

The Art of Waiting by Maria Popova

“It is we who are passing when we say time passes,” the French philosopher Henri Bergson insisted a century ago, just before Einstein defeated him in the historic debate that revolutionized our understanding of time. “If our heart were large enough to love life in all its detail, we would see that every instant is at once a giver and a plunderer,” his compatriot and colleague Gaston Bachelard observed in contemplating our paradoxical relationship with time a decade later, long before the technology-accelerated baseline haste of our present era had plundered the life out of living. “Time is the substance I am made of,” Borges wrote in his spectacular confrontation with time yet another decade later. “Time is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire.”

We are indeed creatures of time who live with it and in it, on the picketed patch of spacetime we have each been allotted. But if time is the foundational baseboard of our being, what happens to the structure of our lives in a culture of doing?

That is what Jason Farman explores in *Delayed Response: The Art of Waiting from the Ancient to the Instant World* (public library) — a part-philosophical, part-poetic effort to reclaim waiting “not as a burden, but as an important feature of human connection, intimacy, and learning.” He writes:

Waiting isn’t an in-between time. Instead, this often-hated and underappreciated time has been a silent force that has shaped our social interactions. Waiting isn’t a hurdle keeping us from intimacy and from living our lives to our fullest. Instead, waiting is essential to how we connect as humans through the messages we send. Waiting shapes our social lives in many ways, and waiting is something that can benefit us. Waiting can be fruitful. If we lose it, we will lose the ways that waiting shapes vital elements of our lives like social intimacy, the production of knowledge, and the creative practices that depend on the gaps formed by waiting.

[...]

An embrace of the moments when waiting becomes visible can remind us not of the time we are losing but of the ways we can demystify the mythology of instantaneous culture and ever-accelerating paces of “real time.” Notions of instantaneous culture promise that access to what we desire can be fulfilled immediately. However, this logic that dominates the current approaches to the tech industry misses the power of waiting and the embedded role it plays in our daily lives.

Discus chronologicus, a German depiction of time from the early 1720s, from Cartographies of Time

Although waiting is different from stillness — another essential, modernity-endangered state of being — in having an object of anticipation, a thing we are waiting for, it is kindred in that recalibrating our experience of waiting not as tortuous but as fertile requires a certain inner stillness that defies the forward slash of the soul toward the awaited. Farman chronicles some of the landmark technologies that have shaped our relationship with waiting — from aboriginal message sticks to the postage stamp to the buffering icon to Japan’s mobile messaging system deployed in the wake of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami — to explore how we can allay the durational restlessness of our lives.

One of the most fascinating and pause-giving chapters of the book uses astrophysics as a lens on waiting — a field in which the greatest discoveries take decades, sometimes centuries, of incubation, prototyping, and testing in the laboratory of reality we call nature. (Take, for instance, the detection of gravitational waves — the most monumental astrophysical breakthrough in our lifetime and the greatest since Galileo — a triumph with a remarkable century-long buildup.)

With an eye to the New Horizons interplanetary space probe — which revolutionized our understanding of the Solar System in faint whispers of data transmitted across three billion miles of cosmic expanse, dripping at a rate vastly smaller than that at which earthlings stream YouTube videos and upload photos to Instagram — Farman frames waiting as an essential building block of the speculative imagination, a period that allows for the cultivation of what Bertrand Russell so poetically and memorably termed “a largeness of contemplation”:

The New Horizons mission is a perfect example of the vital relationship between waiting and knowledge. The unknown creates speculation as we try to fill in the gaps of knowledge with everything from educated guesses to fear-inspired myths about what lies beyond the edge of our understanding.

This mode of speculation creates a new way of thinking. Our imaginations allow us to access that which does not yet exist and create scenarios that have not yet happened. Wait times are key to this mode of creative thinking because they afford us the opportunity to imagine and speculate about worlds beyond our own immediate places and speculate about the possible.

Nearly a century after T.S. Eliot — the poet laureate of “the still point of the turning world” — insisted on the creative value of the incubation period, Farman writes:

Waiting, as represented by silences, gaps, and distance, allows us the capacity to imagine that which does not yet exist and, ultimately, innovate into those new worlds as our knowledge expands.

