

Waiting as an Act of Faith

BY JEN CROW, MINISTER OF PROGRAM LIFE, FIRST UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA



When I mentioned to a friend that I was writing a sermon on waiting as an act of faith, she nearly fell out of her chair laughing. This friend and I, you see, go way back. She knows my struggles, my thoughts, those interior conversations I have with myself when things are good and when things are hard. She knows that when difficult times come, when confusion and fear and pain slide over me, I will be there crying out for an answer, looking for a timeline, wishing to know all the hows and whys and whens of the way things will turn out.

This friend of mine knows that for me to simply be still and wait when the next step is not yet clear, to put down my list of things to do and my lofty, goal-oriented expectations of myself and just sit, if only for five minutes—this discipline of non-action is one of my greatest struggles. And so when my friend finally managed to compose herself after I shared this topic with her, she barely got the words out, asking, “You will be preaching that sermon to yourself, won’t you?” Of course I will.

We live in a culture that resounds with the message: *Don’t just stand there, do something*—a message of constant movement. We experience a daily barrage of words and expectations: piles of mail; messages on our computer and our phone; advertisers, family, friends, and employers all telling us to be or to do something, sharing their expectations of us as we scramble to write down the never-ending lists of what we need to do. Ours is a harried culture, emphasizing communication, information, and action over reflection; constant movement over stillness.

And so it is that I bring you a counter-cultural message, especially in this season of what can become holiday madness—a message of stillness, of waiting, of trust and hopeful expectation, a message that encourages us instead to consider the phrase that my friend repeats like a mantra. *Don’t just do something, she says, stand there.*

Don’t just do something, stand there.

Now, I want to assure you that this is not a sermon advocating procrastination. It is not a sermon asking you to hang back when you feel called to act, or suggesting that you abandon your responsibilities. Times and situations exist in our lives, in our church, in our world community, when waiting and patience will not do, when waiting is nothing more than an act of cowardice. What I’m advocating for here is more the place of patience, the place of stillness and silence in a spiritual life, in a life that strives constantly to align actions with deeply held values.

This kind of patience requires wisdom. It asks us to discern which situations in our life and in the world might benefit from patience, which might benefit from action, and which might require an artful combination of the two. What I am suggesting is not to always lean one way or the other, as our particular culture might demand. I am hoping that we might expand our imaginations a bit to cultivate the practice of patience, of stillness, of waiting, so that when those inevitable occasions arise and we feel rushed to fix something, to change something, to DO anything, we might consider, just consider, waiting as an option.

When we actively choose to wait, surrendering to the reality that some things take more time than we’d like, we cannot always know how it will turn out. But in those moments when we choose stillness and patience over frustration, anger, and impatience, there is no doubt in my mind that we are engaging in a counter-cultural act which, I believe, is also a spiritual act.

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The world is all gates,
all opportunities,
strings of tension
waiting to be struck.

—Ralph Waldo
Emerson

A monthly for religious liberals

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Standing there in silence with all the rush of our lives swirling around us, waiting and actively doing nothing, we may find ourselves overwhelmed by the chatter within. Or we might just, over time, hear the voice of our soul coming through like a whisper. Parker Palmer describes the soul as something like a wild animal. Shy and easily frightened, the soul can only be heard when we cease stomping around the woods with our flashlights and instead sit quietly at the base of a tree, waiting for it to appear.

How might you search for and welcome emptiness?

The waiting can be awfully uncomfortable, though. Our muscles start to ache; we get cold, and tired of being still. We begin to think that if we just moved to the next tree then the thing we hope for will appear. I agree with the French philosopher, Max Picard, who noted that "Silence is the central place of faith." It is in silence, often, that we are most uncomfortable, and it is in silence that trust, faith, and our sometimes shy and whispering inner voice might emerge. It is in silence that we might wait with hopeful expectancy, and it is in silence, in those times of waiting, that many of us find ourselves face to face with fear. For in those moments we may be left only with silence, and a perhaps terrifying emptiness.

