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# passing time

**Andrea Köhler** With a foreword by **Mark Lilla**

# an essay on waiting

Translated from the German by

**Michael Eskin**

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*For the one,  
and  
for her, who first kept me waiting*



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## FOREWORD

Socrates is waiting. Ordinarily a man convicted of a capital offense—in this case, impiety and corrupting the young—would be executed immediately. But the Athenians think it inauspicious to put anyone to death during the annual mission to Delos, and the ship hasn't returned yet. So Socrates waits, and his friends wait with him.

To pass the time they talk. This conversation seems different from earlier ones, though, more earnest and emotional. One man cries. They all know how the day will end, and why, so they have come to mourn. But Socrates won't allow it. He feigns surprise at their sadness and demands an account, though he knows perfectly well what's going on. They are anxious about their own deaths, not his.

But why? They talk and talk. The hours pass and still his friends can't give him a rational explanation for their fear. Each time

they offer one, Socrates shoots it down. They begin to wonder whether anyone really knows for certain what happens to our souls after we die—or, for that matter, whether they existed before we were born. Socrates is pleased; uncertainty is progress. Now he can take the conversation in hand and drive it to the conclusion they've reached many times before, that it's not important when or how death comes, but how we live in light of it. That's what philosophy is about. It is "practice for dying and being dead." If a man stays true to her, he tells them, always questioning himself and others, his soul will be transported to a blessed land, free from body and time. Whether Socrates convinces his friends of this is uncertain. But he reveals something else just by sitting there with them. They learn through experience that waiting inspires philosophy, and that philosophy in turn gives meaning to the wait. The *Phaedo* enacts the very lesson it imparts. It is Plato's most beautiful dialogue.

Man is the waiting animal. That is the golden sentence in Andrea Köhler's beautiful essay on the experience of waiting, which made a deep impression on me when it originally appeared in German. She is too modest to call it a philosophical work, but I am not. English and American philosophers write about subjective human experiences like love and anger more than they used to, but their interests are mainly ethical and their imaginative range narrow. They are so eager to draw lessons that they tend to ignore the texture of the experiences, leaving that to novelists and poets and filmmakers, whom they dutifully footnote. One pleasure in reading certain continental philosophers—think of Nietzsche, Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Benjamin, Sartre—is how they tarry with subjectivity and its paradoxes. Their first question about an experience is, *what is it like?*, not *what does it imply?* That is how Andrea Köhler begins her inquiry, by asking a seemingly simple question: what exactly is it to wait?

Not long into this small book you realize how little you've thought about it. Yet in a sense all we do is wait. We wait for good things to begin and to end, we wait for bad things to begin and to end. The thoughts and feelings we have are not simple, nor are they the same in these four cases. Sometimes we wait in fear, sometimes we're bored or anxious; sometimes our minds turn toward the past, more often we struggle to forget. We day-dream, we have insights, we make resolutions—school's out. And then there are waits we don't want to end, that are pleasures in themselves. Think of a child's joy in the month before Christmas, and the melancholy that sets in once it's past. The holiday never measures up, not because children's expectations are too high but because the wait is so fun.

It's like that for adults, too, after making love, when the dance of seduction is over and the musicians are packing up their instruments. The older you get, the more voluptuous that state of *attente* can be. Sometimes—try explaining this to a sixteen-year-

old—consummation seems beside the point. We all have our idiosyncrasies when it comes to waiting. I'm very bad at it, except when I'm about to make a long journey. I arrange to get my packing done a day early so I can spend the hours before departure in that peaceful zone of pure anticipation. Because I've removed the armor of daily life but haven't yet put on my psychic traveling suit, I float in a kind of reverie. It's happened that after getting to the airport and hearing my gate called, I've been tempted to turn back and just head home. I've already gotten what I came for.

The art of waiting needs to be learned. Socrates believed you cannot live a good life without it. This same thought appears, in somewhat different forms, in ancient Stoicism, Jewish messianism, Christian mysticism, Montaigne, Pascal, and Kierkegaard. Köhler, with a gentle nod to Heidegger, sees waiting as a kind of letting go, a precious *Gelassenheit* that allows us to feel time, not just think it. In waiting, and perhaps only in

waiting, we experience ourselves as temporal creatures, who both live in the moment and project ourselves into the future. We then experience our very selves. Just as no one can take a bath for you, no one can wait for you. The child who cries when his mother leaves the room gets his first lesson in life: we wait alone. Köhler likens our condition to that of Scheherazade, whose life hangs in the balance for 1001 nights as she tells King Shahryar tales; or Penelope planted before her loom, weaving and unweaving without end. We become ourselves by filling the time.

