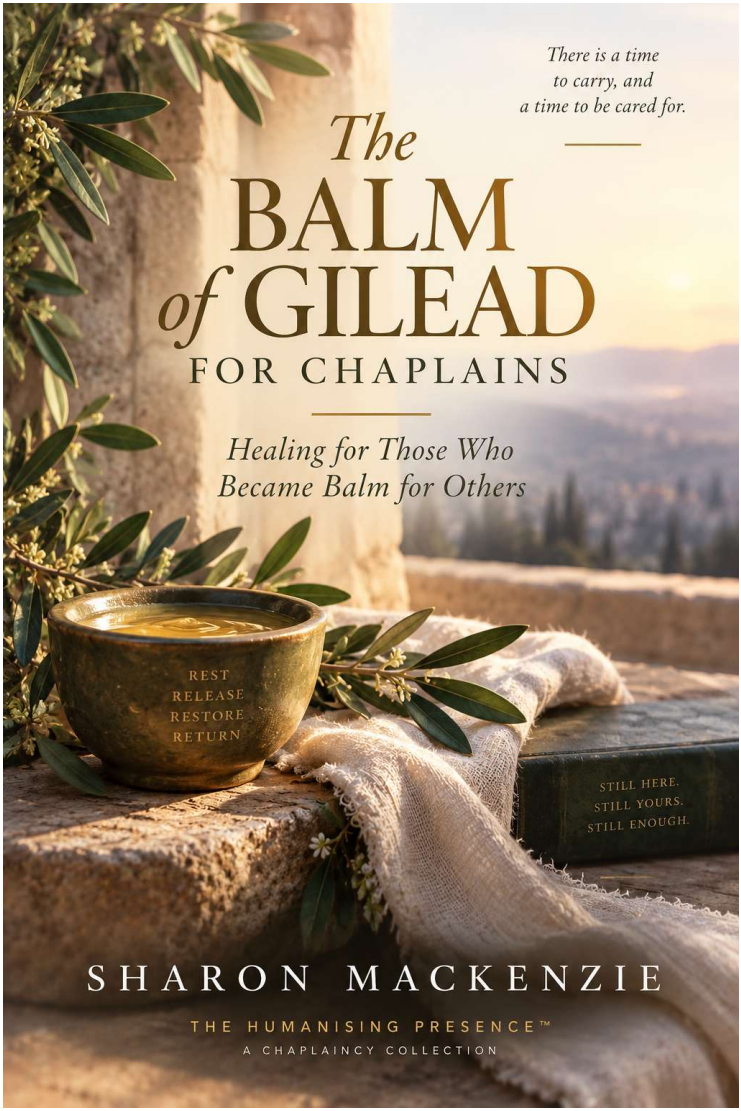


Revised manuscript | 23 October 2026

Dedication

Hey Jude…

And to the chaplains who came carrying compassion and went home carrying wounds.

To those who entered schools, hospitals, correctional centres, defence environments, workplaces and institutions because somewhere inside you was a simple desire: to be present with people. To those who were formed in the Abbey and harmed in the barracks.

To those whose kindness was mistaken for endless capacity, whose faithfulness was mistaken for compliance and whose compassion was treated as an organisational resource. To those whose discernment became inconvenient, whose silence was expected, whose boundaries disappointed people and whose exhaustion was called a resilience problem.

May you find your way home. May your tenderness return without requiring you to be undefended. May your discernment become trustworthy to you again. May God meet you outside the walls.

You were never required to destroy yourself in order to prove that you were called.

“Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there?”

Jeremiah 8:22, KJV

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This Book Is for You

This book is not about making you a better chaplain or getting you ready to go back. You may return, you may never return, or you may discover a completely different expression of your calling.

This book has a different purpose: healing. It is not another resilience programme, a professional development task or a guide to organisational reform. There is another book for the organisations. This one is for you.

That distinction matters. When a person has been wounded inside a caring role, even recovery can become another task. Rest so you can return. Heal so you can serve. Strengthen your boundaries so you can become useful again. I do not want to do that to you here.

You are not a broken pastoral instrument waiting to be repaired for redeployment. You are a human being whose experience deserves to be understood without immediately converting that understanding into organisational usefulness.

There may be places in these pages where you recognise yourself and places where you do not. Take what is yours. Leave what is not. You do not need to prove the severity of your experience to earn the right to heal.

There comes a point when understanding the structure that harmed you is no longer enough. Eventually we have to come home to the person who lived through it.

