

"Who Said Patience is a Virtue?"  
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
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## INTRODUCTION

When I was a kid, I was fidgety. I think most kids are. But my parents had me convinced that I was the most fidgety kid ever. I fidgeted at the doctor's office; I fidgeted when we visited boring old people on Sunday afternoons; I fidgeted until the bell finally rang at school. I couldn't wait for my birthday. I couldn't wait for Christmas.

"Patience is a virtue" everyone said. And clearly I did not possess that virtue; and clearly I was not inclined to cultivate it. I kept thinking: Who said patience is a virtue?

But, in those dark old days, you couldn't Google things. So, I had no idea who originally said, "Patience is a virtue."

Google it and you will find a persistent question: Is it in the bible? The answer is no.

The first known appearance of "patience is a virtue" in the English language occurs in a fourteenth century poem called *Piers Plowman*. The poem is in Middle English, the same language that Chaucer wrote in.

In a previous career I taught Old and Middle English, and I always meant to publish a translation of *Piers Plowman*, but never got it finished because . . . I didn't have the patience: it's a book-length poem, and there are lots of boring parts. It starts like this:

*In a somer seson, whan softe was the sonne,  
I shoop me into shroudes as I a sheep were,  
In habite as an heremite unholy of werkes . . .*

By tradition the poem was written by a minor-order priest named William Langland. The poem mentions the Malvern Hills, still a rural place far from urban centers where people go hiking and enjoy nature.

Besides the first mention of the phrase “patience is a virtue” in English, the poem contains the first mention in book form of Robin Hood, a legend told in ballades which, if you look at them closely, are clearly anti-tax, anti-government, and pro-weapons.

It isn’t hard to imagine that if we wrote the story of Robin Hood in a contemporary American context, it would be a story of militia survivalists. (Some things never change—which is one point I hope to make today.)

But back to *Piers Plowman*. The title character of the poem, Piers, is a good Christian farmer. In English tradition, the plowman has been seen as an honest, hardworking sort of person. (You can still go into any English pub and order a Plowman’s lunch—very simple and hearty faire.)

Another saying from the poem was common when I was a kid, but I haven’t heard anyone use it in years: “I have to plow my half acre.” Honest Piers says this. He means, “I’m going to work hard and mind my own business.” Plowing your half acre . . .

That saying can also be about keeping your head down and hoping that local government officials don’t notice you. Another attitude that stuck with the poor farmers who moved from England into the American South.

The poem is also the first appearance in English of the Aesop fable about belling the cat.

The fable concerns a parliamentary meeting of mice to discuss how to deal with their common enemy, the cat. A young, inexperienced mouse comes up with the perfect solution: the biggest problem with the cat is that nobody hears him coming. So, the obvious solution is to tie a bell around the cat’s neck. All the mice heartily agree with the young mouse’s plan: Hurrah! Hurrah!

Until an old mouse speaks up and says, “Sure. Great idea. But *who* is going to tie the bell around the cat’s neck?

You see, *Piers Plowman* is a very bitter and cynical poem—it’s about the realities of farm life and the near impossibility of throwing off the yoke of the oppressive rich.

That's what the Robin Hood legends are about. That's what "belling the cat" is about in the context of the poem: The rich need to be stopped. But *who* is going to stop them?

To fourteenth century British farmers, government was a tool of the rich; nothing could be done. They knew there would be no Robin Hood. No one could bell the cat. "Patience is a virtue" is a bitter and cynical statement

All the poor can do is keep their heads down and plow their half acres. Hope is only about hoping that the oppressors in power don't choose to oppress the poor any further. As the saying goes in *Fiddler on the Roof*: "God bless and keep the tsar . . . far from me."

For most of human history, that's about all the poor could hope for.

ONE

In the case of *Piers Plowman*, patience is what the oppressed *must* have. The hope is that taxes won't get any worse and eventually you'll die and get your heavenly reward.

Patience is a necessity; and hope is hard to find. That's also the context of the great poem by Langston Hughes called "Harlem:"

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Both William Langland and Langston Hughes knew the pertinent question: *Who gets to ask whom to be patient?*

For medieval farmers, they were asked to patiently wait for death and heavenly reward, all the while enriching the church and the lords, ladies, and government.

African Americans are asked for patience in achieving the dream of racial equality.

The oppressors always say, "patience!"

In the days after the recent mass shooting on Las Vegas, we heard a simple refrain concerning gun regulation: "Now is not the time to talk about it."

When is a good time to talk about the plight of the poor, the deferred equality of African Americans, and the oppression of under-regulated fire arms?

"Patience. Now is not a good time," say those in power. You're going to have to defer your dream. Try some thoughts and prayers."

When will women in the US achieve salary parity with men? Patience! When will woman go to work without fear of sexual harassment? Patience!

Here's the fact of the matter; the word *patience* and the word *patient*, as in someone under the care of a physician, come from the same Latin root; the meaning is "to suffer" or "endure."

Langston Hughes knew the answer to the question "when will African Americans achieve equality?" The answer is, "You're just going to have to suffer; you're just going to have to endure."

The poet who wrote *Piers Plowman* knew that is the answer as well: "Wait for the next world. In this world, no one can bell the cat."

