

PRESENCE

I am giving the sixth spin in the series on profound humanness. This one is on presence. The 12 touchstones of humanness are like 12 facets of a diamond. Seeing through one, you see through the other 11 also. Each one lights up the others.

Working around the world through the tools of GCF and GSD, rubbing shoulders with different cultures, different religions, we have discovered that the awareness of humanness is a universal fact. Universal humanness is not bound or compartmentalized by Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Christianity, or any other religion. It is the awareness of experiencing yourself as a human being.

The touchstone of profound humanness called presence is the presence that becomes a historical sign for all human beings. It is the presence that enables others to become profoundly human also. It is presence, which is an awesome, revealing decision about life visible to others. This kind of presence always comes as an address or as an offense. It is standing in the breach of people's consciousness. Mahatma Gandhi did exactly that. He was a historical presence to his people and the British when he declared that India would be a free country. That half-clad, puny insignificant man, when he brought an untouchable by his hand into parliament, communicated to the people that the lowest of the lowest human being had a birthright to be human, and he put his life on the line for that cause. He didn't need to give a speech on treating untouchables as human beings. His presence conveyed the message. All along, human history has been shaped by individuals and groups who realize that the power of their mere presence can catalyze change and release people to live a full life.

We are in a GSD in a country where the kind of poetry you and I are familiar with is not commonly understood. In India, where you intentionally hide your Christian front, and where you are experimenting with a different symbolic life, you wonder what sustains people in the projects in remote, primitive villages day after day. You hear some of our colleagues say how it's a sheer struggle to go day after day after day. You realize ultimately when you see what it means to be a fulfilled human being, that you are pointing to the mystery of life, and it has nothing to do with religion or culture. In Maharashtra, at our social demonstration village projects, we do not say, "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost," and we do not say "Amen." Sometimes during the Sunday celebration that is our House Church, somebody gets carried away and instead of ending the song "We Celebrate Your Being," he continues to say "Amen, Amen." Immediately someone starts coughing very loudly, rattling the chair, or doing something to stifle the "Amen" quickly. Most of the auxiliary is of Hindu and Muslim heritage. For this reason, we do not impose any particular religious tradition. In our symbolic life, we stand present to the mystery of life and therefore stand present to the knowing, doing and being. You realize that in the intensification of awareness and engagement there comes a sense of fulfillment, and that is profound humanness, or the presence of Being.

Another way to talk about the touchstone of presence as profound humanness is to talk about it as faith, love and hope. Awesome presence is revealed when you have faith beyond faith, which is knowing, when you have the ability to love beyond love, which is doing, and when you hope beyond hope, which is being. The presence of being manifests itself in the midst of standing firm, in having faith beyond faith, when in spite of odds you find life worth living. You find yourself with a resolve to do the undoable tasks.

There is a man in Maliwada who is assigned to be there by his company, the Bombay Dying and Manufacturing Co. It is a textile enterprise. He came to Maliwada along with \$100,000 worth of equipment about 16 months ago. Under his supervision and guidance, the village has made extremely good use of this equipment, including a truck, tractor and jeep you have heard us mention. The tractor and the truck have been helpful in upgrading the economy of the village. The truck is mainly used to enable the food manufacturing unit of the village, which we called the Maliwada Nutri-Food. It manufactures sucre, the dry powdered stuff. This year Maliwada was again given the contract, and an enhanced contract at that. There was great excitement in the village. It meant good, steady employment for the next ten months. This year everything is planned and organized by the villagers themselves. They chose this man from Bombay Dying and Manufacturing Co. to be their chief advisor. Three weeks ago we received a letter from Bombay Dying which shocked everybody. The company said it had decided to pull out all the equipment within a week's time. This was just at the time that the sucre factory was to start its business. While feeling absolutely crippled, this man- the company representative in Maliwada- decided to take a villager with him to Bombay along with a letter of request from the village, signed by several hundred villagers. He took the villager and the letter to his company and presented to them the request that the equipment not be pulled out at this particular time. The company executives listened and decided to allow the equipment to stay for another six months, until December. They returned in a jubilant mood to give the good news to the village. Later on, when we were planing again for the sucre, Mr. Towle, now the chief advisor, said, "When December comes, I'll see that the truck does not leave the village. I'll lie down before the truck and over my dead body this truck is going to leave Maliwada." This man was only able to do this because he has become aware that life is worth living and he has the belief that there is faith beyond faith.

The second manifestation of the touchstone of presence is when you love beyond love, or when you are intensely engaged on behalf of others. In another kind of poetry we can call it "cruciform love." Profound humanness is experienced when in the midst of being intensely engaged you sense the presence of being. You know that you are inadequate. You know that you have no expertise, no skill, that you are not efficient. In spite of all that, you go ahead to move and accomplish the task. I can think of several instances when this happened in Maliwada, but I will talk about two. One relates to one individual and one to the community.

