

## A PHENOMENOLOGY OF HUMAN PRESENCE

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I met a long time friend who told me that she was examining what was exactly missing in her life. She longed for something which at the start she could not immediately know. Then after awhile she told me that she was missing what used to fill her life with fullness of presence. She was missing, paradoxically, the presence of someone who is now absolutely absent, and whose physical presence can no longer be seen. That presence used to fill her with gladness and meaning. Presence, which is now beyond her grasp, causes the emptiness in her life. The years of absence of that important person in her life are also the days of her increased longing to see and feel his presence again. Her experience has created in me a deep impact on how I should conduct my life in relation with others. I am led to inquire further what human presence is all about.

This article will explore the experience of presence and its meaning, and its ways and manifestations in various levels of human experience. Specifically, this article aims to give practical insights into the nature of presence as well as its essential components namely, availability, permanence, mystery, and gift. It attempts to answer the question: What does it mean to be present to the other?

In the philosophical tradition, the notion of presence was not much given a central interest among philosophers until the rise of existentialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. In that period, presence was much highlighted in answer to feelings of inward homelessness, loss and alienation brought about by the abstract and objective quality of life experienced by the many in the too secularized European world. The longing for presence was actually the search of the self to be whole, as a person. Philosophers like Marcel and Buber have dwelt much on the notion of presence as it is implied in their writings, *Being and Having* and *I-Thou*. Proust and Harper also wrote a great deal on it. Deducing from all their writings, presence is before all meanings, something whose essence is primarily rooted in Being. This description of presence is most seen in the writings of Marcel where he described presence to be Being, a mystery with which we participate because it is something essentially connected and intimate with us. Buber, on the other hand, saw presence as something in which Being participates in the Thou in its wholeness and totality. He described it as an encounter with the Thou with another Thou.

Jane D. Gallamaso, Ph.D.

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The root of presence is primarily the gift of Being. The human person who comes to the world is a unique, unprecedented, and priceless being and whose existence, according to Heschel, cannot be substituted nor duplicated. On the other hand, in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, presence implies the unfolding of Being, (*Dasein*). Being unfolds in time, and in time, there is fullness of presence. Harper, a contemporary writer stated that presence is a "multi-layered feeling of connection with oneself and the other." All these imply that the essence of presence is essentially connected with Being.

Today the search for presence remains an active force. Every individual human experience implies the need for an authentic Presence. We live in an age of longing for a deep and enduring relationship among us humans as well as with God. As Harper says, 'We are not alone, not isolated in our existence, our existence is affirmed by a presence.'

What are the ways in which Presence is revealed in our lives? How do we describe an encounter of Presence? Here are some ways by which we can describe an encounter of a Presence.

### Presence Moves Us

Presence reveals to us in many various aspects and dimensions. It can include our encounter with things and with other persons. Some things and places mean nothing to us. They are devoid of any presence. Some people do not have an impact on us. They are devoid of a presence. But I am astounded by a beautiful painting displayed in an art gallery, my soul is soothed upon hearing the music of Clayderman, my sight is captured seeing white clouds passing by a clear blue sky, my spirit is renewed gazing at the calm blue ocean and the verdant green mountains. In the same way, I am deeply affected upon passing by an old school at Don A. Velez St., where I spent my elementary life. I can therefore say that things have certain presence in them whose characteristics catch and move us. Presence fills our senses, our soul, our mind. It makes our whole being participate. In his song, John Denver summarizes the encounter of moving presence of things intertwined with the encounter of persons when he wrote:

You fill up my senses, like the night in a forest  
Like a mountain in spring time, like a walk in the rain  
Like a storm in a desert, like a sleepy blue ocean, you fill  
up my senses, come fill me again.

Jane D. Gallamaso, Ph.D.

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Harper also said, when presence moves us, there is no more distance between the person and the presence before him. No past, no present, no future mediating between them. They become one in the fullness of a duration-less instant. Harper described that when one is truly present to us there exists a feeling of a comforting nearness, of being at home, and of an intimacy of hearts and souls.

In the human level, we can say that presence reveals itself in various ways. There is physical presence and spiritual presence. Like some presences mentioned above, human presence has also the characteristic of moving us once we are caught and touched by it. One magazine reminisced the late Princess Diana and stated that the presence of Princess Diana filled a crowded room; everyone knew when she was around. Her presence moved the crowd. It is also like meeting an attractive person for the first time in a seminar or any gathering whose presence fills the whole room making every one be caught and be drawn to her. In an encounter of an influencing presence, something happens within us; our senses are captured; we lose control, and at times we become speechless. We are filled with awe and wonder. This is the extent of how presence moves us.

