

## CHAPTER ONE

# Waiting

In the early 1980s the Swedish diplomat Jan Eliasson and Prime Minister Olof Palme had an appointment with Saddam Hussein in one of his Baghdad palaces. They had to wait at their hotel for a few days before, late one night, a limousine with black windows arrived to pick them up. They were driven around in the city for an hour so as to make them lose their bearings.

Next they had to pass a security control and were led into a waiting room decorated with gold and oak paneling. After being left for a long time in this luxurious setting they were taken to yet another waiting room, where a chief of staff received them. Ten minutes later a door was thrown open and they were led to a third room, and there he stood: Saddam. With his staff huddled behind him, and holding a hand out stiffly, the dictator greeted the two Swedes.

It was insulting but also somewhat ridiculous, Eliasson remembers, and he pointed out that Saddam was using an age-old trick to diminish one's opponent and enlarge one's own importance (Kantor and Keller 2008: 42).

### *An Elusive Microdrama*

Our interest in waiting as a mode of doing nothing started with less dramatic situations, among them the mundane scene in the supermarket described

earlier. We began by looking for examples of inconspicuous non-events in unglamorous activities such as waiting for a bus and standing in line.

But we soon found that “waiting” covers a wide range of behaviors and emotional reactions. Refugees wait anxiously for asylum. Prisoners count the days until their discharge. Bored workers and schoolchildren look at their watches every five minutes toward the end of a day. Yet other variants include waiting for a plumber who never shows up, or for one’s beloved, who is late.

What kind of “doing nothing” constitutes waiting? What lies hidden behind this insignificant and seemingly inactive pursuit, when one has to “simply wait,” as Estragon expressed it in Samuel Beckett’s 1952 play, *Waiting for Godot*?<sup>1</sup> To explore these questions we started with the concrete infrastructure of waiting, the material locations where we observed the activity. From there we went on to look at the nature of waiting time. How do people experience and handle that kind of time in different situations? Next we turned our attention to how people learn to wait in different cultural settings. We investigated one of the most institutionalized forms of waiting—queuing or standing in line, a behavior that is permeated by rules, norms, rituals, and feelings. This theme took us further into the emotionality of waiting and how, as in our example from Baghdad, waiting links to power. Who waits for whom, who can make others wait, and what difference do gender and class make?

We have focused on waiting as a cultural practice, one shaped by shifting historical and social conditions and something that people learn to handle, a skill that must be trained and developed. The examples are collected from different situations and parts of the world, from hospitals, street corners, travel experiences, and the final weeks of pregnancy.

Waits can be short—as during the time it takes to ride with strangers in an elevator—but they can also feel interminable or fill an entire life. For some people waiting seems to be a full-time activity that takes up all their energy and being. This certainly applies to a Chinese physician named Lin Kong. In the mid-1960s he worked at an army hospital in a city somewhere in China. He was married to a peasant woman whom his parents had chosen

for him and whom he did not love. He had left his wife in the village to take care of their little daughter and his old parents. In the city he fell in love with Manna Wu, a nurse at the hospital, and thereafter, every summer for seventeen years Lin returned to his village to ask his wife for a divorce. But in vain. Because the hospital authorities did not approve of a liaison between them, Lin Kong and Manna Wu refrained from a sexual relationship—day after day, year after year. Eighteen years passed before, in 1984, Lin Kong was allowed to divorce his wife and marry Manna Wu.

Ha Jin tells this story of extreme patience in his novel *Waiting* (2000). The reader might well wonder how it would feel to wait for a loved person for almost twenty years, seeing and talking to the beloved every day during that time. In Lin Kong's case waiting became a way of life; we will return to Lin and Manna, for the novel opens up interesting perspectives.

When we considered more mundane situations of waiting we were struck by the ways in which they constantly alter shape, direction, and meaning. How to study such a multifaceted and elusive activity? At first we enthusiastically gathered ethnographic observations in train stations, doctors' waiting rooms, and ticket lines. Quite often we returned with photos and descriptions of what on the surface seemed trivial non-events, over which we often pondered for hours, trying to see below the surface.

At 12:25 P.M., a middle-aged woman in a blue gown arrives at the bus station in a Swedish town. She is looking around the waiting room with a gaze that finally stops for a few seconds at the electronic timetable high up on the wall. Then she walks resolutely toward one of the exits and takes a seat on an empty bench next to the door. She looks hesitant and a little nervous. Again and again she touches her hair, as if to check that it is in order.