There is a man from Maliwada, a short-statured, stocky man. He is a vegetable farmer. He has been helping in the community kitchen that cooked for the school children for the last year. This summer our community garden dried up because there was no water. With no vegetable supply from the community garden to the community kitchen, the kitchen found it hard to come up with lunches for the children. A few villagers collected money and continued with the kitchen for another week or so. Then again, there was a problem. They knew they could not continue that arrangement forever. There had to be some other structure for lunches. In the meantime, because there was no lunch, school attendance dropped considerably. This little man decided to take complete charge of the kitchen and organize a meeting. He decided to charge a small fee for each child and give his own money every month towards the feeding program. Why did he do this? He said, "When I know the value of education and nutrition, how can I let things go down the drain? How can I not let other children, not my own, but others, have the benefit of education and nutrition? I will see to it that the community kitchen goes on and our children continue to have education and nutrition." Since then, he has taken over the community kitchen. His act of love is beyond love: it is presence that decides you can get up and move.

The second event that stands out for me happened just a few weeks ago when the village invited the dairy development corporation people to talk to them in relation to the fantastic dairy scheme that Maliwada has plans for. The village invited these men to tell them in detail about dairy development. The meeting was set for 8:00 P.M. The whole community center was packed. One of the guild leaders opened the meeting with the Maliwada song, which is "Bharat Uttam Desh Hai." The community really sings this song with great gusto, and they say the Maliwada ritual with full conviction. When these three guests heard the song and the ritual, and when they sensed the sheer motivity coming out of that group, the sheer resolve and determination coming from those simple villagers, they were transformed men. They saw not one individual, but a corporate presence in that crummy, dirty, filthy community center filled with crummy, dirty, filthy people. They came to talk about a dairy, but what they saw was a unique presence of the corporate body, and they realized that these people, crummy as they were, had decided to change history. Those three men went back different men.

In the midst of being profoundly aware and profoundly engaged, you are caught up by the mystery of being itself. This is where God shoves his own being with the being that he created. That is where presence appears. At that point, your personal failures, your horrible surroundings, don't even count. It's like getting up in the morning. You come out of your 10 x 12 room which leaks badly in the rainy season and which is like a furnace in the summer. You step into the collegium room where you see your colleagues around you, and you know they have undergone the some discomforts you have. But what you see is not the painful hurt back of one colleague, the malnutrition of another, or the burden of the responsibility on someone else. What you see is a group that stands as a rock, that has said

there are no personal problems, and a group that is presence of being itself. Presence of being is when the final mystery of life, God himself, unveils his being into your own being, and over that part of presence, you have no control. You know that you have no effectivity or efficiency, and in spite of that things get done. You know there is a power beyond your own power over which you have no control.

In this context, I want to tell you another story. It is about Suryabhan Devatkar. A lot of you have heard about him. He is one of our village leaders who has emerged as a giant of the village. He has no symbolic power. He refused to take up the servanthship which is the head of the Panchayat. He said he didn't want to become that kind of symbol. He wanted to remain a servanthood force. He is a simple farmer, barely educated, and he is a villager in the real sense. Once, we were invited to speak to the India Society of Training and Development, whose membership are the cream of the business world in Bombay. We took Suryabhan along without informing the people who extended the invitation. If we had told the group that we were bringing a simple villager, probably he would have been refused entry. So this was hadden. After our auxiliary finished speaking, this simple villager spoke to the group for just a few minutes in Marathi. This group meets in the Taj Mahal Intercontinental Hotel, a five star hotel. This meeting was held in the Crystal Room of the Taj. The crystal room is really a crystal room. Chandeliers are shimmering all over, there are thick red plush carpets, and so much splendor and grandeur in that place that you could hardly believe it is India. This is another face of India that is only meant for the chosen few. Suryabhan, a simple villager from Maliwada, spoke in that place which only the very rich can afford to enter, to a group in which only a few privileged people get to speak. There Suryabhan gave his testimony of human development. The hall was charged with electricity. After he finished speaking, it was decided that there would be no further business. The meeting would be closed at that point. I want to tell you that Suryabhan was a sheer presence to them. His life was a miracle which generated awe which was nothing but the awe of mystery itself. That awe is presence.

Presence is also a sign. The Maliwada House, or as the villagers call it, the ashram, is a sign of presence. People come to Maliwada, walk through the streets of Maliwada, talk to the people, and enter the House. When they enter the House they see that something different is going on there. They see an international community and corporate living, a style which is a style of servanthood. They see that we do not have any servants, we do not employ anyone to cook for us, wash for us, or to sweep. Our whole life style is an offense as well as an address. The House in that community has become a symbol of a presence which shows caring.

You have heard stories about the blue cloth. You heard how one company decided to donate several hundred meters of blue cloth so all of our 232 auxiliary in the Nava Gram Prayas could be blue. What an impact it is when a room full of people wearing blue are sitting in a little village called

Maliwada. You can hear people shouting or whispering, "Maliwada, Maliwada," wherever you go. You realize that you are a walking artform, or a walking symbol, and you really are a walking presence.

Finally, I want to suggest when your being is filled with His glory, God's glory, that finally is the presence. When you know that the only reason for living is to become the touchstone of that universal depth awareness, you are declaring the glory of God that you are renewed, and you release people to new life.