

The Power of Presence

THE POWER OF PRESENCE

NEIL T. ANDERSON

MONARCH
BOOKS

Oxford, UK, and Grand Rapids, USA

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Published by Monarch Books
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road,
Oxford OX2 8DR, England
Email: monarch@lionhudson.com
www.lionhudson.com/monarch

ISBN 978 0 85721 731 8
e-ISBN 978 0 85721 732 5

First edition 2016

Acknowledgments

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, March 2016, LH26

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Foreword

If you were a renowned author whose books had been read by millions; if you had founded a successful Christian ministry and had the large conferences, films, publishing deals, and international travel that go with that; if you had seen God work through you to radically transform countless lives... would you be prepared to give it all up if God said so? And if you did give it up, can you imagine that you could possibly be happy with the turn your life had taken?

I have had the immense privilege of being friends with Neil and Joanne Anderson for the best part of twenty years. I have observed at close quarters how Joanne, a feisty lady of enormous intelligence and humor with an incredible gift for godly discernment, succumbed to dementia. And how Neil – without a second thought – dropped everything to care for her and, more importantly, to *be* with her.

This small volume is a beautiful love story that will move you deeply. You will enter into the story

of Neil and Joanne Anderson and their life together. But beyond that you will see the story of your life and your ministry in a new light. You will gain a deeper appreciation of the relationship that your Creator and Savior longs to have with you, and realize afresh that He does not intend your life to be primarily about *doing* but about *being*.

I am so grateful to God for the message that He has given to the church through Neil and Joanne: that *every* Christian can take hold of their freedom in Christ and become a fruitful disciple of Jesus. As I lead Freedom in Christ Ministries, the ministry they founded, and see Neil spending day after day out of the limelight simply *being* with Joanne and yet genuinely content and more in love with her than ever, I see someone who is living out the message God gave him.

If you are in Christian ministry, I urge you to read this book. It will only take a couple of hours but the effect could last a lifetime as it helps you reevaluate the balance between *being* and *doing*.

If you find yourself in difficult life circumstances – especially, perhaps, if you too are caring for a loved one – this book will help you find comfort and rediscover the incredible purpose God has called you to.

And if you simply want to learn how to know Jesus better, you will not be disappointed.

Steve Goss

Executive Director

Freedom in Christ Ministries International

Acknowledgments

I want to thank Tony Collins for being a friend of Freedom in Christ Ministries. Tony has a storied career in Christian publishing and, sadly for us, is retiring. Publishing is a big industry, and associations with authors and ministry can be little more than business. With Tony it was friendship and ministry, while still being a good businessman. He also helped me and others to be better writers. Here is to you, Tony. May you have a well-deserved retirement, and many happy years of choosing the jobs you want to do, but don't feel you have to do.

Introduction

“Earth to Neil! Earth to Neil! You’re out in your garden again.” I always wondered how she knew when I was present in body, but absent in spirit. Joanne was frustratingly accurate in her discernment when my mind was somewhere else. Many were the nights when I heard from the other half of the bed we shared for nearly fifty years, “Turn off your brain, Anderson!” How did she know that I was rewriting a chapter in one of my books? She is the most discerning person I know, which has proven invaluable for the kind of ministry God has called us to.

Now I’m sitting in silence in a skilled nursing/long-term care facility. Agitated dementia has been slowly eating away Joanne’s brain, which makes it hard for her sensitive mind to function well. She read two to three books a week for many years, but now she can’t remember what medicine she took ten minutes ago. I suspended all international travel three years ago so we could have some time together. Ministry had dominated our life for most of those fifty years, which prompted her to ask, “When is it *our* time?”

Our time turned out to be very different from what we planned, but not what God planned.

She seldom asks about our children or grandchildren, whom she loved. She doesn't want any visitors, except me. The only thing that brightens her day is when I walk into her private room, which I do at least twice daily. As I walk through the door, and before she sees me, I say, "Beep! Beep!" Instantly, she knows it's me, and says, "Oh Daddy." Only in the last six months has she called me "Daddy," and there is only one human being on this planet that can fulfill that need for her.

