

Temporary Goallessness

No, this will not be a lecture about the value of having goals, aiming high, or envisioning your future. Rather, it will be a bit of a meandering discourse about what happens to a guy (in this case, a martial arts guy) without a project to work on. A quick caveat here: I recently read that although goals are valuable to both men and women, women (because of their superior multi-tasking ability and diffuse awareness) are much less lost when they find that working toward a goal is not feasible. Men (because of their single-focus and desire to achieve) tend to be more readily lost in the bog of inactivity if they are not working on, or planning to work on, a goal. Of course, as with any statement about the genders, things are not so clean cut in reality, but I will, for the duration of this article, assume the above reading on the subject of goals was relatively accurate. I can only reflect on what happens to me (I recently checked and I am still rather male) when I am temporarily goalless. If goal-oriented women without current goals feel the same way, welcome to the marsh.

Alison Armstrong, the uplifting lecturer who has made the study of men her specialty (www.understandmen.com), reported that her son used to complain about being bored. This caught my attention because growing up, I remember, as an only child, complaining, “Ma, I’ve got nothing to do!” My mother, having plenty to do, would suggest that I should read, write, or draw. Good suggestion. As a result, much of my non-martial activity as an adult has been reading, writing, and drawing. The result has been 15 books and 14 illustrated manuals. Ms. Armstrong, however, took a different tack. She told her son that he should be embarrassed to have nothing to do since there was so much to do. She later admitted both to herself and to her lecture audience that seeing boredom through her own eyes was not the best way to respond to a bored, single-focused boy. The next time her son complained, she took more interest in his feelings and asked him what being bored felt like. “Mom,” he said, “it’s like dying slooowly.” Once again, the description struck me. Yes, that was it! No wonder I had embraced reading, writing, and drawing as a boy. Even when I was not excited about doing those activities, they were always better than dying slooowly.

It’s funny how things can come full-circle. At home alone in my rather roomy condo, I work on planning a seminar, designing a class, or practicing a kata that could use some improvement. Then, seminars planned, classes designed, and kata practiced, I take a break. The break occasionally turns to checking things on FaceBook, watching a movie, or thinking about things. That occasionally sinks into inactivity and, you guessed it, boredom. Okay, so now it’s time to go out, shop for the meager number of items on my grocery list, take a walk if the weather permits, or call a friend. That having been accomplished, I remember what my mother

had suggested and I read (I have a stack of at least a half-dozen books by my bed at any given time and a bookcase full of books waiting to be opened), write (notice the article you are reading now), or draw...well, I don't draw as much any more, but I do look forward to occasionally creating a portrait for a personalized gift.

Okay, now you know how I offset the feeling of dying slooowly. I suspect that creative endeavors like writing or drawing is what the artist does, not just because he feel he has to create, but also because he wants to quit the quagmire of boredom. Artists are often considered loners. So are martial artists, despite their tournaments, seminars, and conventions: you generally do not defend yourself nor work on your skills en masse. In your attempt to alleviate the extended pain of "dying slowly", you just might find yourself mentally and physically working on the skills that will prevent you from dying swiftly.

Necessity may be the mother of invention, but perhaps Boredom, not Necessity, is the parent of Practice, and Practice, the parent of Skill.