

“Waiting for Life” by Shari Woodbury
For Heartland UU Church 2-10-13

OPENING WORDS by Andrew Pakula

We arrive together here
Travelers on life's journey
Seekers of meaning, of love, of healing, of justice, of truth
The journey is long, and joy and woe accompany us at every step
None is born that does not die
None feels pleasure that does not also feel pain.
The tear has not yet dried on the cheek but the lips curve sweetly in a smile

Numerous are our origins, our paths, and our destinations
And yet, happily, our ways have joined together here today

Spirit of life. Source of love.
May our joining be a blessing
May it bring comfort to those who are in pain
May it bring hope to those who despair
May it bring peace to those who tremble in fear
May it bring wisdom and guidance for our journeys

And though this joining may be for just a moment in time
The moment is all we can ever be certain of
May we embrace this and every instant of our lives

READING: Tao te Ching, Chapter 15 (Stephen Mitchell translation)

The ancient masters were profound and subtle.
Their wisdom was unfathomable.
There is no way to describe it;
all we can describe is their appearance.

They were careful
as someone crossing an iced-over stream.
Alert as a warrior in enemy territory.

Courteous as a guest.
Fluid as melting ice.
Shapable as a block of wood.
Receptive as a valley.
Clear as a glass of water.

Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?

The Master doesn't seek fulfillment.
Not seeking, not expecting,
she is present, and can welcome all things.

SERMON

December 26. That was the day in 2009 when my daughter Avonelle was “due” to be born. My husband William – or as he had taken to calling himself, “Big Daddy” – was eager to see our baby, face to face. He felt that when they gazed into each other’s eyes, that would be the moment when he first met this new little person. I longed to hold her in my arms. When I could stroke her back and kiss her soft head, that’s when the waiting would be over.

Putting up the Christmas tree and decorations had helped to keep my mind and hands busy as the due date neared. In our preparations for the birth, we had learned it was a good idea to have “things to do” to stay occupied during the early stages of childbirth – but I had completed all of those activities long before the first sign of labor.

Our midwife, Mary Helen, modeled patience as our “due date” of Dec. 26 rolled past on the calendar... and then the 27th, the 28th, the 29th, the 30th, the 31st... First babies typically arrive “late,” Mary Helen assured us. I was working on a jigsaw puzzle of a bright red cardinal in the snow, at 11PM on New Year’s Eve, when contractions finally started. Avonelle was born in the wee hours of Jan. 1st and at last, to my great joy, placed in my arms.

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Waiting is something we all have to do. It is part of the mundane fabric of everyday life – not just the big events. We wait in check-out lines and doctor’s

offices. We wait for illness to run its course, for vacations to roll around, for grief to soften. At this time of year, we wait for signs of spring. In these days of climate change, sometimes we may be waiting for winter to look and feel like winter, for the rhythm of the seasons to get back in sync with our bodies' expectations.

Often we feel like we "can't wait" to do important things – to graduate; to land a job; to meet the perfect mate; to get married; to get this baby out of a pregnant belly and into our arms; to celebrate a special occasion; to retire. We are impatient to get on with it all.

Why is waiting so hard? For one thing, our culture does little to cultivate patience. Here in 21st-century America, the pace is fast, the forms of stimulation endless, the goal perpetual achievement. It is an age of fast food, smart phones, and attention deficits... an age of road rage. We are conditioned to multiply our desires and to never be satisfied.

Even if we get nowhere fast when we join the rat race (those of us who do), the sheer act of movement can make us feel engaged in life. Still, though we may be doing a lot of things on the surface of life – perhaps even *because* we are doing a lot on the surface of life – deep down we may not feel satisfied. Sometimes such dissatisfaction shows up in inner experience as confusion or restlessness. It can appear as feeling a little blue, or as a creeping cynicism or disillusionment toward life.

As a young person, I was often restless – uncertain what I was called to do in this world, but driven to contribute in some meaningful way, and subject to the rise and fall of moods over which it seemed I had little control. I started carrying around a pocket Tao te Ching when I was in college. Chapter 15 was soon dog-eared, and this verse underlined: "Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear?" Lao Tzu was telling me that to get the clarity and steadiness I longed for, I needed *patience*. I needed to learn how to wait.

