

Advent: Expect More Waiting; Wait More Expectantly

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Advent marks the beginning of the Christian calendar and, as many of you know, the word Advent means simply "coming" or "arrival." During this four-week period of Advent Christians make preparations and wait expectantly for the coming of the Child Jesus, whom they believe to be the saviour of the world. According to that first Christmas story almost everyone was in a waiting, expectant mode. Our medley of readings mentioned a few of these people.

Rather than this kind of expectant waiting we moderns have turned the four weeks before Christmas into a mad rush of buying, with little time for waiting or anything else for that matter. During Advent we moderns expect to wait of course, but in a very different way. We expect to wait for parking spaces at the Mall and for sales clerks to ring in our orders. Most of us, myself included, HATE to wait though. Waiting in traffic or in grocery stores often raises our blood pressure, making us anxious and ill-tempered. We wait impatiently for buses and trains and planes. We who expect everything instantaneously hate waiting the milliseconds for our computers to respond. As parents we wait eternally for our kids who themselves are waiting impatiently for Santa Claus or for their 16th birthday and the car keys.

Though it's really a silly idea when you come to think about it, have we not come to expect, if not demand, that life adjust itself to our schedules with no waiting expected? Most days we can resonate with the words of Thomas Edison who said "Everything comes to him who hustles while he waits," and there are the hustlers. There are those hell-bent on keeping us busy while we wait, filling our heads with propaganda and spin that hardly merits the name news, whether in airports or in bank lines. I even attended a Church service once where I got the impression that the preacher felt that the sanctuary needed also to be a 'no waiting zone. He filled up every available possible silence with chatter, fearing perhaps that I, if left waiting in the silence of Church, might have an heretical insight or two.

Since there seems to be enough waiting in life most of us can't see the point of Advent. This morning though I want leave a couple of thoughts with you. Whether you observe the Christmas holidays or not, firstly, I want to encourage you to take another look at Advent and waiting. I want to suggest that Advent and waiting expectantly might well have within them a deeply rich spiritual practice for us. If we were to schedule MORE expectant waiting into our lives, our lives would have the possibility of greater depth. Waiting expectantly in prayer or in meditation is the best guarantor that we will not miss out on life altogether but rather will have the chance to live our lives at depth. Secondly, I want to suggest that there may be very little difference between two kinds of expectant waiting; very little difference in the activity or the outcome of prayer or meditation.

On one level, of course there are kinds of waiting that are a waste of time. We waste a lot of time in our lives needlessly waiting; waiting for love to come our way, waiting for vacation time or to retire, waiting for a spark from heaven, waiting to win the lottery, waiting desperately for something, - for real living to begin- waiting for someone to help us feel alive and to make us feel that our lives have significance. Such waiting is a waste of time. Waiting for something else to come along often means that we are missing out on the life, the person or the experience that is right in front of our noses. The Buddhists are right when they say, kind of cutely, "If you are not here now, you won't be there then."

I want to suggest that other kinds of waiting are not a waste of time, quite the contrary. On a purely practical level most of us have had enough experience with instant messaging to realize that a little bit of waiting time might actually improve communication and comprehension. In former days, when what is now referred to as snail-mail was the only mail there was, we had to wait until the next morning or the next ship to send off that reply letter. The waiting blessed us with a little time to think and to decide whether or not it was a good idea to reply in that tone or to reply at all. Today, no waiting, click... and we spend the next few months dealing with the emotional fall-out. Maybe we should install a mechanism into our computers which delays sending e-mails for 24 hours and then the computer is programmed to ask me, "Ray, do you REALLY think it is a good idea to send this?" Someone has suggested a breathalyzer which if it detected even the slightest trace of alcohol would cut off emails. If we waited might we not decrease the volume of e-mails and increase the quality of our communication?

One of my favourite parts of the *Tao Ti Ching* states "*Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises itself?*" (#15)

So, onto a deeper level, a scheduled rhythm of expectant waiting is called prayer or meditation. At first glance these two activities seem to be very different. In prayerful waiting it appears that the person is addressing someone outside of themselves, expecting to receive an answer from beyond, from God. On the other hand in meditative waiting no such outside voice is expected, rather the person is exploring the silent wisdom within.

