

Waiting for Godot: When Renewal Won't Come

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Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is an absurdist existential play in which two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, spend the entire play waiting for a third character, Godot, who never appears. The play is variously funny, frustrating, despairing, boring and ridiculous. All of the action takes place as Vladimir and Estragon wait endlessly for the mysterious Godot. They are bored, they despair, they muse about God and existence, but nothing they do seems to matter or have any joy in it. The set is bare except for a single leafless tree. They cannot remember why they are there, or why they are waiting for Godot. The events repeat meaninglessly and the characters are unable to affect them. Estragon is unable to even recognize the repetition, while Vladimir has glimmers of awareness that only

bring him rage at the meaninglessness of it all. The few times when the characters choose to do something about their predicament, they cannot seem to physically enact their decision. They go on in endless, meaningless repetition, peppered by suffering, boredom, and cruelty. Its unpleasant. In fact, at the French debut of the play, a French theatre critic famously stood up in the middle of the show, shouted, “Je n’attend pas pour Godot!”—which means, “I will not wait for Godot!”—and stormed out.

Beckett is reflecting a real experience of human existence. He is distilling it and then asking people to experience it through the play. Life feels like this sometimes, and when it does, there is no thinking your way out of it. Like with the characters in the play, thoughts become circular, and the few times reason leads to a decision, the will to carry it out is absent. A friend told me

that when he gets in these kinds of funks, he *knows* he should get up and *do* something—anything—but he can't seem to climb off the couch. Grief, depression, despair, even boredom, can be paralyzing.

There was a period in my early 20s when I was struggling to find any sense of joy or hope. I could not talk to my family, I was not interested in hanging out with my friends, and some days just getting out of bed seemed like too much. At the time I remembered that I used to enjoy these things, but I could not imagine enjoying them again. I could barely imagine simply not hating everything. I had experienced a lot of loss, which had affected my understanding of how the world worked: my grief had turned into hopelessness and despair.

I had a friend at the time who also knew darkness. He had experienced loss, too, and also struggled with cynicism and

despair. I felt like he was the only person who understood. Every day, we would walk together down to the lake, sit on a wooden bench and look out over the water. We would smoke cigarettes. I actually hate smoking, and I didn't even enjoy it then, but it was a way of materializing my grief, my slowly smoldering rage, of being able to see it, hold it in my hand, grind it out, and light it again. It was a physical manifestation of my pain, and it gave me a sense of control over it. But other than that, we just sat. Every day, for hours. We would walk down to the lake, sit in front of it staring, and smoke. Sometimes we would talk. Sometimes we wouldn't.

This time of year is complex. People tell me autumn is high cultural season in Chicago, and I can see why. The beauty is intoxicating. The weather is practically perfect. The air is crisp, you can wear sweaters or apparently shorts and be comfortable,

and there are lovely people-and-food-filled holidays. But all this beauty also portends death. The leaves shimmer with color because they are dying. As they carpet the ground with sound and smell, they leave the tree branches bare for the winter. The air is crisp because it is getting colder. Winter is coming—hovering around the corner like a shadow. The warm cups of cider we are holding today foreshadow shivering cold hands of tomorrow. The harvest season is when we bring in the last batch of fresh food we gather before the ground lies fallow under the snow. Renewal comes with a price: often when we are stepping into a new life, there is a letting go of elements of a previous one. There is loss, and transition.

There are many ways human beings mark the seasonal transitions and their relationship to transitions in our lives. Our modern celebration of Halloween has evolved from an ancient

Celtic holiday called Samhain. Samhain marked the change of the seasons—the shift from the warm abundant summer months to the cold long winter, which was often full of death. In the season of the in-between time, Samhain, the night of the shift on October 31, was believed to be the night when the veil between this world and the Great Beyond was the thinnest. It was a night when spirits could cross over and visit this earthly world, when the living could be in touch with the dead. People understood that some ghosts who came to visit were friendly, the spirits of dead loved ones come back to visit, while others were mean-spirited. They put out food to welcome the friendly ones and wore masks at night in the streets to hide from the mean ones.

Whether or not you believe in a metaphysical world beyond this one, the tradition points at something that obviously still resonates today. While our ghosts might not take form and bang

chains, or ride around on a horse with a Jack-O-Lantern head, we all have ghosts in our lives. Sometimes they are just a shadow haunting the dark recesses of our mind. Other times they are more present in our daily lives: the ghost of a lost loved one that still seems to be sitting at the table with you, present in his or her absence. The ghost of a previous minister, who is still influencing a congregation in real ways. The ghost of a dream lost, rattling the chains longing and fogging up the view of present possibility. The veil between the worlds is thin. The veil between your conscious and your subconscious can be disrupted. The veil between the present and the past is permeable. In this season of transition, ghosts can feel more present. It is in the in-between times, the times when realities are less stable, that the chimeras of other-worldly presences make themselves more loudly known. The beauty is mysterious, and

the transition is disconcerting. It can be eerie, wistful, painful, absurd. The in-between time feels a lot like waiting.

There are a variety of ways to experience waiting. Many of us have had the experience of Waiting for Godot. It is boring, peppered with suffering. There is an almost unreal quality to it: absurd, even macabre, but not in a fun way. In a dark, sad way. Ghosts can become more difficult to reckon with as the days grow shorter. There's a reason human beings are afraid of the dark: its harder to see, easier to trip, easier to get lost. We are more vulnerable.

When I used to sit with my friend on that bench, staring out at the water, I felt adrift. I was waiting, but without any sense that anything would ever come. I had the sense that we were just drifting there, meaninglessly, and terribly. But like Vladimir and Estragon, I was not drifting alone. I had a friend sitting next to

me, staring out at the same scene. Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, though, I felt my friend understood me. We shared gallows humor about the absurdity of it all. We shared smokes. We shared silence. I was not alone.

In the end, this was what got me through that time in my life. There was someone there with me. No matter how far away the closest person felt, no matter what chasm of loneliness I was shouting across, there was another person on the other side, shouting back. Like in *Waiting for Godot*, some of the chatter was meaningless, but we still chattered. To share that chatter mattered. It did not fix it, but it did make it a little bit better. It did not spare me my hurt and it did not span the chasm between us, but it mattered that someone else was there with me.

Sometimes there is nothing to do but wait in this absurd tragicomedy of life. Sometimes renewal won't come and we

cannot make it come—for ourselves or for people we love. The grief, the loss, and the pain is too present, too loud, too real. The boredom is endless. Everything feels meaningless. Sometimes the mean ghosts come around and haunt our minds, and no mask will make them go away. Sometimes the ghost of a lost loved one is too present for you to be able to move on—and maybe you're not ready to move on yet. When you find yourselves or your loved ones facing this sort of suffering, you just have to keep waiting, keep sitting there, existing through it. There is no magic wand to wave, no quick fix. Only the slow unrolling of time will change it. It stinks, and nothing I or anyone else can say is going to make it better. But we will sit with you. We will sit with you, and stare at the sea, or keep the silence, or share a smoke. If you are struggling with this absurdist version of the play called life, let someone in. Let them drift with you for a little while. Its no miracle, but it is the only useful thing. And if

you know your loved one is drifting, go sit with them. Don't try to fix it, or tell them to snap out of it, or get over it. Don't assume you know anything about their ghosts, or their experience of drifting. Just listen, or be willing to watch the waves together in silence. Renewal comes with a price. The season only passes with time. And the only thing that makes a difference in the waiting is company.