

PRESENCE *and* ENCOUNTER

THE SACRAMENTAL POSSIBILITIES
OF EVERYDAY LIFE

DAVID G. BENNER, PHD



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To
My brother
Colin James Benner
(1951–2014)
Always a luminous presence
Still a luminous presence

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FOREWORD

I am sincerely happy and honored to write a few words in support of this valuable book. As David Benner so often does, he moves us toward the heart of the matter with both skill and simplicity. He knows that the deep and needed transmission in the world of spirituality takes place through *presence*. That is indeed the heart of the matter.

Jesus said that he was “present” whenever two or three people were gathered in the Christ spirit (Matthew 18:20). We Catholics fervently believe in the doctrine of the “Real Presence” of Jesus in the physical elements of bread and wine. And Paul even seems to think that the presence of the Risen Christ, or the Spirit, is the very engine of consciousness and evolution (Romans 8:16–23).

Now, in our lifetime, scientists are finding ever newer evidence for what some religious people called *presence* in the very organizing energy of the universe—from fractals, to holograms, to electro-magnetism, to force fields, to gravitation itself—all of which invite us into a certain degree of mystery and non-explainability—and also participation! The great scientists are revealed in their contentment to live provisionally with a certain

degree of mystery! I wish we clergy were as patient. We seem to like certainty and answers—now. In our too literal attempts to explain and control presence, we often explain it away, and most people just lose interest in the deeper journey because they are told, in effect, that there is no “deeper” to be had!

Meanwhile, the scientists still search for the pattern behind the patterns, the seeming *vibrational fields that hold all things together*. We from the religious world often call these vibrational fields the divine presence or perhaps the Holy Spirit. As usual, religion intuitively gives metaphor to what science is now confirming and illustrating on ever new verifiable levels. Remember, truth is one (Ephesians 4:4–5) and will necessarily and in time be seen from different angles and at different levels—with ever more appreciation. How blessed we are to live in our time! There are, however, few teachers who can honor the different levels at the same time.

Although we Catholics would never think of denying the doctrine of the Real Presence (because it is the one central mystery of Incarnation continued in space and time), we fail to communicate it at the needed depth to individual believers. It remains what Jesus called “a lesson memorized.” This happens largely because we fail to point out that presence is *inherently a relational concept*. Presence demands both a subject and an object existing in mutual respect and expectation (which actually makes the object into another dignified subject!). This is what happened when Francis of Assisi grants even “Brother Sun,” “Sister Water,” and “Our Sister, Mother Earth” subjectivity, dignity, and reciprocity. This is the genius of mystics, saints, and often poets, and why they keep growing and expanding. But it should be the genius of all believers.

We Catholics usually teach just one side of the equation—the objective presence in the bread and wine—but we often fail to teach the observing subject how he or she can also be present

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to the Divine Presence that is always seeking to reveal itself! This is *God in Search of Man*, as Abraham Heschel put it in his brilliant book title. This is the absolute importance and centrality of the contemplative mind. The merely functional, problem-solving mind is largely incapable of experiencing any actual real presence.

It is no surprise that David is a teacher—and exemplar—of such contemplative seeing and listening. He could never have written such a fine book unless he was, first of all, a seer himself—for thus he knows how to *enjoy* the vibrational fields of a Loving Presence behind and within the world of things. *This imbedded life and intelligence* pervades the whole universe and all of creation, the mystic says. All elements and animals seem to live inside of this presence quite naturally, all happily obedient to their lovely destiny. Only one species resists and even denies the Presence, and that is us. Don't let it be you!

Richard Rohr, OFM

January 2014

Center for Action and Contemplation

Albuquerque, New Mexico

PREFACE

Far from being merely a topic that I chose out of a desire to write another book, what follows is the fruit of a haunting interest that chose me over forty years ago. I have been pondering the nature of presence and encounter since first reading Martin Buber's *I and Thou* as a university student. His assertion that "All real living is meeting"¹ struck a deeply resonant chord in me. I recognized even then—and now know with much more certainty—that the most vital and significant moments in life are moments of encounter. Whether it is encounter with others, the Wholly Other, or myself, these are moments when I know that life is its own meaning.

Presence makes encounter possible. It also makes life meaningful. The search for meaning is really a search for presence, because grand systems of truth or meaning can never satisfy the basic human longing for life to be meaningful. Without presence, nothing is meaningful. But in the luminous glow of presence, all of life becomes saturated with significance.

Only in presence can we encounter anyone or anything. Others may be present to us, but we will not notice their presence

until we are present ourselves. Once we are truly present, everything that has being becomes potentially present to us.

It was a glimpse of these possibilities, along with an encounter with Jung and Freud, that led me into clinical psychology. That same glimpse subsequently guided my efforts to make presence and encounter central to my psychotherapy, spiritual guidance, and transformational coaching. Usually, there has been a gap between my aspirations and my experience, but I have never lost my conviction that all real living is meeting, and that this is made possible by presence.

