

## **The Gift of Waiting**

Ruth Haley Barton

*God comes like the sun in the morning—when it is time. We must assume an attitude of waiting, accepting the fact that we are creatures and not creator. We must do this because it is not our right to do anything else. The initiative is God's, not ours. We are able to initiate nothing; we are only able to accept.*

Carlo Carretto

Last week, the Leadership Community of the Transforming Center went on retreat as we do periodically--to rest, to wait on God, to celebrate his goodness to us, and to discern his will on important matters facing us. We met at a local retreat center and as we prepared the chapel space for our prayer times, we noticed that there were no Christmas decorations. This struck us as a bit unusual, given the plethora of decorations present in every other nook and cranny of our world during these days. Then we realized, "They are waiting! The lack of decoration is a visible sign that they are honoring the spirit of Advent—the season of waiting for the coming of Christ."

Of course, this highlighted the fact that most of us are not very good at waiting. Many of us decorate for Christmas the day after Thanksgiving and completely miss any element of waiting for the blessings of Christmas. I, for one, do not like to wait for anything. In the grocery store, in the doctor's office, at the hair salon—if there is even a few minutes' wait, everything in me rises up in churning rebellion against this non-productive use of time. My frustration intensifies when I realize that I am caught between my need for what I am waiting for and my impatience with waiting. Yes, I could leave my cart and walk out of the grocery store, but then I am still without the groceries I need. I could walk out of the doctor's office in a huff because the wait is too long, but I am still left with my need for medical attention. I could leave the hair salon insulted that the world has not arranged itself for my convenience, but I'm still going to need a haircut.

Waiting, in the realm of the soul, presents us with the same agony. We sit in the waiting room of the soul because we need something. Yes, we could get up and leave, but we would be walking away from the very place where our need could be met. And so we remain in the waiting place, totally at the mercy of God's timing and initiative in our life.

This past year has been a year of hard work for the Transforming Center. We have held multiple stand alone retreats, guided two communities of pastors and Christian leaders simultaneously, remained faithful to our own development as a leadership community, written books and articles, spoken at conferences and provided spiritual guidance and counseling for many churches and individuals. But on another level it has also been a year of waiting. Over a year ago we made application to the IRS for tax exempt status as a charitable organization. For a variety of reasons our application process became more complicated than we expected and we were not granted our status as quickly as we

expected. The letter granting us this status came just recently—November 10, 2004. Practically speaking, this meant that in a number of key areas of our development as a ministry, we were at an impasse because we could not ask for the kind of financial help we needed in order to move forward. All we could do was wait. This was very hard for us as individuals and as a community.

About six months into the waiting, it began to dawn on me: this is not about “it,” this is about us! I remembered that when the Israelites set out for the Promised Land, God did not lead them by the direct route but “he led them by the roundabout way of the wilderness” because he knew that there was work that needed to be done in them on the way. From this realization an entirely different question began to emerge and I began to wonder: *What is God trying to do in us in the waiting?*

I don’t know everything about what God was trying to do in us in this particular “waiting room of the soul”—I’m sure more understanding will come as time goes by—but here a few things I am aware of:

**Waiting humbled us.** Since most of us in the Transforming Center leadership community are activists by nature, it was very humbling to realize that we could not make something happen that we really needed to have happen. We were cast upon God’s mercy and had to wait for his action in our life as a community in a way that we hadn’t before. I, for one, faced the fact that I don’t like the feeling of being so dependent on someone else for our livelihood and for our ability to go forward as a ministry organization—even when that Someone is God! Daily, as we prayed about this area of our life together, I had to face my frustration with this kind of dependency but also God’s invitation to trust his goodness and wisdom relative to these matters.

**Waiting purified us.** When we have to wait for something, usually our desire and our motivation relative to that thing is stripped to its essence and purified in some way. As we have walked this path together we were stripped of our bravado and our expectations that this venture would be easy or that it would happen on our own terms. Instead, we experienced dependency and vulnerability. We were forced to keep revisiting our identity as a spiritual community that exists for the purpose discerning and doing the will of God even in the midst of unexpected challenge. In doing so, we found that our commitment to each other and our mission only deepened. Our hearts often echoed the disciples’ sentiment when Jesus challenged them about whether or not they, too, would leave him and they responded, “Well, this is really different than we expected but where else would we go?”

