

“Patience”

A sermon given 1/13/19
At First Universalist Yarmouth

Sermon - My only and favorite aunt says that she learned from childhood that you eat black-eyed peas on New Year's Day for good luck. South American customs include wearing red underwear and filling a pot with water and throwing it out the front door to get rid of all of the negative experiences from the past year. I like that one in particular. It feels like a good thing to get rid of the past hurt so that we can be present with what is today.

New Year's is always associated with resolutions. I remember as a child making resolutions and being quite disappointed that I couldn't achieve them. The most common one for me was the resolution to treat my older brother Stan better. I always failed. I think not-so-secretly I wanted him to change to make it easy for me. But ever since I was a young girl, I wanted to be able to control my angry reactions. I had no idea what that would entail.

Patience has never been a virtue of mine. I've wanted it to be and I've even worked at it with some success. But I've been recently realizing that patience isn't what I thought it was at all. I thought it was being able to hold back my impulses, impulses like, reactive anger, talking when I should be silent, or jumping into something that needs more preparation before starting, or quitting when I don't get results right away. I thought it meant counting to 10 before expressing my anger, or waiting for someone, for a future time, or event without revealing how anxious or irritated I am. But this is not patience. Not really.

I've come to believe that patience is actually mindfulness of the reality of life; it is open, not arduous at all.

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Patience is actually a joy. It is in those moments of freedom which feel a lot like starting a new class at the beginning of a school year in a subject or with a teacher you really enjoy. Or, after the first minutes of a movie where

you sigh and settle in because you know this one's for you. You are willing to allow it all to unfold, in fact, the slower the better because you know you'll miss it once it ends. Patience is savoring life, knowing that it is full of interesting experiences to come and that it is for you. Patience is a basic faith in the process of unfolding and delights in the tiny evidences of the new. Patience is the way many parents, in a good moment, feel about their kids growing up. "Not too soon please, but oh, how exciting to find out what they are going to do!"

Patience is possible when we are able to notice the process. If we believe it doesn't count unless it's all done, complete, and perfect or as we envisioned it or want it, we miss the boat. Patience doesn't have to know how it will end up or even if it will end. Patience is in love with the particular, what is going on, the shift in atmosphere or movement in a new direction.

With New Year's resolutions we imagine a change that we want in or from ourselves. We imagine it complete and whole without any process to get there. We don't figure into our plans the time or effort it would take to make this change, we imagine that it's a matter of will. When we fail we consider it a character flaw, a lack of will-power, or bad luck. That is not what it is at all. It is a misunderstanding of what it takes to make a change in our lives. It's a misunderstanding of the process.

If we could approach a desire, like wanting to lose weight, or finding a job or a better job, learning to draw, spending more time with our kids, or advocating for social change—if we could approach any desire with an acknowledgement that we don't know what it takes to make this change, but that we are willing to begin and do our best to meet the challenges that arise, we have a far better chance to continue on when the going gets rough. It's a fantasy to think that we can just change by wanting to or worse because we think we should.

At least when we want to change something in our lives, we are connected with something real, but if it's just to please some outside authority, we don't stand a chance of reaching the goal without a lot of harm to ourselves. My goal as a child of not reacting in anger so much was naïve.

I didn't understand the influences in my family that made me that way to begin with, and I didn't understand how my thinking would have to change to make that happen.

If we have an end result so firmly in our mind that we can't accept where we are, we'll never be able to change. We can't get there from an image of what should be, but only from where we actually are. One game I've gotten caught in many times is having disappointed myself by not doing something I thought I should or failing in what I tried, a voice will say, "there's no point in making a new commitment to this. You'll only fail again. You're a hypocrite if you do."

But if we can admit that it may be a long and arduous process—that we might have ups and downs along the way—that we can get there and don't know when that will happen, it becomes an adventure.

In his beautiful Letters to a Young Poet, Rainer Maria Rilke writes about patience in regard to our own growth. In this passage, he's speaking to a poet about evaluating or creating a work of art. But we can relate what he's saying to anything we want to create or change.

