

## December Theme

### *Divinity: The Practice of Presence*

*The most precious gift we can offer each other is our full presence.*

*~ Thich Nhat Hanh*

## Introduction

The concept ‘Divine’ comes from Latin *divus* which means ‘proceeding directly from God, closely related to God, God-like, of the essence of God’, and from *divinare* which means ‘to discover’. The practice of presence therefore, may be a holy experience, a spiritual connection that helps us to discover our divinity: what being God-like is, how to get closer to God, to ourselves, and to our own spirituality. Our religion offers us opportunities for connection with ourselves, with others, and with the divine- a mysterious and powerful presence among us. This holy and mysterious presence is within us and among us when we sing, when we pray, when we are silent, when we practice sacred listening, and when we love one another. Divinity is within us and among us when we gather in community for worship, enjoy coffee hour, or plan an activity together. Holy presence is in giving and receiving, and may we discover the divinity within ourselves and in the activities of our church and faith; it is in such encounters that some of life's deepest holiness and meaning reveals itself.

Many Unitarian Universalist theologians say that God is a verb, a dynamic process that happens whenever we simply love and care for one another. Jewish theologian Martin Buber spoke of the "I-Thou" encounter, that human meeting when truly divine powers of creation come to life through caring presence with others. Buber says God exists in our relationships when we realize our self in another, when "thou" takes on the same value as "I". Could it be that the divine is with us whenever we are brave and loving enough to be present with one another? Perhaps the highest and holiest beauty of the universe comes into being when we simply practice presence, with ourselves and with others.

Haven't most of us had the experience in some dark night of our soul, when the gentle, faithful presence of another ordinary human being softens and heals our pain? Often it is the divine grace of another person's caring presence that has the power to save us from our deepest suffering. And yet, being truly present for each other is becoming ever more difficult in our distraction-based modern culture, and something about the striking and simple notion of presence feels inadequate. We are not comfortable with the idea that the gift of ourselves is enough, and thus we try to fix or rescue others rather than just be present. Sadly, this tendency gets in the way of practicing simple human caring and presence when it is most needed. We must learn to trust grace and holiness and the power of simple human presence and touch. Presence for others conveys that our concern and love are deep and real, and it is a tremendously transformative and healing practice. Our presence says to our loved ones that their creation remains a place of love and hope, of divinity. Without uttering one word, we can help others to know the world is a grace-filled and nurturing place. Presence acknowledges that the holy spirit of life is alive and well, and the simple gift of ourselves is the greatest gift we can give to someone else. It may be that through presence and love we co-create *with* the Divine a transformed and more merciful world.

This month and throughout the year, may we be open to the holy and mysterious presence that connects us with our own truth, with one another, with the people of the world and with the rhythms of the earth. Let us be open to the power of practicing presence to free us from our fears and unite us in our divinity. Rather than speak with our lips, may we speak with our presence; let our eyes, our hands, our silence, and our faithfulness tell our divine story.

This month's theme was composed by Alex Businger, Gary Strichartz and the Worship Associates.

### **Questions for discussion and discernment on your own, or with each other:**

1. What is it in our humanness that feels divine to you?
2. What does it mean to be divine, or to connect with the divine within?
3. Are you comfortable or uncomfortable with the concept of the divine? Why or why not?
4. What enables you to be fully present for others? In what settings are you able to be fully present for others in your life?
5. What are your blocks to being present for the ones you love?
6. How does it make you feel when someone is completely present for you? Do you feel a spark of the divine? Describe.
7. When is it okay not to be present, to excuse yourself from being present for others, or for yourself?
8. Do you feel as though you are present with the divine in our church's worship services, or in other church activities or programs? Explain.
9. Are there parts of our worship services where you feel the divine shining through? Describe.
10. Do you think presence with the divine requires transcendence, or a belief in the supernatural?

### **Quotes and Short Readings**

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, from My Grandfather's Blessing*

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*

But, if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from these heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime... But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

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*

I swear to you, there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell.

~ *Walt Whitman*

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Just remain in the center watching. And then forget that you are there.

~ *Lao Tzu*

Life is this simple: we are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and the divine is shining through it all the time. This is not just a nice story or a fable, it is true.

~ *Thomas Merton*

We convince by our presence.

~ *Walt Whitman*

When you love someone, the best thing you can offer is your presence. How can you love if you are not there?

~ *Thich Nhat Hanh*

She,  
In the dark,  
Found light  
Brighter than many ever see.  
She,  
Within herself,  
Found loveliness,  
Through the soul's own mastery.  
And now the world receives  
From her dower:  
The message of the strength  
Of inner power.

~*Langston Hughes*

Every man is a divinity in disguise, a god playing the fool.

~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Rings and jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts. The only true gift is a portion of thyself.

~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

The best effect of fine persons is felt after we have left their presence.

