



Waiting and Watching in the Wanderings of Life

Kathryn Kuisle

Vigil keeping, although an ancient ritual, has been practiced for centuries and continues to be a part of present-day life. A vigil can be experienced in a variety of ways with the common theme of waiting and watching. This article presents a brief look at the history of vigil, ways it continues in actual practice today, as well as examples of how an attitude of waiting and watching is valued in many spiritual traditions. Most significantly, this article explores the importance of holding a vigilant attitude in the work of depth psychology. Whether you are an analyst, therapist, client, one searching for meaning and/or struggling with the depths, being patient in the waiting (and vigilant in the watching) opens the door to the soul.

The theme of waiting and watching in the wanderings of life is one that has had, and continues to have, a significant role in my life. At the time of writing this article, a very dear friend of mine was in the midst of chemotherapy for pancreatic cancer. There was an intense waiting, wondering if the treatments would cure, or hold off the growth. Then there was the vigil during her dying process. Vigil-keeping with others, as my friend was dying, did not relieve the pain, but it provided an awareness of the mysterious and precious experience with my friend.

Waiting and watching are so much a part of our everyday lives that they can easily be overlooked, yet they are profoundly important personally, professionally, and culturally. I begin pondering this topic with an excerpt from T. S. Eliot's (1971) poem, *East Coker III*, on waiting:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing. (p. 27)

This poem beautifully encompasses the spirit of waiting. Yet it is also challenging. Imagine waiting without hope, without love, without expectations. But it is in this way that darkness becomes the light, and the stillness the dancing.



Douglas Newton, *Nest*, oil paint on canvas, 16 × 20 in., 2016.

VIGIL

Waiting and watching are central to the ancient ritual of keeping vigil. *Vigil* is defined as a period of watchfulness and waiting that is kept during the night. Traditionally, it often takes place on the eve of a church festival. The word *vigil* in Latin means alert, wakefulness, watchful. It is also related to the Latin word *vigere*, meaning to be vigorous, lively, and alive—which is a bit paradoxical because if you have ever tried to keep an all-night vigil, it is hard to feel alive in the struggle to ward off sleep. Keeping any vigil is vigorous and challenges us to be alive to that which is easily missed.

One of the more ancient vigil experiences took place in Roman times. In the state religion of ancient Rome, the vestal virgins were the priestesses of the Roman goddess of the hearth, Vesta. The virgins kept vigil, tending the sacred fire in the shrine of Vesta, located in the Roman Forum. Their role was making sure the fire never went out. This role of watching and tending the fire was so important that if one of the virgins neglected the fire and it went out, she could lose her life.

Several references exist in various religious traditions which refer to the idea of waiting and watching. One example is the Song of Solomon 5:2 in the Hebrew Scriptures, “I was sleeping, but my heart kept vigil.” This quote presents an image of the organ of life and love that is alert, keeping watch even as the body and mind are in a state of sleep. In the second book of Samuel, David stays up with a sick child, fasting, weeping, and keeping vigil. The Book of Sirach includes a verse which refers to the stars that “never relax in their vigil” (Sirach 43:10). What a beautiful archetypal image of the cosmos watching over us! In the Christian gospels, there is the story of the Christ’s agony in the garden when he asked his disciples to keep watch with him the night before he was to die, but they kept falling asleep, unable to keep vigil.

Keeping vigil as a ritual is still practiced in many instances today, especially in different Christian traditions. There is the vigil celebration on Christmas Eve in anticipation of new birth. The Easter vigil is held after sundown the night before Easter. In some traditions, this vigil is celebrated all through the night with prayer, song, and ritual—holding the sense of waiting and anticipating renewal of heart, soul, and new life. Whether a Christian celebrating Easter or not, many people around the world experience new life with the coming of spring in all its glory. Rosemary Radford Reuther (1992), eco-feminist and Christian theologian, believes that if you truly want to understand Easter, you need to watch spring unfold carefully so you can fully understand the beauty of new life. In Colorado, we experience the waiting and watching for spring quite intensely. It is as though nature can hardly wait for new life to blossom. I wait and watch with anticipation for the first crocus and the first greening of the trees in the neighborhood. Nature teaches us so much about waiting for things to come to life in their own time, not rushing or trying to make something grow or develop before it is ready.

Lighting candles and holding them is an important part of vigils. The need to bring light into the darkness, no matter what the vigil is about, is comforting and symbolically offers us hope. I have seen this, especially in churches in Europe, where candles are lit at the altars of saints. Lighting a candle is a way for people to ask the saints to watch over the prayers, or the needs, that they bring before God via the saint. The act provides vigilance for the supplicant even after leaving the sacred place. I saw this also in Japan and China, in Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. Candles were lit by supplicants, trusting their prayers would be carried on.

