

The Spirituality of Patience

Rev. Scott W. Alexander, Preaching

Sunday, May 31, 2020

TIME FOR ALL AGES

Introduced by Kelly Stephens

“The Marshmallow Test”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX_oy9614HQ

VIDEO BEFORE THE SERMON:

Dr. Judith Orloff author of *“Emotional Freedom”*

“Transform Frustration with Patience”

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/emotional-freedom/201209/the-power-patience>

THE SERMON

It seems like an age ago now...but do you remember what was going through your mind back in early March when suddenly this Corona pandemic broke over America and radically disrupted almost every aspect of our daily lives? Well...I can tell you what I was thinking. I was confidently saying to myself, ***“Alright Scott...this really is a problem (and massive inconvenience) for me (and everybody else) right now...but surely by early summer this virus will have more-or-less run its course and everything will return to the way I want things to be.”*** Maybe some of you had similar optimistic thoughts?

Well, I’ve got news for you – actually it’s something most of you already understand all too well (at this juncture) ...whether you want to or not. Here we are this morning...on the last day of May...standing on the “cusp” of summer...and life in America (and almost everywhere else on this planet, for that matter) **IS NO WHERE NEAR RETURNING TO “ANY SORT OF NORMAL”**...and may not be for a very long time. Countless **“social distancing”** restrictions (while varied by location) are still in place...most businesses (including bars and restaurants) are still struggling...schools (at every level) are still shuttered...hospitals are reeling...testing is spotty...our politics dysfunctional...travel is crippled...countless sporting and cultural events are cancelled...and we are still afraid to gather with our neighbors in stores, bars, parks, and churches -- not to mention even gathering with our own families and friends in the privacy of our own homes.

The fact is, dear friends, **BECAUSE (UNLIKE SOME FANTASIZE) THIS VIRUS IS NOT GOING TO “SUDDENLY DISAPPEAR,” WE ARE GOING TO HAVE TO WAIT...AND APPARENTLY WAIT FOR A CONSIDERABLE TIME...BEFORE OUR LIVES CAN RETURN TO AT LEAST SOME OF THE OLD/COMFORTABLE/ RHYTHMS AND ROUTINES WE SO MISS.** Surely it is as David Brooks recently observed in the *New York Times*, allow me to briefly quote him, ***“We have entered the ENDURANCE PHASE of this pandemic. We are slowly mastering this disease, but we have not yet done so. And so we wait...and endure. Endurance is patience...Endurance is***

living with unpleasantness...Endurance is living with uncertainty...and endurance is fortifying. It is discovering you can get socked in the nose and take it."

[PAUSE...]

And this unwelcome truth – that we have entered the “*the Endurance Phase*” of this pandemic and that we’re going to have to **WAIT** (possibly for a very long time?) before we can once again have the kind of life we yearn for — has gotten me thinking about **the spiritual (and emotional) importance of PATIENCE!** I am passionately persuaded that if we (individually and collectively) do not **find A MEASURE OF PATIENCE** (in the midst of our waiting for this pandemic to resolve itself) that we will profoundly harm not only ourselves individually but also the whole of our culture (and the quality of our shared life together).

So...with it established that we are going to need a lot of patience, the question becomes, **WHAT IS PATIENCE, ANYWAY?**”...And how can we acquire **MORE** of it in the days and months ahead?

Well...let’s begin with what the dictionary says:

[THE FOLLOWING GRAPHIC IS INSERTED INTO THE VIDEOTAPE] .

Dictionary.com

patience

[pey-shuhns]

noun

- the quality of being patient, as the bearing of provocation, annoyance, misfortune, or pain, without complaint, loss of temper, or irritation.
- an ability or willingness to suppress restlessness or annoyance when confronted with delay.
- quiet, steady perseverance; even-tempered care; diligence.

