

Gathering in Glasgow Plenary—“Waiting”

By David Brubaker

November 1, 2019

Introduction

I was deeply honored to be invited to join all of you for this 10th anniversary recognition of the founding of Place for Hope, and to celebrate the growing network that is in place for mediation, conflict transformation and reconciliation throughout the UK.

This is my fifth trip to Scotland, including that first visit to Aviemore in 2009. Four of those visits were at the invitation of Place for Hope, including a training trip organized by Hugh Donald in 2010 and a wonderful week on Iona organized by Ruth Harvey. Last summer I came on my own to do a pilgrimage on St. Cuthbert’s Way.

I was asked to talk about “waiting” this morning, and it may seem an odd time to do so given the pervasive sense of urgency in the land. We are witnessing desperate migrants perish while attempting merely to enter the country. Climate change is already disrupting life in multiple ways throughout the land. The gap between the rich and the rest continues to widen. The legislature is polarized and unable to perform even the most basic aspects of governing. Meanwhile, the head of the country is a boorish man with bad hair, and the leader of the opposition seems old and befuddled. But enough about MY country....

It is precisely when things seem most hopeless that we feel compelled to act...and when we usually most need to wait. There are two examples from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures of waiting, starting with Abraham.

Biblical Examples

Abraham, or Abram, is the spiritual father of all three monotheistic religions. When God called Abram from Haran to the Promised Land he was already 75 years old. It took another 25 years before the “son of promise,” Isaac, was born, and by then Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90. (Which truly gives new meaning to the phrase “miracle baby.”) For Sarah and Abraham,

there would have been a lot of waiting...and wondering if God were ever going to fulfill God's promise.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was visited by Gabriel, who made the following promise:

"Don't be afraid, Mary. You have found favor^[a] with God.

³¹ You will become pregnant, give birth to a son,
and name him Jesus.

³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High.

The Lord God will give him
the throne of his ancestor David.

³³ Your son will be king of Jacob's people forever,
and his kingdom will never end."

Mary waited 30 years for Jesus to begin his ministry, and then three years later saw it end in violence and tragedy. Only millennia later can we begin to comprehend the transnational and transformational nature of this upside-down "kingdom that will never end."

God clearly has a different sense of time, and space, than we do. Perhaps that's because God is working out God's purposes through billions of years of an evolving and expanding universe, rather than the nanosecond that one earthly day, or year, represents in that timeline.

When have you had to wait for something that was very important to you...and what was the result? Talk to the one or two persons next to you, and share a story of a time when you waited.

Purpose of Waiting

There are four good reasons to wait, and you could no doubt add more. The first is that waiting **reduces our impulses**, and gives us time to think, reflect, and consult. We are reminded daily of the dangers and costs of impulsive leadership actions, and each of us could recall a time when we acted in haste and without sufficient information with unfortunate results. The injunction to "don't just do something, stand there!" is generally wise advice when faced with a complex challenge. One of my favorite authors on organizational change, Ron Heifetz, advises

change leaders to “get off the dance floor and get on the balcony” (to see the whole system) before attempting to lead any significant change.

The second is that waiting **builds anticipation**. Those of us who have raised children know the anticipation that children have leading up to Christmas or another major holiday that involves gifts. Waiting for a seed to germinate in the ground, or for a baby to develop in its mother’s womb, is a time of anticipation. The growth is taking place, but it is hidden in darkness, and we wait in anticipation of the emergence of new life. When we fail to wait, we abort the process of anticipation and maturation that is required. That is why we are told to never assist a butterfly to exit from its cocoon—it will happen in the fullness of time.

A third reason to wait is that waiting can **build relationships**. Perhaps you have heard the expression “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Mert and I lived in Brazil for three years in the 1980’s when we were working with Mennonite Central Committee. Brazilians had a more nuanced understanding of how absence works. They said, “Absence is like wind on a fire. If it is a small fire the wind will blow it out. But if it’s already an established fire the wind will enhance it even more.” Waiting is like absence in this metaphor. When a relationship is already established—whether with a friend, a family member, or with God—waiting often enhances the relationship even further.

The last reason to wait is that waiting **builds character**. The famous Stanford “marshmallow experiment” offered one marshmallow to four year olds if they wanted to eat it immediately, but two marshmallows if they could wait 15 minutes (with the marshmallow on a plate set in front of them). According to the TED Talk presenter who summarizes this experiment, asking a four-year old to wait 15 minutes would be the equivalent of asking you and me to wait two hours for a cup of coffee in the morning. Two thirds of the children gobbled down the marshmallow immediately after the researcher left the room, but another third waited the full 15 minutes to get a second one. They tracked those children and 14 years later found a remarkable correlation between success in school and entry to university and those children who were able to wait. The ability to defer gratification, even as a young child, is critical to success in life.

Fruits of Waiting

So the discipline of waiting curbs our impulsive need to act rather than to think and consult, and waiting also builds character. However, the two greatest fruits of a developing a practice of waiting are humility and trust. Waiting requires *humility* because it runs counter to the “I alone can fit it” mentality that pervades our individualistic cultures. It requires *trust* because we need to believe that the universe, or God, or some invisible physics principle is going to working on the problem even when we are not doing so.

We tend to grow in trust when we wait because so often we must wait in the darkness.

Read from Barbara Taylor Brown article on “Lunar Spirituality”

We generally cannot see the seed in the soil or the fetus in the womb (ultrasounds only allow us to see through a glass dimly), yet we choose to believe that the seed is germinating and the fetus is growing even before we see it with our own eyes. We wait, then, with a faith in the evidence of things not seen...and yet believed. That is trust.

This is not a call to abandon action. It is in the cycle of action and reflection...of effort followed by waiting...that we do our best work. Many of you know Fr. Richard Rohr, the founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation. Fr. Rohr likes to say that when he founded the center 30 years ago and named it the most important word in the title was “AND.” Without action, the seed never gets planted and the baby never gets created. But without contemplation, without waiting, we’re too impatient to allow the shoot to appear or the baby to mature.

Ruth Read “A Blessing for the One who is Exhausted,” by John O’Donohue

“Wait for the Lord, Whose Day is Near. Wait for the Lord, Be Strong...Take Heart.”