

Waiting Well

A sermon in two parts preached by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones
Sunday, December 14, 2025, UU Society of Sacramento

Music: “Anthem,” by Leonard Cohen; solo by Anthony Tavianini

Reading

The reading today is from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, a novel which is like a book of scripture to many people. The author is the late J.R.R. Tolkien. This reading is an exchange between Frodo, the heroic Hobbit, and Gandalf, a wizard and wise mentor to Frodo. “I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

Personal Reflection by Andy Cramer, worship associate

Sermon Part I: Waiting Well

Let’s take a moment of silence before I start speaking, pausing just to bring ourselves into this moment. I’ll take three long breaths.

Thank you for waiting!

The holiday season is a time of anticipation, a time of waiting. A child may be counting the days to Christmas morning with excitement that’s almost too big to contain. For a person remembering departed loved ones, going through the holidays can be wistful, or a slog through sadness. A friend or family member who wants holiday celebrations to meet their visions of perfection may be anxious to control other people’s actions instead of managing their own expectations; this of course could lead to frustration for all concerned. And for those around us who want to slow down, take time, and connect with others, waiting for the holidays could have its own sweet sense of anticipation.

I must admit I haven’t always been good at waiting during the holiday season. My excuse is that there’s too much to do in a short amount of time. For example, it’s not until a week before Christmas that I carry my Priority Mail packages into the Post Office to ship them to friends across the country. While waiting there in the lobby, standing in line on a gray linoleum floor, bathed in a gray, fluorescent light, I can feel impatient. If I have the urge to escape, then I might get absorbed in a cell phone app. But if I lose all sense of time, it means I am totally NOT PRESENT!

Since I am learning and hoping to pay attention to the present moment, I don’t like that. Sometimes, instead of looking for a distraction while waiting, I can pause to be mindful. I’ll breathe a few long breaths, in and out. I’ll direct my attention to the sensation of my feet in my shoes on the floor. Sometimes also I watch other people around me as they finish up their work at the packing table or pile their parcels on the counter for the clerk to weigh them. Maybe I catch a glimpse of the handwritten destination of their package in some faraway city, even another country. I marvel that people of all walks of

life are coming together in that one place, each one of us for our own important reason. It is reassuring to me to behold the patient and quiet solidarity of those who wait in line.

After the line in front of me has disappeared, it's my turn. As I move to an available window, the postal clerk says, "Thank you for your patience." *Of course*, I say. But really, it seems that the clerks are the ones whose patience deserves recognition, as they serve a line of customers that keeps on regenerating itself. I'll be making that Post Office visit again this week. And whether it's there or in any place or situation where I might have to wait, I want to be more intentional about it. Whatever the circumstances, I am hoping to be aware of my experience and intending to show more goodwill toward others.

There are so many kinds of waiting. We might look forward to good news from a friend. A family might anticipate when labor pains will begin or when the adoption agency will tell them it has a child for them to welcome. Waiting... may involve tending to a loved one who is near the end of life. Many people wait for the results of a medical test... For a job offer, or a layoff notice. Waiting for school to start up/ or to end. There is often a real Waiting Room as we wait for someone to come out of surgery. Or, if you're the one who has had the surgery, you wait for healing to take place and the return of your strength. Waiting often requires patience and perseverance.

Diana Clark is a Buddhist meditation teacher in the Bay Area whose talks I have attended online. According to her, "The practice of life is a balance between effort and patience." Achieving this balance can be of crucial importance to spiritual wellbeing. Of course, feelings of impatience are natural for everybody. When they come up, we can recognize those feelings and hold them gently.... Give them space. That is, we can accept the urgings of impatience without reacting to them. She has paraphrased a story from the Buddha: "The wagon driver left a road that was smooth and took a rugged, rocky path in order to have a short cut. And then he grieved over a broken axel."

Diana coined a term that I find helpful: Waiting Well. Since we know we will be waiting in one way or another as we live our lives, we can bring attention to our experience as we wait. Waiting well could include taking time for considering our options. Then we could choose wisely, instead of impatiently. In the story, the wagon driver didn't take time to consider his options. He didn't want to wait at all.

Every day of life provides us with opportunities to practice patience. If you're in a truck or car, you wait for the stop light to change from red to green. That's a great opportunity to practice. If you're using a wheelchair or a walker and waiting for the pedestrian crossing light to change, you might also be waiting to make sure that car drivers know that it *has* changed.

Diana says that having patience is not just waiting for something to change while gritting your teeth. Patience is not "waiting while hating," she says. Patience is about how we choose to relate to things that are not going our way. For example, lining up in a long queue takes patience. So does nursing a physical pain that's aching or throbbing. You need patience when you are wondering when the person who's talking to you will get to their point!

When we hate the waiting, she says, we can recognize those feelings and just let them be. It might help if we take a few long breaths.

Of course, looking out at the larger world, we can see so many things that are not going our way. Injustice and oppression go on far longer than a throbbing pain. We can be faced with election outcomes we don't like and wars that we tried to stop. Setbacks like this bring anguish and confusion. She invites us to try to stay present for these feelings, as unwelcome as they can be. "Stay present," she says, "long enough to allow any wisdom to emerge." This wisdom could be a reminder to be patient. We might realize important insights. For example, *maybe that short cut isn't worth it. Perhaps I don't need to tell off the driver who wasn't looking. I am so scared about the state of the world; I think I need community.* Stay present long enough to let wisdom emerge.

Gil Fronsdal is another meditation teacher whose talks have been helpful to me. Whatever distress we might be going through, he said, there is a helpful and simple four-word formula which is easy to remember. These four words are: Don't make it worse. When we are going through a hard thing, there are ways we could react which would make things worse. Don't make it worse.

