

WAITING

By Rev. Edwin Lynn

I began to think about the word to wait, or "Waiting", while I was a guest speaker at the Unitarian Universalist church. Everyone had left the church after the service except for one little girl. She was waiting. Her parents had not returned to pick her up from church school. At first, she enjoyed being alone, but in time began to become fidgety and eventually agitated. While we waited with her, I began remembering the main times I have agitated.

Later, the word came up again when Marj and I traveled in France. We were escorted around Paris by a young man Bruce had met in college. He was a native Parisian and could speak five languages including fluent English. I inevitably asked him what he thought was the essential quality of Americans? He answered typically for Frenchman in the negative "Americans do not want to wait."

It seemed at first that he had identified an incidental aspect of our culture, and yet the more I thought about it, the more I realized that he had touched upon a basic element. We are known throughout the world for the development of fast food of which McDonald's is the exemplar. The food is uniform, but more importantly, quickly served. There is no waiting. In Europe, even though we hear a great deal about the trains being on time, in almost every other activity, waiting is a way of life. Their word for it is "queuing". One queues up when one goes shopping, which is done almost daily. They are thankful that for most items they only need to wait in line. The folklore is that in Russia they wait in three different lines in order to get one item.

It is a basic characteristic of Americans to expect efficiency, which is an expression of American pragmatism. Efficiency has always been a basic production objective. If we have to wait for anything, we assume the cause is inefficiency. We wonder who is goofing off not doing their job.

Waiting is an aspect of power. The ultimate expression of this is in the military service where the slogan is "hurry up and wait." The military has the power to make the low-ranking military personnel hurry up and wait. We are all familiar with waiting rooms. In theory, we make an appointment with a professional, and then if we arrive early there is a comfortably place for us to rest. However, the real function is to line us up in an efficient manner, not unlike the military, so that the professional's time can be more fully utilized. They want us to be available at their convenience, not ours. We each make judgements about how long we are willing to wait in these situations. I know that I would not go to a dentist, who consistently made me wait, but, probably for an occasional doctor's visit or to apply for a bank loan, I would wait. I would resent it, but I would do it, unless it was a repetitive situation. It is not only in professional offices that we are being asked to wait, but increasingly on other occasions as well as private enterprise seeks economies, the lines are getting longer at places like banks and airlines. As funding is decreased in the public sector, the lines are increasing.

Research about waiting is a new study area. It has found that people are more willing to wait if each person is being treated equitably. Rather than the guessing game of which line will move the fastest, we are now asked to wait in one long line, allowing us to go to the next available window. Waiting research has also found that when two people of equal status meeting our culture, a two-to-three-minute delay in arrival is acceptable. If one of the parties is four minutes late, they should mutter something, but

they do not need to extend a full apology. It is rude not to do so. These values relate to the earlier emphasis mentioned on Americans' efficiency – for in most other cultures our five minutes equals one hour. In most countries, an apology is not necessary unless one is an hour late and a mutter is not necessary unless one is fifty minutes late. Waiting is form of symbolic language. Personnel officers, who say that they do not discriminate in hiring, often send out other messages through their behavior of forgotten appointments, and more to the point, very long waits for very short interviews.

Waiting is an important dimension of our relationship with family and friends. We all know people who are always late, and they always have an excuse. In each instance, there is some specific thing that delayed them, but their pattern is clear. Edward Lucas wrote, "People who are late are often so much jollier that the people who have had to wait for them." Sometime lateness is a statement of not wanting to be there. It is a form of quiet protest.

Attitudes toward arriving on time, lateness and waiting, can be a major conflict for couples. One partner wants to arrive early, the other late. When the early one prevails, and the couple arrive before everyone else, there is the inevitably, "I told you so." If the person, who prefers to arrive late prevails, there is the inevitable sense of embarrassment.

Marj and I had to deal with a similar question in my first church. We owned one car. Marj had to go with me to church on Sunday. IU was usually the first one to arrive, and the last to leave. We would often discuss, to put it politely, which I had to leave so early and stay so late. Two young children running around the church fueled debate. Fortunately, we eventually were able to purchase a second car. During our discussions it became clear that the issue of Marj's waiting was an expression of the deeper issues of identity and control. The constant waiting put Marj in an inferior position of merely being the minister's wife, who was expected to dutifully wait. It meant that she had little control of her own schedule being totally dependent on my plans. Control is a major factor in waiting. If we know how long we have to wait it helps us feel that we are still in control. We can plan our time for those minutes. As an example, whenever I drive to a meeting at the Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters, I know that I will have a minimum of a twenty minute wait to get into the Boston Common parking garage. I bring along reading material to pass the time. I accept the wait for I am still in control of my choices.