Formed in the Abbey, Harmed in the Barracks

Many chaplains arrive because something has been forming quietly within them for years: compassion, presence, faith, an instinct to notice the person others overlook, an ability to listen beneath what is being said, and a belief that every human being retains dignity.

Those things are not usually formed in a boardroom. They are formed somewhere quieter. I think of that place as the Abbey.

The Abbey is the inner place where vocation is formed: stillness, prayer, conscience, compassion, discernment, scripture, silence, service. It may not have been literally monastic. It may have been a kitchen table, a church pew, a hospital bedside, a long drive, a season of grief, a community that taught you to listen, or years of ordinary faithfulness. The Abbey is the place in you where care became more than technique.

Then we enter institutional chaplaincy and encounter something very different: the barracks. Here there are hierarchies, policies, procedures, reporting requirements and performance expectations. There are organisational politics, funding arrangements, stakeholders, contracts, risk, reputation and rules of engagement.

The barracks is not automatically bad. Institutions need structure. Hospitals need clinical authority. Correctional centres need security. Schools need governance. Defence environments need command. Workplaces need accountability. The problem is not that structure exists. The problem begins when structure forgets what it is for, or when the chaplain is required to absorb contradictions between systems without adequate authority, protection or voice.

The Abbey asks, ‘Who is this person?’ The barracks asks, ‘What is their role?’ The Abbey forms conscience. The barracks

requires compliance. Healthy chaplaincy needs both. The problem comes when the barracks begins overriding everything formed in the Abbey.

When conscience is subordinated to organisational convenience, compassion is exploited, discernment is silenced and loyalty becomes more important than truth, something inside can begin to fracture. The chaplain may continue functioning long after that fracture begins. Caring people are often very good at continuing.

Then one day the work ends, or the body refuses, or the disillusionment becomes impossible to ignore, or the chaplain realises they no longer recognise the person who entered the role. Jeremiah asks: ‘Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there?’ Where is the balm for the person who spent years being balm for everybody else? This book begins there.

Chapter One - When the Uniform Comes Off

There is a strange experience that can occur when a caring role ends. The work stops, but the body does not seem to know that yet. You may be safe now, but still alert. You are no longer responsible for the role, but still scan for what might go wrong. The phone can be quiet and yet some part of you remains on call.

Chaplaincy is rarely just a role. You may have brought your compassion, spirituality, instincts, hope, sense of calling and identity as someone who can be trusted into it. When the experience becomes harmful, it is difficult to simply say, ‘That was a job.’ Something sacred was involved. The role may have had an ID card, a roster and a position description, but the part of you that entered the room with another person was personal.

This is one reason leaving can feel disorienting. You may miss people you never expected to miss. You may feel relief and grief at the same time. You may feel lighter and then suddenly remember a corridor, a face, a conversation, a meeting or a moment when you knew something was wrong. None of those responses need to be forced into a neat story.

Institutional roles teach us rhythms through doors, keys, security procedures, timetables, handovers, staff rooms, wards, units, classrooms, offices, radios and lanyards. We learn where to stand, who has authority, what tone means trouble, when to wait, when to move and what cannot be said in a particular room. When the uniform comes off, those learned rhythms do not evaporate on command.

Sometimes the first stage of healing is surprisingly ordinary: sleeping without needing to be available, drinking coffee while it is still hot, or going somewhere without calculating who may need you. It may mean allowing a day to be a day rather than a container for pastoral responsibility, or remembering that an

unanswered message is not always an emergency. These things can look small from the outside. They are not small when so much of your life has been organised around other people's urgency.

You may also discover how much of the role had become fused with your identity. If I am not the chaplain, who am I? If I am not the person people come to, what is my place? If I am no longer carrying confidential stories, mediating distress, noticing the lonely person or stepping toward crisis, am I still useful? The question beneath those questions is gentler: was usefulness ever meant to be the measure of your worth?

The Abbey has a different answer. Before the institution knew your name, before anyone accredited you, before a provider placed you, before a manager approved your access, you were already a person. Your worth did not begin with your usefulness and it does not end when the uniform comes off.

Coming home means discovering what happened to you, what it changed, what remains yours and what can finally be set down. It begins with allowing the role to end without requiring the person who carried it to disappear as well.

A quiet place to notice

What still feels 'on duty' in me, even though the role has ended or changed?

What parts of myself existed before I became useful to an institution?

What ordinary things help me remember that I am a person, not a pastoral function?