When we get hooked into reacting, he says, we are giving our freedom away, giving ourselves away. Don't make things worse by giving yourself away. From a Buddhist perspective, suffering arises by clinging to things that by their nature are going to change. Nothing is permanent. Likewise, suffering arises from the impulse of aversion, which is trying to get away from discomfort. Getting caught in obsessing, judging, reacting—this is when we give away our attention and freedom. This, the teacher Gil Fronsdal says, is why we practice being present, which is only the practice of noticing our experience—our emotions and our physical sensations. We can pause to notice without either running away from feelings or clinging to them.

Diana Clark advises us to be grateful for the patience that other people demonstrate for our benefit. After all, she says, sometimes *you* might be the person holding up a line. You might be the person taking too long to get to the point of their story. It's good to thank others for their patience. Maybe doing that can slow us down so that we can practice waiting well.

Let us look at waiting as a spiritual opportunity. The practice of life is a balance between effort and patience. Let us give thanks for the patience that others show to us. Let us be nourished by the patience that we give to ourselves and to one another. Amen

Sermon Part II: Revolutionary Patience

In the first part of the sermon I invited you to consider what /for you/ might be an approach to waiting well. But now let's consider the case *against* waiting. That is, given the urgency of these dangerous times, how can we even talk about waiting? We can't afford to wait, can we?

Leaders in movements for justice have made compelling arguments against waiting for things to get better *on their own*. In 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote these words: "For years now I have heard the word 'Wait'... This 'wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'"

Here is the context of his words. In April of 1963, during a nonviolent campaign against racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, Dr. King was arrested. An Alabama court injunction had banned all demonstrations against segregation, but King and other

leaders had kept the pressure on for weeks. Violating that injunction landed Dr. King in jail for 8 days. While there, he read words of criticism of the Birmingham campaign from various parts of the country. But what stung him the most was that a group of Birmingham's white Christian and Jewish men of the clergy had published an article in the local newspaper. These liberal whites said the civil rights demonstrations were "unwise and untimely" for their city. They called the practice of nonviolent resistance too "extreme."

In response, Dr. King wrote a long letter. He said that he was pained by the dangerous timidity of the white moderate, who wants to appear supportive but at the same time "paternalistically believes [that] he can set the timetable for another man's freedom." Dr. King pointed out that African Americans had waited more than 300 years for justice. "For years now I have heard the word 'Wait'... This 'wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'"

Dr. King wrote his letter by hand in the margins of the newspaper, around the borders of advertisements, and on a few scraps of paper. When a visitor came, he got a few pages of paper to finish the letter. He slipped it out through that same visitor. He wrote: "People of ill-will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will." However, it seems fair to say that while he waited in that cell, Dr. King made very good use of his time. Indeed, Dr. King's Letter from Birmingham Jail has become a classic of political protest literature.

From his words I hear this moral guidance: waiting isn't something that some people should tell other people do to. Indeed, if you are telling people to wait longer for their dignity, safety and freedom to be protected, you are speaking, in code, a message that you have no intention of honoring those needs. It is up to each person to choose how to make use of the time and space in which we wait. From Dr. King's example and his words, we can appreciate that there are different kinds of patience.

Dr. King and other civil rights organizers were patiently systematic when they planned how to protest and where and when. They were patiently methodical when they taught volunteers the practice of non-violent resistance as they prepared for risky demonstrations around hostile crowds. They were not waiting passively, *they were preparing*. They practiced the patience of perseverance.

To be sure, staying strong requires preparations like eating, sleeping, and fresh air. To care for our spirits, we need to find fellowship, make friends, and practice joy. These are components of waiting well. The patience of perseverance might call for going to a rally, protesting, turning out voters, writing emails and letters, even when we don't see results in the near term. It could mean providing accompaniment, refuge, or other kinds of help to neighbors who are being persecuted or threatened by the government.

I feel impatient with our scary times. There are moments when I wish that I didn't live in this time of danger and cruelty. I'd like to have been born in some other, more optimistic era, so I could feel better. But it only takes a minute of reflection on human history, and I realize that my nostalgia is overlooking a lot of terrible stuff. That is, oppression and hardship accompany all decades and centuries. So it was helpful for me to read the wizard's response to Frodo in the *Fellowship of the Ring*. "I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo. "So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see

such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

Spanning decades, the African American Civil Rights movement embodied a patience that was revolutionary. This is a term coined by the late Dr. Dorothee Sölle [ZU-luh]. She was a professor of theology and a progressive Christian. One of her books is entitled *Revolutionary Patience*. When we go through setbacks or defeats, she said, we can choose to express our grief and confusion honestly. She said: When you are at the end of your rope, revolutionary patience means asking for the strength to tie a knot and hold on.

This kind of patience is not passive. It means waiting for the right time and working hard when the moment comes. Dr. Sölle warned us that fear and anxiety tempt us toward quick reactions. But reactivity can exhaust our spirits and our bodies. Exhausting ourselves will not bring us any closer to our goals. We can accept our grief, anger, and frustration without letting them own us. We don't have to allow difficulties to take away our ability to act. Revolutionary patience is a quiet yet fierce commitment to justice and love. It is the demonstration of your love of yourself and humanity, a demonstration of your commitment to the vision of a better world. It is faith in human possibility.

Revolutionary patience requires physical effort, spiritual balance, and the confidence to hold onto our values and keep our goals in front of us.

While waiting, we can heal, grow, learn, gain strength, and build connections. This is waiting well. We can share support, encouragement, ideas and information with others. We can discern opportunities to act. Revolutionary patience is not passive waiting. It is preparation. In the days to come, may we seek wisdom as we choose how to make use of the time that is given us. Amen.