



We're all going to get bored. Says bestselling author Louise Perry. It's worth understanding why.

Reading time: 14 minutes

Actually, now is the time to write about good intentions and I've been thinking about it too, but my two BrainCandies on this topic are still relevant (BC 63 and BC 85). If you are looking for suggestions on how to establish good intentions with a higher probability, you will find well-founded suggestions there. I'll be happy to email them to you.

I went to South Tyrol for a few nice days between the years and had time to work through a lot of my reading list. I also discovered some chance finds that have kept me busy for a while. One of them is an essay by British author Louise Perry. Her key insight is perfect for the start of the New Year and may also have a slight influence on your New Year's resolutions.

Perry is primarily concerned with social developments in Western societies and landed an unexpected bestseller with her first book, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*. She had difficulties finding a publisher. I haven't read the book yet, but I love her essay: [We will all become boring](#), which was published in September 2023. I will focus here on what I consider to be her most important findings and leave out a large part of her argument.

"There has never been a lonelier time in human history. In the UK, the number of people living alone has doubled since 1974 and now accounts for around a fifth of the adult population.

In the United States, this figure is approaching 30%. In Sweden, 48% of households consist of an adult living alone." In Germany, the proportion is 41%.

This is partly a result of medical technology extending our life expectancy (although this trend has now reversed).

It is also a consequence of liberalism: delayed marriages, high divorce rates and the fact that individuals generally have more choice in how they live their lives as a result of greater social freedom.

This kind of choice was not available to people living in communities built on extended family networks, which have historically been the norm in the West and everywhere else.

There is much historical controversy about when exactly the British - including the British diaspora in North America and elsewhere - began to reject the pre-modern kinship system. Regardless of exactly when it began, the process is now almost complete, not just in Britain - the cradle of liberal individualism - but throughout the rich world.

Why have the close community ties dissolved? It's probably mainly for economic reasons - we became wealthier.

People were no longer dependent on the help of the community, and the poor no longer had to help each other to survive.

Perry concludes that "the pattern we can observe across all times and places is this: people crave privacy and autonomy at certain stages of their lives. In particular, able-bodied and childless young adults often crave distance from their extended families and will often go to great lengths to achieve it. At this stage of life, communitarianism is incredibly troublesome. As one of the strongest, wealthiest and most productive members of your extended family, you have often been asked to share your wealth with them in various ways." For young women, this usually meant helping with childcare, elder care and housework, while young men were



expected to share their wages with a seemingly endless parade of relatives, all holding out their hands expectantly.

It is hardly surprising that these young people are rebelling against such a culture.

But they usually forget that at some point in their lives they will end up on the other side of the transaction. Perry wrote in *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*:

"In the natural human life cycle, we begin as dependent babies, spend a very short time as relatively independent young adults, before caring for our own dependent children and finally ending our lives in what Shakespeare called our "second childishness".

Modern contraception has allowed us to artificially prolong the young adult phase and create the illusion that independence is our permanent state. But it's not - it's nothing more than a short phase that some of us will never experience."

And this is not just a question of physical fitness. Another form of social capital that can wax and wane over the course of a lifetime is having fun. The example Perry likes to give comes from the charming television series *Derry Girls*, set in a working-class family in 1990s Derry. The series revolves around a group of teenage girls obsessed with their own little dramas, as teenagers are wont to do. One of the recurring characters is a boring old guy called Uncle Colm.

The girls roll their eyes at Uncle Colm and can't understand why they have to spend their time with him. The adults also find him boring, but still continue to invite him to family parties because their culture is still traditional enough to consider this intra-family hospitality a duty. The girls don't think about it (why would they?),

but the truth is that if Uncle Colm wasn't invited to Sunday family dinners, he wouldn't be invited to anything. No one would choose to spend their time with him.

Friends, there is a good chance that one day we will all be as boring as Uncle Colm, perhaps sooner rather than later. Liberal individualism is good for the People when they are not dependent on others. He's not so great when they are.



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Like all influential ideologies, liberal individualism has its merits (why else would people embrace it?). Personal freedom is great for young, fit and eccentric people, not only because it allows them to "live their best life", but also because it allows them to create wealth. Economic and social liberalism go hand in hand because the latter enables the former. You have to be maximally mobile, open-minded and self-interested if you want to prioritize making money. And these ambitious individualists then build companies and develop technologies that benefit other people.

On a societal level, we can either be rich or we can be communal. Perry doesn't believe we can be both - at least not for long.

Baby boomers were the most likely to enjoy both at the same time, but only because they were born during an ideological changing of the guard. They enjoyed the trusting, family-oriented culture cultivated by their parents and grandparents.



And then experienced the youthful rejection of all the dark sides of this culture.

So, Perry has some bad news: these things are incompatible. You can't promote a culture of optionality and then expect people to choose you when one day you become a boring and annoying option. You can't buy loneliness when it suits you and then try to buy back companionship when it no longer suits you, because you can't buy sincere and intimate companionship. On this subject, Sam Kriss has recently published a remarkable essay on the vast and expanding retiree conurbation in Florida known as The Villages. Perry focuses here on his analysis of the baby boomer ideology of hyper-individualism - the ideology that finally buried the extended family in the twentieth century.

Kriss writes of a city-sized playground with golf courses, restaurants and swimming pools, inhabited exclusively by American baby boomers and as far removed from the pre-modern kinship system as you can imagine:

The message of The Villages is that the true meaning of human life is to have fun, drink and play golf, and the true meaning of human life is only experienced when you are retired: when you have nothing left to do but exist. You are not old, because age is just a number. You don't need to be looked after.

