Learning to Serve with Loving Presence: Embodiment, Reflection, and Relational Alignment in Human Services

by

Elizabeth Bishop

Master of Adult Education, St. Francis Xavier University, 2014

Bachelor of Psychology and Religious Studies, Laurentian University, 2003

Diploma (Developmental Services), Confederation College of Applied Arts and Technology, 1985

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the

Educational Theory and Practice Program

Faculty of Education

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Summer 2026

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Declaration of Committee

Name:	**Elizabeth Bishop**
Degree:	**Doctor of Philosophy (Educational Theory and Practice)**
Title:	**Learning to Serve with Loving Presence: Embodiment, Reflection, and Relational Alignment in Human Services**
Committee:	**Chair:** **Kevin O'Neill** Professor, Education
	Stephen Smith Academic Supervisor Professor, Education
	Heesoon Bai Committee Member Professor, Education
	Jeannie Kerr Examiner Associate Professor, Education
	Heather Boynton External Examiner Assistant Professor, Social Work University of Calgary

Abstract

This thesis explores the Conscious Service Approach (CSA) as a conceptual framework and a way of being where service is an expression of love, considered as an energetic quality of presence, intentional relationality, and compassion for oneself as well as for others. In professional contexts such as healthcare, education, and community work, service is too often framed as self-sacrifice, overextension, or detachment. These inherited assumptions contribute to burnout, disconnection, and diminished quality of care. By contrast, a CSA is proposed as one of self-care while caring for others. A CSA involves being present and self-attuned as integral to being present and responsive to others.

Grounded in lived and living experience, this inquiry employs a narratively driven methodology that involves autoethnography, reflective storytelling, and scholarly dialogue. Rather than positioning narrative as supplementary to the positing of a CSA, personal stories are the primary sites of knowledge creation. My lived experiences of service provision, coupled with literature-informed reflection, illuminate broader cultural and systemic patterns that mitigate against a CSA. By interrogating these lived experiences and discerning how cultural and system patterns may otherwise persist, I articulate how grounded expertise may be transformed into enlivened wisdom to bring a CSA to life.

The CSA introduces a self-filling, self-fulfilling, and self-responsive orientation to service that honours the wellbeing of both provider and recipient. It emphasizes emotional responsiveness, reflective practice, and conscious relationality as pathways to cultivating resilience, fulfillment, and ethical clarity. Service is reframed not as depletion but as a practice of loving repletion that sustains those who give as well as those who receive.

Findings suggest that when service is rooted in embodied awareness, intentional relationality, and compassion inclusive of the self, providers experience renewed vitality, deeper joy and fulfillment, and alignment with values. At the same time, recipients benefit from authentic, compassionate, and responsive service. This dual benefit demonstrates how the CSA can reshape service cultures, offering a sustainable and humanizing alternative to models grounded in sacrifice or detachment.

Ultimately this thesis contributes to scholarship on professional practice, workforce wellbeing, and the ethics of care by presenting the CSA as both conceptual framework and lived roadmap. By situating service within the energetic quality of love and affirming narrative reflection on lived experience as knowledge, it challenges prevailing service narratives and offers a vision of service work that is mutually enriching, deeply human, and healthily sustainable.

Keywords: Conscious Service Approach; lived and living experience; love; autoethnography; embodiment; intentional relationality; enlivened wisdom

Dedication

To all who serve with heart and presence,
who give generously of themselves,
and who remember to hold themselves in love as they do.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge that some concepts presented in this dissertation are adapted and extended from my book, *Conscious Service: Ten Ways to Reclaim Your Calling, Move Beyond Burnout, and Make a Difference without Losing Yourself,* Elizabeth Bishop, Hazelden Publishing, 2022.

During the preparation of this thesis, I made selective use of AI-assisted tools (OpenAI's ChatGPT), only after my original draft was reviewed, to support phrasing, editorial refinement, structural review, and exploration of relevant literature. These tools were used solely to enhance clarity, expression, and research efficiency; all intellectual contributions, lived experiences, analysis, and arguments remain entirely my own. The use of AI was thoughtfully documented and discussed with my supervisor to ensure transparency and integrity.

To honour the privacy and dignity of those whose experiences have shaped this work, pseudonyms and altered identifying details have been used in any references to people or institutions that figure in my narratives. With the exception of my children, sister, and nephew, the family members mentioned are deceased, and their real names are used. Identifying details for living family members have been adjusted or anonymized to respect their privacy. Stories and reflections are grounded in real-life encounters, yet any potentially identifying information has been excluded. I am grateful for the relationships, the connections, and the learning that have arisen through my engagement with so many people over the years; through our shared work, lived experiences, and the moments we have experienced together.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Stephen Smith, for his guidance and steadfast support throughout this study process. I am also grateful to my supervisory committee, Dr. Heesoon Bai, and external examiner, Dr. Heather Boynton, for their insightful feedback and encouragement. Finally, I extend heartfelt thanks to my colleagues and fellow PhD students, Dr. Roselene Dhaliwal, and Chris Yakimov, whose thoughtful reviews and conversations helped sharpen my thinking and sustain me on this journey.

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List of Acronyms

CSA Conscious Service Approach

PAR Participatory Action Research

Glossary

Embodiment: The practice of attending to and living one's internal experience, including somatic, emotional, and ethical dimensions, in ways that inform action and service.

Embodiment Practices: Activities and reflections that connect one to sensory and whole-self ways of knowing, perceiving, processing, connecting, relating, and acting with self, others, and the world.

Enlivened and Enacted: Knowledge or insight that is experienced with self-connection, embodied awareness, and carried forward in intentional action that sustains both the giver and receiver of care.

Enlivened Wisdom: Embodied, lived knowing that emerges through relational connection, joyful engagement, and ethically oriented action; builds on the concept of grounded expertise.

Grace: a way of being that creates the conditions for healing, learning, and transformation. It is expressed through compassionate presence, truthful acceptance, and a willingness to remain open to ourselves and others without shame or condemnation.

Grounded Expertise: Knowledge and skill derived from lived experience, as coined by Madusa & Phipps (2022).

Love (as an Orienting Ethic): Within the Conscious Service Approach, love is understood as an embodied orientation of consciousness that informs ethical, relational, and responsive engagement in service. Rooted in *agape*, it reflects an unconditional regard for the inherent worth and dignity of all living beings. As individuals cultivate self-connection, awareness, compassion, and presence, love becomes less a behaviour to perform and more a way of being from which conscious, compassionate, and ethical action naturally emerges.

Presence: The relational capacity to attend fully to oneself and others, enabling careful and responsive action.

Self-Filled: An ongoing internal capacity to sustain ethical presence and responsiveness, attending to somatic, emotional, and relational experiences in ways that support sustainable service.

Self-Fulfilled: The sense of meaning, integrity, and alignment experienced in sustainable service, arising from the cultivation of self-filled capacities.

Spirituality: refers to the dimension of human experience associated with spirit ~ the non-physical aspect of self that is understood to exist for all people. It is the inner realm where beliefs, values, meaning, and lived experience are integrated into a coherent sense of purpose and connection. Within this space, individuals engage in meaning-making that extends beyond what is materially or tangibly verifiable, yet which profoundly shapes

perception, relationship, and lived experience. Spirituality is also a space of healing and reconnection, where one may experience restoration, coherence, and a renewed sense of belonging to self, others, and the broader field of life. It is within this dimension that connection to divinity ~ however it is understood or named ~ may be felt or realized, offering guidance, grounding, and orientation. In this way, spirituality influences real-world functioning through ongoing integration, shaping how individuals interpret experience, navigate challenge, and are guided by an evolving sense of meaning, presence, and interconnectedness.

Prologue: A Loving Invitation into Conscious Service

This thesis is not merely a presentation of findings or an academic essay; it is an invitation into a living, breathing journey. It is the unfolding of a path walked with intention, reflection, and love; a journey that illuminates how service, when deeply rooted in self-awareness, relational presence, and spiritual connection, can become a sacred offering. This work is both personal testimony and a conceptual exploration, grounded in healthcare, human services, and education contexts, where the stakes of service are deeply human, relational, and ethical.

This reflection shows how the personal is inseparable from the organizational. The choices we make, the ways we serve, and the cultures we create are all intertwined. This study explores questions that have lived at the edges of my practice for decades:

How can service cultures be shaped in ways that honour both recipient and provider?

How can love and presence function not as abstract ideals, but as embodied capacities that shape how service is offered and received ~ brought to life ~ particularly in healthcare, human services, and education?

How might inherited assumptions about sacrifice, duty, and professional detachment be reimagined toward a self-filled, embodied, and ethically attentive practice of service that is grounded in internal resourcing rather than depletion or self-erasure?

What if the challenges, choices, and ordinary moments of daily life could become a source of wisdom, not just for ourselves, but, as service providers within the systems we inhabit?

The term *self-fulfilled* is used to gesture toward a sense of meaning, integrity, and alignment experienced in sustainable service. I use the term *self-filled* to more precisely describe the internal conditions that make such fulfillment possible. *Self-filled* refers not to an achieved state or outcome, but to an ongoing capacity for internal resourcing, attending to one's somatically relational feelings and emotions in ways that support ethical presence and engaged responsiveness. This shift in language reflects the evolving nature of the CSA itself, which remains responsive to lived and living

experience, reflective practice, and emergent understandings. As with the CSA framework, the language used here is not fixed but intentionally provisional, shaped through practice rather than imposed as a final or closed definition.

The questions guiding this study are not theoretical abstractions. They emerge from my own lived and ongoingly lived experience, sustained professional reflection, and an ethical call to serve in ways that are sustainable, soulful, and relationally attuned. Within this framing of the study, love is understood as an orienting ethic, presence as a relational capacity, and embodiment as the evolving practice of attending to one's internally felt experience as integral to ethical and responsive service. Embodiment refers to the lived practice of noticing and working with somatic, emotional, and ethical dimensions of experience in ways that inform action and relational engagement.

In a world structured by binaries such as success/failure, efficiency/productivity, self/other, service providers are often pulled away from the embodied awareness and self-connection that sustain presence, resilience, and joy. Global pressures, systemic inequities, and culturally reinforced ideals of overextension contribute to disembodiment, making serving others both a personal and professional challenge. In healthcare, human services, and education, these dynamics manifest as emotional labour, burnout, and the erosion of relational capacity. Through the lens of the CSA, providers can cultivate enlivened wisdom by deepening self-connection, practicing enlightened communication, engaging in transformative relationships, and co-creating community. In doing so, they sustain their own wellbeing while fostering systems and interactions that honour the wholeness of both provider and recipient.

Throughout this thesis I explore the dance between immediate, felt experience, in the body, the heart, which is the relational sense of service, and the larger meaning that gives it depth in values, purposes, and ethical or spiritual frameworks.

Phenomenologists and thinkers on the sacred have provided yet another lens through which to explore and articulate the tensions at the heart of this work ~ tensions that resonate deeply with the CSA. Engaging with these writings during the creation of this thesis gave me richer language to describe what I had long experienced but struggled to name.

In *I Am the Truth* and *Material Phenomenology*, Henry (2003, 2008) reminds us that experience itself matters ~ our feelings, bodily awareness, and the way life is lived ~ because affectivity lies at the heart of reality. In *Being Given*, Marion (2002) illuminates how encounters can carry profound meaning beyond what we can control or even name, much like the unexpected gifts that emerge when we serve others. In *Under the Gaze of the Bible*, Chrétien (2015) draws attention to the sacred in ordinary life, highlighting the quiet call of transcendence that shapes and guides our actions.

These onto-theological perspectives on affectivity, and on immanent and transcendent meanings, hold space for attending to both the felt, embodied moments of service and the larger ethical and spiritual currents that give them purpose. Seen through the lens of the CSA, such moments are not merely observed but enlivened and enacted: experienced with self-connection, attended to with embodied awareness, and carried forward in intentional action that sustains both the giver and the receiver of care.

In the chapters that follow, I weave together story, theory, spirituality, and introspection, allowing each to breathe in its own right while contributing to a mosaic of meaning making. My voice will shift between being sometimes personal and experiential, at other times academic, and on occasion contemplative. These vocal shifts are not competing; they are layered, relational, and reflective of the very principles this work seeks to explore.

Drawing on the principles of Heartful Autoethnography (Ellis, 1999), this study embraces vulnerability, emotion, and embodied reflection as legitimate and generative forms of knowledge production. Heartful autoethnography extends traditional autoethnographic practice by centring lived and living experience as both the source and substance of inquiry, while also attending to affective, relational, and embodied dimensions of meaning-making. In this approach, writing is not simply representational but interpretive and transformative: it becomes the primary site through which experience is examined, felt, and rendered into insight.

Methodologically, this inquiry is grounded in narrative autoethnography of a fully autobiographical nature. It draws exclusively on my lived and living experience as both the material and method of inquiry. There are no external fieldnotes or detached observational data; rather, the “data” consists of memory, lived experience, reflective

awareness, and the ongoing stream of embodied and emotional knowing as it arises in real time. Knowledge production therefore occurs through recursive acts of recollection, writing, reflection, and reinterpretation of experience as it is lived and remembered.

This inquiry is undertaken through the interpretive lens of the Conscious Service Approach (CSA), which I previously developed and continued to refine and study throughout the process of this thesis. CSA functions as a guiding epistemological and reflective framework through which lived experience is understood, attended to, and meaningfully interpreted. It offers an orientation to experience that emphasizes self-connection, embodied awareness, relational presence, and self-responsiveness, shaping both what is noticed and how it is made sense of within the reflective process.

Within this approach, reflexivity is understood not only as a methodological requirement but as an ongoing ethical and embodied practice of attentiveness to power, positionality, and meaning making. As both researcher and subject of inquiry, I occupy a relational position within the very phenomena being examined. This means that knowledge production is not neutral or externally detached, but is shaped by lived experience, interpretive positioning, and the shifting dynamics between personal narrative, cultural conditioning, and systemic context. Attention to power therefore includes recognizing how certain forms of knowledge are privileged over others within academic and institutional settings, and how lived and embodied experience is often positioned at the margins of what is considered legitimate evidence.

From a CSA perspective, enlivened wisdom does not replace methodological rigour, but orients it. It offers an integrated form of knowing that emerges through embodied awareness, reflective engagement, and relational attunement. In this sense, method provides structure and transparency for inquiry, while enlivened wisdom ensures that interpretation remains grounded in lived coherence rather than abstraction alone. Together, they support a form of inquiry that is both methodologically accountable and experientially alive.

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) asserts, knowledge arises not only through cognition but through bodily perception and engagement with the world. Building on this, embodiment in this study is understood as constitutive of knowing itself. The rhythms of breath, sensations of tension or ease, and affective movements such as joy, grief,

curiosity, or resistance are treated as forms of givenness ~ experiences that arise within awareness and become sites of meaning-making through reflection rather than external observation or measurement.

The analytic process is therefore inseparable from the act of writing. Meaning emerges through iterative cycles of reflective narration, revisiting lived experience through writing, and attending to recurring patterns of embodied, relational, and experiential meaning as they unfold across time. Rather than employing formal coding procedures, analysis occurs through reflexive engagement, narrative synthesis, and attunement to these patterns as they become visible through writing itself.

While Merleau-Ponty's work primarily addresses perception, habit formation, and the body-subject's entanglement with the world, I extend his insights toward an articulation of perception as a pathway to enlivened wisdom, where lived experience becomes increasingly coherent, integrated, and meaningful through reflective engagement.

In dialogue with the works of Thomas Moore (1992), bell hooks (1994), Donald Schön (1987), and Stephen Brookfield (2006), I position service as a practice of presence, self-connection, and responsiveness rather than self-sacrifice. This framing challenges dominant religious, political, and cultural narratives that equate service with depletion, instead proposing service as an embodied and relational practice through which individuals come into deeper alignment with themselves, their work, and the world.

Ultimately, this thesis employs narrative autoethnography not as a method of external observation, but as an inwardly grounded, reflexive process of meaning-making. Writing, remembering, and embodied awareness are inseparable from analysis, such that lived experience itself becomes both the source and site of knowledge production, revealing dimensions of human service practice that remain largely invisible within conventional empirical frameworks.

Theory, literature, and spirituality are interwoven with personal narrative in this inquiry. In this way, methodology and subject matter are inseparable in that the very act of writing itself becomes a practice of conscious service, lived through the body,

attended to with felt awareness, and enlivened by intentional, present engagement thereby embodying textually the principles this work seeks to illuminate.

This thesis is a journey through personal experience, reflection, and practice, guided by the principles of the CSA. It begins with the formation of my vocation in human services and education, tracing the tensions, challenges, and moments of insight that shaped how I understand and enact service.

In Chapter 1, *Absorption, Conditioning, and Radical Reframes*, I explore how early experiences quietly shape beliefs about care, vocation, sacrifice, and worth. Assumptions about duty and professional identity become weighty, sometimes leading us to confuse depletion with strength or self-sacrifice with love. Reflection shows how a radical reframing of conscious service can interrupt these inherited patterns and open the possibility for a more self-sustaining and other-direction sense of service.

Chapter 2, *Service, Love, and Self*, moves into the ways service has been shaped, and at times constrained, by religious upbringing, theological frameworks, and institutional expectations. Alongside lived experience, these influences reveal how love, selfhood, and wholeness can become separated from professional practice. Somatic awareness shows how presence in the body supports ethical responsiveness, relational depth, and sustainable engagement, reframing love as embodied and sustaining, truly sacred, rather than sacrificial.

In Chapter 3, *Living, Loving, and Learning: How Loss Serves*, I deepen the inquiry through grief, loss, and vulnerability, revealing how these experiences cultivate grounded expertise, relational ethics, and enlivened wisdom. Embodied practices of self- and other attunement prepare service providers for the emotional investment required in service while sustaining resilience, integrity, and relational capacity.

Chapter 4, *Learning Loving Service*, examines how lived experience gains authority as knowledge. Reflecting on teaching, consulting, training, and being engaged in community-based research, I show how intentional engagement transforms experience into insight, supporting trust, vulnerability, leadership integrity, and cultural transformation, and extending the principles of the CSA from personal practice into relational and systemic applications.

Finally, Chapter 5, *Promising Principles and Practices*, revisits The Ten Invitations of the CSA ~ Purpose, Wholeness, Freedom, Discovery, Enlightenment, Vision, Leadership, Compassion, Openness, and Presence. I explore how these invitations can be accepted individually and enacted within teams, organizations, and educational institutions, offering practical and structural guidance for embedding love, presence, and ethical attentiveness into service cultures.

These five thesis chapters trace a pathway from personal formation to systemic transformation, illustrating how service lived with love, engaged presence, self-responsiveness, and relational attunement can not only animate service providers, but also ripple outward to revitalize service-based, professional, and personal relationships, communities, and organizations. Conscious service becomes a personal practice and a shared way of being.

Throughout the text, you will meet burnout, grief, joy, anger, love, God, soul, and self, not as abstract concepts, but as points of reference in an ongoing, exploratory process**.** I will introduce you to Tracy, Terry, Stevie, my dad, and my mom ~ loved ones whose lives and loss have had a profound impact on my journey both personally and as a service provider. Alongside these stories, you will also feel the presences of other family members, friends, and mentors who are still living and whose guidance and love continue to shape my path and inform the principles of conscious, relational service. These references to the influence of others are not digressions; rather, they constitute a life shared with significant others in pursuit of conscious, loving service. My aim is to illuminate how service providers in healthcare, human services, and education can improve both the quality of the service they deliver and the quality of their own lived and living experiences by cultivating not only personal resilience, but also deeply relational attunements and mutual and collective joys.

This work resists academic compartmentalization, exemplifying what bell hooks (1994) calls engaged pedagogy. Spiritual language, love as praxis, and contemplative vocabulary appear intentionally, not to sensationalize, but to model a way of knowing that integrates heart, body, and mind. Such language acknowledges that soulful service cannot be divorced from the sacred. It calls attention to the relational, affective, and embodied dimensions of human experience that are often marginalized in conventional scholarship. In practice, this means that inquiry is not limited to detached observation or

abstract theorizing, but is enlivened through the body, felt in attention to sensation, emotion, and presence, and enacted through reflective engagement of self and other.

Theory, literature, and spirituality are approached not as external scaffolds but as companions in this process, entering into dialogue with lived experience to reveal insights that could not emerge from words or data alone. By explicitly weaving the sacred into analytical reflection, the work demonstrates that scholarship can be both rigorous and soulful, that thinking, feeling, and acting are inseparable, and that the act of writing itself can become a practice of conscious service as a disciplined, embodied, and ethically attuned engagement with the world one seeks to understand and transform.

In naming these tensions and perspectives from the outset, my hope is to offer you a map that opens up the service landscape. You may find it helpful as the thesis unfolds to pause, reread, or reflect along the way. Stories may resonate deeply or challenge you. Either way, your engagement positions you as a co-participant in exploring the intersection of love, presence, and embodied, relational knowing, where insight arises through attentive, felt experience and intentional engagement of and with self and with other.

Here is what you can expect:

- Chapters grounded in personal narrative, interwoven with academic literature, spiritual reflection, and philosophical inquiry.
- Ongoing dialogue between my lived/living experiences and conceptual frameworks, thereby animating theory with memory and reflection.
- A consistent return to love, presence, embodiment, and relational alignment, not as ideals but as practical and well-practiced orientations to service.
- An invitation to engage with this thesis not only intellectually but relationally and somatically, in other words, feeling with while thinking through the text.

May this work become a mirror, a companion, and a quiet provocation, gently illuminating the sacred edges of service and self. Whether scholar, practitioner, or seeker, may you find resonance in these pages, and perhaps, a renewed sense of what it means to serve from a place of wholeness.

"This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one... I want to be thoroughly used up when I die." — George Bernard Shaw

Welcome to the work.

Chapter 1. Absorption, Conditioning, and Radical Reframes

Setting the Stage: Why This Chapter Matters

This chapter explores how our earliest experiences quietly shape what we come to believe about service, care, and vocation. Long before we choose consciously to enter helping professions, we absorb messages about sacrifice, responsibility, worth, and what it means to be “good” or “helpful.” These messages are transmitted through family stories, faith traditions, institutional cultures, and formative relationships. They settle into us. They become embodied. They begin to feel natural, necessary, even sacred.

And yet, what feels sacred can also become unsustainable when self-connection is absent.

If this thesis seeks to reimagine service as embodied, self-filled, and ethically responsive, then I must first examine how my own understanding of service was formed. Before I could articulate the CSA, I had to recognize the inherited assumptions that shaped me ~ some life-giving, some costly, many unquestioned. I had to notice where I had confused sacrifice with love, depletion with devotion, and endurance with strength.

This chapter is guided by three central questions:

- How are our understandings of service absorbed through early experiences, culture, and relationship, often before we are aware that we are learning them?
- What forms of conditioning shape our assumptions about sacrifice, duty, and professional identity?
- What makes radical reframing possible? What interrupts inherited narratives and invites a more consciously integrated way of being in service to emerge?

The stories I share here are not autobiography for its own sake, but sites of reflection and discernment. Rather, autobiographical elements are engaged as part of an autoethnographic approach to explore and make meaning of service within a broader relational and cultural context. Following Frank’s (2022) concept of narrative discernment, I approach stories ~ my own and those of others through my eyes ~ as guides in meaning-

making. They reveal both the beauty and the burden within our formation. They invite humility. They invite responsibility. They invite integration.

Through my early work in institutional settings, our family's involvement in the Family Home Program, my engagement in church life, and encounters with disability, loss, and responsibility at a young age, I came to understand service as sacred work. Chretien's (1996) assertion that meaning emerges through relational encounter resonates deeply with this formation. Human connection itself carries spiritual weight. Service, then, is not simply task or technique; it is participation in relational life.

Yet it was only later that I began to recognize the absence of self-connection within that sacred framing. I knew how to give. I knew how to show up. I knew how to be strong. I did not yet know how to remain internally resourced while doing so.

Chapter One traces these beginnings through the narratives that shaped my understanding of service, the losses that deepened it, and the subtle disruptions that made alternative ways of being imaginable. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for the development of the CSA and the broader question of this thesis*: How service might arise not from self-erasure, but from embodied deeply anchored presence and love that is inclusive of self and other?*

The call's first echo…

From an early age, I felt a calling to teach. As a child, I spent hours in the basement teaching imaginary students, captivated by the learning process. Over time, I realized my true passion was not just teaching but learning itself.

For me, the first pulse of the call is an invitation ~ one that life offers repeatedly. In service, this invitation unfolds in multiple ways: guiding the provider onto the path, into the lives of individuals and families, and ultimately back to a deeper encounter with the self. This trinity of mind-body-spirit connection, the relational space shared between two people, and the emerging collective community parallels the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Christianity. We will explore throughout this thesis how this trinitarian dynamic can be brought into our lives on the path of service.

This interplay between self and service resonates with Marion's (2016) concept of *giftedness* in which encounters with others are not merely exchanges of action but invitations to engage in a relational flow of generosity and receptivity. Service, in this light, becomes both giving and receiving. It also reflects Jean-Louis Chrétien's (2004) notion of "the call and the response," where I am called by another and moved to respond to their needs. Service work, then, is not only a calling but a response in action to the call of another in need.

Likewise, giving and receiving are always intertwined. We do not give first and then receive, or receive first and then give; rather, we are already part of the dance of giver and receiver, teacher and learner. This mutuality and reciprocity lie at the heart of the CSA. As I respond to you, I remain present to myself, open to what emerges within me and between us, allowing the relational flow ~ the pulse of the call ~ to guide the encounter.

Over time, my own calling unfolded as a series of invitations that shaped my vocational path. This interplay between giving and receiving, calling and responding, between transcendence and grounding has guided me in integrating my personal and professional identities. I now understand service as an ongoing invitation to engage with others, to be present, and to deepen one's self-awareness.

At age 15, my path shifted when I read *One Child* by Torey Hayden. The book recounted the experiences of an elementary schoolteacher working with a child facing profound challenges. This exposure drew me toward developmental services, a field still referring at the time to *mental retardation*.

Volunteering at an institution in Northwestern Ontario (now closed) that was home to people living with developmental disabilities exposed me to those who have reshaped my understanding of service. Reflecting on childhood interactions with a friend who lived with Down Syndrome and family members facing mental health challenges, I began to recognize the interplay of stigma, marginalization, love, and acceptance.

Love has been central to my experience of joy and fulfillment as a service provider and has been integral to my sense of direction in transforming my vocational choice into a life path. Yet early on, I was conditioned to believe that effective service required self-

sacrifice. I internalized the idea that a service recipient's progress was solely my responsibility, which contributed to stress and burnout. The emphasis on professional objectivity, while warning against excessive emotional investment, left me struggling to navigate my role.

Despite cautions about burnout, little guidance was provided on how to mitigate it. The unspoken expectation of learning how to care for and about yourself as a service provider; figuring it out independently, may reflect the broader lack of self-care among faculty and professionals at the time. Consequently, I believed I had to maintain the appearance of having everything together, which required years of unlearning.

As I embarked on this vocational path, I was aware that people around me somehow believed I had bestowed upon me a special capacity that better prepared me for working with *those people.* At first, it felt like a boost to my ego but, as time went on, I began to cringe when anyone referred to me as *special.* There seemed to be some disconnect between how I was perceived and what I was feeling about my role as a service provider. I didn't feel special. I constantly felt that I was falling short in some way that I could not seem to pinpoint. It never felt as if I was doing enough. I will revisit this notion of specialness later in the chapter.

Research in human service professions shows that early professional socialization often embeds implicit expectations of self-sacrifice and alignment with organizational norms that can contribute to moral tension and emotional exhaustion (i.e., burnout), suggesting the need to reframe the provider's role not as heroic but as relational and responsive (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

I believe these were the early stages of a conditioning process, a socialization of sorts, into what became my interpretation of what it meant to be a service provider. I was convinced that I would be required to sacrifice myself, although I wasn't exactly sure what that meant until I began to feel the early stages of burnout. I believed I was responsible for the outcomes experienced by *my clients* and that their healing, change process, and development was directly related to my quality of service. That belief alone led to countless sleepless nights and a great deal of physical stress.

I was told that service based relationships were very different from my personal relationships and that I was meant to retain my objectivity, demonstrate empathy and

unconditional positive regard, while ensuring that I not fall into the trap of *caring too much.*

Academic theories later provided language to make sense of my experiences. Brookfield's (2006) work on exploring personal philosophy, along with Schön's (1987) framework of reflective practice, helped me to critically examine previously held beliefs about service provision, particularly the notion that, as a service provider, I was meant to be entirely selfless, neglecting my own feelings and emotions. While theoretical insights were valuable, the true evolution was spiritual: life itself became my teacher.

Marion (2016) suggests that authentic presence arises not from technique alone, but from attentiveness to the other's gift and the emergent relational space. Integrating this perspective with Brookfield's reflective approach has deepened my understanding of service as a co-creative, embodied process.

Working in an institutional setting with individuals with developmental disabilities was both a culture shock and a profound learning experience. Initially I felt both drawn and repelled. Societal norms condition us to fear those who present in ways that deviate from perceived *normal* behavior, yet my interactions in this setting revealed the depth of human connection beyond such labels. Caring for myself in ways that honoured my own wellbeing and my capacity as a service provider began as an intellectual process. At that time, adult education had not evolved to the point of talking about embodied practices and integration of self in tangible, tactile ways. In fact, we were encouraged to leave parts of ourselves at home when we showed up at work. This directive continues to reverberate today.

That was almost 40 years ago. And those of us in healthcare and social services are still trying to figure out how to compartmentalize ourselves. Embodiment practices, understood as those that connect us to ourselves in ways that illuminate sensory experience and whole-self ways of knowing, perceiving, processing, preparing, connecting, relating, acting, and being with self, others, and the world, represent another crucial focus of this dissertation. This understanding draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1962) phenomenology of the body-subject, which situates perception as arising through lived bodily engagement with the world, and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's work on animate

experience and kinetic bodily consciousness, which highlights movement, sensation, and lived embodiment as foundational to meaning-making and knowing.

Taken together, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body-subject and Sheets-Johnstone's articulation of animate, kinetic consciousness offer a grounding for the Conscious Service Approach (CSA), where embodiment is understood as the primary medium through which self-connection, meaning-making, and responsive engagement with life are continuously shaped and refined.

Central to this inquiry is the role of lived and living experience, including informal learning, as it pertains to how service is perceived and delivered, and how personal wellbeing is defined and experienced as an integral factor impacting service delivery.

As I continue to grapple with my own conditioning, I am exceedingly curious about how other service providers interpret their roles and how their life events, interactions, and experiences have influenced them. Our personal histories significantly impact our responses and our actions and, to me, are a very valid source of rich information from which to gain understanding of how best to enact service provision, and to potentially re-interpret service provider roles in radical and beneficial ways.

My approach resonates with Carolyn Ellis's (1999) concept of *Heartful Autoethnography* which encourages: including the researcher's vulnerable self, emotions, body, and spirit; producing evocative stories that convey reality; examining how human experience is endowed with meaning; and fostering empathy, compassion, and moral reflection. By integrating heart, autobiography, and artistry into the text, Ellis's framework aligns with my intent to honour my lived experience, sensory engagement, and embodied practice, alongside relationally attuned interactions with service recipients and other service providers, where insight, reflection, and understanding emerge through shared presence, enacted engagement, and embodied knowing and practice.

As we move through this dissertation, I will continue to explore specific life events that have been influential to my personal experience of service both as a provider and as recipient. These influences and what some might refer to as my highly sensitive nature have led me to this place where I am excited to dissect and re-interpret the evolutionary nature of grounded expertise in my life. How have I come to integrate the circumstances

of my life and my personal way of being and perceiving into a pathway of Conscious Service? As I share my own grounded expertise, I will strive to reveal the sensory, transcendent, spirited, communal, and embodied ways in which I was lovingly invited into conscious service delivery and further extend that invitation to you.

When life experience illuminates theoretical concepts, there is a powerful opportunity for integration and living these concepts. I recall how alive the theories and principles became when, as a college student, I paired that knowledge with real-life experiences of interacting with other people. New to the field, I often felt ostracized by my peers, like I didn't quite fit in, so it came naturally for me to gravitate more toward the people I was there to serve.

Meeting Tracy

In the institutional workplace, I learned things that have taken me years to unlearn. I peered into a mirror that illuminated parts of myself that made me cringe, and I saw glimpses of unconditional love. I met Tracy.

I was 17 and Tracy was 32 when we crossed paths. I was drawn to her quirkiness, but also her quiet energy. Tracy never demanded attention; she commanded it simply by being herself. She did not have the capacity to speak with words, but she could communicate and connect. I just really liked her. Tracy had lived almost her whole life in an institution for people with developmental disabilities.

She moved in with my young family when I was just 22 years old and a new mom. It was all part of a big movement toward deinstitutionalization, and I was drawn to being involved. People around us either thought we were crazy or saints. Probably, mostly crazy. It might have been me who thought I was a saint. For the purposes of this text, I will continue to refer to her simply as Tracy, preserving the relational intimacy and continuity of our shared experiences.

I spoke earlier about my discomfort with the unwritten vocational criteria of *specialness*. "It takes a really special person to work with people like that." What a loaded statement not only inferring some kind of expectation about how I am meant to show up in my role, but also, and even more unsettling, that my *specialness* is derived from my capacity to show up as expected with people who have been deemed to be

somehow, less than, or maybe even, undeserving, as intimated in the historical foundations of social work, which I'll discuss later in this chapter.

I frequently heard that sentiment about specialness and, initially, it fed my ego, but over time I grew uncomfortable with the implications. The idea that service providers possess an extraordinary ability reinforces harmful expectations. Many service providers today struggle under the weight of labels like heroic or selfless, which can lead to burnout and reluctance to seek support. These societal attitudes and individual beliefs about the nobility of giving, especially prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic, perpetuate these myths of specialness, heroism, and selflessness related to service, sacrifice, wellness, and self-care central to this thesis exploration.

These myths are also reinforced through more everyday professional narratives and practices, including assumptions that *good service providers always put others first,* that *emotional detachment is professionalism*, or that *feeling too much compromises competence.* Additional pervasive messages include the expectation that *service users' needs must come before one's own at all times*, and that *rest, limits, or refusal are signs of inadequacy or lack of commitment*.

The mythical notions that tell us that service is *not about you* as the service provider, that we need to *leave work at work and home at home*, and that our values *don't matter* tend to lead service providers toward compartmentalization of self in ways that directly impact wellbeing, fulfillment, and capacity for relational high-quality service delivery. These narratives are often reinforced by expectations of emotional containment and self-denial in service contexts, rather than supported through practices of self-connection, embodied awareness, and self-responsiveness. As this thesis unfolds, I will revisit these myths as part of a critical and interpretive process aimed at reimagining service beyond dominant narratives of sacrifice, toward more embodied and relational ways of being in service.

Where did these messages of *specialness and sacrifice in service work* originate in our culture?

The foundations of social work reveal a history intertwined with charity and moral judgement. Prior to the 1860s, church-based charities provided material aid but rarely

financial support. Charity workers, predominantly from the upper class, determined who was *deserving* of assistance based on moral assessments (Guest, 1982). The legacy of this judgement persists today in narratives around social assistance and self-sufficiency.

The establishment of the Charity Organization Society in 1869 reinforced the belief that poverty resulted from laziness rather than systemic issues. These attitudes continue to influence social policies that emphasize individual responsibility over structural change (Carniol, 2010). Similarly, contemporary service systems often create ethical dilemmas for providers who must balance service recipient advocacy with institutional policies that can feel punitive.

Eventually these systems were seen as being inefficient because there were too many loopholes that made it easy for people to *cheat the system and receive relief from more than one charity* (Carniol, 2010, Mulally, 2007). Current systems continue to operate in a suspicious and punitive manner, often asking service providers to report any instances they might be aware of where a service user receives a monetary gift that could alter their eligibility for financial assistance, often no more than $500.00 per month, for a single individual. The system itself is insufficient in its response and sets people up to have no other choice but to seek alternative resources. Such circumstances also leave service providers in a constant state of dis-unity in terms of their desire to serve in ways that support individuals while the very systems they work in are asking them to *report* people.

Rooted in the notion of charity, service delivery is interpreted as a one-way street. Service is offered by those who have more to those who have less who, in turn, are often described as the less fortunate or needy in our society. This automatically elevates the giver in this equation to a more powerful position by virtue of their generosity and helpfulness. But if we look at the Christian definition of charity through the eyes of St. Paul, we learn that it is “the highest form of love, signifying the reciprocal love between God and man that is made manifest in unselfish love of one's fellow men” (1 Corinthians.13). There is nothing here to indicate that one of those *men* is somehow less deserving than the others. Rather, this statement about love and *charity* highlights reciprocity, love and sharing with others just as we have all been provided for through our connection to a divine source.

The history of charity organizations offers a window into the evolution of service: structures were created, programs implemented, and intentions articulated but these early efforts often emphasized procedures over presence and obligation over relational engagement. While these frameworks reveal much about how service was organized, they do not fully capture the lived, ethical experience of being present with another human being. Contemporary philosophical perspectives help illuminate that dimension.

Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of *givenness* shows how encounters call us into responsive engagement beyond our control; the other presents themselves as a gift, inviting a spontaneous and authentic response. Michel Henry's phenomenology of *immanent affectivity* grounds ethics in lived, felt experience, emphasizing that our ethical responsibility emerges from the very affective life of consciousness itself. Together, these perspectives remind us that relational ethics are not abstract ideals but embodied responsibilities. They guide providers to act with attention, presence, and respect for the inherent dignity and *giftedness* of those they serve.

In this light, service is not merely a set of tasks or a historical tradition to be maintained but rather, it is a living, co-creative process. The pulse of the call resonates through each encounter, drawing us into responsive engagement and reminding us that giving and receiving are inseparable, ongoing, and mutually transformative.

If we define service as acts of charity, we not only reduce the meaning of generosity and loving each other to the giving of an earthly material good or to the human construct of dispensable time, we also tend to believe that we are limited in our capacity to show up for each other and ourselves. Service then becomes transactional and conditional and in so doing becomes unsustainable for us as human beings relying on our own resources. Let's consider that our resources extend beyond our human capacity, and in fact, include the gifts of divine source that are available to us as we experience the transcendent nature of trinity energy. The mind, body, spirit connection offers access to powerful ways of knowing, being, healing, and relating that transcend time, space, money, and human proclivities.

A recent study by Kaushik, Garg, and Dixit (2024) explores holistic approaches to mental health, emphasizing the integration of mind, body, and spirit for comprehensive well-being. The authors highlight that such integrative practices draw from ancient

traditions and Indigenous healing methods, underscoring the profound interconnectedness of these facets in promoting sustainable healing. Although this study is not specific to service providers, its framework aligns with the CSA, which emphasizes sustainable, interconnected well-being rather than self-sacrificial labour.

Let's pause for a moment to clarify what I mean by Conscious Service. Here, consciousness is not simply cognitive awareness or "all in the head" knowing. Rather, it exists along a continuum that includes the subconscious, the unconscious, and the many ways we know beyond thought including through sensation, intuition, and the wisdom of the body. Consciousness is holistic rather than a disembodied, mind-centred way of understanding; it connects all ways of knowing and informs how we engage, respond, and serve in the world.

The research supports the notion that the mind-body-spirit connection offers access to powerful ways of knowing, being, healing, and relating that transcend conventional limitations (Kaushik, Garg, & Dixit, 2024). In conversation with a colleague, we reflected on the shared root of the words *sacred* and *sacrifice*. Chrétien (1996) argues that true vocation emerges not from exceptional talent, but from receptivity to others and humility within our relational commitments. This perspective challenges the cultural myth of specialness and reframes service as an ethical and spiritual practice accessible to all.

Commonly, sacrifice is understood as giving up something of personal importance to respond to another. In a culture that encourages us to "have it all," such loss can feel threatening. Yet the etymology of *sacrifice* points to the sacred. What we hold as sacred carries meaning and value, and when we choose the sacred in our lives, we lose nothing. Service providers who find meaning and value in their work often report joy and fulfillment, experiencing service as a life-giving expression of what they hold most sacred.

Paden (1992) conceptualizes the sacred as that which is set apart and imbued with transcendent significance. Applying this framework to service work, we can reimagine service not as mere self-sacrifice but as a reciprocal act of offering, fostering both personal and communal well-being. When service is framed only as depletion, it risks burnout and disillusionment. Understood as engagement with the sacred, we are

invited to consider: What is sacred? Can sacred resources be exhausted? How can human beings draw upon non-human or beyond-human sources of wisdom and energy, rather than relying solely on finite human capacities?

In spiritual and academic discourse, the sacred encompasses objects, places, times, and experiences considered holy or connected to the divine, deserving of reverence and respect (Paden, 1992). Service, understood as an expression of love, creates space for personal restoration and self-responsiveness. Service providers who identify with the “hero” label may overlook their own humanity, becoming disconnected from both self and purposefulness. In such states of disconnection, not only is the service provider’s experience diminished, but the capacity to serve effectively is also compromised.