After a little while the woman takes a cell phone and a magazine from her bag and holds them in her lap. She looks for the bus ticket in her purse and finds it. Then she sinks her chin in her hand and glances at a young couple in the corner of the waiting room.

Shortly before the bus is scheduled to arrive she joins other travelers in a short queue, everyone keeping approximately one meter's distance

from the others. The woman waits patiently in fifth position, holding her phone, magazine, and bus ticket, until the bus arrives and the front door opens. It is now 12:37 P.M., and the woman steps on board.

Returning home with this description of an everyday moment we had to think about what was actually going on during this fifteen-minute wait for a bus. Interestingly, while trying to observe people in such situations we found ourselves caught up in the boredom and restlessness that emanated from our subjects. We found ourselves losing our concentration, our thoughts began to wander, and we forgot what we were there for and started thinking of other things. After all, nothing seemed to be happening, unlike situations where others are *doing* something—as, for example, after the waiting is over.

### *Doing Something—but What?*

Like many other examples of “doing nothing,” waiting turned out to be a phenomenon that is difficult to study head-on. Clearly we needed alternative ethnographic approaches to de-trivialize the mundane activity. We started by looking at artists who have explored waiting as a strange country, among them the Swedish artist Elin Wikström, who in 1994 molded the paradox of waiting as a passive activity in a performance titled *Rebecka is waiting for Anna, Anna is waiting for Cecilia, Cecilia is waiting for Marie . . .*

For the duration of a performance, female volunteers selected by the artist come to a café at the gallery at a scheduled time and wait for fifteen minutes. They sit at a table among other gallery visitors, as if they were the first to arrive for a rendezvous and wait for their date. Occasionally they look at their watches, rummage through a bag, and read a magazine. At a prearranged time they leave the gallery, one at a time, to be replaced by other women, who continue the everyday theater of waiting for someone who never arrives. In this exhibition waiting is presented as a meaningless effort. The women’s ostensible expectations are never fulfilled. Wikström puts it like this:

It's like when you're meeting somebody and you're the first one there. You're waiting for other persons and you go through a lot of emotions. You're worried about what happened to them, angry they're late, and it's also a loss of prestige because people are thinking, "Oh, she got stood up."

The performance wants to give an alternative view of women. In commercials and films, they are always depicted as waiting. Waiting to grow up, waiting for Mr. Right, waiting to have kids and waiting for those grown kids to come visit them. Always this passive idea of waiting. So for once, I wanted the women to be waiting for each other.<sup>2</sup>

Even waiting in vain is at least doing something. Men and women resort to all kinds of mundane activities while waiting, as if to deny that they are waiting or to try to forget the fact: reading, talking, listening to music, watching television screens, making cell phone calls, or gaming, WAPing, and playing or working with their laptops. They also tend to be, to some degree, tense and irritated, as is obvious from their looking at clocks, wrist watches, timetables, graffiti, and litter on the floor, or staring absentmindedly into the distance with an inward look. In such situations there is always the question of how and where one should look when among strangers, or what strategies to develop for "averting the gaze so as not to engage in interaction" (Bissell 2007: 285). Some people watch eagerly for the bus or train they are waiting for, as if they could conjure it into existence. Or they may camouflage their pursuit by eating, drinking, or smoking, as if they were not waiting at all.

The choreography of waiting is rich. Depending on personality and circumstances, people stand or sit still, balance on their feet, lean against walls or pillars, squat, lie down, or walk to and fro; some people whistle, hum, sleep, or close their eyes. They wait alone or in a group, in an orderly line or randomly dispersed, with their arms folded or hanging loosely, hands in pockets or in their laps. For an ethnographer there is in fact much to observe. The dominant impression of passivity is contradicted by all the small movements and diversions.

Above all, however, waiting seems to be a state of mind, a psychological condition that is not directly observable. An observer can learn to see what

is going on at bus stops, for example, or in the waiting room of a dental office. But no one can really know what others are up to, what they are feeling or daydreaming.

Instead of guessing at what people were thinking while waiting we decided to try a more physical approach. What could an “ecology of waiting” be? How is its infrastructure organized? What kinds of social interaction are involved?

