PRESENCE

Many a preacher has engaged the word play between the words “presence” and “presents.” Especially around the holidays. But whether we view it as witty or clichéd, there is something important to be found in the connection between these words.

That something is, I believe, behind the request made in a number of invitations I’ve received across the years—to weddings or milestone birthday parties: “No gifts, please. Your presence is gift enough.” Sometimes it’s hard to believe that this could be true. It can be awkward to show up empty-handed to such an event with nothing to offer but ourselves. But if the host has been honest and their request has been honoured, there will be affirmation that one’s presence is truly enough—enough to count as a welcome and worthy gift.

The present of presence is no small thing in this time of pandemic that often requires we protect those we love by keeping our physical distance from them. As we grapple with this challenge, especially over the coming month of holidays and holy days, I invite you to more deeply consider the meaning of presence in your life and encourage you to find ways to offer it, as best you can, to others as the gift that it is.

In faith and love,
Shawn
Questions to Live With

1. What does it mean to you to be present? What does being present to yourself, to someone else or to some moment feel like to you?

2. What helps you to be fully present? What makes it harder to be present?

3. Is there some part of your life that you feel you need or want to be more present to?

4. When have you experienced someone gifting you with their presence in an important or meaningful way?

5. The pandemic is challenging us with its protracted time of social distancing. What have you done to continue to be present for those you love?

For Inspiration

Welcome to the Temple of Today.
- Tehya Sky

Your true home is in the here and the now.
- Thich Nhat Hahn

You can learn everything you need to know by gardening.
- Bert McCoy

Presence is…the openness that beholds it all.
- Joan Tollifson, Nothing to Grasp

Our breath is a steady, gentle reminder that, when still enough to listen, is whispering, “now . . . now . . . and now.”
- Carrie Ciula

All I am is who I am every day. All anyone is to anyone is a series of days.”
- Charles Yu

Someone shouldn't need to be faced with your absence to value your presence.
- Nitya Prakash

The past and the future, are in the present…Hurrying and delaying are alike ways of trying to resist the present.
- Alan W. Watts

You can only recognize the presence of light in darkness.
- Aniekee Tochukwu Ezekiel

It was the moments; the precious moments. The moments when no one was complaining, blaming, thinking about past hurts or the fear of future ones. It was those moments of simply being present to another person. Those moments of being grateful. Gratitude for another being; gratitude for life. Those moments made their relationship.
- Donna Goddard
Being in the present with total awareness allows us to observe it so that we can watch its unfolding as if we were watching the sun rise or set. We don’t tell the sun how to do what it knows to do so brilliantly, we simply watch, and we experience what we’re seeing with acceptance.

- Ora Nadrich

Clearly, all fear has an element of resistance and a leaning away from the moment. Its dynamic is not unlike that of strong desire except that fear leans backward into the last safe moment while desire leans forward toward the next possibility of satisfaction. Each lacks presence.

- Stephen Levine, *A Year to Live*

Strangely, we are perhaps most fully incarnated as humans when part of us does not want to be here or doesn’t know how to be here. Presence is only fully understood and realized through fully understanding our reluctance to show up. To understand the part of us that wants nothing to do with the full necessities of work, of relationship, of loss, of doing what is necessary, is to learn humility, to cultivate self-compassion and to sharpen that sense of humour essential to a merciful perspective of both a self and another.

- David Whyte

Meditation is not something apart from life. When you are driving a car or sitting in a bus, when you are chatting aimlessly, when you are walking by yourself in a wood or watching a butterfly being carried along by the wind - to be choicelessly aware of all that, is part of meditation.”

- Jiddu Krishnamurti

If today is not your day, then be happy for this day shall never return. And if today is your day, then be happy now for this day shall never return.

- Kamand Kojouri

A famous aphorism tells us, “The Sufi is the child of the moment” (as-sufi ibn al-waqt). One of its meanings is that the true Sufi lives in the constant awareness that his self is nothing but what he is at the present moment. And since each present moment is unique, each moment of the self is unique. In some Sufi texts, each moment is called a *nafs*, a “breath.” The Sufis are then called “the folk of the breaths” (*ahl al-anfas*), because they live in full awareness of the uniqueness of the *nafs* at each *nafas*, each breath, each instant.


