

The Spirituality of Expectation:

What Are You Waiting For?

Rev. Roger Jones, UU Society of Sacramento
Second Sunday of Advent, December 8, 2013

Shared Offering benefits [St. John's Shelter Program for Women & Children](#)

Hymns: #348 "Guide My Feet," #100 "I've Got Peace Like a River,"
#352, "Find a Stillness," #91, "Mother of All."

Sermon

"Do you know what message I am going to preach to you today?" This is what the great Islamic Mullah said as he looked out on the people gathered for Friday prayers. Nasruddin, the Mullah, appears in many Sufi stories as a wise trickster and sort of a goofball. He asked the crowd this question, and they shook their heads—no. He said: "Well, why would I waste my time speaking to people who don't know my message? Go home!" They did, but they invited the great Nasrudin to come back the following Friday.

"Do you know the message I am going to tell you today?" he asked. *Yes, yes! We do!* they smiled. "Go home!" he shouted. "Why would I take the time to repeat what you already know?"

This troubled the congregation. They really wanted to hear from this wise Mullah! So they made a plan. The next *jumah*, the Friday prayers, they had him back. He asked, "Do you know what I am going to say to you?" And half of them shook their heads *no*, and the other half nodded and said *yes!* "Finally," Nasrudin said. "Now, those of you who know what I am going to say, turn to those who don't know what I am going to say, and tell them." And he left.

This is a story about one kind of expectation—an assumption of the way things are. It's when you are counting on something—and in

this story, you don't get it. Something else happens from what you expect.

On Monday I was at a Catholic retreat center in with a group of UU clergy colleagues. In the dining hall we found these little plastic containers of coffee creamer. On the cover it reads: "Non-Dairy Creamer." Under that it says, "Contains Milk."

This wording led to speculation on our part. Can you get milk without a dairy? We laughed it off, and someone found a carton of 2% milk and a box of soymilk. We were amused by this experience of having our expectations upended. We didn't get what we were counting on.

That's one kind of expectation. The other kind of expectation is the experience of waiting. The Reverend Dr. Christina Hutchins is a professor at Pacific School of Religion. A year ago she gave a sermon on Advent, the season of waiting for Christmas. She said that the experience of waiting is a complete and authentic spiritual experience on its own. It is not merely the delay of an event, not the denied gratification of an authentic experience. Expectation is a complete experience on its own. Like all spiritual experiences, it's worth paying attention to it. This is the spirituality of expectation—finding wisdom in the waiting, seeking to gain from the journey along the way.

Right now we are waiting for Solstice and Christmas and New Year's Eve and Kwanzaa and so on. Growing up in a mainstream Protestant household, Christmas was what I waited for. But in truth, I just wanted to get it over with! This Thursday morning I will be one of the speakers at the USS Alliance's holiday lunch program. Alliance chairperson Vivian Counts invited four of us to tell of a holiday memory from our lives. I'm glad there are three others talking, because I can't think of any inspiring Christmas memory from the years before I was a minister. As a child I dreaded the loneliness I felt when school was out for those two weeks. Television was the distracting technology of those days, and the TV often was on, but it did not satisfy. I craved the many shiny packages under the tree, but after tearing into them on Christmas Day, the emptiness inside me felt even sharper. The alcohol abuse and animosity among my relatives made me feel as if I was walking on eggshells. For me, Christmas was to be gotten through. My family went to church many Sunday mornings, but somehow it never occurred to the family to go to church on Christmas Eve, nor to attend any community concerts or special programs in our town. Had we done such activities together, it might have given us a little spiritual nourishment. Perhaps by this Thursday's Alliance meeting I'll remember some suitable holiday memories to tell. If not, I could ask the gathering, "Do you know what I am going to say to you today?" Then they can tell one another.

Among the human family, with the broad variety of conditions and situations in which we find ourselves, we human beings have all sorts of waiting to do. We have many ways to experience waiting, ways to think about our waiting, and make use of the time.

People in prison are people who are waiting—waiting for their sentence to end, waiting for a friendly visit or a letter, waiting for the next meal. For some, the wait is a long time. Yet in that

time of waiting, some prisoners are lucky to find a way to grow. Some have access in prison to theater arts and poetry, or to study for a GED or a college degree or to learn, simply, to read and write. It's my impression that prisons are some of the places where people are most likely to begin an intensive spiritual search or to deepen one. Great spiritual classics have been written in jail-- by Dr. Martin Luther King and the Apostle Paul for example.

I've read and heard many ex-inmates testifying that a spiritual practice is what saved them. In prison many people experience conversion to Islam, or accept Jesus Christ as their Savior, join a 12-Step group, or begin Buddhist meditation. The online congregation known as the Unitarian Universalist [Church of the Larger Fellowship](#) supports a prison ministry by mail, and some UU congregations have their own ministries to nearby prisons. In a book about Buddhism behind bars, one convicted felon writes that mindfulness meditation has been a tool for him in prison, and a blessing. His waiting for the end of his sentence is the occasion of his practice in mindful awareness. Sometimes, he says, they throw him in solitary confinement, a common management practice in prisons today. Solitary sounds frightening and lonely to me. Yet this man says that he tries to think of it as an opportunity for a deeper practice of mindfulness. This blows my mind! Those in confinement have no choice—only the choice between awareness of the moments at hand and suffering in agony about the long wait for confinement's end.