The emptiness that comes with waiting is a natural, inextricable part of any spiritual life, whether it feels excruciatingly uncomfortable or calming and clarifying. The stories of feeling empty and confused followed by periods of clarity and trust are as old as time. Within the Hebrew tradition we have the Israelites wandering 40 years in the desert, Jonah's time in the belly of the whale, and Job's incredible loss and pain. In a more modern context we have Henry David Thoreau's days of

wandering and pondering in the woods of Walden Pond. These periods of emptiness that call for patience and stillness come to almost all of us in different degrees and in different ways.

Deep in the caves of Cologne, in a place where Jews hid during the Nazi Holocaust, these words were found etched into the stone wall: "I believe in the sun even though it is late in rising. I believe in love though it is absent. I believe in God though he is silent...." *I believe in the sun even though it is late in rising. I believe in love though it is absent. I believe in God though he is silent.*

For Martin Buber, the image of an eclipse is useful in understanding the different phases of our faith journey. When a solar eclipse occurs, we find ourselves bathed in unusual daytime darkness. It appears from our vantage point here on earth that the sun has gone out, and without the aid of science we would have no idea how long this darkness would last, or if it would ever go away. Buber offers this metaphor for our life-long journeys of faith: "An eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes," he explains, "not in the sun itself."

In times of silence and of doubt, when we experience the darkness of the eclipse, our faith can remain, shifting and changing as we continue to learn and to experience the full range of life.

As Unitarian Universalists, doubt, change and on-going growth play a central role in our spiritual lives. There is more to a lifelong journey of faith than a destination or a particular set of beliefs. That, I believe, is one of the particular gifts of Unitarian Universalism. We are not only permitted, we are actually *expected* to change over time. Our faith tradition is at ease with the notion that as our lives unfold, as we read and learn and experience different things, our beliefs will change as well.

In this way we are spiritual craftspeople whose life's work lies in the never-

ending journey of aligning our actions with our deepest values. We are people who seek out experiences that cause us to grow. I imagine we won't have to search too far for those occasions that call for stillness, for waiting, for the opportunity to practice patience.

There are daily moments, large and small, when waiting is the best option: moments when we breathe deeply before responding in conversation, when we consider allowing ourselves to grow in experience and wisdom before taking on a particular task, when we commit to an on-going spiritual practice, when we engage in the sometimes slow process of forgiveness in relationship. These moments of patience allow us to pause, think clearly, be gentle with ourselves, and, perhaps, try again.

Given the culture we live in, such welcoming of emptiness and patience will be no easy task, and it may not come naturally to us.

In this season as winter begins, I invite you to expand your imagination a bit, to consider how you might welcome stillness into your life, and into your faith. How might you search for and welcome emptiness? Could you turn the radio off in your car, sit quietly for five minutes before you pick up the phone or turn on the TV, take the risk of acknowledging that just for now you may not know exactly what you believe? How might you practice stillness, practice patience with yourself and with others? How might you consider quiet as an option in more situations, preparing yourself for those times when the natural rhythm of your spiritual life calls for waiting that might take much, much longer?

As we ease into this practice of patience and waiting, may we grow in trust that just as light and darkness, speech and silence define each other, so do patience and action define one another as well. May we grow in the wisdom of patience, trusting in times of darkness amid the ebb and flow of our lives. ■

Waiting

BY RANDY MILLER, CLF MEMBER
INCARCERATED IN INDIANA

For most people waiting takes place in a doctor's office, a teller's line at the local bank, or in a drive-thru anticipating food. For others, maybe it's waiting for your boyfriend to "pop the question" or for your child to come running out of school and greet you with a smile and a hug as the bell rings. Whether it's a few minutes or a few hours, waiting is normally over quickly and painlessly, and life goes on.

Unfortunately, for me waiting is my life. I wait every day, locked in a six-by-nine foot cell 23 hours a day, for any sign of life from the outside world. I wake up and wait for breakfast to be shoved through my door. I wait to be hand-cuffed and taken out for my thirty minutes of recreation. I wait for lunch. I wait to be cuffed again and taken to the shower. I wait for the mail and hope for a message from the outside that I am not forgotten, and as the guard passes me by and leaves me empty handed I wait for the feelings of hopelessness and despair to pass, so I can go to sleep and wake up to wait once again.