What you need is to start living your best life. When they were young, baby boomers blew up the multigenerational community: an unruly youth, a wild youth that made the self its goal.

Now they are doing it again. They have shirked their duty as old people, which is to be the link between the future and the past - because the world no longer has a past and hardly has a future. You are floating in an infinite present. You still wear blue jeans. You will never die.



Picture credits: istockphoto.com / Michael Warren

These baby boomers escaped the extended family when it suited them, and some of them are still rich enough to enjoy what liberal individualism considers the "true purpose of human life": their leisure time, free from unwanted social obligations. For these lucky few, there are still just enough migrant workers to provide cheap care, and the state pension still lands reliably in their bank account every month, thanks to working-age taxpayers. In material terms, they don't need the traditional family. Of course, this will no longer be true for future generations as the pyramid scheme of the welfare state gradually collapses.

This is exactly what Perry's next book will be about: *The Case For Having Kids*. But the picture Kriss paints of the villages is still very bleak, despite the material abundance.

There is much desperate loneliness and listlessness among the generation most passionately invested in the dream of freedom:

There are no cemeteries in these villages. The ambulances are not marked, nor are the hearses. No one talks about the fact that every few weeks a vaguely familiar face disappears from the pickleball court. The most depressing thing Perry has read about the villages came from someone who worked in one of the hospices. When the villagers die, many of them are broke.



They've spent their pensions on margaritas and golf carts. Hospice care is expensive, so their homes are sold while they're still dying, and someone, like the real estate agent Jason, will let another retiree move in there, another lonely person who wants to have fun. Most people who die in The Villages are eventually cremated. This amusement machine, built to please you every night with cheap drinks and dancing, also systematically cremates piles of bodies. People who don't need to visit graves.

A brief interjection from me: I had read about a similar example in another book at the same time. Many retired single Australian men live in Pattaya in Thailand. Expats who wanted to stay in paradise.

And who had to realize that having lots of sun, beautiful beaches and cheap entertainment options around you is not enough to have fun. At some point, the pension is only enough for the numbing daily drinks in the bars and the occasional trip to the notorious red light industry. A very lonely life.

Back to Perry: as we enter a post-affluence era - and Perry is sad to say that this is likely to be the case - we can expect to see the decline of Villages and the rise of true Villages: local networks of social obligation that provide mutual support when people can't rely on the state's surplus. After all, this is how people have lived for most of human history. But reinventing these systems is likely to prove difficult, and it will come at a cost. While baby boomers enjoyed a fun changing of the guard, today's young people are likely to experience the same process in reverse: declining wealth combined with shattered social capital. Loneliness and poverty. (For those who find Perry's outlook too pessimistic and who enjoy reading a bit in German, I recommend the 11.01.24 edition of the Pioneer Morning Briefing: [Caterpillar Nimmersatt](#))

But there is a way out for any group capable of reinventing what the medieval Arab philosopher Ibn Khaldun called "asabiyyah": literally "family ties", understood as social cohesion and common goals. A culture rich in asabiyyah makes demands on the most able, and it offers little in the way of swimming pools and golf courses. But it also looks at the interdependence of people in the long run and concludes that a culture cannot survive long if it destroys traditional institutions in a great progressive bonfire of vanities. When you're young, it's fun to prioritize optionality. But eventually we'll all be the old, sick, boring option.

So much for Perry. She argues pointedly in order to convey her findings clearly. And of course it is impossible to fully appreciate the complex topic of social change in one essay. After all, family constellations are by no means always unproblematic. There are toxic families that no adult wants to return to. There are also old people who have become evil and whom we cannot please.

And it is by no means the case that we only get bored in old age - or rather suffer from loneliness. After all, moments of loneliness can also be extremely valuable for our salvation. We can learn to be less distracted and feel better about ourselves.

The outspoken psychiatrist Manfred Spitzer wrote a statistically well-founded book back in 2018: [Loneliness - the unrecognized disease: painful, contagious, deadly](#). (in German) That was before the pandemic.

In 2023, behavioral scientist and theologian Hans-Arved Willberg wrote in his book: [Loneliness and Isolation](#) that children, teenagers and young adults are now also affected by loneliness. Lockdowns, school closures and online teaching have played a significant role in this. A Springer textbook is really not for interested laypeople, but there is a good interview in German with Willberg in this [podcast](#).



So, what can you take away from Perry's thoughts? On the one hand, it's quite obvious that you need to look after stable, deep relationships in the long term. With your family - if that's a viable option, in partnerships, see also the last BrainCandy 101.

But that's not all, I liked a sentence in a reader review of the Spitzer book: "I - have been alone for twenty years, but not lonely, because I keep myself busy and feel free and happy." The reader probably experiences self-efficacy and thus self-affirmation in his activities and thus empowers himself not to perceive being alone as loneliness.

For me, this also makes it likely that the reader is not referring to the use of entertaining social media.

These electronic social contacts rarely produce a feeling of self-efficacy. The feeling of emptiness tends to increase at the end of the day.

Perhaps the wealthy lonely boomers will soon be able to buy the company of humanoid robots with ChatGPT 6.0. A very interesting gap in the market, but one that gives me goosebumps. Especially as a not untypical member of the Boomer generation. But with more attention to good family relationships instead of the focus on 'fun'.

Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



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