



What Are We Waiting for?
(Learning to Be Present In an
Increasingly Noisy World) Jeff Goins

Annie Dillard once said that how we spend our days is how we spend our lives. If that's true, then I spend most of my life waiting. In fact, we all do.

Waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store.

Waiting to rent a movie.

Waiting for the movie to end.

Waiting to turn thirty.

Waiting for the weekend.

Waiting for vacation.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

Life is an endless series of appointments and phone calls and procrastinated tasks that need to but sometimes never get done. A long list of incomplete projects and broken promises that tomorrow will be better.

But it never is.

Most of life is not the big moments that take our breath away. It's being put on hold and waiting in office lobbies, watching that stupid hourglass rotate again and again on the computer screen. It's load times and legal processes. Long, drawn-out bureaucratic systems that leave us sitting, watching the clock.

Life is one big wait.

For many of us, gone are the days of hopping trains through Europe and road-tripping across the country with college friends. Things have slowed down, and responsibilities have accumulated.

And where does that leave us, the dreamers and imagineers who thought we were born to make the world a better place?

The days might start to feel longer or more static. Everything may seem to be standing still. But of course, it's not. And in this stillness, we have an opportunity.

We must learn the discipline of being present, of acknowledging the lessons life is trying to teach us, or surrender to a cynical, mediocre existence.

Because even on an adventure, you have to wait. You have to deal with what happens when things don't turn out the way you expect.

Welcome to the wait.

As a husband, father, writer, and entrepreneur, I'm beginning to see how important it is to know what to do with waiting.

My schedule is full of obligations and opportunities that tempt me to push through the now, moving on to the next thing. Maybe a lunch appointment that forces me to forget the importance of spending time with my family. Or the promise of more income next year that robs me the joy of appreciating what I have now.

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For each of us, there are unique, everyday distractions that call us away from being here—now: The temptation to linger in the past or to hope for a better future; The alluring eyes of a coworker who appreciates you more than your spouse does. And every time we are lulled away from our lives and distanced from the moment, we lose something of ourselves and our purpose.

And we wonder why the abundant life seems so evasive, so distant. Like something just beyond our reach, it seems to taunt us. And we may eventually despair of ever finding it.

In frustration, as a last resort, we may turn to an old but familiar lesson: one of letting go, of looking beyond personal ambition and replacing it with something better, the slow growth that happens when we surrender to what all these delays and setbacks are really trying to teach us.

So it seems the antidote to our restlessness is not necessarily another adventure or experience of a lifetime, but a deep abiding in where we are now.

How does this happen? With waiting. Normal, everyday situations that test our patience and cause us to reflect on what really matters.

Personally, I wish there was another way. As the world's least patient person, I don't like waiting at all. But I'm beginning to see the value—and inevitability—of the times in between the big moments in life.

Maybe, like me, you've spent much of your life longing for the next season. Hoping better things would come when you graduated or got married or gave your life to a career worthy of your talents. But now, you're not so sure holding out for what's to come is the smartest strategy. If that's you, then I have some good news: you are not alone.

We all want to live meaningful lives full of experiences we can be proud of. We want a story to tell our grandkids that will make them go, "Wow!" That's a given. And certainly, I'm not telling you to be boring or give up on your hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Quite the opposite.

What I am trying to say is this: many of us in search of life's greatest moments fail to recognize that the best moments are the ones happening right now.

The "good stuff" isn't ahead of or behind us. It's somewhere in between—right in the midst of this moment, here and now.

Maybe Annie Dillard is right. Maybe what we call "mundane," what feels boring and ordinary, is really how we spend our lives. And if that's true, then we have an opportunity to make the most of these in-between moments.

Life In Between the Panels

Like a lot of kids, I used to read comic books when I was younger. On my weekly trip to the comic store, every Saturday I spent what little money was in my wallet and then would rush home to read them.

Comic books are short and exciting, snapshots of a larger story distilled down to the essential actions and dialogue. For the adolescent reader in a world full of distractions, they are the perfect diversion.

But comic books don't paint an adequate picture of reality. And like a lot of media, they give us a warped, incomplete view of life.

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As much as Batman inspires us, or Superman encourages us to be brave, our lives look little like the characters who live their lives on the panels. No, our lives happen somewhere in between.

As someone who grows up reading these short stories, I always hoped that my life might look a little like a comic book—plus or minus any mutant abilities (that would be a bonus). But growing up, I've started to see the slowness of life and work and wondered:

Is it inevitable that our experiences tend toward the more mundane as we mature? Or is there something in these moments that most of us are missing?

In a scene from the movie *Super*, a crude film about superheroes, the protagonist Frank is sitting with his self-appointed sidekick, Libby, and they're waiting in vain for something to happen. For an opportunity to fight evil. For the police sirens to start. For or something significant to happen. But nothing does. So they sit in boredom, wondering what to do.

FRANK: *Maybe you need to be bored sometimes.*

LIBBY: *You don't see them bored in comic books.*

FRANK: *That's what happens in between the panels.*

LIBBY: *Wow, in between the panels! Is that where we are right now?*

As I watched the film, I thought: “Yes, this is where we spend most of our lives—in between the panels.”

We all want a life that that looks a little more like the stories we read in books or watch on the big screen. But real life doesn’t often feel like an adventure. In fact, it can seem rather boring. And as hard as we try to make it more interesting, we are still stuck with the frequent, less-than-remarkable moments. So what do we do with those?