## VENUES OF WAITING

Any location can become a waiting area, but when asked to name the first places that came to mind people cited those traditionally associated with waiting: ticket offices, highway toll booths, department stores, and the places connected with waiting for transport—gates, lounges, platforms, benches, and shelters. Other oft-cited places included schools, prisons, business offices, hospitals, and dental offices. All these “container spaces,” as David Bissell (2007: 282) has called them, “are designed to hold the body, where the body is prompted to remain inert in a form of temporary stasis.”

Such places possess a character and traditions of their own. Lining up at the supermarket is not the same as standing in a theater queue. Waiting one’s turn at a golf course is surely different from waiting in a courthouse corridor. Both the physical context of the place and the cultural expectations of the individual affect the experience of waiting.

Some objects—the life vest under the seat, for example, or the emergency ladder on the wall—fall into the standby category. Other things inhabit a mode of alert passivity—the fire station, the rocket on the launch pad, the bottle of vintage wine being saved for a special occasion. Still others, among them certain electrical appliances, must never go out; they must rest with one eye open, watchful technological wild beasts.

And then there are settings and objects that rest in a kind of cultural latency. This condition has been discussed by Jonas Frykman (2005), who exemplifies his case with the many monuments left over from the Communist

era in Eastern Europe, which people don't know what to do with. For the time being, many statues and monuments have been left in parks and market-places awaiting whatever future use or destruction may lie ahead.

### *Ecological Supports*

Above all, waiting transforms the location in which the waiting occurs. Back in the 1960s and 1970s the American sociologist Barry Schwartz (1975: 15ff.) made several empirical studies of what he called the ecological supports of waiting and queuing. Through what means are queuers channeled to keep the order of "first come, first served," he asked.

He found that queue discipline is always tightest in those settings that provide a good infrastructure for waiting. In the United States, for example, barriers, signs, and directions of all kinds—including twisted cords and red ribbons between chrome poles in cinemas and amusement parks, and painted floor lines with foot-shaped marks—suggest where one should stand in line or what distance to keep from others in the queue. Some places even have line managers and queue supervisors, with or without uniforms. These kinds of props all have their own history and reveal interesting national differences.

Take, for example, the advent of what was called the "thinking ticket machine," which was developed in Sweden in the 1960s and came to revolutionize waiting. The technology could be puzzling to the neophyte, for there were no orderly queues but only a seemingly disorganized crowd of people holding little paper slips with numbers, which they glanced at now and then. It was no longer possible to know who was next in line. Yet today these machines are part of the waiting ecology at many service facilities around the world, where they have transformed collective waiting in queues into a successful individual activity.

One of the most obvious ecological supports for waiting is the transit shelter. The Swedish architect Lena Hackzell (1999) developed a passion for this service to travelers. For several years while traveling all over the world she documented different kinds of waiting shelters.

Impressed by the diversity of forms and functions they represent, Hackzell describes these shelters not only as accommodations for waiting but also as places to meet, and thus places that are often permeated with the magic of travel. She observed that many dreams can be symbolized by the little buildings that provide protection against inclement weather. She also noted that the length of time travelers are expected to have to spend in a shelter to a great extent governs its design. Travelers to the Galapagos Islands, for example, can have a long wait for the boat taxi. Thus the hard benches here were supplemented with comfortable hammocks. One of the photos in Hackzell's book shows men lying down and talking while they wait for the boat.

Shelters in the Indian countryside where traffic is sparse have special requirements. Passengers who have missed the only bus of the day are allowed to sleep overnight on the roof of the shelter, where it is cooler and safer. The women of the village make sure that pitchers of fresh water are always available. The roof also has a specially designed surface and a shelf, where it is possible to cook.

Hackzell found that a shelter can have a double function. It can be built as both a classical temple for worship and a gathering place. Even those who do not actually intend to travel get together there just to look at other people and feel a part of things. All over the world human beings have always congregated at bus stops and railway stations, to be with others and see life in action. Such places tend to be full of possibilities and surprises, and there the magic of travel overshadows the tedium of waiting. The very fact that someone is sitting in a shelter with a suitcase arouses the imagination of those who see her. Where may she be going?

### *Framing the Passing of Time*

Waiting rooms such as halls, lobbies, and corridors are easy to recognize even if they are not labeled. Presumably there is something about the layout of the space, the choices of wallpaper and furniture. Or could it be the colors, the smells, the subdued soundscape? Inarguably, though, there is an



aura emanating from these locations that influences people's behavior and moods.

