

On Waiting
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

I took note of a story I read in the newspaper a couple of weeks ago. It was about a dog in Japan named Hachiko, an Akita breed, born in 1923. Every morning at the train station, Hachiko would see off his owner, Hidesamuro Ueno, a professor at the University of Tokyo, when he went to work at the university. At the end of the day, Hachiko would go the station and wait for Professor Ueno to arrive. This routine continued until 1925 when Professor Ueno unexpectedly died at his office, leaving Hachiko at the station watching and waiting for the reunion that would not take place. The next day at this same time, Hachiko, who had been taken in by Professor Ueno's sister, was back at the station scanning the faces of passersby in hopes of spotting his owner's among them. And the next day and the next and the next. Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into years, and for the next eleven years until his own death, Hachiko held vigil at the station. One of Professor Ueno's students noted that Hachiko would appear precisely at the time the train was due in the evening and published this fact in one of the Tokyo's largest newspapers and the dog became a national figure. Year after year, the country followed this story and marveled in it and took lessons from it about commitment and loyalty. The article I read included a picture of Hachiko at the station just before his death, obviously very old. A statue now exists at the spot he waited those many years depicting him and Professor Ueno greeting one another at the end of the day, symbolically reuniting them forever.

Writing up the Hatachi story just now, I assumed it would serve as a lead-in to a consideration of the place of waiting in life generally and in my life in particular. As it turned out, putting this paragraph together also brought up the topics of commitment and loyalty to others, where they fit in a life well lived, in my life. I'm not going to deal with commitment and loyalty here, this will be

about waiting, but I will report that the Hatachi story has prompted me to think about whom I am, and should be, committed and loyal to and what I am going to do about that, and it's been helpful.

Waiting has two basic meanings. The first gets at the process of anticipating something: I'm waiting for a text message. The other meaning has to do with putting something off until later: I'm waiting until April before I get a new car. This writing will focus on waiting as anticipation. In this consideration of waiting, it's important to keep in mind that something is whatever it is, and that whatever it is, it is not any other thing. What we say about waiting, the words we use to describe and explain it, is different from actual waiting, what a person experiences and does when he or she waits and what results from that. We can hope what we say about waiting approximates what actually happens when people wait, but it will never completely match up to that reality because no two things in the world ever completely match up. And whatever we conclude about waiting, we need to be careful about assuming that waiting is the same phenomenon here, there, and everywhere. The waiting one person is doing can be very different from the waiting another person is doing.

A memory that just came to me: One summer as a kid, I was eleven, I would wait all week for Saturday mornings and Palace Peewees' baseball games (Palace was for Palace playground in the West End of Saint Paul, Minnesota where I grew up). I played third base for the Peewees. Saturday would come, I'd been waiting all week, and most often, or so it seemed, the game would rain out. It occurs to me that I see myself now as someone who waits for something good to happen and the something good doesn't happen. I contemplate whether the Palace Peewees' rainouts contributed to or reinforced this self-perception. A lesson I may have taken from the Peewees episode was that since what I wait for isn't going to happen, or if it does happen it won't be much (with the Peewees, deep down I assumed that I would strike out with the bases loaded and let in the winning run with an error

and have to live with that experience and memory), the best thing I have going for me is the waiting itself, which is a half-way pleasant experience and, at times, a very good experience. Plus, again back to the Peewees, waiting for the game provided an organizer for my life: What was I doing? I was waiting for Saturday. That justified, excused, doing essentially nothing on a Tuesday besides waiting for Saturday, which included letting my schoolwork go. I've had a lifelong deep-seated, not fully acknowledged, desire to sit or lie on a couch and vegetate, watch some TV and read about sports and munch on a sandwich, that's it.

Until now I haven't given hard thought to my propensity to wait and do little else and where it comes from--including any psychological or physiological issues that might contribute to this pattern; is waiting a strategy or refuge for the damaged?--and what its consequences have been for me. I wish there had been someone in my life to prompt me to do this kind of reflection, or to offer their take on my predisposition to wait, but there hasn't been anybody like that.

In any case, I have spent, and spend now, a good part of my life waiting, to the extent that as much, if not more than, anything waiting has characterized my life. I waited out my two years in the army, and I waited for the North Saint Paul High School academic years to end (I taught there), and . . . oh, I won't go through the long list of examples. Currently my life is basically about waiting for a trip to the Midwest (I live on the East Coast) in a couple weeks to see my brother (as soon as I get there I will wait to leave). At this moment, it is 10:15 a.m. on a Sunday morning and I'm waiting for a National Football League playoff game later today (the truth, typing up this thought on waiting is a way to kill time until then). From past experience I know that I'll watch about ten minutes of the game and get bored and quit and take a nap and then look around for something good to read, which I won't find, so I'll yet again peruse the sports news on ESPN.com and the New York Post online and then take another nap, but I have developed the skill to pretty much suppress that realization.

