

PRESENCE WORKS LLC™

A Founder's Story

The Wound That Became the Work

*How Childhood Trauma, Decades of Service,
and Post-Traumatic Growth Shaped Presence Works LLC™*

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THE WOUND THAT BECAME THE WORK

—
A MEMOIR OF
BREAKING,
BECOMING, AND
BUILDING BEAUTY
FROM WHAT
BROKE ME
—

*"There is
wisdom in every
wound. And sometimes,
the wound is the
way."*



For those who learned to read the room before they learned to read.

And for the helpers who carry the weight of others' worst days so that no one has to carry it alone.

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."

Psalm 147:3

A NOTE BEFORE WE BEGIN

This booklet is not a resume. It is not a sales brochure. It is not a list of credentials or accomplishments organized to impress you.

It is a story about a wound that became a work. It is a story about a child who learned to survive by watching, reading, and adapting and about how those same capacities, refined through decades of service, suffering, faith, and deliberate reflection, eventually became a framework for helping others feel seen, safe, and supported.

The story is honest. Some of it is difficult. All of it is true.

I do not share it to invite your sympathy. I share it because I believe the people who most need to understand the work of Presence Works LLC™ first responders, peer supporters, chaplains, leaders, and helping professionals deserve to know where it came from. Not from a classroom. Not from a training manual. From a life.

What you are about to read is that life its wounds, its service, its costs, its reckonings, and ultimately its redemption into a calling and a company that exists to do one thing:

*To equip helpers to show up with presence, meet people where they are,
and respond with compassion in the moments that matter most.*

Healing begins with presence.

Chaplain Kelvin Foster

CHAPTER ONE

The Room Taught Me First

Learning to read the atmosphere before I had words for what I was reading

A child in a house learns quickly that safety does not always come from doors or walls.

Sometimes safety comes from reading a tone before the words arrive. From hearing footsteps at the end of the hall before they reach the door. From watching a face begin to change before it hardens. From noticing a silence that is different from other silences heavier, more charged, full of something about to break.

Long before I had language for any of this, I had learned to study the atmosphere. I had learned to read the room.

This was not a gift I chose. It was a survival strategy I developed. The distinction matters, and I will return to it throughout this booklet, because understanding the difference between a survival adaptation and a genuine gift is at the heart of everything Presence Works LLC™ was built to address.

The home I grew up in was not a safe place in the way homes are supposed to be safe. It was unpredictable in the way that environments shaped by volatility, shame, and emotional instability are always unpredictable. I could not always know what I would walk into. I could not always predict what would be required of me emotionally. I could not count on steadiness.

What I could do was watch.

I became very good at noticing what others missed, because noticing was how I stayed safe.

I watched posture. I watched eyes. I watched how someone entered a room. I listened to the rhythm of breathing. I measured silence against what came before it. I tracked emotional temperature the way a sailor tracks weather not because it was interesting, but because the wrong read could cost something.

I learned to suppress my own feelings because expressing them felt dangerous. Vulnerability created exposure. Exposure created risk. So I became very still inside even when things were not still around me. I learned to appear regulated long before I understood what regulation actually was.

Researchers who study childhood adversity call this hypervigilance. The ACEs study, which measures Adverse Childhood Experiences, uses a score of zero to ten. My score is nine. That number carries weight. It represents not one wound but many layered over time, each one teaching the nervous system that the world is not reliably safe, and that the self must remain constantly alert.

I did not know any of that as a child. I only knew that watching worked. Adapting worked. Reading the room worked.

What I did not yet understand was what it would cost.

CHAPTER TWO

What Survival Gives and What It Takes

The strengths and the costs of learning to live on high alert

Survival adaptations are not failures of character. They are intelligent responses to genuinely difficult environments. The child who learns to scan for threat is not broken. The child is resourceful. The child is doing exactly what a nervous system under sustained stress is designed to do.

But survival adaptations have a cost. And that cost does not end when the danger does.

What my early childhood gave me was a set of capacities that would follow me for the rest of my life, into every room I entered, every crisis I responded to, every person in pain I sat beside. Those capacities included:

Pattern Recognition

An unusual ability to detect distress in others before they named it. To notice the shift in a person's affect, the flatness in their voice, the way their posture changed under the weight of something they hadn't yet said.

Emotional Steadiness

The ability to remain calm in the presence of chaos, grief, or crisis. Not because I was unaffected, but because I had spent years learning to hold still when the environment around me was not.

