

# Patience: The Gift of Waiting We Need Right Now

by Holly W. Whitcomb

The season of Coronavirus is getting very long. We survived “crisis fatigue” at the six-month mark, and now, at the eleven-month mark, we are experiencing “lockdown fatigue.”

Our waiting seems endless and we need patience now more than ever.

When we have to wait without knowing answers, without knowing what’s ahead, we are nudged into a new perspective. Waiting without immediate solutions presents us with an opportunity to lean into the not-knowing, to let go of unrealistic dreams or quick fixes, and to grow in patience.



Patience opens us to active waiting. **“Don’t let the time do you. You do the time.”** My hairdresser quoted these words to me some years ago as I was getting my hair cut. She waited for years for her son to be released from prison on an armed-robbery charge, and the waiting was terrible. She participated in a support group for family members whose loved ones were serving time. An ex-con who led the group said, “This is how we survive on the inside and how all of you can survive on the outside: Don’t let the time do you. You do the time.” This kind of active waiting is good advice for all of us who wait.

Too often we think of patience as equivalent to long-suffering, as some kind of passive acceptance. Patience is actually demanding, assertive, and complex. It calls for looking at the bigger picture and assessing timing and trade-offs. When we face an extended period of waiting, we have an opportunity to engage in a radical kind of patience that can take us beyond surviving, to thriving. We can partner with the waiting rather than treat it as an enemy. We can involve ourselves in an active waiting that opens doors, creates opportunities, and stretches our minds, bodies, and souls. While waiting may necessitate a certain powerlessness, this does not mean giving up intelligence, action, and hope. — So how do we engage in the spiritual practice of patience? How do we learn to actively wait?



**First, we accept our not-knowing.** This is really hard because we all prosper in certainty and predictability and we are accustomed to being in control. Right now we know that one person is dying of Coronavirus every six minutes in Los Angeles. Some of us have been vaccinated already and some of us have not and we don’t know if or when most people will be vaccinated. We don’t know when it will be safe for many of us to return in person to church. We don’t know if the United States will ever reach herd immunity. This not-knowing lies heavily

on our spirits, and for our own sanity we need to learn how to abide in the not-knowing. The eventual acceptance of not-knowing is an enormous spiritual leap, and it is here that we need the Holy Spirit and to depend upon God.

**Second, we practice patience by living in trust:** of God, and of ourselves. When our not-knowing drives us crazy, we offer it up and ask God for perspective. In the process of letting go, the Serenity Prayer often helps. I pray this prayer from Reinhold Niebuhr all the time.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
Courage to change the things I can,  
And wisdom to know the difference.

While we are waiting, God is always waiting for us. Early Christianity scholar Roberta Bondi says, “We can be certain that God desires our friendship, and, indeed, created us for this end.” These touching words are true. God yearns to take part in a mutual relationship. Trust in God invites us to let go of our fears, to open our hearts in prayer, and to trust the boundless love and care that God has for us.

Part of the spiritual practice of patience is to trust ourselves as well – and we have! We have relied on our ability to be guided by the Holy Spirit, to learn new skills, and to cultivate resourcefulness. One pastor I know assigns a weekly podcast and then hosts a wildly popular discussion. The creativity and resilience I have been witnessing from our pastors and churches is truly amazing: the brilliant online worship services, the stimulating spiritual offerings, the provocative classes on racial justice, the sweetly connecting coffee hours on Zoom.

**Third, we practice patience by embracing thanksgiving.** I don’t think I could live through Covid if it weren’t for the blessings and kindnesses received each day. Every night before I fall asleep I ask myself: What have been my sources of Grace today? For what do I give thanks? This daily list anchors me, replaces perceived deprivation and resentment with gratitude, and insures an improved rest.

When we are waiting, we put one foot in front of the other every morning and every evening. The spiritual practice of patience encourages an active waiting and invites us to accept our not-knowing, to live in trust of God and of ourselves, and to embrace thanksgiving. With these spiritual tools we are more likely to patiently get through what lies ahead.

### Questions to Ponder

- How is waiting teaching you patience right now?
- What would you teach a young person about patience?
- Since last March, what are you proudest of in your “active waiting?”
- How can you grow more deeply into Not Knowing?
- Where is God inviting you to grow in trust— of God, and of yourself?
- How do you practice gratitude daily?

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