Here’s the good news: This is not the end of the tale. We are not left to live lives of insignificance and mediocrity. But life does slow down; inconveniences do occur; and delays happen to the best of us.

The challenge is what we do with these times. Will we waste, or learn to use, our waiting?

The slower times contain a wealth of wisdom for us to tap into, but only when we recognize and learn to be present in them. Otherwise, we start looking in these moments for every chance to escape reality, and we end up growing detached from it and living a fantasy.

This is why many of us fight the quiet and try to fill the void of inactivity with constant busyness. It's why we sometimes stay up late or can't sleep. We wonder—and worry—if this is all life has to offer. All the while, we miss the truth: The thing we want to escape is what holds the key to our contentment.

What if, instead of pining for the action of the next frame, we surrendered to the wait, learning to live in those “boring” moments with more intentionality? What if we fell in love with the in-between times, relishing instead of resenting them? Well, then, we might just learn a few important lessons.

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LESSON 1: Learn to slow down and see.

In a world saturated with social media and unlimited interruptions, many of us struggle to focus on what's in front of us.

With so many voices vying for our attention—billboards and TV commercials and annoying Internet pop-ups—it's hard to know what's worth our attention. We end up tuning it all out, the good with the bad.

The surprising solution to our distraction confronts us every day.

At the shopping mall.

In long lines of traffic.

Even standing at the coffee pot.

Every time we wait is an opportunity to be present in an increasingly noisy world, to listen to the voices we sometimes lose in the static. And as we embrace the wait, we learn to appreciate the delays and postponements that teach us some things in life are worth waiting for. As we learn to wait, we see the things that we would otherwise miss.

LESSON 2: Learn to let go.

Life was meant to be more than the daily humdrum. It was supposed to be enjoyable. Full of purpose, not just stress and worry. So where has all our satisfaction gone? Where is our pleasure, our joy?

Do you know what we're really doing when we take a vacation to an exotic location? Searching for the life we've always wanted? We seek meaning in our jobs and reserve our greatest happiness for the "major" moments in life.

Certainly, there's nothing wrong with looking forward to a trip or anticipating life's greatest milestones. But when we hold back our whole selves from the smaller parts of life because we're waiting for the big moment, we miss out on the good stuff.

The truth is we're often we're disappointed with what we find in the major moments. Sure, we may be happy; but we are far from complete. Even the best job, best husband, and best vacation have their flaws. What we were hoping for, what we dreamed would be a larger-than-life experience, ends up looking a lot like morning breath and spreadsheets.

So we keep searching and wonder why it becomes harder to sit still and just be. All the while, what we're searching for sits in front of us, hidden in normal, everyday inconveniences.

If we reserve our joy only for the experiences of a lifetime, we may miss the life in the experience. Such opportunities are everywhere, waiting for us to see them. But first we must learn to open our eyes, to recognize the gift of waiting.

LESSON 3: Learn to be grateful.

In the in-between, we begin to recognize the temporal nature of life and that eventually all waiting must end. When it does, we are left with what we did with the time in between the beginning and the end.

Watching a tree grow will likely drive you crazy. It's a boring process if you stand there, impatiently tapping your foot, waiting for it to do something. But if you step away and come back later, you'll be surprised to see something beautiful emerge.

The fact is the plant is doing something: it's growing. Just not as quickly as you might like. Our culture has conditioned us to expect instant results and overnight success; this impatience runs so rampant that we dress it up in terms like "efficiency" and "productivity."

But really what's happening is we are conditioning ourselves to get what we want now, all the time. This mindset robs us of the lessons that waiting can teach us, causing us to miss out on the slow but important stuff of life.

Most growth happens this way: slowly, over time. You don't see it happening—in fact, sometimes the circumstances feel more like inconveniences than opportunities—but then one day you wake up, amazed at how far you've come.

When it comes to waiting, we have a choice. We can try to bypass the delays to get immediate gratification. Or we can embrace the “long game” of life and invest those days, months, and years in the slow, but intentional growth that leads to lasting change.

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Assignment (What Now?)

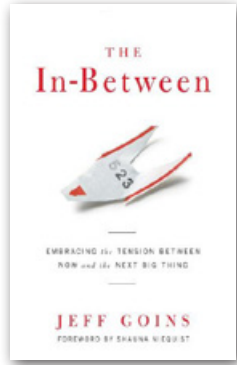
So here's where you come in. It's time for you to take what you've learned and do something with it. If you've realized that the dull moments are the ones shaping us into who we're supposed to be, then it's time to act. (You can start, if you'd like, by joining the [Slow Down Challenge](#).)

Recall a time that forced you to wait and how that discomfort caused you to grow, to learn to be content with not being finished.

And as you reflect on your life, maybe you'll even learn as I did that life is one big wait.

We can sit by and watch life pass us, or we can choose to participate in it, even the slow parts. Especially the slow parts. 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Jeff Goins was born and raised outside of Chicago. After graduating from Illinois College, he spent a year on the road with a band and was once recognized on the streets of Taipei. An author, speaker, and writing coach, Jeff's work has been featured on some of the largest blogs in the world. He lives in Franklin, TN with his family. You can find him online at [goinswriter.com](#).

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