



# *Soul Matters*

**December 2016**

*What Does It Mean To Be  
A Community of Presence?*



## *What Does It Mean To Be A Community of Presence?*

Spiritually, presence can mean two radically different things. On the one hand, contemplatives talk of “being present.” Presence from this perspective is all about awareness and remembering to “live in the moment.” On the other hand, theologians tend to come at presence from the perspective of “otherness.” Their concern is not just that we pay attention to the present moment, but that we notice a transcendent Presence that is woven through all moments.

This month, we refuse to take sides. Attentiveness or otherness? Who says we have to choose? Isn't it true that, more often than not, they dance together more than they compete? Isn't it true that when we are most present, a powerful presence emerges? Pay attention to your child and slowly a confidence and unique self unfolds. Pay attention to the flow of your breathing or the flow of the ocean and something bigger than yourself enters the scene. Look for a long time at a singular tree and eventually it presents itself to you as a world in and unto itself.

The underlying message here is that the world is full of unnoticed gifts and grace. It's a message perfectly fit for this month that so often celebrates presents over presence. In the face of commercials and billboards that tell us our lives will finally be complete if we stuff them with a few more shiny objects or plastic gadgets, our spiritual traditions come along and remind us that our lives are already complete. Their message: The greatest gift of the holidays is noticing the many gifts that have been sitting there all along.

So how will you engage this dance? What powerful and meaningful presence is waiting for you to be present to it? What gift is waiting and wanting to emerge? What will your awareness bring into being this month?

# Our Spiritual Exercises

## Option A:

### Uncover A World in Itself

“The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.” ~Henry Miller

This exercise invites you to tap into Henry Miller’s magic. Simply do as Miller suggests:

**Pick one place, object or animal and give it your attention and presence until it becomes a world unto itself.**

Additionally, figure out your own way of recording the progression from a singular or simple object to an entire world. Maybe you keep a journal and write about something new you notice each time you return to it. Maybe take a new photo of it each time and look back at the photos to see what changes and emerges over time. Maybe just sit with your chosen focus for a whole day and see where it takes you.

Take your time as you chose your focus. Maybe it is a blade of grass or a singular flower. But then again maybe it’s that food truck outside your office at lunch time. Or the old toolbox your dad passed on to you whose story and world you’ve yet to discover.

As always, consider bringing a picture to your group. Seeing your uncovered world, they just might more easily see even more of their own.

## Option B:

### The Presence of God

“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” -Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Teilhard de Chardin’s quote reminds us that “otherness” is not other. The presence of the divine presents itself in very ordinary forms. And it is a different form for each of us. Yes, it visits many of us through joy. But for others, it is encountered as the presence of hope or longing, reassuring quiet or unexpected kindness.

What is the infallible sign of the presence of the holy for you? Hope? Longing? And when does it come? When you feel most inwardly centered or most outwardly connected? What physical form does it ride in

on? The soft wind when you're walking in the woods? The vibrancy of color as it makes a painting or the sky come alive? The softness of your beloved's skin?

This exercise asks you to name it. Come to your group ready to fill in the blank: "\_\_\_\_\_ is the infallible sign of the presence of holiness for me." And after you fill in the blank, share one story of when that presence showed up and gave you its gift.

## Option C:

### Make Your Presents About Presence

Your children need your presence more than your presents." – Jesse Jackson"

It's not just our children. We all need it. Who wants a new tie when they could have the gift of being seen? Yes, the grandkids want that check from Grandma, but what they will remember is you asking them to join them for a Saturday as you go through the boxes of old stuff in the attic and telling them the stories connected to that so-called junk. This exercise asks you to creatively engage this truth that Jackson lifts up:

**Pick at least one person this year and make their holiday present about presence!**

There are so many ways to come at this. Offer your presence by making the gift something you do together. Show them you are present to them and really see them by picking a gift that reflects something especially unique about them. Or help them be more present to life by giving them a gift that helps them stay focused on what's important or that helps them step back from the blinding busyness of routine life.

As novelist Cecelia Ahern reminds us, "Sometimes, people can go missing right before our very eyes." Ultimately, that's what this exercise is about. Give a gift that helps you find those you love again and helps them find you.

