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The Poetics of Waiting

Annie Kunnath
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi - IN

Abstract

This article consists of three parts, excluding the Introduction and the Conclusion. The first part "What is it 'to wait'?" is a lexicographical study on the word 'waiting', in various Indo-European languages. This lexicographical adventure that passes through some dense foliage will not only clarify the different connotations in the phenomenon of waiting, but will also lead us to the second part of the paper – "Waiting and Time Consciousness". Here, the art of waiting is examined through the looking glass of Time as understood by the philosophers Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, Hannah Arendt, and Martin Heidegger. The questions of how we wait and why we wait are addressed in this section. The third part looks at the presence-absence of the waiting spirit in the post-truth era that we are living in. Titled, "We, the Hollow People", this section highlights what happens to us when we forget to wait, forget to stand and gaze. The Concluding part "Waiting for God Who Awaits Us" speaks of Christians as "waiters", waiting with and for God, the other, and also on oneself, not on lofty mountain peaks, but right down on the "bathroom floor".

Keywords: advent, expectation, hope, time consciousness, waiting

"If you can wait and not be tired by waiting…" Rudyard Kipling

The exergue which figures in this article is from Rudyard Kipling's didactic poem "If". Among the many qualities, mostly stoic in nature, that would enable one to become an ideal/perfect human being, is the good of waiting:

> If you can wait and not be tired by waiting…
> Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
> And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son! (Kipling 1916: 181–182).

According to Kipling, the ability to wait, and to wait patiently, has a double effect: the mastery of the self, and the mastery of the "Earth" and all that is in it. It may be that the poet was inspired or influenced by the early sixteenth-century English proverb: "All things come to those who wait"; sometimes rendered as "Good things come to those who wait".

This article explores one of the most banal of human experiences, that of waiting. While the theme of *waiting has been explored in literature, some of the best known being T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land (Eliot 1954: 59–84), and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot (*see *Beckett 1956),* there has been little philosophical inquiry into a phenomenon that is integral to our lived experience. This surprising lacuna is all the more perplexing when we consider that the concept of act/action, "what must I do?", is an essential part of philosophical inquiry. But is waiting the opposite of action? Is the *act* of waiting doing nothing? What is waiting? What kind of experience is it? How do we wait? Why do we wait? And, how does waiting figure in the emotional and spiritual intelligence of human beings?

The answers to these questions are articulated in three interrelated parts. The first titled "What is it 'to wait'?" is a lexicographical enquiry on the word 'waiting' in various Indo-European languages. This lexicographical adventure that passes through some dense foliage will not only clarify the different connotations in the phenomenon of waiting, but will also lead us to the second part of the article: "Waiting and Time Consciousness". Here, the art of waiting is examined through the lens of Time as understood by the philosophers Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, Hannah Arendt, and Martin Heidegger. The questions of how do we wait? what do we wait for? and why do we wait? are addressed in this section. The third part looks at the presence/absence of the spirit of waiting in the post-truth era in which we live. Entitled "We, the Hollow People", this part shows what happens to us when we forget to wait, when we forget to stand and gaze. A concluding section "Waiting for God Who Awaits Us" presents Christians as 'waiters', waiting with and for God, the other, and also on oneself, not on lofty mountain peaks, but right down on the "bathroom floor".

1. What Is It 'To Wait'?

A look at the etymology of the word 'waiting' will help to understand its meaning and implications. It is interesting to note that there is no entry on 'waiting' in the *Dictionary of Philosophy*, or the *Dictionary of Ideas*, or the *Glossary of Philosophical Terms*. While the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* does not have an entry on 'waiting' *per se*, the word appears in the section on *Delectatio morosa* (literally, meticulous or slow pleasure or delight). The epithet *morosa* refers to "the pleasure that the imagination savors deliciously as it is expectantly waiting (Lat. *moratur*) in the desire for an object that remains absent because it is inaccessible or prohibited" (Cassin 2014: 792). Interestingly, in Christian moral theology, this term refers to the pleasure of sinful thought or imagination! Now, according to the *Dictionary of*

Untranslatables,

> The Latin word *morosus*, in fact, has a double etymology: when written with the first syllable long, it derives from *mos*, *moris* (character trait, with a pejorative connotation of being difficult, sombre, and acrimonious); when written with the first syllable short, it comes from the verb *moror, -aris* (to linger, to wait), and from the noun *mora* (delay, stop, pause) (*Ib.*).