Disconnection from self occurs when we are absent from the forefront of our own experience, no longer attuned to the rhythms of our body, heart, and soul. I once believed I was deeply connected to myself because I was aware of my thoughts, yet I was profoundly disconnected from my greater, sacred self. I have come to understand that thoughts are tools rather than truths; they serve me best when guided by body wisdom, emotional responsiveness, and the insights of the soul. In this way, service rooted in the sacred becomes both life-giving and regenerative, supporting personal, relational, and collective well-being.

What is the soul, we might wonder?

The soul in relation to service can be considered the core of our being, the repository of our deepest values, creativity, and capacity for empathy and compassion. In Thomas Moore’s view, as articulated in *Care of the Soul* (1992), the soul is the wellspring of meaning and a guide for living authentically. When applied to service, the soul motivates us to care not just for tasks or outcomes, but for the well-being of others on a profoundly human level. It calls us to engage with compassion, to listen deeply, and to respond with empathy and love.

In practical terms, serving from the soul means that our work is infused with a sense of purpose and connection. It goes beyond simply fulfilling duties and becomes a form of personal and communal healing. This soulful approach to service recognizes that

every interaction holds the potential to nurture both the giver and the receiver. As Moore (1992) suggests, attending to the soul is not a luxury but a necessity for a fulfilling life of effective service.

The soul of service resides in the experience of an expanded heart space, an internal sensation of openness filled with an energetic draw to respond with love. In the sacredness of my being, I am stirred to care, to love, my heart opening, my breath slowing, while I myself experience the sensation of engulfing compassion. I know I am where I am meant to be and that, in the stillness, my words and actions will be guided. I am safe here in this space as is anyone who joins me. I don't have to fix anything, provide the *correct* response, control any outcome, be subject to any time constraint. I am in the moment, and I become a channel for service, both expressive and receptive. As Antoine de Saint-Exupery (1943) put it, "it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye" (p. 63), Invisible yes, yet palpable.

If I listen only to my mind, I miss the sensations in my body that say it is time to rest or heal or move, I miss the emotional energy that encourages me to cry, laugh, and grieve, and I miss the intuitive whispers of my soul that signal misalignment with my values, beliefs, and personal truth. If I ignore these subtle yet profound sources of knowing (tension, shallow breathing, the knot in my belly), I eventually move into survival mode where I am not as well equipped to engage in presence with another. My contributions to the relational space are naturally altered because I am not responsive to my own needs as one of the partners in the relational dynamic.

Learning from the Other Side…

One of my first community-based service provider positions following graduation was the role of Adult Protective Service Worker and involved working directly with about 50 individuals living with developmental disabilities who required various forms of support to maximize independence in the community. It was a powerful learning ground for a variety of social service skills, an *intensive* of sorts that offered a fast-paced introduction to a wide range of effects of developmental challenges, the community services available, a network of service providers, and an overview of what it meant to live independently. I was constantly challenged in terms of my biases and mindsets, coming face to face for the first time with imposter syndrome. I was stretched in my capacity to learn and respond in the moment with limited supervision. I developed a

strong sense of autonomy in my work and felt both excited and petrified at the prospect of the amount of decision-making authority I had. I loved it.

I was also overwhelmed by how quickly I felt drawn into the lives of the people I served. There was a sense of higher risk for these individuals than what appeared to be the safe and protected environment of the institution. In the community, people were *left to their own devices* and often experienced many situations that threatened their wellbeing or safety on physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and social levels. Whether someone made a choice to spend their money on something other than the electric bill or found themselves wrapped up in a romantic relationship that had become destructive, it became quickly apparent that I could relate to many of their struggles because I had walked a similar path, albeit with access to resources many of these people did not have. Yet I was fully aware that it wouldn't be wise to announce that fact since it would in some way either diminish my authority or position or have my colleagues and managers questioning my fitness for the work.

Holding this tension became quite stressful for me and I often found myself projecting the inner judgements I held about myself and my abilities on to other service providers or, at times, onto family members and loved ones of the people with whom I worked.

I would shudder if someone referred to me as a *social worker*. I do not hold a degree in social work, but that didn't have anything to do with it. I did not want to be associated with the stigma that surrounds social work. I didn't want to be seen as someone who took children from their families, who knew what was best for other people and came across as holier than thou. I didn't realize that I, myself had bought into the stereotypes and generalizations and wanted to get as far away from my own self-judgement as I could.

I became acutely aware of this judgement I held about people in any vocation of service, be it healthcare, human services or otherwise. I had become jaded, and I began to view these professionals in general terms as people who wanted to appear good in public because of the work they did. *These people*, to my mind, were not self-sacrificing (like that is something to strive for). They were selfish and self-absorbed, motivated by a

desire for attention and validation because of the services they provided. In my way of thinking at the time, it was all ego-based.

Much of the judgements I held about colleagues and coworkers stemmed from my desire to be right and to be better than other people. I was in competition in my own mind constantly comparing myself to others and totally relinquishing any hope of expressing true authenticity.

While I was on maternity leave from this position, we decided to participate in the Family Home Program, which made it natural for Tracy to move in with us. The program was designed to support deinstitutionalization by pairing individuals with families who could provide support within a natural, community-based setting.

During the five years that Tracy lived with us, the discrepancy between the ideal version of myself I had held on to for so long, and the reality of my current state of being, grew even wider. My partner and I welcomed our second child during that time, lost a beloved grandparent and a parent, and relocated twice. If I had to choose one word to describe how I felt during that time in my life, it would be exhausted. And I mean that in every sense of the word. Not only was I physically spent, heavy, lethargic, and tense, I was devoid of any real sense of passion, plagued with feelings of isolation, and wandered around in a mental fog most of the time. Holding on to the false notion that somehow, in some way, I was still better than those I saw around me, had turned into a self-righteousness that felt uncomfortable.

Thankfully we had access to a few supports, including my family, to buoy us and surround us with opportunities for resources, respite, and a listening ear when we needed it. We also had people in our midst who questioned our choice to have Tracy live with us, and who gossiped about what they assumed to be our *ulterior motives*. Finding myself in another's shoes, I was jolted into a personal awareness that showed me the costs of projecting bias and judgement on others.

I had worked with a woman who lived with a family in a communal supportive boarding home for many years. During the short time I worked with her and knew her *family,* I had passed many judgements and felt suspicious of the boarding mom's motivations and how finances were handled.

Now, here I was in the same position as the woman I had judged so harshly. I recognized, after the fact, that even though there had been no confrontation, the woman I was meant to support could sense the tension between her boarding mom and I, and eventually became closed off to communication with me. It was a humbling and powerful learning opportunity and one I think back on often to remind myself that none of us really knows what other people experience, what motivates them, and what beliefs or values underlie their choices and decisions.

It is not enough to declare our capacity to walk and serve non-judgementally. The truth is that we are judging, discriminating creatures; it is part of our conditioning, something we learn so we can adapt in a world that doesn't always make sense or align with our perspectives. In his book *Human Judgement: How Accurate Is It, and How Can It Get Better?* Wilcox (2023) synthesizes insights from various fields, highlighting that human judgement is a fundamental cognitive process shaped by evolutionary history and cultural contexts. This work underscores that our propensity to judge is deeply embedded in our cognition, aiding in navigating complex social environments.

I am not referring here to the everyday discernment we all need in order to navigate the world. Rather, I am speaking about judgements and discrimination that arise from ignorance or inequitable perceptions of others whom we perceive as fundamentally different from ourselves. These kinds of judgements, which often emerge naturally through socialization, require careful reflection and investigation. When such perceptions are ill-informed, they must be dismantled and revised lest they become personal permissions that justify discriminatory actions and infringe upon others' rights and safety. While my focus here is on the judgement of others, it is important to recognize that these tendencies are often turned inward as well, surfacing when we fall short of our own expectations or those we perceive as coming from others.

Rather than eradicating this personal bias, our goal in service delivery is to practice strategies that allow us to suspend our judgements of others long enough to see past them, to transcend any urge to impose our beliefs or values and, instead, to hold as a priority the health of the relational space. Before we even begin to apply our techniques and tools, our best practices, and research-based approaches, we are first called to tend to our connection with others, to be willing to see beyond the tangible evidence and hold energetic space for what could be, based on what the other person

wants for their own life, even when that might not fit with what we would want for ourselves. Such presence requires a depth of inner knowing and a profound connection to self that allows one to identify those moments when we start telling ourselves that we know better for others than they know for themselves so that we may move back into a state of curiosity.

The raised brows and suspicious rumblings of many colleagues and former co-workers only served to heighten my sense of isolation and fuel many self-doubts that were already running rampant in my cloudy mind. How long could we keep this up? Was the decision to have Tracy live with us really in the best interests of everyone involved? The stress at times was overwhelming and the tension between wanting to give up and not wanting to quit was a very difficult tightrope to walk. I don't really know what I was expecting but let's just say, it was not what I had signed up for.

Tracy had been heavily medicated for a seizure disorder that had been diagnosed in early childhood but never followed up on over the years. Working with our family physician, the medication was gradually reduced, and Tracy emerged from her medically induced buffered state of being and with that came heightened energy, restlessness, and difficulty with relaxation and sleep. She became quite demanding of attention, mostly mine, and would insist on being in the same room with me, and preferred that it be the kitchen. Tracy loved food, and there was at times, a choking concern. When upset, she would holler and attempt to drag me from one room to the next. At times, she would be awake most of the night, sometimes, eating from the fridge, or ripping up books. Eventually, the doctor prescribed a sleep aid that not only made a difference to Tracy's sleep routine, but mine as well.

It was a very challenging time. Through the exhaustion, frustration, isolation, and disillusionment, I was convinced that Tracy was somehow doing everything on purpose to drive me to the brink. I've seen that kind of thinking get the better of many service providers when they've lost sight of their original intentions and are feeling overwhelmed and apathetic, which are classic symptoms of burnout. The only thing I could think of that would be worse would be to have Tracy move back into the institution. I couldn't stomach the thought of it. It was hard to know for sure how Tracy would have felt if we had made that choice but, in my heart, I imagined she would feel abandoned, and I was sure I'd be consumed with guilt. So, we carried on.

I was still attending church at this time in my life and Tracy accompanied us every Sunday. The congregation got used to her presence and while there was never any lack of acceptance, there were also never any moves toward connecting with her either, except for one congregation member who was a writer with articles often appearing in our local newspaper. She asked if we would be willing to be interviewed for a story she was writing for the Lutheran church magazine and wanted to focus on our journey with Tracy and how our relationship had formed. We agreed.

I was raised in the Lutheran Church, attending Sunday School as a young girl, being confirmed as a teenager, and eventually began teaching Sunday School as a young adult. I've never really defined myself as a Christian, however I recognize my roots in the teachings of Christianity. I attended church regularly and had read with great commitment the New Testament in my youth.

There were things that never quite sat well with me in the church. Once again, I never felt included or as though I belonged there. I was most inspired by my interpretations of the teachings of Jesus Christ and, more specifically, by what I felt as a call or duty to serve. My understanding led me to believe that it was most noble to give of self without expectation of anything in return and for me at that time, this included my own joy and fulfillment. When I noticed that I was in a joyful space as a result of my service delivery, I never allowed myself to fully embrace it. In fact, it had me question myself because this fleeting satisfaction somehow felt like I was receiving something not meant for me. So, when I was introduced to the concept of altruism as a part of my academic studies, I had a word that described what I had been aspiring to my whole life and a concept that fit nicely into my frame of reference about what it meant to be a good Christian.

I wondered how to reconcile these tensions…

With its roots in Latin and French, the word altruism refers to personal qualities of people who tend to focus on something other than themselves which, in service provision, means other people. I can recall classroom discussions that emphasized the tendency toward unselfishness, meaning to help or assist without any expectation of return, and to give without the need or desire to receive. At face value, this creates an enduring emotional lop-sidedness for people who choose the role of service provider as their paid vocation.

Healthcare, human services, and education are not highly paid positions, with some people in these sectors making only minimum wage. When service providers are unable to sustain themselves, they often take on more work in multiple organizations, leading to overload, exhaustion, and potentially burnout. Not only does the lack of funding to support high quality service delivery and those who provide it say something about how much society values this work, but it also speaks to how highly regarded those who access services are as well. This is especially clear when we consider those living with mental health challenges or those who engage in illicit drug use.

I can recall grappling with feeling underpaid and undervalued for my work and at the same time feeling guilty for feeling that way. “Shouldn’t I be happy to simply do this work without any concern for myself, my wellbeing, my survival? Isn’t that selfish to think otherwise, especially, when my livelihood is directly connected to someone else’s challenges in life?” I know I’m not alone. So how do we interpret what it means to be altruistic in our role as service provider when, at the same time, we collect a paycheque for it?

I caught myself many times over my career muttering to myself, “they don’t pay me enough for this” when I found myself in overwhelming, at times, potentially dangerous situations. Going above and beyond is no longer seen as beneficial and yet, at the same time, it doesn’t feel right not to. Directly linking personal effort and quality of service to the number on the paycheque feels like taking a stand and, at the same time, falling short. In many ways, workplace policies create a paradoxical situation that perpetuates this internal tension that service providers commonly experience.

At its core, the labour movement in Canada has long advocated for pay equity, fair compensation, and safe workplaces. Unions have played a leading role in the push for pay equity legislation, including the federal *Pay Equity Act* (1987, revised 2018), which aims to ensure workers performing work of equal value receive equal compensation, a goal rooted in decades of union advocacy addressing systemic wage discrimination. Canadian unions, including the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), continue to emphasize fair wage structures and job evaluation processes to reduce inequities in pay, particularly for historically undervalued jobs and equity-seeking groups. Labour advocacy has contributed to narrower wage gaps for women and other equity-seeking workers through

collective bargaining and public policy engagement. Beyond equitable pay, Canadian unions have consistently promoted safer workplaces, negotiating health and safety provisions in collective agreements, supporting worker training and hazard identification, and advocating for stronger legal protections so employees can refuse unsafe work without fear of retaliation. Yet within service work, this raises a persistent tension: how to fairly compensate care-based labour without reducing or reframing its relational and altruistic meaning.

Now back to Tracy

Welcoming Tracy as a new member of our family brought with it a shift in the relational dynamic that I had with the institution that once was Tracy's home and my former employer. We worked with two dedicated and responsive social workers within the *Family Home Program* who met us with respect and kindness through the ups and downs. The respite services we accessed brought us into relationship with two community based social workers who, in addition to coordinating our respite needs, offered patient and loving ears and shoulders to lean on and who, in turn, became lifelong friends. Other than that, the network of professional support we had did not align with our success.

Communication with staff members who worked on the wing that Tracy spent time on during the day, as well as the community based vocational program, was often rife with misinformation, ignored messages, and lack of response. Gestures toward self-determination and inclusive practices were superficial and without impact. It was difficult, I think, for the institutional staff to see Tracy's new situation as an extension of how they might support her differently as part of a family dynamic, and it was challenging for the person-centered vocational program to do so as well.

There was a disconnect in our relational spaces, where perceptions and suspicions of each other became barriers to creating a supportive community for this new living dynamic with Tracy. At the time, I often found myself actively looking for the mistakes of others, crafting detailed stories to complain. I now recognize that I used this tactic to avoid engaging with my own feelings and connecting more fully with my lived experience. As Arthur Frank (2022), a narrative scholar of illness and life stories, suggests, the narratives we construct about others, including the patterns of attention and judgment we cultivate, both reveal and shape how we engage with our own lives. By

becoming aware of these narrative tendencies, we can practice what Frank calls *vulnerable reading*: a reflective approach that encourages noticing our reactions, questioning the stories we tell, and discerning which narratives foster connection, learning, and personal growth, ultimately offering personal choice in meaning-making.

Chretien (1996) emphasizes the formative power of vulnerability: by acknowledging our limitations and relational interdependence, we cultivate ethical and spiritually resonant responses, even amid exhaustion, grief, or institutional pressures. At that point in my life, the last thing I wanted to feel was vulnerable because to me, vulnerability meant weakness and failure. Over time, I have come to recognize the deep strength inherent in authentic vulnerability, a quality that is central to the principles of the CSA.

When Tracy died unexpectedly five years later, my desire for revenge rose to the surface. She had been staying back at the institution while we were away on vacation and had choked on her lunch in a bathroom stall.

I was trapped in an emotional cocktail of anger, sadness, grief, denial, and guilt. I think I made my way through a case of beer over the following few days. When I began to emerge out of that form of self-escape and self-abandonment, I decided that someone had to pay. I had worked in that institution myself for a few years and had seen first-hand the evidence of abuse, neglect, and poor care. Of course, I had also seen evidence of gentle care and kindness, but at that point I was solely focused on my anger and seeking revenge.

I advocated for an inquest and my request was granted. We were able to ask questions throughout the process and I was hell-bent on laying blame, finding fault, and ensuring everyone felt as shitty as I did. It didn't make me feel any better. Several recommendations were made to improve care and supervision in the institution and a few months later it closed, not because of the inquest, but because it was scheduled to anyway.

Members of our church congregation, for the most part, ignored that Tracy had passed and the ones who approached us, not knowing what to say, spoke of the better place she was now in, and pointed out the end of her suffering. I've always found that interesting that Tracy's living with a developmental disability equated to her suffering. On

some level I knew these congregation members were ill-informed and that they meant well. But, in my grief, I wasn't up to the role of teacher or advocate, so I said nothing.

Silencing myself in times of sorrow, especially within my church community, only further served to heighten my feelings of isolation. This is probably true for me beyond this community as well. Before too long, I would find myself on a personal and academic journey that would alter my perspective of my Christian upbringing and would sever my relationship with the church. In the next chapter, I'll explore how my religious and spiritual beliefs were expanded and became integral to a more deeply attuned and self-fulfilled approach to my work as a service provider.

Attending church continued to be a part of my life for several years to come following the passing of Tracy. I think a part of me was hoping to find absolution for all the ways I felt I had failed her as a caregiver and for me, especially, some reconciliation with the image I had held of myself in that role. My humanity had emerged in ways that I found challenging to accept, and I was ill-equipped to respond.

This is Terry

A brother

A presence

A loss that continues to shape my understanding of care and service…

We were lucky. Except for the loss of deeply loved grandparents, the rest of us were here. We were alive. We loved each other. We were lucky.

Terry was 10 years older than me. I always thought he was so cool, and I was proud to call him my brother. He was a bit reckless ~ a rebel ~ with a big heart and sensitive nature. In the recent years, I had seen him grow into a loving father ~ a more peaceful man. But he never lost that glint in his eye.

The last time I saw him, Terry was cutting the grass. I was dropping off my niece and nephew after a sleepover. He stopped the mower and we chatted for a moment. As I backed out of the driveway, Terry waited, all the while smiling at me as I left. It was almost like he knew.

You know those dreaded middle-of-the-night phone calls? Mine arrived a few weeks later. Terry had been in an accident. He was unconscious and being air lifted to the hospital. He had fallen out of a moving truck at a campsite about an hour outside of town. My sister and I raced to the hospital. At the time, I was working in brain injury rehabilitation. I took one look at Terry, and I knew in my heart that he was already gone. They performed surgery to decrease the pressure in his brain and we waited. He never woke up.

I was sick to my stomach at the thought of what my mom and dad were going through. My heart was heavy and my belly in perpetual knots. My family's worst nightmare was playing out.

I remember thinking about what Terry would want if he could wake up. Would he be prepared to live the kind of life he would surely face as a result of such significant injuries? I couldn't imagine it. The loss of his quality of life would be too much for him ~ for any of us. It was unfathomable to imagine Terry living in a long-term care facility.

Hours after Terry's surgery, a few of us were outside the hospital. Some of my family members were smokers as I had been for many years myself having quit a couple of years earlier. I recall watching them smoke like I was in some slow-motion silent film thinking how great it would be to have a cigarette, like perhaps, there would be some magic I could inhale that would make it all go away. And then I realized that I could stand there and smoke all day and it wouldn't change a thing.

I lived right around the corner from the hospital at that time. We had decided to take a short break, freshen up and meet back to wait for Terry to wake up. As I walked home, there was a black squirrel who walked along with me. We didn't see many black squirrels in those days in my area. Now they seem to be everywhere. I knew in my heart, it was Terry. He was with me in a different way, and I felt comforted and hopeful by the experience of his presence.

In those first few hours, my experience as a service provider working in brain injury rehabilitation offered a perspective that the rest of my family didn't have. I knew, based on Terry's inability to breathe on his own and regulate his temperature and other bodily functions, that his injury was very, very serious. I knew that it was highly unlikely that he would open his eyes again, and if he did, he would not be the Terry we knew and loved.

He was in many ways, already gone. At the same time, I remember holding on to hope. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance? Maintaining hope is part of my nature as an eternal optimist, but it was also important for my family, for me to demonstrate that. At least, that was my belief then and it still is now.

One of the most powerful, intangible, and yet palpable qualities of service delivery is the energy of hope, understood not only as an emotional stance but as a sustaining relational and meaning-making capacity within uncertain and liminal contexts. In this sense, hope can be understood in alignment with Thomas Moore's (1992) spiritual psychology of care and soul, in which sustaining presence, attentiveness, and meaning making in the midst of suffering are central to how individuals and practitioners remain oriented toward life even in conditions of profound uncertainty. As such, hope operates as both a professional and human capacity that is cultivated through relational engagement and that supports both those who are served and those who serve.

But, the day after Terry's accident, when my mom asked me if I thought he was going to die, I couldn't lie. I had already gone to the end of the process I had seen play out for so many others in my work. If Terry regained consciousness, he might not be able to speak, to walk, to ever live independently or work again. His personality would not be the same. He might have some awareness of what had happened to him, and this could lead to immeasurable grief and despair in his life. He would need extensive rehabilitation and may require alternative living arrangements. His life would be forever altered in profound ways and so would ours. In fact, that was already true. Could I imagine Terry receiving services from the organization I worked for? No. My first thought in response to that question was that I would not be satisfied with our services for my brother.

My initial awareness of what I perceived as a gap in service delivery came not from my direct involvement, but from what I observed in the experiences of others receiving residential services within the agency. At that time, I was not directly engaged in that area of service. It wasn't until later, when I became the Director of Programs and Services, that I became more actively involved and developed a deeper understanding of residential services. Much of my early perspective on service provision was shaped by my previous work in institutional settings and by my experiences with Tracy.

The residential program at my organization felt like a mini-institutional setting to me in some ways. The emphasis on the rules, the clinical aspects of rehabilitation, and at times the attitudes held by those working there went against my personal beliefs and values.

Communal living spaces are complex in nature with many moving parts, people, and personalities, and at times, I witnessed what felt to me to be an overextension of self on the part of service providers. Some demonstrated a critical attitude and perception of family members, and an inability to relate to the deep loss and grief that many people experience for themselves and/or for their loved ones as a result of such a traumatic injury and alteration in life circumstances. I couldn't imagine that for Terry or for our family. I will investigate this conversation around family members and from the angle of organizational culture in upcoming chapters.

It wasn't long before the rest of the family began to realize what was happening, so I broached the discussion of organ donation. The neurosurgeon working with Terry, who happened to be the same neurosurgeon who cared for many of the people (we) served in our organization, was a bit stunned when I spoke to him about Terry's eligibility as a donor, as it tends to be a very delicately timed conversation. My background and training in brain injury had equipped me with the awareness that Terry's body was likely in a gradual process of shutdown and that he likely had already sustained brain death. The whole family had already agreed to organ donation if that were in fact, true, and after several more hours of assessing Terry's response, the required processes began to determine his status and move forward with donation. Terry's gift changed the lives of seven people.

For me, Terry's ability to donate his organs, provided comfort and gave a glimpse of *resurrection* in the aftermath. According to Christian thought, Jesus Christ, died ~ sacrificed his life for ours ~ on the cross and rose again three days later. In many ways, Terry's gifts of life, undertaken three days after his brain death, provided some evidence that his life did go on too.

The ongoing grief process allowed for the doubts and denials that often accompany loss to rise to the surface. Had we made the right decision? Did we act too soon? What if we had waited a bit longer, maybe, he would have opened his eyes. But in

my heart, I knew, whether I liked it or not, that Terry's life path had unfolded according to his soul's personal journey.

My faith has always told me that there was something beyond this life, this human existence. As a little girl, I might have imagined we all danced in the clouds up there retaining our physical form and delighting in everything that made our heart sing. As my spiritual journey evolved, I began to see life after death and resurrection in a new light. Perhaps, it was our energetic essence that carried on even after physical death. Maybe, there is an entirely new realm of experience available to us when we exist instead in a different dimensional space. Could it be possible that we are able to communicate and remain connected to our soul families beyond the physical experience? I am convinced that this is true, just as that little black squirrel may have been trying to tell me that day on my walk home and to this day, every time I see one.

Losing my brother strengthened my faith in that I became so grateful for the core beliefs I held about eternal life even as they had shifted over the years. It soothed me to know that Terry's spirit carried on, that I could communicate with him and continue to love him even if I couldn't see him with my physical eyes.

Several weeks after Terry's death, our family travelled to a friend's camp on Lake of the Woods near Kenora, where we had all been born. One evening we were sitting in the living room together watching television when a sensation came over me. My body was tingling, and my sensory perception felt heightened beyond what was occurring in my physical space. I looked down the hallway and there was my brother. He looked younger than he did at the time of his passing ~ he was only 44 years old when he died. He was wearing jeans and a navy-blue t-shirt. I knew I wasn't physically seeing him with my human eyes but there was no doubt I was looking right at him. He kneeled beside the chair I was sitting in with his arm along the arm rest and he just stayed there. I didn't want to move or say anything because I knew that he would be gone so I just sat in that space with him. When the moment was over, I announced to the room that Terry had just been there. No one questioned it.

During that same trip, I was sitting on the dock one evening, reading a book by Melody Beattie. In it, she described a time in her life when she was being guided in seemingly effortless ways toward exactly what she needed. She'd encounter someone

who offered the answer to a pressing question, stumble across a book that spoke directly to her curiosity, receive help at just the right moment, or hear her intuition with striking clarity whenever she needed direction. She recognized a sense of perfect alignment in her life; everything unfolding in sync and on time. Yet, she kept coming across materials about grief. Despite the synchronicity she was experiencing, she couldn't understand why grief kept surfacing. After all, everything seemed fine, there was no obvious loss or hardship in her life at the time (Beattie, 1995).

Then her 12-year-old son, Shane was involved in a skiing accident, sustaining a severe brain injury, and was lying in a hospital bed on life support.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I read this passage. The experience Melody described with her son was parallel to what we had just gone through losing Terry. Melody recognized that all the grief materials that crossed her path were a form of preparation ~ like her soul was getting her ready for what was to come. In that moment, I flashed back to several moments of intuitive experiences I had in the days leading up to Terry's accident. A friend of mine was visiting at the time, and I was so happy to see him and spend time with him. But I kept getting these feelings and messages that "something was going to happen" while he was there. I didn't feel afraid or worried. The intuitive energy would just flow in and flow through and I would carry on. I also recalled the many times I actively worried about Terry, the rebel that he was, even as a little girl. In an instant it all came together for me ~ my soul was being prepared. I felt safe and held despite the overwhelming grief and loss. I wanted nothing more than my brother to be alive and at the same time, I knew that I was somehow supported.

One day I was out walking. Moving my body had become a way of moving through the emotional energy I was living in at the time. This had been such a significant and traumatic loss for our whole family, and we were all sad in our own ways. We were in it together, and yet, we walked our unique individual paths alone. I noticed that I was beginning to have moments of relief that felt lighter in comparison to other darker, heavier moments. And I knew that, both things could be true at the same time.

My spiritual practice leading up to Terry's death was strong, active, and powerful and had created a foundation within me that I suddenly realized was still present amid my grief. I could feel the sadness and walk with my bereavement with awareness and

conscious connection to it, precisely because I had this foundation of joy and purpose that lived in the core of my being. I could feel and sense it in my solar plexus and sacral areas. Of course, sometimes, I forgot it was there, grief and anger overtook me, and I didn't feel as connected to that grounded place of safety and source, but I know now that this was the establishment of my spiritual anchor, and I knew I would feel that joy again.

Creating this foundation, however, it is personally experienced and felt in the body, is essential to a service provider's capacity to remain present with the challenges, traumas, tragedies, and despair often encountered in the lives of others. Equally, it is vital to our ability to stay present with our own suffering. Knowing what joy feels like, learning how to cultivate it, and embracing it as a lived experience does not mean we bypass the pain inherent in being human. Rather, it means we care deeply enough about ourselves to honour joyfulness as a central and sustaining force in our overall wellbeing. In doing so, we strengthen and sustain our ability to engage in the emotional investment, what is often referred to as emotional labour, that lies at the heart of meaningful service and authentic relational presence, without becoming overwhelmed or lost within it.

During a particularly challenging time in my healing process after Terry's passing, I found myself sitting alone in church one Sunday. When *Amazing Grace* began to play, I was suddenly overcome with emotion and began to sob. In that moment, I felt an overwhelming sense of isolation, and whatever remaining attachment I had to the organized church seemed to dissolve entirely. I remember thinking: What is the purpose of a religious system or community if the absence of connection feels so profound? I came to understand that simply calling a place a *community* does not mean it is experienced as one.

Looking back now, I wonder if my grief may have acted like a kind of desensitizer, numbing me to any possibility for connection that may have been present. This realization has led me to reflect more deeply on the relationship between self-connection and the capacity to be open to meaningful, intimate connection with others. I will explore the idea of community as a felt, sensed, and even transcendent experience in chapter 4.

As I continued journeying through grief over the months and years that followed, I was called to revisit the assumptions I had once made about the experience of those we

served through our agency. If the services we provided weren't *good enough* for my brother, what did that mean for everyone else? That loss changed my perspective irrevocably. Whether in my personal life or in my professional role, I now view service delivery through the ever-present lens of a family member.

When I hear a service provider speak dismissively or judgementally about someone they support, I instinctively imagine how I would feel if they were speaking about someone I loved. I recognize that this sensitivity may sometimes border on being hypercritical, and yet, it opens up space for me to practice compassion toward those service providers, too. I remind myself that they carry their own lived and living experiences that inevitably shape their responses. Many are exhausted, overextended, disillusioned and are precisely the people I hope my work will benefit. These moments offer me yet another invitation to "walk my talk," to tend to another layer of my own wounding, and to welcome the unexpected healing that often arises through the path of service. For that, I surrender with gratitude.

The parallels between my vocational calling and this deeply personal period of loss became impossible to ignore. Terry's death not only drew me into an intimate and humbling relationship with grief, but it also illuminated many of the misconceptions I had held about my role as a service provider, especially regarding quality of life, trauma-informed practice, and the importance of genuine compassion and presence in the face of life's most unimaginable experiences.

A decade after Terry's passing, his daughter became pregnant with her first child at the age of sixteen. My family and I were concerned about her young age, her single-parent status, and the road ahead. She has since gone on to have two more children and has become one of the most loving, patient parents I've known. The night before she went into labour with her first child, Terry came to me in a dream. We were standing in the *rumpus room* of our childhood home, the one we had shared with our parents. No words were spoken ~ we just stood facing each other, and he was grinning from ear to ear, laughing with pure joy.

When my great nephew entered the world the next day, I understood the purpose of that dream. It reminded me of the joy that remains available to us, even in the midst of sorrow, loss, and uncertainty. It grounded me once again in the quiet knowing that more

than one truth can exist at the same time: sadness and joy, grief, and new life, worry and wonder. And within that paradox, something sacred unfolds.

Below is a piece I wrote several years ago as part of an early reflection on the value of lived and living experience. At the time, I was navigating a period of personal and professional transition, seeking to make sense of the ways life had shaped me through both struggle and joy, and how those experiences were informing my approach to service. I didn't know it then, but I was beginning to articulate a way of being that would later become central to how I understand and embody conscious service.

Since Terry's passing, these words have taken on an even deeper resonance. Grief has a way of stripping away illusion and sharpening our awareness of what matters most. The lessons life teaches us, whether we are ready for them or not, are not just meant to inform how we show up in service to others, but also how we show up for ourselves. Terry's death invited me into a more intimate relationship with both loss and love, and in doing so, reaffirmed what I had begun to realize when I first wrote this: our lived experience is not separate from our service ~ it is the heartbeat of it.

This reflection continues to remind me that there is a blessing in allowing life to teach and shape me, even (and especially) when it's uncomfortable. As I was starting to draft my book, the following piece, *Lived Experience is a Valuable Teacher*, emerged capturing that ongoing journey that continues to evolve with every season, every loss, and every opening of the heart.

Life Experience is a Valuable Teacher

> Let's give life a little credit. Every day is filled with learning and teachable moments. What insight comes to you on the commute to work? How does your heart speak to you when you wash the dishes? What message does your ego scream when you are mired in frustration or conflict? And what of your soul? What does it say when you slow down enough to listen?
>
> There is way too much weight given to measurable evidence. Of course, we all want evidence of our accuracy, our impact, and our efforts. Have you ever noticed though that much of life comes without any tangible evidence other than the clear, still moment of transformative knowing that we experience within ~ the moment often impossible to articulate, but nonetheless, life changing. A perspective shifted, inspiration sparked, a life changing knowing ~ all these moments of clarity rarely come with proof or

evidence or any guarantee for that matter. However, they hold great import and power.

What if we started fully appreciating the evidence contained in our hearts and stopped negating our personal truths in favour of collective fear-based interpretations?

Inherent in the act of service lies the opportunity for self-knowledge. As we seek to be of assistance in the world ~ especially with other people ~ we can't help but examine the corners of our own experiences. This is the gift of the mirror effect that exists in our relational spaces. While it takes discernment and a gentle heart, seeing ourselves through the eyes of others can be a very informative personal growth tool.

Discernment is required to ensure that what creates internal resistance is met with courage, humility, and acceptance so we can take what fuels our transformation without the desire to berate ourselves for the realization ~ or shoot the messenger. A gentle heart is necessary, so we can be open to receive the reflection of our greatness and learn to embrace our creativity, loving nature, and beauty.

We've already established that service providers are not immune to the challenges, tragedies, and traumas that have impacted the lives of those they serve. When you meet someone, whose life has been touched by pain and loss, as a service provider, you learn from that person what they need ~ if you are listening and paying attention.

When we think about organizational policy and funding opportunities, we place great value on learning from the lived experiences of those we serve ~ at least, that's what we say we are doing. We learn about the battle from the person who's fighting it. We understand the impact of pain when we sit with the one who is hurting. We recognize growth and healing when we join in celebration with the victor.

So, why then do we so readily gloss over our own lived experience as service providers? What gets in the way of making the connection between how our personal challenges have led to our greatest learnings? And then what prevents us from taking that a step further to recognize how that life lesson informs our practice as a service provider. How do these experiences and the personal growth they afford help us to deepen our capacities for presence and engagement with others?

We capitalize on our lived experiences when we allow ourselves to sink deeply into them and absorb all the wisdom they have to offer. Squeezing out the value of lived experience means we learn to honour it. You will never learn anything in a textbook that surpasses the value of what you have lived. Learn to think of your life as a laboratory where everything can be the object of your subjective observation. Watch it. Take notes. Listen

to it. Feel it. Take more notes. Peer at it from different angles. Shake it up and see where things land. Do the same thing over and over. Do something completely different. Lose control. Hold on tightly. Play with the events of your life like a scientist would manipulate the variables in an experiment.

When we come to understand ourselves as the most important subject of our lives ~ because we are ~ we gain the ability to transfer what we discover to our interactions in the world. There is nothing like connecting with someone who has deep self-understanding and who ~ at the same time ~ is willing to admit their blind spots.

Know yourself and be willing to be surprised. See your truth and revel in your mystery. Get comfortable with the perfection of your flawed human experience. Make yourself safe and become that safe place for other souls on the path of transformation and growth.

Life will throw you your share of struggle and strife. The first order of business is to live it and live through it. Learning will make itself evident as you make yourself available to it. Writers say to write when you are raw and publish when you are healed. I think this sentiment can apply to life as a service provider as well.

Learn and grow in your rawness and serve when you have integrated your experience.

Tracy's loss marked the start of a search for meaning that would shape my work and my life…

Operating under the deeply embedded desire to be validated in some way by the external world, I pushed on to find other ways that I could contribute to the field of developmental services, following Tracy's death, while remaining home with my children. Eventually I was invited to teach in the Developmental Services Worker program (the program from which I had graduated) on a part-time basis, beginning my 35+ year relationship with that same college as a faculty member. At one time, this was my dream job, but that sense of fulfillment faded quickly when I found myself teaching courses that held little to no meaning for me. Over the years, this touchstone of personal meaning making has become a key gauge for assessing alignment with my values and the integrity of my actions, reflected in the sense of joy and fulfillment they produce. As Arthur Frank (2022) suggests, the stories we tell about our lives, and the discernment we exercise in choosing which experiences to internalize and integrate, are central to meaning making.

Similarly, research in occupational psychology emphasizes that meaningful work contributes to identity, well-being, and the experience of purpose, highlighting the connection between personal values and the fulfillment derived from one's actions (Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). Together, these perspectives underscore how narrative engagement and reflective discernment allow us to recognize when our work resonates with our deepest values and supports our sense of purpose.

I have always been very motivated by a desire to initiate change where I thought it was needed. When I reflect on the human services system, I could see so clearly everything that could be done better and all the gaps that needed filling. I know I'm not alone in this motivation, and I'm sure that my feelings of frustration over the years are mirrored by many service providers around the world. Systems transformation is often slow, arduous, and complex in nature, which means that as individuals integral to the system, we are called to tap into our stores of patience, compassion, commitment, and courage to move the agenda forward while caring for ourselves and each other.

This tension between aspiration and constraint resonates with van Manen's (2000) reflections on a *phenomenology of practice*:

> The practicality of a phenomenology of practice should not be sought in instrumental action, efficiency, or technical efficacy. Rather, as the author notes, even if philosophy does not produce immediate outcomes, it can *act on us* when we engage with it. The original emphasis is placed on "creating formative relations between being and acting, between who we are and how we act, between thoughtfulness and tact" (p. 13), highlighting that a phenomenology of practice is primarily concerned with how reflective, whole-self engagement shapes both the practitioner and the relational, ethical quality of their actions. In other words, its significance lies not in what we can do with it in a technical sense, but in how it transforms our awareness, responsiveness, and presence in practice.

Van Manen reminds us that reflective engagement is itself a form of action in shaping who we are as practitioners and not just what we do. Over the years, my understanding of service has evolved. Earlier on I viewed my role through a lens of obligation and sacrifice. Now I see service as an extension of love and connection.

Rather than fighting against flawed systems, I strive to work within them while fostering meaningful change.

Shifting from frustration to appreciation enables more sustainable engagement. Recognizing what is already valuable in service work allows for a more constructive approach to change. Rather than focusing solely on systemic gaps, I now ask: What do I love about this work? What energy do I want to bring to it? How can we expand on existing strengths to enhance service delivery?

Donald Schön (1983) argues that moral and professional growth in practice arises from ongoing reflection on one's actions, intentions, and relational impacts. This aligns with the conscious discernment and attentiveness that the CSA encourages, bridging personal awareness with responsive action.

Through my early initiation into service delivery and academia, I uncovered things about myself that made the process challenging, and I also discovered the parts of myself that have allowed me to sustain. I am in better touch with my courage, my ability to commit, my capacity for growth, and my deep desire to be authentic.

Of note in this quest to feel better aligned within and more authentic without, I began to question my earlier understandings of Christianity and spirituality, what that meant to me as a human being and service provider and began the journey of grappling with this aspect of my identity. I will dig into this exploration more deeply in the next chapter.

This chapter has traced the early landscapes that shaped my understanding of service ~ family narratives, church involvement, institutional work, loss, responsibility, and the quiet absorption of sacrifice as virtue. These influences did not simply inform what I did, they shaped how I inhabited myself while doing it. Over time, however, subtle disruptions began to emerge. Questions surfaced. Something in me longed for a more integrated way of being ~ one in which service did not require disappearance. That longing gradually drew my attention to the body, to the ways meaning is carried not only in belief but in flesh, breath, and action. It was not through a formal declaration, but through a deeply personal act of inscription, that this shift first became visible.

Body as Canvas

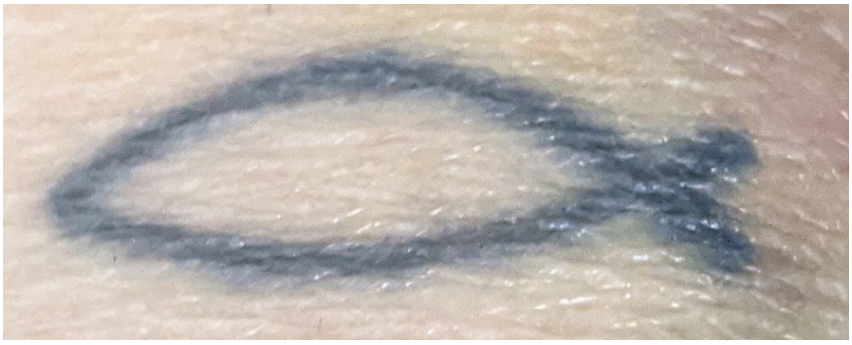
I have several tattoos, and only recently did I begin to see that they tell a story I did not consciously intend when I first chose them ~ a story that mirrors my evolving understanding of service, faith, and living integration.