Yet instrumental applications of these powerful dynamics miss the point that in order to truly unpack transformational potential, presence must be a way of living, not merely something we attempt to do. Presence is not something that can be turned on and off like a tap. It is either an expression of our being or it is posturing and pretense.

Ultimately, we can no more control presence than we can control our being. Presence and being are so beyond our control that we are unable to even adequately define them. I will do my best to clarify what I mean by these terms, but you will quickly notice how big concepts such as *presence* and *being* resist containment in a string of words that we might offer as a definition. This is even more the case when we encounter them with an initial capital letter. When I speak of “Being” or “Presence,” I refer to God. Naming the deity in these ways reminds us that neither names nor definitions contain reality but merely and imperfectly point toward it. This is particularly true when words are used to point toward the Ultimate Reality we have conventionally called God. While these concepts are big, it is equally true that they have immense practical implications. It is these implications that most interest me, and we will keep them very much in focus as we explore this topic together.

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I long to live with more presence. I long to know the presence of God more deeply. I long to learn how to make myself more available for encounter, and I am convinced that these things are all connected—that somehow my presence is essential to an encounter with the presence of anyone or anything, especially the presence of the One who is the ground of being and the source, therefore, of presence.

I write about these things not so much to communicate what I understand as to help me learn to live with more presence. Consequently, the voice with which I will be writing is a voice of one sharing ponderings rather than teaching truths. It is my hope that my ponderings will evoke your own, for it is in such reflection that the practical implications of the things we discuss will take root in your soul.



Presence requires inner space, and talk about presence requires the same. If, therefore, you are willing to allow these concepts to get you rather than you simply getting them, I would encourage you to make space for reflection. Read the leaf you encountered at the end of the last paragraph as an invitation to pause for reflection. When you come across these leaves throughout the text, stop reading for a moment and be hospitable to your thoughts. Allow yourself to experience the truth of what you have read—or notice how my words fail to capture a truth you know and that I seem to have missed. I will end each chapter with one more chance for “Pausing to Ponder” before we move on, and, of course, you should also pause for reflection at any point that seems to invite it.

Another way you can create inner space and be a good host to the concepts I will be presenting and you will be entertaining is to read soulfully rather than just mentally. Bring your senses and imagination to what I share. Listen with your feelings and

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pay attention to your body and spirit as you do so. Be attentive to movements within your depths as you engage with the things we will discuss—notice what makes your spirit soar with hope and vitality or what leads you to a place of disquiet; pause and ponder the significance of these inner responses.

Allow our journey together to be a dialogue—not simply between you and me but also within yourself. This will provide the necessary inner space and stillness to allow you to be grasped by truths that can't be grasped by the mind, even though they can be known by the soul.

Lima, Peru
Semana Santa (Holy Week) 2013

1



THE NATURE *of* PRESENCE

The world is full of presence. Every moment of life is crammed full of potential encounters with people and things that are present to us even though we may not be present to them:

- ✎ the presence of a city—vital, decaying, dangerous, enchanting, oppressive, perhaps even seductive
- ✎ the comforting presence of loved ones—long unseen, sometimes long dead
- ✎ the troubling presence of people with whom we have unfinished business
- ✎ the evocative presence of a sacred space—perhaps a cathedral, a grove of trees, a shore's edge, or wherever we are called into awareness of the transcendent
- ✎ the distinctive presence of a home—immediately noticeable on entering, if we are paying attention

- ☞ the unmistakable presence of death that we might experience at a funeral
- ☞ the plethora of presences that confront us on entering an art gallery, walking through a shopping mall, or attending to sea life in a tidal pool
- ☞ the numinous presence of the Wholly Other—both at times and in places that might be expected but also at times and in places and ways never expected
- ☞ the puzzling presence of someone we encounter—disturbing us in ways that may be good or bad but that cannot easily be ignored

What is this strange thing called presence? Presence is the awakening that calls us into an engagement with some aspect of the present moment. Presence makes us feel alive, or, perhaps better, it lets us know that we are alive. It demands that we notice, and, in so doing, the distance between whatever we notice and us is suddenly reduced. We feel connected. Sometimes this might feel like more connection than is comfortable, but no longer are we on the outside looking at life through a thick glass. Suddenly, we have passed through that which distanced us, and we are inside and a part of life. We are involved. We are participants, not simply spectators.

Presence is elusive, but it can come to us with astounding force. Notice how a wisp of a scent can pull us into the presence of a beloved—a presence that may be both subtle yet powerfully real. A great work of music can similarly draw us into the presence of the artist—often into a period of time and a world dramatically different from our own. An experience might invite us to be present to the world and to ourselves. A fleeting memory might instantly draw us into awareness of the absence of one still powerfully present to us.

