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PRESENCE WORKS LLC™

CHAPLAIN'S LOG™

Trauma-Responsive Encounters

Stories of Presence, Attunement, and Compassion: When Showing Up Matters Most

Six Editions: Educators, Healthcare, Veterans, Disaster Response, Students, and Clergy

PRESENCE IS OUR POSTURE. ATTUNE IS OUR PRACTICE. LOVE IS OUR MISSION.

Healing Begins with Presence™

The stories in this collection come from many different settings: classrooms, hospitals, veterans' centers, disaster shelters, mentoring relationships, and congregations. Some are drawn directly from real encounters. Others are composite teaching scenarios, built in the same spirit, to protect the people involved while still teaching what actually happened.

Every story in this volume is meant to show what presence and attunement actually look like, not as techniques to memorize, but as a way of noticing the human being in front of you, whoever they are and wherever you meet them.

Six editions follow: Educators, Healthcare Professionals, Veterans, Disaster Response, Students, and Clergy. Pull up a chair to whichever one speaks to your world, or read them all. The setting changes. What people need rarely does.

EDUCATOR EDITION

Trauma-Responsive Encounters in Schools

Seeing the Student Before the Behavior

01 The Student Who Put His Head Down

A student who is normally engaged began sleeping during first period. After several days, it would have been easy for his teacher to read the behavior as laziness or disrespect.

Instead, she quietly asked him after class, “I’ve noticed you’ve been really tired lately. Is everything okay?”

He shrugged at first. After a pause, he explained that his family had recently lost their housing, and he had been sleeping on a relative’s couch.

The teacher realized the problem wasn’t motivation. It was exhaustion.

She told him, “Thank you for telling me. Let’s figure out how we can help you get through today.”

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The teacher replaced judgment with curiosity before she ever said a word to him. She waited until after class, so he wouldn’t have to explain himself in front of everyone else.

What I Was Paying Attention To

She noticed a pattern, several tired mornings in a row, not just one bad day. She paid attention to what his exhaustion might be communicating instead of assuming it meant he didn’t care.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that trauma-responsive education asks not only what’s wrong with a student, but what that student might be carrying.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Curiosity before correction changes what a conversation can become.
- Behavior often communicates a need a student doesn’t have words for yet.
- The most important question is sometimes the one asked quietly, after class, not in front of everyone.

Take a Moment to Reflect *What behavior in your classroom might look different if you became curious before becoming corrective?*

02 “I’m Not Doing This!”

A normally cooperative student suddenly refused an assignment, pushed his chair away, and said loudly, “I’m not doing this!”

The teacher felt the urge to confront him in front of the class. Instead, she lowered her voice. “Okay. You don’t have to explain anything right now. Why don’t you take a minute?”

Later, privately, the student revealed that the assignment had reminded him of something difficult happening at home.

The teacher still maintained her expectations. But the conversation changed from confrontation to connection.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

She regulated herself before she tried to regulate the room. Lowering her voice, instead of matching his volume, kept the moment from becoming a standoff in front of the whole class.

What I Was Paying Attention To

She noticed how far this reaction was from his normal behavior, and treated that gap as information rather than defiance. She gave him room to step away instead of demanding an explanation on the spot.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that trauma-responsive practice doesn’t eliminate accountability. It changes how we get there.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Lowering my voice can do more than raising it ever could.
- Refusing to join someone’s escalation changes what happens next.
- Accountability and connection aren’t opposites.

Take a Moment to Reflect *What happens when the adult refuses to join the student’s escalation?*

03 “You Remembered My Game”

A mentor told a student, “Good luck Saturday. Let me know how the game goes.”

Monday morning, the mentor asked, “So, how’d you play?”

The student’s face changed. “You remembered?”

“Of course I remembered.”

The conversation lasted less than five minutes. But something important happened. The student learned this adult actually sees him.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The mentor’s consistency, remembering something as small as a Saturday game, built trust in a way no single big gesture could have.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He paid attention to what mattered to the student himself, not just what adults usually assume should matter.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that sometimes connection begins with remembering something small.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Small, remembered details can carry more weight than big gestures.
- What matters to a young person isn’t always what adults expect to matter.
- Five minutes of being truly seen can change how someone shows up the rest of the week.

Take a Moment to Reflect *What seemingly small detail could communicate to a young person, “you matter enough for me to remember”?*

HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS EDITION

Trauma-Responsive Encounters in Healthcare

Caring for the People Who Care for Everyone Else

01 After the Code

A nurse walked out after an unsuccessful resuscitation. Someone asked, “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’ve done this before.”

A colleague didn’t argue. She simply said, “I know you have. That doesn’t mean this one didn’t matter.”

The nurse stopped walking. After a moment: “He reminded me of my dad.”