We don't talk much, because it takes too much energy. I have become keenly aware that God is using Joanne's illness to teach me about the power of presence. I'm learning on a much deeper level the purpose of just being there, and what it means to be still and know that He is God. Being alone with my soulmate, best friend, and lover is not a "come down" for one who has traveled the world. It has been a "come up." There is an inexplicable peace that comes from knowing I don't have to *do* in order to *be* in God's will – to be in His presence – to be in each other's presence.

Many have noted that the caregiver of one suffering from dementia or Alzheimer's disease is the

one who actually suffers the most. For the first two and a half years I took care of Joanne at home. Doing so is a twenty-four-hour, seven-day-a-week job that progressively gets more difficult. It is like raising a child who is regressing rather than maturing. Instead of potty training, one has to cope with incontinence. She has always been such a modest lady; I desperately wanted to spare her from all the indignities that come from the loss of control, but I couldn't. At the skilled nursing facility she strongly prefers that I do her bathing and grooming, which I do. I know it sounds strange, but that is our time together. It's my presence she longs for. She has my full attention. There are no more "earth to Neils."

In our "retirement" there have been no day trips, vacations, movies, or dining out. It sounds bleak, but in all honesty I can say that it hasn't been. In fact, it has been a peaceful time of reflection upon the presence of God, and how that has shaped me, our marriage, and ministry. My theology tells me that God is omnipresent; however, we are not always aware of His presence, and yet without His presence we are not fully alive.

What we call socials or fellowship usually falls far short of the spiritual union implied in *koinonia*. A civil union between two people is not the same as

a marriage where two become one in Christ. Most celebrants at the Lord's Table are falling far short of the communion God wants to have with His children. In fact, words cannot capture the essence of what it means to be fully in communion with God and others. It is not a location or an activity. It is a state of being – a mingling together of one another's presence.

This is not a book about dementia or Alzheimer's disease. It is a reflection on the presence of God, and what it means to be in His presence during the loneliest and most difficult times of our lives. I will share some of Joanne's struggles with dementia, because that is the context in which I am presently experiencing what I am writing about. My silent times with Joanne have given me the opportunity to reflect on over forty-five years of pastoral work, and recount how God's presence has transformed me and shaped a global ministry.

Chapter One is about the absence of presence, and the fear of being alone or abandoned. From the beginning God has said it isn't good for us to be alone. We absolutely need God, and we necessarily need each other. Imagine being totally alone in the presence of evil, and how frightening that would be. Why did the Old Testament make no distinction between death and hell, using the same word for both?

Chapter Two deals with suffering in the presence of God. What do we do in hard times when God seems to be absent, when He suspends His conscious blessings? Twice before, God has taken Joanne and me through dark times that brought about monumental changes in our lives for the good. Now we are experiencing His ministry of darkness again, but this time it is different.

Chapter Three is about coming into His presence. What does it mean to pray by the Spirit? How does prayer become two-way instead of one-way? There is no dialogue when only one is present. Every believer is hearing from God, but many are unaware of it. How should we come into His presence? What good is prayer if God isn't present?

Chapter Four covers ministering in God's presence. How many activities in the name of "ministry" would continue as scheduled if the Holy Spirit were absent? How does the omnipresence of God enter into our ministry? Does He work alone, or do we work together? What is God's role in ministry and what is ours? Can we even call it ministry if God's presence isn't an integral part of it? Didn't Jesus say that apart from Him we can do nothing?

Chapter Five is about resting in His presence. God told Moses that His presence would go with him

and He would give him rest. How does His presence go with us, and how does forty years of wandering in the wilderness constitute rest? Jesus said, “Come to me and I will give you rest.” What is the sabbath rest that remains? How do we enter into His rest?

The final chapter considers what it means to be fully in His presence. Someday we shall see Him face to face. Oh, what a glorious day that will be! What will it be like to be in the presence of eternal goodness with a complete absence of evil? We can’t even fathom that. We can only hope and long for it, but until then we can learn to practice His presence now. My prayer is that this little book will cause you to “seek his presence continually” (Psalm 105:4).

Neil T. Anderson

1

The Absence of Presence

In taking upon Himself a human soul, He also took upon Himself the affections of the soul. As God He was not distressed, but as a human He was capable of being distressed. It was not as God He died, but as man. It was in human voice that He cried: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” As human, therefore, He speaks on the cross, bearing with Him our terrors. For amid dangers it is a very human response to think oneself abandoned. As human, therefore, He is distressed, weeps, and is crucified.

