

BEST PRACTICE ARTICLES

Chaplain, Know Thyself: Practices for Deepened Self-Awareness

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Chaplains who practice the skills of self-awareness become mindful of who they are, of what they do and say (and don't say), of how they are perceived, and of the contexts they serve in. Self-awareness fosters compassion and true presence and helps chaplains honor, regulate, and tend to their own care and recovery. The chaplain's commitment to "do no harm" applies to them as well as to those for whom they care. An ongoing practice of self-awareness can help chaplains to remember not to sacrifice themselves or ignore the signs of potential harm to their body, soul, and spirit. This article offers a "how to" framework for self-awareness, focusing on knowing one's identity, expanding self-awareness through others, practicing boundaries, and engaging self-care and recovery.

I began my chaplaincy journey twenty-five years ago with a local law enforcement agency in Los Angeles County, California. My duties included ride-alongs with officers, making death notifications, assisting with domestic disputes, and helping individuals experiencing mental health challenges. The focus for care was on members of the agency (many of whom previously served in the military), but it also extended to those in the greater community they served.

Early on in my time as a chaplain I became familiar with a local neighbor named Judy (not her real name) who had repeated calls for service. She experienced regular manic episodes and struggled with excessive drinking. During these calls I had the opportunity to get to know and build rapport with her. One day the Watch Commander asked me to assist them because Judy had barricaded herself in her home and was threatening to take her life. Once on scene, I spent hours speaking with her through the front door, encouraging her to come outside so we could connect her to support and care. She eventually opened the door and lunged at me. Before I was fully aware of what was happening, the officer who was standing next to me pushed me behind him to shield me from her. My focus was on the conversation with Judy and her well-being, so much so that I was unaware of my own physical safety. It is not uncommon for spiritual care providers, who focus on the person in front of them, to disregard their own internal

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and external awareness. I hadn't anticipated the potential range of extreme emotions she might direct towards me as she opened the door. I didn't calculate how close I was to the front door and how physically vulnerable that made me. I didn't look around for a safe place for me to step aside to protect myself when she exited. I didn't consult with the officers. I think back on this story now and cringe at my lack of awareness. I also realize how much my self-awareness has grown in the twenty-five years since. Today I see self-awareness as foundational to the work of chaplaincy. According to psychiatrist Ramakrishnan Parameshwaran, "Chaplain self-awareness enables mindfulness when a chaplain is working with a client. Mindfulness enables a chaplain to pay full attention to the client's 'facial expressions, body language, and emotional stories.'"¹ In this way, chaplains become more aware of their expressions and what they are communicating non-verbally. Chaplains who learn to be mindful of not just their surroundings but also of who they are, what their capacity is, what grounds them (as well as who is in front of them for spiritual care) are setting themselves up for sustainability, wellness, and longevity in chaplaincy.

Before responding to the call involving Judy, I could have spent thirty seconds in my car on a centering prayer or grounding practice, attending to my breathing. A centering prayer reminds me of the care and presence of God with me and that I don't have to carry the weight of this work on my own and makes space for me to be aware of what I am feeling and experiencing in my heart and mind, including how my body is holding stress. I can slow down my thoughts and allow for action rather than reaction by attuning myself to what I am feeling (anxiety, fear, peace), what I am about to enter, and things to take note of when I arrive on scene. Rather than placing myself in potential danger and shifting the officer's attention from Judy to me, I might have stood behind the officer before she opened the door, prepared for her possible anger, and reminded myself not to take her emotions personally. Practicing self-awareness as a deeper self-knowledge would have helped me to be grounded in the situation and to more effectively care for others and myself.

Why Self-Awareness Matters

Self-awareness has helped me to know who I am apart from what I do, helped me to provide holistic spiritual care, and guides me during times of stress. Chaplains who practice the skills of self-awareness become mindful of who they are, of what they do and say (and don't say), of how they are perceived, and of the contexts in which they serve. This is more than an intention. It is a skill that expands over time. In the above story, I had

¹ Ramakrishnan Parameshwaran, "Theory and Practice of Chaplain's Spiritual Care Process: A Psychiatrist's Experiences of Chaplaincy and Conceptualizing Trans-personal Model of Mindfulness," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 57, no.1 (2015): 24-25. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.148511>

self-awareness in knowing that I was entering into a complicated situation. The hope is to expand and grow that self-awareness. There is always more to be attentive to in a situation and in ourselves. Practices like surveying the place or body scans can grow understanding of what is unfolding. Self-awareness fosters compassion and true presence and helps chaplains honor, regulate, and tend to their care and recovery. The chaplain's commitment to "do no harm"² applies to themselves as well as to those for whom they care. An ongoing practice of self-awareness can help chaplains remember not to sacrifice themselves or ignore the signs of potential harm to their body, soul, and spirit. Chaplains can cultivate both internal self-awareness (through a sense of self) and external self-awareness (an honest understanding of how one is perceived by others).³ What follows is a framework for self-awareness, including practices that can further sustainability and growth for chaplains.