"Consider yourself and your feeling right every time... If you are wrong after all, the natural growth of your inner life will lead you slowly and with time to other insights. Leave to your opinions their own quiet undisturbed development, which, like all progress, must come from deep within and cannot be pressed or hurried by anything. Everything is gestation and then bringing forth. To let each impression and each germ of a feeling come to completion wholly in itself, in the dark, in the inexpressible, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own intelligence, and await with deep humility and patience the birth-hour of a new clarity, that alone is living the artist's life, in understanding as well as creating.

There is here no measuring with time, no year matters, and ten years are nothing. Being an artist means, not reckoning and counting, but ripening like the tree which does not force its sap and stands confident in the storms of spring without the fear that after them may come no summer. It does come. But it comes only to the patient, who are there as though eternity lay

before them, so unconcernedly still and wide. I learn it daily, learn it with pain to which I am grateful: patience is everything!”

We are the artists of our own lives. We certainly couldn't call living a science! It's an art.

We have to leave room in our lives for gestation and creation. I can only vaguely remember how time felt to me as a child. Every day was lengthy and filled with experiences—even a lazy day. Life had intensity. Lying in the grass was a series of discoveries: bugs, seeds, tiny flowers, sounds of bees and birds, the heat of the sun on my body, the feel of grass and earth between my toes. Patience is like that. It is being now, being with what is now, and being ready for what is next.

The reason I don't experience patience more is that I panic. I start to feel that unless I do something BIG, nothing will change. I have to MAKE it happen (all caps). I'm always bewildered and saddened when these kind of efforts fail. They always involve other people who may or may not have the same vision or interests. They may be starting at a different place or I may not have understood where they were. Reality collides with big resolve. Big crash. Reality tends to win by definition.

So, Jennifer and I started on a weight loss program a few years ago. Someone there pointed out that on December 30th, a flood of weight loss program commercials went on the air. This is surely strategic to take advantage of our tendency to make New Year's resolutions. We are both ready to do this and it wouldn't have mattered that it is the beginning of the year, but it does have a kind of neatness to it. Our readiness has come about by many small events—doctor's visits, understanding the causes of symptoms, improving the quality of what we eat, learning about and being horrified at how food is manufactured in this country, and desiring health. All of these involved small steps over time, long periods of digesting information and noticing feelings. Until, finally, it's time. I knew it and Jennifer knew it.

As we went into the program and paid our dues, got our food scale and booklets to evaluate and track the food we eat and the exercise we do, I felt

like I was starting on a long trip. Success is assured. It's not in question. I don't have to do anything but whatever I can do next. I feel like a kid in school with new friends and books to read and homework to do. It's going to be great fun. It won't be without pain. I will be hungry, perhaps often, but that's ok. I'll get caught without the foods I need sometimes because I won't always plan well. I'll eat something I regret sometimes. That is all part of the journey. I know what kind of effort and time this has taken in the past and know it will be even more at my age.

The reverse side of realizing that patience is joyful is knowing we cannot be patient with misery. That's good news. We can stop beating ourselves up for not being patient with misery. If it is not in our control to stop the painful situation, perhaps there is a way to cultivate some patience with conditions by looking at them in a new way. If as a child and teenager, I had been able to talk with someone about my anger toward my brother, if I could have gotten a new awareness of why I felt that way, I might have cultivated a new relationship with him or at least stopped worrying about the one we had.

When I was in seminary, there was a class that I found particularly difficult to sit through. I really wanted it to be over. Jennifer made up a sticker chart for me to mark the days until the end. It is so funny how much that helped me get through. I looked forward to putting a sticker at the end of each day. But then, something else happened. I remained engaged with the experience, even though I felt resistant, and at some point I let go and began to enjoy the class. I forgot about the chart and never finished it because it no longer mattered whether it ended or not.

Benedict Spinoza wrote, "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare." Wendell Berry echoes this at the end of a poem, "This is no paradisaical dream. Its hardship is its possibility." The things each heart longs for are all excellent and difficult in some way. It is patience that allows us to do the hard thing, knowing that it will lead us nearer to our goal. It is patience that allows us to overcome our resistance and know what it is we must do. It is patience that leads us to joy. Patience is everything!