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# Embodied Presence

Framework & Practices for Reclaiming Our Humanity

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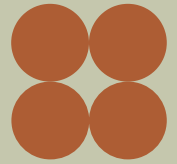


Through reading this you will...

- Understand why we developed the **Embodied Presence Framework**
- Understand the different components of the framework
- Understand how **presence & reflective practice** are situated within the framework
- Differentiate between **interpersonal** qualities, skills, practices, & methods
- Learn how to apply the Embodied Presence Framework to your own practice

# Embodied Presence Framework

## AN INTRODUCTION



Ultimately, this is about your interpersonal journey. We want you to really think about things like: Do you know yourself? Do you feel good? Are you able to know what you want and need to feel good? Do you feel good in your relationships (with friends, family, partners, co-workers)? How do you want to show up in those relationships?

We all go through periods of confusion about our lives, we may lack clarity on our career path or feel unsure about continuing in a relationship. Often, we tend to outsource these sorts of questions and grapplings to therapists and coaches. We may not feel like we have autonomy or self-efficacy to make these changes by ourselves.

While those kinds of supports can be immensely helpful, what if you had a roadmap for approaching your own growth in these areas?

It's our hope that the Embodied Presence Framework actually gives you a sense of what you as an individual can engage in, and that it will give you an idea of how to move towards feeling better inside yourself and inside your relationships. And it's those relationships that ultimately matter. This works supports you in reconnecting to your inherent interdependence.

This framework will help you to begin your journey toward presence. And when we say journey, we mean a lifelong adventure which will have highs and lows, bumps along the way, and opportunities for reflection, growth, and change. Developing a "journey orientation" helps us move away from the idea of linear improvement and to move through life's inevitable hurdles, mistakes, and failures with more ease. We want to release the idea that you are striving for perfection or some fantastical place where you

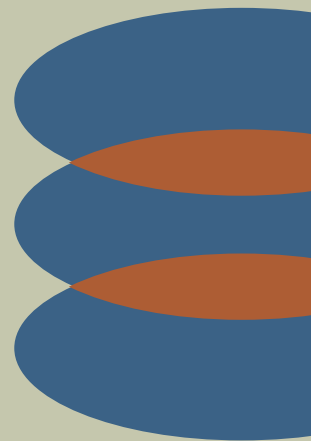


have this stuff all figured out. We have all been socialized into systems that keep us in a state of disconnection, so this process is about healing our relationship with ourselves and others and unlearning harmful patterns. We begin by outlining our own personal journey toward building a framework, sharing it as a roadmap to awareness, change, healing, and transformation. We walk you through the framework, while also reminding you that it's non-linear and iterative in nature. We will end by sharing how the framework can be used.

# WHY A FRAMEWORK?

I originally created the framework because in the interpersonal effectiveness course that the three of us had been teaching, my experience with the students was that it all still felt very nebulous. Students and employees are asked to enhance soft skills—and they are somehow just supposed to know what that means. We may have a general sense of what it means—communication skills or getting along with others. But what do we really mean when we say interpersonal skills? What exactly are they? And the question from there was, how do we get better at them? As I asked my colleagues & peers these questions, the answer was, “Well you’ll just gain experience through going out and doing the work, in your internship or job, working on your projects, working with clients, & you’ll somehow magically develop these skills.”

In reality, practicums, internships, and co-ops do not provide explicit interpersonal skill development, instead focusing on job-specific and content skill development. Unless there are problems or tensions, you likely won’t receive any intentional interpersonal skill development. This leaves students and employees in a place of implicit learning—and as we discussed earlier, that approach only reinforces the patterns inherited through systems of oppression. In developing the Embodied Presence Framework, we sought to bring clarity and structure to both teaching and learning interpersonal skills. We hope this framework offers anyone who wants to work on these things a way to navigate the practice. ~ Libby



## AN OVERVIEW



In our visual of the Embodied Presence Framework, we see a person at the center, embodying presence through their mindful pose and contemplative stance. They are sitting in the water of reflective practice, which provides an inward mirror and outward view of the world in which they live. This person represents each of us on our interpersonal journeys.

