

The Presence of Presents  
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Have you ever waited 22 years for anything? More than that, have you ever waited twenty-two years in an oppressive setting, holding on to faith and hope, raised up and then dropped back down, each time the highs getting lower and the descent seeming greater. Have you ever waited in such a place?

Well, I know someone who has done just such a thing. And, in a few minutes, I'll talk a bit more about her. For now, though, let's take a look the idea of waiting, action, and doing nothing, perhaps, beginning with this morning's first reading:

Teilhard de Chardin - from a letter to his cousin Marguerite Teilhard, July 4, 1915 in The Making of a Mind: Letters from a Soldier-Priest 1914-1919, p. 57

Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are, quite naturally, impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages; we are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet, it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stage of instability...and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you, your ideas mature gradually -- let them grow. Let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don't try to force them on, as though you could be today what time (that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your own good will) will make you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be. Give our Lord the benefit of believing that His hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete...

[Above all, trust in the slow work of God.]

De Chardin was a French Jesuit priest, who lived on this planet from 1881 until 1955. Trained as a paleontologist and a philosopher, he ran aground of the Roman Catholic Church for his less-than literal interpretation of Genesis in his book *The Phenomenon of Man*. Seen as undermining the doctrine of original sin engineered by Saint Augustine, his work was banned from being published by the Roman Holy Office. It wasn't until John XXIII was pope that the ban was lifted and his work considered an important influence on the church's stance on evolution.

Considering the way Pope Benedict is reversing what he sees as flawed elements of John's Second Vatican Council, the official stance on de Chardin may change again in the near future.

Much of this may be surprising, considering how soothing and assuring many people find his writings.

De Chardin's wrote extensively on what is termed the Omega Point and the Noosphere. The Omega Point is the point at which consciousness reaches its ultimate complexity, and that is the ultimate aim toward which the mind is evolving. It was through this process, he wrote, that humanity would eventually converge upon a "final unity" – a unity that would be synonymous with the Eschaton and God, Eschaton being the Greek word that literally means "end."

The noosphere that he refers to is the "sphere of human thought." It evolves, according to him and others, just as the geosphere (inanimate matter) and biosphere (biological life) has evolved. All things, come together at the Omega Point, with human thought moving into the consciousness state of ultimate complexity – the Omega (End) point – or God. At that point, it would seem, we would be home!

Considering these things in union with the reading, there might be a temptation to almost feel passive, and to some degree helpless – suggesting that "things are unfolding as they should," and that we should just keep it simple and just let it all happen – since it is all out of our control, anyway. Relax, go easy, patience, be happy now!

It's the *59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge Song*<sup>1</sup> ... you know, *Slow Down You Move Too Fast, You Got to Make the Morning Last...*

And for Luke, it might have been called the *Mary and Martha Song!*

The Martha and Mary story suggests that Martha, the mistress of the house, erred on giving too much attention to the affairs of the household, arranging things for the dinner and Jesus's welcome – rather than slowing down and being with Jesus, like Mary. Sitting there in his presence, he being the priority – not all the busy work. In fact poor Martha has been the focus of criticism, used as an example of how we can be lost and distracted from the presence of God. Sit down, Martha, relax. Be with Jesus, let things take care of themselves.

Maybe... at least until about a half an hour later when someone says, "Hey, where's the wine?" "What? Dinner's not on the table?" "I thought **you** were getting the bread?" "What kind of a welcoming is this, anyway? Don't you have any respect for your guests!!!"

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<sup>1</sup> <http://users.cis.net/sammy/groovy.htm>

Still to, Chardin, Luke, Mary and Martha, Simon and Garfunkel, and many more... the notion that we move too fast and need to slow down is all around us. And, in fact, we do.

We do have to wait, sometimes, for things to happen, for inspiration, healing. We need to pray and be present, to meditate and be aware of God's presence. And that takes practice, suspending thoughts and distractions – and, if you are like me, it's always sort of hit and miss. We need to do all this... but slowing down from a frenetic distracted self-absorbed pace in such a way that occludes the Spirit's nudges and those around us – is much different from going too slowly. In fact, it borders on nicely brocaded and eternally maddening indifference.

Too often, I think, the Joe Gilmore image of God pacing the horizon waiting for us to get it, to catch up with God's loving vision for all of us – is exactly right! The present is always about listening for and seeking God's will and taking action. Jesus did not sit upon a chaise lounge for his entire ministry.

Just maybe, maybe, Martha was fully aware of all of this and was serving God and Jesus by arranging the hospitality that would welcome others into that space. There is no way to have God in our lives, I think, without a longing for hospitality, a word I find synonymous with justice.

And waiting to do nothing is nothing more than submission to injustices that satisfy the dominant groups in any society. The Spirit is action, even when at rest and especially when attempts are made to contain it.

