

## The Lost Art of Waiting

*Please note: This essay is under the banner Essays on the Early Church. It's here simply because it's a convenient place to park it.*

This brief article seeks to bring together several disparate themes under an overarching one as suggested by the title. That is to say, it deals with insights gained from hanging around a transportation terminal (chiefly an airport), how Henry David Thoreau viewed sunsets or the westerly direction and finally, the liturgical season of Advent which is one of expectation. How all this shakes out for each reader is anyone's guess. Anyway, it's offered to see if it resonates with personal experience. Independent of that, however, is the sheer pleasure of having assembled such observations which affect us all in one way or another. So let's begin and see how it pans out.

Towards the end of some movies—and I'm thinking of those when Christians are about to be torn to pieces by lions or to be burned in the arena—often there's a poignant scene of how they recollect their lives in the face of a terrible death. Of course, the music is somber against the bloodthirsty crowd watching the first batch of martyrs getting ripped apart. Often you'll have a man holding the hand of a fellow Christian as both awaited their turn. Finally it's time for those in the cellar to come out, having watched their fellow Christians meet their gory end. As for the executions, at the last minute the camera pans away; such is their demise off screen for the views to imagine. End of movie. No matter how corny the scene, invariably it has the power not only to move but to stick with you. Such was my case with regard to biblical-based films. The same can apply to a criminal about to be executed though the general lack of a religious theme makes it less touching. I'm not sure if more modern movies take this theme; most likely not. Too sentimental and not enough gore.

So why bring this up? Of hand I can't remember any particular movies from the 50s or 60s, just bits and pieces which I recall more often than not. Those waiting to be martyred have been snatched away from their daily lives, cast into prison and now transported to the basement of the arena. Their lives are not unlike ours, nothing extraordinary, except for courage of their conviction. Apart from this obvious quality, their lives toward the end is marked by the certainty of knowing their end is neigh. This knowledge is unlike no other, enabling you to focus upon Last Things with the greatest clarity.

Somehow tied in with the just mentioned images from old movies—and always I've made this association—is the example of an elderly man noted for his holy way of life. The context where I remember him best was a bus stop. I had been dispatched by a good friend of his, the same age, to collect him. The traffic was heavy, so I was delayed approximately thirty minutes. After having parked, I hastened within the drab, utilitarian building to find

him sitting in one of those cheap plastic chairs anchored to an unswept floor. He hadn't been looking around for me as is the case with most people awaiting a pick-up. Instead, he just sat their reading scripture, completely absorbed in it. Despite my effusive apologies he brushed them off, happy as could be as he waited there.

This fellow was a convert from Orthodox Judaism, quite rare, but when you think of Jesus' heritage, the association is clearly there. It is we who have fabricated the distance between the two. Anyway, this fellow (and I see him just twice a year when he comes my way for a visit) noticed my unease at having been delayed. He used my apologies as an opportunity to describe his life style, especially as he got older. At the time he was in his late 80s, quite spry and alert for his age. He explained that being in the bus stop was the most natural thing in the world, his native environment. I asked him to flesh this out because at first glance it was the last place you'd want to be with along with a number of people milling about, some clearly neither waiting for a bus nor waiting for someone to arrive.

Bus stops—in fact, train stations and airport terminals—have a common denominator. They are places where people are in transit, that is to say, they don't reside there. Even the building are constructed that way or seem so because everything is utilitarian and minimalistic.. The population which always is in a state of flux consists of countless strangers thrown together with one aim in mind, to get out of there as quickly as possible. Granted, in more recent years these terminals have installed more high-end restaurants and various shops but still...Go into one of these establishments with a name brand and at some other time go to a restaurant of the same chain. Same food but a radically different atmosphere. You can feel an underlying tension in an airport restaurant which includes arrival-departure monitors here, all eyes glancing up at them frequently. A ball game may be on a television, but even that gets scant attention. Also people are glued to their cell phones...as if that weren't anything new...for they can receive the same information there as on the monitors. In a regular restaurant people are relaxed, hopefully not on their phones as much and enjoy each other's company at a leisurely place. Not so in an airport terminal. However, as we all know, that is becoming less frequent. As for train stations and especially bus depots you have to be more careful both of yourself and pickpockets.

The most common denominator as to the ebb and flow of people at such terminals is that they strive to spend as little time as possible in such places. It becomes a real challenge when a flight is delayed and you have to camp out either on an uncomfortable plastic seat or on the less inviting floor. We see pictures of this on the nightly news as during foul weather or during holiday crunch times. Not one person among the hundreds can get comfortable but do their best to make the best of a bad situation. While one eye is asleep, the other is peeled on the ever-present arrival-departure monitors.

