

The Presence of Presence

The Presence of Presence in life's more challenging moments.

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When I chose the topic for this study, I was aware that I had already been interested in it for many years. Frequently when my own life has been challenging, or when I have accompanied others who have turned to me when encountering difficulties and seeking ways to deal with them, I seek and investigate, study and explore... This has been the case over a long period, actually since I was a girl.

The development of this topic into the subject matter for my study, which I would also write about, drove this forward from being implicit to explicit (in an incomplete and incessant fashion of course).

When facing challenging difficulties I experience the excitement of the moments when I am at my best, an expansion and development of my being, connected to my strengths and to the empowering resources which support me; but also the frustration, disappointment and despondency of the occasions when the challenge has dragged me to within its depths, into the experience of difficulty, into a frustrating sense of being diminished.

These feelings exist in a kind of cocktail, retaining life's frictions as they move against each other, as when a stream of water flows and occasionally meets a rock, and searches for a new channel to continue flowing along, or like two stones striking each other repeatedly until they create a spark, the spark of life.

The movement of the search and the friction in itself is full of vitality, significance and creativity for me.

We may practice over many hours a quiet, alert, interested, compassionate presence; we experience this kind of presence after appropriate physical exercise, for example at the end of a yoga class; during a particular moment we have spent outdoors in nature; in a quiet room; at a class; in therapy. It is more challenging to find that dimension with that presence in stressful or difficult everyday situations.

The possibility that "in real life", in day-to-day challenging situations, and in any particularly difficult situation, that we can attach ourselves to a broader presence, to something supportive, is for me magical, and I experience such moments as powerfully rewarding and recharging resources.

These moments instill optimism and belief in my own direction and imbed them securely within me. The moments are stored in a kind of personal coin box, into which, each time one of these moments is experienced a highly valuable magic coin is dropped. The coin box is me, being filled with vitality and a powerful presence.

What is it that helps people to become connected to a broader presence, to something supportive in life's challenging moments? Is it being connected to such a presence

that helps people in these challenging moments or...is it something else completely different...and what is this presence?

This is a never ending learning process, which naturally has no precise directions, but at the same time can be learnt and discovered by each and every individual, who may also learn and "copy" from each other to gain inspiration.

Dictionary definitions of presence:

- 1) **The state or fact of being present in a place, a witness to events.**
- 2) **Being in a place, being present, staying over,**

I notice that the word "witness" in the first definition awakens within me a curious sensation...it is ethereal for me, I imagine a pair of eyes and perhaps ears but the fuller experience is lacking in this dictionary definition, of something more physical, attached to the complete body, to the heart, to compassion, to empathy, to nature and to creation.

A few words I wrote about presence in the introductory focus course:

(When I read it, it sounds like a song of praise to presence ☺ and I also now have noticed that I wrote it in the feminine)

She is always there, stable, embracing, expansive, broad, powerful and in her silence she has space for all; she breathes deeply,

Multi – dimensional, she is continually changing, expanding and folding herself up, becoming clearer and more focused

Nourishing, connected to the forces of nature, listening and embracing

Infinitely revealing.

A Flow of consciousness on presence.

The ability to be involved with what we sense, feel, experience, think, imagine – without becoming detached from it on the one hand, while not becoming submerged in it or overwhelmed by it on the other hand.

Meeting that which appears at the appropriate distance.

Taking an interest in that which appears within me and within my environment with curiosity, empathy, compassion and granting it legitimacy.

I notice that I repeat the words expansion, a broad presence, an expansive presence.

The action of identifying with something, inherently causes narrowing limitations, when we identify with part of ourselves, with a certain opinion, belief, impression, we narrow our perception and the experience.

And perhaps in writing the last sentence I am also identifying and narrowing my outlook...or perhaps as Ann Weiser Cornell puts it that also in order to focus we identify with something, with self in presence.

Presence as I experience it, will mostly be a complete experience: physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. For the most part the whole body will be present and there will also be a sense of expansion beyond the body's physical limits and there will be a sense of connection with forces beyond our own selves: nature, the universe, creation.

Presence mainly connects us to the here and now (the present) while other parts of us may wander off into the past and future. Naturally the experience is very personal and changes from person to person and from moment to moment and there is no one correct way of experiencing presence.

I suppose that there are people who will experience it or explain it as a connection to the divine or to the infinite, while others may describe it as something that connects them to a more spiritual level.

