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PRESENCING EMBODIED LEADERSHIP:

Synchronizing and Integrating Trauma for Transformative Healing

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Abstract: For presencing leadership to become a deeply embodied way of being, the practice of trauma presencing must be consciously integrated within embodiment practices. Without this integration, practitioners risk misinterpreting unresolved trauma, remaining unaware of its presence, mis-attuning to trauma in themselves and others, or becoming hyper- or hypo-activated in trauma-related time loops. As these risks often go unrecognized, practitioners may inadvertently address only surface-level symptoms while missing subtler, unresolved trauma processes. This article highlights the importance of trauma presencing in the development of presencing leadership and calls for a deeper examination of disembodiment as a somatic phenomenon that can be integrated through trauma-sensitive practices. By examining trauma as a “blind spot” in the body and field, this work explores trauma’s time-looped, relational nature within the soma as processes that can be felt, synchronized with, and integrated. Trauma presencing enhances embodiment capacities, allowing presencing leadership to emerge as a deeply lived experience on individual and collective levels.

Key words: Presencing, ontological, process ontology, presence, fourth-generation coaching, presencing mastery

I. Introduction

“Trauma is perhaps the most avoided, ignored, belittled, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering.”

- Peter Levine

Where other forms of leadership may offer temporary, segmented, or superficial solutions, presencing leadership provides an expanded capacity to address seemingly insurmountable challenges and facilitate awareness-based systems change at a profound level. How, then, can presencing leadership develop as a deeply embodied practice and way of being? This inquiry often leads to refining presencing distinctions, such as those within the five journeys of Dynamic Presencing (Gunnlaugson, 2020): *Primary Presence*, *Primary Knowing*, *Primary Perceiving*, *Primary Communicating*, and *Primary Leading*. Each journey comprises distinct movements that guide practitioners in their respective explorations. While advancing these distinctions is essential, this article aims to draw attention to related under-explored areas, particularly the role of trauma within embodiment contexts of presencing leadership.

This article argues that a leader's capacity to presence trauma is critical and that this ability is anchored primarily in the subtle realms of embodiment. Without trauma presencing practices, practitioners face increased risks, including unawareness of trauma, mislabeling or bypassing trauma responses, mis-attuning to trauma in themselves and others, overlooking disembodied information, and hyperactivation in past-based trauma loops. Beyond these specific risks, there exists an overall vulnerability to unconscious gaps within presencing leadership that even regular embodiment practices may fail to address. Trauma presencing, therefore, not only mitigates these risks but serves as a crucial process in maturing embodiment wisdom, thereby enriching presencing leadership as a deeper, more integrated way of being.

II. What Is Trauma Presencing?

When we hear the word “trauma,” we often think of catastrophic events such as natural disasters, war, abuse, or political upheaval, which can misleadingly confine trauma to the realm of the abnormal or exceptional. In reality, trauma—particularly developmental trauma—pervades modern society, influencing personal functioning, social relationships, parenting, economics, politics, and education. Rather than searching for isolated cases, it may be more insightful to ask, “Where do we all fit on the broad, surprisingly inclusive spectrum of trauma?”

This article does not aim to address trauma from therapeutic, medical, or policy perspectives; those perspectives are comprehensively covered in the work of experts such as Dr. Christina Bethell (Bethell et al., 2022), Gabor Maté (Maté, 2022), Peter Levine (Levine, 2012), Dr. Bessel van der Kolk (Van der Kolk, 2015), Dr. Richard Schwartz (Schwartz, 2021), and Thomas Hübl (Hübl, 2023). Instead, we focus on trauma's role in presencing leadership as an embodiment practice and introduce trauma presencing as a crucial addition to the practice, aimed at addressing potential blind spots in presencing leadership.

For a trauma presencing practitioner, trauma often remains “invisible” within embodiment practices. This invisibility means that we may initially fail to perceive trauma somatically, emotionally, or mentally. Trauma, by its nature, is an absenced experience and thus frequently presents as a blind spot in embodiment practices. For instance, a practitioner may notice certain thought patterns while practicing presencing but, upon tuning into her emotional state, finds herself not sensing any emotions. She might think, “I don’t feel anything” and move on. Typically, this experience is overlooked; however, from a trauma presencing perspective, this “not feeling” becomes a focal point. Trauma presencing involves staying with this experience of “not feeling,” “numbness,” or “partial feeling,” and filling it with awareness. This practice of attuning subtle awareness to areas of numbness is what we refer to as trauma presencing. It is based on three interwoven embodiment competencies: (1) presencing trauma, (2) synchronizing with trauma, and (3) integrating trauma.

