89lisabeth_Roudinesco%22%20%5Co%20%22%C3%89lisabeth%20Roudinesco) in [*Le Monde*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Monde).[[3]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-3)

Assessment[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Adam_Phillips_(psychologist)&action=edit&section=3&editintro=Template:BLP_editintro)]

Phillips has been described as "perhaps the best theorist of the modes and malfunctions of [modernist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernist) psychology".[[16]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-16) For his intellectual resources, Phillips "draws from philosophy, literature, politics amongst others. However, whilst this affords Phillips the opportunity to be expansive it also makes him a maverick", and others "suspicious of his work",[[17]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-17) so that he has been called "ludic and elusive and intellectually slippery."[[18]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-18) Indeed, "To his critics ... Phillips is little more than a charlatan about whom an alarming cult of personality is developing."[[12]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-Fearn-12) He himself was opposed to "the idealization that is a refusal to know someone", and even in appraisal of the psychoanalytic greats thought that alongside "thoughtful consideration ... puerile consideration would not be the end of the world",[[19]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-19) in accordance with his enduring scepticism "about psychoanalysis ... it should be the opposite, the antidote to a cult."[[20]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-20)

On psychoanalysis[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Adam_Phillips_(psychologist)&action=edit&section=4&editintro=Template:BLP_editintro)]

Phillips constantly refuses to "claim" any particular patch of psychoanalytic territory or even defend the value of psychoanalysis itself. "For me", he has said, "psychoanalysis is only one among many things you might do if you're feeling unwell—you might also try aromatherapy, knitting, hang-gliding. There are lots of things you can do with your distress. I don't believe psychoanalysis is the best thing you can do, even if I value it a great deal."[[21]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-21) He has also been alert to the possibility that "psychoanalysis ... disempowers in the name of knowing what's best ... at its worst it forces a pattern. It can make the links that should have been left to find their own way."[[22]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-22) In the end, he claims, "Psychoanalysis cannot enable the patient to know what he wants, but only to risk finding out."[[23]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-23)

On psychoanalysis and science he says, "I don't think psychoanalysts should have bought into the scientific model with such eagerness. I don't think psychoanalysis is a science or should aspire to be one."[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Phillips_%28psychologist%29#cite_note-autogenerated1-5)

Works[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Adam_Phillips_(psychologist)&action=edit&section=5&editintro=Template:BLP_editintro)]

* *Winnicott* (1988)
* ***On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (1993)**
* *On Flirtation: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Uncommitted Life* (1994)
* *Terrors and Experts* (1995)
* *Monogamy* (1996)
* *The Beast in the Nursery: On Curiosity and Other Appetites* (1998)
* *Darwin's Worms: On Life Stories and Death Stories* (1999)
* *Promises, Promises* (2000)
* *Houdini's Box: On the Arts of Escape* (2001)
* *Equals: On Inhibition, Mockery, Hierarchy, and the Pleasures of Democracy* (2002)
* *Going Sane* (2005)
* *Side Effects* (2006)
* *Intimacies* (with [Leo Bersani](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Bersani), 2008)
* *On Kindness* (with [Barbara Taylor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Taylor), 2009)
* ***On Balance* (2010)**
* *The Concise Dictionary of Dress* (with Judith Clark, 2010)
* ***Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (2012)**
* *Becoming Freud: The Making of a Psychoanalyst* (Yale UP, 2014)
* *Unforbidden Pleasures* (Penguin, 2015)
* *In Writing* (Penguin, 2017)
* *Attention Seeking* (Penguin, 2019)

External links[[edit](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Adam_Phillips_(psychologist)&action=edit&section=9&editintro=Template:BLP_editintro)]

