

## *Between Presence and Reason*



### Between Presence and Reason

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Exploring history through biographies has been a passion and education for the past few years: Cleopatra, *The Lives of the Stoics*, Marcus Aurelius, *Not in His Image* on the Gnostic view of emerging Christianity as a mental illness, Alexander Hamilton, Ulysses S. Grant, the life of Mark Twain, Martin Luther King Jr., several on JFK, *Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic*, and currently *Mind on Fire: The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*.

All this catch-up rests upon decades of interest in human development: the lives and insights of Joseph Chilton Pearce, J. Krishnamurti, David Bohm, Samdhong Rinpoche and Tibetan Buddhism, pioneers in prenatal memory and consciousness, early child and family development, and alternative modes for lifelong learning and joy.

Woven throughout this stream are core themes. What is mind, thought, and the capacity to reason? And what is the nature of the human body, direct perception, wisdom, and true intelligence—which is not thought? Most who have skimmed or penetrated more deeply into modern philosophical inquiry, from Spinoza (1632–1677), who quietly rewired the entire structure of Western philosophy, to the present, appreciate that the dichotomy between “presence” and “reason” has a long history, dating back to Epicurus (341–270 BCE), the philosopher of peace. And surely, he was inspired by earlier insights. While not quite framing the dichotomy between “presence” and “reason,” Krishnamurti’s twenty-five-year inquiry into the human mind and intelligence with David Bohm centers on these classic themes.

In our previous post, “Don’t Worry, AI Will Fix It,” Darcia Narvaez, PhD, argues:

“AI is capturing the attention of many because we have so dumbed down human potential that it seems as smart or smarter than humans. It’s because we’ve been encouraged to lose half our minds.”

In a well-functioning brain, the right hemisphere picks up—through a plethora of senses and whole-body immersed experience—how the real world works in relation to the self. (This requires lots of self-directed playing with diversity—different ages, genders, contexts—throughout childhood. Sitting with screens does not do it.)

The RH then passes these impressions to the left hemisphere (LH), an isolated ivory-tower magician that picks out patterns and invents generalizations. The LH then passes those generalizations back to the RH for assessment of veridicality. The RH tosses out the distortions (but only with adequate life experience). Individual knowledge, wisdom, and know-how are transformed by this dynamic process.

RH is the seat of emotional intelligence, relational intelligence, self-control, embodied awareness, and the true self.

Presence describes the nonverbal right hemisphere. Presence is the state of being fully engaged with the moment—mentally, emotionally, and physically. What athletes call “the zone” and researchers describe as “flow.” When attention isn’t scattered across memories, worries, or internal commentary, but gathered right here, where life is actually happening. Not lost in thought, not rehearsing, not analyzing. We *are* the experience rather than observing.

In Zen this transcendental state is described in the classic expression: “the bow shoots the arrow, the archer disappears.” In true mastery—whether in archery, meditation, art, or life—the sense of a separate “self” doing the action dissolves. Instead of us shooting the arrow, the entire situation—our true and deepest nature—acts.

People often describe presence with sensations like calm alertness, time slowing down, a softening of internal pressure, feeling more “real” or “awake,” with a deeper connection to others. Presence changes how you relate with everything. Relationships deepen because you’re actually there. Stress decreases because you’re not living in imagined futures. Creativity increases because your mind isn’t fragmented. Decisions improve because you’re seeing clearly. Life feels brighter, more entangled. Presence is a quality of choiceless inner freedom.

Like sticky flypaper, so attractive and enchanting are the mental images we call thoughts that these infectious abstractions grab and hold our attention, leaving precious little attention to attend to presence. So little attention remains unoccupied that we forget presence even exists. The false perception that the content of consciousness *is* consciousness has extinguished for most what simple presence feels like. “We wake up thinking. Talk to ourselves and others all day... We fall asleep thinking and when asleep the brain dreams, trying to make sense of all the noise.”