We hear that terminals are an image of life itself. Airports are higher class than train stations and bus terminals, the last being at the bottom of the heap. Nevertheless, all three are images of the impersonal way we perceive ourselves, the famous alone-in-a-crowd analogy. Every time we turn our attention to flight information screens...and this is every few seconds...mentally we count down the time for leaving. When it comes there begins the narrowing down phase: showing our tickets, getting examined by the TSA and then waiting in a smaller but still sizable room. Not long afterwards our flight is announced for boarding, and off we go. Still we must get on the plane. This involves walking through, sometimes up and down, tube-like corridors that extend to the plane itself. Who can't help but think of cattle being led to the slaughter? When you think of it, getting from your home to actually being on a plane is quite a process of winnowing down our freedom of movement. It's more controlled than with buses and trains even though they have the same basic pattern. During this process it's easy to pick out the seasoned traveler from the novice. The former does it without looking around, knowing he's in an alien environment but oblivious to everything else going on around him. On the other hand, the novice is fascinated child-like and considers it a real adventure.

With all this in mind, what about living in such an environment as suggested by my elderly friend? Yes, such places are the very embodiment of transitory-ness. But can you be at home there? I pressed him at length this time because always he talked about it. Without hesitation he said "yes" just as he had said so at other times. Obviously such a place is not conducive for raising a family. Chances are you could hang out in an airport for an extended period of time, providing it has numerous terminals. You could move from one to the other without attracting undue attention. In fact, I'm unaware of having seen such homeless people. They're more common in bus stops and train stations using them as temporary shelters as to get out of the cold. Airports are too upper-class. The key factor is that they are further removed from city centers and less easy to get to.

Let's say you want to try living in a metropolitan airport. You can do a lot of pretending, using a sleeping bag to pitch camp as if you're flight is delayed. Also you can move from terminal to terminal finding more comfortable seats, and if you had sufficient money, there are plenty of places to eat around the clock. I wonder how long you could pull this off without attracting attention. To do it requires some knowledge of the staff such as the changing of security personnel and drawing attention to yourself on closed circuit television. It wouldn't take long to know the details, and once you've worked them out, you can try making yourself feel at home.

The Big Question is why? Trying to break the Guinness Book of Records? Too much time on your hands? I've seen a few videos on YouTube on the subject, some being in a political limbo or the like plus one guy who supposedly lived in a French airport for eighteen years.

Obviously these are exceptions but not the point here. If you were to try it out and have sufficient funds, realistically you could manage a few days or longer but not much more, taking into consideration that you haven't yet been discovered. After a while—and even an overnight camping adventure as many have experienced not by choice but by being stranded—you'd get board. In essence you're not in an environment which you'd call home. Even those who live under bridges and in subway tunnels have some kind of camaraderie which holds them together. In other words, despite their precarious position they have set up shop and call it "home." This is accentuated further by the lack of outsiders, a clique of sorts. Yes, they outsiders are near but at a sufficient distance. In an airport it'd be different. You're a loner among a multitude of loners, all coming and going somewhere.

These reflection on trying to live a stable life within an unstable environment amount can be carried out in a limited fashion at any time in a real airport, bus stop or train station. You can sit down in a corner with a good view and watch the ebb and flow of travelers. Walk around a bit to check out the scenery, essentially the same in each terminal. Those sitting down or sleeping on the floor are in an alien environment ultimately waiting to go home. This is true even if they're off on a vacation or moving to the other side of the globe. After you've observed this ever moving stream of humanity you get a better appreciation of what home means to you. Yes, it involves a physical place, even under a bridge as noted above. After a relatively short time of trying this experiment you've had it. You want to board the plane or walk out and take a bus or cab to get away back to civilization.

Our experiment reveals that despite the mobility of modern society and the supposed liberation it embodies, we desire to be at home, to enjoy a stable environment. Moving around might be fine for a while but ultimately it's boring. Then you look at your own stable home. It's great but in the larger scheme of things is temporary even if you've never left the home in which you had been born, a rarity nowadays. The ultimate lesson about living in a place designed for pure utility and movement (airport, etc.) is that your own home or stability is temporary. So if you're in doubt about the meaning of a stable environment, head off to your nearest transportation terminal and hang around even for a few hours. Once you're back home, you'll appreciate your own place while at the same time knowing it too is coming to an end.

