

On Being Present Where You Are

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR Long ago Douglas Steere found his identity in the balance between the philosophical and the active life. It was this rhythm, first discovered through Quaker saints like John Woolman, that drew him into the Society of Friends, and it is this dual rhythm that has motivated his life ever since. It has pulsed through thirty-six years of teaching philosophy at Haverford College, the writing, editing, and translating of ten books on various phases of contemplation, twenty trips to Europe, six to Africa, and three to Asia, and numerous sabbaticals devoted to investigating, organizing and visiting relief work for the American Friends Service Committee in Finland, Poland, Norway, and Germany.

An arrangement by which Haverford College, during the decade of the 1950s, let him offer one semester out of every four for some journey for the Service Committee was really only a formalizing of what he had long been doing, except that under this dispensation his wife Dorothy accompanied him, adding her sympathetic insights and service to his own. Most recently among his other interests he has become deeply involved in the Institute on Contemporary Spirituality made up of ten Roman Catholic and ten non-catholic scholars who have met for two extended periods in 1965 and 1966 — first at St. John's Benedictine Abbey and this year at Pendle Hill — for exchanges of their respective treasures of spiritual practice. Readers will note the ecumenical touch in the present pamphlet, and beneath it the inevitable flow and counter flow of contemplation and involvement in which Douglas Steere finds the clue to what the world is seeking.

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Foreword

In this lecture, which draws together many personal experiences and which ranges over the contemporary scene as I have been in touch with it in the recent past, I have tried to explore a few facets of this gift of being present where we are. I recall John S. C. Harvey saying one time when he was comparing the rare gifts of both Rufus M. Jones and Henry T. Hodgkin that “Rufus points the way, but Henry tells us how to get there.” There is, I hope, a little of both the “way” and the “how” in, this lecture. In a Quaker meeting, an unfinished message often leads to others being inwardly drawn to expand and to complete it. I hope, in sharing this rough-woven word, that others may take it up and add to its dimensions.

Once more I am deeply thankful for Anna Broomell’s priceless counsel in felicities of expression and for Dorothy Steere’s initial help in suggesting improvements in the text of the lecture.

Douglas V. Steere

The word “presence” has taken on a new assignment in our generation. We have come to speak of the UN “presence” in Cyprus or in the Gaza strip or in the Congo, or the Quaker “presence” in Delhi or in Lusaka. We assume that it means that the UN or the Quakers are *there*. We assume also, though this may be a gross exaggeration, that this presence is felt and acknowledged by those whom it touches, and that it is making a difference — we hope a favorable difference — to the situation. But are these assumptions correct? Is presence possible when there is almost no physical representative on the scene? It has often seemed to me that slave-tortured Africa was more acutely present to Scotland and to Britain in David Livingstone’s day over a century ago when there were only a handful of widely scattered missionaries and consuls about, than today when tens of thousands of her citizens are actively at work on this continent. What, then, does it mean to be present and what does genuine presence imply?

If we return to our own childhood, do you recall sitting in a classroom as a child while the teacher took the roll? When your name was called out, you answered “present.” You might have been half asleep, or had your mind on what part of the stream you were going to fish on the next day, which was Saturday, or be worrying about whether the teacher would call on you to put your solution of the arithmetic problem on the board, but you still mustered up enough response to register that you were *present*. What does it really mean to be present in any given place or at any given time? Certainly when I answered the roll call, all that the teacher was recording was my physical presence: Douglas Steere’s body is seated at this school desk today. But the teacher assumed more than that when she heard my answer, “present.” Rightly or wrongly, she assumed that not only my body was present but that my mind was also available for the day’s workout, and that she could

communicate with my mind, perhaps even influence it, if she chose to put a question to me and perhaps if I was too elsewhere or especially stubborn and preoccupied, she could stimulate my mind a little by the application of a light nip from her willow pointer to call me back to attention. I must confess that my answer of present on many school days did not live up to the teacher's assumptions. Do you recall at the age of say, twelve, how some person of the opposite sex of whom you had been almost completely oblivious, suddenly stepped up out of the blur and became intensely present to you? Do you remember how, in a cluster of adult relatives of whom you were dimly aware, one or two of them were vividly present to you?

One time a friend of ours told us of entertaining her six year old daughter's friends at a birthday party and of how she tried to enter into the fun in kittenish ways as if she too were a little girl. As one of the children was leaving, the hostess said to her, "I'll bet you think Caroline's mummy is a very funny old person," and received the reply, "I don't think about you at all!" She had not been even remotely present to this little girl during the whole party.