Attuned Presence

A deep sensitivity to what a person needed in a given moment. Not the solution they were supposed to need, but what they actually

needed — space, silence, acknowledgment, or simply someone willing to stay.

These are real gifts. I do not diminish them. They have served me, and through me, they have served thousands of others.

But they also came with a shadow.

The same vigilance that helped me read a room also made it very difficult to rest inside one. The same emotional steadiness that made me effective in crisis made it hard for others and sometimes for me to know when I was struggling. The same sensitivity to others' pain made me slow to attend to my own.

I learned to carry weight quietly. I was good at it. Too good at it.

The technical language for what developed over the years is Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or Complex PTSD. Unlike a single-incident trauma, Complex PTSD results from prolonged, repeated exposure to adverse conditions, particularly during childhood. It shapes the nervous system at a foundational level. It affects how a person regulates emotion, relates to others, perceives threat, and understands themselves.

I share this not for sympathy but for clarity. Every principle in the PRESENCE™ Framework every element of the ATTUNE™ Modality was eventually tested against the reality of my own inner life. I did not build these frameworks from theory alone. I built them from the inside out.

What looked like discernment was first born in danger. Understanding that distinction is not self-pity. It is the beginning of genuine healing.

CHAPTER THREE

Called Toward the Wounded

A life that kept moving in one direction

Looking back across a life, it is possible to see a thread that was not always visible while I was living it.

I did not plan a career in service. I did not sit down at seventeen with a map and trace a route from firefighter to Navy Corpsman to VA case manager to hospice volunteer to chaplain to trauma-responsive trainer. The path did not look like a plan. It looked like a series of callings, each one pulling me toward places where people were in pain, disoriented, afraid, or alone.

Only later did I understand why I kept ending up in those places.

The child who learned to be present with danger became the adult who could be present in the middle of it. The young man who had learned to read a room without flinching could walk into a burning building, or a crisis scene, or a VA waiting room, or a hospice room, and remain steady, attentive, and useful.

The survival adaptation had found a home.

A LIFE OF SERVICE — THE VOCATIONAL THREAD

YEARS	ROLE	WHAT IT TAUGHT ME
1981–1988	Firefighter EMT	People in crisis need steadiness, not urgency
1988–1997	U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsman	The body and the mind are not separate in trauma
1997	Korean Air 801 Disaster Response, Guam	Structure and presence save lives after catastrophe

1997–2000s	VA Case Manager	<i>Systems can re-traumatize the people they are meant to serve</i>
Ongoing	VA Hospice Volunteer	<i>Presence at the end of life is the purest form of ministry</i>
Ongoing	Board Certified Chaplain	<i>Spiritual care and psychological care are not opposed</i>
Ongoing	Trauma-Responsive Trainer	<i>What heals people can be taught, structured, and scaled</i>

Each of these roles taught me something that could not have been learned in a classroom. Each one deepened my understanding of what human beings need in their worst moments. Each one refined my ability to recognize distress beneath its disguises beneath anger, silence, control, deflection, and bravado.

One moment stands out above all others as a turning point in my understanding of what peer support could mean.

In 1997, Korean Air Flight 801 crashed on approach to the airport in Guam, killing 228 of the 254 people on board. I was among 400 Navy Corpsmen mobilized to respond. We were trained by the NTSB and American Red Cross and assigned to provide peer support to a military community of 35,000 people affected by the disaster.

I saw, in that response, what structured, trauma-informed presence could do that no amount of urgency or advice could accomplish. I watched people begin to stabilize not when they were given answers, but when they were given steady, compassionate, attuned company. I watched the quality of someone's presence their regulation, their attunement, their willingness to simply stay do more for a person in crisis than any information ever could.

I did not have language for it yet. But I filed it away in the part of me that was always watching, always learning.

I did not merely choose helping professions. I had been moving toward wounded people my whole life.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Wound and the Work

When the inner life and the outer calling become entangled

There is a version of this story that would be easier to tell.

In that version, a wounded child grows up, finds his calling, serves faithfully, and the wounds heal quietly in the background as the work proceeds. In that version, the healing and the service run on parallel tracks, each one clean and orderly.

That is not my story.

In my story, the wound and the work became entangled. The same vigilance that made me effective in crisis also made it hard for me to rest. The same capacity for presence that allowed me to sit with others in their worst moments made it difficult for me to acknowledge when I was sitting in mine. Service brought meaning genuine, deep, sustaining meaning but it also brought exposure. Years of exposure. Cumulative, layered, unprocessed exposure.