* [Review of The Beast in the Nursery](http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/phillipsa/beastitn.htm#ours) at [Complete review](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Complete_review) \*[Discussion with Adam Phillips about Monogamy](https://web.archive.org/web/20070621202714/http%3A/www.salon.com/feb97/monogamy970219.html)
* [Profile](http://www.newstatesman.com/200104230011) in the [*New Statesman*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Statesman)
* [Audio: Adam Phillips in conversation on the BBC World Service discussion show](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/specials/1246_the_forum/page11.shtml) [*The Forum*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Forum_%28BBC_World_Service%29)
* [Fisun Gunar Q&A:Adam Phillips 17.4.2010](http://www.theartsdesk.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=1339:adam-phillips-interview&Itemid=23)
* [Audio, transcript of 2009 interview with British journalist Jennifer O'Mahony](http://jaomahony.wordpress.com/2011/12/05/adam-phillips-interview/)
* [Audio of interview with Leonard Lopate on WNYC radio on February 26, 2013](https://web.archive.org/web/20130301050556/http%3A/www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/2013/feb/26/adam-phillips-gives-praise-unlived-life/#commentlist)
* *Paul Holdengräber (Spring 2014).*[*"Adam Phillips, The Art of Nonfiction No. 7"*](http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6286/the-art-of-nonfiction-no-7-adam-phillips)*. Paris Review.*

**#2) Excerpts from New Statesman Profile**

Phillips has intrigued and amused his own readers in a succession of critically acclaimed essays. Like a good clinician in the consulting room, he never dictates or harangues, but hints at hidden meanings and points of interest. In his early works - On Flirtation, On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored - he wrote of topics such as tickling and cross-dressing with the same care he lavished on love and death. Packed with maxims and allusions to philosophy and letters, they attracted admirers whose eulogies jostle for position on the back covers of his paperbacks. The one dissenting voice came from within his own profession. Reviewing On Flirtation in the British Medical Journal, Anthony Daniels, a consultant psychiatrist at All Saints Hospital, Birmingham, complained that "paragraph after paragraph conveyed little or no sense to me, and I could detect no difference in meaning when I converted some of his affirmative sentences into their negatives".

One journalist who knows several former patients of Phillips's professes never to have heard of anyone getting better as a result of his treatment. If this is true, his popularity has not suffered as a result. There is also a question of what "getting better" means - a subject on which Phillips has controversial opinions. He once said: "If people leave my room feeling OK, then I have failed. I have just reproduced a little enclave of well-being." In The Beast in the Nursery, he wrote: "The reassuring notions of so-called insight - the how-I-came-to-be-who-I-am stories - are a poor substitute for people's capacity to transform their worlds. Psychoanalysis should not be promoting self-knowledge as a consolation prize for injustice."

He recoils from the assumption of many therapists that life must necessarily be a process of dealing with disillusionment. Therapy, he writes, “teaches us to accept frustration, to tolerate dissatisfaction. It can teach you to bear too much.” The notion that therapy has promoted, rather than abolished, stoicism seems absurd; but there is method in his treatment of madness. Phillips has a refreshing disdain for the snobbery of suffering, the respect for pain that supposedly makes it worth enduring. To him, the purpose of psychoanalysis is less to metabolise this experience than to show how it can be made a source of creative action.

Phillips is content to suggest his ideas rather than establish them. He will simply raise the question of why the negative aspects of an individual’s character are taken to be more revealing than the positive ones.

In Phillips's view, the main requirement of therapy is that it be interesting, and if nothing remarkable exists then it is necessary to invent it. In Houdini’s Box, he wrote: "Psychoanalysis, of course, does not reveal what people are really like, because we are not really like anything; psychoanalytic treatment is productive of selves, not simply disclosing selves that have been there all the time waiting to be discovered, like Troy or Atlantis."

**#3) Adam Phillips: On Pleasure & Frustration**

**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5C7HXBeHp3c**

-demand that we be happy and enjoy our lives: an obstacle; undermining; we live in a quasi-hedonistic culture.

-previous internal injunction: to be good; now, to be happy. A distraction. Life is also painful (if somebody can satisfy you, then can frustrate you). We learn this in childhood: everybody has to do deal with ambivalence, i.e., loving and hating the same person.

-we are being sold on endless possibilities for pleasure (get rid of pain and increase pleasure).