One should, however, be careful not to exaggerate the similarities between waiting places. Each place also has its own features, which depend on what kind of waiting is done there and by whom. While she was a patient at a Boston-area breast center, Laura E. Tanner (2002: 117) found herself moved from a tastefully furnished outer waiting area into a space that felt like both an actual and a symbolic assault on her autonomy. In this room she felt that it would be impossible to establish the kind of personal territory that is possible even in crowded locker rooms or transit waiting areas.

Inhabited almost entirely by women in hospital johnnies waiting for mammograms, ultrasounds, or biopsies, that inner waiting room, with its bare-bones décor of chairs, women's bodies, and magazines, threw into relief dynamics less visible in the softly lit public space of an outer waiting room furnished with antique reproductions. In this room, strangers sat stiffly beside one another in rows, clutching the tops of gowns that threatened constantly to open. Handbags—large and small, leather, vinyl, scuffed, shiny—perched on laps. In the corner, one gowned woman cried silently, while another stared blankly ahead. The sound of nurses' clogs on the Formica floor preceded each announcement of a patient's name.

Official waiting rooms are often described as boring places with neutral curtains, indifferent art on the bare walls, withered plants, uncomfortable chairs arranged symmetrically, old magazines, a gloomy atmosphere, and long waits. Such spaces may be replicated a thousand times over and yet look essentially the same. Designs in chromium and artificial leather, linoleum floors, fluorescent lights, and hard plastic chairs, found in so many anterooms of officialdom such as workplaces, surgeries, and unemployment offices, are anonymous yet instantly recognizable.

There are of course more opulent waiting rooms. Given money or rank, it is possible to upgrade the quality of spatial design. There is a hierarchy of designs, from first-class saloons to business lounges. The central railway station in Stockholm still has a waiting room for royalty. It is a large hall

with heavy silk draperies, soft carpets, and rococo furniture. Three magnificent cut-glass chandeliers hang from the ceiling. Four royal palaces are painted on the walls. The antique pendulum clock is said always to read 8:42. The place feels forlorn, as if it were waiting in vain for its visitors.<sup>3</sup>

How do people experience different waiting rooms? Through photographs and installations, the British artist Hatty Lee has reflected on the coexistence of the public and the private, and on the architecture that frames the passing of time. Some of her minimalist pictures show red seats on a green synthetic carpet in front of plain white walls. A solitary flowerpot in the corner tries to provide distraction. This is the generic waiting room, where it is impossible to decide for what purpose one is expected to stay. Similarly nondescript rooms are often used to represent waiting per se, as in this student's complaint in our survey:

Often it's like hanging around in a big empty waiting room where a friendly nurse sticks her head out every so often and says, "Just a few more moments and we can see you," and then nothing for hours. You've read all the magazines lying on the chairs and tables, you feel a sense of urgency to get on with it that nothing and no one else seems to share. Meanwhile, everything seems to be happening, but not to you.

Hatty Lee's installations work like a kind of time machine, where the viewer is reminded of the emptiness of waiting (Morrissey 2000: 16). There is nothing to do in Lee's spaces but wait, or think about waiting. The rooms become physical metaphors for formless space and the overwhelming materialization of time, the kind of experience we have when in the hospital or at the dentist. Some of these spaces show attempts to provide distractions, but even the droning TV channel and collections of tattered toys and old magazines often just add to the feeling that time has stopped.

Especially in the waiting rooms of hospitals, Laura E. Tanner (2002: 124) has noticed, reading becomes oddly difficult. It is harder to leave one's body behind and let a book or magazine take over the imagination while worrying, being ill, or in pain, though that is just the time when one may be most in need of such escape. In the medical waiting room even a short magazine

article can elude our attention, Tanner observes, “distracted as we are by the tick-tock of our own uncomfortable embodiment.”

In Swedish waiting rooms, silence or very subdued conversation usually rule, but etiquettes of behavior vary. “People are forgetting their manners and imagining that the waiting room is like their car—private and sound-proof,” an American woman angrily writes in her blog on the Internet.<sup>4</sup> She calls for explicit waiting room etiquette:

Don’t use cell phones; turn off the sound of your laptop; don’t chat loudly; don’t sing while listening on your iPod; if you bring children, take care of them; leave magazines and other things where you took them; make room for others; and, finally, sit quietly.

