True patience

It’s about “long obedience,” not idleness or selflessness.

by Samuel Wells in the February 2023 issue

A 1978 stage production of Waiting for Godot at the Festival d'Avignon, in France. (Photo by Fernand Michaud / Wikimedia Commons)

Patience is said to be a virtue. Said, at least, by parents to demanding children. But where does resigned passivity end and active patience begin?

Samuel Beckett’s 1955 play *Waiting for Godot* offers a picture of two men, Vladimir and Estragon, displaying depressing inactivity. They remain stationary throughout the play. If you remove the last syllable of the title, you can read the story as a savage critique of Christianity. The two characters are ready for God to come and settle everything. Like members of a millennial sect, their existence is entirely focused on anticipating that God will appear. But their patience will never be rewarded: they’re waiting for someone who’s never coming and doesn’t exist.

Beckett is parodying not just Christianity but any search for meaning that assumes we're on the verge of discovering our purpose in life. What drives you crazy when you're watching the play is how passive Vladimir and Estragon are. Surely if Christ were coming, as traditional Christian conviction holds, he wouldn't want us to idle our days in circular conversations and fruitless debate.

Another unsatisfactory portrayal of patience is the character of Agnes Wickfield in Charles Dickens's 1850 novel *David Copperfield*. The young David lives in the home of the widowed Mr. Wickfield, whose daughter, Agnes, is the embodiment of patience and wisdom. Agnes becomes devoted to David. She's so saintly she even nurses his wife Dora in her dying days. Agnes isn't inactive—she founds a school for girls. But it's not until the end of this enormous novel that it dawns on David that they should perhaps get married.

Agnes offers a more positive vision of patience than Vladimir and Estragon. The object of her waiting is genuine, if apparently out of reach, and while she's waiting she's involved in other things. But is Agnes's example the only way to embody patience? Does patience have to be downtrodden, long-suffering, totally selfless, almost impossibly perfect—and in the end, gratingly angelic?

Recently at my church we were offered an alternative. Bryan Stevenson spoke about his 40 years working as a lawyer seeking the release of Black prisoners in the United States who have committed no crime and yet find themselves on death row. There's nothing passive about Stevenson's pursuit of justice.

He spoke of the need to be proximate to the issues and the people, and he told stories of how through profound human encounter he came to understand the circumstances and plight of the people whose dignity he upholds. He described the urgency of changing the narrative around mass incarceration of Black Americans and detailed how the US has gone from moderate rates of incarceration 30 years ago to the biggest prison population in the world today. He insisted on the importance of sustaining hope; he and his colleagues at the Equal Justice Initiative have achieved the release of 150 death row detainees, a drop in the bucket but also a trajectory others can follow. And he acknowledged the call to bear in one's body the scars incurred by doing work that inevitably attracts enmity, resistance, and even violent opposition.

Stevenson's witness recalled for me a phrase adopted by Eugene Peterson but originally coined by Friedrich Nietzsche, who spoke of patience as a "long obedience in the same direction." Stevenson is neither an absurd fool like Vladimir and Estragon nor a faithful doormat like Agnes Wickfield. Yet he has a patience that outlasts any of them. His is a long obedience in the same direction.

That started when at 16 he reflected with his grandmother on how to respond to his grandfather's murder—whether to take violent retaliation or begin a journey of revolutionary patience. He chose the journey, which took him to Harvard Law School and then to Atlanta, where he learned about the number of men on death row, and finally to Montgomery, Alabama, where he founded EJI.

Thirty years later, in 2018, that journey led EJI to establish the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, which tells the story of how slavery was replaced with segregation, entailing the lynching of thousands of Black Americans, and how, when the civil rights movement ended segregation, it was simply replaced with mass incarceration—yet another way to keep Black people from breathing. Alongside the museum is EJI's remarkable National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which documents and honors more than 4,000 people who were lynched between 1877 and 1950 (see "Lynched but not forgotten," June 20, 2018).

Stevenson is a long way from reaching peace and justice. But his is a long obedience in the same direction.

Pastor and author James Howell has a memorable phrase about patience. Mindful of negative resonances like Vladimir and Estragon and Agnes Wickfield, he says that patience isn't about passivity or frenzied distraction: it's about "being impatient about one thing for a long time." That's true patience. Not idle waiting. Not absurdly sacrificial selflessness. It's being *impatient* about one thing for a long time. That's what a long obedience in the same direction truly is.

Reflection on patience is, in the end, a meditation on God's patience. God doesn't wait idly. In Jesus, God is proximate with us, tells us a different story, gives us reason to hope, and finally bears in his own body the scars of his commitment to us. Jesus is God's long obedience in the same direction. God's patience is exactly this: God is impatient—passionately impatient, crazily impatient, devotedly impatient—about one thing for a long time. That thing is us.