First responders have a phrase for what builds up over years of service: the weight of the work. It is not one call that breaks a person. It is the accumulated weight of many calls, many scenes, many silences driven home alone, many nights when sleep does not come easily, many years of carrying what has been witnessed without adequate space to set it down.

I carried that weight. I carried my own original wounds alongside it. And I carried the particular burden that many helpers carry: the belief that because you are the one who helps others, you do not get to need help yourself.

One of the most dangerous beliefs in first responder culture is the belief that strength means not needing support. It does not. It means knowing when to ask for it.

Chronic health challenges compounded the picture. The body keeps its own record, and mine was keeping a thorough one.

The reckoning came, as reckonings do, not all at once but gradually. Through moments of honest reflection. Through conversations with people who told me the truth. Through the discipline of chaplaincy training, which requires a kind of self-examination that most professional training does not. Through the slow, uncomfortable process of understanding the difference between what I had learned as survival and what was possible through actual healing.

I began to see that what I called calm was sometimes suppression. That what I called strength was sometimes endurance past the point of wisdom. That what I called discernment had roots in fear as much as wisdom, and that the two needed to be untangled carefully.

This is not a comfortable chapter to write. It is also the most important one.

Because everything that Presence Works LLC™ teaches about the difference between survival-driven response and regulated, compassionate presence all of it I first had to learn about myself.

CHAPTER FIVE

Post-Traumatic Growth

When suffering becomes something other than loss

Post-traumatic growth is not a cliché. It is not a silver lining imposed on suffering to make it more bearable. It is not triumphalism.

Post-traumatic growth, as researchers Tedeschi and Calhoun define it, is the positive psychological change that emerges from the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances. It is not that the suffering was good. It is that, in the aftermath of suffering through reflection, community, faith, and time something new becomes possible that would not have been possible without it.

For me, post-traumatic growth did not arrive as a single moment of clarity. It arrived as a slow accumulation of understanding. It arrived as I began to tell the truth about my own history rather than managing it from a distance. It arrived as I stopped performing invulnerability and started practicing the kind of honest, grounded presence I had been trying to teach others.

Greater Humility

I stopped believing that my way of carrying pain was superior to others'. I understood that my apparent strength had costs I had not fully acknowledged.

Greater Compassion

Having faced my own wounds honestly, I found I could sit with others in theirs with a different quality of presence not as someone who had solved the problem of suffering, but as someone still in the work of it.

Clearer Calling

The work was no longer something I did to be useful. It became something I did because it was the truest expression of who I was and what I had been formed to offer.

Deeper Language

Years of lived experience, suffering, service, and study gave me more precise, more honest, more transferable language for what actually helps people in distress. That language became the PRESENCE™ Framework and the ATTUNE™ Modality.

This growth was not achieved alone. It was achieved through faith, through the kind of honest spiritual examination that my tradition demands, through clinical training and peer supervision, through relationships with people who were willing to tell me the truth, and through the slow discipline of learning to receive the same care I had spent a career offering others.

Orthodox Christian theology speaks of theosis the process by which a person is gradually transformed, through grace and cooperation with God, into a fuller expression of their humanity. It is not a sudden event. It is a lifelong journey. It involves suffering, and it involves the redemption of suffering into something that could not have existed without it.

I do not know a better framework for what happened to me than that.

The gift is not the trauma. The gift is what God, grace, discipline, service, and growth brought forth from it.

CHAPTER SIX

Why Presence Matters

The core insight that changed everything

There is a moment I keep returning to in my mind. Not one moment, exactly more like a pattern that I began to recognize across hundreds of encounters, in firehouses and VA corridors and hospice rooms and disaster response sites and chaplaincy visits and peer support conversations.

The pattern was this:

The people who helped the most were not always the most knowledgeable. They were not always the most experienced. They were not always the ones with the most resources or the clearest protocols.

They were the ones who knew how to stay.

They were the ones who could enter a room where something terrible had happened and remain present without flinching, without rushing toward resolution, without imposing their own discomfort onto the person in pain. They were the ones whose nervous systems communicated, without words: you are safe with me. I am not afraid of what you are carrying. I am not going anywhere.

In the language of Polyvagal Theory the neuroscience of safety developed by Dr. Stephen Porges this is called co-regulation. One regulated nervous system can help another nervous system shift from a state of threat into a state of safety. Before a word is spoken. Before any intervention is made. Before any resource is offered.

The quality of the presence is itself the intervention.

People begin to heal not when they are given the right answer, but when they experience the right presence safe, steady, unhurried, and genuinely attentive.

