



# Modes of Waiting

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“Waiting? Oh, yeah, I hate that!”

Waiting occupies a significant place in the experience of parents and educators. Think of how often and how long we wait with patience, fretfulness, expectation, or even helplessness for a child to get out of diapers, to learn to talk, to ride a bike, to overcome fear of water, to swim, to read, and so on. Waiting is a far from trivial matter in our day-to-day pedagogic lives.

In a sense waiting is so familiar a topic that we feel we know only too well what the meaning of waiting is. And yet we would have difficulty describing the experience of waiting in a particular situation. Moreover, there are different kinds of waiting. There are differences between, say, waiting for our paychecks and waiting for spring to arrive, waiting for the bus to come and waiting for a child to walk, waiting for the end of a movie and waiting for death. On the one hand, waiting may mean simply boredom, an inefficient use of time, empty and unproductive time. But on the other, it may also mean a critically important time which, for example, somehow helps nurture understanding and expression in children, or allows for the appreciation of a good meal at a restaurant, just as it serves quietly to ferment good wine.<sup>1</sup> Although, even people who feel that the value of waiting is important in teaching may become easily irritated if they must wait a little too long. They may be overtly waiting while suppressing their impatience, but is this “real” waiting? What is real waiting?

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## Manifold Ways of Waiting

A small child comes home tired and hungry from playing outside. Mother says, “Supper is almost ready.” But the child can hardly wait. “Can’t I have a cookie now?” Yet mother is firm and the child throws a tantrum.

When miserable, how difficult it is to wait! One morning we wake up too early and we wait silently in bed for the dawn and for the family to awaken. What a tranquil experience! When we reach school age, we wait for recess time, for summer and other vacations filled with expectations. They seem to approach so slowly. Holidays are long in coming! And even at the end of a school day the hands of the clock seem to move deliberately slowly until finally the bell rings.

On a day in our childhood, excited with the expectations of the beach (the ski resort, or wherever we are going) we wonder why the ride to the destination is so unbearably long, while the way back home is always short. Or, the meal we ordered at a restaurant sometimes seems never to come, and we feel neglected. Unbearable, indeed! The situation becomes even worse if we start counting how many more minutes we'll have to wait or how many more kilometers we'll have to travel. The question "Not yet?" arises again and again. But we may remember little insights in those situations. Because waiting gets unbearable if we fret, why not stop fretting by thinking of something else? Assume an air of detachedness like an adult, act as if we did not care. In this way we "invent" a new style of waiting.<sup>2</sup>

Later in our youth, we wait for examinations often nervously, and sometimes with confidence or resignation. We learn to wait for the evaluation of ourselves by other people whom we do not know. Later, and in the experiences of friendship, marriage, childbirth, and other relations and situations, we come to acquire a new type of waiting in which the achievement of our own goals and wishes depends not only upon the conduct of ourselves but also upon that of other people. This is so taken for granted in our life that we seldom think about it. And finally, as we grow older, we wait for our death with fear, sorrow, relief or indifference. Thus the lived quality of waiting actually changes as we grow older, and as our attitude towards waiting changes.

Furthermore, it is easily imaginable that the experiences of waiting do vary in different societies in different times although we may not specifically know these forms of waiting.<sup>3</sup> There is a distinct form of waiting in what Karl Jaspers called "limit situations" such as in the Nazi concentration camps.<sup>4</sup> Another type of waiting can be found in a tribal chief's waiting: he continues his ceremonial dance for days in the belief that a big catch by his young tribesmen depends upon how well he dances. And then there are the experiences of waiting described in myths and literature: the "enduring" Odysseus' waiting through twenty years of wandering after the Trojan War until he finally returned to his homeland where his wife was also waiting for his return; more desperate even appears Sisyphus' waiting in the endurance of an eternal punishment of rolling up to the top of a mountain a large stone which always falls down just when it reaches the summit.

When we reflect on the various modalities of waiting, there always seems to be two qualities present: "what is waited for" (its explicitness may vary) and "how we wait" (whatever its hue and nuance may be). We might call "what is waited for" the objective aspect of waiting, and "how we wait" the subjective aspect. However, this distinction is not experientially real or substantial but only helpful for the purpose of analysis.

