

“Presence and Listening”
Dianne M. Daniels; UUCN, September 21, 2025

Sermon: “Presence and Listening” by Dianne M. Daniels

Introduction

Good morning, friends. It is a joy to be with you again in this beloved community.

Our theme today is Presence and Listening. These may sound like simple words, but they carry deep spiritual weight. Presence is more than just being in the room — it’s being fully present to the moment, fully present to one another, and fully present to the holy.

And listening is more than just hearing words — it’s a way of saying: you matter, you belong, you are not alone.

Together, presence and listening are both practices and gifts. They are spiritual tools that help us live more fully into our Unitarian Universalist Values — rooted in Love at the center, and circling outward into Justice, Equity, Interdependence, Pluralism, Generosity, and Transformation.

Let’s walk together through three questions: What is presence and listening? Why does it matter? And what are we called to do with it?

The What: What Do We Mean by Presence and Listening?

Presence is showing up fully — body, mind, and spirit aligned in the here and now.

Thich Nhat Hanh once said:

“When you love someone, the best thing you can offer is your presence. How can you love if you are not there? The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers.”

Presence isn't just about occupying space. It's about bringing the fullness of ourselves into the moment and letting others know, through our attention, that they matter.

Listening, likewise, is deeper than waiting for our turn to speak. True listening is an act of humility. It is about quieting the inner voice that wants to judge, to compare, to respond. Parker Palmer captures this truth:

“The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed — to be seen, heard, and companioned exactly as it is.”

Listening becomes a form of presence. And presence is the foundation of listening. They are inseparable.

Our Shared UU Values guide us here. Love is at the center — presence and listening are how we embody love. Equity reminds us that every voice is worthy of being heard. Pluralism teaches that through listening, we learn from many truths, not just our own. Interdependence shows us that our very being is woven with others, and that presence is not optional but essential to community.

The So What: **Why Presence and Listening Matter**

Why does this matter? Why spend a Sunday morning talking about something as basic as presence and listening?

Because our world is starving for it.

Richard Rohr once wrote:

“We cannot attain the presence of God, of Spirit, of the Holy, because we’re already totally in the presence of God, Spirit, and what’s Holy.

What’s absent is our awareness.”

We are swimming in distractions. Our phones ding, our calendars overflow, our minds race ahead to tomorrow’s worries or back to yesterday’s regrets. Presence slips through our fingers.

And so does listening. We scroll, skim, and swipe more than we stop and listen. We crave to be *heard*, but we rarely make room to **hear**.

Yet presence and listening are what heal us. They are what stitch our torn world back together.

Rev. Kathleen McTigue shares a story in her reflection, "More Than a Cup of Soup." She watched a woman working behind the counter at a soup shop.

The line was long, but when an elderly customer approached, the woman lingered with him.

She asked after his health, his wife, and commiserated about their struggles, touched his hand lightly, and said she'd look for him tomorrow.

McTigue wrote:

“It's easy to believe that some small corner of the world's fabric is being patiently, lovingly stitched back together — and that something more gets carried out the door than a bag of bread and warm soup.”

That's the power of presence. That's the gift of listening.

And this is where our UU Values come alive:

Justice asks us to listen to voices pushed to the margins, to create spaces where silence is broken and truth is spoken, so matter how difficult.

Equity reminds us that every person deserves to be seen and heard — not just those with status or power, or those we think will do something FOR us.

Interdependence reminds us that we thrive not in isolation, but in webs of mutual care where listening becomes a lifeline, that voice that affirms “I hear you” and “You matter”.

Presence and listening are not niceties. They are lifelines. They are spiritual practices that carry hope, compassion, and love in a fragmented, often divided world.

The Now What: Living into Presence and Listening

So how do we practice presence and listening? How do we live into these values in a noisy, distracted, hurried world?

First, we can start small. Presence is cultivated moment by moment. Pause before speaking. Breathe before responding. Put away the phone during a meal. Look into another's eyes with kindness.

The Zen master Ichu was once asked for words of wisdom. He picked up a brush and wrote one word: "Attention." The student asked for more. The master wrote: "Attention. Attention." When pressed further, he wrote again: "Attention. Attention. Attention." Presence is nothing more and nothing less than attention. I would add that FOCUSED listening is a special added level of grace.

Second, practice listening as a form of reverence. When someone speaks, imagine your heart saying: "You are beloved. You are worthy of my attention and my focus. You are not alone. You are heard." That is the essence of our Value of Love.

Third, we bring presence into our communal life. Every time we gather here — for worship, coffee hour, meetings, or service — we have the chance to be intentional about presence and listening. That is how communities of Love, Equity, and Justice are built.

Finally, we must also remember to be present with ourselves. Annie Dillard wrote:

"Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to **be** there."

Presence isn't only about showing up for others. It's about showing up for ourselves — honoring our own inherent worth and dignity,

remembering that the holy is found not only in conversation but in breath, in stillness, in attention, in silence.

Closing

Beloved community, presence, and listening are not luxuries. They are the very heartbeat of our faith.

To be present is to love. To listen is to serve. To practice both is to embody our UU Values and to offer healing in a world that desperately needs it.

Let us return, then, to the simple gifts of presence and listening. Let us practice them not occasionally but daily. Let us create and strengthen a community where everyone feels seen, heard, and held.

And let us close with the words of John O'Donohue, A Blessing for Presence:

May you awaken to the mystery of being here
And enter the quiet immensity of your own presence.
May you have joy and peace in the temple of your senses...
May you take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention...
May you experience each day as a sacred gift,
Woven around the heart of wonder.

Amen. And may it ever be so.