There are more personal types of waiting. During the day, we wait for a work break, the lunch hour, and the end of the day. We can wait for an event or we can wait for the sun to rise. I find myself waiting for my salary check to pay the bills. It reminds me of when Marj and I were first married, and we purchased a sewing machine in 1958 for \$125. We were going to be paying for it in monthly installments for a year. I thought how glad I would be when the year was over and the payments would be completed. How naïve I was. That was only the beginning of a lifetime of payments. Some are waiting for a promotion, rather than continuing to do their present job productively. Some are waiting for the right person rather than giving their best to all they meet. Some are waiting or their mother to be more loveable rather than loving her now. Some ae waiting for their children to grow up rather than enjoying them in the present.

Some of this is natural. I am not a purist. We all live with a sense of anticipation. In fact, in some cases such as a performer, anticipatory adrenalin can be helpful. Some form of anticipation, or waiting, are part of human nature, but an abiding philosophical perspective or spiritual orientation can hep us see that every moment is important. We need to live in the now. Not the "now" promoted in the sixties

with everyone lying on the beaches of California sunning and surfing, but now that means fully living through both the routines and delights of daily living.

I find related to my own concerns about getting my pay check, and paying my bills that there is always another bill. If there wasn't another bill, I would probably go out and spend the money to create one. Part of living in the now is realizing that life does not get more perfect. Today is as perfect as it is going to get. Your mother is lovable now, not later. The children are the right age now, not at some other time. We don't know the future. We need to experience and enjoy each day fully. As the children grow older some problems pass away, but new ones are created.

Jess Cassel, who served as Program Director of the Great Books Foundation Programs, always emphasized living in the now. He used to say, "imaging doing what you are doing right at this moment and continuing it for the rest of your life. How would you make it more pleasurable?" I have applied this principle which driving on long trips. I find driving boring, but I try to adjust and become aware of the next to make it both acceptable and pleasant. Usually, music or enjoying the sights in greater detail are enough to overcome the routine.

The most challenging test of waiting is during a time of difficulty, such as when we are ill, required to stay in the hospital, or mourning the death of a loved one. The tendency is to want to just wait not do anything, until we get better. Others think they will read and accomplish other tasks during this period only to find they are too bored or work out to do much of anything. We need people for support in these waiting periods.

We need to face the situation, accepting the limitations, and confront the challenge. Waiting is a form of spirituality. The dictionary gives as a definition of waiting, "To remain inactive or stay in one spot until something anticipated occurs." This is close to a definition of meditation at least in terms of inactivity. We need to be positive about the experience which may not cure the difficulty, but in a more relaxed state, the waiting will be more tolerable.

Waiting is an important dimension of religion. We seek answers but often do not find them. As Unitarian Universalists we know that answers are not clear. It is similar to the characters in Samuel Beckett's play, "Waiting for Godot", who continually wait for Godot to arrive. There are many promises, but he never comes. Paul Tillich, Protestant theologian, in his book entitled, "The Shaking of the Foundations", has a chapter under the title "Waiting". He states that both the Old and the New Testaments describe our existence in relation to God as one of waiting. He writes, "I am convinced that much of the rebellion against Christianity is due to the overt and veiled claim of Christians to possess God, and therefore also, to the loss of the element of waiting, so decisive for the prophets and apostles...They did not possess God...they waited for him." As Unitarian Universalists, we are not waiting for a Messiah. We do not know, nor probably will ever know, the complete answer. We are living in questions, and still living life fully.

We, as American, don't like to wait. Unlike other nations which allow wide latitudes in arrivals, or Europeans, who accept queuing up for almost any purchase, we expect, even demand, efficiency and promptness. There are a few situations, and the number is growing, where others determine if we will wait – in the military, professionals' waiting rooms, and government services. Attitudes towards being on time, waiting and making others wait, can be the source of many disagreements in all forms of

relationships from business to marriage. Our attitudes toward waiting are influenced by the desire to control our time.

Beyond the waiting for external transactions to take place, there is a larger and more significant area of internal attitudes. We wait for the work day to end and for the children to grow up. Some of these attitudes are natural, but in excess they can be destructive of enjoying the present. They can be subversive of fully living.

The most difficult test of living in the present is when illness or tragedy occur. It is a spiritual challenge. Negative, tense waiting, will not alleviate pain or grief. We need to relax, as best we can, using positive thoughts and attitudes. We need to realize there probably will be no clear answer why such a thing has happened to us. We need to live in today's question, not waiting for tomorrow's answer that may never come.

By living in the now, in the present, in the reality of today, we live more fully, more fulfilled and spiritually enriched.