That elderly fellow whom I mentioned had direct insight into the paradox of finding stability in a place embodying motion, waiting for something to happen or to go as well as having a permanent place to live. He had a modest apartment, living alone while cultivating a religious mode of life not unlike a monk or urban hermit (modes of life that are sanctioned officially, by the way). You could see the determination on his face: he was born to be an example of stability in places marked by mobility. At one point in his life he

considered getting married and raising a family Fine, but not for him. His vocation was to cultivate a permanent mode of life where you're simply waiting. That's why he was fond of bus and train depots. He couldn't afford to fly, so no airports. On those rare occasions when he traveled, it was no problem if the bus were late. He'd simply sit quietly, watch the people and pray. Actually watching people in motion was a kind of meditation on the transitory nature of life. They simply were going about it in a more physical way than he. You'd think this "vocation" is of no value. However, over the years he has become quite well known as a spiritual director simply by...doing nothing!

So if you sit around (starting as we're doing now in a transportation terminal) and transpose it to sitting at home, after a while you discover some innate voice within that says you are at home. There's something more to all this hectic moving about...and even better, something more than life itself. You can't explain it unless you actually go out and loiter in a place where people are milling about or more specifically, are focused upon getting away from the place in which they're located now (the terminal) to some other place. That's why so much attention is upon the monitors displaying flight information. They're like guards telling you how much time you have left to serve. Should your flight be displayed in red, you're cooked.

Switching gears a bit, we can get some light on the transitory nature of life through the massive but not as well know **Journal** of Henry David Thoreau. He's famous, of course, for his numerous jaunts in and around the Concord-Lexington area. On occasion Thoreau has stepped outside these limits but always returns as though being drawn by a magnet. If you really want to get at the heart of the man, consider his almost religious reverence for the west <sup>1</sup>. A striking example is when setting out on a walk, Thoreau doesn't head directly in a westward direction. At first you'd think he'd favor the east where the sun rises. However, Thoreau claims...and I'm paraphrasing a bit here...it's more mysterious to be drawn by something (the setting sun) than to have it coming to you. This takes into account that while some may be drawn to the east because among other things it symbolizes new life, nevertheless it isn't as mysterious. By contrast, the west is more appealing because we're being drawn...not just in that direction but over the horizon which remains mysterious to us.

Many of us can sympathize with Thoreau, especially in the autumn and winter months when the sun inclines to the south. Its rays aren't right on top of us as in warmer weather. Instead, they are slanted toward the south which makes them quite mellow or golden. The upshot is that shadows are exaggerated, long and drawn out toward the northeast, the sun's opposite direction. All you have to do is go outside around three to four in the afternoon.

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1 There's a sixteen page reference to the west from his **Journal** posted on this homepage, an interesting snapshot into Thoreau.

Just standing there puts you fully in sync with Thoreau's love of the west which quickly you'll agree is the most transcendental of the four cardinal points. As you watch the sun setting you can't help be drawn to it. Actually the pull is irresistible. "Take me with you" we exclaim. We don't know where this leads. That's beside the point. It's the drawn that counts. Personally I felt this draw very young even before knowing about Thoreau. Our house was on a hill with the living room facing southwest. Many a time I'd sit in a chair looking in that direction, wishing to be on the other side of the distant horizon. Then when we actually took trips westward, the mystery dissipated. However, it returned once back home. That I discovered a difference between two experiences of the west, quite significant, remained with me to this day.

Added to the mystery are high flying jets headed westward into the sun, their contrails a blazing white that turns golden the further the sun sinks. They remain bright even when the sun has gone beyond the horizon and we enjoy the wonderful afterglow of twilight which darkens ever so slowly. It seems that the further away are the contrails, the more mysterious they become. People on them indeed have traversed the barrier of the horizon. They can turn around and look at us, beckoning us to follow. Indeed, they crossed the magic threshold and are still alive or so it appears.

Thus Thoreau's westward attraction is a going from where we are now to where we desire to go. We have an inkling it's better over there but can't quite put a finger on it. It has nothing to do with actually going west, even in his day when the frontier was opening up even more with people leaving the East for greater adventures in the West. Actually it's remarkable that Thoreau never gave into that pull, for going West must have been the talk of the town. You wonder how many citizens of Lexington and Concord actually picked up and headed in that direction.

The liturgical season of Advent is a notable exception to this westward drawing. Many say it's the best time of the year even unfortunately it's drowned out by the secular celebration of Christmas. Advent has to do with the coming of Christ and extends over four weeks of expectation. When Christmas arrives we experience the customary let-down that nothing new has happened. Things go on as they always did. This is re-enforced by the repetition of the same expectation and arrival experienced year after year. In fact, during the Christmas season you miss Advent, that it could be extended. So while this season is built around a divine coming, it parallels Thoreau's view of the east<sup>2</sup> with the sun coming toward us. And for him, the east is not mysterious by reason of this approach.

