



## What are we waiting for?

Clay Nelson © 3 December 2017

Christians are celebrating the First Sunday of Advent today, one of the four Sundays before Christmas. As Unitarians, it is fair to ask, why do we care? Well, because Advent is all about celebrating waiting.

Christmas is easy to wait for, unless you are a child, because there is no question it will come, and we need those four Sundays of Advent to prepare for a sure thing.

Even so, celebrating waiting just seems wrong. That waiting is a good thing is counter-intuitive to our experience. One study suggests we spend about 12 years of our life waiting. It is such a common part of life, many places have a waiting room. Doctors' offices are notorious for making us wait. This week I spent 35 minutes after the appointed time at the hospital for a five-minute appointment. That doesn't count the time spent waiting in traffic or at stop lights or looking for parking to get there on time.

Dr Seuss sums up how we feel about being in a waiting place, it's "a most useless place" for people just 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 waiting around for a Yes or No or waiting for their hair to grow. Everyone is just waiting."

We spend so much of our time doing it, we are all fairly good at common kinds of waiting. Out of necessity we each have taught ourselves ways to wait. We can meditate, think about things we need to do, we can check our watch every few minutes, pace up and down, drum our fingers, brush off lint, curse. Since the arrival of the smart phone we can complain on Facebook about having to wait while we do.

Probably one of the more fruitful things we can do while waiting is nothing. We westerners have not been trained to do nothing. Idle hands, we were told, are the devil's workshop. There is that residual Puritanical sense that time, like food or scraps of cloth, must not be "wasted." "Waste not, want not." And the assumption is that doing nothing is a waste of time.

Time is almost always, for us, something which must be "used" or "filled." We treat ourselves as if we were an extraordinarily expensive machine which must be kept in production virtually every moment in order to justify keeping it. From the point of view of some writers of funeral poetry the best that can be said of someone is that she or he died while in the midst of productivity. They would have us go with a shovel plunging into the earth, fingers on the keys, foot on the pedal. Some ministers want to go directly from their pulpit oration to the great congregation in the sky. A final thump on the pulpit — then quickly into the hands of God. For me, a product of my culture, I find doing nothing difficult, but ideally when I go, let me be lying on some green and pleasant land or on some desert mountain top staring at the circling birds, doing nothing. From nothing to nothingness.

Doing nothing while we wait is also difficult because we have learned to keep down the noise of the war within ourselves by the distraction of busyness. For some, it is not puritanical morality which keeps them busy but the nameless fear which wells up within them when activity stops, when the noise is stilled, when that outer world becomes quiet and the terrors of the inner world begin to stir. We are strangers to ourselves and we fear the stranger within who appears while we wait who, while we are waiting, feels strange things, thinks peculiar thoughts, and remembers things we'd prefer to forget.

Even waiting with others is no reprieve from ourselves. The waiting room becomes a court of judgment and our fellow waiters our accusers. English novelist and dramatist RF Delderfield, using the simple set of a crowded waiting room, makes the point in his play *To Serve Them All My Days*. In the ante-room to where the School Board of Trustees sat interviewing candidates for the position of Headmaster, the hero, Powlett Jones, and his colleagues waited in absolute distraction and desperation, fidgeting, coughing, occasionally venturing an inane comment which fell like lead at their feet.

The appointment is unavoidable. There is no exit. And there, the hell of other people seeing through our disguises as only strangers can: noting our bulging waistline, the spots on our ties and worse, far worse, reading in our traitorous faces the secrets of our sins and infirmities. What a microcosm of the human condition of estrangement, where we sit, not as companions, but each accused and judge of the other. To drop a magazine is an indiscretion to make the cheeks burn in chagrin. Whether or not to cross one's legs requires more forethought and consideration than whether to change one's occupation. The slightest distraction is relief; the ringing of the receptionist's telephone, the entrance of another examinee, even an unruly child to become the focus. And whatever lies beyond the door, a root canal or the nameless void, is welcomed as escape from the hell of waiting.

All that has to do with one kind of waiting. There are two kinds waiting, though not unrelated. There is the waiting for the known event. Waiting for the airplane, the bus, the doctor. Waiting in traffic. Waiting for St Nick to visit. But there is another kind of waiting which, some have said, is life itself – living as waiting. But waiting for what? That is the key question, the answer to which makes all the difference.

"Life," said Zorba the Greek, "is what you do while you're waiting to die." Zorba confronts us with the reality most of us would prefer to ignore — the limitation on our existence: the inevitability of death. That inevitability accepted, then life is what we do in the meantime: living as a way of filling the time of waiting. "Life is what you do while you're waiting..." says nothing about what kind of life or what kind of doing. Recognising and accepting the reality of death does not necessarily affect the quality of the waiting time between birth and the inevitable end.