-not a powerful account of the usefulness of frustration. There is an attempt to foreclose on appetite. “Fantasies of satisfaction are saboteurs of pleasure.”

-what is the nature of satisfaction? What really gives us pleasure?

-we need better enticements to adulthood, i.e., not about getting everything we want. We idealize childhood (symptom of real despair in the culture). We need to idealize adulthood, i.e., pictures of good lives not set up to make one fail … more realistic idea rather than ideal … something generally attainable. Ideas are transformable; ideals are not/generally complied with.

-cultural ideals are humiliating.

-who we want to be is very important.

**#4) BBC Interview: The Life Unlived with Andrew Marr with Adam Phillips, Julian Baggini, Helen Dunmore and Frances Ashcroft**

[**https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b01k2cg0**](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b01k2cg0)

-most of us spend our time living about the lives we are not living.

-we think about what we need and want (what we don't have); we also are more aware of other people's lives.

-could be wasted time, but also useful.

-we need to be able to think about frustration (culture of immediate gratification). Frustration could be taught in schools. Finding languages for what matters most to us. Could be both painful and pleasurable (not just hard work).

-refers to Shakespeare often.

-Darwin (the first goal is survival, then production) to Freud (Freud adds the question of pleasure/survival is not enough/life has got to be worth enough to survive) .... competition/survival to pleasure (sometimes, the pleasure of being understood/relational/no longer alone - sometimes we want something else/we don't want to be understood). Freud addresses the issue of frustration. Freud describes the ambivalence about getting pleasure and enjoying it.

-to lure us into the future (there needs to be the right amount of frustration). If we wait too long or don't get what we want for too long, we give it on wanting/we become nihilistic/bitter/defeated.

-on getting away with it/adolescence: secret moments when we get away with it (not necessarily a good thing/a mixed thing). Haunting. Authorities are not omnipotent. Believing in God ..... if we transgress, is there an omnipotent authority watching us/punishing us?

-we are most revealed to ourselves when we fail.

*Julian Baggini (born 1968) is a British philosopher, journalist and the author of over 20 books about philosophy written for a general audience. He is co-founder of The Philosophers' Magazine[1] and has written for numerous international newspapers and magazines. In addition to writing on the subject of philosophy he has also written books on atheism, secularism and the nature of national identity. He is a patron of Humanists UK.*

**#5)** [**Audio of interview with Leonard Lopate on WNYC radio on February 26, 2013**](https://web.archive.org/web/20130301050556/http%3A/www.wnyc.org/shows/lopate/2013/feb/26/adam-phillips-gives-praise-unlived-life/#commentlist)

[**https://www.wnyc.org/story/272025-adam-phillips-gives-praise-unlived-life/**](https://www.wnyc.org/story/272025-adam-phillips-gives-praise-unlived-life/)

***Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (2012)**

-we are haunted by certain things we desire and did not get.

-things we need to go back to; to pick up again. Nostalgia can be a kind of refuge.

-no one can live all of their possible lives; life is inevitably a sacrifice.

-occurs at developmental transitions; at these moments, we reconsider where we are and what we have sacrificed.

-temptation to assume the unlived life is better.

-at a restaurant, can't eat everything; can you appreciate and enjoy what you have chosen?

-risk that we are too good about adapting to things (masochistic; accommodating).

-life has a lot to do with luck; makes our choices that much more crucial.

-all sorts of directions you can go .... this not about being happy, but about our relationship to frustration; frustration is alluring and has a lot of potential. What do we do with frustration?

-frustration allows us to imagine, to think, to feel .... it's about the life we are waiting for. The danger is that in keeping our options open, we don't live one life or another .....

-the fantasy or phantom life: we will take more risks, be more brave, more to lose ....

-"If only xyz ...." everything would be great.

-Has to be fantasy before there is reality.

-frustration should be taught in schools.

-enjoy "would have, should have, could have" ... avoid living a life of grudges or resentments or vengeance ....

-the baby at the breast: wanting: the beginning of frustration. How long will it take to get to the breast?

