

October 26, 2008

Nancy Baker

Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Milford, New Hampshire

## **Patience is More than a Virtue**

Once there was a group of little chickens in a farmyard taking instructions from a hen on the scratching process. It wasn't going well. "You must learn to be patient," the hen pronounced. "I don't want to learn to be patient," said a chick. "I want to be patient now!" The underlying assumption of this humor is that patience takes time. This morning I'd like to suggest to you that it takes only what the moment requires. Patience is not a virtue or a discipline or a disengagement from the needs of NOW. Patience is state of hopeful expectation.

For centuries we've been taught that patience is virtuous. Patient people are good people. How come then that we can name the seven dwarves and the seven deadly sins, but we seldom have little trivia contests about naming the 7 heavenly virtues? Can anybody name the seven heavenly virtues? [Faith, Hope, Charity, Fortitude, Justice, Prudence, and Temperance] Did you notice that Patience is NOT one of the 7 heavenly virtues. Actually it is one of what are called the 7 contrary virtues, the ones meant to specifically counter the 7 deadly sins. These are: Humility against pride, Kindness against envy, Abstinence against gluttony, Chastity against lust, Patience against anger, Liberality against greed, and Diligence against sloth. So, here patience is the counter to anger. Interesting, don't you think? Here is the origin of the notion that anger is an impulsive reaction to the frustrations of now, and that patience somehow gets us to LATER when we've all calmed down and are thinking more rationally. Frankly that doesn't work for me. Why can't I be proactively patient?

When we can't get it right, when we can't pin it down with words we are sure of, we look for synonyms. Patience. Can you think of a synonym for it? If you go to Roget's Thesaurus you find a wide range of possibilities listed: forbearance, suffering, endurance, leniency, tolerance, perseverance, forgiveness, unexcitability. All of these synonyms get at some aspect of patience, but when you apply the test of substitution, they just don't work. I've lost my patience, you might say, but would you say, I've lost my suffering, I've lost my endurance, I've lost my tolerance, I've lost my forgiveness, or, doggone it, I've lost my unexcitability?? And none of these synonyms gets at the root meaning of the word, which has a delicious ambiguity about it. For many years I taught Latin, so know that the verb *patior* in Latin is very curious one. It is what is called a deponent verb, meaning that it has passive forms, but active meaning. And, it means both to suffer and to allow. How can we be passive, yet active; suffer, but enable?

There is a Taoist parable that points out why patience lies in the center, somewhere in that state between being engaged and being resigned.

An old farmer had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit.

“Such bad luck,” they said sympathetically.

“We’ll see,” the farmer replied.

The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses.

“How wonderful,” the neighbors exclaimed.

“We’ll see,” replied the old man.

The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy on his misfortune.

“We’ll see,” answered the farmer.

The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army.

Seeing that the son’s leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out.

“We’ll see” said the farmer.

In this parable we might mistake patience for the good sense to know when to just let the natural process be. Taoism is a discipline that uses what we westerners tend to think of as a patient attitude. So, is patience a discipline? You might think so, and that’s when we fall again into the synonym trap. Patience is not a synonym for persistence, as the children’s story this morning illustrates. The tortoise was persistent because he used his own strengths to advantage and kept at it. He was patient when he thoughtfully refrained from engaging in an exchange of insults, instead offering the rabbit a way to save face. Then the tortoise made a commitment to just be himself with the whole animal world watching. The outcome was less about winning a race than about affirming the essential self of both contestants. Acceptance is a word we might apply to outcome; patience is a word that sits at the heart of process. When we say that we are losing our patience, it implies that we had it in the first place, and that our grasp on it is slipping. That is such an odd statement. If we really had patience, we wouldn’t let the driver on the cell phone in the other lane, or the last week of an election campaign, or our two year old in need of a nap, erode our self control. Patience is too often something we recognize or appreciate only when we think we’ve lost it and need it back. And then we want it NOW. We try to prevent it getting away by “counting to ten” or by trying to force our focus beyond frustration, where we think control lies. Patience is so very difficult because no one else can have it for us. We can’t buy it or borrow it. If patience is a form of control, it is self control, and it must be effective as a strategy, not as a reaction. A Buddhist parable offers an example:

There once lived a great warrior. Though quite old, he still was able to defeat any challenger. His reputation extended far and wide throughout the land and many students gathered to study under him.

One day an infamous young warrior arrived at the village. He was determined to be the first man to defeat the great master. Along with his strength, he had an uncanny ability to spot and exploit any weakness in an opponent. He would wait for his opponent to make the first move, thus revealing a weakness, and then would strike with merciless force and lightning speed. No one had ever lasted with him in a match beyond the first move.

Much against the advice of his concerned students, the old master gladly accepted the young warrior's challenge. As the two squared off for battle, the young warrior began to hurl insults at the old master. He threw dirt and spit in his face. For hours he verbally assaulted him with every curse and insult known to mankind. But the old warrior merely stood there motionless and calm. Finally, the young warrior exhausted himself. Knowing he was defeated, he left feeling shamed.

Somewhat disappointed that he did not fight the insolent youth, the students gathered around the old master and questioned him. "How could you endure such an indignity? How did you drive him away?"

"If someone comes to give you a gift and you do not receive it," the master replied, "to whom does the gift belong?"

