To be present is a simple concept, and yet startlingly complex, full of unspoken implications. How am I, or you, present? To oneself, to intimate family and friends, work, the environment, toward peace and justice, to the Divine? Not a simple proposition, being present holds layers of reality and reverberation. A deeply spiritual act, being present renders a person incapable of deception and illusion. When fully—or even moderately—present, we become transparent, vulnerable in the courageous understanding of the word, and a witness to the marvel of reality in each breath unfolding now, now, now.

I have a dog, a sturdy Chesapeake Bay retriever, who teaches me to be present. At seven months old, Kenai was off leash when a passing train blew its whistle. Startled and disoriented, he bolted away, oblivious to everything except his own fear. The landscape was stark: the barren and windy border between Wyoming and Colorado, USA. Though we searched and searched for him, he was not seen by anyone, and presumed dead.

Nine months later, a rancher on horseback was surrounded by her herd of cattle. She noticed the cows sniff the air, and turn a curious gaze to the east. There on a distant ridge stood an animal. Smallish, the color of dark, dried grass, she thought it was a small mountain lion or coyote. On closer observation she realized it was a dog, standing very still, staring back at her. As she rode toward the animal and called out, it turned and ran away.

For the next ten days Brenda left a pile of dog kibble on the frozen, snowy ridge each morning, attempting to coax the dog to her safety and warmth. No luck ... just a hungry dog that permitted her to watch him eat—from a distance. Meanwhile, a snowstorm dumped two feet of snow, and she was afraid that he would die. In an Internet search, she found my posting of a missing dog from a location five miles away, and contacted me. I had posted the lost dog report and never deleted it.

On 1 January 2007, my husband and I arrived at the ranch hoping to be reunited with Kenai. The four-wheel drive tractor had room for one passenger. I rode up to the ridge, took a deep breath, and stepped from the cab into the brilliant morning light. I could see Kenai in the distance. Brenda backed the tractor away. I was alone. I took another breath, and called “Kenai, Kenaiii,” while clapping my hands. Sixteen months old, Kenai stood still, sniffing the air. A quiver ran from the tip of his nose into his tail. Then, whimpering and crying with recognition, he leapt and ran through snowdrifts into my waiting embrace of hope, belonging, and joy. As Jim and Brenda joined us, he greeted both of them with the same delight.

We’ve recently moved 3,300 miles to Alaska, USA. Every time I see my dog I am present to his story, to the wonder his presence invokes, and to the interwoven nature of Presence in our world—revealed in time and place.
Five Minute Practice of Presence

Go to a place where you can be quiet for five or more minutes. It could be outdoors, in your residence, office, or in a bathroom. Maybe you are traveling on a train, a bus, or plane. Wherever you are—wherever you are—is a place of presence.

Make it simple. Today you do not need candles, incense, music, or a prayer shawl. No fountain, icon, chair, or prayer beads. Just you and however you can show up, right now. The cosmos is big enough for all your joy, and all your pain. Just show up.

Breathe. Simply breathe. Notice the texture and temperature of the air you inhale. Breathe enough oxygen to feel movement in your body. Expand your chest and belly.

Exhale. Let go. Let go of everything that does not serve you or the integrity of the other. The universe knows what to do with let-go’s. We don’t have to do anything except let go.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe out. Breathe in. Allow each inhale to be deeper, every exhale deliberate. Feel energy move and shift in your body as your cells oxygenate.

Awaken your senses. Be present to yourself and your surroundings. Notice what attracts your attention, and stay with that. Simultaneously turn your attention to your breathing. Continue for as long as you desire. What do you notice?

Draw in the deepest breath of your day. Perhaps the deepest breath of your life. Breathe gratitude. As you exhale, let go into the present moment.

Allow your breath to companion you through your day. Whenever you experience stress, worry, or a desire to be present more completely to a person, place, idea, or the Holy One, take a five minute break. You know what to do.
As a young twenty-something Roman Catholic, I spent a considerable amount of prayer time engaged in Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, a centuries old practice of prayer. Adoration offered me a time to listen, to discover, to discern, and absorb my growing spiritual identity. Twenty years later the practice of stillness and adoration still rouses my spiritual sensibilities.

