



“The Spiritual Gift of Waiting”
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Emerson Unitarian Universalist Chapel

Reading adapted from Holly W. Whitcomb’s “Seven Spiritual Gifts of Waiting”

I hate waiting. I will not eat at a restaurant if I have to wait. I will not approach a freeway entrance if there is any possibility I will have to wait in traffic. If I have to wait in line at the grocery store, I will bossily charge up to the manager and ask why customers are waiting and suggest they open a new checkout lane without delay.

Twenty-two years ago I was twenty-nine years old and nine months pregnant with our second child. I looked like a Mack truck. Pregnancy, perhaps more than anything else, teaches the gifts of waiting. That year I was waiting not only for a baby to be born, but for other things as well. I was waiting to be employed. I was waiting for friends. I was waiting for a time to stop grieving the small university community we had just left. I was waiting for money to buy a new furnace. I was waiting for Milwaukee to feel like home.

Every stage of our lives involves some new form of waiting. When our children are tiny, we wait for a good night’s sleep. When our children are toddlers, we wait for the time when they will no longer wear diapers, can take a bath on their own, and get dressed by themselves. When our children are teenagers and driving, we often wait until we hear the front door close and know they are safely home. And at any stage of life, we can experience waiting for the results of medical tests. This kind of waiting is perhaps the hardest of all. A weekend can seem like an eternity.

Waiting presents an enormous challenge. We are impatient I-can-fix-it kinds of people... but not all situations can be fixed. We assume that everything in life can be made better by taking action, but sometimes it just isn’t so.

Waiting is an important guest to honor in the guest house of our humanity. If we consciously allow waiting to be our teacher, we can accommodate waiting more peacefully. If we welcome waiting as a spiritual discipline, waiting will present its spiritual gifts. Waiting contains some of our richest spiritual opportunities if we are conscious enough and courageous enough to name them and live into them.

Sermon

For the last fifteen months I have had the privilege of corresponding with a man who is serving time. I got to know “Anderson” on the outside, through his partner’s family. I liked him. I hired him to work on my house. He was good natured, easy to be around and always smiling. But I felt like I saw him in a different way when I learned that he was going back to prison. And when I say that I don’t mean that suddenly I didn’t like him or didn’t trust him anymore. I say that because we went beyond our “hi how are you” relationship to something more real. We talked about real things, like his thoughts and feelings, his hopes and fears, and what he was going to need from the outside while he was behind bars. As I recall (and I hope I’m right in my recollection because Anderson is going to get a copy of this sermon!), I recall he was particularly worried about three things. First, he was afraid of being changed by the culture of prison. It’s a tough culture and he was quite legitimately afraid of losing a piece of himself to survive there. Second, he was afraid of being forgotten and left behind. Not an unreasonable fear. A lot of families and friends can’t always hang in there for the years their loved one is behind bars. Third, I think he was afraid of the waiting. Prison can seem like empty time. Too much time to think, to ponder, to worry, to get in trouble, both in your mind and outside of it.

I promised Anderson that I wouldn't be one of the people who forgot him and he took me up on that offer. Anderson has written to me faithfully since he's been in prison, and I always look forward to his letters. He keeps getting more real, more authentic, and I treasure his willingness to trust me with the details of his hopes, dreams, and fears. In his letters, I've seen Anderson deal with the waiting in a lot of ways. He tries to keep busy so he can forget that he's waiting. He tries to use the time to work on himself, so that when he gets out he won't make the mistakes that landed him there in the first place. Sometimes the waiting gets painful, only reminding him of the people he's not with, the places he can't go, the anniversaries, birthdays and holidays that he's missing. Sometimes in the waiting he'll get down on himself, seeing himself as an unworthy person, an unworthy father, son, and partner. An unworthy man. He will feel like he has nothing to offer anyone, least of all himself. Sometimes, that's when he writes me, and in his writing, he tries to talk himself into a better place, tries to remember that he's actually not been forgotten, that the good parts of him haven't gone away, that he is not defined as a human being solely by his mistakes, and that he has something to live for. This time isn't going to last forever. Someday, he'll have waited long enough, and it will be time to come home.