This understanding did not come from a textbook. It came from decades of observation, from my own experience of what helped and what did not, from the moments I got it right and the moments I got it wrong, from watching what happened in a room when a genuinely regulated, compassionate person showed up versus what happened when a well-meaning but anxious or distracted one did.

The science confirmed what I had already learned through experience. The neuroscience of attachment, developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, showed that human beings need a secure base a stable, trustworthy presence from which they can safely explore their own distress. The research of Dr. Daniel Siegel in Interpersonal Neurobiology demonstrated that human nervous systems influence one another continuously, and that the presence of a regulated, attuned person can literally shift the biological state of someone in distress.

Every first responder, every peer supporter, every chaplain, every organizational leader who sits with someone in crisis is either providing that regulated, attuned presence or they are not. And the difference is not incidental. It is everything.

This is why presence matters.

This is why Presence Works LLC™ exists.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Development of PRESENCE™ and ATTUNE™

How a lifetime became a transferable framework

I want to be honest about how PRESENCE™ and ATTUNE™ were developed, because it matters to the integrity of the work.

They were not invented in a seminar. They were not assembled from other people's research and repackaged under new names. They were not created to fill a market gap, although they do fill one.

They were distilled. They are the distillation of a lifetime.

As a child

I learned to scan for danger. I learned that the quality of another person's presence their tone, their steadiness, their availability determined whether a room was safe.

As a first responder

I learned how people behave under acute stress. I learned that the most effective helpers were regulated, clear, and fully present not urgent, not anxious, not performative.

As a corpsman and case manager

I learned how suffering hides beneath anger, silence, numbness, and control. I learned that helping someone requires meeting them where they actually are, not where you wish they were.

As a chaplain

I learned that meaning-making is not a luxury in the face of suffering. It is a necessity. And that spiritual care, when offered with humility and permission, can reach places that clinical care alone cannot.

As a man with my own wounds

I learned that information alone does not heal people. People begin to heal when they experience safety, steadiness, dignity, and genuine compassionate connection.

Over time, these observations crystallized into two related truths that I could not stop returning to:

First: how we show up matters. Not merely what we do, but the quality of self we bring into the room. Our regulation. Our groundedness. Our willingness to be fully present rather than merely professionally present.

Second: people can only be helped well when we meet them where they truly are not where we assume they should be, not where they would be if the situation were different, but exactly where they are in this moment, in this state, with this history.

From those two truths came the frameworks.

PRESENCE™	<i>How We Show Up — The Doctrine of the Practitioner</i>
P — Prepared	Entering each encounter with a regulated nervous system, self-awareness, and clarity of purpose
R — Regulated	Nervous system regulation as the non-negotiable foundation of all effective peer support
E — Engaged	Full, undivided, non-distracted attendance to the person in front of you
S — Safe	Creating physical, relational, and psychological safety as the first order of the encounter
E — Empathic	Feeling with, not merely for the capacity to be genuinely moved by another's experience
N — Non-Judgmental	A disciplined, active practice of holding one's own reactions without allowing them to shape the response
C — Consistent	Predictability and reliability as the foundation of trust
E — Ethical	Clear boundaries, scope of practice, and the container that makes safe care possible

ATTUNE™ <i>How We Meet People Where They Are — The Applied Method</i>	
A — Approach	Intentional, non-threatening contact that communicates availability without pressure
T — Tune In	Active, multi-channel listening to what is said, how it is said, and what is not said at all
T — Trust	The ongoing relational work of becoming a temporary secure base for the person in distress
U — Understand	Grasping not just the content of the experience but the meaning the person assigns to it
N — Normalize	Communicating that their response is a normal human reaction to abnormal levels of stress
E — Empower	Restoring agency and self-efficacy walking alongside rather than rescuing or solving

These are not techniques I invented. They are truths I lived, named, and made transferable so that others do not have to learn them the way I did.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Why Presence Works LLC™ Exists

The institutional expression of a personal redemption

Presence Works LLC™ was not founded because I saw a market opportunity.

It was founded because I kept encountering the same problem across every context in which I served: good people who genuinely wanted to help other people in pain but had never been given a practical, trauma-responsive, field-deployable framework for doing so.

I saw peer supporters who cared deeply but grew dysregulated in the presence of someone else's distress and did not know what to do with that. I saw chaplains who possessed genuine compassion but lacked a structured method for translating it into effective, reproducible care. I saw first responders who ran toward every physical crisis with practiced competence and yet had no language, no protocol, and no community of support for the emotional and psychological weight they carried home from those same crises.