To structure this thought, I'll comment on three readings I've done the past couple of weeks having to do with waiting to see where they take me. The first is a *Time* magazine essay written years ago (Jul. 23, 1984) by Lance Morrow called "Waiting as a Way of Life." The second is a book originally published in German by Andrea Köhler entitled *The Waiting Game: An Essay on the Gift of Time* (Upper West Side Philosophers, Inc., 2012). And the third is a novel by a Chinese writer now living in America, Ha Jin, entitled, appropriately enough, *Waiting* (Vintage, 2000).

In small type and set in, quotes from the Morrow essay followed by my commentary:

Waiting is a kind of suspended animation. Time solidifies: a dead weight. The mind reddens a little with anger and then blanks off into a sort of abstraction and fitfully wanders, but presently it comes up red and writhing again, straining to get loose. Waiting casts one's life into a little dungeon of time. It is a way of being controlled, of being rendered immobile and helpless.

This is an example of seeing something as always being a certain way. Yes, waiting is like this . . . sometimes. The challenge for the individual is to check out whether what Morrow asserts about waiting applies to his or her own waiting. If it does, it comes down to problem solving: what can I do to extricate myself from this fix?

Waiting is a form of imprisonment. One is doing time—but why? One is being punished not for an offense of one's own but often for the inefficiencies of those who impose the wait. Hence the peculiar rage that waits engender, the sense of injustice. Aside from boredom and physical discomfort, the subtler misery of waiting is the knowledge that one's most precious resource, time, a fraction of one's life, is being stolen away, irrecoverably lost.

I know from my own life waiting can be positive and uplifting—

like when I've waited to see my young daughter, who lives in another state. Waiting to be with her hasn't been imprisonment, injustice, discomfort, misery, or stolen, irretrievably lost, time. Waiting has been a good experience for me in itself, and it has prompted me to do what I needed to do to make the time when I see my daughter good for both of us. Where is Morrow getting this totally negative take on waiting? What does this say about him, his life, his perspective on himself and the world? We need to do more than accept as gospel whatever is put out there by anyone who comes off credible and self-assured (Morrow meets these criteria). We need to analyze and assess claims and hold them up against the test of reality, which includes the reality of our own life experience.

People wait when they have no choice or when they believe that the wait is justified by the reward—a concert ticket, say. Waiting has its social orderings, its rules and assumptions. . . . Waiting can have a delicious quality ("I can't wait to see her." "I can't wait for the party"), and sometimes the waiting is better than the event awaited. At the other extreme, it can shade into terror: when one waits for a child who is late coming home or—most horribly—has vanished. When anyone has disappeared, in fact, or is missing in action, the ordinary stress of waiting is overlaid with an unbearable anguish of speculation: Alive or dead?

Here, Morrow acknowledges that waiting can take various forms and have various outcomes. Waiting can be for all practical purposes inevitable (to get the concert ticket I need to wait in line), but it can also be a matter of social convention (the idea that I have to wait until I finish college before I embark on my career) and thus a matter of choice. Waiting can, yes, be delicious, and it can be terrifying. The question becomes, which of its various possibilities, positive and negative, applies in my waiting at the moment, and what can and should I do about that? I don't have to just make do with, endure, whatever is going on at in my life. I

can change what is, I can create my life, I can sculpt it, I can shape my own destiny. Not completely certainly, I'm not omnipotent, but neither am I a puppet on strings.

Waiting can seem an interval of nonbeing, the black space between events and the outcomes of desires. It makes time maddeningly elastic: it has a way of seeming to compact eternity into a few hours.

Waiting is nonbeing, a black space? Is the point here that waiting is too passive, inert, that life should be about doing and achieving results, and that waiting doesn't qualify in these regards? If so, that is worth pondering. The phrase "seeming to compact eternity into a few hours" sounds impressive, even profound—but what exactly do those words mean, and what is their reference in the world of concrete reality? I'm coming up short trying to figure out what this phrase is besides high-sounding words on a page.

All life is a waiting, and perhaps in that sense one should not be too eager for the wait to end. The region that lies on the other side of waiting is eternity.

Or at least all life includes waiting, if only for lunchtime. To some extent, yes, to live is to wait. Thus it is worth our time to consciously, critically, come to grips with the place of waiting in our lives. I'd like to think that we capable of understanding waiting and managing it well enough so that it contributes rather than detracts from our personal wellbeing and the wellbeing of those we care about.

Now to the second source, the Andrea Köhler book, *The Waiting Game: An Essay on the Gift of Time*. The same quotes/responses approach:

"The cradle rocks above an abyss," Nabokov writes. Our existence is "but a brief crack of light between two eternities of

darkness.”

