

Diagnosing *Acedia* and Its Spiritual Neighbors

BY JONATHAN SANDS WISE

We have a problem of *acedia*, these three authors agree. It is personal and communal, innate and institutional, as old as the desert and as new as the iPhone, hard to recognize in ourselves and yet impossible to miss in our culture as a whole. And most of all, it is deadly to our spiritual lives.

It is almost as hard to define the vice of *acedia* as it is to know how to pronounce it. (I have heard “uh-KED-ee-uh,” “uh-KAY-dee-uh,” and “uh-SEE-dee-uh,” among other pronunciations. No wonder people just say “sloth” or “boredom.”) These three books—Richard Winter’s *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment: Rediscovering Passion and Wonder* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002, 160 pp., \$16.00), Kathleen Norris’s *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer’s Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008, 334 pp., \$16.00), and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove’s *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010, 163 pp., \$14.99)—are remarkable for their similarities, despite their very different purposes and emphases, but even so the very slipperiness of the concept and the breadth of experiences characteristic of *acedia* makes each book distinct.



Richard Winter’s *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment* is a call to a life of Christian service, motivated by his diagnosis that only a life of meaningful, passionate pursuit of the good and beautiful will ultimately cure us of our plague of boredom. While Winters discusses a bit of everything, from the entertainment industry to the science of yawning, and

from the history to the consequences of boredom, his purpose is never primarily sociological, historical, or philosophical, but pastoral; and this shows in the brevity of his discussion of such significant themes. Still, he always provides enough details, studies, quotes, and illustrations to keep moving his interesting and important argument along: we are bored, boredom is destructive individually and culturally, and the only way out is through something like religion (especially Christianity).

As a professional psychiatrist, Winters is most comfortable when he is discussing the research literature related to boredom, and it shows in the clarity of these parts of the work. In some of the most interesting chapters he discusses studies showing that boredom is caused not only by understimulation (as in a boring lecture or in repetitious and seemingly meaningless work), but also, and more surprisingly, by the overstimulation that is characteristic of a leisure culture. We are bombarded with images by the entertainment and advertising industries that amplify the culture's emphasis on our subjective feelings and entitlement to happiness. This form of boredom is destructive, Winters argues, leading to pornography and sexual addiction, aggression and pointless violence, and we cannot get out of boredom by *trying* to escape it. Instead, happiness must be a byproduct of the passionate pursuit of meaningful and fully-engaging activities. In the final two chapters Winters leads us to the conclusion of his argument: for these activities to be truly meaningful, they must be part of a broader, more objective, outward-looking understanding of the world like the one provided by Christianity.

Winters briefly differentiates an ephemeral sort of boredom, such as any of us might experience while standing in a long line or listening to an intensely boring presentation, from boredom as a longer-term phenomenon involving "an existential perception of life's futility, a deep sense of meaninglessness and purposelessness" (p. 28). While much of his remaining discussion seems to apply to both forms of boredom, it is clearly only the latter sort that has some affinity with *acedia* as the desert fathers and mothers described it, though even it is not precisely the same. As Winters himself notes in his chapter on the medieval concept of *acedia*, while there are some clear similarities between boredom and the various meanings of *acedia* and sadness, they are not the same thing. Despite this admission, Winters seems to suggest that much of what used to be called *acedia* would now be seen as depression and should be treated accordingly (pp. 77-79).



In *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*, Kathleen Norris spends a fair amount of time wondering and even worrying over whether it is true that *acedia* and depression amount to the same thing, for the very good reason that she has been guilty of *acedia* for much of her life, while her

husband suffered greatly from clinical depression. Unlike Winters, Norris clearly believes that these are two different phenomena with very different cures: while depression, like anxiety and overwhelming grief, requires the help of a psychiatrist and perhaps appropriate medication, *acedia* is a spiritual and moral ill and requires a very different sort of cure. Through the course of this lengthy work, Norris provides lots of hints as to how she would differentiate the two, as well as her thoughts on their proper treatment. For example, while depression and *acedia* feel the same most of the time (which may be why Winters, who focuses almost solely on the *feel* of boredom, fails to fully differentiate the two), depression is a horribly painful state that its sufferers want, more than anything, to get out of, though they may find it impossible to take any positive steps on their own. *Acedia*, on the other hand, is the inability to care about much of anything, and persons in this state do not really care that they do not care, and so they do not desire to be cured (pp. 17, 24, and 150). Even more telling, depression typically has some sort of definable cause and is externally directed in a way that makes it impossible to miss that something is very wrong. "*Acedia* is more subtle," Norris says, "and when it wells up in me, only the venerable practice of spiritual discernment is of much use" (p. 147).

