

MAKE ME PATIENT – RIGHT NOW!

A Sermon Preached at the
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
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The secret to listening to a sermon, as I sometimes remind those who listen to me here, often lies in sitting there patiently trying to figure out, “Now, what happened in *his* life that made the minister want to preach about *that*?”

Well, before you speculate too long on what got me pondering patience, let me confess that my sermons lately have all been about spiritual virtues that I honestly know I’m simply not very good at: relinquishment, unconditional gratitude, and, yes, patience. Just ask my family! They’ll tell you! Occasionally I myself remark that the reason God sent back into parish ministry, and gave me the family task of overseeing my parents’ care in their later years, must be She’d noticed that, despite my many years as a husband, father, minister, and then as UUA President, I still needed people to teach me about patience.

The poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti is now nearly 90 years old. But according to an interview he gave not long ago, there are still many things he’s waited for, some none too patiently. Which helped me realize that my dear wife just may be wrong, when she accuses me of being impatient by character, all across the board! As it may be a mistake to assume that patience is always a virtue in *every* circumstance. After Thanksgiving, when we’ve all probably tried, quite unsuccessfully, to be patient with all our relatives, and otherwise grossly over-estimated our powers, as we enter a spiritual season traditionally focused on waiting, perhaps we should all realize together that just as there are many different kinds of waiting, so too there are several different types of patience.

There’s **contemplative patience**, for example: prayerful, meditative, waiting for insight. Maybe I’m a little better at that, I tell myself hopefully. Certainly the daily spiritual practice called “Living by Heart,” which we teach here on the second Wednesday of each month, seems to have helped me a bit. Nearly every morning for several years now I’ve started my day with a time of reflection, and journal-writing. Often, however, I wish I did it consistently *before* reading the daily newspaper.

As Thoreau once wrote somewhere in *his* journal, “Many rush down to the Post Office every day for the latest news when they have not heard from themselves for a long time.” And again, “Read not the Times. Read the Eternities.” Or as a Buddhist might phrase it, “If you really want to learn to cultivate patience, don’t just do something. Sit there.”

Not that that is easy; especially if you’re actively parenting children. Which Thoreau never did; and which fell out of my daily life some years ago. Not until I became a grandpa, and started observing younger parents, did I realize that what an important school of patience parenting can be. Certainly that heartfelt prayer, “God, make me patient! Right now!” probably came from a harried parent. Ah, **parental patience!**

The day after Thanksgiving I was in a waiting room, waiting for my car to be serviced. Next to me was a young father, with two very rambunctious boys, about five and six. They’d been there since before I came in, and they were bored with coloring, the TV, even the computer Dad had brought along. “Dad! I want to go home,” said the older boy, for the tenth time. “Really?” said Dad calmly, dialing his wife, “You should’ve *told* me. Here: tell your *mother* this time.”

Meanwhile, I was patiently trying to finish one of the best novels I’ve read in a while: David Wroblewski’s literary debut, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* -- among other things, the story of a boy born without any power of speech, in a family that trains attentive canines, then places them with people, who in turn learn their patience from the animals. But like many great works of literature, it’s also about a human family whose refusal to listen, patiently, has tragic consequences.

When I think of my own failures of patience, it is sins against **conversational patience** that I regret the most. Not just the rude kind: interrupting, finishing a sentence started by someone else. But also the silent kind: unwarranted assumptions; attributions of motive; interpretations made before the whole story has unfolded. I think I became a pastor again to re-learn the discipline, and privilege, of listening, without judgment; of hearing others offer their own story to an appreciative, patient, friend on life’s journey. And if I’ve ever

seemed to any of you not to *want* to listen, please forgive me. Like you, I'm imperfect. But I do want to learn patience. And listening. Really, I do. So tell it to me again. Please.

Friday, you may know, was also the first annual National Day of Listening, sponsored by NPR and Story Corps. With suggested questions characteristic of 'appreciative inquiry,' family members were encouraged to interview, on tape, an older relative. I wanted my nephew Daniel, now writing his senior college honors thesis in economics on our current financial crisis, really to listen to his 88-year old grandmother, who lived through the Great Depression. As she herself said once again, "This may be my last Thanksgiving."

Which brings me to another form of spiritual patience. Let's call it "**ultimate patience.**" After all, in the end, as I said in my sermon on relinquishment, we give up everything, including our very lives. The question is: will we feel that we have lived a life that is worthy of our dying? having given back at least as good as we've received? A life marked by enough responsible living, grounded in deep gratitude, even in the hard times, that our final words can be words of thanks, and not of regret? I don't know. . .

We all suffer. Buried in our word *patience* lies an old Latin root, "to suffer, to endure." The question is, how will respond when we *do* suffer? With revenge against those we think are to blame? Well, every wisdom tradition I know says that *that* path only leads to further tragedy. But whether or not we all believe the Bible saying, " 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay,' sayeth the Lord," or just refuse, in the name of basic human dignity, to stoop to being so childish and immature as to seek any tit-for-tat revenge; or take the Buddhist point of view, that all we transient creatures need all the compassion we can muster for one another – an ultimate patience is far sounder than expecting your momma, or your spouse, or even our President-elect, to make everything all better soon.

Last Sunday, after the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service here, there was an amusing miscommunication between one of the rabbis and a member of the Methodist Bell Choir. Rabbi Perkins was talking about a musical event on Dec. 7 for their new, young cantor. The Methodist confused it with their own event on the same afternoon: a *Messiah* Sing.