A Framework for Self-Awareness

Self-Awareness and Identity

A self-awareness framework begins with knowing oneself. It is important for chaplains to know why they are chaplains, what makes them unique as individuals and as chaplains, and how they embody and communicate that uniqueness. Why are you a chaplain? The answer to that question is foundational. Simon Sinek, in his "Golden Circle" TED Talk, discusses how people may know what they do and how but not necessarily why.⁴ Knowing the why—both the motivation and calling—is key for chaplains. When chaplains recognize why they do what they do, they can gain and expand insight into their commitment to healing and transformation for themselves and the communities they serve. Knowing the why lends strength, resilience, satisfaction, and joy to the daily rigors of chaplaincy. Knowing the why helps chaplains ground themselves in who they understand themselves to uniquely be. Intentional reflection and practices for knowing our identity can grow self-awareness including external self-awareness, how we are perceived by and engaged with those around us. This sense of self is not static but is continually evolving. Identity consists of and is formed by family of origin, faith/spirituality, personality, abilities and limitations, strengths and vulnerabilities, relationships, cultures, and contexts, experiences and stories, preferences and passions, etc. When I became a chaplain, I was aware that I was an extroverted white Christian woman pastor in her 20s, living in the multicultural city region of Los Angeles, and serving as a chaplain in a city

2 The Hippocratic Oath includes a promise for medical professionals "first, do no harm." In law enforcement, there is a commitment for chaplains to be assets, not liabilities for the officers they are with on scene. In chaplain codes of ethics (which vary from context to context), chaplains commit to not misusing their authority and office and to facilitate resources and care rather than harm.

3 Tasha Eurich, "What Self-Awareness Really Is (and How to Cultivate It)," *Harvard Business Review*, January 4, 2018, <https://hbr.org/2018/01/what-self-awareness-really-is-and-how-to-cultivate-it>.

4 Simon Sinek, "How Great Leaders Inspire Action," TED Talk (TEDx Puget Sound), September 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action.

police department that was majority men. I navigated a space in which I didn't see myself reflected. Instead of getting lost in that context, I found ways to fully embody my uniqueness in a way that helped me to be part of the "family" rather than an outsider.

As chaplains seek to understand themselves, they become more cognizant of their strengths, vulnerabilities, and liabilities as well as the lenses, perceptions, and biases utilized to interpret the world around them and the people they engage. For example, growing up, I frequently moved homes and cities. The upside to this is that I found ways to easily adapt and pivot to new places and experiences. The downside to this experience was that establishing roots and developing trust took more time and effort. This flexibility and adaptability have cultivated curiosity, an eagerness to learn and grow, and adaptability within the fluid and ever-changing contexts and demands of my chaplaincy vocation. This is part of my identity and experience in the world. Chaplains who understand themselves grow their willingness to understand others and see them for who they uniquely are.

Self-Awareness Through Others

Humans help each other to be self-aware, serving as truth tellers and voices of accountability. Each person's unique lenses and perspectives are not complete. We need each other to see more fully, including helping one another to see blind spots and to grow. Listening to others helps us to change the seats of our understanding. We need relationships and to be human means we are rooted in each other. Relationships lead us as we navigate our sense of self, including our agency and voice. We honor our autonomy and protection while also being open to being known and seen. Our sense of self and community are interwoven. We live in the tension of both. We honor agency and distinctions as well as communion and commonalities.⁵

The African concept of *Ubuntu* is instructive here: "I need you to be fully me and you need me to be fully you." Relationships help people to be more fully who they are meant to be. I lived in Sonoma County, which is known for its redwood trees, some of the strongest and tallest in the world. Their strength comes from their shallow, interconnected root system. In other words, the massive trees draw strength from one another. It is the same for us. We need one another to reach our full potential, to be sustained, to grow, to be strong, to be brave, and to thrive. We do so together. Not all relationships contribute to flourishing. It is important for chaplains to identify the relationships that are needed for grounding and mutuality. Connections with other chaplains and others in one's life enable chaplains to know themselves and to offer integrated and holistic care. Relationships and connecting with others remind

⁵ Herbert Anderson, "Soulness and the Liminal Work of Soulcare," *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 37 (2017): 13-14. <https://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/view/463/447>.

us that (in some respect/ways) we are like all others, like some others, and like no others. We are like all others in that our lives have value and worth and we share humanity. We are like some others in places of commonalities and points of connection such as culture or location. And we are like no other in that each person is unique. Chaplains hold all three in tension: shared humanity, commonalities, and uniqueness. The world is beautifully diverse, and it can be challenging to know how to navigate it well. We can learn about ourselves within the context of relationships, in connection with others. Others can be like mirrors, helping to see oneself from a different perspective. Discovering more of who one is within connections to others is revelatory, but it is important to know the distinction between oneself and others.