Rodolph Otto describes the experience of Moses in the Bible when he encountered the splendor of God's presence through the burning bush. Otto, describes the encounter of presence in these words: '*Mysterium tremendum and Mysterium fascinosum*'. It means that Moses's encounter with God is characterized by a feeling of a harmony of contrast. He was tremendously afraid of a presence before him. Being just human, he sensed a feeling of strangeness and distance before a great power he beheld, and yet being a son of God the power of God's Presence was beyond his resistance. As Otto described the experience, although "strange and remote, it is also so close and familiar". The presence of God before Moses moved and filled him with awe and absolute reverence to God.

There are still many instances in the human level where presence moves us in a deeper way. There is the presence of students communicating with one another in an honest pursuit of knowledge. A teacher once said to her students, "This room is filled with presence". It can also be felt in parents listening to the problems of their confused child. It can also be seen in kind deeds, in thoughtful ways, and most of all when we are with our loved ones. In all these experiences we feel the mysterious fullness of presence of a meaningful human relationship in which our whole

Jane D. Gallamaso, Ph.D.

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is made available and offered to another's presence. We are moved and touched.

### **Human Presence is Mutual**

In "The Symposium," Plato talked of the souls' search for his other half. Specifically, in his "Myth of the Fall", he stressed the soul's recovering its wholeness which is precisely its original state. Relating the idea to our discussion, we can say that man responds to a presence in order to be whole. Harper says, we are yet inadequate selves. Without our friends, our loved ones, our family, and our community, and the world around us, we are nothing. We can only become whole when we respond and responded by a presence. In my own reflection, I cannot survive to recognize and care for a presence that does not recognize me in return. For sometimes, my care for the other is inspired and endured by his recognition. But if he finds my presence disturbing, and not necessary then I can let him know me better to erase his initial impression on me, or I can choose to quit. The other may also be the same. If his presence makes me afraid, angry, or disturbed, he can opt to make himself be known by me in a deep sense so that I might erase my initial impression on him, or he can choose to quit.

In another instance, Buyer points out the elements of reciprocity in the dialogue between human beings. He says that in a mutual dialogue of two persons who are truly present to each other, each person turns to the other as his partner in dialogue, makes himself available to the conversation, and accepts the other unconditionally in his wholeness and totality. Thus, it is only when we recognize a presence that we are recognized in return. To be present is to mutually work together in the care and nurturance of human existence.

### **Presence is Elusive**

Presence is not easily caught. But when caught, it can be elusive if one is not vigilant or attentive. We cannot hold presence all the time. It can get lost.

Our world is filled with living presences. A teacher meets presences as he enters the classroom; a student meets a presence that sits

Jane D. Gallamaso, Ph.D.

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alone in a bench in a school campus. Presences are everywhere. We meet them everywhere in specific circumstance and time.

However, the irony is: most of the time presence seems hidden in subtle silence. For instance, a girl's effort to win the love of a guy is in vain. He does not notice her. She is a silent presence, shy and speechless. But her presence echoes for him through her enduring kindness, and thoughtfulness. She is always there for him but he is insensitive. He does not notice her. She cannot also force the guy to take notice of him. But when the time has arrived for him to notice her, she is gone. Presence then, appears in subtle and quiet ways. We cannot possess it. We can only invite it. It must notice and recognize us. Yet presence is always there waiting to be touched and awakened. Harper says we have to awaken presence. In our world, presences need to be recognized. There are sick, poor and abandoned people. They are waiting for us to touch their lives. Our experience with them will also touch our lives in return.

But to deal with presence is to take caution. It is elusive. When we show off too much we lose it. If we control and make demands, it fades away. If we impose ourselves too much on the other person, we lose him. If we try to control him and make unreasonable demands we will also lose him. Thus, since presence is elusive, we have to do away with forced and self-imposed rules.

### **Presence as Availability**

Marcel speaks of our essential availability for the other. To be present is to be available. To be available is to be there for the other. It means to be in communion with him in the realm of Being. It also can be interpreted as being sensitive to presence. This necessitates our genuine recognition and care for the presence before us. Harper refers to this availability as our "Attentiveness to Being". To be attentive is to recognize and care for a presence. It can mean being open and being around. As some songs say "I'll be there" or 'look around and you'll find me there'. All these affirm our willingness to be available for the other. In concrete terms, when we make ourselves available; we offer our time, efforts, works, resources, help, abilities or talents for the other. In the noblest sense, it can mean a whole self-donation to a certain cause or life's task, or to persons in the world. Our very self is a gift made available for the other. Mother Theresa gave her whole life attending to the sick and the needy. Mahatma

Gandhi gave his life in working to unify the world and to achieve peace through non violent means. The two are truly present to the world even when they had died. These are just few examples of genuine availability.