Nelson Mandela spent 26 years in prison under the white Apartheid government of South Africa. What a long, uncertain wait! His passing last week at age 95 makes me want to learn about that experience, as well as other details of his life in the freedom struggle in South Africa. I want to know what sustained him. He could never be sure if he would live his entire life in prison, be released, or be executed. Did Mandela know his people had

not forgotten him? Did he know that activists around the world were demanding his release? He practiced the spirituality of waiting.

A friend has told me a story about Mandela's time in confinement. After some years, he was transferred to the Robben Island prison, infamous for its harshness. He found himself doing hard labor, with other political prisoners. Their task: breaking rocks in a quarry, pointless. Robben Island also held other inmates, those convicted of murder, armed robbery, sexual assault. Many were members of criminal gangs with reputations for terrorizing other inmates. They tried to push the political prisoners around, take their food, or disrupt any political conversations. By this harassment, they were trying to provoke the activists to reacting.

Members of these gangs labored in the quarry, but in separate groups from the political activists. One day they began singing a song, taking a popular tune and changing the words to mock the political prisoners. They were again trying to provoke them into a reaction. And they got one.

The political prisoners decided to fight back--by singing. In response they chose a rousing, familiar song. Typically it was not a political song, but in this context, they charged it with political accusations. The two groups competed by singing, back and forth. For several days, these opponents confronted one another--in song. Nelson Mandela later claimed that his men had much better voices, with wonderful harmony. He and his group would often get lost in their music-making. They would forget all about the gang members, who had taunted and threatened them. Soon the gang members became quiet. They only listened, as the political prisoners made music. The singing brought peace.

When the prison guards figured out what was happening, they demanded that the music cease. They didn't even allow whistling. In the stillness that followed, it was clear to Mandela that fears had melted away. By pushing back,

creatively, the political prisoners converted hostile opponents into people with a shared plight, a shared condition of confinement and waiting. By choosing creative action, Mandela's colleagues sang away their passive despair and their fear. They brought meaning into their time of waiting by choosing to be creative.

When I think about the waiting of people in such painful situations, it's embarrassing to say I want to get the month of December over with! It puts into clear perspective my feelings of dread of the loss of daylight, my irritation with holiday commercialism, my frustration with traffic, like the slow traffic on this Marathon Sunday here in our neighborhood. I say to myself: So what! How lucky I am only to have to wait for traffic to move!

The Buddhist priest Thich Nhat Hanh writes that waiting in traffic at a red stop light is a chance to practice being mindful. Red light, notice the moment. Notice our experience of sitting in the car or waiting at the crosswalk. Red light, notice the moment. Blessed be the red light, great companion of our waiting!

What are you waiting for? Most of us are waiting for something... a job, a pension or Social Security, a baby to be born or an adoption agency to call with good news. We wait for an upcoming trip, happiness, our next birthday, this semester's grade report. We wait for a diagnosis or lab results from a clinic, for moving day, for Christmas Eve. Most of us are waiting for something, most of the time. Meanwhile, we have days and moments in which to live and move and have our being, we have a journey called *what's going on right now*.

Personally I am waiting for January 26, the day of the congregational vote here at USS, on my candidacy to be the called senior minister. I'm now in month number six of my seven-month job interview with you. It's a long wait. Part of me would like it to be over. But you and I have seven months of life to live and ministry to do before then, while we wait.

So I am doing my best to enjoy the journey, enjoy the moments of ministry that pass before that big day. After all, if I were walking on a sidewalk under a tall building and moving men were maneuvering a grand piano out of a window and it slipped out of their control, and it fell on me, my waiting would end right then. This example, this wise warning, is handed down to us in the sacred scripture of the Warner Brothers cartoons, with which I grew up.

Given the uncertainty of anything we are waiting for, why not choose to pay attention? Give some attention to the complete, authentic experience of waiting? Explore the journey of our experience of each day.

Sooner or later, what we are waiting for does not arrive, or *we* do not arrive at that point. The piano falls. The traffic light turns red and does not change back to green. In matters of life both great and small, we will end... before we *reach* the end. To do authentic waiting is a challenge--and a paradox. It means we need to invite patience, be gentle, and practice curiosity. Yet given that we cannot count on reaching every goal, every end, it seems we should *not wait* on some things.

We should not wait to live with courage. Should not wait to speak the truth and speak with kindness. Not wait to live as our conscience and heart are asking us to live. We should not wait to be grateful. Not wait to be generous. Not wait to take care of our health and our spirits.

We can stretch ourselves, open our hearts, and practice a bit more courage as we wait. By the way we live in the time of waiting, we can prepare ourselves better for whatever we might be waiting for.

We are waiting for Solstice, when the night is longest, and the days begin to have more light once again. Meanwhile we have a new day to welcome, every day. We have sundown by 5 PM and sunrise by 7 AM, and a day full of whatever it brings, with the touch and flavor of waiting as an authentic part of the experience.

The experience of expectation is an authentic and complete spiritual experience by itself. Waiting for the green light, for the holiday, for the solstice night, is not the delay of the prize or its absence; it holds a prize all its own. With awareness, we can move toward wholeness in the moment. On every day of our journey, we can pause to notice what is already here, and give thanks. And give thanks. So may it be.