

RECLAIMING PRESENCE

Two Reflections on Attention and the Inner Life

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Opening

These reflections grew out of a day of conversation with spiritual directors, but they speak to a wider question many of us are beginning to notice:

What is happening to our attention, and what kind of presence is still possible in a world that is constantly pulling us away from ourselves?

They are offered here not as instruction, but as companionship. A way of thinking more slowly about attention, solitude, and the kind of presence that allows us to remain available to God, to one another, and to the life we are actually living.

Be still, and know that I am God.

— Psalm 46:10

PART I

The World That Forms Us

Introduction

I want to suggest that we treat this reading, as best we can, like a kind of quiet space. Not something to move

through quickly, and not something to finish, but something to sit with.

You may feel this reflection is not really for you because you are not someone who spends hours each day on a screen. Even so, it is difficult now to live untouched by it.

The question is not only how much we use our devices. It is what kind of life begins to form when so much of our attention is shaped this way.

For much of my life, I was trained to be useful. That mattered. People needed help. They needed steadiness. They needed someone to know what to do.

And I do not reject that formation.

But over time, I began to see its limits. Not everything important can be fixed. Not everything can be solved quickly. Not everything is helped by moving faster.

Some things ask for something else: silence, patience, and the willingness to stay.

That is where presence begins to matter.

The World We Now Inhabit

Before saying what I mean by presence, it helps to name the world we are living in.

In a relatively short span of time, the phone has become part of the setting of daily life. Not just a tool we use,

but something we live with, and sometimes live inside of.

We did not simply pick up a device. We stepped into a way of living.

And it happened quickly.

At some point, almost without noticing, the screen stopped being a place we went to and became something we carry with us all day. We wake up to it, move through the day with it, and return to it again at night.

Somewhere in that quiet shift, something else began to change.

The Question

What kind of presence is becoming possible—or difficult—in the world we now inhabit?

This is not only about screen time. It is about what kind of life begins to form when so much of life passes through a screen.

And this matters anywhere human presence matters: in conversation, in friendship, in care, in prayer, and in the simple act of being with another person without reaching for something else.

What Is Being Formed

The change is not dramatic. It is quieter than that.

Attention thins. Silence becomes harder to tolerate. The space between things fills more quickly.

Not all at once, but over time.

And slowly, something shifts—not only in what we do, but in who we are becoming.

Interruption does not only distract us. It forms us.

What Remains

I come back often to an image of my father sitting at his kitchen table, working quietly with his hands.

His hearing had faded. His world had grown smaller. Much of what once defined his life had fallen away.

But he remained there, present to what was still his to hold.

When I return to that image, I find myself asking what remains when so much has fallen away.

A table. A small piece of work. Hands still able to hold something real.

It is not dramatic, but it is enough.

And it leaves a question behind: what is enough at the end of the day, when it is just ourselves and the life we have actually lived?

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.
— 1 Samuel 3:9

Presence as Attention

Presence begins with attention.

To truly attend to another person is already to offer something. Not advice or solution, but the simple act of noticing.

To be heard well is already to be accompanied.

And yet this kind of attention is not easy now. Interruption comes quickly, often before we even notice it.

Attention becomes something we must recover on purpose.

Presence as Embodiment

Presence is not only mental. It is bodily as well.

It lives in posture, pace, and breath—in the simple willingness to remain where we are.

We know the difference between a message and a hand on the shoulder, between hearing about sorrow and sitting with someone in it.

The body carries something real, and presence lives there.

Presence as Stillness

Presence asks for stillness—not perfect calm, but enough settledness that we do not keep leaving the moment before it has a chance to speak.

Some things do not come at speed. Some things need room.

Stillness is what allows that room to exist.

Presence as Silence

Silence is not empty. It is often where something begins.

But silence can feel unfamiliar now. We fill it quickly, almost automatically.

When silence disappears, we begin to thin inwardly.

Part of the work may simply be this: to let a few quiet spaces remain quiet.

