



WAITING OR WAKENING?

Carol Kurtz Walsh

You can't stay in your corner of the Forest waiting for others to come to you. You have to go to them sometimes.

Pooh's Little Instruction Book, inspired by A. A. Milne

If every day is an awakening, you will never grow old. You will just keep growing.

Gail Sheehy

I am beginning this article while *waiting* for a doctor's appointment. I am not prepared to *wait*, so I am writing on the back of an envelope while pondering both the positive and negative aspects of *waiting*.

In retrospect, I experience my life as filled with long stress-filled periods of *waiting*. This began when I was very young. My father left for three years when I was two, because of WWII. I remember *waiting* for him on the front porch and when any man dressed in a military uniform walked by I would run up to him and yell, “daddy”. When he finally came home I had to *wait* for him to pay attention to me, because my mother came first.

When I was five it was realized that my birth date was five days after the kindergarten enrollment date so I had to *wait* a whole year to start school. I was more than ready to start, but unfortunately I had to *wait* and watch my friends leave for school every morning. I remember being lonely and spending a lot of time on our concrete porch steps *waiting* for my friends to come home. To a five year old *waiting* a year felt like a lifetime.

And so it continued. When I was eleven I couldn't *wait* to become a teenager. I thought as a teenager I would have more privileges. Of course that wasn't so. Then when I was a senior in high school I could hardly *wait* to go to college. When I finally got there I could hardly *wait* for Christmas vacation so I could go home. Isn't it interesting how *waiting* doesn't necessarily produce what we were hoping for? Isn't it also interesting how one form of *waiting* often shifts into another?

My family used to joke about how much I hated to *wait*. It didn't matter if I was in line at the grocery store, or *waiting* for a movie to start; I would feel incredibly edgy. *Waiting* seemed like a waste of time. It didn't matter if I was *waiting* to get married, to give birth, or to recover from grief. *Waiting* seemed like life had stalled – a moment or many moments of meaningless, lost time. I now wonder how much energy I wasted by resisting and resenting those moments of *waiting*. Yet, what was I really waiting for? Was I *waiting* for my future? Are we all, in some way, *waiting* for our future to begin?

Impatience about *waiting* seems to be a national curse. We have all experienced it. We have all witnessed or been the brunt of both children and adults' impatient *waiting*. We've seen children have temper tantrums because they have to *wait* for their turn on a ride, because they want that cookie they know is in the cupboard – right now! We see multiple signs of adult's impatience with waiting, i.e. when someone honks their horn the second the light turns green, or when the sales person rolls her eyes while we are searching for change, or when the parent screams because they are in

a hurry to leave but have to *wait* while their insistent, independent toddler struggles with their socks, or when the husband is pacing because his wife is taking too long putting on her makeup.

(Note: At this point in my writing I was called into my doctor's office, so my writing stopped. Then I had to *wait* another half hour before she came in. I decided to just breathe.)

The problem with *waiting* is that it creates emotional, physical stress because we often focus on the future – what can I, will I, should I, be doing in the next hour, days, weeks? Impatient *waiting* takes us away from the moment at hand and into what might happen (Just think what I could do if I win the lottery?), what we want to happen (Wouldn't it be great to go on vacation to Europe?), or what we fear will happen (What if my new boyfriend/girlfriend leaves me? What will I do?). We don't think of the time we spend *waiting* as a precious gift – as a time to catch our breath and be in the moment. Instead we think about the future, i.e. what do we need to buy at the grocery store, will my spouse be upset because s/he is waiting, or what we are going to say to our boss the next day when s/he realizes that our report will be late?

While *waiting* there may be a tendency to drift toward worrisome or negative thoughts. We are especially vulnerable to this during the quiet moments we are *waiting* to fall asleep at night. During these restful pauses our minds easily drift to the past. “Why did I say that to my friend?” “Did I look silly wearing that outfit to the party?” “Why wasn't I invited to that luncheon?” “Why didn't I get that promotion?” Of course when these stressful thoughts fill the void of quiet, they keep us awake.

So the question that beckons itself is, “How can we make these moments we have to *wait* into something meaningful?” It occurs to me that *waiting* can be likened to the punctuation in writing. All forms of punctuation indicate an ending, but they are also predictors that something will follow – be it the rest of the sentence, another sentence, a new paragraph, or a new chapter. Punctuation creates pauses of differing lengths, which also become bridges linking two thoughts. Depending on the length of time we must *wait*, *waiting* can feel like a period between sentences, a comma in the middle of a sentence, a break between paragraphs, a break in chapters, or at the most extreme the pause between books. (Of course death would be the end of our book of life. Then there would be no more *waiting*.)

