

## **“The Gift of Presence”**

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

December 4, 2016

*A sermon is meant to be heard rather than read. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

### Readings

First Reading: “You Reading This, Be Ready” by William Stafford

Second Reading: selection from “The Power of Presence” by Debbie Hall<sup>1</sup>

### Sermon

Once I was old enough to start receiving invitations to weddings, a particular phrase started to jump out at me. Often, these types of invitations begin, Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So request the honor of your presence at the marriage of their children. This language has often struck me as having a bit of formality and tradition to it. And, yet, requesting the honor of our presence is also something that life asks of us, isn't it?

So, our worship theme in this month of December is “Presence.” We explore the questions, “what does it mean to be a person of presence?” and “what does it mean to be a community of presence?”

I want to acknowledge that this time of year, and this particular year, is pretty unique. We have the hubbub of the holidays - a time when we “should” be feeling festive and cheery. For many of us, this is one of the busiest times of year, as we prepare for holiday parties and for holiday travel; as we do our holiday gift-buying. It's also been barely one month since the election, and we find ourselves in an awkward and uncertain period of waiting for the next presidential administration to begin and bracing ourselves for the changes that could have damaging effects on

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<sup>1</sup> “The Power of Presence,” by Debbie Hall, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5064534>

many people and our planet. Someone described it to me as feeling like we're in a whirlwind.

So, with the tempests of political and social change swirling about, and with increased demands on our time and attention, we enter this holiday season.

What could any of this have to do with the theme of presence?

My answer to this is that presence is something I know I need. I have an intuitive sense that I would benefit from slowing down, taking in each moment, and being fully present. I know that others in my life need my presence as well. And yet, right now it's feeling pretty difficult to be present. There are many tasks competing for my attention, and it's feeling difficult to pay attention to the present reality of our world because it is disappointing and angering.

I know that many of you try to cultivate your own practice of compassionate and engaged presence through meditation and other spiritual practices. And, we know that the presence we desire isn't always easy to obtain.

Yet, our presence matters to those around us. And, our family and friends know when we are absent.

Omid Safi is the Director of Duke University's Islamic Study Center and a columnist for the On Being blog. He shares this story<sup>2</sup> which captures so well how our lack of presence can be felt by those around us:

"I was sitting in our living room a few days ago, with my laptop on my lap, doing what I always do "after work" — answering emails that don't stop at 5, catching up on business.

My little girl, a real love of my life, came into the room in that beautiful way she does. She doesn't so much walk as she skips, she glides, she dances. She walks on her tippy toes, because she is, as she says, a "for real life" princess. As she came

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<sup>2</sup> "The Thief of Intimacy, Busyness" by Omid Safi, November 13, 2014. <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/the-thief-of-intimacy-busyness/7031>

dancing into the room, she started to say in her own sing-songy way, "Baba, would you like to..."

At that very moment she saw me, laptop in lap, locked into my jihad against email. The smallest jihad. The struggle I always lose.

She cut herself off. Her dancing came to a halt. Her sing-songy voice changed to something else, something not even resembling disappointment. It was resignation, more like surrender to the rhythm of her Baba's life, knowing the scene she had seen countless times before.

Without waiting for my response, she cut herself off mid-sentence, pivoted on her beautiful feet, and walked out. I heard her say, with her back turned to me, "Oh, you're busy."

As she walked out, I stared at this blasted laptop screen. Silver frame. Plastic, shiny screen. Cursor that blinks like a heartbeat. But it is not alive, this laptop. There is no heartbeat here, as there is in that delicate angel of mine.

I ran after my little love and held her in my arms. I wanted to apologize not just for being busy in that moment, but for all the hundreds of other times she must have come into the room, dancing and prancing, singing and wishing to take me with her on her imaginary flights of fancy to beautiful worlds where little girls and their babas walk through meadows populated only by butterflies, unicorns, friends, tea parties, sunshine, and hugs. It's a beautiful pink and purple world that my daughter lives in. Far too often, she's been there alone."

In his telling of this story, Safi reveals so beautifully what is potentially lost when we are not present.

So, as we head into the holiday season, as we enter a period of anticipation and waiting for the solstice and for Hannukah and Christmas and the New Year, I want us to remind ourselves of the true, precious gift of presence.

Our full presence is a gift to others. Thich Nhat Hanh says that our presence is the most precious gift we can offer others.

But, what does it really mean to have or to offer “presence”?

In our reading, Debbie Hall shares her wisdom that “Presence is a noun, not a verb; it is a state of being, not doing.”