III. Trauma as Muted Experience

Trauma represents the most intensified internal stress response to overwhelming experiences in the absence of an attuned witness. Typically, experiences arise, take form, express themselves, and pass within our mental, emotional, and somatic channels of perception. However, when an experience overwhelms the system, the body and emotions require an attuned witness to help co-process the experience. In the absence of this relational presence, the nervous system over-regulates or under-regulates into a fight, flight, or freeze response (Levine, 2012). If these responses are insufficient, particularly under chronic developmental stress, the nervous system “mutes” the experience, effectively disembodimenting and isolating it from the individual’s holistic sense of self. As a result, the overwhelming experience is not only hidden from our perception but is also disconnected from our awareness that such absencing has taken place. This allows the individual to continue functioning with relative stability, although this muting within the body and psyche can be so profound that the original trauma is obscured, leaving only symptomatic behaviors or “trigger episodes” that reflect this underlying muted trauma. This phenomenon of absencing in trauma is the focus of various trauma healing approaches, including Somatic Experiencing, the NeuroAffective Relational Model (NARM), and Comprehensive Resource Modeling (CRM) (Bohleber, 2007; Levine, 2012; Hübl, 2023; Heller et al., 2020; Schwarz et al., 2017).

While deep states of presence can be accessed by stabilizing awareness through presencing practices, sustaining this state as a consistent daily experience often proves difficult. Presencing leadership practitioners, in particular, may experience moments of disconnection, self-detachment, or “triggering” that leaves them feeling out of sync in leadership contexts. This article posits that

such occurrences are not simply random events pulling us out of presence; rather, they often arise from pre-existing somatic fields of trauma that are muted and, thus, outside our awareness (Hübl, 2023). In the context of Dynamic Presencing, we may believe we are failing to engage with the “arising new” during the transition from letting be to letting come, as described in the journey of Primary Perceiving, or we may think we are falling short in embodying the movement of “being real” within Primary Presence (Gunnlaugson, 2020). In reality, we are “tripping over” unresolved, disembodied aspects of the past—moving through imperceptible shadow fields generated by unintegrated trauma (Hübl, 2023).

These trauma fields extend across individual, relational, and collective spaces—*the you-space, we-space, and all-space* (Gunnlaugson, 2020). They represent “gaps” in our presence that often go undetected, as presencing practices primarily focus on connecting to presence rather than absence. This oversight presents a significant challenge for presencing leadership, as many core issues in leadership situations stem from the absence of presence rather than its direct presence. The ability to connect with the absence of presence, rather than solely with presence itself, is essential to the effectiveness of presencing as an embodied leadership practice, especially since group dysfunction is often rooted in trauma and its absencing.

Developing the ability to presence trauma and its absencing allows presencing leadership practitioners to synchronize their awareness with the developmental arc of trauma integration. This practice can lead to new forms of insight, ethical discernment, and innovation within leadership contexts. In what follows, this article will address the “absence of presence” as a phenomenon that can be presenced and will delve into the three phases of trauma presencing: presencing absence, synchronizing with trauma as movement, and integrating trauma.

IV. The Absence of Presence as a Presence-able Phenomenon Within the Soma and Embodiment Process

In my personal practice and work with clients and organizations, I have observed that trauma, much like light bending around the gravity of an invisible mass, “bends” presence around itself. This allows us to presence trauma by becoming attuned to where we “cannot feel” or “cannot sense” parts of our experience. We develop an awareness of moments when our presence feels reduced, as if parts of our physical or emotional experience were suddenly missing. By cultivating sensitivity to this absence or numbness, we become aware of gaps in our own perception. For example, during a meditation or presencing practice, a practitioner might notice mental activity around an event without any corresponding emotion or bodily sensation, indicating a gap in awareness. In trauma presencing, rather than bypassing or attempting to “will” underlying

experiences to surface, we are called to gently hold these gaps within our awareness. This gentle holding can allow previously disembodied sensations or emotions to reveal themselves as trauma. The gap is not forcibly closed but gradually “filled in” by what was present all along.

