

The Spiritual Nature of Presence
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December 1, 2024

I think all of us have at least some ideas of what is meant by “presence.” I remember when I was in elementary school when our names were called at the start of the day we answered “present.” That meant, of course, you were physically in the classroom. But we mean something more than that when we are speaking in a spiritual context, don’t we?

You are likely familiar with the Jewish or Christian concept of “divine presence.” Jews refer to “*she-chi-nah*” or “*ru-ach ha-ko-desh*,” and Christians to the “Holy Spirit,” God’s presence on earth and in our midst. When Jews and Christians pray, they seek to connect with this divine presence. Pantheists believe that all of nature is filled with a divine presence, that nature itself is divine, or in other words, God is nature. For a pantheist if you are present with nature, you are experiencing God.

The theme for December is not “divine presence” but simply “presence.” So, what I want to explore with you this morning is what importance does “presence” have for UU’s, regardless of what you do or do not believe about God. Presence is for all of us. I believe that “presence” happens most often by making a conscious choice to focus attention. I consider presence to be a spiritual practice open to all, no matter your beliefs.

I really like this definition of presence offered by Sam Parks and I hope to expand on it this morning:

Living in presence means being fully engaged in each moment, without being consumed by regrets, anxieties, or distractions. It is about savoring the beauty of life, finding joy in the simplest things, and developing a sense of gratitude for what is happening right now. When we live in presence, we tap into our inner wisdom and connect with something greater than ourselves, leading to a profound spiritual transformation.

Listen to these words by Mary Oliver from her poem “The Swan.” Notice that she invites us to see, hear, and feel, that is, to use our senses fully. This is very much a poem about being present:

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air –
An armful of white blossoms,
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
Biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
A shrill dark music – like the rain pelting the trees – like a waterfall
Knifing down the black ledges?

And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds –
A white cross Streaming across the sky, its feet
Like black leaves, its wings Like the stretching light of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?

Those last lines of the poem are what I want to focus on especially, because they directly address “presence” as a spiritual experience. If you feel the experience of the swan “drifting on the river,” “in your heart,” and that it “pertains to everything,” then Oliver is telling us that presence creates a unity between the subject and the object. Also, she tells us the experience of presence transports us out of the ordinary.

For me, Oliver is saying that being present to the beauty of nature is the purpose of life. Being present to such beauty makes us feel more alive. Joseph Campbell said that what all of us is seeking is the “experience of being alive.” That is the experience of presence at its core. When we are present with natural beauty we are inspired to protect and preserve this precious resource. What we choose to be present with can inform our ethical choices. If we love this world in which we live, it makes sense to work to protect it. If we love people, we work for justice, equity, and pluralism.

Oliver’s poetry is important since it reminds us that we need to return to the beauty of the natural world, because by living in developed societies we humans have become increasingly detached from nature. We may have forgotten how to be present to awe and wonder of the kind Oliver draws us to. We need reminders to call us back to this felt experience of reality. Thought leaders including the sociologist Max Weber and contemporary historian and social commentator Morris Berman have also pointed out that in postindustrial society, people have become increasingly detached from nature. Science and reason have demystified the world to a degree, and that is good, but it comes at a price. Perhaps because we understand more, we are less awed. Most people live in cities, obtain food from supermarkets, spend much of our time in front of screens, and so on. Weber wrote about the “Disenchantment with the World.” Berman wrote about the “Re-enchantment of the World,” by which he meant, returning to a connection with the world that people had before the industrial revolution. A time when the natural world was “magical.” We have lost opportunities to be present, and to be in awe, because of civilization, industrialization, technology, and science. I think the practice of presence must include an appreciation of, and a re-enchantment with, the natural world.

In addition to Mary Oliver there is another figure who has had a significant influence on my appreciation for the practice of presence, and a counterforce to disenchantment. That person was philosopher Martin Buber, who lived from 1878 to 1965. He was born in what is now Ukraine and raised in the Hassidic Jewish tradition. The Hassidim are known for their spiritual and mystical leanings, as well as being quite strict in observance of Jewish laws. Buber was decidedly spiritual but not as strict in his observance of Jewish laws as most

Hasidim. Also, unlike Hassidim in general, who tend to isolate from the larger communities in which they live, Buber sought dialog with a broad spectrum of non-Jewish and less fundamentalist Jewish thinkers. He was an avid reader from childhood on, and familiar with the writings of Descartes, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. His work has been recognized by Humanists and Existentialists. He lectured in European and American Universities as well as Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Part of what Buber intended to do in his writings and his lectures was to bring spiritual experience into the realm of philosophy, and to make it more available to all people. I think he was broadening the concept of *she-chi-nah* (presence) for people beyond his Jewish faith and for that matter the Cristian faith as well.