~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Life is good only when it is magical and musical, a perfect timing and consent, and when we do not anatomise it.... You must hear the bird's song without attempting to render it into nouns and verbs.

~ *Ralph Waldo Emerson, Society and Solitude (Works and Days)*

Every soul innately yearns for stillness, for a space, a garden where we can till, sow, reap, and rest and by doing so come to a deeper place of self and our place in the universe. Silence is not an absence but a presence, not an emptiness but a repletion, a filling up.

~ *Anne Leclair*

Life is "heavy" is it not? However, we lighten it with our love of it, and I have found that whether returned or no, that love is always worth it. It is the loving that is the gift of life, and whether bittersweet from loss, or returned in another's eyes, we are blessed to have had its presence in our lives.

~*Gloria Smith*

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Tell your mind to come.  
Be open. Do not be afraid. Stay as heart.  
You simply be the space in which everything happens.  
Nothing is a big deal.  
Everything comes and goes in the stillness of your Peace.  
This is your power. This is your strength.  
Stay as the great space.  
You may start off as a person but you end up as the presence.  
As you keep watching with neutrality you find yourself as Presence.  
And when the person is gone, the voice of the serpent will also be gone.  
But don't wait.  
Don't wait for Presence. Be presence.  
You just be empty.  
And stop thinking about the future.  
Nothing is there for you.  
Nobody has ever experienced the future.  
You are only ever now.  
Where do these words come from when they are not prepared for you in the kitchen of the mind?  
They flow straight from the Source itself.  
His timing is always perfect.  
And He does not need to study anything.  
He is never on the way to somewhere.  
Is there something that wants to run now?  
Be aware of this.  
Is he, the runner, a representative for you?  
Don't be confused by the one who wants to run.  
If you run now, you are running away with the one you should be running away from.  
You don't need to run.  
Simply turn away from his company and be in the stillness of your own Heart.  
Be in your God-space. Be one with that. It is your true space.  
The Supreme Lord says, 'Be still and know I am God.'

~ Mooji, *Monte Sahaja Retreat 2015*

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*

We have not come here to take prisoners  
But to surrender ever more deeply  
To freedom and joy.  
We have not come into this exquisite world  
to hold ourselves hostage from love.

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Run my dear, From anything  
That may not strengthen  
Your precious budding wings,  
Run like hell, my dear,  
From anyone likely to put a sharp knife  
Into the sacred, tender vision  
Of your beautiful heart.  
We have a duty to befriend  
Those aspects of obedience of our house  
And shout to our reason  
"Oh please, oh please  
come out and play."  
For we have not come here to take prisoners,  
Or to confine our wondrous spirits  
But to experience ever and ever more deeply  
our divine courage, freedom, and Light!  
~ *Hafiz*

You cannot be an attractive and life-changing presence to some people without being a joke or an embarrassment to others. You simply can't. You have to be controversial to succeed.  
~ *Mark Manson*

You are so much sunshine in every square inch.  
~ *Walt Whitman*

In the stillness of your presence, you can feel your own formless and timeless reality as the unmanifested life that animates your physical form. You can then feel the same life deep within every other human and every other creature. You look beyond the veil of form and separation. This is the realization of oneness. This is love.  
~ *Eckhart Tolle*

True change happens within, not without. Find the Now within. Everybody you come in contact with will be touched by your presence and affected by the peace that you emanate, whether they are conscious of it or not.  
~ *Eckhart Tolle*

Dear Lord...shine through me, and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Your presence in my soul...Let me thus praise You in the way You love best, by shining on those around me.  
~ *John Henry Newman*

When you are steadfast in your abstention of thoughts of harm directed toward yourself and others, all living creatures will cease to feel fear in your presence.  
~ *Patanjali*

There is an old Eastern legend which tells us that "The gods became jealous of humanity, and they were fearful that the gift of divinity would be stolen by them, so they had a council. And some said, 'Let us place our gift in the skies.' Others said, 'No, they will search the skies; they will even fly.' And others said, 'Let us put our gift of divinity in the depth of the ocean.' And the reply was, 'No, they will plumb the depths of the ocean. Someday they will be on the floor of the seas and they will find the gift.' And the wisest of the gods said, 'Let us hide divinity WITHIN them. That is the last place they will look.'"

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Yes, dear friends, the last place we look for the gift of divinity, the last place we expect to find the highest and most healing powers of the creation, is within ourselves...within our ordinary human hearts beating in simple compassion, gentleness, and love. Why can't we believe that within us lie some of the most precious powers of creation, powers capable of blessing, healing, even saving other persons? Why do we think we need something more, something else?

~ *Waiting in the Garden*, by Scott Alexander

### **Acknowledgements**

This month's theme introduction was inspired by two sermons:

1. Moment of Truth, by Sara Campbell. Link: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/183817.shtml>
2. Waiting in the Garden, by Scott Alexander. Link: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/183058.shtml>

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