Ambrose

Every night I help Joanne do her “ablutions.” That is what she called her evening bathroom rituals, which always seemed to take an inordinate amount of

time. I thought that “ablutions” was a word she made up to describe her routine. I was surprised to find out that “ablution” is a real word that means a washing or cleansing of the body. Being a prolific reader, her vocabulary is more extensive than mine. Her degree is in home economics and food, but it should have been English literature. She typed all my papers, two master’s theses, and a doctoral dissertation for my first four degrees. When Biola University supplied all the faculty with an Apple computer, I knew I needed to learn how to type. Joanne taught me how, and I typed my final dissertation and every book since. She was also the first editor of all my books. What a blessing that has been to me. She corrected more than my grammar. She provided a feminine critique of our message. I say “our” because we have lived our message together. Her name only appears on two of my books, *Daily in Christ* and *Overcoming Depression*, but there is a little of her presence in every book.

After she finishes dinner at night I help her to the bathroom. She sits in front of the sink and asks, “What do I do next?” Even simple routines have become cloudy. I wash her face and put on the night cream that has kept her looking much younger than she is. She is a physical wreck, but Joanne has the skin of a twenty-year-old. I bought her a power toothbrush

that she motors around her mouth, while remnants of her evening meal come drooling out. People with dementia have trouble swallowing, and food stays in their mouth like a chipmunk. Then it’s off to bed.

I used to pray for her before I left every night, but for the last few months she has been praying: “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Then she says the Lord’s Prayer. Short-term memory is gone, but remnants of long-term memory linger. She is like a little girl saying a child’s prayer, but the sincerity in which it is said brings tears to my eyes. The Lord is still in residence.

I often stay until she is asleep. One evening I had drifted off to sleep myself when she suddenly broke the silence with a desperate cry of “Neil!”

It startled me. I said, “I’m here, Babe.”

“Oh, I was afraid you were gone,” she replied. She had been mentioning some struggles with fear, which puzzled me at first. We had talked many times in the past about fear. She once had a fear of flying, but overcame that and was able to travel with me when she wanted. She also edited *Freedom from Fear*, which I wrote with Rich Miller. So she has an above average understanding of what constitutes the God-given ability to fear the objects that threaten our

physical and psychological safety, and could normally distinguish that from an irrational fear or phobia. She also knew that physical death is no longer a legitimate fear object. Paul said, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). So what was she afraid of?

A similar cry came from the middle cross two thousand years ago. “And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mark 15:34). Nietzsche said, “God is dead, and we have killed him.” Such apostasy overlooks one of the most basic tenets of Christianity. Jesus was fully human *and* fully God. He was one person, with two natures. God didn’t die, but the One who came in the flesh did physically die. The concept of being alive means *to be in union with*, and to die means *to be separated from*. We are physically alive when our souls are in union with our bodies, and we are spiritually alive when our souls are in union with God. That is why the early church defined salvation as union with God. Like Adam, Jesus was both physically and spiritually alive. Unlike Adam He never sinned, and therefore never died spiritually, even though He was tempted in every way that we are. From the middle cross also came these words, “Father, into your hands

I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

The Apostles’ Creed states that Jesus descended into *hell*, which is the Hebrew word *sheol*. Hebrew has only one word for hell and death, and that is *sheol* (in Greek, *hades*). The emphasis is on separation, not destination. It was the separation of His human nature from the Father that caused Him to cry out. Between the excruciating pain of the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus took the plunge into the abyss of aloneness – complete abandonment – which is a frightening prospect.

The fear that comes from being totally alone speaks to our vulnerability. We cannot rationally explain it away. That is what Joanne sensed that evening. Almost every time I leave the room Joanne asks if I will be back that evening or the next morning. If she doesn’t ask, I tell her that I will always be there for her, and I mean it. So does God. He says, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5), which qualifies Him to say, “Fear not. I am present with you in your distress, whether you sense My presence or not.”

In that moment of separation Jesus quotes from Psalm 22. His cry of agony is a prayer: “My God, My God.” While the mocking crowd and the first thief have given up their faith in God, Jesus clings to it. What an incredible example that is for us in the

hour of our greatest despair. In the midst of His own abandonment, He declares the nearness of God.