I saw organizations that wanted to build peer support programs but had no coherent framework for what peer support actually is, what it requires of practitioners, or how to build it sustainably over time.

Presence Works LLC™ exists to close that gap.

Most programs teach people to recognize symptoms. Presence Works™ teaches people what to do in the moment, under pressure, without a clinical license, in the first minutes that determine everything.

The PRESENCE™ Framework is not a theory. It is a doctrine of self a disciplined practice of bringing a regulated, prepared, ethically grounded, genuinely attuned presence into every supportive encounter. It can be learned. It can be practiced. It can be evaluated and refined over time.

The ATTUNE™ Modality is not a script. It is a set of learnable, adaptable relational skills that guide a peer support encounter from first contact through closure and follow-up. It works in a firehouse, a hospital corridor, a dispatch center, a crisis scene, and a chaplaincy visit. It translates across contexts because it is built on the consistent foundation of what human beings need when they are suffering.

Together, these two frameworks represent what I know what I have spent more than forty years learning through service, suffering, training, and reflection organized into a form that can be taught, certified, implemented, and sustained.

The populations we serve include first responders across fire, EMS, and law enforcement; healthcare professionals; emergency dispatchers; chaplains; peer support teams; organizational leaders; and educators. These are the people who carry other people's worst days. These are the people who most need to be equipped and most deserve to be supported.

Presence Works LLC™ exists for them.

CLOSING REFLECTION

Healing Begins with Presence

What this long journey has taught me

I began this booklet with a child in a room, learning to read the atmosphere before he had words for what he was reading.

I end it with a man who has spent more than four decades learning what that early capacity was for.

It was not merely for survival. That was only the beginning.

It was for the firefighter in the station who needed someone to sit with him after a bad call but did not have the language to ask. It was for the veteran in the VA waiting room who had given up expecting anyone to actually see him. It was for the nurse in the middle of a pandemic who was drowning in grief she had no space to process. It was for the dispatcher who heard the worst moment of someone's life every single shift and went home to silence. It was for the chaplain in the hospice room who needed to know that their presence their simple, steady, unhurried presence was enough.

It was for all of them. And in being for them, it became more than survival.

It became a calling.

What began as survival became service. What was once hypervigilance had to be redeemed into discernment. What was once emotional suppression had to be transformed into compassionate, regulated presence.

I carry an ACEs score of nine. I carry a diagnosis of Complex PTSD. I carry decades of critical incident response, hospice ministry, disaster relief, chaplaincy, and trauma-responsive care. I carry the weight of a life that has known deep pain and deep purpose and I have learned, slowly and imperfectly and with a great deal of help, that those two things are not as separate as I once believed them to be.

Presence Works LLC™ was born from that long journey. It exists because people in pain do not only need answers. They need someone who knows how to notice, how to stay, how to care, and how to help them take the next step toward healing.

The child who learned to read the room in order to survive eventually became the man who teaches others to enter rooms with steadiness, dignity, and compassion not because danger awaits, but because a person does.

That is the wound that became the work.

And the work continues.

Healing begins with presence.

Chaplain Kelvin Foster

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chaplain Kelvin Foster, BCC, BCCTR, DAAETS, is the Founder and Executive Director of Presence Works LLC™, a national trauma-responsive peer support training and certification organization.

His professional background spans more than four decades and includes service as a Firefighter EMT (1981–1988), U.S. Navy Hospital Corpsman, VA Case Manager, VA Hospice volunteer, Board Certified Chaplain, and regional disaster spiritual care leader for the American Red Cross across central southwest Florida and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

He was among 400 corpsmen mobilized following the Korean Air Flight 801 crash in Guam in 1997, providing peer support to a military community of 35,000 and witnessing firsthand the transformative power of structured, trauma-informed presence in the aftermath of mass casualty events.

Chaplain Foster holds board certifications in chaplaincy (BCC), trauma response (BCCTR), and is a Diplomat of the American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress (DAAETS). He currently serves as Chaplain to the North River Fire District and is affiliated with the Tampa Bay Regional Critical Incident Team, UCF Restores Redline Rescue, the Federation of Fire Chaplains, the Florida Health and Safety Collaborative, and several regional Level I and II Trauma Center chaplaincy programs.

He is the author of *A Pocket Guide for Peer Support Team Members of First Responders and Helping Professionals*, available on Amazon.

He lives in southwest Florida.

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