History, frozen...
future plans, phantom dreamscape:
presence dances now.

- David L. Hatton

Meditation is a social and political act. Listening and not-doing are actions far more powerful than most of us have yet begun to realize.

- Joan Tollifson
We’ve lost our Sundays, our weekends, our nights off — our holy days, as some would have it; our bosses, junk mailers, our parents can find us wherever we are, at any time of day or night. More and more of us feel like emergency-room physicians, permanently on call, required to heal ourselves but unable to find the prescription for all the clutter on our desk.

- Pico Iyer

Perhaps our dreams are there to be broken, and our plans are there to crumble, and our tomorrows are there to dissolve into todays, and perhaps all of this is all a giant invitation to wake up from the dream of separation, to awaken from the mirage of control, and embrace whole-heartedly what is present. Perhaps it is all a call to compassion, to a deep embrace of this universe in all its bliss and pain and bitter-sweet glory. Perhaps we were never really in control of our lives, and perhaps we are constantly invited to remember this, since we constantly forget it. Perhaps suffering is not the enemy at all, and at its core, there is a first-hand, real-time lesson we must all learn, if we are to be truly human, and truly divine. Perhaps breakdown always contains breakthrough. Perhaps suffering is simply a rite of passage, not a test or a punishment, nor a signpost to something in the future or past, but a direct pointer to the mystery of existence itself, here and now. Perhaps life cannot go 'wrong' at all.

- Jeff Foster

“Patience of Ordinary Things”
It is a kind of love, is it not?
How the cup holds the tea,
How the chair stands sturdy and foursquare,
How the floor receives the bottoms of shoes
Or toes. How soles of feet know
Where they’re supposed to be.
I’ve been thinking about the patience
Of ordinary things, how clothes
Wait respectfully in closets
And soap dries quietly in the dish,
And towels drink the wet
From the skin of the back.
And the lovely repetition of stairs.
And what is more generous than a window?

- Pat Schneider

Join a Journey Group

Journey Groups are the best way to go deeper with our monthly theme by sharing with a small group of people for a couple of hours each month. Groups meet online on Zoom and are scheduled at different times during the month. For more information, visit our website https://firstunitariantoronto.org/journey-groups/, or look for the link in First Light.

Upcoming Monthly Themes
"Winter Grace"

If you have seen the snow under the lamppost
piled up like a white beaver hat on the picnic table
or somewhere slowly falling into the brook
to be swallowed by water,
then you have seen beauty
and know it for its transience.
And if you have gone out in the snow
for only the pleasure
of walking barely protected
from the galaxies,
the flakes settling on your parka
like the dust from just-born stars,
the cold waking you
as if from long sleeping,
thent you can understand
how, more often than not,
truth is found in silence,
how the natural world comes to you
if you go out to meet it,
its icy ditches filled with dead weeds,
its vacant birdhouses, and dens
full of the sleeping.
But this is the slowed-down season
held fast by darkness
and if no one comes to keep you company
then keep watch over your own solitude.
In that stillness, you will learn
with your whole body
the significance of cold
and the night,
which is otherwise always eluding you.
- Patricia Fargnoli

Upcoming Services

Sun Dec 6 10:30 a.m.
Still Here, annual commemoration of famous and
not-so-famous lives lost in 2020, Rev. Lynn Harrison

Sun Dec 13 10:30 a.m.
Chanukah, Dallas Bergen

Wed Dec 16 7:00 p.m.
Blue Christmas, a contemplative service for those
who struggle with the season, Rev. Shawn Newton

Sun Dec 20, 7:00 p.m.
Turning Points, a contemplative service to mark the
turning of the wheel of the year, Rev. Shawn Newton

Thur Dec 24 7:00 p.m.
Christmas Eve: Joy to the World? A service of
readings, carols, and candlelight, Rev. Shawn Newton & Lynn Harrison

Sun Dec 27 10:30 a.m.
Finding Presence, Rev. Dr. Stephen Atkinson

Sun Jan 3 10:30 a.m.
Fire Communion, a “letting go” ritual for the start of
the new year, Rev. Lynn Harrison & Rev. Shawn Newton

New Horizons Editing Team: Wendy Peebles, Jeanne Van Bronkhorst, Margaret Kohr, Rev. Shawn Newton, Rev. Lynn Harrison

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