

Living in Presence

A sermon by Rev. Peaches Gillette

UU Society of Ithaca, NY

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I was teaching the other day and had to do a science lesson about solids, liquids, and gas. To make the lesson more fun, I asked the children which forms they would rather be. I used the concept of superpowers to make the idea more relatable and to help inflate their imaginations. As the children called out their preferences, I thought about how love is like liquid, taking on the shape of the vessel of our relational encounters.

Our presence is like liquid, taking on the shape of the need and emotional expressiveness of the one we are with so that we can adequately respond or craft our understanding or loving objectivity to the one who needs our attention.

The concept of our presence must be able to move, shapeshift, ebb, and flow according to the dimensions of who we are and who the other is – in this way, we can give greater detail to how we express our caring. When a particular person, or even a stranger, enters into communion with us, we acknowledge them. We consciously note them physically and begin exploring their emotional effects.

All we see with our eyes and that which we emphatically evaluate will become part of the shape of our presence - their age, cultural characteristics, demeanor, appearance, and, if they speak, their emotional tone. We take in the environment that sets the situational context.

Our presence adjusts and adapts to the space; we shift our presence depending on whether we are engaging in private or in public, if we are with someone who is incarcerated, if we are with someone quite elderly, someone dying, someone who has experienced war, someone homeless, in a nursing home, hospital, on the street, or in this sanctuary, because each of these things will undoubtedly require respectfully specific type of attending. In religion, the concept of divine presence is closer to what I believe our presence represents if it is backed with love and not worn away as just a common cliché.

“Presence” is not a formula. It refers to a qualitative concept of being physically or mentally and spiritually engaged with another; it does not refer to a quantitative concept and cannot authentically be expressed through a sort of mathematical equation. In business, there is the concept of leadership presence, which is in fact, a technique that, through showing caring, production can be increased. But when we view the idea of our presence as a formula that is statically applied to individuals or groups or within any space and in the same measure within any present moment, we cause two problems.

First, we cause the imprisonment of our spontaneity as people whose tenderness and compassion must reflect that we see one another in the light of our love and as who we are as we sit before each other responding to our individual hurts and pains with distinct ways of feeling heard and healed. In other words, we, nor they, are stagnant. The way I am present with my son or my grandchildren is not the same presence I bring with an incarcerated person or an elderly dying friend or a veteran or someone frustrated with a disability. My presence shifts if I am with someone asking for prayers or who just lost a child. But always the love is the same, the kind of love that requires selflessness - agape - the highest form of selfless love. At least that is what I try to bring when I sit and listen, not just with my ears but with my heart. My presence reshapes; it takes the form of the emotional and spiritual dimensions of those I attend to.

The second problem that looking at presence as a formula causes occurs when we use formulas in human interactions and end up treating another as if they are the object of what we, ourselves, need to express, as if they are the test subject of our own beliefs and not a being whose life is like a prism of unique experiences. And, by the way, on a level almost impossible for others to detect, we are never the same from moment to moment.

So, to repeat, presence is qualitative, not quantitative. Each moment in which we are supposed to focus rapidly folds into the next moment and the next, and our presence must also fold in sequence. As stated by an unknown source, “Our sense of self is constantly changing from moment to moment, influenced by our thoughts, emotions, experiences, and even our physical state, meaning that who we feel like we are can fluctuate depending on the situation and time.” Our self is

not a fixed entity but rather a fluid concept that adapts to our environment and internal state. Okay. that is the way this brain works, so let's put all of that on a shelf and move in another direction, a more beautiful and less technical one: Living in presence.

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. But living in presence goes beyond mere self-awareness. It is about developing a deeper connection with our spiritual selves and the world around us. It is about recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings and cultivating compassion and kindness towards ourselves and others.

Here is a poem that felt good to me. It is posted by the Westmount Center for Spiritual Formation. They do not list the poet's name.

[the poem here]

There are times when we hear or see something that feels deeply resonant within us. As this truth is often accessed through cognitive awareness, it sometimes stays in the mind and does not become fully a part of us. I have been deeply curious about how we embody what shines for us, how we make it real. How does this resonance move from the mind into the body—the viscera, the cells, the veryheart—so that we live it with the very fabric of our being?

Inner stillness and poetry can lead us to both a greater attentive presence within ourselves and, thus, a broader access to reality. Attentiveness enables us to participate with our whole being in what was glimpsed initially only with the mind. It is as if silence, which implies listening, and poetry participate in a mutual reciprocity, each feeding the other. A quiet and clear mind receives those spare

words that reveal truth, and a hush comes over us as a poem leads us into a new way of seeing.

Poetry, then, becomes an avenue for encountering oneself in a way that approaches the edge of the wordless place—the still point in which we simply are. The desire to rest in who we are is at the root of our deepest human longing. It is this longing that silence opens and poetry evokes, and suddenly what could not be revealed in a thousand lectures, sermons, or therapy sessions emerges for us as something entirely fresh. We gain new access to something previously hidden. While the mystery is not solved, we are given the capacity to interface with the veil, almost as though we are remembering. Within this remembering, we have an opportunity to move closer to our essence.

I see presence as a state of grace that exudes our deepest love for others. It underscores our acceptance of others and allows us to embrace their humanity and wholeness, exemplifying Martin Buber's writings about "I and thou." The "I-Thou" relationship, characterized by mutual recognition and respect, is the key to human flourishing and meaningful existence. In much of Buber's work, he states that the foundation of our relationships is our mutuality, when we both experience the world through the awareness of this shared universe. If we open ourselves to others and invite them into our relationship, we can experience that universe together. We can begin to see the depths of our connectedness, and it is divine.

Our presence is not based on technique any more than is our teaching; it is based on our ability to engage in a mutuality that allows learning to take place. Our presence can have an astounding healing effect on others and a way that we can feel the true relieving qualities of loving others. Our culture spends a great deal of time analyzing and scrutinizing our need to be loved and very little time focusing on or elevating the beauty of our NEED TO LOVE.

Our presence can be like a flare shot into the sky for those who feel lost at sea; we become a sign of hope. Our presence can be a shout through the wilderness that serves as an audible beacon for someone who has lost their way, a sign that

someone wanted them to come home. Our presence can be like the north star ablaze on the face of heaven, giving someone direction. Our presence can be a tangible reality that no one is alone. Our presence can be a glorious gift we give one another. Cherish this gift, recognizing it is one of our greatest gifts.

- Reverend Peaches Gillette