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Is Being Good Boring?

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Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23

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The love of the new. The need for speed. Riding down the highway at Mach-2 with your hair on fire. The lust for the razor's edge. The curiosity about the inexperienced. The thrill of the dangerous. If this describes you, you're a neophiliac, and Nietzsche captures your spirit: "The secret of reaping the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment from life is to live dangerously." Merriam Webster defines neophilia as the love of or enthusiasm for what is new or novel.

The thirst for something new can be addictive. Indeed, many addicts are themselves neophiliacs, and the story of recovering users is often the story of people who crave danger and excitement. And that's how we typically think of this malady—it's been historically associated with trouble! It's a love of danger that trends toward disaster. Researchers have found that a novelty-seeking personality actually has genetic connections and patterns to addictive behaviors, criminal activity and compulsive tendencies.

Being a true neophiliac requires the ability to adapt and embrace new possibilities. The guy in this story clearly was not: *There was a man who bought the plans for a birdhouse online. Instead of sending him the plans for a birdhouse, the company sent him plans for a sailboat. He tried to put it together, but it just wouldn't work. He couldn't figure out what kind of bird was going to live in this dumb birdhouse. So he wrote a letter and sent the parts back to the company.*

The company wrote a letter of apology and added this postscript: "If you think it was difficult for you, you should have seen the guy who got your plans trying to sail a birdhouse."

New research has shown that neophilia can be an incredibly healthy trait as well. In fact, it's an important human survival skill. Anthropologists now know that novelty-seeking genes have helped the human species adjust to more hospitable climates or simply launch out in search of new scenery. Christopher Columbus, the Jamestown colonists, Lewis and Clark were all probably neophiliacs.

Psychiatrist Robert Cloninger notes that novelty-seeking "can lead to antisocial behavior, but if you combine this adventurousness and curiosity with persistence and a sense that it's not all about you, then you get the kind of creativity that benefits society as a whole."

And that ought to raise some questions for us. How can the very human thirst for variety and excitement be channeled into useful energy instead of harmful?

Let's face it: Being good is boring. At least it often feels that way. So are we Christians doomed . . . condemned to living boring lives as do-gooders?

Today's text from Proverbs can help us with that.

Our text has a specific endgame—shaping behavior toward prudence and away from problems. There's a reason why Proverbs is included in what is called the "Wisdom literature" of the Bible. Proverbs is all about character formation passed down generationally (1:8). The idea is that if you live right before God and people, things will usually go well for you in life. What we have are not "rules," but principles. If you're smart, you pay attention to what the Bible says, because if you do, you'll probably experience success. And there's nothing boring about success in life.

One of the wisest things we can do is advocate for the poor and afflicted. This is no easy matter, but the writer of Proverbs warns us that not to do so invites disaster: "Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity" (v. 8). "Do not rob the poor because they are poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate" (v.22).

The smart thing to do is not to look for a rush in doing evil, but pursue—passionately—that which is right. The writer says that building a "good name" is going to get us farther ahead than amassing "great riches" (v. 1). When we build that, we gain the reputation of being a person with "character."

Author N.T. Wright calls character "a hard won second nature." To illustrate, he recounts the story of Captain Chesley Sullenberger III, the heroic US Airways pilot who saved the lives of thousands in 2009. A flock of geese struck and destroyed both of the engines, sending his plane careening toward the Bronx, NY. In the two minutes he had before a ditch landing, he flawlessly executed every sequential step necessary to allow him to glide his now dead-weight with wings onto a safe landing in the Hudson River instead.

Wright hails Sullenberger's virtue. "Virtue, in this sense, isn't simply another way of saying 'goodness' Virtue in this strict sense, is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices, requiring effort and concentration, to do something which is good and right but which doesn't 'come naturally.'"

Another author puts it this way: "The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction." This phrase is the inspiration for the title of Eugene Peterson's book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.

