

THE
OF PATIENCE

DISCOVERING
THE SPIRITUAL ABUNDANCE
OF WAITING

MARGARET WHIPP



**TWENTY-THIRD
PUBLICATIONS**

twentythirdpublications.com

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Originally published in the UK under the title
The Grace of Waiting
by the Canterbury Press, an imprint of Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd
of 13a Hellesdon Park Road, Norwich, Norfolk NR6 5DR

Margaret Whipp asserts the moral right to be identified as the Author of this Work.

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS

One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200
New London, CT 06320
(860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411
www.twentythirdpublications.com

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ISBN: 978-1-62785-365-1
Library of Congress Control Number: 2018959090
Printed in the U.S.A.



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	I
ONE	
The Waiting Room	4
TWO	
Practice Time	15
THREE	
The Wilderness	27
FOUR	
The Wine Press	42
FIVE	
The Watch	55
SIX	
The Winter	68
SEVEN	
The Womb	82
EIGHT	
The God Who Waits for Us	97
BIBLIOGRAPHY	106

INTRODUCTION

If there is a book you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it. **TONI MORRISON**¹

People tell me every day how much they hate waiting. They have tried to be patient. They have tried not to show how anxious and fretful and frustrated they feel about their situation. They have struggled to accept not knowing how long they may be kept waiting; they have done their best to embrace not being in control of the outcome of their waiting; but still, as their waiting drags on, they find it hard to be graceful about it.

“I’m writing a book about waiting,” I venture, with a wry smile. And then I wait for a response.

This book is the fruit of hundreds of everyday conversations with people who are trying to be patient.² Many of them make light of their struggles. “I guess that’s why we’re called ‘patients!’” Others unleash a torrent of pent-up fears and resentment. “They never tell you anything.” “It’s ridiculous.” “It’s about time they sorted this system out.” “I can’t believe it has to take this long.” Some honest souls are more reflective

about their waiting. “The hard thing is the uncertainty.” “I’m so worried.” “I don’t know what this will mean for the family.”

After the harrumphing, the sighs. After the sighs, the tears. After the tears, a few more wry smiles. And then, perhaps, the real conversation can begin.

As a hospital chaplain, I recognize how isolated people become in their waiting. They feel left out and forgotten, anxious that life is passing them by. One of the greatest comforts is having someone to talk to, someone who can share the waiting and reassure them that they have not been totally abandoned. It’s surprising how much a simple greeting can do to lighten a dark hour, bringing a glimmer of quiet grace.

As I come alongside others in their waiting, I try to be, in Kafka’s gentle phrase, “a true attendant upon grace.” Our brief time together may, or may not, unfold into a profound exchange of wisdom and compassion; but I try to remain patient and quietly openhearted, however seemingly fruitless my efforts appear. The hidden grace of waiting is not mine to command. “Perhaps it will come; perhaps it will not come. Perhaps this quiet yet unquiet waiting is the harbinger of grace, or perhaps it is grace itself” (Janouch, p. 166).

These “quiet yet unquiet” glimpses of grace are the subject of this book. They are glimpses of what patience feels like, how we learn and practice it, and the unlikely gifts that it brings.

Many of these insights have been gleaned from my years of pastoral experience of slowly waiting with others, especially in hospital contexts. Most have found resonances in the dark waiting times of my own personal experience. None of them, I hope, are trite or untested. This will not be a book, therefore, of exhortation or theory. It is more of a pilgrim’s travel guide, sketched out for the benefit of those who will follow the same rough pathways, seeking a fellow-pilgrim’s encouragement for the road ahead.

I am grateful, more than I can say, to all those who have, knowingly or unknowingly, contributed to this book. They are friends who have patiently walked with me through some blistering and treacherous paths of life, and strangers whom I have come alongside for shorter or

longer stretches along their way. Falling into step with one another, and sharing our stories of unchosen waiting and incomprehensible delays, we have grown more patient with ourselves, and more appreciative of the necessary slowness of our unique pilgrimages through life. Friends and strangers alike, their wisdom and experience and, above all, their patience have returned to mind throughout the writing of this book. In their wise ways and kindly words, they have helped me to appreciate the sheer grace of waiting, to practice the unfashionable virtue of patience, and to embrace its surprising and beautiful gifts.

