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As Poetry Recycles Neurons
Doing Goethean Science
04 March 2013

P(r) is for Presence

In our current culture of excess, materialism and gratification few people live in the moment, and even fewer live in their bodies. They live in the past and dream of the future. The closest they come to the present is thinking about what they want right now but even that is a dream of the future, never an acceptance of what is. Bodies are a nuisance, objects to be tamed and altered, decorated and abhorred, rarely appreciated for the extraordinary machines that they are or thanked for the physical and emotional abuse they endure daily. If our bodies could talk, what would they say? But our bodies do talk, all the time. They are constantly telling us about ourselves internally, and give us moment-to-moment updates on the spaces we inhabit, each moment shaped by the preceding moment and shaping the next. Our bodies put 24-hour news feeds to shame. What a wealth of real-time information is available to us if we would only listen. That is my aim: to learn to access the information my body holds, to become a presence in my body and in the present moment, not watching them both from the outside.

#1 - In which I'm presented with a riddle:

“A question asked begins a sequence. We can think because we are able to ask questions, the answers to which lead us to further questions.” (Al-Rawi, 50)

For a long time I have worried that I do not live in the moment, that I spend my life remembering the past or thinking of the future, not experiencing the present as it unfolds. I want to experience the world with intense focus and crystal clarity, I don't want to miss anything, I want everything to be available to me and to be aware of it. In an effort to bring myself into the present, I embarked on a month-long study in which I used a combination of meditation and movement to try to achieve presence.

“The ancients believed in Fate because they recognized how hard it is for anyone to change anything. The pull of past and future is so strong that the present is crushed by it. We lie helpless in the force of patterns inherited and patterns re-enacted by our own behavior. The burden is intolerable.”

(Winterson, 99)

I want to escape that cycle of patterns. I want to become more than the stories I've been told and the habits I have learned. I want to be free of constraint and other people's ideas of where I've been and

where I'm going. I want to be my own person, truly, and comfortable in my skin. At first it seemed very silly and narcissistic to conduct a research project on myself, but presence is about how we observe and experience the world around us—and are present within it—and since my body is the vehicle through which I experience the world and my mind processes those experiences, how can I hope to understand the world if I don't understand myself?

#2 - In which we don't have a conversation:

At the beginning of February I had one question: how do I become more present? But it seems that I was not asking the right question, or maybe the question didn't mean quite what I thought it did. The first two weeks of my study I often felt like I was blindly running into the same wall again and again. No amount of meditation would shut my brain up. Hours of quiet contemplation did not teach me to see things with perfect clarity. It wasn't until the end of the second week that I tried walking meditation and started reading *Varieties of Presence* by Alva Noe that things started to make more sense.

“...As if experiencing were like eating, or as if the only way to hold you were to hold every square inch of you. Or as if the only part of you that I really hold is your hand. I never hold every square inch of your hand either. The world always outstrips what we now touch, or hold, or can take in at a glance.

'Real presence,' if we think of this as the presence that would be afforded by the existence of detailed internalizations of everything, is a myth. Presence as access is as real as presence gets, and that's real enough.” (Noe, 33)

By trying so hard to be present, to remember and record every moment, I was removing myself from the experience, I was trying to hold it so tight that I lost it. Over the course of my study, I realized that I have been trying to treat life like a research project and that what I thought I was seeking is actually omnipresence.

I seek omnipresence

*but that is the territory of the gods.
My mortal flesh could not take the strain
and I've no wish to be crushed like Atlas.*

The simple answer to my question “how do I become more present?” is simply to live life and to be aware of it. However, because this is not a novel or a Hollywood blockbuster, there are no simple answers because there are no endings, no absolutes, nothing ever finishes.

“...I write fiction so that I can keep telling the story. I return to problems I can't solve, not because I'm an idiot, but because the real problems can't be solved. The universe is expanding. The more we see, the more we discover there is to see.

Always a new beginning, a different end.” (Winterson, 137)

This is something that I struggle with daily, the lack of absolutes, the lack of finality, but at the same time, I fight constraints, I fight boundaries, I fight my own history. And I have learned that the only way to win this fight is to give up. To accept that everything is ephemeral and changing and that there are no endings and the best thing I can do with my life is to witness it and enjoy the unpredictability of existence. And, most importantly, that the only boundaries are the ones I create for myself and that there is no “end” to presence. You can never achieve it all the way, all the time.