In many indigenous traditions, vigil keeping is also part of life. According to Mandelbaum (1979), in some First Nation traditions the vision quest involves periods of intense vigil. There is usually fasting, praying, and keeping watch, although this varies according to customs and traditions of the tribe. For example, Eastern Cree youth go into a far-off place in the forest to fast and pray until a Spirit visits, often an animal spirit power. The quest, or vigil, is an important aspect of movement into adulthood (pp. 304–305).

Taoism, the ancient Chinese mystical tradition, teaches the wisdom of *Wu wei*. Wackes (2013), describes *Wu wei* as “go[ing] with the flow’ of the universe by observing, contemplating, just ‘being,’ waiting and watching for the next turn in the road” (para. 1). This tradition teaches that when we stop making waves and learn to wait and watch, we see outside forces more clearly and make wiser moves. “Act hastily, and every step is a potential blunder, with emotion and ego driving decisions more than one’s reason” (Livni, 2017, para. 10).

In Buddhism, daily meditation is a central practice. The purpose is to watch the mind and not judge what comes up, just allow the thoughts to come and go. In 2007, at the *Global Citizenship Through Universal Responsibility* lecture in Ottawa, the Dalai Lama was asked, “What is the best way to meditate?” His answer came in the form of a story in which he described the number of *stupas* (shrines) that the Buddha’s ashes were divided among. In the story, he explained that there were 84,000 different ways of meditating, which is to say that everyone has to find their own way. There is no clear formula, just as there is no formula to follow when we are finding our own way in the process of individuation. For some, meditation is extremely helpful in their life process. The popularity of meditation, whether for spiritual, physical, or emotional reasons, indicates the importance of learning to know oneself through patient self-observation, a kind of vigil keeping. In most mystical traditions, contemplation, which is another way of keeping watch and listening to the murmurs of the soul, is chosen over action. The cultivation of the soul is chosen over anything else. Just as the cultivation of plants is needed, so is the tending of the soul.

Communal vigils often spring up when a community or group has suffered a tragedy, a death, or deaths. When something horrific has happened, people need to be together, with candles, singing, sometimes praying and telling stories. It is too much to be alone with the shock and grief. We see vigils recounted on the news more and more often, usually, unfortunately, due to shootings, which continue to happen in our country. In the spring of 2019, after the Highlands Ranch school shooting in Colorado, a vigil was held for the students and the community. At the vigil, speeches were given by politicians, which went on for quite a long time. These speeches were addressing what should be done, but they were not touching the pain and fear of the students. As a result, many students left to create a vigil outside, which provided them the time and space to grieve, to tell stories, and be together after such a traumatic event in their young lives. This is one of many examples of vigil needed for healing.

With the experience of COVID-19 throughout the world, in our neighborhoods and families, there is a worldwide vigil taking place right now, as we wait to see when a vaccine will be found, when we can be with family and friends again, and when a sense of normalcy will return. Most painful of all is vigil keeping with a loved one with COVID-19, wondering and waiting for return of health, or death—which is made all the more difficult by not being able to be physically present. Vigils have also been popping up around the country remembering George Floyd, as well as raising awareness of the racial crisis. This need to have vigil, to come together in difficult times, is in the collective

psyche. In many traditions, there is some form of vigil after a person dies as a way to honor and remember the person; for instance, the Catholic wake, or the Jewish tradition of sitting Shiva.

The waiting and watching is part of the fabric of our lives. There are times when we keep watch with someone who is sick. When someone is dying, it can be a very long vigil. It doesn't mean that one is sitting by a bedside necessarily; they could be miles away, still holding vigil with a loved one nearing death. I would imagine many people reading this article have kept vigil with someone in their dying process, alert to the person's needs, trying to give comfort and ease pain or fears while they process their own grief. Pregnant women have also sometimes expressed their experience of pregnancy as a long vigil. As we see, vigils come in many forms. Some vigils are consciously and willingly entered into while others occur without any conscious intention. The person waiting to hear if they got a job after an interview can have a vigilant attitude. Parents, as they watch their children grow and move into their adult lives, are in a long vigil. Whether conscious or not, holding any kind of vigil inevitably entails encountering many unknowns.

THE UNKNOWN VISITOR

I turn now to looking at how waiting and watching is significant in our lives as analysts, therapists, students, and people engaged in, as Carl Jung (2009) called it, "the spirit of the depths" (p. 229). This concept of being attentive to the spirit of the depths is illustrated in an ancient story from the writing of Ovid in *Metamorphoses* (VIII 616–724) about the unknown visitors. It is the story of Baucis and Philemon, which Marie-Louise von Franz (1999) presents in her book, *Archetypal Dimensions of the Psyche*:

Jupiter and Mercury decided to come down to earth, disguised as poor wayfarers, to test human beings. And wherever they knocked and begged for shelter, they were haughtily turned away.

