

Praise for
WAITING IN MINDFUL HOPE

Martina Lehane Sheehan has written a rich and inspiring book to accompany our Advent journey. Within its pages, she traces three vital movements in the spiritual life: waiting, mindfulness, and hope. Under waiting, Sheehan suggests that we welcome times of “non-doing.” She even maintains there is such a thing as “a holy waste of time.” In part two, she defines mindfulness as “lucid awareness” and traces this venerable practice in our Christian tradition as well as other faith traditions. In the section on hope, Sheehan suggests ways to keep hope alive even “in places of exile.” Throughout her book, Sheehan weaves together Scripture, ancient and contemporary teachings, poetry, and brief stories that struck a chord with me. *Waiting in Mindful Hope* is a beautiful celebration of our pilgrimage. It will be a welcome companion for all the seasons of our life.

MELANNIE SVOBODA, SND,

author of *Hangin' onto Hope: Reflections and Prayers
for Finding “Good” in an Imperfect World*

WAITING IN MINDFUL HOPE

Wisdom for Times of Transition

MARTINA LEHANE SHEEHAN



**TWENTY-THIRD
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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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Introduction

We are a pilgrim people, forever on a journey of transitioning, always waiting in anticipation of the “not yet.” The Latin word for *Advent* is *adventus*, meaning “arrival” or “anticipating the new.” We find ourselves in these *adventus* spaces during every period of transition, whether we are trying to escape a stressful lifestyle, seeking to travel more lightly, or simply listening for what is being created anew.

This book, which can be dipped in and out of, will help you to choose intentional times of awareness—or rather it will help you to notice how awareness is *choosing you*. Initially it was designed as a book specifically for Advent, but as I progressed it became clear to me that this was a book for every season, because the cultivation of *mindful*

living, attentive waiting, and hope are at the cornerstone of authentic living throughout the year.

I hope that this short book will help you to achieve a sense of balance and self-possession, especially during times of stress or change. In striving to get the life for which we yearn, we often neglect the precious in-between times; how often do we find ourselves saying “once this chapter is over everything will be fine”? What we fail to understand is that it is in the waiting time and transitional spaces that real growth and transformation take place.

You may be surprised to discover that much of what tires us isn't so much our actual workload but the constant busyness of our minds. When we begin to integrate present moment attentiveness with compassion and acceptance, we find we are more energetic. By engaging with the suggestions and reflections in this book, you will learn how to break free of that exhausting and incessant mental activity and learn instead to step into the reality of *the present moment*. In doing so, you will gain a new “aliveness,” but most of all, you will discover that it is in this newly cultivated receptive space that you can become open to “the more.”

Allow this book to become a companion for transitional and waiting times; allow it to aid you in envisioning new possibilities while attending to what is unfolding

Introduction

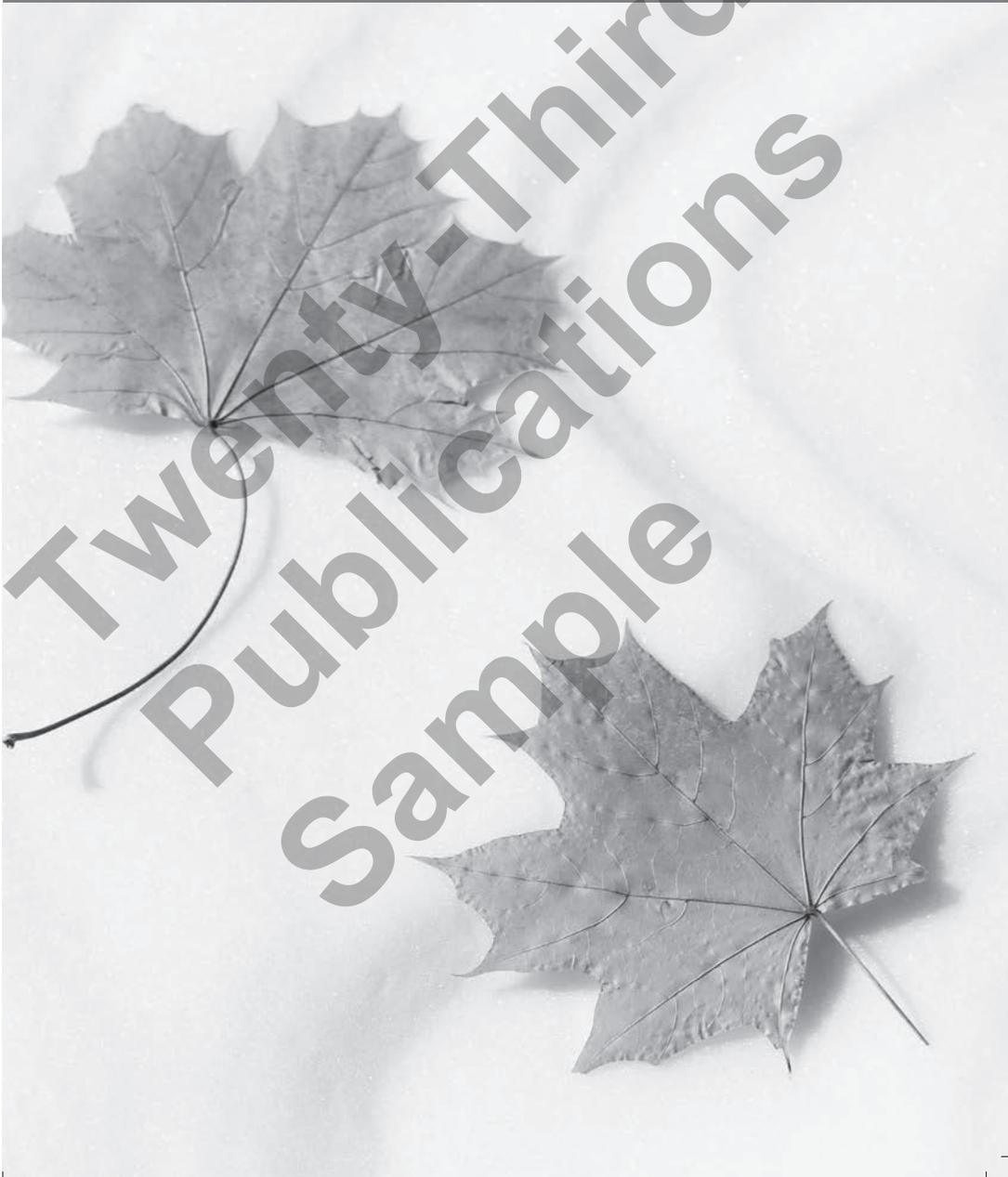
in the now. It will help you to find a spiritual steadiness during times of change and help you to surrender to life's vicissitudes; it may even empower you to dance on the shifting sands beneath your feet. It will help you to retain serenity in your life and encourage you to open your heart to the Spirit.