Sometimes the presence of another commands our attention

and demands our own presence. The Gospels tell the story of Jesus teaching in the temple, and they describe those hearing him as being astounded because he taught as one having authority.¹ What was the basis of that sense of authority? I can't imagine that it came from polished delivery, command of his material, highly developed rhetorical skills, self-confidence, or any other personality trait or thing that he was doing. It sounds to me like the authority of presence.

I recall a silent retreat my wife and I led for a group of advanced contemplatives. Many were nuns and monks, and all had well-developed practices of contemplative prayer and meditation. As I stood before them for an initial teaching session, I was struck by their stillness, openness, and attentiveness. All seemed to belong in this room of invited attendees, but one person particularly caught my attention. There was nothing remarkable about either her appearance or behavior, but something in her way of being suggested what I can only describe as a fierce presence. She seemed to be fully in the present moment—free of inner preoccupations or distractions and capable, therefore, of being unusually open, still, and engaged. I found her presence to be comforting and disturbing, attractive and terrifying. She did not have to speak to have authority; her authority, or power, did not appear to come from anything she did but from who she was. I simply knew that I was in the presence of someone who was fully present to me. That awareness served to deepen my own presence. While there was nothing frightening about her as a person, the intensity and alignment of her being were disarmingly different from the sort of diluted presence I was used to in others and myself.

Presence can be like that. When it is even relatively unclouded, it can shine with a brightness that can be disturbing. But what a good disturbance it is. It is like an alarm going off. It is an

invitation to awaken and be present. Its authority is troubling only when we want to remain asleep!



There is something magical about presence. It is not subject to the ordinary laws of materiality and time. Our presence enters the room before we do and often stays long after we leave. When in the presence of someone who is fully present to us, time seems to slow down. Sometimes, it even seems to stop. For a moment, we may feel that there is no past and no future.

Physical and emotional distance also seem to collapse in presence. We might feel close to someone who is far away or intimate with a just-encountered stranger. Boundaries between self and others soften and sometimes seem to dissolve, leading to a sense of shared oneness similar to what people sometimes report experiencing in orgasm. The mystics speak much of this sense of oneness and seem incapable of talking about it without the use of the imagery of sexual union.

Presence instantly moves us into a strange place that has an unreal quality to it. Yet in our depths, we know that what we are experiencing is more real than anything we encounter in ordinary consciousness. Presence can be dramatic, but it can also be remarkably ordinary. It can be calming, but, as we have seen, it can also be disturbing. It can be confused and confusing, but it can also possess a luminosity and clarity that lights up a room and can light up a life.

Ralph Harper suggests that “From theophanies to erotic closeness, presence feels the same, even if the personalities are not the same.”² This also reflects the mysterious nature of presence, in that the clearer the presence of a person, the less it is simply *that* person’s presence that we are experiencing. There is something transpersonal about presence. It is as if we are not experiencing the presence of a unique individual but of Presence itself.

Notice how someone can offer us a clear and luminous presence, yet we might know nothing, or almost nothing, about him or her. If we are fortunate enough to subsequently be able to get to know this person better, we may then become aware of two almost separate realities that are present when we are together. We might, on the one hand, continue to encounter the presence that the person radiates, and this may be quite unchanged by knowing things about the person. On the other hand, we can be clearly aware of the person's uniqueness, or what we might call personality. A person's presence will always be less differentiated and more global than his or her personality. It is as if the presence is less "owned" than it is Presence mediated.

When I think of this distinction between encountering a person in his or her uniqueness and encountering the presence that individuals carry and share, I think again of the nun I met in the silent retreat I just described. After this retreat, I had a chance to spend time with this woman, and since then we have become very good friends. In these subsequent interactions, I have come to know much more about her. When we are together now, I can readily see her in her uniqueness and individuality, but I also still powerfully experience the presence she possesses that is not simply hers or about her. The two operate on different planes of reality. Each involves a different level or type of knowing. My knowing of her is shaped by information she has shared about herself and my experiences with her. This grows and changes as the relationship develops. But beneath it, I am always aware of the Presence that I continue to meet in her. This, I know, is not simply reducible to her personality or behavior. It is grounded in her being and made possible by her way of being in relationship to the transcendent Presence she mediates.

These mysteries of presence render it resistant to exhaustive analysis. As with all transcendent realities, while it can never be fully understood, there is no question it can be deeply known.



Everything and everyone has presence. Just think of your experience of things and people when you step back from your thoughts about them. Think, for example, of the presence of a building you are familiar with, perhaps where you work or some place you frequently visit. Notice how the presence of this place may be related to its design and aesthetics but isn't limited to it. Or think of people you regularly encounter, and notice the presence they emanate—not simply their behaviors or their personalities but the auras they give off.

