Words can tell us much about a culture. In Spanish, the word esperar means both "to hope" and "to wait". I did not appreciate the wisdom of that conjunction until I sat in the sala de espera at Caracas airport, waiting, hoping that from the indescribable chaos would ultimately materialise an airplane to Merida. It was a long room, packed with hundreds of people—two loudspeakers overhead with competing messages, interspersed by whooping alarms whenever a door was opened. Rumours about departure times abounded. Uniformed airline employees screamed over the din about boarding this flight or that. I would not have been surprised had a herd of sheep or a small circus troupe come through. Truly, it was a room where one must choose between esperar or desesperar.

A week later, another sala de espera, this one in El Vigio, to which we rushed by taxi when the airport at Merida was rain-bound, hoping to fly back to Caracas. Here, no-one mans the metal detector and x-ray machines. They use the honour system. There is only one ticket desk at the airport, but there are five different airlines with planes on the runway. No-one knows anything.

Still, there is something alive about these Venezuelan airports, certainly moreso than the sterile Houston airport from which we had come. If shopping malls have become the new churches in our consumer society, perhaps airports are our funeral parlours. There is little joy here, not even much life, except for the occasional toddler trying out his legs for the first time in an unobstructed space. Otherwise, US airports are sombre, disconnected places, with much blank staring into space. All spontaneous life has been sacrificed to promote the aura of predictability, of control, of certainty. Not in Venezuela. Here, travel is still invested with the passion and uncertainty of great explorations. Will my plane ever board? Will I get on the right plane? Will it land at the right airport? Surely these same feelings accompanied the journeys of Pizarro, and of Lewis and Clark. Sitting in the sala de espera we become the spiritual kin of Simon Bolivar, criss-crossing the Andes while liberating five countries. In Venezuela, travel regains some of its heroic nature.

One of the great self-deceptions of our times involves control, the idea that we human beings can control our lives. This is especially true in medical matters. The middle-aged children of my elderly patients want specific answers, not just shrugged shoulders or the vague response "she is very old". They demand causes, mechanisms, certainty, and cures. My attempt to discuss the great uncertainties of life are met with impatient, condescending expressions. The children do not believe in waiting and hoping. These great great great great great grand-children of the Enlightenment still trust in the ultimate perfectability of human beings. Unfortunately, some of my colleagues foster that failed belief system. With sufficient evidence, with enough meta-analyses, with better algorithms, we will finally arrive at a place where we will always know what to do, always choose precisely the right path. In this medical utopia, computers will rule. No wait; no hope.

Let them all go to Venezuela. Let them fly from Caracas to Merida, or let them try. Then surely all confidence, all smug understanding will fly away. The passion, the joy, and, most of all, the uncertainty of life, will come flooding in like the tide. Let them try to stop it.

James S Goodwin