



Series:

**When the Heart Ripens
and life turns spacious**

Episode:

B2. SPACIOUS

**- The Grace Of Presence Over
Performance**

Tony Macelli

Welcome to another episode in the series “When the heart ripens”, now introducing a new theme – spaciousness of heart. Please read the Introduction to this Series for more information about the series of episodes.

The point is not to map a path but to name the movements that tend to emerge when the soul grows freer, when the ego grows quieter, and when the inner life takes on a more spacious tone.

PREVIOUS EPISODES in this Series

A. Rootedness in the Real

- 1. ROOTED - Being rooted in the ordinary*
- 2. ROOTED - The creativity of seasoned imagination*
- 3. ROOTED - The turn from achievement to meaning*

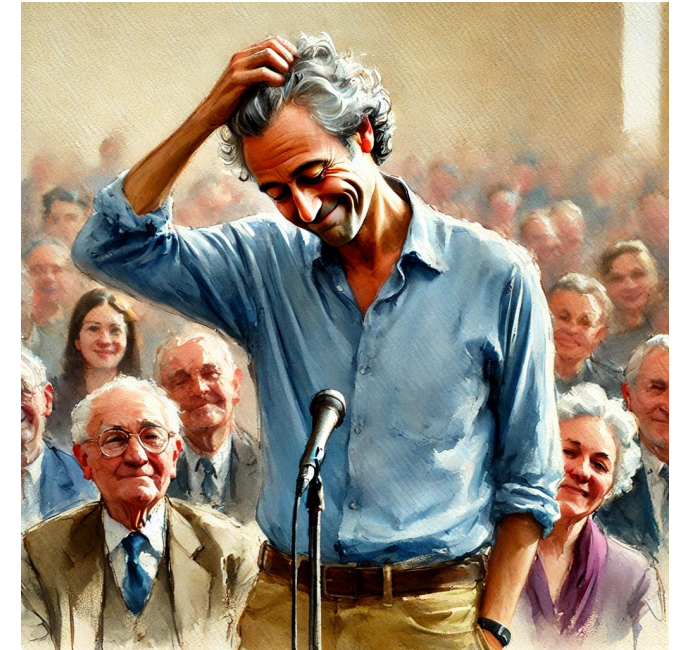
B. The Spacious Heart

- 1. SPACIOUS - Spaciousness of heart*
- 2. SPACIOUS - Love as gift rather than possession*

What happens when you are expected to do something but find that you cannot do it well? Do you lose your composure in defeat, or panic yourself into a cover-up, as if your self-image depended on always being right or successful? The story and reflection in this episode explore the quiet freedom that appears when presence matters more than performance, and when not knowing, or not being able, no longer threatens who we are.

STORY

The room filled gradually, the way rooms do when people arrive without hurry. Chairs scraped softly against the floor, coats were folded, greetings exchanged. Matteo stood near the lectern, arranging his notes more out of habit than necessity. He had spoken often enough to



groups like this – curious, engaged, older, unafraid of complexity. The University of the Third Age suited him. The pace was human. The questions were real.

He began easily. The topic was one he knew well, or had known well for many years. His voice settled into its familiar rhythm, not polished, not theatrical, but clear. He noticed faces lift, pens move, small nods of recognition. There was no inner tension. The talk unfolded as it needed to.

About halfway through, a hand went up near the back. A woman with silver hair and an attentive, steady gaze asked a question that landed just off-centre. It was not hostile, but it was precise. It touched on a detail Matteo realised, with a small inward pause, that he had not revisited in some time.



The moment registered quietly in his body. A younger version of himself would have filled the gap quickly, leaned on approximation, tried to sound more certain than he felt. That reflex had once mattered. He remembered it now without embarrassment, almost with affection.

He smiled.

“That’s a good question,” he said, and allowed the words to rest. “And I realise as you ask it that I didn’t refresh that particular angle when I was preparing. Time does curious things to memory. It leaves some things intact and quietly walks off with others.”

A ripple of laughter moved through the room, warm rather than indulgent. Matteo felt



Matteo listened. He did not guide the conversation much. He did not need to. Meaning surfaced easily when no one was trying to force it into shape. His role had changed without effort – from speaker to participant, from authority to presence.

As the session drew to a close, there was no sense of something missing. People lingered, speaking to one another, gathering coats slowly. A man approached Matteo and said, “That was refreshing. Not just the talk – though that was good – but the way you held the room.”

Matteo nodded, receiving the comment without storing it. Outside, the light had shifted. Late afternoon had softened into something quieter. He walked toward the bus stop with his notes still in his bag, unused pages among them, and felt no regret.

Somewhere along the way, he realised that performance had stopped being necessary. Presence was enough. And in that *enoughness*, something truer had room to appear.

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REFLECTION

There is a particular weariness that comes from trying to be impressive. Many of us recognise it in ourselves. We shape our words carefully, monitor how we are received, try to appear competent, insightful, or useful, and quietly offer more than we truly have. At first this effort feels necessary, even virtuous. It can resemble responsibility or generosity. Over time, however, the heart begins to protest. It tires of the constant adjustment. It longs for something simpler



no urge to recover anything. He stood comfortably inside the not-knowing.