External Self-Awareness and Boundaries

Chaplains are more than what they do and need to guard taking on what doesn't belong to them. Without boundaries chaplains can be overly impacted by others' reactions, absorb trauma, and reel from the chaos. External self-awareness and reading the context are crucial in maintaining boundaries. Chaplains are commonly viewed as the embodiment of experiences with suffering and/or death. When I walked onto a school campus wearing my chaplain jacket to provide a death notification, people would say, "here comes the grim reaper." It is a recognition that they know something bad has happened. Chaplains are also often seen as representatives of religious authority and that can include representing someone who caused harm. Pain and anger may be personalized towards a chaplain regardless of the situation and even though that chaplain is not the source of the original hurt. The chaplain is also seen as someone who brings comfort.

Shortly after being introduced as the new chaplain, a police department member came up to me, and said: "I give you six months and you'll be gone." I didn't know this person's name, and I am not sure if they knew mine. They didn't know who I was. However, they had determined that I was not welcomed or wanted within the department and that I didn't have what it takes to last there. Maybe they said this because they had never had a chaplain in the department before. Maybe they had a previous bad experience with a chaplain or a religious leader. Maybe they were just skeptical. I reminded myself at that moment of my call, why I was there, and that this person didn't know who I was or what I was carrying. I also acknowledged that I didn't know what that person carried and what led them to say what they did to me.

After experiences like these, I take time to do self-talk, reminding myself that this is not personal to me even though it feels personal. These emotions are not mine to carry or internalize. However, what they may trigger in

me is. Awareness helps chaplains to honor themselves, practice self-care, self-compassion, self-kindness, and self-management, and know how to separate themselves from people's emotions. It helps them shake it off.

Self-Awareness, Self-Care, and Recovery

Chaplains are exposed to primary and secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and moral injury. Chaplains can also experience groundedness, sustainability, and recover from the exhaustion and trauma they experience. Recovery is an ongoing reality and commitment. There is hope for sustainability, transformation, and healing. The time and effort invested in knowing oneself serves chaplains as they better recognize the impact of being present with people during crisis and after. In early January 2025, my community of Pasadena/Altadena experienced a once in a lifetime windstorm, sparking a fire that destroyed 90% of Altadena's structures: including homes, businesses, houses of worship, and schools. I responded as a chaplain and neighbor. I prepare for events like this through collaborative drills and mutual aid. Listening to my heart and mind helped me to prepare, respond, and recover.

A visual that helps me is what I call the sponge practice. After each incident or call I respond to, I visualize myself as a sponge. I recognize all that I have absorbed and that I am carrying. I feel the weight of the emotions, not all my own. I recall the stories I heard and images I saw. Now I picture myself squeezing that sponge and releasing all that is being held. When a sponge becomes weighted down with water it is heavy and unable to absorb anymore. And if left in that state, the sponge becomes moldy. In releasing what I am holding onto, I take time to name what I am carrying, recognize what is not mine to hold onto, and then choose to release and let go. Recovery doesn't mean that I disregard what is said or done, but it is knowing when to consider or reflect or recognize when someone might be airing out frustrations and fear not connected with me, like my "I'll give you six months" story.

Chaplains use action-reflection-action to develop their spiritual care skills, especially for being present.⁶ When responding to calls for care, chaplains can utilize this approach by taking time to reflect on a particular experience of providing spiritual care, including the interactions and behaviors, and after reflecting adapt those responses. This is not for the purpose of critiquing or being hard on oneself but rather for understanding and learning from the interaction. This approach helps one to understand what happened, including the response, and can lead to integrated and sustained care and wellness. In this assessment, curiosity is cultivated and awareness of the conscious and subconscious thoughts and behaviors as well as needs and resources are revealed. Taking time to reflect after offering care helps chaplains to be cognizant of themselves and the needs of those around them. Earlier it

⁶ Rev. Anton Boisen developed this approach seventy-five years ago and it is still part of the core curriculum for Clinical Pastoral Education.

was noted that chaplains are instruments of care. This can be also understood as the chaplain being both the embodiment and conduit for care while also receiving and experiencing it. Chaplaincy is a long-term journey, like a marathon, that requires preparation and care. Practice needs to be consistent, rooted in a rhythm that sustains and grounds the chaplain for the journey. The action-reflection-action approach can assist in developing the endurance required for chaplaincy.

