

Our theme for October 2021

Presence

“Where are you? Here. What time is it? Now. What are you? This moment.” ~ Dan Millman

Presence means bearing witness to this moment, embodying it, and accepting it, exactly as it is. The past is irrelevant, and the future is unknowable. The only place is here. The only time is now. *This is it.*

Presence—which traces its roots through Middle English, Old French, and, ultimately, to the Latin *praesentia*, or “being at hand”—means surrendering our own expectations and resting in alert receptiveness to the divine will of the universe, in whatever way it’s currently showing up.

That’s not easy for many of us. If desires and emotions draw our attention to the past, and anticipation and planning coincide with speculation about the future, then the sense of balance and joy available only in the present can get lost in our lives. According to Dr. Samuel Johnson,

When we are young we busy ourselves in forming schemes for succeeding time, and miss the gratifications that are before us; when we are old we amuse the languor of age with recollection of youthful pleasures or performances; so that our life, of which no part is filled with the business of the present time, resembles our dreams after [the midday meal], when the events of the morning are mingled with the designs of the evening.

As Unitarian Universalists, we can recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every moment, honoring even those hours of hardship as a path to peace. We can practice being present to the pluralistic living tradition we share—however it’s unfolding. Try it right now.

Be present to transcending mystery and wonder. There’s holiness in your direct experience of reading these lines—decoding countless combinations of characters between each blink of the eyes. Indeed, your being, your very existence itself, is nothing short of miraculous. To paraphrase nature writer Richard Jefferies, it’s eternity now, and you’re right in the middle of it.

Live into the words and deeds of prophetic women and men that challenge us to confront wrongs of the status quo with justice and compassion. Witness the wisdom from the world’s religions as that wisdom continues operating under daunting circumstances today. Behold the timeless teachings calling on us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Heed the guidance of reason and the results of science. Regard the rhythms of nature: “Let us get these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind,” writes Jefferies.

Seeking a more specific, concrete exercise in presence? Spend five minutes with a pet, or perhaps an infant child. Bring your full attention, your complete consciousness, your whole self to the encounter. What do you notice? What more can you learn? Animals and babies alike appear to live almost entirely in the moment most of the time. Unburdened by preoccupations of prior blunders or prospective horrors that might or might not ever materialize, it seems they instinctively understand that the past is irrelevant, and the future is unknowable. The only place is here. The only time is now. *This is it.*

This month’s theme was composed by Jeff Brown and the Worship Associates.

Questions to contemplate:

1. What, in this very moment, is missing?
2. Can you think of moments in your life when you've been completely present? How about absent?
3. What enables you to be fully present? In what settings are you best able to be fully present for yourself and for others in your life?
4. What hinders your ability to be present for yourself and the ones you love?
5. How does it make you feel when someone is completely present for you? Do you feel a spark of the divine?
6. When is it okay not to be present, to excuse yourself from being present for others, or for yourself? Are there circumstances when it's unhelpful or dangerous to be present?
7. How can you be present and practice pure awareness right here, right now, in this moment as it is?

Quotations to consider:

“Be present as the watcher of your mind—of your thoughts and emotions as well as your reactions in various situations. Be at least as interested in your reactions as in the situation or person that causes you to react. Notice also how often your attention is in the past or future. Don't judge or analyze what you observe. Watch the thought, feel the emotion, observe the reaction. Don't make a personal problem out of them. You will then feel something more powerful than any of those things that you observe: the still, observing presence itself behind the content of your mind, the silent watcher.” ~ Eckhart Tolle

“Our mind wanders incessantly, but our body and senses are always in the present. To investigate our embodied experience is to investigate the living present.” ~ Anne C. Klein

“The most precious gift we can offer each other is our full presence.” ~ Thich Nhat Hanh

“I want to know if you can see Beauty even when it is not pretty every day. And if you can source your own life from its presence.” ~ Oriah Mountain Dreamer

“All the members of that one body, being many, are one body ... God works as bridge builders, coal miners, teachers, salesmen, lawyers, artists, ministers; and it is God ... which determines our special form of expression.” ~ Joel S. Goldsmith

“Perhaps the most important thing we bring to another person is the silence in us. Not the sort of silence that is filled with unspoken criticism or hard withdrawal. The sort of silence that is a place of refuge, of rest, of acceptance of someone as they are. We are all hungry for this other silence. It is hard to find. In its presence we can remember something beyond the moment, a strength on which to build a life. Silence is a place of great power and healing.” ~ Rachel Naomi Remen

“Action always happens in the present ... it is an expression of the body, which can only exist in the here and now. But the mind is like a phantom that lives only in the past or future. It’s only power over you is to draw your attention out of the present.” ~ Dan Millman

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” ~ Marianne Williamson

“When despair grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting for their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.” ~ Wendell Berry

“Embodiment is living within, being present within the internal space of the body. It’s something quite different from being aware of the body.” ~ Judith Blackstone

“I can sense your presence in my Heart although you belong to all the world.” ~ Rumi

“Go out into the world today and love the people you meet. Let your presence light new light in the hearts of people.” ~ Mother Teresa

“Instructions for living a life: *Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.*” ~ Mary Oliver

“The most important hour is always the present. The most significant person is precisely the one sitting across from you right now. The most necessary work is always love.” ~ Meister Eckhart