From Nabokov’s memoir, *Speak Memory*. This quote asserts that our lives exist within a continuum, that is, between two other things, “two eternities of darkness.” My view of it is that our lives don’t exist between two things. I think that before I existed, for me there was nothing, and that when I die, for me there will again be nothing. It won’t be dark after I die. It won’t be anything after I die. And it won’t be for eternity, because nothing—that reality, or better, unreality--doesn’t exist in time. It is hard for human beings to contemplate nothing, no-thing, but it is worth trying to come to grips with it, because as far as I can see, it is the context of our existence. Nothing-life-nothing. When Napoleon was conquering Europe, it wasn’t dark for me; it was nothing for me. When I am dead it won’t be dark, it will be nothing. This life, for me and for you, isn’t a crack; it’s the whole thing. What we do with this incredible gift of existence while we still possess it, including wait for something or another, is all there is.

“Keeping others waiting,” writes Roland Barthes, “is the prerogative of the powerful.” Being sentenced to waiting is a curse, and whoever puts it on us has us in his grip. A person or institution forces a rhythm of being upon us that go against our own fundamental sense of lived time, and that’s what makes this situation so depressing.

Waiting can be about power and being one-up on someone, and it can be about making people unhappy and bringing them down. “I’ll see you at 3:00 (but really I’m going to be late or stiff you altogether, in any case, leave you waiting).” Who keeps me waiting and why, and what effect does that have on me? Whom do I keep waiting and why? And what are the consequences of that both for myself and for others? If I get clear about that, perhaps I can learn to play “the waiting game” more effectively and more justly than I do now?

Waiting is impotence, and the fact that we might not be able to get out of this predicament on our own is a humiliation that skews our perception of the world as a whole – which is why the one waiting often feels that he has been wronged, that he is being penalized for no reason. The passivity of waiting, the sense of condemnation that often goes along with it, can almost feel like corporal punishment, being both shameful and painful.

My sometimes point again: sometimes waiting is about impotence and humiliation and feeling wronged and passivity and punishment and shame and pain, and sometimes it is about the opposite of that. The challenge is to see what waiting means in one's own life at a particular time, and transforming it into a positive rather than negative aspect of one's existence. I think, to a reasonable and significant extent, we can do that if we put our minds to it.

Godot's absence is far from tragic—in fact, it's quite a stroke of good luck. For as long as we have something to wait for, our life has a purpose.

Waiting for a certain thing or a certain somebody that isn't going to show up can give your life purpose. So can waiting for something good to happen even if you don't know exactly what you're waiting for—the next email could be it, whatever it turns out to be, there's hope. But the question is, what is the quality of that purpose? All purposes aren't of the same order of merit or worth. The challenge for you, and for me, is to adopt the purposes that will best (as we define best) direct the way we spend the precious and finite time we are allotted to be alive. Near the end of our lives we will make a fundamental decision: whether we have made good use of our one chance to live or to have essentially blown it. With each passing second, that choice point is nearer. Waiting needs to fit into that frame of reference.

And the third and last source, Ha Jin's book, *Waiting*. Rather than a quotes-response pattern, I'll just write about the book.

The protagonist, a man, now in mid-life, for sixteen years waits to divorce his wife and marry another woman. He finally gets the divorce and re-marries only to discover that this new marriage, and life generally, is no better than it was before. In fact, things are worse now. Before, he had something positive to wait for—the new marriage and the good life it will bring. Now what does he have? He has the dawning awareness that his first wife wasn't his problem. *He* was his problem; he wasn't up to putting together a good marriage with anyone. And more, his circumstance in life, including his work and social situation, restrict his love-interest and happiness possibilities greatly—he has a context problem. With his second marriage came the understanding that the best thing he had going for him was . . . waiting.

Indeed, as a practical matter, a life essentially organized around waiting might be the best alternative among the available options. Going to the train station every day for all those years in hopes of seeing Professor Ueno may well have been Hatachi's best course of action. What was his alternative? Sitting in the back yard chewing on a bone? I don't mean to sound flip saying this, but really, what were Hatachi's options? Waiting for something that is not going happen—call it waiting for Godot if you'd like—may be the best card we can play given the hand we are dealt in life. Last year, for five months I waited for someone to get in contact with me who I knew deep down wasn't going do it. After looking into this topic of waiting, I've decided that given what was going on with me last year, waiting like that was understandable and made sense. I've gotten myself into a personal place these last few months where I'm not about to sit around checking my messages twenty times a day for months on end for anybody or anything. But at the same time, I'm not berating myself for doing it last year, because last year it gave me something to wait for at a time when, so it seemed, the only other thing to wait for was nothing.

