

Practicing Presence

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 15, 2024

To live in the past is to know depression. To reside in the future is to steep oneself in anxiety. To find that balance of the in-between, to inhabit presence in the current moment, that is to truly know peace.

This is a continuum I encounter and have encountered regularly as a minister and as a chaplain – how can we settle ourselves in the here and now? How can we engage with the presence of the current moment? In reflecting upon these sentiments, I thought of an experience I had when I served as a chaplain in a university hospital in New Jersey, when I arose each day with the intent of connecting the mortal with the immortal, the finite with the infinite – guiding individual souls through the spirit of the divine. I curated my rounds each morning, some a single, isolated visit, others regular patients of whom daily or bi weekly interactions provided what they needed and desired while struggling with their own ill health. One of my regular patients was a woman awaiting a looming, intensive medical procedure. Steeped in the imminent future, her very body was suffused in pervasive anxiety. Focused, too, on the past, she held a depression in the life she had lived. Through my training I intuited what she needed. Her body yearned for that sacred and holy peace found in the present moments and so, each morning, I sat alongside her hospital bed as we colored and produced basic pieces of art. In that moment, alongside an array of paper and pencils and pens and markers we focused solely on colors and outlines and shapes and shadows. In that moment, a short moment encountered each morning, she found the peace she needed to persevere. Over the course of several days, she began to find hope. To find beauty. To find contentment. She began to heal her aching spirit.

This is the power of the current moment. I invite us to bring religion into this practice. Buddhism is a faith dedicated to the exercise of mindfulness and of residing in the present moment of which we find ourselves in during each minute, hour, and day. To live with great

purpose and intention in the here and now – just as my patient did with her markers and colored paper. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh offers that with these practices of mindful breathing and movement and meditation, we, quote, “become alive again. We will be like dead people reborn.”¹ It is a “resurrection,” he writes, these moments of residing solely in the now, not imbued with the debilitating ills of inhabiting the past or the future. I think of navigating life through a thick fog, a dense cloud close to the ground that inhibits our engagement with our surroundings – we are the moving, breathing dead. And yet, with each breath, with each mediation, with each intentional moment, the clouds lift, and we become immersed in life once again. We are offered the opportunity to fully connect with ourselves, with others, with the beauty and wonder all around us, for that is to truly live.

Through intentional presence, we not only become more engaged with our surroundings, but we are likewise more connected with our own hearts, spirits, bodies, and minds; aware and welcoming of that of which we hold within. Are we feeling anger? Are we reacting with judgement? Are we speaking with animosity? I think of the poem we read earlier written by 13th century poet, scholar, and theologian Rumi. Joy, depression, shame, malice, “Welcome and entertain them all,” he wrote, “grateful for whoever comes.”² When we are present, we engage with whatever is in our body at whatever particular moment we find ourselves in – the good, the bad, the indifferent. If not depressed, if not anxious, we can meet them with the peace we have cultivated – welcoming each of our emotions for just what they are – emotions. If centered in the now, we can become fully present to whatever life offers, not stagnant in our thoughts, but intuiting how we can transform these ill thoughts or words or actions of harm to those of love and compassion and wellbeing. We are offered the chance to learn and grow from whatever emotions we experience in each moment.

To practice presence is to come alive and fully engage with our surroundings. To practice presence is to connect to all of that of which we hold within. Yet this is bookended with the

¹ From *Soul Matters Worship Resources*

² “The Guest House” by Rumi

depression of ruminating in the past and the anxiety of residing in the future found as we navigate our own individual journeys towards this gift of the present moment. This idea of depression and anxiety was offered by Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu.³ Others, including authors Eckhart Tolle and Jack Kornfield, offer different yet similar interpretations. For example, analogous to living in this state of the anxiety for the future is to live in a state of fear.⁴ What is yet to come? What ills can I fruitlessly attempt to expect and foresee? This is where I personally reside, somewhere between that continuum of peace and a state of anxiety or fear. Questions and predictions and worries and anticipation of all that is yet to come and all that is entirely imagined – this is a tiring mentality to occupy! These fears hardly ever come to fruition. In reflecting upon these experiences with my dad, he often offers, “Did you learn anything, Janie?” “Guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness” – ailments of a life lived in the past, suggests Eckhart Tolle.⁵ Afflictions of ruminating on decisions made, words offered, actions taken, lies told, mistakes experienced, living entirely within that which cannot be changed, that which can never be recreated or transformed. How can we release all of this and focus on the here and now which is so very beautiful and sacred? I offer, forgive yourself. Be kind to yourself – you are worth it. In relieving ourselves of the detriment of both overinvolvement with the past and the future, Thich Nhat Hanh offers, breathe. Be mindful. Meditate. How can we find that peace held intimately between guilt or resentment and fear or anxiety? We can engage in an activity that feeds our spirits, minds, and bodies. We can find wonder, awe, and beauty in the natural world. We can reside alongside those of whom we love. During those hospital visits, my patient articulated the joy she encountered while anticipating my visit of which we produced basic art, as it served to her as a sacred pause, a respite, and a release as a moment of pure peace.