The ability to presence absence without force or agenda represents a subtle but profound refinement in presencing practice. This approach does not seek to “heal” or “fix” the past but rather to allow the absence of presence to be included within our somatic embodiment. Trauma presencing asks us to respectfully acknowledge and re-embody disembodiment that was initially too overwhelming to integrate fully within the i-space, you-space, and we-space (Gunnlaugson, 2020). For presencing leadership, this can be transformative.

As practitioners refine this capacity, they begin to realize that trauma exists not only within their own i-space but also permeates the larger relational fields of the you-space, we-space, and all-space. Muted trauma, rather than presence, forms the foundation of many social structures. Practitioners come to see these fields as interwoven and interdependent, understanding that their individual trauma presencing process contributes to a collective trauma healing process. Receiving this understanding without judgment, they can approach it as a sacred aspect of their practice. Over time, they can not only *let be* (Gunnlaugson, 2020) the present moment and receive the emerging future, but also embody the disembodied, unintegrated past. What emerges is a growing depth of presence and embodied wisdom—unassuming, constant, and effortless. This way of being becomes part of an expansive planetary process of re-embodiment and emergence, inviting a profound new depth to presencing leadership.

V. Presencing Trauma, Synchronizing with Trauma, and Integrating Trauma: Cultivating the Three Capacities

V.1 Presencing Absence – The First Capacity

The first phase of trauma presencing is *presencing absence*, a subtle capacity that enables practitioners to sense a break, gap, or absence in their own mental, emotional, or somatic experience—or within the collective experience of a group they are working with. This absence often exists beneath more overt symptomatic patterns that act as mechanisms to maintain the underlying absence. These patterns may manifest as mental, emotional, or somatic behaviors or as habits mislabeled as stress, personality traits, irritation, disconnection, or other forms of hyper- or hypo-regulation. In a presencing practice, these mechanisms frequently distract practitioners from the underlying absence or trauma. In some instances, collective trauma embedded in the we-space even enables certain mechanisms to pass unnoticed or, in some cultures, to be celebrated—such as workaholism in the United States. Given the complexity and variety of these manifestations, it is

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easy to mistake them as root causes or to attribute their origins solely to environmental factors. Such an approach addresses the “smoke” of the issue rather than the “fire” of trauma, which expresses itself as absence within presence.

As practitioners cultivate this subtle attunement to absence, they begin to recognize the underlying “invisible trauma root system” of various personal, relational, and organizational issues. What previously appeared as a web of isolated problems now reveals itself as a network of inner and outer resources keeping trauma frozen, suppressed, numbed, unfelt, and disembodied. Practitioners then start experiencing these areas of absence as disembodied aspects contained within a larger, embodied experience. In this expanded presencing space, practitioners learn to hold the areas of non-presence, allowing them to gradually fill in and become integrated within the practitioner’s awareness.

As this subtle, expanded presence develops, practitioners realize that these areas of absence are not static but are instead dynamic, living movements within the soma, psyche, and emotional body, contextually rooted in developmental and relational space-time. At this point, trauma presencing shifts from *presencing absence* to the next phase, *synchronizing with trauma*, marking an emergent development in the process.

V.2 Trauma Synchronization – The Second Capacity

At this phase in the trauma presencing process, what was once an area of absence, numbness, or muted presence now begins to emerge as a dynamic, intelligent movement within the soma, psyche, and emotional body. Trauma material transitions from being invisible and disembodied into a living movement gradually absorbed into embodied presence, revealing itself to the larger container of embodied awareness that now holds it.

The practitioner’s role here is to maintain this expanded, safe container of embodied presence while also synchronizing it with the unique relational, developmental, emotional, and somatic qualities of the trauma material as it unfolds. This requires a refined precision from the practitioner as the previously invisible trauma becomes absorbed into presence. At this stage, trauma transforms from a past-based, time-looped movement into a presence-based, emergent process—a capacity I call *trauma synchronization*, encompassing the i-space, you-space, we-space, and all-space.

During synchronization, the numbness surrounding trauma begins to melt, allowing the initially overwhelming experience to surface within a contained, felt, and embodied presence. What was once too intense for the nervous system to handle can now be experienced and integrated. For example, a childhood experience of fear due to neglect might reveal itself as somatic shaking, emotional fear, and mental imagery. Here, the practitioner maintains a subtle, attuned presence,

allowing the trauma material to arise, take shape, express, and then dissolve, eventually joining the individual's integrated life experiences. This integration fosters wholeness, expanding the field of embodied presence and deepening wisdom.