Finally they arrived at a miserable hut belonging to an old married couple, Philemon ("having a loving disposition") and Baucis ("the tender one"), who was a servant of the Great Mother. . . . The two old people welcomed the wayfarers into their hut and prepared a meal for them, slaughtering their only gander in the wayfarers' honor. On the following day the gods revealed themselves to the old people in their full glory and rewarded them by granting them a wish. The two asked to be allowed to remain together until death and even afterward. Thereupon, their hut was transformed into a magnificent temple, in which from then on Philemon and Baucis lived as priest and priestess. When they had reached the ends of their lives, they died at the same time and were changed into two trees, which stood so close together that their branches entwined in an eternal embrace. The scoundrels who had refused the gods shelter were drowned in a great flood and repaid in that way for their godlessness. (pp. 58–59)

The story of Baucis and Philemon is simple, and yet possesses profound meaning. It reminds us to welcome the unknown visitor no matter how that visitor comes into our lives. For me, that means I need to be watchful and alert so as not to close the door of my soul, or my mind, to an unknown visitor. Divine visitors can knock at our door anytime. They are always present. Understanding the archetypal dimension, as well as

being open to it, is essential in grasping Jungian psychology, for the archetypal dimension is foundational to the psychology of Jung.

What does it mean to allow, even invite in, the unexpected? To begin with, we look at who the unknown visitors are: Jupiter and Mercury. There is much one could say about Jupiter (or Zeus, as the Greeks call him). I will refer to him as Zeus in this paper, and Mercury as Hermes. Two of Zeus' characteristics are most interesting to consider here. He is known for being the god of hospitality, yet he can be unpredictable and destructive. He is unpredictable in that he shows up in various guises and manifestations. Usually he is unrecognizable until he acts. Both Zeus and Hermes are welcomed by Baucis and Philemon despite their poverty. The couple's warm response is in stark contrast to the other villagers' lack of hospitality. Zeus reacts by bringing about the destruction of the village and all its people. What is certain is that these two qualities of Zeus—unpredictability and destructiveness—will most likely be present with any experience of transformation, just as with Baucis and Philemon and the significant transformation they went through.

As for Hermes, he is the messenger of the gods as well as the trickster. In this story, he appears, at first glance, simply a companion accompanying Zeus. Who might these unknown visitors be in our lives, or the lives of those we live or work with? They can manifest in many ways. They could be something physical; an illness, especially when it comes on quickly, or the birth of a child, a grandchild, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the opportunity to risk in a new role or job. It could be a virus that moves throughout the world.

Unknown visitors also come into one's emotional life dressed as depression, anxiety, obsessions, panic attacks, suicidal thoughts, falling in love, grief. The unknown visitor may enter into the spiritual realm of one's life. It could be an unexpected inspiration, such as the creation of a poem, piece of music, or a painting. It could be a prayer that floats to consciousness. The unexpected visitor could be a numinous experience which takes one out of oneself into awesomeness. I remember one December morning when the light of the sunrise was extraordinary; there were no words to describe the beauty of those few moments. It was an unexpected gift that words could not describe. The unexpected visitor can also be a loss of faith or a loss of meaning, or loss of a love relationship. Can we accept and welcome these visitors?

Hermes may be present in the story as a reminder of how important it is for us to listen willingly, attentively, to the messenger and/or take the message seriously. One asks, "Why me?" Or one finds oneself thinking, "I didn't really hear that," or "I don't want to hear that." The messenger comes, and a person's response is often, "I'm too busy," or "I don't trust the message," or "I didn't expect this message or that outcome." The unknown visitor or messenger can also be the trickster, who can confuse us with dreams full of complexity, or dreams that are seemingly nonsensical. The visitor could be unwanted phantasies, hateful or desperate feelings that plague us. Unwanted events sometimes enter our lives out of the blue and cause havoc. We can find ourselves in conflicts, with ourselves or others, that were never expected. Thoughts we don't like, or are too challenging, can creep in. Synchronicities can happen that boggle the mind and leave us puzzled, confused, or perhaps delighted.

