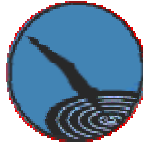




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World of Personal Spirit

ACCESSING DEPTH THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF PRESENCE

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Abstract

We hear a lot about being “fully present” these days, both as facilitators and in general conversation. And we probably have a general idea about what it means; “to really be there”! But what does that mean? And if it is so simple and so obvious, why is it talked about so much? This paper will offer that presence is a quality of being that is developed through practice, and that eventually leads all the way to the unfolding of spirit. That spirit shows up both in our interior and exterior worlds. And that we need to counterbalance rapid exterior change, such as technological growth, with enhanced interior growth, or presence!

Being Fully Present – why should you care?

As a facilitator, we are all increasingly coming across the notion of being present. Many leading practitioners talk about presence as integral to their work, e.g.:

Angeles Arrien – “Show up, and choose to be fully present.”



Harrison Owen – “The Open Space facilitator should be totally present and absolutely invisible.”

The ability to “hold space” or “be fully present” is becoming a foundation piece to many innovative approaches that focus on transformation, such as Dialogue, process facilitation, and large scale change techniques. For instance, the Future Search approach calls for minimal facilitator interventions and instead designs structures that enable people to make greater levels of connection – both with each other and within themselves. In all of these, there is a decreased emphasis on what the facilitator does and an increased emphasis on what they are.

As an individual, many of us are so stressed out, and doing so much, that we wonder in quiet desperation, “There has got to be a better way! Something has got to give!” There is a limit to what we can do in 24 hours; there may not be the same limits on what we can be. And for some of us, the practice of being fully present is a basic commitment to our personal development, to our spiritual journeys.

Presence

So what does it mean to “be present”?

Presence involves being in the here and now. Its opposite is absence. Being fully present is an ongoing journey that reveals over time deeper levels of being – present to yourself, to others, and to spirit (however you conceive that). Presence is accompanied by authenticity, alertness, awareness and fullness. It occurs with the vulnerability of true strength.ⁱ It involves acceptance and compassion for yourself and others, not trying to fix people toward some ideal notion.

If presence is a quality of being, the questions that occur to me are, “Present to what? And what is the relationship between being and doing?”

Being and Doing

Ken Wilbur provides the most useful insight that I know of on this question.ⁱⁱ In terms of bedrock reality, we humans, and all elements of the cosmos, exist in four forms (what Wilbur calls the four quadrants): as an individual and as part of a collective (simultaneous whole/parts) and as seen or experienced from the inside and the outside. As an individual, you and I have interior feelings and awareness, and external behaviours. We exist and create our meaning as part of a larger group or society, with its (interior) values and beliefs and its (exterior) social codes and technical and economic systems.

	Interior	Exterior
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intention and subjectivity; • Self and self expression • Consciousness • Truthfulness and sincerity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviour and form • Physical forms and bodies • Objective nature • Factual truth
Collective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Worldspace • Ethics and morals • Mutual understanding • Justice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Systems • Economic and social systems • Science and technology • Functional fit

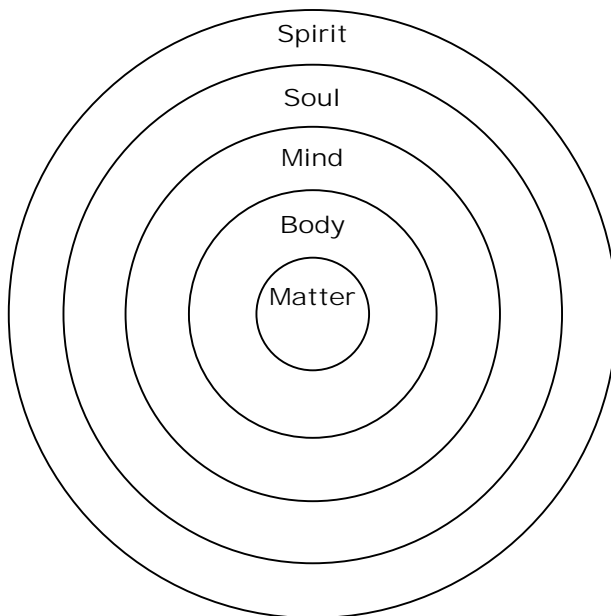
None of these quadrants can be dissociated from the other; we exist and have our expression in all four forms. The interior is the realm of Being, it is where presence exists. The exterior is the realm of Doing, of objective fact and physical reality. Being and Doing cannot be considered in isolation from each other. Our doing is an expression of our being. As individuals, if we want to do more, we must somehow be more. As facilitators, if a group wants to do more, we can model and act as a catalyst to greater being.