But we can also get beyond ourselves, if we know how. Andrea Köhler wants to persuade us that learning to wait can open the soul to surprise, to wonder, to what Christian theologians call the *kairos*, the moment in time that breaks through time, reorienting it. In the blink of an eye we experience our time as gift, as miracle. Just let go, she says, and wander:

That all roads are, in some way, also detours  
we feel in places like Venice or Lisbon,

where most lanes and alleys end at city walls, bridges, or canals. How could we bear life without travel, which reminds us that sometimes we must get lost to get where, without knowing it, we want to be: this piazza, that façade, or that enchanted panorama we would not have found without making a wrong turn. But roaming is also an end in itself. It follows the distant call of mysterious voices, children playing, the peal of bells of borrowed time. Only one ready to lose himself in the labyrinth enters into the dream that a place dreams of itself ...

Wise advice for those who would practice living and being alive.

*Mark Lilla*



# PREFACE

## *On Waiting*

Waiting is an imposition. Yet only waiting in its manifold guises—in traffic or love, at the gate or the doctor’s—affords us an embodied sense of time and its promises. *We wait*: for spring and the jackpot, for the food, for an offer, for *the one* and Godot—for test results, happiness, birthdays, and laughs—for a call, for what’s next, for the knock on the door—for the pain to subside and the storm to blow over ... Idleness, by-ways, detours, and boredom—waiting is the page in the book of planned hours that needs to be filled. With luck, its reward will be freedom.

I love the transitions, the liminal states, the hours undefined—for a while, anyway—the twilight that heralds the night, which, in turn, promises more than just morning’s return. Those who can wait know well what it means to live in the conditional tense. How-

ever, if fooled by false hopes we don't make our choices, insisting on 'keeping our options open', we'll easily miss opportunity's call and let life pass us by. Such sins of omission are the stuff of literature, which is ruled by an economy of attention whose costs and benefits cannot be gauged by the standards of our fast-paced, over-committed everyday lives, and which enjoins us—as already Seneca noted—to spend our time in meaningful and hopefully also fulfilling ways.

There is no growth, no development without waiting—think of pregnancy, puberty, or the strains of creative labor. Maybe that's what Franz Kafka meant when he referred to his own life as a "hesitation before birth." Waiting means imagining what might or might not happen. Moreover, insofar as it implies keeping desire in check it lies, as Sigmund Freud has suggested, at the root of all symbolic communion and can thus be considered humanity's first major cultural achievement.

If we think of life as an irregular concatenation of instants, including those moments

when the steady flow of expectation is suddenly interrupted and we feel stuck, then these temporary breaks will appear above all as congestions or interferences in the world of chronic simultaneity we have created at the expense of the open-ended, undulating rhythms of time unfolding. Still, within the high-speed worlds of affluent societies, oases of slowness have emerged—from memorial sites to spas—designed to restore a different measure of time to the ‘hurtling standstill’ of our age. Most of these ‘islands of rest’, however, have something artificial about them, for there is no way back to paradise, which, all promises of salvation notwithstanding, was never to be had in this life anyway. Even a trip around the world will neither relieve us of time’s pressures nor lead us to heaven’s gate, as Heinrich von Kleist imagined. At best, we may wind up on an island that vaguely resembles our idea of earthly bliss. Life’s most mysterious ‘island of rest’, its most enigmatic break, is undoubtedly sleep—our nightly exercise in waiting, from which we will one day no longer awaken.

We can never shake the constitutive duality of our existence, indelibly marked as it is by the unremitting interplay between sleeping and waking, absence and presence, the not-yet and the no-longer. Music may have given the most palpable expression to this duality, even though its rhythms, rests, and repetitions follow patterns that are more predictable than life's vagaries.

I have tried to echo the rhythms of expectation and waiting by punctuating my reflections with fictional interludes spoken by an 'I' not unlike the author's, who, I must confess, considers herself a member of that 'laggard species' that is all too often guilty of tardiness. Which is to say: I wrote this book without the slightest sense of nostalgia or cultural lament, and with the hope of bringing out the joyful aspects of waiting, slowness, and rest.

Of the promise of salvation, the coming of the messiah, and the utopian dream of paradise on earth I will treat only marginally—these forms of expectation involve general questions of faith any speculation on

which will most likely be a foregone conclusion to the true believer. What I am interested in is the kind of waiting that falls squarely within the realm of individual experience, which, in today's world, faces the paradox of an overabundance of too little time.

*Homo sapiens* is the *waiting animal* capable of anticipating death. Even as unpredictability is gradually eliminated from our lives (or so it seems) due to ever-shortening wait times and the vanishing of in-between spaces, our parting rituals, too—from the simple 'so long' to the performance of last rites—adapt to the pressures of a restless world. There was a time when each parting contained a 'small death', in the sense of a strong chance of never seeing each other again or losing touch for good. But since technology has made it possible to stay connected at all times, we can barely imagine what it might mean no longer to be around one day. Waiting is a state in which time holds its breath in order to remind us of our mortality. Its motto is not *carpe diem* but *memento mori*.