In the story of Baucis and Philemon, it is not a coincidence that the only people who opened the door to the gods and welcomed them in were poor, living in a simple, rustic cottage. The attitude of openness, of humbleness, of serving—even before they recognized the visitors as divine—is the attitude needed to be open to the experience of transformation. We can only imagine the attitude of the villagers that turned Zeus

and Hermes away. Perhaps the villagers were overtaken by pride, fear of the unknown, or prejudicial ideas or attitudes—all the shadow issues that we are constantly dealing with that block us from seeing a different perspective. Baucis and Philemon not only opened the door, but willingly gave of what they had, and then they were given so much more. Sometimes one can be so afraid to give and to let go of that which might have felt nourishing at one point in life. The result can be that life becomes stuck, too comfortable, and/or stale. Examples of aspects that may need letting go of might be: inflations, thinking too highly of oneself, or deflations, seeing oneself as worthless; attitudes or aspects of oneself that are old, worn-out patterns, prejudices, and fears that hold us back from life. As I write this paper, protesters in our streets are challenging us to look at our attitudes about race, challenging us to change. In all of these and more, the opportunities to welcome in the unknown visitor can be missed if we are not open to them.

The welcoming and nourishing of the divine visitors is what, in the end, provides a new life for Baucis and Philemon as guardians of the Temple and watchers of a sacred place. They also experience their final transformation into two trees woven together: an oak and a linden, both symbolically significant trees. The linden tree has a heart-shaped leaf. In old Slavic mythology, the linden was considered a sacred tree. It is a symbol of strength, morale, resistance, and knowledge. The oak is considered a cosmic storehouse of wisdom embodied in its towering strength (Young, 2015). It grows slowly but surely, at its own rate. In the end, the story is about what becomes of the ones who open to the unknown visitors. They are an emblem of love and strength intertwined with wisdom.

Marie-Louise von Franz (1999) has written about the unknown visitor. She states that one of the greatest contributions of Jung is that his work has taught us to keep our door open to the “unknown visitor.” “He also tried to teach us an approach through which we can avoid the wrath of this visitor . . . For it depends only on ourselves whether this coming of the gods becomes a blessed visit or a fell disaster” (p. 73). How we receive and respond indeed takes conscious, vigilant work.

DARKNESS AND SURPRISE IN THE THERAPEUTIC WORK

We always have to be on the lookout for surprises, which can manifest in so many ways in our lives, via people we meet, events, dreams and dream images, nature beings, unbidden thoughts, insights, fears, hopes, pain, joy—the list could go on and on. Any of these surprises can be a blessing or a disaster. In whichever way a person might experience a visitor, it may provide an opening to change, growth, or healing with the right attitude. These surprises can be scary for people, mainly because they are out of the person’s control. They can show up at night via dreams that are disturbing or thoughts that nag at one, preventing sleep. They may be anxieties that go unnoticed with the busyness of daily life but float to consciousness as one slows down in the evening and prepares for nighttime. However, throughout history, night has been a time associated with dangers, darkness, ghosts, restlessness. This unease about the night is often portrayed in movies, novels, and plays.

When I lived in Italy, I had the opportunity to see three plays, all of which had the opening scene taking place in the night. The first play was *Agamemnon* written by Aeschylus (1975), in 458 B.C. The night atmosphere was set on the darkened stage. The play began with a watchman waiting and watching for the flame to appear, which would indicate that Troy had been captured. The watchman described his waiting as a

long year's vigil in which he found no pleasure. The watchman's description, and the actor's performance, gave that sense of how hard waiting and watching is, and how very lonely as well.

The second play was performed in the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. *Antigone*, a Greek tragedy by Sophocles (1984) (440 B.C.), opened in total darkness evoking the look and feel of the deep of night. Antigone, who stood in the shadows barely visible to the audience, divulged things to her sister that she dared not speak in the light of day. The words, needing the cover of night, regarded the deaths of her brothers and her desire to give one of the brothers the rites of burial that had been forbidden by the king. She explained that performing these rites in the dark of night would mean risking her life. Yet she felt compelled to provide her brother with the rite of burial. The strength of Antigone's actions in the depth of the night, and her vigilance around being caught, created a very tense atmosphere throughout the theater. I am reminded of how some vigils are frightening and take courage to carry out. Today's racial tensions are revealing loudly and clearly that vigilance is an ever-present aspect in the lives of most, if not all, people of color, and unfortunately, nighttime in particular calls for extra vigilance.

The third play I attended was Shakespeare's (1603/2005) *Hamlet*, written in the 17th century, which opened with a dark setting depicting the middle of the night. Darkness surrounded the sentinels on watch who discussed stories of the appearance of a ghost. The ghost, some imagined, was the ghost of the late King, the father of Hamlet. As they told these stories, the ghost appeared as the clock struck one, the darkest part of the night that is moving into a new day. With fear and confusion gripping the men with this ghostly visitor in the night, the stage was set for the tragedies to follow.

In all three plays, the night, in its darkness and shadows, evoked feelings of fear, watchfulness, longing for light, secrecy, otherworldly beings. The darkness of the night also foretold the darkness in deeds done, and deeds about to be done. Jung (1979), in his book, *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, spoke of the dark and unconscious "night-side of life" that is out of the control of the psyche (p. 95). He writes that poets would name figures of night demons, spirits, or gods, and that prophets and seers would find the night a source of nourishment. Jung states, "But this same region also has its victims: the great evildoers and destroyers who darken the face of the times, and the madmen who approach too near the fire" (p. 95).

