

Presence and Creativity

by

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You may have already noticed, when you think of some of your most revered heroes and heroines, that a combination of presence and creativity in action is an incredibly powerful way to make an impact and add value to the world we live in.



On our journey home after the 10th EAHAE (European Association of Horse Assisted Education) conference in Poland, Dr Annemieken Van Reepingen and I, wandered through Warsaw, discussing the relationship between presence and creativity. She had delivered an experiential workshop at the conference in which participants learnt the difference between being fully present in the body, and not.

As you'd expect from old friends who haven't seen each for years, each bursting to share the ideas we have discovered and passionately curious about how they all fit in with the perspective of the other, our discussion got so interesting we promised to write an article about the relationship between presence and creativity on our return home.

Well, here is what we wrote:

Jesvir Mahil

When we are fully present in our own bodies, aware of the rhythm of our own breathing and alert to all the sensations we feel, it is very difficult for another person to topple us over. We are able to maintain our balance with strength and resist external pressure when we are fully present. If you practice martial arts or any other sport where balance is important, you will know the importance of breathing rhythmically and as the Chinese, Japanese and Indian philosophies teach, the importance of the solar plexus, wherein our personal power supposedly lies. This is often described as a yellow ball of light, like the sun, located in the region of our bellies. When I was learning Tai Chi, my teacher described it as a cauldron full of boiling water and advised us to move gracefully to avoid spilling any of the scalding water. This was a good metaphor that always reminded me to remain alert to the fire in my belly; my personal power.

It seems to me that this personal power taught throughout the ages in yogic and martial arts philosophies is closely linked with the concept of presence. Indeed they may be exactly the same thing. What is important is the impact of our presence or personal power in our daily lives. Dr Van Reepingen clearly demonstrated this through an exercise where we imagined being three metres ahead of our physical body and found ourselves being easily toppled over by our partners in the exercise. In comparison, when we were fully present in our own bodies, we were able to resist external pressure and maintain our balance.

There is a growing trend in the personal development industry for literature advocating the importance of presence, for example a Google (2014) search for books on 'Mindfulness', the modern companion to the ancient tradition of meditation, brings up no less than 1,500,000 entries. A search on Amazon.com (2014) for Mindfulness shows 14,852 products being sold, presumably to people who want to harness this power of presence which is commonly associated with reduction of stress.

The book that I am personally working with to gain better awareness of presence, is by Williams and Penman (2012) and the title promises "Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world". I was drawn to this book because there is a chapter entitled "When did you stop dancing?" I know the power of dancing and that it is impossible to dance well unless we are fully present in our bodies. In fact, there is a popular quote going around on social media, accredited to Gabriel Roth (Life, 2014) that says:

"In many shamanic societies, if you came to a shaman or medicine person complaining of being disheartened, dispirited, or depressed, they would ask one of four questions. When did you stop dancing? When did you stop singing? When did you stop being enchanted by stories? When did you stop finding comfort in the sweet territory of silence? "

This quote leads nicely to the link between presence and creativity. I can understand the importance of being fully present in our own bodies when we are dancing or singing but not when we are listening to a great story for example. Doesn't our mind take us on a journey

that is beyond our physical experience when we are listening to an engaging storyteller? Does that absence from our bodies, when our minds are elsewhere, take away our power?

This was the question over which I pondered with my friend Dr Annemieken Van Reepingen. I am a creative writer and one of the first books I wrote, (Mahil, 2006) was mostly written as an unconscious stream of consciousness, in short bursts of creativity, in the middle of the night when I was usually only half awake and not fully present in my body at all. I do not remember writing creatively and being fully present at the same time. Telling a good story often involves entering the realm of different worlds through our imagination, which is a bit like daydreaming. I am sure we can all remember times when we were daydreaming and jolted back into consciousness by the sharp pangs of reality which brought us back into our own bodies like a bolt of lightning. For me, this is usually looking at the clock and realising that hours have passed when I meant to only sit down and write for half an hour! Although there may be a paradox between being conscious and fully present and at the same time accessing the inspiration for creativity from our unconscious, Annemieken and I realised in our discussion that in order to write authentically we have to be present to our own selves and values to ensure that we are not writing to please others. There is power in our words when they come from our own heart and soul and when these words ring true for others. So in this sense, we do need to be present and in alignment with our own souls in expressing our creativity.

Out of the many definitions of creativity, the one that I find most useful in my business work is suggested by Robinson (2011: 2):

“Creativity, ... is the process of developing original ideas that have value, ...”

Is it possible to use the principles of mindfulness as explained by authors such as Williams and Penman (2012) to create a powerful presence and to be creative as defined by Robinson above? Well, here we have to understand that creativity is not often achieved in isolation. When we generate original ideas, we cannot claim that they have value just because we say so. Most creative work in business is accomplished through collaboration and popular authors on creativity such as Csikszentmihalyi (2013) remind us of the importance of others in evaluating whether an idea is original and whether it has value:

“There is no way to know whether a thought is new except with reference to some standards, and there is no way to tell whether it is valuable until it passes social evaluation. Therefore, creativity does not happen inside people’s heads, but in the interaction between a person’s thoughts and a sociocultural context.”

