

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
5 December, 2011

Waiting
for Majora and James

I can't remember which emergency or which trip to the emergency room it was, but it definitely wasn't for Jessye, who was four then, I think, because I do remember telling her that we might be there a while, and to pack up some toys – quiet toys. And I can remember her walking into the Children's Hospital emergency room, wearing her little purple and green knapsack, and thinking, as always, that ministers' kids have interesting lives, and that it was good I had started a therapy fund for my daughters.

It got more interesting, actually, and not, for once, because of my work; it was what Jessye had packed – just four things. I remember feeling exasperated, because I hadn't checked, and I couldn't imagine it would entertain her for very long. I was so wrong.

The first thing that came out of her bag was a big hairdo and makeup kit, amply stocked by my mother, who, despairing of my usefulness in this department, was doing her part for my daughters' future mental health. Next came a Little Mermaid costume, which included a fitted, long-sleeved, lycra and gold lamé bodice, and a long, scaly, emerald green tale. When outfitted in this extraordinary getup, Jessye had to take mincing little steps to accommodate the tail. After the costume came the shoes: you guessed it if you were thinking sparkly gold plastic kitten heels. And then, the pièce de résistance: the mermaid's magic wand, which I think is the moment that this particular Disney princess movie elided with another Disney princess movie, but I can't be certain; it was all girls at our house: all princess movies, all the time.

Next came Jessye's rather lengthy transformation into the Little Mermaid, which included her setting up a kind of dressing room or green room behind a waiting room couch, doing her hair and makeup in great detail, donning the costume ... and getting into character, including *the voice*. We are not talking about the part of the movie when Ariel's voice has been stolen by the evil Ursula, rendering the mermaid mute. Jessye, now Ariel, emerged from behind the couch, which, she announced to the beleaguered

masses in the waiting room, now her audience, was her undersea grotto. Without further introduction or fanfare, she launched flawlessly into every word of the script, every lyric, every verse of every song.

Kids with bad boo-boos, sick kids, parents worried sick about their sick kids: all came under the spell of the Little Mermaid, who tottered around on her high heels, long tail swinging, singing, waving her magic wand over each one, child and parent alike, urging them, with wand-turned-baton – a nod to Sebastian the Crab – to join her in lusty singalongs of award-winning ditties such as

Under the sea
Under the sea,
Darling it's better
Down where it's wetter
Take it from me....¹

The Children's Hospital Emergency Room Waiting Room Show went on for well over an hour to round after round of applause, enchanted smiles, and laughter even amidst tears: a wonderful evening, despite the circumstances ... and one less “bad mother” therapy session in Jessye's future.

I already knew a lot about waiting rooms and waiting, but I learned something precious from my little mermaid that evening. While waiting can be hard on the spirit, we don't have to wait while we wait. And we don't have to wait alone.

Gopi Kallayil is a Google executive, a digerati whose data-saturated work life could kill the soul. His response to that threat is refreshing, and victorious: Setting worldly matters aside – cutting himself loose from the morass – he says, “I perform a gratitude practice on my drive to work every day. I count ten things ... [for which] I'm grateful.” He *looks forward* to stop lights, he says, not for the opportunity to tweet or text, but for a sweet interlude in which to be present. Shunning multi-tasking, he adds, “More and more, I find myself preferring to do one thing, and do it well.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn, who created mindfulness-based stress reduction, invites us to focus as we wait: not on the Internet, not the latest app ... but the breath. Focus on your breath, he says, “as if your very life depended on it, which it does, in more ways than [we] can possibly think.”²

¹ lyrics from Samuel E. Wright, *Under the Sea*

² Andres Tilin, “Stay Connected,” in *Yoga Journal*, November, 2011

I've been thinking a lot about waiting, lately, since my friend Majora told me she and her husband, James, are waiting for a foster child to be placed with them, and that the waiting is hard. I remember that, waiting for my first child – three years! – and how hard it was to see yet another Christmas come and go with no baby in sight.