Learn the Zen of doing *nothing*, this woman concludes her lesson. Comments from visitors to this woman’s blog suggest that many people strongly support her rigorous views.<sup>5</sup>

Some waiting spaces create their own unwritten rules and traditions. In a study of low-income, pregnant Latinas in Cleveland, Ohio, the anthropologist Kate E. Masley (2007) observed that her subjects managed their pregnancies amid trying social and cultural conditions. She conducted ethnographic research in the waiting room of an OB-GYN clinic, a place that to her represents a microcosm that many doctors, nurses, and other health workers rarely have the opportunity to see and understand.

Powered by fluorescent lighting, the small waiting room of the OB-GYN clinic has no windows. There are twenty-two chairs lined up in horizontal row formations. Health and clinic information cover the bulletin boards along with seasonal holiday decorations.

The usual sounds are the television, running of the air-conditioner or heater, children laughing, crying, playing, and running around, nurses chatting and moving in and out of rooms, patients conversing, people sighing, laughing, supporting one another, and parents and family members talking to and reprimanding their children. (Masley 2007: 23)

In material ways this is an ordinary waiting room, but the social life it holds makes it different from others. The pregnant women are not in the least

practicing “the Zen of doing nothing.” Instead they are using the space as a platform for talking about matters of common interest, particularly their kids, and for giving and receiving support. It thus becomes an arena where their voices, feelings, and experiences can be heard.

The anxiety that these women may bring with them from the world outside the clinic is diminished by their shared cigarette breaks, consumption of soda, candy, and snacks, and confidences. Displays of mutual affection and the sight of children at play may help to buffer the stresses that the women encounter while waiting for appointments and interacting with doctors, nurses, and administrative assistants. In her fieldwork Kate E. Masley observed that the waiting room space represents an informal social institution where low-income women of different ethnicities possess some authority, take up space, and feel relatively secure.

Studying a waiting room brings to light both cultural rules and potential conflicts about appropriate behavior. A seemingly insignificant activity is directly connected to the existentially urgent questions about how time ought to be spent, which laws of behavior should be upheld, and who should decide these matters. Waiting does strange things with time—but also with social order and power relations.

#### TIME—STICKY, WASTED OR DEAD?

I wonder how many days of one's life are made up of dead time, only spent waiting for it to pass. Right now I have zero desire to do anything. I am really just looking at my watch, waiting for it to be time to cook. Eating is always a good way of killing time. Sure, I have a lot to do; pack my suitcase, finish a paper, empty the memory card, and buy hair conditioner. But all those things are so boring that I prefer to sit here and just wait.<sup>6</sup>

When people like this young person talk about their experiences of waiting, they generally complain about three things. First, that it is boring to wait. Second, when forced to wait, people experience time passing much more slowly than normally, and, third, they feel that they have wasted—“killed”—the time. The perceived difference between slow and fast passage of time is

a relative matter, of course.<sup>7</sup> Looking forward to something delightful is certainly a different time experience than worrying about something such as a doctor's verdict of one's health.<sup>8</sup>

The quality of waiting time constantly shifts. Life stops for the second before the energy-saving bulb lights up and for the minutes spent waiting in the line at the ATM, and it drags during the long teenage years before one attains adult status. To say nothing of the eighteen long years our Chinese couple waited. Almost every moment they must have been thinking of what they were longing for—and at the same time they were busy getting through their everyday chores.

Waiting can thus be an anticipatory mode of being, during which the very act of waiting draws attention to the passing of time. Without inherent content of its own, the time spent waiting passes more slowly because one is so preoccupied with the clock. It is not uncommon that a two-minute wait can feel either like the blink of an eye or like “forever.” At one Web design firm many of the young employees let their computers stay on overnight because they didn't want to wait the thirty seconds for the machines to boot up in the morning (Willim 2002: 102ff.). Similarly, the moments waiting at a traffic light can be disproportionately stressful. This can be exemplified with a detailed description of the experience one of us had during a long wait at a car repair shop.

### *Sticky Time*

How long will the regular maintenance service take, I ask, leaving the car key at the desk. We ought to be done before lunch, is the answer. It is now 7:10 A.M. During the wait I take a walk downtown, have a cup of coffee, read a book, and do some errands. I don't spend much time thinking about the car. Around twelve o'clock I return to the repair shop. The car isn't ready, so I have no option but to sit down in the reception area, where there is a coffee machine and local newspapers. Other people are also there waiting.