-frustration is always a temptation scene, i.e., restless unease and feel frustrated and need to fill it in, ie,I have some chocolate or go shopping rather than letting the moment evolve.

-states of wanting are frustrating and frightening ... find something to fill it in and become addicted ... addictions are false solutions to wanting.

-love stories are all about frustration.

-all parents frustrate their child. Show the child that frustration is bearable.

-only if we can deal with frustration, we can find what fulfills us. You can't be satisfied unless you know what frustrates you.

-people talk about their unlived lives in psychotherapy ....

-how do you maintain faith in life in the face of frustration? People do not talk about their frustration. There are limited resource (scarcity) s in this life. Dating apps, i.e., romance may not be a number games, it is very unpredictable/good luck/bad luck.

-the finding of an object is a re-finding of the object.

-letting go/let go of attachments/Buddhism -- actually not all that good. All religious attempt to address frustration: escape desire, or wait til heaven, etc. All attempts to deal with our frustration as children.

-we are frightened to discover what our desires are.

-psychoanalysis: someone listens to you and helps you modify your desires.

-huge pleasures in not getting it.

-understanding may pre-empt other pleasures.

-we need to try NOT to get it; we spend childhood and most of our lives trying to get it.

-pleasure in getting away with it vs. abiding by rules and authority.

-our desires are always in excess of what the world or a person can deliver.

-therapy: (1) pragmatic/solve a problem, and (2) opening topic may lead to valuable side effects that are meaningful. Limits of self-understanding.

-feel free to bear and explore frustration/experiment with not grabbing the very thing you want.

**#6) On Being Too Much for Ourselves: Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips on Balance and the Necessary Excesses of Life**

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ3PNd7nv54**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ3PNd7nv54) **On Being Too Much for Ourselves**

-stresses and strains of everyday life; we feel like we are failing. Too much frustration, too lttle love, too little success.

-feeling too much or too little. We feel "too much for ourselves."

-It is impossible to over-react Our feels are stronger than we would like them to be.

-The Freudian slip: an example of over-reaction/excess.

-All parents feel overwhelm by their children. Parents bear the fact that the child will be frustrated; bear hatred from the child, which feels excessive.

-The child feels he/she is too much for the parent. "Too muchness" is thought of as a problem. This leads to, Why do people exaggerate?

-the picture of ourselves we have is excessive/we are ignorant of ourselves.

**#7)**[**https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/08/adam-phillips-on-balance/**](https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/06/08/adam-phillips-on-balance/)

 **“There are situations in which it is more dangerous to keep your balance than to lose it.”**

**BY MARIA POPOVA**

*“Something is always born of excess,”* Anaïs Nin wrote in her diary in June of 1945 as she contemplated [the value of emotional excess](https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/09/03/anais-nin-on-emotion-and-writing/), adding: *“Great art was born of great terrors, great loneliness, great inhibitions, instabilities, and it always balances them.”* And yet our compulsive pursuit of balance — take, for instance, [the tyrannical notion of work/life balance](https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/03/11/david-whyte-three-marriages-work-life/) — is predicated on eradicating “excess,” pitting it as a counterpoint rather than a complement to equilibrium and [inner wholeness](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/11/03/parker-palmer-hidden-wholeness/).

That paradoxical relationship is what the celebrated psychoanalyst and writer **Adam Phillips** examines in [***On Balance***](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0312610742/braipick-20) ([*public library*](http://www.worldcat.org/title/on-balance/oclc/559791828%26referer%3Dbrief_results)) — a marvelous collection of essays on “the balancing acts that modern societies involve us in,” exploring the many myths that bedevil our beliefs about balance and impede our pursuit of it.

With an eye to John Stuart Mill’s 1834 proclamation that “there seems to be something singularly captivating in the word balance, as if, because anything is called a balance, it must, for that reason, be necessarily good,” Phillips writes:

The people we fall in love with we find singularly captivating, as are any of the people (or ideas) that inspire us, for better or for worse. What is strange about Mill’s simple observation is that it is the singularly captivating that tends to make us lose our balance. Mill intimates with his peculiar logic that the idea of balance can unbalance us.