Present to What?

Another way of saying, “being more” is “present more”; but present to more of what?

Here is where both evolutionary science and perennial wisdom philosophy help. We know how life has evolved over time. Crudely put, first came rocks, then plants, then animals, then humans. Matter leads to body leads to mind. Who knows what’s next! The great sages throughout time have said that what is next is soul and spirit, and that this potential is available to us all. Matter, body, mind, soul, spirit; often dubbed “the great chain of being”. It is in fact the traces of spirit-in-action, or how spirit shows up in the world.



If we overlay the two notions of the four quadrants and the “Great Chain”, we see that developments in our interior world (left hand quadrant) are matched by developments in our exterior world (right hand quadrant). Awareness and behaviours or physical form are different at each of the levels of matter, body, mind, soul and spirit. For instance:

- Simple celled physical forms have an awareness of simple irritation

- Organisms with a neural cord have an awareness of basic perception
- Animals with a limbic brain system have an awareness of emotions
- Humans with a complex neocortex are aware of symbols, concepts and logic
- The great sages and saints (and we're only beginning to know what their brain waves look like!) are aware of the unity of all life.

So the question of “present to what” becomes a question of expanding awareness or consciousness. Are we present to mind only? How much of mind? To both mind and body? Where do we draw the boundaries as to what we will be aware of? How much of ourselves will we accept? For us in our contemporary world, this might mean:ⁱⁱⁱ

- Are we aware of our ideal persona only, disowning our shadow side?
- Are we aware of our total ego, including persona and shadow, but disowning our bodies?
- Are we aware of ourselves as a fully integrated being, mind and body, but disown our interdependence with the environment?
- Are we aware of the soul of the group that we are working with as it is emerging?

The Practice of Presence

For myself, I find that practicing presence is not easy, but it is very simple. Cultivating awareness requires determination, and regular practice – just like playing the piano or perfecting your golf swing. You need to look at your life and yourself, but without judgement. You need to look and be aware, but you do not need to fix. On the contrary, we can let go of ideal notions of who we are or ought to be! With greater awareness comes the freedom to choose appropriate behaviours. (being and doing!) Awareness and true acceptance are healing.



In the workshop we will practice various exercises that centre around mindfulness, being fully aware in the present moment of self, other individuals, the group and subtle energies. It is a combination of full attention and letting go!

As a facilitator, I find I must become aware of my own thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations when I am with a group.

- Does my body feel tight, with perhaps a tense jaw or shoulders? Be aware and breathe, breathe it out and let it go. I may end up feeling physically light and airy, like there is lots of space inside me!
- Am I feeling worried or anxious because the group or agenda is not playing out as I thought it would? Be aware of it, and present to other thoughts that arise. In my case, it might be the ideal image of the know-it-all expert surfacing once again! Recognize and accept it with compassion, then choose how you are going to follow and encourage the group's process.
- Am I not liking the people I am with, perhaps not agreeing with their values, and seeing their behaviours as disruptive and ugly? Be aware of it, acknowledge and name it, accept yourself and them anyway, look them deeply in the eyes. Maybe the beauty of who they truly are will shine forth.
- Am I feeling resistance from the group? Be aware of it and look at the thought and feelings that arise. Ask deeply what is my intention in this situation? Am I here to control and guide (my worried show-off side!) or am I here to serve others through love and truth? If I cannot demonstrate love and truth with myself, then I surely cannot do it with others.
- Am I finding that surprising thoughts, visual pictures or ideas are surfacing? Be aware of them as possible intuitive hunches; sit with them for a few minutes quietly. Does it feel like

my own personal issues? Mentally put to one side. If the idea or image persists, offer it to the group as an observation for them to check out.

