

6. Waiting

July 20, 2017

This quote is from an article in *Gizmodo* online, which refers to a study recently published in *Science*. “New research shows that ravens can plan ahead for different types of events, and even resist the urge to take an immediate reward in favor of getting a better one in the future. These capacities are often considered the exclusive domain of humans and great apes, so their presence in birds comes as a surprise...

“Animals that can’t plan ahead live in the moment and act in accordance to immediate needs. Their lives are a flow of action and reaction... Animals that can anticipate the future, on the other hand, can use or build tools to perform a task, engage in bartering behaviors, and exert self-control. In previous experiments, great apes have demonstrated these capacities, but monkeys have not...”

“Being able to wait and think things over before acting is at the core of intelligence and probably explains why corvids are so smart,” said Nieder.

...and perhaps explains why humans seem to be acting less intelligently as time goes on.

Ravens are excellent role models for the sixth of the 10 Most Excellent Practices. Number six is often translated as *patience* or *forbearance*, but I’m going to focus in on one aspect this practice, which I’m going to call *waiting*.

Traditionally, this practice is broken into three areas: the patience of perseverance, patience in the face of insult, and patience of accepting the truth. The patience of perseverance relates to our ability to continue on our path without succumbing to doubt or frustration. Patience of accepting the truth is about our willingness to see deeply the truth of every moment. We’ve spoken about both of these before, and no doubt will in the future. Tonight, though, I want to focus on the second type of patience: patience in the face of insult, and specifically one subset of this, a skill which I call *waiting in the face of unpleasantness*.

Let me tell you a little more about the ravens. After the ravens had discovered that they could use a particular tool to open a container that had a nice treat inside, the researchers did a variety experiments that showed that when given the option of choosing one of several objects, one of which was the tool, the ravens usually chose the tool. (And then later were given the container.) Next, they gave the ravens the option of choosing the tool or getting a treat right away, but the immediate treat was

not as good as the one in the container. Most of the time, the ravens chose the tool, even though they had to wait – sometimes up to 17 hours – to use it to open the container to get the better treat. The ravens did this 86% of the time! That’s pretty amazing to me.

I wonder how many of us could resist a immediate treat for a better treat later! It takes some determination, in my experience.

In this case of deferred gratification, the ravens had to endure the unpleasant situation of not having a treat *now*, and having to wait an unknown amount of time to get one. But they waited. And as far as I can tell from the report, they didn’t drum their claws on the ground, or demand immediate attention, or get into a state of agitation or anger while they waited. They just waited.

I think that would be a challenge for many of us, even if we know that the treat we are waiting for is going to be worth it. Now of course I don’t know how the ravens felt inside. They might have been restraining themselves from attacking the keeper every moment of those 17 hours. But they did refrain, and that’s a key point here. The practice of waiting does not require perfect internal peace. In some ways, patience and equanimity look very similar to me, but this is one way that they differ. Equanimity is an internal state that manifests externally (sometimes it manifests as patience). Waiting is an action that we can choose to take, whether or not we feel patient inside.

And, as I have mentioned with regard to every one of the Most Excellent Practices so far, while inner patience will manifest as external patience, so the activity of intentional patience will develop spontaneous internal patience. Whatever the ravens felt inside, outside, they just waited. Let’s keep this in mind, as we look at some more challenging situations.

I said that traditionally, this *waiting in the face of unpleasantness* is called *patience under insult*. I’ve reworded it like this because *insult* isn’t limited to acts of aggression by others. I’m sure you can see the benefit of not lashing out or fighting back or returning anger for anger when we are under an intentional malicious attack of some sort. But *insult* also refers to *perceived* insult or offense, or even subconscious offense caused by triggers or habits, and so on.

Let me tell you about my visit to California last week. My mother, at 89, has finally quit driving, so I got to drive her around town on a long list of errands that she had been saving up for me. She feels understandably less in control of her life without a car, so she takes control of the driving from the passenger seat. “Turn here. No! That’s wrong! Go to the next corner!” Bear in mind that I grew up in this city, and knew where we were going as well as she did, but I didn’t mind letting her call

the shots. She has odd reasons for going in roundabout ways, but we always get there in the end. Initially, her instructions were sort of endearing, and then they became funny. But after a while they started getting annoying. I guess her tone of voice and choice of words were tapping into my aversion of being told I'm doing something wrong, and eventually I found myself getting aggravated. Finally, we were about a mile from home, and passed my old Junior High School. I'd ridden my bike there every day for two years, and past it for my whole life, so I also had a "normal" way of getting home from there. I started to turn onto a cross street, and my mom cried out, "NO! Not here! Keep going straight!" I took a breath and thought, "OK, I'll go on up to the light," but a couple streets later, she pointed suddenly to the right, saying "TURN HERE!" At that point, I lost my patience. The first thing that came into my head was "I KNOW HOW TO BLOODY WELL GET HOME FROM MY OWN SCHOOL, THANK YOU VERY MUCH!!" Fortunately, the attention I had to pay to traffic and pedestrians and making that turn safely prevented me from voicing that angry comment, and by the time we were safely heading east, the urge to say it had passed. I was still annoyed, but I didn't have that uncontrollable compulsion to speak my mind.

As a result, my mother did not know I was angry, and by the time we got home, I was over it. It did cause me to reflect, however. It was only 10 seconds or so that were needed to still my angry tongue, and it would have been really unpleasant for both of us, for the rest of the day (or longer) if I had actually spoken. I started watching myself more carefully after that, and tried to wait at least five seconds, if not 10, before replying any time that I recognized that annoyed feeling in my gut.

I've talked a lot in the past about being mindful of a situation so that you can respond appropriately. Learn to recognize the sensations in your body that indicate emotional reactions, and learn to see what is *really* happening in a situation before you respond to your brain's *story* of what's going on. But this practice of *waiting* can save the day even when your mindfulness is lacking. When you are in the middle of an unpleasant conversation and you don't remember to be aware of your emotional reactions, you *can* still get into the habit of just waiting five seconds before speaking.

Waiting in the face of unpleasantness doesn't take spiritual prowess or deep insight. It can help cultivate those things, and it can be a result of those things, but the bottom line is that you can do it any time and in any state of mind. It only takes five seconds, and just a little patience.

The 10 Most Excellent Practices for Enduring the Flood and Reaching the Other Shore

Waiting Exercises

1. For the next day or two, while you are engaged in conversation, try waiting five seconds before each time you speak. Do this during all conversations if you can, especially during easy conversations, because if you aren't in a challenging situation, you will be more likely to remember to do this. If you can, when you pause, just wait. Don't be rehearsing your words or distracting yourself. Notice how it feels to intentionally wait for these few seconds every time you speak.
2. If you know you are going to be in a challenging situation soon, prepare for it by reminding yourself to wait before you speak. Don't worry about being mindful of your reactions or your emotions. Just try to remember to pause during the difficult situation. Afterwards, notice how it felt when you remembered to pause versus when you did not. Would the conversation have gone differently if you had not paused before you spoke?