



Driven out of Distraction: Lessons from a Fruitfly

by Virginia Apperson

One of those obnoxious, proverbial *flies on the wall* had her eyes on me the other evening, and I'm embarrassed to admit what she observed—a woman-possessed.

Within a 3 minute period she bore witness to me assisting with dinner, catching up with my husband on the day, watching the evening news, checking my e, snail and voice mail, and giving a half-hearted greeting to my infirmed dog, along with who knows how many other impulsive stops and starts. And that's just the outer events, the sneaky little insect was also able to hack into my head and marvel at the incessant chitchat rattling around in my brain.

Unable to contain herself, this impudent, little superego named Frida chided me: "Whoa, girl, what's up with you?!"

Indignantly, I snapped at her, "You're a fine one to talk, Miss Highflyin' Busybody."

Hurt, Frida zizzed back: "Hey, I was put on this earth to flit. I'm supposed to hither and thither. What were you put on this earth to do?"

Who knew I'd get called on the carpet by a neurotic, Jungian gnat, preaching individuation at sundown. And her buzzwords stung. She was right. Of the innumerable tasks at hand, I was not **present** to a single one. I was plugged into autopilot, acting *as if* I was engaged. How could I get or give anything meaningful out of life, if I was on to the next thing before I'd even started the previous one. According to the dictionary, **presence** is "a place where a person is." And the little pest knew that I was indubitably not where I was.

Ever since that fly got in my multi-tasking ointment, I haven't been able to justify my hypercharged ways. So I decided to set about becoming proficient in presence. Afterall, I'd just written a book on the topic, but the very task of writing it

backfired and sent me into overdrive. In our search for a book title, John Beebe and I, like Goldilocks, tried many on for size, but none quite fit our intentions, until John came up with *The Presence of the Feminine in Film*. That one felt good with just the right touch we were after. It's only now, though, as I reflect on why I wrote the book in the first place, that I realize that **presence** was the perfect word, not just for our topic, but also for something within me that needs tending and dare I say, for which the culture, too, is literally starving. Feminine presences, in particular, share an expertise in living in the present tense, about being present of mind and of body. My unbidden visitor helped me see, it's time to put into practice my preaching.

So what is it that the *Ladies* have to teach, that the knuckle-headed Masculine zooms past? Presence asks us to be still, attentive, careful, deliberate, attuned. To sink and settle below the surface. To deeply listen. To be gentle and emotive. Awareness of breath. Going with the flow. Indistractibility. To be here, not there. In the moment, front and center. To show up, in entirety, especially the warts.

In the book, we contend that the very act of film-watching can be an act of presence or an act of oblivion. To be an *active* film-watcher means that we are in tune with our experience of the film; we feel along with the characters and immerse ourselves into their dramatic experience. We let ourselves be impacted, rather than simply being passively entertained. We are not observers, but inside of the story. We cheer. We sob. We ache. We giggle. And **then** we wonder what those reactions have to do with our own lives. Most of all, we believe not just in Lassie or Heidi or Joan of Arc, but more importantly in our own capacity to redeem the wounded or disadvantaged or banished parts of ourselves.

Pangs in our hearts, heat in our blood and the *can't go back to sleep* nightmares are built-in wake up calls for action against our amnesia and numbness. But more often than not, rather than being present to these harbingers of truth, we swat them away, just like I wanted to smush that meddlesome herald Frida, bugging me to take things one at a time. Part of a film's unique traits is its ability to get right in our face and serve up larger-than-life presences that instruct us how to tolerate our symptoms, until the individuating call bears fruit. Each of us has our own femme fatale that beckons us. Every time I've shared our

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book, person after person has an example of a film that moved them out of their comfort zone.

Since the insect's biting remarks, I started my quest for greater presence by revisiting film characters whose special savoir-faire successfully balances a driving animus. Rather than kicking back and lazily following the humdrum collective current that dictates how things are supposed to play out, these irreverent role models stand for what matters to them, though often at huge risk. Here's a smorgasbord of Feminine Faces. A little girl named Ponette, who lost her mother, but refused to accept the grown-ups' lack of faith in her dead mother's capacity to resurrect. Mary Poppins, Elizabeth Bennett, Eliza Doolittle, Maria von Trapp and her Mother Superior, Shirley Temple's little heroines, Mrs. Doubtfire, even Scarlett O'Hara at times—each one, impressively present to an urge, an inner truth, a confidence in their creative power. In heart-wrenching contrast, we watch all hope wane as **absence** seeps into *The Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Brokeback Mountain*, resulting in conflagrating madness and crushing loneliness. More recent Feminine roles that premiere presence are the culinary queen Julia, as well as Meryl's Mamma Mia, an Artemisian Neytiri and the puella avenger Lisbeth Salander—all impassioned and determined and self-possessed females, willing to come face to face with darkness, but also to embrace the light.

