

Aunt Bossy

Written by Susan Murphy

Wednesday, 26 February 2014 07:45 - Last Updated Wednesday, 26 February 2014 08:14



Turn The Page

Dear Aunt Bossy,

I like to read biographies, autobiographies and memoirs, but whenever I do, I always feel like the world's biggest loser when I'm finished. Everyone else's life seems to be so much more interesting than mine.

When I look at my life, I do see that it is pretty good, but in comparison to others, it is just so boring and I am so ordinary.

What should I do?

Sad Nan

Dear Nan,

Aunt Bossy

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First of all, do not stop reading biographies and memoirs. Hidden within are all sorts of secrets. For example, Aunt Bossy just finished reading "Wild" by Cheryl Strayed, and was blown away by the adventuresome nature of this young woman who walked the Pacific Coast Trail all alone for three months. AB was slightly distressed because she is a bit too long in the tooth to attempt such a thing. She also felt very inadequate because she has never been able to learn to tie a knot or start a fire.

However, today, when Aunt Bossy was faced with some unpleasant tasks, she said to herself, "If Cheryl can walk twenty miles with bleeding feet and no toenails, I can certainly clean out the "mush" room and maybe even vacuum." The same thing happened when Aunt Bossy went to lunch and managed to forgo the wonderful bread at Wren Bistro. "If Cheryl can eat dehydrated stuff for weeks on end, I can give up bread."

On the other hand, you need to take things further than that if you think your life is boring and you are "ordinary." You need to rev things up, and you can use biographies and autobiographies to show you the way.

What is the writer (or her subject) doing that thrills you? Does she know lots of interesting people and get to travel to exotic places and eat at wonderful restaurants? Guess what, you can do that too.

There are interesting people within your reach. The secret is to find them, and you do that by talking to people of all sorts. Don't stick with "your group." If you are an old black lady, find a young white boy to talk to. If you are a white suburban country club person, find a black urban person to interact with. Go for the opposite of you.

"Yikes," you say, that is hard and scary." Yessiree. It is also fun, interesting, and can be very rewarding.

So how do you find these "others?" Go to church, join an organization with which you are not very familiar, learn how to have a conversation and get people to open up and talk, volunteer. (If you really want to juice up your life, volunteer at a Hospice and let dying people tell you about their lives. That will put things in perspective fast.)

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As for travel, if you don't have time or money to hit the road, hit the sidewalks of your town. There are all sorts of different neighborhoods everywhere, including shops and restaurants. If you live a pretty fancy life, eat at a neighborhood dive where the place goes silent when you walk in. If you don't have much money, have a drink during happy hour at a glamorous bar or restaurant. Explore your community and you will be surprised at what you will find.

When it comes to food, we are fortunate that the world is available to us right here. Check out the sections of your supermarket that you usually ignore. You name the cuisine; your store has something to satisfy that. Go to the "other" supermarket. Try chitlins and caviar.

Talk to the butcher about how to prepare a meat you haven't eaten before. Ask other shoppers how to cook something you see them looking at that is new to you.

If it is an art or discipline, such as a sport, that you admire, jump right in. You don't have to be accomplished at the start. You can paint, draw, sing and dance as much as you want. You can also go hit a ball, ride a bike, run.

This approach might not be terribly successful from the first day, but keep at it. The person whose biography you just read didn't develop his or her life out of nothing.

Break those lives down and find the steps, or if you are dealing with a character who seems to have had a perfect and golden existence from birth, please do some more research. You will find unmentioned challenges, sorrow and disappointment. No one escapes those.

You have two assignments. One is to get out and create whatever it is that struck you as envy-producing about the other person's life. Assignment number two is to be grateful for all the good things that you do have.

Good luck,

Aunt Bossy

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Tell Me...

Dear Aunt Bossy,

I'm sort of shy, but am willing to put myself out there to overcome that. The problem is that I don't know how to start a conversation. What do people say?

Silent Joe

Dear SJ,

Start by saying, "Wow, I had a busy week, what did you do this week?" or "I really like this place, what brings you here?" Notice neither question can be answered with one word.

Once the person starts talking, your job is to listen as if your life depended upon it, because it does. You should echo back words and phrases and use probing phrases.

"Problem? Tell me more." Or "Sounds like you really worked hard." Off they will go explaining. Just saying "how interesting" can lead the other person to keep talking. When I lived in New Jersey, all I had to say was "Getouttahere!" and the other person would expound.

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These are certainly not the only questions and probing phrases you can use, so come up with some of your own. Just be sure they are open-ended questions.

Don't be afraid of reaching a dead end. If the person with whom you are talking appears to be shy and struggling too, you can always say, "You know I always have a hard time talking to strangers, but you are easy to talk to." They might be utterly relieved and the conversation can go from there.

You must discipline yourself so that when the other person says something, you don't respond by blabbering on about yourself. For example: Other Person: "Well I just got back from Hawaii." You: "Oh, I love Hawaii, blah, blah, blah." You should respond by saying, "Hawaii, how exciting!" You will get to talk about your Hawaiian experience later.

The key is to listen and be interested in the other person. Focus on him or her.

Practice this with people you already know and talk to regularly. Before you know it, you will be ready to take your conversational abilities to rooms full of strangers.

Aunt Bossy is Susan Murphy, an internationally known Communication Skills Coach who adores spending every winter and spring in Beaufort. Ask for advice @ Bossymurph@mac.com

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