My first tattoo, shown below, is a symbol of Christianity. At the time, I was quietly re-imagining what it meant for me to be Christian. I was moving away from inherited doctrine and institutional definitions and toward something more lived, more intimate. I was drawn not to religion as structure, but to what I understood as Christ consciousness ~ not as a title bestowed, but as a way of being.

For me, this consciousness was not about intellectual assent or emotional devotion alone. It was about embodiment. About how love moves through a body. About how compassion is expressed in tone, posture, and presence. About integrity as alignment between what I believe and how I live.

The tattoo became a marker of that shift. It was not decoration. It was declaration. A visible commitment to live what I was still learning how to name.

In this sense, my tattoos function as living memory etched into flesh. They are reminders that growth is not only cognitive; it is lived in muscle and breath, in choice and relationship. They mark moments when something inside me reorganized. Just as the CSA invites self-connection and relational presence, these symbols remind me that insight must eventually take form ~ in how I show up, how I respond, and how I love.



Chapter 2. Service, Love, and Self

Setting the Stage: Why This Chapter Matters

By this stage of my journey, I had become an expert in compartmentalization. Separating my personal emotions from my professional responsibilities felt like a skill, a mark of competence. Yet this detachment came at a cost: I was attentive to external perception but largely disconnected from my own inner life. My values, beliefs, and experiences as both a human being and a service provider were fragmented, and I had little awareness of what it meant to be grounded in my body. It would take years before I recognised that truly feeling my feelings required presence ~ being in my body, sensing, noticing, and allowing.

We drove across the country that summer on our annual trip since having relocated to BC, and as we entered the city limits of Thunder Bay, I felt an internal arrival like I had never experienced before, as though I had just landed in my body. In that moment, I knew, “oh, this is what it’s about.” I was struck with the epiphany that being in my body was a requirement for feeling my emotions, rather than thinking them as I had done my whole life. This arrival of myself felt like moving along a travelator in the airport of life. I was aware that I was moving forward in my experience of being present as though I were watching myself from within myself. I felt my body touching the seat of the car and my hands on the wheel as I sensed an expansion in the centre of my being. I relaxed and felt a sense of relief, the kind that comes with finally figuring something out. It was one of those moments you know, while you’re in it, you’ll never forget ~ a moment of deep presence.

These somatically sense-making experiences became central to my understanding of embodiment and integration of holistic practice in my life. Through them, I learned to stay present with emotional energy, even when it was intense, uncomfortable, or challenging. Attending to these bodily-felt experiences revealed multiple ways of knowing ~ sensory, affective, relational ~ that complement intellectual understanding. These varied ways of knowing have shaped not only how I perceive and interpret situations but also how I live and respond in the moment. This integration of somatic awareness and reflective engagement directly informs my work as a human service

provider, creating a foundation for me to act with attentiveness, responsiveness, and ethical presence in interactions with those I serve.

At the same time, this chapter explores emotional labour and emotional investment and how deeply engaging with others in service can both enrich and challenge us. Emotional labour is not merely a transactional effort; it is intertwined with the energy we invest, the care we offer, and the relational presence we bring. Recognizing this interplay helps illuminate the perceived costs and rewards of service, and underscores why living in the body through self-connection and reflective practice is essential for sustaining ethical and compassionate engagement.

Guided by these reflections, this chapter is framed by the following questions:

- How has service come to be separated from love, selfhood, and wholeness within professional, theological, and institutional frameworks, and with what consequences for those who serve?
- How has compartmentalization, detachment, or the suppression of emotional experience shaped professional identity and well-being?
- In what ways do burnout, emotional labour, and compassion fatigue function not merely as individual pathologies, but as signals of fragmentation, revealing the costs of disconnection from integrated selfhood?
- How can embodied practices and somatic awareness deepen integration, self-connection, and relational responsiveness while preparing the body and self for the emotional investment inherent in service?
- What does it mean to understand love as a somatic, integrative practice, expressed through presence, integrity, and action, and how might this reframe service as a site of union rather than self-erasure?
- How can joy, fulfilment, and enlivened wisdom be understood as integral components of ethical, self-filled practice?

Through this chapter, I invite the reader to witness how grounded expertise grows into enlivened wisdom, and how self-connection, reflective practice, and embodied ways of knowing and being form the foundation of the CSA. It sets the stage for seeing service not as separation from self, but as a lived integration of presence, care, and relational responsiveness.

Just get through the day…

Embodiment practices, including movement-based activities like walking, running, and kickboxing, became essential tools for me. Quieter practices such as yoga, Reiki, and meditation also supported my connection with self. Recognizing bodily sensations: tightness in my chest, a knot in my stomach, for example, helped me cultivate self-awareness and responsiveness.

One of the most powerful integrated practices I come back to involves sensorily noticing in the moment no matter where I am or what I'm doing. I notice when the knot appears in my belly, or my chest becomes tight. I become curious and speak with the bodily sensations as I would a dear friend. Sometimes I'll put my hand over the area that is speaking to me, often my heart or my belly, and send the message that I am here, and I can trust myself to respond.

My wake-up call came through a brush with burnout, a condition the World Health Organization (WHO) defines as resulting from chronic workplace stress. WHO identifies three dimensions of burnout:

- Energy depletion or exhaustion.
- Increased mental distance or cynicism related to one's job.
- Reduced professional efficacy (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019).

While this definition acknowledges burnout, it risks compartmentalizing stress by treating work as separate from overall well-being. Burnout is not merely a workplace issue; it is holistic, affecting body, mind, and spirit (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). The expectation that service providers sacrifice themselves without replenishment or self-connection is particularly harmful.

After about fifteen years in the field, I realized how far I had drifted from the spark that drew me into this work ~ my heart, my instinct, my lived experience ~ and how disconnected I had become from myself, both at work and in life. Whatever I chose from that moment on needed to hold meaning. I had to see it, yes, but more importantly, I had to feel it resonate in my heart and body.

Burnout had crept in quietly. The work became steps to follow, theories to cite, techniques to apply. I could execute interventions perfectly, measure outcomes, tick every box, and still feel hollow. Day after day, I caught myself chanting inside my head: *"I just have to get through the day… I just have to make it to 4:30… I just have to make it to 4:30…"* The words repeated like a mantra, a measure of survival, a signal that I had lost touch with the pulse of the call that had first drew me here.

It was in the shower, the most ordinary and private of spaces, that the mantra hit me fully. Water poured over me, hot and relentless. I felt the shock on my skin, the rhythm of the drops, the curl of steam around the mirror. I heard the words again, louder this time: *"I just have to get through the day… I just have to make it to 4:30…"* And I felt the weight of them: exhaustion, disconnection, the distance between who I had become and who I had been when I started this work.

In that moment, I remembered why I had entered this field in the first place. I recalled the faces, the stories, the gut-level knowing ~ that energetic pulse ~ that had called me to serve. Theory, procedure, and technique could never replace that lived, embodied wisdom: wisdom that lives in action, in life, in spirit, in heart, and in my body. The water ran over my arms, and I felt the gap between the practice I had mastered and the person I had once been, and I knew that reconnecting with this wisdom was the only way to bring heart and meaning back into my work.

I closed my eyes and let the water soak me, letting the mantra fade. I wanted to feel again ~ not the perfect response, not the textbook solution, not the professional self that had grown competent and removed ~ but the me who had been moved to care, the me who could not look away from distress. That raw awareness became the pivot point: a way to reconnect with myself, re-enter my work with heart and spirit, and find meaning again.

Here, enlivened wisdom becomes essential: knowledge arising from lived experience, integrated in the body, felt in real time, and illuminated by theory, but never replaced by it. This is the direction of my study: theorizing *from practice*, not applying theory *to practice*.

Lived and living experience generates understanding, guides action, and shapes theory ~ a theory that lives in service itself, not just in thought. And yet, this turning point was not a one-time event. Each time my lived and living experiences draw me back into reflection or academic engagement, I encounter new knowledge, new theory, and new ways of understanding human service, consciousness, and care. These encounters do not replace my experience ~ they illuminate it, giving language and structure to what I have felt and learned in practice. Over time, this cyclical interplay between experience and theory has deepened my understanding of the CSA, enriched its articulation, and strengthened its practical application. Lived experience continues to catalyze theorizing, and theory continues to clarify, support, and expand the work that grows from the heart of service.

As I embarked on this path of meaning, self-directed learning fuelled by organic curiosity was my preferred mode of education. I became a sponge for all things spiritual, metaphysical, and esoteric, while maintaining connection to my church and my religious frameworks. My personal lens began to shift in profound ways as a stronger sense of myself and my holistic experience strengthened. I didn't realize at the time that I was developing a strong foundation of joy and peace within, likely because I couldn't recall ever feeling that way, so it was not familiar to me. Contrast illuminated this awareness over the years that followed, which I'll share more about throughout this dissertation. Exploring spiritual texts and philosophies felt like charting an inner landscape. In those moments, I realize that compassion unfolds when curiosity and presence converge It is not about knowing what to do but about allowing my attention to meet another's experience without fear.

As I continued to reflect on the tensions of service, pay, and personal fulfillment, I kept coming back to the question of compassion: how do we sustain it without burning out? Joan Halifax (2018) offers a helpful lens. She reminds us that compassion is not a fixed quality or a finite resource; rather, it emerges in real time through attentional balance, affective insight, and relational presence. Compassion unfolds as we notice, attune, and respond without fear or attachment to a particular outcome, reframing it from a drain on the self to a source of relational and personal vitality.

During my self-directed learning journey, I explored spiritual and philosophical perspectives, including *A Course in Miracles* (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007), which

suggests that all emotions originate from either love or fear. Compassion, often viewed as an exhausting burden, is actually an expression of love. It is not compassion itself that depletes us but fear-based responses such as worry, self-doubt, and emotional over-identification with others' sufferings. I notice moments of genuine curiosity and engagement spark a subtle joy that arises when I follow my self-directed learning. This joy is not dependent on external validation; it reinforces the idea that attention, presence, and love naturally fuel compassionate engagement.

If we reconsider the experience of compassion fatigue from the perspective of *A Course in Miracles* (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007), we can see that when we feel tired and disillusioned because we believe we care too much, we have likely slipped out of love and into fear. We have become worried about the person we care about, which is, by the way, very natural. Perhaps we are afraid of their story. What if that were to happen to me? Maybe it did happen to me and now listening to them tell their story is triggering my past traumas and unhealed wounds. Maybe we don't know how to respond and are concerned that we'll say or do the wrong thing, make it worse, and look inept at the same time. When worry creeps in, I can pause and recognize it as fear, not compassion. Halifax's (2018) enactive framework helps me see that compassion requires attentional balance and affective insight. By grounding myself, I can respond from love rather than react from fear.

The Canadian Medical Association defines compassion fatigue as "the cost of caring for others, resulting from the desire to relieve suffering." However, Figley (1995) and other researchers argue that it is unprocessed secondary trauma, rather than compassion itself, that leads to fatigue. If we shift our perspective to see compassion as an energy source rather than a drain, we can transform our approach to service work.

The notion that it *costs to care* is a contributing factor in needing protection from each other and further serves to separate us and create division when what we need to do is move forward in connection and unity. Operating under this notion means that we not only need to protect ourselves physically from other human beings, but also psychologically, emotionally, and energetically, reinforcing the perceived need to establish and enforce *professional boundaries*. Being compassionate does not cost us anything; it does not take away from our experience, rather, it enhances it. Compassion is an expression of love. It is not compassion that makes us tired, but a fear-based

response that drains us, usually magnified by the lack of self-compassion, so common among human beings, especially those who identify as service providers.

When I believe that caring costs me something, such as my internal peace, I might notice tension and tightness in my shoulders as I listen to another. Halifax (2018) reminds me that compassion is not a fixed act but an emergent process arising from attention and presence. Simply noticing my body and allowing myself to be present is already a form of compassionate engagement.

Iyanla Vanzant (1998) offers an insightful reframe: compassion is not about doing for others what we assume they need but about holding space for their capacity to navigate their own challenges. This distinction helped me recognize that my previous approach to empathy was performative, driven more by my desire to be perceived as caring than by authentic connection. This insight dismantled my previously held notions of compassion and empathy as foundational values to all forms of human service in our society. Because I thought I knew what these qualities meant, I mistakenly believed that I could somehow think my way into demonstrating them in my relations with others. It never even dawned on me that I was depriving myself of these very qualities since my ego was the main force behind my desire to be perceived as compassionate, caring, and empathetic in nature.

Pause here and ask: How might cultivating attentional balance, somatic awareness, and intentional presence prepare learners and practitioners for more sustainable and authentic engagement in service work? How might these practices be integrated into curricula, experiential learning, and professional mentorship for people entering service-based careers? We will explore this in more detail later in this dissertation.

As I continued to merge the foundations of my religious education and the novelty of my current explorations, I was more inclined to search for congruence and commonality, rather than comparing for the sake of determining which viewpoint was more *right* or *better* than the other. This, I realize now, is my preferred way of navigating my life and this world we share. I search for the places where agreement might be reached, alignment might be realized, and attunement elevated and experienced. This is my path to peace.

I notice a sense of inner calm and clarity when I allow myself to explore ideas freely and without judgement. These moments of peace are instructive since they model for other practitioners that self-reflective engagement and curiosity foster sustainable compassion in professional practice. Joy arises naturally when I witness the emergent growth of others, rather than when I intervene or *fix* their challenges. Self-directed learning, curiosity, and authentic attention are not only personally sustaining but also enhance relational care in professional settings.

I've learned that compassion thrives in context. It emerges through relational attunement, intentional presence, and responsiveness, practices I now cultivate in both my personal and professional life. This is the shift from exhaustion to bodily-informed, conscious service, and it highlights the potential for academic preparation to cultivate service professionals who are self-aware, attuned, and resourceful.

If compassion is an expression of love…

St. Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, "**4** Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. **5** It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. **6** Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. **7** It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." (1 Corinthians 13, New International Version, The Holy Bible). St. Paul speaks of an ever-abiding experience of persevering energetic flow that fortifies our capacity to continually choose love. He seems to recognize that human beings have a range of emotions and behaviours, noting specifically, pride, anger, envy, for example, and makes a clear distinction between these emotions, one might say, derived from fear, and those derived from love. Yet, society often frames love as fragile or conditional. In service work, we fear that offering love makes us vulnerable to depletion or rejection. But true love is generative; it expands rather than diminishes.

I like to think of love and fear as sitting right beside each other. The deeper and more intensely we love, the higher the risk of slipping into fear. We fear loss, harm, disruption, disengagement, disagreement, discord, rejection, ridicule, and resistance which are all states of being that are not loving in nature. *Love hurts, love bites, love stinks* are lyrical sentiments capturing our romantic angst-filled plight in contemporary relationships and which serve to perpetuate the idea that love is somehow the source of

our suffering and pain. *A Course in Miracles* (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007) would say that it is love that shines a light on everything unlike it. When we find ourselves in love with another in any expression or form that may take, we are given a front row seat to all things unloving that require healing.

At the heart of the CSA lies a simple truth: service is love made tangible, and it lives in the present moment. Lesson 293 of A Course in Miracles (Foundation for Inner Peace, 2007) offers a profound reminder: “all fear is past and only love is here” (ACIM, Workbook Lesson 293). Every gesture, every choice, is either an expression of love or a call for it. Seen through the lens of CSA, both serving others and embracing self-love unfold most fully when grounded in the loving now. Love, presence, and service are not separate practices; they are inseparable expressions of a single truth: that the moment we inhabit is the moment in which love is both offered and received.

Holding an intellectual interpretation of an energetic quality is but one aspect of learning about its essence and substance. True wisdom is realized not merely in thought or understanding, but in embodied practice demonstrated in how it is lived moment to moment. It becomes tangible when we develop the capacity to inhabit the present fully, to respond attentively, and to engage relationally with others. In other words, wisdom is not abstract. It is enacted, felt, and experienced through our choices, our actions, and the quality of our presence.

As we cultivate awareness of our bodily sensations, emotional currents, and relational dynamics, we begin to integrate what we know intellectually with how we perceive, interpret, and respond to lived experience. Through this process of embodied awareness, knowledge is no longer something we simply possess but something that gradually becomes woven into who we are. Our values move beyond ideas to shape our habits of perception, our relational presence, and our ways of being in the world.

Embodied awareness therefore provides the bridge between knowing and being because it creates the conditions through which insight can be continually integrated into lived experience. Being is not a static state that is achieved once and for all, but an ongoing expression of what has been consciously integrated through reflection, experience, and practice. It is through this continual process of integration that understanding matures into what I’ve been referring to as, enlivened wisdom.

In this way, the qualities we cherish ~ such as compassion, attentiveness, humility, courage, love, and ethical responsiveness ~ move beyond conceptual ideals and become embodied expressions of how we relate to ourselves, others, and the world. Knowledge may be communicated, but wisdom emerges through the continual practice of living what we have come to know.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a prominent 20th-century phenomenologist, emphasized the centrality of the body in shaping human experience and knowledge. In his seminal work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argues that our perception is not a mere mental activity but is fundamentally rooted in our bodily engagement with the world. He introduces the concept of the "body-subject," asserting that our physical being is not just an object in the world but the primary means through which we experience and understand our surroundings. This perspective suggests that consciousness is inherently embodied (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 4).

Within this dissertation, consciousness is understood not simply as awareness or cognition, but as the dynamic, integrative capacity through which individuals perceive, experience, interpret, and make meaning of themselves, others, and the world. It encompasses bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, values, relationships, and spirituality, bringing these dimensions into an evolving awareness that informs how we respond to life. While awareness may involve noticing an experience, consciousness involves integrating that experience in ways that transform how we understand ourselves and how we choose to relate to ourselves, others, and the world. Rather than representing a static state to be attained, consciousness is understood as an ongoing process of becoming ~ one that deepens through reflection, embodied awareness, and lived experience. Through this continual process of integration, knowledge becomes embodied, perception becomes more discerning, and wisdom is increasingly expressed through one's way of being.

Merleau-Ponty's critique extends to realism's emphasis on reason and mental perception as the sole basis of knowledge. He contends that such an approach overlooks the foundational role of bodily experience. For instance, he discusses how the act of touching involves a reciprocity where the hand that touches is also capable of being touched, illustrating the intertwined nature of perception and physicality. This

"double sensation" exemplifies his argument that our bodily experiences are not passive receptions but active engagements that shape our understanding of the world.

By emphasizing embodiment, Merleau-Ponty highlights that true wisdom and understanding emerge when we fully engage our bodily sensations, rather than relying solely on abstract reasoning. This approach suggests that knowledge is not merely conceptual but is deeply rooted in our physical interactions with the world, making our experiences so tangibly lived.

My experience driving into my hometown illustrates Merleau-Ponty's premise. The *knowing* that accompanied my literal and figurative arrival both in Thunder Bay and in my body, helped me to understand not only intellectually, but emotionally, and spiritually, what I had been trying to conceptualize and intellectually mastermind into being for years. Up to that point, for example, I had trouble grasping what everyone meant when they spoke of *being grounded*. Even in meditation and reiki workshops, I still didn't quite get it, and I remained stuck in my head expecting the experience of grounding to reveal itself in the content and quality of my thoughts. I remember one day in particular, as I was walking into the college for class, when I noticed that my feet felt like they were landing in some awkward unbalanced pattern. Not that I was dizzy, but it was as though one foot was landing harder than the other in a strange way, as if I were disconnected from the neck down, my head way above my body attached by a string, and my whole sense of self up there with it.

Walking myself home and connecting with love…

As I reflect on this now, I imagine my walking practice had much to do with bringing me into my body, although that was not my initial motivation. In my early thirties, I began a daily walking practice that extended over time and became a moving meditation as well as a source of exercise for me for many years. I could say it spearheaded my journey into fitness, which prior to that time was relatively non-existent. I've been active ever since in a variety of ways and at various intensity levels, but always called back to my breathing and into my body, even if only for a moment. With a 25 year commitment to my physical fitness, I can see how the experience has shifted and morphed over time into a more holistic way of being and living. Eventually, I have been able to move more quickly out of my head and tune into what is happening in my body

and to recognize the varied sources of wisdom and ways of knowing contained within this vessel. Even when I wasn't aware of the interconnected process within, something always alleviated or lifted for me after moving my body. These days, I am more likely to notice the transformation in the moment because I have trained myself to watch for it.

I used to align with Merleau-Ponty's (2012) notion that reason and mental perception, rather than physical and emotional experience, form the basis of knowledge and self (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Even though in my heart and soul, I identified as a dreamer, emotionally led, with a sensitive nature, I was also aware that this was not preferred by many people around me, or perhaps, not as highly valued as it was to be smart, productive, and accomplished from an intellectual perspective. So, on some level, I committed myself to that direction, attaining excellent grades and moving through academics with great ease, even when I wasn't there, both literally and figuratively. I have spent most of my life in my head, while grappling with my sensitivities and navigating the waters of my emotionality and spiritual questions, trying to do so through the gateway of my mind, which often left me frustrated and anything but enlightened.

Professional vocational organizations and governing bodies perpetuate the importance of *reason and mental perception* over the physical, emotional, sensory value of learning and living experience. Research in healthcare and often in social work, for example, is valued more when it is evidence-based through scientific processes, but this extends the compartmentalized view of what it means to be human, to learn, and to serve, and it completely leaves out the heart.

In a recent workshop I facilitated on Conscious Service participants reflected on the energy of love and their comfort level with love-based discussions in the workplace. One participant admitted feeling vulnerable and uneasy about using the word *love*, preferring *care* instead. This reaction isn't unusual; I've often been encouraged to use *care* rather than *love* in workshops or written materials. Yet I declined for several reasons, perhaps stubbornness among them, because I believe that if we see service as an expression of love, we need to name it openly.

Language is a powerful tool for connection, shared vision, and the expression of emotion. Yet modern communication, flooded with buzzwords, abbreviations, and emojis, can dilute our innate capacity to relate to and love one another. So, I choose to

talk about *love* rather than *care*. We often distinguish between caretaker, caregiver, and the *cared-for*, but don't we all care, or at least aspire to, on some level? If mentioning *love* in the workplace unsettles us, it might be time to explore what would make these conversations safer and more constructive.

Another participant raised the issue of vulnerability: what if our loving gestures are rejected or go unreceived? That fear points to *conditional* love and offering affection only when we're sure it will be reciprocated. But service as an expression of love means being willing to offer a kind word, a smile, or a listening ear without guarantees. It involves small, everyday gestures of empathy and presence: making eye contact with someone who's struggling, forgiving each other, or approaching a colleague after a conflict. When we learn to love ourselves enough to prioritize the collective *we*, our loving gestures become unconditional, supporting both personal and communal well-being.

Becoming unconditional in our loving gestures is a by-product of actively loving ourselves enough to know that the wellbeing of the collective *we* is directly linked to personal wellbeing in a mutually influential way. Union does not mean we lose ourselves in each other but, instead, that we show up as fully integrated (inner unionized) in our relationships and interactions to join with another fully integrated person or group of people. Otherwise, all we're talking about is co-dependency, which is neither autonomous nor unified.

Scruton (1986) argues that love transcends individual interests, creating a shared sense of concern and mutual well-being. Nozick (1989) describes love as a union in which autonomy and shared identity coexist. In this view, love does not dissolve individuality but creates a relational bond in which two people remain distinct while becoming meaningfully connected through mutual care and shared purpose. This distinction is particularly relevant to the Conscious Service Approach, which challenges assumptions that caring for others requires the diminishment of self. Instead, it suggests that authentic service, like healthy love, is strengthened when both connection and individuality are honoured. Applying these perspectives to service work, challenges the notion that professional boundaries require emotional detachment. Instead, they suggest that connection and love can enhance resilience rather than deplete it.

Traditional guidance in service professions often advises to *leave yourself at the door.* This notion suggests that compartmentalization is necessary for professional effectiveness. True integrity, however, comes from alignment between values, emotions, and actions (Brown, 2018).

The APA Dictionary of Psychology (n.d.) defines boundaries as “psychological demarcations that protect the integrity of an individual or group.” Boundaries are often rigid walls that separate service providers from their humanity. Instead, alignment with role purpose and presence creates fluidity, allowing for authentic engagement while maintaining self-awareness and self-care.

Rather than treating embodiment as a fixed practice or state, service providers can cultivate dynamic, responsive ways of being that integrate lived bodily awareness with emotional attunement, reflective insight, and relational responsiveness. This approach moves beyond self-monitoring or fear of depletion, fostering not only presence and connection but also sustainable engagement and ethical responsiveness in service work. In this sense, bodily awareness provides a grounding orientation, but it is through its integration with enlivened, relational, and reflective capacities that service becomes truly sustaining and transformative.

This notion that one can separate who they are from what they are doing and still show up authentically is baffling to me. Perhaps a more integrated and deeply attuned state of presence supports an engaged and attentive stance with the people served through our efforts. Perhaps we are better equipped to recognize our biases and judgements as they arise as a natural part of our human conditioning, so that we can transcend these limitations and avoid projecting them onto others. Perhaps a very intimate connection with our values and belief systems will allow for an ongoing, natural review of those areas that may not align with how we truly wish to live and show up in the world and through our service efforts in ways that create space for adjustment, refinement, and critique, thereby ensuring that we actively live our lives according to our values and beliefs and avoid holding others to our personal standards and practices, recognizing and honouring that they have their own personal way of perceiving and being.

What about a connection so deep within ourselves that we are able to observe our thoughts and cognitive processes without losing ourselves in mindless chatter. This would involve an internal intimacy that supports emotional responsiveness and helps us ride the waves of emotional nuances in the moment so that we are less likely to be overwhelmed or even shut down. There might be a recognition of self so clear that we can differentiate between the soul of our being that moves with love and the egoic voice that leads with fear. Maybe it's more about getting out of our own way so we can show up with a loving and compassionate, kind acceptance, that holds an all-encompassing safety for other people and ourselves simultaneously, rather than leaving what makes us who we are on the other side of the door.

Service providers are human beings first and foremost, no more or less valuable than those they hope to serve, and not without a range of human experiences, emotions, challenges, triumphs, and despair. So much can be learned from our own life experiences that, when honoured and embraced as an evolutionary tool, as challenging as that can be, can become stores of wisdom and resources upon which to draw in our acts of service. The service provider's life experience does not become the focal point of the interaction with others, but it is at play in the background, the personal story actively informing, supporting, and always contributing to the interactions, whether it is acknowledged or not.

The path of self-discovery, self-responsiveness, and self-fulfillment is one that supports the vocational calling of service providers, especially in their personal wellbeing and joyfulness as human beings. Through greater self-awareness and embodied reflection, individuals become better able to recognize their needs, values, and patterns of responding, allowing them to engage in service with greater authenticity, presence, and discernment. In this way, personal growth and professional practice are not competing priorities but mutually reinforcing processes. As service providers become more deeply connected to themselves, they are increasingly able to form meaningful relationships with others without losing themselves in the process. The Conscious Service Approach therefore positions personal wellbeing not as a reward for good service, but as a foundational condition that enables compassionate, sustainable, and fulfilling vocational practice.

Dis-integration of self, understood as a loss of coherence between the physical, emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual dimensions of one's experience, can pave the pathway to disconnection with others because authentic engagement requires the full presence of self. When individuals become disconnected from their embodied awareness, values, needs, emotions, or sense of purpose, they are more likely to respond from compartmentalized states of functioning, shaped by habit, obligation, or external expectation rather than conscious, integrated choice.

In this sense, dis-integration reflects a disruption in the continuity between embodied awareness and conscious awareness—the internal bridge through which experience is processed, integrated, and expressed. When this integration is weakened, the capacity to remain present, responsive, and relationally attuned is diminished.

Cultivating a self-filled state provides the foundational capacity to re-establish coherence. It involves being resourced, grounded, and sufficiently present to receive and respond to others without overextension. However, being self-filled alone is not sufficient for truly relational or ethical service. Moving toward self-fulfillment represents a further stage of integration: a fully enlivened and reflective presence in which one's actions, values, and relational engagement are consciously aligned.

A shift from service as a selfless act to responding as a self-fulfilled being cultivates inner sovereignty while simultaneously strengthening the capacity for intimate, attuned connection with others. In this state, there is no need to seek protection from the person or their stories, nor to rely on external validation or gratitude for the service offered. Freed from these attachments, the risk of co-dependent relational patterns and overextension is reduced, allowing service to flow more naturally through the integrated whole of self ~ physical, mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual.

In this way, cultivating self-filled capacity lays the groundwork for re-integration, while self-fulfillment reflects sustained integration in action. Together, they support service that is relationally responsive, ethically grounded, and sustainably embodied.

Integrity involves an integration of our thoughts, emotions, values, beliefs, sensations, and actions. Such integrity is nevertheless a state that naturally fluctuates. Yet we often try to protect this integrity with rigid boundaries, even as we

compartmentalize ourselves and our relationships. As Katie and Mitchell (2002) suggest in *Loving What Is*, perhaps the path forward lies in accepting reality as it unfolds rather than creating artificial divisions between mind and body or self and others. By learning to love what is, we can remain open to the constant flow of life, embracing both our limitations and our potential for deeper connection.

Cultivating a strong connection to self enables service providers to develop the internal balance and harmony needed for true alignment and integrity of response. From this place of inner stability, they can monitor their internal resources including the reserves that foster joy, fulfillment, and awareness of personal wellbeing, and draw on them in real time when engaging with others. These capacities, however, do not exist in isolation but rather, are supported and amplified by intentional strategies, practices, and policies that recognize the complex realities of crisis, overwhelm, and despair. For example, reflective supervision, trauma-informed team practices, and flexible organizational policies provide the scaffolding that allows internal resources to be accessed and expressed safely, sustaining relational presence and ethical responsiveness. Rather than relying on hard-and-fast “boundaries” that isolate or divide, such structures enable service providers to navigate challenging interactions with resilience and discernment. In doing so, they honour both love and transcendence, recognizing that human connection, when supported by both inner capacity and organizational scaffolding, can elevate our shared experience beyond mere survival.

I recently listened to a podcast exploring the potential risks of artificial intelligence (AI), and it highlighted the importance of human motivation. Throughout history, technological advances have been used to support life-affirming progress, or, conversely, to enable destructive outcomes. This podcast’s debate on whether AI could ultimately destroy humanity brought to mind our longstanding emphasis on mental capacity, often at the expense of embodied ways of knowing, spirit, connection, and love. In a sense, we may already be immersed in forms of *artificial* intelligence whenever we value disembodied cognition over holistic experience. Recognizing this can remind us to center our humanity, our somatically felt sense of self, our spiritual depth, and our capacity to love, so that technology serves our highest collective good rather than undermining it.

Organizational structures in healthcare, social services, and education often emphasize division, between service providers and recipients, between management and employees, and even between colleagues. However, true service is rooted in union rather than separation.

Nozick (1989) suggests that in loving relationships, autonomy is not lost but shared. Solomon (1988) describes this as the “paradox of love,” where individual self-fulfillment enhances collective well-being. This perspective can be applied to service professions: when individuals cultivate self-connection, self-compassion, and self-responsiveness, they bring greater presence and resilience to their work.

When we focus on becoming self-filled as individuals, we enhance our capacity for contribution in the relational space, individually and collectively, whether that be in our personal, professional, or service-based connections. Challenging the notion of self-sacrifice, to be self-filled means that learning how to organically replenish the self, to love the self, to care for the self because we are grounded in self-love, ultimately, decreases the risk of seeking the filling of our internal voids in the external world and from other people. Yet, at the same time, an aspect of overall personal wellbeing is inextricably linked to the quality of our intimate connections, our sense of belonging, and the health of the collective of which we are a part.

Union, as a characteristic of romantic love can be extended here to love as an expression of service. Scruton (1986) says that love exists “just so soon as reciprocity becomes community; that is, just so soon as all distinction between my interests and your interests is overcome” (p. 230). In this iteration, concern is an essential characteristic of union, and any action that emerges from this concern, extends beyond the benefit of the individuals alone, and considers the best for both, and all, involved.

Union then becomes more than an attitude that we have toward each other. Rather, it requires genuine relationship based on shared vision, concerns, and motivations. In this way, *you and I* become *we*. In unionized environments, *we* often refer to the sense of collective and organized agreement that exists between the labour group of an organization ~ one that remains separate and often divided from the management group of the same organization, resulting in ultimate disunion. In this way, the collective *we* is not achieved and there remains an *us and them* mentality, attitude,

and practice that is often very disruptive to the effective functioning of the organization and certainly doesn't support personal and collective wellbeing or the provision of high quality, consciously loving, service in the community.

My faith evolved when I studied religion academically…

When I was completing my bachelor's degree in Psychology and Religious Studies, I recall feeling surprised when I read that the word, *religion* meant *to bind*. The root intention underlying religious formation, appeared to be, if only in language, to bring together, to create a sense of belonging and connection, to unite. Why then, had my experience in the church felt mostly isolating? Even though I had been actively involved, a regular parishioner, a Sunday School teacher, a support to my mom who did the accounting for the church as a volunteer, I never felt a part of the flock. Perhaps, I was not as alone in that as I thought.

As I grappled with my commitment to the Lutheran religion and my church activities, and more importantly my faith and spiritual life, I continued to attend services, albeit sporadically. One day, my mom called me to let me know that one of the parishioners at the church had died by suicide. She and her husband had been one of the most, if not, the most, prominent, actively involved members at that time. Church council, choir, assistant pastor, volunteer, organizer, bible study, you name it, they were involved and at the forefront. What happened? If religion is meant to bind us not only to God, but to each other, how can we explain the obvious gap that must have existed for this woman that led her to end her life?

One can't overlook the holistic realities at play when it comes to health and wellbeing, including emotional and mental health, but I also could not overlook the fact that whatever she had been seeking in the church to address what she was living with inside, was not enough. I spoke with the pastor and asked if he would support me beginning a *spirituality group* which I envisioned as a circle of interested people who would meet regularly outside of church to talk about how religious practices and beliefs translated into daily living and connected to spiritual expression. He agreed, we posted the first session, and my enthusiasm to remain a part of the congregation was restored. As I reflect on this now, I see how the spirituality group was another way that my previously discovered touchstone ~ that things had to have meaning for me if I am to be

involved, was at play here and truly guiding me in the way I had hoped it would when I made that commitment years previous.

The Spirituality Group was small but aligned in purpose, meeting regularly outside the church, often in my home, to explore how we lived spiritual values in our daily lives, rather than simply hearing about them in weekly sermons. We aimed to embody and ground ourselves in these teachings, making them tangible and personal. Although the church's pastor attended and offered some initial endorsement, his frequent return to official Lutheran positions on topics like abortion and homosexuality sometimes pulled the conversation away from intimate, lived experience. We were not seeking theological debates on social issues; we wanted to deepen our personal spirituality in a more embodied way ~ through practice, reflection, and genuine dialogue that allowed for growth and evolution over time. We wanted to feel it in our bodies in a way that made it come alive through our actions and relationships. My personal hope for the group was that it would, in turn, hold a safe, relational space for engaging in this kind of meaningful exploration ~ that it, too, would become alive with spirit.

When I shared my concerns and original vision for the group with the pastor, our conversation was challenging, but ultimately productive. The group continued, sometimes with him, sometimes without. This dynamic highlighted a pattern I've seen in other settings: discussions that drift toward external issues or the lives of others, rather than focusing on the self. For instance, in team meetings with service providers, the spotlight often falls on service recipients' circumstances while overlooking the providers' own lived experiences. Yet in service work, our greatest asset is our ability to be present, to *be with* others through loving energy and authenticity. Such embodied presence depends on grounding ourselves in personal awareness and integrity, ensuring we connect with others from a place of wholeness rather than from theory or detached service.

Embodiment enables us to recognize the somatic signals of stress, grief, and anxiety, which often precede cognitive understanding (Damasio, 1994; van der Kolk, 2015). Emotional labour, typically framed as the management of feelings in professional contexts (Hochschild, 1983), becomes particularly complex when grief is personal. Experiencing loss while maintaining a professional role, such as teaching or providing care, reveals the interplay between internal states and external expectations.

Practitioners are tasked with navigating their own emotions while supporting others, emphasizing the ethical responsibility to maintain both self-care and authentic presence (Jordan, 2010).

Embodiment refers to the lived experience of being in one's body, integrating physical, emotional, and cognitive awareness. Damasio (1999) emphasizes that emotions are not merely abstract concepts but physiological experiences that shape our interactions. In service work, embodied presence enables providers to attune to their emotions and regulate their responses, preventing burnout and what is commonly referred to as compassion fatigue.

Self-awareness cultivated through holistic practices such as mindfulness and movement-based therapies can foster resilience by supporting individuals to notice their internal states and begin to relate to them with greater openness and care. When service providers become disconnected from their bodies, they are more likely to operate from a place of depletion, reactivity, or overextension rather than grounded presence. In this context, Neff and Germer (2018) highlight self-compassion as a critical foundation for sustaining engagement without self-sacrifice, particularly by supporting acceptance of lived experience and reducing patterns of self-judgement.

However, within the Conscious Service Approach, these practices are understood as an important entry point rather than a sufficient endpoint. While mindfulness and self-compassion can stabilize awareness and reduce immediate distress, deeper integrative supports are required to move from acceptance toward transformation. This includes practices that actively restore coherence across the physical, emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual dimensions of self, enabling dis-integration to resolve into embodied integration rather than merely being observed or managed.

From this perspective, resilience is not only the capacity to endure or remain present, but the capacity to re-integrate experience into a coherent sense of self that can respond with clarity, alignment, and relational attunement. In this way, awareness-based and compassion-based practices create the conditions for change, while integrative and embodied practices support the actual re-organization of how the self is experienced and enacted in service.

According to the Oxford Dictionary (n.d.), embodiment is “a tangible or visible form of an idea, quality or feeling; the representation or expression of something in a tangible or visible form.” This expands on Merleau-Ponty’s notion that the “physical senses and experience, are the basis of knowledge and self,” integrating the physicality of the body and the physicality of experience, expression, and action in the world.

Without holistic living practices, we remain in an intellectualized experience of life. But what does it mean to be loving if it is only something we think and talk about? How do the qualities inherent in our roles as service providers become tangible expressions in the world if we do not move beyond thinking, or even feeling in a purely emotional sense?

As an individual practitioner, I might abide by the values inherent in a professional code of ethics, declare a set of values and beliefs that guide my practice, intend to contribute, respond, and experience lovingkindness, compassion, joy, and presence in my role, but until I have embodied these qualities, bringing them to life, on a sensory and experiential level, it remains nothing more than a good idea, a potentiality.

Within organizational structures, mission and values statements, policies, and procedures, likewise, hold very little meaning when offered in a disembodied way void of commitment, practical action, and inclusivity. This disconnect within organizational culture, between the personal and collective, is rampant in our healthcare, social services, education, and justice systems, pre-existing, but exacerbated by the COVID 19 pandemic, resulting in human resource shortages, difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified team members, higher rates of burnout, exhaustion, and mental health challenges among providers. Barriers to accessing supports due to stigma and fear of retribution, lack of transparency and effective communication within organizational structures present unique challenges for service providers who may be facing their own mental health challenges, including the symptoms of burnout.

Some organizational systems, and their policies and practices, create barriers to healthy work environments for all, involving dysfunctional labour relations that perpetuate disharmony, disunity, between management and direct service providers. There is often a lack of adequate training and academic preparation focusing on the

integral role of individual wellbeing in the workplace, and the importance of a sense of joy and fulfillment as essential to that wellbeing.

In approaching the work of service, it can be tempting to focus solely on systemic change or, conversely, on what the individual alone can do. Yet the reality of these systems, and our place within them, demands an integrated view that honours both the personal and collective dimensions of transformation. In chapter 4, I will delve more deeply into organizational culture and this integration of the personal and collective through the lens of the CSA, but for now let's explore personal practices of embodiment a bit further.

Embodiment, as a personal practice and way of being in the world, can be understood through the examination of lived experience, or what Phipps and Masuda (2018) refer to as "grounded expertise." It is common to assign the value of grounded expertise only to those whose lived experience is considered out of the ordinary, or, in healthcare and social services, to those receiving care. For example, this perspective is often fundamental to person-centered or person-driven approaches. Often overlooked, however, is the lived experience of service providers as a valuable source of insight and grounded knowing.

Grounding our expertise as service providers requires a self-loving and self-responsive process and approach where the embodiment of compassion, for example, as an internal resource and ultimately an energetic exchange is central to the evolution of self-connection and an authentic expression of service in the world.

Compassion, we are reminded, is not offering to others what we think they need or an intrusion of self into another's experience that seeks to override or interrupt the natural process they are moving through. Neither does compassion require self-abandonment as though it will run dry if we allow ourselves to receive it or alternatively express it with others. Rather, our receptivity and openness to self-filled experiences makes it possible to step into authentic expressions of compassion in our interactions and relationships. I open myself, my heart, my soul, my mind, and my body to receive compassion, love, respect, curiosity, understanding, acceptance, any love based quality, and in so doing I have filled myself. By becoming receptive to the essence of these qualities, I not only reap the soothing and uplifting energy in my being but to then offer

this in the world becomes a natural and automatic self-fulfilled outcome through my intentionality. I walk in love. I am love.

