

*letters to a
young artist*

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Presence

Dear BZ:

Presence. You want to know what it is. Well, you hit on my favorite subject.

First of all, even before I became an actress I was told I had “presence.” “Stage presence.” I didn’t know what that meant. I forgot about it. Long after I had trained to become an actress, I came upon the word in a way that was intriguing to me.

Joseph Chaikin was a theater director who came to prominence in the sixties in the experimental theater scene in New York. He wrote a book called *The Presence of the Actor*. In it he defines presence in this way: “a kind of deep libidinal surrender which the performer reserves for his anonymous audience.” He then went on to write that sometimes a person has “presence” onstage, but not in life. And then he wrote: “Gloria Foster has presence.”

At the time I did not know who Gloria Foster was. She is in two *Matrix* movies; she played the Oracle. As soon as I had a chance to see her perform, I did. She was extraordinary. And the interesting thing about Gloria Foster was that in person, she was not at all a “close to you” kind of a woman. By the time I met her I met a woman who definitely kept her own space. Onstage it seemed that the light shone right through her, and that, in fact, the light found her wherever she was onstage. Her film work was filled with both dignity and humanity. Her death left a hole in the theater.

I agree that presence is that feeling that the person onstage or in a film is standing right next to you. In film the presence blasts across the screen. Presence defies the limits of a person's body, defies the limits of the actual space it takes up.

Some people call presence charisma. Perhaps it's the same thing. There are many charismatic people who are not artists. And presence is not the same as fame, by the way.

If you think about the people around you, there are many who have presence. There's a woman who is a cashier at Wilkes Bashford, a clothing store in San Francisco. Her name is "Miss Kish"—that's a nickname she has been given. For years I went into that store and was intimidated by Miss Kish. She is an African-American woman in a store that's mostly frequented by whites (with the exception of a few famous blacks like the former mayor of San Francisco, Willie Brown). She wore a man's hat at the cash register, often a bright red one. She looked as though she did not suffer fools. I was shocked to get a phone call from Miss Kish in November 2004, when John Kerry lost to George Bush. She wanted to know my opinion. To me, it was as if Kerry had called!

Presence means you hold your own space, control the space around you, and sometimes welcome others into it.

I saw a man in New York City in the late seventies kissing trees on a regular basis. Of course, such an action is bound to attract attention, but presence is not merely the attraction of attention. When he kissed a tree, it took my breath away. He was an older man with white hair. It was his level of commitment that gave him presence.

Lauren Hutton, the first supermodel, was discovered in the sixties by Diana Vreeland, the editor of *Vogue* magazine. At the very moment that Diana Vreeland discovered Lauren,

Lauren did not realize she was attracting attention. She was in Vreeland's office as a model who simply showed the clothes to Vreeland and others at *Vogue* who made decisions about fashion. She was too short to be a high-fashion model. She was stunned by the scene in Vreeland's office—the glamour, the diversity of looks and attitudes. She actually stopped working and sat on a windowsill to watch the action, while all the other models paraded in and out for the staff of *Vogue*. Vreeland suddenly pointed to Lauren with her long white glove—a glove she wore to turn the many pages of images she had to look at—and said, "And *you* have quite a presence." Lauren actually looked out the window, thinking that Vreeland was talking about somebody behind her. "You, you stay after," said Vreeland. And a multimillion-dollar career was launched, and nineteen covers of *Vogue* magazine. Her presence was the *intensity of her gaze*—not the expectation that others *would be gazing at her*.

Lauren also has presence of *wit*. Presence of *mind*. I joked with her: "I think you should have a Kennedy Center Honor for your smile."

"Oh, you do, do you?" she said in her Southern accent.

"Yeah, we live in a culture infatuated with beauty—I mean, singers get the Kennedy Center Honor, writers get it, comics get it; why don't beautiful people get it? Our whole culture is based on beauty, and you have quite a smile. It should be honored."

"Is that right?" she said, clearly getting a kick out of this exchange.

"Yes, I think I'll write George Bush a letter."

"Will you sign your name?" she asked.

"Of course," I said.



Memphis Smith, my dog. Here, presence is on display in part because of the photographer, Mary Ellen Mark. She turns a sigh into a laugh.

“All three of ’em?” she asked.

Presence means paying attention to find any opportunity to engage.