Such waiting has been my life for over eight years now, ever since my selfish, thoughtless actions placed me in the care of the Department of Corrections. In the short term, I wait for those who run my life to tell me what I can do today. In the long term, I wait to see if I can prevent myself from making the same mistakes again once I am released. Every day is waiting and every day is the same, waiting for tomorrow in hopes that it will be better than today.

This *used* to be my life, consumed by waiting, engulfed in negativity. Then it slowly occurred to me that all this time I was wasting—worrying and waiting for change to come to me—was actually my opportunity to make the changes

within myself I needed in order to live the life I wished for, free from desire, greed and negativity.

Waiting became meditation and a chance for me to look deep within myself and discover who I really am. Waiting became my chance, my church, my Sacred Circle of growth and reflection. While waiting I confronted my fears and found forgiveness for myself. I discovered compassion and an appreciation for the many blessings I never noticed I had. Waiting became prayer and a bond between myself and the Creator. It became my chance to give thanks for the clarity I had found and to search for further guidance. Waiting became my chance to give honor and praise to something higher than myself.

Imagine the connection you create when you pause and truly pray four to five times a day—a connection not only with the Creator, but also with each and every person you pray for. The guards I used to hate began to become those I love. And once that hatred was gone from my heart and I acted with compassion towards them, the guards slowly started to act more compassionately towards me as well.

Waiting led me to meditation and prayer, which eventually helped me discover what I consider to be my purpose in this life: to work towards the complete prevention of youth crime and abuse. While waiting, I've made every attempt possible to inquire and learn as much as I can about child psychology and the juvenile justice system. I have written for several youth advocacy organizations and developed



some close relationships with the people running those groups. Now that I have been placed back into the general population in the prison, I've also been chosen to participate in a "scared straight" program for local teens.

Waiting should be called what it truly is, opportunity. Everyone has the same opportunity to turn all that idle time into meditation, prayer and self discovery. Instead of being in a hurry to get where we're going, we can take advantage of the time the Creator gives us to be thankful and reflect upon the blessings we have been given.

I used to dread all the hours I spent alone, waiting for something to happen. Now I miss those opportunities so much. Waiting gave me a chance for discovery, and what I found, in all likelihood, saved my life. It is my prayer and my hope that everyone will learn to love to wait, and to see waiting for the precious gift that it is. ■

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Expectant Fathers

December makes me think of pregnancy. There were Mary and Elizabeth, whom we hear about in the nativity stories this time of year, but there was also my wife Dori, who was five months along and suffering a bad case of morning sickness when our son was carried off a big Northwest Airlines jet and delivered into our arms just a few days before Christmas. Having wanted a baby for years, we suddenly had one C.O.D. and another on lay-away. It's not the way we would have planned it, but that's how it happened.

Important things in life have a funny way of arriving on their own schedule, despite what we do to prepare ourselves. My wife and I learned wonderful breathing exercises in a birthing class we attended with a roomful of other soon-to-be parents. Pick a spot, focus your attention, slow inhale, fast exhale. Would my panting make Dori's labor one bit easier? Probably not. But it gave me something to take my mind off the disturbing fact that I had been totally removed from the chain of command. Powers greater than myself had been set in motion. I could pant or holler, stay calm or get hysterical, but it would not alter the outcome. God willing, and mother enduring, the baby would be born in its own sweet time.

Birth, death and most of the agony and ecstasy in between descend when they will. If that sounds scary, I can only offer the same advice the midwife probably gave to Joseph. Try to breathe into it. Trust life to do the rest.



by **Gary Kowalski**.
From *Green Mountain Spring and Other Leaps of Faith*, published by Skinner House in 1997. Available from the CLF

library by contacting Beth Murray at bmurray@clfu.org. ■

Solstice Reflection

In a dark time the eye begins to see. —Theodore Roethke

Solstice celebrations capture the moment when the darkness gives way to the light. For thousands of years, people have tried to hold onto that moment of joy and certainty.

Five thousand years ago at Newgrange, in Ireland, people built a circular structure that let a shaft of light travel deep into a central chamber at the dawning of the winter solstice. There, the light pierced the darkness and illuminated intricate symbols, including eye-shaped carvings. We can imagine how the anxiety caused by the approaching darkness was relieved when the light was seen making its journey down the shaft. Then, observers could predict their future with confidence.