“Well, he’s *good*,” said the Rabbi, “but the Messiah? I don’t know!” Which led me to remind them of the old story of a priest and a rabbi discussing waiting for the Messiah; patiently, of course. Finally, the priest said, “I’m waiting for him to come back again; while you’re still waiting for him to arrive!” “Right,” said the Rabbi, “So if he gets here, let’s agree that we’ll both ask the same question: ‘Have you been here before?’”

But until all is ultimately made just and right, what may be needed from us can best be called **practical patience**. Remember the Serenity Prayer? “God, grant me the serenity to change what cannot be changed, the courage to change what should be changed; and the wisdom to know the difference.” Well, that sums up most of the issues surrounding patience in daily practice! Because there *are* things we should be impatient with: Injustice. Persistent lies. Public corruption. Abuse. Violence. And other evils.

This is where I differ from the standard interpretation of Job, as a model of patience in the face of cosmic injustice. Endurance, yes! But please notice: *Job spoke up; he complained, directly to God!* No matter that She replied to him not out of the neatly ordered universe many wish that a nice all-protective, patriarchal Daddy God *should* have created for us, but rather out of the whirlwind, the maternal matrix of chaos from which all creative possibilities spring; which cannot always protect us; or those whom we love. Still, this is the truth about Life, about the unmerited, impermanent beauty of Being itself; about conditions on which we gratefully receive it; patiently, responsibly, respond to it; and then finally, finally relinquish it all. But. . .

Too often we’re asked to turn away from this whole truth: to be not patient, but passive – a form of the same Latin verb, but as the past perfect participle. As a pastor, I warn you, this is NOT a form of authentic, living patience; instead, it can be a deadly kind of denial, or co-dependence, with addiction, abuse, or injustice. Beware! It may be wise for you to tackle that with which you’ve come to understand you should no longer be patient with a little help from some friends -- from a discerning counselor; from supportive friends.

The same difficult, practical principles about patience are true not only in personal life, but also often in public policy. This week I have been corresponding with a family connected to this congregation who live now in Bangkok, Thailand. Where the ruling party is corrupt. Where the opposition party has now taken possession of all the airports. And where the military, which has tried to learn patience, about when to intervene in the affairs of a fledgling democracy, may soon be forced to act. And I've been thinking about the many forms of impatience our President-elect is being subjected to by those of us who so recently were staunch supporters. What I want to say to them, and you, is this:

Learn what patience *truly* is. It is NOT the same in all times, places, and circumstances. At times it is a virtue that can be pushed so far that it becomes a vice. At other times, it is still a virtue that those of us who have learned to be impatient for justice, for truth, for all those ideal ends that we so fervently seek, still need to learn. "The greatest prayer is patience," said the Buddha. And in that spirit, let us now pray for what we most need:

"Source of Life, Mother of all, Father of mercies, help us in the here and now to learn how to leave to You what belongs to You, and when to act as you would have us act, as our thanks to You. Help us to take from the companions you have given us, young and old, human and otherwise, lessons of forbearance and patience. In the end, help us to relinquish all that we have and all that we are to You. Help us, also, in the light of this patient awareness, to make of our lives a worthy offering, never tarnishing them with unworthy envy, bitterness, or regret, but offering only ongoing hymns of praise. Amen.

*Hymn 51

Lady of the Seasons' Laughter

Gibbons/Hurd

Benediction

Quietly, patiently, let us now prepare to leave this place:
resolved to listen well, to nurture well;
to leave the final resolution of all things to the All;
to take our part, when it is needed;
to proclaim patiently, either in words, or better, in our deeds,
the unmerited beauty of Being itself. Amen.

I am waiting for my case to come up/ and I am waiting/ for a rebirth of wonder
and I am waiting for someone/ to really discover America/ and wail . . .
and I am waiting/ for the American Eagle/ to really spread its wings
and straighten up and fly right/ and I am waiting for the Age of Anxiety/ to drop dead
. . .and I am perpetually awaiting/ a rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for the second coming/ . . . for the grapes of wrath to be stored
And I am waiting/ for them to prove/ that God is really American
And I am waiting/ to see God on television/ piped into church altars
If they can find/ the right channel/ to tune it in on
And I am waiting/ for the last supper to be served again/ and a strange new appetizer
and I am perpetually awaiting/ a rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for my number to be called/ and I am waiting . . .
for the meek to be blessed/ and inherit the earth/ without taxes
and I am waiting/ for forests and animals/ to reclaim the earth as theirs
and I am waiting/ for a way to be devised/ to destroy all nationalisms
without killing anybody/ and I am waiting / for linnets and planets to fall like rain
and I am waiting for lovers and weepers/ to lie down together again
in a new rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for the great divide to be crossed/ and I anxiously waiting
For the secret of eternal life to be discovered/ by an obscure practitioner
and I am waiting/ for the storms of life/ to be over
and I am waiting to set sail for happiness/ and I am waiting
for a reconstructed Mayflower/ to reach America/ with its picture story and TV rights
sold in advance to the natives/ and I am waiting/ for the lost music to sound again
in the Lost Continent/ in a new rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for the day/ that maketh all things clear
and I am waiting for retribution/ for what America did to Tom Sawyer . . .
and I am waiting/ for Alice in Wonderland/ to retransmit to me
her total dream of innocence. . . and I am waiting for Aphrodite
to grow live arms/ at a final disarmament conference/ in a new rebirth of wonder

I am waiting/ to get some intimations/ of immortality
by recollecting my early childhood/ and I am waiting
for the green mornings to come again/ for some strains of unpremeditated art
to shake my [keyboard]/ and I am waiting to write
the great indelible poem/ and I am waiting/ for the last long rapture
and I am perpetually waiting/ for the fleeting lovers on the Grecian Urn
to catch each other at last/ and embrace/ and I am awaiting
perpetually and forever/ a renaissance of wonder