In my opinion, while the meaning of the word 'waiting' corresponds directly to the second etymology, there is however, an indirect corelation with the first etymology, in so far as the ability to wait is a character trait: I am capable of waiting patiently, deriving joy and serenity from this act; but I can also be a difficult, despondent, acrimonious 'waiter'.

In my search for this elusive term, I finally found an entry in the German linguist Ludwig von Doederlein's *Handbuch Der Lateinischen Synonymik*, first published in 1849 (Von Doederlein 1841: 133). Doederlin notes that the German language distinguishes between the two verbs *warten* and *harren*. While both denote waiting, the character or *mode* of waiting is very distinct or specific. Thus, while *warten* refers to a calm, passionless waiting for, *harren* denotes an eager, impatient, longing-for waiting. Doederlein also points out that Latin has no corresponding synonyms for these two words. This is not a pointless observation. After all, Doederlein is writing a hand-book of Latin synonyms in German! Like Latin, English (as well as French), has no separate words for the presence or absence of emotion in the act of waiting. But while there are no synonyms in the Latin language for *warten* and *harren*, Latin however (unlike English or French), has four different verbs to speak of waiting: *maneo*, *exspecto*, *praestolor*, and

opperior.

Maneo translated as: abide, stay, remain, wait, await, refers to the physical act of being, of remaining in a place, of staying put. Unlike *maneo*, the three other Latin verbs that refer to waiting – *exspecto*, *praestolor*, and *opperior* – denote a mental act, and mean: to wait for, to wait in conscious expectation of someone or some event. However, all three verbs have different shades of meaning. *Exspecto*, for example, does not carry any additional idea of what will happen when the expected event or person arrives. *Exspecto* is more of a feeling, an expectation. To use an Augustinian terminology, it is the presence of the not yet (*nondum*). On the other hand, the verbs *praestolo*r and *opperior* have an accessory meaning or practical reference, that of the waiting person *doing* something after the arrival of the awaited event or person. A *praestolans* waits for someone to do something for him. The gatekeeper, the sentry, or the biblical ten virgins (foolish or wise) (Mathew 25: 1–13), who wait for the bridegroom's arrival to light the procession are characteristic examples of a *praestolans*. The *opperiens* also waits, anticipating an event, so as not to be taken by surprise. An example would be the early Christians who awaited the *parousia*, with *Maranatha* on their lips, watchfully waiting for their Lord who taught that he was not their master, but a friend. These biblical references to the ten virgins and the early Christians also help us to understand the difference in the relationship of the *praestolans* and the *opperiens* to the person for whom they are waiting. The *praestolans* is in a subordinate relationship, whereas the *opperiens* is in a co-ordinate relationship with the person waited for, who could be a friend or an enemy. Spoiler alert: that *praestolor* is a prose expression, without rhyme or meter, indicating its tedious nature, as opposed to *opperior*, a poetic, if not a rare expression.

I will carry this reflection still further by saying that despite their distinct characteristics, and the different nuances in their meanings, all

four Latin words share the underlying notion of something happening while waiting. For, how to negate the thoughts that go through the mind of the one who waits – that silent dialogue with oneself, the sensory experiences, the physical events that unfold around the one waiting, the memories that clock in unawares. Waiting therefore is never sterile, but fecund, a *happening waiting*. There is no such thing as being absolutely still, as absolute silence. This is true even of the word *maneo* with its physicality of staying put. Interestingly, *maneo* also means to continue, to endure, to last. In this sense, waiting is a test of endurance, lasting and continuous. Like Ulysses, wrapped in a cloak that some kind soul has thrown over us, we lie sleepless in the night, rebuking our heart crying: "endure my heart, endure; a worse thing even than this thou didst endure…" (see Homer 1975). *Maneo* becomes a continuous and lasting experience of the physical form of waiting, one that does not end, testing our endurance, even when the physical mode of waiting is over.