May this book guide your heart to know what to leave behind and what to take with you. May it be a homecoming journey, a return from exile, a discovery of the true self, and a rejection of all that is false and illusory. As you lift the lantern of a new hope, may light be cast on your path; may it be done unto you according to the highest plan for your unfolding.

Martina Lehane Sheehan

Part One

WAITING



Wakefulness

We have tested and tasted too much, lover—

Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.

But here in the Advent-darkened room

Where the dry black bread and the sugarless tea

Of penance will charm back the luxury

Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom

The knowledge we stole but could not use.

"Advent" by Patrick Kavanagh

Waiting does not come easy to most of us. We live in a world where it is almost fashionable to be stressed from a hectic workload. Society places an increasingly high value on productivity, applauding our ability to multitask and to get work done in record time. Because of this, we can find ourselves being driven to say “yes” to everyone and everything, even when our inner selves are screaming to say “no.” While we try to move faster to “save time,” we rarely get to enjoy the time that we have saved. This can come at a high price in terms of our spiritual and psychological well-being. If we are to “charm back...the child’s soul” (which can be another name for “soul self”), we may have to withdraw a little from our sugar-coated culture of excess in order to appreciate, in Kavanagh’s words, “the newness...in every stale thing.”

WAKEFULNESS

We have to remain aware and awake, St. Paul says, because “the time has come; you must wake up now...the night is almost over, it will be daylight soon” (Rm 13:12). We usually try to console ourselves during waiting times by repeating the mantra that we will be happy when we achieve this goal or reach that particular destination. When we do this, however, we tune out and so become disconnected from

the fertile ground of the present moment. In order to be fully awake, we need to keep vigil and avoid obsessing over the past or the future at the expense of the here and now.

We all have a longing for a less cluttered space in our minds and hearts, and even in our surroundings. It is significant that, in some accounts of his birth, the Creator of the Universe chose a simple cave in which to be born; a cave is an uncluttered, empty space in the center of the earth, emptied out by the forces of nature. Perhaps the Spirit also needs this empty space in us, because it cannot fill us if we are already full. Historically, we see that the Good News did not come to the people who were already filled with their own importance, nor was it revealed to those of great power, like Tiberius, Caesar, Pilate, or any of the great and powerful. It came instead to people of simplicity, like John the Baptist, who lived an uncluttered and simple life in the wilderness.

The most intrusive clutter usually comes from the chatter in our own heads, that incessant inner dialogue. It is actually the default mode of the mind to envision useless scenarios around *what could be*, *what should be*, *what should have happened*, or *what should have been said*. Trapped in these ruminations, our hearts cannot receive the nourishment that is available in the present moment. To be in a *state of receptivity*, we have to *live fully in the present while*

holding a joyful expectant sense of anticipation of the “not yet.” The Advent characters in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke are not passively waiting. They are waiting intentionally and actively. When we wait actively, we become fully attentive because we trust that something is unfolding moment by moment.

