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The Pure Gift of Presence

For Albert C. Pye, Jr.

On November 25, 2018, Albert C. Pye, Jr. died.

As he was known by his friends, Jr. as he was known by family, died suddenly after a short illness from which we expected him to recover. The doctors could only tell us that his heart just stopped, and they do not know why. Suddenly, we all entered into another world, a strange phantasmagoric horror show where Jr. was not present.

He gave us the pure gift of the virtue of presence. He gave it willingly and generously without expecting anything in return. We took it for granted the way we know that the sun will rise in the east and set in the west. We knew that if we called on Jr. that he would come.

Jr. is my first cousin on my mother's side. His father and my mother were siblings in a family of nine born to Truman Pye, Jr. and Lillie Ann Goffman Pye. My grandparents reared their children in the hostile racist world of Jim Crow Greenville, Mississippi and taught them to take care of each other, to love God, and to serve humanity to the glory of God. The truth is that as human beings, we all live in an indifferent natural world that does not consider humanity as anything special. Nature does not care about color or class or religion or education or social status when fire, flood, any number of natural disasters, and germs come our way. This is reason enough for human beings to be present with and for one another.

My mother told me stories of how she and her siblings would run errands for neighbors, help them with business transactions, and in a time when many people were illiterate, they would read and write for the neighbors. My grandfather was a Baptist preacher who attended the National Baptist Sunday School Convention every year and would bring a gift back for each of the children when he returned home. The nine children were taught to be excellent, but most importantly they were taught the power of unity.

My mother says, her mother taught the lesson by taking straws from a broom and showing them how easy it was to break one. But, when you put the straws together, it was more difficult to break them. Growing up, I saw how my mother and her siblings took care of each other, and they raised us cousins to be close. My aunts and uncles gave us the gift of their presence. In sorrow and in joy, they were there. In ordinary times, when we got together in the summer to picnic in the park, they were there. My Uncle AC, Jr.'s dad, a professional soldier and member of the Special Forces, would take leave from somewhere across the globe to be present for family.

Jr. followed in his father's footsteps. But, not only would he be present, he would be present to help. When my father died, he was the first call my son and I made from the hospital emergency room. It seemed that no time passed before he was with us giving us moral support. He was available to do whatever needed to be done. This availability was not only in emergencies, but ordinarily. We called him

when we needed the truck. We shopped together for top soil for the garden and for plants at his favorite nursery.

After he and I were semi-retired and working for ourselves, we clocked many miles together to be with family at funerals. We knew the days of our own deaths were coming and talked about how we both wanted to be cremated. I said that I wanted my ashes put in a biodegradable brown paper bag and dropped into the nearest river. Then go par-tay. We would laugh and move on to the next topic of conversation.

His presence was an ethical act.

Ethics asks the questions: What is right to do? How do we know? The ethics of presence says that giving moral support, the help of love and encouragement, the psychological comfort that tells people that they are not alone in the situation, is the right thing to do. We know it is right because we each will need that kind of psychological moral support at one time or another.

Jr. was generous with his presence and with his encouragement. He would give good advice to younger generations of the family and to anyone in his orbit. If you brought a problem to him, he would think about how he could help. An avid golfer, he had a wide network of people he knew from the golf course. He was willing to share his contacts to help find a solution to a problem.

These days, in the era of virtual reality, when we think about presence, we think about the psychological sensation of being in a virtual space. The ethics of such presence revolves around whether the virtual space in which we find ourselves is respectful of the virtual presence of others. Are we acting correctly in an unreal reality? The ethics of virtual presence also asks if a virtual experience can cause us to have empathy for human being who suffer from famine or war or any number of tragic situations. However, to be present in the really real world is another kind of commitment. It accepts the responsibility to pour ourselves into others. It is a risk because rejection and misunderstanding are always possibilities. It requires us to make choices since we cannot be everywhere we are needed at the same time, and people we care about may not understand the choices that we make. The ethics of presence requires bravery. Moreover, the ethics of presence in the really real world consumes time and money.

As a womanist thinker thinking about ethics, I identify four womanist virtues distilled from the definition of womanism. These virtues are: responsibility, commitment, love and complexity. My cousin Jr. lived all these virtues. He was not a flawless individual, none of us are but he accepted his own complexity along with that of others. He willingly and lovingly took on the responsibility to be present. When we worked on the 2012 family reunion together, I signed the letter we sent to family members the way I sign all my correspondence, Peace. He added Love. The letter went out over Peace and Love.

In ethics, we think about the difference between that which is and that which ought to be. The world is full of tragedy and lies, full of people who are not reliable, who are critical and ungenerous. They will never help another person because they are afraid that the other person's achievements will somehow detract from their own status. Jr. lived his life at the nexus of the is and the ought. He was reliable and generous with his moral support. He encouraged people around him to be the best they could be. He helped perfect strangers on the golf course with their swings. He coached his daughter's golf team and caddied for a young man who shows real talent. And he would tell us the truth, even if, especially if, it was a truth we did not want to hear. But, when he spoke the hard truth, we knew he did it in love.

The late French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, wrote about the pure gift. For Derrida, the pure gift is the gift that is given with no expectation of reciprocation. The pure gift is given without an expectation that the gift is recognized as a gift, that one should even expect a "thank you" which is a kind of payment. Jr. gave us the virtue of his presence as a pure gift.

Now, he is gone. We are left to deconstruct the concept of presence. Derrida gave us a critique of the metaphysics of presence. This critique says that the oppositions that the metaphysics of presence produces leads to hierarchical thinking. We privilege one over the other. In the opposition of presence and absence, we prefer presence. However, deconstruction understood as *différance* tells us that oppositions exist not as one over the other but they exist side by side, where one *is* the other at a difference moment in time and space. Presence is absence different and deferred. Absence is presence existing in a different moment in time and in a different space.

The Apostle Paul writes of presence and absence: "Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight) We are confident, I say and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. Wherefore we labor, that whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him." (2 Corinthians 5: 6-9 KJV)

Jr.'s absence from us is his presence with our ancestors, with our people who have crossed over, and most importantly with God who is Divine Love. Jesus the Christ is Divine Love incarnate in human flesh. To the extent that we live Divine Love, that we show it and share it, we are one with Jesus both present and absent in the body.

See you later Jr. I know you will hold it down on the other side until we get there.

Peace and Love.