Chapter Two - You Are Allowed to Name the Wound

Chaplains can become very good at understanding other people's behaviour. We contextualise, empathise and make room for complexity. We know that leaders are under pressure, organisations are imperfect and people often act badly from fear, fatigue or limitation. Sometimes that generous understanding becomes the very mechanism by which we avoid acknowledging that something hurt us.

You can understand why someone behaved as they did and still say: it harmed me. Those statements are not enemies. Compassion does not require inaccurate accounting. Naming a wound can feel disloyal when the place that harmed you also gave you meaningful work. Perhaps you loved the people. Perhaps some leaders were kind. Perhaps you experienced moments of genuine grace. Perhaps you still believe deeply in chaplaincy. Acknowledging harm does not erase any of that. Mature truth is capable of holding more than one fact at a time.

Healing does not require demonising organisations. Nor does it require protecting them from every uncomfortable truth. Do not exaggerate what happened, but do not minimise it either. Accuracy is a form of dignity. It allows you to stop arguing with yourself about whether you are permitted to have been affected.

Perhaps you were pressured, silenced, exposed to risk, given contradictory expectations or left without a safe avenue to speak. Perhaps the institution wanted the benefits of your independence but became uncomfortable when independent judgement produced an inconvenient conclusion. Perhaps your provider wanted access preserved more than it wanted your concerns heard. Perhaps nobody intended to harm you and yet the arrangement still did.

One of the cruellest effects of prolonged ambiguity is that chaplains can become the final court of appeal against themselves. Was I too sensitive? Too direct? Not spiritual enough? Too spiritual? Did I misunderstand? Should I have

waited? Should I have said more? When every external pathway is unclear, the conflict can migrate inward.

Naming interrupts that migration. You can begin with what happened and what it changed: this was confusing; this placed me in an impossible position; this frightened me or made me angry. It changed how I trusted, affected my faith or made me dread going in. This mattered.

A wound does not have to be dramatic to be real. Repetition matters. Small compromises, chronic pressure, constant vigilance, unresolved role conflict and the steady requirement to swallow what you can see can accumulate. The absence of one spectacular event does not mean there was no injury.

You are allowed to use language proportionate to your experience. You can say that something was harmful without proving that every person involved was malicious, or that a structure failed you without claiming that everything within it was bad. You are allowed to tell the truth in complete sentences. Naming is not the whole of healing, but it gives healing somewhere honest to begin.

A quiet place to notice

What happened when I tried to explain what I was experiencing?

What have I repeatedly minimised because I could understand everyone else’s position?

What is the most accurate, least exaggerated sentence I can use to name what happened to me?

Chapter Three - Burnout Is Not a Verdict

Burnout is a useful word, but sometimes it is too small. It may describe depletion without telling us what caused it. A person can be exhausted because they worked too much. They can also be exhausted because they spent months or years carrying contradictions they did not create and could not resolve.

The language surrounding chaplaincy distress can become a form of invitational gaslighting. When words such as burnout, compassion fatigue, poor boundaries, insufficient resilience and lack of self-care are applied too quickly, they invite the chaplain to interpret a reasonable response to unreasonable conditions as evidence that something is wrong with them.

Nobody has to say, ‘This is your fault.’ The invitation is subtler: take a break, strengthen your boundaries, use supervision better, become more resilient, learn to switch off. Pray, rest, attend the retreat. All of these may be good things. None, by itself, resolves a structural contradiction.

If you are accountable to a provider and a host whose expectations conflict, a breathing exercise cannot reconcile the contracts. If you are discouraged from naming organisational harm because access must be preserved, a day off cannot create an independent reporting pathway. If you are physically exposed because relational accessibility has been prioritised without corresponding safeguards, better self-care cannot redesign the environment.

The story can quietly become: you could not cope. But another story may be true: you were repeatedly navigating divided accountability, constrained voice, unsafe expectations, institutional dysfunction, moral strain and responsibility for problems you did not have authority to resolve.

This is where narrative control matters. Language does more than name distress; it tells us where to look for responsibility. If the word burnout turns everybody’s gaze toward the chaplain,

the environment can disappear from view. The chaplain becomes both the person harmed by the conditions and the person expected to repair the consequences within themselves.

There is a difference between taking responsibility for your healing and accepting blame for what made healing necessary. You may need rest, counselling, medical care, spiritual care, boundaries, time, grief, community or change. Receiving that care does not require you to accept a false explanation for why you need it.

