

Pause Time

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org
Rev Paul Beckel
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I went with my family this week to see *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, a movie in which Tom Hanks, playing Mr. Rogers, forms a relationship with a man who has no patience for hypocrisy — which is pretty much the entire world in which he lives.

This was not a superhero movie — not in the sense that every moment was something new, a constant wrestling back and forth between the purely good and purely evil, with no resolution until the very last moment. There was a different kind of intensity, perhaps more disconcerting because it was real.

First thing first, of course, Mr. Rogers steps into his house and greets us. “Hello.” [long pause/big smile].

You’ve got to be kidding, I thought. You’re not really going to do this to us, are you? We’re adults. We know this whole shtick. The pause. The warm smile. Taking off the shoes. Tossing them from hand to hand. Fully experiencing the joy of that little toss. And completely, focused, on *us*. For now, nothing else matters.

Mayhem in the streets outside. Poverty and death, we’ll get to these soon enough. When we get to assassination, and divorce, and kids with cancer, we’ll be fully present to these things. We’ll be present, unflinching, to the fear, the disappointment, the uncertainty.

It’s so easy to satirize Mr. Rogers, and I understand he found it delightful when Eddie Murphy did so. He didn’t bother to wonder if it was done in good fun, or with a sneer. It’s so easy to laugh at Mr. Rogers because his demeanor was so unfamiliar that, to me at least, it felt a little creepy.

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I invite you now to let go of the creepies. Let go of anything that haunts you. The things you disdain. Within yourself or in the world outside your skin. Let’s just take a moment instead to be here together.

I invite you now to pause
Not to think
Not to feel
but to be calmly alert
observing but not naming what you see around you
observing but not describing whether it’s black or white, soft or hard
experiencing without manipulating

[pause]

Tao Te Ching advises, “stay at the center of the circle // and let all things take their course.”

[pause]

When told that his extraordinarily complex violin concerto would need a soloist with six fingers, Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg replied, “Very well, I can wait.”

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In my childhood home, today would have been the first Sunday of Advent, the season of waiting, with just four Sundays left before Christmas. We celebrated the season with an advent wreath. A circle of evergreen with four candlesticks. Three purple, one pink. On the first Sunday of advent, and then at suppertime throughout the week, we lit a purple candle. Throughout the following week we lit two purple candles. Throughout the following week we lit three purple candles. And on the fourth Sunday, we lit the pink candle as well, grateful with anticipation as wrapped boxes piled up beneath the Christmas tree.

In retrospect I might look at that scene cynically, noting that I was waiting for presents more than for the birth of the Christ child. But those presents, in retrospect, were genuine symbols of love come into the world. Christmas a genuine experience of joy. Not that I didn't have lots of other joys, and lots of other experiences of love as a kid. But the symbolic drama had an effect. Call it psychological or spiritual, a drama or a game, it was an exercise in patience. It was a demonstration that the discipline of waiting would pay off in the end.

And that, too, I might reflect upon cynically. Because waiting doesn't always pay off in the end. Sometimes what we're waiting for is certain, and sad. Sometimes it is uncertain, sometimes illusory. And sometimes the waiting doesn't end.

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Linguists have come up with the term, “pause time” to refer to that momentary lapse in conversation which serves as a signal that it is ok for the next person to begin speaking. In conversation, northern Europeans and their American descendants operate under the assumption that it is ok for only one person to speak at a time... but when a speaker pauses for a certain fraction of a second, it is not impolite to jump-in. Studies have determined just what fraction of a second is the obligatory “pause time” in different regions and cultures.

For example, linguist Deborah Tannen writes, “I was considered extremely polite when I lived in New York but was sometimes perceived as rude in California...a polite Californian I know was shocked and hurt to find herself accused of rudeness when she moved to Vermont.... Many Americans find themselves interrupting when the talk with Scandinavians, but Swedes and Norwegians are perceived as interrupting by the longer-pausing Finns.”

These are broad generalizations, of course. But don't even bother waiting for a pause with Italians, Hispanics, New York Jews, or African Americans, who tend to practice a form of

overlapping conversation in which two or more people talking at the same time is not just accepted, but *encouraged* as a form of supportive rapport.

Perhaps when you get together with family members or friends who have acculturated to different conversational norms you experience the jarring juxtaposition of unfamiliar pause times.

I'm not here to advocate for short pause times or long pause times or overlapping conversation. I mention this only to suggest that each of us experiences waiting differently. And to invite you to notice what waiting has meant in your life, and therefore what it might mean today and tomorrow.

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What's so hard about waiting? Perhaps it is that feeling of being caught in between. I've let go of what I had, but I don't yet have anything new to hold onto.

Perhaps waiting is really a two-step process: first, letting go of what was before, and second, holding on to "nothing" — until what is coming, comes.

Letting go of what was before // and then holding on to "nothing" — until what is coming, comes.

It is not really waiting when we haven't yet taken step one, and let go of what was before. That's just being entrenched.

Sometimes we avoid waiting by holding back. Sometimes we avoid waiting by jumping forward, and grasping at whatever new comes along. Do you tend to do one or the other? Avoid waiting by holding back, holding on to what was? Or do you avoid waiting by jumping forward to latch on to something new, even if that's not the right thing for you?

Tao Te Ching is a short booklet of Taoist scripture that focuses upon "*doing non-doing.*"

Doing non-doing. Perhaps this is the essence of graceful waiting. / For this Taoist "non-doing" is not at all passive. It is not holding back, sitting oblivious in the clouds. On the contrary, doing non-doing is being self-aware, but acting un-self-consciously. It is a fluid, spontaneous mode of being – Forgiving the universe for unfolding one moment at a time. *Waiting is acting* in synchronicity with the way things really are.