Like anger, beneath which David Whyte has so poetically observed lies [an indication of what really matters to us](https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/05/15/david-whyte-consolations-anger-forgiveness-maturity/), these unbalancing acts, Phillips argues, are a vital and indicative part of our aliveness:

We should not, perhaps, underestimate our wish to lose our balance, even though it’s often easier to get up than to fall over. Indeed, the sign that something does matter to us is that we lose our steadiness.

Phillips considers the necessary excess of optimism and why an artificial balance is sometimes more dangerous than surrendering to such “singularly captivating” loss of steadiness:

We can only be really realistic after we have tried our optimism out. It is not always clear in which areas of our lives it is realistic (or even optimistic) to aspire to the balanced view; or indeed in which parts of our lives the balanced view helps us to get the lives that we want. Balancing acts are entertaining because they are risky, but there are situations in which it is more dangerous to keep your balance than to lose it.

In one of the most rousingly and rewardingly unbalancing essays in the book, titled “On Being Too Much for Ourselves,” Phillips considers an especially anguishing aspect of our relationship with excess, fueled largely by our [pathological busyness](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/05/05/kierkegaard-on-presence-unhappiness/). Phillips, who has previously explored [the crucial role of “fertile solitude” in cultivating self-reliance](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/07/18/adam-phillips-on-risk-and-solitude/), writes:

It is not unusual for us to feel that life is too much for us. And it is not unusual to feel that we really should be up to it; that there may be too much to cope with — too many demands — but that we should have the wherewithal to deal with it. Faced with the stresses and strains of everyday life it is easy now for people to feel that they are failing; and what they are failing at, one way or another, is managing the ordinary excesses that we are all beset by: too much frustration, too much bad feeling, too little love, too little success, and so on. One of the things people most frequently say in psychoanalysis is, ‘Perhaps I am overreacting, but . . .’; and one of the commonest complaints today is about feeling too much or feeling too little. I want to suggest that we are simply too much for ourselves, but that this too-muchness is telling us something important… My proposition is that it is impossible to overreact. That when we call our reactions overreactions what we mean is just that they are stronger than we would like them to be. In other words, we sometimes call ourselves and other people excessive as a way of invalidating or tempering the truths we tell ourselves or that other people tell us. It is impossible to overreact.

Our choice of language often betrays our repressed reactions [more than we realize](https://www.brainpickings.org/2011/09/01/the-secret-life-of-pronouns/), but never more so than in Freudian slips — those awkward moments when our words inadvertently reveal what we mean but didn’t intend to say. Phillips considers this particularly common and colorful example of overreaction:

When we make Freudian slips we try to cover our tracks by claiming that we have said more than we mean, when in fact we have meant more than we had wanted to say… We may feel like we are saying too much, but we may be saying just the right amount; adding things to the conversation that are worth talking about and trying out. We can’t decide not to make Freudian slips; but even when we use ordinary language intentionally, we often say more than we intend. If I say to you that I am a great admirer of your work, I am telling you about my greatness as well as yours; when I say, “See you tomorrow,” I am assuming I know what isn’t going to happen in the interim. Our language, without which we couldn’t imagine our lives, is too much for us in the sense that it can surprise us: we hear in it — and we say in it — more than we intend to. And more than we attend to.

Phillips looks at how our early childhood — those “years of intense feeling” — shapes our aversion to excess and gives rise to our compulsive quest for composure, control, and intentional organization with which to disguise our deep inner shame of being seen as “overreacting”:

We have all had the experience, as children, of being too much for someone; of making someone feel things that they didn’t want to feel… Everyone starts with the experience of being too much for someone else; not only with that experience, but with that experience somewhere in the mix of who one is. Before we acquire the limiting and limited excesses of language we have lived with the excesses of need. If, even only occasionally as a child, you are too much for your parents — which then means you are too much for yourself — what can you do?