Presencing leadership practitioners who incorporate trauma synchronization invite a more profound embodied wisdom into group dynamics, as these gaps in presence are filled with attuned awareness. If the trauma was collective, it integrates within the group as greater embodied wisdom and as an expanded, ethically informed social understanding. From this perspective, trauma presencing not only contributes to the development of presencing leadership but also offers critical insights for social justice—a topic to be explored further in future articles.

V.3 Trauma Integration – The Third Capacity

The process of synchronization naturally leads into the final phase of trauma presencing: trauma integration. This phase can be easily overlooked, as the cathartic and dynamic qualities of the synchronization phase often leave presencing practitioners with a sense of completion once trauma has expressed itself and dissipated. However, it is essential for practitioners to create a subtle, supportive container that allows the nervous system—once home to the trauma—to explore and stabilize within its new, integrated state of being. In this phase, trauma is fully integrated, digested, and transmuted into wisdom that flows throughout all channels of experience, including the soma, emotional body, mind, and even what we might consider the soul. At this stage, the nervous system gradually adjusts to a renewed sense of self and reality, and this shift is relationally absorbed across the i-space, you-space, we-space, and all-space. In this way, integration contributes not only to the wholeness, presence, and embodiment of the individual but to the collective field of life as well.

Trauma integration blends seamlessly with the synchronization phase, releasing past time loops and allowing this transformative experience to be woven into the embodied flow of life experiences. This deepens the subtle embodiment of the practitioner, filling spaces that were previously occupied by unprocessed trauma with embodied presence. Supporting this integration often involves a “re-entry” period into daily life that is intentionally slower-paced, allowing for the internal-to-external transformation to take root and expand across all levels of experience, from the i-space to the all-space.

VI. The Wisdom of Trauma: Implications for Embodied Presencing Leadership

Trauma presencing is grounded in a refined stance of respect and acceptance for trauma, absence, and numbness within our experience, emerging from a precise attunement to absence itself.

Rather than seeing absencing as something wrong or unwanted, this perspective shifts away from viewing absencing as a flaw, which is often a symptom of our disconnection from trauma. From the vantage point of the original overwhelming experience, absencing or numbing—holding trauma material in an invisible, time-looped form—functions intelligently as a protective mechanism, a solution rather than a problem. Trauma processing deepens our relationship to these qualities of absence and mutedness, culminating in gratitude for what Thomas Hübl calls “that which stays hidden” from our awareness (Hübl, 2020). This process fosters a compassionate embrace of the exiled parts of our experience.

As presencing leadership integrates trauma presencing, disembodiment begins to reveal itself beyond the assumption that greater embodiment is inherently superior. Instead, we cultivate a home for disembodiment within our embodiment practice, expanding our capacity to hold the entirety of human experience. In this way, more aspects of humanity are welcomed and held within humanity itself.

VII. Conclusion

In working with individuals, organizations, and through my own inner journey, I have come to see that there is deep wisdom within our frozen, disembodied trauma. Trauma, often absenced and layered with symptoms of numbness and fragmentation, holds invaluable insight for those who seek to embody presencing leadership. Yet, true access to the wisdom of trauma requires a shift in perspective: it is not about breaking through or bypassing these frozen parts of ourselves, but about developing a reverent and attuned sensitivity to what remains hidden. Trauma’s function as an “intelligent solution” rather than a flaw suggests that disembodiment and numbness have served as vital protective mechanisms, shielding us from overwhelming experience.

For presencing leadership to evolve as a deeply embodied practice, it requires not simply a pursuit of greater embodiment but a profound recognition of our potential disembodiment—our unpresenced, numb places—woven subtly through our individual and collective experience. Trauma presencing offers a pathway to address these hidden aspects, cultivating an attuned relationship to the absences within us and allowing them to come into presence in their own time. As this process unfolds, it reorients presencing leadership toward a more comprehensive embrace of both presence and absence, expanding the capacity for resilience, wisdom, and ethical attunement in leadership.

By honoring the role trauma plays in our lives and by allowing it to re-integrate as part of our embodied awareness, presencing leadership gains a greater depth for navigating today’s complexities. Through this respectful attunement, the blessings and wisdom that trauma carries are

no longer frozen or hidden but are revealed as essential parts of our journey, offering gifts from our past that shape our presence today and lay the foundation for an embodied, compassionate future.

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