

# **The One Thing That Changes Everything: An Introduction to Presence-Centered Healing and Transformation**

**By Rhonda Mattern**

In recent years, a fundamentally different approach to healing and transformation has emerged that combines elements of spiritual practice and psychology into a distinct new discipline. Numerous individuals and groups practice its methods under different, and often esoteric, names: non-dual psychotherapy, Buddhist psychology, Leela Therapy, Diamond Heart Work, Internal Family Systems Therapy, The Presence Process, and Integrative Processing, to name a few. I see these diverse practices as branches of the same burgeoning discipline, an approach I call presence-centered healing and transformation.

## **Principles of Presence-Centered Healing and Transformation**

Presence-centered methods help people to become more *present* to, and *centered* in, the vast transformational capacity of their own consciousness. Despite their diverse names and origins, most presence-centered approaches are based on similar principles:

### **Consciousness is the force that heals, transforms and uplifts all life**

Presence-centered approaches see consciousness itself as the source of healing and transformation and help us to be more present to the full spectrum of our awareness.

### **Consciousness is present in everything, not just the “higher self”**

Rather than focusing exclusively on the “higher self,” presence-centered practitioners learn to become more aware of the *whole self*—body, mind, emotions *and* the awareness beyond the mind.

### **Suffering occurs when unconscious patterns block our awareness of our spiritual nature**

Psychology points to conditioned responses as a root cause of suffering and spiritual teachings cite separation from our spiritual nature. Presence-centered practice takes both insights a step further: unconscious patterns create suffering by blocking our awareness of unconditioned consciousness (i.e., our spiritual nature). This view of the root cause of suffering requires a completely different approach to breaking free of it, which is articulated in the final principle below:

### **Healing and transformation occur when we bring the vast consciousness of our spiritual nature to unconscious patterns**

This principle combines two long-accepted maxims into a third insight:

<b>Insight #</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Healing and transformation happen when you:</b>
Insight #1	Spiritual teachings	Experience the wisdom, compassion, and love of your spiritual nature
Insight #2	Psychology	Understand your unconscious patterns (i.e., conditioning) and choose new behavioral strategies
Insight #3	Presence-centered practice	Bring the consciousness of your spiritual nature to unconscious patterns

If you learn better from pictures, you can visualize this insight #3 like this: Picture your soul or spiritual nature as a beautiful castle. Now see your limiting attitudes and emotional reactions (e.g., angry outbursts, judging yourself mercilessly, etc.) as alligators in the castle moat. It's not enough to learn how to enter the castle, because alligators keep pulling you back into the moat. It's not enough to learn how the alligators pull you into the moat, because that doesn't get you back into the castle.

Spiritual teachings show you how to get into the castle, which is essential. Psychology teaches you how alligators pull you into the moat, which is critically important. Presence-centered practice helps you take the next step: bringing the wisdom, creativity, and compassion locked inside the castle to alligators limiting the possibilities in your life.

I call bringing consciousness to unconscious patterns “the one thing that changes everything” because of the profound changes this simple practice continues to bring to my own and others' lives.

### **How Presence-Centered Practice Differs from Other Approaches**

Working with a presence-centered practitioner was different from anything I'd ever encountered, and it changed things that nothing else had changed. Long years of meditation, therapy, and alternative healing methods barely put a dent in the thick veil of depression, fear, and self-doubt that had plagued me for decades. Presence-centered practice changed all that in less than three years.

During presence-centered sessions, we didn't talk about consciousness—we experienced it! My mentor helped me to deeply connect with the awareness beyond my thoughts and conditioning, not just for a few minutes, but throughout the entire session, and not just now and then, but *during every session*.

Finally I'd found the approach to healing and self-actualization that I'd always dreamed was possible: a practical, hands-on mix of spiritual practice and psychology. This was the “third force” that pioneering psychologist Abe Maslow had envisioned half a century earlier. And it was truly a force to be reckoned with: a completely new and distinct discipline, not just talk therapy with a few spiritual concepts or meditative practices pasted onto it.

One of the first things my mentor helped me to learn was how to tell the difference between unconditioned awareness (i.e., higher consciousness) and conditioned thoughts. After a bit of experimentation, I realized that what I thought was my soul or higher consciousness was just a bunch of thoughts about it. Shifting from my thoughts about consciousness to the *actual experience* of it was a subtle skill to master, and working with someone who knew the terrain first-hand made all the difference.

Another aspect of practice-centered practice was radically different from anything I'd ever experienced: both the facilitator and the person being facilitated practice *the same thing*—being unconditionally present to everything that arises. The methods my mentor used weren't amorphous or incomprehensible; they were concrete skills that she clearly articulated and patiently helped to me to master. Learning these skills helped me to access my own insights and experiences instead of depending on hers.

Surprisingly, as I began to practice these skills, I discovered limiting patterns that gifted therapists had missed—long-hidden root causes of my lifelong struggles with depression, troubled relationships and low self confidence. Why had therapists overlooked these patterns? Because less conscious parts of myself had deeply hidden them. As I learned to shift into the wise, compassionate space of my own consciousness, my more wounded parts finally felt safe enough to surface.