Simply put, the Embodied Presence Framework says that if you engage in the core practices and cultivate presence then you will enhance your interpersonal qualities, which will lead to improved interpersonal skills that show up in our daily lives. We call this a framework because it provides organizational structure to a series of concepts. It gives us a way to organize our thinking and learning.

# Embodied Presence Framework

When I **PRACTICE**:

Grounding  
Self Compassion  
Releasing  
Clear Boundaries  
Intention Setting

I increase my **SKILLS**,

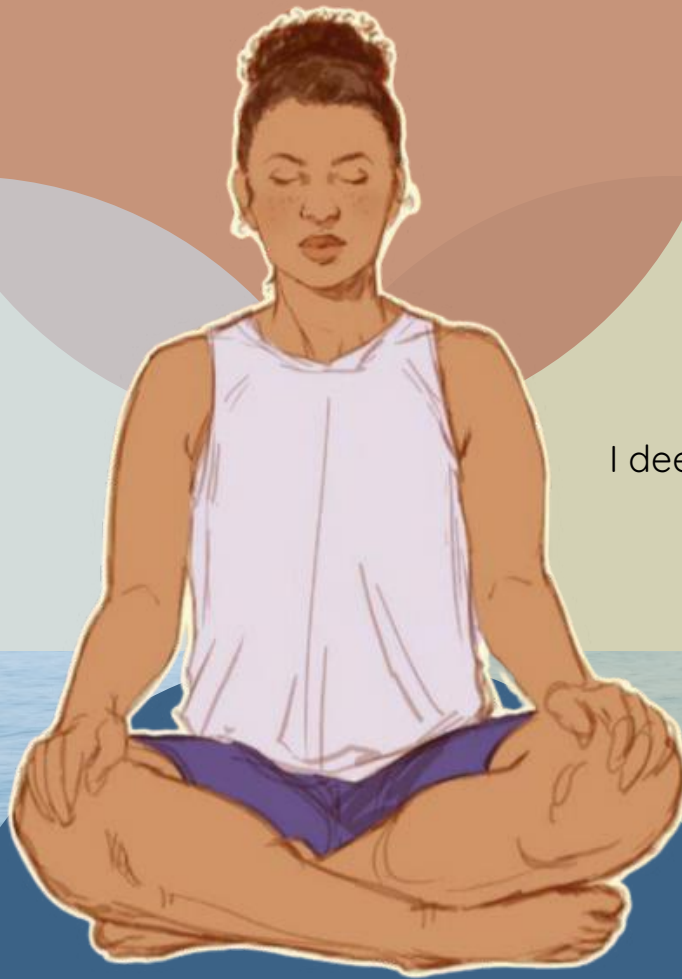
such as:

Listening Skills  
Conflict Resolution  
Storytelling  
Collaboration  
Facilitation

I deepen my **QUALITIES**,

such as:

Patience  
Kindness  
Humility  
Empathy  
Flexibility



**My Practice leads to Presence.**

When I can be present to myself,  
other people, and the world around  
me I can bring the best of my  
qualities and skills into my  
relationships & my work.

The framework is non-linear and iterative. Non-linear means the journey toward interpersonal development won't look the same for everyone, and your journey won't be a simple progression forward. Rather, you could imagine your journey looks like a toddler made your road map, looping around from the various skills, qualities, and practices. Iterative means that the journey is also not one at which you arrive and can check off the box of interpersonal effectiveness. Rather, you will discover and rediscover, learn and unlearn things multiple times throughout the process, revisiting, rethinking, reflecting and deepening along the way.



## Reflective Pause

Reflect on the Embodied Presence Framework.  
Does the framework resonate with you? Why or why not? Which aspects resonate with you, and which do not?

## INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

The Embodied Presence Framework began with doing research on interpersonal skills to better understand what people are talking about when they refer to interpersonal or “soft” skills. The internet is full of wildly different lists. What also stood out was that they all contained a mix of what felt like skills and attributes, or as we are calling them, qualities. For example, patience and listening are on most lists, but listening feels very much like a skill, whereas patience feels like a quality. So we start with defining both skills and qualities.

Interpersonal skills are how our interpersonal development manifests in our daily lives. They show up in school through active listening to our teachers, collaborating in group projects, and presenting in class. They show up in our work through interviewing for a job, collaborating on team projects, facilitating meetings, and presenting our work. They show up in our personal lives through listening to a friend share their story, negotiating chores with our partners, and managing conflict amongst our children. Although interpersonal skills show up differently for different people, nearly everything we do with others is an interpersonal skill.



## Can We Agree To Stop Calling Them “Soft” Skills?

The term “soft skills” has been criticized for being problematic for a few reasons:

**Undervaluation:** Implies that these skills are somehow less important or less valuable than “hard skills” (technical or job-specific skills) when they are in fact crucial for success in many areas of life.

**Misleading terminology:** Suggests that these skills are soft, fluffy, or easy to acquire. In reality, they require significant development and practice.

**Dichotomous categorization:** Labeling skills as either “soft” or “hard” creates an artificial dichotomy. In reality, skills are interconnected, and proficiency in one area often relies on a combination of different skills.

**Gender bias:** Become associated with traditionally feminine qualities, reinforcing gender stereotypes and undervaluing the contributions of women in the workplace.

We use the terms interpersonal development, interpersonal effectiveness, and interpersonal skills to highlight the importance and interconnectedness of these abilities. These alternative terms help promote a more holistic and inclusive understanding of the skills needed for personal and professional fulfillment.

There are many different interpersonal skills we may be interested in learning how to cultivate. The table below represents a selection of interpersonal skills, and there are additional skills that can be included. Interpersonal skills vary depending on the situation and our interpersonal goals. These examples cover a range of skills that enhance our interactions and ways of being in relationship with one another:

|                       |                              |                               |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Facilitation          | Active Listening             | Conflict Resolution           |
| Presentation          | Dialogue                     | Collaborative Decision Making |
| Writing               | Persuasion                   | Collaborative Problem Solving |
| Collaboration         | Negotiation                  | Showing Appreciation          |
| Situational Awareness | Advocacy                     | Offering Recognition          |
| Mediation             | Activism                     | Leadership                    |
| Relationships         | Treating Others with Dignity | Teaching Others               |
| Questioning           | Giving Critical Feedback     | Knowing Your Limits           |
| Teamwork              | Receiving Critical Feedback  |                               |
| Networking            | Motivating Others            |                               |

## Reflective Pause

Which of these interpersonal skills do you regularly engage with?  
Which do you practice and develop with intentionality? How do you  
currently practice these skills?

## INTERPERSONAL QUALITIES

Most interpersonal development training opportunities focus on interpersonal skills. These trainings typically do not focus on the qualities necessary to be better at those skills. For example, if you are in training for conflict resolution they will provide a lot of concrete conflict resolution skills, but they may not help you develop the qualities of empathy and compassion that are necessary for good conflict resolution.

Interpersonal qualities are the internal attributes necessary to engage in interpersonal skills well. We all have some qualities that come more naturally to us (“I’ve always been a patient person”) and others that feel like a challenge (“I tend to be a cup-half-empty kind of person”) and yet others that we wish we had more of (“I wish I were more resilient”). Our framework emphasizes that these qualities are things we can learn and deepen over time through practice. Above all, this framework helps you reflect on and be more aware of these qualities in yourself.

There are many different interpersonal qualities we may be interested in developing. The below table is not exhaustive, and some may feel like they are saying the same thing. Interpersonal qualities can vary depending on context, culture, and personal preferences, but these examples cover a broad range of attributes which are important for being interpersonally effective.