As one of the eight parts of speech in English grammar, waiting is a verb that expresses both a state of being and an action. I should add *action in inaction* – a *happening waiting* that I have just mentioned. As a stative verb, it denotes the actual/current state of being of the subject, while at the same time indicating a future plan. Take for example the phrase 'I am waiting for the rain to go away'. It expresses the present continuous, or progressive state of my being (and therefore denotes the incompleteness of action, of something that has begun and continuing/progressing), while at the same time hinting of future plans: I want to go out and play. Waiting also denotes action (it is a word of doable activity), because we are doing something – the act of waiting, whether it is voluntary or involuntary. If waiting happens on us involuntarily like being forced to wait out until we are healed (result of an accident, or illness, or quarantine), in that forced stillness or quarantine, something is happening too. Here, I am reminded of the

words of Sam in the movie *Ronin* (ronin means 'masterless samurai'): "We're doing something, we're [sitting here] waiting".

That waiting is never still, that there is always a happening in waiting, is perhaps best captured by Sylvia Plath: "Waiting lies heavy on my lids. It lies like sleep, / Like a big sea. Far off, far off, I feel the first wave tug / Its cargo of agony towards me, inescapable, tidal" (see Plath 1957).

2. Waiting and Time Consciousness

Waiting is undoubtedly linked to time. But the understanding of time varies. And contrary to the scarcity of thinkers on the concept of waiting, there are many philosophers of Time, including Aristotle, Augustine of Hippo, Gilles Deleuze, Paul Ricoeur. In this second part, I will study the thought of four philosophers namely, Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, Hannah Arendt, and Martin Heidegger, and try to understand the phenomenon of waiting, through the prism of their ideas on time, time and consciousness.

My first understanding of waiting – waiting as felt time, *i.e., durée* (duration) – is linked to Bergson's idea of time. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson writes of the existence of two temporalities: one "lived time", and the other "thought time" (see Bergson 1910). While lived time is linked to subjective experience, the thought time is objective, and is linked to the time of clocks, watches, calendars. Bergson comes to this conclusion after (also) famously studying time by literally calculating the time it takes for a sugar cube to dissolve in a glass of water. Time, Bergson states, cannot be calculated merely as clock time; rather time is *durée* (duration), and can be calculated through felt time/lived time, that is through experience. This idea of waiting as *durée* is also found in the writings of Harold Schweizer in his book *On Waiting* (see Schweizer 2008), the second chapter of which focuses on Bergson's notion of time. Schweizer takes up Bergson's idea, and explores the

relationship between waiting and time. He notes that when waiting is placed in the context of lived (felt) time, it is not simply a passage of time to be traversed, but rather an unending trial of endurance, the Bergsonian *durée*. Only a few minutes may have passed, but the waiting stretches the present into an unbearable, infinite crawl:

> although time is supposed to function like a door or a hall through which we pass unawares, in waiting, the door jams and the hall is endless. The hour does not pass. The line does not move. Time must suddenly be endured rather than traversed, felt rather than thought. In waiting, time is slow and thick (see Schweizer 2008: 14–34).

My second understanding of waiting is summed up in this formula: 'Waiting is fixed, and waiting flows'[1]. This, I think, is the essence of waiting. In saying this, I am not only adopting Husserl's understanding of time in relation to past and present, but also his theory of time consciousness. Incidentally, Husserl's experience and perception of time: "time as motionless and yet it flows" (Husserl 1991: §31) differs from that of Isaac Newton for whom past, present, and future are points on an imaginary timeline, a series of past, present, and future moments. I will explain this ambiguous nature of waiting (for how can something be fixed and flowing at the same time?), through three interrelated examples: Janus from Roman mythology; the place and status of words in a sentence; and finally, our grasp of daily (and not so daily) events.

The two headed Janus of Roman mythology, who lent his name to the month of January, has one head turned towards the past and the

[1] My adaptation of Husserl's observation of the antinomy of time: "time as motionless and yet it flows", Husserl 1991, §31.