Whatever your circumstances, if you Google the word “waiting,” you find yourself in the great company of those who wait:

. . . from the ridiculous, such as

waiting-for-bieber-dot-com, a real-time feed of Twitter users desperately trying to get teen idol Justin Bieber to follow them;

and CNN's belief blog about why young Christians aren't waiting anymore;

. . . to the serious, such as

waiting for Nike to Just Do It and change its labor practices;

waiting through the endless debate over legalizing medical marijuana, referred to as the wait to inhale;

waiting for test results and outcomes, and for healing of all kinds;

and children waiting to be fostered or adopted, and the people waiting to foster or adopt them. Scanning those poignant sites, you feel the full force of the irony of a system designed to help that is in fact keeping them from one another;

. . . to the very serious company of those who wait for an organ transplant. The soul-searing plight of these people and their loved ones puts *waiting* on another whole level, and has in me the effect of shutting down the entire inquiry for a long moment.

My mind goes white until I find my breath and make a prayer, first for forbearance and courage in those who wait in the utmost exigency; and then in gratitude for soundness of health, my own and yours, and for all of us who, even if unwell, are not waiting for an organ transplant. The prospect puts all waiting in perspective, puts the famed FedEx ad in an unbearably harsh light: “Waiting,” intoned the overnight package delivery service company, “is frustrating, demoralizing, agonizing, aggravating, annoying, time consuming, and incredibly expensive.”³ *Incredibly*.

Can we choose not to wait while we wait?
Can we find one thing to do, and do it well?

3 Quoted in *Fortune*, 28 July, 1980, p. 10

Can we bring to mind and heart all for which we are grateful?
 Can we come into the present, find our breath, and just breathe?
 Can we wait together?

In a study of the psychology of waiting in line, predictable outcomes emerged, such as “people want to get started,” “anxiety makes waits seem longer,” “uncertain or unexplained waits are longer than known, explained waits,” and “unfair waits are longer than equitable waits.” The surprise outcome, though, was the last – though we know this intuitively. “Solo waits,” the study concludes, “feel longer than group waits.”⁴ If we have a choice to wait alone or wait in good company, we might choose to spend at least an evening of it with others who share our plight ... and a little mermaid.

My teacher of blessed memory, the Dutch-born Catholic priest and writer Henri Nouwen, believed that “one of the most beautiful passages of scripture” – the first chapter of Luke, verses thirty-nine through fifty-six – suggests that we, like Mary and Elizabeth, wait together. In a beautiful Advent reflection, Father Nouwen writes, “Most of us think of waiting as something very passive, a hopeless state determined by events totally out of our hands. . . . It is not difficult to understand the irritation [we] feel when somebody says, 'Just wait.' Words like that seem to push us into passivity. . . .

“Active waiting,” he continues, “is the conviction that something is happening where you are, and that you want to be present to it. A waiting person is someone who is present to the moment, who believes that this moment is *the* moment.” He quotes French mystic Simone Weil, “Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life.”

“To wait open-endedly,” Henri Nouwen concludes, “is an enormously radical attitude toward life ... in a world preoccupied with control. . . . So is to trust that something will happen to us that is far beyond our own imaginings. So, too, is giving up control over our future.... The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction.”⁵

Beloved spiritual companions, it's true: waiting can be “frustrating, demoralizing, agonizing, aggravating, annoying, time consuming, and incredibly expensive.” But take

4 David Maister, *The Psychology of Waiting in Lines*, 1985. See davidmaister.com/articles/5/52/

5 Henri Nouwen, “A Spirituality of Waiting,” in *The Weavings Reader*, edited by John S. Mogabgab (Upper Room Books, 1993)

it from the little mermaid: we don't have to wait while we wait, and we don't have to wait alone. Instead,

May we recall that for which we are grateful,
and engage deeply in the sweetness of an interlude of presence.

May we find our breath, and breathe deeply.

May we wait actively,
wait open-endedly,
and wait in good company, *this* good company: wait together.

For now, this moment is *the* moment.