Illustration by Lisbeth Zwerger for a special edition of Alice in Wonderland

In another chapter, he turns to Samuel Beckett's classic play *Waiting for Godot* to reframe waiting not as a stoic feat of endurance in the name of some anticipated reward but as a process transformative and rewarding in its very unfolding — a sort of training ground for hope, which is ultimately training ground for character:

Beckett's play, in its many violations of theatrical norms, strips away plot expectations to make a comment on the human condition. Godot symbolizes whatever we wait for, whatever we long for, whatever we rely on to save us from our current state of uncertainty and despair. Godot represents the promise of what might come on the other side of our waiting.

[...]

It shows how time flows through us and changes us. Day after day, as we wait for the things we desire, we become different people. In the act of waiting, we become who we are. Waiting points to our desires and hopes for the future; and while that future may never arrive and our hopes may never be fulfilled, the act of reflecting on waiting teaches us about ourselves. The meaning of life isn't deferred until that thing we hope for arrives; instead, in the moment of waiting, meaning is located in our ability to recognize the ways that such hopes define us.

At the end of the book, Farman offers two practical strategies for recalibrating our experience of waiting from burdensome to fruitful. The first is a deceptively simple yet effective discipline of shifting focus from the negative feelings waiting breeds — boredom, helplessness, anger — to a reminder of the positive object of the waiting. As soon as we remember, really remember, what we are waiting for and why we want it, Farman argues, the frustration of waiting is neutralized.

Art by Salvador Dalí for a rare 1946 edition of the essays of Montaigne

But far more interesting and profound is the second tactic. Farman proposes a radical shift of viewing time not as individual but as collective, which is inherently a radical act of empathy — the willingness to accept another's time as just as valuable as our own, however different our circumstances may be. Embedded in this act is a challenge to the power structures of the status quo, for it forces us to consider who is imposing the wait times on whom and who benefits from that imposition. In a sentiment that calls to mind the fascinating science of why empathy is a clock that ticks in the consciousness of another, Farman writes:

If my time is distinct from your time, and you end up wasting my time by valuing your own, you have robbed me of my resource (time). When you value your own time instead of my time, you have effectively stolen minutes (or hours) from me. We see these attitudes in abundance.

However, if we shift perspectives and see our time as intertwined with one another's, then we are all investing our time in other people's circumstances.

Art by Isol from Daytime Visions

Farman recounts a not-uncommon experience: At the grocery store, he finds himself getting reflexively frustrated with the woman ahead of him, who is taking too much time to check out. Only upon realizing that she is counting food stamps and coupons does he transport himself, with a pang of shame, into her difficult circumstances. He writes:

If we work toward an awareness of time as collective rather than individual, we can come to understand wait time as an investment in the social fabric that connects us. My patience with someone like the woman at the grocery store who has to account for every dollar and pay with food stamps is an investment of my time in her situation. As we invest time in other people through waiting, we become stakeholders in their situations. This has the radical potential to build empathy and to inspire a call for social change, as we realize that not everyone is afforded the same agency for how time is used.

There are times when we should wait and see the benefits of waiting; however, there are times when waiting needs to be resisted. Waiting can be a tool of the powerful to maintain the status quo by forcing people to invest their time in ways that inhibit their ability to transform their situation. Many examples demonstrate the kinds of waiting that reinforce the power dynamics in a society. From the long-delayed recovery efforts and federal dollars following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or the perpetually delayed recovery for Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands after Hurricane Maria in 2017, to the long commute times between home and job (often, jobs) imposed on many people below the poverty line, unequal access to time is revealed in the different ways people are forced to wait. Many social justice advocates like Angela Davis and Michelle Alexander point to prisoners like those sitting in San Quentin as prime examples of those who are forced to wait unjustly. The “prison industrial complex,” as Davis terms it, is fueled by racial inequality that targets African Americans more than any other population. In this example, wait times are strategies of the powerful to maintain the status quo of power relationships in the social order.

Complement Delayed Response with Ursula K. Le Guin on why our relationship with time is the root of our morality, Søren Kierkegaard on how to bridge the ephemeral and the eternal, James Gleick on our temporal imagination, and this lovely vintage children’s book about the nature of time by Gleick’s mother, then revisit German chronobiologist Marc Wittman on the psychology of time and how the interplay of spontaneity and self-control mediates our capacity for presence.