

Becoming a Presence Activist by Viral Mehta

A friend of mine is visiting from out of town and staying in East Oakland, in an area that's infamous for its gang violence and unrest. This friend happens to be a monk. He shaves his head and dresses in the traditional brown robes of his monastic order -- not the kind of person who blends easily into the background. Having spent many years making compassion a conscious practice, his response to situations is to try to do his bit to spread goodness. So he went out for a walk, just to engage with the community. As he was walking up 35th Avenue, a couple of tough-looking street youth yelled out to him:
"Hey man!"

He turned around, looked at them and said, "Yes?"

"Are you a Buddhist monk?"

"Yes, I am."

"You look hella peaceful, man!"

Just by being -- the way he was walking, the pace, his garb and shorn head, the expression on his face, his thoughts and intentions -- he had conveyed something so powerful, in a context where one might least expect it. It is a poignant story, but in fact, any of us can develop that kind of presence.

What would happen if we approached every interaction with an intention to give fully and unconditionally? Beyond the material level, and in a way that is very sensitive to the context. In a given moment, it may be just fully listening, or sharing an encouraging word, or taking a kind action. What gift we give is almost secondary. But just to get to the point where we want to give something, we have to overcome our sense of scarcity.

In a recent column, The New York Times' David Brooks cites research on the effects of scarcity on the mind. In one game, Princeton students were asked to answer questions in a short period of time but were given the option to borrow time from future rounds. Despite their high IQs, they ended up borrowing time at ridiculous rates, ultimately ruining their long-term performance in the game. So it turns out that the actual challenge of scarcity isn't in just the external circumstances or even our cognitive abilities -- the crux of it is how we respond internally to scarcity.

This psychology of scarcity can subtly come into play in our relationships. Sometimes we get so fixated on what it is that we want from a situation or a person that we no longer have the flexibility of mind to see anything else. If we become so focused on what we don't have, then we start to look at relationships with just an eye for what they can provide for us. We are governed by questions like, "What can this person do for me? What can I get out of this situation?" At the root of being me-oriented is a mental orientation of the cup being half-empty.

The key to moving away from this perception of scarcity is gratitude. The reality is that the cup is half-empty and half-full, but as author Julio Olalla insightfully puts it, "without gratitude, nothing is enough." As we start to actually feel grateful for all that we have, we recognize the abundance within our own lives. Of course, there's our health, resources and opportunities, but also a gratefulness for just being alive, being connected to so much

and being able to choose our state of being.

By taking stock of our lives in this way, we actually receive these things as the gifts that they are and that shifts us to a mindset of abundance. We realize that we have more than enough, and our cups overflow. We start to look for opportunities everywhere, just searching for ways to express the gratitude we feel. All of our relationships -- with family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances -- become fair game. As do interactions with total strangers.

A few years ago, in downtown Chicago, 10 of us had decided to try an experiment. To create an excuse to connect with those we walk by all the time, we'd whipped up 150 bagged lunches, split up into groups of three and hit the streets. Beyond just the lunches, the idea was to really explore our own generosity within each interaction. So with everyone who looked like they could use a lunch, we'd start with making our offering and then letting things happen organically. Some would heartily accept, but then quickly move on; others would outright refuse the meal; some didn't even have the mental faculties to process it; and others would engage with us and even be moved to tears.

But we were the ones learning the lessons. My most vivid memory is of seeing an African-American man waiting to cross the street. He must've been in his late 40s, had on a leather jacket and something told me he might appreciate a meal. As we approached each other, before I could even say a word, he'd held his hand out, wanting to shake my hand.

I shook his hand and he gave me a big, heartfelt hug, saying, "Thank you."

"For what?" I asked him. I hadn't even offered him the lunch yet.

His response rocked me. "For caring. I've been out of a job for four months, just scraping by on the streets. And everyone walks by and no one even looks me in the eye. Just the way you looked at me, I could tell you cared."

I offered him the lunch, but that had already become secondary; he didn't even take it, and within a minute, we were both on our way. In that short time, he had given me a taste of what is possible when we approach any situation with the simple intention of giving unconditionally of ourselves. I'd learned that the greatest gift we can share is our presence, and that this shining potential exists in all of our relationships. I realized, then, that we could all become presence activists.