Has the search for meaning led me astray…

I have referred to having discovered an important touchstone that guides my personal and professional practice which involves being directed by what holds meaning for me. As I continue to explore embodiment work and how that becomes tangible in my life, I am considering that this meaning making value has been largely intellectual in nature, up to this point. It is my mind, my perceptions, coloured by all that creates my personal lens and frames of reference that influence whether I see meaning in my choices and life experiences. This search for meaning and desire to make sense out of things that often do not make sense, has in many ways kept me disconnected from the truth that my soul yearns to know.

Has the compass of meaning been misguiding me? Has it kept me stuck in my head, grappling to intellectualize what could only be captured through a more emotionally, sensory, spiritually attuned process? Perhaps, my commitment to engaging in things that held meaning for me has simply come down to allowing myself to be led by love ~ love for myself, for others, for the world, for my experiences ~ through demonstrating self-love by engaging in what I love and letting myself receive that love within my entire being. The desire to have a meaningful life and experience has transformed into a commitment to living a life of love through inhabiting the spirit and energy of love.

I recently began integrating holistic centering practices into my personal approach to learning and facilitation. I begin each session with a centering activity and take opportunities throughout the reflection, dialogue, and presentation of content, to tune in. When emotionally challenging material is shared, I have begun to take that moment to encourage a deep breath, a tuning in to notice and observe the internal processes and connection between mind, heart, body, and soul. Not only has it proven useful to others, but it has most certainly been of benefit to me as an act of self-responsiveness and presence in the moment.

Rather than self-reflection as an after-the-fact practice, we can become self-connected and begin to process what is present for us in the moment that it is occurring,

and this can be done without leaving the relational space or shifting our focus. Schön (1983) refers to this dynamic, responsive process as *reflection-in-action*, describing how practitioners think critically and adapt their approach while engaged in the act itself. More than one thing can be happening at once and in fact, it already is. We can contain more than one thought, one feeling, one sensation, one idea, one belief system or value in the same moment and to recognize the interconnected nature of these complexities is to celebrate union over compartmentalization and separation.

Grounded expertise emerges from lived experience, offering guidance that formal training alone cannot provide. Whether as service provider or recipient, our experiences shape intuition, decision-making, and relational attunement (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983). In my own work with individuals navigating substance use, depression, and suicidal ideation, I observed that attentiveness to lived experience, both mine and that of the people I responded to, enhances the quality of engagement. Lived/living experience teaches us that vulnerability, emotional honesty, and relational presence are central to effective service.

From labour to investment…

Service work requires significant emotional labour, defined as the regulation of emotions to meet professional expectations (Hochschild, 1983). While necessary in many relational and care-based roles, this labour can become emotionally and somatically exhausting, particularly in environments where authenticity is constrained or undervalued. Over time, repeated emotional regulation without adequate support for integration can contribute to dis-integration of self, where felt experience becomes increasingly separated from expressed experience.

Within this context, Morris and Feldman (1996) suggest that emotional regulation strategies such as deep acting may reduce the strain of emotional labour. Deep acting refers to the internal process of attempting to align one's felt emotional state with one's outward emotional expression, rather than simply modifying external behaviour (surface acting). This may involve cognitive reframing, perspective-taking, or invoking empathic understanding in order to generate an emotional state that is congruent with professional expectations.

Importantly, deep acting represents a shift from surface-level compliance toward a more internally coherent form of emotional regulation. Rather than simply “displaying” an appropriate emotion, individuals attempt to *inhabit* the emotional state required in the interaction. In this sense, deep acting can be understood as an intermediary process that moves closer to authenticity by engaging internal experience, even when that experience is shaped by contextual or institutional demands.

However, deep acting does not necessarily resolve the underlying conditions of emotional labour. When sustained without opportunities for reflection, restoration, and integration, it can still contribute to internal strain if the generated emotional state remains context-dependent rather than fully embodied or self-endorsed. From a Conscious Service Approach perspective, deep acting may therefore be understood as a transitional strategy: it reduces surface dissonance and supports relational effectiveness, but it does not in itself ensure full integration across the emotional, embodied, and values-based dimensions of self.

Grounded expertise begins to transform when service providers integrate their lived experience with professional skills. Schön (1987) describes this as "reflective practice," where individuals learn through action and self-examination. By embracing grounded expertise, service providers move beyond intellectual understanding toward embodied knowing and ultimately, into enlivened wisdom, enriching their ability to connect with those they serve.

The concept of emotional labour has been central to my experience as a service provider over the past 40 years. The term emotional labour has been used in a variety of contemporary contexts to highlight the “the unpaid, invisible work we do to keep those around us comfortable and happy,” (Hartley, 2017) but in fact, it was originally coined by sociologist, Arlie Hochschild, in 1983 as referenced above. Hochschild says that emotional labour refers to “the work of managing one’s own emotions that was required by certain professions. Flight attendants, who are expected to smile and be friendly even in stressful situations.” (Beck, 2018). From this perspective, emotional labour is only experienced in the workspace within the roles one is paid for, but not an element of personal relationships and homelife.

Specifically, in her book, *The Managed Heart* (1983), Hochschild says that emotional labour is “regulating or managing emotional expressions with others as part of one's professional work role.” It is worth noting that there tends to be an emphasis on the “managing” of emotions in ways that influence how one is perceived by external bodies. In other words, we may be feeling one way, but we are encouraged to express and display what we believe is expected of us, and therein lies the emotional labour.

Morris and Friedman (1996) expanded on the study of emotional labour and suggested four distinct dimensions through which it could be conceptualized, including, “frequency of appropriate emotional display, attentiveness to required display rules, variety of emotions to be displayed, and emotional dissonance.” I am immediately curious about the terms, *appropriate* and *required*. Who decides what is appropriate and required, or not? Is there a finite *variety* of *appropriate and required* emotional responses from which one can choose to display? The terminology seems to reinforce the tendency to think through or intellectualize emotional energy, figuring it out, justifying or explaining it, or removing ourselves from the emotionally laden situation, as opposed to feeling it and allowing ourselves to embody the experience for what it might offer in the moment, simply as an aspect of being human.

Morris and Friedman further offer that emotional labour involves the “effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions” (p. 987). This includes both external expectations related to how a service provider is expected to interact with those being served, as well as the internal state of tension or conflict that arises when employees are required to display emotions that are not congruent with their felt experience, known as emotional dissonance.

Within the Conscious Service Approach, emotional dissonance can be understood as a site of increasing disconnection between internal experience and external expression. When sustained over time, this dissonance may contribute to forms of disembodiment, wherein individuals become progressively less attuned to their embodied emotional signals as a way of maintaining functional performance within the role. In this sense, the body may become a site where emotional experience is managed rather than fully processed or integrated.

From this perspective, prolonged emotional labour without adequate opportunities for reflection, restoration, and integration may also contribute to emotional and spiritual strain. Emotional strain emerges where felt experience cannot be fully expressed, metabolized, or held within relational or organizational contexts, while spiritual strain may arise where there is a disruption between one's enacted role and one's deeper sense of meaning, purpose, or values. This is not to pathologize emotional labour itself, but rather to name the cumulative effects of sustained dissonance when integration across the physical, emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual dimensions of self is not supported.

The genesis of the term is relevant as it relates to service providers involved in the intimate work of responding to other human beings, however, the narrow focus on the workplace tends to perpetuate the compartmentalization I see as inherently damaging to one's personal wellbeing, thereby, contributing to unhealthy systems, and ultimately adversely impacting the quality of service delivery.

Human relationships require a certain amount of *emotional labour* to nurture, maintain, and when necessary, repair and restore, the relational space. The emotional space tends to be where we recognize our connection with each other. We feel things about and in response to the other person's presence in our lives. It is through our emotional experience that we come to know that we care for another, that we can both embrace and express our love for others and receive their love for us. Love in this context, is an expression, of caring, presence, engagement, and open heartedness toward others.

Jeung, Kim and Chang (2018), point out that "several studies of emotional labour in particular occupations have documented that it can be exhausting, be considered as stressful, and increase the risk of psychological distress and symptoms of depression" (pg. 6). The term itself implies something that is best avoided, especially, if we continue to look through the lens of the *work/life balance* myth. Emotions are often messy and unpredictable, uncomfortable, and complicated. And labour, well, that simply implies that we'll have to work for it. Why should we be exposed to jobs that create these challenging conditions for us? With that perception, it's easy to see how emotional labour becomes the enemy and bears the brunt of responsibility for a plethora of unpleasant, unhealthy, and potentially, dangerous workplace conditions.

As Jeung, Kim and Chang further discovered:

> "Emotional labour has been linked to various job-related negative behaviors and adverse health outcomes, such as job dissatisfaction, loss of memory, depersonalization, job stress, hypertension, heart disease, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, and has even been shown to exacerbate cancer. For example, Zapf revealed that emotional labour in combination with organizational problems, was related to burnout. In addition to the negative effects of emotional labour, it is well known that emotional labour itself is closely related to workplace violence. Employees working in service sectors are more likely to be exposed to occupational violence from their clients while performing their duties, compared to those of other industries, such as manufacturing, and those who engage in white-collar jobs. Client violence is very common in today's modern industrialized society and includes client, patient, customer, and prisoner-initiated violence. In Western countries, high risk jobs of client violence were found to be "caring jobs," such as police; firefighters; teachers; and welfare, health care, and social security workers" (pg. 188).

Notice how the *violent behaviour* from this perspective belong entirely to the service recipient. But what about the destructive, at times, psychologically violent behaviour that is sometimes demonstrated by the *burnt-out* service provider, or the violent behaviour that emerges as a result of unmet needs?

In my personal exploration of emotional labour, I have come to realize that it is a poor designation of a natural element of being in relationship with others. The development of relational space, in both personal and professional contexts, is not so much labourious as part and parcel of any caring practice. This inherent practice of care is more accurately described as a form of emotional presence. It is an investment in the well-being of self and other that arises from authentic connection, empathy, and mutual respect.

Rather than framing it as a transactional burden or task to be managed, I prefer to view emotional labour as *emotional investment*. This reframing better captures the intentionality and deep personal engagement that often underlies our service to others. It reflects a commitment to showing up fully, with heart and humanity, in the spaces we share. It also honours the real emotional energy extended without reducing it to merely an occupational demand.

By shifting the language from labour to investment, we create room to acknowledge the emotional richness of our work, not just the perceived cost. This perspective encourages us to care for ourselves as well recognizing that sustainable emotional investment includes reciprocity, energy awareness, and support.

As a service provider, I can expect that I will be called to emotionally invest in my work, in the relational space I co-create with others including those who access my services, and my organizational colleagues on all levels. Just as I would if I were birthing new human life into the world, I must learn how to prepare myself and my space to be able to care for and nurture my creations, how to process my experience and relationship to others as we face unpredictability and development, and ultimately how to best respond to what I am called into both internally and externally as learning and growth continues.

Further, it becomes imperative that I approach this investment as a self-filled and integrated being, making no distinction between personal and professional emotional responses. This means learning to honour my lived and living experience, my personal grounded expertise, as a rich resource of wisdom, guidance, and healing. This is where the notion of *enlivened wisdom* becomes essential: a dynamic, embodied knowing that arises from the convergence of emotional presence, reflective practice, and relational engagement.

Investing my whole self…

Enlivened wisdom is not static knowledge but a living current shaped by experience, intuition, and responsiveness. It calls on us to bring our full selves into our work, to recognize that our capacity to serve with authenticity and depth is amplified, not compromised by our humanity. By framing emotional investment through this lens, I deepen my ability to respond with compassion, clarity, and integrity, while remaining attuned to the evolving needs of both self and others.

The heart of integrity, for me, lies in a deep sense of alignment and congruency within my being, which forms the foundation of embodiment. If this is true, then how can I justify compartmentalizing myself, separating emotional experiences in ways that diminish a key aspect of my capacity as a service provider?

The role of self is not peripheral. Rather, it is central to effective service delivery and to the sense of fulfillment a provider may experience in their work. Self-inclusion can be understood as an organizing principle ~ one that guides action, shapes responses, and informs direction in any service-oriented context involving human connection. From this perspective, we can begin to explore the inherent importance of the self in cultivating relational space and in supporting the wellbeing and vitality of those who serve.

To include ourselves is to acknowledge the intrinsic desire for integrity ~ a natural striving for ongoing integration across all aspects of our being. Within this understanding, wellbeing is not a fixed state of balance, but a dynamic and continuously shifting process of moving into and out of alignment. This fluctuation reflects the lived reality of human experience, in which physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual states are constantly responsive to internal needs and external conditions.

Rather than signalling failure or success, these shifts are understood as part of an ongoing process of integration and re-integration. Wellbeing, in this sense, is not defined by the absence of imbalance, but by the capacity to notice, respond to, and re-integrate experience as it arises. This reflects a self-filled capacity: the ability to remain sufficiently resourced and self-connected to engage with change without disconnection, suppression, or overextension.

From a Conscious Service Approach perspective, this ongoing movement is understood as the natural counterpoint to dis-integration of self, in which coherence across the physical, emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual dimensions is disrupted. Wellbeing therefore involves the continual restoration of coherence, supported by embodied awareness as the bridge between experience and conscious response.

Recognizing lived and living experience, without separating the personal from the professional, is essential to sustaining this integrative process. It allows service providers to treat internal experience as meaningful information rather than disruption, supporting presence, responsiveness, and authenticity in relational contexts. Over time, this capacity creates the conditions for self-fulfillment ~ an integrated, enlivened state in which actions, values, and relational engagement are consciously aligned, and service is no longer an act of self-sacrifice but an expression of coherent being.

Organizations that gather around principles rooted in the inherent value of their people, often referred to as *human resources,* cultivate environments of integrity. Through the processes they implement and the relational containers they create, these organizations model what it means to be aligned in practice and purpose. They embody a living system of healthy growth and transformation.

My own journey toward honouring integrity has required me to explore the interconnection of all aspects of myself, and the dynamic interplay between my personal and professional worlds. This exploration has illuminated the organizing principles that live within me. I am convinced that an internal state of loving congruence ~ an integrated self ~ can only enhance my capacity for authentic, generative connection with others.

This understanding of integrity and self-inclusion as foundational to service work has deepened through my personal journey with emotional investment in relational space. My lived experiences, especially those marked by joy, fulfillment, trauma, and transformation, have profoundly shaped how I understand and embody wellbeing. These experiences have not only informed but enriched my professional practice as a service provider.

Some of the most meaningful and challenging moments in my life have been intricately connected to what I've encountered in my service work. The way I perceived and was altered by these events has been filtered through a deeply personal lens that is inseparable from my professional identity. Just as my personal healing, growth, and insight have shaped the service I offer, the responsibilities and reflections born of my role in service have influenced how I navigate the rest of my life. There is no clear boundary between these realms.

For me, integration has not been optional. It has been essential. It is through the weaving together of life experience, professional practice, trauma, healing, and insight that I have evolved into who I am today ~ a whole human being who has chosen the path of service. When I'm integrated within, I can show up with authenticity, to hold space for others, and to continue evolving through the work itself.

The Path Emerges…

Building on these foundations, the CSA emerged from my master's research project and lived experience as a framework for integrating self-connection, relational presence, and community engagement into both professional practice and personal life.

Three major themes emerged that shaped the CSA:

- **Language and Terminology:** Overused words can lose their depth of meaning, preventing deeper inquiry. To encourage a fresh perspective, I shifted terminology: Self-Awareness became Self-Connection, Effective Communication became Enlightened Communication, Therapeutic Relationships became Transformative Relationships, and Team Building became Co-Creating Community. These shifts are supported by Rosenberg's (2015) work on communication and Miller's (1976/2008) relational-cultural theory, which emphasize mutuality, authenticity, and emotional clarity.
- **Embodiment and Holistic Integration:** The process of learning must move beyond intellectual understanding into lived/living practice. Knowledge must be internalized cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally (Mezirow, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Somatic practices help transform experience into embodied wisdom (Levine, 2010; Shapiro, 2009).
- **Unlearning Conditioned Beliefs About Service:** Many service providers are conditioned to believe that overextension and self-sacrifice define commitment. Challenging these assumptions is necessary for sustainable, conscious service (Bloom, 2016; Kegan, 1994).

As I pulled together my data and developed my research paper and presentation, the ideas began to gel, and my next project was visible on the horizon. Between graduating my master's program and beginning my doctoral studies, a span of about six years, the CSA was born. In 2022, Hazelden Publishing released my first book *Conscious Service: Ten Ways to Reclaim your Calling, Move Beyond Burnout, and Make a Difference without Sacrificing Yourself.*

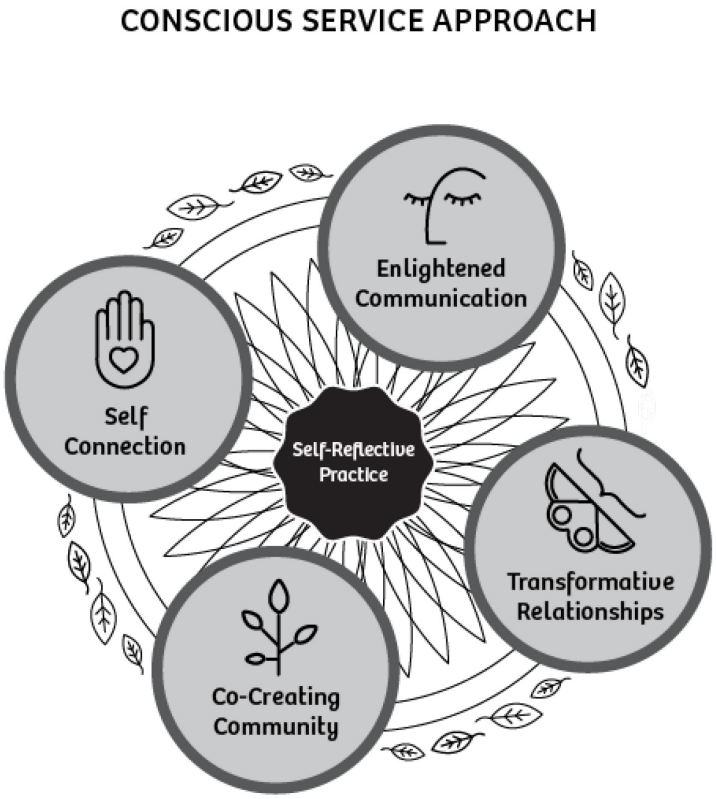
I wanted to create something that described my discoveries in ways that might have the same transformative impact for others. The process of articulating this learning and more importantly living it, has been central to the evolution of my grounded

expertise. Before we go any further, I want to take a moment to ground us in the CSA. The excerpt that follows, drawn from ideas in my book, offers both a description of the CSA and reflections on how it connects with existing literature and ideas.

Conscious Service is an evolving practice grounded in four interrelated elements that together form an approach to life, relationship, and service. While these elements can be entered through different points, they are not hierarchical or linear. Individuals often engage first with the element most resonant with their current lived experience. For some, this may be an inward focus on Self-Connection, while for others, attention may be drawn initially to relationships, communication, or collective life.

The four elements of the CSA include Self-Connection, Enlightened Communication, Transformative Relationships, and Co-Creating Community. While each element has its own emphasis, they are animated by a unifying exercise: Self-Reflective Practice. This reflective orientation weaves throughout the approach, allowing insight to move beyond conceptual understanding into somatically known, embodied, relational integration. Conscious Service is therefore less about acquiring knowledge and more about cultivating awareness, presence, and lived coherence.

Although engagement with new ideas often begins at an intellectual level, particularly through reading and study, the invitation of Conscious Service is to move beyond cognition alone. When ideas that resonate are allowed to sink from intellectual understanding into felt experience, they become integrated within the body, the heart, and relational life. It is through this process that shifts occur, both in one’s personal life and in one’s capacity to serve others with authenticity and sustainability.



(The CSA is visually represented in the accompanying graphic, designed by Dani Vachon of Creative Navigation.)

“That’s just the way I am” is a familiar phrase, often used to suggest a fixed sense of self. Implicit in this stance is the belief that once certain realizations about oneself are reached, growth has somehow concluded. At times, this position can function as resistance, shielding us from change or from the deeper acceptance of personal responsibility.

Self-Connection moves beyond static personality labels, inviting ongoing engagement through body, heart, and spirit with present-moment experience. Rather than emphasizing self-analysis or judgment, it prioritizes awareness of emotional states, physical sensations, and internal cues as sources of information. This orientation aligns with emotional intelligence frameworks (Goleman, 1995) and somatic approaches that integrate body awareness into reflective practice (Shapiro, 2009).

Through Self-Connection, individuals cultivate self-love, self-compassion, and self-responsibility, which are capacities that are foundational to effective service. This practice supports authentic responsiveness within relational contexts and reduces projection by increasing awareness of one's internal landscape (Mezirow, 2000; Brookfield, 2017). In self-connection, one comes to know that they are internally resourced: grounded, present, and capable of remaining by their own side even in moments of challenge. This internal steadiness enables greater integrity and choice in how one engages with others.

Many people engaged in service professions have been trained in a wide range of interpersonal communication techniques: maintaining eye contact, monitoring tone, using "I" statements, paraphrasing, and active listening. While these skills are valuable, knowing them does not guarantee their effective or ethical application.

Enlightened Communication transcends technique, focusing instead on the congruence between intention, internal state, and relational impact. It involves applying what is already known about effective communication while attending to the qualities that make such communication possible, such as authenticity, clarity of intention, and energetic alignment (Goleman, 1995; Rosenberg, 2015).

It is possible to observe all the external markers of good communication while still creating dissonance or harm. Many people can recall interactions in which words were carefully chosen and delivery appeared fitting, yet something felt misaligned. Enlightened Communication addresses this gap by emphasizing internal coherence. The words spoken, the tone used, and the intention held are brought into alignment with one's embodied state of being, fostering clarity and trust.

Clarity of intention is central. While communication often carries a desire to be heard, understood, or supported, Enlightened Communication invites conscious awareness of these motivations and their impact on the receiver. Even in moments of conflict or estrangement, communication is more likely to remain ethical and effective when connection is honoured rather than withdrawn.

This approach also acknowledges the role of vulnerability. Naming nervousness, uncertainty, or fear at the outset of a difficult conversation can shift relational dynamics, not by controlling outcomes, but by anchoring the communicator in integrity and self-

connection. In doing so, Enlightened Communication becomes a lived practice that integrates cognitive understanding, emotional awareness, and relational attunement.

Service relationships have traditionally been framed as therapeutic or helping relationships ~ terms that often imply a one-directional flow of care and power. Within this framing, one person gives while the other receives, reinforcing hierarchies that can obscure mutuality and shared humanity.

Transformative Relationships challenge this paradigm by emphasizing partnership, balance, and reciprocity. All parties bring something of value to the relational space and all stand to be affected by the encounter. This mutuality can be particularly challenging within service professions, where receiving is often undervalued or implicitly discouraged.

Transformative relationships require presence and engagement. Practitioners cannot offer authentic relational contribution without first cultivating internal space through self-connection. In this sense, Self-Connection, Enlightened Communication, and Transformative Relationships are intrinsically linked. Engaged awareness and receptivity allow practitioners to remain open to being affected, rather than defensively positioned within roles.

Mutual transformation becomes possible when both parties bring awareness, vulnerability, and personal value to the relationship (Wheatley, 2006; Rosenberg, 2015). These relationships are grounded in presence, compassion, authenticity, and the honouring of personal power. Importantly, transformation is not limited to the receiver; the practitioner is also shaped through their willingness to receive, to be impacted, and to remain energetically receptive rather than transactional (Miller, 1976/2008).

Co-Creating Community extends Conscious Service beyond individual and interpersonal contexts into collective, organizational, and societal life. While institutions and systems are often perceived as separate or autonomous entities, they are continually shaped through the presence, actions, and energy of those who participate within them.

Individuals are not merely influenced by the systems they inhabit. Rather, they actively co-create them. Each person contributes, whether through active engagement or absence. Patterns of *us and them* thinking, common within organizations and broader society, can erode community by reinforcing division and disconnection.

Co-Creating Community invites conscious attention to one's role within collective spaces. Rather than focusing solely on formal roles or positional authority, this element emphasizes lived leadership rooted in inner authority, and the energetic quality individuals bring to groups and systems. In this way, capacity, synergy, and ethical co-creation become focal points, fostering environments that support shared responsibility and collective wellbeing (Wheatley, 2006).

Through sustained practice of Conscious Service, engagement at the community level becomes an expression of integration rather than obligation. Conscious participation in collective life reflects the same principles that guide individual and relational work: awareness, presence, responsibility, and care (Bloom, 2016; Levine, 2010).

As I commit, again and again, to the principles of Conscious Service in my own life, one insight has become increasingly clear: Conscious Service is, at its core, an expression of love, inclusive of self and other. Cultivating a loving, embodied presence directly shapes my capacity for compassion, respect, acceptance, and warmth in relationship. Love, in this sense, is not an abstract ideal but a lived, moment-to-moment practice. When awareness, presence, and real integrity are aligned, service arises organically, guided by intuition, and grounded in care. Being love, rather than striving toward it, becomes both the practice and the offering.

Body as Canvas

This tattoo means *love* in Japanese culture. I had it done in 2002, during a period of deep spiritual exploration. My intention was not merely symbolic; I sought to encourage the embodiment of love in my life. I wanted to make visible, on my own body, a commitment to live this quality in thought, feeling, and action. By marking my body in this way, I created a tangible anchor for practice: a reminder that love is not abstract, but something I experience, carry, and express in daily life. This tattoo reflects the beginning of an ongoing journey into the mystery of love, shaping how I know, feel, receive, and enact it ~ or not. In this sense, it is a somatic guidepost ~ a lived, engraved marker of the values and relational intentions that inform my commitment to loving engagement with others, sustained ethical presence, and bringing consciousness into service work.

As we move from understanding the principles of the CSA into the lived reality of service, I invite you to step with me into the moments where theory meets life. In the next chapter, we will explore what it means to be fully present as a service provider, experiencing both the joy and fulfillment that emerge alongside the challenges, vulnerability, and grief that are inseparable from human connection.

Through stories of personal loss and reflection, we will examine the emotional realities that underpin relationships ~ what is often called emotional labour, but which I see more accurately as emotional investment in relational presence. These narratives illuminate how we can prepare ourselves, process what arises, and respond with integrity, awareness, and compassion, while remaining grounded in an embodied, self-responsive state.

Here, the principles of the CSA ~ Self-Connection, Enlightened Communication, Transformative Relationships, and Co-Creating Community ~ are not abstract ideas but living practices. They come alive in moments of challenge and transformation, showing how grounded expertise evolves into enlivened wisdom. Chapter 3 is an invitation: to notice, feel, reflect, and witness how conscious, embodied service unfolds in the heart of real life.

Chapter 3. Living, Loving, and Learning: How Loss Serves

Setting the Stage: Why This Chapter Matters

Through the lens of the CSA, embodiment offers a practice for engaging fully while maintaining self-connection, resilience, and presence. This chapter explores how personal and professional loss deepens understanding of service, emotional investment, and relational ethics. Drawing on lived experience, I examine how grief, trauma, and the holistic needs of learners intersect with professional responsibilities. By weaving personal narrative with insights from neuroscience, contemplative traditions, social services literature, and philosophical reflections, this chapter highlights how these experiences cultivate grounded expertise, relational ethics, and enlivened wisdom in practice.

My reflective writings and lived experiences are intentionally included to illustrate the interplay between embodied practice, emotional labour, and conscious service. While academic training offered research on burnout and compassion fatigue, it provided few practical tools for cultivating wellbeing or creating a self-responsive roadmap. Over time, I have developed practices including breathwork, yoga, mindful walking, and other somatic approaches that support awareness, grounded energy, and responsive presence in real time. Embodiment may appear intuitive, but its depth emerges only through attention, practice, and the willingness to engage the body's wisdom. It raises the question: What does it mean to truly embody knowledge, care, and presence?

With this understanding, I turn again, to experiences of loss that revealed how these principles live in practice. The death of loved ones taught me the necessity of staying present with grief in the body by attending to tension, sensations, and the rhythm of breath, rather than intellectualizing or bypassing it. Avoidance or detachment led to disconnection, not only from my own emotions but also from my capacity to be fully present with others. By inhabiting these experiences somatically, I developed greater attunement to my emotional landscape, which enhanced my ability to respond ethically and compassionately to the emotional currents of those I serve. Embodiment became

not only self-awareness, but a relational practice ~ a living pathway ~ for translating inner experience into attentive, responsive, and sustainable engagement with others.

Guided by this inquiry, this chapter is framed by the following questions:

- How can embodied practices and somatic awareness enhance the capacity for emotional investment while mitigating the costs of emotional labour in service?
- In what ways does lived experience of loss ~ personal, familial, and professional ~ shape the development of grounded expertise, relational ethics, and conscious service?
- How can embodied engagement with grief and vulnerability cultivate enlivened wisdom, integrity, and presence, allowing service providers to sustain themselves while responding ethically and compassionately to others?

Reflecting on these experiences, I see how grief infiltrates all aspects of life, influencing both personal relationships and professional engagement. Learning from loss is not only cognitive but somatic, requiring integration of mind, body, and spirit (Todres, Galvin, & Dahlberg, 2007). Above all, it reveals the human capacity to hold joy, sorrow, resistance, and acceptance simultaneously. These stories ~ from the lives and losses of Stevie, my dad, and my mom, to the break-up of a marriage, the birth of my grandson, and the loss of a life-long friend ~ invite readers to explore that capacity in their own lives and practice. They are an opportunity to notice, feel, and engage with the full richness of human experience, and to witness how conscious, embodied service unfolds in real time.

As Rumi (1995) reminds us, “The wound is the place where the Light enters you” (p. 36), pointing to the transformative potential of suffering. By staying present with our own wounds and the emotional landscapes of those we serve, we discover that embodiment is not only a personal practice but a relational one, and that conscious service is inseparable from our lived, felt, and fully engaged presence in the world.

My body already knew…

“Please don’t let her be here for me…please.” I was pleading with every fiber of my being as I saw the face of my colleague peering through the window in the door of the classroom.

I was in the middle of a pop culture class. It was 1:50 and we were almost ready for a break. The topic was drug and alcohol addiction. I had been feeling uneasy for the past few days. Something wasn't right. I had recently experienced a falling out with a romantic partner and at first, I thought maybe this was the source of my discomfort. But it wasn't. I knew there was something else leaving me feeling unsettled and on alert.

I answered the door. "Your sister is on the phone and says that she needs to speak to you now." I excused myself and began the long walk to the office to take the call. I could feel my body preparing itself, my adrenaline surging, my senses heightening, my whole body tingling, the hallway becoming narrow before my eyes. "Maybe, it's my dad," I said. And then spontaneously uttered, "This is the third time I have received this kind of news while working at this college." I had been working there part-time when I received the news of my grandmother's death, and that of a close friend who had been killed in a car accident.

We were in the office. I was handed the phone. "Marg?" I said, my voice already quivering, my whole body shaking. "What's wrong?" I can still hear my sister's voice and the most horrendous words I have ever heard as though she were beside me now speaking them into my ear. "Steven killed himself." "No, he didn't," I said throwing the phone behind me. I was on the ground with my face in the carpet. I couldn't breathe, couldn't speak. "No, no, no" this isn't happening. "Is it your dad?" my colleague asked. "My nephew killed himself," I said. Silence.

"I can't do this now. I have to get up. I have to go." Suddenly, I was on my feet. A small circle of people had gathered watching me as I finally moved from the floor and announced that I had to leave. I was told that I couldn't drive that I would need someone to pick me up. I went to my office. I was watching myself, now. I had left my body and was hovering somewhere along the ceiling. I called my friend, Shelley, and told her what happened. "What?" she said in disbelief. "You heard me." I couldn't say it again. I knew I would have to say it over and over and over. Shelley was on her way.

I put my hand on the phone to call my mom. I stopped. I called another close friend, Nancy. We were scheduled to go out of town that weekend. In a robotic voice, I told her what happened and asked her to cancel our reservations. One by one, notifications were made. My world continued to crumble.

My hand was on the phone again. This time, I had begun to dial. “What if they didn’t know yet?” I just couldn’t tell my mom and dad. I put the phone back down.

Another colleague entered my office after hearing the news. She hugged me so tight; she lifted me right off the ground. Nobody knew what to do.

After promising not to leave the campus, I was allowed to go to my car to smoke a cigarette. It is absolutely freezing with very little snow covering the ground for mid-November, but the air is like ice. I’m not there anyway. I call my nephew, Adam, Steven’s brother. “Adam, what happened?” “I don’t know.” “Do grandma and grandpa know?” I ask him. “I don’t know.” Adam confirms that we are to gather at his apartment. Oh God, I have to tell my kids.

Shelley has arrived and I am free to leave. The halls of the college feel like a tunnel. I see the faces of people I know ~ some have heard the news, I can tell. Others have no clue yet. I say nothing. Another phone call with Adam ~ he asks me to pick up grandma and grandpa. They know. Do I go to my daughter’s school, or do I wait for her to come home in a half hour? Let’s just stop at the house first and then I’ll figure it out. Melanie, my daughter, is already at home having skipped her last class. I call her downstairs. I put my arms around her and quietly utter the words again, “Stevie killed himself.” She begins to shake and cry and protest. I am turning to stone.

I call my ex-husband, Greg, in Vancouver. I ask him to go to our son, Taylor and tell him what has happened. He immediately starts making the travel plans.

We have to go. We have to pick up grandma and grandpa. I have to see my sister. I have to see Adam. I have to see my brother-in-law, Steve. I am afraid to see them. I feel sick.

I open the door. My dad sits on the front bench with his coat and boots already on, his head is down. Devastated. My mom sits on the steps, quietly sobbing. They look like two little kids whose parents have forgotten to pick them up after school. My heart breaks. “I can’t do this.” Every inch of my being is seizing, tightening, as though if I don’t hold on inside of myself, I will completely disintegrate.

In silence, we drive to my nephew's home. Shelley is the chauffeur. What must that have been like for her ~ to witness, moment-by-moment, member-by-member, the utter despair of an entire family?

Margaret. All I can see is her face. There is nothing else. She is focused on me as I put my arms around her. There are no words. Steve. I have never seen him cry before and even now, it is barely audible. But I can feel it. Adam is in shock. Stunned.

People are everywhere in this tiny one-bedroom apartment. Coming and going. Mostly, people I know, except for the two strangers who stand somewhat awkwardly in the middle of the room. Crisis Response Team volunteers were sent to help. They look like they wish they were as far away from this as they could possibly get. I understand. So, do I.

More phone calls. Friends begin to gather with us. One friend asks me, "is it what I think it is?" Steven's struggles were not a big secret. People knew we were concerned for him. Suicide had been discussed but I never believed, he would actually do it. Or maybe, I just refused to believe it, denying it as a possibility. Now, he was dead. He hanged himself in his garage. My sister found him.

Stevie's friends begin to arrive. I had become somewhat close to his friends over the preceding months. One of them hugs me so tight that I can still almost feel it when I close my eyes, even 20 years later.

People continue to come and go. Chaos. Talking. Phone calls. Arrangements. My home will become our base. We decide that Margaret will stay with me. The drive to their rural home is too far and there is too much to do. Steve decides to go home. Margaret sleeps next to me in my bed for the next few weeks.

We wrap ourselves in pictures, music, memories, alcohol, cigarettes, and togetherness. A few days earlier, Shelley had expressed her curiosity with my connection to this group of people, Stevie's friends ~ a curiosity I also held. What was it? All I knew is that I felt drawn and couldn't explain why. My home bursting with family and friends, including Steven's entourage, Shelley said, "Now, I know why" and I did too.

My nephew, Steven was 26 years old when we lost him to suicide. I had been blessed with a renewed closeness to him during the months prior to his death and found

comfort in the recognition of that gift. My perspectives surrounding death shifted even further. Many family members did not want to acknowledge, at first, that Steven had killed himself. There is so much taboo surrounding suicide. I remember thinking that it was just one way that people leave.

As I prepared to return to work a week later, I just knew there would be no way I could walk into a classroom full of students (some of whom knew my nephew), and not acknowledge what happened. I brought a picture of Stevie and over that first week back, I shared my story. I acknowledged that I would be there for the remainder of the semester and would do my very best to be as present for them as I possibly could. It was a relief for me, but I believe it also was for them. I recognize now that this was an act of loving self-responsiveness.

It made it okay to talk about it and for them to approach me. In fact, there were many parallels with the material we covered in class and my personal experience. Many of the students had experienced similar losses or had personally lived with depression. I firmly believe that it is important to attend to the holistic needs of learners just as we aim to do in health care and human services. What kind of institution of higher learning are we if we don't acknowledge the many social and emotional challenges that often face adult learners today?

Making it through those first few weeks and going to work was tough, but in many ways, I was still very numb and with the heightened adrenaline pumping through me, it was not as hard as it would become later. Following the Christmas break, I returned to the new semester ill prepared. It became very apparent to me that it was only a matter of time before everyone knew I wasn't holding it together at all. I was about to fall apart.

In my mind, my primary focus was my own healing, the support of my family, and the preservation of my career. Not only would I potentially damage myself and those I loved if I just pushed through, but it would also be a major disservice to the learners in my classrooms. I requested a brief leave of absence, which was honoured and granted. I followed up with replacement instructors and spoke personally to each class before going on my break.

The sudden death of my nephew, Stevie, illustrates the depth of emotional and somatic responses in the face of trauma. The moment I learned of his suicide, my body

reacted before my mind could process the news. Adrenaline surged, senses sharpened, and I experienced a dissociation common in acute grief (van der Kolk, 2015). The subsequent coordination of family communications, caring for my children, and engaging with others demonstrated what Schön (1983) calls reflection-in-action ~ decisions guided by intuition, relational attunement, and lived experience.

This narrative also reveals the limitations of formal mental health systems. Despite interventions and referrals, systemic gaps meant that those most intimately connected to Stevie including his family members, were often sidelined or underestimated. Our lived knowledge and emotional attunement were critical to responding to his needs and managing the aftermath, emphasizing the value of family as partners rather than passive observers (Cameron & Gibson, 2005).

In these moments, I witnessed firsthand the convergence of emotional labour, embodiment, and relational ethics. I felt how grief, presence, and relational responsibility were enacted through the body ~ through tension, posture, breath, and the subtle rhythms of attention ~ rather than only through thought or intention. Emotional investment in the lives of loved ones cannot be separated from professional principles of care; they are mutually informing. This experience reinforced the importance of validating lived expertise, honouring family systems, and cultivating bodily presence in moments of profound human vulnerability. By attending to my own somatic responses, I have become more attuned to the emotional and relational needs of others, illustrating how embodiment is not merely personal awareness but a relational practice that shapes ethical, responsive, and sustaining engagement in service work.

In my role as a service provider, I had many experiences with people who struggled with substance use, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. In my classes, we talked about these challenges. We examined and dissected them from an intellectual, and sometimes, emotional perspective. Meanwhile, it was happening to someone I love and right in front of my eyes.

As family members of someone contemplating suicide, we become acutely attuned to their pain. We sense the depth of their despair and often struggle with the overwhelming question: *What can we do to stop it? To fix it?* Yet, at the very same time,

the sheer impossibility of truly grasping the reality of suicide keeps us suspended in hope that maybe things will get better, that this isn't where the story ends.

Recently, I came across a term that reframed my understanding: *death by despair.* It felt like a more honest reflection of what happens when someone cannot find a way out of their suffering.

My sister and I had talked with Steven many times about how he was doing, both between ourselves and with him. A few weeks before he died, we called the crisis line during a particularly distressing evening. Steven was given the chance to go into detox and begin a recovery process. But as soon as the support team left, he told us he wasn't interested. He didn't want to go.

He saw his doctor not long after and received a referral to the local mental health association. On the day he died, a letter arrived asking him to confirm his intake appointment.

A couple of weeks earlier, Steven had told my sister he was having visions of taking his own life. She brought him to the hospital. They waited for hours. He was interviewed in an open waiting area, asked by the physician if he was currently feeling homicidal or suicidal. "Not right now," he said. And so, they sent him home.

It was nearly impossible not to feel anger at the system, and the people within it. How could someone so beautiful, so loved, fall through the cracks so completely?

A few months later, my family gathered in our mother's backyard. We were drinking and remembering Steven. My sister, deep in her grief and heavily intoxicated, tried to jump out of my moving vehicle on the way home. She knew she needed help, and we went to the hospital. Things escalated quickly. The police were called. Margaret ended up in handcuffs. We requested a different doctor than the one who had seen Steven, but soon enough, there he was.

Margaret let him know exactly what she thought of him before she was sedated and finally able to rest. She was admitted for 72 hours.

During that time, something shifted in her. She came to realize that even if Steven had been admitted that night at the hospital, he likely wouldn't have stayed. It was as though any real opportunity to alter the outcome had passed long before. We'll never truly know.

