

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 29 March, 2009

Patience

A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far is the title of one of poet Adrienne Rich's collections.¹ One of my favorite prayers is for patience, and impatience. The importance of impatience in our call to justice cannot be overstated, and, in the interest of full disclosure, a sermon on impatience would have been easier to imagine after I wrote this sermon on Tuesday morning and then lost it to a software crash that afternoon, auto-save notwithstanding. Nonetheless, I am compelled to reflect with you on learning patience, and practicing patience – even a wild patience – because I am struck by the spiritual vacuum created in its absence.

As a small child, I once watched my grandfather repair a door that wouldn't close. The single frame of memory is of his rubbing Dial soap across the top of the door, and inside the jamb. He talked to me as he worked, and he worked it and worked it for a long, long time. And then, finally, click. As I recall that memory, suddenly, patience seems old-fashioned. Who has the time to fool with stuff like that? What happens to our souls when we don't?

Do you remember Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince*? In this scene, the little prince takes a lesson from a fox about friendship. The fox suggests that the little prince tame him, except that “to tame” isn't really the right verb. In the original French, the word was *apprivoiser*, meaning “to establish ties.” How do we establish ties?

“I want to, very much,’ the little prince [said].... ‘But I have not much time. I have friends to discover, and a great many things to understand.

“One only understands the things that one tames,’ said the fox. ‘Men have no more time to understand anything. They buy things all ready made at the shops. But there is no shop anywhere where one can buy friendship, and so men have no friends any more.

1 *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*: Poems, 1978-1981

If you want a friend, tame me....'

"What must I do, to tame you?' asked the little prince.

"You must be very patient,' replied the fox. 'First you will sit down at a little distance from me – like that – in the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to me, every day....'

“The next day the little prince came back.

"It would have been better to come back at the same hour,' said the fox. 'If, for example, you come at four o'clock in the afternoon, then at three o'clock I shall begin to be happy. I shall feel happier and happier as the hour advances. At four o'clock, I shall already be worrying and jumping about. I shall show you how happy I am! But if you come at just any time, I shall never know at what hour my heart is to be ready to greet you....”

And so the little prince tamed the fox. And when it came time for him to leave for new adventures, the fox had a gift for him. "Goodbye,' said the fox. 'And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.’”²

What is essential is invisible to the eye. The reward for patience is the capacity to see clearly. Patience is a virtue, because it brings the beauty of faithfulness and devotion to our lives. And again, it is a spiritual practice, a practice that grows our souls. We would do well to adopt a mnemonic, to remind ourselves to pay attention to our breath, to feel our feet on solid ground, to be patient with others, and with ourselves.

True story: a group of western scientists was doing research in a very remote area of Mexico. They hired local porters to transport their equipment. Along the way, without explanation, the porters stopped. The scientists were astonished. Then they became irritated. Finally, they were furious. The Mexicans appeared to be simply standing around, waiting. Then, without any particular signal, they started moving again. Imagine the reaction when one of them explained, “Because we had been going so fast, we had left our souls behind. We stopped to wait for our souls.”³

2 Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, from chapter 21

3 Piero Ferrucci, *The Power of Kindness*, p. 106

How have you left your soul behind? Hurrying will do it, for sure, and that pinhole vision that comes with plunging headlong through life. We leave our souls behind when we have no time to pay attention, no time to come to rest, no time to savor, no time for kindness. Some of what patience can bring is a *yes* to the invitation to go deep. Pay attention, rest, savor, be kind ... go deep.

And then there's waiting. O, but we hate to wait! We want it when we want it, which is now. Waiting is torture. Robert Levine, who studies the experience of time in different cultures, reports that western society and Japan, where punctuality and precision are rewarded, wait the least. Brazil, Indonesia, and Mexico, moving more slowly and with less precision, wait the most. Not surprisingly, the disadvantage of living in an accelerated world is widespread cardiovascular disease. It is not good for our hearts to hurry. Our hearts need a slower pace, just as our souls need to catch up.

Interestingly, in Japan, “social support and cohesion” make up for the pitfalls of time pressure.⁴ I think of our friend Mike, who grew up in the midwest, and now recalls Sunday afternoons as time to “visit.” To visit entailed calling on various family members, neighbors, and co-workers, chatting over a cup of tea and something sweet; no agenda, but the happy outcome of a strong social network. Might we adopt a practice of visiting ... for heart and soul?

In reflecting on patience, and impatience, it's probably safe to say that one of the greatest challenges to our patience is in our unavoidable interactions with insufferable people. Try this: let's ask ourselves, *What if I'm one of those people?* For just a moment, we can imagine how desperately they want to be accepted, and liked, and how, instead, they're constantly met with irritation, and treated as a nuisance. Can you feel the pain of that? It's almost unbearable, isn't it? This is an exercise in patience; this is the perspective of patience. Patience gives us insight, and insight gives us compassion.

Here is one of my favorite stories about this experience, as told by American Aikido pioneer, Terry Dobson:

“The train clanked and rattled through the suburbs of Tokyo.... Our car was [almost] empty....