Waiting on God together, sharing honestly about the pain and questions raised in the waiting, talking to God about it when we were alone and when we were together, experiencing our vulnerability and dependency on God as a community shaped us and solidified our commitment in ways nothing else could.

**Waiting taught us about remaining faithful to our calling.** At times during this past year we were tempted to pull back because it was just too hard; however, we also recognized that God was doing something in us and through us that was so real that it could not be abandoned. There was one night in particular when God used one of our communities to affirm his calling upon our lives in the midst of this very difficult time. We were sitting around talking one night while on retreat and folks began to share spontaneously about what their experience with the Transforming Center community had meant to them. They shared that as pastors and Christian leaders, they had nowhere else to turn for the kind of safety in community and personal spiritual formation that they were experiencing here. They shared in very specific ways how God was transforming them personally and how their ability to connect their leadership with their own formation process was causing them to become more effective leaders in ways that were noticeable to others. They reflected on the fact that their participation in the community experience was becoming a significant piece of their health and well-being in ministry and did not believe they could continue without it.

These dear friends had no idea how much we needed to hear their affirmation that night or the pressure we were facing relative to our financial viability. Their testimonies resounded in our souls as being affirmation from God himself. It was one of the things God used to help us to purpose in our hearts, “We may not have our tax exempt status but we have ourselves to keep bringing to this ministry as faithfully as we know how, and by God’s grace we will.”

**Waiting sensitized us to God’s coming in our own human experience.** By the time we received word that we had been granted our tax exempt status, we had accepted the fact that it might not be granted in the time frame that would be most helpful for 2005 and had already started planning to adjust our activities accordingly. I don’t want to say we had given up but it may have been something like that! This cutting back and adjusting seemed to be a part of what it meant to accept our financial and organizational limitations so when the letter came granting us our status, we were stunned. We were so overcome with a sense that God had visited us that for several days we did not do anything but sit with our wonder and gratitude, pondering what these things might mean. An occasion which in some situations is just a matter of course, for us became a time for deep gratitude and awareness of God’s presence with us. We were grateful for our attorney and how God had used his wisdom to guide our process. We were grateful for those who had believed in us and contributed funds without being certain that it would eventually qualify as a tax-deductible donation. We were grateful for each person who had given of themselves so faithfully to this ministry with no thought of personal gain. And we were grateful to God because we knew he had acted on our behalf.

Truly, this rather mundane aspect of organizational life would forever be an occasion for communal remembering of what it means to wait on God and how it is that God uses these waiting periods to shape us and also to meet us on our journey. For the Israelites, communal remembering had to do with manna and quail; for us it has to do with the IRS and section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code!

But waiting on God is not to be confused with passivity. Waiting on God in the places of our human tenderness and human need is an active waiting that contains a seed of expectancy and hope. We wait with the kind of anticipation a night watchman feels as he waits for the morning sun to signal the end of his watch. No matter how many hours of darkness he has to wait through, the watchman knows from experience that morning will come. He is alert to the dangers of the night while every fiber of his being leans toward that coming. His eyes have become practiced at recognizing the first ray of sunlight on the horizon. (Psalm 130:5-6)

*This* is how we wait for God—with longing, with expectancy, with alert awareness, our whole self straining to catch the earliest possible glimpse of this God who comes. This is the essence of the spiritual journey for all of us—waiting for the person of Christ to come into the places of our emptiness, the places of our waiting, the places of our not knowing...so that his love and his life can be birthed in us in ways that are new and sometimes even take us by surprise!

### **Practice**

*“God presents himself to us little by little. The whole story of salvation is the story of the God who comes.”* Carlo Carretto

Is there a place in your life where you know that Christ has not yet come, where you struggle to experience God with you? As you journey through the last week of Advent, you may want to pay attention to the gifts that have come to you through the waiting. What is true for you now that wouldn't have been true if you hadn't had to wait?

As you approach Christmas Day, watch for signs of Christ coming to you in that place and be sure to welcome him there.

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