Kindness  
Honesty  
Flexibility  
Empathy  
Patience  
Assertiveness  
Responsiveness  
Self-confidence  
Trustworthiness  
Diplomacy  
Cooperation  
Relationality

Openness  
Good Judgment  
Dependability  
Respect  
Humility  
Equanimity  
Confidence  
Receptiveness  
Integrity  
Supportiveness  
Self-Efficacy  
Curiosity

Responsibility  
Accountability  
Generosity  
Optimism  
Gratitude  
Resilience  
Environmental Consciousness  
Sympathetic Joy  
Reliability  
Tact  
Conscientiousness  
Dignity

## Reflective Pause

Which interpersonal qualities do you  
feel strong in?

Which feel like a challenge?

Which do you want to improve?



## PRESENCE

Let's look at the diagram again. Presence is there at the center. Everything revolves around our ability to be present. Presence is all about having a deeper sense of awareness of your own internal state. Presence allows us to more accurately observe our own behavior and give attention to the emotions and stories that are attached to that behavior. Presence also offers us more choice—the choice to thoughtfully respond to a situation rather than react from a subconscious, patterned place. So if we know we want to improve our skills and enhance our qualities, presence is a state of being we want to cultivate in order to do that.

Presence will ultimately give you more access to what is happening within you, in your environment, and in your interactions with others. It might sound counterintuitive now, but the more present you are the more you are able to give your attention to others.

It's also true that we are navigating complexity and intensity on a daily basis, leaving many of us feeling overwhelmed. When you become disconnected from yourself, your body, your emotions, it's hard to show up with qualities like empathy, patience, compassion, or flexibility. Cultivating presence can help us to show up well in the midst of tension, pressure, and conflict in our rapidly changing world.

## Reflective Pause

Describe a time in your life when you felt fully  
present in the moment.

What was the experience like? What factors  
helped contribute to your sense of presence?



## INTERPERSONAL PRACTICES

At the top of the diagram you see the five core interpersonal practices, the embodied path to cultivating presence. Engaging in each of these practices, consistently over time will support your ability to be present. You might be asking yourself —why these five practices? Are there more? Do I have to do them all? These five were gleaned from a range of embodiment-based practices intended to cultivate presence. It is our personal experience, both inside and outside of the classroom, that these five, practiced with consistency over time, will lead to presence and ultimately improved interpersonal skills.



In brief, here are the five core practices, each can be put into action in many ways:

**Self-compassion** is about supporting the fundamental belief that we are inherently worthy of love, guiding us in choosing kindness and connecting us to our shared humanity.

**Grounding** brings us into our body, the present moment, and the surrounding physical and metaphysical world around us.

**Releasing** helps us let go of the ideas, beliefs, thoughts, and patterns that keep us from being who we are or want to be.

