*If summer is about urging ourselves to slow down—spending carefree afternoons whiling away time outdoors in the sun—then giving into spells of boredom is one of the best parts about this season. Today we’re sharing a post contributor Ellen Koneck wrote in 2018. In it, she explores the inner workings of boredom and silence, and why it’s so important to integrate both into our lives.* You’ve undoubtedly heard the narrative about this particular moment in culture; this particular feature of our era: that we need instant gratification. We demand immediate feedback, immediate results. We don’t have the attention span to read longform essays, let alone books; we can only focus long enough for bullet-point lists and Sparknotes. We boil water in the microwave and fast forward through commercials and opening credits. We maintain a society-wide addiction to stimulation and speed. We loathe boredom, silence, and in-between spaces. As much as I wish it weren’t true, I can’t deny this particular hallmark of modern life. I find myself scrolling Instagram while I’m on the phone with my mom and flipping through magazines while I’m watching a movie. There are so many competing demands for our attention, it’s as if we’ve internalized the idea that anything *less* than overstimulation is boring. But I vividly recall being bored as a kid. On summer days when I didn’t have school, I’d wake early and halfheartedly play Barbies, or skim a chapter of a book, or page through my sticker collection to smooth any curling edges, or organize my Beanie Babies by color, *then* by size. All of this took approximately 22 minutes. Really riveting stuff, as you can tell. I’d finally and inevitably resort to “accidentally” banging closed a dresser drawer loud enough to wake up my twin sister, so she’d play with me and cure my restlessness—or, at least, be bored *with* me.

We didn’t grow up with cable television, so the morning programming was news and weather, not cartoons. And the internet didn’t become a common household resource until about the time I reached middle school—so for at least my elementary years, there was no automatic or obvious boredom-cure. Instead, we had to strong-arm our way to the other side of that daily ennui with books, music, biking, tag, hide-and-seek, crafts, and elaborate schemes to build tree forts and start clubs that *somehow*never came to fruition. Of course, talk of childhood often has an air of nostalgia—apparently, in the process of storing memories, we add a gloss of sunshine and roses. But I think the kid brain was on to something: it had the wherewithal to make frog- and firefly-catching an hours-long activity. Kids are muddy and barefoot and sunburnt and seeking treasure. When boredom strikes, they strike back. Unfortunately, any resilience I had in the face of boredom as a kid has apparently waned to the point of nonexistence. Most adults I know are the same way: our brains no longer have the bandwidth for boredom. It’s just *too* excruciating to endure; we check our phones instead. But the ability to endure boredom, to sit in silence, to rest in a space that’s objectively “unproductive” is just an underexercised muscle. More importantly (and I’m going to mix metaphors here, bear with me), it’s like a moat that you *must* cross to get to a contemplative state—aka The Zone\*—whether in writing, prayer, meditation, or even physical exercise. *\*You know the zone: when you’re in a groove, sinking every shot, picking up speed at mile three, writing sentence after sentence of something you’ve long tried to express, resting in the space of internal silence, staring at the stars and feeling the simultaneous significance and insignificance of your little slice of life—etc.* So when I encounter boredom, I try to embrace it like an old pal—okay, fine: a frenemy (someone I tolerate politely but whose calls I make a point of habitually screening). Or maybe it’s not a moat or pseudo-friend at all, but a really persuasive troll that tries to deter me from crossing a bridge that I was recently sure I *really want to cross*. I try to enter and engage that bored space. Swim in that moat. Strong-arm the troll. Whatever it takes. The point is: boredom is an indicator that something deeper is just around the corner, and if you can stick it out a minute longer, it will bear fruit. Not just because you’ll be done being bored (!!), but because scientific studies actually demonstrate that we need to disengage, be *more*idle, and be *less* productive to increase brain activity, creativity, and “aha” moments. And if meditation is prayerful for you, connecting with the source of all truth, beauty, and goodness is already a *pretty* good reward in itself. Boredom is an indicator that something deeper is just around the corner, and if you can stick it out a minute longer, it will bear fruit. I started to realize the potential power of boredom in college. I was trying to practice more contemplation by adding more silence to my life, and so I committed to praying a rosary every day—my *least* favorite meditative exercise—because heck, if it worked for some spiritual masters and gurus in the past, there must be something to it. In fact, (I reasoned) most religious and philosophical traditions have some kind of devotional practice that utilize prayer beads—the word *bead* even derives from *bede*, which means “prayer” in old English. The hurdle of boredom with this kind of practice was steep: it was not only ancient and foreign to me, but long and repetitive.