Now the real conversation could begin.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The colleague didn’t mistake experience for immunity. She let “I’ve done this before” stand without treating it as the whole truth.

What I Was Paying Attention To

She listened for the personal connection underneath the professional composure, and stayed close enough to hear it when it surfaced.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that healthcare professionals can be highly competent and still be deeply affected.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Experience doesn’t cancel out impact.
- “I’ve done this before” is often not the whole story.
- The real conversation sometimes only starts after someone stops walking away.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Who cares for the caregiver after the room has been cleared?*

02 The Nurse Who Had Nothing Left

A nurse became unusually impatient near the end of several demanding shifts in a row. A coworker could have said, “You’ve really got an attitude lately.”

Instead: “You don’t seem like yourself. How are you doing?”

The nurse exhaled. “I’m exhausted.”

The conversation revealed overtime, family pressures, difficult patients, and very little recovery in between.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The coworker led with curiosity instead of criticism, even though the irritability could easily have been read as an attitude problem.

What I Was Paying Attention To

She recognized irritability as a possible sign of depletion rather than a character flaw, and asked a question instead of making an assumption.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that compassion becomes difficult to give when our own reserves are empty.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Curiosity before criticism changes what people are willing to reveal.
- Irritability can be a sign of depletion, not disrespect.
- Recognizing the person behind the professional role opens the door to something real.

Take a Moment to Reflect *What happens when we recognize the person behind the professional role?*

03 “Just Sit Here With Me”

After losing a longtime patient, a healthcare worker sat alone in a break room. The chaplain entered.
“Want to talk?”

“Not really.”

“Okay.”

The chaplain sat down. Several minutes passed. Then the healthcare worker said, “Thank you for not making me talk.”

What Presence Looked Like That Day

Staying was more valuable than speaking. The chaplain didn’t need words to communicate that he wasn’t going anywhere.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He respected what she needed instead of what he assumed she should need, and let her silence set the terms of the visit.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that silence can be compassionate when someone doesn’t have words yet.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- “Not really” is a complete answer, and it deserves to be respected.
- Staying can say more than speaking.
- Sometimes the most useful thing I can offer is simply not leaving.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Can you remain useful when there is nothing for you to say?*

VETERANS EDITION

Trauma-Responsive Encounters With Those Who Served

Honoring the Service Without Ignoring the Person

01 “That Was Forty Years Ago”

A veteran told a chaplain about an experience from his military service. Then he laughed nervously. “That was forty years ago. I should be over that.”

The chaplain answered, “Forty years tells me how long you’ve carried it. It doesn’t tell me what you should feel.”

The veteran grew quiet. For the first time, the conversation wasn’t about why he hadn’t gotten over it. It was about what he had carried.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The chaplain refused to impose a timetable on someone else’s story, even one the veteran himself had already tried to impose on his own experience.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He listened for the shame hidden inside the nervous laugh, and responded to that instead of to the joke on the surface.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that time passing and something being resolved are not necessarily the same thing.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- I try not to impose a timetable on someone else’s healing.
- Shame often hides inside humor.
- “How long have you carried this” opens a different conversation than “why haven’t you moved on.”

Take a Moment to Reflect *What changes when we stop asking why someone hasn’t moved on and start asking what they have been carrying?*

02 “I Miss Who I Was Over There”

A veteran said, “Everybody thinks coming home was supposed to be the good part.” He paused. “But sometimes I miss who I was over there.”

Rather than correcting him, the peer supporter asked, “What do you miss?”

“My team. Purpose. Knowing exactly where I belonged.”

The problem wasn’t simply missing deployment. He missed connection, identity, and purpose.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The peer supporter listened without judgment, resisting the urge to correct a statement that could easily sound wrong on its surface.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He looked underneath the statement for its actual meaning instead of taking it at face value.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that sometimes what appears to be longing for the past is really longing for belonging.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- I try not to correct a feeling before I understand it.
- “What do you miss” opens more than an assumption ever could.
- Longing for the past is sometimes longing for connection, identity, and purpose in disguise.

Take a Moment to Reflect *How can we help veterans rediscover purpose without assuming we already understand what they lost?*

03 “You Don’t Have to Explain It to Me”

Two veterans were talking. One began describing something from his service and stopped. “You probably wouldn’t understand.”

The other replied, “Maybe I won’t. But I’ll listen.”

