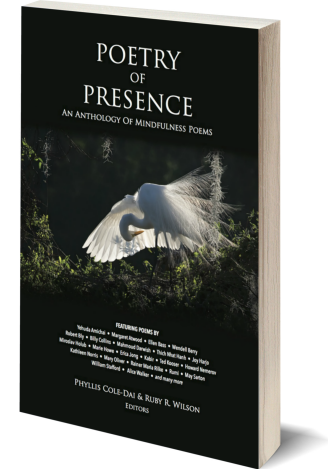


Companion to *Poetry of Presence*

A gentle guide for personal and/or group reflection

This resource can inspire your private musings on the book, prompt journal entries and other creative responses to the poetry, or stimulate group discussion. It will serve you best if you've already read the anthology. Feel free to adapt it to your needs.

If you'd like to share a personal reflection with us or make a suggestion for future editions of this guide, we'd enjoy hearing from you at editors@poetryofpresencebook.com.



—Phyllis Cole-Dai & Ruby R. Wilson

1. If you could send aloft a paper lantern (biodegradable, of course) inscribed with a single line from *Poetry of Presence*, which line would you choose?
2. How does “On How to Pick and Eat Poems” serve as a prelude to the collection?
3. How new are you to reading poetry? To practicing mindfulness? Has this book made you want to read more poetry, to engage more mindfully with your life, or both? Why or why not?
4. Define “mindfulness” in your own words. How might mindfulness enhance the living of your life? How might poetry support your practice of it?
5. The poet Edward Hirsch says, “When I recite a poem I reinhabit it, I bring the words off the page into my own mouth, my own body. I become its speaker and let its verbal music move through me as if the poem is a score and I am its instrumentalist, its performer.”

Pick a poem from the collection to *inhabit*. To read *mindfully*. Do so now, perhaps using the approach we suggested in the book’s “Invitation”:

. . . situate yourself in a comfortable time and place, free of distraction. Now stop. Relax. Breathe awhile. Summon your full awareness. When you’re prepared, read the text, either silently or aloud. Notice when your mind wanders, and gently call it back. When you reach the end, sit with the poem for a spell. Don’t analyze it. Don’t judge it. Don’t rush away from it. Just let it resonate, like the sounding of a bell, until it finishes with you. (p. 20)

6. Part of reading a poem mindfully is welcoming it, receiving it openly, without passing judgment. Does this come easily to you? When reading, do you ever notice signs of resistance or rejection in your body, mind or spirit? What are they? By contrast, what does *acceptance* feel like?

7. Would practicing mindfulness in a “natural” setting be easier or harder for you than in an urban setting? A household setting? What challenges to mindfulness are posed by these different environments?
8. In what ways do the poems in this collection exhibit a tension between solitude and relationship? How does the presence of others hinder or help the practice of mindfulness?
9. As we practice mindfulness, do we ever feel sadness, anger, anxiety or other emotions often considered negative? How can poetry help us “compost” such feelings, as Teddy Macker wrote (p. 113), and turn them into fertile ground?
10. “If you’re thinking about your life,” said the poet Mark Strand, “you can’t avoid the fact that it will end in death. In fact, everything about a poem — the meter of the poem, or the measure of the poem — is a reminder of time.” How is the practice of mindfulness bound up with an awareness of mortality? In what poems do you see this powerfully expressed?
11. Identify a few poems in this collection that especially strike you. Do they have much in common? Why do you think they speak to you so strongly?
12. The poet Muriel Rukeyser once said that if there were no poetry in the world, it would have to be invented, “for there would be an intolerable hunger.” What hunger in you, if any, do these poems satisfy?
13. Poetry, declared Robert Frost, “makes you remember what you didn’t know you knew.” How does reading this collection make you remember what you didn’t know you knew?
14. Identify some of the nature poems in this anthology. Why do you think we, the editors, included so many? How does your reading of them affect your sense of belonging to the natural world?
15. *Poetry of Presence* includes many didactic or instructive poems. Can you name some of them? How are they useful to you as a reader?
16. Do you notice any humor in the poems? Why might humor be important to the practice of mindfulness?
17. Which contributing poets are you least familiar with? Have you discovered some poets in this volume whose work you’d like to read more?
18. *Poetry of Presence* undoubtedly includes the work of poets whose identities are significantly different from your own. What, if anything, do you gain from reading their work?
19. This anthology includes the works of a number of American Indian poets, including Joy Harjo, Linda Hogan, Lydia Whirlwind Soldier, Kimberly Blaeser and Denise Low. Do their poems throw special slants of light on mindful living?

20. Rumi, Hafiz, Kabir and Rilke are some of the “ecstatic poets” in this anthology. “Let the beauty of love be what we do,” Rumi wrote. “There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.” Reflect on times you’ve witnessed others “doing the beauty of love,” as well as ways that you yourself “kneel and kiss the ground.”
21. Denise Levertov once said, “I’m not very good at praying, but what I experience when I’m writing a poem is close to prayer. I feel it in different degrees and not with every poem. But in certain ways writing is a form of prayer.” For you, how is a writing or reading a poem like, or not like, prayer?
22. Why do you think we chose to conclude *Poetry of Presence* with Richard Schiffman’s “Smart Cookie?”
23. Try your hand at mindfully writing a poem. Follow the advice of Natalie Goldberg: “Keep your hand moving for, say, ten minutes, and don’t cross anything out, because that makes space for your inner editor to come in. You are free to write the worst junk in America” (or in whatever place you happen to be).
24. Respond creatively to one or more of these quotes that have relevance to mindfulness poetry:
 - a. “Poetry and Hums aren’t things which you get, they’re things which get you. And all you can do is to go where they can find you.” (Winnie the Pooh, in A. A. Milne’s *The House at Pooh Corner*)
 - b. “Poetry is about slowing down. You sit and you read something, you read it again, and it reveals a little bit more, and things come to light you never could have predicted.” (Mark Strand)
 - c. “Poetry is life distilled.” (Gwendolyn Brooks)
 - d. “These poems have come from a great distance to find you.” (Edward Hirsch)
 - e. “They can be like sun, words. They can do for the heart what light can do for a field.” (St. John of the Cross)
 - f. “Poetry calls us to pause. There is so much we overlook, while the abundance around us continues to shimmer, on its own.” (Naomi Shihab Nye)
 - g. “To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.” (Wendell Berry)
 - h. “Poems not only demand patience, they demand a kind of surrender.” (Mark Strand)
 - i. “It is out of the dailiness of life that one is driven into the deepest recesses of the self.” (Stanley Kunitz)

- j. “To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.” (Mary Oliver)
25. After reading *Poetry of Presence*, do you sense the need to address a specific challenge in your life? (For example, you might want to transform the way you respond to change or loss.) If so, how might you engage with that challenge moving forward?
26. What does this poetry collection reveal about life in human community?
27. “Words create worlds.” Do you agree with this popular saying? Can words (e.g., poems) effect real change in the world? Why or why not?



“The end of the poem is just the beginning.”

PHYLLIS COLE-DAI & RUBY R. WILSON

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For more information visit www.PoetryofPresenceBook.com.