“I could try to answer badly, Do you want that?” he continued with a broad smile, “But I won’t do that to you.” Another soft laugh. “What I am curious about instead is how that question meets our own experience.”

He stepped away from the lectern and sat on the edge of a chair. The shift was almost imperceptible, but something in the room loosened. Hands rose again, not to test him, but to speak. One person offered a memory. Another added a counterpoint. The woman who had asked the question nodded, satisfied not with a solution, but with the space that had opened.

and truer – the grace of presence without the strain of performance.

This longing is not a modern invention, nor a personal idiosyncrasy. It emerges wherever the heart has grown tired of earning its place. Those who have travelled this interior path often discover that healing does not begin with self-improvement, but with a gentler honesty. Henri Nouwen (1932–1996) gives voice to this recognition when he writes that the turning point comes “when we dare to be ourselves before others”. His words point toward a quiet courage – the willingness to appear without armour, without the need to manage how we are seen. Presence becomes possible when competence is no longer used as a shield.

As the heart matures, the strategies that once secured identity begin to loosen their hold. Achievement, reputation, usefulness, and comparison still have their place, but they no longer carry the same weight. A person starts to trust that their worth is not dependent on sustaining a role or maintaining a polished self-presentation. What nourishes others, they discover, is not performance but availability.

When performance recedes, attention gathers. The inner life becomes less divided, less preoccupied with outcome, more responsive to what is actually happening. Presence has this integrative quality. It brings the self into coherence. Parker J. Palmer names this when he observes that the true self can appear only under conditions of quiet presence, not under the pressure to perform. His insight confirms what experience already suggests – authenticity surfaces when we allow ourselves to be unforced and undivided.

This is why presence often carries an influ-

ence that effort cannot manufacture. It does not persuade or impress, yet it subtly alters the atmosphere around it. A life lived from presence acquires a certain transparency. Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) gestures toward this when she speaks of “a life that simply bears God”. Her phrase evokes not intensity or display, but a depth of attunement in which presence itself becomes sacramental. Such a life draws attention away from itself and quietly makes room for something greater to be felt.

You can recognise this grace in ordinary encounters. Someone listens without scanning for their next contribution. Their attention is relaxed rather than strategic. They do not need to steer the conversation or secure a particular impression. In their presence, something in you eases. You feel met rather than managed. This easing is not accidental. It is the effect of a



heart no longer organised around performance.

Living this way involves a gradual relinquishment of the ego’s anxieties. It calls for patience with our own incompleteness and a willingness to be human rather than admirable. Over time, the impulse to perform loses its urgency. What remains is a quieter authenticity, one that does not withdraw from responsibility but meets it without self-defence.

For those who sense an invitation here, the movement is modest. It begins with small pauses – moments where we allow ourselves to arrive before responding, to notice before shaping, to remain present without filling the space. As these moments accumulate, presence becomes more familiar, and the heart grows more spacious, more at ease, more capable of receiving and giving love.

Presence is one of the quiet ways a mature heart shines. It seeks no spotlight and carries no banner. It does not need to prove its value. In its simple sufficiency, it creates the conditions in which grace can do its work.

PRACTICE

A gentle orientation: This practice will not produce maturity or remove the habit of performance. Ripening happens over time and often beyond our direct control. Practice can, however, sharpen recognition, helping us notice the qualities of a heart that is already learning to rest in presence. Practice also makes us more receptive to what the divine forces want to work in us.

Let these points accompany you lightly. You are not meant to do all of them. Simply notice what resonates.

1. Recall a recent situation where you felt even a mild pressure to perform. Speaking in a group, answering a question, explaining yourself, or being expected to know more than you did. Let the memory come without analysis.
2. Notice what tightened in you at that moment. The chest, the jaw, the breath, the pace of



thought. Stay with the bodily sense rather than the story.

3. Imagine the same situation without the need to be impressive. Picture responding more slowly, not knowing, or allowing the moment to remain unfinished. Notice what changes in your body.
4. As you move through the day, attend to pauses before speaking. Especially notice moments when you choose not to fill a silence, correct an error immediately, or add something clever or helpful.
5. When a small mistake or lapse occurs, see whether you can allow it without inner commentary. Observe the difference between responding to a situation and managing an image.
6. Pay attention to how others respond when you are not performing. You may notice more honesty, more participation, or simply more ease. Let that be enough.

Close this practice by giving thanks not for your efforts, but for any small shifts of awareness that emerged and may emerge in future.

If you are in a group meeting: Invite participants to share a moment when they allowed not knowing or imperfection without rushing to repair it. Attend together to how the atmosphere changed, and what that revealed about presence.

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Contact:

chat, comment, ask, suggest, correct:
imagnetony@gmail.com

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ACCESSIBLE BOOKS

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ONLINE AND YOUTUBE RESOURCES

Talk: “Henri Nouwen – The ministry of presence.” From the Henri Nouwen Society’s online archives.

Talk: Parker Palmer, “The courage to show up as yourself.” Common on Quaker and educational channels.

Teaching: Evelyn Underhill reflections Curated through the Underhill archives and Anglican spirituality channels.

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