Sometimes the most restorative sentence is ‘That was too much to ask of one person.’ The arrangement may have been unreasonable, however hard you tried to cope with it.

This book therefore refuses to use burnout as a verdict. It may describe how depleted you became, but it does not settle what caused that depletion. Your workload, governance environment, divided loyalties, safety conditions and the cumulative moral cost of remaining present all deserve attention.

The healing question is not, ‘Why wasn’t I resilient enough?’ It is: what did I have to cope with? And once that is named, another question becomes possible: what no longer belongs inside me?

A quiet place to notice

When I use the word burnout, what causes disappear from the story?

Which supports helped me, and which explanations made me feel more responsible for a structural problem?

What did I actually have to cope with?

Chapter Four - The Burdens That Belonged Upstream

One of the deepest movements in healing is learning to distinguish between what belonged to you and what was deposited into you. Chaplains often work close to consequences. Proximity can create the illusion of ownership.

The disagreement between provider and host institution belonged to those organisations to resolve. The provider's anxiety about maintaining access, a funding body's expectations and an institution's reluctance to address harmful leadership did not become yours to carry simply because they affected your work. Nor did the provider's reputation or the failure of two organisations to clarify your role.

You may have been required to deal with the consequences. That can make something feel like your responsibility. A student arrives distressed because adults have failed. A prisoner carries the effects of institutional decisions. A staff member tells you about a culture that management will not address. A provider asks you to smooth over a relationship it should be governing. Because the consequence lands in your room, it is tempting to believe the cause has become yours to solve.

Care and ownership are different things. You can care about a problem without becoming its owner, and accompany a person through consequences without accepting responsibility for the system producing them.

Many chaplains are conscientious people. Conscientiousness is beautiful until a system discovers it can leave gaps because you will quietly fill them. Compassion is beautiful until an organisation learns that your discomfort with letting people down will keep you carrying more. Flexibility is beautiful until everybody else's lack of clarity becomes your permanent adaptation.

This does not require a conspiracy. An arrangement can continue through repetition: if the chaplain absorbs the conflict, it does not have to travel upstream. If the chaplain compensates for the gap, the gap becomes less visible. If the chaplain keeps everyone calm, leadership may never feel the full consequence of its own decisions.

Healing may therefore include an audit of invisible burdens. What did you carry because you were kind? What did you carry because nobody else would? What did you carry because the person in front of you would otherwise suffer? What did you carry because saying no threatened access, belonging, reputation or vocation?

Some responsibilities were genuinely yours: your conduct, confidentiality, decisions, boundaries, mistakes and words. Taking responsibility for those is part of integrity. But integrity also means refusing false responsibility. Accepting blame for what belonged to someone with greater authority distorts the account of what happened.

‘I was carrying it’ is not the same sentence as ‘It belonged to me.’ The distinction can change everything.

A quiet place to notice

What did I carry because I was closest to the consequences?

Which responsibilities belonged to people or organisations with more authority than I had?

What was genuinely mine, and what only felt mine because I cared?

Chapter Five - The Sacred Act of Giving Responsibility Back

There may come a point in restoration when understanding what happened makes room for release. Until then, the mind can keep revisiting: if I had explained it differently, been firmer, been softer, spoken sooner, stayed quiet, tried once more. Retrospective imagination can produce an endless supply of alternate versions of you.

There may be things you would do differently now. That is wisdom, and wisdom does not require self-punishment. Being able to imagine a better response now does not mean the version of you inside the situation had the same distance, information, safety or freedom.

At some point you may need to say: I return this responsibility to the people who had the authority to carry it. What belonged to the provider, management, governance or the institution goes back to them. I keep only what was actually mine.

Giving responsibility back is not revenge. It does not require the other party to agree. It may happen without a meeting, apology or acknowledgement. It is an internal correction of ownership.

This can be difficult for people formed in Christian service. We are often taught to carry one another's burdens, go the extra mile, forgive, be patient, serve and endure. These teachings can become dangerous when responsibility has already been distorted. Carrying one another's burdens was never meant to mean carrying another person's accountability so they never have to face it.

There is a form of false peace that depends upon the most conscientious person continuing to absorb the discomfort. When that person stops, the system may become noisier. That does not necessarily mean the boundary is wrong. Sometimes the noise is simply responsibility returning to its proper owner.

You may feel guilt when you stop rescuing. Guilt is not always proof of wrongdoing. Sometimes it is the sensation of leaving an

old role. If you have spent years preventing consequences from reaching other people, allowing consequences to travel upstream can feel cruel even when it is simply accurate.