In time, after the winter, the growing and harvest seasons would follow.

Constructing shafts for the light to penetrate deeply into the central chamber of our hearts is an effort that must take place in a time of waiting and uncertainty, in a time before “the eye begins to see.” It is a time when adjustments need to be made. Christians call it *Advent*, a time to prepare for the arrival of the Son, the light of the world.

So much of what we do in life depends on how we respond to this waiting moment.

Such a time can be met with confidence and anticipation or anxiety and despair; confidence that the light will be seen again, or anxiety that it may never return. We are in such a moment today. Violence, whether we call it war or terrorism, fills our minds. Compassionless public policies gnaw at our hearts as the season of compassion approaches.

What can we do in this waiting moment?

Practice imagining the dawning shaft of light as it makes its way into your own heart. To direct this light requires us to, as Dag Hammarskjöld suggests, “vanish as an end and remain purely as a means.” No small task. But if you doubt its effectiveness, think of those who have made a difference in your life and what they have selflessly given you. Or think of the man whose life we celebrate at Christmas. Jesus, it is clear, vanished as an “end” and lived only as a “means.”

Join with others. No solitary individual assembled the great circular stones at Newgrange. People gathered together to build a chamber where the light could be reflected in others' eyes. Waiting is not the same as being passive. Living in this dark time requires active waiting.

The only question is: Will we, in this waiting time, build a chamber where the light can be reflected widely enough so that others can see its beauty?

by **Stephen Shick**, minister, Unitarian Church of Marlborough and Hudson, Massachusetts. Published by Skinner House in 2003 in *How We Are Called: A Meditation Anthology*, Mary Benard and Kirstie Anderson, editors. ■



I Am Waiting

I am waiting for my case to come up
and I am waiting
for a rebirth of wonder
and I am waiting for someone
to really discover America
and wail
and I am waiting
for the discovery
of a new symbolic western frontier
and I am waiting
for the American Eagle
to really spread its wings
and straighten up and fly right
and I am waiting for the Age of
Anxiety
to drop dead
and I am waiting
for the war to be fought
which will make the world safe
for anarchy
and I am waiting for the final
withering away
of all governments
and I am perpetually awaiting
a rebirth of wonder

I am waiting for the second coming
and I am waiting
for a religious revival
to sweep thru the state of Arizona
and I am waiting
for the grapes of wrath to be stored
and I am waiting
for them to prove
that God is really American
and I am waiting
to see God on television
piped into church altars
if they can find
the right channel
to tune it in on
and I am waiting
for the last supper to be served again
and a strange new appetizer
and I am perpetually awaiting
a rebirth of wonder....

I am waiting for the great divide to be
crossed
and I am anxiously waiting

For the secret of eternal life to be
discovered
by an obscure practitioner
and I am waiting
for the storms of life
to be over
and I am waiting to set sail for
happiness
and I am waiting
for a reconstructed Mayflower
to reach America
with its picture story and TV rights
sold in advance to the natives
and I am waiting
for the lost music to sound again
in the Lost Continent
in a new rebirth of wonder....

I am waiting
to get some intimations
of immortality
by recollecting my early childhood
and I am waiting

for the green mornings to come again
youth's dumb green fields come back
again
and I am waiting
for some strains of unpremeditated art
to shake my typewriter
and I am waiting to write
the great indelible poem
and I am waiting
for the last long rapture
and I am perpetually waiting
for the fleeting lovers on the
Grecian Urn
to catch each other at last
and embrace
and I am awaiting
perpetually and forever
a renaissance of wonder

By **Lawrence Ferlinghetti**, from *A Coney Island of the Mind*. Copyright © 1958, by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Reprinted with the permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation. ■

Carol Our Christmas

Carol our Christmas, an upside down Christmas:
snow is not falling and trees are not bare.

Carol the summer and welcome the Christ Child,
warm in our sunshine and sweetness of air.

Sing of the gold and the green and the sparkle,
water and river and lure of the beach.

Sing in the happiness of open spaces,
sing a nativity summer can reach!

Shepherds and musterers move over hillsides,
finding, not angels, but sheep to be shorn,
wise ones make journeys, whatever the season,
searching for signs of the truth to be born.