While Margaret was hospitalized, I met with a mental health social worker on her behalf. The conversation shook me. This professional had the audacity to suggest that family members should *step aside* when it comes to suicidal ideation or mental health crisis. That we should leave it to the experts. Can you imagine anything more absurd?

Loss often exposes systemic gaps in care, revealing the tension between professional protocols and family expertise. For example, when supporting individuals experiencing suicidal ideation, systems may prioritize procedural distance over relational engagement. My own family experiences highlighted the critical role of family as collaborators, rather than obstacles, in care provision (Cameron & Gibson, 2005; Tronto, 1993). Recognizing family members' lived knowledge enhances service delivery, enriches relational understanding, and strengthens ethical practice.

As service providers, it is time we fully acknowledge and respect the role family plays in the care and support of their loved ones. It is *not* our place to pathologize their history or judge how *broken* we think they are. Frankly, we're *all* carrying something. We're all a little broken.

Family members deserve respect. They deserve to be honoured for the courage it takes to love someone through their suffering. It's not an easy road, and they are walking it the best way they know how. Ask yourself: how easy would it be to *step aside* if it were your child, your sibling, your partner, your nephew battling despair? Especially when many professionals have been trained to remain distant, boundaried, and self-protective ~ less emotionally invested, less human.

These deeply personal experiences have not only shaped how I view systems of care but have also profoundly influenced how I show up in my work. They have deepened my empathy for those who walk with a loved one in pain, trying to support them while navigating their own heartbreak. With that in mind, I share another excerpt

from previous writing, developed during my time working closely with family caregivers, whose resilience, insight, and love continue to teach me what it truly means to care.

> No matter how much compassion and presence you have as a service provider, you cannot replace the love that comes from someone who has known you forever regardless of how dysfunctional a relationship might look. Let's not get in the way of these natural supports and instead work to strengthen them.
>
> Family members also have rich lived experiences that we can learn from and allow to shape how we show up in service to others. They are not the enemy but rather our partners in the pursuit of high-quality service delivery. Rather than seeing family members as a nuisance or obstacle, treat them as a living, breathing resource, and another opportunity to serve with love.
>
> We are in this together so let's act that way.
>
> Learning through lived experience allows us to become the teachers that others need to be of service. Learning from the people who show up requesting our services is the most valuable tool we can access as service providers.
>
> It can be a perplexing notion, but the truth is that as we live through our experiences, we are the ones most in tune with what it is we need as individuals. In the depths of despair, it is easy to hope and wish that others will just figure it out and know what we need ~ then give it to us. But it doesn't work that way.

I certainly recognized that most profoundly in the days following Stevie's death. My mom, sister and I were attached at the hip during that time, and often, found ourselves trying to figure out the behaviors of other people in response to our loss. We were hyperaware of the things people said or did that were either helpful or not. Finally, we decided that there was no way possible, nor would we wish it to be, that they could know what we were going through or how to respond, and that, in fact, we would be the ones who would teach people what we needed. This has been a shift in perspective that has not only supported me through loss in my life but has also encouraged me to examine more deeply what it means to be empathetic.

Navigating grief while fulfilling professional responsibilities requires intentional reflection and ethical presence. Sharing personal narratives, when relevant and beneficial, can create a relational bridge with learners or service recipients, validating their experiences and fostering holistic support. In classrooms, acknowledging loss

allows learners to engage authentically, and provides opportunities to connect theory with lived realities (Phipps & Masuda, 2018). The capacity to model vulnerability and resilience enhances both teaching and caregiving roles, bridging personal experience with professional responsibility.

Lived experience ~ what I have referred to as *grounded expertise* ~ is a wise and trustworthy guide as we navigate grief and other profound challenges. It teaches us from the inside out, shaping how we show up for ourselves and others. Whether we are the ones receiving care or offering it, we are invited into a reciprocal process of witnessing, expressing, learning, and responding.

For those accessing services and supports, sharing your truth, what you know, what you feel, what you're learning, can be a powerful act of self-advocacy. Ask for what you need. Speak to what would be most supportive. And for those in the role of service provider, remain curious. Listen beyond the words. When clarity is lacking, lean on your intuition. Offer what feels aligned, and if you miss the mark, adjust. If you hit the bullseye, stay present. The process is dynamic and fluid, not fixed or formulaic.

Let's stop drawing such hard lines between service provider and recipient. Before anything else, we are human beings. It's okay not to have all the answers. It's okay to be in the process of learning. In fact, it's in the darkness ~ in the unknown, that our roles often become most clearly illuminated. That space of mutual uncertainty becomes sacred when we approach it with compassion and presence. This is the heart of emotional investment and reciprocal relationship.

When someone shares their story with you, and it moves you, that is a gift. Your role is not only to respond with care, but to receive ~ to be moved in heart and body by what you have heard. Holding what they offer with reverence demonstrates your humanity and embodies service, grounded in a foundation of self-connection and inner fullness.

My own learning through lived experience deepened following the death of my nephew, Stevie. Unlike my grieving process after Terry's passing, my healing after Stevie's death was tangled in complexity. Suicide brings with it a particular kind of fear, a darkness that can feel overwhelming. But it wasn't only the nature of his death that made

my grief harder to hold. In the year leading up to Stevie's passing, I had become somewhat disconnected from myself. My spiritual practices had faded, my lifestyle had shifted, I wasn't walking or moving my body the way I once did. I was living more externally, and it made a difference.

Without that foundation, I didn't know how to be with my grief. For nearly a decade, I avoided the deep, visceral anguish that simmered beneath the surface. I moved through life, but not through the pain. Even as I write this now, tears surface ~ reminders that the journey of grief is still unfolding.

It was in the quiet of the pose…

The turning point came years later, unexpectedly, in a yoga class. At that time, my family was living communally ~ my daughter and her baby, my son and his wife, my then-husband and I, all under one roof. It was a joyful, deeply connected time in my life. I was practicing yoga regularly. And yet, during class, specifically during *warrior pose*, I found myself overwhelmed with panic. My mind raced with the thought: *What if something terrible is happening at home right now? What if I get called out of class to hear devastating news again?* I could feel the panic rising in my throat, my body tightening, and the desperate urge to flee the pose.

What I realized in that moment was profound. This fear had visited me many times before, often in spaces where peace was expected, like church, yoga, or during moments of joy. Trauma doesn't always show up when invited. It arrives precisely when we feel safe enough to feel it.

But this time, something shifted. I stopped resisting. I began to respond to the fear with love. I said to myself: *This is natural, Elizabeth. Of course, you're afraid something bad could happen. Because it has happened. But it's not happening now. You are safe. You can be with this.* That response, loving instead of resisting, opened a new path. It was a choice I hadn't fully accessed before: to respond to my inner wounds with compassion, not avoidance. As Bessel van der Kolk (2014) argues, the body retains the imprint of experience, and somatic practices can be essential in developing emotional awareness and regulation. This aligns with my own journey toward holistically felt presence and self-connection.

Kahlil Gibran wrote in *The Prophet*:

> *"The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain... When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy...*"

These words became especially meaningful after Stevie's death. I used this quote in his obituary, and it continues to speak to the inseparable relationship between joy and sorrow. They live side by side. Our capacity to feel one deepens our capacity to hold the other.

Grounded expertise: knowledge gained through lived and living experience, becomes enlivened wisdom when integrated into conscious presence, reflective practice, and ethical action. Experiential learning, as described by Kolb (1984), is cyclical: we act, reflect, adapt, and embody new understanding. The grief following Stevie's death illuminated the inseparable relationship between joy and sorrow (Gibran, 1923) and the ethical imperative of holding both within ourselves and in service to others.

I've often played the role of obituary writer and musical coordinator for my family during times of loss. The right words and the right songs always seem to find me. That began with my grandmother's funeral in 1989, when I insisted on including an Elvis song. Somehow, that thread of honouring both grief and beauty through expression has remained with me.

A Course in Miracles (Federation for Inner Peace, 2007) teaches that there are only two emotions: love and fear. As I mentioned earlier, I've come to believe they sit beside each other, always. The more we love, the more we risk fear, of loss, of rejection, of harm. It's not love that hurts, but our fear of losing it. Yet love isn't lost if we can stay connected to it. One of the most helpful suggestions I've received is this: when I feel the ache of missing someone I've lost, I shift into *loving* them in that moment. That choice, replacing longing with active love, returns me to peace more quickly than any resistance ever could.

A Glimpse of Joy, Amid the Shadow

About a year after Stevie died, I attended my son Taylor's graduation from Vancouver Film School. He had returned home for the funeral and again for Christmas, and now I was witnessing his incredible growth. At the service, he had read *Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch and sang the lullaby lines, offering comfort through his tenderness and strength. He was the youngest valedictorian that school had ever had, and his teacher called him *a force of nature*. Watching him speak, I was overwhelmed with gratitude for his presence, his heart, and the relationship we still shared.

That day, I felt the full weight of what it means to love deeply. I was immersed in both joy and grief. My identity as a mother, and the emotional investment I make in my family, was front and center. That moment exemplified what I now understand as grounded expertise, which lays the groundwork for the wisdom that arises when we integrate lived experience with presence and reflective awareness. Taylor's actions weren't just gestures; they were expressions of our shared love and resilience.

Still, I wrestled with guilt. Why did I get to enjoy this moment while my sister's loss was still so raw? Was my pain valid? Was it okay to feel joy? I came to understand that grief is not a competition. Each person's pain is their own. The only permission I needed was my own to feel, to grieve, and to love without comparison.

This journey has shown me that emotional investment is both the cost and the gift of love. Grief alone is exhausting. But when paired with the added pressure of managing others' needs or expectations, it becomes nearly unbearable. After Stevie died, I often felt invisible. Others asked after my sister or my mom, but rarely me. And yet, on that graduation day, I allowed myself to feel joy. To remember that love, like grief, demands to be felt.

This is what sustains us: the willingness to stay with our experience, to allow joy and sorrow to coexist, to hold presence as sacred, and to trust that healing emerges not from fixing, but from feeling. When we embrace our emotional investment, honour our grounded expertise, and embody our lived truth, we create space for transformation, not only for ourselves, but for everyone we serve.

In fact, what I have been calling grounded expertise ~ the knowledge gained through lived and living experience ~ has now transformed into something I refer to as enlivened wisdom. It is not just a body of knowledge rooted in practice or personal journey but rather, an active, breathing force within us. Enlivened wisdom moves through us when we choose to remain present, when we respond with love instead of resistance, when we integrate rather than separate the parts of ourselves. It is wisdom that doesn't sit quietly on a shelf but pulses in our daily lives, in our relationships, in our service, in the choices we make to show up whole.

To live with enlivened wisdom is to recognize that who we are and what we've lived matters. It is to walk through the world with the kind of humility that knows learning never ends, and with the courage to trust that our most tender, complex, and even painful experiences may become the very ground from which compassion, insight, and connection are grown.

Emotional investment, when combined with self-awareness and embodied presence, enables service providers to respond authentically to the needs of others while honouring their own experience (Todres, Galvin, & Dahlberg, 2007). Enlivened wisdom does not reside in textbooks or protocols alone. Rather, it pulses through our relationships, decisions, and everyday presence. It invites us to bridge personal loss with professional service, transforming grief into a resource for empathy, ethical engagement, and relational depth.

Ultimately, embracing this integrated approach fosters a practice of conscious service rooted in reflection, emotional investment, and relational attunement. By learning from living, we not only enhance our capacity to serve but also create spaces where compassion, presence, and transformative understanding can flourish, both for ourselves and for the communities we support.

In the rhythms of his life, I began to see patterns that shaped me long before I recognized them in myself…

My dad was a service provider himself. He served in WWII, an experience that remained with him shaping his sense of identify over the course of his life. Beyond that, he was also an Identification Sergeant with the Ontario Provincial Police for many, many years. He was at *police school* when I was born. Before my mom passed, she gave me

all the letters he had written to her at the time of my birth providing a glimpse into a side of my dad I never really knew.

I recall waking up at night and finding my mom and dad talking after he had returned home following an investigation. My dad was often called to crime scenes and was required to take pictures. As you can imagine, these were grisly scenes and even though my dad never explicitly shared how he was impacted, it was evident in his demeanour as the years went by.

He loved photography and enjoyed learning about how this passion could help him capture on film the details of a crime scene that would be later used in court proceedings. In fact, he was first to have colour photographs allowed in court in Ontario, a pioneering role that always brought him pride.

We had a dark room in our home where he would develop his pictures. Sometimes, I'd sit in there to talk on the phone and have privacy from the rest of the household and inevitably started opening drawers and poking around. The images of some of those photos remain vivid in my mind more than 45 years later. I can only imagine the depth of impact on my dad having been present at the actual scene.

My dad saw a lot, swallowed his emotions, often appeared very short tempered and angry, drank too much, and isolated himself to some extent for many years. He was physically there in the home, but never felt fully present for a large part of my life. I know now that I was witnessing my father's self-abandonment. I know it now because I have experienced my own. It was not that I didn't feel his love for me because I did. Rather, it was more like an absence of his spirit ~ his essence.

As my dad aged, no longer working as a police officer, which was a key aspect of his identity, he continued his interest in photography by taking wedding pictures for countless people in our community. He drove a school bus for many years, he was a responsive friend always supporting people who had daily living challenges, and he loved cooking and making his own wine.

As an informal service provider, my dad was like a magnet for people who needed extra support and would become a part of many people's extended families, helping with shopping, visiting during challenging times, sharing food he had prepared,

volunteering for meals on wheels. It was clear that he liked to be busy, and it was important for him to be connected in his community.

Most of all, my dad was an amazing grandpa, especially with my children. The timing of their births aligned perfectly with his new schedule and for years, he picked them up from daycare, prepared lunch for them almost daily until they were well past the age where they needed that. They both had experiences with my dad's many friends, rode on the school bus with him, and loved their *papa* to the moon and back. The presence that I often felt missing from my dad in my childhood was restored in the relationships he created with my children, and I have always been grateful for that precious gift.

When my dad was dying, I was beginning my master's program and had a 3-week residency that I was scheduled to attend. Should I stay or should I go? I wrote my dad a love letter of sorts and I made him a mixed tape filled with all the music that he loved and listened to passionately as I was growing up. My dad was a whistler and I recall many road trips filled with his exuberant whistling along to Neil Diamond on the stereo. My son, Taylor has picked up that whistling habit and every time I hear him whistle, I think of my dad and the influence he had in my children's lives.

We spoke just a few days before I was scheduled to leave, and my dad told me he wanted me to go. He said that I should follow through with the plans I had made. He said he was proud of me and promised he would do his best to be there when I returned. We spoke every day after I left, even as he transitioned into hospice care and his ability to communicate began to fade. Two weeks into my residency program, he passed away.

What follows is an excerpt from a piece I wrote during that time, reflecting on what it was like to accompany a loved one through the final stages of life. Revisiting it now, I recognize how these moments shaped my understanding of presence, relational boundaries, and the ethical weight of being invited into another's vulnerability. At the time, I was not consciously theorizing service or embodiment; I was simply living the experience. Yet, in hindsight, this account reveals how emotional investment, bodily awareness, and relational responsibility quietly informed my ways of being with others.

Including this reflection here is not intended to offer analysis or resolution, but to situate lived experience as a legitimate source of knowing. The excerpt grounds our

discussions of embodiment, emotional labour, and enlivened wisdom in the ordinary, tender realities of caregiving, grief, and relational proximity ~ realities that continue to shape how I understand service, presence, and love in practice.

> When my dad was ill, it was our mom who held the main role as his caregiver. She had some paid supports ~ most of whom fell short of her expectations.
>
> Family caregivers face so many challenges. Not only are they dealing with the declining health or struggles posed by some form of “disability” in the lives of those they love, they also suddenly find themselves with a whole new group of people ~ not necessarily of their choosing ~ trapsing through their homes and lives.
>
> Think about that for a moment. Even though I have worked with family caregivers, and I’ve been one, it is still a challenge to imagine what it would feel like to expect different people ~ whom I’m not related to in some way ~ in my home every day. There is a certain vulnerability that comes along with that process.
>
> I have found over the years how deeply important it is to remember that, as a service provider, I am invited and granted access to someone’s “home” whether that be literal or metaphorical, I am a guest in this space.

Jacques Derrida (2000), speaks of the graciousness of being a host and the importance of attending to the needs of our guests with warmth, preparation, inclusivity, and thoughtfulness. But what does it mean to be a guest in someone else’s space, particularly when the host might be reluctant, overwhelmed, or emotionally unavailable? This question becomes especially relevant in the context of end-of-life care and service delivery, where the roles of host and guest can blur, shift, and even reverse.

As a family member supporting a loved one who is dying, and as someone who has also been in the role of recipient and provider of care, I’ve come to see how critical the relational space is. Creating a connection with service providers as a recipient requires vulnerability. It involves a willingness to be seen, to share personal stories, and in some cases, to surrender a sense of privacy. These are the same elements that underpin all meaningful relationships, including the most intimate ones. And even though a service provider may only be in our lives for a short time, just as no relationship comes with a guarantee of permanence, the success of the partnership rests on our mutual capacity to honour the development of relational intimacy.

The following excerpt, written during the time of my father's final days, explores this very terrain: how we show up for one another when roles are fluid, when time is short, and when love and loss are both intensely present. It reflects the ongoing thread of enlivened wisdom, the lived experience that continues to shape how I intend to show up in service, in family, and in life.

> I think part of what challenged my mom in the care of my dad including the expectations she had of service providers is the simple fact that she did not want what was happening to be happening. And I believe that this is a common experience of the people we work with in healthcare and human services.
>
> She knew her husband was nearing the end of his life, and she was resisting this reality with every ounce of might she could muster. When we are in resistance, we might feel angry. And when we are angry, it's easy to look for the next dog to kick so to speak. The personal support workers ~ and sometimes, us kids ~ were perfect targets.
>
> I share this with the deepest sense of compassion for my mom ~ a compassion that I wasn't in touch with at the time. When we were going through it, I was in my own personal denial. I didn't really know how intense it was for either my mom or dad. I just showed up when I wanted to without any real responsibility or change to my role as their daughter.
>
> My mom needed to vent. She needed to talk about what was not working or the challenges my dad was facing. She needed to blow off steam, but I didn't want to hear it. I tried to convince her that she had the gift of time with my dad. I was determined to show her what a blessing it was to be witness to these end days. I see now that while that may have been very true ~ and I do believe it is ~ it wasn't helpful for her.
>
> The truth was that I, too, was in resistance to my dad's death. My lack of acceptance of that reality made it very difficult for me to be supportive of my mom. We often think that families ~ even the *dysfunctional* ones ~ will rally during times of stress or loss. But that's not necessarily so.
>
> When one member of the family is in distress, the whole system is impacted in some way. While many family caregivers rise easily to the occasion, some struggle to find their capacity. Others fall apart.
>
> Resist the urge to think you would do it any better if the shoe were on the other foot. The last thing a family needs is any form of judgement or any attempt to take sides in disputes.
>
> Quality service relies on our ability as service providers to intuitively respond to the often-unspoken fears and anxieties that lurk beneath the

> surface for caregivers when faced with the declining health of someone they love. It is exactly this kind of emotional presence and engagement that offers a safe space to be with what is.
>
> There are two sides of the fence. What you offer today, you may need tomorrow. We are all in this together.

My father's service in WWII and subsequent role as an Identification Sergeant with the Ontario Provincial Police profoundly influenced his identity and our family dynamics. His work, often involving exposure to traumatic scenes, necessitated a form of emotional labour ~ work that, as Guy, Newman, and Mastracci (2008) argue, often remains institutionally invisible and unsupported. The emotional toll of such labour manifested in his demeanor, frequently tense and withdrawn, highlighting the hidden “costs” of caregiving roles that we are ill-prepared and ill-equipped to manage well (Guy et al., 2008).

Despite these challenges, my father continued to serve his community through various roles, embodying service as a lifestyle rather than a profession. His capacity to provide relational presence, especially as a grandfather, demonstrated the potential for healing and connection within familial relationships, highlighting how meaning and identity are co-created within relational space (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001).

During his final days, I navigated the tension between personal commitments and familial responsibilities. Sending a love letter and mixed tape served as a means to honour both, echoing Derrida’s (2000) framing of responsibility as an ethical demand that exceeds simple availability. This experience underscored the reciprocal nature of service, where providers and recipients co-create relational spaces of care, reflecting Fineman’s (2000) argument that vulnerability and interdependence are fundamental conditions of human life.

I’ve often said that if there were three sides to the fence, I’ve stood on each one. For 45 years, I’ve worked as a service provider in the traditional sense, supporting individuals, families, and communities through various roles. Along the way, I’ve also cared for loved ones in informal, deeply personal ways. And at different points in my life, I’ve found myself on the receiving end of care, accessing services from both traditional and alternative practitioners to support my own wellbeing.

Each of these perspectives have shaped and refined how I see the world, altering not only my personal lens but also my approach to service, whether paid or unpaid. These experiences have taught me that the *boundaries* between roles are far more fluid than we often acknowledge. The idea that we are either *providers* or *recipients* is a comforting illusion. The truth is most of us will move between these roles many times throughout our lives.

And that's a beautiful thing. Our personal experiences especially those that place us in need, have the potential to soften us, to cultivate a deeper sense of empathy and compassion. They offer us the opportunity not just to feel for others, but to act with genuine care. This is where our humanity connects us, beyond professional identities and job descriptions.

We are always learning from one another. The next time you find yourself accessing services whether it's a medical appointment, a massage, or a session with your counselor, pay attention to how you feel in that space. What do you notice about your sense of power, your comfort, your trust? Are there moments when you slip into judgement, especially if the service is delivered in a way that differs from your own professional style?

These moments can be incredibly revealing. They invite us to reflect on what it means to give and receive, to hold space, and to be held. And they remind us that the most meaningful service is not rooted in authority, but in humility and connection.

Just as I caught my breath…

Within a year of relocating from Thunder Bay to Vancouver, my marriage began to unravel ~ at least, from my perspective. I had been deeply immersed in writing a literature review and drafting my first book, completely absorbed in the creative process. But when I emerged from that cocoon of focused work, I was struck by an undeniable inner knowing: something no longer felt right. I vividly remember hearing the quiet yet certain voice within say, *"I don't want to be married anymore."*

The very next day, my daughter called with unexpected news. She was pregnant. And just like that, my personal revelation took a back seat to her life-changing moment.

Melanie was born on my 24th birthday, a sacred gift I've always held close to my heart. My grandmother, too, had given birth to her son, my uncle, on the same day at the same age. When Melanie's doctor told us her baby was due on that same date, also, her 24th birthday, my 48th, we knew this child was a blessing in perfect alignment.

Still, the news came with apprehension. I worried about the challenges Melanie would face as a single mother and the ripple effects this would have on our family. But even before Cohen arrived, I knew I would fall in love again that spring, and I did. I had already fallen, in fact, long before I held him in my arms. When he finally came into the world, I was completely smitten.

Just ten days after Cohen's birth, I received a call from a lifelong friend back in Thunder Bay. One of the four of us, friends since childhood, was nearing the end of her life. Sandi, my soul-sister since kindergarten, had been living with cancer for over 15 years. Her condition had worsened quickly, and she was now on her deathbed. I flew home, and a few days later, Sandi passed away.

In the span of just weeks, I had witnessed the miracle of new life and the heartbreak of profound loss. The emotional intensity was staggering, and at times, overwhelming. When I returned to Vancouver, I would sit for hours with Cohen in my arms, holding him close and reminding myself that this newborn energy was the closest thing to God I could feel. I was deeply, unspeakably grateful.

Once again, I was reminded that more than one truth can exist at the same time. I could mourn Sandi's absence while simultaneously basking in the joy of becoming a grandmother. My grief and my love coexisted, each deepening the other. Our family decided to move into a large, shared home shortly after Cohen's birth, creating a new rhythm of daily life. Living communally brought its own challenges, but it was one of the happiest and most supportive times in my life ~ a time that felt aligned and deeply nourishing for all of us.

Through this season, I also began to understand, on a deeper level, the toll of overextension, not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. I had long carried the sense that I *should* be doing more, offering more, showing up more completely for those around me. It's a pattern I've seen not only in myself, but in colleagues, students, and

loved ones. But I've come to see that this balancing act isn't simply about setting *boundaries* or *putting your oxygen mask on first*.

Instead, it's an intricate and intimate dance ~ a pulsating rhythm of engagement and restoration. It requires that I remain rooted in myself even as I reach toward others. To truly sustain my relationships, my service, and my sense of vocation, I must be present within myself while being present with others. When I honour my own rhythm, I become less preoccupied with the *shoulds* and *musts*, and more attuned to what is real and needed in the moment. I respond with intention rather than reaction. I show up with wholeness, not depletion.

Every time I've lost someone I love, I've been reminded of the fleeting and precious nature of life. These reminders have called me home to my roots in Thunder Bay and to the relationships that continue to shape me. In the wake of these personal shifts, my marriage eventually came to its natural conclusion, just as I had sensed it would years before.

The concurrent experiences of my grandson's birth and my friend's impending death illuminated the coexistence of joy and grief. Holding these emotional extremes required a deepened self-connection and heightened attentiveness to the relational processes unfolding around me, reflecting a relational understanding of meaning as co-created within dynamic interpersonal contexts (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001). Living communally during this period further underscored the necessity of sustaining personal rhythm within shared relational space, echoing Fineman's (2000) assertion that vulnerability and interdependence are enduring conditions of human life.

Loss, in its various forms, has been a teacher of impermanence and the necessity of grounded self-connection. Trusting my inner guidance during these seasons of tension and transition reflects an ethical commitment to presence that exceeds simple role obligation, resonating with Derrida's (2000) framing of responsibility as an ongoing, relational responsiveness.

Today, I trust more fully in my inner guidance, my soul's voice, and the quiet knowing that even in the midst of endings, life is conspiring in my favor. My soul has my back. And I am listening.

I was exactly where I needed to be…

My mother and I were very close throughout our relationship, at times, enmeshed, for brief times, estranged, and for the most part, engaged in each other's lives. Eight years after my dad's passing, my mom began her journey to the other side. As one of her main caregivers, I was able to understand more clearly what she went through with my dad and how challenging it is to be in a position with unchosen and at times, unresponsive service providers. I had an edge though in that I had been in similar shoes as the service providers at some point in my career as well. The opportunities for empathy, understanding, non-judgement, and kindness were endless. Sometimes, I passed. Sometimes, I didn't. In this section, I am integrating excerpts of previous writings about my mom and our experience together.

A service provider herself, my mom worked for many years for faith-based organizations where her role in accounting and human resources was a pathway to more informal supports that she generously offered to the many people who accessed the organizations. She volunteered her time to maintain the *books* for her church, she offered her time to prepare meals at the local drop-in center, and she was often an ear for others, her friends, her family, and in her leadership role with her support group, Emotions *Anonymous*. My mom, like her mom, cherished her role in our family and was actively involved with her children and her grandchildren throughout her life.

Now my mom was on the other side of the fence. As the recipient of services this time, she was much less frustrated. Sure, there were a couple moments with a few service providers, but for the most part, there had been a softening. Once again, my mom reminded me of the importance for professional service providers to consider the vulnerability required to allow strangers into our private worlds. It's important because most of us will experience that sense of being reliant in some way on the expertise and kindness of someone we don't know.

Have you ever felt a deep affinity with a service provider you have accessed? Perhaps, the doctor that delivered your baby, or the social worker who supported your child ~ maybe, they hold a special place in your heart. It is the energy of intimacy that creates that sense of bonding that in any other circumstance could take months or even years. When we are required to bare ourselves, body, mind, and soul, we need to feel

some sense of safety, even in the fear and apprehension. If we can't go there, we cannot receive fully the service that is offered.

But it is not another person's responsibility, nor entirely within their power, to ensure our safety. At best, others can hold an intention to be a safe space and to co-create conditions of safety, but ultimately, each of us must embody that safety from within. True safety is a deeply personal, lived experience. While someone may offer calm presence, compassionate care, or a structured environment, none of this guarantees that the person receiving it will *feel* safe. Safety is not something we can impose or prescribe but it is something we can cultivate together, through relationship, presence, and mutual attunement.

In organizational contexts, safety often refers to physical protections, like identifying hazards, responding to incidents, and minimizing risks. While essential, this approach only addresses one layer of the human experience. Emotional, psychological, and spiritual safety are equally vital, yet far more nuanced and often overlooked. These forms of safety cannot be legislated into existence; they must be relationally embodied and supported through conscious practice, cultural values, and organizational intention. In the next chapter, I explore how embodied experience of personal safety and organizational responsiveness intersect, particularly through the lens of conscious service.

Understanding safety as a multi-layered, relational process is critical for service providers. It asks us to expand our hearts and to engage with emotional investment, to be willing to *feel* with and about others, not just *do* for them. This is where enlivened wisdom becomes essential: the kind of knowing that arises not from theory alone, but from lived experience that has been felt, integrated, and carried with presence. Enlivened wisdom allows us to enter relational spaces grounded in compassion and clarity, attuned not only to the needs of others but to our own internal cues. When we are connected to this inner wisdom, we are better equipped to respond intuitively and skillfully to the unspoken dimensions of care.

Just as those accessing support must summon courage to be seen and to trust, so too must we, as service providers, show up with the same willingness to be affected by the experience of another. This requires more than cognitive empathy; it calls for

embodied presence which is the capacity to remain grounded in one's own body while staying attuned to the emotional and relational field unfolding between people. When both individuals enter this shared space with authenticity, bodily awareness, and attentiveness, intimacy takes root, and from that, a sense of unity emerges. It is within this space of mutual vulnerability ~ felt, sensed, and lived ~ that service transcends transaction and becomes a sacred exchange. This is not merely a professional responsibility but rather, it is spirit in action, expressed through the body as an embodied enactment of love.

This relational space, grounded in trust and intentionality, becomes the container through which both the giver and receiver are replenished. But that replenishment can only occur when the space feels safe emotionally, spiritually, and physically, for *both* people. Without this foundation, intimacy can become strained or unsafe. With it, it becomes transformative.

I witnessed this dynamic closely in my own life while caring for my mother. She was a proud and private woman; some might even say, vain. Maintaining her dignity was important to her, and she preferred to receive personal care from strangers rather than her own children. This choice helped her preserve a sense of autonomy, privacy, and emotional safety during a vulnerable time.

That experience taught me, again, that what may seem simple from the outside ~ another task, another body to care for, can be profoundly intimate for the one receiving care. As service providers, we must continually return to the truth that each body, each person, carries a unique story. When we care for another, we are not just touching skin, we are touching memory, identity, loss, and longing.

To bring enlivened wisdom into this work is to know this not only intellectually, but viscerally. To engage with emotional investment is to let ourselves be changed by these encounters. And to serve with integrity is to continually deepen our own relationship with safety, presence, and love, so that what we offer is not just skill, but soul.

It can be difficult to imagine ourselves on the receiving end of personal supports. Most of us hope we'll expire before that happens. Knowing that can be a gateway to

developing the kind of deep respect and regard for human dignity for others that we would wish for ourselves or someone we love.

I cannot separate myself from the reality of any side of the fence because I know I could be seeing from another point of view in any moment. If there is anything about the service I'm providing that would seem somehow lacking if I or a loved one were on the receiving end, then I've got some self-examination to conduct.

Stay focused on the common human experience. Keep your eyes on how you would wish to feel if you were in receipt of services. Watch others for examples of what you would like to embody and those things you desire to avoid. Continue to come back to your heart and see yourself in all roles.

My mom was diagnosed with gastric cancer in the spring of 2017 following months of significant depression that had her hospitalized for a couple weeks before the cancer was discovered. I had heard so much about the second brain in our stomachs and the hormone production that happens in the gut, and I couldn't help but wonder what came first, the cancer or the depression. Were they related? My mom had lived through all the same tragedies I have already talked about, and then some, leading to a lifelong struggle with her emotions, but she actively responded to this reality. This was the first time that she had become debilitated by depression and challenged to cope. Now her life was coming to an end.

I experienced the loss of my parents quite differently. With my dad, I was on the sidelines, not directly involved in his care, immune to the reality of that day-to-day struggle. We had time to talk, to resolve, to forgive without the added pressure of navigating his health care plan.

Both my mom and dad lived with regret in their lives. Regret can be a huge waste of time, so I do my best to reframe it. I used to say that I have no regrets. I used to say that I have learned from everything that has happened, even the stuff I wish hadn't. But, maybe, regret serves some purpose even if only to offer us the opportunity to regain our balance.

I knew I would regret not being there when my mom was diagnosed with cancer. I knew where I was meant to be, and I had the luxury of that choice. But first I had to get through the resistance.

The hospice setting was an eye-opening experience that disrupted many of my assumptions. I had believed that hospice professionals, working so intimately with death and dying, would be trained in a more holistic and conscious approach to end-of-life care. I expected that my mom would receive wraparound support, physically, emotionally, spiritually, and that her final weeks would be met with intentional presence and tenderness. But I was mistaken. The reality was sobering.

Had we not been there around the clock, my mom would likely have died alone. The gentleman in the room next to hers did. With no family or visitors, the entirety of his human contact came through a handful of brief, clinical interactions, medication administration, assistance with meals, and personal care. The direct care my mother received ranged from abrupt and harsh to dismissive and condescending. Occasionally, there were moments of kindness, but they were the exception.

I found myself watching the rhythms of the hospice staff with growing frustration. Much time was spent behind the glass of the nursing station, writing notes, about what, I couldn't be sure, as care plans were sparse and meaningful engagement was minimal. Over the course of a month, I bore witness to what felt like procedural maintenance rather than compassionate care. The physician's visits grew increasingly detached, his prognosis shifting with each encounter until, before a long weekend, he joked that if my mother was still alive when he returned, he would write a journal article about her. It was surreal. And it was deeply humanizing because in that surreal space, my emotional investment was absolute.

Despite the inadequacies I perceived, I was grateful we were allowed to be with her continuously. We quite literally moved into the hospice and lived alongside her, something that would not have been possible had this taken place during the COVID-19 pandemic. In that shared space of waiting and presence, I found myself once again, confronting not only the care system, but my own judgements and expectations.

I realized that my frustration at the staff, at the system, at the limitations of care, was rooted in something deeper: a disconnection from my own compassion. I had momentarily stepped out of my *spirit-aligned self* and into a reactive posture. The more I focused on what others weren't doing *right*, the more I externalized my pain in an effort to feel in control. But it never led me to peace.

My mother's journey through illness and death highlighted the complexities of receiving care. Her vulnerability underscored the need for empathy, relational attunement, and respect for personal autonomy in caregiving relationships (Fineman, 2000). The hospice experience revealed systemic gaps in relational engagement, emphasizing the importance of emotional presence and compassion in service provision (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001).

Witnessing her experience deepened my understanding of grace and mercy: grace as openness to love amid suffering, and mercy as the ability to remain present without being overwhelmed by another's pain. These principles exemplify the emotional investment required in conscious service (Fineman, 2000).

What if, I wondered, I extended the same *consciously felt and sensed energy of service* ~ the kind I believe in and teach ~ to the very people I was struggling to understand? What if I offered the energy of *love*, not only to my mother, but to those caring for her? Could it soften my perspective? Might it create a bridge of *unity* where division had taken root? What if, in doing so, I allowed *grace* to emerge?

That inquiry continues to shape me.

A recent conversation with a colleague, whose background is in chaplaincy, turned to the concepts of *grace* and *mercy*. We reflected on the familiar phrase, *"There but for the grace of God, go I."* I remembered how often I used to say this, silently, when witnessing another person's suffering, until loss found me. After Steven's death, I stopped saying it. I wondered: had I somehow fallen out of divine favour? Was I no longer sheltered by grace?

But now I see it differently. Grace is not something bestowed upon us from an external source. Grace is a *state of being,* a frequency of the *spirit* that arises when we are open to love, even in the midst of pain. It is not reserved for the fortunate few. It is

accessible to all who are willing to receive it. In this sense, grace is transcendent, like a presence that moves through and beyond our ordinary experiences, rooting us in something eternal and unnameable. It is a portal into unity, into the shared sacredness of being human.

If grace grounds us in love, then mercy becomes the extension of that love into the relational field. My colleague defined mercy as the "*willingness to step into another's suffering.*" And while poetic, something about that definition didn't sit right with me. As service providers, when we believe we must *suffer with* another, we risk leaving behind the very presence we are meant to bring. *We lose ourselves in the pain instead of becoming a steady presence within it.*

To me, mercy is not about carrying another's pain. Rather, it is about remaining with them, with openness and care, without becoming engulfed. Mercy is fortified by *spirit* allowing us to remain deeply connected to our own center while also being present to the suffering of others. It is not pity. It is not martyrdom. It is love, expressed with humility and without loss of self.

This is the emotional investment I have come to value, not only in my relationships with those I serve, but in how I care for myself. It is through receptivity that I am able to embody the energies of grace and mercy. And it is through embodiment that I access enlivened wisdom: that living, breathing integration of experience that teaches me how to serve without losing myself, how to stay connected without becoming depleted, and how to love fiercely and still remain whole.

I will continue to explore these ideas in the next chapter, particularly as they relate to the interplay between personal and collective wellbeing, and the ways organizations can either hinder or support the deep, transformative work of conscious service.

I struggled with my mom's diagnosis, just as my mom had with my dad's passing. I arrived home that summer wanting to be as far away from there as possible. Fighting with my brother, drinking too much, taking up smoking again, anything to escape the reality we were in. Then one day, I stood in the parking lot at the hospital. It was a beautiful sunny day and it hit me like a lightning bolt. I was here. This was happening. Let go. So, I did. I finally felt safe enough to step into acceptance, even if I didn't like it.

In that moment, any frustration I had with my mom, with the healthcare providers, with anyone, simply dissolved. It was as if something greater had entered the space, softening everything. What unfolded was more than just emotional release ~ it was a moment of transformation where my presence, my breath, and my awareness came fully into alignment. I felt rooted in my body, yet simultaneously lifted beyond it in a moment that revealed how embodied awareness can restore presence, regulate emotional overwhelm, and open space for compassionate engagement rather than escape.

It felt miraculous, infused with a kind of grace I can't quite explain. There was a sense of transcendence, as though the barriers between self and other, between fear and love, between the physical and the unseen, had momentarily dissolved. In that space, I touched something sacred ~ spirit, perhaps, moving quietly and powerfully through the space.

I often wish I could decipher the exact ingredients of that experience and bottle them up like a healing potion. But maybe the mystery is part of the gift reminding me that in certain moments of deep surrender and connection, something far greater than us is present, guiding us home to ourselves and to each other.

End-of-life care illuminated the limits of both formal and informal caregiving. Observing gaps in hospice provision, I recognized that compassionate presence cannot be mandated; it must be cultivated through embodied practice and relational attunement (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001).

Mercy is not suffering with another; it is remaining present without losing oneself. Grace is not external; it is a frequency of being that flows through intentional, embodied presence.

On the day our mom died, I was alone with her and witness to her final breath. I am humbled to know that precious moment belonged to me.

Again, I am aware of the fine balance between love and fear, joy, and sorrow, as I walked that line between gratitude for the precious time we had together before she passed, and the lifelong loving and authentic relationship my mom and I had shared. At the same time, I was plagued with a deep sense of feeling ripped off.

About a year later, I was walking on a day like any other. It was autumn and the leaves were crunching beneath my feet. The sun was shining, and I had just left my grandson's school playground. I would return to have dinner with him and my daughter later that evening. I thought about my mom. I thought about the fragility of life and how quickly it moves. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the beauty of my experiences ~ all of them. No regrets.

Let life call you. Let it teach you. Be softened by it. It is all meant to be savoured.

Embodiment is not a luxury ~ it is foundational to sustainable, life-affirming service work. The body is the primary site through which we experience, interpret, and respond to the world, and attention to the lived body shapes the quality of presence, relational attunement, and resilience. From phenomenological and somatic perspectives, embodiment situates cognition, emotion, and relational capacity within the felt experience of the body itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1945; Shilling, 2003). In service contexts, this means that providers' awareness of posture, breath, gesture, and internal states directly informs their ability to engage deeply, respond empathetically, and maintain grounded energy over time.

The principles of Conscious Service, including self-connection, enlightened communication, transformative relationships, and co-creating community are most fully realized when brought to life through the sensations and actions of the body. Relational and social constructionist frameworks highlight that wisdom is not abstract but emerges through interaction, reflection, and attunement within relational contexts (Gergen et al., 2001; McNamee & Barrett, 2001). By cultivating embodied awareness, service providers transform lived experience ~ joy, grief, caregiving, and loss ~ into actionable insight, grounded expertise, and ultimately, enlivened wisdom. Neuroscientific and somatic research further supports this, showing that attending to bodily signals enhances emotional regulation, empathy, and sustained engagement (Craig, 2002; Siegel, 2012).