In the beginning of time God said that it was not good for us to be alone. Imagine how you would feel if you were in a mortuary and entered a room alone where the corpse of a stranger was displayed? Would you feel uneasy? Eerie? Maybe you would feel a little frightened even though you know that the dead person can do you no harm? This is not the fear of anything in particular, but the fear of being alone with death. This speaks to the most basic of human needs – to have a sense of belonging – and why many struggle with issues of abandonment.

Such a fear cannot be overcome by a rational explanation of its groundlessness. A child's fear of walking through the woods alone on a dark night can only be overcome by the presence of another. The uneasiness of sitting alone with a corpse disappears when a friend or family member joins you in the room.

When I was a young child on the farm I woke up one afternoon from a nap. I went downstairs but didn't see anybody. "Mom, where are you?" I asked. There was no answer. It was a warm summer day, so I assumed that my parents and siblings were outside. I ventured out with the hope of finding someone, but

they were nowhere to be found. The apprehension mounted as I raced from the barn to the cornfields. I was almost overcome with fear, but it was immediately eradicated upon seeing the family car turn into the quarter-mile-long lane that led to our house. They had taken a quick run to a neighboring farm thinking that they would be back before I woke up.

I was pedaling a stationary bike, rehabbing my knee and watching television, when I saw another plane hit the second tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Instantly, I knew it was no accident. Even though Joanne was home with me I felt an urgent need to be with other people. I just needed to be a part of our collective humanity, which had just been assaulted. I wanted to be in the presence of others and share in our common grief. I really don't have adequate words to describe the power of presence. I just know that it is real, and without it we suffer.

A similar reaction happened when Islamist terrorists attacked and killed two police officers and the staff of the satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo*, in January 2015. To protest the atrocity, forty world leaders joined hands in solidarity with 3.7 million people. It was the largest demonstration in France's history. Some of those world leaders were

sworn enemies of each other, but they set aside their differences for a day to stand together against a greater threat to all humanity. Sadly, there was no significant presence from the US executive branch of government. They missed an opportunity to say to the rest of the free world, “We’re with you, and we are in this together.”

Our presence or absence at certain events speaks volumes to others. When my children were growing up I always made a point of circling important dates in my calendar that involved my immediate family. I don’t think I ever missed one of Karl’s soccer or baseball games. If someone asked for an appointment to see me when I was a pastor, I would tell them I was already booked for that time unless it was a catastrophic event. I felt no guilt or obligation to tell them that I was already committed to be with my family. My secretary couldn’t tell my wife or children that I was unavailable if they called. She could say that I was with someone, and give them the choice of whether it was right to interrupt what I was doing. Family members feel abandoned when a spouse or parent is not there for them in times of need. I almost never traveled for ministry when my children were still living at home. If I did, I tried to take them with me. Many family vacations were intertwined with

ministry. Usually that was the only way we could afford a vacation.

The quality of presence is determined by our capacity to love. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Imagine being raised in a family where there is no love shown to one another. It would be a house full of people who are all alone. A living hell. Many years ago, a shy college student shared that her mother had remarried a man whom she feared. She, in turn, totally rejected him as the head of their “home.” In retaliation he forbade her to eat with the rest of the family. So she ate her meals alone in her bedroom. They hadn’t spoken one word to each other in two years. She professed to be a believer, but her stepfather wasn’t.

I asked her if she loved him.

“No,” she said. “I hate him.”

“Do you want to go on living like this?” I asked.

Of course she didn’t, but she didn’t know what to do about it. So we worked out a plan. That night she was to go home and ask his permission to talk to him. If he granted her that permission, she was going to ask his forgiveness for not loving him and not accepting him as the head of their home.

She followed through on that commitment, and he said, “My God, I have a daughter.”

Hell is loneliness where no love can penetrate. It is the total absence of God, who is love. In the final judgment those whose names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life will be cast out of His presence. That is hell. Heaven is to be completely in His presence. Experiencing His presence now is a taste of heaven on earth. It is understandable why the Old Testament has only one word for hell and death, because they are essentially the same.

In contrast, I have been in the presence of evil that defies description. It is not a time when you want to be alone, because fear can immediately engulf you. There is no rational reason why we should be afraid if we know the truth, because Satan is disarmed. However, did reading that last sentence, which is absolutely true, wipe away all your fears about a possible future encounter with a demonic spirit? Would you feel better if I was there with you at the time? Sorry, but I can't be there for you. Would you feel better if Almighty God was present with you in the same room at the same time? He is.