[THIS SLIDE STAYS UP FOR 10 SECONDS ON THE VIDEOTAPE]

[SCOTT READS DEFINITIONS]

PATIENCE

- the quality of being patient, as the bearing of provocation, annoyance, misfortune, or pain, without complaint, loss of temper, or irritation.
- an ability or willingness to suppress restlessness or annoyance when confronted with delay.
- quiet, steady perseverance; even-tempered care; diligence.

Now...what immediately strikes me about this definition of PATIENCE is how **PASSIVE** and **NEUTRAL** (even unenthusiastic a quality!) it is. Patience (as defined here) is not as **some powerful, pro-active reality of transforming good** in our lives -- but rather as the useful quality of merely “*tolerating*”... “*putting up with*”...or “*suppressing negative reaction*” to things that irritate, annoy, provoke or anger us.

This “passive” definition of patience made me realize that I believe there are **THREE VERY DISTINCT KINDS OF “WAITING” WHEN THINGS ARE NOT GOING THE WAY WE WANT THEM TO IN OUR LIVES:**

- 1) First, there is **TOXIC, IMPATIENT WAITING** -- this is the kind we all want to banish from our lives.
- 2) Second, there is **TOLERANT/NEUTRAL WAITING** - this is the passive kind the dictionary describes, and...
- 3) Third, there is **SOULFUL/SPIRIT-SATISFYING WAITING** -- the kind of patience I will be recommending to you this morning.

Let me quickly project this list of these three distinct kinds of “waiting” up on the screen for you, so you can remember them.

[THE FOLLOWING TEXT IS INSERTED INTO THE VIDEOTAPE HERE]

THERE ARE THREE VERY DISTINCT KINDS OF “WAITING” WHEN THINGS ARE NOT GOING THE WAY WE WANT THEM TO IN OUR LIVES:

- 1) **TOXIC/IMPATIENT WAITING...**
- 2) **TOLERANT/NEUTRAL WAITING...**
- 3) **SOULFUL/SATISFYING WAITING**

[THIS SLIDE STAYS UP ON THE VIDEO FOR 10 SECONDS]

So let me address each of these THREE DISTINCT KINDS OF WAITING IN TURN...first, **TOXIC IMPATIENT WAITING.**

TOXIC IMPATIENT WAITING is the counter-productive (and spirit-robbing) kind of “waiting” I have been spiritually working to eliminate from my life for decades now. A few days ago, when I told Collins -- my spouse of the last 30 years – that I would be addressing the topic of “*Patience*” this morning, he sarcastically quipped back, “*Scott Alexander preaching about PATIENCE?...isn’t that a bit like Attila the Hun hosting a peace conference?*” Now actually – as good humored as this was meant -- his response is a bit unfair...for the truth is that (if I don’t say myself!) over recent years I have really worked at become much less impatient personally when confronted by delays, irritations and inconveniences in my life...but I suppose our spouses (of many years) are always a bit slow to notice and affirm positive changes in our behaviors!

But, still, he has a point! For much of my life, TOXIC/IMPATIENT WAITING has been a habitual (and non-productive!) emotional response of mine when I bump up against things not going my way. Let me just give two quick examples if I might from my own life of TOXIC/IMPATIENT WAITING:

- Example #1 (and full disclosure here, folks...this has happened more than once!): I’m in my favorite **Publix** grocery store up on Oslo Road, after a long day at work here at the fellowship...and after quickly and efficiently collecting the items I want in the cart, I head to the check-out area only to discover that the lines (that were non-existent when I came in the store) are now suddenly several-persons long. So – impatient creature that I am...always in a hurry and always hating to wait for anything -- I try to pick the line which (by my own weird calculation) seems that it might “*move the fastest.*” And -- more times than not, it seems 😊 -- I somehow pick the “*wrong*” line, either with a particularly slow check-out person...or with plodding people in front of me maddingly slowing the check-out process down with scores of coupons or lengthy/pointless questions about the sale price of an item. And so (more often than not) I stand there fuming (steam of frustration beginning to come out of my ears) as I WAIT...feeling my impatience (and my unhappiness) growing...focused only on what

I perceive to be **NOT** going right for me at the moment. By the time my turn comes to check out, I am in no mood to cheerfully greet the check-out person...I am filled with TOXIC FRUSTRATION...grumpy, irritable, and sorry that I came shopping in the first place!