Anyone who works in the field of therapy has encountered people who are experiencing this "dark night" phenomenon—or perhaps have gone through it themselves. St. John of the Cross, a 16th century Roman Catholic mystic, wrote of this experience in his book, *Dark Night of the Soul*, which was originally published in 1562. Michael Fordham (1958) discusses it in his book, *The Objective Psyche*, and quotes Cross' description of the soul's experience as follows: "The soul finds no pleasure in anything ... the soul sinks into a state of silence and solitude, she does nothing but allows herself ... to be led by God, to receive and to listen with loving interior attentiveness" (p. 139). In the E. Allison Peers translation of *Dark Night of the Soul*, John of the Cross describes the first night as "bitter and terrible to the senses ... the second bears no comparison with it, for it is horrible and awful to the spirit" (Peers & Cross, 1990, p. 61). For people who experience this dark night, it comes upon them as an unknown visitor. Jung (1968) states that "the hero's main feat is to overcome the monster of darkness: it is the long-hoped-for feat and expected triumph of consciousness over unconsciousness" (p. 167).

At times there is a "night" in the therapeutic process. In an article on the void in psychotherapy, found in the book, *The Couch and the Tree*, Van Dusen (1958) writes

of the cycle of night and day as the cycle of Yin Yang, the ancient Chinese concept of duality and balance making a wholeness. He describes the Yin Yang concept as experienced in therapeutic work. “The fertile void of night comes into psychotherapy so that we might dissolve a little and come out a little changed into a new day” (p. 58). He encourages the analyst (or the therapist) to not be afraid of the void, but rather be open to it. Being open to the “night” in therapy calls for adapting to the difficulties of such a time. We are in a “night” as we live through this time of the pandemic. We are called upon to adapt to different ways of living with many unknowns for the future. We have to wait for the next phase of being safe, for businesses to open, for a vaccine to be produced. We wait for the dawn, which perhaps will bring in new ways of living, shifting priorities in our lives. The void of the night cannot be escaped in either analytic work, our personal lives, or our collective life. The day dawns only after the night has passed. A night vigil, literal or symbolic, does not fill the void, but helps one enter into it with openness—and hopefully trust—in the light of a new day.

In working on my dissertation on the topic of vigil, I interviewed many people about their experience of keeping vigil. It became clear there was one common element that people realized in their experiences of vigil. They become aware that in a time of vigil they enter into some experience that is unknown, with an equally unknown outcome. This experience of unfamiliar territory and unknown outcome was identified as a time of vigil. An awareness emerged that they were involved in mystery, whether it was a pregnancy awaiting a birth or the process of a loved one dying. It could also be the experience of living with the unknowns of a depression or physical illness. In their own words, individuals described a need to surrender to the process. Some called it surrender to God, some to the Self. An awareness grew in these individuals—an awareness of seeing and hearing differently—as they began to name their experiences of vigil. I sensed they became more attentive to life in their inner, as well as outer, world. The challenge was about trying to stay alert and awake through the *night* of whatever they were going through.

As I reflect back on my life of many years, I realize I experienced numerous times of vigil—although I didn’t call the experiences “vigil” at the time. Many were as I waited for clarity to come about the next step in my life. Sometimes unknown visitors came, some in the outer world and some the inner world. One example was when I was in the midst of a huge shift in my life, knowing I needed to leave a job and the city where I was living, but no definite plan of the next step. I was waiting, keeping vigil for guidance. As it happened, I had a brief conversation with a woman I barely knew, to whom I mentioned I was looking for something new. She suggested I look into working as a civilian for the Army—a new world indeed. I followed that suggestion, which allowed me to live and work in Europe for 16 years, providing amazing experiences in many forms—the most significant being that I was able to study in Zürich and become a Jungian analyst.

The description of the vigil experiences described by the people I interviewed possessed a similarity to descriptions of psychological process, such as the journey of individuation, or for some, the experience of going through the dark night of the soul. A significant aspect of these processes includes the experience of the unknown visitors coming into our lives. It happens again and again, with some of the visitors being much more impactful in our lives than others. Often it is the “unknown visitor experience” that brings people to seek therapy. For those of us who are psychotherapists, we may be dealing with our own unknown visitor (or visitors) at the same time they are

showing up in the consultation room. This work is challenging. At times it can be frightening and exhausting, but it can also be rewarding and nourishing.

What challenges do we meet as analysts or therapists, as we walk with people through this process? There are many. One question to ask ourselves is, do I keep a vigilant attitude—an attitude that supports an atmosphere of openness to whatever, or whomever, enters the space, be it physical space or psychic? Do I have an attitude that includes the sense of waiting and watching?