We opened the service this morning with a four corner chant, Be Still and Know That I am. While Psalm 46 in Hebrew Scriptures is its source and it is meant to be an affirmation from a higher external power, it is also a powerful call to use our own strength and patience to recognize the resources that lie within each one of us. If I am still, I am not struggling against myself, making myself vulnerable to outside forces that would undermine the best in me. There is no 12 step process to patience. Patience is the riser and the tread in every step of a whole and healthy self.

If patience is not a virtue, and it is not avoidance or a discipline, what is it? I suggest to you that patience is hopeful expectation. There is a world of difference between looking at patience as a guiding virtue or a form of self control, and using patience to express your faith in the goodness of life itself. Again, let's not confuse synonyms here. I'm not talking about anticipation, which is a kind of emotional longing. I mean a deeply embedded hope that is an antidote to fear. I mean seeing hope as patience with the lamp lit. President Woodrow Wilson once said, "All things come to him who waits - provided he knows what he is waiting for." Patience as a virtue is patience for the sake of being patient, and suffering is its mantra. Patience as the energy in goal setting is something else, and it is all about enabling. Patience can be the unbroken thread in the constantly evolving state of now. Instead of letting fear drive us to impatient responses, we should let hope steer us to patient action. This year I've heard so many people whom I know to be well considered and responsible citizens, ones who always inform themselves on issues and vote thoughtfully, say to me that for the first time they have a yard sign out front or a bumper sticker on their car, or they are writing letters, canvassing, or using their precious gasoline dollars to hear candidates. Right now people are fearful for our future, and with good reason. Hateful rhetoric does little to calm those who watch the stock market tank. We want solutions and we want them right now! Patience doesn't seem to factor in, even with those who always seem to take the long view. But what might happen if we let patience work for us right now? We might see that while we are suffering financially and are fed up with the politics of now, we have somehow enabled hundreds of people in our larger community to speak up for their values and interests, to get involved, and to invest in the process beyond bubbling a black dot on a ballot. No matter how negative the rhetoric is and how depressing the global economy is, and how frustrated we are with the situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, if we apply hopeful expectation to the situation, we see that we have been engaging in a different kind of dialogue, and in this conversation the voices are more varied and committed in more passionate ways. Regardless of the outcome, what a pity it would be if we don't have the

patience to see that larger, more varied, and more passionate dialogue is in itself a meaningful way forward. So even if you have lost your patience with this administration and this election, please don't lose your patience with the process. Remember the temper driven two year old? She or he becomes a 15 year old and tries our patience in ways we couldn't have imagined and for which no amount of counting to ten is very helpful. Before you know it, that annoying 15 year old can vote, and if you as a parent or a circle leader or an involved adult have modeled how to be an informed, engaged, and thoughtful citizen, you have used patience in hopeful expectation, and we are all the better for it. We must be like Whitman's Noiseless Patient Spider, "seeking the spheres to connect them, till the bridge you will need be form'd", till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere." Community begins when individuals explore what is beyond them and find places to connect. In every way that we engage in community, if we hold on to our values and we instill them in others as we can, we affirm that we know what we are waiting for, and we model hopeful expectation, the most powerful change agent there has ever been.

Many of you know that I spent years in the classroom and have just retired. Do I miss teaching? people ask. Do I miss the kids? Yes, yes. What I don't miss is getting up so early in the morning, doing lesson planning in out there in the pews, and having a lapful of papers to correct on every weekend trip in the car. I was never impatient about those realities, and I never let them undermine my joy in the essential goodness of teaching. A teacher can have content knowledge, classroom management, the latest approaches to instruction, and the respect of colleagues and parents, but if that teacher doesn't have patience, she or he is not effective. For all the years I taught I had a little poster in my classroom of the words that are quoted on the top of the order of service this morning.

Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves ... Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps, then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

It is true. Sooner or later, if you have patience in the process and a hopeful expectation of a good result, the future that you envisioned is often the future that unfolds. Our son Andrew certainly needed our patience, and he always had it. I think Bob would agree that we never once gave him the sense that our expectations of him weren't hopeful, positive ones. Ever the idealist, Andrew followed me into teaching, but the impatience he had shown us as a teenager was still front and center during his first year of teaching. Be patient with it, I advised. Take it day by day. Build trust and relationships first with patience and then try to teach stuff. Like every first year teacher he struggled against his own inclination to let his subject rather than his object drive the process. He is in his 4th year of teaching now and recently he and I had a wonderful long talk about patience. My jaw dropped when he said, "I am probably more patient as a teacher than you were. Having patience is my whole approach to the kids." At first I was a little surprised because students used to say to me, "you have patience with me even after I figured I'd used it all up." But I think this just reinforces the idea that patience is like compound

interest. If someone has been patient with and hopeful for you, you take that support and pay it forward, doubled. Patience is perhaps one of the few gifts that can be offered, but not received in an equal exchange. The true power of patience is in the act of giving of it. While it empowers both giver and receiver, patience is the gift that, in the end, you always keep.

Life poses the questions and living discloses the answers. So in hopeful expectation of rich answers, embrace the questions and let them resolve themselves as you are ready for them. If you are patient, your still strong center will tell you when your answers have arrived. Patience is not a virtue. It is our hopeful expectation that actively living our questions will bring answers that are worth waiting for.

Nancy Baker