

## **The Lost Art of Patience**

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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A couple of years ago, archaeologists excavating a 4000 year old burial site south of Hanoi in Vietnam made an extraordinary discovery. All of the skeletons at the site, except for one, were buried straight from head to foot in their graves. However, the remains of that one exceptional, once living person were laid to rest curled up in the fetal position. When Lorna Tilley and Marc Oxenham of Australian National University excavated and examined the skeleton, it became clear why that one person had been buried in that unusual position. “His fused vertebrae, weak bones and other evidence suggest that he lies in death as he did in life, [he was] bent and crippled by disease.”

Tilley and Oxenham figured out that this young man, who lived 4000 years ago had become “paralyzed from the waist down before adolescence, the result of a congenital disease” (known as Klippel-Feil syndrome). After having been stricken by the disease he “had little, if any, use of his arms and could not have fed himself or kept himself clean.” But he lived on after that for at least another ten years or so. The Australian archaeological team concluded—and this is the important part—that “the people around him who had no metal [tools] and [who] lived by fishing [and] hunting...took the time and care to tend” to this young man’s every need for more than a decade. (James Gorman, “Ancient Bones that Tell a Story of Compassion,” *NYTimes*, December 17, 2012)

A whole new field of study—called bioarchaeology—is beginning to reveal that the time and care devoted to that young man in Vietnam 4000 years ago by those around him was no anomaly. From ancient sites located around the world, from Iraq to Florida, from Arabia to Italy, some as old as 45,000 years, archaeologists are revealing one-bone-at a time, that our ancestors provided direct, time and care intensive support to help and sustain the chronically ill

and handicapped—the kind of patient attention that conveyed to those receiving care a sense of their own worth and a strong will to live. As well, and I think this is important, the unusual people in our lives, the ones we all-too-often see merely as the recipients of our care and goodwill are, in fact, vessels of strength and meaning in their own right. They are the ones who, by virtue of unusual beliefs or unusual physical traits, frequently open up new visions and understandings of the extraordinary range, the depths and richness of what it means to be a human being.

What the bones of our ancestors from around the world reveal—reciprocal patient and loving care for one another—has been written into the very core of human civilizations as one of the few key virtues we should strive to attain and embody. Patience knows no cultural, geographical or historical boundaries—secular or religious, pagan or monotheistic, East or West. From Lao Tzu to Aristotle, from Jesus to the Buddha, from the values of First Nations peoples right on down to the words and deeds of the Rev. Martin Luther King whose birthday we commemorate tomorrow, each identifies patience as so crucial to human good and flourishing, that without it—and don't we know it by long and painful experience—things fall apart: friendship, family life, education, the attainment of a skilled craft or art, life in community from a congregation like ours all the way up to the congregation of nation states. “By your patience you shall win the true life of your souls,” said Jesus. “I have just three things to teach, said Lao Tzu, “simplicity, patience and compassion. These three are your greatest treasures.”

But before I go on extolling the virtue of patience, and in due regard for the man whose birthday comes tomorrow, it must be said that, in the words written by Martin Luther King from the jail in Birmingham, Alabama fifty years ago, “There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over and [women and] men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of

injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience...”

“Idle no more” are the words resounding across our own nation; the cup of endurance is running over here and now. And why? Not only because of long standing grievances. What’s been happening in Canada the past two months is, I think, a reaction to the reckless *impatience* of government manifest in hastily written, mashed-up pieces of omnibus legislation like Bill C-45 that threatens, in the words of Idle No More leaders, “that threatens Treaties and the Indigenous Vision of Sovereignty to protect water, air, land and all creation for future generations.” (from: idlenomore.ca. press release, January 10, 2013)

The immediate idea for this sermon was triggered by words from a poem by the contemporary English poet Geoffrey Hill. Last Autumn, I read this line: “worst of our age: no time here for patience.” When I read those words, I knew that I wanted us to pause together to rethink and re-feel ourselves into cultivating an appreciation for the capacity of patience, for patience is under incredible threat and duress in our civic, social and personal lives.