When we are living through times of waiting, we discover that we are not in control; we discover that we cannot change every circumstance by tapping our fingers impatiently on the counter, by honking the horn, or by engaging in some kind of rant. We need, therefore, to learn how to strengthen our ability to wait with patience and mindfulness, instead of considering the waiting period to be a waste of time. “The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains. You also must be patient” (Jas 5:7–8).

Perhaps we could start learning how to wait mindfully in simple ways — when, for example, we are waiting for the kettle to boil or are delayed in a line in the shop or bank. Here, we can consciously welcome a breathing space; we can look around us and take in sights and sounds and practice being fully present. When velocity and turbulence cause us to tense our shoulders and clench our fists, we can take a breath and choose to let go a little. Instead of filling every spare moment by reaching for our phones to text or

access social media, we can practice welcoming times of “non-doing.” We can do this whenever we find ourselves pounding on the keyboard of our computer when a program will not open fast enough, or repeatedly hitting the button of the pedestrian crossing (imagining we can make the green man appear more quickly). Instead of fuming against these would-be obstacles, we can discover how they are offering an opportunity to strengthen our “waiting muscles.” All of this helps us toward a more surrendered life, one that helps anxiety to gradually slip away. When we reset our pace and the tempo of our lives, our priorities begin to shift and we begin to align ourselves with divine timing.

PATIENT ACCEPTANCE

Instead of feverishly trying to change circumstances, we can bring a gentle acceptance toward whatever is present right now, because no situation (or person) can change until they are first accepted. Anyone who has gone through an addiction recovery program will endorse the view that the process of acceptance and surrender is a gradual one. Sometimes we have to stay in the stuck places for a while without trying to prematurely “fix” them. While surrender does not come easy to most of us, it is a crucible for

transformation and rebirth. Something can be hatching in the dark that could not otherwise gestate. Nature can help us to creatively embrace the waiting seasons in our souls. Scripture often uses the metaphor of the seed to describe this slow but transformative potential for growth; it tells us that a tiny mustard seed can become the greatest tree where birds come to shelter (cf. Lk 13:19). When the seed is underground and invisible to the eye, it contains all the properties and beauty of the flower. Nature embraces the rhythms of waiting in darkness while lying under the earth. It reminds us of how the Creator of the Universe waited in obscurity and silence before being incarnated into humanity. The Christ Child grew in the womb of a young girl, with no quick fix or grand entry, but a slow and fragile waiting process. This teaches us that the deepest soul movements cannot be rushed but need to be entered into gently, and patiently inhabited.

In those dark days when we fear we will never see the sun again, when the future is concealed from our sight, we must trust that despite how it seems at present, we are not abandoned. Like the tree in winter that does not yet see the spring, we must feel our rootedness in divine soil where eventually we will sense that there are new buds emerging. The transitioning from fear to faith is not easy, but it thaws our frozen hearts and loosens our arthritic spirits.

In times of waiting, we need to be especially aware of how the advertising industry encourages us to find some instant escape route via the attainment of a glitzy new possession or mood-altering substance. It tells us to *bypass waiting times* and instead to catapult ourselves forward into some “just around the corner” future fantasy. It skilfully works on our “empty places,” convincing us that we do not *have enough*, and of course convincing us that we, ourselves, *are not enough*. This creates the psychological suffering that comes from *craving what we do not have and rejecting what we do have*. Instead, we can allow ourselves to be encountered *right here, right now*, where our parched hearts begin to drink from the tranquil pool of divine presence.

A HOLY WASTE OF TIME

We have deep longings for the formless and infinite things of the Spirit—for beauty, love, tenderness, healing, and growth. We cannot summon these gifts through willpower alone, but we can *allow* them to unfold and to emerge organically from within. This requires learning how to practice *acceptance and intentional waiting*.

Waiting times are not pointless, but the petulant child within us frequently throws tantrums—lots of them—

because of having to wait. We usually want to fix our lives all by ourselves (and of course fix everyone else's also!).

Personally, I don't like to feel directionless, to be without my map or compass. Yet, when looking back on my life, I have discovered that these waiting times were the moments when I was most disposed to hear the gentle breeze of the Holy Spirit, where my soul heard "Sshh, be still, I am with you." It was during these times that I received invitations to release my feverish grasp, to trust that the future will arrive in its own time, and to know that I will not receive what I need for tomorrow until tomorrow comes. Instead, I found myself thanking God for the in-between holy "waste of time."

SOURCE

In the gospels we see how Christ, throughout his earthly life, frequently returned to places of solitude, especially in times of major decision making, as well as before and after his ministry of great teaching and healing. He was frequently to be found communing with his Creator on the hills, out on a lake, in the fields, etc. He knew where his source was; he knew that "he had come from God and was returning to God" (Jn 13:3). The temptation of Christ is one such potent example; here, Jesus spent forty days