## Subjective Aspect of Waiting

Otto F. Bollnow has made important contributions to disclosing the meaning of the subjective aspect of waiting by contrasting "patience" with "hope" and "expectation." According to Bollnow we experience patience in three different contexts. First, patience occurs within the context of our relation to work and is characterized in contrast to "haste" and "impatience." To proceed hastily is to rush into the future, jumping over the present while actively engaged in action. To have impatience is to pull the future into the present in the passivity of longing. Though haste is more active and impatience more passive, in both cases we attempt to "accelerate the natural flow of time and jump over it." In contrast, "patience lies in the harmony between the degrees of wished-for and the actual flow of objective time" (1969, p. 83).<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, patience occurs in the context of our relation to other people and is characterized in contrast with "gentleness," "prudence," and "indulgence." To relate to others with gentleness is to be "slow but constant without awkward stiffness." Prudence in interpersonal relations means "a kind of caution which would not allow other people or things to do harm." Indulgence means "not to put into question a person's past faults" and it is also characterized by the attitude "that there is no expectation for better in the future." In contrast, patience in interpersonal relationships is characterized by the fact that it does not refer to past events; rather it is more like a state of being which is only possible when there is a precondition of a "trustful relationship to the future." Yet this patience in relation to others, which is particularly important to the educator, must not be confused with "weakness" or "indifference" (pp. 86-89).

Thirdly, patience is examined in relation to life in general. In this context, patience is "not succumbing to the suffering but the reference to a better future." Thus, we "can be patient only when we feel supported by a more extensive, inclusive meaning of Being." In this sense, Bollnow points out the superficiality of "the Enlightenment understanding of patience which equated it with mere perseverance in work" (p. 91).

After describing patience in its three phases, Bollnow clarifies the meaning of "hope" which underlies waiting, in contrast with "expectation." Both hope and expectation refer to the future. However, in expectation there is a strong inner activeness in spite of outward passiveness; there is a belief in the occurrence of the expected event; and the expected event is sensed to be imminent and clearly imagined. Hope differs from expectation in that there is a kind of relaxation as seen in the fact that no hope is unendurable or unbearable; the exact occurrence of the hoped for event is not definitely known;

the hoped for event lies at a certain vague moment in the future; and the image of the hoped for event is indeterminate. In short, Bollnow characterizes "expectation as enclosed time, hope as disclosed time" (pp. 129-30). Through such contrasts, Bollnow helps us see various modes of "how we wait." What would attending to the objective aspect of waiting—"what is waited for"—show us?

### Objective Aspect of Waiting

Waiting for the elevator is different from waiting for one's baby to start walking. This sense of difference is not theoretical but experiential. Actually our sense of difference is more than that. After all, an elevator is different from a baby, and so we should not be surprised that our kind of waiting is affected by that for which we are waiting. But it does not follow from this that there are as many distinctively different ways of waiting as the number of all the objects in the world. For example, waiting for the elevator is not as different from waiting for computer printouts as it is different from waiting for the baby's walking. How can we be sensitive to the commonalities as well as to the differences in the quality of various forms of waiting?

It may be helpful to identify the various worlds to which the objective aspect of waiting—what is waited for—belongs: (1) the world of instrument-machinery (waiting for elevators and computer printouts, waiting for a drink to come out of a vending machine, etc.), (2) the world of nature (waiting for the sunrise, waiting for the flowers to bloom, waiting for spring, etc.), and (3) the world of becoming (waiting for a child's growth, waiting for the completion of works of art, waiting for the genesis of understanding and expression, etc.).

#### *Waiting in the world of instrument-machinery*

This is the world of means and ends; the tool serves as the means to the accomplishment of a purpose formulated prior to the actual use of the tool. Of course, as we can easily surmise from the possibility of errors and disorders of machinery, our knowledge about the relevant means to an end is never perfect. However, this imperfectness is taken as something which can and must be somehow overcome in the future. Thus, in this mechanical world, waiting does not play an important role. On the other hand, since no end can be achieved without the necessary preparation and manipulation, waiting without sufficient operation amounts to *doing nothing*, which may mean incompetence or even silliness on the part of the waiting person. It is silly to wait in front of a vending machine without feeding coins and pushing a button. On the other hand, even when necessary operations have been already employed, waiting is still inevitable until the result arises. But here again, as long as the employed operations have been sufficient, the manner of waiting is irrelevant since the

same result will follow anyway, regardless of whether we wait passionately or whether we "divert ourselves."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, if the same result follows two different processes, the process which involves less waiting is usually regarded as "more developed" or simply "better." Faster operating machines are regarded as "better." In this second sense, waiting is nothing but a *necessary evil* which would better be eliminated. In short, waiting in the world of instrument-machinery is unproductive and meaningless because it only connotes either doing nothing or necessary evil.

### *Waiting in the natural world*

The process of growth of animals and plants appears largely "encoded" from the start as possibilities in each individual. Of course, the fulfillment of the possibilities and the rate of growth may be accelerated or decelerated in relation to the environment, but the growth is characterized in principle as the gradual unfolding of natural potentialities. A tadpole will be a frog and nothing else. Or, to take another example, the motion of celestial bodies exhibits a distinctive rhythm which is essentially independent of human will and human operation and this rhythm makes the natural world different from the mechanical one. In the world of nature we sense a power toward human technological control. Thus, we wait for the day-break, spring or blossoms, tacitly knowing that we cannot influence them, that their rhythms are out of our control. At the same time, though, waiting in the natural world involves our trust in the power and process of nature which are independent of human operations or attitudes (fear, sorrow, etc.). So, we can wait for our wounds to heal or for a baby to be born, because we are trusting the rhythm and process involved; if we do not trust, we cannot wait in the natural world. Further, growth and change without our operation is thus taken for granted in the natural world, whereas no change can be expected without necessary human operation in the mechanical world. Here lies another distinctive mode of waiting, which is characterized by *powerlessness* of the self and by *trust* in the external rhythms.

