

The Waiting Place according to the Gospel of Dr Seuss

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Twenty-six years ago Dr Seuss published his last book and it became an instant success as a graduation gift—Oh, the Places You'll Go!

Last Sunday you may have met Ron. We began seminary together 37 years ago and our lives have been intertwined ever since. I preached at his ordination. He served at mine. I was his best man. He was mine. He babysat my kids. He honoured me by asking me to be his first child's godfather. We knew each other's families and stayed in each other's homes. Our families holidayed together. We encouraged, supported, and challenged each other for 24 years. Then I moved to New Zealand and we lost contact. So, after 13 years of silence, the reunion was sweet.

When we were in seminary a lot of folks had high expectations for us. They were quick to tell us, "Oh, the places you'll go!" Well, this past week we caught each other up on oh, the places we've been. It turns out that we took completely divergent roads in our ministry. Sometimes that was because of the opportunities that came our way. Sometimes that was because of the choices we made. But in spite of that our journeys had much in common. We both had been to "The Waiting Place" more than once. Dr Seuss describes our journeys so well he could have been watching us.

OH!
THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!

You'll be on your way up!
You'll be seeing great sights!
You'll join the high fliers
who soar to high heights.

You won't lag behind, because you'll have the speed.
You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead.
Wherever you fly, you'll be best of the best.
Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.

Except when you don't.
Because, sometimes, you won't.

I'm sorry to say so
but, sadly, it's true
that Bang-ups
and Hang-ups
can happen to you.

You can get all hung up
in a prickly perch.
And your gang will fly on.
You'll be left in a Lurch.

You'll come down from the Lurch

with an unpleasant bump.
And the chances are, then,
that you'll be in a Slump.

And when you're in a Slump,
you're not in for much fun.
Un-slumping yourself
is not easily done.

You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.
Some windows are lighted. But mostly they're darked.
A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!
Do you dare to stay out? Do you dare to go in?
How much can you lose? How much can you win?

And IF you go in, should you turn left or right...
or right-and-three-quarters? Or, maybe, not quite?
Or go around back and sneak in from behind?
Simple it's not, I'm afraid you will find,
for a mind-maker-upper to make up his mind.

You can get so confused
that you'll start in to race
down long wiggled roads at a break-necking pace
and grind on for miles cross weirdish wild space,
headed, I fear, toward a most useless place.
The Waiting Place...

...for people just waiting.
Waiting for a train to go
or a bus to come, or a plane to go
or the mail to come, or the rain to go
or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow
or the waiting around for a Yes or No
or waiting for their hair to grow.
Everyone is just waiting.

Waiting for the fish to bite
or waiting for the wind to fly a kite
or waiting around for Friday night
or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake
or a pot to boil, or a Better Break
or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants
or a wig with curls, or Another Chance.
Everyone is just waiting.

It turns out Dr Seuss wasn't focusing on Ron and me at all. Who knew? He was describing his own experience. Dr Seuss's real name was Theodore Geisel. He used the pseudonym "Seuss"—his middle name—because he was waiting until he possessed the talent and experience necessary to write, as he put it, "the next great American

novel.” That novel never materialized, but Geisel spent his life writing the most popular and significant children’s books in history. It would be hard to call his career anything but an incredible success. But he was always waiting. He was waiting for himself to become a “serious” writer, which he would never become. I find some comfort in that. Even the creative, successful and illustrious check in to the waiting place.

So, in less poetic terms, what exactly is this place that most of us would prefer to avoid? I don’t know anyone who likes being stuck in traffic, or waiting for medical test results or for a job offer. When we want something to happen but that something won’t happen for a while, or even ever, it is uncomfortable and anxiety inducing. It is to be here, but wanting more than anything to be there.