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2 As for the way we describe sunrise and sunset, an English teacher many years ago insisted we put it as "The sun rises *toward* the east." Similarly, "The sun sets *toward* the west."

Are we caught in between two expressions of the same reality, literally opposite to each other yet ultimately identical? With Advent emphasis is upon a divine coming. With the west à la Thoreau we're the one's moving in that direction or more accurately, being drawn there. As for his special eloquence during the winter months, we can see easily how it fits in with his preference for the west. During winter daylight hours are the shortest. That means the time for the sun coming over the horizon to going over the opposite horizon is relatively brief. There's less time to hang around and be centered upon how the east and west balance each other off. Also you have more time to ponder where the sun is at during the darkness. You know by its westward descent and later eastern rising that it's traveling beneath you as of that moment. At the same time you don't know what it's up to. So this absence of the sun yet knowing it's somewhere out of sight and destined to return is a huge mystery.

A caveat of sorts is in order here. While we can gaze westward from the comfort of our homes in the bitter cold, but for people of Thoreau's time it was different. Their very survival depended upon having enough wood on hand as well as candles. Still, that didn't prevent someone like Thoreau from his making his observations. It seemed to enhance them. It seems that while they had to work hard to survive, mentally and spiritually they were more freed up.

Perhaps the key regarding both extreme poles lies in the fact that they are bounded, that is, they have horizons. The east becomes illumined gradually whereas the west becomes darkened gradually. Thus one represents coming of light and the other its departure. While it's natural to welcome light coming to us, it isn't for light to depart from us. However, the departure of light is moving beyond the horizon. There we have not yet been and long to do so as did Thoreau. As for the east, we know by the twilight that it is coming; as with the western horizon, can't go there. So during the sun's course we're being brought light while at the same time are being deprived of it. As for the western horizon, who knows what is there? The twilight proper to that direction increases rather than decreases our longing to find out. At the same time we feel restrained from actually going over the western horizon. Better to stay put and enjoy the mystery.

So here we are, stuck in between two horizons, east and west, as the sun is making its way from one to the other, almost taunting us with its privy knowledge of where it came from and where it's going. During the time when the sun is above, we go about our lives which is bordered between two cardinal directions. This is the time often marked by necessary, prosaic activity pretty much devoid of mystery. Yet the daylight hours can be sacralized by awareness of its location between the two cardinal directions. Here the earlier reflections about hanging around an airport might fit in. That environment is characterized chiefly by

transitory-ness, of being neither here nor there. Everyone is focused on moving on, the sense of which is so obvious by the way everyone watches the arrival-departure monitors.

If attention is upon either arriving or departing, that means where we're at is an in-between land. It stands in sharp contrast to our innate desire to be home. Yet this offers an opportunity we can't get elsewhere. We can step back and observe ourselves caught in a no-man's land, treading water, so to speak. Take, for example, people milling about an airport terminal. Right away you know they're held in abeyance, not going anywhere. It's so obvious. The same applies to those awaiting passengers or seeing them off. It's even more evident if you step outside the terminal and behold the ever coming and going of cars and buses, a kind of controlled chaos. In the meanwhile you hear the incessant roar of jets nearby. As soon as one group either comes or goes, another takes its place and so on around the clock. In a way, time is suspended even though we see it displayed on the monitors.

Thus awareness of time is crucial within an airport or any other type of terminal. Interestingly, it differs with each individual meaning that the current or actual time is secondary to the time when his or her plane is departing or leaving. And so time in this unique environment has the paradox of being suspended while simultaneously of the essence. Often it's said that most of our lives we don't live in the present moment. Nothing could be truer once you step inside a terminal. It's clearly evident on all the faces you see as people rush from the entrance to the ticket counter and then plop down on chairs with eyes glued to the monitors. Then you have others looking for people who have arrived but can't find them because either they're lost or delayed. They stand out the most because they aren't going anywhere and may be said to be the only ones living in the present moment. A bit exaggerated, of course, but it has some truth.

So having attempted to connect three disparate elements as hanging around in an airport, Thoreau's eloquent description of the west and the expectation symbolized by Advent, what does it say about us? The latter two are appealing for obvious reasons even if we don't carry them out. The first is very common to many, flying being the most popular form of transportation. As for Thoreau and Advent, they deal with a situation when we're comfortable with ourselves. This may be taken as another way of saying when we are at home, home in the fundamental sense of being where we know we should be and not desirous to move from it. Time is marked by the passage of seasons, not monitors. While in an airport or other type of terminal, we couldn't be further from home. Actually such places are jam-packed with people going there...or leaving home, depending. And we must admit, that does have an undeniable appeal.

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