We know we are being present or that someone is truly present for us not by any discernible activity but by the quality and character of our being or the other’s being with us.

Just as noticeable as it can be when someone we love is absent, we also take note when the opposite is true - when we are gifted with someone else’s full presence.

I imagine that you have experienced the gift of presence at some point from someone in your life. I’d like you to call such a moment to mind. What was that like? What were the qualities of that presence that made a difference to you?

Tara Brach, a Buddhist teacher in the insight meditation community, shares a story of being invited to speak at a Buddhist conference. She was slotted to be the second speaker. And, they were each allotted the minutes to speak. The speaker that preceded her was Baker Roshi, a much revered elder and teacher in the Buddhist tradition especially in the West. The question that the conference posed was, “What allows us to spiritually awaken?” Well, Baker Roshi got up from his seat and went to the microphone and said, “What allows us to awaken and to be free is intention and attention.” Then he bowed, and he sat down. Tara Brach had to follow that, and she says she doesn’t really remember what she said, but she remembers the elegance of Baker Roshi’s teaching.

Intention and attention are the elements of full presence. First, we have the intention to really be here. Our heart is giving itself to the moment. And, then we learn to just pay attention. To be aware of what is happening in us and around us in the moment. That is full presence.

As William Stafford writes, “Will you ever bring a better gift for the world than the breathing respect that you carry wherever you go right now?”

One of the spiritual exercises being offered to us this month through the Soul Matters program is to make your “presents” about “presence.” You might offer the gift of doing something together with someone you love. Or, you might be present by choosing a gift that really reflects something unique about the person you are offering the gift to. However you engage in this exercise, the practice is intended to help you find those you love again, and to help them find you.

And, that is really what our presence is about - finding one another, especially in the midst of hard times. And, we, indeed find ourselves in some challenging times right now.

One of the things I believe that we need from one another in this moment is to be present alongside one another with the willingness to hold the full awareness of our present reality, as challenging as it may be.

So, it is perhaps the second element of full presence that might be especially difficult right now - paying attention to our current reality when the reality is tough to bear. It feels like a dark hour. And, as we enter more deeply into the winter season, we can reflect on what it means to stay present in the dark.

I have shared before that I lived in Nicaragua for a brief period during college. I was in a very rural and fairly remote part of the country, in a farming community with little electricity. One day we spent the entire day in a health clinic to assist a group of doctors and nurses from the United States who had come to provide much needed medical assistance to people in the community. At the end of the long day, I prepared to walk the short distance - perhaps quarter mile or so - back to my host family's home. As a nineteen year-old who had grown up in a city, I hadn't ever experienced the full darkness of nighttime in an unlit space. I didn't have a flashlight with me, but luckily I was walking in a group. I remember walking very cautiously along the road afraid of making a misstep, and the way I made it home was by listening very carefully to the steps of those around me. I gave my full attention to the sounds of their feet on the gravelly path and to their breathing - following along uncertainly all the way home.

In these darks times, we need to stay present, too. Even if we are feeling lost and uncertain, we can pay attention to those around us for wisdom and guidance along

the path. We can look to those who make their peaceful and powerful presence known in the face of fear and hatred.

This is one such story. And, it actually comes from a few years back. You may remember the tragic event back in 2011 when a gunman showed up at a constituent meeting being led by U.S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in a grocery store parking lot in Tucson, Arizona. The gunman shot Representative Giffords and 18 other people that day, killing 6, including nine-year-old Christina Taylor-Green. The Westboro Baptist Church, a hate group known for its anti-gay beliefs and inflammatory protesting, announced that it would protest at the funeral of this young girl - probably just a media-grabbing tactic but one that would have had a horrific impact on a community in mourning. In response to this announcement, members of the community, including Kat Sinclair, a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson, decided that they would offer a different kind of presence that day. Borrowing from the practice of the "Angel Project," which had started in response to the Westboro Baptist Church's presence at the funeral of Matthew Shephard, a young gay man killed in Wyoming in 1998, Kat decided to organize a group of angels in Tucson for the day of the funeral. They brought long poles of white PVC plastic, and yards of white fabric and used them to make giant angels, whose wide wings would block the protestors' hate-filled picket signs from view. It turned out that Westboro Baptist Church didn't show up that day, but instead, the angels were there, offering a silent ministry of presence for a community in need of healing.

As we enter this holiday season, let us remember that our presence is truly a gift. Let us offer one another the gift of the breathing respect we carry wherever we go right now.

If we show up with our hearts set on being full present, we, too, can bring healing to our broken world.

So may it be.