Whenever I have worked in teams, I have noticed that it is those members that are most fully present in themselves that manage to steer the group and even if they don’t generate the most original ideas, they are the ones that add most value by making use of the ideas in a manner that is appropriate to the sociocultural context.

So regardless of whether we are writing creatively in deep solitary slumber, or whether we are developing innovative products in collaboration with teams, it seems wise to be mindful that we put full presence into the expression of our creativity.

Annemieken Van Reepingen

Before we can start talking about the relation between presence and creativity, let's define presence. What is presence? Presence to me is:

- being in the here and now,
- and in contact with the world around you.

It means being aware of yourself, of whatever is going on in your body. Your body has wisdom, your mind is only a small part of that great whole system you are. What are your sensations, emotions, thoughts?

Presence is at the same time staying in contact with the external world, using all your senses, including what we call your sixth sense, your intuition. Being present is not a closed state of consciousness, it is quite the opposite: it is being totally aware of your surroundings. Being present in that way does not leave room for thoughts that are not about the here and now, it does not leave room for worrying about the past or the future.

Being present requires also letting go of expectations, letting go of what you think should happen in the situation, thus making room for what is actually happening.

I work daily with horses and people. Horses are masters in being present, they are prey animals. For them being present is a prerequisite to survive. You never know whether a lion might come round the corner, and you have to keep all your senses open to find out whether he is hungry or not, all in a split second. Leading them requires the same presence from us: staying in contact with our inner selves and in contact with the world around us. People on the other hand are masters in not being present. Horses can teach us a lot in this regard.

Presence evokes a state we call "the flow". You are in the flow when everything happens smoothly, almost automatically, it does not cost you any energy. On the contrary, it gives you energy. Some say that is because you tap into the energy of something greater than yourself. In any case, it is a state of being that does not cost you any effort, there are no obstacles really. When I am in this fluent presence, I often say and do things I am amazed about later, when I look back. How on earth did I think of that or come up with that? Where did that come from? This is where creativity comes in: new and valuable things come up that you wouldn't have been able to come up with without this state of presence. When you think about it afterwards, it almost seems like you have become some kind of channel for ideas. I have heard many artists and masters in their profession say that they feel they are a channel in their best moments; in the moments they create best whatever it is they create: a piece of art, a presentation, a coaching session, teaching, furniture, etc...

So, my hypothesis is that to be able to be creative, you need presence. And everything that prevents you from being present kills creativity. One of the biggest killers, and one of the sneakiest ones too, is perfectionism. Bréne Brown (2013) defines perfectionism as putting oneself out. It is trying to do the best we can, so people are pleased with what we do and like and love us. It is not really about looking for better quality. It is not trying to develop and get better; it is trying to **look** better. Perfectionism is a shield that people put up to

protect themselves from rejection and criticism. “If I do things perfectly, no one can criticize me, and everyone will love me and treat me with respect”. Perfectionism is a monster that devours energy. It wears you out and leads to burn-out.

In other words, it is a shield against vulnerability. This leads us to the conclusion that being present also means daring to be vulnerable. If you are present with everything you have in you and in contact with everything there is around you, you are in a state of vulnerability. This means, that in order to be creative we have to be able to be vulnerable. And isn't it true indeed that we feel extremely vulnerable when we are creative or expose the products of our creativity: every author feels vulnerable when his book is published and read by the public; every painter feels naked when people look at his paintings.

Now, we are ready to close the circle: it is exactly presence that will keep you in this vulnerable and creative state. Presence will keep you away from perfectionism or any other defense mechanism or shield you use to hide yourself. Now, you might say: “why wouldn't I hide out? Why would I want to be vulnerable? It's a dangerous world out there”. Because I have never seen anyone happy hiding out, except maybe in the hide and seek game! It is exhausting and wears you out, alienates you from yourself and others and as we already pointed out, kills creativity. Being present and vulnerable on the other hand is the prerequisite to really connect with your inner core and with others. And we human beings are all about connection. We are unhappy if there is a lack of connection; we need connection to strive and survive. We certainly need connection to be happy. Presence allows you to connect.

If you hide out, your view will be impaired. So instead of protecting yourself from danger (when I talk about danger, I am referring to physical and emotional risk) you increase the chance of getting hurt. In contrast, presence will keep you safe, as you will be aware of everything that happens and be able to react if and when necessary.

Jesvir Mahil

Conversations themselves can be incredibly creative as this joint article written by my friend Dr Annemieken Van Reepingen and myself illustrates. We each have our own perspective, our own frame of mind, our own history of experiences with which we judge the world. When we build bridges through the love inspired by friendship, creativity is born.

We would love your thoughts and feedback on our article and will answer your questions about presence and creativity as best we can. We can be contacted by email:

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