Unlike Winters, who is writing to convince us that we are bored and need God to escape our boredom, Norris's work, like some of her earlier best sellers, is a sort of spiritual memoir. If you want to know what the book is about, look again at the subtitle, which is definitely truth in advertising. This book is two parts a memoir about her own experiences of *acedia* throughout her life, two parts a memoir about her wonderful but often very difficult marriage to a man who suffered both from depression and from an unbelievable litany of physical ailments that almost killed him many times before they finally did in his fifties, and one part spiritual musing on *acedia*, writing, depression, and the wisdom of monasticism. This beautifully written, amazingly thoughtful, often rambling, but never pointless book somehow adds up to a rich exploration of why we need to regain an understanding of *acedia* in our current time. Norris is at her most gripping and hard to put down when she tells the story of her own life, marriage, and rediscovery of faith through Benedictine monasteries, but she has also marshaled an amazingly broad array of resources to help her understand and express the symptoms of *acedia*, and the "Commonplace Book" at the end includes a broad selection of quotes from those resources. *Acedia and Me* is, in fact, something of a large, narrative-driven commonplace book: full of thoughts and reflections, it is never systematic, but always suggestive, and despite her protestations to the contrary, very careful in its use of terms.

As a central theme of Norris's work is the importance of monastic practices for understanding *acedia*, it should not be surprising that many of her suggestions for treatment come from that tradition as well. Being bored

might require finding a meaningful life project and worshipping God, as Winters says, but these are precisely what the person with *acedia* no longer wants or finds it possible to do. Instead of pursuing a grand quest for meaning in life, the monastic tradition teaches, we need to force ourselves to go against our desire for solitude by being with other people and caring for them (p. 29), and to simply do the humble, quotidian, physical tasks of everyday life, such as washing the dishes, with care (pp. 100, 145). The *feeling* of boredom may be caused by repetition, but Norris found that in her life the wisdom of the desert tradition held true: it is careful, constant repetition, even deliberately meaningless repetition, that allows one to slowly work through the vice of *acedia*. When we cannot make ourselves care about the good, or God, or love, or our vows, simply staying put and forcing ourselves to keep saying the right things and doing the right things, whatever we may feel, is often the way to begin caring again:

As for the words that I am dutifully saying — “Love you” or “Dear God” — I might as well be speaking in tongues, and maybe I am. And maybe that does not matter, for it is all working toward the good... every day and every night, whether I “get it” or not, these “meaningless” words and actions signify more than I know. Repetition... knows us better than we know ourselves. (p. 188)



Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove wants to help us understand the same counter-cultural point in *The Wisdom of Stability: Rooting Faith in a Mobile Culture*.

His book is similar to Norris’s in many ways (as the foreword by Norris suggests), but its emphasis is slightly different. Where Norris wants to focus on *acedia* as a personal vice, though one exacerbated by current cultural trends in industry, media, and advertising, Wilson-Hartgrove gives us a broader if breezier cultural critique so that he can focus on the solution that he has found most powerful: a life of chosen simplicity and poverty in a stable community.

Another similarity between Norris and Wilson-Hartgrove is their dependence on interesting stories, both of their own lives and of others, and on quotes from others to drive their works. While Norris tells stories

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of her own life and marriage in Hawaii, New York, and North Dakota, Wilson-Hartgrove relies more on retellings of Scripture and on stories of his New Monastic community called Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina. The point, though told differently and in a much shorter work, and though focused on the cultural problems and solutions rather than an individual vice, is much the same. “We are desperately habituated in an unstable way of life” Wilson-Hartgrove explains (p. 11), but “stability’s wisdom insists that spiritual growth depends on human beings rooting ourselves in a place on earth with other creatures” (p. 4). While we need stability to fight our rootless wandering, both spiritually and physically, every attempt to *make ourselves* stable simply commodifies it, turning it into a perfect home or community that we can buy our way into. Stability, Wilson-Hartgrove wisely insists, can only come as a gift from God (p. 16).

Winters argues that aggression and sexual addiction are consequences of boredom, and Norris notes in passing that *acedia*, as a capital vice (capital here means “head” and indicates that it is the head of an army of vices, hence its destructive power), tends to lead to other vices as well, including boredom, sloth, and aggression. Wilson-Hartgrove includes a nice discussion of three particular vices that tend to follow in the train of *acedia* and are particularly problematic when you try to live in community, as he does in Rutba House: ambition, boredom, and vainglory. Stability often means repetitive work, cleaning up after others, and sublimating your own desires to the will of the group. In such a situation, it is easy to hear the whisper of ambition that you could do more and better work elsewhere; easy, too, to simply feel bored, as Winters described it, dissatisfied with your surroundings and your tasks in life. Vainglory is perhaps the hardest of all to cure, for it comes precisely when you begin to make spiritual progress, to really settle into an uplifting rhythm of work that transforms time from the enemy into a friend: vainglory suggests that *now* others will notice and I will become like a desert monk, sought out by everyone for my wisdom. The only solution to these is to stay: to keep working even when you do not want to do so, to keep praying even when you do not feel like it, to keep acting in love even when you cannot care.



We have a problem. It is personal and communal, innate and institutional, as old as the desert and as new as the iPhone, hard to define and easy to confuse with other related problems, hard to recognize in ourselves and yet impossible to miss in our culture as a whole, and most of all, it is deadly to our spiritual lives. But when we are in the throes of *acedia*, we just do not care. If we want to care again, all three authors agree, we must somehow just keep going by staying still, striving to join in the fight

for good and God's kingdom by taking part in the mundane miracles of showering, doing dishes, and speaking in love to those around us every day. If we can just do this, then by some amazing grace, we may find that staying still has finally allowed us to go with love, and that repetition has changed us into people who can do something truly new.



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