

On Presence

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How does one write about something the great sages have already written about at great length? The idea of trying to add to that body of writing is a bit intimidating.

What a perfect place to start. What better example of not being present because of a busy mind. I want to write about something but my mind travels to old landscapes of inadequacy (“intimidating”) blocking the quiet from which the best thinking occurs. Yet in that moment when I saw that I was floating away to that familiar landscape, I was curious about it and could feel the constriction (both cognitive and somatic) that accompanies thoughts of inadequacy. Then, as is always the case when I reflect on the sensations which accompany an unquiet mind, a cascade of calm flowed over and through my body. I felt the quiet, soothing breathe of presence. Awareness is that which takes me from distracted mind back to quiet mind.

Indeed, even as I write this I watch the coming and going of distracted mind and quiet mind.

As I wondered what to say about presence I clearly felt the distinction between these two poles. When I was trying to think about what to write there was an “efforting” which produced a staccato like train of thought. “I could write about Buddhism. But then I would have to research and quote. But maybe not. People do not really care about references. Oh, come on. This is supposed to be at least somewhat academic. If you want to talk about a religion you must demonstrate that you have some source material from which you are drawing. That could be a lot of work. Crap, I just want to go home and sit on the deck and look at the garden. I wonder if the tomatoes were watered. It’s wrong that they only have to be watered every other week. They look desiccated.... Oh yeah, what was I thinking about?”

For me, the movement from busy mind to quiet mind usually starts in the experience of distress which always accompanies an unquiet mind. I am surprised how one must reflect upon this. Why do we not have some autonomic system which switches on five seconds after busy mind begins, flooding the brain with serotonin (or some such thing) and bring us back to quiet? Rather we are barely and rarely conscious of the fact that we have spent the entire day bouncing off the walls of cognition. The walls aren't even padded. Yet we bounce off them like a super ball.

When I finally do reflect on my state of mind and feel the corresponding somatic tension, I at least then have a choice. I can continue to bounce off the walls watching my head ricochet off hard surfaces becoming increasingly damaged with blood pouring out my ears, my eyes turned up into my head unable to see, wildly flailing and shouting impotent pleas for mercy as I begin to lose consciousness.... Oops, there goes a particularly adolescent male part of busy mind. Sorry about that.

I at least have a choice to continue in that vein or to quiet down. If I choose quiet, the path is usually through my body. If I focus on the sensations in my body and stay focused on the sensations I quiet down. But it isn't quite accurate to say sensations. It's more like energy. But God that sounds new age. So let's say it is like the energy they speak of in physics, an actual, measurable phenomenon. Maybe it is electrical, or chemical or maybe the sages are right and it is that which underlies this universe of form. What I know and experience numerous times each day is that when I stay aware of the feeling of this energy in my body my mind becomes quiet. (It is such a tragedy that most religions espouse a mortification of the body and have made it an enemy of all things spiritual. They have created a split supported by shame and self hate. It is the body and more specifically the energy which animates this body which is clearly my most direct portal to spirituality). Quiet, of course, shouldn't be confused with dead or inoperable. I am actually more alive and attentive than at any other time. And it is the best time to listen.

Presence is perhaps best described by what is internally absent. Now I can hear all my New York friends saying, "Yeah, like your freakin' brain".

I specify ‘internal‘ because it is most clearly the internal noise, which is better described as a cacophony of disparate and conflicting, unorganized and noncontiguous, going nowhere, have no idea what I was thinking about three minutes ago disjointed type cognitions. In the absence of all that noise I become attuned to a hum. (Yeah I know “a hum???” But really that is the most descriptive term). Keeping awareness on the hum I am more aware of the external world; the sights, colors, sounds, movements and feelings of those around me. In fact sometimes I can come to presence from the back door. If I am distracted while sitting with someone in my office and can’t stay focused, I can listen to the hum (yeah I know I used that word before but there is humming everywhere) of the air conditioner and my mind will quiet down. I can then listen to the individual with whom I am sitting and hear things I would not have heard two seconds ago.