WAITING

In a recent interview, Jungian analyst Andreas Schweizer said that he found it took at least 10 years before he could let therapy happen, to really be with the client (Moris, 2016). Any of us who are therapists know the feeling—that urge to do something, to solve the problem, to show some results, etc. With time and experience, we learn we must wait. Even when we think we know the answer—the perfect solution—we must ask ourselves, “Can it wait? Can *I* wait and not say what I’m thinking? Can I hold my brilliant insight?” The urge in us to respond is so strong because “doing” is so valued in our world. However, often, when we offer a solution, or say aloud what we believe to be “the correct answer,” it very likely falls flat with the client, as it is too early for them to hear it; it doesn’t land in their psyche. The suggestion or insight is lost.

Can we wait for the unknown visitor to come in a dream, or an insight from the client, or wait for a synchronicity to happen? When working in supervision with Sonja Marjasch, a Jungian analyst, she suggested that if nothing is happening in the analysis (or seems to be happening), just wait and life will intervene (personal communication). Life will, through some event or experience, get things moving. For the analyst, waiting for the next movement and trusting that a solution will evolve when the time is right, or that healing is happening even if not visible, is very challenging. The desire to be “doing” is strong. Even after all these years of practicing, I still get caught offering solutions at times. It takes great attentiveness and consciousness to not let the urge “to do” take over. Jungian Analyst Kathrin Asper suggests that therapists/analysts who do quick associations for the client do it out of their own fear of not being good enough—a shadow side we need to be aware of (Moris, 2016).

A challenge, especially for the analyst, but sometimes for the client as well, is that of discerning between waiting as an act of vigil, and waiting and avoiding; waiting and laziness; waiting out of fear of what it would mean to move on. Waiting can sometimes be an excuse as it is safer. It is difficult to give up our dependence on old paradigms, our old ways of thinking and walking in the world. It is difficult to imagine living without our neurosis, without our addictions. So the question becomes, when do we wait and when do we challenge? It is not always easy to know. I have found, if I can wait, often a dream will come along that gives a hint, or nudge, or outright declaration that it is time. It could be the client’s dream or a dream of my own. Or it may be an experience of the client’s, or something that happens in the therapeutic process and/or relationship in the room.

There is also the challenge of being honest with ourselves as analysts and therapists. At times we experience boredom we get impatient. Certainly this happens in clients’ lives too. Waiting gets tedious, even waiting in line at the grocery store—I have found this to be a really good place to observe my attitude about waiting. Also, being stuck in traffic is another good time to observe and practice waiting, which can help out in other aspects of life.

Waiting is particularly hard in phases of the analytical process in which there are no dreams, no connections, and few words if any. In a case that was shared while in my training (thus I know permission was given for its telling), I heard the story of a woman who came to an analyst in Zürich for analysis. After the initial greetings she sat in silence for the whole hour, as did the analyst. At the end of the hour, she paid the analyst and left. She returned the next week and the same thing happened: silence the whole hour, and at the end of the session she would pay and leave. This went on for several weeks, maybe longer. And then one day she came and began to speak. She told the analyst that she had to see if he could wait with her, without words. If he could, she knew she could trust him. I don't know that I would have done with that waiting without speaking for so long. I guess, in this case, the unknown visitor was silence.

This woman's waiting is a great example of the client's vigil-keeping, even if totally unconscious of it. Clients consciously or unconsciously may wait and watch for changes within themselves or in their lives or relationships. A client may be testing out the therapist and/or the therapeutic relationship. We are in the process together—whichever chair one sits in—whether in therapy or not, there is a waiting and watching. Rumi's poem, *The Guest House*, speaks to this so well:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond. (Rumi & Barks, ca. 1255/1995, p. 109)

WATCHING

In depth psychology and in the analytical process, an awareness of vigil creates an atmosphere of openness to the mysteries that will unfold. When the work of analysis or therapy begins between an analyst or therapist and client, a vigil is initiated. The analyst begins a period of watching that may last weeks, months, or years. In this watchfulness, we try to be attentive to the spoken and unspoken word, to the conscious and unconscious life of the client, and to what is going on in ourselves—as well as to

the movements that take place in our work together. Hopefully there is a sense of expectancy, without cluttering the psychic space with “our expectations.”

As I have mentioned, therapists need to be on the lookout, alert to surprises, to the unexpected, the unfamiliar, the unknown. Therapists accompany the client through this time of emptiness and darkness. It is a time of staying awake and being alert for whatever may come. This attentiveness is extremely challenging. The desire to nod off in sleep may be very strong, literally or symbolically. Yet being able to keep the vigil, to keep watch together with the client provides tremendous support and care.