To all these fellow-pilgrims in patience, with respect and affection, I dedicate this book.

Notes

1. Tweet 30 October 2013.
2. To preserve anonymity, names and details have been changed throughout the book.

ONE

The WAITING ROOM

How long, O LORD?

PSALM 13:1

SHIRLEY IS SITTING ALONE IN THE CROWDED WAITING ROOM. Fingers restless, shoulders tight, chin upturned, her eyes constantly scan the double doors where nurses come and go. For what seems like an eternity, Shirley waits for her appointment, wondering how long it will be before somebody calls her name. Meanwhile, everything in her struggles to contain the dread anguish of waiting. How long?

These hours spent in the waiting rooms of life are rarely pleasant, and, for the most part, unavoidable. It can be terribly hard to wait. We would rather push things quickly along, anxious to spare ourselves the uncertainty and helplessness of waiting. Yet waiting is a fundamental human and social reality. Life is full of unchosen, unwanted waiting—in times of change and transition, in sickness and recovery, in parenting and caring, in old age and incapacity, in dying and grieving, and in the countless ordinary delays and disruptions of daily life.

This book is a personal, spiritual, and practical exploration of necessary waiting—and it has taken time, and patience, to write.

WAITING TIMES

I work within an English National Health Service Hospital Trust, where nobody likes to wait. There are systems in place to monitor waiting times at every opportunity. When someone attends a clinic, we measure the minutes spent waiting for their appointment. When they come to the emergency department, we measure the hours it takes for them to see a nurse or doctor. If they have cancer, or need surgery for an arthritic hip, we measure the days and weeks they are kept waiting before diagnostic tests or active treatment can begin. We have targets to meet and statistics to report. The overriding goal is to reduce or eliminate the time spent waiting for active care.

History will judge us to be an impatient generation. We are in such a rush, so much of the time, unforgiving in our haste. We have come to see waiting as nothing more than a problem, a nuisance, an interruption in the stream of life, an irritating pause button that breaks the illusion of cheerful continuity and control. The idea that waiting is often necessary, or occasionally valuable, seems hopelessly old-fashioned and unpopular.

Yet what I have learned, as a painstaking observer in countless waiting rooms of life, both literal and metaphorical, is that a time of waiting that is actively embraced, and not breezily rejected, can become an opportunity for surprising spiritual growth and existential discovery.

My personal interest in waiting dates back to the years I spent in medical practice. I was a young woman, working as a consultant oncologist in the local cancer hospital. Perhaps, in my own way, I was also waiting to grow up, absorbing essential life lessons from the many older people who were patients in my care. Immersed in other people's suffering and fears, I was impressed by the wisdom and resilience in many of those who attended my clinics. Most of them were unsophisticated people, navigating their path through life without any substantial academic or professional expertise. They were not well versed in either medical or theological learning. Yet as I watched people wrestling with tragedy and raw fear, I marveled at the spiritual resources that so often sustained them. It was a kind of grace.

It was during those years that I came across a charcoal sketch, simply entitled “The Waiting Room.” It was no great work of art, but I found it surprisingly moving. It had been commissioned by a breast cancer charity that was trying to portray aspects of what it meant to live with a life-threatening disease. Something about the artist’s sketch resonated very keenly with my daily clinical experience of looking out on a room full of waiting patients. Every face shown by the artist captured something unique, and intense, about this human reality of waiting. The tautness of expression, the different shades of frustration, endurance, distraction and hope—played out on a dozen or so faces—each hinting at some hidden inside story of what it meant, personally and phenomenologically, to wait.

The brutal honesty of this sketch touched something deeply human for me. We spend so much of our lives waiting, not only when we are sick but in all kinds of everyday circumstances. Waiting for the lights to change. Waiting for the weather to improve. Waiting for exam results. Waiting for love. Waiting for the computer to reboot. Waiting for a ceasefire. Waiting for a holiday. Waiting for a creative idea. Waiting for a baby. However mundane or mysterious, there is always something we are anticipating on the horizon.