“At one station, the doors opened, and suddenly the afternoon quiet was shattered

4 *ibid*, p. 108

by a man bellowing violent, incomprehensible curses. [He] ... staggered into our car. He ... was big, drunk, and dirty. Screaming, he swung at a woman holding a baby. The blow sent her spinning into the laps of an elderly couple. It was a miracle that the baby was unharmed.

“Terrified, the couple jumped up and scrambled toward the other end of the car. The [drunken man] aimed a kick at the retreating back of the old woman, but missed as she scuttled to safety. This so enraged [him] that he grabbed the metal pole in the center of the car and tried to wrench it out of its stanchion. I could see that one of his hands was cut and bleeding. The train lurched ahead, the passengers frozen with fear. I stood up.

“... I'd been putting in a solid eight hours of aikido training nearly every day for the past three years. I liked to throw and grapple.... Trouble was, my martial skill was untested in actual combat. As students of aikido, we were not allowed to fight.

“Aikido,' my teacher had said again and again, 'is the art of reconciliation. Whoever has the mind to fight has broken his connection with the universe. If you try to dominate people, you are already defeated. We study how to resolve conflict, not how to start it.'

“I listened to his words. I tried hard.... In my heart, however, I wanted an absolutely legitimate opportunity whereby I might save the innocent by destroying the guilty.

“This is it! I said to myself....

“Seeing me stand up, the [drunken man] recognized a chance to focus his rage. 'Aha!' he roared. 'A foreigner.... You're [going to] get a lesson!' He gathered himself for a rush at me.

“A split second before he could move, someone shouted, 'Hey!' It was earsplitting. I remember the strangely joyous, lilting quality of it – as though you and a friend had been searching diligently for something, and he suddenly stumbled upon it. 'Hey!'

“I wheeled to my left; the [drunken man] spun to his right. We both stared down at a little old Japanese [gentleman] ... well into his seventies, sitting there immaculate in

his kimono. He took no notice of me, but beamed delightedly at the [drunken man], as though he had a most important, most welcome secret to share.

“‘[Come here,]’ the old man said in an easy vernacular, beckoning to the [drunken man]. ‘Come here] and talk with me.’ He waved his hand lightly.

“‘The big man followed, as if on a string. He planted his feet belligerently in front of the old gentleman, and roared above the clacking wheels, ‘Why ... should I talk to you?’ The [drunken man] now had his back to me. If his elbow moved so much as a millimeter, I’d drop him in his socks.

“‘The old man continued to beam.... ‘What[‘ve you] been drinking?’ he asked, his eyes sparkling with interest. ‘I been drinkin’ sake,’ the [man] bellowed back, ‘and it’s none of your business!’....

“‘Oh, that’s wonderful,’ the old man said, ‘absolutely wonderful.... I love sake, too. Every night, ... my wife ... warms up a little bottle .. and [we] take it out to the garden, and we sit on an old wooden bench. We watch the sun go down, and we look to see how our persimmon tree is doing....’” [He proceeded to go on at some length about the persimmon tree.]

“‘As [the drunken man] struggled to follow the old man’s conversation, [his] face began to soften. His fists slowly unclenched. ‘Yeah,’ he said, I love persimmons, too....’ His voice trailed off.

“‘Yes,’ said the old man, smiling, ‘and I’m sure you have a wonderful wife.’

“‘No,’ replied the [drunken man]. ‘My wife died.’ Very gently, swaying with the motion of the train, the big man began to sob. ‘I don’t [have a] wife, I don’t [have a] home, I don’t [have a] job. I’m so ashamed....’ Tears rolled down his cheeks. A spasm of despair rippled through his body.

“‘Now it was my turn,’” continues Terry Dobson. “‘Standing there in my ... ‘make-[the]-world-safe-for-democracy righteousness, I suddenly felt dirtier than he was.

“‘Then the train arrived at my stop. As the doors opened, I heard the old man cluck sympathetically. ‘My, my,’ he said, ‘that is a difficult predicament.... Sit down here and tell me about it.’

“I turned my head for one last look. The [drunk] was sprawled on the seat, his head in the old man's lap. The old man was softly stroking the filthy, matted hair.

“As the train pulled away, I sat down on a bench.... I had just seen aikido tried in combat, and the essence of it was love. I would have to practice the art with an entirely different spirit.”⁵

My spiritual companions, a wild patience has taken us this far. Let's celebrate everything that's been worth the wait! And now let us go deeper into the spiritual practice of this virtue:

Paying attention, breath by breath,
standing on solid ground,
soaping the jamb of the doorway into the mystery,

let us wait for our souls to catch up,
visit and establish ties and tame the fox,
wait for our hearts to see rightly.

And now
may compassion arise
and something new be born
of our extraordinary
patience.

5 Terry Dobson, *Aikido in Action: Doing Combat with the Essence of Love*, from *The Foundations of Peace (IC#4)*, Autumn, 1983, p. 35