

A Patient Lent

by

[Marina Berzins McCoy](#)



When March rolls around in New England, I eagerly look forward to the arrival of spring and new plant life, only to discover that, same as last year, meteorological spring comes a lot sooner than the “spring” soil that allows the ground to be workable and new life to emerge. I am not an especially patient person. I hate waiting and doing nothing and the frustration that ensues when the ground and cold weather seem not to change. I can fall prey to March (and even April) blues, whether the patient waiting is for the garden itself or the “garden” as metaphor for relationships, work, or other parts of my life where the ground is not as fruitful as I would like. I want the ground to thaw and to be workable, and I want it now!

Recently, I read these words on patience:

True patience is the opposite of a passive waiting in which we let things happen and allow others to make the decisions. Patience means to actively enter into the thick of life and to fully bear the suffering within and around us. Patience is the ability to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell as fully as possible the inner and outer events of our lives...Patience is an extremely difficult discipline precisely because it counteracts our unreflective impulse to flee or to fight. (Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, Compassion, 93)

When I think of relationships in which patience is needed, I know how much my own tendency is to flee, fight, or idealize. Part of me is tempted to go out and plant tomato plants in April, when in my area the wisdom is to wait for Memorial Day, “just in case” the plants will bloom. But good gardening is far more than the fantasies of blossoming, disease-free roses displayed in catalogues,

because success requires a degree of realism. Yes, the groundhog will eat my lettuce if I don't enclose it in a fence, and no, I can't plant tomato plants in April. Likewise, I'd like to believe when a relationship of mine is not quite right that maybe by fleeing from the reality of the situation, everything will be OK. Or maybe I can force a resolution and make it happen just the way that I want it to go, right now. However, I know that I am more likely to end up with a good resolution if I can look at the reality of the situation for a little while, even if I don't yet know how to address or resolve it. The above quote feels Ignatian to me: if Ignatius encouraged us to spend time [using our senses in an imaginative Gospel scene](#), how much more ought we also to be present to and allow ourselves to "see, hear, touch, taste, and smell" real life too!

So maybe the ground is still frozen, so to speak, somewhere in my life. Or maybe it feels like there will never be enough sunlight to grow things again. I can be tempted to rush to a resolution. But sometimes it's better to start by spending time taking a good look at the way that it really is and to stay with that for a while, with the uncertainty of how it might "thaw out." This is what I take to be patience: the capacity to stay in the not-knowingness of things for a time, while trusting that [God is somehow at work](#), and so I will not have to stay here forever.

For me, the season of Lent is also about exercising patience of this sort: I can bring to God the troubled parts of my life, my tendencies that are less than holy, or my relationships or projects that are less than successful, and ask God to tend to them. Thankfully, Lent is a good, long 40 days, and we are not expected to get it right on Ash Wednesday or even by Holy Thursday. Instead, I suspect God asks me to start with sharing my heart and longings with God and then asking for the grace of patience. This Lent, I hope to be patient with myself and with others, because I can recall how patient God has always been with me.

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