

What Do We Mean by Presence in the Digital Realm?



When we think of presence in the digital realm, for the purposes of this session of The Art of Online Hosting, we can think of it in three ways, or as three levels of “Hosting Presence”:

1) Being fully present and aware, inhabiting the moment

Presence as simply “being present” to one’s self - awake, aware, and able to respond (rather than react) to whatever comes up in the moment. This definition of Presence can also be expanded out to the state of being Present to and with the “whole” - “whole” in this case meaning both the group or situation we are hosting, and to the larger living system of which we are a part.

2) Bringing Others to Presence

3) Weaving a Container to “Presence” what we want to Call Forward

Presence as a calling forth, and living into, our deeper intent or purpose.

In this way, Presence is imagined as a verb, an active force; the act of bringing something forward - or inviting it, invoking it.

One question that comes up in relation to the 3rd level of Presence is: “What do we most want to “presence” in ourselves and in the environments we create online?” And further, if we think of the Internet as part of a larger wholeness, part of a natural living system, “what wholeness might be calling for presence through our conscious use of this medium”?

What are we Learning About Hosting Presence Online & How are we Applying What We are Learning



Taking the three “kinds” of presence described above one by one, the following shares some of what we’ve been learning in our own online hosting practice about Presence in the Digital Realm.

1) Coming to Presence Ourselves

Coming to presence ourselves means doing what we need to do to be fully present - Some of you in the Art of Hosting will know this as the first of the four-fold Way of Hosting: “Host Yourself.”

Hosting ones self will mean something different for each person. As a host, finding out what it means for you is a fundamental part of your practice.

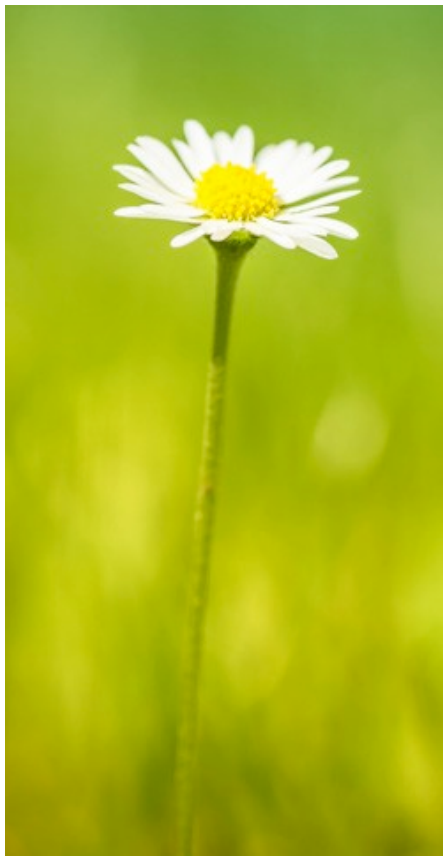
Here’s what I, Amy, know about hosting myself.

When I am getting ready to host an online event, this is what’s important for me, and what I care for in myself so I can care for the larger whole.

- ❖ Breathing - paying attention to my breath and making sure I am filling my lungs from bottom to top.
- ❖ Being outside by myself in silence for at least a few minutes

- ❖ Taking care of my body's basic needs: water / peeing / eating breakfast - something small with both protein and carbohydrates
- ❖ Make sure I have enough sleep the day before so I wake rested
- ❖ Make sure I have done enough preparation that I can let go and stay present to the moment
- ❖ When I begin, I light a candle and a small stick of incense - after 30 years of meditation with sandalwood incense, the smell is a trigger and immediately takes me to a place of calm presence
- ❖ If I'm at all nervous, I remember that it's not about me - and I share gratitude for whatever might come through me in support of the whole
- ❖ Total Focus - My total attention is on the group, No multi-tasking, ever

What are the practices you use to bring yourself to presence?



2) Bringing Others to Presence

Create a center for your circle - if we are gathering people in a face-to-face environment, we always provide a visual focus for the circle. It is a way to invite Beauty into our midst, and give our eyes somewhere to rest. It functions subtly as a shared focus and point of unity for the group.