Waiting, at its worst, is a rejection of the present. The problem, of course, is that we cannot actually reject the present. We are stuck, and no amount of lamentation or grumpiness or staring at the post slot will untether us from the present. Dr Seuss refers to the old saying “A watched pot never boils.” We are all familiar with the fact that this is not technically true, a watched pot will boil, but it will feel slower and more agonizing than the unwatched pot. The hidden profundity in this saying is that to stare at water, willing it to boil sooner is to fixate on an absence. It is to devote all of our energy to emptiness. It is to narrow our field of vision to a single thing that isn’t there. And if we have narrowed our vision to something that isn’t there, then we are seeing nothing. And that is why it is so uncomfortable, because to anxiously and single-mindedly wait is to devote ourselves to nothing.

Dr Seuss describes this as the waiting place. The picture he paints is of a sort of suspended animation, where the focus is on what is not. It is place where we cannot do anything and cannot leave. We seem to be utterly powerless, dependent on some external force to free us, God or a phone call or the rain or another chance. We have deposited all of our capacity to act on the other side of some uncontrollable event.

Probably the worst part of the waiting place for me is that we are there alone. We dwell on our emotional state to such a degree it can consume us. We become it. We question and doubt ourselves. We blame and shame ourselves. We undermine our capacity to act.

In Dr Seuss’ words:

I'm afraid that some times
you'll play lonely games too.
Games you can't win
'cause you'll play against you.

All Alone!
Whether you like it or not,
Alone will be something
you'll be quite a lot.

And when you're alone, there's a very good chance
you'll meet things that scare you right out of your pants.

There are some, down the road between hither and yon,
that can scare you so much you won't want to go on.

How do we get out of the Waiting Place? Dr Seuss wisely avoids giving the answer, he just optimistically assures us, “somehow you’ll escape all that waiting and staying.” Although he does have one caveat, we will probably have to confront one or more of our demons before getting back on track with our lives.

I will offer one way of making the Waiting Place less useless while waiting our escape. I base it on his observation that “life is a great balancing act.” Instead of a single-minded focus on a future that is not yet, focus on the present. Engage in a mindful way of being. Stop standing in the kitchen staring at the infuriatingly calm, lukewarm water. Instead notice the hum of the refrigerator and gleam of the kitchen sink and scene outside the kitchen window. It won’t control whatever event you are waiting for, but it does give you some degree of control of yourself. It can abate the paralysis of waiting.

To mindfully engage with the present is to free ourselves of the notion that everything depends on whatever it is we are waiting for. It is to stop viewing it as a hinge for our happiness or our wholeness, which means that it is to stop insisting on a single lens through which to view the situation. It is to open ourselves up to multiple lenses, multiple possibilities for the future. It is to place our reliance on something other than that event. It is to become flexible, having more faith in ourselves. It is to acknowledge that the world will continue whether we participate in it or stand in our kitchen fixating on a pot of water.

But mindfulness is only one piece of the puzzle. Mindfulness alone will not create space for waiting to be a fruitful, spiritual practice. To engage in useful waiting is to find a way to engage with both the present and the future at the same time. It is to interact with the world and ourselves as we are, while holding in our mind the world and ourselves as we want them to be.

Yes, it is work. It is to work towards a vision in an excruciating, invisible way. Think of the caterpillar’s cocoon. A whole lot of nothing appears to be happening. To wait in a fruitful way is to be in the present time with our present self, and ask that self how we want to be at the awaited time, when we graduate or retire or get married. It is to wrestle with our soul, which is malleable, instead of with time, which is not. To torture the metaphor, it is to work on the pasta sauce while waiting for the pasta water to boil.

This can manifest itself in many ways. Spiritual waiting can be as heavy as trying to make deep changes within ourselves or as light as imagining all the different ways the awaited future can look. Primarily, to wait usefully is to be awake, and not to reject either the present or the future. It requires being in a conversation between our current selves and future selves, not letting either lapse into a monologue.

And if you are dexterous and deft.

And never mix up your right foot with your left. Will you succeed?

Yes! You will, indeed!

(98 and 3/4 percent guaranteed.)