Waiting, like nothing else, reveals our complex human relationship with time. We have some desire, some goal in mind; it may not seem too far away, yet still we must wait for the possibility to come into focus, for the actuality to come within reach. We cannot rush to grasp the future with any certainty. We cannot force the pace of life’s unavoidable slowness. Time will not let us do that. Some things simply have to unfold. And so, we are constrained to wait.

As a hospital chaplain, I am often called to come alongside people in their waiting. Unlike our hospital managers, or the politicians who commission their services, it is not my job to home in on quantitative targets to reduce their waiting time. And, unlike my clinical colleagues, it is not my responsibility to progress their diagnosis or to initiate treatment. My role is more patient and personal, more attentive and watchful, with an eye not for the quantitative reduction of waiting but for

its qualitative depth and meaning and potential value. My ministry is to sustain and support the waiting soul, the person grappling with the anguish and uncertainties of temporal existence, and to chart together some path of “graceful waiting.”

This book is written in the belief that, ultimately, all our waiting is waiting on God. Perhaps, even more importantly, in our waiting we might glimpse how God is somehow waiting for us. What I hope to explore in the coming pages is the potential strength and meaning that comes through patience. Is it possible to learn to wait, not resentfully, but peacefully and patiently? Is there a grace in the waiting?

From time to time down the years, I have been intrigued to meet people who seem to have embraced just this possibility. I remember speaking with a remarkable young minister while waiting in line for the refectory at a conference. He told me that some years earlier he had decided that, whenever he went shopping at the supermarket, he would deliberately choose the longest checkout line. Instead of huffing and puffing about the precious time he was wasting through having to wait his turn, my friend embraced this small, but immensely telling, spiritual discipline of gathering up the necessary peace and patience to learn to wait. It was his act of unforced, quiet obedience: a silent witness against the restless hurry that generates so much unnecessary pain and tension in modern life.

Of course, it is not nearly so easy when something more serious is at stake. Yet perhaps, as we learn to practice waiting in the small inconveniences of daily life, we may be readier to face the challenges of more fearful times of terrible tension and dread.

The poet Julia Darling, who died in 2005, put her own experiences of waiting to good effect. She decided to write about her treatment for breast cancer and her time spent in the hospital. In a series of gently ironic poems, she pioneered fresh ways of engaging illness through the sheer communicative power of her pen. Her vignettes are so accurate and full of compassionate detail that they have the effect of soothing and transforming some of the appalling challenges of a frightening illness and a harsh prognosis.

One of my favorite poems from her collection describes “A Waiting Room in August.” With exquisite detail, Darling conjures up the tension and dignity of patients waiting “like a drum” for the coming summons. The profound struggle of waiting is captured by the contrast between a deep-felt inner anxiety and a proudly maintained outer decorum of those, with hands folded, shoes polished, and wigs lying “patiently” on dignified heads, have “made an art of it.” The poem ends with the comic-exasperated cry: “Haven’t we waited beautifully?” (Darling, p. 20).

Like it or not, Darling appreciates that the reality of waiting cannot be sidestepped or obliterated; somehow it has to be borne. Sweetly and oh-so-subtly, the poem puts the question as to whether and how we might “make an art of it.” This book is part of my attempt, as a Christian, to wrest some unfashionable blessings from these perennial human challenges of waiting, and to see if the time-honored art and practice of patience can guide us along the way.

THE RELENTLESS MARCH OF ACTIVITY

The problem with waiting is that it runs counter to our cultural expectations of ceaseless activity. Our anxiety, as busy modern individuals, is not simply that we feel helpless when we are forced to wait. We face a deeper problem, because we judge that waiting is a useless and insulting waste of our precious time. What is the point of waiting when we ought to be getting on with life? Even children pick up this joyless contemporary impatience: as a petulant toddler complains on a popular comic video, “Hurry up, lady, I have things to DOOO!”

This relentless, driven attitude toward time is a peculiarly modern obsession. We suffer from chronic busyness, anxious and greedy in our relationship with the passage of time. Many of us, not only in public but also in the private chambers of the mind, are caught in the acceleration traps of a 24/7 society with its ever-increasing frenetic pace of innovation, connectivity, and expectation. Perhaps the truth is that we are frightened to slow down in case we fall behind.