# Your Question

*As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list that needs to be covered in its entirety. Instead, simply pick the one question that speaks to you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The goal of these questions is not to help you analyze what Presence means in the abstract, but to figure out what being a part of a community of Presence means for you and your daily living. So, which question is calling to you? Which one contains "your work"?*

1. **Has the experience of "presence" increased or decreased for you as you've gotten older?**
2. **How might tomorrow be an opportunity to "discover presence"?**
3. **What absence walks with you more days than not?**
4. **Who has gone missing right before your very eyes?** ("Sometimes, people can go missing right before our very eyes." -Cecelia Ahern)
5. **Have you lost sight of yourself?** (" Sometimes, we lose sight of ourselves when we're not paying enough attention." -Cecelia Ahern)
6. **Would you be more present to your life if you weren't trying to perfect it or win at it?** ("Allow your life to be a work in progress. Do not hurry to mold the masterpiece; Always there is more to be done. Life is always unfinished business." ~Richard S. Gilbert")
7. **When was the last time you created a world in itself?** ("The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself." ~Henry Miller )
8. **Where is your chance tomorrow to love someone with your presence?** ("At the end of the day: do others feel loved in your presence? This is the spiritual bottom line." – Masin Kipp; "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity" - Simone Veil)
9. **Whose absence feels most present to you? What can you do tomorrow to feel and honor them more deeply?** ("One of the best feelings in the world is knowing that your presence and absence both mean something to someone." -- anonymous)
10. **Are you living like you deserve to take up space in the world?** ("You deserve to take up space in the world." -Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)
11. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

# Recommended Resources

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be *a community of Presence*.

## Presence

**Definition:** The state or fact of existing, occurring, or being present in a place or thing. Latin: *in:proesentia; proe, before, and esse, to be.*

## Wise Words

“This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness.” ~**Mary Oliver**

“The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.” ~**Henry Miller**

“At the end of the day: do others feel loved in your presence? This is the spiritual bottom line.” ~**Masin Kipp**

Sometimes, people can go missing right before our very eyes. Sometimes, we lose sight of ourselves when we're not paying enough attention. ~**Cecelia Ahern**

“When you love someone, the best thing you can offer is your presence. How can you love if you are not there? The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers.” ~**Thich Nhat Hanh**

“Learn me slowly; be patient with my pages.” ~**Pavana**

“If your absence doesn't affect them, your presence never mattered” ~**Anonymous**

Oh, the comfort — the inexpressible comfort of feeling *safe* with a person — having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all right out, just as they are, chaff and grain together; certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away. ~**Dinah Maria Mulock Craik**

“One of the best feelings in the world is knowing that your presence and absence both mean something to someone.” ~**Anonymous**

Presence is removing judgment, walls and masks so as to create a true and deep connection with people or experiences. ~**Amy Cuddy**

The ability to be fully aware of the present moment is also the ability to be “non-discriminating” between the experiences we like (because they are pleasant) and the experiences we don't like (because they are unpleasant). Awareness is non-discriminating because awareness does not want to get and does not want to reject, it just is aware, and accepting of everything that manifests. ~**Chan Dao Lu**

“Out of our busyness, we are called back into balance, back into ourselves and the silence of present being. But it is not just back into ourselves to which we are called; it is also the awareness of the continuous presence of the environment around us and within us. We are called to remember our relationships and our dependencies. We are called to once again feel the oneness which sustains our being in balance with creation, and to do so with wonder and appreciation.” ~**Susan Manker-Seale**

## **Life Is Always Unfinished Business**

In the midst of the whirling day,  
In the hectic rush to be doing,  
In the frantic pace of life,

Pause here for a moment.  
Catch your breath;  
Relax your body;  
Loosen your grip on life.  
Consider that our lives are always unfinished  
business;  
Imagine that the picture of our being is never  
complete;  
Allow your life to be a work in progress.  
Do not hurry to mold the masterpiece;  
Do not rush to finish the picture;  
Do not be impatient to complete the drawing.  
From beckoning birth to dawning death we are  
in process,  
And always there is more to be done.  
Do not let the incompleteness weigh on your  
spirit;  
Do not despair that imperfection marks your  
every day;  
Do not fear that we are still in the making.  
Let us instead be grateful that the world is still to  
be created;  
Let us give thanks that we can be more than we  
are;  
Let us celebrate the power of the incomplete;  
For life is always unfinished business.

**~Rev. Richard S. Gilbert**

At the center of the world and in each breath  
this is the holy temple, the birthing moment:  
giving and receiving love. That is all.  
This is the sacred point,  
the love in you  
meeting the love in the world.  
However broken or weary you are,  
bring yourself here, in love,  
now. **~Steve Garnaas-Holmes**

“Where can I flee from your presence?”  
**~ Psalms 139:7**

## **The Presence of Trees**

Slowly, I am remembering  
the language of awe,  
how to take in, say,  
the living complexity of a tree  
its gnarled trunk,  
its ragged bark,  
the way its leafy canopy  
filters sunlight  
down to the brown  
carpeted ground,  
the way the wind bends my heart  
to the exquisite presence of trees  
the forest that calls to me as deeply  
as I breathe,  
as though the woods were  
marrow of my bone as though  
I myself were a tree, a breathing, reaching  
arc of the larger canopy  
beside a brook bubbling to foam  
like the one  
deep in these woods,  
that calls  
that whispers home.