Embodied Self-Awareness

Bodies absorb the intensity and stress of crises and critical incidents. The body indeed “keeps the score,” and so does the heart.⁷ In responding to call outs and requests for service, including riding in vehicles with lights and sirens to a scene, I have experienced my heart race and my breathing become more labored. The body responds to what it is witnessing and experiencing. Acknowledging and naming what is going on brings acceptance and space for recovery and re-regulation. I need to be attentive to what grounds me, what reminds me of who I am, and how my body, soul, and spirit are integrated.

Breath prayers and breathing exercises, such as breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth or box breathing, can help oneself to be aware of breathing, heartbeats, and what one is experiencing in the moment.⁸ These practices can slow breathing and heart rates, making space for listening, attentiveness, and rest. Being aware of body functioning brings connection, regulation, and grounding. In addition to responding, it is important that one knows their resting heart rate, what normal breathing feels like, and how it feels to be at peace. When the baseline is known, then one can discern when things are not normal and how the body is reacting. How do you know what your ideal breathing is? How do you know what it means to be calm as well as alert? How do your body and heart respond? Placing my hand on my heart and feeling my heartbeat when I am responding to a crisis is a micro ritual that has helped me to become attuned to myself. I am familiar with my heartbeat and when it feels intensified, placing my hand on my heart brings reassurance and calm, as well as an intention to re-regulate my resting heart rate. When I experience labored breathing or the sensation of my heart beating out of my chest, I choose to ground myself, breathe, and become more attuned. What is distinct about your resting body and mind? What grounds you? And how do you know when you are not grounded?

⁷ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2015.)

⁸ Breath prayers are simple meditative prayers (often phrases from sacred texts) synchronized with breathing patterns. In my Christian tradition, I utilize Psalm 46:10, inhaling “Be still” and exhaling “and know that I am God” to ground myself in God’s presence and care. Box breathing goes something like this. 1. Inhale for four seconds. 2. Hold breath for four seconds. 3. Exhale for four seconds. 4. Hold for four seconds. See “Box Breathing: How to Do It and Why It Matters,” *Calm*, October 16, 2023, <https://www.calm.com/blog/box-breathing>.

In addition to listening to physiological responses, it is also important to understand our resting state of mind and presence well enough to know when something has changed in it, when external factors are causing both to adapt. Chaplains are exposed to trauma of various kinds and sometimes that can trigger vulnerabilities and memories related to previous harm. It is imperative for chaplains to know, recognize, and honor them. Chaplaincy experiences can resonate with harm from one's past. Self-awareness helps chaplains to recognize and honor them all. Pain and loss are part of human experience. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, "suffering is not optional."⁹ As chaplains accompany people experiencing suffering, it may remind chaplains of their own losses. In knowing themselves, chaplains learn to be kind and to love themselves and others. Chaplains can be injured and impacted by experiences in a variety of ways. Practical Theology Herbert Anderson suggest that there are

three ways one can be wounded: *bodies* are vulnerable and can be injured; even if one survives physically, one (one's '*self*') may be turned inside out; and beyond harm to the body or self, there is soul erosion—damage to the core of one's being or *soul*. When held together, these images—body, self, soul—contribute to understanding 'human' as a bio-psycho-socio-spirituality unity.¹⁰

Taking time to be aware of what is experienced and carried, increases the ability to tend to those who chaplains accompany. In humanizing oneself, we are able to more fully see those in front of us.

Chaplains can also make space for and pay attention to thoughts and feelings by practicing mindfulness, the ability to focus on what's happening right now.

Mindfulness is a disciplined form of self-awareness and has been described as a key method both for increasing competency in connecting with one's inner life and for developing compassion for others. In any given moment of activity, action, cognition, emotion, and memory are present and interdependent.¹¹

We may not be as aware as we believe we are, which is why intentionality matters. This attentiveness cultivates patience, acceptance, and letting go as well as the ability to be flexible and adaptable. Rather than suppressing what one is feeling, mindfulness makes space and permission for it.

⁹ Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Image, 2004), 71.

¹⁰ Anderson, "Liminal Work of Soulcare," 10.

¹¹ Philip Knowles, "What Is Trying to Happen Here? Using Mindfulness to Enhance the Quality of Patient Encounters," *The Permanente Journal* 12, no. 2 (2008): 55–59. <https://doi.org/10.7812/tpp/07-043>.

Conclusion

Self-awareness affirms and expands our understanding of who we are as well as our vocational calling. Chaplaincy contexts include experiences of anxiety, chaos, and the unknown. It is important to remember who we have been, who we are, and who we are becoming, personally and collectively. Knowing oneself, including one's values, strengths, commitments, and relationships, can help guide chaplains through uncharted waters. As chaplains remember what grounds them, they discover and know more fully who they are. Investing in knowing ourselves brings anchoring and hope in times of uncertainty to both us and those for whom we care. May we chaplains heed the call to know thyself.

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