

Time Out

*How men hate waiting while their wives shop for clothes
and trinkets; how women hate waiting, often for much of
their lives, while their husbands shop for fame and glory.*

Thomas Szasz
The Second Sin (1973)

Waiting erodes life. It simply crumbles by drumming fingers, tapping feet, or pulling hair. We wait at the dentist, the airport, the altar. We wait for that phone call, that letter, that apology. We wait standing in lobbies, sitting in cars, and lying in beds. We even have facilities designed for staying put – waiting rooms.

Waiting rooms are furnished to enhance the killing of time: an aquarium (with fish waiting to eat), a dusty plant (waiting to bloom), a flickering fluorescent light (waiting to die), dog-eared magazines with half-completed crossword puzzles (waiting to be finished), mindless music (waiting to end but never will). And there's the clock, which if it went any slower would go back in time. You might think waiting rooms would have stimuli to make time pass quickly. But then, of course, you'd be not be waiting, which defeats the purpose of the room. I guess that's why waiting rooms don't have pony rides (for the kids) and mechanical bulls (for the adults). To accent the sensory deprivation, windows that wait to be opened can't be. The air is stale but climate controlled; somewhere between hot enough to keep you on the back burner but cold enough to keep you on ice.

For a breath of fresh air you can wait outside, preferably in a line to demonstrate your civility. The waiting line (or in Britain, the "queue") serves a purpose beyond the egalitarian spirit of first-come first-serve. It marks the difference between lingering and loitering: the former is legal; the latter is not. We think lines make waiting efficient, but waiting, by default, reflects inefficiency.

Wait. Maybe it's the apogee of efficiency, because man works at it. Some have even made the job of waiting a career, ranging from ladies-in-waiting (for royalty) to waiters (for those who wish they were). I guess you could classify nurses and hospice workers as types of "waiters". One waits for you to get better, the other to get worse.

Come to think about it, society is structured in a waiting hierarchy, corresponding with education and income. At the bottom of the food chain are the *helpless-waiters*: beggars (waiting for money), prisoners (waiting for freedom), the unemployable (waiting for work). Some have high school diplomas, many do not. And all are poor.

Higher up are the *helpful-waiters*. They're blue-collar high school graduates, some with a few years of college, who are trained to wait on others: airport ground crews, store clerks, and "waitpersons" (flight attendants, receptionists, and of course, waitresses). They either wait for an outcome of their work – like nurses taking temperatures and giving enemas – or wait to come out and work – like firemen waiting for fires and soldiers waiting for war. They're middle-class and hard working, unlike those above who are upper-class but hardly working.

I'm speaking about the well-paid *wait-less* who don't appear to wait much. But it's an illusion. The *wait-less* are heavyweights who work at waiting: planners, analysts, facilitators, and others who perform tasks that are justifiable but unnecessary. Most have university degrees and majored in some form of dynamic inactivity.

Finally, at the top are the *waited-on*: those who never wait because they're too busy making others do it. They're all overpaid and fall into one of two groups: professionals with ethics, like doctors and lawyers, or amateurs with none, like repairmen and the politicians.

I'm surprised that a political scientist like Hobbes or Marx didn't write a garrulous paradigm about social waiting, some pedantic dog snot about man's inherent right to wait (whatever that might mean). America's *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights* flourish platitudes about rights – though slaves had to wait seventy years for them – but they omit the right *not* to wait. Somewhere they smuggled in the right to a speedy trial, but Hello? we're still waiting. Wait-and-see is the heart of politics. We wait for a response to diplomacy and a reaction to threats. We wait for the outcome of every political word that ends in "ion": revolution, election, liberation, legislation. We wait anxiously for peace, tensely for war. Even in war we wait. Soldiers kill people only one percent of the time; they kill time the rest: they hold their horses or their breaths, sit tight or stand at ease. War is hell.

For theology, like politics, everything worth waiting for is just over the horizon: the Apocalypse, Judgement Day, the Rapture... and heaven knows what else. We're told to pray; then wait. Those with faith wait; then see. Those without faith, wait-and-see. And those who wait-and-see without praying meditate. To meditate you lotus your legs rather than kick your heels, and pose your thumbs rather than twiddle them. It's all part of the moratorium on action, a method to suspend the mind from waiting. Meditation transcends waiting because one doesn't expect anything – though I'll bet some expect a call from Nirvana, "Next please."

You'd think philosophers would wax eloquently about this universal quality of man ("the waiting animal"), because it's one thing that separates us from lower life forms. Animals don't wait any more than they regret. They're either looking for food or looking to run. Except for domesticated critters, which drum their claws or tap their paws. Pets wait for us as much as we wait on them. Dogs wait for their walks; cats wait for their food, then wait to ignore it. Let's face it, if man hadn't taught animals to wait, they wouldn't. Waiting is natural to man, not animals, because waiting is a state of consciousness. Descartes missed the thought: he should have said, "I wait, therefore I am."

Life isn't just about waiting for personal things like prayers or phone calls to be answered, or waiting for dinner or tax returns, or going to bed or jail. There are universal things we're all waiting for, some big like global warming, some small like death. Frankly, there are some things I've given up waiting for: the fuel-cell car, a solution to world poverty, the Second Coming, Rumsfeld's resignation, a balanced budget, a balanced mind... But it's odd; no matter how much I give up waiting there's always something to take its place. Waiting is just a part of life – a busy man's explanation for being idle, and an idle man's excuse for being alive.