This insatiable activism is one of the most serious spiritual dystopias

of contemporary life. We are addicted to keeping “busy.” Our everyday conversation betrays an alarming set of values where being “busy” is regarded as socially admirable—a kind of boast, even when it is disguised as a complaint. Whenever a colleague asks if I am “busy” at work, it’s hard to resist the pretty strong expectation of a positive reply. Typically, our conversation will go back and forth in mildly competitive terms, amid friendly sighs and grins, as my colleague and I exchange subtly self-promoting and self-pitying updates on the manic pace of activity that we are each respectively trying to sustain.

Recently, I experimented with a different script. In response to the question, “Are you busy?,” I tried a quiet pause. Instead of rushing to affirm my self-importance with the usual catalogue of ceaseless demands lining up for my attention, I would venture a more reflective answer along the lines that chaplains try to avoid unthinking busyness. The result has been some fascinating, and rather moving, conversations with colleagues who would dearly love to break free from the merciless trap of escalating hyperactivity.

Stephen Cherry, the Dean of King’s College Cambridge, identifies this uncritical busyness as one of the most damaging moral distortions of our age. Intriguingly, he puts this on a par with the ancient deadly sin of sloth. Chronic busyness, he maintains, should be seen as more of a vice than a virtue, because it conspires to deaden our moral and spiritual sensitivities to the true value and purpose of God-given time. Cherry believes that Christians should be among the first to challenge a prevailing culture of toxic busyness, on the grounds that busyness:

- distorts your perception;
- makes you feel self-important;
- makes you rude;
- is an excuse for impatience;
- is an excuse for not getting things done;
- is addictive;
- burns you out;
- is lazy—chronic busyness occurs when you have not asked

the important questions or decided on your priorities.
(Cherry, 2012)

Mindless busyness is a cruel and all-pervasive trap in our society. And if I am caught in this habitual hyperactive mindset, it is little wonder that waiting comes to feel so alien and oppressive. Having to wait, more than any other experience, challenges the fond illusion that my timetable, my activism, my busy plans for getting things done, should take priority over everybody and everything else that matters.

ALL IN GOOD TIME

From the first poetic words of the Book of Genesis, the Bible offers a graceful and countercultural perspective on time. In the beautiful story of creation, we read about the shaping of a whole universe, morning by morning and evening by evening—all proceeding in God's good time. In contrast to the prevailing commercialization of time, which grasps each unforgiving minute for some instrumental advantage, we sense an all-encompassing spiritual wisdom that values the mystery of time, from its first inception, as a gift of pure grace. This perspective is essential if we are to embrace the challenge of faithful waiting.

Taking an eternal perspective, we might begin to reframe the temporal meaning and necessity of waiting. In God's good time, we intuit a deeper value in our times of waiting, more as a welcome shadow side to human activity, and less a disruptive intrusion into our anticipated plans. From this contemplative perspective, we might cultivate a more holistic understanding of time's rich ecology, within which our seasons of waiting find their necessary depth and purpose. Having to wait for something, from this standpoint, is not so much like coming up against a roadblock or structural fault in the smooth onward progress of "our" time. Instead we begin to glimpse something of a larger providence, gently inviting our fitful human priorities to bend in service to an eternal weight of glory.

My hope for this book is to gently foster this graceful and more kindly approach to waiting. I came to the topic as a priest and pastor,

drawn by a mysterious sense that in all our human waiting there is some hidden invitation to wait on God's grace.

I cannot claim that this has been an easy book to write. It has presented me, at every stage, with a personal challenge to probe the dark matter of our human fears and longings, and to begin to chart this strange territory of time and eternity that is so singularly compressed in the experience of waiting. I have had to reflect very deeply on my own relationship to time, and to ask searching questions of my taken-for-granted understandings of providence and the pace of human events. Not surprisingly, I have been forced to "wait" through a prolonged gestation before I could feel ready to give birth to my ideas.

My research for this book has inched forward slowly and tentatively. I am grateful for those friends and fellow-travelers who have shared their honest struggles and revealed their own modest, but hard-earned, wisdom—one conversation at a time. Little by little, I have sensed faint outlines emerging from the mists of waiting—a luminous phrase here, a glowing prayer there—like so many points of light shining amid the darkness. Like Jacob (Genesis 32:22–31), I have wrestled both the unbearable intensity of waiting, along with what I can only call the angelic sweetness of waiting: slowly, patiently, and on my knees.