**~Michael S. Glaser**

## **Christmas Light**

When everyone had gone  
I sat in the library  
With the small silent tree,  
She and I alone.  
How softly she shone!  
And for the first time then  
For the first time this year,  
I felt reborn again,  
I knew love's presence near.  
Love distant, love detached  
And strangely without weight,  
Was with me in the night  
When everyone had gone  
And the garland of pure light  
Stayed on, stayed on. **~May Sarton**

Perhaps the most characteristic element of  
Christmas is what we call the Christmas spirit,  
its joy, its reassessment of life as good. This  
persistent presence is difficult to explain, but no  
one questions its genuineness. **~Unknown**

“It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags. And he puzzled and puzzled ’till his puzzler was sore. Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn’t before. What if Christmas, he thought, doesn’t come from a store. What if Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more.” ~**Dr Seuss**

Light is to darkness what love is to fear; in the presence of one the other disappears.  
~**Marianne Williamson**

“Your children need your presence more than your presents.” ~**Jesse Jackson**

Realize deeply that the present moment is all you ever have.  
What a liberation to realize that the “voice in my head” is not who I am.  
Who am I then? The one who sees that.  
Life is the dancer and you are the dance.  
~**Eckhart Tolle**

If we open to the moment through our bodies, a whole new level of insight and wisdom can support us in ways our conscious mind cannot. May we all open to a greater level of embodied presence. The great challenge in our busy world is to stay connected with ourselves— with our bodily felt experience, our living wisdom, our sensitivity and our depth. This intensive retreat addresses this challenge through helping you to develop greater presence in body, speech, and mind and to connect with yourself, your awareness, and your felt experience in a fully embodied way. ~**John Welwood**

“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” ~**Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**

“You deserve to take up space in the world.”  
~**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

## Videos & Podcasts

*How to Flourish in an age of Distraction*  
Thoughts on paying attention to how our attention and presence is being stolen especially during the holiday season  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZdD6MMfrWs>

*The Power of Being Present to Your Body*  
Presence is expressed through body language: Self image impacts presence, body language impacts self image. Amy Cuddy’s video on Body Language is YouTube’s second most popular video to date.  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_cuddy\\_your\\_body\\_language\\_shapes\\_who\\_you\\_are?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are?language=en)

Interview on Presence  
“Presence is removing judgment, walls and masks so as to create a true and deep connection with people or experiences..” -**Amy Cuddy**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFILB6yQrU>

*Settling Into Presence*  
Eckhart Tolle offers guidance for settling into presence and resting in the depth of an “unfilled” moment.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WreEewZGTWI>

*Mysterious Ways*  
“[We are present] to many fewer mysteries in our lives since this technology attached itself to our hips...”  
<http://www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/mysterious-ways/>

*The Last Quiet Places: Silence and the Presence of Everything - On Being Podcast*  
Silence is an endangered species, says Gordon Hempton. He defines real quiet as presence — not an absence of sound, but an absence of noise. The Earth, as he knows it, is a "solar-powered jukebox." Quiet is a "think tank of the soul."  
<http://www.onbeing.org/program/last-quiet-places/4557>

*Focus: the Hidden Driver of Excellence - Daniel Goleman*

“What information consumes is the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9yRmpcXKjY>

*In the Presence of Elephants and Whales - On Being Podcast*

We were made and set here, the writer Annie Dillard once wrote, "to give voice to our astonishments." Katy Payne is a renowned acoustic biologist with a Quaker sensibility. And she's found her astonishment in listening to two of the world's most exotic creatures. She has decoded the language of elephants and was among the first scientists to discover that whales are composers of song.

<http://www.onbeing.org/program/katy-payne-in-the-presence-of-elephants-and-whales/241>

## Articles

**Do You Take Up as Much Space as You Deserve?** By Lisa Gardner

<http://tinybuddha.com/blog/do-you-take-up-as-much-space-as-you-deserve/>

(another moving reflection on the same theme: <http://sexloveliberation.com/taking-up-space/> )

**Crying Together** by Rev. Dr. Lynn Unger  
Maybe we could just sit down and cry together first. In the presence of Black rage. In the presence of white shame. In the presence of grief and despair and the overwhelming knowledge that white men with guns just keep killing people.