Emptiness—or mindfulness in the East—describes the still state that I’m calling Presence. Empty of self-generated noise, thoughts, worries, and abstract mental images. Rediscovering in and for oneself the qualitative difference between a brain overflowing with thoughts banging around like rocks in a rolling tin can, and a brain that is empty and silent, is the beginning of real transformation. Just the beginning.

Halfway through *Mind on Fire: The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, I’m stunned at the deep resonance between Emerson’s transcendental state and the state Bohm and Krishnamurti called insight-intelligence.

Emerson’s transcendental state is a mode of perception in which a person rises above ordinary thinking and taps into a deeper, more universal form of awareness. It’s not mystical in the sense of escaping the world; it’s mystical in the sense of *being* the world.

Emerson believed that the deepest truths aren’t reached by logic alone. They’re felt or perceived directly. In this state, the boundary between “me” and “not me” softens. We feel part of a larger whole. When you transcend the noise of society, Emerson believed we access a kind of inner moral compass that is more reliable than external rules. The world appears more vivid, meaningful, and interconnected. He describes this in *Nature* when he wrote, “I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all.” Krishnamurti described a similar state in 1922: “I could feel the wind passing through the trees, and the little ant on the blade of grass... I was in everything or rather everything was in me.”

Nature is for Emerson what many call God—not the manmade images of a punishing, vengeful parent (Calvinism, for example), but an infinite, creative, intelligent force in and behind everything. We might use the term *Mind* to represent this creative intelligence active in each of us. We are nature, and therefore, for Emerson and Krishnamurti, nature is the medium through which this transcendental state becomes known.

Resonating with nature quiets the social self. Away from society’s expectations, we perceive our own mind as it reveals patterns and unity. Emerson saw nature as a living manifestation of deeper truths. Every leaf, river, or cloud expresses universal laws and dynamic creative forces. Nature isn’t separate from us; it reflects our own structure. Nature mirrors our inner world. Nature isn’t just scenery. It’s our teacher. Understanding nature is understanding ourselves.

If we define “real intelligence” as the ability to perceive directly, understand relationships, and act with clarity, then Emerson’s transcendental state is that intelligence. He distrusted analytical, mechanical thinking. To him, intelligence is holistic—seeing connections, not just parts; intuitive—knowing without needing to calculate; moral—aligned with what is good and just; creative—capable of original insight; self-reliant—not dependent on external authority.

This is very different from the narrow, mechanical habit of memorizing facts, following rules, doing what others say or expect, or solving technical problems. When we flip the switch from our mechanical chattering normal and rediscover this transcendental state, our perceptions become sharper. Our sense of connection deepens. We know directly, not because a book or authority says so. Creativity expands without effort. Doing the right thing becomes obvious and natural. We know the world is a living system—and *we are that*.

The perennial challenge is that we can't think our way into silence. Emptiness is the absence of wanting or becoming—what Buddhists call grasping. Grasping acts in the mind like a clenched fist. Transcendence—reaching beyond this self-inflicted limitation—releases this tension. Mind expands, and with it, empathic entanglement with everything, as direct experience, not concept. This profound change in the state of mind is palpable, releasing an inner light that sweeps over the horizon, embracing and becoming everything. Once discovered and experienced, this physical releasing of the clenched fist in the mind becomes a doorway to who and what we really are.

With rare exception, Krishnamurti's public narrative described the limitation of thought, pointing to its enchantments, self-deceptions, and endless conflicts. Perhaps his most poetic and powerful description of this transcendental state—one I believe Emerson and others share—invites something completely different:

Silence grew and became intense, wider and deeper. The brain which had listened to the silence of the hills, fields and groves was itself now silent. It had become quiet, naturally, without any enforcement.

It was still, deep within itself; like a bird that folds its wings, it had folded upon itself; it had entered into depths which were beyond itself. It was a dimension which the brain could not capture or understand. And there was no observer, witnessing this depth.

Every part of one's whole being was alert, sensitive but intensely still. This new, this depth was expanding, exploding, going away, developing in its own explosions; out of time and beyond space.

Michael