

Many faiths recognize the virtue in patience

by Sandi Dolbee

In a land of honking horns, chirping cell phones and drive-through attention spans, there isn't time to be patient.

Pick your poison: consumerism, materialism, self-absorption. Experts say they are each an ingredient in a recipe for perpetual impatience, turning humans into hamsters racing in their wheels, getting nowhere fast.

BE PATIENT - Studies show impatience can be unhealthy, linking it to hypertension, increased anger and elevated stress. CNS Illustration. Elizabeth Carll, a clinical psychologist in Long Island, N.Y., whose specialties include stress and health, blames technology for our patience deficit. Remember when a blackberry was something you ate?

"I think we've gotten to be very high speed, and technology has contributed to that," Carll says. "It doesn't give us much time to think about things when you're always responding so quickly."

Studies show impatience can be unhealthy, linking it to hypertension, increased anger, elevated stress levels and a host of other personal ailments. Carll argues that it's also not good for society. "I think patience really is the foundation for society in many areas of life," she says.

The world's religions preach the value of patience. In Christianity, it's one of the fruits of the spirit. In Judaism, it's part of wisdom. In Buddhism, it's an avenue on the journey to enlightenment. And so on.

Carll, asked to explain why it can be so universally regarded as important and so universally ignored, answers this way: "It's human nature."

The Rev. David Fairchild, pastor of the nondenominational Kaleo Church in San Diego, sees a spiritual disconnect.

"Why do I get angry when someone cuts me off or doesn't acknowledge me at the counter when I walk up to it? Because I, in that moment, think I'm so important, and so glorious that I should either be noticed or respected because of my greatness," Fairchild suggests. "In that moment I want to be the king and lord. The truth is, I demonstrate my brokenness, not my greatness, when I'm unwilling to be patient."

On the other hand, the 21st century doesn't have a monopoly on impatience.

Consider the biblical story of the Jews wandering in the wilderness after they escaped from Egypt, an exodus celebrated in the Passover holiday this month. After their deliverance, it didn't take long for the crowd to grow impatient, whining about food and resorting to making idols.

Glen Scorgie, professor of theology at Bethel Seminary San Diego, says the story may be as much about doubt and fear as anything else. Either way, he observes, "Faith wears thin whenever hope is deferred, and large amounts of patience are required."

One reason patience is a virtue, Scorgie adds, "is precisely because it has always been in short supply."

SUGGESTIONS

Waiting isn't easy.

"I think it is a difficult skill to learn," says Teresa Polk, a lawyer who is in the process of becoming a lay Carmelite nun. "It involves a lot of endurance."

Her advice: Take it a step at a time. She hearkens to a prayer by a 13th-century saint that was adapted into a "Godspell" song: "day by day." Polk uses her electronic leash to connect spiritually as well as professionally. Each morning, after she boards the commuter train to take her to work, Polk logs onto the Internet and calls up a daily prayer.

She says she knows people who will grab their Rosary beads when they're stuck in traffic and use that time for prayer. "It definitely helps you calm your mind," she says.

Buddhist nun Karma Lekshe Tsomo says developing patience is a way of cultivating peace.

"It is considered an antidote to anger and hatred, which are of course the root of many problems," says Tsomo, a professor of theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego.

She thinks people inherently know that compassion and patience and love are important, but they get seduced into materialism. "The advertising, everything around us, tells us we want more of this stuff. It more or less never ends because the minute you get one, it's outdated and you need an upgrade."

In Buddhism, this seduction is attributed to ignorance - ignoring the pure, clean natural state of the mind by getting caught up with the distractions of the world. "It creates a cycle of dissatisfaction," Tsomo says. "If we were satisfied, we wouldn't need all that stuff."

How can people become more patient?

"The Buddhist would recommend meditation. Meditation is a way of getting back to that state of awareness," Tsomo says.

If you're standing in a line, she suggests taking that time to become aware of your breathing. Calm yourself, going with the flow of nature - "instead of getting irritated, which is a low-grade form of anger, which is unfortunate and also unpleasant."

Another technique: consciously generate loving kindness toward everyone in the line.

That's echoed by Rabbi Michael Berk, senior rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel in San Diego.

"I'll tell you what I think really is the root of it for me," Berk begins. "We have in the Bible this incredible notion of (being) created in the divine image and what that means is that every time you look at another human being, you're supposed to see the face of God."

Would you honk your horn at God driving too slow or berate God for not waiting on other customers fast enough?

That said, however, Berk takes issue with blaming the wandering people in the Exodus story for their impatience. Perhaps the impatient ones were Moses and God, who were expecting too much too soon from these newly freed followers.

"There's a rabbinic saying: Don't judge another person until you've stood in their shoes," Berk says. "And I think it's important to remember those things."

CAVEATS

Rabbi Berk, Buddhist nun Tsomo and New Testament theologian Scorgie agree that there are times when people shouldn't be patient.

"I think we need not be patient with injustice, with cruelty, with dishonesty, with corruption, with violence," Tsomo says. "These things we should actively work to change, to transform."

Sometimes, Scorgie says, "holy outrage may be a more appropriate response in the eyes of God."

Berk would add this category: self-improvement. "We should have a certain amount of restlessness, if not impatience, about that."

The Rev. Wilk Miller, senior pastor of First Lutheran Church of San Diego, a congregation known for its social activism, says people ought to be careful when telling others to be patient.

"A rich person cannot tell a poor person to be patient," Miller says. He issues similar cautions about counseling a homeless person to be patient when you have a nice house or a victim of discrimination to be patient when you have full rights.

"I think that's the problem," Miller adds. "We call people to patience and tolerance and I may not be doing it myself."

ON PATIENCE

"If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow."

- Chinese proverb

"To lose patience is to lose the battle."

- Mahatma Gandhi

"I am extraordinarily patient, provided I get my own way in the end."

- Margaret Thatcher

"It is strange that the years teach us patience; that the shorter our time, the greater our capacity for waiting."

- Elizabeth Taylor

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