other towards the future, but with no head in the present, the now. Janus does not seem to live in the present, at least not apparently. However, the head turned towards the future can be seen as a metaphor for waiting, waiting for future events, and therefore living in the now, the present. We experience our everyday activities through distinction (separation), and in relation (continuity), whether it is hearing a melody, or uttering a sentence, or just galloping into the sunset. This experience is unity in succession. Take the example in John's Gospel: "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The meaning of the word 'flesh', with its various connotations and textual history, can be understood in isolation. But in order to understand the meaning of the phrase, we need to place the word 'flesh' in relation to the words before and after it. The word (as in most languages) has to respect its particular place in the sentence in order to be understood. Put another way, it is like the three steps of a dance: we maintain (the grammatical order of the words); we distinguish (the meaning of 'flesh' in the sentence); and we relate (the meaning of 'Word' to 'flesh' and 'dwelt' etc.). If we failed to relate the words there would just be a series of nows, and we would not only not hear a sentence, but even less understand it. So it is with the phenomenon of waiting. The experience of waiting permeates beyond the now, and transforms the now; but this permeation maintains the temporal order that distinguishes the past from the future. The two-headed Janus is therefore a Janus in waiting, living suspended moments not in isolation, but in relation.

To take another example – the assassination of Indira Gandhi. We remember where we were when we first heard or saw the news, who was with us, which TV channel we were watching (this is very easy to remember, because in 1983 Indian TVs had only 6 channels!), and perhaps even what we were eating, and what happened before and after this tragic event. We relive those moments in the now, a

remembrance of the past in the present. And this ability to remember, to relive, and also to relate the event with preceding and succeeding events (what happened before and after this national tragedy: people gathering in the streets, women wailing, shops closing etc.), means that the present (the now) is never experienced in isolation, removed from the past and the future, but in relation (Husserl 1991: §31, §33). However, this national tragedy happened at a particular moment in time, and experiencing this event as a relation, does not mean negating the temporal event or the temporal position of the catastrophe. Thus, the assassination of Indira Gandhi occupies a fixed, determinate, and immutable temporal position in world-time, sandwiched between what came before and after these events, receding relentlessly into the past and becoming history without losing its place in the present. "Time present and time past" wrote T. S. Eliot, "Are both perhaps present in time future/And time future contained in time past/ If all time is eternally present/All time is unredeemable" (Eliot 1954: 185).

My third understanding of the phenomenon of waiting is in the form of a syllogism:

All actions are unpredictable.
Waiting is an action.
Therefore, waiting is unpredictable[2].

The unpredictable nature of human action (both speech and deed) is brilliantly developed by Hannah Arendt in her *Human Condition* (see Arendt 1958). According to Arendt, unpredictability and irreversibility are central to action, as also freedom and plurality. The unpredictable character of action is a result of human free will, and the ability to change situations. But the unpredictability is also the result of the fact

[2] The syllogism is my own.

that there is no such thing as an isolated act, and there are no Robinson Crusoes. Every action triggers a chain of events with infinite consequences and reactions, far beyond the control of human agency. In Arendt's words:

> though action may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every action becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes… the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation (Arendt 1958: 190).

And again: "The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end" (233).

The unpredictable nature of action is closely linked with irreversibility, that is the impossibility of retrieving or undoing the consequences of an action. This is because, as mentioned above, every action takes place in the world of human interaction and relationships, with their boundless consequences and responses. We weave entangled webs not only when we practice deception, but also through every involuntary and voluntary acts. But *vita contemplativa* will never be the antidote to *vita activa* with its unpredictable and irreversible features. Arendt points out that the unpredictable and irreversible features of human action can be linked to the human capacity to promise and to forgive. Both faculties are intrinsic to human action; both are disclosed and realised in human plurality. The other(s) are essential for forgiving and promising. This two-headed Janus would, through the act of forgiveness, unbind an agent from past actions, especially involuntary ones, and promise milestones to contain the

unpredictability and uncertainty of the future:

> Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever.

And she continues:

> without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart (237).

In her article "Modes of Waiting", Mikio Fujita distinguishes between two aspects of waiting: the subjective aspect (*how* we wait), and the objective aspect (*what* we wait for), their difference being more experiential than theoretical (See Fujita 1985). An expectant mother's waiting for the birth of her child is different from someone waiting for the traffic light to change. Our experience of waiting, and the way we wait is directly linked to what we are waiting for. If the what we are waiting for is associated with extrinsic rewards, then our experience of waiting would be mechanical, frustrating and restless. But if we wait with patience and trust, we *become* rather than acquire. Waiting becomes an ongoing process of growth. Such forms of waiting are deeply engaging and contemplative.