<http://www.questformeaning.org/spiritual-themes/challenge-and-transformation/crying-together/>

### **Presents and Presence**

The nicest gifts people have given me have been enabling, confirming gifts, bestowing understanding and self-esteem, help in time of trouble and delight for ordinary days. What struck me most was the connection between the gift and the giver of the gift and the sense of

appreciation for that person in their lives at that time.

<http://uuwestport.org/sermons/rev-frank-hall-minister-emeritus/frank-hall/presents-and-presence-december-21-2008>

### **The Gift of Presence, The Perils of Advice**

Parker Palmer: Many of us “helper” types are as much or more concerned with being seen as good helpers as we are with serving the soul-deep needs of the person who needs help.

Witnessing and companioning take time and patience, which we often lack — especially when we're in the presence of suffering so painful we can barely stand to be there, as if we were in danger of catching a contagious disease. We want to apply our “fix,” then cut and run, figuring we've done the best we can to “save” the other person.

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/parker-palmer-the-gift-of-presence-the-perils-of-advice/8628>

## Movies & Television

**Other People** (2016)

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/other\\_people](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/other_people)

**The Eighth Day (Le Huitième Jour)**

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/eighth\\_day](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/eighth_day)

**The Notebook.** Being Present for someone who is no longer fully present.

<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/notebook>

**The Global Brain:** Peter Russell (1983)

Explores the idea that the Earth is an integrated, self-regulating living organism and asks what function humanity might have for this planetary being.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CjjQTX9kmS8>

## Songs

Red Molly – *May I suggest:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7kbvTPIYgNw&list=RDeW1DDSQnEYo&index=4>

Kris Allen - *Live Like We're Dying:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbfeSImDntw>

James Morrison - *One Life* [Acoustic]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wIIWLwQlCso>

*Beautiful Day* - U2:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=co6WMzD>

[Oh1o](#) (a great instrumental version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBUMkRnCU3Q>)

## Books

[Present Moment Wonderful Moment](#) by Thich Nhat Hanh

<http://www.parallax.org/product/present-moment-wonderful-moment-mindfulness-verses-for-daily-living/>

[Silence: The Mystery of Wholeness](#) by Robert Sardello

“Each of us has an ever faithful companion-presence. Something that is always with us. Something that helps us to live with inner integrity and depth, to see through the outer covering of others and of the world to their purpose and core being, and to get over placing ourselves at the center of everything. This companion-presence is Silence. It never goes

away. We go away from it, become distracted and forgetful, and lose the manners needed to nurture companionship with it.”

[https://www.amazon.com/Silence-Mystery-Wholeness-Robert-Sardello-ebook/dp/B004ZZKU9C/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1476619775&sr=1-1&keywords=sardello+silence](https://www.amazon.com/Silence-Mystery-Wholeness-Robert-Sardello-ebook/dp/B004ZZKU9C/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1476619775&sr=1-1&keywords=sardello+silence)

[Parenting with Presence: Practices for Raising Conscious, Confident, Caring Kids](#) by Susan Stiffelman

“Shows parents how they can transform parenting into a spiritual practice.” — Eckhart Tolle, author of *The Power of Now*

“Who knew that the child or teen crying in the next room is actually our spiritual teacher? Who would have thought that annoying outbursts and provocative behavior could lead to more conscious, spiritually tuned-in, effective, even enjoyable parenting? Susan Stiffelman’s groundbreaking, immensely readable guide teaches all we need to know about how to nurture our children — and ourselves — to become more conscious, compassionate, and, believe it or not, calmer human beings.” —

Kathy Eldon, founder and chairman of the Creative Visions Foundation

[https://www.amazon.com/Parenting-Presence-Practices-Conscious-Confident/dp/1608683265/ref=sr\\_1\\_13?ie=UTF8&qid=1476651214&sr=8-13&keywords=The+Presence+of](https://www.amazon.com/Parenting-Presence-Practices-Conscious-Confident/dp/1608683265/ref=sr_1_13?ie=UTF8&qid=1476651214&sr=8-13&keywords=The+Presence+of)

[Children’s Book List on Presence](#)

[https://www.amazon.com/gp/registry/wishlist/26FF9FBGH96UO/ref=cm\\_sw\\_su\\_w](https://www.amazon.com/gp/registry/wishlist/26FF9FBGH96UO/ref=cm_sw_su_w)

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