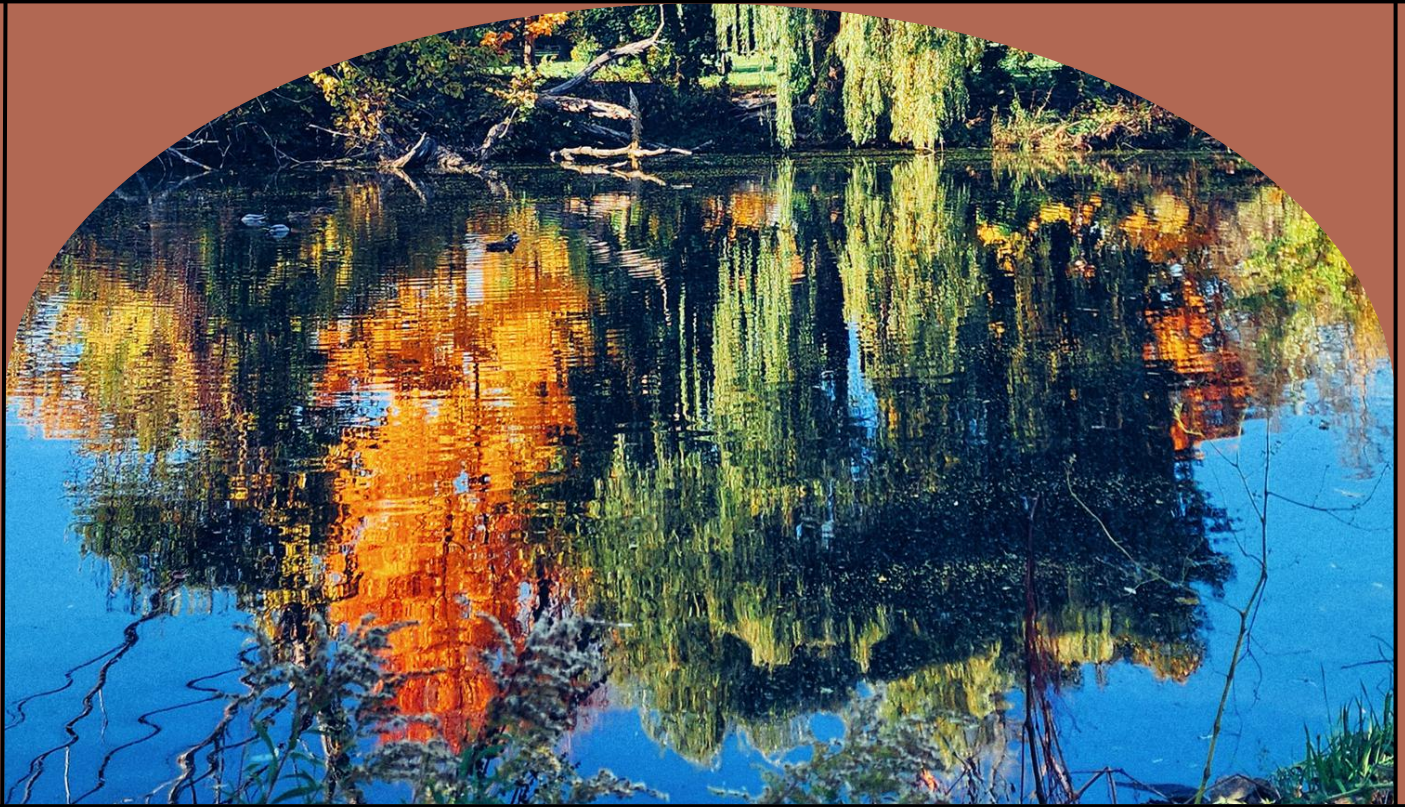
**Clear boundaries** help us understand our own needs, wants, and desires, and supports us in communicating them to others through clarifying our sense of self and autonomy for ourselves and others.

**Intention setting** involves building or co-creating the direction and guidelines for pragmatic, purposeful action while also leaving room for possibility in our lives.

### Ok, but how? Looking ahead to Interpersonal Approaches

There are so many ways we can engage in the five core practices! And the truth is, we don't even know them all. Some of our favorites include breathwork, journaling, circle practice, and more. The five core practices give us a way to understand what we are doing when we practice a particular method, modality, or technique. We've decided to call them interpersonal approaches, which we will address in future offerings.

We believe this term indicates an activeness and intentionality in the practice, that you are “approaching” the practice. You can think of these interpersonal approaches as practices in action. If you have a practice or approach from your experience or culture that supports your presence, then you should include that in your effort to improve your interpersonal qualities and skills.



## REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

We are always practicing something. Typically we operate on a sort of autopilot, often with a set of unexamined beliefs, values, and stories about our life and the world around us. Our daily lives are a practice in reinforcing those things. The Embodied Presence Framework calls us to living a life of reflective practice, to examining those beliefs, values, and stories, to opening ourselves to our own internal landscape. Can you practice being with yourself—your emotions, sensations, habits of mind? Can you learn to stay present when the practice becomes uncomfortable?

When we talk about this framework with others, we often say this work sits in the water of reflective practice. That you can't do any of it without the choice to be reflective, to really look at your life, your behaviors and actions, your emotions, etc. etc. etc. And ultimately we have to do this kind of reflection with other people, not just a therapist or coach, but the people we are in relationship with. The simple logic of this framework is practice, reflect, adjust. The work of interpersonal development requires both the intentional looking inward at ourselves and outward at our context, environment, and relationships. It is the practice of being human.