#3 – In which I don't know where we will arrive:

“He trod through the heavens, kicking the stars like stones. He stepped down out of the clouds the way a man steps out of a mist. He was back on earth. He was proportional and seemly. His gigantic nature was contained.” (Winterson, 54)

Sometimes I feel expansive. Like my entire being is stretched across the whole of everything and that I contain the entire universe with myself. So maybe my problem isn't that I lack presence. I am aware of so many things—sometimes things I don't even know I know—so I am here, I am seeing, hearing, tasting. Perhaps the problem I am trying to solve is a lack of focus to my presence; I am all over the place. I think I have been seeking something that is not possible to achieve without going

mad. I've come to realize that there are times when I am completely present and the joy of those moments is overwhelming—walking by the bay when a sudden gust of wind rushes me, bringing a brief scent of early spring with it, accidentally making eye contact with a stranger on the bus and instead of immediately looking away we smile at each other, looking at old photographs with my best friend and we realize at the same moment that our mothers were the same age then that we are now, opening a jar for my grandmother, making up ridiculous stories with my sister about our other sister being a secret agent, secretly smoking cigarettes with my brother on Christmas Eve because we're both adults now and our mother is stressing us out, concentrating hard to learn a new crochet stitch, helping my roommate make a sparkly black tutu for her Halloween costume, watching raindrops fall through sunlight, the pain of realizing that my 11 year relationship was really, finally over, when my cat Miles was hit by a car and after we buried him in the backyard the other cats sat by the freshly turned earth until nightfall, the scent of mud and salt and the call of seabirds as I walk along the bay at low tide, a murder of crows gathering in leafless trees, the moon in the sunny afternoon sky. These are the moments in our lives that matter and I don't think we can help but be present in them, whether we are participating or only observing. This is my presence. This is the way my presence manifests itself. It won't be just like anyone else's because it is my experience with the world, seen through my eyes, within the context of my understanding. Even when the moments are painful there is a certain joy within them, a knowledge that we are alive and real and here. That we impact the world and the people in it just as it does us. That is presence.

#4 - In which nature is my partner:

“Awareness is consciousness together with a realization of what is happening within it or of what is going on within ourselves while we are conscious.” (Feldenkrais, 50)

Presence is not something that can be forced, but neither is it something that comes unbidden. You have to invite it in and be open to it, but let it come in its own time. It is delicate empiricism, so

you have to be delicate. Don't make direct eye contact, relax your focus and turn your head slightly and you might catch a glimpse of it out of the corner of your eye. And most importantly, remember that perception is not perfect or absolute.

“...to be conscious of something is not to depict it, or to represent it. To perceive something is not to consume it, just as it isn't a matter of constructing, within our brains or minds, a model or picture or representation of the world without. There is no need. The world is right there and it suffices. At most we can meet the world. Stand with it, up against it. [It] is right there, front and back, for us to explore.” (Noe, 21)

Living life like a research project, seeing details with crystal clarity, etc, is not necessary because the world is there for you to examine any time you want. Nature is your partner and will always be there for you.

#5 – In which I listen:

“By experiencing unfamiliar movements, a woman can allow her body to break through cultural norms. Learning this type of dance means learning new body wisdom and rituals, so that the dancer becomes aware of her culturally acquired conditioning, repression, and blockages. New worlds of awareness become accessible, releasing memories stored in the body and a joyful physicality that in turn leads to a less rigid way of life.” (Al-Rawi, viii)

“We are here in order to move. The body is a motion machine. The bone-levers and the muscle-pulleys make that perfectly clear. They account for sixty percent of the body's weight. We may have a high purpose, but physical movement, hand over hand, one foot in front of the other, is how we accomplish it.” (Egoscue, 4)

Every day for a month I have either belly danced or done a walking meditation, often both. I

like to move, it feels good, wakes me up and helps me think, but I have never moved with such focused intention before. When I think about it, which isn't often, I consider my body to be the vehicle I ride around in, my container. But I have come to realize that is not fair to my body. My body *is* me, there cannot be a separation of the two. Through walking meditation, I have consciously realized something I have always known unconsciously, that when my body is active my mind is too. I have always known that I think better when I am moving; when I am stuck on an assignment for class I will often take a walk in the woods on campus or go explore Olympia on foot, and when I get back I have usually figured out the problem in my head and can then put it on paper. I took some belly dance classes many years ago and since then have occasionally danced along with a video, but never on a regular schedule. This month I remembered how much I love dancing and why. In belly dance you have to be very aware of how your body fits together and which muscles move which body parts. Even if you can't name the muscle groups, it is impossible to do some of the more advanced moves without having some idea of what it is you are trying to move. I was very excited and proud of myself a week into the project when, while participating in an online class at DaturaOnline.com, I figured out how to do a move that had evaded me since I was sixteen years old. It is a hip move sometimes called a Maia, a figure-8 drawn with the hips, but vertically in space rather than horizontally as is more common. It was exhilarating to realize that I had been in conversation with my body, that there was communication going on under the surface and that once my disparate parts started listening to each other, I was able to do something I had never done before, something I didn't think that I could do.