However it is experienced the expansion of presence allows a connection to resources, resources of the whole body, of the whole person, resources of nature and of the universe.

Different cultures and religions suggest different ways by which man can become connected to something wider than himself, bigger than himself, supporting.

Prayer is such a means, and it does not matter to what or to whom we pray we are turning to an expansive resource.

I sometimes have the feeling that in challenging moments of life there is a root that has been sent out, not towards the ground but to a multiplicity of directions and worlds. This root or tendril joins onto resources and is nourished by them and something of the essence of these resources passes through this root to me while dealing with the present.

Sometimes the sensation is that the root is searching for something to nourish it and does not manage to attach itself, or something along the way prevents the experience which will back up (back!) my challenged presence at that moment.

“When I feel grounded and centered,

I have sense of me that is larger

Than me”

Kevin McEvenue

I am interested in what helps others and me in challenging moments of life:

The perspective of time, the strength of the temporary

T. a dear friend described her struggles as a girl, before something stressful, such as an important exam. She used to think that the difficult day of the exam would pass by, and that time is like an enormous broom that sweeps the cosmic floor, as she put it.

Intuitively, from being in touch with her internal wisdom she found something which would let her experience the perspective of time, and it sounds from her description that she was able to expand beyond the stressful time she was going through and into the experience of time passing by and thus she was able to be present in the stress and not to drown in it or totally caught up in it.

Tribal connections

One mother describes the difficult struggles she has in the mornings with her children. One morning at the height of the struggle, she suddenly experienced a special kind of tribal connection, to the tribe of mothers. Other mothers in different places around the world were dealing at exactly that moment, at seven thirty in the morning, with similar difficulties. She felt a kind of relief, a relaxation in her back creating a connection to the circle of mothers that gave her a sense of shared experience and support, and she carried on getting the kids organized...

That mother is me.

Recognition, demarcation of boundaries and building trust

M. (who is experienced in focusing) explains that at a challenging moment in any given interaction she imagines that she puts the feeling that awakens within her into a box (a kind of clearing a space) knowing that she will return to it at a later time, to explore what happened at that particular moment, what emotions were experienced, etc. She stated that she does go back to whatever she has closed up in the box and I suppose that in that way she builds up the trust between herself and the "thing" which she has closed up in the box in challenging moments that she will indeed return to listen to it. The thing agrees to wait in the box and enables her to get through the challenging situation she is in, in the best possible way for herself, as she says.

It sounds as if by setting boundaries for something within herself she succeeds in staying within a more expansive presence.

Breathing and compassion, contact between the internal and external

A. describes that at difficult moments he breathes and searches for a broader perspective, and when he has perspective (a question which was not answered: how does that perspective become accessible to him??) he sees 'both sides' within him, meaning the different voices and different parts, and then compassion towards the difficult sensations he was experiencing is awakened within him, which enables him to cope better with the situation.

Many people describe breathing as being associated with an extensive presence, with breathing being connected to the present moment, to the whole body, and also connecting between the internal and external. Inhaling and exhaling, something from the outside, from the world touches me and enters inside of me and something from me, goes out into the world, and touches the outside. This again is a connection between something smaller, with a much bigger space.

The fear of losing that which is dear to us, learning from experience

A woman who I have accompanied for many years tells me about situations with people she is close to, when she is challenged and faced with a crossroads –how to respond? A voice awakens within her which reminds her of the incident when she lost her relationship with her partner who was very dear to her. The voice reminds her that she doesn't want to lose the person who she is with. She is extending from the past to the current difficulty, is reminded of her past experience, of the pain she felt and is still feeling. The expansion into the past experience, to the memory of pain, to the perspective of time supports her.

The contribution of the search itself

My focusing partner tells me that the very act of collecting memories from her life for my study is a valuable resource for her. She found herself in a challenging moment and reminded herself that this is an opportunity to find the presence of presence and in that way experienced expansion just from the very fact of searching.

In a different moment, during a challenging interaction with a family member she noticed that there was a sensation of being in a whirlpool and found herself looking at the scene in front of her eyes at that moment, at objects or any human activities which were around her rather than at the focal point of the difficulty. She felt that in that way she was expanding beyond the whirlpool of difficulty and that enabled her not to be carried away into the whirlpool of the person standing opposite her.

The Great Spirit¹ comes to visit

Focusing:

I focus when experiencing a great difficulty and encounter something small, screaming, crying. It asks: Why? Why like this? We, the one listening to me and me are sitting by the window and a gust of wind breezes in from time to time, I listen to the breeze with my whole body, I am thirsty for the wind. It aerates and lightens the dense intensity of the last few difficult days.

