

First†Metropolitan United Church

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### **Being Present to the Sacred**

There is a way between voice and presence  
where information flows.  
In disciplined silence it opens.  
With wandering talk it closes. – Rumi

We are very fortunate as human beings. Our very breath teaches us how to come into the present moment. Take a minute and just breathe. Be aware of your breath: in through the nose, out through the mouth. Let your weight drop down. Now, on the in-breath being aware of breathing in. On the out breath, being aware of breathing out. On the in breath – coming into the present moment, this one moment in time. On the out-breath – it is a wonderful present moment. In-breath: present moment. Out-breath: wonderful moment. And gently come back to normal breathing. Sigh. Find yourself in this room, in this time and in this place.

Present Moment. Wonderful Moment. Present. Presence.

I'd like you to take a few minutes if you would and remember a recent time when you found yourself being fully present to another human being. It may have been a situation where someone had come to you for support; or a situation where you were in casual conversation and suddenly you were aware that you needed to pay more attention. That this person in front of you was saying something really important and you wanted to be there; not to miss it. Can you remember the situation? What was it that caused you to pay close attention? What did you notice in their body language or tone of voice? How did you help yourself to be fully present to this person? How did you stop yourself from jumping in to tell your story? How did you stop the constant interior chatter? What did you do? If you found your mind wandered off during the conversation, how did you bring yourself back? When you look back on this situation, did something shift in you or in your relationship with the other, as a result of you being deeply present to them? And when the conversation was over, what did you do?

How we bring ourselves into the presence of another human being, is the same way we bring ourselves into the presence of the Sacred, of the Divine. And, of course, being fully present to this human being IS being present to the Sacred.

I have a friend who is currently going through radiation for treatment of breast cancer. She is normally a wise-cracking, no nonsense, survivor of life. Often ready with a quick comment.

She was over for dinner, and we were chatting. I was busily making dinner, chopping vegetables to go into chicken chop- suey. And I was listening to her, but I was pretty focused on those peppers I was chopping, when suddenly I heard something different. The tenor of her voice changed. I stopped chopping. I set down the knife. I came into the living room. I listened. She was describing what it was like to have the radiation machine whirr and circle over her body. How the more aware she was what this machine was actually doing (radiating her), the more frightened she became. She said she just wanted to scream; to jump off the table and run. I asked what she did to stay calm. I remembered my own experience of laying on the table being radiated; I could hear again the sound of the machine whirring over my body. I remembered the metallic taste of my own fear. My friend continued to tell me her story, how she breathes to stay calm. We discussed together some different methods of breathing. And then out of the blue she said, “You know, I used to meditate. But I couldn’t keep my mind from wandering off into weird hallucinations. So I stopped.” We explored ways to calm and focus the mind. Our relationship changed and deepened as a result of this conversation. My wise-cracking, tough, brave friend revealed a deeper side of herself. A side I had not known until now. Something changed.

It is like this with the Beloved. “For the Beloved One to make love, for the divine alchemy to work, the Pitcher needs a still cup.” – Hafiz, Sufi Poet.

The Beloved is trying to get our attention. Come, drop everything, pay attention, turn your attention towards the Beloved. Stop the busyness, breathe, and listen, be still. Show up! And when we do this, our relationship with the Friend shifts and deepens. We are changed.

We are surrounded by the Sacred, but we are not always present to it. And that’s OK. We are after all human beings, living in three dimensional time and space. We have cars to drive and work to do. It could in fact be very dangerous to be fully present to the Divine and drive a car at the same time. We know it would certainly be very hard to do both fully and well at the same time. Maybe only the saints and mystics are aware of the presence of the Divine on a regular basis. But maybe not. There are rumours that many of them went through times where they felt the Divine was absent; wasn’t listening, had drifted away.

So how can we turn towards the Friend? How can we come into this Presence? How can we wake up to the Presence that is always there for us?

One way is to have a place at home where you regularly sit, to be in silence, to be present to yourself. To create “sacred space” – a chair, a candle, a cross, a picture of Christ – things that say to you: “when you come here, you are coming into Sacred Space and Time, you are opening yourself to be in the presence of the Friend.”

And once you are in that place, and have taken a few deep breaths to relax, and let go of the day’s worries, simply say, “I place myself in the presence of Christ; of the Beloved; of the Nameless One, of the Creator”; (however you call on the Beloved); put out your intention, your desire to be fully present. And then breathe and wait and listen. Sometimes, one simply continues to silently say “*I place myself in your Presence.*” Sometimes it helps to have a piece of scripture or a favourite poem to focus your mind, to remind you of the presence of the Beloved. Sit with this reading. Be with it. And as you do this stay with your breath. Breathe. And when you feel yourself in the Presence of the Friend, have a conversation or sit in silence. But take time just to sit in that Presence, to sit with that energy. Breathe it in. Receive it. Be with it. No words are necessary. Take time. Savour the moment. And when you feel done, give thanks for this wonderful moment, for this time together. Ask for what you need to continue your day.

And, of course, we can place ourselves in the presence of the Sacred at any time: when we hop on a bike, when we go for a walk, sit on a park bench, go swimming, when we dance. Sitting still is not required. However, *inner stillness and silence are.*

I sometimes pray with a pipe. I put my prayers into tobacco and into the pipe, and as I light the pipe, I send my prayers out. When I lived in Ontario, I would often go up to the bush in Haliburton and sit by the shores of the lake and pray my pipe prayers. I had a favourite spot, between two tall pine trees. And often when I would do this, the chickadees would come. They’d line up, upside down, head to tail, on each pine tree, and stay for the prayers. And when the pipe was done, they’d leave. It made me think that when we sit in prayerful silence, we show up. The chickadees were there all along. The place where humans and the wild creatures live in harmony is always there. But when I showed up, in prayerful, respectful awareness of their realm, the chickadees appeared or maybe I finally was able to really see them. I was finally taking time to be with them. “All are my relations.”

And we remind ourselves that the more we can be present to ourselves, the more we can be present to another. The more we open our hearts to our own woundedness, the more we make space for this, with loving kindness and compassion, the more we can be fully present to another – in all their woundedness. In being fully present to the other, we are being present to the Sacred. In being present to our own deep heart, we are being present to the Sacred. In being present to our dear bodies, we are being present to the Sacred. And in being present to the Earth, to the chickadees and the pine trees, we are being present to the Sacred.

## **A Cushion for your Head**

Just sit there right now  
Don't do a thing,  
Just rest.

For your separation from the Sacred,  
From love,  
Is the hardest work  
In this  
World.

Let me bring you trays of food  
And something  
That you like to  
Drink.

You can use my soft words  
As a cushion  
For your  
Head.

- The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, Trans. Daniel Ladinsky