In my 20s, I was attracted to a meditation practice in part because of its promise to help moderate the ups and downs of my energy and emotions, making me more patient and steady. I knew my water was muddy and I wanted to make it clearer. I found that when the wind speed of my mind fell during meditation, the water of my feelings churned less, and I could see more of what was going on within me and in the world.

This is not always a pleasant experience. In fact, the initial effect of such inner settling may be a greater awareness of how agitated our minds usually are. As I made friends with what Buddha called the monkey mind, I increasingly recognized how conditioned I was for stimulation, rather than for stillness. The process of slowing down the mind – reducing the wind speed on my inner pond,

and letting the silt settle – could be rather uncomfortable at times. But I did find that the practice gave me more patience for the unfolding of my life. I might feel agitated while I was meditating, but I felt steadier in daily life. I soon concluded that this benefit alone made the effort of meditation worth it.

So instead of seeing waiting as something unpleasant we are forced to do, we might look upon waiting as the essence of spiritual practice. Whether our practice is to bring our attention back repeatedly to the focal point of our meditation, or let thoughts slip by without holding onto them; to listen in silent prayer for a still, small voice within, or tune into the beauty around us on a walk; we are training our minds how to be completely present in the moment – not expecting anything in particular to happen. This is, in fact, where Lao Tzu goes with chapter 15:

Do you have the patience to wait
till your mud settles and the water is clear?

[the passage continues...]

Can you remain unmoving
till the right action arises by itself?

The Master doesn't seek fulfillment.
Not seeking, not expecting,
she is present, and can welcome all things.

We can welcome all things. As we learn to wait, in spiritual disciplines or in daily life, we may find we are able to experience more fully, more consciously, whatever is going on in our depths – anger, joy, grief, love, fear, longing... we are more able to bear all the pains and pleasures of living. We become less guarded toward life, and more aware of when our defenses do kick in. Hence, when people take up a daily spiritual practice, or go on a silent retreat, it is not uncommon for troubled memories or sweet yearnings that have been deeply buried to surface.

Waiting does not always lead to more vivid self-knowledge or to more direct wrestling with our habits. But even when we feel like we are in a dry spell – not feeling the connection to Source, not seeing the beauty all around us, not hearing the Inner Teacher – often something *is* actually moving far below the surface. The monsters in the deep are shifting. The logjams are clearing. The root of the lotus plant is growing upward from the muddy floor toward the light.

When we learn to wait, to sit in silence with whatever is happening in our life, to honor our longing for spaciousness within ourselves – when we do that, the mud within us can settle, so that we feel more clear, more pure, unencumbered by the past, open to the future. This not only benefits us, it benefits the people in our lives, who will be drawn to our inner calm. It may even contribute to a shift in our wider culture toward greater patience and a greater ability to bear with pain and discomfort – rather than covering up our pain, or acting out in ways that can sometimes be tragic. I believe this kind of spiritual work – learning to ride the currents of life – can have a healing effect that begins within us and radiates outward.

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Now, there is another kind of waiting for life. A kind of waiting where we ARE waiting for something to happen. The birth of a child is an archetypal waiting of this sort. We may be waiting for something else not entirely within our control – trying not to fret while we wait for a medical diagnosis, watching to see where a relationship is going, or waiting for some critical mass to be reached that will help realize our vision for a more loving world. At such times we may find it rather difficult to wait. It can be hard to stay in the moment when you are wondering if you have a serious health condition, or whether a promising new relationship will stand the test of time.

Alternatively, we may be waiting for something to ripen within ourselves – perhaps a creative idea or a maturity of perspective. We may be biding our time, silently gathering the strength that will allow us to take a difficult step: to forgive someone, to touch our deep sorrow or shame, to release an attachment, to say yes to something we feel called to do which we know will not be easy.

We may yearn to move forward. But, like having a baby, we can't rush the process of transformation. We can't cut short the gestation period. If we have passed from caterpillar to chrysalis, we cannot burst out before our new wings are formed. Waiting is the work. Spring cannot come before the leaves of autumn fall and form new loam, before the snows of winter cover over the ground and protect the seedlings nestling in the earth. Waiting is the work. "Do you have the patience to wait till the mud settles and your water is clear?"