I sometimes ponder the question, is there an aspect of the psyche that keeps vigil when one sleeps—even when one is awake and busy with the events of daily life? The other day someone told me of an incident where she was confronted by another woman whom she found difficult. The woman telling me the story said that she had spoken up in response to the woman’s confrontation and was very surprised at the firmness and appropriateness of what she heard herself say. She told me, “It just came out,” as though some aspect of her psyche was ready and waiting for the moment.

Freud (1966) called dreams “guardians of sleep which get rid of disturbances of sleep” (p. 58). He said dreams are like watchmen. In a sense, our dreams keep watch, revealing what is needed in helping to find healthy psychic balance. In the medieval legend of the Holy Grail, Arthur goes to the chapel the night before he is to be crowned king to pray all night. Merlin, the magician, arrives in the middle of the night. Realizing that Arthur must be in battle the next day, Merlin tells him to go to sleep, explaining that he will keep vigil for him through the night. This allows Arthur to sleep, comforted by the knowledge that the prayer would go on. This description presents an archetypal image of someone keeping watch, carrying on the prayer or concern, in sleep. Some may call this image (or sense) of something greater than themselves their angel, or God, the Self, a deceased loved one, the wise old man or woman, or perhaps the two million-year-old man. Waking with a new idea or insight, a thought on how to solve an issue, a new hope (or the strength to face a challenge that needs to be dealt with) are all indications that something is happening in the inner world without conscious help. These kinds of experiences happen in the night, which supports this idea that something or someone is keeping watch.

The analytical process is a wandering process. As we know, there is no clear, linear path on life’s journey toward wholeness. Jung describes “... the way to wholeness [as one] made up, unfortunately, of fateful detours and wrong turnings. It is a *longissima via* [long path], not straight but snakelike ... a path whose labyrinthine twists and turns are not lacking in terrors. It is on this longissima via we meet with those experiences which are said to be ‘inaccessible’” (Jung, 1953, para. 6). This inaccessible aspect demands a great deal of effort. It takes intense listening, watching, waiting—both within ourselves as well as in the process with clients. Some might ask, what are you waiting for, as an analyst or therapist? Do I have an expectation for this person’s life? That, too, I must let go of. If I think I know what the person needs, that is my expectation, my agenda, not the Self’s. What are the person’s dreams pointing to? Even then, it is challenging because I am seeing the dream message/image through my eyes, my experience. As I listen to the client, clearing my agenda is not easy.

Going back to T. S. Eliot’s (1971) poem which says, “wait without hope, for hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love for love would be love for the wrong thing” (p. 27), I see our role as waiting WITH rather than FOR—as the process of the client’s life, or our own lives, unfolds. Waiting is a part of life which is so difficult

at times. Candidates studying and preparing to become analysts know well the experience of waiting—waiting for the inner message of the topic for the symbol paper, or what fairytale one will write about, waiting for readiness to take exams, for a thesis topic, and on and on. All of that helps one become more attentive to the inner divine voice or movement. It moves one to an awareness and strengthening of a deeper process underlying all the requirements of the training.

Waiting with patience is a crucial attribute for all of us to try to develop and continually practice. It is extremely significant in the clinical setting, but also in most every aspect of life. Von Franz (1999) says:

if one can wait patiently, most of the time the deepest motivations and needs gradually become visible and in place of the impulsive possession by an affect, a kind of calm and sureness comes from the inmost core of the psyche and makes possible a responsible decision or step. (p. 171)

In Stephen Mitchell's (1989) *The Enlightened Heart*, Lao-Tzu is attributed with the saying, "Nature never hurries and yet everything is accomplished" (p. 14). Lao-Tzu poses the questions: "Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?" (Lao-Tzu, 2000/4th century B.C.E., chap. 15). We need to trust in the slow work of the Self, and be mindful of waiting and watching in our wanderings of life.

Our world is in the midst of a unique vigil as I write this. We are six months into the pandemic with an unknown time left to go. COVID-19 is an "unknown visitor" that pushed open the door of humanity and came in, affecting life and living around the globe. Reactions vary, with many people being impatient, wanting life to get back to normal, while others give their all to save lives in service. Still others do what they can to stay safe and healthy, wearing masks and washing hands. We are indeed wandering through this experience that has so many unknowns, the foremost: When will this end?

People, consciously or unconsciously, are in a vigil experience of waiting, watching, listening. It may help to ask: how am I keeping vigil in this time of COVID? Do I fill up the day with talking, checking the news, being bored? Some people say they are tired of all the talking; besides, there isn't much to talk about since activities are limited. Others are appreciating the slower pace, the added time for creativity, long walks, and prayer. Others find this experience a barren time with little or no creativity, low energy, an inability to settle, to pray. For some, loneliness and fear fill the day and night. For others, the realization of the importance of connection with friends, family, and coworkers has taken on a new clarity.