Right side up Christmas belongs to the universe,
made in the moment a woman gives birth:

hope is the Jesus gift, love is the offering,
everywhere, anywhere, here on the earth. ■



by **Shirley Erena Murray**, Rumati Beach, New Zealand. © 1992
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From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY
SENIOR MINISTER,
CHURCH OF THE
LARGER FELLOWSHIP

I've spent a lot of time in waiting rooms in my life. Waiting for doctors, waiting for dentists, waiting for my tires to be rotated. Waiting for my airplane to board, waiting for my table at the restaurant, waiting for my number to come up at the Department of Motor Vehicles. Waiting. Sometimes only for a few seconds, sometimes for an interminably long time, to hear: "The doctor will see you now."

On reflection, I realize I've also spent time in a lot of phantom waiting rooms, waiting for something that will *never* happen. Waiting for justice to roll down like waters. Waiting for my father to apologize for his violent temper. Waiting for my partner to decide to become a different person.

It's as if I've been sitting in the dentist's office waiting for my name to be called so my party can go eat a gourmet dinner. Sitting in the tire rotation place waiting to board a plane. Sitting at the DMV waiting for a medical diagnosis. Phantom waiting rooms. Waiting for something that is guaranteed not to happen.

Years ago I worked with a therapist who had grown up in a Buddhist monastery in Japan. He told me that when he was about twelve, the Abbot at the monastery woke him up very early one morning and told him with urgency: "Go to the tea store, quickly, and buy some rice!" Obediently, he ran into the village, waited for the tea store to open, and asked for rice. He returned to the monastery to say that they did not sell rice at the tea store, only tea.

The next morning, the Abbot woke him still earlier. "Go to the tea store, run faster, and buy some rice!" When the

boy protested, the Abbot walked silently away. So the boy got up, got dressed, and went to the tea store again, this time running. "I am sorry, sir, they only sell tea."

The next morning, the Abbot woke him earlier still, and said, "Run as fast as you can to the tea store to get some rice!" The sleepy boy sat up on his mat, staring at the Abbot in disbelief. Something on his face must have made it clear that he knew no matter how quickly or how early he went to the tea store, they would never have rice. The Abbot patted him and told him he could go back to sleep.

**Phantom waiting rooms.
Waiting for something
we claim to want, but
will never get if we keep
waiting where we are.**

That story became a central metaphor in my work with the therapist. As I would be puzzling about how to say something just right to someone in my life, asking them in exactly the way that they might finally give me what I wanted, he would say, "Do you think if you get there earlier they will have rice?" Or simply, "Run faster!"

Phantom waiting rooms. Waiting for something we claim to want, but will never get if we keep waiting where we are. The most frustrating waiting rooms, of course, are the ones that purport to deliver what we're looking for. Doctors who don't really take a good look at our bodies but focus instead on the pharmaceutical drugs they hope we will use. Parents who we need to take care of us when we are vulnerable, but clearly their own problems are consuming all of the energy they have. Preachers who drone on and bore us, concentrating more on displaying their own brilliance than offering us the healing words that we need. These bad

experiences may convince us that we'll never get what we want, so we might as well be passive and wait.

Ask yourself: What have you waited for so long that you begin to think it doesn't exist, or that you can never have it? And then ask yourself: Where am I waiting for this? Have I spent months or years camped out in front of the tea store, hoping that one day they might decide to stock rice? In these critical days in which we live, the time for phantom waiting rooms is over—if it ever existed. Our planet needs us to be awake, to be alive, to claim our power as active forces!

It is my deepest hope that each person reading this, no matter whether in a prison cell or a luxurious home, has stopped looking outside for what can only come from within. So often we are waiting for other people to offer us love that we can only offer ourselves. We can find this love, no matter who and where we are, if we open to the spark of divinity, that wisdom that lives within each of us. From there, as we learn how to nurture our deepest selves, I pray that we may find ways to serve our wider world, to care for and support one another, and to be strong enough to hold on to what we know to be true, no matter who tells us we are wrong. ■



REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

You're standing there in the cold, waiting for the bus to come, and every minute feels like an hour. You're waiting for the phone call that will give you the results of a medical test, and the more you try not to think about it, the more your pulse races in fear. You're waiting for your birthday to come, or for the start of vacation, and the anticipation is half pleasure and half agony.