From lived experience, our ancestors identified and held up patience as one of our greatest treasures, a moral excellence, a virtue that we need to learn and nourish with care and attentive practice. Patience is our capacity for calm, self-possessed endurance; a virtue that resides in what the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle called the “golden mean” between the excesses of quick-tempered anger flanking it at one end of the spectrum and a zombie-like indifference at the other. Patience is the acquired ability to slow down long enough to make room in our lives for the deliberate practice and attainment of humane arts and skills—the kind that enables us to care and inspire one another, like those villagers in Vietnam thousands of years ago, the kind that a musician needs in order to master her instrument or a mechanic his ability to

overhaul a transmission, the kind of commitment a politician needs in order to endure the necessary delay that accompanies due consultation over matters of rights and careful stewardship of social and natural resources.

Countless are the occasions where the needful capacity for patience arises; each day of our lives is the time and site for its wisdom and application. We know and feel its worth when we see it on display in our homes, on the road, at work, worship, and play, and in the public realms of political and economic life. We know and feel its absence when impatience wields the lash. As the Clown says in *All's Well that Ends Well*: “My poor body, madam, requires it: I am driven on by the flesh; and he must needs go that the devil drives.” What was our recent economic crash, particularly in the States and Europe, if not the headlong, cynically driven impatience for immediate reckless profits? Or our irrational, got-to-have-it-now demands for lines of credit to make huge purchases of real estate, gadgets, and travel far beyond our means to repay?

Is it just me?—does it seem that the tempo of time and our caffeine fueled impatience with time passing and our impatience with others has sped up and threatens to veer out-of-control? Increasingly, it seems—and I can’t help feeling this in Vancouver and in Canada at large—when asking whether we support a proposal or initiative, we take less and less time to ask: is it good or bad for the *common good*? Instead, all around, we hear: Is it efficient? Is it productive? Would it benefit the gross domestic product? Will it contribute to growth? (And I ask: Whose growth? What kind of growth?)

This propensity to restrict ourselves to issues of profit and loss—to economic questions in the narrowest sense—to an impatient and reductive “economic man” view of human nature, writes Bill McKibben, “leaves us vulnerable to meaninglessness”—to a world where reckless

growth, quarterly statements of profit and loss, and to a world of consumption “is all that happens because there’s nothing else left that means anything.... We now have to ask ourselves,” he continues, “Is my life amounting to something? Does it have weight and substance, or is it just running away into nothing, into something insubstantial? And the only real resource that many of us have against that meaninglessness, now that the church and the village and the family and even the natural world can’t provide us with as much context as before, *is our individual selves.*” If all we have is our individual, economic consumer selves to draw on—then god help us; for pressed as we are for time, for quiet, for community and sanity, what we’ll have is an each-against-all, break-necked, sped up view of the natural state of humanity. (McKibben, *Enough: Staying Human in an Engineered Age*, 2003, p46)

I think we can agree that it doesn’t have to be this way. And I know that you try to think, feel and act otherwise as best you can. That thinking, feeling and acting is a kind of moral stance and practice that sees patience as a virtue, and impatience, most of the time, and with some notable exceptions, as a vice; as something we could well do without in our lives. But it’s hard; I know. I struggle with this myself. That’s one of the reasons why I found a speech given by the late novelist David Foster Wallace really compelling. Wallace has been described as one of the most brilliant writers of his generation. And so it was a great tragedy, in September 2008 that he died so young—he was only 38. Three years prior to his death, he gave the commencement speech at Kenyon College in the States, and I want to share some of the things he said to the graduating class on that late spring afternoon.

Wallace confessed that “a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. Here’s one example...everything in my own experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute centre of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self

centeredness, because it's so socially repulsive, but it's pretty much the same for all of us... It's our default setting, hard-wired deep down." After he gives some pretty good examples of this, he contends that by, what he calls "*choosing to do the work,*" we can somehow alter or get free from this "deeply and literally self-centered" stance, which "sees and interprets everything through this lens of the self." It's work that Wallace believes has everything to do with achieving a "real freedom" that is the hallmark of being conscious and alive in the adult world. And I think it also has a lot to do with the subject of this sermon.