TWO

Is patience a virtue? I hope I've made the point that the answer is complicated.

In the case of social oppression, patience is *not* a virtue. Patience may be *required* in the face of oppression, but it is not a virtue.

Well, then, why am I not suggesting that we get out there and burn it all down?

The answer is "history:" some peasants during the time of *Piers Plowman* did revolt, led by a man named Wat Tyler. Tyler was executed, as were a good many of his supporters. History teaches that oppressors of whatever stripe always understand and use violence very effectively.

One of history's lessons is that burning it down doesn't work out very well. I think that one thing the US doesn't need any more of just now is violence and anger. We're up to our necks in violence and anger.

As I've said several times, I believe that now more than ever we need progressives to be the grownups in the room.

What I want to propose is that the best mode of our being is to be patiently impatient.

A bedrock principle of Humanism is that human beings *create* human problems. Oppressions due to race, gender, gender difference, sexuality, class . . . . All human created.

I don't recommend that you read a new book called *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-first Century* by Walter Scheidel. It's turgid reading.

Yet Dr. Scheidel uses a lot of history and data, so his conclusions are as sound as scholarship can get. He says this: as soon as human societies get beyond subsistence level, economic inequalities begin to develop.

These inequalities are reversed in three ways: revolution; war; and plague—war and plague being the most sure, since revolutions don't always redistribute wealth. (The American Revolution, for example, *did not* redistribute wealth, it merely changed who got the benefit of taxes, and the tax burden on the poor went up, not down, with the expenses of the war to be paid—we Americans have historically tended to forget that war costs money.

War. Plague. Revolution. As I've said many times, the only other potential redistributer is taxes. Preferable, I think, to war, plague, or revolution.

But we have to be patiently impatient making that happen . . .

### THREE

Nowadays Albert Camus is lumped together with a few other post-Second World War philosophers under the much misunderstood label “Existentialist.” To his own generation, however, Camus had earned his unique cred as part of the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation of France. He had faced death every day for years and come away from the experience calm, sensible, and . . . philosophical. Even-handedly patient.

Not only did Camus participate in combat operations against the Nazis, but he also risked his life writing for an underground Resistance paper called *Combat*. In that paper in October of 1944—a time when the outcome of the war was still very much in doubt—Camus wrote about a friend who had been recently executed by the Nazis. He wrote this: “if we are still here, this is because we did not do enough.”

At first glance, this sounds like classic survivor’s guilt: why did my friend die and I did not? On a deeper level, I think Camus expresses the feelings of many activists: if I’m still alive, I haven’t done enough.

After all, how much is “enough”? It’s easy to slip into thinking, “If we’re trying so hard, why doesn’t anything positive ever happen?”

Perhaps too many of us get up in the morning and think, OK, today I will achieve world peace . . . . Or something of the sort. And then, reality sets in with its complications. And we despair.

As one counter to despair, we have the testimony of Camus’s war era writing. He didn’t know how it would all turn out, but that did not stop him from patiently hoping and eloquently continuing in the struggle.

In your order of service this morning is a quote from the 1990s era cartoon *Pinky and the Brain*. In each episode Pinky—the sidekick—says: “Gee, Brain. What are we going to do tonight?” Brain always replies: “The same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to take over the world.”

I suspect that was Camus’s driving purpose: to take over the world for culture and debate and free thought and good humor in the face of the various human-created totalitarianisms that haunted his lifetime on this planet.

Was he a fool for trying?

As an epigraph to one of his letters in *Combat*, Camus quoted Etienne Pivert de Senancour: "We are mortal. That may be; but let us die *resisting*; and if our lot is complete annihilation, let us not behave in such a way that it seems justice."

" . . . if our lot is complete annihilation, let us not behave in such a way that it seems justice."

You and me, we're lucky: the Gestapo is not likely to show up on our doorstep today. But despair at all the human problems that there are to solve *might* show up.

Camus is there to tell us to buck up: Until his dying day, Camus resisted extremism—both publicly and in his own mind—in all its forms. Camus was one of the adults in the room.

That may be the boldest—and most extreme—statement any of us can make.

## CONCLUSION

I'm not a fidgety kid any more. I still have a short attention span though. But I'm not fidgety. I have *not* learned to be patient with injustice. But I *have* learned to be patient with human nature—both my own and that of others.

The human psyche is the canvas that history paints on, and the human psyche is the painter of human history.

The human psyche is where each of us lives. For each of us, the challenge is as it was for medieval poets and plowmen;

as it was for Harlem Renaissance poets and philosophers: how do we live a good life in the face of reality's sharp edges and society's injustices?

Albert Camus is no doubt correct: If we are alive, we have not done enough.

Yet to live a good life we must be *patiently* impatient as we ask ourselves, "Gee, Brain. What are we going to do tonight?"

And answer: "The same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to make the world a better place."

## SOURCES

About *Piers Plowman*:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piers\\_Plowman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piers_Plowman)

About the Robin Hood legends:

<http://www.robinhoodlegend.com/>

About Langston Hughes:

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/langston-hughes>

About Wat Tyler and the Peasants Revolt:

<http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Wat-Tyler-the-Peasants-Revolt/>

*The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the Twenty-first Century* by Walter Scheidel. <https://press.princeton.edu/titles/10921.html>