The Practice of Presence:

Nurturing Deep Connections as a Chaplain

By Gil Fronsdal

Casino Sign: You have to be present to win
Chaplaincy Sign: You have to be present to connect
Buddhist Sign: You have to be present to be free

In Buddhist teachings, being present through mindfulness is fundamental and profound. In chaplaincy, being present through the practice of presence is the primary means for the chaplaincy relationship. The chaplaincy practice of presence often has a broader, richer meaning than the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. While it includes being mindful of what one can see, hear, and physically feel, the practice of presence includes attention to what is not easily experienced through our ordinary senses. This can consist of attention to the general emotional and spiritual atmosphere in the chaplaincy setting. It is recognizing the changing characteristics of the relationship between the chaplain and those the chaplain is with. It can also include sensing whatever presence of the sacred—God, love, or emptiness in Buddhist traditions — that might appear during the chaplaincy encounter.

Because chaplains are associated with the religious and spiritual realms, their presence can infuse a sense of the sacred into their interactions with those they serve. Their presence might evoke religious memories, associations, and deep emotions in those they meet. Sometimes, a chaplaincy encounter can touch into a transcendent sense of the present because of the palpable spiritual life of those they interact with. For the chaplain to engage in the practice of presence, is to be attuned to all these dimensions of the encounter.

Key aspects of practicing presence are being attentive and non-reactive. It's about offering attention and a caring presence untainted by personal judgments, fears, or biases. Like a parent transmits calm and ease so children feel safe, chaplains, when calm and attentive, foster an
environment where others can relax and trust. Calm presence, in turn, enables a greater heartfelt connection between the chaplain and the patient.

Self-awareness becomes paramount to achieving non-reactive attention. Chaplains navigate their own biases and preconceptions by dedicating about 50% of their attention to introspection. Recognizing their personal biases, chaplains can be careful to avoid these prejudices influencing their interaction with anyone they meet.

Being present involves more than being physically there; it requires adapting to the other person's world, attuning oneself to their needs, and establishing a genuine human connection. Adjusting one's demeanor, positioning, and responses helps create a sense of rapport and trust.

Presence encompasses non-reactive attention, a deep connection to others, attunement, and self-awareness. It involves profound respect and appreciation for the dignity and value of each person encountered. In the healthcare setting, this is particularly vital in those times when respect and appreciation of a patient are lacking.

The chaplain's role extends beyond merely being present; it includes creating an environment where individuals feel heard, known, and respected.

Furthermore, a chaplain's practice of presence may include attuning themselves to both the individuals and their sense of what is sacred or heartfelt. Such attunement amplifies the richness of presence.

Maintaining this deep presence requires self-monitoring and expertise in recognizing internal tensions or reactions that might hinder authentic connections. With the practice of presence, tensions are felt without letting them interfere. When their reactions are strong, a chaplain can be one’s own chaplain through the compassion they evoke.

In conclusion, the practice of presence as a chaplain involves embodying non-reactive attention and self-awareness, establishing deep connections, respecting who they serve, and supporting
the spirituality and wholeness of individuals in need. It is a practice of presence to support the welfare and emotional health of those seeking solace, healing, and understanding.