Heidegger discusses the concept of waiting while explaining the nature of thinking and its two modes – calculative (*das rechnende Denken*), and meditative (*Gelassenheit*). Calculative thinking, also called as dialectical or mechanical, aims at a particular goal, and does

everything to achieve it. It "calculates", "plans and investigates", and "serves specific purposes" (Heidegger 1966: 46). This kind of thinking is not still, but "races from one aspect to the other" in an attempt to dominate reality. In this race humans do not grow in thinking; rather, there is a growing "thoughtlessness" (*Gedankenlosigkeit*) which "spring from some process that gnaws at the very marrow of man today: man today is *in flight from thinking*" (45). Thoughtlessness, Heidegger continues,

> is an uncanny visitor who comes and goes everywhere in today's world. For nowadays we take in everything in the quickest and cheapest way, only to forget it just as quickly, instantly. Thus, one gathering follows on the heels of another. Commemorative celebrations grow poorer and poorer in thought. Commemoration and thoughtlessness are found side by side (*Ib*.).

Meditative thinking, on the other hand, is non-active, and is the essence of thinking (*das besinnliche Denken*). In this mode of thinking there is no attempt to dominate reality; instead, there is a willingness and freedom to be open to reality.

For my part, I would call *Gelassenheit* 'fruitful thinking'. Like all Heideggerian concepts (as is often the case when we try to translate concepts from one language to another), *Gelassenheit* is lost in translation. What then is the essence of meditative, non-active thinking? It is hard to know, and perhaps we will never know. But, according to Heidegger, waiting is the access to *Gelassenheit*, the most obvious and most important form of non-active engagement, where waiting is neither a means to a particular end nor an end in itself. Humans are capable of meditative thinking. But humans are on the run from meditative thinking. Meditative thinking means to be aware of, to

be conscious of what is going on around us and within us, to contemplate, to let things be, to ponder… like the young maiden in Nazareth who pondered in her heart (Luke 2:19). To ponder is to weigh, to appraise, to reflect. This act calls for an active and conscious slowing down, a patient rumination. The poet William Henry Davies has portrayed this act of patient rumination in his poem "Leisure":

> What is this life if full of care,
> We have no time to stand and stare […]
> No time to see, in broad daylight,
> Streams full of stars, like skies at night […]
> A poor life this if, full of care,
> We have no time to stand and stare (Davies 1911: 15).

Like the statutory warning "cigarette smoking is injurious to health" on a cigarette packet, W.H. Davies words cautions us, living in this post-truth age of artificial intelligence, that if we find no time to still our spirit, ours is indeed a "poor life"! Worse still, we rarely see or accept that we are stuck on the hamster wheel of life.

Heidegger takes care to point out that meditative thinking is not a useless, alienated, or detached kind of thinking. On the contrary. Meditative thinking is laser-focused on the who, why, what, where, when, and how of our being – our existence *here* and *now*. In Heidegger's words meditative thinking calls us "to dwell on what lies close and meditate on what is closest; upon that which concerns us, each one of us, here and now; here, on this patch of home ground; now, in the present hour of history" (Heidegger 1966: 47). It must "be able to bide its time, to await as does the farmer, whether the seed will come up and ripen" (*Ib.*). Meditative thinking will lead us to think further, and "grow more thoughtful", "to dwell calmly between heaven and earth". Paraphrasing the poet Johann Peter Hebel words: "We are

like plants which – whether we like to admit it to ourselves or not – must with our roots rise out of the earth in order to bloom in the ether and bear fruit", Heidegger states:

> For a truly joyous and salutary human work to flourish, man must be able to mount from the depth of his home ground up into ether. 'Ether' here means the free air of the high heavens, the open realm of the spirit (47–48).

3. We, the Hollow People

Our moral compass has gone haywire, and we are the hollow people. We dwell in a post-truth age with its reckless disregard for truth, where anything can be said, where alternative truths, empty talk and fake news travesties as real and true; where fiction disguises as fact; where superficiality masquerades as expertise; where there is a chronic flight from thought; where waiting is alien, a thing of the past. The post-truth person posts opinions and ideas on social media without verification or expertise, least concerned about the moral responsibility of their actions and their repercussions. Our attention to the world is insufficient in quality and quantity. Wikipedia and Internet search engines are the new Levellers – we are all experts. We are all on equal footing, neither slave nor master of any subject. Thomas Nichols, academician and specialist in International affairs, writes of the "death of expertise" in his book of the same name, referring to the easy access to knowledge, and the poorly informed debates (See Nichols 2017). Nichols paints a vivid picture of the dangers of excessive democratisation of information dissemination in societies, especially when this democratisation does not care a hoot on the importance of expertise and rigorous learning. On the other hand, these *sorciers-apprentis* have spawned an army of ill-informed netizens and citizens

who denounce expertise[3]!