In simple terms, adoration is a time of being present and offering praise to Jesus Christ in the form of consecrated bread, which Roman Catholics believe to be the Body of Christ or the Blessed Sacrament. I had no language or comprehension for it at the time, but Adoration was a time of deep contemplation and meditation. It still is.

I would often visit the neighborhood church to just sit in the sanctuary—listening to the sound of my breath and body, stilling my questions and restless mind. While on retreat at my favorite monastery, I visited the chapel during the wee hours of the night in order to be stilled, and present to the Presence beyond myself. Responding to the invitation to breathe, write poetry, sing praise, and explore heart and soul, it was there that I also noticed the illumination of sin and wounds, and discovered a desire to serve others. A natural contemplative, saying yes to this form of praying grew my soul and capacity for silence, wonder, and relationship.

In the geographical location where I now live, the nearest church is quite a distance away. I have created a beautiful spiritual practice: I visit my own inner sanctuary that travels with me, available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, day and night. Now it is within my own heart and soul that I meet the Beloved, the Wholly Other, the one who draws me within and beyond myself into discerned action and union with all of creation.

I am grateful for the years I prayed with the actual Blessed Sacrament. I am grateful for the understanding my spiritual director helped me to comprehend: that I can pray anywhere, at any time. I am grateful that adoration, contemplation, and my inner sanctuary propel me into the world’s pain where my soul is grabbed and wants to respond. Whether I am in a church, or on a playground, I have the ability to adore, contemplate, and evoke a place of sanctuary. This benefits me, and those I serve, companion, and teach.

Create or visit your own unique inner sanctuary. Where is it that you move beyond yourself and paradoxically into yourself, resting in the Presence of mystery, the Holy One who some name G’id, Yahweh, Allah, Jesus, Buddha, Sophia, or that who is beyond all naming?

What prayer practices have been foundational to you, and changed over time? Are there prayer practices that you want to learn? What will support your process, and guide you to action?

Could a spiritual director or guide aid you in your process? Find a spiritual director in the Seek and Find guide at www.sdiworld.org.

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For the one I companion

For the one I companion ~ you just left.
Stunned, the golden leaf of your unfolding
lofts my soul to stillness.
I am lost, held, embraced in your beauty—
a revealment of Mystery—enfleshed.
Oh joy! Oh delight!
With radical, gratitude, I can only, I can only
simply ... breathe ... your blessing.

—Pegge Bernecker

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**Question:** Sometimes when I meet with my spiritual guide a long silence erupts, and I become uncomfortable. What should I do if this happens again?

Hoot Hoot: Thank you for your excellent and common question. Often, we do not appreciate the gift of silence. So we chatter, speak quickly, internally ponder what to do next, or fidget. In spiritual direction silence can be beneficial. Silence can allow us to listen to what we may be afraid to speak, or to our story unfolding with new revelation. Silence allows us to digest reality. Silence may be an opportunity to be present to the here and now of love and mystery. Silence can reveal our places of fear or discomfort, or growing edges. The next time you experience an awkward silence, notice your discomfort, and be willing to explore it with your spiritual director as it occurs. Try to breathe deeply with peace, knowing the one who occupies the third chair may be inviting you and your guide to deeper understanding, reverence, or wise action. Be still, and listen with openness and gratitude.

—If you have a question for Owl, please e-mail Listen@sdiworld.org.

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Dr. Claude Alexander
Doctor of Ministry Graduate

Preaching is a passion for Dr. Claude Alexander, the busy Senior Pastor of the 10,000-member University Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. When he learned he could earn a specialized D. Min. degree in Homiletics in his own community and under a preeminent preaching authority, he enrolled at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary—Charlotte.

“The pace of my work was such that the program was appealing,” he says. “I was also intrigued by the seminary’s commitment to the Scriptures and to the mission of producing effective leaders for the Church. And the opportunity to study under Dr. Haddon Robinson, believed to be the foremost authority on preaching expository sermons, was a dream come true.”

Dr. Alexander says he benefited from the program’s collegial environment, in which students learned from one another, and from the personal and pastoral interest of Dr. Robinson and the seminary staff. “We were shepherded. They took a personal interest not just in my academic performance, but also in my physical well-being and the well-being of the ministry. I was able to see a glimpse of the Body of Christ at work for the improvement of the kingdom of God.”

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