*Are the boundaries of our bodies
absolute, or only a suggestion?
A dare from our ancestors to see
how far we can truly go when pushed...*

While walking through the woods at Priest Point Park, and then on the beach one very windy afternoon, I realized something about myself that I find very interesting, especially because it is so integral to the way I present myself to the world, and I don't recall ever thinking about it. The way I

dress is testament to my awareness (albeit unconscious) of my physical presence in the world. I wear long, flowing skirts that swish when I walk, blow in the wind, and drag behind me on stairs because I like the way it feels. I like softly clinging fabrics and scarves. I use my clothing as an extension of myself in the world, like antennae or feelers. I like the feel of the fabric against my body as I move.

*“Can these movements which move themselves
be the substance of my attraction?
Where does this thin green silk come from that covers my body?
Surely any woman wearing such fabrics
would move her body just to feel them touching every part of her.”
 (“Belly Dancer,” Wakoski, 20)*

Except for two years in my late teens, I have always worn my hair long—at least shoulder length, because I love the way it feels streaming behind me. I prefer to be barefoot, but when I have to wear them, I like flat-heeled, thin-soled shoes so I can feel the ground and my feet can move freely.

Although I wear hiking boots sometimes at school or in town, the two times I have tried hiking in them my feet felt so stiff and unnatural—like I was wearing concrete splints—that I was afraid I was going to fall and break something because I could not freely move my feet or ankles, and there was a good inch of padding and rubber between my feet and the ground I was walking on.

#6 – In which I have gained new experiences, taken new qualities into myself, and gotten to know the world more deeply:

“If only I understood that the globe itself, complete, perfect, unique, is a story. Science is a story. History is a story. These are the stories we tell ourselves to make ourselves come true.” (Winterson, 145)

I have definitely changed over the course of my study. I have learned things about myself that, for all my years of navel-gazing, were still a mystery. I realized that I lack a strong sense of self, a center, and so I try to compensate by making a lot of “I” statements to reinforce the stories I tell myself and others about who I am. However, I don't feel that is enough to maintain my presence in the minds

of others and in the physical world, and so I try to fill an imaginary hole with *things*: cookies and cupcakes and makeup and wind chimes and eyelash curlers and clothes and shoes and jewelry and sparkly pink beads and handbags and handbags and handbags and embroidery floss and notebooks and note cards and pens and pencils and lip gloss and post-its and buttons in antique canning jars and marbles from my grandfather and packets of antique sewing needles and a petticoat (a petticoat!) and hats and train cases and potted plants and scarves and kaleidoscopes and colored glass bottles and Christmas lights and boxes of boxes and musical instruments and strings of bells and Halloween decorations and camping gear and posters and spoons and baby pictures and books and books and books and books.

For a long time I was under the impression that perception and presence of body and mind is about quiet contemplation, sitting still, meditating, thinking deeply on a topic. But I have come to realize that it has more to do with being in the world and appreciating what is there, not observing it from remove.

“...to know the world, we must move and inquire and explore and exercise our practical and conceptual knowledge. In this sense, we manifest, in our experience itself, our implicit appreciation that perceptual presence is always a work in progress. We turn and squint and peer and take a look again.” (Noe, 40)

Based on that criteria, I am unquestionably present. I show up every morning alive, alert and ready to explore. I walk around and look and listen. I feel the wind on my face. I see sunlight and moonlight, I smile at strangers, I overhear conversations, I talk to trees and birds, I smell flowers and garbage and baking bread. I am in the world and of it, and every single thing I experience fills me with wonder.

#7 – In which I am aware of my responsibility:

“Presence is manifestly fragile. This idea will be developed throughout; it is a discovery. We spontaneously squint our eyes and shift our head and body position to keep things in view, or to get a

better look at things that interest us. In this way we exhibit our sensitivity to the fragility of our access to the world.” (Noe, 2)

Does presence need me as much as I need it? Are we on a journey of reciprocal creation, not able to exist without the other as witness? Even if I am only observing something, I am affecting it in a way. My physical presence changes things, if only in the memories of the the observed. Even when there are no other humans around, the earth knows that I was there. If I really do make such an impact on the world just because of my existence, I have a responsibility to it to live my life as fully as possible, to witness all of the wonderful and terrible things the world puts in my path. Is it magical thinking to believe that some moments were created just so you could experience them? I think that the most respectful thing I can do, the most responsible thing I can do, is to be more present within my presence, to be aware of what is happening around me and to accept it for what it is without trying to make it into something it's not.

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