- Example # 2: (and, yes, this has happened to me more than once too!) I'm at some far-away airport, heading home, comfortably sitting on an airplane that has left the gate, and is heading to the runway to take off, when the pilot comes on the intercom to share the unwelcome news that the plane is being held on the tarmac on an **"indefinite ground hold."** Now...I've got a tight connection that I really want to make in Charlotte to get home on time, but even though I know there is **absolutely nothing I can do** to get that plane into the air (and to my connection) sooner, I sit there fuming, again steam coming out of my ears, feeling my blood pressure rise, muttering to those around me what a terrible, stupid mess this is...making both myself (and my seatmates) miserable...when I could just (wisely and calmly) open a book, or close my eyes and listen to classical music through my earphones...and relax, and let the day unfold as it will. But instead, I sit there fussing and fuming.

Essayist Michael Lewin writes this of his own toxic impatience:

Impatience seems to be a growing [problem] that we all have to contend with in our lives, either as perpetrators or recipients. I have often felt it in myself, and seen it in others; that welling up of irritation, annoyance and frustration that can change peoples' personalities in an instant. That feeling of exasperation that keeps us way from being present in the moment, calm and attentive, to the unfolding of life as it is, and not as we want it to be.

Responding to situations in a considered, reflective manner seems to bring out the best in us, and reacting to situations in a hasty "let's get this over with" approach invariably brings out some of the worse in us. Impatience rarely gets the results we really want, it just forces its way forward with an "I know best" attitude that tangles us up in irritation and disappointment.

My impatience is something that I constantly work with in order to cultivate a more relaxed state of mind, a more relaxed state of being where I'm fully attending, fully accepting of the present, fully engaged with the now. But it isn't easy...

Whether I'm waiting for the kettle to boil on the gas ring, or delayed in traffic congestion, if I'm preoccupied with the thoughts that I'm far too busy to be wasting time, that I should be elsewhere, then my impatience is winning....Impatience will not change anything for the better, it only makes us feel worst. It tries to rush us swiftly into the next moment without due regard for experiencing the present one.

TOXIC IMPATIENCE (of this sort) is an all-too-seductive-and-easy kind of unpleasant **"waiting"** that I am spiritually and emotionally working to banish from my life. It is a kind of easy unrewarding "waiting" that always makes me miserable in the moment, and never satisfies, enriches, or ennobles me...and although my spouse may not always recognize the progress I am making, I am slowly learning (in my day-to-day life) to avoid this sort of destructive and un-useful TOXIC/IMPATIENT WAITING...but every once and awhile I get sucked back into it, against my better instincts!

[PAUSE...]

And then there is **THE SECOND KIND OF "WAITING"** when things **"don't go our way"**...the **TOLERANT/NEUTRAL** kind of waiting described in the dictionary definition of **"Patience."** I suppose this kind of "tolerant" waiting – when we manage to avoid (as the dictionary says) letting ourselves get irritated or

annoyed or angered when we bump up against difficulty or inconvenience in our lives -- is **one emotional or spiritual step better** than the TOXIC/IMPATIENT/FLY-OFF-THE-HANDLE WAITING I have just described. One of the synonyms the dictionary gives for **“patience”** is **“forbearance”**...which is the ability to **“Tolerate”** and **“Withstand”** and **“Put Up With”** irritating things. Perhaps many times in our lives **IT IS ENOUGH** (as the dictionary suggests) simply to **NOT** react (in an outwardly negative way) when things go awry. As with physicians treating a sick patient, perhaps it is often enough for us (in our own emotional lives) to **“First do no harm”**...to simply first remain calm, collected and neutral. So, sure, waiting in a calm and patient (and non-irritated...non-reactive) manner (when things don't go as you want or expect) is clearly a simple (and useful) virtue of living...and it is often enough to see us emotionally through.