To make his case, Wallace set up the following scenario: you've just finished a long challenging day of work; you're tired and stressed out, but you realize to your dismay that you don't have any food at home and so you have to go to the grocery store. Turns out so does everybody else. The place is crowded, "the store's hideously, fluorescently lit, and infused with soul-killing Muzak...and of course there are also glacially slow old people and spacey people and kids...and the checkout line is incredibly long" And when you finally pay for your groceries, he says, you have to take your "creepy flimsy plastic bags of groceries in your cart through the bumpy, littered parking lot," and then "drive all the way home through slow, heavy SUV-intensive rush hour traffic." In the midst of all this, Wallace relates, "all my natural default settings are certain that the situations are all about *me*, about *my* hunger and *my* fatigue, and *my* desire to just get home, and it seems that everybody else is just in my way, and who are all these people anyway?"

"If you choose to think this way," he says, "fine—except that thinking this way tends to be so easy and automatic that it doesn't seem to be a choice...it's the unconscious way I experience the boring, frustrating, crowded parts of adult life when I'm operating on the unconscious belief that I am the center of the world. The thing is there are different ways to

think about these kinds of situations. In this traffic for example...that Hummer that just cut me off is maybe driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he's trying to rush to the hospital—and it's actually I who am in the way. And the woman who screamed at her child in the checkout line—"maybe she's not usually like this; maybe she's been up three straight nights holding the hand of her husband who's been dying of bone cancer..."

And then he said to those graduating seniors that spring day: "Of course, none of this is likely, but it's not impossible—*it just depends on what you want to consider.*" If you're on automatic pilot and you think you know what reality is and that you're at the center of it, you won't consider other possibilities. "But if you've really learned how to think, how to pay attention...then it will be in your power to experience a crowded, loud, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful but *sacred*, on fire with the same force that lit the stars—*compassion, love, the sub-surface mystical unity of all things deep-down.* Not that that mystical stuff's necessarily true: the only thing that's capital-T True, Wallace says, is that you get to decide how you're going to try to see it. You get to decide what has meaning and what doesn't. You get to decide what to worship."

After Wallace lays out a number of options for worship: gods, money and things, your own body, beauty and sexual allure and power—each one weighed and found wanting, he ends with this: "Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth, comfort and personal freedom. The freedom to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But there are other kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of wanting an achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves paying attention and awareness, and discipline,

and effort, and being truly able to care about other people and to sacrifice for them.... That is real freedom. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the “rat-race”—the gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing.”

What is that infinite thing, that fire that lights our souls? We know the deep, fierce, quiet joy that comes from patient, loving attention for one another, for mastering a skill and a meaningful life, as well as the joy in seeing others achieve it—the first independent steps of a child, their learning to read and riding a bike. The patient growth of love between two people over time. The thoughtful letter, hand written to us that comes in the mail at a time just when we needed it. The satisfaction from slowing down, and taking time to solve a problem, of getting that joint welded just right, of adjusting a throttle so the engine idles in that efficient sweet spot, of helping a client navigate their way out of a bureaucratic labyrinth; the mutual joy in truly listening to someone else’s story and of being truly heard.

Take time to be holy, the old hymn sings. Patience. May we find it, cultivate it, live it and encourage each other in the sacred task of staying alive and conscious and patient with ourselves and one another so that this precious art and its gifts will not be lost.

“In your patience ye shall win your souls,” said the young rabbi. “Simplicity, patience and compassion,” Lao Tzu, said. “These are our greatest treasures.”

*You can access most of David Foster Wallace’s Kenyon College Commencement Address in writing by going to:*

*“Plain old untrendy troubles and emotions:” [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/sep/20/fiction](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/sep/20/fiction)*

*As well, go to YouTube and type in “David Foster Wallace Kenyon College” to listen to a complete audio recording of “This is Water,” parts 1&2*