Framing this time as a vigil may help us to live in it more consciously. In a vigil, there is the surrender to that which is beyond oneself. It is not giving up, but accepting that there is much that is out of our control. It is how it is. Can we surrender to all the unknowns and still live our lives, even though it is quite different than it was a few months ago?

Psalm 33:20 has a phrase that presents an image for our time in history and this vigil experience, which may be helpful. It is: "Our soul waits . . ." The world soul waits, and each of us in this world is soul-waiting. Rumi, in his poem, *The Breeze at Dawn*, so beautifully reminds us of what is needed and available in our waiting and life wanderings:

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.

Don't go back to sleep.

People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.

The Door is round and open.

Don't go back to sleep. (Rumi & Barks, 1995, p. 36)

Kathryn Kuisle, PhD, is a senior Jungian analyst with a private practice in Colorado Springs, CO. She teaches in the C. G. Jung Institute of Colorado, of which she is president. She lectures and holds dream and fairy tale groups. She taught for years in the Depth Certificate Program of Regis University.

FURTHER READING

Aeschylus. (1975). Agamemnon II. (R. Fagels, Trans.). In *The oresteia* (pp. 1–35). Penguin Classics. (Original work published 458 B.C.E.)

Baucis and Philemon. (2019, April 2). *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baucis_and_Philemon

Eliot, T. S. (1971). *Four quartets*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Fordham, M. (1958). *The objective psyche*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Freud, S. (1966). *Introductory lectures on psycho-analysis* (J. Strachey, Trans. & Ed.). W. W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1920)

Jung, C. G. (1953). Psychology and alchemy (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). In H. Read, M. Fordham, G. Adler, & W. McGuire (Eds.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung* (Vol. 12). Routledge.

Jung, C. G. (1968). The archetypes and the collective unconscious (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). In H. Read, M. Fordham, G. Adler, & W. McGuire (Eds.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung* (vol. 9, part I). Routledge. (Original work published 1959)

Jung, C. G. (1979). The spirit in man, art, and literature (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). In H. Read, M. Fordham, G. Adler, & W. McGuire (Eds.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung* (Vol. 15). Routledge. (Original work published 1966)

Jung, C. G. (2009). *The red book: Liber novus* (S. Shamdasani, Ed., Trans.) W. W. Norton & Co.

Lao-Tzu. (2000). *Tao te ching*. (S. Mitchell, Trans.). In *A new English version: Tao te ching*. Perennial Classics. (Original work published 4th century B.C.E.)

Livni, E. (2017, January 1). An ancient Chinese principle can help you get comfortable with doing less. *Quartz*. Retrieved March 21, 2019 from <https://qz.com/876067/the-chinese-principle-wu-wei-eliminates-the-need-for-lifehacks/>

Mandelbaum, D. G. (1979). *The plains Cree: An ethnographic, historical, and comparative study* (Vol. 9). University of Regina. Canadian Plains Research Center University of Regina Press.

Mitchell, S. (Ed.). (1989). *The enlightened heart: An anthology of sacred poetry*. Harper & Row.

Moris, L. (Director). (2016). *Jungians speaking* [DVD]. Blue Salamander Films.

Peers, E. A., & Cross, J. (1990). *Dark night of the soul* (E. Peers, Trans.). Image Books Doubleday. (Original work published ca. 1578)

- Ruether, R. R. (1992). *Gaia and God, an ecofeminist theology of earth healing*. Harper.
- Rumi, J. A.-D., & Barks, C. (1995). *Rumi: Selected poems* (C. Barks, Trans.). Penguin. (Original work published 1244 and 1273)
- Shakespeare, W. (2005). The tragedy of Hamlet. In S. Wells, G. Taylor, J. Jowett, & W. Montgomery (Eds.), *The Oxford Shakespeare. The complete works* (2nd ed.). Oxford World Classics. (Original work published 1603)
- Sophocles. (1984). Antigone II (R. Fagles, Trans.). In *The three theban plays: Antigone; Oedipus the King; Oedipus at Colonus*. Penguin Classics. (Original work published 441 B.C.E.)
- Van Dusen, W. (1958). Wu wei, no mind and the fertile void in psychotherapy. In A. Molino (Ed.), *The couch and the tree*. North Point Press.
- von Franz, M. (1999). *Archetypal dimensions of the psyche*. C. G. Jung Foundation.
- Wackes, K. (2013). *Daoism*. http://www.worldreligions.kenwackes.net/Unit_9-Daoism_1.html
- Young, P. (2015). *The lore of trees*. <https://longwoodgardens.org/blog/2015-03-09/lore-our-trees>