

We Wait

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Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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*I didn't know the full dimensions of forever,
but I knew it was longer than waiting for Christmas to come*
Richard Brautigan

Opening Words² Nathan MacDicken

“Good things come to those who wait.”

I think we've all heard some version of this old proverb. But still, it can be hard to wait, can't it? As a culture, we seem to want near-instant gratification! We live in a world of Fast Food, High-Speed Internet and the Easy Pass. Each generation's children seem to grow up faster than the last.

Nevertheless, we can be patient when we need to be. You still have to wait to be 16 to drive a car. You have to wait four years to get a new President. You have to wait for the weekend. And all too often, you have to wait in traffic to get where you're going.

The singer Tom Petty says, “The Waiting Is The Hardest Part.” But anticipation can also be the fun part!



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The long climb as your Roller Coaster car nears the top of that first big hill. The building suspense, in your favorite movie, just before the Hero swings in or the monster jumps out! And of course, counting down “the 12 Days of Christmas.”

There’s another well-known proverb: “Life is a journey, not a destination.” I’ve been chanting this one a lot over the last few years. Sometimes the long-awaited, hard-earned pay off can be all too fleeting. Our choir might work for weeks on a song that will be over in minutes! My wife can spend hours in the kitchen – and you should see how fast her deserts are devoured! (Usually by me.)

Some things can’t be rushed. Chief among these are prayer and meditation. Sometimes God is best found in the “Empty Spaces”. A long, quiet walk in Nature. A pause in a line of dramatic dialogue. The soft sound of a child sleeping. In visual art, the part of the image where nothing is happening – What we call “negative space” – can strongly define our subject matter.

The cold winter months can be very silent and still. So much so that we can find ourselves despairing in them. I believe that’s why so many cultures have celebrations of candle light and gathering loved-ones... It can be a very long wait for spring. We need to see each other, hold each other, hear each other’s voices to get through the “frozen times”.

So here we are. Winter approaches. The “Advent” of the New Year is coming. Now we wait. Let us take this “holy pause” – together.

Sermon³

Duane Fickeisen

This season between Thanksgiving and Christmas can be such a busy time. Many of us rush from event to event, from concert to party, from shopping to wrapping to shipping, shouting zip codes. And yet it is also a time of anticipation — many of us eagerly await the holiday celebrations, gathering of family, exchange of gifts, and once-a-year special treats.

We are eager for the solstice to pass and the hours of daylight to start growing longer again, for the turning of the calendar and the opportunity to put the current year behind us and to start over again with renewed resolve to make things better.

Some of us are anxious knowing that this will be the first year that Christmas will come without a partner or a beloved family member present. Still others stand vigil over someone who is gravely ill, praying for comfort, wellness, and relief from suffering.

And for others the holidays carry special significance as the last time we'll celebrate in our current home or before the kids leave the nest or — in Judy's and my case — the last December that we'll be here with all of you.

For many in our communities it will be a time without enough resources for shelter, food, and health care, and no good prospect for that to change soon.

And so even in the midst of being busy, we wait. Whether we wait with eager anticipation or dread, we wait.

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One of our favored religious ancestors, Ralph Waldo Emerson, once asked, “How much of human life is lost in waiting?”

I wondered in response to Waldo how much life we have to gain by learning to wait well. What if the measure of our lives is more about quality than quantity? If what matters is not how much we get done or where we have gone, but what we do and how we do it? Isn't our happiness more closely tied to the quality of our relationships and to the attention we pay to the world around us?

If the goal is a life filled with meaning and an effective pursuit of happiness, might we gain life by learning to wait well? To be fully present here and now rather than always living in anticipation of the future or in rehashing the past?

Others have written that waiting is futile, that we should be proactive and “dare to attack” in order to “capture opportunity⁴” or that we should “seize common occasions and make them great⁵” or that we should not “be content to wait and see what will happen” but have “the determination to make the right things happen.⁶” “Do not wait; the time will never be just right.”⁷

Sometimes we do need a kick in the seat of the pants to get us going. Haven't most of us experienced first hand the effects of putting something off too long with the consequence that delay made things worse? The serious toothache isn't likely to

⁴ Paul J. Meyer

⁵ Orisson Swett Marden

⁶ Peter Marshall

⁷ Napoleon Hill

get better without treatment. The chirping signal that the smoke detector's battery is low deserves a timely response. The last minute shopping trip only to discover that what you really, really wanted to get for someone has long ago been sold out?

On the other hand, there are times when putting something off has benefits. A cooling off period can sometimes help resolve a conflict. Fermenting grapes will only become fine wine in their own time. Ignoring calls from a telemarketer may cause them — eventually — to give up. The thing you covet may go on sale — later.

But all of those assume that we have control over when things happen. That's not always the case. And yet we persist in asking, "Are we there yet?" when we know darn well the answer. And if it wasn't "No," we would not have even thought to ask.

Christmas will come when it comes. The solstice can't be rushed. The New Year by our conventional calendar is still several weeks away. So we might as well use this time as an opportunity to learn and to practice waiting with patience and grace.