Several other distinctions made this work different from anything I'd ever encountered:

- Instead of trying to fix, change, or get rid of things, I learned to be unconditionally present with them. Paradoxically, the moment I stopped trying to change my life, it started changing in ways I'd never been able to effect through self-discipline, practicing new behaviors, and other such strategies.
- Dissecting my dysfunctional habits always felt like the equivalent of a spiritual root canal—painful, tedious, and exhausting. On the other hand, experiencing my conditioned responses from unconditioned consciousness was surprisingly illuminating and enlivening. And facilitating this work left me energized instead of burnt out.
- Instead of devising strategies for behaving in new ways to overcome conditioned responses (more conditioning!), I learned to bring the creative, spontaneous wisdom of my own consciousness to conditioned responses, first in quiet practice sessions, then in “real time”—i.e., as patterns got triggered in daily life.

The first time I managed to bring consciousness to limiting patterns in “real time” marked a significant turning point in my life. On that day, my boss began screaming at me uncontrollably in front of co-workers. My usual mistrust of authority immediately arose, followed by fear of losing my job and a panicky need to defend myself. As I opened my consciousness to these patterns without fighting them, my body quaked with terror, and yet I felt surprisingly centered and present. After several speechless moments, a few unassuming words popped out of my mouth, completely disarming my boss. She invited me into her office, began to cry, and confessed how poorly suited she felt to her job. A short time later, she left the company.

For years I'd longed to live in greater harmony with my spiritual ideals, and nothing I tried seemed to work. Now the very things I had turned to for support—spiritual practice and psychology—began working unbelievably well.

### **Inside a Presence-Centered Mentoring Session**

Before closing this introduction, I'd like to convey some sense of how presence-centered facilitation works. Here's an excerpt from my first session with someone I'll call Alice:

Rhonda: What are you hoping to accomplish from these sessions? (*Alice rambles on for about 10 minutes; her speech is tense and rapid, her goals unclear.*)

Rhonda: So how do you feel right now as you're talking about your goals?

Alice: I'm not sure.

Rhonda: So if it feels right, just take a minute to close your eyes and see how you feel.

Alice: Hmm...I feel kind of tense.

Rhonda. (*I invite her to relax and connect with her deeper awareness.*) Now from this deeper awareness, tell me your goals for these sessions.

Alice: (*Her speech is soft and slow, her body relaxed.*) I want to learn to love myself. And I want to find whatever I've been hiding that's keeping me from doing work that I love. (*Her relaxed demeanor and clarity signal that she's shifted into unconditional awareness.*)

Rhonda: I'm curious how you're feeling now as you tell me your goals?

Alice: I feel very still. I feel this deep peace and clarity.

Rhonda: Yes. So now, from this place of deep peace, tell me what you notice next.

Alice: I notice this tension around my heart, this feeling of anger. I don't want to feel that now. I don't want to leave this peacefulness. (*Notice her shift back to conditioned thoughts.*)

Rhonda: So I'm curious. Is it possible to feel this anger and this deep peace at the same time?

Alice: Hmm...(silence) Wow. (*Sounding surprised.*) Yes, I can feel both at once. Wow, that's amazing.

Rhonda: And what do you notice as you stay unconditionally present to the anger, without thinking, without trying to change it in any way?

Alice: (*long silence*) Wow. It got really intense at first and then it just burned away.

Rhonda: And what's left?

Alice: (*silence*) I'm feeling this really deep hurt. It's much deeper down than the anger. The anger was actually hiding this.

Rhonda: Yes. So what do you notice if you stay present with that really deep hurt...

Alice: (*Shifting back into conditioned thoughts*) Wow, I'm not sure I want to do that. It feels really uncomfortable. You know, I just remembered another goal for these sessions. I want to understand why I eat so much. I heard once at a spiritual seminar that eating helps to ground you when you've had too many deep spiritual experiences. I think that's why I eat.

Rhonda: (*I take a few minutes to help her shift back into unconditional presence.*) Now, from this place of deep peace, what do you notice?

Alice: I'm feeling that deeply hurt part of me again.

Rhonda: And as you stay deeply present with that hurt, what are you aware of?

Alice: This part feels like it doesn't deserve to do work it loves. And suddenly I see a little baby in a crib. I'm crying and no one is coming.

Rhonda: So what do you notice as you remain in this deep peace and continue to experience this?

Alice: Oh wow. The hurt is starting to lift a little. My whole body is relaxing.

Rhonda: And what are you aware of now?

Alice: Oh my gosh...eating doesn't have anything to do with what I thought. I eat so I don't have to feel this wounded part of myself. (*long silence*) Oh my gosh; I can't believe this. It's just so clear.

Rhonda: Yes....

Alice: All of my life, I've been avoiding this part of me, but right now, it feels so good just to be here with it.

Rhonda: Yes...

Alice: It's amazing how different it is to just be present with these parts of myself instead of hiding from them.

Rhonda: It's a whole new way of being, isn't it?

Alice: Yes, it really is.

### **How to Learn More**

Whether facilitating for others, or applying it for myself, presence-centered practice continues to humble, surprise, and amaze me. Those interested in learning more are welcome to check out the practitioners, tele-classes, and other resources listed on my website at [www.the1thing.net](http://www.the1thing.net). And don't hesitate to send me your questions and comments at [info@the1thing.net](mailto:info@the1thing.net). I know of no greater joy than passing on this life-changing work to others.