Waiting feels like a comma or a period when there is only a short pause in time, for example when we are *waiting* for the water to boil, for the elevator, or while sitting in the noisy car wash. We all have to wait for red lights. Can you imagine what it would be like to use these brief pauses in time to take a deep breath? Think how much more energizing that would be compared to the impatient drumming of fingers on the steering wheel? I remember a lecturer saying that the best tennis players make exquisite use of the extremely short moments they pause between serves. They breathe. These small moments of *waiting* are gifts to us, as they give us a wonderful time to pause, to go inside and regenerate our energy by taking a deep breath.

An effective use of pauses was described in the November 23, 2008 issue of the “Washington Post Magazine” by Vanessa Gezari. She wrote about Danielle Romanetti, who fills the small moments of time she *waits* by knitting. She quoted Vanessa as saying, “You can get an awful lot of socks knitted while sitting at a red light in rush hour”. She described how professional women who have a hard time relaxing when they are *waiting*, knit instead. The rhythmic motion of hands becomes soothing and meditative.

Longer moments of *waiting* can feel like a break between paragraphs when a mental, emotional, or circumstantial shift occurs. These two moments in time – one before the shift and one after – give us the opportunity to change our focus or intention. For example, we have cooked dinner and are *waiting* for our spouse to come home, so we can eat dinner and then relax. However, we find ourselves *waiting* impatiently in the middle of this transition by pacing the floor or looking out the window. Instead, we could choose to use this transitional time to read a good article, turn on soothing music, or even better still do a brief meditation or execute some yoga stretches. Any of these positive approaches might help keep our stress level down and our energy up. In addition it will keep us connected to ourselves.

The longest periods of *waiting* tend to feel like beginning a new chapter, or book. These dramatic shifts in our lives can be powerful and momentous, i.e. when we are *waiting* to get married or for our new baby to be born, or when we are *waiting* to graduate from college and begin a new job, or when we are *waiting* for our loved one to come home from Iraq. We

can use these in-between times to help us turn an emotional, spiritual, or intellectual page. When *waiting* embodies huge times of transition, a more mature “Self” has the possibility of emerging.

Everyone in this country experienced a transformative transition in 2008, when we all had to *wait* for the election results. When the results came in and Barack Obama was elected our next president, our country not only shifted into a new chapter of its history, but into a whole new book – about how we see ourselves as a united nation comprised of a multitude of differing individuals, and how we are seen in relationship to the entire world, as well as how they see us.

It is interesting that *waiting* feels differently if it is self-imposed, in contrast to being imposed on us by external factors, such as when I was *waiting* in the doctor’s office. Waiting seems easier when it is our own decision, for example when a couple decides to *wait* longer to get married until their finances are put in order.

There are other times when self-induced periods of *waiting* can be both necessary and helpful, such as in the aftermath of a crisis, losing a loved one, having our home destroyed by fire, or losing a chunk of our money in the stock market. How many of us are *waiting* until the market goes back up to make changes, or are now *waiting* for 2010 in hopes that the financial crisis will be over? During a crisis, moving through a transition and onto the next phase of life is difficult. Because emotions run high during times of crisis, it may be beneficial to *wait* before making choices about the next move. This self-induced form of *waiting* – and not merely re-acting in response to the situation – may be the healthiest approach.

On the other hand I want to present a brief caution – we can also use *waiting* as a defense mechanism, a form of procrastination. This would be akin to finishing one chapter of life and not starting the next. This form of self-induced *waiting* sometimes occurs when we are in the process of creating something new and become stuck, or have a “creative block” – such as when we are creating a new business, a dinner party, or writing a poem. We *wait*, hoping some inspiration or courage will magically appear, helping us surmount our self-judgment and fear.

Procrastination is not “laziness” as some would believe. Procrastination is a delayed response often induced by fear, self-judgment

and/or self-doubt. During these times, this purposeful self-imposed *waiting* can be destructive, as it allows us to trick ourselves into believing that we must *wait* until the time is right, or when we are ready, or when someone else will rescue us with their support. As Sharon Salzberg says in the January 2004 issue of *O Magazine*, *The Power of Intention*, “If we fall, we don't need self-recrimination or blame or anger - we need a reawakening of our intention and a willingness to recommit, to be whole-hearted once again.”

It is important to distinguish between the times when *waiting* might be helpful and when it is procrastination. Again, there are times when purposefully deciding to *wait* might be helpful. Kay Ryan says, “Who would have guessed it is possible that *waiting* is sustainable. A place with its own harvest.” Purposeful *waiting* is vitally important when we are pregnant and waiting to give birth – whether that means giving birth to a baby or an idea. During these times a bit of *waiting* may help that idea develop and mature. It is important to honor that gestation time. Then, when the *waiting* time is over, and the thrust of inspiration and the power of creation takes hold, we can use the force created by the pregnant moments of *waiting* to propel us through the difficult moments of labor, to give birth to something new. Then we will reap the rewards of our inspired *waiting*.