What we do, Phillips points out, is begin to see this excess as badness — we aren’t simply “too much,” but too much of something undesirable, uncomfortable-making, and ultimately dangerous:

The child who experiences himself as being too much for his parents — all children to some extent — experiences himself as in some way harming them. And as the child’s survival depends upon his parents, or those who look after him, this puts him in mortal danger. For this reason alone it is very difficult for the child — and for the adult that he will become — to think of his too-muchness as anything other than a problem. And yet, of course, parents are there to absorb, and be absorbed in, their children’s excesses (and vice versa). Indeed, people know that they are in a relationship when they become a problem to each other (or, to put it slightly differently, if you want to have a relationship with someone you have to become a problem for them).

Nin, it turns out, was right after all — great excess is necessary for great works of art, and what greater an art than that of human relationships? Phillips captures this necessary too-muchness beautifully:

We are too much for ourselves because there is far more to us — we feel more — than we can manage.

The piercing precision of insight in the example with which Phillips illustrates this took my breath away, for one of my most vivid childhood memories is a newscast in my grandparents’ living room announcing the death of Princess Diana, which instantly sent me into an inexplicable spiral of sobbing grief for a stranger’s tragic fate. Phillips, however, argues this experience is quite explicable for the very same reasons — it bespeaks the uncomfortable too-muchness of our emotional capacity:

People didn’t overreact to the death of Diana; through the death of Diana they recognized just how much grief they were bearing, how much loss they had suffered in their lives, how they felt about the fate of young women in our culture. Indeed, grief, rather like sexuality, reminds us just how much we are too much for ourselves, how intense our loves and longings really are.

[…]

We are too much for ourselves — in our hungers and our desires, in our griefs and our commitments, in our loves and our hates — because we are unable to include so much of what we feel in the picture we have of ourselves. The whole idea of ourselves as excessive exposes how determined we are to have the wrong picture of what we are like, of how fanatically ignorant we are about ourselves.

It is in adolescence, Phillips argues, that we first begin to play with the boundaries of excess, feeling out what we might be capable of and contemplating — sometimes experiencing — its consequences. Indeed, that precipice of maturity is itself “singularly captivating” in both promise and peril. Phillips writes:

Adolescence — when children begin to have the physical capacity to murder and conceive — is our more conscious initiation into those very excesses that make us who we are; and, of course, who we might become. Adolescents are excessive compared with the children they once were and the adults they are supposed to become. But adolescence, at least for modern people, seems to be peculiarly difficult to grow out of.

Instead of growing out of it, Phillips argues, we come to fetishize it — something glaringly evident in our youth-centric, youthfulness-obsessed culture, where a [dignified relationship with aging](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/10/21/ursula-le-guin-dogs-cats-dancers-beauty/) is increasingly elusive. That cult, Phillips suggests, springs from envying the very excesses of adolescence:

The contemporary idealization of adolescence is telling us something about how we manage our complicated feelings about being too much for ourselves.

[…]

Excessive behavior, in other words, is not so much something we grow out of as something we grow into.

And with this he returns to the essential what-to-do question of living with our all too human, all too vital imbalances:

Perhaps “excess” is a word we use to reassure ourselves that we can be something other than excessive. If we start off by being, at least some of the time, too much for other people, and become, in adolescence, definitively too much for other people, so much so that we have to leave them, and then become adults who are unavoidably too much for ourselves, what is to be done? Well, one thing that can be done is to find someone we are not too much for…

[***On Balance***](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0312610742/braipick-20) is a pleasurably discombobulating read in its totality. Complement it with Phillips on [why the capacity for boredom is essential for a full life](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/06/19/adam-phillips-boredom/), Martha Nussbaum on [how to live with our human fragility](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/14/martha-nussbaum-bill-moyers-world-of-ideas/), and David Whyte on [the true meanings of friendship, love, and heartbreak](https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/04/29/david-whyte-consolations-words/).

# #8) Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips on Why a Capacity for Boredom Is Essential for a Full Life

# <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/06/19/adam-phillips-boredom/>

## “Boredom … protects the individual, makes tolerable for him the impossible experience of waiting for something without knowing what it could be.”