You can create your center explicitly as part of your visual presence, like FireHawk and I did with the flowers and candles on our web cam screens today, or you can simply light a candle and describe it (or not) to your participants. If the circumstances are such that you can't do anything explicit, your center can even be something metaphorical or imaginary that only has form in your own awareness; in my experience, it will still make a difference.

Interaction and engagement brings people to presence. Get some kind of interaction going in

the first 20 minutes of your online session - take no more than 15 minutes on your welcome and introduction, preferably less - before you introduce something your participants have to participate in or respond to.

The appropriate form for this interaction will be different in different contexts, but Stringing the Beads or hearing all the voice is one of the very best ways we know to get each person “present” and “in the room”. Consciously invite deep listening and anything else that will keep people present, even when it’s not their turn to speak (if they aren’t present online, there’s a good chance they will be multi-tasking).

Depending on time, you may have to adapt the sharing in your Stringing of the Beads to just name, location and “one word”. Or even just name and location. But if at all possible hear each person’s voice.

Sometimes, if your group is too large or a large group sharing doesn’t match your purpose, you may choose to invite each person’s voice in small group dialogue instead. A quick round of stringing the beads in dyads or triads can be very effective.

Dialogue builds a container of trust, and it increases presence by a multitude of 100 ... engaging people in real, meaningful dialogue brings forward not just their mental attention, but invites their whole being - heart, mind, imagination, even their body - into presence. We’ll be talking more about the role of the body in session three of this course, and there is MUCH more that can be said about dialogue, as any host of participatory practices will know.

Examples of other ways of inviting interaction and engagement, beyond giving people the opportunity to speak with and listen to each other, include polls about something of importance to the group (if you have a way to show the results of your polls directly, great; otherwise you can share them verbally), work on a written assignment together in a shared note-taking document, or take your participants through a process where they have an active role.

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We’ll be talking about this more in upcoming sessions, but probably the most important thing we’ve learned in over 15 years of online hosting is that **It’s Not About The Technology**. It’s about the engagement, the interaction, the conversation - in other words, participant experience. And to a great extent,

the more technology can recede into the background, the better your participant's experience will be in the digital realm.