I do not mean to imply I can choose a quiet mind as easily as I can choose to scratch my head. Sometimes choosing is more akin to pleading and begging my mind to stop it’s unceasingly, frenetic noise. And sometimes the best I can do is hold on for the ride. But more times than not I do have a choice. But that choice is dependent on awareness. If I am not aware of my state of mind I am pulled hither and yon without a sense of agency. I am, as the sages have said, lost in the dream. It is difficult to listen when consumed in one’s own dream. I am lost in that dream even if I am trying to quiet my mind with more mind noise such as; “Ok focus now”, or “Stop thinking about tomatoes and get present”. Rather a shift of attention is the key. I will, for example, place my focus on the sensation of the energy in my legs and immediately...quiet mind.

I can “show up”, be present, as never before. It feels like a profound gift. But (and this is an important but) ten years ago I may have thought and said the same thing. And ten years from now I may look back at this paper and think “how cute that I thought that was presences“. So here I am back at filters. I only know about presence through the filters that are still in place. This acknowledgement is important because it acts as a buffer to grandiosity, which, of course, is another filter. One it has a specific and

negative impact on one's ability to be and remain present. It is helpful to remember that I still carry around a collection of filters. It reminds me my thoughts are transitory and therefore are not to be taken too seriously. One constant is that presence always comes with a sense of humility.

Another aspect about presence is that there is no obligation to remain present at all times. One is allowed to come and go without feeling like one is doing something wrong. There is no top dog in presence telling us we should remain there or else. When I am present there is never a voice telling me I should have been here earlier or what is wrong with me that I do not live here all the time. In fact what I find is an equanimity which whispers "stay as long as you like, leave whenever you wish, come back when it suits you". No pressure, no bargaining, just a sense of expansive acceptance. It is when I am *not* present that I can hear that familiar voice criticizing me for not being sufficiently present.

This is why I infuse this paper with humor. Like our thoughts, we take spirituality in general and the state of presence specifically too seriously. And taking it too seriously lends itself to beating ourselves up because we aren't doing it right and this case not being sufficiently present. And we all have our own unique way of castigating ourselves. Yet that castigation only occurs when I am not paying attention to that hum. When I am aware of the energy in my body I am at peace. Everything is as it should be. Therefore anything coming my way is received without the need to judge it, protect myself or stress about it. This has a profound impact on my ability to listen. Reik called it listening with the third ear. There is a receptivity which when not being present is simply impossible. Not only does one see with increased nuance the movements of the speaker's body, face, and breathing but additionally emphasis placed on single words or phrases, slight alterations in emotional inflection and the subtleties placed throughout the narrative which allows one to read between the lines. I do find that this is the most fertile ground for intuition, that is, when thoughts, ideas, feelings arise which otherwise may not have. The times when I can hear things that are not yet spoken and sometimes not yet thought.

As mentioned earlier these intuitive moments come with humility. They

never, and I mean never, arise with an egoic sense of self importance. If I perceive something that is not yet spoken I ask the speaker if it seems to resonate. If it turns out to be true, or partially true, I am never, and I mean never, filled with a sense of grandiosity. Rather gratitude washes over me. This intuition is a gift. I have received it and really the only honest response is gratitude. Not that the gratitude is volitional, it simply occurs. It is as if when one receives the gift of an intuition, a second gift of gratitude is then given. Isn't that cool, "receive a gift, get another".

Hopefully this is sounding like a spiritual practice. And of course it is. If one knows that we are more than separate, isolated, individual selves and that we are connected, even if we do not fully understand how, then gratitude simply arises in those moments where we can experience that connection. Brother David Stendl-Rast said that gratitude was the heart of prayer. What I do in my office feels more like prayer than therapy. Therapy presumes something needs fixing. Prayer is a form of meditation. Opening to, accepting and loving what is present. It is during those moments of presence that I can and do experience other as brother or sister. Not as a diagnosis, not as un-whole and not as needing healing. Everyday my heart breaks for the suffering someone is going through. Yet I never (any longer) think of this someone as disturbed. But as a loved one going through some aspect of living that I too could be going through and may have in the past and may yet in the future. Most of the insights that have come out of psychology I still find of incredible value. But time and time again I find that transformation occurs when we dive into those uncharted waters, that we have, for many reasons, spend a lifetime avoiding, in the spirit of mutual prayer. Presence brings us to prayer and prayer keeps us present.

Akin to one of the guiding principles of AIWP, i.e., "there are as many religious beliefs in the world as there are human beings on the planet". (Gandhi), there are numerous ways to become present. Our work is to find our own way home.