### Reflective Pause

Which of the five interpersonal practices most resonates with you at this moment? What is it about those practice(s) that resonates with you?



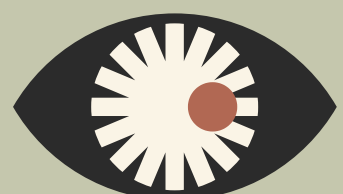
## How to use the **EMBODIED PRESENCE FRAMEWORK**

**We intend for this framework to be a useful tool for you to use in your interpersonal journey.**

At the same time, we sometimes worry that the framework may be perceived as more prescriptive and set-in-stone than it actually is. We agree with statistician George Box (1987) who argued that “all models are wrong, but some are useful.” We do not intend for our framework to ever be finished. It is a living, breathing framework that helps us bring multiple truths together. It is not perfect or “correct,” but publishing a book requires us to present the framework as it currently stands.

Additionally, this framework is our way of teaching & supporting others in their interpersonal development. The framework is not meant to be accepted unquestioningly. You should verify the framework for yourself by working through it in your own life and finding what works for you and what does not. We imagine that some practices, qualities, and skills will feel more natural at some moments in your life than in others, so it is an ongoing journey to engage with this framework as it personally resonates with you. We also know that there are other interpersonal practices, qualities, and skills that we have yet to imagine or forgot to include. Thus, we recommend treating this

framework as an opportunity for authentic reflection in and on your own practice. It’s also important to reiterate that we see great possibility in the power of small adjustments practiced consistently over time. We don’t recommend trying to overhaul your life by introducing five new time-consuming practices. Of course there may be times that you will be drawn into deeper, longer, more extensive practices, but ultimately this is all about living into your best life everyday, so find what feels accessible and sustainable.



# EXAMPLES OF USING THE EMBODIED PRESENCE FRAMEWORK

We want to provide you with some examples of the Embodied Presence Framework in action. We've chosen a few that will demonstrate that there are many ways to work within the framework and there is no one right way to do this work. We all take unique paths through interpersonal development that are informed by culture, identity, values, and past experiences. These examples are also very linear so as to demonstrate how each of the elements of the framework work together. In reality, it's a combination of practices and approaches engaged over time that's likely to bring resolution to the scenarios described here. Here are five examples that demonstrate the multiple in-roads to this framework. Remember, there are endless possibilities for discovery in your journey toward presence.

## BEING IN RELATIONSHIP WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS DIFFERENT POLITICAL BELIEFS

**Scenario:** You have an upcoming visit with your in-laws and you usually find yourself frustrated and angry when your mother-in-law shares her political views.

**Skills:** There are many skills we use when navigating relationships, especially those with tension and disagreement, and this scenario is inherently complex, requiring a multitude of these skills.

**Qualities:** If you want to improve these skills, you are aware that they will require respect, tact, and assertiveness, among others.

**Presence:** You notice that you often disengage during these visits and you lack the ability to stay present. You notice that you feel annoyed, frustrated, and that you feel tension in your shoulders and neck. You'd like to be able to stay present during your visits, but this doesn't yet feel accessible.

**Practice:** You decide you want to engage in the practice of Clear Boundaries. The first step is to figure out what you need to stay present. How can you ask for that from a compassionate place?

**Approach:** Journaling about your past experiences with your mother-in-law to examine your feelings and beliefs. You might use some well-crafted prompts that help you understand the boundaries you need to set.

## EXAMPLES OF USING THE EMBODIED PRESENCE FRAMEWORK

### LOVING YOURSELF AND YOUR PARTNER

**Scenario:** You are in a relationship with a significant other and you find that your low self-esteem is holding you back from fully loving—and being loved by—your partner.

**Presence:** When you are with your partner, you notice that you are “in your head” too much, worrying about what they might think or how you do not feel worthy of their love.

