IDEAS

Kierkegaard's Three Ways to Live More Fully

Take a cue from the Danish philosopher: Instead of seeking a new life, go deeper into the one you have.

By Arthur C. Brooks

Illustration by Jan Buchczik

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People hate being bored. Researchers show that we will go to almost any length to avoid boredom. That can even include giving ourselves painful electrical shocks to stave off ennui—experiments have found that many college-age subjects will actually do this rather than face as little as 15 minutes of doing nothing. Indeed, one of the worst parts of life for many people during the COVID-19 lockdowns was the sheer *boredom* of being stuck at home, which scholars have shown was associated with substance use, distress, and loneliness.

Almost nothing is worse, then, than realizing that your life *itself* has become boring. Perhaps you have at one time or another concluded that your work is drudgery, your hobbies humdrum; that even your relationships are superficial and unsatisfying. Each day reminds you of the one before. What is there to do?

One obvious answer is to run away, to throw out the old routines and connections, and find new ones instead. But maybe the solution to boredom is the exact opposite: not to seek a new life, but to go *deeper* into the one you have. This is exactly what the Danish existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard advocated. When life becomes tedious to you, he argued, you don't need to look outside for something to shake up your malaise. You need instead to look inward and find what's missing within your own heart and soul.

Like many philosophers, Kierkegaard was, by most accounts, a chronic malcontent. He questioned everything, and seemed to be unsatisfied with life, seeking more than a conventional 19th-century Danish existence would ordinarily deliver. This dissatisfaction yielded at least two books, published when he was 30 and 32 years old respectively: *Either/Or*(1843) and *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), in which he proposed that we can experience three phases in our life, each deeper than the last, depending on how bored and disaffected we are, and whether or not we are willing to do the work to abate our disgruntlement.

According to Kierkegaard, when we first find life boring, we seek new delights. He called this the aesthetic stage of life. Kierkegaard focused particularly on art and the erotic, but the category obviously refers to much more. This is the time, usually in early adulthood, when people are most open to new experiences and opportunities.

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For some, this is the "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" stage. But even if you aren't someone who's into a libertine lifestyle, "the aesthetic" might encompass a more innocent sort of experience—a hobby such as travel, say.

This is fine for a while. For many, though, this consumerist approach to living eventually comes to seem trivial—and, ultimately, boring. “Is this all there is?” you ask yourself. At this transition to the next stage, you need to shift from treating life as an act of consumption to becoming part of a process that creates deeper experiences. You need to “get inside the machine.”

This new approach to life requires making new commitments, which can involve a difficult and frightening vault into the unknown. In his 1940 poem “Leap Before You Look,” W. H. Auden reflected on this:

The worried efforts of the busy heap,
The dirt, the imprecision, and the beer
Produce a few smart wisecracks every year;
Laugh if you can, but you will have to leap.

For Kierkegaard, this leap involved entering the “ethical stage” of life. He noted that for most people this means marriage, as a condition of life in which you no longer simply encounter a variety of people romantically, but create a joint existence with just one person. In this way, a big part of your experience is now determined by your own actions and ethical commitments.

For many of us, this ethical stage is where we spend the rest of our lives. The ethical mode is deeper and better—and harder in many ways—than the aesthetic was. But a few people will run into boredom once again, and ask themselves if some deeper way of being can be found.

For example, you might consider where your need for commitment comes from. You have a bond of love with your spouse, but what underpins that bond? At this point, you may feel a renewed sense of compulsion to jump into a still deeper phase, from doing good to looking for the source of good itself. Kierkegaard calls this the “religious stage,” in which you associate your life with a transcendent cause or purpose. Kierkegaard’s conception gave rise to the phrase “leap of faith”—though it is doubtful that he himself ever used the exact expression.

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In a traditional religion such as Christianity or Islam, the religious stage might mean arriving at an understanding of your marriage as an earthly manifestation of God's love for humankind—a way to feel his presence and model it—and seeking to deepen your faith. But traditional religion is not the only way to make this leap. For you, meditation might provide a way to understand at this deeper level why your life is the way it is, why you made the ethical commitments you did, and whether some different dedication might be better.

Kierkegaard believed that this form of transcendence has special power to illuminate life. "Spiritually speaking," he wrote, "everything is possible."

Kierkegaard's stages do not need to correspond to specific chronological ages. You can put his ideas to use no matter where you are in your life's journey. And you can apply them to any particular area of life, from the simplest of tasks to the grandest of endeavors.

