Spiritually, presence can mean two radically different things. On the one hand, contemplatives talk of “being present.” Presence from this perspective is all about awareness and remembering to “live in the moment.” On the other hand, theologians tend to come at presence from the perspective of “otherness.” Their concern is not just that we pay attention to the present moment, but that we notice a transcendent Presence that is woven through all moments.

This month, we refuse to take sides. Attentiveness or otherness? Who says we have to choose? Isn’t it true that, more often than not, they dance together more than they compete? Isn’t it true that when we are most present, a powerful presence emerges? Pay attention to your child and slowly a confidence and unique self unfolds. Pay attention to the flow of your breathing or the flow of the ocean and something bigger than yourself enters the scene. Look, for a long time, at a singular tree and eventually it presents itself to you as a world in and unto itself.

The underlying message here is that the world is full of unnoticed gifts and grace. It’s a message perfectly fit for this month that so often celebrates presents over presence. In the face of commercials and billboards that tell us our lives will finally be complete if we stuff them with a few more shiny objects or plastic gadgets, our spiritual traditions come along and remind us that our lives are already complete. Their message: The greatest gift of the holidays is noticing the many gifts that have been sitting there all along.

So, how will you engage this dance? What powerful and meaningful presence is waiting for you to be present to it? What gift is waiting and wanting to emerge? What will your awareness bring into being this month?
QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH

Below is a list of questions to open the mind's gateway to reveal the wisdom that is right below the surface of our ordinary, everyday lives. Pick one question, any, the one that grabs you and won’t let go, then walk with it. Let your mind wander and wonder. Let the question percolate. Listen curiously to what surfaces. Live into the answers. Be surprised by what is discovered. Share what you learn with someone you meet along the way.

1. Has the experience of “presence” increased or decreased for you as you’ve gotten older?
2. How might tomorrow be an opportunity to “discover presence?”
3. What absence walks with you more often than not?
4. Who has gone missing before your very eyes? (“Sometimes, people can go missing right before our very eyes.”-Cecelia Ahern)
5. Have you lost sight of yourself? (“Sometimes, we lose sight of ourselves when we're not paying enough attention.”-Cecelia Ahern)
6. Would you be more present to your life if you weren’t trying to perfect it or win at it? (“Allow your life to be a work in progress. Do not hurry to mold the masterpiece; Always there is more to be done. Life is always unfinished business.”-Richard S. Gilbert)
7. When was the last time you created a world in itself? (“The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.”-Henry Miller)
8. Where is your chance tomorrow to love someone with your presence? (“At the end of the day: do others feel loved in your presence? This is the spiritual bottom line.”-Masin Kipp; “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity”-Simone Veil)
9. Whose absence feels most present to you? What can you do tomorrow to feel and honor them more deeply? (“One of the best feelings in the world is knowing that your presence and absence both mean something to someone.”-Anonymous)
10. Are you living like you deserve to take up space in the world? (“You deserve to take up space in the world.”-Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)

Opening Words
To love life is to notice the wonders that abound
And
To notice the wonders that abound
Is to be grounded here and now
And
To be grounded here and now
Is the beginning of finding love for this life today.

Let us ground ourselves in this instant to the worship of all things good and right.

-Daniel Kanter “to Love Life”

Closing Words
Listening is soul work. It can help the living find the meaning to go on in the midst of trying circumstances, and it can help the dying accept the brevity of their lives. Without listening, there can be no story. And without stories, we cannot complete the unfinished work of healing.

[Blessed be the listeners]

-Richard Stone, The Healing Art of Storytelling
Spiritual Practice - Deepening Experiences
A new way of being for all ages

Option A:

Uncover A World in Itself

“The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.” -Henry Miller

This exercise invites you to tap into Henry Miller’s magic. Simply do as Miller suggests:

**Pick one place, object or animal and give it your attention and presence until it becomes a world unto itself.**

Additionally, figure out your own way of recording the progression from a singular or simple object to an entire world. Maybe you keep a journal and write about something new you notice each time you return to it. Maybe take a new photo of it each time and look back at the photos to see what changes and emerges over time. Maybe just sit with your chosen focus for a whole day and see where it takes you.

Take your time as you chose your focus. Maybe it is a blade of grass or a singular flower. But then again, maybe it’s that food truck outside your office at lunch time. Or the old toolbox your dad passed on to you, whose story and world you’ve yet to discover.

As always, consider bringing a picture to your group. Seeing your uncovered world, they just might more easily see even more of their own.

Option B:

The Presence of God

“Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” -Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Teilhard de Chardin’s quote reminds us that “otherness” is not other. The presence of the divine presents itself in very ordinary forms. And, it is a different form for each of us. Yes, it visits many of us through joy. But for others, it is encountered as the presence of hope or longing, reassuring quiet or unexpected kindness.

What is the infallible sign of the presence of the holy for you? Hope? Longing? And when does it come? When you feel most inwardly centered or most outwardly connected? What physical form does it ride in on? The soft wind when you’re walking in the woods? The vibrancy of color as it makes a painting or the sky come alive? The softness of your beloved’s skin?

This exercise asks you to name it. Come to your group ready to fill in the blank: “_______ is the infallible sign of the presence of holiness for me.” And after you fill in the blank, share one story of when that presence showed up and gave you its gift.
Other Wise Words...

Life Is Always Unfinished Business

In the midst of the whirling day,  
In the hectic rush to be doing,  
In the frantic pace of life,

Pause here for a moment.  
Catch your breath;  
Relax your body;  
Loosen your grip on life.  
Consider that our lives are always unfinished business;  
Imagine that the picture of our being is never complete;  
Allow your life to be a work in progress.  
Do not hurry to mold the masterpiece;  
Do not rush to finish the picture;  
Do not be impatient to complete the drawing.  
From beckoning birth to dawning death we are in process,  
And always there is more to be done.  
Do not let the incompleteness weigh on your spirit;  
Do not despair that imperfection marks your every day;  
Do not fear that we are still in the making.  
Let us instead be grateful that the world is still to be created;  
Let us give thanks that we can be more than we are;  
Let us celebrate the power of the incomplete;  
For life is always unfinished business.

-Rev. Richard S. Gilbert

The Presence of Trees

Slowly, I am remembering the language of awe,  
how to take in, say,  
the living complexity of a tree  
its gnarled trunk,  
its ragged bark,  
the way its leafy canopy filters sunlight down to the brown carpeted ground,  
the way the wind bends my heart to the exquisite presence of trees  
the forest that calls to me as deeply as I breathe,  
as though the woods were marrow of my bone as though I myself were a tree, a breathing, reaching arc of the larger canopy beside a brook bubbling to foam like the one deep in these woods, that calls that whispers home.

-Michael S. Glaser

Christmas Light

When everyone had gone  
I sat in the library  
With the small silent tree,  
She and I alone.  
How softly she shone!  
And for the first time then  
For the first time this year,  
I felt reborn again,  
I knew love’s presence near.  
Love distant, love detached  
And strangely without weight,  
Was with me in the night  
When everyone had gone  
And the garland of pure light Stayed on, stayed on.

-May Sarton

Perhaps the most characteristic element of Christmas is what we call the Christmas spirit, its joy, its reassessment of life as good. This persistent presence is difficult to explain, but no one questions its genuineness.

-Unknown