Film, our ubiquitously hip and modernized fairytale form, was a great place to start my presence pursuit. Next stop was right in my professional backyard. Lucky for me, presence is in my job description. It is elemental to psychoanalysis, both for the analyst and analysand. Those of you who've experienced it know this form of psychotherapy is not a quick fix, rubber-stamping affair. Demanding ingredients—patience, faith, courage, love—make up the alchemical recipe that is poured into an alchemical cauldron where our dated, but tenacious defenses start to melt away. And then the heat is cranked up to just a simmer. Or sometimes, the burners jettison the brew to a roiling boil. Either way, plenty of transformation is in store for those willing to bow to such a process. And I am privileged to be a participant.

Group therapy adds another angle to the witnessing presence. To have 8 or so people attest to one's life-story, to one's struggles, to one's dreams and longings, creates an insurance policy for re-remembering the discarded aspects of our souls. To be surrounded with such congruence offers the necessary helping hand up and out of the blinding muck that has hindered growth. Groups render an amazing corrective to the very culprit that has been all too convincing at keeping us out of touch with one's true self. And when someone is absent from the group, both physically or emotionally, each member of the group feels it as if they were missing a limb or an organ.

Whether in individual analysis or group therapy or on one's own, paying homage to the dream's genius demands enormous presence, since such nighttime/naptime correspondences come obliquely encoded. A dream's obtuse dispatch is easy to dismiss; yet when we marvel at the particular choice of character, the setting, the nuanced leap from one moment to the next, then all of a sudden the Rubik's Cube lines up, and we get what's been missing in our waking lives. Since the dreammaker's missives are not flashing, neon billboards, Jung taught us a code-cracking trick, to dialogue with the dream. Practicing

active imagination requires trust that figures in a dream don't want to be freeze-framed, but rather want to be taken seriously and in fact want a relationship with us. For all its mischief and fancy footwork, the dream might be thought of as a presence-inducing device hoping to put our compulsive ways to a screeching halt, while beckoning us back to ourselves.

Just this morning, I awoke, aware of being visited in the night by Attila, a massive, dappled grey steed that had broken free from his imprisoning stable. It's been said that if you don't get the knock at the door the first few times, then a sledgehammer or bulldozer are inevitably forthcoming. It seemed prudent for me to pay attention to this big bruiser, get a super-sized saddle and hop on. We ended up having a lovely ride and chat, and Attila only had to dress me down a tad, yes, in the same vein as Frida's chastisements. These two are finally getting through to me. Shame on me if I'd bolted out of bed, inadvertently deleting my dreammail.

Where else has presence shown herself? Mother Nature is the standard-bearer for modeling here and now-ness. From the grandeur of a giant sequoia to the simply elegant orchid. From the stock-still, stalking lion to the suckling Labrador with her 5 pups. The miraculous perseverance of the salmon, the hummingbird and my little fly friend's treks. A tree's gnarls, the river's path-making, a pebble's dents and veins. Each flaunt a robust, tacit, unequivocal, instinctive connection to their own unique integrity without apology.

And finally I want to make a big nod to the ancient practice of meditation, which is getting some much-deserved attention recently. More and more research is showing us fancy, modern folk that sitting still, both mind and body, can do wonders for our soul. "Attentional blink" is a catchy phrase that describes our mind's excessive diversions. There's just plain too much going on in us and around us. Intentionally erasing the toxic, infecting clutter is proving to heal all kinds of debilitating, civilized ills. As we scale back on our consumptive behaviors, exhausted bodies and overstimulated heads sigh with relief. Yoga, breathwork, massage, acupuncture are just a few other samplings of complementing endeavors.

In our December program, I will be sharing some thoughts with you about **absence**, in *The Choir of Orphans*. As we form a collective presence, on behalf of the orphaned parts of ourselves, my hope is that our orphans will make their presence known, and we will all be enlarged by this reunion. Jung says it so beautifully,

Life has grown desiccated and cramped, crying out for the rediscovery of the fountainhead. But the fountainhead can only be discovered if the conscious mind will suffer itself to be led back to the "children's land," there to receive guidance from the unconscious as before (Collected Works, vol. 12, para 74).

Or, as Spencer Johnson tells us in *The Precious Present*, "the present is simply who I am just the way I am...right now. And it is precious."

In closing, I'd like to share a final snapshot of presence that has been with me ever since I began to imagine this article. A familiar childhood image of my mother, standing at the sink, washing lettuce from her garden, each leaf caressed and bathed, treated as if it were royalty. Truly a woman after Frida's little throbbing heart.