I offer one more gift of residing in the presence of the current moment – engaging with those simple things that have the potential to offer us mystery, wonder, and awe. When we meet the mundane with close attention, when we are fully present with monotony, indescribable beauty

³ From *Soul Matters Worship Resources*

⁴ *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* by Eckhart Tolle

⁵ Ibid

arises. We are called to intentionally observe the particular shade of green in a blade of grass, to find an abstract image in the clouds above us, to smell the musty scent of dirt on a rainy day, to see the dimples on the cheeks of a beloved, to feel the warmth of a hug – the more we engage with this, the more sacred and holy our lives become. The more peace we find – blessed moments of pure, inner calm. With this yearning and attraction to beauty, the wonder and awe grows and imbues our daily lives with joy and a quiet, unassuming tranquility and presence.

Once we have cultivated a presence within us, we can offer this profound gift to another; and this becomes reminiscent of how we engage with ourselves. It is the power of deep listening; in communing with the raw emotions of another and reacting as such. It is a time of hearing the articulated laments of the spirit. Just like Toad and Frog, we feel sad together. We feel happy together.⁶ We exist together, accepting just who another is in any particular moment – angry, jealous, sorrowful. Author and activist Parker Palmer offers us this: “The human soul doesn’t want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed — to be seen, heard, and companioned exactly as it is.”⁷ What is the soul? It is that spirit inside of us, that still, small voice within. We can pause in the sincere and heartfelt practice of companioning the soul of another, of intentionally pausing with deep love to be with the spirit – to see it and hear it quietly and silently. This practice may be counterintuitive from the tendency to fix or give advice or save a companion who is clearly unwell. I invite us to lean into this potentially new insight and acquired wisdom, and as such share another story of chaplaincy. There was a man who had decided, in all of his emotional pain, not to talk, ruminating in his mind over afflictions unknown to me, unknown to any of the hospital staff. Conversation was fruitless, unanswered questions became entirely irrelevant to the situation at hand. All that could be offered, from myself or any of the hospital staff, was presence. Each afternoon, this ailing man and I existed together and silently watched television. I sat, no words necessary, to be with a man who was

⁶ “The Letter” from *Frog and Toad Are Friends* written by Arnold Lobel

⁷ “My Misgivings About Advice” by Parker Palmer

clearly aching. The hospital staff and I quietly companioned his soul – listening and seeing through the silence and the dark.

I return to the sentiments of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, as he offers, quote, “The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence... When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers.”⁸ Not guidance, not advice, not solidarity – although there are times when these are needed. But we reflect that particular gift of mindfulness we have cultivated within us – this is often paramount. That intentional pause in the now. When this is fully received, the one we companion flowers and their fears become bravery, their regrets become hope, their anger becomes determination. This is when love flourishes. This is when peace infuses the air we inhale. When all we do is companion the soul. When we listen to and see the spirit.

This pairs with another spiritual journey as we ask, how is our presence received by others? Are we emanating anxiety? Are we issuing forth resentment? Are we pouring forth anger from our souls and our spirits? With mindfulness and presence, we hope to issue peace, we offer that our existence be one of love and compassion rippling out to all. This is achievable by each of us – to pause in that moment of a deep breath and settle ourselves in the here and now so that we emanate that which heals and calms and soothes. What we cultivate within is what we project without; who we are on the inside becomes who we are on the outside. Do others feel love and peace when in our presence? For this is to be a genuine spiritual being, a guide towards a life of mindfulness. This is to share the peace and presence we hold within to all of those in our midst – this is our greatest gift.

So may we craft art with those dreading the future and lamenting the past, creating a pause, a respite, a refuge from the ills of anxiety and depression. May we nurture that which is held in the in-between, nourishing an inner peace that emanates through our very presence. And may we reside in this – this peace of the present moment – cultivated through the practice of breath

⁸ From *Soul Matters Worship Resources*

and meditation and prayer and mindfulness, as we both hold this treasured gift within us and share it with the world. May we intimately know the beauty of the wind and the rain and the trees surrounding us, connecting with simple wonder and awe. May we find beauty in this moment – this very moment – in the pews with one another – as we simply are. May we journey, quietly and intentionally, with the soul of another; with their spirit and inner light and all of that of which they hold soundlessly and deeply within. May we go forth, cultivating within a calm that settles our very beings in each moment. May our spirits know what it means to live with intention. May our hearts know love as they beat with the power of peace. May our souls emanate compassion and tranquility. And may our presence be our greatest gift.

May it be so, and Amen.