My dog has presence. Her name is Memphis. In Los Angeles people stop their cars and shout out the window, “What kind of dog is that?” In New York, people stop me on the street to talk to her. Once, when she was a puppy, she slipped out of her collar at a busy intersection in New York. I threw myself on top of her. People ran from all corners. “Is your

dog having an epileptic fit? Wanna use my cell phone?” I even thought to myself on that occasion that they’d probably let a human being just lie out on the street, but people ran from all corners to help a dog. Haydee, who is from Peru, sometimes walks Memphis for me when I’m working. She told me, “Anna, everybody wanna talk to Memphis; they don’t see me; they only see Memphis.” With me on the elevator in my building was a woman—a stockbroker type, in her own thoughts, at the end of a long day, tired. We were riding in silence. (I live in a building that’s not so large. Nonetheless, people keep their personal “space” in the elevator.) Suddenly she lit up and said to me, “Is Memphis your dog?” I was startled by the suddenness of her question and the life that came out of an otherwise day-drained persona.

“Yes,” I said.

“That dog makes my day!” she said.

Same scene in an elevator in Los Angeles. In LA Memphis was not allowed in the main elevator—she had to take the service elevator. My assistant hated the service elevator; she said it “smelled.” Memphis loved the service elevator—the smells of the men, the smells of their lunch, pizza, etc., the smells of their bodies, the smells of work. She’s a work dog after all, part Australian cattle dog—a herder. One day I was on the main elevator—without Memphis, of course. A man who had been pointed out to me as an archconservative turned to me and said, “That dog of yours is fantastic.”

“She’s a mutt,” I said.

“Well, she’s got some border collie in her. Great dog. Very alert,” he pronounced.

“Thanks,” I said. And he strutted out of the elevator, crossed the lobby, and climbed into his SUV.

Alert. Part of presence is about being *alert*.

I asked a friend of mine, "Why does everybody look at Memphis?"

"Because she's pretty," my friend said simply.

But presence is not just about being pretty. Presence is your ability to be present. Because Memphis is part Australian cattle dog—a red heeler—she is very intense, and does not like to miss a beat. She pays attention to the movings and goings-on around her. "Pretty" does help. But "pretty" is not the same as presence.

If two people have an argument, Memphis runs back and forth between the two of them, as if she is afraid they will leave the room. As a herder, she is looking for every opportunity to keep moving things together. Presence is having something that you are wired to do, that you are committed to do, so committed to do it that it's almost like it's in your DNA. It's being ready at all times and looking for every possible opportunity.

Presence is not so easy. There is so much *stuff* out there. To get presence, you have to move through layers and layers of commotion and noise and other sites that grab the light. It's hard to grab the light these days. People used to talk about Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame. Now it's more like one minute.

It might seem that presence is all about advertising. You might think, just hire a good PR firm. PR is powerful, but it's not the same as presence. Real presence has to come from the inside.

Real presence is the feeling that the person onstage is right next to you *because you long to have them there. Or because you are terrified that they could come after you and get you in*

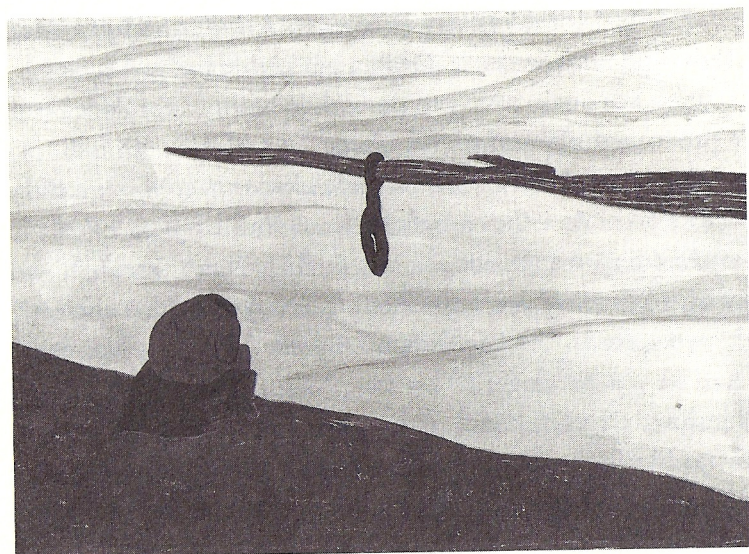
your seat. Monsters have presence. Godzilla had presence. Terrorists have presence. Osama bin Laden has presence.

Presence doesn't have to do with likability. Nor does being a provocateur guarantee presence.

