

THE LIVING PRESENCE
24 June 2012
Rev. Lisa Ward

I was walking to my car after a minister's meeting in Bethesda, Maryland. The parking lot has two tiers, with a wooded divide and path linking the upper and lower parking lot. Another bit of wooded land separates the lower parking lot from a busy traffic corner. As I was approaching my car in the lower parking lot, I heard a noise behind me, different enough to alert me to turn around. About ten yards away, a young buck was sauntering past me toward the wooded divide. I stood still, hoping my presence wouldn't alarm him. My recognition alerted him, and he simply turned to look at me. He was close enough for me to see the fur on his not-yet-matured antlers.

We met each other's eyes for, I don't know, an eternity that lasted about 7 seconds. I projected an intention toward him to communicate, "not dangerous". He decided to trust the situation and continue his journey a few more steps to eat the greens that were growing under the trees. Before he bent down he directed his gaze and body attention toward me and we, once again, met each other's eyes. Another timelessness of 5 seconds, or so, eyes locked, I projected, without moving, "not dangerous" or perhaps, simply, "yes". The young buck put his head down and munched the land's riches in this quiet pocket of a highly populated area, with busy traffic just fifty yards away. In retrospect, I didn't hear the traffic, for I had focused on the sound of his chewing the greens.

I stood still in awe, feeling as if I had come upon a treasure that I had not earned, while working out in my mind how long I could linger there before getting on to other appointments and the long ride home. I had to calm the doubts that simply

watching a deer have a snack was more important than “improving myself” with some such activity or increasing my relevance in some such project. I trusted this opportunity to practice stillness and allowed my gratitude for this exquisite moment.

I noticed two ministers wrapping up their goodbyes in the upper parking lot, far enough away to be outside this bubble of stillness -- which I didn't dare break by alerting them -- yet they were so close that a diverted glance would have brought into notice this picture of a four-legged being and a two-legged being in a shared moment. I didn't even catch when they got into their cars and drove off.

Layers and layers of awareness are happening all the time around us. Each moment has infinite ways of knowing and seeing within the larger web of being. Each moment has within it experience and perspective, stillness and engagement.

The buck continued to check me out periodically, though with less stiffened alertness each time. It seemed he had made the decision that I was, indeed, not dangerous, and, probably, irrelevant. I had wondered, early on, whether, perhaps, *the buck* was dangerous, and calculated, in one of our locked gazes, what I might do if he charged me, since I didn't have much room or equipment to defend myself, though I had never heard of a deer charging a human. The situation was strange enough, however, for me to have to process fear about it.

Affection rose within me once the fear passed and I then thought that this adolescent should be more careful and not take such risks. I could be dangerous! (ok, I admit, we have a 14 year old boy at home...). We bring who we are and what we know to every moment, and when we let it flow, even let it go, into a

larger presence of being, we create openings for new understandings, unexpected findings and mysterious belonging.

Some rustling behind me alerted me to at least two other deer – female – who stayed partially hidden in the woods near the road. It seemed they all were moving on to other fields at their own pace, passing me by as though they were passing a tree, or stone wall...just part of the environment. My energy signal, once attuned with the moment, had little significance to the rest of their day, whereas I, doing my level best to attend to the grace of the moment, cherished its feeding of my heart. In truth, this was just a moment, made remarkable to me by noticing it.

And, just as gently as it began, the moment seemed to pass. The buck moved on, met with the other deer on the driveway, and disappeared into the suburbs in the time it took for me to find my keys. They were gone. No fan-fare, no epiphanies, just a blessed opportunity to shift focus from busy-ness to presence....from self-absorption to shared being...from unconsciousness to yes.

That kind of notice is available to us at all times. There are, simply, layers and layers of assumptions, distortions and distractions that keep us from this natural resonance with being, this grace-filled unity in presence.

Patty de Llosa, in her book, The Practice of Presence, writes: “We get so caught up in the immediate demands on our time that there’s none left for feeling alive, for being present to ourselves...We were born with this possibility,” she offers, “and it still vibrates in each of us today, though often buried under a huge pile of future

urgencies and past psychic debris...Our gold is buried,” she cajoles, “let’s admit, in attitudes of pretty solid rock. It needs to be mined and processed.”¹

When we gather in Unitarian Universalist communities, we invite the possibility of mining and processing that gold, that inherent worth and dignity, that knowledge of interdependent being, that celebration of the shared “yes” of our lives. We come in with all our distractions and urgencies and expectations and judgment, directing our focus to honoring freedom of conscience, the wisdom of the ages and the genius of creation.