That changed everything.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

Understanding every detail wasn’t required for compassion. The willingness to listen mattered more than the ability to relate.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He paid attention to the moment his friend almost stopped talking, and made sure his response didn’t confirm the fear that no one would understand.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that authentic humility creates more trust than pretending to understand.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- I don’t need to have lived something to be able to listen to it.
- “Maybe I won’t, but I’ll listen” is more honest than pretending to relate.
- Humility builds more trust than false understanding ever could.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Can you accompany someone without needing to say, “I know exactly how you feel”?*

DISASTER RESPONSE EDITION

Trauma-Responsive Encounters After Disaster

When Everything Familiar Has Changed

01 The House Was Gone

A survivor stood where her home once stood. A disaster worker began discussing assistance programs. The woman barely responded.

Finally she said, “My mother’s pictures were in there.”

The responder stopped talking about paperwork. “Tell me about your mother.”

For the next several minutes, assistance could wait.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The responder recognized when the practical task needed to pause, and let the conversation go where the survivor needed it to go instead.

What I Was Paying Attention To

She understood that the survivor might be grieving far more than a structure, and paid attention to the one detail that mattered most in that moment, the photographs.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that a house contains memories, identity, history, safety, and belonging, all at once.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Paperwork can usually wait a few minutes. Grief often can’t.
- The detail someone mentions first is often the one that matters most.
- I try to ask about what was lost, not just what needs to be replaced.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Are we responding to the damaged property, or the person standing in front of it?*

02 “Other People Lost More”

A survivor repeatedly said, “I shouldn’t complain. Other people lost everything.”

The chaplain responded, “We can care about what happened to them and still make room for what happened to you.”

The survivor began crying.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The chaplain didn’t allow comparison to erase her experience, even though she was the one minimizing it herself.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He noticed when gratitude was being used to silence grief, and gently made room for both to exist at once.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that suffering does not need to compete for permission to be acknowledged.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Comparison doesn’t have to win. Both things can be true at once.
- Gratitude is sometimes used to silence grief, and I try to notice when that’s happening.
- Everyone’s loss deserves room, regardless of who lost more.

Take a Moment to Reflect *How often do people minimize their own needs because someone else “had it worse”?*

03 The Volunteer Who Finally Sat Down

After days of disaster response, a volunteer kept working. Meals were skipped. Sleep was shortened. Every request received the same answer: “I’ve got it.”

Finally another responder put a bottle of water beside him. “You’ve been taking care of everybody since we got here.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“I know. Sit with me for ten minutes.”

The volunteer reluctantly sat. Only then did he realize how exhausted he was.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

Sometimes supporting the helper meant interrupting the helping. The other responder didn’t ask permission, he simply sat down beside him.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He noticed the person who never asked for anything, and treated that as a signal worth acting on instead of a strength to admire from a distance.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that disaster responders can become so focused on survivors that they overlook their own limits.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- “I’ve got it” isn’t always the whole truth.
- The person who never asks for anything is often the one who needs someone to sit down anyway.
- Supporting the helper sometimes means interrupting the helping, not waiting for an invitation.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Who is checking on the people doing the checking?*

STUDENTS EDITION

Trauma-Responsive Encounters for Young People

You Are More Than What Happened to You

01 “Nobody Notices When I’m Here”

A student with inconsistent attendance was finally asked, “We’ve missed you. What’s been going on?”

He responded, “Why does it matter? Nobody notices when I’m here anyway.”

Instead of discussing attendance immediately, the adult said, “I noticed.”

Two words. But the student looked up.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The adult began with belonging instead of beginning with the attendance policy.

What I Was Paying Attention To

They heard the need underneath his statement, not just the complaint on the surface.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that before some young people believe education matters, they need to believe they matter.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- “I noticed” can be a complete sentence, and a complete answer.
- I try to begin with belonging before I begin with policy.
- The need underneath a complaint is often the real conversation.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Who needs to hear, “I noticed you weren’t here”?*

02 “Everybody Thinks I’m the Bad Kid”

After another disciplinary referral, a student said, “Everybody already thinks I’m the bad kid.”

The mentor responded, “I don’t think you’re a bad kid.”

“Then why do I keep getting in trouble?”

“I think sometimes you’re making choices that create problems. But your choices aren’t your identity.”

The student grew quiet.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The mentor separated the person from the behavior, without pretending the behavior didn’t have consequences.

What I Was Paying Attention To

They maintained accountability while making sure it didn’t turn into shame.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that young people need to understand mistakes have consequences without believing mistakes define who they are.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Choices and identity aren’t the same thing, and I try to keep them separate out loud.
- Accountability doesn’t require shame to be effective.
- Sometimes the most important sentence is, “your choices aren’t your identity.”

Take a Moment to Reflect *Are our words correcting behavior, or creating identity?*

03 “I Don’t Know What I Want to Be”

A teenager said, “Everybody keeps asking what I’m going to do with my life. I don’t know.”

The mentor smiled. “At your age, you don’t have to know your whole life.”

“Really?”

“Really. Let’s figure out the next good step.”