There were, however, a few adults whom you *did* think about and they mattered terribly to you. I recall two aunts who were ever so present to me. Within a single month one left for a long sojourn in the Philippine Islands as a teacher and the other went off with her husband to live on the other side of our continent and I was utterly desolate and bereft. My brother and sister and parents were still there, but I took them for granted and they were largely a part of the household furniture at that stage and nothing like so present to me as these aunts had been.

Then I came down with scarlet fever and after a month in a public contagious hospital I was released too soon and my seven year old sister caught the disease and died. Suddenly in her absence she was present as she had rarely

been in her active life, and for many months after this my sister Helen lived closer to me than ever in life. She was no longer physically present and yet she was present in a thousand ways: in love, in remorse, in loneliness, in wistfulness, until life closed over this presence and it became only an occasional and yet a very precious one. The fact that a departed one could be more present in her physical absence than in her living contact was a strange discovery for a twelve year old boy and one with some searching implications for the life beyond this life that I cannot develop here. Later it was to help me to understand Jesus's saying that it might be better for him to go away and to come to them from within as an inward comforter.

Another experience of presence which came in my childhood dug the dimension deeper. I read a life of Abraham Lincoln, and Lincoln, to whose family a forbear of my father's belonged, stalked out of the oblivion of fifty years of death and became a hero and almost a companion of mine. He was present for me — far more present than many people whom I was able to see and to touch and to talk with every day. T. S. Eliot points out how often we find our true contemporaries not in our own generation, but they walk out of other ages and lay hold of us, are *acutely* present to us, and we know them for our own. He confesses that Lancelot Andrewes, the 17th century Anglican whose *Private Devotions* are familiar to many of you, was vividly present as such a living contemporary to him.

We may prepare ourselves for this broadening of the notion of presence by recalling how many times in our lives we have felt the vivid presence of another when he or she was thousands of miles away, felt it far more acutely than when we could actually reach out and touch that individual in the very same room. To be present, then, can on one level mean to be locatable at a given point in space and time.

But two persons (even two married persons) or two races

or two religions or two cultures can live in precisely the same place and at the very same moment of time and yet can brush past each other with no more understanding of each other or effect upon each other than what Dr. Jacques Cuttat calls “a dialogue of deafs.” (*Bergson, Grisebach and Kant on the One Who Is Present*)

For a person or a cluster of persons to be locatable in a given space and time is a *kind* of being present to each other, but it is a far cry from exhausting what real presence means. Henri Bergson, in his *Creative Evolution*, speaks of “a body as present wherever its (attractive) influence is felt” (p. 198). This is a highly suggestive definition and might go far to light up some of the instances suggested above. It seems on the surface to contrast sharply with that of the German theologian, Eberhard Grisebach, whose word for presence, “*Gegenwurt*,” literally means “that which waits over against me.” In other words, presence is that in the other which resists me, which I cannot manipulate; that which I confront.

If the relationship of persons is what is being referred to, it is conceivable that these two conceptions of presence are not really in conflict but may turn out to be truly complementary to each other. For Bergson’s dynamic definition of presence in terms of influence or penetration or power to transform, and Grisebach’s more static concept of presence in terms of a resistance which tends to elicit my acknowledgment of it, may each disclose an aspect of encounter. Neither dares be absent if the being present to each other is to penetrate to the deeper dimensions.

As a matter of fact I believe Immanuel Kant in his second formulation of the categorical imperative (the built-in sense of duty in us all) is making the same reservation that Grisebach is making. “Treat humanity, whether in yourself or in others, always as an end and never as a means.” If presence meant only the Bergsonian operative

influence which one person might have upon another, this influence might well be exploitive or destructive. For there is in all of us an inclination to order our environment, including its human members, from our own axis outwards. Grisebach, like Kant, would therefore accent the integrity of a fellow subject, the waiting resistance, the overagainstness, the incorruptible integrity in the other that is open to influence but that also operates from a mysterious and highly important axis of its own.

In the matter of persons, then, if we were to attempt to characterize this further dimension of presence that goes beyond locatability, we should have to speak of its posture as a readiness to respect and to stand in wonder and openness before the mysterious life and influence of the other. It means, to be sure, a power to influence, to penetrate, to engage with the other; but it means equally a willingness to be vulnerable enough to be influenced by, to be penetrated by, and even to be changed by the experience.

If this is an accurate account of what actually takes place on the deepest levels of love and of friendship, it also means that out of the long loneliness of life there are possible some luminous moments of profound communion, of truly coming into the presence of the other. And when they do come, all efforts to measure their worth seem superfluous.