In so many ways, this is a season of waiting. Today is the first day of Hanukkah, the Jewish holiday that celebrates the return of the Israelites to their land and their Temple. According to the story of Hanukkah, the Greek Empire was in control of Israel and was trying to eradicate the Jewish faith and culture. The Maccabbees, a rebel militia group, fought for the survival of the Jewish people and their faith. After years of struggle, they succeeded in regaining control of the Temple, the most holy place in Israel. The first thing they did was to light the sacred flame that was to burn every night, a symbol of the steadfast presence of their God. But, there was only enough oil to burn one night and it would take days to make more. They lit the flame anyways and got to work making oil. When the first night had passed, they waited for the flame to die. Instead, it kept burning. When the second night had passed, they waited for the flame to die. Instead, miraculously, it kept burning. So it went for eight days, which was exactly how long it took to make more oil.

Today is also Winter Solstice, the shortest day and longest night of the year in the northern hemisphere. In the Pagan tradition, this is the time the gods seem to be hiding their faces from humanity. This evening many Pagans will spend the long cold night around large fires, chanting, dancing, ritual, singing to the sky and earth, as they wait for the return of the sun's life giving energy.

I imagine there were many kinds of waiting in the Christmas Story: Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, waiting for years to conceive a child; Mary waiting to give birth; Joseph waiting for his own heart to let him feel like Mary's real husband as she carried a god's child; the Three Wise Men waiting to arrive as they made the long journey east; the Shepherds perhaps waiting for just about anything to happen; and, if we allow ourselves to entertain, even for just a moment, the mythological richness of the doctrine of the Trinity, God waiting to take human form as a lowly, vulnerable, completely helpless infant.

All this waiting. All this time to be filled. There is often such a silence, a frustratingly empty silence, a sense that nothing is happening, or that it is happening too slowly, and we are waiting for something to fill up, to be fulfilled, to come to fruition so that our waiting can come to an end. Each of these sacred stories embodies the truth that waiting is a powerful thing. Waiting is not just about what you are waiting for, not just about what is going to be filled up, or fulfilled, or come to fruition. Waiting itself is sacred, and what we do with our waiting can be a powerful affirmation of faith, trust, seeing the emptiness itself as an experience worthy of its own recognition, regardless of what comes of it.

There's a saying that I'm sure Anderson has heard, and perhaps you have as well: "Don't let the time do you. You do the time." Many ex-cons will say that this mantra is what allowed them to find meaning in their experience and to keep putting one foot ahead of the other. The same is true for their families. They can't live just for the day the prison sentence is over. You have live in the present and make the most of your moments because all you really have is now. And so it is in our beloved holiday stories. What we see in each of these myths is the difference between passive waiting and active waiting. We all have places of emptiness in our lives and try as we might, we are not in control of when that emptiness gets filled, if it ever really does. We are like that little boy in our children's story, watching the ground waiting for those carrots

to come up. He had no control over when the first shoots would push through the soil. All he could do was wait. We can live into our emptiness, live into those places that lie in wait, live into the loss of control. This is what it means to live a grace-filled spirit-filled life.

What are you waiting for? And what are you doing with your waiting?

Holly Whitcomb, the author of our reading this morning, was on to something when she recognized her general impatience with life. We live in an impatient society, built around the imperative of instant gratification. In other words, we want what we want when we want it. Our society as a whole seems far too ready to leave the restaurant if we have to wait in line because we're hungry now. Are you feeling an emptiness? Fill it with something or someone. Are you feeling an uneasiness in your life? Find the problem and fix it. Make the uncomfortable feelings go away, however you have to do it. Pop a pill. Have an affair. Pour a drink. Blame someone. Turn on the TV. Surf the web. Buy something.

I firmly believe that what we're seeing with our economy today is a dramatic unfolding of the truth that this kind of living is not sustainable. It's not economically sustainable. It's not environmentally sustainable. It's not socially sustainable. It is most definitely not spiritually sustainable. Emptiness is not always meant to be filled, and we can't keep running around in fear of our emptiness trying to fill it with things that will actually never fill it. We can't fix the emptiness. We can't spend it away. We can't eradicate it through unceasing busyness, meaningless sex, unthinking consumerism, or mind-numbing entertainment. In fact, the more we avoid the emptiness, the more dangerous it feels and the more power our fear of it has. The longer we put off embracing our emptiness, the more trouble we get into.