James Carse's book, *The Silence of God* has challenged my simplistic understanding of these two forms of expectant waiting. It is important to know that Carse is arguing as a practising Christian. What is he suggesting? Firstly, he is very concerned about those who claim to have the latest e-mail from the Almighty and dare to speak for him. Such people usually become gods unto themselves wreaking destruction along the way. He argues that the deity found in the Bible is no longer the speaking God. "*The canon is closed ...The revelation is complete. It is only our reception that is incomplete ...the best we can do is to come to sacred writings from within our own ... conceptual biases. When we quote them we give them a meaning that is our own - not God's... One could reasonable argue that acting as though one had divine authority is itself the very source of evil.*"

Very insightful. Wouldn't our world be a safer and more satisfying place if more of the world's religious communities would stop speaking for God or acting on her behalf? For our purposes this morning what does it mean for prayer if, as he suggests, the speaking God is over and the revelation is closed? Do people not engage in prayer, waiting and expecting to hear God speak to them directly, to give them a new message? Carse believes that this type of prayer is wrong-headed. *"In an encounter with divine reality we do not hear a voice but acquire a voice; and the voice we acquire is our own. It is an experience in which we find we say what we never thought it was possible to say."*

What is left of our simplistic division between prayer and meditation? In both kinds of activities we rest in calm, expecting to receive insight and wisdom from deeply within. Whether we name that wisdom God or not, matters not. The name does not matter. The outcome is the same. Scheduling more expectant waiting into our lives helps us to find our voice. Finding voice can be comforting. That voice deep within assures us that we are precious and holy and what we have to offer this life, however small, is of great value.

Finding voice, whether through prayer or meditation, can be dangerous. It can upset our status quo and send us out on journeys thought impossible. Mary Oliver's poem said it well. *"You knew what you had to do, though the wind pried with its stiff fingers at the very foundations, though their melancholy was terrible. It was already late enough, and a wild night, and the road full of fallen branches and stones. But little by little, as you left their voices behind, the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds, and there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own."* (The Journey) Through disciplined waiting we find the courage to venture and explore and, if need be, to leave life-denying people and experiences.

What might happen to a community of people disciplined in expectant waiting either in prayer or meditation? Might such waiting not transform community life?

"When someone listens to you with genuine openness you will find a voice. This is not simply having new words to say it is rather an expanding, an opening toward oneself, an awakening of the heart." (Carse)

An awakening of the heart brings about deeper communication from the heart as we all know "what comes from the heart goes to the heart." (Alan Alda, *Things I overheard while talking to myself*) Waiting expectantly, listening with wide open heart for that deep conversation within, waiting for a heart-felt response from the other enriches community. We reach out to one another and make a difference in the world.

Imagine what might happen.
Wait expectantly and see.
Happy and enriching Advent to you all.

Reading: *The Silence of God, Meditations on Prayer*, James P. Carse

The silence of God is acknowledged in a variety of ways in many spiritual traditions. The essential insight here is that in an encounter with divine reality we do not hear a voice but acquire a voice; and the voice we acquire is our own. It is an experience in which we find we say what we never thought it was possible to say

What we must note in each of these traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam)... is that although each has its origin in the speaking God, the speaking God is over. The canon is closed... The revelation is complete, it is only our reception that is incomplete ... Why has God become silent? I am suggesting that the silence of God is not something that threatens these religions, but is an elemental reality in each of them... It is not a silence into which God has disappeared, but a silence in which God is most remarkably present.

The impossibility of arriving at a definitive interpretation of scripture is precisely what makes it scripture. The best we can do is to come to sacred writings from within our own ... conceptual biases. When we quote them we give them a meaning that is our own - not God's...

(There are) two kinds of silence ...the silence of obedience and the other... the silence of expectation... The silence of obedience ... brings our speech to an end. The silence of expectation ... is just the opposite. It is the silence that makes speech possible...

When someone listens to you with genuine openness you will find a voice to say what you have never been able to say before ... This is not simply having new words to say it is rather an expanding, an opening toward oneself, an awakening of the heart ...