Presence And Four Types Of Love

An essay by the Spanish existentialist philosopher, Ortega y Gasset, speaks about the different kinds of love that may exist between a man and a woman. He describes first of all the physical love in which one or both of the partners wants to use the other as a source of physical gratification and the whole relationship is contrived in order to maximize this possibility. The partner is “used,” quite possibly most willingly used, to give the other the

gratification that he seeks, but he or she is present to the other only as a thing, an object and condition of that self-gratification.

He then describes a second type of love which is much more perverse than the first type. It is a love that has as its goal the psychological conquest of the other partner. When the partner can be induced to fall in love and to submit and to be dominated, then the operation is complete and the interest in the presence of the other wanes. He or she becomes just one more mounted trophy in the game-room of the mind. "When the fish is in the boat the fun is all over."

A third type of love may involve the two partners in each projecting an image upon the other: an image of what the loved object should be like. It may be an image that has come from their own father or mother or from some dream idyll. Having projected this image upon the partner, they then proceed to focus their love upon the image. The image may have little or no relation to the real person of the other; in fact it may even threaten to strangle, to smother, and even to destroy the true life of the partner quite as much as the great serpents threaten the lives of the figures in the Greek sculpture, the *Laocoön*, and each may be struggling as fiercely as these Greek victims in order to try to extricate himself. In many instances, the struggle for integrity fails and the projected image prevails, and when this happens neither can be present to the other except in this disguise.

In the fourth type of love which Ortega only hints at, something of Rilke's brilliant flash of insight enters when he describes love as "two solitudes" that "protect and touch and greet each other." Each is willing to drop, or at least to lower, the projected image and to feel an increasing sense of responsibility that the other should fulfill the mysterious destiny that God has hidden within him whether this shatters the image or not. Each counts it an infinite blessing

to be able to live in the presence of the other and to be forever surprised by the joy of seeing the other grow from the deepest inner vision that is hidden in him.

Sometimes the loved one himself loses the vision and the one who loves him is prepared to suffer, sustain, and to have faith in him during the time that he is in flight from his destiny. Often enough there are storms and crises and it is only in the moments of forgiveness and reconciliation that this fourth type of relationship emerges or is restored. There can be little doubt that the post-crisis presence is often superior to the pre-crisis one for it has been tested and has been vindicated. Sometimes it is only when the partner has been threatened with some form of extinction that the reverence for the mystery and wonder of the true person in the partner surfaces, and for the first time the real person is present to the partner.

This fourth level searches each of us to the quick not only in our friendships and marriage but also in our contacts with other religions, races and nations. We long to be truly present to each other but we tremble before the possible cost of such vulnerability and are tempted to settle for something less exacting.

On Being "All There"

People sometimes speak of a person suffering from a mental disease as being not "all there." It is a strange expression, but a telling one, for true sanity might well be defined negatively as the absence of elsewhere, or positively as the quality of being fully present to any situation into which I may be drawn. I am sane when I am *all there*. How searching this being *there* in situations of need really is!

Tolstoy, in his famous *Twenty-three Tales*, devotes the final one to describing a king who is in search of an answer to three questions: How can I learn to do the right thing at

the right time? Whose advice can I trust? And what things are most important and require my first attention?

Disguised in simple clothes, the king visited a hermit deep in the wood and asked him his three questions. Getting no answer but finding the frail hermit on the verge of collapse, the king took over the hermit's spade and finished digging his garden. At sunset a bearded man staggered in with a terrible bleeding stomach wound, dealt him by one of the king's bodyguard who were scattered through the forest to protect him. The king washed the wound, bandaged it with a towel and handkerchief, and kept changing the bandages until the flow of blood stopped and the man could be carried into the hut.

The king slept the night on the threshold of the hut and when morning came, found the bearded man confessing that he had lain in wait for the king's return from the hermit's hut, having sworn to kill him for a judgment the king had once given against him. He begged the king's forgiveness and pledged to serve him. The king, promising to send his own physician to attend him, rose to go but again put his questions to the hermit, complaining that he had still received no answer to them.

The hermit insisted that the king had twice received his answers on the previous day: When the king appeared on the previous afternoon, the hermit in his weakness did not see how he could finish digging his garden, and the king had relieved him. This was the right thing at the right time and the most important to be done — for had he returned through the wood at that time, his enemy would have killed him. When the wounded man appeared, stanching his blood and relieving him was the right thing at the right time and made a friend of an enemy. "Remember then," added the hermit, "there is only one time that is important. Now!" And, further, "The most necessary man is he with whom you are ... and the most important thing is to

do him good, because for that purpose alone was man sent into this life!”