Story: Once I was to facilitate a team session, and was listening during the presentation of team assessment data by a colleague. I found myself feeling heavy, tired and listless. I say myself doodling, scrawling down miscellaneous key phrases as they came up in the group. Why am I tired and bored? Be aware of it; don't reject it as inappropriate behaviour! Suddenly, the insight came to me that just as I was becoming unengaged, so was the group unengaged because they were feeling powerless. I sat with the idea and it wouldn't go away. I offered it to the group: you could have heard a pin drop! The energy shifted right away, and the true issues began to emerge.

The practice of presence for me is not just a workplace skill, but a basic approach to living. It speaks to a faith or felt sense in the continuity of life, in the unfolding of spirit within and around me.

Inside/Outside Approach to Change

So much of the organizational change that we see is driven by external factors: Information Technology and the Internet, mergers and acquisitions in a global world, kaleidoscopic cultural diversity, environmental changes. It would seem that our exteriors are experiencing transformational shift. Unless we want to get ripped apart, our interiors need to shift accordingly. Our awareness needs to expand to live in this new dimension. Practice of presence is thus a means of personal transformation.

It can also be used as a means of approaching organizational transformation. We are familiar with the notion of the evolving and growing organization, from entrepreneur, to successful small business, to large global organization. These evolving organizational forms also



express the evolution of spirit-in-action from Body to Mind, Intellect and Soul.^{iv} As an organization evolves, its values, culture, structure and processes will also evolve. Successful transformation of an organization also means transformation of the individuals working there.

The Evolving Organizational Model

Organization	Spirit-in-Action	Hero	Characteristics	Limits to Growth
Reactive	Body	Entrepreneur - solo opportunist	Go For It! Sees a change in the environment/ new idea and capitalizes on it Work hard – just do it! King of the jungle!	No real time for customers or service Systems and procedures are chaotic
Responsive	Mind	Mom and Pop – good people	Pleasant and Functional Orderly systems and procedures Friendly place for employees and customers Responds well to the known environment Moderate and steady production capacity	Can't plan for a different future Culture is a bit placid and dull
Proactive	Intellect	MBA – expert people	Plan and Control Awesome production capacity A well oiled machine that runs by the numbers Control is key A closed system Leadership based on expertise	Doesn't perceive changes outside the system Appears arrogant and isolated to outsiders Requires compelled behaviour by employees
Interactive	Soul	Everybody - wisdom of all	Surfing and Growing Open system constantly interacting with and learning from environment Constant transformation Leadership based on task at hand, passion and willingness to assume responsibility	Based on form

As facilitators and organizational change agents, it is a mistake to impose a one-size-fits-all model. We need to honour and be present to individuals and organizations where they are, and offer a means to growth and transformation should they wish. Usually, the necessity for

growth will show up as systemic problems; these are the inherent limits to growth within that paradigm. Individuals and organizations often have to let go of relying on the very strengths that made them succeed in the first place. The entrepreneur has to let go of running the show by themselves in order to create orderly systems and service customers. The small business has to let go of a pleasant and reliable environment in order to build something more exciting for an evolving future. And the powerful, qualified experts who run our large organizations have to let go of prediction and control to embrace an open organization that embraces the wisdom of everyone – inside and outside the organization.

Through the practice of presence, we can see the beauty and energy of each phase; the raw vitality of the entrepreneur, the comfortable ambience of the small business, the awesome reach and production capacity of the global organization. And in that very presence, new avenues to the further emergence of spirit may emerge.

Summary

The practice of presence is just that – a practice, a lifelong journey. It is not a warm-up or a rehearsal, although indeed you may wish to practice in a concentrated fashion before a big assignment! It is an end in itself that both expresses and develops your inner life.

Ultimately, presence is the most generous gift of all. When there is nothing else to do, we can still be there – with all our faculties, attention and care. It is a gift to yourself, to friends, family and clients and a gift back to spirit from whence it comes in the first place.

ⁱ Bennet Wong and Jock McKeen, *The New Manual for Life*, PD Publishing, 1998

ⁱⁱ Ken Wilbur, *A Brief History of Everything*, Shambhala Press, 1996

ⁱⁱⁱ Ken Wilber, *No Boundary*, Shambhala Press, 1985

^{iv} Harrison Owen, new book to be published 2000