Our waiting grants us the opportunity to develop practices that make the waiting bearable and even beneficial. So I invite you to pull the rip cord. Set aside your lists, stop fretting about what needs to be done, what the future might bring, or how short or long it is until Christmas. At least for this hour. Stop the busy chatter and simply be present to the here and now.

No need to add to anxiety. It's not good for your heart to rush and worry.

Breathe in, breathe out. What will be, will be.

For this hour each week come into this sacred space, be held in the love of community, carried by music and poetry, and be present in the here and now. Just be here and let our communion of seekers be the chalice that shelters your flame, that holds you in compassion and care.

Come again next Sunday to learn about our efforts to educate girls in Mozambique from Karen and Bill Butt who have been administering the program there on our behalf. And next Sunday afternoon, do come to Judy's and my home in Carlisle for our holiday open house and be fed. Let the afternoon be our gift to you.

Tomorrow morning the frenzy of preparation for that open house begins, and I intend to keep reminding myself to enjoy the process of decorating, shopping, and cooking. It is so easy for me to become frustrated at all there is to do and forget to revel in the memories evoked by that tin rooster ornament I made when I was a kid. I have a strong visual memory of cutting up and flattening a tin can, cutting out the rooster with Dad's help, and painting it. And here's my Grandmother's badly tarnished and tangled bird nest ornament and the cheap glass balls that have lost almost all their color — the ones my parents bought for their first Christmas tree in the 1930s, when they struggled to pay the rent and put food on the table. Breathe in. Breathe out.

It is so easy to get caught up in striving for perfection and getting it all done on schedule that I can forget why we are doing this and become anxious and frustrated rather than welcoming the playful and joyous creativity that so feeds my soul.

Emerson's protégé, Henry David Thoreau, had a much different take on idleness than did Waldo. He wrote, "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry."

Waldo found waiting to be a waste of life, while Henry found the waste in hurry. Perhaps someone should develop a psychological metric with Henry-esque aversion to hurry on one end of the scale and Waldo's aversion to waiting on the other. And then propose how to keep a healthy balance between them.

In two weeks, on the 19th we'll have another story Sunday, this time about how the least likely family in town took over the Christmas pageant. It will be funny and poignant. And then come on Christmas Eve for our Lessons and Carols service at 7:30 as we remember the ancient story from both traditional and modern points of view.

Let these be times to nourish your soul in these darkest days of winter. Come here to pause, to set aside the busyness, to wait together.

This second Sunday of Advent in the Christian calendar marks the season of waiting, of anticipation of the birth of Jesus as the ancient story tells. It is a time designated to look ahead and to celebrate this story of the distant God coming to dwell among us, incarnate, made flesh, and showing us how to live in connection and love with our neighbors, both stranger and friend, as one of our hymns declares. Wake now, compassion, praying and striving their hardship to end.

We are also, right now, in the midst of Hanukkah, the Jewish celebration of the miracle of the temple oil lamps burning on and on after the Maccabees restored the temple that Antiochus defiled in an effort to destroy Judaism. Despite there being only a single day's supply of consecrated oil (it takes eight days to purify new olive oil), the lamps burned for the full eight days until more oil was ready.

As the Hanukkah candles are lit — one for each of the eight nights — Jewish law forbids them to be used for illumi-

nation for reading or work, enforcing a time of reflection while you wait for them to burn all the way down. Tonight, the fifth night of Hanukkah, Jews will light five candles in the menorah and wait until they burn out.

Sometimes winter weather enforces a pause when snow and ice make travel hazardous and schools and businesses shutter their doors. The enforced change of pace can be both an annoying interruption in plans and an opportunity to pause, make a cup of tea and read a good book, play a game, or bundle up and take a winter walk, strolling without any particular destination, but simply being present to quiet wonder.

Waiting well means paying attention to the present moment. It means noticing what is already here. It means staying attuned to the anticipation — for better or worse — of what might be coming. And it means recognizing and letting go of your need to control outcomes, knowing that while we can exercise our ability to make decisions, we can't know with certainty what the future holds or how the choices we make will unfold.

Staying present may be more easily accomplished through practices of observing, noticing, and appreciating. Actively seeking beauty, attending to relationships, and finding reasons for gratitude can help.

So can spiritual practices that encourage centering and grounding in the present — meditation, yoga, and contemplative prayer come to mind. Practices that engage and pamper the body — exercise, walking, massage, soaking in a hot bath, for example — may be helpful.

Find ways to nourish and engage your creativity — that focus your attention, engage the right side of your brain, and give you something to do.

In our hurried lives, we expect quick gratification, fast results, and almost instant responses to messages, but we still need to wait. Cultivating patience and practices that support staying present in the current moment rather than wasting it by being anxious about the future yet to come just might serve you well. It's an important life skill. You're going to need it. Guaranteed.

Are we there yet? Not quite. How much longer? A hundred years. That's forever. Almost.

Image: "The Sacrifice of Isaac" by Rembrandt, 1635, oil on canvass. Image in the public domain.