Being present for the holidays

Pete & Shelley Aarssen - December 2025

That word “present” is an interesting one. It can be used as an adverb, a verb, and of course, a noun when you are talking about giving a present or gift.

When we speak of “being present” it is known as the present progressive form “to be present”. The word “present” is considered a homograph (words that are spelled the same with different meanings and possibly different pronunciations. Our intention in this article is not to provide a grammar lesson but rather a lesson in simply being human, especially around the holidays.

Recently, Shelley met a woman in the parking lot of one of our grocery stores. The woman had parked in a handicap spot, likely due to her limited mobility. She was taking a portion of her groceries to give to a man who was slumped over, sitting by the entrance. I commented on how kind she was to do that. It prompted me to look at the man and greet him with some monetary help as I entered the store. We’re telling this true story to highlight what it means to be human. We need to be present to each other to see the other person and allow the other person to see us, with all our good and bad qualities. In this brief encounter, I saw an impoverished man displaying a genuine expression of gratefulness on his face as he simply said: ‘thank you’. I also encountered a woman who was generous and caring despite her own limitations which inspired me to do likewise.

Our needs seem to be especially felt during the holidays when the desired picture-perfect celebration doesn’t appear possible for us. Loneliness and the need for human contact and care is an especially important area to consider as we head into the “most wonderful time of the year.” It is possible to feel lonely even in a crowd and sometimes that is hard to understand. Like when we attend a gathering of people and no one attempts to engage us or offer hospitality, then we begin to wonder what we’re even doing there. To be present to those we meet we must first understand ourselves, being in touch with our emotions and our God-given temperament. The four temperaments are: choleric, melancholic, sanguine, and phlegmatic, and we are most often a combination of two temperaments with one being dominant. Our temperament tells us a lot about how much social contact we need to be healthy and happy. For instance, a choleric is an optimistic and social person but tends to take over in conversations. If a person knew that this was their temperament, they’d be comfortable in social settings but to be present to others, they would have to hold their tongue to let the other person express their views without judgement. A melancholic, on the other hand, tends toward pessimism but is thoughtful and more detached from their surroundings. This person would have to work up courage in social situations. They would much rather remain in the background. But to be present, they would have to push themselves out of their comfort zone using their natural tendencies to show the other person that they truly care. The life of the party, sanguine temperament, would be a natural meeting new people and having lots of friends. Where they struggle is following through on their promises and appearing superficial. Finally, there’s the phlegmatic temperament that is a bit introverted but is constant, calm and polite. This personality struggles with being too low-key. When we know our strengths and weaknesses of character, we are much better equipped to treat others well and be truly present in all situations. Pope John Paul II, who died in 2005 was known for his ability to make the person he was talking with feel like the most important person in that moment. He was a very busy man with much on his mind but somehow, he knew how to treat every human being with the utmost respect. This Christmas let’s not worry too much about the giving of presents and rather be present for others by giving our time and attention to those who need us most. Doing this will certainly bring ourselves and others much joy and chase away any feelings of loneliness.

Merry Christmas!