[PAUSE...]

But what I really want to suggest to you this morning is that there is a **SPIRITUALLY AND EMOTIONALLY SUPERIOR KIND OF PATIENCE** that is also available to us -- above and beyond simply **“putting up patiently”** with life's inevitable inconveniences, delays and irritations. And that is what I am calling this morning **SOULFUL/SATISFYING WAITING!**

[THE FOLLOWING PHRASE IS INSERTED INTO THE VIDEOTAPE FOR 10 SECONDS]

TRY TO PRACTICE SOULFUL/SATISFYING WAITING IN YOUR LIFE

Such patience (which must come from deep within us) is so much more than simply refraining from getting irritated and annoyed...it is making a positive, pro-active, purposeful choice of the spirit to “WAIT” in a certain soul-satisfying way...and that is the way of **MINDFULNESS**.

One author (who writes about **“The Spirituality of Patience”**) wisely points out that IMPATIENCE is:

That feeling of exasperation that keeps us away from being present in the moment – keeps us away from being calm and attentive and “awake” to the unfolding of life as it is -- not as we want it to be. Impatience tries to rush us swiftly into the next moment without due regard for experiencing the present one.”

Whenever we encounter a situation which frustrates or irritates us (like in the line at the grocery check-out line... or sitting on a plane on the tarmac of an airport...or trying to navigate the “telephone tree” of your cable TV provider – dear God why do they make it so impossible?) whenever we feel impatience welling up inside of us, we can **TAKE A DEEP SPIRITUAL BREATH...RE-FOCUS OURSELVES**...and choose to pay **full and mindful attention** to:

- Where we actually are, and...
- What we are actually doing or thinking...and
- Who we are with...and
- What we can still enjoy about (or contribute to) the present moment

If...in moments when we are obliged to **“WAIT”**...we can find the wisdom to pay attention...then we can truly arrive **“at home” in the moment**...and see – perhaps as never before -- the beautiful/satisfying world that is at hand.

Let me tell you a story about **“a little amazing something”** that happened to me the last time I was out in California on business. I was out in the Los Angeles area...in a boring little rental car...on the infamous **“405” interstate** which runs along the Pacific through Los Angeles...on my way to a professional conference...when the heavy traffic (already irritating me!) suddenly slowed to a very slow crawl...and then a full stop! Now...at

first, from deep inside my body, I started to notice my typical/default impatience and frustration building -- because I hate traffic jams...and really wanted to get up to the conference center see all my friends and start socializing! I was on the verge – in the moment on the “405” -- of making myself **miserable with toxic impatience**. But then, for reasons I can’t quite explain, I was able to calm and focus myself...and **EXPAND** my attentions (in a **SPACIOUS AND LIBERATING WAY**) and **FOCUS ON** the beautiful world that stretched all around me. I put on the soothing music of a classical radio station...took a few deep breaths...and began to feel my body relaxing into calm...right there in that mess of a traffic jam. Then, I began to look – truly look at what was (in amazing fact) around me...it was (despite my being stuck in an unwelcome delay) **a wonderful (even sacred) moment**. The sun was setting (cool and purple in the stunning sky) over the mountains the surround Los Angeles to the east...the buildings were all bathed in soft yellow light that made the city-scape beautiful...it was a lovely and calming end to the day. I then began to look at the colorful cacophony cars and trucks around me, and at the diverse and interesting drivers all sharing this moment with me...I even caught a few of their eyes, and exchanged knowing smiles and waves -- It was almost as if I could hear them kindly saying to me, ***“Hey neighbor/driver!...sure we’re all stuck together here in this unwelcome rush hour jam...but we’re freeway companions and soulmates sharing in this curious time-warp...able to share a smile and affirm one another, even though we’d all probably rather be somewhere else!”*** In that moment...by entering into what I can only call a **SPACIOUS MINDFULNESS**...and **AN OPEN AND ACCEPTING AWARENESS OF ALL THAT WAS**...I was able to calm my mind...relax my body...and actually enjoy a rush-hour trip on ***“The infamous 405.”*** And I must tell you that that day ended well...in very short order (and as suddenly as it had begun!) the jam lifted...the traffic got back up to speed...I got to the conference center (not all that late, really) a relaxed and happy camper....eager to enjoy the companionship of my friends.