This is the thing. There is no solution to emptiness, because emptiness is not a problem. Emptiness is a spiritual gift ushering us into deeper living. The real question is not "How do I fill this emptiness?" The real questions are, "What is my emptiness calling me to? What is the discomfort telling me? Where are my feelings asking me to go?"

When I was in seminary, I spent some time training as a chaplain and as a pastoral counselor and one of the first things they tried to train us out of was the desire to help people. Sound strange? Isn't that what chaplains and counselors are supposed to do? Help people? After all, everyone who came to us for care came with problems. They brought an emptiness of some kind and the desire to fill that emptiness. Isn't what we were supposed to help them do? This is the problem, though. Often we simply helped them run from an emptiness they needed to welcome into their lives. The desire to help, or the desire to fix is about our own fear of emptiness. Our desire to help was about our needs, not the needs of the people we were trying to serve. And not only that, but the fixing often got in the way. You can't rush healing. You can't rush wholeness, because the kind of healing and wholeness you rush isn't real. It's a bandage that does nothing for the wound underneath it.

The way we were trained out of the desire to fill other people's emptiness was to learn how to sit with our own emptiness, with our own unfulfilled longings and to resist the temptation for the quick fix. To use Holly Whitcomb's examples, we had to learn to stand in line at the restaurant. If we could sit with our own emptiness and longing, then we had half a chance of being able to sit with someone else's and to walk with them on their journey and to ask them, "What is your emptiness asking of you?" or "What do you think you need to wait for." There is so much to learn and experience in that place of emptiness, and when we rush it, when we try to force the fulfillment of our desires, or what we think we desire, we actually end up losing so much – the chance to learn, to grow, to experience the true richness of life and all its possibilities.

All those things we want in our lives that seem to be held away from us, form the invitation to walk into sacred waiting. The unfulfilled desires, the hoped for outcomes, the acquisition of some thing or some one or some goal, the desire for healing, the grief for one who is lost, the hopes we have for our children and loved ones, the yearnings for whatever feels lacking. These are all invitations to welcome the honored guest of waiting into our lives. And I know, this is not an easy guest to seat at your table. This is not an easy guest to share a meal with because our whole being has been trained to show it the door.

Religious mystics, those who make a spiritual discipline of emptiness and waiting, say this guest is god itself, because god is exposed in our yearning. God is made alive in the gap between what we want and what we have. In fact, I would say that every major religion tradition is about nurturing and exposing that gap. A true religious is less about filling our emptiness and fixing our lives, and more about exposing our desires and channeling them in life-affirming ways.

The Buddhist practices of mindfulness and meditation are all about working through our attachments and nurturing a pregnant emptiness. Judaism, with its laws and rituals, is about emptying your life of false ways of living, so that you can sustain an emptiness that waits for the moving of God in your life. Jesus told the wealthy man, give away all that you have and follow me. Empty yourself so that you can be filled with the living spirit. Islam asks its followers to empty their lives five times a day. Leave what you are doing, cleanse yourself, and give yourself up to prayer. In those times, there is only your Beloved, waiting for you and for him.

In Unitarian Universalism, we have our principles and purposes. We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and we affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence. The gap between the reality of this world and these powerful principles means that our experience of that source of all things, which some call God, is about a long sustained active waiting, in which we plant seeds many of which we may never see push through the earth, but trusting that the generations who follow us will.

All the major faiths affirm the universal truth that we are called to emptiness, called to walk into that sacred place of yearning so that we may experience the source of life itself entering us and moving through us for a purpose that is larger than we will ever know.

I wonder how Anderson's waiting will have changed him when he comes home. I wonder how waiting for Anderson to come home will change his family, will change me? Sometimes I think to myself that Anderson has but dimly perceived how strong he is. His eloquent letters (and yes Anderson, believe it or not, sometimes you write very eloquently!) speak of such deep insight, wisdom, a desire for wholeness and healing. He can often see the mundane and the minute in that big picture way. But even when he thinks he's stuck, he's growing. That's the nature of waiting. Just because it seems like nothing's happening, doesn't mean nothing's happening. There's just no telling what the holy is shifting and changing in those deep places we but dimly perceive.

May your waiting be with you. Amen and blessed be.