Buber is most widely known for a small book called, *I and Thou*. One of my professors in graduate school lent me his copy of this inspirational book. I developed an instant appreciation for its premise. It was a refreshing balance to the scientific approach to human relationship study in the field of social psychology, that I was immersed in at the time.

Buber stated that before the industrial revolution people had two ways of experiencing the world; one being objective and the other more spiritual and more connected to nature. The *I-It* way of perceiving is the more objective and more familiar to us. Buber used the example of observing a tree to describe this. Usually when we look at a tree, we see the tree as a category. If we know something about trees, we can say it is, for example, a lodgepole pine. Or we can think about its utility as a source of shade or lumber. We might see it as part of a cluster. If one is a botanist, one might know a lot about the life cycle, cell structure, habitat and so on of the tree. I am trying to illustrate, in the *I-It* mode of experience, there is a definite separation between subject and object, the subject being the observer in this example, and the object being the tree.

According to Buber if we only engage with the world in the *I-It* mode it leads to feelings of alienation. Building a fulfilling and meaningful life, as well as healthy community and society, can only come from engaging the world in the *I-Thou* mode, according to Buber. It appears important that we relate to others at least at times from the *I-Thou* mode. This is where “deep listening” plays a role.

Buber says the *I-Thou* mode allows us to be truly human. In this mode, which he calls "encounter," we enter a relationship with the object encountered, we participate with that object. When one is fully present, both the *I* and the *Thou* are transformed by the relation between them. Remember, Mary Oliver asks if the encounter changed your life. I think it is like the “experience of being alive,” that Campbell spoke about. The *Thou* we encounter is felt to be a unity not only as a sum of its qualities. The *Thou* is not experienced as a point in space and time, but rather as if it were the entire universe, as if the entire universe somehow existed through the *Thou*. To quote Buber:

...if I have will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer *It*. I have become seized by its power of exclusiveness.... Everything belonging to the tree is in [my experience]: its form and structure, its colors and chemical composition, its [connection] with the elements and with the stars are all present in a single whole.

Buber says we can enter relationship with anything we encounter, inanimate objects, including animals, and other people. With other people the *I-Thou* of encounter is defined as “love.” In Buber’s words:

Like the *I-Thou* relation, love is a subject-to-subject relationship. Love is not a relation of subject to object, but rather a relation in which both members in the relationship are subjects and share the unity of being.

It must be obvious that the *I-Thou* mode of experience is what I am calling presence. And for me the *I-Thou* relationship is represented by the words of Oliver’s poem:

“And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?”

The sense of unity that happens in the I-Thou encounter reminds me also of the Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson’s concept of the “oversoul.” My good friend Ronn Smith introduced me to Emerson and added a lot to my experience of presence in nature as a spiritual practice. Listen for the felt spiritual unity that occurs in these Emerson quotations:

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist and whose [bliss] is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul.

...that Unity, that oversoul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other, that common heart.

In these words of Emerson, I find a real similarity to Martin Buber. Emerson’s referral to seeing “the world piece by piece” for me is very much like Buber’s “*I-it*.” And Emerson’s “wise silence and universal beauty to which every part and particle is equally related,” is the “*I-Thou*.” When we feel that “common heart” that too is the *I-Thou*.

I hope I have shown Mary Oliver, Buber, and Emerson share in the conviction that “presence,” the practice of paying deep attention, invites a spiritual experience, in which the observer and the observed form a unity. Such practice and experience give meaning and connection to our lives.

It must also be obvious that “deep listening,” our theme for October, is associated with presence, and with *I-Thou*. Psychologist Carl Rogers whom I spoke about in October, was heavily influenced by Buber. Rogers referred to relationship between client and therapist at least at times, entering the *I-Thou* mode. From my own experience as a practicing therapist, I must agree. Rogers and Buber had a conversation about that very thing in 1957. Martin Luther King was also influenced by Buber and referred to “*I-Thou*” as what was needed to transform the civil rights movement, in his Letter from the Birmingham Jail.

Buber argues, much as Weber and Berman have, that society is structured in a way that makes *I-Thou* difficult to experience. Our economic, educational, and political systems are largely designed and lived in an *I-It* frame. Our social and institutional lives are mostly focused on transactions and outcomes. This is not to say that there is something inherently wrong with *I-It*. Rather, if we do not create the space and opportunity for *I-Thou*, for presence, then life loses its meaning and purpose. Oliver, Buber, and Emerson would agree I believe very much, practicing presence is necessary for a healthy spiritual life.

If you would consider a suggestion, I have one for you. I would encourage you to practice either deep listening, or presence with nature, art, or music, for at least a few minutes every day. Perhaps you will feel that sense of unity or common heart that I have referred to here. Perhaps as Mary Oliver said in her poem, it will change your life.

And what a perfect time to begin to strengthen a life-enhancing practice, when most of us are reeling from the current political reality? Perhaps as we are in the holiday season “presence” is a welcome “present” we can give ourselves.