The pressure visibly decreased.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The mentor reduced pressure that wasn’t actually necessary in that moment.

What I Was Paying Attention To

They met the student at the developmental stage he was actually in, instead of the one adults sometimes expect.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that hope doesn’t always require a ten year plan. Sometimes hope is simply discovering the next step.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Not every question needs a lifetime answer.
- “Let’s figure out the next good step” can relieve pressure a five year plan never could.
- I try to meet young people at the stage they’re actually in, not the one I expect.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Are we helping young people discover possibilities, or demanding certainty before they’re ready?*

CLERGY EDITION

Trauma-Responsive Encounters in Spiritual Care

When Presence Becomes Ministry

01 “Why Did God Let This Happen?”

After a sudden death, a grieving family member asked, “Chaplain, why did God let this happen?”

There were many theological responses the chaplain could have offered. Instead, he recognized that this might not actually be a request for a theological explanation.

He said, “I don’t have an answer that could make this loss hurt less. But I will stay here with you.”

The family member began to cry.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The chaplain resisted the pressure to explain the unexplainable, even though he likely had a theological answer ready.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He heard grief underneath the theological question, and answered the grief instead of the question.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that sometimes people asking “why” are really saying, “this hurts.”

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Not every question is actually a request for an answer.
- I try to let theology make room for lament instead of replacing it.
- “I will stay here with you” can matter more than any explanation I could offer.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Can our theology make room for lament?*

02 “I Don’t Want to Pray”

A person in crisis told the chaplain, “Please don’t pray for me.”

The chaplain responded, “Okay.”

No argument. No correction. No attempt to sneak prayer into the conversation. They continued talking.

Before leaving, the person said, “Thanks for respecting that.”

What Presence Looked Like That Day

Spiritual care began with respect, not with the chaplain’s own agenda for how the conversation should go.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He followed the person’s spiritual cues instead of his own, and let “okay” actually mean okay.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that the ministry of presence isn’t measured by how many prayers we say. Sometimes love looks like respecting someone’s no.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- “Okay” doesn’t need an asterisk or a follow up attempt.
- I try to follow spiritual cues instead of setting my own agenda.
- Respecting someone’s no can be its own form of ministry.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Can we remain fully pastoral when the person doesn’t want the spiritual intervention we hoped to offer?*

03 The Pastor Who Had No One to Pastor Him

A pastor had spent weeks caring for a grieving congregation. Funerals. Hospital visits. Counseling families. Phone calls. Prayer.

A chaplain asked, “How are you doing?”

The pastor immediately began talking about the congregation. The chaplain gently interrupted, “I know how they’re doing. I’m asking about you.”

The pastor fell silent. Then his eyes filled with tears. “I’m tired.”

For the next few minutes, the shepherd got permission to stop shepherding.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The chaplain saw the human being underneath the clergy role, and refused to let the deflection stand as the whole answer.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He noticed when service was becoming a way of avoiding one’s own needs, and gently redirected the question back to the person, not the role.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that spiritual leaders need places where they aren’t required to be spiritually strong for everyone else.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- “I’m asking about you” sometimes needs to be said twice.
- Service can become a way of avoiding my own needs, and I try to notice that in myself too.
- Even the shepherd needs permission to stop shepherding sometimes.

Take a Moment to Reflect *Who pastors the pastor?*

Walking Together

A classroom. A hospital room. A veterans' center. A disaster shelter. A school hallway. A church.

The environments change. The uniforms change. The responsibilities change. But one need keeps showing up in every single one of these stories: people need to know that they have been seen.

That's why these encounters were never really about having the perfect response. They're about learning to notice the moment. Presence asks, how am I showing up? Attunement asks, what might this person need from me right now?

Sometimes we speak. Sometimes we listen. Sometimes we help solve a practical problem. Sometimes we connect someone with additional support. Sometimes we pray, when prayer is welcomed. And sometimes we simply pull up a chair.

Whether I'm sitting with a student, a nurse, a veteran, a disaster survivor, a teacher, a pastor, a first responder, or a colleague, I don't have to become an expert in someone's pain to get better at being present with them.

Thank you for spending this time with me. I don't share these stories because I have every answer. I share them because every person in these pages, whether I sat with them myself or simply learned from their story, has taught me something about compassion, hope, and what it means to truly show up.

HEALING BEGINS WITH PRESENCE™

Practice Note: These stories span multiple professional settings. Some are drawn from real encounters and have been shortened and de-identified; others are composite teaching illustrations built in the same spirit, to protect confidentiality while teaching trauma-responsive principles. They do not provide medical, psychological, legal, or educational policy advice. Supportive practices should be used with informed consent, within the practitioner's training and scope, and alongside appropriate emergency, medical, behavioral health, supervisory, or spiritual-care resources when indicated.