Take, for example, an ordinary activity like reading. At the aesthetic level, you read what you come across that seems interesting; maybe you ask people for suggestions, or just browse around between news and essays on the internet. For some, this is good enough. But for you, it might not be—because you want to read with greater focus and purpose, to use your reading to learn and grow. If so, you can move to the ethical stage, in which you make a point of reading more deeply in a few areas, and look for ways to apply that knowledge to your life and work.

If you want to go deeper still, you can select a text of spiritual profundity, and savor every word in your search for life's truths. As Kierkegaard recommended, "Read it with the passionate feeling that it is the only one thou wilt read." This is the religious stage of reading—known as "Lectio Divina" in some Christian traditions.

Or consider your work. Many young adults cast about professionally, taking this job or that, to get different experiences and see what they enjoy and are good at. This is the aesthetic approach to work. Some stay in this stage their whole working life, but others realize in young adulthood that they want more of a vocation, so they proceed to the ethical stage and fully commit to a career by investing in education or moving for an important job. This turns their work

into a relationship that fuses their values with their labor to create a professional purpose that has real personal meaning.

For a few, work can become akin to a religious vocation—if it serves others and reflects their most transcendent beliefs. Obviously, this applies for people in overtly faith-based jobs, but it can occur in other areas as well. I believe that writing, speaking, and teaching about happiness places me in this stage.

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Finally, think of friendship. We can be quite aesthetic in our social relationships, enjoying the company of a lot of people without much serious investment in their life. But you might find that this leaves you feeling a certain emptiness, if these are "deal friendships" more than "real friendships." The latter requires a commitment of attention—learning about the other person and spending time together for the sake of the friendship per se, and not just because, say, you happen to see each other regularly at work.

Again, for a very few people in your life, you might want to take your friendship to the highest level, the "perfect friendship" that Aristotle wrote about. Such relationships are usually based on a deep connection and a shared love of something, to an extent that feels almost holy.

Besides causing a deadly global pandemic, COVID-19 was a scourge of boredom for millions when lockdowns denied them the novelty of life's aesthetic stage. Yet some managed to use that time as an opportunity to progress through more of Kierkegaard's stages. Some made deeper commitments, such as marrying (officially or unofficially) or pursuing a degree via distance learning. Others saw in the pandemic's stillness a chance to explore the more transcendent parts of their life, by learning to meditate or responding to a religious stirring.

Therein lies the paradoxical beauty of Kierkegaard's approach for all of us. The monotony of life contains a reservoir of ways to find relief, if we can only muster the courage and energy to dive in instead of opting out. If today you find yourself bored with your work—perhaps surfing around and reading some

random essay on happiness—you may have just gotten a signal from the universe that it's time for your spirit to evolve.

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https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/01/soren-kierkegaard-advice-deeper-living/677081/

Søren Kierkegaard is a notoriously difficult philosopher to read, but not for the abstruse plunges into abstraction characteristic of academic philosophy. Further, the good Dane—he deserves better than to be dubbed "the Melancholy Dane"—was obscure in his own time other than in some minor local skirmishes with Danish church authorities. Most of us love our "Kierkegaard" from pithy summaries by commentators on him. He also pioneered a novel "existential" approach to faith—Christian faith unequivocally for him—that was very honest, brave, and brilliant, even if it can never satisfy many.

I'm not sure what grade Søren would give Arthur Brooks for this attempt at interpretation: B- maybe. I doubt Herre Kierkegaard would go along with many of Arthur's illustrations of the "religious" life in particular. For Søren, the religious life throws one into territory off "ethical" charts, as best illustrated by the pillar Abraham being willing, in *Fear and Trembling,* to sacrifice his son Isaac till the Lord told him not to, having tested Abraham sufficiently, first giving him the son desired more than anything and then abruptly asking Abraham to murder the child. (We could get lost going down this rabbit hole: Was it God or the Devil driving the narrative here, and which one placed the ram stuck in the thicket to suggest he use the knife on it instead? We can rightly ask whether God would be involved in any of this. But we must remember that, as in the Book of Job, the narrative is literary implying literary devices with both their power and limitations.) This is what makes Søren Kierkegaard the pained "existentialist" beloved by other great anguished souls like Miguel de Unamuno (*The Agony of Christianity*). No wonder few want to join their "church."

But just as being "Christian" means a definite adherence to the original Galileean model while applying it in contemporary terms, reading and presenting Kierkegaard to modern readers—I'm not sure what can be understood by postmodern ones—requires taking some liberties with the original, testing them out, and finding out what flies and what does not, falling flat. There is something useful and worthwhile in Arthur's version. TJB