

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”?*