Now I become more conscious of the fact that I am waiting for my car. Earlier I had camouflaged it with other tasks. But once I had completed my

errands I found myself in a vacuum. Now waiting itself is the focus of my attention, and I feel boredom, irritation, hope, and finally anxiety about what the service will cost. I have no control over what is happening. I am at the mercy of others. I begin to wander about restlessly.

For a while I study life at the desk, observing the behavior of the mechanics and the customers in this male environment with its established routines. Then I wander to the shop around the corner and look at the car accessories, but with no special interest for the moment in polishing wax or engine heaters. Now and then I glance at the serviceman with whom I had left the key, but he is busy with other customers. I decide to restrain my irritation.

I suddenly find myself daydreaming about buying a new car, maybe one of the shiny Audi Quattro in the showroom—much too expensive, of course, but if I buy a lottery ticket and win a million dollars . . .

I wait for another three quarters of an hour, and then the car is finally ready. I have to take a queuing number to close the transaction. The man behind the reception desk mutters something about the slow computer connection. Then he goes to the printer and stares at it until the receipt prints, as if by doing so he could hurry it along. My choosing to pay with a credit card leads to another delay while the machine contacts the bank. The serviceman taps his fingers on the desk and looks at me meaningfully. I respond with a smile but refrain from yawning, tramping, or twiddling my thumbs.

By the time I have the car key back in my hand I had spent six hours waiting. If I had not jotted down these notes, I would probably have forgotten the boring wait.

The first five hours were by conscious intent spent as if they were not really devoted to waiting but rather as an ordinary morning spent doing things, where it's not necessary constantly to look at one's watch. Pretending not to be engaged in waiting differs only superficially from sitting down in resignation, counting the minutes, and being bored. With make-believe one is trying to ignore what is actually going on. On that particular morning make-believe worked rather well, and time passed smoothly until twelve o'clock. After that, however, the waiting should have been over and the car

ready to pick up, and then time took on a new quality. It became sticky, or gluey, caught in the friction between my hope and my impatience. At that point the seconds and minutes bent into a form in which I had to experience them slowly, one by one, each demanding my full attention.

After twelve o'clock it had become impossible to pretend not to be waiting. It then became impossible to concentrate on reading a newspaper or thinking of something else. Body and mind became dominated by the irritated longing for an end to the drawn-out event. The restless walks around the repair shop, the impatient glances toward the servicemen were those of a prisoner of waiting. For such prisoners the world outside loses its significance; they become confined in a bubble of almost motionless time. At that point daydreaming is the only release, allowing time for a while to lose the sticky quality.

### *Handling a Wait*

What would David H. Maister (1985) have said about the repair shop experience? He is one of many business consultants who have tried to develop techniques for facilitating waiting in the service sector. His six principles dealing with this problem can be applied more generally.

The first principle is that *people want to get going*. At a restaurant, for example, the time spent waiting for the menu can seem longer than that spent being served, even if by objective measurement the latter takes ten or twenty minutes longer. As Maister has noted, pre-process waits are perceived to last longer than in-process waits, the former often accompanied by the fear of having been forgotten.

The second principle is that *uncertain waits are longer than known, finite waits*. The most profound source of anxiety in waiting is how long the wait will be. A patient who is told that the doctor will be delayed thirty minutes experiences an initial annoyance but then probably relaxes into an acceptance of the inevitability of the wait. However, if the patient is told that the doctor will be free soon, but not exactly when that will be, she spends the whole time in a state of nervous anticipation, unable to settle down, afraid

to leave even briefly, just as in the repair shop. A wait for a predetermined time is finite; beyond that point there is no known limit.

Third, *unexplained waits are longer than explained waits*. At the repair shop there were no reasons given as to why the car was not ready, and that made the wait much harder to endure. Most people are prepared to be a great deal more patient when they understand the causes for delay. Airline pilots are used to applying this principle; on-board announcements of postponements are replete with explanations about tardy baggage handlers, fog, safety checks, and air-traffic controllers' instructions.

Fourth, *unfair waits are longer than reasonable waits*. When a receptionist in an office answers the telephone while you are waiting to be served, the distant customer is being given higher priority than you. As Maister has pointed out, this does not feel OK. Why should you, who have made the effort to come to the service facility, wait while the caller, who has merely picked up a telephone, doesn't have to? Cultural notions of fairness here come into play, an issue to which we will return later.