But to qualify for making anything of this bone-bare answer of the hermit’s, of our being present where immediate need is to be found, you have to be all there. You have to be awake. You cannot be in a drowse of preoccupation, in what Pascal called the *Gethsemane-sleep* where Jesus’s disciples failed him three times by drowsing off, by not being present where they were.

There is a moving scene in Augustine’s *Confessions* where Augustine seems ripe for the spiritual turning, for the big change, and where the one man he longed to speak with was Bishop Ambrose. Again and again Augustine walked hopefully past the open door of the Cathedral library where Ambrose was sitting absorbed in his reading. Ambrose was present for Augustine, but Augustine was not present for Ambrose. Knowing how busy Ambrose was, Augustine could not muster the courage to disturb him, so he went away and his conversion was further delayed.

Robert Raines includes in his *Creative Brooding* a letter from a juvenile delinquent who wrote his mother, “Mom you are a wonderful cook, and you had everything so clean and you were tired so much from all those things that made you busy; but you know something Mom? I would have liked crackers and peanut butter just as well if you had only sat down with me awhile during the day and said to me: “Tell me all about it so I can maybe help you understand.” (Macmillan, N. Y. 1966, p. 80.)

Martin Buber, in his *Between Man and Man*, tells of a student who came to him for counsel. Buber listened to his story and gave him professionally competent advice, and the student went away and took his own life. Buber goes on to tell how he was searched to the core of his being as to whether if he had been really present, really engaged, really all there for that student, the outcome would have been the same.

The Cost Of Being Present

But to be really present to another requires even more than allthereness. There was an old advice among the early Franciscan Third-Order of lay Christians that the giving of alms, the equivalent of our “checkbook charity,” was not enough. The members of the Third-Order were to seek to find ways in which they could mix their bodies, their personal service, with their alms. Francis’s own spontaneous acts gave them the clue when he kissed the blind man’s face into whose hands he pressed assistance, or when at the leper hutch at Rivo Torto he not only brought food but he dressed the leper’s sores. The members were to be personally present where they helped, and always to search for fresh ways to show that they cared and were mixed with the victim’s situation. The small town gifts of food and offers of service that tumble in in such profusion when heavy sickness or death stalks a neighbor’s household often have about them much of this Franciscan flavor. To be personally present in what you do gives some earnest that you mean it.

When, in the Old Testament story, the Shunamite woman whose son is stricken hastens to the mountains, hunts out and finds the prophet Elisha, and gets his instant promise to come and minister to her son, Elisha’s first act is to send his servant companion on ahead of him with instructions to lay his staff on the boy’s body. But this produces no effect. On his own arrival, Elisha kneels before the bed on which the stricken boy is lying and prays to God to restore to life this only son of these devout parents, but still there is no change. In this moving story, it is only when Elisha lays his own body over the body of the boy and breathes his own breath into the boy’s nostrils, that the boy returns to consciousness and is restored to his family. To be really present may be at no less cost of involvement.

“A Real Friend Is Present”

When it comes to our friendships, how shallow these often seem to be, and how seldom are we really present to a friend! Is it that this cost of presence is so high that we shrink from more than soft outside friendships? A member of our Quaker Meeting was suffering from an acute diabetic condition which had brought her not only blindness, but the prospect that at most she had only a year or two to live. In response to the Meeting’s query about members who wished to visit her, she sent word that she did not want visits from anyone who meant to come only once or twice. She did not need to be diverted by courtesy calls. Her life was now too short for making acquaintances unless they really meant it. “Please don’t come unless you mean to continue to come.”

These terms of hers point toward the cost of presence. For really to be present to another, to be a true friend, means to be forever on call, forever open, forever willing to be involved in the friend’s troubles as well as his joys. Pierre Ceresole, the beloved Swiss Quaker pioneer and founder of the International Work Camps, once wrote in his private journal, “The moment, the critical moment where true friendship or true love begins, is when one feels that if he or she has really done something grievous and regrettable or even criminal — well it is exactly as if one had done it oneself.”

One of the vital Ad Hoc churches in the Christian world today, where men and women are really present to each other, is in the Alcoholics Anonymous where the one agreeing to link his life with yours is ready to come to you anywhere, at any hour of the day and night, and on no notice at all in order to meet your need — and both of you know in advance that there will be need.

In the writing of a letter, the epistle can be a kind of hurried calendar of events with a formal solicitous inquiry

about your condition at its conclusion, and it will be quite clear to the receiver that as it was being written he was hardly present at all to the writer. Or the letter can be written in such a way that the receiver knows instinctively that he and his situation are present to the writer throughout. I was touched in the summer of 1965 to get a letter from Albert Schweitzer in reply to one I had written him just after his 90th birthday. In the course of telling me about his life in Lambarent, he asked me if I did not miss giving my college lectures now that I was retired. With the hundreds of things he had to do, he had been concerned truly to enter into my life and situation.