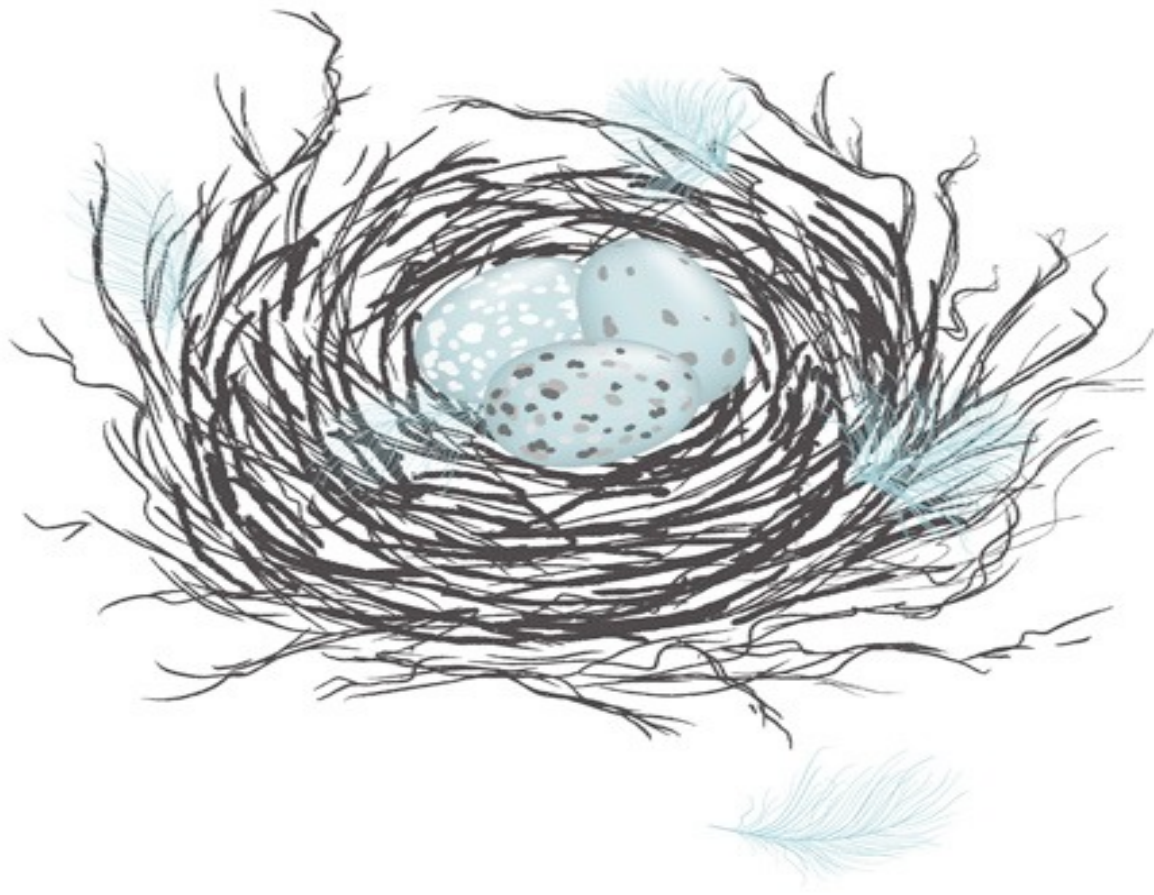
Ironically, one of main things that can take people "out", or distract them from presence in the digital realm can be the technology itself. Some will be quite comfortable with technology and have no problems, while others will not be at all comfortable even to start with, or they will experience frustrating challenges - either with their own technology or with others' struggles with it.

The key for helping your participants be comfortable in this strange new medium is for YOU to be comfortable yourself. Do your best to project calm, and security, and acceptance.

It's not that nothing will go wrong - it's likely that something WILL go wrong. So make light of it as you handle it as quickly and effectively as you can; let everyone know they don't have to be perfect, and help give them the confidence that you can hold whatever happens without judgment or anxiety.

One of the primary reasons people resist working online is the fear that they will appear foolish or incompetent. This is especially true for older, accomplished people who have gained mastery in their field. People often resist situations where they are "out of control"; there can be a fear they will lose stature or self-respect by not knowing how to do something.

So, whatever you can do to ease anxiety around technology is good. Choose technology that is appropriate for your context and the ability level of your participants. Give your participants the best support and preparation you can - a written guide if that will be helpful, and offer time outside your event (even private time if the circumstances warrant it) for people to practice the technology at their leisure.



3) Creating the Container - “Presencing” the Purpose or Intent for your Gathering

“We chose the term “presencing” ... because it is about becoming totally present - to the larger space or field around us, to an expanded sense of self, and, ultimately, to what is emerging through us.”

~ Presence: Human Purpose and The Field of the Future, by Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joe Jaworski, & Betty Sue Flowers

As a host you are always modeling what you want to bring forward in your group. Sometimes that is a “stance” that requires you to hold several things at the same time - your own intention, the stated purpose or intent of your gathering, and what you do not yet know. For that you need to relax, and also to be present and alert.

Modeling for others means holding these intentions yourself first. For example, if you want to bring forth sacred space in your group - bring sacred space forward in yourself; if your intent is to create opportunities for new relationships, collaboration, or community-building; come to the work with a stance that is open, collaborative, curious about others and what might be possible.

We'll talk more about all this in Session 3, but ... Language is everything when you're online, and we don't just mean the language of words. This new medium requires new languages to convey what we most want to communicate - languages of sound, of color, line, and image; of rhythm and movement, imagination and song; of silence, and sensing, poetry and trees; light and emotion. **Develop your lexicon.** That's part of what we'll be doing here over the four sessions of this course.