It should surprise no one that most spiritual attacks happen when we are alone, and mostly at night. One of Job's friends had such an encounter (Job 4:12–17):

Now a word was brought to me stealthily; my ear received the whisper of it. Amid thoughts from

visions of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, dread came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones shake. A spirit glided past my face; the hair of my flesh stood up. It stood still, but I could not discern its appearance. A form was before my eyes; there was silence, then I heard a voice: "Can mortal man be in the right before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker?"

"A word" was not "a word from the Lord." God doesn't come to us "stealthily." That was a visit by the "accuser of the brethren," who had a message for Job: "You are suffering because of your sin." In truth Job was suffering because "there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil" (Job 1:8). Good people do suffer for the sake of righteousness.

Christians all over the world are having demonic visitations at night. They are suddenly aroused from deep sleep by an overwhelming sense of fear that makes their hair stand up. Some report a pressure on their chest, and when they try to respond they seemingly can't, as though something were grabbing their throats. At such times the presence of evil is all we sense, but God is also present. If we call upon the name of the Lord we will be saved. For those who think, *But fear was controlling my life, and an evil*

force was preventing me from saying anything! Paul answers, “The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4). This is not a physical battle that requires a physical response. God knows the thoughts and intentions of your heart, so you can always turn to Him inwardly. The moment you do, you will be free to call upon the Lord. Just say “Jesus,” and the attack will stop. If you submit to God first, you will be able to resist the devil and he will flee from you (James 4:7).

When I first went public with my ministry I would be visited by an evil spirit at 3 a.m. the night before every conference, and it continued for four years. How much do you think the omnipresence of God means to me? “We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him. We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:18–19). It is no wonder that anxiety disorders are the number one mental health problem of the world. Fear was the first emotion that Adam acknowledged after the fall, which arose from a state of disconnection.

I’m writing this book in real time: it’s like a diary

of my last journey together with Joanne. As I was typing the last few paragraphs I received a call from a nurse who cares for Joanne. She said, “Your wife asked me to call you. She is afraid that she is all alone. I’m handing the phone to Joanne now.” If I needed some affirmation about what I was writing, I just got it. I assured Joanne that I would be back that evening, and she said, “Oh, okay.” I had been with Joanne for two hours in the morning. I had given her a shower, dried her hair, and put three types of lotion on her body. There was a general lotion for most of her body, a special lotion to ease the itching that comes from sleeping on her back, and another special lotion for her calloused feet. Huge callouses had built up on her heels just from lying in bed on her back all the time. We now put a pillow under her calves to better distribute her weight.

Why was she afraid of being alone when the nurse was standing right beside her? There are occasions when the presence of any human or even a pet makes us feel safer, and not alone. The presence of a shady person or wild animal will have the opposite effect. There are other occasions when only the presence of the right person or people can assuage our fears. Think of a frightened child on a playground, at a daycare center, or at school that can’t be consoled until a

parent shows up. In some cases the right parent needs to show up, which is most often the mother. Have you ever been cared for by someone who is doing it simply to make a living? The caring stops when the shift ends. Have you ever been cared for by a person who loves you voluntarily at their own expense? There is no fear when love shows up.

That phone call had an immediate impact on me. Joanne's need for my presence has kept me off the road with only rare exceptions for the last three years. During that time I have written the *Victory Series* and *Becoming a Disciple-Making Church*, which is something I might not have done if we were enjoying our retirement. Only recently have I started journaling my thoughts for this book, which I have been putting into words between visits when I got back home. I don't have to be home to do that. I can do that in her room – and so I will.

2

Suffering in His Presence

Endurance produces character, which contributes in some measure to the things which are to come, because it gives power to the hope which is within us. Nothing encourages a man to hope for blessing more than strength of a good character. No one who has led a good life worries about the future. Does our good really lie in hope? Yes, but not in human hopes, which often vanish and leave only embarrassment behind. Our hope is in God, and is therefore sure and immovable.

Chrysostom

Joanne and I were really looking forward to 2012. We had some short trips planned and other activities that we could do together. The big event was in June, when our ministry was having an international staff