### BY MARIA POPOVA

When was the last time you were bored — truly bored — and didn’t instantly spring to fill your psychic emptiness by checking Facebook or Twitter or Instagram? The last time you stood in line at the store or the boarding gate or the theater and didn’t reach for your smartphone seeking deliverance from the dreary prospect of forced idleness? A century and a half ago, Kierkegaard argued that this impulse to escape the present by keeping ourselves busy is [our greatest source of unhappiness](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/05/05/kierkegaard-on-presence-unhappiness/). A century later, Susan Sontag wrote in her diary about [the creative purpose of boredom](https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/10/26/susan-sontag-on-boredom/). And yet ours is a culture that equates boredom with the opposite of creativity and goes to great lengths to offer us escape routes.

Children have a way of asking [deceptively simple yet existentially profound questions](https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/11/26/does-my-goldfish-know-who-i-am/). Among them, argues the celebrated British psychoanalytical writer [Adam Phillips](https://www.brainpickings.org/tag/adam-phillips/), is “What shall we do now?” In an essay **“On Being Bored,”** found in his altogether spectacular 1993 collection [**On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life**](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0674634632/braipick-20) ([public library](http://www.worldcat.org/title/on-kissing-tickling-and-being-bored-psychoanalytic-essays-on-the-unexamined-life/oclc/26132476%26referer%3Dbrief_results)), Phillips writes:

Every adult remembers, among many other things, the great ennui of childhood, and every child’s life is punctuated by spells of boredom: that state of suspended anticipation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire.

Phillips, of course, is writing more than two decades before the modern internet had given us the ubiquitous “social web” that envelops culture today. This lends his insights a new layer of poignancy as we consider the capacity for boredom — not only in children, though especially in children, but also in adults — amidst our present age of constant access to and unmediated influx of external stimulation. This is particularly pause-giving considering the developmental function of boredom in shaping our psychological constitution and the way we learn to [pay attention to the world](https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/08/12/on-looking-eleven-walks-with-expert-eyes/) — or not. Phillips writes:

Boredom is actually a precarious process in which the child is, as it were, both waiting for something and looking for something, in which hope is being secretly negotiated; and in this sense boredom is akin to free-floating attention. In the muffled, sometimes irritable confusion of boredom the child is reaching to a recurrent sense of emptiness out of which his real desire can crystallize… The capacity to be bored can be a developmental achievement for the child.

Because of [how profoundly our early experiences shape our psychoemotional patterns](https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/03/02/character-personality/#gtol), it’s inescapable to contemplate how this translates into our adult capacities. How easily and uncomfortably the phrase “modern adult” can replace every mention of the child in the following passage from Phillips’s essay:

Experiencing a frustrating pause in his usually mobile attention and absorption, the bored child quickly becomes preoccupied by his lack of preoccupation. Not exactly waiting for someone else, he is, as it were, waiting for himself. Neither hopeless nor expectant, neither intent nor resigned, the child is in a dull helplessness of possibility and dismay. In simple terms the child always has two concurrent, overlapping projects: the project of self-sufficiency in which use of, and need for, the other is interpreted, by the child, as a concession; and a project of mutuality that owns up to a dependence. In the banal crisis of boredom, the conflict between the two projects is once again renewed.

It is unsurprising then, Phillips notes, that the child’s boredom evokes in adults a reprimand, a sense of disappointment, an accusation of failure — that is, provided boredom is even agreed to or acknowledged in the first place. In a certain sense, we treat boredom like [we treat childishness itself](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/06/18/c-s-lewis-writing-for-children/) — as something to be overcome and grown out of, rather than simply as a different mode of being, an essential one at that. Phillips adds:

How often, in fact, the child’s boredom is met by that most perplexing form of disapproval, the adult’s wish to distract him — as though the adults have decided that the child’s life must be, or be seen to be, endlessly interesting. It is one of the most oppressive demands of adults that the child should be interested, rather than take time to find what interests him. Boredom is integral to the process of taking one’s time.