We the citizens and the netizens of the post-truth age have almost lost the spirit of waiting. Our craving for all things instant, including instant material results, and instant gratification, coupled with our never-ending quest for constant and immediate affirmation, acceptance, recognition, feedback through social media (likes and likewise), is a toxic cocktail. And immediacy is the antithesis of waiting. Reflexive and critical capacities require a gestation period, which in turn requires patience, Bergsonian *durée*, Simone Weil's attentiveness.

Simone Weil, the French Jewish mystic, philosopher, and political activist, and one of the few philosophers to write about waiting, speaks of our moral obligation to be attentive to the other, to oneself, and to God. The French infinitive "*attendre*" that Weil uses does not mean merely being attentive to the other, but carries primarily the sense of waiting: to wait for something or someone. In one of her letters to the poet Joe Bousquet she wrote: "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity" (« *L'attention est la forme la plus rare et la plus pure de la générosité* ») (Weil 1982: 18). Being attentive to the other calls for a waiting for the other, a waiting that involves listening to the other, being present with and for the other. According to Weil, the other breaks me open, even forcefully, out of my own individuality and solipsism, and points me towards the good. In a sense, the other is my north pole directing me towards the good, forcing me to abandon my selfish aspirations and pursue the good. The very essence of humans, claims Weil, is this desire for the good and for the other (Weil 1950: 249).

In "Ellul and Weil: *Attention* as Waiting", Sarah Louise MacMillen writes of the inattentive (and therefore), restless spirit of the post-

[3] Take for example, the recent conspiracy theories regarding covid and covid vaccination, the anti-expertise and anti-intellectualism, the suspicion on intellectualism.

moderns who are impatient even for the revelation of Truth, Justice, and Grace. These values are now overshadowed by the all-domineering and wilful aspect of "technique". Drawing on complementary critiques in the writings of Simone Weil and Jacques Ellul, MacMillen observes that:

> Simone Weil would have us return to an obligation to be 'attentive' as a unifying ethic of both a) pedagogy/didactics, and b) being-in-the-world. It is that openness of *waiting and hope* (*attendre et espérer*) against the domineering and wilful aspect of *technique*. Waiting (*attention*) suggests a true openness to the experience of others – it is an ethic and discipline of *listening* in an age of empty speech (Macmillen 2022).

Simone Weil's *Awaiting God* (*L'attente de Dieu*), a collection of essays and letters to the Dominican priest Father Perrin, speaks of her inner struggles, her relationship with a God who waits, and whom she awaits.

Simone Weil has written candidly about her inner struggles, about her relationship with a God who awaits, and whom she waits for (see especially Weil 1951a). But her profound relationship with the awaiting God is best revealed in her 'Prologue', where she writes of a nameless stranger who erupts into her life without any invitation, makes her – a non-baptized – kneel on the Church floor, then takes her to the upper room, breaks bread, "bread that truly had the taste of bread", pours wine "that tasted of sun and earth", shares stories, and stretches out on the floor besides her, talks "about things of all kinds, with no rhyme or reason, just like old friends", and who tells her (again for no reason) to go away, to get lost. And when she falls on her knees begging him not to send her away, the stranger throws her out down the stairs.

Simone Weil then spends the rest of her life waiting – not to return to the upper room, or even to find it, but waiting for him, yearningly. She experiences the other's withdrawal and absence as abandonment, waiting to know if the stranger loves her. This is how she ends her 'Prologue':

> I know quite well that he does not love me. How could he love me? And yet something deep within, a particle of myself, cannot help thinking, all the while trembling with fear, that despite everything, he does love me[4].

In her other writings, Weil revisits this disappearance of God, and her inner experience of being abandoned by Him, of God's withdrawal, and her long waiting for Him, and speaks of these experiences as the *condicio sine qua non* of being in the world. Meditating on the cry of abandonment "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*" (Mathew 27:46; Mark 15:34; Psalms 22:1) of Christ on the cross, Simone Weil states that this cry should be understood as the fundamental condition of human existence in the world. We are all crucified and abandoned by God. What characterizes existence is desertion, abandonment: "God and humanity are like two lovers who have missed their *rendez-vous*. Each is there before time, but each at a different place, and they wait and wait and wait" (Weil 1951b: 141).