There is communication with the breeze at the window that suddenly expands into "the Great Spirit". I know that if I pay attention, it will be present even if at that moment it is not pleasantly blowing over me, I trust that it is there and at that moment simply conversing in another place...

My focusing partner asks me: how is this connected to my life story?

Something concerned with trust and faith.

The Great Spirit teaches me that when I am finding things difficult I can **look away** from the difficulty to the trees, to the wind blowing through the leaves...to nature, which is all around us. And that is everything. That is the connection with the Great Spirit. To the ability to trust.

¹Translator's note - the term in the original Hebrew can mean either Great Wind or Great Spirit

From that day to this, especially in the days following this focusing, this type of connection to the Great Spirit has grown much stronger. For fractions of moments during my busy day-to-day life, I look at the leaves swaying in the wind, at a tree glimpsed through a window and beyond to other things, and maintain this connection.

During one of life's challenging moments I was in my daughter's room and it was...not easy...the window and curtains were closed and I looked for somewhere to shift my glance to, for something that would connect me to the Great Spirit. I suddenly saw a painting with a horse in it hanging on her wall. I turned my glance towards it and could feel myself being supported by the "largeness" and "breadth" of the universe.

My feeling is that I have gained a real technique for creating a connection with a very broad presence, in difficult moments, a technique which is nurtured by nature and by the Great Spirit (wind). This is a sense of connection to something big, expansive and complete. It is an empowering experience, which is very useful in my daily life.

Images pictures and films

Reading the article on the focusing project in Afghanistan 'planted' in my mind the image of the guesthouse. In certain moments when the presence...is not initially discernable, the image floats up from within me, and I immediately feel the presence of the guest house, an experience of space, tranquility, festivity, as when welcoming guests. This experience enables me sometimes to accept my "internal" guests.

I noticed that an image (or a picture) which I encountered when focusing or in some other way, which I have worked with, becomes present and supportive during difficult moments and enables an extra dimension of experiences at that difficult time, something to lean upon.

Focusing:

I focus during difficult situations that I find stressful, when I am with someone close to me whom I have a large degree of responsibility for and who I accompany closely on a daily basis.

An image appears in which I see her rolling and tumbling down the slope of a mountain. Due to seeing that image, I experience a sense of tension and choking with great concern. Very slowly, after listening to different parts which awaken after being with this image (which is actually a video) I become calm. She stops falling when she reaches the bottom of the slope, her body lies spread out on the ground, spread wide and open, and she looks up to the blue skies, listening to her quickened breathing after the rough movements. Smiling. I lie down beside her on the ground and we are both together. Feeling the ground beneath us. Experiencing the skies in their infiniteness. Becoming calm.

From that time onwards, whenever she slips, for one reason or another, the video appears in my mind, as if I have taken it off the shelves of my library, I am with her, allowing her to tumble, remaining relatively calm in view of the descent.

In my very calmness there is something which makes it easier for me, and for her, and enables our relaxation together on the ground at the bottom of the slope.

And another wonderful focusing:

I am focusing with my partner, the very first time that I saw her, in the first lesson in the certification course...and we are paying attention to a physical symptom that has appeared after long weeks of tension, related to the decision to move abroad with my family.

There is a sense of internal conflict, an internal struggle. I envision myself lying on the ground, lying on my side with my arm extended upwards, straight under my head and my hair swept to one side. A force is trying to tear me apart, to uproot me from the ground and I am holding on. A struggle.

We listen patiently to the woman who is experiencing such hardship and after a while, the struggle calms down. A sense of submission appears, relaxation, giving in and going along with the situation.

Then the large shovel scoop of a tractor lifts me from the ground and I am submissive and co-operative. The scoop lays me down in mid-air on a flying carpet, a Persian rug (I too am Persian). I and my family are carried on this magic flying carpet through the air and the sensation is that on this carpet I know where I come from and it doesn't matter where I'm going to.

My family are all around me, my partner and my children, they stroke me, comfort me. I ask myself whether it's alright that my children are comforting me in this way and answer myself that in this dimension it's alright.

The sensation of the carpet is very strong and I stay with it for a long time.

Nine months later, while I am packing up the house and folding up our lives here ahead of the move that is one week away, the Persian carpet becomes present again.