That, perhaps, is what Cheryl Strayed alluded to so beautifully nearly twenty years later, when she wrote that [“the useless days will add up to something [because] these things are your becoming.”](https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/07/13/tiny-beautiful-things-dear-sugar/)

Illustration by D.B. Johnson from [Henry Hikes to Fitchburg](https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/08/29/henry-hikes-to-fitchburg-d-b-johnson/), a children’s book about Thoreau’s philosophy.

Phillips goes on to consider more directly the evolution of boredom from childhood into adulthood:

As adults boredom returns us to the scene of inquiry, to the poverty of our curiosity, and the simple question, What does one want to do with one’s time? What is a brief malaise for the child becomes for the adult a kind of muted risk. After all, who can wait for nothing?

[…]

We can think of boredom as a defense against waiting, which is, at one remove, an acknowledgement of the possibility of desire… In boredom, we can also say, there are two assumptions, two impossible options: there is something I desire, and there is nothing I desire. But which of the two assumptions, or beliefs, is disavowed is always ambiguous, and this ambiguity accounts, I think, for the curious paralysis of boredom… In boredom there is the lure of a possible object of desire, and the lure of the escape from desire, of its meaninglessness.

[…]

Boredom, I think, protects the individual, makes tolerable for him the impossible experience of waiting for something without knowing what it could be. So that the paradox of the waiting that goes on in boredom is that the individual does not know what he was waiting for until he finds it, and that often he does not know that he is waiting… Clearly, we should speak not of boredom, but of boredoms, because the notion itself includes a multiplicity of moods and feelings that resist analysis; and this, we can say, is integral to the function of boredom as a kind of blank condensation of psychic life.

Lamenting that we tend to treat boredom as a handicap and to deny it as an opportunity, Phillips cites the story of “a precociously articulate eleven-year-old boy” who was once a patient of his, brought in by a mother who believed her son was “more miserable than he realized,” in large part due to his “misleading self-representation.” Phillips found that this superficial self, which the boy donned as a shield for disapproval, was largely tied to the experience of boredom. Once again, Phillips offers a passage all too intimately applicable to the modern human condition beyond just childhood:

[The boy] was mostly in a state of what I can only describe as blank exuberance about how full his life was. As he was terrified of his own self-doubt, I asked him very few questions, and they were always tactful. But at one point, more direct than I intended to be, I asked him if he was ever bored. He was surprised by the question and replied with a gloominess I hadn’t seen before in this relentlessly cheerful child, “I’m not allowed to be bored.” I asked him what would happen if he allowed himself to be bored, and he paused for the first time, I think, in the treatment, and said, “I wouldn’t know what I was looking forward to, ” and was, momentarily, quite panic-stricken by this thought.

Phillips directed the treatment toward the boy’s “false self” and his belief that being good, by the token of his mother’s approval, meant having lots of interests that didn’t leave room for the vice of boredom. Over the course of the following year, Phillips helped the boy develop his capacity to be bored. He recounts:

I once suggested to him that being good was a way of stopping people knowing him, to which he agreed but added, “When I’m bored I don’t know myself.”

This, I think, is how we as grownups in the modern world often go through life. Our version of being good is being productive. Choosing constant distraction or busyness — two sides of the same coin — we seek to avoid not boredom and passivity, but end up robbing ourselves of [presence](https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/06/07/annie-dillard-the-writing-life-1/), because presence presupposed a detachment from what we look forward to, what is to come, and a mindful groundedness in what is.

This is the cultural pathology of our time: If we stopped doing what we do, we might not know who we are. As I’ve [reflected before](https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/10/23/7-lessons-from-7-years/), to cultivate the art of presence in the age of productivity is no easy feat.

[**On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored**](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0674634632/braipick-20) is a beautiful and psyche-stretching read in its entirety. Complement it with this [cultural history of boredom](https://www.brainpickings.org/2012/06/18/boredom-a-lively-history/), then revisit Phillips’s fantastic conversation with Paul Holdengräber on [why psychoanalysis is like literature for the soul](https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/06/09/adam-phillips-paul-holdengraber-interview/).

Bottom of Form