A real friend is present. He is there when you need him. A real friend seems to know the word to speak, or the question to ask, or the book to send in order to help to restore for us the lost image of our life task. He knows how to confirm in us the deepest thing that is already there, "answering to that of God" in his needy friend.

In offering hospitality, the outer side, the comforts, the diversions the host provides may exhaust what he has to give and the visit may pass without host or guest ever being really present to each other. Or the occasion of hospitality may be a time where the host and guest have not only some leisure for each other but they become truly present to each other and whether through a press of the hand, or in talk, or in silence, or in a walk, or in the things they do for each other, something opens in them both and something happens.

The visits of Jesus to Bethany must have been like that. He and his hostesses, Mary and Martha, to say nothing of Lazarus, must have been present to each other. I had a visit not long ago from an old friend in whose Scandinavian home I once enjoyed all of the graces of true hospitality and I recall vividly his word with me an hour before my departure about what he felt I had been given to do in this swiftly

passing life. No other person can ever chart a course for you, but a friend and a host who is really present can at times firm up what you in your own deepest heart of hearts have already felt drawing at you. And he did just this for me, and in that moment we both knew that we were truly present to each other.

The family-visiting of Quakers travelling in the ministry must have had some of this same note about it. The visiting Friend sought to be truly open and present to members of the family as he visited with each one about the spiritual condition of his life at that time.

“I Am Ready. Are You Ready?”

Presence may also come in an act of prayer. For in the life of prayer we bring ourselves into an openness that makes it possible for us to be freshly aware of God’s presence. It is not that he is not present at other times but that by this voluntary act of ours, the act of prayer, we are enabled to break with our outer preoccupations and to become aware of the presence and of what that presence does to search and to transform and to renew us and to send us back into life again.

A speaker was once introduced by the perfect chairman who said simply, “Mr. Weaver, we are ready. Are you ready?” When I gather myself for prayer it is almost as if God were so addressing me: “Douglas Steere, I am ready. Are you ready?” And my answer is, “O Lord, you are always ready but am I ever ready? O Lord, make me ready, or at least make me more ready to be made ready.”

In prayer where intercession is involved, I make those for whom I am praying present for myself by thinking of them and of their need and of the One who can meet that need in its deepest sense. Perhaps my friend is swept by a persistent temptation to which he has yielded often enough

to threaten to glaze over his life, to numb the heart core in him, and finally to cut him off from ever sensing the deepest spring of love in another person or in the One that sustains him with both an unceasing and an unspeakable love. In my prayer I make him present to me by thinking intensively of him and of the threshold over which both God's and my own caring must pass in order to reach him. I think, too, of this whole solace of intercessory caring which God's love and the love of the whole communion of saints is forever drawing at his life. My own caring for him is frail in comparison to this, but I feel that it is swept up into this greater net of attracting energy and that for all of its frailty it may be the decisive impulse that may touch my friend's decision and open him to these ever present forces that could change his whole perspective.

In intercessory prayer my friend may be more truly present to me than as if I were literally never out of his sight. I believe that this is why Forbes Robinson could say in all sincerity that he would rather have half an hour of prayer for his friend than hours of conversation with him. The friend, and the provident mercy of God and his redemptive company, might well be far more present to him in the one situation than in the other, although intercessory prayer and conversation are far from mutually exclusive. In a conversation itself I may be in intense intercession.

In intercessory prayer, however, where I and my friend may be acutely present to each other and to the ground of infinite compassionate love, it is not only my friend who is irradiated and opened to transformation but this holds for my own life as well, for two persons can never be truly present to each other or to the living God and remain the same.

When E. Herman says, "To come near to God is to change," she might as readily have said, "To be present to God, either alone or in the presence of another, is to change," for to be present is to be open to influence.

The Unbidden Presence

Prayer is a voluntary means that is given as an ever available door by which to come into God's presence. But his presence often enough comes to us unbidden and overwhelms us when we least expect it and we have only our usual abysmal need to attract it. Hugh Walpole tells of a day in the First World War when he held a horribly wounded Austrian soldier in his arms for half an hour as he slipped out of this life. He felt the presence in that man as never before.

Charles Raven, in his autobiography, *A Wanderer's Way*, speaks of how in Liverpool "on my walks in the mean streets, God met me in splendour. Always the sense of His presence was unexpected, even startling in the suddenness of the manifestation ... I was coming home after a long tramp and passed some shawl-clad women gathered round a dingy shop. The proprietor, in his shirt sleeves, was dispensing packets of fish and chips wrapped in a newspaper. The place was lit by naphtha flares, and misty with the steam of cooking ... And again of a sudden the glory; and God fulfilling his eternal task and giving to his children their daily bread." (Henry Holt, New York, 1929, p. 109, 111.)