But embodiment for service providers cannot be practiced only in isolation. It requires organizational scaffolding that validates, models, and supports bodily and emotional presence. Moving away from disembodied models of productivity and performance invites a reimagining of service work ~ not merely as tasks to complete, but

as relational, energetic, and deeply human exchange. Practical strategies for fostering embodiment include:

- **Encouraging Mindful Moments** to anchor attention and cultivate self-awareness
- **Training in Emotional Preparation** to recognize, regulate, and channel feelings constructively
- **Fostering Self-Reflective Practice** to integrate lived experience into conscious decision-making

When organizations prioritize embodiment, they shift from transactional models of care toward relational models that honour the wholeness of both providers and recipients. This transformation begins with individual practice but is sustained through collective intention, creating systemic conditions that support presence, resilience, and flourishing. Embodiment, therefore, is both a personal and organizational imperative, enabling sustainable, relational, and spiritually aligned service (Fineman, 2000).

As we close this section, we return once again to a theme that threads through this work ~ Body as Canvas. The insights explored here seep into posture, gesture, and breath, painting themselves across the living form. Each moment of awareness, each reflection, adds another layer to the canvas we carry. The body is no longer a vessel alone but a dynamic, ever-evolving reflection of our inner journey, bearing the imprint of lived experience, enlivened wisdom, and the ongoing practice of conscious service.

Body as Canvas

This tattoo is a memorial tattoo to honour the life and memory of my nephew, Stevie. It symbolizes my ongoing love for him, my belief that his spirit continues to be with me, and my deep gratitude for all our relationship brought into my life from beginning to end and beyond. Marked on my skin, the tattoo becomes a living site of remembrance that allows love and grief to be metabolized through the body rather than held only as cognitive or spiritual belief. In moments of touch, sight, or sensation, it anchors me in presence and relationship. The angel wings and infinity symbol illustrate my belief in the never-ending connection I am blessed to experience with all my loved ones who have transitioned.

In the next chapter, we will explore what it means to extend the principles of embodiment into our systems, our teams, and our shared commitments. We will examine how organizations can move beyond structural compliance and into relational alignment, where personal and collective wellbeing are not separate aims, but deeply interconnected expressions of conscious service.

Chapter 4. Learning Loving Service

Setting the Stage: Why This Chapter Matters

Chapter 4 is grounded in narrative inquiry drawn from my lived and living experience; however, it is intentionally structured as a multi-level analysis of service systems rather than a purely individual account. While the narrative begins at the level of personal experience, it consistently moves between individual, interpersonal, organizational, and systemic dimensions in order to illustrate how conditions within service systems shape, not only the experiences of service providers, but also the quality, sustainability, and ethical dimensions of care itself.

From this perspective, individual experience is understood as inseparable from the relational and structural contexts in which it occurs. Shifts in organizational design, policy, workload expectations, and funding structures are therefore not external backdrops to practice, but active forces that shape embodied experience, relational capacity, and the sustainability of service work. In turn, these systemic conditions influence outcomes at multiple levels, including provider wellbeing, team dynamics, service quality, and the broader health and effectiveness of care systems.

By moving iteratively between these levels of analysis, this chapter seeks to make visible the reciprocal relationship between lived experience and system design, and to demonstrate how transformation must occur not only at the level of individual practice, but also within the structures that organize, constrain, and enable service delivery.

This chapter deepens the exploration of grounded expertise alchemizing into enlivened wisdom ~ the wisdom cultivated through the integration of lived and living experience. Personal experience, when consciously absorbed and reflected upon, shapes not only professional practice but also self-awareness, relational depth, and the potential for systemic transformation. Enlivened wisdom is not merely the by-product of experience; it is the outcome of intentional reflection, emotional integration, and a commitment to growth (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 2000).

This conceptual understanding first took shape in practice when I co-led a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with a local healthcare provider and a

community-based program serving people who use drugs. The project emphasized relational space and inclusive collaboration, particularly with voices often marginalized. Grounded expertise affirms that people with lived experience are experts not despite their journeys, but because of them. This approach resonates with Lave and Wenger's (1991) conception of learning as participation within communities of practice and reflects principles of knowledge democracy (Hall & Tandon, 2017), which affirm the epistemic authority of those whose insights emerge from lived experience, collective struggle, and transformative engagement.

Through this work, I began to consider the vitality and embodied presence of experience. I now refer to this evolution as enlivened wisdom. Where grounded expertise is rooted, enlivened wisdom is animated and felt in the body, present in the heart, and expressed through action. It synthesizes experience, self-awareness, and loving intention, guiding both service and life (Sternberg, 2003; Levine, 2010).

Engaging intentionally in this process can elevate personal wellbeing and professional contribution (Brookfield, 2017; Shapiro, 2009). It transforms raw experience into insight that animates relational and organizational practices with presence, purpose, and love, bridging personal, professional, and collective dimensions of service (Wheatley, 2006). What is cultivated and embodied at the individual level is not contained there; it becomes expressed relationally and, over time, contributes to shaping the culture, norms, and relational patterns of teams and organizations.

From this perspective, individual ways of being in service both reflect and influence the systems within which they are embedded. As such, change at the level of personal practice can act as a generative force within organizational life, where embodied presence, values-aligned action, and relational awareness begin to inform broader patterns of interaction, leadership, and service delivery. In this sense, systems are not separate from individual practice but are continually produced and reproduced through it.

This chapter is guided by the following questions, which orient the inquiry from personal reflection to organizational and systemic insight:

- How can lived and living experience be intentionally integrated to cultivate grounded expertise that informs professional practice, relational depth, and systemic awareness?
- In what ways does enlivened wisdom ~ embodied, reflective, and ethically oriented ~ support the development of trust, vulnerability, and relational integrity within organizations and communities?
- How can the principles of the CSA, including the engagement continuum and love in action, guide the translation of personal insight into sustainable cultural and organizational transformation?
- What practices, structures, and relational strategies enable individuals and groups to embed presence, ethical attentiveness, and love into collective service, even within complex systems?
- How are systemic conditions co-created through the reciprocal relationship between organizational structures and the lived, embodied, and relational practices of individuals, and how can this understanding support meaningful and sustainable transformation in service contexts?

By addressing these questions, this chapter invites readers: service providers, leaders, or anyone reflecting on relational and organizational engagement, to explore how personal experience, thoughtfully integrated and enlivened, can animate not only individual practice but also broader organizational culture, trust, and community.

The Roots of Knowing…

As we've explored, grounded expertise is not the accumulation of lived experience alone; it is the intentional integration and reflection on experience within professional practice. Through this reflective, embodied integration, enlivened wisdom emerges: a dynamic understanding that is felt in the body, informed by the heart, and expressed through action. It is both personally grounded and broadly applicable, guiding service in ways that honor self-connection, relational depth, and transformative engagement (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 2000).

Early in my career, I believed that my lived experience alone prepared me to help others. Over time, I came to recognize a critical distinction: personal challenges must be acknowledged, processed, and meaningfully integrated before they can inform ethical,

sustainable service. Without this transformation, service providers risk unconsciously projecting unresolved wounds onto others which is an act that can lead to burnout, role confusion, and ultimately, ineffective support (Maslach, 1982, Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

My conscious journey toward cultivating grounded expertise began during my master's program. This was not just a period of academic growth, but a transformative phase of self-reflective practice, where I learned to examine my assumptions and challenge long-held frames of reference (Brookfield, 2017), anchoring lived experience within broader professional and scholarly contexts (Kolb, 1984). I could finally name my practice, articulate my learning, and begin to align it with intentional, conscious inquiry.

Research activities offered a powerful mirror, reflecting my intellectual curiosities, attachments to ideas, and desire for validation. Through engagement with participants, I realized that self-reflective practice extends beyond the personal, carrying collective and even spiritual implications. The insights I witnessed in others revealed that transformation in service is both relational and systemic (Wheatley, 2006). What I was uncovering was not solely about service strategies or practitioner frameworks. Rather, it was about a communal, energetic process that transcended individual identity and tapped into a shared field of awareness, echoing principles of the CSA.

Gerda Walther (1922) observed that a social community is not created by interaction alone but through what she calls “inner joining.” To me, this points to something deeper than connection ~ it points to integration. By integration, I am referring to a state in which the different dimensions of self ~ physical, emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual ~ are not operating in isolation or contradiction but are held in a coherent and mutually informing relationship with one another.

This “inner joining” therefore describes an internal condition of coherence in which experience is not fragmented or compartmentalized but is consciously and somatically integrated. Within the Conscious Service Approach, this is understood as a prerequisite for authentic relational engagement: if internal experience is dis-integrated, then relational presence is necessarily partial, shaped by adaptive strategies rather than full embodied availability.

This inner joining must therefore first occur within oneself before it can be meaningfully extended into relationship with others. Without this internal coherence, what appears as connection may in fact be interaction occurring across fragmented states of self, rather than between fully present beings. From this perspective, integration is not simply self-awareness, but embodied coherence ~ an aligned and receptive state in which awareness, emotion, values, and bodily experience are held in relational harmony.

Reflecting CSA principles, if I am not anchored in union with myself, I cannot genuinely engage with others in a way that is fully present, responsive, and ethically grounded. Here, personal presence is not simply an interpersonal skill but a form of internal integration that makes relational depth possible (Levine, 2010; Shapiro, 2009).

This notion aligns with the heart of Conscious Service ~ a path that invites us to continually evolve, to transform expertise into wisdom, and to offer our presence in ways that are both whole and healing. When grounded expertise matures into enlivened wisdom, service becomes not only what we do, but a reflection of who we are becoming.

To illustrate enlivened wisdom, I continue to explore the CSA through the metaphor of the mycorrhizal network: a natural system where trees exchange nutrients and information. Dr. Suzanne Simard (1997) first documented this phenomenon, later described in greater detail as the “Wood Wide Web,” revealing how trees communicate to sustain the health of the entire ecosystem (Simard, 2021). Subsequent work in forest ecology has reinforced the idea that forests function as cooperative networks rather than competitive hierarchies (Wohlleben, 2016). In the same way, human service work is rooted in interconnected relationships, where energy, support, and knowledge flow between individuals and communities.

- **Self-Connection:** Like a tree drawing nourishment from the soil, service providers must first cultivate inner resilience and connection before effectively supporting others. Practices of embodiment, mindfulness, and somatic awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; van der Kolk, 2015; Gendlin, 1978) provide avenues for tending to one’s internal ecosystem. This is where we become self-filled: grounded, resourced, and able to meet experience without immediately reaching outward for regulation or validation.

- **Enlightened Communication:** Just as trees signal distress and share resources, authentic, present communication among humans fosters mutual growth and understanding. Critical reflection in practice, naming and interrogating our assumptions, for example, creates space for such communication (Brookfield, 1995; Fook & Gardner, 2007).
- **Transformative Relationships:** Thriving ecosystems are built on reciprocity. Service relationships must be balanced, honouring the simultaneous nature of giving and receiving (Dirkx,1997). In the cultivation of transformative relationships, we step into self-fulfillment, not as something obtained from another, but as something that emerges through mutual presence and exchange.
- **Co-Creating Community:** A forest is only as strong as its collective health. Similarly, organizations and communities flourish when all members contribute to and benefit from their environment (Senge, 1990).

The integration of lived and living experience is often messy and intense. Integration implies intention and awareness, yet much of this transformative process unfolds organically. The conscious part lies in choosing to witness it, to remain connected to the alchemy of personal growth. This is where transcendence lives, within the self.

I remember reading Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) and Brookfield's (1995) work on the importance of naming one's practice. We can learn, integrate, and develop ways of being that shape how we serve, even as we struggle to articulate the path we've taken. The principles of the CSA have become so deeply embedded in my thinking that I often don't realize I'm applying them until someone else reflects it back to me, or I witness it within my interactions.

My aspiration is to balance the mystery of this evolution with the ability to clearly articulate and share it, so that others might benefit from what continues to emerge through my inquiry, both formal and informal. Not surprisingly, the times I've found myself out of alignment with these principles have been the most illuminating, and the most uncomfortable. During personal struggles with health, relationships, or circumstances, I've often paused long enough to recognize that I wasn't walking my own philosophical path. That realization has been a powerful teacher and catalyst.

Perhaps the most significant development in this work has been learning to recognize when I'm out of integrity, and to stay with the discomfort long enough to recalibrate with compassion. The question is no longer *if* I'll veer off course, but *how long will I stay there, and can I actively love myself back into balance?*

Being grounded in expertise requires a deep and often difficult connection with our own humanity, acknowledging our mistakes, disappointments, and shame, as well as our capacity for love, joy, curiosity, and learning. Allowing myself to feel the emotional energy that comes with all of this has been a defining feature of my own grounding process.

Often, I've resisted this awareness and the vulnerability it brings. But again and again, it calls me back to my personal practices. Conscious Service demands that we never invite others into inner territory that we ourselves are unwilling to explore. Integrity begins in that commitment.

As I continue to reflect on how lived and living experiences become grounded expertise, and ultimately enlivened wisdom, I return to the metaphor of the mycorrhizal network. This fungal system transmits chemical messages between trees, sharing nutrients, defense signals, and even toxins. It's a powerful metaphor for the communication and relational dynamics within service systems. Our organizational cultures, like forests, are shaped by what is transmitted: care or harm, nourishment, or depletion (Simard, 2021).

When viewed through the Conscious Service lens, the mycorrhizal metaphor highlights the role of Self-Connection. Like a diseased or damaged tree, we can engage in practices to restore our own system, tending to the roots of our body, mind, heart, and soul. We might rest, reflect, cry, nourish ourselves, create meaning. We assume personal responsibility for our integration, nurturing ourselves rather than depleting or abandoning ourselves.

In this healing process, Enlightened Communication becomes a lifeline, both with self and others. This kind of communication is infused with intentionality, respect, compassion, and personal power. When we commune with ourselves from a place of love, it becomes far more likely we'll extend that same presence to others. Healing

doesn't happen in isolation. We are, after all, social beings, shaped by relational spaces (Frank, 1995).

As in the forest, where trees support one another through connection, human relationships offer containers for restoration and growth. Transformative Relationships are those built on trust, reciprocity, and openness (Mezirow, 1991; Dirkx, 1997). They are rooted in self-determination ~ each person choosing to be present, to share authentically, and to receive fully.

In the mycorrhizal network, every tree has the capacity to transmit and receive. The same must be true in service work. If we believe that only service providers hold wisdom, we miss the point. Those receiving service, participants, and peers bring their own grounded expertise, and the possibility for mutual transformation through relationship. This aligns with research on *experts by experience*, which emphasizes the legitimacy and transformative potential of lived knowledge in shaping service systems (Borkman, 1976; Noorani, 2013).

Just as a tree gives life through the quiet offering of oxygen, it does not strive or exert itself to do so. It is not performing a task or meeting an expectation; it is simply expressing its nature. In the same way, if love is our nature, then the offering of love is not something we must force, earn, or exhaust ourselves to provide. It is something that flows when we are connected to ourselves. When we are rooted in self-connection and nourished from within, love becomes less an effortful act of giving and more a natural expression of being. In this sense, service is not something we do to others, but something that emerges through us, as a reflection of our own integration and aliveness.

To ground our expertise is to integrate our experiences in a way that they become useful, relevant, and ethical. But it also means recognizing and honouring the wisdom others bring and allowing those encounters to transform *us*.

Transformation is alchemical ~ a process that turns the common into the precious. Sometimes, it feels magical as if something previously unseen is suddenly revealed when in fact, it was there all along, just waiting for us to notice.

Relational spaces in healthcare and human services offer profound potential for this kind of transformation, if we're willing to release what we thought we knew and enter

the unknown. That process can be disorienting, but with self-connection and enlightened communication, it becomes a safe and loving space for new growth.

The forest, like a community, thrives or suffers as a whole. The health of one tree impacts the health of many. Likewise, individual service providers shape and are shaped by the cultures they inhabit. Each of us offers something through the network, so we must ask: *does what I contribute nurture or destroy?*

Co-Creating Community, a central principle in the CSA, invites us to recognize that personal experience and communal experience are inseparable. Our wholeness, our wisdom, and our service are not solitary, they are shared. And it is in that sacred interdependence that enlivened wisdom is born.

The quality of service provided is deeply tied to the well-being of service providers. Research on organizational trauma indicates that unresolved workplace stressors including systemic inequities, relational dysfunction, and disengaged leadership, directly contribute to burnout and reduced effectiveness. (Bloom, 2010; Harrison & Westwood, 2009; Sams, 2022; Van der Kolk, 2015). While these patterns may seem entrenched, pathways for meaningful change exist, highlighting the potential for organizations to cultivate presence, relational attunement, and embodied engagement among providers (Figley, 1995; Dirkx, 1997).

- **Shifting Leadership Models:** Moving from hierarchical control to collaborative, servant, and transformational leadership fosters trust, creativity, and deeper engagement (Laloux, 2014; Greenleaf, 1977; Senge, 1990; Michaelson, 2021). Leaders who embody principles of service and model ethical behavior contribute directly to team cohesion, job satisfaction, and organizational resilience (Stone, Russell, & Patterson, 2004; Eva et al., 2019). Cultivating this leadership approach creates relational space for self-connection, presence, and collective growth.
- **Integrating Personal Well-being into Daily Operations:** True well-being extends beyond peripheral wellness programs; it requires embedding supportive practices into the very fabric of organizational culture. This includes modeling self-care, valuing engaged presence, and fostering climates that encourage providers to cultivate resilience and self-connection, reflecting principles of the CSA. Such integration nurtures both individual wellbeing and relational effectiveness.

- **Redefining Professional Boundaries:** Traditional models often promote emotional detachment as a form of protection. Contemporary approaches, like The Engagement Continuum, invite flexibility and encourage presence and empathy without over-identification (Bishop, 2022; Figley, 1995). Evidence from social work and healthcare suggests that mindful emotional engagement, balanced with intentional self-care, reduces compassion fatigue, and strengthens relational outcomes with service recipients (Harris & Griffin, 2005; Mealer et al., 2009). This approach supports providers in showing up authentically while honouring their emotional and energetic capacity.

Addressing the crisis-level conditions in healthcare and human services requires a multidimensional response that honours the complexity of systems and the humanity of those within them. Change often begins with leadership, and experience confirms that transformation occurs more efficiently when leaders are not only aligned but actively embody the change they seek (Senge, 1990; Laloux, 2014). Yet powerful growth can also emerge at the grassroots level ~ within teams, programs, and peer circles ~ even when leadership engagement is limited (Borkman, 1976; Noorani, 2013).

Bottom-up initiatives can create ripple effects, sparking dialogue and gradually influencing organizational culture. Change spreads relationally, like the mycorrhizal networks in a forest, transmitted through resonance, trust, and authentic commitment (Simard, 1997; Wohlleben, 2016).

There is growing critique of performative well-being initiatives that offer surface-level solutions without addressing systemic barriers. Programs such as guided meditation, lunch-hour yoga, or Employee Assistance Programs are valuable, but when positioned as primary solutions, they risk framing well-being as an individual responsibility while leaving structural inequities unaddressed (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Fook & Gardner, 2007). Sustainable transformation requires policy changes, equitable workloads that allow adequate time for reflection, recovery, and integration between periods of intensive relational work, and leadership practices that embed support at every level and reduce sustained exposure to high-frequency interpersonal demands (van der Kolk, 2015; Senge, 1990).

Transforming culture demands attention to both the individual and the collective. Personal practices that nurture physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and relational well-being are essential. Simultaneously, systemic shifts in policy, leadership, and operations support sustainable change. The system and the individuals within it are deeply interwoven (Senge, 1990; van der Kolk, 2015).

Assuming personal responsibility for our role in organizational health is both an act of service and an expression of personal power. Conscious reflection on workplace structures, combined with self-connection and mindful engagement, allows us to dismantle what no longer serves and co-create practices that do (Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1983).

Practices such as Self-Connection, Enlightened Communication, and Transformative Relationships are not abstract ideals; they are practical tools for culture shift. These principles support personal well-being and contribute directly to Co-creating Community, establishing organizational climates where connection, compassion, and collaboration are normalized (Bishop, 2022; Dirkx, 1997).

Through my own journey, grounding expertise in personal truth has required deep internal work including contemplation, sensory presence, responsive self-care, and self-forgiveness. Creativity emerged not as a specific skill, but as a way of being, expressed in relationships, choices, and the energy brought to work and life (Dirkx,1997; Michaelson, 2021). Each of us is a creative agent in designing our experience. Acting from self-connection sends nourishing signals into the network, like a tree sustaining the forest (Simard, 1997; Wohlleben, 2016). Enlightened communication channels this nourishment, aligning words, actions, and intentions with love. Service, at its highest, is an energetic exchange that supports all involved. When practiced consciously, it animates a healthy organizational system (Bishop, 2022; Greenleaf, 1977).

Presence must permeate every layer of the organization. Service is not just about external offerings; it is expressed in how colleagues relate, how decisions are made, how accountability is upheld, and how power is shared (Laloux, 2014; Senge, 1990). Leadership, consciously expressed, is service:

- **Executive leaders** serve employees, funders, boards, and the communities they support (Greenleaf, 1977; Laloux, 2014).
- **Team leads** serve program teams and program integrity (Bishop, 2022).
- **HR professionals** serve the well-being of the organization's human infrastructure (Sams, 2022).
- **Every role** contributes to the broader service mission; every interaction has the potential to nourish or deplete (Bloom, 2010; Simard, 1997), in ways that are dynamic rather than fixed, shaped by both relational context and internal states of integration.

When service is not embedded as a core value and leadership lacks commitment, high-quality care becomes impossible. Internal system health directly influences external impact (van der Kolk, 2015; Bloom, 2010). Serving each other with awareness, creativity, and integrity cultivates a culture that is humane, resilient, effective, and alive (Dirkx,1997; Michaelson, 2021).

I came to learn how truly complex, transformation can be…

To engage in truly transformative service, we must recognize the inherent complexity within the systems we seek to influence. Unlike complicated problems, which may be difficult but are ultimately solvable with step-by-step protocols, complex challenges are dynamic, relational, and often resistant to linear solutions. They involve multiple perspectives, deeply held values, unpredictable outcomes, and the ongoing interplay between individual agency and structural conditions (Plsek & Greenhalgh, 2001; Snowden & Boone, 2007).

Diane Finegood's Complex Systems Framework Collection offers lenses to navigate this terrain, emphasizing that frameworks are guiding perspectives rather than prescriptive roadmaps (Finegood et al., 2021). They help us ask deeper questions, examine assumptions, and recognize patterns that might otherwise remain hidden. These frameworks orient us toward possibility rather than assurance, highlighting the elements that make a challenge complex: interdependent relationships, divergent perspectives, underlying belief systems, and inherent uncertainty. Engaging with these challenges effectively requires self-connection, relational attunement, and presence within the system, which are principles central to the CSA.

From this view, the CSA can be understood as a living framework for healthcare, education, and human services. It does not dictate exact steps, nor attempt to fix complexity. Instead, it invites practitioners, teams, leaders, and faculty to engage with complexity through an energetic presence rooted in love, awareness, and contribution. CSA honors both individual transformation and systemic evolution, recognizing that the two are interwoven.

Just as complexity resists control, so too does community resist confinement. Community is an emergent, dynamic system, not merely a structure or a group of individuals sharing a mission. It arises through intention, connection, and shared resonance, reflecting the interplay between individual agency and systemic patterns highlighted in complexity frameworks. When we view community through this lens, we begin to understand that our contribution is not only about productivity or outcomes but about presence: how we show up, the energy we bring, and the frequency we transmit through our service.

This transcendent perspective aligns with the writings of Viktor Frankl, who proposed that meaning is discovered through engagement with something greater than the self ~ through love, purpose, and dignity even in the face of suffering (Frankl, 1985). Similarly, Parker Palmer describes community as “that place where the person you least want to be with always lives,” reminding us that authentic relational engagement arises not from ease or sameness but from the courage to show up and be transformed by connection (Palmer, 1998). These insights underscore that presence, contribution, and energetic attunement are central to the CSA: the very principles that allow individuals and systems to navigate complexity, co-create community, and sustain transformative service.

By embracing complexity, we acknowledge that things do not necessarily need to be fixed, but much can be transformed. Transformation often begins in the unseen layers through clarity of intention, alignment of inner and outer actions, and the courage to remain present within ambiguity. The CSA deepens our capacity to be with complexity, with grace, integrity, and grounded creativity, recognizing that systemic transformation emerges through the energetic coherence of individuals willing to lead from within. Service thus becomes an act of transcendence, a living expression of love, community, and shared humanity.

They say the best way to learn, is to teach…

Grounding expertise and moving into enlivened wisdom in my life has directly informed my work, including my role as a faculty member and my private consulting and training engagements. My recent foray into community-based research projects has provided many opportunities for growth and development and has anchored my informal learning experiences. These learnings extend beyond my role as a researcher to the deeply relational aspects of the research process. I've learned much from my research project partners, participants, and the emergent information, some of which has aligned with my expectations, while other findings have surprised me in meaningful ways.

Teaching at a community college for 35 years, primarily in human services programs, has reinforced that self-reflection and self-connection are paramount to effective facilitation. I see myself in service to learners, striving to create safe, inclusive, and loving spaces ~ a container within which transformation can occur. Course content is vital, but the group's emotional landscape is equally significant. The journey to any destination must reflect the qualities we hope to cultivate. If I advocate for wellbeing but undermine it through my own actions or structures, authenticity is lost.

Facilitation is more than content delivery ~ it is connection. Storytelling, sharing lived experience, and inviting learners to bring their backgrounds and perspectives fosters safe, co-created learning environments. Many drawn to service vocations are wired for giving but struggle to receive. Self-connection and receptivity are foundational to holistic wellbeing and grounding expertise, enabling service providers to sustain themselves while supporting others.

Developing the capacity to be with self in presence and the capacity to receive are ways of being that require practice. Developing and sustaining personal practices that prepare, support, and fortify service providers is a curriculum unto itself that could be woven into all academic preparation programs.

Academic institutions must align processes with desired outcomes. Policies, grading practices, and course designs often contradict messages about self-care, resilience, and relational engagement. Preparing graduates for transformative service requires embedding experiential processes, wellbeing practices, and relational strategies into

learning environments, so that students are not only taught *about* these qualities but invited to practice and inhabit them. Leadership development, mentorship, and dialogue between academia and service workplaces are essential to cultivating capable, self-connected, and systemically aware practitioners (Schön, 1983; Kania, Kramer, & Senge, 2018). If we want to prepare graduates who are self-connected, capable of transformative relationships, and ready to contribute to co-creative communities, then our academic processes must embody and enact these outcomes. The process must reflect the desired result.

It has been a challenge to incorporate learning approaches that allow learners to embody the theories and philosophies that guide human services practice. I've wrestled with making wellbeing strategies practical in ways that move beyond theoretical discussion into lived/living experience. Academic programs must evolve to include experiential processes that support the development of wellbeing practices, relational strategies, and the competencies necessary to contribute to and thrive within transformational workplace cultures.

It is a disservice to adult learners when academic preparation fails to acknowledge the realities of the systems they will work within. It is an even greater disservice to avoid difficult conversations and needed skill development. Are we equipping learners with the capacity to access support, seek mentorship, chart a meaningful career path, and build leadership qualities that sustain themselves, their colleagues, and their organizations?

We often assume that those in leadership roles possess the necessary skills to foster healthy culture. Yet leadership titles don't automatically equate to visionary, self-aware, or health-promoting leadership. Managing people is not the same as leading transformation. We must ask: How are we preparing and supporting people for these essential roles in the future of healthcare and human services?

Furthermore, open dialogue between academic institutions and workplaces is essential. Aligning learning opportunities with the realities of service environments benefits both learners and employers. Academic institutions can actively contribute to systems transformation by collaborating with partners to ask: What do service providers truly need to thrive? What skills, so-called soft and technical, are needed to support personal wellbeing, relational health, and effective service delivery?

I wanted to understand the system from every angle, to shift paradigms and trace the currents shaping the world of care and learning…

Through my consulting work, I observed that sustainable transformation in healthcare, education, and human services requires attention to both culture and structure. Relational, values-based approaches allow organizations to examine mental models, power dynamics, and relational patterns that often impede change. Structural adjustments alone are insufficient; meaningful transformation begins with individuals who are aligned in purpose, present in their engagement, and ethically attuned.

In line with Kania, Kramer, and Senge's (2018) six conditions of systems change, which draw on the Iceberg Model and Donella Meadows' Places to Intervene, effective change addresses structural, relational, and transformational layers: policies, practices, resources, relationships, power dynamics, and mental models. Consulting experience reinforced that starting only with structural change leads to shallow progress, whereas supporting individuals in safe, inclusive relational spaces fosters alignment, trust, and authentic co-creation, laying the groundwork for systemic evolution.

Shifting paradigms is central to navigating complexity. It requires us to examine deeply held beliefs and approach change with flexibility, coherence, and openness, not rule-setting or conformity. As beliefs shift, systems evolve. Love, unity, spirit, and embodied presence must fuel this evolution ~ not only intellectual understanding, but enlivened, present wisdom.

When I began my doctoral journey, I sought to explore the zeitgeist: the spirit of the time that sustains our current systems and contributes to their dysfunction. I continue to believe that a paradigm shift is necessary, one that transcends mindset and belief and invites embodiment of the energy and values we articulate in our mission, mandate, and vision. True transformation arises when individuals recognize themselves as essential to the whole, and when structures are shaped by inclusive, innovative, and soulfully aligned practices.

Reflecting on organizational vision and values offers a chance to examine alignment with everyday practice. If an organization claims to be person-centered and compassionate, are these qualities reflected in both service delivery and employee

experience? I've worked with leaders who misidentified disconnection and disillusionment as lack of commitment. What appeared as apathy often masked a deeper experience of being undervalued and unseen. Until we genuinely listen to what matters to our human resources, recruitment and retention challenges will persist.

Organizational culture provides structure and order to workplace processes and practices, both explicitly through policies and implicitly through shared norms, rituals, and values (Swindler, 1986). Culture evolves as conditions change, but misalignment between adopted practices and entrenched beliefs can obstruct transformation. Efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and expediency often overshadow holistic wellbeing and service quality, especially during complex transitions such as mergers. Culture shapes not only what we do and how we do it, but also how presence, self-connection, and relational attunement are expressed in daily practice. Community, in contrast, is the energy or spirit within which we do it, creating a relational field in which compassion, connection, and collaboration can flourish. When culture and community are aligned, individuals and teams can engage fully, bringing both expertise and enlivened wisdom into service, fostering environments that support sustainable, transformative practice.

The cultures we co-create help us to thrive within specific contexts. As conditions change and we evolve, so too must our cultural practices. In my experience, however, organizational culture does not always shift in a timely or aligned manner. New practices, tools, and models may be adopted in healthcare and human services, but these often sit atop entrenched values and beliefs that have not transformed at the same pace. These deep-seated beliefs, held by service providers, organizational leaders, and often reinforced at a societal level, can prevent genuine systemic transformation.

Efficiency, expediency, and cost-effectiveness have at times been elevated above the core mission and values that support high-quality service and the holistic wellbeing of employees. In organizations undergoing complex transitions, such as mergers, these tensions become especially pronounced. Integrating not only systems and procedures but also people and histories can be challenging. Long-tenured employees bring invaluable wisdom, yet they may also carry organizational trauma that influences how they engage with change.

Organizational trauma, triggered by mergers, leadership changes, or chronic stressors, can impede trust, collaboration, and innovation (Wilmot & Thompson, 2021; Sams, 2020). Trust is foundational; without it, low morale, resistance to change, and disengagement can compromise both service quality and employee retention.

I have personally witnessed how unresolved relational dynamics create barriers to transformation, resulting in a two-steps-forward, one-step-back cycle. From a CSA perspective, these challenges highlight the importance of cultivating presence, self-connection, and relational attunement: when individuals and teams are anchored in these practices, trust can be rebuilt, relational energy can flow, and systemic change can become possible.

Lack of trust manifests in many ways: diminished commitment, lack of follow-through, resistance to new initiatives, insufficient peer support, low morale, and a general reluctance to engage. This erosion of trust can also inhibit creativity, collaboration, and conflict resolution, while contributing to disillusionment and disengagement. Employees may adopt a *why bother?* mindset that stifles innovation and collective growth.

The organizational fallout is significant: high turnover, absenteeism, grievances, reduced quality of service, and reputational damage. These issues also compromise access to funding and diminish the organization's capacity to deliver safe and inclusive services.

Organizations that truly embody their mission thrive when values are actively lived, not just declared. This requires a culture in which both service users and providers experience alignment with the organization's ethical commitments, and where each person's contribution is recognized as essential to the collective mission.

Such cultures are not accidental; they are intentionally formed through reflective, educational, and professional practices grounded in the CSA. Research on spiritual intelligence (SQ) shows that curricula emphasizing SQ improve communication competence, resilience, engagement, and ethical decision-making among nurses and nursing students (Sharifnia et al., 2022). Reflective practice (Schön, 1987) through reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, experiential learning, and mentorship, provides

concrete strategies for embedding CSA principles, supporting self-connection, professional identity, and ethically grounded practice.

When I entered this field in the 1980s, prevailing norms emphasized self-sacrifice and overextension, often resulting in burnout. By contrast, CSA-informed formation enables service providers to engage with depth and purpose without sacrificing well-being. The emerging generation's emphasis on sustainability and fulfillment can thus be seen as the outcome of intentional formation, rather than a diminishment of commitment. In this way, reflective practice, SQ, and CSA provide the mechanisms through which humane, resilient, and mission-aligned organizational cultures are realized.

These trends in workforce priorities reflect and reinforce the kinds of cultures intentionally cultivated through CSA-informed formation. Emerging professionals increasingly prioritize wellbeing, flexibility, and meaningful engagement, not out of reduced commitment, but as a corrective to the unsustainable overextension observed in prior generations (Twenge & Campbell, 2019; Deloitte, 2022). Post-pandemic work realities further underscore the importance of flexibility, trust-based recognition, and psychological safety as essential mechanisms for retention and organizational sustainability (Kniffin et al., 2021; Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). In this way, the values and expectations of the emerging workforce both shape and are shaped by reflective, purpose-driven organizational cultures.

Intergenerational learning is one of the most underutilized opportunities within organizations. By creating structures that honour both the wisdom of long-term employees and the innovation of newcomers, organizations can cultivate a more inclusive and resilient culture. Reciprocal coaching and collaborative learning can enhance onboarding, supervision, succession planning, and performance development.

The desire for joy and fulfillment at work is no longer fringe ~ it is central. Especially in healthcare and human services, where work is inherently relational and often vocational in nature, employees must be connected to a sense of meaning and purpose. Most people I've met in this field felt called to serve. Yet many became disillusioned, struggling to recapture the inspiration that first drew them in. Others, misaligned from the start, moved on quickly.

To deliver high-quality services, service providers must feel joy, engagement, and alignment with both their work and the people they serve. Emotional investment is not optional; it is essential. Some argue for strict separation between personal identity and professional role, believing this will protect against burnout. In my view, this artificial divide undermines relational attunement, increasing the risk of disconnection and stress.

Authentic presence ~ bringing the whole self into service ~ is essential for relationally attuned, safe, and effective practice (Halifax, 2018; Scharmer, 2016). Research on professional identity and embodied practice highlights that cultivating presence supports both resilience and meaningful connection (Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Gendlin, 1981). When individuals cultivate presence and emotional investment, organizational structures such as intergenerational learning, peer coaching, and collaborative frameworks can amplify this engagement systemically.

Intergenerational learning, peer coaching, and collaborative structures foster inclusive, resilient cultures (Billett, 2014; Collier, 2017). Practices such as Success and Growth Planning, when co-developed with employees, align personal growth with organizational mission, embedding relational and wellbeing priorities directly into development processes (Cameron, 2021; Grant & Hartley, 2014).

Unlike standard templates, these plans embed cultural and strategic alignment directly into the development process. They invite employees to articulate their contributions, aspirations, and interests, explore learning and career opportunities, and identify relational and wellbeing priorities in partnership with their leadership coach (formerly known as their *supervisor*). This collaborative model replaces disciplinary frameworks with growth-oriented ones and supports a culture of trust, balance, and possibility.

Implementing such approaches in unionized environments can be challenging. In my experience, labour-management dynamics often reinforce division rather than collaboration. A strong union can be a powerful advocate for wellbeing, but when adversarial dynamics take hold, they can entrench mistrust and stifle transformation.

Unionized contexts require careful navigation, but relational approaches can support collaboration rather than division. Studies show that trust-building and shared

governance can strengthen both organizational culture and union–management relationships (Heery, 2016; Kaufman, 2010).

One of the most consistent sources of stress I've observed across all levels of service is poor relational dynamics between coworkers, between employees and management, and within leadership teams. When these relationships are healthy, they foster a sense of belonging, safety, and mutual respect. When they're strained, they undermine not only morale, but also the very foundation of effective service delivery.

That's why I believe so strongly in the need for enlightened communication, which really means communicating with love. The word *love* may make some people uncomfortable in professional settings, but I believe it absolutely belongs. Many human service organizations are rooted in spiritual traditions that emphasize unconditional love implying that we learn to stay open without being overrun and prioritize connection even when perspectives differ.

In a recent workshop I facilitated, I asked participants to reflect on relational stress at work. Almost every head nodded in recognition. Most welcomed the invitation to talk about love in the workplace, though some were unsure about the language. Several even shared examples of how their organizations are explicitly integrating loving values into their culture and communication strategies.

Enlightened communication: communication with love, is central to thriving culture. Love here is not sentimental but rather, it reflects kindness, compassion, patience, and curiosity in professional interactions. Organizational values are only meaningful when lived daily, linking employee experience to service quality.

Organizations may believe they are supporting employee wellbeing because their values statements say so. But if employees don't feel that support in their daily experience, the values are not alive, and it's likely that service users feel the same disconnect. The relationship between the employee experience and service quality is undeniable. For organizational leaders and funders alike, this connection must be taken seriously.

Embedding Conscious Service principles across personal, team, leadership, and organizational levels enhances relational wisdom, equity, and systemic transformation.

Grounded expertise, self-connection, and relational presence are the foundation for sustainable, life-affirming practice in healthcare and human services.

Now we turn to research, showing that the CSA is not optional, but essential…

My recent research initiatives have centered on service provider wellbeing, equity in workplace culture, and the development of inclusive, responsive service spaces. These inquiries have highlighted the deep emotional investment required of service providers, the often-overlooked centrality of joy and fulfillment, and the transformative potential of peer coaching, leadership, and system-supported structural change.

Through the study *At the Intersection of Service Provider Wellbeing and Equity in Healthcare and Social Services (*internal report*)*, we observed that many practitioners felt ill-prepared for the emotional complexities inherent in their work. This underscores significant gaps in traditional academic and professional training, echoing critiques that professional education often prioritizes technical proficiency over relational and emotional competence (Schön, 1983; Adams, 2020). Furthermore, our exploration of wellbeing revealed that experiences of joy and fulfillment were not only scarce but often perceived as privileges rather than fundamental elements of vocational vitality and sustainability.

A critical question emerges: how can service providers remain connected to personal joy and fulfillment while responding to the suffering of others? Traditional approaches that emphasize self-protection, rigid boundaries, or avoidance of emotional involvement are insufficient. Rather, effective practice requires acknowledging that emotional investment is integral to service. This means preparing oneself for the realities of human engagement, processing the emotional impact of work, and developing the capacity to respond to both self and others in a grounded, compassionate manner.

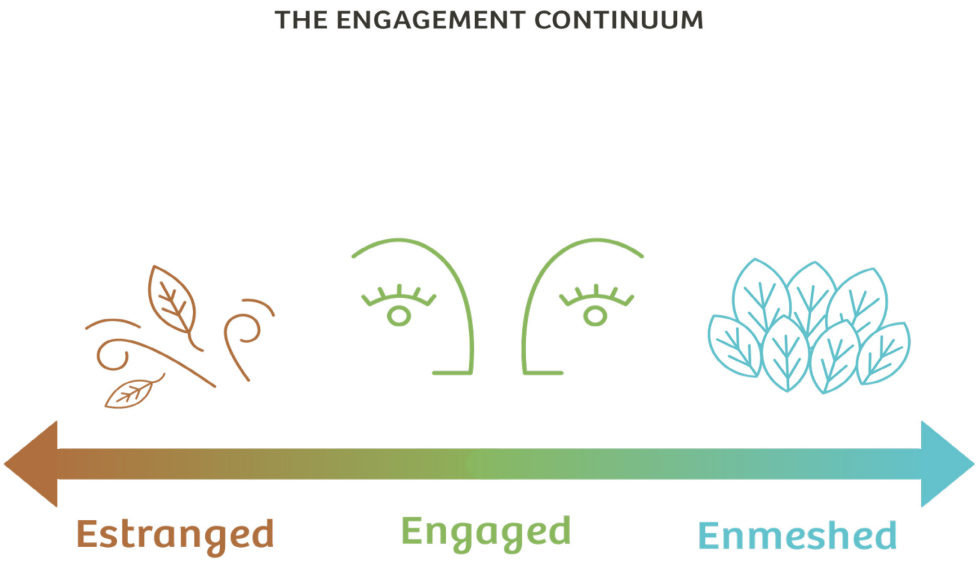
Equity-informed organizational practices and systemic policies play a pivotal role in supporting meaningful contribution. Opportunities for personally identified meaningful work are among the most powerful forms of recognition, fostering both individual and collective wellbeing. However, even within equity-informed environments, participants consistently noted a gap in in-the-moment wellbeing supports. They reported self-care practices primarily outside of work, such as vacation days or after-hours activities, but identified few strategies embedded within the moment-to-moment demands of service

roles. This underscores the need to reframe wellbeing not as an isolated task, but as a way of being self-filled ~ embodied, responsive, and present (Siegel, 2010).