Often people who have presence know that *you* are there before you know *they* are there. Israel, one of the doormen in my building, was beside himself. Israel is Puerto Rican. It was winter. What had just happened? "I seen J. Lo. On the street!" he whispered. "And I seen her and she just went like this." And he put his finger to his lips, "Sssh." He was practically blushing. "I said, 'Cool. Cool.' And she just walked on by; I was like, 'I got you covered. Cool,'" he said. His eyes were twinkling. "That woman," he said emphatically. "There needs to be a picture of her in the dictionary beside the words 'Latin woman'!"

Presence can be magical. It can delight the people around you. Think of when you were a kid, and you had a favorite friend, or a favorite relative—something enchanted you—presence is *enchanted*. And it does not always have to do with what a person *actually* is. It is what you *wish* they were. There is myth in presence. This works for that which we wish to embrace us, and it is the same for that which we fear. There is also magic in fear.

Jacob Lawrence, the great African-American painter, moved as a child from Atlantic City to Easton, Pennsylvania, to Philadelphia to Harlem, where he settled with his mother when he was thirteen. He did not often see white people until he became famous as a painter and was embraced by the mainstream art world. His parents had grown up in the South, where people were lynched. He believed that all white people were potential lynchers—and so he was always alert to



One of Jacob Lawrence's paintings from his sixty-panel *Migration Series*, which depicts the journey that members of his family and other African Americans made from the South to the North in the early part of the twentieth century. This painting (panel #15) is a representation of a lynching.

the possibility that one of them could appear. Especially if one showed up in Harlem, where he otherwise felt safe, at home, surrounded by his own.

"If I saw a white man," he told me, "I would automatically think, Oh, that's a lyncher."

So I asked him, "Well, what happened when you got famous and you were around white people?"

"Oh, you know," he said calmly, and with a tone of reassurance, "these things are all fears, like children are afraid of ghosts, and goblins, and eventually they go away."

But for the time that the fearsome object has its hold on you, it has presence. *Presence is having a hold on the desires and fears of those around you.*

If you have presence, it could be helpful to know how to use it.

Study photographs to learn about presence.

There is a photograph of Naomi Campbell taken at the Cuban National Ballet School, by Patrick Demarchelier. She is poised to dance with a male dancer. Her focus is direct, her concentration razor-sharp.

Naomi Campbell has presence.

President Bill Clinton has presence. He is known for remembering the names of people he's met only once, and remembering details of conversations.

Presence requires being aware. Presence requires paying attention. Presence requires using your intelligence. Presence requires allowing *others* to make an impact on you. This means putting your mind on them, not just on yourself.

Presence is empathy. Cesar Chavez had presence. He understood the plight of the migrant workers and was able to speak *to them and for them*.

Presence can come from deep commitments to beliefs, unpopular beliefs.

I saw a photograph of the Queen Mother, standing simply in a garden with her purse. Now she had presence.

Presence is not the same as attracting attention. It's not a gimmick. It is not a brand. I said previously that presence was about "grabbing the light." No. It's about *finding* the light and being a part of it. These days, I believe that light might just be *in* the audience, *with* the public, *in* the world, *among* the possibilities of "us" human beings rather than in the language of "self."

Oprah Winfrey has presence. Big time!

It is harder and harder to have presence in a world of so much noise, so much show, so much amplification.



Naomi Campbell in a fashion photograph taken in the School for the Ballet Nacional in Havana, Cuba. The photograph was taken by Patrick Demarchelier for *Harper's Bazaar*. Notice Campbell's focused gaze and that of the dancer.

Presence will probably, in the near future, be based on absolute authenticity. Whoever can achieve that in a world of brands, and seductions, and false promises, and addictions to false loves, will be truly charismatic.

I'm sure you have presence, BZ. Expand it. Dare to open your heart to the good and bad around you.

ADS

P.S. I am writing this to you on the back of several napkins in a restaurant in Tiburon, California. My hosts are very late. A

Sri Lankan busboy just walked by and said, "You must have a lot on your mind. You are writing a *lot*." (He laughed out loud.) Gosh, I just realized my pen leaked! I have ink all over my hand! No matter. This has got to be one of the most beautiful spots in the world. It's just after sunset, and I can see the Golden Gate Bridge lighting up in the distance. A ship just went by with black sails and a string of lights. It reminded me of *Othello*. I'll be writing from all sorts of places. I'm a gypsy—which goes with the territory. So sometimes the spots will be glamorous, and sometimes I'll be writing to you from the back of a rental car. It's not all a vase of roses, this life! Hope to meet you soon.