Presence as Relational Availability

Presence is felt when another person knows they have truly been met—not managed, not quickly understood, but received.

We can be in contact with many people and still not be deeply present to anyone.

Real encounter asks for time, for patience, and for a willingness to stay.

Presence as Non-Performance

Presence is not performance. Not polish. Not having the right response.

It is the willingness to remain when things are unfinished.

Sometimes the most faithful thing we can offer is not a response at all, but a steady presence that does not rush ahead.

Presence as Discernment

Discernment depends on presence.

What is true is often slower than what is immediate. It takes time, return, and a thread of attention that does not break too quickly.

Without that, we begin to lose the thread of our own lives.

Presence as Resistance

In a culture of interruption, presence becomes a quiet form of resistance.

Not dramatic, but real. The resistance of not giving everything over to speed, noise, and constant return.

Sometimes it begins simply: this is enough for now. This is where I stop.

Presence as Practice

Presence becomes real through practice.

Small acts: walking without the phone, letting a moment remain unfilled, choosing not to respond immediately.

None of it is dramatic, but each act returns something to us—our attention, our freedom, our capacity to remain.

Reflection

Where in my daily rhythm do I most notice my attention being pulled away?

What is one small practice that might help me reclaim a little more attention this week?

But Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.

— *Luke 2:19*

PART II

Reclaiming Presence

Beginning Again

Before speaking more about distraction, I want to begin personally.

I did not set out to become a writer.

Writing came later as a way of staying with what I had lived. Over time, it began to show me something.

Life was asking something different of me—not mastery, not speed, not fixing, but staying.

The Inner Life

The deeper question is not only what is happening around us. It is what is happening within us.

Whatever forms us inwardly shapes how we are present to everything else.

Solitude

Solitude is not the same as being alone.

We can be alone and still feel inwardly crowded.

I remember sitting at a restaurant once, alone at the bar during a difficult stretch of life. It did not feel like peaceful solitude. It felt closer to invisibility, as if I were there but not seen.

Years later, I found myself at another table, this time with my grandson. He sat beside me, his attention mostly on the phone in his hands.

I tried more than once to begin a conversation. None of it lasted long.

And I noticed the contrast.

Years ago, I had been alone and felt the ache of it. Now I was with someone I loved, and still there was a kind of absence in the room.

That stayed with me.

It made me ask what we now mean by being alone, and what we mean by being together—when attention can leave the room before the body does.

Formation

Presence is not only a behavior. It is something formed over time.

What we repeatedly give our attention to begins to shape what we can notice, what we can bear, and what we come to desire.

Continuity

Presence is not only about the moment. It is also about whether we can stay with our lives long enough for something deeper to emerge.

Much of what matters does not come all at once. It comes through return.

Through staying long enough for what is true to take shape.

Edges

We need edges—places where something ends.

Enough for now. This is where I stop.

Without edges, experience loses its shape. Everything runs together, and before long we feel as though we are never fully here.

Practice

We do not reclaim presence by thinking about it. We reclaim it by living differently in small ways.

Beginning the day without the phone. Leaving moments unfilled. Allowing silence to return.

These small practices begin to reshape desire.

Relationship

We can be connected and still not be present.

Contact is not the same as encounter.

Real relationship asks for embodiment, patience, and the willingness to remain.

Presence Can Feel Exposing

Sometimes presence is difficult because it asks more than attention.

It asks us to remain with what is unfinished, to stay without rushing toward resolution.

Presence is not something we master. It is something we consent to again and again.

Remain in me, as I remain in you.

— John 15:4

A Quiet Return

We come back again and again.

In the end, reclaiming presence is not mainly about being less distracted. It is about becoming more available—to God, to another person, and to the life we are actually living.

Reflection

What kind of attention has my life been forming in me?

What in my daily life most needs an edge—a place where I can say, “enough for now”?

Closing

These reflections are drawn from a larger body of work exploring attention, solitude, conversation, and the inner life in a distracted age.

For those who wish to continue further, these themes are developed more fully in *Reclaiming Presence*.