But I was at a point in my life that I was feeling so overstimulated by all the noise I ingested in a given day—music, television, movies; professors, parents, friends, (in real life and on social media)—that I could barely discern my own voice in the midst of such a cacophony of internal din. I craved the silence and stillness, and didn’t know how else to find it. After a few months of excruciatingly reciting the same words over and over for 40 minutes straight, something changed. I stopped having to consciously focus on the repeated words themselves, and instead, discovered that the repetitive chant had become like a familiar, patterned backdrop; it was a backdrop woven of words that helped settle my mind and invite my being into a state of rest. Practitioners of Buddhist meditation understand this concept similarly. *Mantra* means mind-vehicle, and it is a word or phrase repeated throughout a person’s practice. The term itself doesn’t sustain meaning for the duration of the practice, but instead becomes a conduit for entering a different mental space. It’s like a key for getting through a gate; it’s a drawbridge for crossing the moat. It’s a snack to appease the troll (okay, what do trolls even like? Answers to riddles? Arm wrestling?). But you get it. It became a cue for my brain to enter auto-pilot, where the item I forgot on my to-do list didn’t bother me, and the tasks of the day felt unhurried. My wandering thoughts didn’t go away, they just didn’t demand undue attention. It was deeply peaceful: the din was finally quieted enough for me to feel rooted again, to discern my own voice among the myriad I’d internalized. Speaking of learning to hear your own voice: I recently read that gum sales are down (bear with me AGAIN). Studies blame cell phones. The “impulse purchase” section of your local Target used to capture attention and trigger stimulation (that’s kind of quaint, isn’t it?). Now, people waiting at the register are increasingly captivated *exclusively* by whatever app they’re scrolling through. And when you’re waiting at a bar for your date to arrive, or a coffee shop for your pal—*scrolling*. I’m not here to demonize the cell phone (too many #hottakes on that already, thanks anyway); rather, I’m pointing that we’re completely discouraged from spending time with ourselves. We fill up any moment alone, any downtime, with distractions and noise. And that’s what boredom ultimately is: an invitation to center and take stock of ourselves. A chance to look closer at whatever we perceive as boring about our circumstances. An opportunity to be engaged in rather than distracted from life. And that’s what boredom ultimately is: an invitation to center and take stock of ourselves. A chance to look closer at whatever we perceive as boring about our circumstances. An opportunity to be engaged in rather than distracted from life. Contemplation is just on the other side of boredom, if we can bear to get there. Good friends, who are wiser than I, have been practicing meditation and prayer for years; some take breaks two or three times a day in silence, and others spend an hour meditating each morning. Some are just beginning, or taking up these kinds of practicing anew after some time away. I asked these expert pals of mine what advice they’d give for developing strong practices and overcoming the hurdle of boredom and the discomfort of silence and stillness, and what was waiting on the other side. **I’ve collected their tips and advice here, for any of you seizing this season as a time to start or renew contemplative exercises.** Julia P: *The Surrender Experiment* and *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself* are great books about meditation. The first is more spiritual and the second more scientific, but I found both extremely helpful and enlightening. Michelle K: Find a type of prayer that works for you. Don’t try to make something fit that doesn’t; you’ll know. We all have different temperaments, so it isn’t worthwhile to stick with a certain book or method just because someone else recommends it. If it’s not fruitful, do something else! Cammie L: In order to actually maintain a practice, I’ve found that it’s very important to do it around the same time every day, otherwise it’s too easy to blow off. When you first begin, find a space that is quiet, calm, and comforting. Eventually you’ll be able to practice in, like, a crowded Starbucks—but in the beginning, try to create a consistent space that is quiet and dimly lit. Emily B: You have to think of this as a re-learning of something that*should* come naturally to us, if we weren’t subject to such an onslaught of overstimulation all the time. We opt for distraction instead of discomfort, and sitting still with yourself or with God is a profoundly intimate (and *eventually* wonderful) thing to do. It’s important to remember that in these exercises we’re seeking to return to something really organically human, not *escape* from anything. Michelle N: I think space is one of the most important things when practicing prayer or meditation. Space can affect our senses and mood. Certain spaces make me feel calm (like churches); others make me feel anxious. In spaces where there is quiet, and where there is art and candles my mind is automatically transformed. For you, this might be in the tub, on your couch, or on a walk. But seek out spaces that can be sacred for you. Change your environment to help direct your mind and body toward the interior state you want to reach. Ashley L: Contemplation is about surrendering. This is a weird concept—and foreign to a lot of people—but the best way to overcome the hurdle at the start is to stop fighting it, get your butt in a chair, and do it. Maria B: For me, I find it helpful to turn my attention to my body to counteract any restlessness. Sometimes I follow my breath, or I sit with the feeling of expansion in my chest. The sensations of the body aren’t static—which helps keep me attentive and focused. Julia P: Creating a habit takes 18 days, so step one is challenging yourself to try a new discipline or exercise for only 18 days at first. Don’t think that you’re signing up for forever on day one—it will feel way too impossible. Michelle K: God is not boring. You are not boring. Prayer and contemplation really *shouldn’t* be boring. And there are as many ways to pray as there are people on earth, so if you’re bored, it might be because you’re not really bringing your real and whole self into that space. That’s why it’s important to find a practice that works best for you. Cammie L: Thoughts are not the enemy! People become so focused on the “empty mind” concept—but it doesn’t really exist! Emily B: Yes! The wandering mind is not in competition with the calm mind. One of my meditation instructors says, “Making your brain be clear of thoughts is like telling your heart not to beat.”—it isn’t about resisting, but resting. Ashley L: Do *not* judge the experience or the meditation as “good” or “bad”!  There is no such thing. There’s just surrendering to the discipline of the practice. Maria B: In terms of books, the classic *Into the Silent Land* did it for me. *Radical Acceptance*, which is written from the Buddhist tradition and engages with psychology, is also really moving and helpful.