At least that’s our aspiration, right? We are so well trained in our lives and by our fears to remain on the surface of things that it is not easy nor even recognizable how to dig deep into the core of the beauty and worth of our being.

So we create systems of distraction, dwelling in the familiar, engaging in dramas and power plays, maintaining a distance with defenses, tests and expectations, thinking we are in control of feeling alive and making our way. We find moments of recognition and assurance that feed the inner knowledge of our shared dignity, yet we can easily get lost in the shuffle, wanting more and wondering what it all means.

We are meaning makers, we human beings, meaning seekers, meaning consumers. We want to know what we are doing here, why our lives are the way they are, how to feel comfortable in our skin, how to navigate our world of change and chance, how to know what’s right and what’s wrong, how to find joy and feel peace.

¹ De Llosa, Patty, The Practice of Presence. Morning Light Press, pp. iii-iv

There are also times when we emerge from unconsciousness with a determined “no” to make room for “yes”.

“Let go of the story”, writes Eckhart Tolle, “and return to the only place of power: the present moment.”²

Again, this is part of what we do when we gather in worship. We call on one another with a shared intention to, as Kathleen McTigue offers in her opening words, “rest for a moment on the forming edge of our lives...and claim for ourselves awareness and gratitude.”³ We give ourselves the opportunity to breathe together, to sing together, to share an experience together, to come to silence together.

All of this is an opportunity to know shared being. All of this is an invitation to touch on the living presence, which dwells in all being and assures us of our belonging. When we arrive at that knowing, however fleeting, we find the power to choose to live our lives fully in what’s good and true and beautiful. That is what we are excavating, bit by bit, from our inherent being.

The more we welcome presence, the less our past debris controls us. The more we welcome presence, the less we seek for answers in the future. The more we welcome presence the richer our days become, regardless of the content, and the less we feel alone, regardless of our circumstance.

² Tolle, Eckhart. [A New Earth](#). Penguin Books, p.139

³ McTigue, Kathleen. [Singing the Living Tradition](#), UUA, #435

A lot of attention is being paid in modern spirituality, as it has been over the millennia in mystical traditions to come to know the living presence which abides in the present moment. What I like best about this inquiry is the fact that it can be found anywhere by anyone, with discipline and humility. We do not need to travel to a far off mystical land, though I'm sure that could jump start an awareness. We do not have to find a guru, though, again, that could help enhance the process. We can find the living presence in anything we do. We need just make room with clear, open-hearted intention.

Not an easy thing. But a simple thing. And available to us all.

It begins with our willingness to be still enough to let go of our own story. Not for ever – just for the moment. This comes from noticing and staying with the noticing. We can learn how to do this from our breath. We can notice the inhale and exhale. We can realize that there is no past or future to a breath. It comes and goes in the present. We can understand that this breath comes from shared being – interdependent being. We would not breathe without the trees. We cannot breathe without sharing the air with others. It begins with noticing that we are individuals within a unity of being.

And what will come, if we let it, is humility and gratitude. Humility, not only in our embrace of shared being, but also in forgiving our imperfections. We do not have to be perfect to come to presence, we have to be forgiving of ourselves and others. We have to let go of those stories as well.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

And gratitude comes naturally when we let it. Life is a gift that we did not earn. Sometimes it might feel like a nightmare that we did not ask for...or so we thought...but that's another sermon....Life is a gift. A difficult, surprising, heart-breaking, awe inspiring, unrelenting gift that we did not earn but can fully live. With help. With each other.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Fear often arises in this awareness. Fear of disappearing, fear of the unknown, fear of lost time, fear of vulnerability. It takes courage to let ourselves be, to claim our true belonging. It can be uncomfortable as we realize we are not the center of the universe, nor any better or worse than anything else. Uncomfortable until liberating, for we can realize that being unique dissolves judgment. We do not have to be special, we have to be ourselves. And in our authenticity we are held, we belong, we are beautiful.

This inherent worth and dignity stuff ain't easy.....But it is true for all authentic being.

Henry David Thoreau, 19th century Unitarian, wrote: "I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment, while I was hoeing in a village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance that I should have been by any epaulet I could have worn."⁴

⁴ <http://www.quotationspage.com/search.php3?homesearch=thoreau&page=4>

Humility, gratitude, noticing, breathing, forgiving, trying again, letting go, letting be.

You can do this. We can do this. The world needs this. Amen.