Patience

and the crucible of life

Waiting | Suffering | Growth

Patience does not come easily to many of us, for many reasons. Yet in this moving reflection, **Br. Curtis Almquist** *suggests a few of the many reasons that being forced to wait can actually be a gift. We are all invited to discover the countercultural (and surprising) goodness of waiting.*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "patience" as "the calm abiding, a quiet and self-possessed waiting for something"; however the etymology hints at the normal context, which is often very difficult. "Patience" comes from the Latin patientia, which is a "quality of suffering" – suffering with calmness and endurance, what the scriptures call "long-suffering." And suffering you often are when you are forced to relinquish your desires, or when you are left to wait without recourse. Patience is oftentimes not pretty and may feel vapid; sometimes there is a storm before the calm. It is one thing to wait in eagerness for something delightful we anticipate will unfold. It is another thing when we must be a patient patient because we are not in control over suffering – our own suffering or that of someone else whom we carry in our heart.

Here is a disclaimer. Sometimes we should not be patient. Some things we encounter in life are urgent, and we must act now.

But in the normal gestation of life, we must often wait. Without our learning patience, we will miss being present to a great deal of life. Life entails so much waiting. When the answer is not forthcoming, when something is not being resolved, when the door is not being opened, when someone is not acquiescing, when we have lost any sense of controlling some circumstance, we may experience a certain anguish or anger. To experience the fullness of our life, we must learn to wait well. Saint Francis de Sales advises, "What we need is a cup of understanding, a barrel of love, and an ocean of patience." Patience is a quality of waiting.

Patience does not come easily to most of us, for several reasons. Our ego, how many of us grandstand our own importance on the stage of life, can be a great impediment to patience. What I want, and when seems right, when I am entitled. It took me many years to distinguish the adoring love I experienced amongst my own family-of-origin from my true place in the world. For some of us, the context of learning about patience has very little to do with us, personally, and everything to do with others. They have their place, their needs, their hopes and desires. I must wait my turn. Sometimes there are many people in line ahead of me. The Jesuit priest, Anthony de Mello, describes the necessary shearing of the ego that can happen as we grow older: "Before I was twenty, I never worried about what other people thought of me. But after I was twenty I worried endlessly about all the impressions I made and how people were evaluating me. Only sometime after turning fifty did I realize that they hardly ever thought about me at all." The stage on which many of us learn about patience is discovering we are seldom THE STAR and more often the extra. We have an important and unique part in life, but so does everyone else. We must learn, listen, and become patient in the waiting.

Having to wait may prove to be a crucible to your soul, burning away what does not belong. You will not always get what you think you want in life. Jesus describes himself as "the gate" and "the door," and sometimes he bars the way (John 10:1-9). As I reflect back on my own life, I teem with relief and gratitude for so many things I thought I wanted but was denied. (In my younger years I was nicknamed "Curtis Armtwist.") I realize now that had this-and-that or such-and-such have happened, I would have ended up in a very different place.

Sometimes, by God's grace, we are denied our dearest hopes. T. S. Eliot writes of how we often want what proves to be the wrong things, and how "the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting. Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought: so the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing" (T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) in Four Quartets: East Coker, III, 11. 23-8). Patience can even mean learning to be grateful for the doors that did not open before you, and, therefore, the new direction in which you turned which has brought you to where you are.

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Finding the goodness in waiting, in slowness, is quite countercultural; however our having to wait may turn out to be a great kindness of God towards us. The scriptures consistently refer to us as "children of God" (not "adults of God"). Children are not developmentally ready to know everything at once. There is a progression in our capacity to know, which God knows. The apostle Peter awakened to this realization. He writes, "Beloved, while you are waiting, be at peace… and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation" (2 Peter 3:9, 15). Our experience of having to wait may, in actuality, be God's experience of waiting on us until we are ready for more. Take heart. Simone Weil, the great French spiritual writer and political activist of the 1940s, writes how "waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life."

Here's one more benefit. Adding the phrase "patient waiting" to your soul's vocabulary may be a helpful intervention to the onset of anxiety. There is a freedom that can be gleaned in your being powerless to know the future. God knows. God knows what you do not know, and God knows that you do not know. In the beginning of creation, God creates an interchange of light and darkness to fill each of our days. It is as true for the sky as it is for the soul. We can only bear so much light. Light can be as blinding as darkness. The eyes of your heart will be enlightened with as much light as you can bear ("The eyes of your heart," an evocative phrase of Saint Paul in Ephesians 1:18). When you are in the dark, God is not in the dark. The psalmist writes of God: "Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike" (Psalm 139:11. See also 1 John 1:5). If you are in the dark about something, your waiting invites patience for the dawning. The dawn will come in the fullness of time.

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Waiting patiently is not a limp submission. Waiting patiently is an active presumption that God is at work in our life in ways beyond what we could ask or imagine (See Ephesians 3:20-21). When you have no choice but to wait, open your eyes and open your heart to what you otherwise might have missed. You do not have what you are waiting for – what is next – but you do have what is now. Don't cut in line. Be present to what is now, even if it is full of struggle. You will find the companionship of God's real presence in the waiting, which is the fruit of patience.

I waited patiently upon the LORD;
he stooped to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the desolate pit,
out of the mire and clay;
he set my feet upon a high cliff
and made my footing sure.

– Psalm 40:1-2

For Further Reflection

Do you struggle with waiting? What is it about the experience that is hard for you?

When and how have you, conversely, discovered the goodness in waiting and slowness?

What practices help you to stay present and grounded in times of waiting?

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