

Waiting
December 2020

In the early morning hours at Concourse C of the Denver International Airport, one large pocket of stranded twenty-year-olds was draped over the seats, suitcases wedged in creative ways to make beds of the uncomfortable connection of chairs. They had been singing together since their flight—and mine—had been cancelled. Now they were asleep, exhausted from filling the hours since the previous day's morning cancellations and from holding onto hope that when daylight returned, a Southwest jet would gracefully glide into its docking position at their promised gate, next to mine. Hours earlier, I had positioned myself, the only other “pocket” of passengers, far enough from the exuberant group returning to college so that they finally stopped asking me to join them in song.

The silence was thick in the many corridors of numbered gates which, during the day and until about 9:00 p.m., had bustled with tangled families, resolute career travelers, the excited, the lost, the confused. As night wore on, only an occasional security guard or a passenger support specialist marched past, their reflections full on the walls of windows.

In the morning of the long day that had just ended, the Southwest gate representative dashed my travel enthusiasm by announcing that my flight was delayed because of the weather. As the hours of delay accumulated, one of the airline employees walked me to a section of the massive window to explain. “See there?” she said, tapping on the pane. “The six Southwest jets?” I thought I was looking at shrapnel-riddled wings. “That damage is from hail. Good old Denver springtime hail.”

The good old Denver springtime hail, with a touch of tornado-like winds, would eventually cancel my flight to Reagan National Airport until 5:30 the next morning.

The thing about waiting, once the nature and time of the wait is established, is that nothing really can be done. Once the wait is announced, it digs in its claws. It may even grow longer, depending on circumstances. Only infrequently, and never, I believe, at an airport does the wait grow shorter. It affects all, unless money or an extreme set of options is available. For example, a fellow passenger, due to give a talk at the Smithsonian, opted to “hop” to at least four cities, none of them as even a drunken crow flies. My only option was to wait out the wait.

We in this country have had our fill of waiting. When 2020 trundled in, fat full of optimism, we were hopeful. I remember babbling to a friend that “2020 means good eyesight. This year, we will be visited by foresight, keen sight, far sight, clear and studied sight.”

2020, however, had other plans. I waited six months for my root canal treatment to come to a close. Regardless of party ties, we the people would wait the endless months until Election Day in the USA. COVID-19 entrenched, we are waiting, waiting, waiting. Nearly everyone I talk to refers to this year as “endless.” We, in this country and many others, have had our fill of waiting. For healing, common ground, unity, acceptance, peace, a vaccine.

Yet waiting can be a good thing. We might refer to it as anticipation. The month of December heralds for many throughout the world the birth of a baby who grew up to preach forgiveness, love, and peace.

On an individual note, some wait for the birth of their own baby. For bread from a hot oven and a place to sleep. For a small gift from an outstretched hand. For the return of far-flung family members. For a job. For the ill to recover. For the bombs to stop. For the amaryllis to bloom.

This waiting gives us something to live for. It might even give us a sense of peace because, if you think about it, waiting gives us time to hope.

Waiting gives us Time. When our plans or goals are thwarted or dashed, waiting is sometimes the only option, and in that waiting, we might soon hear a solution, another way, a friend's soothing voice, someone's offer of a gift. We might see the sun's rays emanating from behind a storm cloud. For those of us who are impatient or impetuous, waiting might be our saving grace.

However joyous or helpful waiting is, it does, however, require work. Waiting cannot and does not go away. We cannot ignore it, dissolve it, or destroy it. All we can do is accept it, do our best to soften the edges, work hard to fill it, and see what we can gain from it. We make a plan. That day at DIA, I made a plan.

I began with lunch. The place where three fast-fooderies converged was heavy with the smell of unventilated, greasy kitchens. Babies and toddlers wailed. Groups were determined to talk above the constant intercom announcing the few departures and arrivals. My fish sandwich was abundant in mayonnaise and roll; protein and greens were suspicious. Yet I vowed that lunch would be a long and languorous affair. I set out to savor that burger, bit into it with dainty deliberation, chewed as if ruminating, slowly read my paperback between swallow and bite. Too hasty at times, I whispered, "Wait. Be slow."

Keeping in mind that anticipation is a positive part of waiting, I scheduled, for as late as my tummy could handle, my supper of bottled water, Nature Valley bars, ziplock bags of carrots, and—for dessert—Tic Tacs. In the meantime, I frequently called my husband, who each time admired but rued my existential treatment of my predicament. "What're ya gonna do?" I responded, à la Tony Soprano. After each call, I explored one new feature on my phone. In between, at the top of each hour, as per my plan, I took a thorough spin around the concourse, trailing my faded-tapestry JC Penney wheelie suitcase and matching zippered tote. I examined the shops' knickknacks, grew old in the Tattered Cover bookstore. A people watcher, I studied those in argument, in love, in thrall, in deliberation, in desperation, in bliss.

Hours passed, and pedestrian traffic waned to a trickle. The shops closed. Gate desks were deserted. The lights dimmed. The halls grew hollow. The intercom ceased but for an occasional murmur about safety regulations. Supper time. Book time. Eight hours till possible take-off. I played a mind game: At the top of each hour, I would only think of that hour, forbidding myself to think past those sixty minutes. I began the hour with yoga stretches and deep breathing. Using the back of my print-out pages of Southwest information, I began an overdue letter to an old friend, details flourishing in the drawn-out minutes. Arranging my suitcase under my legs

for theft deterrence and the need of an ottoman, I returned to my reading, which, due to the slowing of time, lulled me into a heavy doze. Such rejoicing when I stirred! Less than twenty minutes left in the hour and time for my stroll through every arm of Concourse C!

Between the 3 o'clock and 4 o'clock hours, as the lights dimmed even lower and night grew heavier, came a pause in my regimented occupation, which could be known as the cleaning machine hour. As if choreographed, as if from an animated movie, they came from nowhere. Huge armored-tank-like trucks, a focused, scowling driver atop each, broke the silence with their metallic thrumming, their hidden vacuums of breadth and depth sucking up the detritus of the day's wave of workers and travelers. Where the tanks could not go, smaller vacuum vehicles screamed and scooted, like bumper cars, into and around obstacles; their drivers, young and relaxed, steered as if preparing for the French Grand Prix. The minute debris, that which had fallen into and under, was the job of a third group of humans, who looked like moon walkers. In space suits and caps, they trod under the heavy weight of noisy, cylindrical vacuums strapped to their backs, managing the python-writhing, sucking tubes. All this an efficient, well-executed, half-hour dream dance. As quickly as they appeared, they disappeared, and silence ensued.

"Well then," I thought, nodding my head at the strange performance, "that was pretty amazing!"

At 5:00 a.m., shaking off the sleepiness that lingered, I ambled to my gate, where a new-morning batch of Southwest representatives, trailing the scent of strong coffee, were congregating. I shared that I had spent the night in the airport and was applauded, welcomed into their circle, and given a view of the scheduling screens. No cancellations.

Really, then, what had this wait cost me? Very little. What had I gained? A survivor's satisfaction, a story, and inclusion in the Southwest workers' ranks. I had also been witness to—as if an interloper—a rare and uncanny occurrence: the magical world of airport concourse cleaning.

On schedule, the Southwest jets appeared. The college students began singing. I waved to them as I headed toward the jetway. During our ascent, I saw that dawn was breaking.