[PAUSE...]

In his essay ***An Open and Spacious Awareness...for an Open and Spacious Life***, Buddhist teacher Larry Yang describes the kind of **PATIENT MINDFULNESS** I experienced that day on the California freeway...a mindfulness that helps us see beyond the narrow confines of the moment and reminds us that...***“Our lives are always more expansive than we think them to be, especially when we are unable to move beyond a specific problem [or irritation. A spacious mindfulness practice can benefit a sense of larger perspective, a bigger picture, an openness that often can soothe the mind and calm the heart.”*** I must tell you that the healing calm I experienced amidst that California freeway traffic jam that afternoon has stayed with me...and has reminded my soul that in almost every frustrating circumstance, I can expand (and deepen) my awareness of “where I actually am in the world” ...and thereby be blessed (and made peaceful and whole).

[PAUSE...]

And speaking of traffic jams -- and **pro-active, purposeful soul-satisfying waiting**...let me tell you one more story. The brother of a friend of mine (a typical impatient American male as I understand it!) was vacationing in England with his family. On the day in question, they were heading in their rental car for the car ferry at Dover with (as they say) ***“10,000 of their closest friends”*** when suddenly the traffic came to a complete halt. Something clearly had happened up ahead, and it was apparent that – given the total jam up of vehicles as far as the eye could see -- that traffic would be stymied for hours. And so while he (as a typically-impatient American male practicing TOXIC WAITING) began to fuss and fume and fret about how terrible it was he couldn’t get the ferry on time ...all the Brits around him modeled a different kind of response. Instead of all sitting glumly in their cars cursing about their bad luck...they cheerfully got out of their cars...began chatting with one another (as if they were long-lost friends)...and then (with relaxed good cheer) broke out what food

and drink they had in their respective vehicles (crackers...herring...olives...cheese...beer) **and enjoyed a huge, impromptu communal picnic!** Those Brits somehow instinctively knew to choose a path other than toxic impatience. They didn't have a **collective temper-tantrum...THEY HAD A PICNIC!**

[PAUSE...]

Friends...we are now all stuck together in an **unholy traffic jam called the Corona epidemic...**and like it or not, **we are all going NOWHERE FAST!**

The only question each one of us faces is: **HOW AM I GOING TO WAIT?**

Am I going to wait (fussing and fuming) with **TOXIC IMPATIENCE** -- making myself, and everyone around me miserable in complaint?

Or am I going to wait in **TOLERANT NEUTRALITY**— passively putting up with things that displease and inconvenience me not making myself miserable , but not enjoying myself either.

Or am I going to wait in **SOULFUL SATISFACTION** – looking for the spiritual and emotional opportunities that lie silently all around me in this standstill?

Dear friends...I beg you...find some quiet time this week...pause...and ask yourself: “WHAT IS HERE...IN THIS WAITING...RIGHT HERE, IN THIS WAITING...THAT IS TRYING TO BLESS ME? WHAT CHOICES CAN I MAKE (RIGHT HERE...RIGHT NOW...THAT WILL TURN THIS TOUGH, UNWANTED WAITING... INTO SOMETHING WONDERFUL.

Amen.