Of course the line separating the world of nature and the world of instrumentals is not absolutely drawn. For example, through genetic research and genetic engineering, humans gain control over domains of nature hitherto inconceivable. Thus, the human controlled "growth" of commercial vegetables in hothouses and the "production" of chicken in industrialized chickenhouses may now be taken almost totally in terms of the mechanical world. This factual overlap of the worlds should not, however, conceal their difference. To become sensitive to this felt difference itself is important. Today, when the world is increasingly perceived as technological, it is no wonder that the natural world has been eroded by the mechanical, and thus some forms of waiting are now experienced under the auspices of the mechanical. So some pregnant mothers and their doc-

tors cannot wait for natural birth and resort to all sorts of mechanical manipulations. Some people who work in an air-conditioned building and commute by an air-conditioned car or subway from a house which is also air-conditioned, may have lost the sensitivity to seasons. It is not surprising that these people may have difficulty in recognizing the particular mode of waiting in the natural world. They have difficulty in recognizing it because they have forgotten the natural world, a world which for them has already withered.

### *Waiting in the world of becoming*

The world of becoming is here the one in which we become ourselves; the world where our understanding, expression, and creation takes place; the particularly human world in and through which we become more human.

“What is waited for” in the mechanical and natural worlds is clear and distinct. But in the world of becoming the object of waiting is more elusive. Or, even granted that the purpose seems discrete at a certain time, it may nonetheless change as time goes on into something totally opposite, become indistinct or vanish completely, or develop into a new, more enriched purpose. An eternal love may abruptly end, and a young revolutionary may gradually become a reactionary. Similarly, a creative work of art may seem to require more work after the finishing touches were made. How does an artwork become “finished?” There is a kind of waiting in the work of artistic creation. What is waited for is realized through various trials and modifications, abandonments and new beginnings. What is clearly known prior to its realization pertains to the mechanical or natural world. This does not mean that there is no such thing as what is waited for in this world, but that what is waited for exists only in a more flexible and tacit form which is inseparable from the sense of directionality and value.

In the mechanical world, waiting (doing nothing or necessary evil) sharply differs from sufficient operation and preparation which will bring about a certain preconceived product, such as taking coffee from a coffee machine. In the natural world, too, waiting is distinctively different from operation. Waiting is only possible on the condition of a tacit trust in the natural power or process which is independent of human intervention and manipulation. In the world of becoming, however, the demarcation line between waiting and operation is subtle. For example, an “inspiration” may suddenly hit us while we are resting, doing nothing in particular but drinking tea or taking a bath. Anecdotes of such experiences are abundant in the history of discoveries and inventions. Thus the commonplace distinction between waiting and operation, the distinction which is valid in both natural and mechanical worlds, is not valid in the world of becoming. Rather, waiting and operating, resting and working, penetrate each other to form a holistic process of becoming. In a

weak form we know this connection already: sleeping is as important as playing or being awake for a child's development, relaxation is as important as concentration in creative thinking, etc. To better understand waiting in the world of becoming, we need a good metaphor, one which could get at the mode of being that is prior to the usual separation into operation and waiting. It must be a metaphor which could refer to the productive waiting-working continuum as distinct from the unproductive counterpart which is neither waiting nor working. In any case, waiting does not exclude or conflict with operation in this world.

In the world of becoming, there is a particular counterpointal structure, a dialectic if you like, between "how we wait" and "what is waited for." On the one hand, "what is waited for," no matter how vague it may be, prepares a certain mood or certain possible moods of the particular waiting. We wait for the birth of a baby in a quite different manner from the way we wait for our death. This type of influence of "what is waited for" upon "how we wait" can be also found in other worlds. For example, waiting in front of the coffee machine for the cup to be filled and waiting for the elevator to come down have a different modality. However, only in the world of becoming is it also possible that "what is waited for" which has so far been nebulous, may become distinct because of a certain way or certain possible ways of "how we wait." For instance, if a poem comes to a poet, the poem depends on the way the poet has waited for the poem. It is not that a certain poem comes to the poet regardless of what he or she is doing—thinking, working, resting or day-dreaming—in short, how he or she is living. In addition, although an inspiration might come to us at a seemingly unexpected moment, it does not come to anyone at any time.<sup>7</sup> In the world of becoming, we can even say that the very way of "how we wait" enables us to be aware of what has been out of our reach and, thus, enriches and transforms the initial "what we waited for." In the other worlds, however, "how we wait" never affects or constitutes "what is waited for."