In April of 1963, when The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was incarcerated for participating in the protests against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama fellow clergy criticized him, saying his actions were poorly timed, impatient, and disruptive. "Geez, Martin, what are you doing stirring up all this trouble and noise for? C'mon, Man, take it easy!"

The entire text of Martin's response, "Letter From a Birmingham Jail"<sup>2</sup> is available online and is a must read, even if you have read it before, In one section his response Dr. King says the following:

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists<sup>3</sup>, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nobelprizes.com/nobel/peace/MLK-jail.html>

<sup>3</sup> William Gladstone, British Statesman and Prime Minister

Seeking justice is not easy work.

Chardin's ideas got his work banned; but he **produced** a work. Martha's preparation earned her criticism, yet a feast was **prepared** – and I am sure both Jesus and Mary ate! Jesus went off into the desert to pray, and he followed that by dedicating his life to **his work**. Martin meditated each day, before he, too, **gave his life** to the cause.

No, the presents of presence are not the opportunities to simply “do nothing” as a steady diet, they are as much – they are more - the actions we are called to take – based on the presence of God in our lives. The gifts of such presence are actions, just as much as they are times for quiet meditation and discernment. Actions given, as well as received.

“Spiritually-based waiting” is always an active state.

So, back to the beginning - I started out asking if anyone here had waited twenty-two years for anything. Has anyone come up with anything?

Let me close with a brief story about someone who has been a Candidate for Minister of the Word and Sacrament for the last twenty-two years, since 1985. If you are unfamiliar with the process to ordination as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament, it goes something like this:

Inquirer – the First year or so when someone who believes they are called to ministry reflects on that call with others, including member of a Committee on Preparation for Ministry.

Candidate: following a period of reflection and work for the Committee, the Inquirer is presented to the Presbytery to be cleared to become a Candidate and begin the rigorous work that may lead to ordination.

Candidate Cleared to Seek a Call: having completed all the work involved, the Candidate stands before the presbytery and is examined. Following a vote by the Presbytery, the Candidate is either cleared to seek a call or not.

Lisa Larges became a Candidate for Minister of the Word and Sacrament in 1985. Clearly one of the most qualified to become Minister of the Word and Sacrament of all Candidates before or who have since followed, she has regularly been denied being moved forward by her committee. The reason? Lisa is a lesbian. A “practicing” lesbian; a woman who has recently been called to serve as the Minister Director of That All May Freely Serve – but has not been moved forward by the Presbytery of San Francisco so that she might be examined and cleared – because Lisa, you see, has a loving partner.

Flash the Constitution: G-6.0106b.

So Lisa waits but not without action. Her work to further the cause of LGBT/folk in this church has made this a more welcoming church – for all. Her work has made this a church that is stronger, more welcoming, more on the edge and prophetic – and that has helped this church and all its members.

“Wait!” Says the church. Look at the work you are doing. You have already found your ministry. Don’t be discouraged. One day, Lisa. One day, Martin. One day, God.

No.

You see, not every church in the PC(USA) is like this church. Not every presbytery like the one that ordained me two years ago. Unless churches like the Palisades Presbyterian Church continue actively in setting the place to welcome all – then my ordination and others like it will be the tokens to appease the broader church conscience rather than the widening spirit of Chardin’s Omega Point, wherein we converge on God together, just as God made us to do.

My work in the Presbyterian Church, my call, was given life by this congregation. I am very aware of that. I am also very aware that the broader church would like nothing better than for us to be quiet, having now had our way, so to speak. That cannot happen. Too many rely upon us for hope, justice, and an example of how the hospitality of this Spirit is alive in new and different ways.

The injustice in the institution of this church runs deeply and cannot be more broadly ignored, regardless of the limited successes. Those successes must always create more prophetic challenges from the edge of God’s plan – or Lisa and others like her – will continue to wait, quieted so others might be comfortable with their own limited sense of God’s family.

And as for God... God, of course, is always right. But this church and others are wrong, as many have been before – just like in denying the ordination of women.

Some folks use the struggle of others to set a timeline for emerging groups... suggesting that each group must wait, wait for their turn, pay their dues....

I always respond to such statements asking those with the questions if we have learned nothing from the struggle of others? Do we have to get our hands onto the doors of the ovens at Auschwitz to remember that we already learned the lesson of marginalization and exclusion...

As I spend some time this summer reflecting on my time here, thinking a bit about the future, I know that I need to continue in the tradition of this congregation and its courage. For me, there is no place from which to proceed onward except from the edge you have provided toward the radical hospitality of justice and inclusion.

And, if the “present” in this struggle is one of decades, then let us not become weary. Let us pray for those like Lisa, who are the modern-day prophets – and let us leave no gift unwrapped, no present of the Presence of God unused – in making this place a welcoming sanctuary for all.

And let us say, “Enough. God, the place is prepared and set... all are welcome, in your name!” Amen.