One way or another, life seems to involve as much waiting as doing. We can't shoot hoops until our friend arrives, can't go out until the baby wakes from a nap, can't make a decision without information that won't be available until Thursday. It's the story of our lives, but more particularly it's the story of this season. In the Christian liturgical year, this is Advent, the time of waiting. What an amazing idea. Not only do you get a holiday, you also have a holiday about waiting for the holiday to come.

It seems, somehow, so terribly old-fashioned. After all, we are busy people. There are things to get done, jobs to perform, hobbies to pursue, information we must gather. Of course we spend time waiting, but it's something we minimize, not celebrate.



We check our email while in line at the grocery store. We squeeze in a few exercises as the computer boots up.

What could we modern, busy people want with a holiday—a whole month of holiday—that is all about waiting?

The Advent we see around us is often more commercial than religious. From about Halloween to Christmas the carols come on in the grocery store and the ads on TV are full of snow-flocked trees and gift wrapping and Santas selling everything from carpeting to package delivery. And, of course, there is a time of waiting as we count off the days remaining before the presents need to be mailed or the cookies need to be baked or the Christmas letter needs to be written, with the reward of the holiday itself gleaming there at the end of the line.

It is, it seems to me, a time of waiting not unlike standing in line for the big roller coasters at Disney World. It's a time of enduring the present with your eyes on the big pay-off at the end. You inch forward, surrounded by a bunch of strangers who have a tendency to push. And when you finally get to your destination and hop into the car with your friends, there is the adrenaline rush of that quick ride, which is great fun, but leaves you feeling just a little bit sick to your stomach at the end.

That's not the kind of waiting that the holiday of Advent is supposed to be about. The waiting of Advent is, not surprisingly, much more like waiting for the arrival of a baby. It's a chance to stretch our hearts, to make room for more love. It's a time to rearrange the furniture in our crowded lives, to find a place where love can stay. It's a chance to consider whether, when love comes knocking at the door, we simply declare "No room!" and tell it to go sleep in the barn.

The season of Advent reminds us that times of waiting are not necessarily about emptiness—that they could, instead, be times of openness.

Advent is a time of knitting booties or sewing quilts, redecorating a room or building a toy box, all of which are excuses for creating the open space in our minds to dream about the possibilities of who the coming child might be and what kind of gifts they might bring.

The waiting of Advent is, not surprisingly, much more like waiting for the arrival of a baby.

In the end, the season of Advent comes down to hope. As long as we are waiting, as long as we can imagine that there is something good in store, we can afford to go on in the face of all of life's hardship. The remarkable thing about waiting for a baby is that you never know who will arrive. You don't know what they will look like, what talents might develop, what personality will take shape. It's the one time in life that there is nothing to calculate, no



costs and benefits to weigh and analyze, no bets to hedge. You simply make a choice to open your heart and your life to love, and be glad at whatever comes. You may wait impatiently. As anyone who's ever been pregnant can tell you, you may wait uncomfortably.

But you wait in the anticipation that something as precious as it is unknown is just around the corner. And in that waiting, in that open space where we practice unconditional love, hope can't help but catch and grow and shine through the long night. ■



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The wet air curls against me as I sit in the boat without seeing through the fog. I'm without my bearings, lost between the elements of air and water. It happens this way, that sometimes, when a person sits on a boat surrounded by water and fog so thick, so deep, there is a dizziness. It seems the boat has turned over and is rising, moving upward through sky like a vanishing cloud. Or it descends to new depths in the world beneath, as if to fall into underground rivers and be carried away.

Without her bearings this person loses her place in the world. She must sit still, without panic, and wait for a glimpse of something to emerge from the fog. Maybe there will be a clearing through which a tree branch is seen, or a shard of blue sky.... Or it might be a wading bird that appears out of the thick whiteness, and since its feet touch bottom, you can tell which way is up, which is down. You can tell where gravity lives. Then, only then, can you believe there is something solid in the world.

And so I sit here in fog and air and wait for something to become visible. ■



by *Linda Hogan*, excerpted from her novel *Power*, published in 1998 by W. W. Norton and Company.