Your voice and the capacity to project it is one of the primary skills you will be developing as an online host. This is especially true if some or all of your events are auditory rather than visual, but even visual sensory input is different online than it is when you are face to face, and understanding the power of your voice remains of crucial importance.

It's not only the words you use - the images you can paint and explicit understandings you can convey through artful wording - but your voice can evoke other senses and experiences as well. What can you convey with your voice simply through tenor and rhythm, tone and pace? Think about it; Practice. What do you want to convey - Clarity? Openness? Invitation? Ease and Comfort? Welcome? Acceptance? Appreciation? **FEEL the words as you say them, and notice what changes in your voice.**

When you're online, you may find that sometimes you need just that little bit "more" to project effectively - you might need to exaggerate slightly, you may need to repeat yourself once or twice or make things explicit that you might not otherwise need to. There's a fine line here... you don't want to dull the senses with repetition or be too obvious either.

Sometimes what you want to cultivate or invite into your container is much more subtle. Silence is one of the most important tools you have for inviting in the subtle realms, so allow time for silence in your design. Silence can feel especially challenging in an online environment, so **start by cultivating your own capacity for comfort with silence, and find ways to help others find the patience to wait for what wants to emerge rather than rush in to fill the void because of fear or discomfort with uncertainty.**

Deep Listening...

When we're online, we don't have all our senses in play like we do when we are with each other in the flesh, and as appears to be true anytime one or more of our senses are compromised, others become heightened and step up to fill in whatever is "missing". The ability to "listen" (and not just hear) is one of these senses that can be greatly heightened in the online environment.

You'll be surprised to see what surfaces when you listen deeply in online space ... whether it's listening to (and sometimes past) the words people are using, or listening to the tone of their voices, or listening into the quality of silence produced between us. The same faculties of sensing and intuition that are active in our face-to-face hosting practices are also at play online. They can be even more subtle in the digital realm, however, and take longer for some of us to access or trust.

So, Deep Listening is not only a primary faculty for becoming comfortable with silence, it's a primary capacity in your practice as an online host.

One way to develop deep listening within your groups is to explicitly invite it - most often while listening to each other in conversation, where there are deeper and deeper levels of listening available to those who would explore them. World Café, for example, invites very deep levels of listening in its invocation to listen for patterns and deeper insights that can emerge from a series of small group conversations when we pay attention and look for them. Similarly, the invitation to listen for the collective wisdom that emerges from holding diversity as a resource for learning is another example of a deep listening practice advocated by the World Café format.

In groups that have worked together over time, or where you are gathered specifically to practice the skill, there are many other ways to cultivate deep listening well. For example, one is to ask people to regulate their own mics, and "listen in" for when there is an opening for them to speak. Another is to play with improv and other creative modalities that require sensitivity to one another and the environment.

Lastly, Presence Imagination!

Imagination is one of the most evocative languages we humans have ever discovered ... the poet David Whyte references the way the Romantics spoke about imagination - not in the sense of making something up, but in "giving image to" what's at the very essence of reality - of truth, and beauty. Giving language to what's most truly real for us.

In the digital realm, imagination is the closest companion of your voice as you use them in tandem to project what it is you want to invite forward into your groups, and into the world.

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AN INVITATION

Many if not most if us in this course are experienced hosts, and we each bring wisdom and experience to this work - many of us have deep wisdom practices and/or hard-earned knowledge and multiple intelligences to call upon.

Everything we've ever done or learned is part of who we are when we step forward as a host, and it's all there for us to draw on... we might need to find ways to modify or adapt our face-to-face practices into the digital realm but that's what makes this online work such a fascinating, pioneering adventure.

What resources are you tapping into for bringing yourself and others to presence? What resources do you use to create a container for what you want to invite forward, whether you are online or face-to-face? We invite you to share what you are learning with us, so that we can create a repository of resources that we can all draw upon and add to as our learning grows.