The waiting seems to be at cross-purposes, and is reminiscent of the waiting of the two protagonists Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Both *wait endlessly by the willow tree for Godot who never arrives.* Waiting in this case becomes not the journey towards the destination, but destination itself. *Both Vladimir and Estragon wait in different ways. Although the who they are waiting for*

[4] Weil 1950b, 9–10. The translation from the French text is mine.

is the same, the how of waiting is poles apart. While Vladimir waits willingly, Estragon is much less so. But what is it that makes Vladimir more willing to wait than Estragon? Lisa Missing undertakes a psychoanalytic reading of these two characters, "who put their whole existence into waiting", in order to understand why they act differently from each other in their waiting (Missing 2007*). She looks at the uncertainty in waiting, at consciousness, at coping mechanisms in relation to waiting, and at the ways of waiting. Missing concludes that the difference comes from their conscious decision, and their coping mechanism. Unlike Estragon, Vladimir is not only unwilling to accept that they are waiting in vain. He has also made a conscious decision to wait.*

4. Waiting for the God Who Awaits Us

On 1 December 2018, Pope Francis spoke to the pilgrims from the dioceses of Ugento and Molfetta about the joy of waiting: "We Christians are called upon to preserve and spread the joy of waiting: we await God who loves us infinitely and at the same time we are awaited by Him" (Pope Francis 2018). It was the eve of Advent, the time of joyful and fruitful waiting. But Francis was not referring to the waiting season, but of waiting *for* Advent, and of the lack of waiting and preparation for Advent. He was referring to the importance and the need "to enter well into the waiting of Advent": a waiting of awaiting!

Paula Gooder in her book *The Meaning Is in the Waiting: The Spirit of Advent* reflects on the spiritual practice of active waiting as being essential to our well-being, and explores the need to re-learn this forgotten art of waiting. Advent, says Gooder, is not only a time of waiting and preparing for the future, but also a time of waiting for an event that has already happened:

> Advent, then, calls us into a state of active waiting: a state that recognizes and embraces the glimmers of God's presence in the world, that recalls and celebrates God's historic yet ever present actions, that speaks the truth about the almost-but-not-quite nature of our Christian living, that yearns for but cannot quite achieve divine perfection. Most of all, Advent summons us to the present moment, to a still yet active, a tranquil yet steadfast commitment to the life we live now. It is this to which Advent beckons us, and without it our Christian journey is impoverished[5].

Yes, Advent is an awaiting to relive the story of the Incarnation story. The last call of the New Testament, and with which the Book open-ends, is the transliterated Aramaic cry *Maranatha*. It is a call of expectation, of waiting: 'Come Lord come'. We await Your coming. Between the preparation for the Incarnation and the *Parousia*, our Christian journey is one long waiting for banal and important events, unavoidable and essential waiting either in a contemplative and embodied way, or with resentment or apprehension. But we are never alone in our waiting, and as Qoheleth says, there is nothing new under the sun[6]. The lives of biblical figures – Noah (and his crew in the Ark), Abraham and Sarah, the Prophets, Hannah, the Israelites, John the Baptist, Ana and Simon, Mary – to name but a few, were waiting-centered.

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[5] Gooder 2009, 21. Gooder's book borrows its title from R.S. Thomas' poem "Kneeling": "Moments of great calm, / Kneeling before an altar / Of wood in a stone church / In summer, waiting for the God / To speak; the air a staircase / For silence; the sun's light / Ringing me, as though I acted / A great rôle. And the audiences / Still; all that close throng / Of spirits waiting, as I, / For the message. / Prompt me, God; / But not yet. When I speak / Though it be you who speak / Through me, something is lost. / The meaning is in the waiting" (Thomas 2004).

[6] "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, 'See, this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us." Ecclesiastes, 1:9–10.

We Christians are 'waiters', and we are called to be waiters (*diakonos*), servitors. "They also serve who stand and wait", wrote John Milton in his sonnet "On His Blindness" (Milton 2003: 168). Yes, we are the waiting people, *being and becoming* in waiting.