Difficulties in *waiting* can be emotionally transformed into patience – neither rushing toward the future, nor reminiscing or ruminating over the past. Anna C. Brackett said in her book, Technique of Rest, “After we discover that the people who sit still on a long railroad journey reach that journey’s end at precisely the same time as those who “fuss” continually, we have a valuable piece of information which we should not fail to put to practical use.” Effective waiting requires patience, for when we are impatient a lot of energy is wasted.

As an aside you, the reader, might be wondering why I have put “*wait*” and “*waiting*” in italics. Did you notice that each time you read those words a nanosecond pause was created? As a quick exercise you might re-read a couple of paragraphs, and every time the words “*wait*” or “*waiting*” occurs, take a quick breath and then when there is a comma or a period, take a longer breath. This could be a way to practice using pauses as a time to breathe and sink into the Self.

Whether long or short, personally purposeful or created by universal forces, how do we best utilize these pauses in life? Differentiating between purposeful *waiting* until it is time to give birth to an idea, or *waiting* as a defense mechanism requires self-awareness. To be tuned into our own psyche helps us uncover the driving force behind our *waiting*, and in turn how best to deal with waiting. As Lee Iacocca, US automobile businessman says, “The trick is to make sure you don't die *waiting* for prosperity to come.” There are times when we cannot *wait* for things to happen, or for something to come to us. We must go get it. Or, to use Barak Obama’s words, “Yes we can!”

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How do we best utilize periods of *waiting*? Some of the answer lies in the difference between “being” and “doing”. In 1998 I wrote an article entitled “Be and Do” for “Pathways”. I said in that article, when we are “doing” we tend to focus on the end result – such as a product, a level of achievement, or a chosen goal. When focusing merely on the desired outcome, we might unconsciously connect it to mental misconceptions or assumptions, as I discussed in my last “Pathways” article. For example if we define success as the amount of money we earn, we might become focused on working extremely long, highly paid hours, instead of finding work that satisfies us, and then being serenely present with each task we encounter. Other examples might be: we assume that our neighbors will only like us if we compulsively keep our yards neat and plant beautiful gardens, or that we will only have friends if we do everything they ask of us. When we focus on the outcome and/or other people’s expectations we are “doing”, not “being”. As a result everything feels more stressful.

I am not saying that the end result is not important. But, when the product or the outcome becomes a primary motivating factor, it is usually an indicator that our egos are getting in the way. Perhaps we are trying to prove something to ourselves or to somebody else. The goal (i.e. to feel nourished, to win a prize, to do a project well) is important. But it is better to be focused on the process rather than the goal, for oddly enough it is more likely that the product will be better.

The process of “being” involves moving toward an inner awareness – toward the transpersonal, mystical, and the spiritual and away from the loud, powerful ego. Eckhart Tolle in *A New Earth* says, “The elimination of time

from your consciousness is the elimination of ego. It is the only true spiritual practice.” He continues, “. . .of course, we are not referring to clock time . . .(but) to be one with life by living in alignment with the inevitable ‘isness’ of the present moment.”

I also said in “*Be and Do*”, that as rampant as compulsive “doing” is, nobody – when they are truly honest with themselves – seems to be pleased with it. Many complain about how much they have to do, and their subsequent level of stress. They desperately crave more time to relax. However, this habitual pattern of business is so ingrained that many feel powerless to change it. And yet, when we have time to merely be – such as when we are waiting at a stop light – we have the compulsion to fill it with something. Unfortunately that something is often anxiety, impatience, or judgment – all negative emotions creating stress.

In contrast to the external and future-oriented focus of “doing”, “being” involves self-awareness. “Being” allows us to focus internally and embodies an attentiveness to whatever is present – be that physical, emotional, intellectual, or spiritual. We do this by becoming silent, still and serene – silencing the mind, stilling the body, and allowing things to “be” as they are, without judgment.

Interestingly, we can be in the moment and become self-aware while also actively doing something. The simplest example is breathing. Although breathing is technically doing something, if we pay exquisite attention to our breath we are “being”. We can be aware and awake while walking, doing yoga, cooking a meal, or gardening, *if* we do so while quieting the mind and focusing inward. Or, as in the example of Vanessa the knitter, she was able to “be” while also doing something, for her knitting put her in a meditative, being-in-the-moment state. The same can true for anything we do, if we are also present to whatever arises within us.

I also said in my article “*Be and Do*”, that “being” is also centered on three different processes – creating, connecting and communing. When we are in a state of “being” all three of these actions occur at a much deeper, more meaningful level. For example when we are “being” while also *creating*, we are more able to connect to that inspirational source coming from within. When I am in my studio working on my art or writing, in the strictest sense of the word I am “doing” something. Yet, the creative process is facilitated when

I am present with my inner self, as the resultant product will be more authentically me. And that is what art truly is, the expression of the true self.