Wellbeing is dynamic, fluid, and context dependent. It cannot be compartmentalized into scheduled activities without risking ineffectiveness. Emotional preparation for service must be continuous and responsive. Brief interventions outside of work, while valuable, do not compensate for the demands of high-stakes relational labour. Instead, service providers need practices that support presence, engagement, and reflective processing throughout their workday. Organizations can complement this by addressing systemic barriers and creating cultures that enable service providers and teams to thrive.

Service providers often oscillate between states of disengagement including estrangement resulting from rigid boundary-setting or emotional withdrawal and over-engagement, where personal trauma or excessive responsibility for others' outcomes leads to dysregulation and enmeshment. Both extremes undermine presence, effectiveness, and wellbeing. The *Engagement Continuum* encourages attention to engagement as a moment-to-moment experience, fostering clarity about personal responses, energy allocation, and meaningful contribution without reliance on rigid boundaries through cues such as breath, emotional tone, somatic tension, and relational attunement.

The *Engagement Continuum*, developed through the CSA, provides an alternative to conventional boundary-setting paradigms. Rather than positioning detachment or over-identification as binary options, the continuum invites practitioners to observe and adjust their levels of presence and engagement. This fluid model cultivates grounded expertise and enlivened wisdom (Bishop, 2022), wherein personal presence, reflective capacity, and relational awareness become central to both effectiveness and resilience.



(The Engagement Continuum is represented in this graphic designed by Dani Vachon of Creative Navigation)

The Safe Inclusive Spaces project, conducted in 2023 (Bailey et al., 2025), employed participatory action research with community partners to examine relational dynamics between service providers and people who use drugs. Listening circles revealed both the harm of stigmatizing responses and the transformative potential of humanizing, compassionate engagement. Participants articulated their commitment to equity-informed practice, alongside the emotional toll of sustaining this commitment in under-resourced systems. These findings reinforce scholarship emphasizing relational care and justice-oriented pedagogy ~ pedagogical approaches that prioritize equity, voice, and ethical relational engagement ~ as foundational to transformative learning and supportive working environments (Ladson-Billings, 1995; hooks, 1994).

Service providers consistently described the emotional labour of their roles, noting how difficult experiences lingered after work, disrupting sleep, generating helplessness, and at times deepening despair. Participants reported feeling ill-prepared academically for these emotional demands. While clinical and procedural competencies were addressed in

their training, emotional and relational competencies were often neglected. This gap underscores the responsibility of academic and professional preparation programs to cultivate the capacities necessary for service providers to thrive in complex, relationally demanding systems.

One participant highlighted the impact of fully engaged, self-responsive practice: by attending to his own presence and grounding throughout the day, relational outcomes improved, interactions carried a sense of connection, and he left work replenished ~ self-filled and self-fulfilled ~ rather than depleted. This example illustrates how self-loving, self-responsive engagement can expand relational and systemic impact, while simultaneously supporting personal wellbeing. Service, approached from this perspective, becomes a living expression of love, presence, and human connection.

A 2022–2023 mentorship initiative demonstrated tangible pathways to embedding peer leadership, coaching, and succession planning within organizational life. These programs foster continuous learning, relational accountability, and cultures of wellbeing, aligning with Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) concept of professional capital, which emphasizes collaborative and relational processes over individual skill-building alone.

While distinct in scope and population, this mentorship initiative echoes themes found in the Safe Inclusive Spaces project, particularly the emphasis on relational accountability, collaborative learning, and embedding culture change within organizational systems

Grounding expertise into enlivened wisdom is not a fixed endpoint, but an evolving, lived process shaped by self-awareness, intentional learning, and engagement with the systems we inhabit. As demonstrated, integrating self-connection, enlightened communication, transformative relationships, and co-creating community supports the development of sustainable, life-affirming practices for service providers and organizations alike.

These elements collectively establish a new paradigm of service, one that honours the inner life of the practitioner as fully as it attends to the needs of those they serve, while actively committing to the overall health of the organizational culture.

Body as Canvas

I wanted this tattoo, placed on the inside of my right forearm**,** for a long time**.** The Om symbol, often chanted in meditation or yoga as a low, sustained hum **~** *Aauuum* **~** is said to be the sound that arose at the moment of creation, a vibrational expression of life coming into being. Experienced not through cognition but through resonance, it moves through breath, tissue, and tone. Etched into skin, it serves as a reminder that wisdom is not merely contemplated but lived through with regard to how one shows up, responds, and relates. In this sense, enlivened wisdom is not something we hold, but something we continuously enact. I ask myself, and I invite you to ponder: *What sound do you want your life to make?*

The next chapter introduces the *Ten Invitations of the CSA*, guiding principles that distill core themes of this thesis and provide a framework for ongoing reflection, application, and integration at personal, team, leadership, organizational, and academic levels. Together, they chart a path toward a more conscious, compassionate, and transformative approach to service.

Chapter 5. Promising Principles and Practices

Setting the Stage: Why This Chapter Matters

This chapter introduces The Ten Invitations of the CSA: a set of guiding principles designed to support meaningful transformation within individuals, teams, organizations, and systems. These invitations were first articulated in *Conscious Service: Ten Ways to Reclaim Your Calling, Move Beyond Burnout, and Make a Difference Without Losing Yourself*, published four years ago. That book emerged over a number of years through the integration of lived and living experience in human service contexts alongside sustained academic inquiry, and the invitations themselves formed its central organizing structure.

As the final offering of this thesis, this chapter marks a return to those same invitations, not as a repetition, but as a deepening. What was originally offered as a practitioner-oriented framework is revisited here with greater depth, humility, and relational awareness, informed by literature, study findings, applied practice, and ongoing engagement with service providers, organizations, and educational settings. This return reflects the understanding that conscious service is not static, but continually shaped through experience, reflection, and relationship.

Each invitation ~ Purpose, Wholeness, Freedom, Discovery, Enlightenment, Vision, Leadership, Compassion, Openness, and Presence ~ offers an entry point into a more conscious, compassionate, and relational way of engaging in service. Together, they form a framework that invites ongoing reflection, dialogue, and action in support of personal and collective wellbeing.

CSA, with its Ten Invitations, maps onto a growing body of literature advocating that spirituality, meaning, purpose, presence, and reflective practice are not optional extras in social work or service professions but fundamental to effective, ethical, and sustainable engagement (Boynton, 2025). Boynton (2025) articulates spirituality competencies: awareness of worldview, humility, attunement, and ethical responsiveness, that correspond closely with CSA's Invitations, providing a framework for curriculum integration. Canda and Furman (2009) also emphasized that addressing

spirituality is essential for both education and professional practice, supporting the inclusion of CSA principles in training programs.

These invitations are not rigid directives, but open pathways. Each extends a gentle call to consider how we show up in our work, how we relate to ourselves and others, and how we might reimagine systems of care in ways that honour both the humanity of those receiving support and those providing it. Rooted in the belief that service can be an expression of love, this approach emphasizes the essential role of the inner life of the practitioner, the integrity of leadership, and the responsibility of academic institutions in shaping future service cultures.

Throughout this chapter, I offer inferences drawn from the findings presented thus far, alongside practical recommendations for how these guiding principles can be embodied, enacted, and extended relationally into organizational practice. These recommendations are intended to support direct service providers, leaders, educators, and decision-makers in cultivating more enlivened, responsive, and sustainable approaches to service, ultimately contributing to the evolution of healthier, more compassionate service cultures.

At its heart, this chapter is an invitation to include the self, to reimagine leadership, to reshape curriculum, and to engage with service as a living, relational practice: one that is grounded in love, guided by intention, and open to transformation.

Guided by these intentions, this chapter is framed by the following questions:

- How can the Ten Invitations of the CSA be practically integrated into the daily practices of service providers, leaders, and educators in ways that honour both personal and relational wellbeing?
- In what ways can these principles foster conscious engagement, relational integrity, and ethical responsiveness within organizations and systems?
- How might reflective and embodied practice, informed by these invitations, support the ongoing evolution of service cultures toward greater sustainability, compassion, and relational depth?

- How can individual, team, and organizational practices be structured to enact love, presence, and ethical attentiveness while maintaining balance, self-responsiveness, and resilience?

I invite you to know why you are here…

to reconnect with purpose, not as a job description or mission statement, but as a living relationship with meaning. Purpose becomes clearer when we pause long enough to listen for it.

Scholars in spiritual intelligence describe purpose as a “change intelligence,” allowing individuals to access values and abiding meaning that sustain them through complexity (Zohar & Marshall, 2000; Frontiers, 2024). Similarly, Boynton (2025) identifies purpose and meaning making as central spirituality competencies in social work education, helping professionals anchor their work in values that prevent burnout and disengagement**.**

Purpose is a foundational principle of sustainable service. When we understand what inspires us, we make choices that align with our values, transforming our work from a burden into a meaningful pursuit. Research suggests that intrinsic motivation enhances well-being and reduces burnout (Deci & Ryan, 2017).

The connection to purpose requires inspired intentionality ~ engaging in work not solely for external validation but because it aligns with our values. Rather than focusing only on measurable outcomes, service providers can cultivate a sense of fulfillment by recognizing the personal and relational impact of their work. Organizational systems, often driven by funding requirements, emphasize quantitative success. However, true service quality extends beyond metrics to include the depth of human connection and transformation (Laloux, 2014).

One of the most powerful ways that we can demonstrate love for ourselves, is to take the time to understand what motivates and inspires us, to care about what we find to be meaningful in our lives, and to take that a step further to find ways that we can express that inspiration with people and in settings that matter to us including the places and spaces we love. When I take seriously what motivates me and come to recognize the most powerful sources of motivation in my life, my choices begin to shift in ways that

have a profound impact. Work that once felt heavy becomes experienced as a gift rather than a burden. When I am motivated, it no longer feels like work, even when I'm being stretched and asked to expand.

Alan Cohen (1996), says in his book, *A Deep Breath of Life,* that we know we've landed on something we are meant to pursue when we feel a combination of fear and excitement. The fear tells us that we have something to learn and an opportunity to grow, and the excitement tells us that it matters enough to us and that there is love or inspiration enough to sustain us in times of challenge or discomfort.

For me, it was this deep sense of feeling inspired by my work in human services and with human service providers, that always brought me back to my center during the times when I felt like giving up. When I remembered how much I truly cared about my work, the next steps began to emerge, along with the energy and focus required to take them.

I believe that we all arrive here with purpose in this life, not that we have to do any one thing or discover some form of action that will give us purpose. I prefer to think in terms of being purposeful, living on purpose, serving on purpose. When I am living on purpose, I also feel a sense of integrity and alignment in my life and my energy becomes balanced, which is a strong indicator of wellbeing. If I get caught up in tasks and projects that have lost meaning for me, then I find myself drained and depleted. As I've shared previously, my turning point many years ago, began when I decided that I would only engage in things that held meaning for me ~ it had to matter. And while it has been a journey with many twists and turns and many moments of being inspired and uninspired, of feeling purposeful and feeling aimless, this commitment to my personal definition of living on purpose has always been a barometer and a compass guiding me to the pulse of the call.

What does it mean then to live and serve on purpose? In addition to a sense of inspiration, I believe this is also connected to intention. Inspired intention provides clarity and allows us to proceed on our path with focus as well as adaptability. When we embody inspired intentionality, it is easier to detach from specific outcomes and instead be invested in the process and the relational elements of our role as service providers.

To embody inspiration, or any quality we wish to bring into our experience, means allowing it to be felt, sensed, and lived, rather than effortfully produced. When we live and breathe a quality, it no longer requires conscious striving; it naturally shapes how we act, relate, and move in the world. We become the tree.

When I aligned with what held meaning for me and with my own sense of inspiration, my vocational path forward became clearer and more focused. I did not then, nor do I now, know every step along the way. What I do recognize is when I am being drawn toward aspects of my work that carry deep meaning. Attending to that sense of inspiration has often allowed me to trust the process and to let things unfold with as much grace as possible.

Being invited to purpose does not mean that we have to prove our worth or value, but rather that we recognize it, and in doing so, we acknowledge our capacity to contribute in ways that are both in alignment with our sense of inspiration and that also hold the possibility of benefit for others. This creates space for service as an expression of love.

An external motivator common in service delivery and potentially dangerous is the focus on the outcomes realized by service users. If we are motivated by a desire to contribute and make a difference, which is often expressed by service providers I've met over the years, then we may tend to search for evidence of the benefits of our contributions in the growth or goal attainment of the people we serve. The emphasis on service based outcomes that can be quantitatively measured is reinforced in many organizational systems, which is a requirement that has been imposed by funding bodies.

The measure of success and high quality service delivery goes far beyond numbers and statistics and requires an exploration of the personally experienced positive impacts that service has for those accessing it. If we are focused on numbers, not only do we miss opportunities for deepened connections, the creation of transformative relational space, the gift of reciprocity, and our own learning and growth, but we also lose connection to our internal sense of inspired and intentional service delivery fuelling what holds meaning for us in our work. When that is lost and not re-

imagined or re-gained, service providers can quickly fall into disillusionment and apathy, the perfect breeding ground for burnout.

On a personal level, we can take responsibility for maintaining motivation and inspiration as it relates to our own guiding values and how this aligns with organizational mission, vision, and values. Having this information about ourselves, what it feels like in our bodies to be motivated, inspired, intentional, and in integrity with what holds personal meaning ~ and loving ourselves enough to honour this information ~ we can move with a sense of confidence and gratitude that we are on a pathway that matters ~ that we are living on purpose.

Organizational leaders can support this, first personally in their own lives, and become powerful role models for the people they serve through their leadership ~ the human resources. Walking the walk has compelling influence within organizational culture. In fact, it creates safety and a sense of community within the workplace. In this way, leaders send the message that *we are truly in this together and I will not ask you to do something, that I am not willing to do myself*. That is integrity and goes a long way when developing the kind of relational space that supports innovation and creativity.

Leaders demonstrate loving service to the teams and individual service providers they partner with when they care about what matters to them. Showing genuine interest in the aspirations, inspirations, and motivations of the human resources involved in service delivery, not only helps people feel valued and supported, but it also extends that implicit permission, that it is safe and desirable for service providers to be aware of their sense of joy and fulfillment in their vocation. Leaders who put energy toward creating these relationships also reap the benefits of that same loving space, even while they are facilitating organizational goals and objectives.

Leaders can foster purpose by modeling alignment between personal values and organizational mission. Faculty members can encourage learners to develop holistic personal learning goals, emphasizing self-awareness and motivation as part of career preparation.

Curiosity can serve as a vehicle into motivation and inspiration. Academically, we can nurture and stimulate curiosity not only about the field and associated theories and tools, but also about oneself and the personal learning one is hoping to acquire. In my

faculty work, we encourage the development of holistic personal learning goals especially as it relates to a learner's time in field placement. Encouraging this connection between natural curiosity and personal motivation and inspired learning helps learners develop this internal compass that contributes to the development of their career paths from a place of self-respect and self-directed action.

***Reflection*:** What aspects of your work feel aligned with your original calling/motivation to enter a service vocation? Where do you notice energy and meaning arising naturally?

***Practice*:** Take three deep breaths, then set three small actions/intentions this week that bring you closer to your sense of purpose. Notice how your body and mind respond as you imagine doing them.

I invite you to show up fully…

to bring your whole self into your work and your relationships, rather than fragmenting who you are in order to function. Wholeness is not about having it all together; it is about being present with what is true.

Boynton (2025) emphasizes humility, attunement, and spiritual self-awareness as essential competencies for ethical practice, each of which requires showing up fully and authentically. Recent research also demonstrates that spiritual intelligence correlates with improved communication competence and life satisfaction (Mehralian et al., 2023), further supporting CSA's claim that wholeness is a foundation for resilience.

Traditional service models often emphasize compartmentalization, urging professionals to separate personal and professional selves. However, research on burnout and resilience suggests that authenticity and self-integration lead to greater job satisfaction and well-being (Brown, 2018).

To show up fully means honouring all aspects of self, including intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual, without overextending or depleting personal energy. Self-reflection and holistic practices, such as mindfulness and somatic awareness, support this integration (Neff & Germer, 2018).

Organizations can foster wholeness by creating psychologically safe workplaces that validate service providers' humanity, while academic programs can embed holistic learning experiences that prepare students to navigate emotional and ethical challenges.

To show up fully invites service providers to recognize and celebrate their wholeness and to acknowledge the value of a holistic approach to their lives, their service, and the lens through which they perceive the world around them as they occupy the central space within that reality.

Advice intended to protect service providers from burnout and fatigue often includes the guidance to separate the self from the other, to make clear divisions between work and home ~ the personal and the professional ~ to adopt a distanced and boundaried approach to their service-based relationships. Service providers are reminded that *it's not about them* and to *leave their values at the door*. *Don't take your work home with you* whatever you do. This guidance no matter how well intentioned comes up short as a grounded strategy for the realities of the impact that the nature of service-based work can have on service providers.

I was recently in a conversation with a colleague who remarked that she had to *challenge this notion of bringing our whole selves to work* and while I had a sense of what she was trying to say, I felt a sadness in my heart because it remains so common to misinterpret what it means to be authentic, grounded, present, and fully engaged. Our whole selves are required for that kind of experience, and not only does it enhance the quality of our lives, but it elevates the connections we can experience with others.

This doesn't mean that you give over your entire life, all of your energy, and every ounce of your being to your service based work. We are multi-dimensional beings who engage in this world through a dynamic relationship within self and with others. When you are at home, be there fully and when you are at work, bring your whole self there. This doesn't mean overextend yourself, over give, stay late, work on weekends, keep going even when you know you must stop. It doesn't mean that your whole life is about one singular thing that being your work or job.

Frederick Buechner (1973) said, "Vocation is that place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger" (p. 95). Our vocational paths are simply one way through which we can express the authenticity of our souls.

To show up fully means to stop pretending that what you value does not influence the way you perceive others. Stop pretending that when you don't feel well, you are still able to engage at the same level you can when you are fully energized and stop acting as though how you feel doesn't matter. Showing up fully means that you pay attention to what you think, how you feel, what you sense, what your body tells you, and you integrate this information as valuable guidance. You don't act as though you are present and engaged with someone while internally, you are stewing about something that happened at home before you left for work.

To show up fully means that you are attuned to all your personal ways of knowing including what you observe, perceive, sense, and feel. You value these ways of knowing and being as aspects of yourself that provide you with valuable information. Knowing is not simply about intellectual information, storing facts, reciting theories, and expounding on philosophical rhetoric. Rather, embodied knowing recognizes that authentic wisdom is experienced on every level of our human being and includes not only what we notice and learn through external stimuli, but what we learn through the integration process of that stimuli ~ the internal workings of our system, and ultimately how our choices, decisions, and actions are informed and influenced by that alchemical process.

Compartmentalization of self requires that we go into states of resistance toward aspects of our being and experience. Resistance separates us from intuitive guidance, increases our experience of stress, and ultimately damages our sense of wellbeing. Flowing with what is and learning how to cultivate engagement and presence in our lives allows for fluidity and adaptability to situations and conditions both internal and external.

In my service provider journey, I had become an expert at compartmentalizing myself and pushing through when I needed rest or realignment, ignoring the signals I received that nudged me toward changing my path, and overlooking my emotional needs in new positions where I was developing confidence and felt unsteady. Personally, I had been accustomed to equating self-awareness and reflection with thinking. When I recognized my deep need for feeling my way through life events, paying attention to what I sensed to be true, and engaging with myself spiritually, a whole new world of information and knowing opened up to me and brought with it a greater sense of

wellbeing, elevating the quality of my service delivery and my experience as a service provider.

As individual service providers, engaging in self-reflective practices fostering deeper experiences of self-connection creates a sense of safety to be with self and to respond to self. Embodiment practice is a holistic experience that requires an honouring of all aspects of being, knowing, learning, and living, as they are felt, sensed, and enacted in lived experience.

At the individual level, it is important to develop skills and practices that allow us to lean into a holistic learning experience. Rather than emphasizing intellectual practices, thinking, and filling our brains with more information and content, consider listening to the emotional and sensory responses you have as you learn about new concepts, theories, and ideas. Instead of being able to accurately define the role of empathy and compassion in service delivery, practice tuning into your experiences of empathy and compassion as you feel it toward other people and toward yourself. Notice where compassion expresses in your body. Observe what embracing the qualities and values of service delivery means to you, as you sense it as a fully human being in relationship with self and others.

Organizational leaders can encourage these practices by engaging in their own exploration, creating space to share experiences within team discussions, and encouraging this holistic knowing as a natural and valued way of being, an organic and inherently worthy element of organizational culture.

Academically, learning processes can be integrated that support learners with holistic embodiment of concepts. Instead of thinking, talking, reading, and writing about the guiding principles of social work, for example, engage in a centering practice that creates space for learners to become familiar with their internal experiences of these qualities on all levels of knowing. Integrate these practices regularly both as exploratory exercises to enhance learning and as a way of establishing, maintaining, and sustaining self-connection strategies as a lifetime, career long way of responding to self and acknowledging the role of self in service delivery. Academic programs offer anywhere from a year to several years of preparation and learning, providing the perfect opportunity to create a foundation for service provider wellbeing and integration of self

within that process. Such practices often serve as lifelines and touchstones for service providers throughout their careers.

***Reflection*:** Which parts of your whole being ~ emotional, mental, physical, or spiritual ~ feel neglected or disconnected? How might you begin to bring them together in relational dialogue?

Practice: Pause for five minutes. Place a hand on your heart and notice sensations in your body. Invite any neglected feelings or thoughts into awareness without judgement. As you sense and feel them in your body, silently observe them with love and journal about your experience after, if that is beneficial.

I invite you to embrace full responsibility…

to recognize your agency without slipping into self-blame. Freedom grows when we respond consciously to what is within our control, while releasing what is not.

Responsibility is often associated with obligation. Yet true responsibility is liberating, granting us agency over how we respond to challenges. Systems transformation requires shifting from blame-based approaches to a culture of personal and collective accountability (Laloux, 2014).

Service providers frequently feel responsible for outcomes beyond their control, which can lead to stress and frustration. Embracing responsibility means focusing on our responses rather than external circumstances, and organizations can foster this by creating learning environments where mistakes are opportunities for growth rather than punitive measures (Bloom, 2016).

Responsibility rarely evokes the idea of freedom. Yet cultivating the ability to choose our responses, even in uncertain contexts, is a path to freedom. At a theoretical level, this aligns with Boynton's (2025) view that spiritual reflexivity requires practitioners to own their worldview and their responsibility for engagement. Schön's (1987) theory of reflective practice similarly underscores that freedom emerges through taking responsibility for one's choices and responses in uncertain situations.

One of the biggest challenges in systems transformation could be remedied through the acceptance of deeply radical personal responsibility. Often when things are

dysfunctional within organizational culture, it is the mindset that it's someone else's responsibility to address or to change that keeps the system stuck in a stalemate.

In regulated professions with ethical codes of conduct, the policing of our colleagues is often promoted, and disciplinary action perpetuated through the reporting of unethical behaviour processes and practices, and the subsequent public exposure of the service provider including the consequences of any investigation. In fact, the term *investigation* is commonly used in healthcare and human services systems to define the practice of exploring *unacceptable* workplace behaviour or service based conduct.

Healthcare and human services are about promoting wellbeing, growth, and connection. They are about responding to the needs of the people and the community. Instead of investigating with punitive approaches all that isn't working, why don't we shift our focus to everything that is flourishing and find ways to encourage and support service providers to develop their sense of deep responsibility to both their professional roles, and also their own experience.

Deep personal responsibility extends beyond the tasks we feel obligated to perform each day as an element of our survival and transcends everything we think we must do as part of the many roles we have in life. We can reframe the common experience of service providers to feel a sense of responsibility *for* people and things that are actually out of their control. Other than caring for the needs of people whose survival depends on it, we are truly only responsible *for* ourselves. We may have responsibilities *to* people within our roles, but that is different from being responsible *for*. We cannot take responsibility for how others feel, what they think, their behaviour, their beliefs, how they see the world, and what matters to them. We can, however, take deep responsibility for how we interact with others, how we show up and contribute, what *we* think, feel, and believe, and how *we* act. Our point of personal power resides in this space of deep responsibility and ultimate freedom.

My experience with developing personal responsibility has been nothing short of life changing. Recognizing that it was up to me to choose how I would respond to any situation in my life, shifted my focus from what I perceived to be other's wrong doings or misgivings and brought me back to a place within myself where I could focus on my own behaviour ~ responsive or reactive. I began to realize that I could decide how I was

going to show up and how this aligned with the person I intend to be. When I lose sight of this and find myself focused on other people and their actions or non-actions, I am released again from that helpless state of being when I determine my ability to respond to the situation. This doesn't mean that others do not have responsibility, it simply means that I am going to take full responsibility for myself, my feelings, my thoughts, my actions, my beliefs, and my responses ~ I am responsible for my sense of peace.

Taking the time to consider personal capacity to respond can open up potentials and possibilities that might previously have been overlooked. Simply asking "what am I responsible for in this situation?" can have a profound impact on the levels of stress we feel about the circumstances of our lives. If there is nothing that can be done, then perhaps, we are simply working on accepting what is, even if we don't like it. Releasing resistance to what is through embracing the ability to respond is a game changer when it comes to cultivating presence, engagement, and a sense of wellbeing.

Taking full responsibility for one's career path, daily experience, energetic state, and quality of relationality with others offers the opportunity for clarity, peace, and focus. Instead of seeing other people as barriers, we can ask, *how can I approach this differently and still keep moving forward with what holds meaning for me*? Making other people responsible for how we feel, what we say, and what we do, is the epitome of self-neglect and self-abandonment, and an absolute discounting of personal power.

Organizational cultures can be bolstered when the individuals within the space step into their full capacity to respond, where there is freedom to make mistakes, learn from them, and come back renewed, where conflicts are resolved with ease and grace because we know that we have a part in that, and where we recognize in our souls that who we are has everything to do with how we serve. While it is important for leaders to walk the talk, it is also important that all employees take personal responsibility to step into self-leadership and find ways to contribute what is uniquely theirs to offer. Relational safety and equitable workplace practices are necessary for self-leadership to flourish in any organizational community, and this in turn, requires deep levels of individual personal responsibility. If everyone waits for someone else to do it, we will all wait forever.

Learning spaces can create opportunities for the development of deep responsibility by offering a variety of ways for learners to articulate and demonstrate learning. This includes inviting learners to identify what matters most to them in their learning journey through relevant and meaningful personal learning plans, and cultivating safe spaces for the exploration of the unlearning that often accompanies transformative learning experiences ~ processes that can leave learners feeling vulnerable for a time.

Ultimately, such approaches champion the wisdom that emerges from honouring lived and living experience as a legitimate source of knowledge. In doing so, learning moves beyond colonial structures of evaluation and assessment, capturing forms of growth and understanding that transcend a well-written paper or a perfect exam score.

Inviting learners into partnership within the academic system creates space for clarity about learning responsibilities, bringing clarity to the roles of faculty and learners. I can recall many times when I have overextended myself as a faculty member taking on more responsibility for a student's success than they were taking themselves. When I recognized that this was not a helpful approach and that my responsibility to learners was to ensure they had access to all the supports they needed for success, I began to show up in ways that felt more aligned with learning partnerships. I have noticed over the last several years that this has shifted the dynamic in my relationships with learners and I am less likely to feel frustrated with someone's lack of follow through because I am clearer about how I can support that person rather than believing I have to do more myself to ensure their success. It has been liberating.

Reflection: Identify one belief that constrains your service or professional growth. Write a compassionate alternative that opens space for choice and curiosity.

Practice: Speak the alternative belief aloud like a mantra or journal it daily for one week.

I invite you to connect with yourself…

to cultivate an ongoing relationship with your inner world including your body, emotions, values, and intuition. Discovery begins when we turn toward ourselves with curiosity rather than judgment.

Self-awareness and self-connection are central to conscious service. Establishing a self-reflective practice allows service providers to develop a deep relationship with themselves, fostering emotional resilience and preventing burnout (Schön, 1987). Journaling, meditation, and creative expression can be effective methods for cultivating self-connection.

This invitation represents my point of initiation into the Conscious Service journey that has continued to evolve over the past 30 years. I personally accepted the invitation to discovery following my divorce from my first husband when I realized I had spent years analyzing his actions and behaviour, and it was time to take a serious look at myself, who I was, how I showed up, what mattered to me, and the deep seated beliefs that shaped my view of the world. This was the beginning of my process of grounding expertise long before I had words to name what I was doing.

My process of discovery involved a great deal of reading, learning, and introspection. I began journaling and meditating on a more conscious level and spent hours walking in nature as I invested time and energy into understanding myself. It wasn't until years later, that I softened back into my emotional energy and experience. As a young child, I was very in touch with my emotional experience and without even knowing what was happening at the time, I began to resist what was a natural way of being for me, and instead began to mentally analyze my feelings avoiding the experience of them within my body at all costs. I think I became afraid of my feelings on some level and had grown to believe that I was being controlled by my emotions. I began believing some of the messages I was hearing about being too sensitive and recognizing that my expression of emotional energy made other people uncomfortable.

Now I see my emotional experience as a source of rich information that tells me what is happening within and illuminates the connection between what I feel, what I think, and what I believe, and how this all influences the meaning I attach to things. I also see emotional energy as a process of transmutation that allows my being to release, integrate, and heal.

As I studied and absorbed information, including going back to school to finish my bachelor's degree in Psychology and Religious Studies, I started feeling safer to expand beyond my comfort zone and to approach my living experience in an experiential

way. This invitation to discovery essentially stimulated my curiosity and I cherished the sense of inspiration and intrinsic motivation that my growing inquisitive nature afforded me. Soon, I started seeing connections between what I was learning about myself and my living experience and the work I was doing as a service provider.

Speaking of connection, it was through this discovery process that I started to recognize the difference between being self-reflective as an action and feeling self-connected as a state of being. This became a committed pursuit for me, especially as I was navigating an experience of burnout related to my work and my overall sense of joy and fulfillment.

Counter-intuitive as it might be, this is the first space where service providers can step into deep personal responsibility beginning within and responding to self. Establishing, engaging in, and sustaining a self-reflective practice is a powerful method for intentionally tuning into self. At first, a schedule is likely required to engrain the practice, but over time, as the experience of self-connection becomes preferred, the practice itself can become organic to the day's flow and exist as a supportive structure to being self-connected, and a process to return to when disconnection is noticed.

It's important to note that the state of self-connection is not synonymous with feeling peaceful and joyful at all times, but rather enhances our capacity to be with ourselves in times of turmoil, confusion, unrest, and heightened emotionality of any vibration. Detaching from how one expects to feel in the self-connected state is paramount. The intention is simply to be with self.

As touched on previously, self-reflective strategies can include both solitary practices, such as journaling, meditation, creative expression, prayer, movement, energy work, listening to body wisdom/sensations, yoga ~ any activity that you engage in alone with the intention to bring you into connection with self. It might also include connected or integrated activities like peer dialogue, movies, books, music, exercise classes, meditation groups, accessing a counselor/therapist ~ anything you access that involves other people or external material, and serves to bring you closer to yourself. Establishing a practice with variety offers choice and flexibility. We can truly use any experience in life to learn from if we so choose.

Central to the development of self-connection is the living presence of self-love. In fact, the desire to self-connect is an expression of self-love in that we care enough about ourselves to be attentive to our experience ~ to be with it. Many service providers have barriers to this reality because they are more accustomed and comfortable with the extension of self in giving to others. For service to others to be an expression of love in the world, it must be generated and birthed from a place of internal love so it must be inclusive of the service provider themselves.

Hermetic philosophy articulates a principle of correspondence between different dimensions of experience, often rendered in modern metaphysical literature as *"As above, so below. As within, so without"* (Greer, 2011, p. 30). This maxim underscores the idea that internal psychological states shape external relational and organizational dynamics, and vice versa, a notion that resonates with the CSA's emphasis on self-connection as foundational to meaningful engagement.

Organizations can support self-reflective practice and self-connected spaces by intentionally integrating them into regular check-ins with individual service providers and into team meetings. These spaces become particularly important when engaging questions of success, growth, and personally meaningful contribution, and whenever innovation, creativity, compassion, or relationship-building are needed. Organizations who support and celebrate the practice of self-reflection and self-connection are more likely to reap the benefits of engaged and present human resources.

Organizations can integrate reflective check-ins within teams, while academic institutions can encourage experiential learning that connects theory to personal experience. Self-discovery is an ongoing process that enhances both professional effectiveness and personal fulfillment.

Academically, the practice of self-reflection is discussed in many preparatory health and human services programs, however, it is often connected back to theoretical constructs, so in some ways, is more akin to reflective learning than it is self-reflective practice. Opportunities for this self-reflection are often embedded through writing activities or small group discussions and are frequently tied to scenarios and artificial situations. In the academic preparation for vocations in human services, there is a wealth of time, experience, and opportunity to encourage the establishment,

implementation, and evaluation of personal self-reflective practices using the real life experiences facing learners. It is in the application to what is happening now that learners will be able to practice strategies that hold meaning and relevance for them and offer lasting learning and integration.

Learners often face a variety of challenges as well as victories throughout the course of their academic training including how they respond to their personal circumstances, relationships, and roles, as they continue their education and quite often, engage in the workforce at the same time. This is the real life balancing act that provides the perfect opportunity for self-reflection to transform into self-connection and deep personal responsibility. Faculty members don't really need to make up scenarios and mull over *case studies* when most learners have a plethora of relevant experience to draw on, which in turn, supports the development of their grounded expertise.

Promoting self-connection in the moment with real life learning opportunities aligns with Schön's (1987) foundational work on reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, which highlights how professionals learn and adapt in complex, relational, and uncertain service contexts. Boynton (2025) similarly underscores spiritual reflexivity as a competency often neglected in social work curricula. She notes that developing such reflexivity helps anchor ethical and sustainable practice by fostering self-awareness, value clarification, and capacity for presence.

***Reflection*:** What new insights or patterns have you observed about yourself or your interactions with others? How can curiosity guide your next step?

***Practice*:** For five minutes, notice one habitual thought, feeling, or action without trying to fix it. Ask, "What might I learn if I stay with this?" Record any insights in a journal.

I invite you to communicate with love…

to let care, clarity, and compassion shape how you speak and listen. Enlightened communication is less about technique and more about intention and presence.

Communication in service settings often prioritizes efficiency over relational depth. Enlightened communication, in contrast, is intentional, compassionate, and fosters trust and psychological safety. Authentic communication requires vulnerability

and the courage to move beyond superficial exchanges into honest, heartfelt connection (Peck, 1987). Within the CSA, this depth emerges through self-connection and embodied presence: service providers who cultivate awareness of their inner landscape are better able to listen deeply, respond with empathy, and co-create spaces of mutual growth and understanding. In this framework, communication is not merely a skill but a practice that transforms service into genuine relational engagement (Peck, 1987).

Service providers can enhance communication by developing self-awareness before engaging in dialogue, ensuring that interactions are rooted in presence rather than reaction.

As many service providers will surely attest, the fields of healthcare and human services often include learning about effective interpersonal communication, which is not only relevant to our professional roles but also integral to our personal relationships. Some of the greatest stressors in my life have come back to difficult communication dynamics, whether related to personal barriers to self-expression or lack of coping strategies and effective response methods in challenging interactions or conflict. I have spent countless hours processing my personal inner turmoil over a conversation gone wrong and internally masterminding my next steps, or rather, my next words.

Like many of us, my focus tended to be on the words I chose to express myself, the use of tone, body language, gestures, and eye contact, often overlooking deeper forces that had great influence on how I communicated with others, including how I received incoming messages and interpreted meaning. I began to wonder how so many of us have *learned* what it takes to communicate effectively, and yet still, we continue to find ourselves mired in the miscommunication, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation that contributes to dysfunctional relational dynamics that are not only ineffective, but also unsafe ~ the very dynamics that contribute to a lack of psychological health and safety in the workplace.

As I became more committed to self-connection, I also became very aware of being in and out of integrity or alignment within myself. I started to take more seriously the importance of intentionality, authenticity, and purposeful communication, which meant, for me, that I was required to be fully present and engaged within myself before I attempted to have meaningful communication with others. If I cared about how I was

feeling in my interactions with others, and prepared myself for purposeful communication, there was a higher likelihood that I would express this same care for the impact of my message on other people. The connection for me was undeniable.

Individual service providers can prepare themselves for enlightened communication by first becoming as clear as possible about the intentionality underneath their message, as well as the nature of the energetic transmission of that message. Attending to timing and preparation, particularly in challenging conversations, supports intentional interaction and allows love-related qualities, such as compassion, empathy, respect, and acceptance to be felt in the body and expressed through practice, shaping both how messages are offered and received.

Preparation for enlightened communication surpasses crafting the mechanics of the message, ensuring clarity, and choosing the best words and requires even just a moment of introspection to embody an emotional state of presence and engagement to contribute to the creation of a caring space for connection that feels safe for all involved. That moment can go further to create a loving interaction than any well-crafted script ever could.

When we are disconnected from self, we are more likely to react rather than respond, to push our agenda forward at all costs, and to lose sight of the importance of the relationship in the process. In high pressured workplace environments, or in elevated spaces of inner turmoil, the importance of self-connection in the living practice of enlightened communication is crucial and at the same time, extremely challenging to attain and sustain. The invitation to communicate with love translates into self-responsiveness within the challenge and sets the stage for an overflow of loving communication within the context of the interaction. If you have time for nothing else, simply invite love into the dynamic and see what happens.

An organizational culture characterized by loving communication amplifies the voices and perspectives of all members of the community. It would encourage a collective sense of belonging and connection to each other and to the overall mission of the agency. People would have the autonomy and support to express and contribute to the larger picture in ways that hold personal relevance and meaning. Kindness and compassion would define communication and nurture safety, patience, transparency,

and trust. Respect is a given in such an environment and is demonstrated with self and other. Conflicts and challenging conversations are not avoided because there is a recognition that the desire to understand each other and find resolution and common ground does not negate individual uniqueness and is an indicator of love in the space. To confront what might be difficult to talk about demonstrates care for the relationship and respect for each other. When we don't care, we don't bother.

Such organizations embed practices and ways of being and relating that value personal connection, the preservation and growth of safe relational space, and the experience of community. Policies and procedures reflect this commitment and where they do not, they are collectively revised. Instead of efficiency and surface-level effective communication, loving organizations invest the energy required to ensure interactions are characterized by grace.

Organizations can model this through transparent leadership and relational-based conflict resolution. Academic programs can integrate communication strategies that emphasize emotional intelligence alongside technical skills.

Academically, gracious, loving communication can be modelled and developed in every classroom conversation, integrated into small group work, and demonstrated in written communication. Extending gratitude for learner's contributions to the larger learning community can be a simple way of honouring their offering. Challenging learners beyond habits of mind and comfort zones, can be done with kindness and empathy, recalling what it feels like as faculty members to stretch ourselves outside of what we have always known to be true. Redirection is offered with respect and warmth. Learning in front of others is demonstrated by instructors who can acknowledge their personal areas of learning and growth and engage in self-reflective conversations when flexibility is required.

Scott Peck (1993) describes civility as the willingness to endure necessary suffering to avoid unnecessary suffering. He emphasizes that true civility involves confronting challenges directly rather than avoiding them, aligning with his broader view that facing legitimate suffering supports spiritual and emotional growth. In educational contexts, this suggests that faculty can create supportive spaces for difficult peer-to-peer conversations, viewing them as opportunities for learning and relational development.

Such moments help learners cultivate essential workplace skills while practicing self-responsive strategies for navigating interpersonal dynamics that frequently generate stress in service contexts. These latent learning opportunities are not necessarily reflected in grades; rather, learners can be encouraged to articulate the insights gained and explore ways to integrate them meaningfully.

Current scholarship supports this invitational approach. Hodge et al. (2025) argue that spiritual sensitivity, including authentic relational presence and fostering psychological safety, is ethically central to social work practice. Empirical research on spiritual intelligence (SQ) further indicates that higher SQ is associated with improved communication competence and relational attunement, reinforcing the connection between inner work, meaning-making, and effective interpersonal engagement (Hodge et al., 2025).

Reflection: After a challenging interaction, reflect on what moments of care or understanding were present. Identify an intention you could hold to encourage sustained connection even in conflict or disagreement.

Practice: Meditate on one quality of love or care before engaging in service work.

I invite you to focus on transformation…

to look beyond maintenance and survival toward growth, healing, and possibility. Vision invites us to imagine what could be, not just manage what is.