### Presence as Permanent

Physical presence is spatial and thus, what is situated in the realm of space and time comes and goes. Wrecked by change and mortality that characterizes the human physical world, this kind of presence does not endure. We do not always have with us the ones we love. They will be gone soon or we will be gone ahead of them. The reality that physical presence does not endure poses a challenge to us to transcend time and space.

However, presence is not lost forever. This world will perish but presence does not perish with it. According to Harper, we may only lose our connection with presence but it is not totally gone. Presence is still within our reach and is very much accessible. Thus, its permanence depends on the quality of relation that was established before a person dies. For Marcel, a life lived in communion with Being transcends this deceptive world of change to an eternal life beyond where true and permanent presences are found. Buber says, between lovers, there is neither space nor time. Nothing is in between. The final home of Presence is in the Eternal, spiritual world. Roger Troisfontaine also says that 'spiritual presence is superior than visible presence'. He further says that it is up to the freedom and fidelity of the survivor to perpetuate the lost presence. Most of all the death of a presence promises us with deep hope of an awaited encounter with the True Presence in the life beyond.

In my reflection, I have felt a haunting presence that disturbs me now and then; a presence I want to recapture not because I want to appropriate him, but because his presence once filled my life and I want to experience that fullness once more in order for my life to have meaning. But then, beset with despair because present impossibility of the fulfillment of my inmost longing, I humbly turn my spirit to my ultimate recourse, the Absolute Ultimate Living Presence who is God. God is a presence I have not seen, but have known with certainty that he exists. He is a God who shelters me in an unconditional sense.

Many of our prayers are in fact invocations of presence. We invoke that a present be given to us, that it must come to our life for it has

Jane D. Gallamaso, Ph.D.

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not yet been given. And if it is already given we again pray that such presence will be always with us for the rest of our lives. We always want our love ones to be with us always.

### **Human Presence as a Gift**

A human presence is a gift. Our very self is a gift to the other in the same way that the other is a gift to us. This tells us that as a self we are not adequate. The presence of other selves makes us whole and complete. Our existence is affirmed by the presence of other beings. Our love one (family, friends, lover etc.) is a concrete presence. We are very happy when we are in the presence of the one we care for. In the words of Buber, we become what we should be only when we are spoken to and addressed by a Thou. Many of us long to be given a presence since according to Marcel only in being given with a gift of self-of person that we participate in an eternity of some sort. To exist, to be complete and happy, is to live in the light of presence as long as we live.

### **Some Obstacles**

There are some reasons why at certain times it is difficult for us to recognize a presence. Marcel mentioned of the attitude which he calls as having. He says that in a relationship of having, the person is treated as a mere object, and the relationship is either instrumental or functional. In this case the impersonal relation makes it impossible for us to know and accept the other of what he truly is. Buber also speaks of an I-It relationship in which he characterized it to be out knowledge of the person based only on observation and perception. The other person is also treated as a mere object when we are not aware of his true person in wholeness or totality. Both notions of Marcel and Buber signify that we fail to recognize and respond to a presence. We must therefore by choice come near to presence, and the way is to live in the light of Being or in the light of the I-Thou relation. This means that our relationship to the other should be one of a personal communion, where we make our life available to the other and accept human presence in wholeness and totality as our partner in dialogue regardless of differences or points of view in life. And, our role is also to be present to the other. Each self is a present to the human world.

Jane D. Gallamaso, Ph.D.

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### Keeping Presence Alive

A presence once given does not always stay. Some presences get to fade or to be lost totally without vigilance to Being. Thus, Presence must be kept alive, nurtured and be given depth through time. In the same way that human relationships such as friendship and love, since they signify presences, must be kept alive. The friendship and love must grow and unfold in time. The quality of relationship must deepen in time. How is this possible? Harper speaks of "Attentiveness to Being." To keep the presence alive we must be actively and continuously attentive to it. In the words of Buber, if in case we fall to the I-It relation in certain occasions of our lives, we must continually re-enter into the I-Thou relation. Marcel on the other hand speaks of continually dwelling in the realm of Being and constantly choosing the person as the being that he totally is. For a life lived in communion is a life worth of true meaning.

### Conclusion

We have somehow explored some manifestations of human presence in various human life experiences. We have also sought to describe what constitutes human presence. Presence moves us; it is elusive, and mutual. We also know that its essential components are marked by availability, mystery, and as a gift from the absolute, unconditional Being we call God. Although we can describe presence in many ways, real essence is only manifested in an actual experience of an encounter of a human presence from beings who are open and available to each other in an actual communion of an I-thou relation. After eliminating obstacles to the encounter of human presences, our final task is to keep it alive through Attentiveness to Being.

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Jane D. Gallamaso, Ph.D.

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