We wait for 40/50 days during Lent
wait in upper rooms in fear and trembling
for tongues of fire to descend on us
wait for a God to open the arid womb of a Sarai, an Elizabeth, or a Hannah
wait for a miracle – prodigal daughters waiting for the prodigal mothers.
We are the Israelites waiting for a sign, still one more time…

We wait 40 years wandering in desert lands to enter the promised land
Or perhaps never.
We wait in the gardens of Gethsemane for the cup of affliction to pass us by.
We wait for the end of time.

We wait for the leaven to act, for the dough to rise
for the wine to ripen
for a meaningful conversation
for a jury's verdict.
We even have a waiter whose job it is to wait!

We wait for self-realisation, enlightenment,
for writer's block to pass, for inspiration.
Wait in purgatory for our sins to be purged.
We are all Penelopes waiting for our Ulysses.

We wait for someone – anyone – to respond
to recognise; to reciprocate a gift, an emotion.
We wait for the dial tone, and the kettle to whistle,
wait for a picture to upload on the smartphone,
for knowledge to reach us at the swipe of our fingers

We wait
for water to heat and water to cool, for the dripping tap to stop
for the class bell to ring
for a boring sermon or a lecture to end.
We wait for a cure.

We wait our turn at the bakery, the grocery, on opening nights, libraries, for Harry Potter books.
We dance while we wait for the traffic lights to change
play board games or read books in waiting rooms.

We wait for the transubstantiation of bread and wine.

We wait in refugee shelters and in concentration camps
for the mindless wars to cease, for peace to reign
for justice.
We waited out a plague – Covid!

With an enduring heart
we wait for the seed to burst forth from the winter earth.

We are the waiting people living in this "waiting room of a world".

Perhaps the one who lived this endurance-in-waiting, in this "waiting room of a world", in flesh and bone (Husserl's *leibhaftig* translated in French as *en chair et en os*, and traditionally rendered in English as "in the flesh"), is Nightbirde (Jane Marczewski) (Nightbirde 2021). At times, her probing of the depths of her soul resonates with that of Simone Weil and John of the Cross.

Nightbirde's waiting is a meta-waiting. She was barely thirty when she died of metastasis of cancer. Her battling with three bouts of cancer and with God are like that of other cancer patients as they wait for a miracle cure. But unlike most others, Nightbirde expressed her struggle with God (and His with her), in her mystical writing "God is on the bathroom floor". As she waits to make sense of this intruder and wrestles with God, she learns a new prayer: "Thank you!", a prayer that she does not yet mean, but will repeat until she does. She writes of her waiting which is both vivid and visceral:

> I am God's downstairs neighbour, banging on the ceiling with a broomstick. I show up at his door every day. Sometimes with songs, sometimes with curses. Sometimes apologies, gifts, questions, demands. Sometimes I use my key under my mat to let myself in. Other times, I sulk outside until He opens the door to me Himself (*Ib.*).

Of her unceasing prayer to God, and of her experience of prayer while waiting, she writes:

> Tears have become the only prayer I know. [...] I want to lay in a hammock with him (God) and trace the veins in His arms. I remind myself that I'm praying to the God who let the Israelites stay lost for decades. They begged to arrive in the

> Promised Land, but instead He let them wander, answering prayers they didn't pray. […] Even on days when I'm not sick, sometimes I go lie on the mat in the afternoon light to listen for him (*Ib.*).

She continues, this time talking about God's presence in His absence, and the reason why some people do not see God:

> I know it sounds crazy, and I can't really explain it, but God is in there – even now. I have heard it said that some people can't see God because they won't look low enough, and it's true. If you can't see him, look lower. God is on the bathroom floor (*Ib.*).

Nightbirde's account of her battle with cancer, and the side effects of her treatment began with her experience of spending most of her time in the bathroom with her "head on the toilet" vomiting until she was hollow. And she ends by saying that it is in the deep waiting, which for her is physically lying on the bathroom floor, brought about by her illness, that she sees God.

And yes, we wait for God, because we do not know where to look for Him, or we look for the Holy Light in the heights and the unattainable, while all the time He is waiting for us in the depths of the dark nights of our soul and body, in the "Holy darkness", waiting "on the bathroom floor".

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