Martin Heidegger said that being is presence.³ Whatever else this means, it suggests that in some way presence is a basic property of simply being. Everything that exists has presence by virtue of its being.

Being is more straightforward for rocks, trees, and black holes than it is for humans. Inanimate objects are never tempted by false ways of being. They are aligned within their being, and consequently their presence is less ambiguous. This is also true for nonhuman living beings—for example, animals and trees—all of which remain closer to their natures than is true for most humans. As a result, their presence is also more pure and singular.

For humans, living our truth is much more of a challenge. First, we are profoundly alienated from our being. We forget what it is to stand in awe of being itself, and of our being in particular. We are lost in doing and tempted to believe that there is nothing more to us than this. This separation from our being also reflects our separation from Being itself. At the core of our soul is an ache that is answered only in knowing both our being and the Ground of Being. But that ache is easily ignored and misinterpreted, and consequently we seldom are aware of this most fundamental level of our alienation.

A second way that living the truth of our being is more complicated for humans than for nonhumans is that humans alone have the capacity to create false ways of being. As children, we learn to try on various identities as we attempt to discover a satisfactory way of being in the world. Even though we usually lose awareness of doing this after adolescence or early adulthood, we continue to try and create our “self” through the first half of life. But the self we create is a persona—a mixture of the truth of our being and the fictions we spin as we attempt to create a self in the image of an inner fantasy. The simple truth of our being gets lost in the metanarratives we spin. We become the fictions we live. Consequently, our way of being in the world is so false and unnatural that our presence is thoroughly ambiguous. It is no wonder that we find the presence of most people so clouded as to be not worth noticing, and it is no wonder that a truly unclouded presence is so luminous and so compellingly noteworthy!



One final thing to note at this point about the nature of presence is how it lifts us above the sphere of particularities and separateness into a world of integral wholeness. Presence is experienced as a unitary whole. Think, for example, about the experience of sitting on the top of a hill, far from the polluting lights of a city, gazing at a dark, starry sky. Unless you are an astrophysicist or an astronomy buff, your experience will not likely be one of thought and analysis but of singular, holistic absorption. You will experience the presence of the starry sky, not your thoughts about it.

The more pure and uncontaminated the presence, the more it is experienced as a whole. The power of presence seems to gather up all the separate and isolated parts that normally are our focus and wrap itself within a harmonious whole. Complexity is enclosed within a shroud of singularity and wholeness.

Often this sense of wholeness brings with it a surprising sense of increased vividness to everything being experienced—possibly a sense of being more present to your experience, even to yourself. Sometimes this includes a sense of being at one within yourself. Occasionally, this sense of oneness may even include the person who offers the presence (or others who share it), possibly even involving a sense of oneness with everything that is. Frequently, it produces a sense of intimacy that strains the usual subject / object duality. Such an experience might also leave you in awe before the mystery of life; and because it frequently leaves you feeling more whole and integrated, it often feels like an experience of standing on sacred ground. Like Moses,⁴ you might feel a need to remove your shoes to honor the sacredness of the moment and the place it offers you.

This is the reason the language of presence is so frequently on the tongues of mystics. This is how the saints feel in relation to God and how they experience God with them. It is the experience of totality and union in the midst of shattering fragmentation and separateness. It offers fleeting moments of knowing that stand in stark contrast to what our senses tell us so much of the rest of the time.

This is also why presence has such transformational potential. John O'Donohue describes such moments of presence as a sacrament⁵—a visible sign of invisible grace. The source of the grace—or, if you will, the gift—is the Transcendent Presence that is mediated by more immanent forms of presence. Although that source may be invisible (sometimes even beyond belief) and the presence ephemeral, the gifts of the encounter can be readily seen by anyone who has eyes to see.

Pausing to Ponder

- ∅ I have suggested in this chapter that presence has a paradoxical quality to it. Often subtle and easily missed, it can also have great authority and power—sometimes commanding attention and demanding a response. Notice whether you can recall an encounter with someone whose presence carried this sort of authority, an authority that did not come from an imposing personality or authoritarian behavior. How would you describe the quality of the person's presence? If others experience you in this way on at least some occasions, how do you relate to inner authority that, at least occasionally, you seem to carry? How do you understand it?
- ∅ Notice whether you have ever experienced, in the presence of another, the hint of a larger presence that was less "his" or "her" presence than something mediated through the person. How do you understand this transcendent dimension of presence?
- ∅ If being is presence, what do you know about the way inanimate objects can communicate presence simply through their being? What qualities of presence do your home or other things associated with you communicate? How would this differ from or be similar to whatever presence you might assume you communicate?
- ∅ In this chapter, I proposed that the more pure and uncontaminated the presence, the more it transcends the particularities of the person associated with this presence. This may explain the fact that presence feels the same in some fundamental way even when experienced with quite different people. Consider whether your experience supports this.