To summarize, waiting in the world of becoming is characterized in that (1) "what is waited for" is essentially indeterminate, (2) it is a more comprehensive mode of being which includes operation, and (3) there is a mutually dependent relationship between "how we wait" and "what is waited for." The significance of the experiential quality of waiting is related to the world to which this form of waiting belongs. The notion that waiting is nothing but boredom is only pertinent to the mechanical world, whereas the opposite notion that waiting is vitally important is pertinent only to the world of becoming. A person who says, "Oh yeah, I hate waiting!" may be speaking predominantly from the experience of waiting in the mechanical world. It would be too bad if this person had lost the sense of peace-

fulness of waiting for a beautiful sunset. A teacher may kick at a vending machine cursing its slowness, but this attitude should not be carried over to the sphere of becoming in the classroom. Inattentiveness to the different worlds described above seems to be what makes it difficult for us to wait in a truer and richer manner for the becoming of ourselves and others.

Above, the three different worlds were described, for clarity's sake, as if they were totally separate. For example, waiting for flowers to bloom was taken as an instance of waiting in the natural world. However, blooming can surely be accelerated or postponed, to a certain extent, by employing various horticultural techniques. This waiting will then acquire the features of waiting in the mechanical world. On the other hand, suppose that a person is caring for an apple tree in the garden by plucking weeds and guarding against worms, cutting out overcrowded twigs, and waiting for the tree to blossom. This waiting will have similar features to the waiting in the world of becoming. Thus it is not the case that we can simply classify the actual cases of waiting into three categories. Nevertheless, to take the above example, waiting for flowers to bloom will always retain to some extent the feature of waiting in the natural world. In this sense the above three worlds are distinctively different in analysis but they are not incompatible in a concrete and actual experience of waiting.

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Sometimes, in waiting for a person before going out together, we may become irritated. Our wait may seem incredibly long, and we may honk the horn, knock on the door, or call for the person from afar, feeling we are wasting our time. In this case we are waiting as if we were waiting for a product in the world of instrument-machinery (waiting is doing nothing). On other occasions, we may be waiting for the person feeling tacitly or explicitly that we cannot do anything about it, as if we were waiting for the full moon to rise. In this case our waiting is experienced like waiting in the natural world; we are powerless but we keep waiting because we trust that the person will finally come. Or, on still other occasions, we may be waiting for a person to dress while expecting how handsome the other person will appear. And if the other person knows this expectation, it will give power to the dressing-up itself; for who would want to dress up if none would think anything of it? In contrast, we might think that the other person is inconsiderate, or that he or she has forgotten us. Then, we might give a little sign (a honk or knock) or, if the situation appears graver, confront the situation directly in the hope that we might be able to bridge our waiting and the person's experience. In some cases the other person may be willfully trying to exert power by making us wait. Even a short sketch like this will show how manifold and rich the experience of waiting can be.



The articulation of the modes of waiting is intended to be of some help to our becoming more mindful of the manifold ways of waiting, of our own and of others'. Especially for educators in the present context of overwhelming technologization, this articulation may enable us to consider non-instrumental ways of waiting.

## Notes

1. It is notable that the ancient Greeks had a sense of distinction in time experience: whereas *kronos* refers to the kind of time that invades us independent of our wishes and thus erodes any sort of human and natural accomplishments, *kairos* indicates the kind of time which is supportive of the fermentation of good wine.
2. A thoroughgoing idealization of this "insight" can be found in the Stoic notion of *apatheia*. See John Rist, The stoic concept of detachment, in John Rist (Ed.), *The Stoics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p. 259ff.
3. For example, Gurvitch describes different ways of time experience in various classes. See Georges Gurvitch. (1971). *The Social Frameworks of Knowledge*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, especially Part Three.
4. Victor E. Frankl (1963). *Man's Search for Meaning*, New York: Pocket books; Bruno Bettelheim (1960). *The Informed Heart*, New York: Free Press.
5. Otto Friedlich Bollnow (1960). *Neue Geborgenheit: Das Problem einer Überwindung des Existentialismus*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer. Pagination corresponds to its Japanese translation, by Hideyuki Suda (1969). *Jitsuzon-shugi Kokufuku no Mondai*, Tokyo: Mirai-sha, p. 83.
6. It is significant that Blaise Pascal's criticism of the superficiality of human "divertissement" coincides with the period of dominant mechanization of the world by scientific, industrial and economic revolutions.
7. "If the thunderbolt hits you, you must have been prepared for that." Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1980). *Citadelle*, Paris: Gallimard.