

THE PRACTICE OF PRESENCE

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"Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves--goes its self, *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying: *What I do is me: for that I came.*"

"As kingfishers catch fire"
--Gerard Manley Hopkins

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How can presence be practiced?

- 1. Availability**
- 2. Listening**
- 3. Exchange**
- 4. Reflection**

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"Remember only this one thing. The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.

That is why we put these stories in each other's memory.

This is how people care for themselves."

--the Badger in Barry Lopez. Crow and Weasel .

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“The Dalai Lama and the Dog Boy”
from Passionate Presence
by Catherine Ingram

Over twenty years ago, while staying in Bodh Gaya, India, my friends and I began hearing rumors about a boy who had allegedly been found among wild dogs. The rumor in town was that his seemingly canine behavior, lack of speech, inability to walk upright or eat with his hands indicated that he had probably been raised among the dogs. We were intrigued. I had read *Gazelle Boy*, about a child who had been raised by gazelles in Africa, and I had also been fascinated by the story of "the wild boy of Aveyon" found in France in the 1800s. So it was with enthusiasm that I accepted an invitation to see the boy at a private gathering with the Dalai Lama, who had expressed an interest in the child. The meeting was to be held at the Gandhi Ashram where the boy was staying among a group of social workers and behavioral therapists who had assembled around him. A friend and I attended the meeting of about twenty people,

Judging from his size, the child appeared to be about five or six years old. Crawling on all fours, his eyes darting from side to side, he was like a frightened animal. Seeing him made me uneasy, such as when I have seen depictions of creatures that are half human and half some other animal. I felt a primal recoil from something alien. This surprised me because I had expected compassion to be my primary response to the boy.

The Dalai Lama was seated in the center of the room, and the child was brought before him. As the Indian officials and therapists began making their presentations about the boy to the Dalai Lama, he reached down and began to gently stroke the child's head, much as one would pat a dog. The gathered assembly pretended not to notice. Was it okay to treat the boy like a dog, or was that not good for his "rehabilitation"? The officials continued explaining their efforts to train the child to walk, to form words, and so on. All the while, the Dalai Lama continued to stroke the boy's head and shoulders, smiling and warmly murmuring until the child eventually curled up at his feet.

I could only imagine the comfort for that boy in those moments. Whatever his history had been, I was sure that his current circumstances in his new life with strange and powerful creatures must have been at least difficult and perhaps terrifying. Here, if only for a short while, one of the strange creatures met him--being to being--and communicated in his only shared language, the language of the heart.

Heart language has one thing in common the world over. It is the quiet offering of understanding to others without the demand for being understood oneself. Certainly, being understood is wonderful. It is delightful to be met in the deepest aspects of our being and a cause for celebration when it happens. But wishing to be understood by others, to be met in deep places, often leads to disappointment. Understanding others, meeting them wherever their hearts reside, brings peace to oneself and has the greatest potential to transform difficult situations for others. No matter how seemingly great the gap in communication, most creatures respond to a loving presence. Almost all of us can feel when someone has our best interests at heart, listens with an open mind, and offers comfort without seeking benefit for himself.