Secondly, in a state of “being” we more easily *communicate* with our inner higher selves, our inner spirit, a Higher Source, (or however you refer to the source which is greater than yourself). “Being” helps us experience a soul-felt connection between our inner selves, the inner selves of those around us, and all that is in nature and the universe. We become aware of an inner unity connecting all that is.

Thirdly, when we are “being”, and connected to ourselves, we are more easily able to *commune* – that is to be a part of a community, a system and/or a family. We are more able to be authentically and intimately present with another. This was the case of Lester, who was a slap-you-on-the-back, jovial kind of guy. As the life of the party, and leader in his community he was well liked. Lester was highly educated and a successful, married man. However he had a hard time *communing* with his family and his wife complained that he was emotionally unavailable for intimacy. She insisted that they seek counseling.

In therapy Lester realized that he couldn’t identify emotions, nor could he articulate what he was experiencing in his body. As he slowed down and was encouraged to close his eyes, focus inward and label what he felt, his self-awareness increased. He realized how his racing around was a way to avoid what he was experiencing inside. Learning how to first pause, take a breath and identify physical and emotional feelings helped him become more expressive with his wife. In turn she felt she was learning new things about him, and thus felt more emotionally connected.

Sometimes when I work with a couple I will have them stop talking, focus on their breath and merely look into one another’s eyes. This exercise of being totally present with the other is amazingly difficult to do. Couples who have a hard time being present with one another, tend to become self-conscious and antsy. They want to talk, to look away, disconnect, or fill the perceived void with some action. The process of “being” often feels like *waiting* for something else to occur that is more meaningful, exciting or rewarding. Yet, what is more meaningful than connecting to ourselves with the breath, while also connecting to the other with our eyes? No matter what we are doing, we can use periods of *waiting* as powerful times to access the core of our being.

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Waiting is sometimes still difficult for me. Yet the older I become, the easier it is to wait during those small pauses in time. This is a surprise to me, for I would have thought the opposite to be true. The actress Elizabeth Taylor the British movie actress, said in “*A Wreath of Roses*”, “It is very strange that the years teach us patience – that the shorter our time, the greater our capacity for waiting.”

Yet, there are still those moments when time seems to be of the essence. I love what Anne Frank said in her book *Diary of a Young Girl*, “How wonderful it is that nobody need *wait* a single moment before starting to improve the world.” Whether you voted for Barack Obama or not, or agree with how he is going about this transitional time, I believe that his intent is to not *wait* a moment before trying to improve a vastly fractured, wounded world. Let us hope he is on the right path for accomplishing this. William Jennings Bryan, US lawyer, orator, and politician said that, “Destiny is no matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be *waited* for; it is a thing to be achieved.”

I believe in synchronicities (simultaneous occurrences with meaning). I had written the bulk of this article before the holidays and then I attended a five day silent meditation retreat led by Tara Brach and the Insight Meditation Community of Washington. Each day talks were given by one of the four leaders. On the last day of the retreat Jonathan Foust (Tara’s husband and the former president of Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health) gave a talk and synchronistically shared thoughts dovetailing with this article. He said how restorative it would be to use each moment we pause to take a breath and sink deeply within ourselves – for example while waiting for water to boil for our tea. Then Jonathan went one step further and said that not only can we take a restorative breath, but we can spread thoughts of loving kindness to those around us – for example while waiting at a stop light. What an amazing concept. Rather than just sitting and stewing while waiting not only can we focus on ourselves, which will increase our inner awareness and our energy, but we can also turn our loving/healing thoughts toward those around us.

These small moments of daily practice Jonathan reminded us are “simple, but not easy”. How true. We can use valuable moments in our

lives by waiting, or we can make a conscious choice to use these precious pauses to wake up – to waken to ourselves and the world around us. The concept is uncomplicated, however to emotionally, physically, and spiritually experience the benefit, it is necessary to choose this form of practice. We must bring our intention to consciousness. As Sharon Salzberg says in *O Magazine*, *The Power of Intention*, ” Each decision we make, each action we take, is born out of an intention.” Then in another quote she says, “Life is like an ever-shifting kaleidoscope – a slight change, and all patterns alter.” With each small change we make, we have the ability to alter much about our lives and the lives of those around us.

When we use every moment as a potentially restorative moment, a moment to waken to ourselves, we can also go one step further and use the energy we have experienced within ourselves and send it forth into the world around us. Then, with every conscious breath taken, and with every loving thought extended we change personal and universal patterns. What an amazingly simple, yet potentially powerful concept.

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