**Practice & approach:** You decide to engage with the core practice of self-compassion, focusing on meditation as a way to build compassion towards yourself.

**Quality:** As a result of this practice, you build kindness, mindfulness, empathy, and optimism.

**Skills:** Through this practice, you feel even closer to your partner. Your love for your partner grows, as does their love for you. You continue to work on loving yourself so that you may also love and be loved by your partner.

### LEARNING ABOUT YOURSELF THROUGH BREATHWORK

**Scenario:** You’ve been feeling stressed out in some of your relationships and you’ve been told you are being overly controlling in some situations.

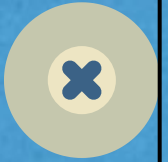
**Practice & approach:** You decide to engage in the core practice of Releasing and you’ve heard that breathwork is a good approach for engaging in this practice.

**Presence:** When you engage in breathwork you are able to spend some time being more present with your emotions around these relationships. You become more aware of your patterns of behavior and can see that you have been trying to control some situations.

**Quality:** As a result, you commit yourself to showing up with more open-mindedness, patience, and curiosity.

**Skills:** You decide that you want to really improve your ability to engage in active listening...and the loop starts again.

# LIVING FROM A PLACE OF EMBODIED PRESENCE



We'd love to tell you that with practice you will one day arrive at a place where all of this is second nature, but the truth is much more complicated than that. First, we (the authors) haven't arrived at that place. Maybe it's somewhere out there in the future, but we've adjusted ourselves to the idea that this is a lifelong, intentional practice. Second, as humans, we are inherently emotional creatures who will experience a life full of ups and downs. This framework intends to have us stay present to all of those experiences through intentional practice. And finally, we live in a culture which will, probably for our lifetimes, continually present us with opportunities to disconnect, to numb ourselves.

So what does it mean to live a life of embodied presence, to embody this framework? Living a life of embodied presence is an ongoing practice, demanding intention, self-awareness, and patience. It is a continual journey of self-discovery and learning to embrace the present moment with openness and curiosity. We hope that by adopting these core practices into your daily life, you can lead a richer, more fulfilling life, experiencing a profound connection with yourself and the world around you.



## FINAL REFLECTIONS

Grab a journal - or better yet a friend who has also read this chapter, and reflect on these questions.

- What would it look like for you to make a personal commitment to use the Embodied Presence Framework for at least a few months, commit to wholly embracing the framework yet also verifying the truth of the framework for you.
- What is an interpersonal skill that you want to develop further? What qualities might be necessary for that interpersonal skill? Which of the five practices do you think will best help support you in developing that interpersonal skill? Thinking through the examples of how to use the framework, develop one or two practices of how you will use the framework to support your interpersonal journey.
- What characteristics of our culture or your upbringing show up when you think about adopting this framework for your personal practice?

# INSPIRATION & LINEAGE

It's important for us to note that we did not invent any of the ideas presented here, that we have simply attempted to draw together a framework that many Americans (and perhaps others socialized in "Western" ways) will find accessible for application in college classes and workplaces.

Our collective lineage of thinkers, writers, and teachers includes: [bell hooks](#), [Bobbie Harro](#), [Audre Lorde](#), [Grace Lee Boggs](#), [Paolo Friere](#), [adrienne marie brown](#), [Brené Brown](#), [Quanita Roberson](#), [Staci K. Haines](#), [John Dewey](#), [Martin Buber](#), [John Peters](#), [Dot & Bob Bolton](#), [David Bohm](#), [John Shotter](#), & [Donald Schön](#).

Further, this work is only necessary due to epistemic injustice & cultural erasure of Indigenous teachings & practices. This work stems from our own desire to reclaim connection to cultural practices that support interdependence with all living things.



## LEARN MORE ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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The authors have all taught multiple sections of a course entitled **Interpersonal Effectiveness Training** at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, in the BS in Psychology and MS in Applied Psychology programs. This work stems from their shared desire to introduce more mindfulness and compassion into the practice of interpersonal communication.

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