

Waiting room: Summer of anger

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

If 1967 was America's Summer of Love, 2009 will be remembered as the Summer of Anger. Town halls became "town hells" and tempers flared on the Internet and across other media.

But let's imagine that tomorrow major global problems were solved and the chasm that blue and red Americans scream across was closed. I think we'd still be a pretty angry lot.

Why? Because most of our routine anger is rooted in impatience. Impatient people are inherently aggressive and inclined to harbor an ever-simmering level of frustration. And Americans (alongside other affluent Westerners) have cultivated impatience.

You could say it's in the water—our bottled water. Getting a drink of water used to be as straightforward as turning on a tap. Tap water is still available, but now we must choose between it and any number of forms of bottled water. Do you want carbonated or noncarbonated? Do you want your water flavored with lemon or strawberry or cranberry? Do you want your water caffeinated or enhanced with vitamins?

The variety of bottled waters is just one instance of our being overloaded with choice and information. Fashioned first and foremost as consumers, we face complicated menus not merely at restaurants but in almost every aspect of our lives. The sheer quantity of options, invitations and possibilities creates a certain level of unceasing background pressure.

Not only must we rapidly make decision after decision, but every decision presents us with a series of nagging questions. I've chosen a movie, but did I choose the right movie? I finally decided to join this church rather than that one, but is it the right church? Fifteen of my Facebook friends want me to support 15 different causes—have I selected the best and most deserving ones?

The pressure ratchets up as the marketers, realizing that the public is flooded with choices, shout all the louder to seize our limited and already overwhelmed attention. They know that if we don't make an immediate decision to secure their proffered goods, we probably never will, and that a host of other goods are clamoring for our time and money. So the adept salesperson wants to make and keep us impatient, aware only of the desperately fleeting now.

All this helps explain why the most neglected spiritual discipline of our day may be patience. The church father Tertullian saw this virtue at the heart of Christian spirituality because we cannot attain "the good health of faith and the soundness of the discipline of the Lord without patience." More than that, Tertullian saw patience as "the very nature of God."

He thought patience was so important because he had a profound and hugely capacious sense of what God was about. God was not merely about changing this or that individual soul. In Christ, God was (and is) about nothing less than the business of redeeming and transforming humanity and the entire cosmos. The apostle Paul was not bashful about this objective (see Col. 1:15-19). And the Lord's Prayer expects nothing less than that God's will be "done on earth as it is in heaven."

I suspect that we easily succumb to impatience because we are so focused on ephemera, on the dizzying succession of so many little things. Most of them will not matter in two weeks, or even two days. But when we reduce God's work to a matter of individual, personal success and convenience, and then fixate on slow-moving traffic that is keeping us from our next "urgent" appointment or a colleague's resistance to a new and more efficient office procedure, we can only grow impatient. Of course, these small things are important in their way—but we tend to lose perspective on their true (and limited) importance when we fail to place them within the framework of the big picture.

Paradoxically, learning to pray for fruit that may take generations to blossom may move our skittish selves toward patience. The big picture puts the little stuff in its place and takes away the sting of urgency. And it bestows permanent value on our own small acts of faithful, patient persistence.

"Our prayers," wrote the German pastors J. C. and C. F. Blumhardt (father and son), "are hammer-strokes against the bulwarks of the princes of darkness; they must be oft repeated. Many years can pass by, even a number of generations die away, before a breakthrough occurs. However, not a single hit is wasted; and if they are

continued, then even the most secure wall must finally fall. Then the glory of God will have a clear path upon which to stride forth with healing and blessing for the wasted fields of mankind.”