In fact, coming to terms with the limits of existence can, and does for some, lead to despair. After all, if all this waiting comes, at the end, to nothingness, why wait? Using life merely to wait for another kind of existence after death has its dangers. Christianity has so described the beauty and bliss of heaven as to make some impatient with the wait to get in.

For those who expect either eternal reward or eternal punishment for the kind of life they live, for the quality of their waiting, there is motivation for at least attempting to do good and not evil and to make the best, not the worst, of the time filled in waiting. One might be

surprised. If, at the end of it all, some cosmic clerk at the pearly gates were to smile and say, “Thank you for waiting. This way please.” It might have been worth it after all.

For others, however, perhaps for most of us here, the waiting is neither for reward nor for punishment. We enter life, take our place and wait — then exit. For us, then, the nature of our waiting — what we do while waiting — is critical. We are, as Zorba says, waiting to die and the waiting time must be, not a means to an end but an end in itself.

Poet Robert Frost had an important insight on waiting. He said, “What you want, what you’re hanging around in the world waiting for, is for something to happen. Life is standing on the corner waiting for an accident in the street or for a robber to come charging out of the bank, guns blazing, creating meaning.

The Spanish word *esperar*, means both “to wait” and “to hope.” That makes sense, because waiting presumes that something is going to happen. We hope something will happen before the final happening. What it is that we hope for, what it is that we wait for, defines and qualifies the nature of our existence. This is a philosophical or theological problem which exists primarily for the middle class on up.

Gail Sheehy, in *Pathfinders*, says, “It might be said that anticipation is one of the truest measures of social class.” The rich, she says, think in decades. Poor people think about Tuesday all day Tuesday. Getting something to eat for Tuesday night is a full-time occupation. Those of us in the so-called middle class assume dinner, and clothing, warmth, shelter, education. We have the luxury of waiting for something to happen. Mere existence, a life-or-death struggle for some, is a colossal bore for others.

Walker Percy, in his book *Message in the Bottle*, confronts us with our ambivalence in the face of impending disaster. If we hear, for example, that there is a hurricane approaching, we are naturally apprehensive. We do not want the wind to pick up our cars and throw them through our nice houses. But, we are also excited. Something might happen. A hurricane. A riot. A war.

We listen to the news reports as the disaster gets closer and closer. The hurricane strikes one place after another. The skies above us darken. The air becomes electrified. The trees begin to sway. Something is going to happen. But, then, the hurricane veers harmlessly out to sea. Are we relieved? Or are we disappointed? The fact that our home was not, in fact, destroyed, leaves room for us to be disappointed – not disappointed that all our belongings were not destroyed, not disappointed that no one was hurt or killed. We are simply disappointed that nothing happened. We waited. And nothing happened.

So, we are all hanging around waiting for something to happen. Waiting for what? *Waiting for Godot*, suggests Samuel Beckett. Godot the unknown, who was supposed to arrive today, but didn’t: who promises to arrive tomorrow, but probably won’t. And we are not at all sure of what Godot has to offer, or if we will take the offer if he comes and if he offers it. But we come back each day, to wait.

There are two kinds of waiting differentiated by commitment. Waiting for the plane implies that we have committed ourselves to something – to an idea, namely, that the plane will come, that it will be the right plane and that it will take us where we want to go.

A life lived hanging around merely waiting for something to happen is also based on a commitment to an idea, and that is the old idea of human dependency and helplessness. Though we have denied them and rejected their names, many of us still live waiting for fate or the gods to act, to make something happen. To set our own aims, to forge our own destinies, to decide for ourselves what will happen is to gamble on human freedom. It is to decide not to wait any longer. And that requires courage.

In the history of Greek religion, there is an age called “The Failure of Nerve.” There was a period in which the Greeks embraced reason, and gave up their gods. But soon they became afraid without them, doubted their human capacity for self-sufficiency, and brought them back again. In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon and Vladimir, bored with their cosmic waiting in the void, keep saying that they are going, but they do not move. They are afraid. What if Godot comes, and is angry that they are not there? Hanging around waiting for something to happen is a failure of nerve. It is surrendering faith in oneself to gamble on the unknown. It’s a poor theology.

Giving up mere waiting, taking responsibility for making things happen, the creation of life, meaning, and purpose is also a theology. “Life is what you do while you’re waiting to die.” Theology is all about what we make of life between the givens of birth and death.

We have, then, a theological choice about life — to hang around waiting to see what the gods have in store, to see if Godot will come and, if he does, what difference his coming will make. Or to fill our waiting time with action that makes things happen. “Let us not waste our time in idle discourse.” Vladimir says, in a burst of courage and independence. “Let us do something, while we have the chance. On the other hand,” he says, nerve failing, “we would be no less a credit to our race if we folded our arms and weighed the pros and cons of it all while we wait.”

Advent is about celebrating waiting. It is a time out to consider how we are going to wait and for what. I can’t tell you what to choose, but I will suggest that you at least consider whether or not you are making a life while waiting to die or merely — waiting.