Fifth, *the more valuable the service, the more patience the customer will show*. Waiting for something of little value can be intolerable, whereas people such as Lin Kong and Manna Wu are ready to spend a large part of life in patient endurance. Maister illustrates this principle with a description of how eagerly airline passengers jump out of their seats the instant the airplane reaches the gate, despite knowing that it will take time for all the passengers ahead to disembark, and that they may well have to wait after that for their baggage. The same passenger who sat patiently for many hours during the flight suddenly exhibits intolerance for an extra minute or two spent disembarking, maybe even fury when his baggage is delayed yet another few minutes. Such passengers are motivated by the thought that the flight is over and that there is no more value in remaining seated.

Lastly, Maister claims, *solo waits feel longer than group waits*.<sup>9</sup> In air terminals or train stations one often sees individuals sitting or standing next to each other in silence—until an announcement of a delay is made. Then they suddenly turn to each other to share their irritation and discuss what is



happening—a temporary community is created. A similar phenomenon occurs in queues for concert tickets or at popular bars and fashionable restaurants, where the waiting then becomes a part of the experience. The exceptions to this rule, as we saw in the car repair shop, happen when a customer feels that the other customers are competitors for service rather than fellows in waiting.

What happens when these principles are applied in a very different field, for example that of international refugees waiting for asylum or the return home? In Sweden in the early 2000s about thirty thousand refugees arrived annually from many different countries, mostly Asia and Africa. Roughly 50 percent of the asylum seekers were expelled. It could take several years, however, for the asylum seeker to get either a residence permit or the order to leave. This policy forces the refugees to live with uncertainty, as the sociologist Jan-Paul Brekke (2004) has pointed out. The only stable thing in their everyday life is waiting for a decision.

This kind of waiting is above all a matter of coping with sticky time. Daily rhythm is dominated by thoughts about the mail carrier who will eventually deliver the longed-for letter. The day is divided into two parts, expectation before the mail carrier arrives and disappointment after, when no letter has appeared. According to Maister's fifth principle—the more valuable the service, the longer the customer will wait—the refugees must show considerable patience.

During the wait the refugees are in a transition stage of liminality, neither here nor there, neither inside nor outside the country they are hoping to live in. The ethnologist Rebecka Lennartsson (2007) has interviewed asylum seekers who had spent many years of their life in such liminality. They talk about the waiting as an "empty time," a period of boredom dominated by anxiety, nervousness, and confusion. In this emotionally vulnerable and powerless state it is impossible for them to forget that they are waiting.

Maister's second principle, that uncertain waits are longer than known, finite waits, is illustrated by the statement made by a young man from Afghanistan, as quoted by Brekke (2004: 29):

We have no life apart from thinking about this residence permit. Whoever you ask, you get nowhere. They just tell you to wait. But for one more day? One more month? One more year? How much longer must I wait to know what my destiny is?

Many refugees feel set apart from ordinary life. Day-to-day existence is ruled by waiting. Their enforced passivity stands in sharp contrast to their active journey or dramatic flight from the home country. One man said that he used to spend much time in front of the mirror in his room, just looking at himself. He found waiting and doing nothing mentally exhausting.

A woman from Ukraine put it like this: "You just wait for something, something that is empty, which does not exist." She felt that she was in limbo, in a directionless time. A man from Syria said he could not start his future. He had left his past behind, his future was blocked by the pending decision, and his present was in between the life he had lived and the one he hoped to live in Sweden. "You are nobody while waiting," a man from Sudan told Lennartsson.

But generalizations can be misleading. "You wait in different ways," one of the refugees explained, meaning that this experience is perceived differently depending on whether one has recently arrived or been an asylum seeker for a long time. The experience of waiting is also affected by comparisons with other refugees. As David H. Maister argues, if others receive an answer before you do, despite having arrived later, your waiting will seem even longer and more unfair.

### *Waste of Time*

Maister's six principles do not necessarily illustrate a panhuman attitude toward waiting; more probably they summarize a modern Western version of coping with time as a limited good that people do not want to waste. For some people, having to wait feels like being paralyzed or stuck, as this woman in our student survey told us:

The worst is when you are not able to influence what is going to happen. You feel completely powerless. For example, when you call the