Some civil rights workers have found presence in jail cells. Brother Lawrence was overcome by the Lord's presence as he gazed at a tree. John Woolman felt it flooding into his life as a young man, "My heart was tender and often contrite and universal love for my fellow creatures increased in me."

Who of us does not quicken to the lines in Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, "And I have felt a presence that disturbs me with the joy of elevated thoughts?" Who of us has no notion of what Evelyn Underhill means by speaking of the inward "slowing down" or what George Fox means when he speaks of God's "turning of the wheel of his life within us?" Who has never felt melted down and brought to tears of

tenderness at a great passage in a book, a scene in a play, a sight of the sea, a word or the hug of a child, a surge of pain, a midnight hour in a “white night” when we have been shown the way and have yielded, or at one of those moments in a conversation with a friend where we touched “where words come from?”

These minor ecstasies, as Elizabeth Vining calls them, are all fingers. They all point to the presence. William Blake knowingly says, “There is a moment in each day which Satan cannot find,” and at these moments it is as if we heard again, “I am ready. Are you ready? I am present. Are you present?” And now and then we dare to whisper the answer, “I am present, Lord. I am present where I am, and you are present with me.”

The “Dialogue Of Deafs” Among The World Religions

In the spring of 1966 I made a journey of some two months to Japan and India. I went out on behalf of the Friends World Committee to see if it was right and feasible in the spring of 1967 for the Quakers to serve as hosts for a colloquium, for a “dialogue in depth,” in each of these countries. Such a gathering would bring together for about a week in Japan some leading personalities from Zen Buddhism and from Protestant and Catholic Christians; and in India, ten Hindu teachers and spiritual masters and ten Christians, ecumenically chosen from both Catholics and Protestants. In each case an able Quaker from the country itself, with the assistance of a sponsoring committee, would guide the colloquium, and a small team of Quakers would be present to be at the service of the guests.

The truth of the matter is that in Japan, the indigenous Christian churches have been living for well over a century in the midst of a Buddhist society, and in India, for well over four centuries imbedded in a Hindu society, as though

these fellow world religions did not exist, as though they simply were not present.

Writing of India, where he has spent the last decade, Bede Griffiths, OSB, says of the Roman Catholic Church, "Today the Church remains completely cut off from the tradition of Indian culture." (*Good Work*, Bull. Catholic Art Assn. of USA, Autumn 1963, pp. 100-101.)

The Swiss orientalist, Dr. Jacques Cuttat states, "Up to the end of the 19th century, the monotheistic Jewish, Christian, Moslem communities of India lived side by side with Hindus and Buddhists, tolerated by them but also spiritually unrelated with them." (*The Spiritual Dialogue: East and West*, p. 38.)

The problem today is "What does it mean to be present where we are?" For centuries many Christians in these countries have not been present where they were. They have despised and looked down upon the reigning world religions which they or their forbears left and have simply shunned them. In doing this they have often shunned a deep part of their own hidden life. The fact that after all of these years of the most intensive missionary effort, less than one-half of one percent of the Japanese people and two-and-a-half percent of the Indian population have become Christians would seem to be saying something to us.

But an even more serious concern might be found in the fact that in India, Indian Christians have learned almost nothing from this long exposure of the Indian Christian church to one of the greatest spiritual vehicles of the world — to Hinduism. The result is that Indian Christians, with a few exceptions like Sadhu Sundar Singh, have rarely brought into the world Christian treasury anything really unique or distinctive. In their worship, theology, devotional practice and Christian social mutations, they have tended to exemplify a non-Asiatic version of institutionalized Western Christianity.

A Negro friend of mine once asked Gandhi what was the greatest handicap that Jesus had in India, and instantly Gandhi replied "Christianity."

The problem that imaginative Indian Christian leaders confess they face is how to awaken the Indian Christian to discover what it means to be present where he is, and to come into vital and life-affecting contact with his Hindu brother and with his Indian heritage. Only as he overcomes his fear and dares to do this is he likely to have a fresh gift to offer on the altar of the world.

To engage in this contact does not mean to weaken his new-found Christian faith. Nor does it mean that if he acknowledges Hinduism or Buddhism or Islam or any of the great world religious faiths as an important response to the Divine initiative, he has thereby admitted that all religions are equally adequate responses to the Divine Love. It does mean that he stops shunning, stops derision, and begins actively to be present to the creative discoveries which his brother's religion does contain and to the Divine initiative which has never left any people of the world without its drawing power.