How great would it be for human beings, every one of us, to channel this drive we have—this thirst, this lust for the difficult, dangerous and demanding—into building character, establishing a pattern of obedience, advocating for the afflicted and speaking up for the poor! That's a life worth mentioning! That's a life that counts. That is anything but a life that is boring or mundane.

Such a life is not boring, but "blessed" (v. 9).

The late Fred Craddock, in his book, *Craddock Stories*, explains the problem of boredom: "Boredom is a preview of death, if not itself a form of death, and when trapped in prolonged boredom, even the most saintly of us will hope for, pray for or even engineer relief, however demonic. Sincere Sunday worshipers will confess to welcoming in muffled celebration any interruption of the funeral droning. Be honest: Have you ever quietly cheered when a child fell off a pew, a bird flew in a window, the lights went out, the organ wheezed, the sound system picked up police calls, or a dog came down the aisle and curled up to sleep below the pulpit? Passengers on cruise ships, after nine beautiful sunsets and 86 invigorating games of shuffleboard, begin to ask the crew hopefully, 'Do you think we'll have a storm?'"

"I recently heard a quiet and passive clergyman tell of his attending the Indianapolis 500. He confessed that after two hours of watching the same cars speed by again and again, the boredom turned him into a degenerate sinner. At first, he said, he simply entertained thoughts of 'What if ...?'; and his own imagination thrilled him. But soon his boredom demanded more. A car caught on fire. Hurrah! Not until later did he remind himself that he, a Christian minister, had experienced no concern for the driver."

A passion for social justice doesn't develop overnight. Acquiring character, a good reputation, and deep generosity is a process. But it doesn't have to be a boring process, if the boring, the mundane, the pedestrian is a problem for you as it is for many.

Here's what one family did. It was daring, perhaps dangerous, and certainly at the time, daunting. Kevin Salwen was driving home with his daughter Hannah who was then 14, and they came to a stoplight where Hannah noticed a homeless man panhandling while nearby, only a few feet away, a Mercedes was idling, waiting for a green light. She wondered why the guy in the big car didn't sell it and use the money to provide meals for the poor.

At home that night, and for many subsequent evenings, a discussion and debate raged. Finally, the mother, Joan, said, "What do you want us to do? Sell our house?" Their house was worth about \$1.5 million. Long story short, that's exactly what the Salwen family did. They donated about \$800,000 to The Hunger Project to help a village in Ghana. Later, the entire family went to Ghana to visit the village. Kevin and Hannah have now co-written a book documenting how they "halved" their lives called, *The Power of Half: One Family's Decision to Stop Taking and Start Giving Back*. The Salwens know that doing something as dramatic as selling your house is not a possibility for most Americans, but they hope that their gesture will encourage others to explore creative possibilities.

The Salwens found a way to deal with their passion for social justice, and for them—as well as for all of us who are determined to build character, establish a good name, and make our lives count—it has been exciting and very rewarding. And blessed.

The key to our neophilia is balance—interest in what's new held in tension with wisdom and discretion.

Winifred Gallagher in her book, *New: Understanding Our Need for Novelty and Change*, notes all the messages that come our way. "At this point in our warp-speed information age, our well-being demands that we understand and control our neophilia lest it control us. We already crunch four times more data—emails, tweets, searches, music, video, and traditional media—than we did just 30 years ago, and this deluge shows no signs of slackening. To thrive amid

unprecedented amounts of novelty, we must shift from being mere seekers of the new to being connoisseurs of it."

And neophilia in the spiritual life is no different. We must understand and control our desire for the novel and exciting, lest it control us. We are disciples . . . Christians . . . building character and a good name through "a long, slow obedience in the same direction."

Sources:

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The message is from sermons that I preached over the years that I have been in the pastorate. I have compiled them from the notes I made before they were preached. I do not know where I found some of the material contained here. I may have borrowed it, as a whole or in part, from others. I simply do not remember. If this is the case, I apologize right now, and that our combined efforts will glorify God.