Waiting to Unfold
by Mirka Knaster

How many times have artists thought, while working on a project, "Will I ever get this completed?" How often do we face seemingly unsurmountable obstacles on the path to turning our vision into reality? And when will we reach the level of proficiency and excellence we aspire to?

Anyone engaged in creative activity of whatever form is familiar with this terrain. Yet to overcome doubt and frustration, to master any craft or art, we have to cultivate a particular quality. It is one that appears opposite to what we want, which is usually immediate gratification: Patience, a virtue extolled by spiritual traditions around the world.

Given the nano-second nature of our technological society, it seems harder than ever to be patient, to wait with calm rather than agitation, to not expect big or even small changes to occur instantaneously. Our expectations have grown increasingly disproportionate to what's possible in the creative process, which does not proceed at the speed of light.

Patience may seem as though we're doing nothing but, in fact, it is action, just a different kind. What might feel like intolerable inactivity could actually be important subconscious movement. As Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) wrote in a letter (April 23, 1903) to Franz Kaver Kappus (1883–1966), a 19-year-old cadet and fledgling poet:

Portrait of Rainer Maria Rilke (1906), by Paula Modersohn-Becker. Source: commons.wikimedia.org/

Everything is gestation and then birthing. To let each impression and each embryo of a feeling come to completion, entirely in itself, in the dark, in the unsayable, the unconscious, beyond the reach of one's own understanding, and with deep humility and patience to wait for the hour when a new clarity is born: this alone is what it means to live as an artist: in understanding as in creating.

In this there is no measuring with time, a year doesn’t matter, and ten years are nothing. Being an artist means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn’t force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come. It does come. But it comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast. I learn it every day of my life, learn it with pain I am grateful for: patience is everything!

I'm not saying that patience is easy. Rilke notes that he "learn[ed] it every day of [his] life with pain." Given the etymology of the word, this makes sense. Patience is

derived from the Latin patientia, from patient- ‘suffering,’ from the verb pati. So, yes, the waiting can feel like agony, but that doesn't mean patience is passivity or resignation. When we watch a plant grow, a flower blossom, a tree leaf out--all in its own time--we consider it the most natural development. Yet, in ourselves, we wait anxiously for the unfolding to occur. I'm as guilty as the next artist or writer in wanting to force the closed petals to bloom this very instant. I can't honestly state that I'm a fount of patience, but I try.

Agapanthus 'White Heaven'. Photo by Dominicus Johannes Bergsma. Source: commons.wikimedia.org/

However, being patient with the artistic journey we're on does not necessarily mean gritting our teeth to complete everything we begin. Sometimes we need to abandon a project because it's just not right or ready yet. Occasionally, I come across things I started years ago. This becomes an opportunity to finally realize what I want to do because I have a clearer image or I've developed a new skill. Or I decide I've lost my passion for the piece and let it go, turning it into something else entirely. Patience is also about applying our intuition to sense the best moment and the appropriate choice to make.

Willow Gentian (Gentiana asclepiadea). Photo by André Karwath. Source: commons.wikimedia.org

Over the centuries, artists and writers have exercised patience in major endeavors, in attaining their dream. How have they done it? Each personality finds ways to stay the course, to manage the detours, to move aside the barriers, to handle the frustrations. I don't need to name the obvious. The history of art and literature is full of these individuals. Somehow they turned patience into power.

The tender fronds of a fiddlehead fern unfurl. Photo by Ken Sturm/USFWS. Source: commons.wikimedia.org/

As Winston Churchill declaimed during the darkest hours of World War II:Success is not final, failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts. And patience is another sort of courage.

Questions and Comments:
What are the obstacles that most demand your patience?
What helps you to be patient? How do you cultivate patience?