"No Religion Is An Island"

In the United States we have more Jews than in Israel, and their religion has almost from the beginning of our history been something apart, something to which we paid little attention, something which might keep a Jew from attending his shop or coming to a meeting on Saturday, but very little else. They gave us the Old Testament, yes, but why did they fixate at that point?

In our day men like Abraham Heschel and Martin Buber have enriched the spiritual life of our Christian people immeasurably by sharing with us some of the great treasures of Judaism. A well-known Jewish columnist, Harry Golden,

was bold enough to joke with his Christian brothers who invited him to give a commencement address at a Presbyterian college in North Carolina. Referring to our “God is Dead” theology in America, Harry Golden assured his Presbyterian friends that they could rest easy, for the Jews would see to it that God was worshipped during this blitz of Protestant theology they were undergoing, and that when it was over, the Jews would return God to them to worship again!

Abraham Heschel, in an important address at Union Theological Seminary, dared to speak with great frankness about our deep dependence on each other as adherents of the great religions in this period in which we are living: “Our era marks the end of complacency, the end of evasion, the end of self-reliance. Jews and Christians share the perils and the fears; we stand on the brink of the abyss together. Interdependence of political and economic conditions all over the world is a basic fact of our situation. Disorder in a small and obscure country in any part of the world evokes anxiety in people all over the world.

“Parochialism has become untenable. There was a time when you could not pry out of a Boston man that the Boston State House was not the center of the solar system or that one’s own denomination had not the monopoly of the Holy Spirit. Today we know that even the solar system is not the hub of the universe.

“The religions of the world are no more self-sufficient, no more independent, no more isolated than individuals or nations; energies, experiences and ideas that come to life outside the boundaries of a particular religion or all religions continue to challenge and affect every religion. *No religion is an island.* We are all involved with one another. Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us... . Today, religious isolation is a myth.

“We must choose between inter-faith and inter-nihilism. Should religions insist upon the illusion of complete isolation?

Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other's failure?" (*Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. XXL, #2, Part I, Jan. 1966, pp. 119-130.)

Dialogue In Depth

On the dialogue between Jews and Christians that has been in progress for years without a final conclusion, Paul Tillich says, "They have not converted them (the Jews) but they have created a community of conversation which has changed both sides of the dialogue." This line of Tillich's expresses almost precisely what happens in a real dialogue in depth when members from two great religions, each of whom cares deeply about his own experience and what it has opened to him, begin to speak to each other, become truly present to each other, interpenetrate each other, irradiate each other. For when this happens both are changed in the course of the dialogue.

If the Holy Spirit is always at work and if it has something of decisive importance to say to the Christian religion through Zen Buddhism, or through Hinduism, and to Zen Buddhism and to Hinduism through exposure to the experience and witness of Christians, how can it really say this unless each is willing to be present, truly present, to the other? The purpose, then, of the Friends World Committee in arranging for and serving as host to these two gatherings in Japan and in India is to assist in the processes which may help in *some* infinitesimal way to make these great world religions more truly present to each other.

We do not know how this is to be done. Yet we are not without clues. I have found no one who has helped to formulate the tone and spirit of such a meeting more helpfully than the Swiss Ambassador to Greece, Dr. Jacques Cuttat, whom I have cited before. He suggests that if those who gather for such an occasion could be brought to have

Saint-Exupery's faith that, "If I differ from you, far from harming you, I increase you," they might be willing to listen to each other with a new openness. He begs us all to learn how to "give to the faith of another the amplitude of love. We must learn how to create an inter-religious space and in such a space, God's spirit can blow as it wills." Cuttat believes, as I believe, that the Holy Spirit does have something urgent to say to our highly institutionalized and Westernized Christianity through Hinduism: through its God expectancy, through its belief in simplicity of life, through its continuing practice of inward meditation, through its passion for sanctity, and through its sense of thankfulness which it manifests in so many touching ways.

Dr. Cuttat believes in such intimate exchanges in depth as we propose. Whether as hosts at these gatherings we can have the grace and skill to help create this interior space, and can be given the third ear to listen to our guests and to hear what they are saying, remains to be seen. We do not intend to use academic papers in these meetings but rather to rely upon simply formulated topics and to try to encourage the use of experience and insight. Perhaps in the bold undertaking Friends, through the Friends World Committee's initiative and willingness to serve as hosts and conveners, may experience something of what our Catholic friends call the Real Presence and what we would term the gathering of the spirit in the course of these visits together, and we may have something to share with the world as the result of such pioneering occasions. Perhaps, too, we may learn some of the things not to do which we may pass on to others for future occasions.