An experiential image engraved onto my body supporting me and serving as a reminder of something important in the midst of this enormous family move.

A personal journey

When I started to ask people where they get their support from in challenging moments their first answers related to things that give them support, but not in those challenging moments themselves. Examples included: Speaking to a close friend, meeting with my psychologist, taking a rest, sharing with their husband etc.

Their answers led me to be more specific in my questions and to emphasize that what I was looking for was where they get support from within challenging moments themselves, precisely at the moment of the difficult interaction, the conflict and not what helps them to work through the difficulty which they have already gone through.

When I made that clear, I realized that there are people who thought that was impossible. For example one woman who I am close to, replied that during the difficult moment itself, the initial response to stress and difficulty is predominant, and not much can be done to change that. If she just manages to notice her breathing then she is in a really good situation.

This answer motivated me, awakening a strong impulse not to give in. I felt driven to find other techniques and skills that could be used to gain support within the challenging moments themselves and despite the difficulty to become connected to a supporting presence.

And then, gradually, bit by bit, I began to notice that something familiar and ancient was creeping through me and bubbling up from within. My familiar wish to stop the pain, my will to improve responses in different interactions and by doing so limit suffering damage done and the pain experienced. My wish for everything to be as it should be. That is something that resides within me having a very long history. From early childhood.

When I was a young girl, my nickname was 'Little Joy'. I was the girl who brought joy to others. I had good reasons to want to make people happy, with that young girl having met a great deal of sadness through the years, which perhaps the young 'Little Joy' did not allow in the role she had taken.

I occasionally remember the sentence from the book "The Wise Heart" by Jack Kornfield, which calmed me down considerably and helped me when I read it for the first time several years ago:

"The First Noble Truth is that life is difficult and painful, just by its nature, not because we're doing it wrong".

(The Wise Heart; Jack Kornfield; p.126)

Something about this sentence is very calming when I read it, creating a physical sense of reliance, and a relaxation with my chest. It allows me to lean on something...yes...life is painful, but that doesn't mean that it is not alright...remembering this sentence enables me to face my difficulties calmly, from a calmer place, with more acceptance; from a recognition of the difficulty and an acceptance of it. The opening words "The First Noble Truth" add a kind of festive sanctity to the whole, with a presence that holds truths that are beyond our personal beliefs.

And the dialogue continued.

I noticed that there was something in me full of passion and an impulse to search and to discover. Something which says "It's possible" and another voice which says: try to come to terms with the lack of balance, with the difficulty, with the inaccuracies, with that which 'grates' upon you.

I accept being in the "also and". Forgetting and remembering.

While writing these words a certain experience of insightful understanding becomes clear; that in a challenging moment, the possibility exists to experience both that urge to find something which may support me at that moment, which is a search for resources and at the same moment have the full acceptance that there is difficulty and pain, and that is fine. This can grant me an interesting experience of presence. I have already experienced this more than once but I continue to search for and experience this cocktail in the real life situations of the coming days.

Perhaps the broader presence can embrace motivation, curiosity, optimism and at the same time a deep acceptance of difficulty and pain as they are.

Reflections and loose ends for continued observations:

In answer to my question- "What helps you when you are experiencing difficulty?" one man replied that for him the answer often is to keep quiet and to continue onwards. What does that mean? How does it support him? Does he expand in any way?

Time and time again I see that when I or others around me experience difficulty, the broader lesson of the difficulty they are experiencing gives them support. That which they learn or practice through coping with the difficulty. This clarity adds an important perspective to the challenging coping process at that time.

This too is an expansion to something that is beyond the difficulty, to a presence which can observe the lesson learned, the insights which are broader than the daily difficulty of the current moment.

I am curious to ask many more different people from different backgrounds what it is that supports them in their time of difficulty. I imagine myself travelling around the world and researching this question in different cultures.

I see images of myself observing Africans, Indians and people from many other interesting distant regions.

But for the time being I'll focus on Europeans☺.

I am an Israeli, living near Vienna, Austria since summer 2015.

I have been working with people for more than 20 years.

I have learned different ways of working with people and methods such as the Grinberg method, active imagination, voice dialogue, family constellation, and focusing.

I would be very glad to read your comments, your feedback and if you agree also your personal experience: what supports you in challenging life's moments, what can you see that helps you to be connected to a wider presence in those challenging situations. I am collecting more life experiences and promise to share it with whoever is interested.

I would also be very happy to teach workshops about this subject for focusing students or others.

Thanks,
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