This gradual and gracious process has shaped not only the content but also the style of the book. It is not a textbook, or moral and theological treatise on the "meaning in the waiting," but rather a personal and spiritual invitation to live and pray gracefully in the midst of each unexpected and unchosen hiatus along the path of life. I hope it will bring sustenance in your own struggles.

KINDLY WAIT

There is a helpful distinction between two different Greek words for "time." The word *chronos* describes the continuing passage of time. It is the root for our word "chronology," the regular, moving time that can be measured by a clock. A rather different meaning is captured by the word *kairos*, which suggests an opportune time. I think of the *kairos* moment as a point of intersection between time and eternity—

which emerges all in good time—whenever we glimpse the grace of God coming more fully into focus within the protracted uncertainties of our ongoing life.

For every movement of the spirit there is a due season. A friend who had struggled for years with a restless sense of vocation described his longing for a sense of direction to become clear. In his fretful waiting, he recalled the wisdom he had learned from walking with his father's old pocket compass. His father had taught him that when we are trying to map a way forward, we have to wait for the compass needle to settle. This delicately balanced instrument swings and wavers for some time before it settles to the steady pull of the north. This became a lifelong lesson for my friend. Despite the anguish of waiting, he realized that there was nothing to be gained, and a great deal potentially to lose, by rushing onward before the time for action had become fully clear.

You may be approaching this book in the hope of finding some resolution to some particular challenge of waiting. Perhaps someone has suggested that you read a book instead of fussing and fretting about the uncertainties you face. If that is the case, then I hope that the book will not disappoint you. It is not my intention to offer any kind of escape or solution to the perennial problem of waiting, which is nothing more or less than an ineradicable part of our life as creatures in time.

What I hope this book will foster is a patient and graceful perspective that will deepen and sustain your spiritual capacity for skillful waiting. I doubt you will gain much by skipping through its pages in a hurry. Whether you have picked up the book in the teeth of a challenging time for yourself or someone close to you, or whether you have decided to read about waiting as a calmer spiritual exercise—perhaps for the season of Advent or Lent—I would urge you to embrace the spirit of this book in practice, and not merely in theory.

Each chapter will introduce different themes and experiences, like so many classrooms in the school of patience. Take your time. Let yourself walk slowly through the ideas explored in each chapter, allowing time to pray and ponder over those questions that resonate most deeply with your experience. You may need to pause over a line of poetry or a verse

of Scripture, or to rest in quiet meditation wherever you sense God's gracious questioning of your ingrained thoughts and habits of the heart.

At the end of each chapter you will find a simple spiritual exercise, or *practicum*. As the name suggests, the challenge of waiting presents a very practical opportunity for us to grow in the grace of patience. These exercises are not meant to be rushed through as an optional post-script to some more substantial intellectual message. Since waiting is a very practical matter, which involves us both physically and spiritually, and unavoidably temporally, then you will need to give the time for your soul and body to internalize and truly embrace some of the holy wisdom that you are hoping to cultivate.

PRACTICUM

Time out for a simple body prayer

This is an exercise adapted from Father Richard Rohr (2014). You will need to find space and time, perhaps at the end or the beginning of the day, to make this fourfold prayer of waiting in a graceful and expectant way.

AWAIT—Sit or kneel, with your hands palm up, in a gesture of receptivity. Await God's presence. Give time to wait, not as you expect or hope or imagine God's presence to feel, but just as it is in this moment of time.

ALLOW—Reach up, with your hands open to this encounter. Let go your cherished sense of control. Allow a sense of God's presence (or God's holy absence) to come and be what it is, without meeting your preferences and expectations.

ACCEPT—Bring your hands, cupped towards the place of the heart. Accept as a gift whatever is real in this moment of prayer. Whatever does or does not come to you, accept that

you are not in charge. Accept the infinity and transcendence of God's presence, which is real and present whether or not you have any awareness.

ATTEND—Finally stretch out your hands, in a gesture of readiness and response. Make an active gift of your waiting, as you attend to what you are called to, whatever reorientation or recommitment God now invites.

For God alone my soul waits in silence.

PSALM 62:5