An Ecumenical Aspect Of The Colloquia

In this small project there is also a hope of contributing something to the ecumenical movement which since Vatican

It has reached beyond seeking to reconcile Protestant and Orthodox groups with each other. Now, with Roman Catholics joining in a variety of ways, there is a challenge before us to try to learn how to face the problems of our world as a full Christian body. It is heartening to see even the guarded enthusiasm of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions at having some of their leading thinkers invited to share with Protestant scholars in this confrontation in India and to see the interest that the Roman Catholic Church has taken in the inclusion of their scholars in the meetings with Zen Buddhists in Japan.

Soon after I arrived in Japan in early May, the Quaker professor, Yukio Irie, and I were discussing with a distinguished Zen Buddhist master the ecumenical factor of the choice of the Christian scholars to be included in the forthcoming meeting. We had gone to a Zen temple to have a visit with this Zen Buddhist master. His approval and willingness to serve in this colloquium in Japan were likely to be decisive as far as the other Zen masters were concerned.

We sat opposite him on a mat in his cell in the temple, which opened upon a beautiful little pool with goldfish swimming in it and with rocks and bamboo trees exquisitely placed. He was often in meditation as we carried on this conversation in Japanese with Yukio Irie translating for me. The visit lasted an hour and a half. The Zen master asked many searching questions and finally Yukio Irie, with some warmth, said, "He has made a fresh and highly interesting proposal. He says that his experience with Buddhists leads him to expect that we have only trouble ahead with an ecumenical group of Christian scholars in the colloquium. He asks why we should not simply have five Zen Buddhists and five Quakers to meet together, and stop at that."

I waited for a time and then asked Yukio Irie to tell him that, after what I had been through, I felt inwardly convinced that we dare not any longer come to our Buddhist brothers

as separate denominations; that we must now come to them together. As we waited for his answer, I feared that this would end the possibility of his accepting our invitation. He sat for a minute or two silently thinking and looking out at the pool and then spoke to Yukio Irie who turned to me and said, "He says that you are right. We must now do these things together." In the end he not only accepted our invitation but asked Yukio Irie, "Why did we have to wait for some foreign Quaker to issue this invitation? Why have we Japanese not long ago done this ourselves?"

The Presence-Creating Power Of Vatican Council II

This ecumenical dimension of the colloquium in the vast subcontinent of India will result in certain Roman Catholic participants meeting each other for the first time, and there is a feeling of great welcome for being present to each other across Christian lines and making this approach to Hinduism together.

In the United States we are constantly witnessing new areas of this breaching of the barriers of disregard and suspicion that separate Protestant and Catholic and are discovering a whole new willingness to face common problems together. I recently attended a five-day meeting of 600 presidents and deans and professors of the Christian colleges of the world that takes place every four years. It was fascinating to watch the process of becoming present to each other in this group which contained forty Roman Catholic educators who had been invited to attend this year for the first time in history.

One Protestant college administrator spoke to a nun and said how astonishing it was that they had been invited (for this had always been the Association of Protestant Colleges). To this, the nun replied, "But perhaps it is even more astonishing that we accepted!"

To see these Catholic and Protestant educators whose colleges have existed in almost sepulchral separateness in the same states and often in the same cities, now taking part freely in the discussions of their common educational problems meant they were being present to each other, and the warm personal relations that were established there are typical of the harvest of this presence-creating power of the post-Vatican Council II period.

A Roman Catholic Church in Janesville, Wisconsin not long ago invited their Lutheran neighbors to come over and teach them how to sing hymns, which have now come to play a larger role in the revised liturgy. They assured their Lutheran friends that even singing Luther's "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" was quite in order!

In Selma, Alabama, the world witnessed a new spectacle when Benedictine monks, a Catholic Bishop-elect, nuns and Catholic laymen linked arms with white Protestant churchmen and with Negroes to present a common witness.

William Channel, who is in charge of the American Friends Service Committee's migratory worker program in the state of Florida, reported recently that his greatest asset in this work is an intrepid nun. She is their most persuasive organizer in getting some corporate union action into operation among these defenseless people.

Ten Roman Catholic scholars in the field of the spiritual life and ten non-Catholic scholars in this area recently spent several days together at Pendle Hill. They were working on papers written by four members (two Protestant and two Catholic) of a newly founded Institute in Contemporary Spirituality. The subject was prayer in the contemporary scene.

All of these are further evidences that this life next to each other where we are not present to each other is crumbling and a vast enrichment is coming to both sides as we encourage each other in that which is most precious to us both.