The CSA invitation to Vision and Focus on Transformation reflects and extends scholarship on spiritual intelligence (SQ) and transformative leadership. Baykal (2024) frames SQ as a form of “change intelligence” that equips individuals and organizations to cultivate deeper motivation, meaning, and adaptive capacity. By guiding decision-making through a values- and meaning-centred lens, SQ promotes sustainable transformation rather than short-term performance gains.

CSA extends this by explicitly locating transformation not only in meaning-making and values alignment, but in the ongoing integration of embodied experience across the physical, emotional, mental, relational, and spiritual dimensions of self. In this way,

transformation is understood not simply as a shift in perspective or motivation, but as a re-organization of how experience is held, processed, and enacted in real time.

Thus, CSA's approach resonates with SQ while also deepening it, emphasizing stewardship, ongoing investment in a living practice, and the deliberate cultivation of renewed ways of being (Baykal, 2024). Transformation in service work therefore requires shifting focus from immediate outcomes to long-term growth. Recognizing the subtle, often non-linear nature of personal and relational change allows service providers to remain engaged even when external circumstances appear unchanged.

I remember the moment when I intentionally shifted my focus to transformation and away from specific outcomes. It was the same moment that I made the commitment to focus on my own transformation as much as I concerned myself with others. For my whole career to that point, about 20 years at the time, I had constantly searched for evidence of the value and impact of my efforts in the visible changes that occurred in other people's lives. On the day that I accepted the invitation to vision, I realized that I had very little external evidence that any of my efforts resulted in significant changes in the lives of others in terms of their living situations or physical realities. I started to wonder what I might learn if I began to ask, *"how have I been transformed today?"* on my drive home from work. That question began to reshape my awareness and expand my vision a little bit every day. Intentionally pursuing my own transformation, allowed me to notice the subtle nature of what it means to grow and evolve. Becoming aware of those nuances within myself, sharpened my ability to see transformation in others. This expanded vision also included a balanced appreciation for process and outcome.

This epiphany occurred on the heels of a regional work related trip where I was meeting with students on field placement. I was visiting a group home in a small community that was home for several individuals who had previously lived in the institution I talked about in the beginning of my journey. I told you a bit about this place when I shared my story about Tracy. As I entered the home, I was met with several familiar faces, including that of a now grown man, who was just a little boy, and I, a teenager, when we first met.

We had developed an almost instant rapport, and I looked forward to spending time with him. He was not able to communicate with words but the connection we

formed was undeniable. We knew each other. There was a connection that transcended the common dynamics of interaction and relationship. Now twenty years later, I was stunned to see him again. When I greeted him, he approached me without hesitation and guided me to his room showing me where he now lived. I don't know for sure if he actually recognized me, but it sure felt like he did, and more importantly, I knew who he was in my life. I cried when I got back to my vehicle in awe of the gift I had just received. This experience was the impetus for the breakthrough I had several weeks later when the invitation to vision and focus on transformation was extended to me as I drove home from work. While I couldn't point to all the times that my service, actions, or presence, made any kind of difference to the people whose lives I had been welcomed into over the years, I became deeply aware of the difference this path and these people had made in mine. It changed the way I looked at my life as a service provider forever and the way I felt about *and* in my role.

Individual service providers are often tasked with measuring outcomes and demonstrating success whether for the people they work with or for the programs they work within. Funding depends on this data ~ recognition of the program's benefits is tied to these results ~ and service providers are often evaluated through the lens of successful program and service-related outcomes. While service providers often hope and intend that their contributions will have beneficial impact on the lives of others ~ definitely not causing harm or making things worse ~ the potentially positive influence does not necessarily translate into guaranteed significant changes in someone's situation. People continue living with mental health challenges, and potentially dangerous substance use. People continue in their process of healing from injuries that might have life changing impacts on their mobility, way of life, and ability to navigate independently. Children and youth may remain in foster homes and youth centers. These specific outcomes may not change, but through the presence of a service provider, another person may feel heard, seen, and cared for. They may gain greater access to both internal and external resources, and over time, experience a deeper sense of belonging and connection within their communities.

And perhaps, through presence, love enters the shared space ~ touching the hearts of both.

Accepting the invitation to vision with a focus on transformation means that we bring hopefulness to our interactions because we, as service providers, believe in the

capacity and dignity of all human beings, and their ability to discover and express what they envision for themselves, even if it's only about the next moment. This invitation asks that we hold the vision of another's wholeness while remaining present to what is happening now and the process involved in human evolution, even when it looks like nothing is changing. Responding to this invitation means that we recognize the reciprocal nature of the service based relationship in that transformation, learning, growth, and healing are available to both the service user and for ourselves.

To embody a visionary way of being with a focus on the transformative potential of the relational space is a call to appreciate the nuanced, subtle, and at times, imperceptible nature of human development. A visionary is both internally and externally focused on their quest to realize transformation and a visionary knows that something is always shifting and changing.

Organizational leaders are often tasked with the role of holding the vision of the organization's mission and mandate and working to ensure that it is realized through operational activities. This requires alignment within leaders in terms of their personal values and motivations and the overall mission of the organization. Leaders who demonstrate integrity ~ alignment ~ between their personal philosophy and the organization's mission, and then translate that into how they interact with team members are better equipped to harness the potential for transformation at the organizational level.

If the organizational mission includes qualities such as love, compassion, respect, and dignity, leadership is called not only to endorse these values but to embody them in everyday practices, making these qualities tangible and perceivable in relational interactions. Organizational embodiment ensures that the mission is enacted rather than simply espoused, allowing it to ripple through the culture and influence both formal and informal relational spaces. Leaders who accept the invitation to vision with a focus on transformation can strengthen their enactment of these qualities through both self-reflective practices and in-the-moment, self-responsive strategies, cultivating a presence that models and transmits the organization's core values. By integrating embodied practice into leadership, transformational vision becomes visible, felt, and enacted, fostering innovation, sustainability, and relational trust within organizations (Laloux, 2014).

Academic institutions can support this process by encouraging learners to track their evolving perspectives and skills, reflecting not only on what they know but on how they live and enact their learning in everyday interactions. As learners prepare to enter vocations of service, faculty can extend the invitation to vision ~ transformative and relational vision ~ by encouraging a commitment to progressive thinking and the development of creative growth mindsets. Future service providers have the opportunity to bring new ways of being and serving into healthcare and human services systems. Learners can be encouraged to track the development of their theoretical knowledge, application to practice, and begin to create the vision of how their personal career path will contribute to overall organizational and systems transformation.

***Reflection*:** What is the larger picture ~ the embodied experience, you want to cultivate in your life, relationships, or work? How does your daily practice connect to this vision?

***Practice*:** Draw, write, or visualize a brief *snapshot* of the life you are creating. Include both your actions and the qualities (patience, courage, compassion) important to embody. Revisit it regularly.

I invite you to create community together…

to understand leadership as something relational and shared. Community forms when power is used to invite participation, not enforce compliance.

To me, leadership is an energy, not a position. Learning to become self-led has been a lifelong journey for me, but a pathway that has continually revealed deeper layers of freedom. I always prided myself on being someone who takes initiative. I had no problem going above and beyond both personally and professionally, but it was years before I realized that this action was often externally motivated and any sense of fulfillment I might experience was completely dependent on the response of others. Needless to say, I was often left feeling quite empty in my efforts as the results I hoped for often fell short of my expectations.

Leadership literature increasingly emphasizes that authentic leadership is relational, grounded in transparency, humility, and ethical integrity (Brown, 2018), which aligns closely with CSA's emphasis on self-leadership and community co-creation.

Boynton (2025), notes that self-leadership practices, such as reflective inquiry and values clarification, strengthen the leader's capacity to engage others in shared decision-making and to foster psychologically safe spaces.

As I refined my vocational focus to the activities, roles, and experiences that held meaning for me, it became more comfortable to lead myself. There was something about that connection I felt to myself and my sense of joy and love for my work that impacted my self-confidence and capacity to speak on my own behalf in the same ways I had learned to advocate for/with others. Each time I found the courage to share my enthusiasm for a certain direction at work, every time I declared what inspired me and how I wished to contribute, I felt stronger and more capable. I recognize now that these were acts of self-love guided by a commitment to bringing joy and fulfillment into my vocational experience. Accepting the invitation to leadership made more difference in my life and my experience than it did for others.

By the time my work roles shifted into formal leadership responsibilities, I had developed an approach with myself that seemed natural to apply to my relationships with team members. For me, it was important to encourage a self-reflective approach within team dynamics and processes, to focus on relationship building and strong communication, and to support opportunities for pathways forward that team members identified as personally important. At times, this approach was challenged when for example, senior leadership wanted me to be more directive with the team or an individual in particular, or when team members wanted me to challenge an organizational decision without sharing their own perspectives or concerns. This tension, while at times a bit uncomfortable, became very important to the process of creating community together and in turn, was crucial to my personal development and evolution both personally and professionally.

If I wished to be the kind of leader who was approachable, responsive, caring, compassionate, supportive, visionary, and present, then I had to be equally committed to personal and collective wellbeing. I had to bring myself authentically to my leadership role, to my relationships, to the organizational culture, and that meant practicing deep responsibility and integrity. At times, this felt like a burden and that I was somehow *sacrificing* something, usually when I was overwhelmed and had momentarily

disconnected, thus leaving myself out of the compassion equation. Most of the time, I felt energized and free to be myself contributing from my heart and soul.

But living in authenticity and showing up as myself was not always easy. Sometimes, being *authentic* felt fake and unsafe. When I spoke about this feeling with my counsellor at the time, she suggested that it seemed natural to her that expressing authentically would feel strange and uncomfortable because it is about the process of becoming that which we have not previously allowed ourselves to be ~ dropping the masks ~ and potentially showing up in very different ways than we had become accustomed to presenting to the rest of the world. That made sense to me, so I decided to work on getting comfortable with the uncomfortable.

I started to realize how much energy it had taken to try to portray an image that was not true to me. I thought about all the wasted time and energy that leaders often spend on covering their missteps and making excuses for short fallings, instead of simply being genuine and transparent. I thought about how leadership in organizations I had worked in often paid lip service to what they thought the collective wanted to hear, when in reality there was no purposeful intention to follow through or make genuine efforts in the direction promoted. The interesting thing about this lack of transparency is that people can see right through it ~ or maybe better said ~ feel right through it.

Embedding reflective practice within organizational processes, such as Success and Growth Plans, enables employees to connect their personal strengths and values with meaningful contributions, fostering a sense of agency and collective responsibility. This aligns with findings in leadership and organizational psychology, which highlight that relational transparency, vulnerability, and modeling self-care contribute to both well-being and productivity (Chiarelli, 2024).

When leaders actively support this process by encouraging self-reflection, modeling vulnerability, and cultivating psychological safety, they create environments where individuals feel seen, valued, and empowered. This relational foundation enhances employee well-being and organizational productivity alike, reinforcing a culture of trust and shared growth.

Organizations can cultivate leadership at all levels by promoting self-leadership and shared decision-making. Similarly, faculty can encourage learners to take ownership

of their learning experiences, fostering confidence and initiative. By integrating self-leadership, reflective inquiry, and relational competencies into curriculum design, educators prepare students to navigate the complex emotional and relational dynamics of service-oriented work (Schön, 1987; MacKinnon, 2024).

Just as in the workplace, academic programs and faculty have a vital role to play in cultivating self-leadership. By embedding reflective inquiry, emotional intelligence, and relational competencies into curriculum design and pedagogical practice, educators prepare future service providers not just for technical tasks, but for the relational and emotional realities of service. Faculty can support students in developing inner capacities, such as self-connection, presence, and discernment, equipping them to navigate complexity and contribute meaningfully to systemic transformation.

***Reflection*:** How do you practice self-leadership in subtle, everyday moments? How can your influence be exercised through presence and example rather than authority of a position or role?

***Practice*:** Choose one interaction today to lead with intentional presence. Before engaging, pause, breathe, and identify the qualities you want to bring into the conversation, like clarity, empathy, love, or patience.

I invite you to seek and share support continuously…

to release the myth of self-sufficiency and engage in reciprocal care. Compassion flows most freely when support is normalized rather than rationed.

Within contemporary service contexts shaped by high workloads, time pressure, and neoliberal expectations of individual resilience, this invitation is not without tension. The prevailing paradigm often positions care as an individual responsibility to be managed within limited time and under conditions of sustained demand, rather than as a shared, relational, and structurally supported practice. In such environments, reciprocal care can become difficult to enact unless it is actively embedded into organizational culture, workload design, and leadership expectations.

From a CSA perspective, this highlights the importance of moving support from an optional or informal practice to an integrated and resourced part of service systems,

where time, relational capacity, and recovery are structurally accounted for rather than individually absorbed.

The expectation that service providers should have their “act together” before helping others perpetuates a harmful myth. Compassion, including self-compassion, is essential for sustainable service work (Neff & Germer, 2018).

Research on self-compassion indicates that individuals who practice self-kindness, mindfulness, and a sense of common humanity experience reduced burnout and increased resilience, supporting sustainable engagement in service professions (Neff & Germer, 2018).

It took me years to learn how to navigate my workplaces in ways that felt safe and supportive. My tendency was to be an open book, share my thoughts and feelings, my frustrations, and ideas, at times, without reading the room. In actuality, I was reading the room intuitively, but I was not trusting what I sensed, and my mouth got ahead of me. This often left me feeling very exposed and vulnerable (not in a way that felt strong), and it contributed to my being perceived in ways other than what I had been aiming for. Particularly, when I was seeking support during times when I felt ill-equipped or overwhelmed, the lack of self-preparation often resulted in greater unease and insecurity than I had been experiencing before. During the first few years of my career, I firmly believed that it wasn’t a good look to seek support or assistance in my work. The stress and anxiety this created led to many sleepless nights and mornings rising with an aching jaw having clenched in nervous inner turmoil for hours.

I recognized that seeking support and sharing my perspectives could be experienced as a strength builder and an action that could elevate my sense of security and safety both internally and in relationship with others. Before I could hope to be met with compassion from those around me, it was necessary that I embody compassion for myself.

The ego, when out of balance, can either inflate our perception of personal qualities or minimize them. Within the Conscious Service Approach, ego is not understood as something that is balanced in and of itself, but rather as a dynamic aspect of self-experience that can become amplified or diminished depending on internal states

of integration. What supports coherence is not the ego achieving equilibrium on its own, but the capacity of the self to hold, regulate, and integrate egoic processes within a wider field of embodied awareness, values, and relational attunement.

From this perspective, it is the integrated self ~ not the ego in isolation ~ that enables balance. When individuals are more fully self-connected and embodied, egoic tendencies such as inflation or diminishment are more likely to be noticed, contextualized, and re-integrated rather than acted upon without reflection.

Seeking support as a service provider is a strength. In fact, it is a requirement for both our survival and ability to thrive in this vocation. I learned that not only could I have my needs for support met, but I could also strengthen my relationships, and learn how to be a stronger support for others, when I developed my capacity to ask and receive.

I started to pay attention to how I felt any time I sought feedback or support from someone, noticing the sensations in my body when I was in what felt like a safe space for me, and what my body told me when I wasn't. At first, I made this safety all about the other person ~ I did that for years. *They weren't safe* for me to share with or seek out support. There may have been attitudes or responses I had previously experienced that supported that assessment, but it wasn't empowering to me. Was my safety in the hands of other people or could I have more power in the creation of personal security?

Reframing the seat of safety granted me deep personal power and reliable guidance when it came to any decision to share or seek support and from whom I would make that request. *Where do I feel safe as opposed to who makes me feel safe? What factors contribute to my sense of safety?*

Timing is also at play in the seeking of support. Just as any other form of communication, it is advantageous to pay attention to the optimal conditions, whenever possible, that will provide the elements required for the best possible outcome. *Was I prepared for the interaction, the response, the sense of feeling vulnerable? Had I created safety within me, first? What was I looking for both in the process of the interaction and afterward? What were my intentions at the deepest level of my being?* Learning to wait for clarity on these questions helped me to slow myself down internally and externally, bringing a deeper sense of presence within and allowing me to be with

myself and my experience in a purposeful and loving way before I asked someone else to sit in that space with me.

Service providers in healthcare, social services, and education are often held to a very high standard when it comes to personal morals, character, and behaviour. Society seems to hold the expectation that people in positions to serve their communities, are somehow, not impacted by all the same struggles that other human beings encounter. This belief is often internalized for service providers making it challenging to seek support when experiencing personal struggles, including the experiences of burnout and overwhelm perpetuated within the very systems they work for.

I can recall being reminded more than once how crucial it was that I have my *shit together if I hope to be of any support to anyone else*. I've referred to this notion in previous chapters. While my initial academic preparation for the field of human services occurred more than 40 years ago, I only recently heard from a current learner in one of my courses that they had been exposed to this perspective by one of their instructors who also pointed out that they in fact, did *not* have *their shit together*.

I have been supporting the idea that there is an inextricable link between service provider wellbeing and the quality of service delivery throughout this entire dissertation, so I understand the surface intention behind the statement. However, it is shortsighted, misleading, and unhelpful as a form of encouragement for service providers to care for and about themselves and utilize strategies to support their wellbeing and self-knowing. Instead, it tends to instill fear of exposure, doubt that there will be adequate understanding, compassion, and support in their workplace for them, and so therefore, an almost innate desire to hide any struggles they may be experiencing until it becomes painfully evident.

The COVID-19 pandemic further perpetuated this hero ideology and elevated the pedestals upon which healthcare professionals and first responders were already precariously perched. In Vancouver, I recall use of the term *hero* being tossed around at least daily, graffiti depicting firefighters, paramedics, doctors, and Bonnie Henry, in superhero capes ready to leap tall buildings in a single bound. The clatter of pots and pans could be heard for months at the 7pm *shift change* in an attempt to offer support to those on the *front lines* another term that promotes the idea that being of service to

humanity is akin to fighting a war. These deeply embedded societal beliefs are not helpful nor supportive to people whose vocation, perhaps, life calling, involves supporting humanity. Rather, it creates more reason to hold on to those unrealistic expectations of the human beings who respond to the needs of other human beings. Not only do we impose this on service providers, but we also instill and encourage the internalization of these expectations, and then we do very little to prepare service providers for the nature of their work in holistic ways that lead to the development of embodied practices, ways of knowing, and ways of being that will sustain them in the face of the aspects of their work that require processing and self-responsive strategies.

Most service providers I know would much rather be met with authentic curiosity about the nature of their work, the challenges and the rewards, and a deepened understanding of how to progress systemic transformation and make a difference to their experience as service providers, including the impact of their service. An engaged discourse with the possibility of meaningful action is much preferred over superficial platitudes and pot banging.

Being heard and supported in my experience, including what challenged me and what inspired me, became my preferred mode of recognition. Whether it was organizational leadership who assisted me to create my pathway to meaningful contribution, or my peers and colleagues who listened and encouraged me with compassion, finding these safe relationships in the workplace gave me the sense of security I needed to explore, take risks, and trust myself to grow and learn.

In addition to knowing what you need in terms of support from those around you, it’s crucial to be aware of your capacity and availability to support others. Create safe sounding boards that serve as a resource for you and that also provide an avenue for you to contribute to the sense of community in your organization.

I define safe sounding boards as those personal, relational spaces that are sacred, authentic, real, and powerful. What is shared in this space can be done without editing and censoring, with raw emotion, if required. It is held with respect and honour, making it a sacred exchange that it is not shared with others. Where there are ethical or safety concerns, outside resources may be sought, but this action is taken with

transparency and compassion. There is no fight to take up, no army to deploy, no desire to influence anything outside of the sacred space of the safe sounding board.

When we seek out support from someone we trust, who sees us in our highest expression, who believes in our capacity, and who loves us enough to challenge us, we have found a safe sounding board. Accessing this space with intentionality is powerful because we know that we will be encouraged to feel, to love ourselves through it, and to step back into a space of integrity and aligned action. This kind of support invites us to forgive, to speak up, to apologize, to resolve, and ultimately to return to a space of loving kindness in our workplace relationships, even if we never agree.

Workplace studies demonstrate that relational safety and access to supportive peer networks enhance psychological wellbeing, trust, and engagement, underscoring the importance of creating structured and informal spaces for feedback, coaching, and shared reflection (Adams & MHA Research Team, 2024).

The capacity to stay in loving energy in spaces of polarity is the kind of relational dynamic that has the power to transform our systems in profound and lasting ways.

When organizational leadership recognizes and embraces the inherent humanity at the heart of what they stand for, what they offer to the community, the responsibility they have agreed to uphold, they can exemplify what it means to create safety and encourage supportive relational dynamics within the workplace culture. More than anything, leaders who accept both the power and pitfalls of their own humanity and demonstrate their personal capacity to seek out and share support continuously ~ those leaders who walk the talk ~ create a deeper sense of safety for everyone else to do the same regardless of position in the organization.

Organizations can support this by normalizing vulnerability and creating peer coaching programs. Academic settings can integrate discussions on self-responsiveness and ethical support-seeking, priming future service providers to prepare for and navigate the emotional demands of their work.

In my academic position, I've noticed consistently over the years, a few common dynamics within the relational classroom space. Learners will form bonds and connections with other students who share a similar work ethic and with whom they

resonate personally. When it comes to completing group work, they will gravitate toward each other. On the other hand, there are always a few learners who don't like working in groups either due to negative experiences in the past or because of challenges with social anxiety. And then there are students who are habitually *left out* because they either don't pull their weight in the project work or they demonstrate undesirable social behaviours within the group. It sounds a bit like elementary school, but the nature of this dynamic seems to be alive and well in adult education too.

I've heard faculty members avoid group learning, while some will push it even harder because *they have to learn to work together*. I am of two minds ~ I believe it is important to offer a variety of delivery modes when asking that learners articulate their learning, so I am open to accommodations for those who require it. I also believe in offering opportunities to complete learning activities together, whether it is simply engaging in dialogue or if it is a more extensive piece of research or presentation. I believe that academically, we can take the opportunity to emphasize the learning process available in groupwork as opposed to overfocusing on the outcome or product. Group and partnered activities can be opportunities to practice relational dynamics and the co-creation of synergy and a sense of community, that is inclusive and diverse. I often feel a sense of community develop for some students, even most, however, sadly, it is often not equitably experienced by all.

Academically, we can shift the focus on grades and outcomes, and instead home in on the natural opportunities present to develop the real-world skills and qualities that learners can take with them into their workplace and other relational spaces beyond graduation. Tapping into the natural relational dynamics that already exist in the learning environment, keeping in mind, the sensitivity, safety, privacy, and compassion required to do so, can encourage learners to begin developing the qualities of a safe sounding board as well as identifying what feels safe to them personally.

Similar to the beneficial impact of facilitating self-reflective practice with learners, faculty members can also encourage and facilitate the development and implementation of strong, compassionate, and connected relational space within the classroom dynamic.

In academic settings, integrating opportunities for ethical support-seeking, peer coaching, and reflective dialogue prepares students to cultivate both personal resilience

and relational competency, essential for navigating the emotional and systemic demands of service work.

***Reflection*:** Where in your life do you offer compassion automatically, and where is it more difficult? How might self-compassion enhance your capacity to extend compassion for others?

***Practice*:** Place a hand on your heart, breathe deeply, and silently offer love and compassion to yourself. Let yourself be immersed in this energy. Soak it all up. Then notice how your compassion flows out of you toward others. Does it feel like labour, or does it flow with ease? Notice what arises in your body and mind.

I invite you to learn from your life…

to approach experience ~ both the difficult and joyful moments ~ as a teacher and learner. Openness allows wisdom to emerge from both success and struggle.

We've established that lived and living experience is a valuable source of knowledge. Grounded expertise emerges and evolves into enlivened wisdom when individuals integrate personal wisdom with professional skills. Recognizing the learning opportunities in everyday experiences fosters growth and adaptability (Schön, 1987).

Life is a powerful teacher as long as we accept the invitation to remain open to her guidance and wisdom. My life as a teacher embodies the spirit of the feminine, the mother, the wisdom of the divine empress energy. Perhaps, you would define that differently. Perhaps, in masculine or non-binary terms. Because this is your life you are learning from, you describe it and call it by any name you wish.

Throughout this dissertation, I have shared many intimate, at times, heartbreaking life experiences that have shaped me and how I see myself and the world around me, including how I perceive my personal contribution and relationship with service. When I was young in my career, the only learning I valued was academic or professional in nature having very little regard for what living my life had been showing me or trying to show me all along. At about the same time that the seeds of Conscious Service began to germinate within me, I also intentionally and purposefully shifted my

focus to the rich wisdom that had been flourishing through simply living life, that I had not given much attention to previously.

Experiential learning scholarship reinforces that life experiences, both joyful and challenging, contribute to the development of practical wisdom, enhancing decision-making, adaptability, and relational skill (Boynton, 2025).

I think sometimes, we can misperceive this as being self-centered or self-absorbed ~ this desire to look closely and feel deeply into the nature of our living reality as it happens, has happened, and as we wish it to be. I have come to realize that it is not self-centered or self-absorbed, but rather self-concerned, self-curious, and self-filled. As I've mentioned before, service providers are often naturally comfortable with the act of giving and extension of self. Our society certainly heralds the selfless community servant as noble and revered, so when service providers start to focus on themselves, their needs, their internal landscape, their emotional realities, their spirits' desire to soar, it can initially feel extremely uncomfortable. This is why we use the excuses of not being able to *pour from an empty cup* and *put your own mask on first* analogies to help us feel more comfortable with caring for and about ourselves. After all, as long as that self-focused energy allows us to keep giving to others, it can be justified.

What if we considered that service providers are meant to be healthy, joyful, and well in their lives and their work just as much as anyone you might respond to through service? There is no need to justify caring about and for ourselves and our lives. It is our inherent right, in fact, it is our personal responsibility to do so. When we learn from our lives and nurture ourselves throughout its unfolding, we become inclusively responsive, and we honour ourselves as the bright-eyed learners that we are.

Integrating reflective practice into professional development allows service providers to recognize and apply insights from lived experience, linking personal growth with ethical and meaningful contributions in their work (Parnell & McAllister, 2023).

To accept the invitation to openness as we learn from our lives is the first step in the process of grounding our expertise. If we so choose, if we are intentional and purposeful, we can learn something from everything and everyone. At times, as I've described in this dissertation, that learning emerges from the painful and uninvited experiences as an attempt to make some sense and meaning out of tragedy and

trauma. I have learned over the years that I can also learn through joy, through service, through love, and through a commitment to being with myself, even when I'm with others.

Organizations can honour lived experience by creating spaces for storytelling and reflection. Academic programs can honour lived experience by embedding storytelling, journaling, mentorship, and reflective exercises, validating personal learning alongside formal assessments, and cultivating holistic professional development.

When I am working directly with learners preparing to step into the field, I encourage the articulation of both personal learning goals and objectives, as well as professional outcomes. The wisdom that we come by naturally through an innate process of alchemy can be difficult to describe in words. But, when we challenge ourselves to name our learning, to embrace our growth through whatever means it has presented itself, we are more deeply drawn into a space of self-connection and ultimately, into our capacity to actively witness our personal evolution.

The truth is that we are already learning from living whether we define it or even appreciate it as such. Our living experience informs our worldview, our personal lens, our perceptions of self, others, the world, the universe, and the cosmos. Opening ourselves to this living learning allows us to choose with intention and purpose how we will use what life has brought us for our own expansion and once grounded, as a potentially beneficial way of being in service with others.

Organizationally and practically, this invitation can be accepted through the integration of practices that honour the role of self in service, approaches that recognize and support the humanity of service providers ~ in fact, prioritize it ~ through recognizing and valuing what individuals bring to their work that extends beyond their practical skills and talents.

The creation of safe relational space is paramount to supporting our human resources. The relationship, as we learned previously, is the container where the potential for transformation exists. Workplaces and organizational leaders who make human connection a priority in their culture send the message that people are valued as whole beings who bring a vastness of wisdom, knowing, variety, innovation, and love to the contributions they are called to make. As leaders, we need to understand more

deeply what those callings are, what they mean to individual service providers, how they have taken root in their hearts, and most importantly, how we can support the pathways that enhance the expression of these callings in meaningful ways in the workplace.

Honour the mundane and the miraculous moments of living life as a source of learning and relating.

***Reflection*:** Which experiences, emotions, or ideas do you habitually resist? How might welcoming them create space for growth?

***Practice*:** When encountering a difficult thought, emotion, or perspective today, pause and name it without judgement ~ speak to it with kindness. Breathe into it, then notice what new possibilities emerge when you remain open.

I invite you to be here now…

to return, again and again, to presence. This moment is not a means to an end; it is the ground from which conscious service becomes possible.

The invitation into this present moment is always available, it never expires, you can accept it or reject it at will, and you will always be asked and welcomed back. The power lies within us, and it is activated in the moment. We step into it with intentionality and purpose to be with ourselves as we live our lives. Have you ever noticed how deeply connected you are to yourself when you have an aha moment? If you weren't connected to yourself, you might not be aware of any realizations or epiphanies that are presenting to you. The pressures both internally and externally, can tempt us into a state of autopilot as a means of survival, but if we learned anything at all throughout this discussion, it is that who we are is absolutely essential to how we serve. We must be here, and we must be here now.

Presence is the foundation of effective service. When individuals are fully engaged in the moment, they create deeper connections with themselves and those they serve. Mindfulness practices enhance presence, reducing stress and increasing resilience (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Contrary to popular belief, this does not require more time. I recently heard someone urge their podcast listeners to *take time to just be* and I believe this is a

commonly held notion in our society. Being is not doing. It is not a task that requires a certain amount of time or some other space other than where we are in order to experience it. We are *being*, either consciously or unconsciously, whether we are in motion or stillness. To be of conscious service in the world means to be present in each moment with intentionality, and to notice when we have slipped out of that self-connected space so we can lovingly and gently bring ourselves back into inner union.

I can confidently say that I spent most of my life anywhere but here, until I began to intentionally and consciously be with myself, my thoughts, my feelings, my body, my beliefs, my stories. It was extremely uncomfortable for me to be in presence with myself, especially after years of getting as far away as I could whether through my imagination, busy-ness, other people, or self-destructive habits. I think this is common for many human beings walking the planet at this time. It is much easier to ruminate on the past and worry about the future then it is to be with what is right now. For me, acceptance of what is ~ even when I don't like it or agree with it ~ has been the key to finding the grace to be with my experience.

The notion of presence is often promoted as this blissful, serene state that we just need to again, find the time and space for. But this is misleading. To be in presence could mean that we are very much immersed in something painful, dark, and frightening, and that might include those experiences we are hoping for. It's not only what we strive to avoid that can be difficult to be with, it can also be the realization that we are creating exactly what we have desired and our capacity to receive might be asking us to stretch in ways unfamiliar. Presence simply means to be with self and other in the moment.

The connection between self-presence and presence with other (whether human, animal, or nature) is inseparable in my opinion. If I'm not engaged within my being, I will not be fully engaged with you, I will not be connected to my surroundings, to my community, to my divinity, to all that is. It is not either/or, it is and/both.

Presence is an energetic state of being that creates the experience of internal engagement and signals to others that you are engaged with them. It is both sensed and felt in relational spaces, saying, *"I'm fully here and I am here with you. I bring my whole self to this moment and draw on my natural resources to fill myself and share with you."* When I am consciously connected to myself, I am more fully aware of the resources

available to me, I'm aware of where and when I may need to conserve my energy, and I'm aware of my personal holistic needs, providing me with the ability to self-respond.

Accepting the invitation to presence in this now moment brings us full circle to the practice of self-connection through self-reflective practice. I can see in my own experience how this journey has brought me back to the roots of my curiosity and the genesis of the CSA. Self-reflective practice (journaling, meditation, connecting with nature, creating art, prayer, sharing with a friend or colleague) is the act of doing that fortifies us in the experience of being. In this space of being with self, we can then engage with the acts of doing (breathing, encouraging self-talk, sending love to the body, reframing our perspective, setting intentions) that encourage self-responsive and loving ways of being with ourselves. Nothing says I love you like the willingness to stay by our own sides even in great discomfort. Sometimes, that is the only thing required, the loving presence of self.

Research in mindfulness and contemplative practice demonstrates that present-moment awareness supports emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, and relational attunement, all of which are essential for sustainable service provision (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).

Cultivating presence within organizational functioning can be particularly challenging when we consider the external pressures of time, lacking resources, and the toll that can happen when responding to the needs of other human beings, especially during times of crisis. Combined with financial realities, public perception, and internal relational challenges, the invitation to stay present may not appear as appealing. So, why not disconnect from the discomfort, separate ourselves emotionally, and plow through with logic and reason to solve the issue at hand as quickly as possible? There are consequences when we rush the process and eliminate other ways of knowing in that as service providers, and organizational leaders, we may find ourselves in states of dis-integrity, which erodes our sense of self and overall wellbeing. This lack of holistic review and consideration often has harmful impacts on our relational dynamics with others.

I can recall a particular incident where I allowed my desire for efficiency to override the practice of enlightened communication leading to a damaged relationship

that I could never fully restore. The time saved by this oversight actually created many other barriers that were both time consuming and disheartening over the months that followed.

Organizational studies indicate that embedding presence-based practices into meetings, workflows, and classroom pedagogy fosters a culture of engagement, attentiveness, and psychological safety, enhancing both individual wellbeing and collective outcomes (Grassi et al., 2025).

Organizations can embed presence-based practices into meetings and interactions, fostering a culture of intentional engagement. Academic settings can integrate mind-body-spirit exercises into classroom experiences, helping students develop the capacity for sustained presence.

Faculty and leadership can model presence through active reflection, intentional engagement, and incorporation of self-responsive strategies, preparing learners and employees to navigate the relational and emotional demands of professional service work effectively.

***Reflection*:** How fully are you inhabiting the current moment? What sensations, thoughts, or emotions are present that usually go unnoticed?

Now, finally, let me to invite you into this closing ***Practice:*** a space of presence, and a practice I use academically to begin class dialogue, encourage self-responsive strategy development, and to access as a safe space when we encounter challenging emotional energy in our discussions.

Close your eyes or soften gaze. If it is more comfortable, let your eyes land on a spot on the ceiling or wall. Breathe.

Notice your feet on the ground or your body in the chair or surface you are sitting or lying on. Keep breathing.

Allow yourself the sensation of being grounded, in your body, with yourself. Breathe. Place your hand over your heart or belly or both. Tune into the sound and feeling of your own heartbeat. You are anchored and held, yet flexible and able to move and flow.

Locate that space inside of you that you experience as safe and peaceful. You might think of it as an inner oasis or safe haven. Call it what you like but imagine that it contains all the loving energy and qualities you require for yourself right now. Notice what is available to you in this moment. Breathe. Notice where you experience this space in your body.

Imagine you are absorbing and receiving these qualities throughout your entire being. Breathe. Remember that you can stay in this space as long as you like or visit briefly for moments at a time. When you open your eyes and move into the next activity of your day, you can bring these qualities with you. This energy can continue to express through your being bringing benefit to you and those who cross your path.

From here we scan our entire being. Start with your body and notice any physical sensations that arise for you. Notice tension, discomfort, pain, openness, relaxation, lightness and breathe into those spaces as though your breath is a vehicle for the qualities of your inner oasis responding with love to whatever needs it.

Notice your thoughts. What are you thinking about? What is the quality of your thinking? Notice the connection between what you are thinking and what you sense in your body. Breathe knowing that you are flowing compassion and kindness to your thoughts without any desire to change them. You simply observe and acknowledge without judgement.

Let your emotional energy bubble up to the surface of your awareness. Keep breathing as you imagine you are riding the emotional waves as they ebb and flow. Notice if you have been resisting your feelings, notice any fear attached to feeling your emotions. Keep breathing as you simply observe and stay present to your emotions. Notice any connection between your thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. Put your hand over the area of your body that speaks to you. Breathe and know that you are sending acceptance and respect to your emotional self. You are loving yourself.

Finally, notice any stories that you might be creating in an attempt to make sense of your experience ~ to try to explain it. Just listen to those stories and interpretations and notice how they manifest for you in thought, emotion, and sensation. These stories can illuminate beliefs and values systems that may be ready for you to re-imagine them. For now, simply observe with curiosity and a desire to understand. Allow the energies of

your inner oasis to wash over these stories with reverence for how they have helped you navigate life up until now.

Keep breathing.

Set intentions. You can be intentional about all the big things in your life, and you can be intentional about the next moment. Breathe and consider how you wish to experience the rest of your day. Imagine how you prefer to feel, how you'd like to show up, contribute, and receive. Allow yourself to be with your intentional energy and witness these declarations from the space of your inner oasis.

Offer gratitude for everything. Breathe. Be in gratitude for all that you have just received from within yourself ~ the information, the wisdom, the ideas, the insights, the energy, the love, perhaps, the guidance. You are accepted and you are loved.

Take a few more deep breaths and when you are ready open your eyes.

Body as Canvas

This is my most recent tattoo, inspired by an invitation from a dear friend, who wanted to mark our bodies together with the same symbol, celebrating our friendship and her recovery from cancer. The unalome, a sacred Buddhist and Hindu symbol representing the path to enlightenment and spiritual awakening, was an obvious choice for us. It honours the twists and turns, hilltops and valleys, of lived and living experience that shape who we are as human beings and influence how we show up as service providers.

Just as the unalome spirals and bends before reaching clarity, the CSA has evolved through reflection, research, inquiry, and practice. Growth, learning, and embodied practice are never linear, yet they are essential to meaningful service.

The CSA invites a fundamental shift in how we understand and embody service. Rooted in presence, love, and relational awareness, it challenges the dominant

narratives of burnout, over-functioning, and disconnection that have long shaped healthcare and human services. By engaging with its ten guiding invitations ~ Purpose, Wholeness, Freedom, Discovery, Enlightenment, Vision, Leadership, Compassion, Openness, and Presence ~ we step into a relational paradigm that centers wellbeing, authenticity, and human connection.

This thesis has shown the profound potential that emerges when service providers are supported in reconnecting with themselves and each other. It highlights the wisdom within individual experiences and calls for organizations to co-create cultures where emotional and relational realities are not only acknowledged but embraced as essential to meaningful and effective service. Self-leadership and reflective practice are not optional; they are the foundation for sustaining service that is ethical, compassionate, and human-centered.

Ultimately, the CSA is both a call and a commitment. It asks us to return to ourselves and to transform service into an act of love in action. It challenges us to nurture conditions where joy, wisdom, and shared humanity are not rare exceptions but everyday experiences.

Let this work serve as a starting point, a living invitation to co-create systems where service is not something we do to others, but a practice we cultivate with each other. In this way, we move closer to a world where healing, transformation, and collective thriving are not only possible, but they are also inevitable.

Epilogue: Continuing the Journey of Conscious Service

As I bring this thesis to a close, I am reminded that the work of conscious service is never truly complete. Engaging deeply with the literature, the narratives, and the reflective practices embedded in this study has been a continual invitation to walk my talk ~ to bring into my own life the principles I have explored and offered to others. In this process, I have become increasingly aware of the powerful force that love holds in service work, in interactions with others, in communications with myself, and in the everyday moments where choice, attention, and intention converge. Love, I have discovered, is both an energetic guide and a grounding presence, reminding me to re-align when out of balance and to act with both courage and care.

Engaging in this study and writing this thesis has underscored that the CSA is not a prescription. It is a framework, a loving suggestion, an offering inviting the reader to consider different ways of knowing, being, living, relating, and serving. It honours the process of grounding expertise and transforming it into enlivened wisdom, and it encourages service providers to engage with themselves as fully as they engage with those they serve.

Looking to the future, the potential of the Conscious Service Approach (CSA) lies in its application, refinement, and evaluation across healthcare, human services, and education systems. Further inquiry is needed to build a robust and practice-informed evidence base, drawing on lived and living experience alongside qualitative, participatory, and applied research methods to understand its impact across diverse professional contexts and to identify effective modalities for implementation. In this framing, lived and living experience is understood as a legitimate form of evidence that gains rigour through systematic reflection, articulation, and iterative application within real-world contexts.

CSA has the potential to serve as a foundational approach in the education and preparation of service providers, including integration into academic curricula, micro-credentials, and ongoing professional development. It may also inform organizational policies, leadership practices, and workforce development strategies that prioritize integration, wellbeing, and relational sustainability in service-based roles.

In practical terms, CSA offers a framework for supporting systems transformation by embedding principles of embodied awareness, integration, and reflective practice into the structures that shape daily service delivery. This includes supporting environments where relational work is adequately resourced, where reflective capacity is built into role design, and where wellbeing is understood as an ongoing, system-supported process rather than an individual responsibility.

By situating CSA within both applied practice and research-informed development, it offers a pathway toward organizational cultures that are more sustainable, ethically grounded, and responsive to the realities of those who provide and receive care.

In closing, my hope is that CSA serves as both mirror and invitation: a space where readers can reflect, practice, and expand their own understanding of service. May it inspire them to approach their work with intentional relationality, self-compassion, and the courage to love and serve fully, even amidst the complexity of real-world challenges. Service, when lived with awareness and love, becomes not only a professional act but a way of being that is mutually enriching, humanizing, and transformative.

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