As every parent knows, the waiting is not over once the baby is born. It just begins a new phase. One family took its turn caring for the yellow baby chick that had become a class favorite at the child's school. This chick was the weakest of the brood. One of the students, eager to see the little yellow bird, had tried to "help" it when it was hatching, picking off pieces of the shell for the chick. But as baby chicks come out into the world and begin peeping and preening, the struggle

to crack out of the shell is what strengthens them. The chick deprived of the chance to do this was weaker as a result.

As parents, we do a delicate dance, stepping in to help when our children need us – but not, in our impatience, “rescuing” them when they need to struggle a bit to help them learn and grow. In order to see clearly which is called for – action or patience – it helps to have built up a certain tolerance for exertion and for waiting. Like baby chicks, little humans need the chance to try and try again. Often they need us to simply be with them while they develop at their own pace.

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John Lennon famously sang, “Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans.” Life is also what happens while you are waiting for something to happen. How might our experience shift if we regarded each time of waiting, not as a test or a burden – something merely to be gotten through – but as an opportunity?

Those everyday times of waiting – at the post office, in a traffic jam, during a tiresome meeting which we just wish would be over – those times could be opportunities to build our chops in the essential skill of patience. We might sharpen our attention on the matter at hand, or if our attention is not needed, take the opportunity to take long deep breaths, to silently repeat our mantram, to notice the beauty in our immediate environment.

For most of us, I suspect, strengthening our patience muscles requires regular training. It is not something we master and then enjoy without effort. For example, I’ve noticed lately how impatient I tend to be while driving. If the person in front of me doesn’t go when the light changes, or if I find myself behind someone who drives (God forbid) under the speed limit, my body becomes agitated immediately. My arms and chest tighten. I’m prone to grumble aloud at the slowpoke ahead of me, causing my daughter, if she’s in the car, to say, “Mommy, are you frustrated?”

So I realize that this suggestion to practice waiting gracefully during those everyday moments is not necessarily an easy one. And lest I leave you with the impression that meditation hasn’t helped me, because I still feel impatient sometimes, let me assure you that it has – you should’ve seen me before I took up meditation! ;) At least now I can catch myself tensing and choose to consciously relax my body, or make conversation with my child instead of grousing at a stranger.

Let me share with you a little Sufi teaching tale about patience: Late one night, Nasrudin’s neighbor found him on all fours in the moonlight searching for something outside his house. The neighbor asked what he had lost. ‘I’ve lost my

key,' said Nasrudin. 'I have been looking for hours.' The neighbor got down and helped him search. After an hour of helping, the neighbor's patience was wearing thin. 'Where exactly did you drop the key?' he asked. 'I dropped it in my house,' said Nasrudin, 'but there's more light out here.' Nasrudin, a wise fool who appears in many teaching tales, reminds us that patience is not a cure-all. Even patience cannot help us if we are playing the fool. But in most of the tasks of daily life, patience will serve us well.

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During those more momentous periods of waiting in our lives – when we are waiting for inspiration, for clarity, for transformation – we might *seek out* stillness and silence. We may regard agitation as normal, a sign that we are, in fact, downshifting and getting more in touch with ourselves. We can welcome dry spells as potentially productive. If we are waiting to see results from our social change efforts, we can keep faith with all of those who have sown justice before us, by continuing to act from love – resisting oppression, building the beloved community, caring for each other and our earth – knowing that someday, however near or far in the future, others will reap the benefits of our loving action. And we can keep good company while we wait – with our loved ones, with fellow seekers like those assembled here, and with spiritual companions from ages past, like Lao Tzu, who have left testimony of their own grace-full waiting.

May we have the patience to wait till our mud settles and the water is clear. May we embrace the life we are living in this moment and in each moment to come. Blessed be.

CLOSING WORDS adapted from Robert Doss

For all who see God, may God go with you.

For all who embrace life, may life return your affection.

For all who seek a right path, may a way be found...

And may we have the patience to wait as we walk that path, step by step.