Release can be practical. You might stop drafting the email you will never send or rehearsing the meeting that cannot be repaired. Put the documents in a folder rather than on your desk. Decide what record needs to be retained and what no longer needs to occupy daily mental space. Return objects that keep you psychologically on duty. Let the institution become a place in your history rather than a permanent room inside your head.

Giving responsibility its proper place can feel like mercy.

A quiet place to notice

Whose responsibility am I still mentally carrying?

What would ‘giving it back’ look like without requiring anyone else’s agreement?

Where might guilt simply be the feeling of no longer over-functioning?

Chapter Six - You Do Not Have to Keep the Institution Inside You

Institutions can remain inside us long after we leave them. We anticipate their judgement. We argue with leaders in imaginary conversations. We explain ourselves to people who are no longer listening. We mentally rehearse the complaint and relive the meeting.

This is understandable. When something unresolved has mattered deeply, the mind keeps looking for the missing ending. Perhaps one more explanation would finally make them understand. Perhaps the right wording would produce fairness. Perhaps a leader will suddenly recognise what happened and restore the story to right order.

Sometimes that happens. Often it does not. Healing cannot be held hostage to another person’s insight. An institution can remain inside us when its labels become our own: difficult, disloyal, not a team player, too emotional, too sensitive, not resilient, unsafe or rebellious. Those labels can continue speaking long after the people who used them are absent.

Restoration gradually relocates authority. Their voice becomes one voice, not the voice. Their interpretation becomes one interpretation, not truth itself. Their disappointment becomes theirs. Their version of events can exist without becoming the architecture of your identity.

This does not mean refusing all feedback. Healthy internal authority is not stubbornness. It is the capacity to receive information, test it against conscience, evidence, values, wise counsel and reality, and decide what belongs. You can learn from criticism without surrendering the right to evaluate it.

You may need to notice institutional habits that followed you home: over-explaining, preparing a defence before anyone has accused you, reading silence as disapproval, scanning authority figures for mood, assuming boundaries need justification or feeling responsible for everybody’s comfort. These habits may

once have helped you navigate the role. They do not have to govern the next chapter.

The Abbey begins to re-emerge when there is enough quiet for your own voice to become audible again, beneath the defence and the preparation of a case. It is the voice that can say: I know what I saw, what I value, what I regret, what I do not accept and what I am free to leave behind.

You do not have to keep the institution inside you in order to prove that what happened mattered. You can remember without remaining inhabited.

A quiet place to notice

Which institutional voices still speak inside me?

What behaviours helped me survive there but do not belong in my life now?

What does my own voice sound like when I am not preparing a defence?

Chapter Seven - When You Were Taught Not to Trust What You Saw

One of the deepest wounds in institutional environments can occur when discernment repeatedly collides with organisational preference. You notice a pattern. You raise it carefully. The response is minimisation, delay, redirection, reassurance or a warning not to create difficulty.

After enough repetitions, the conflict can move inward: perhaps I am seeing too much, perhaps I am interpreting it wrongly, or perhaps I am the problem because I cannot simply let it go.

Discernment is not infallibility. Chaplains can misunderstand. We can hear one side of a story, over-identify, miss context or interpret through our own history. Good discernment therefore remains humble, evidence-aware and open to correction. But humility is not the same as chronic self-erasure.

There is a difference between being corrected and being trained not to see. Correction gives reasons, evidence and a pathway to clearer understanding. Silencing simply teaches that some observations are too inconvenient to hold.

Relational work gives chaplains unusual access to human consequences. People tell you what they will not tell management. You see repeated distress across people who may not know one another. You notice the same fear, the same confusion, the same leadership behaviour, the same gap between policy and lived reality. None of this automatically proves a systemic conclusion. It does, however, justify attention.

When the organisation has no safe way to receive information about recurring patterns, the chaplain can be left holding confidential knowledge and wider concerns without a safe way to address those concerns. That is a difficult moral space. Over

time, the easiest way to survive may seem to be to distrust the part of yourself that keeps noticing.

Healing can restore discernment slowly by restoring your right to examine your perceptions, rather than declaring every old perception correct. What did I see? What evidence supported it? What did others independently report? What was interpretation, and what was fact? What did I know then, and what do I know now?

This is internal authority returning with humility intact. You do not need to become certain about everything. You only need to stop treating uncertainty as proof that you were wrong. Your discernment does not need to be perfect to deserve respect.

A quiet place to notice

What did I repeatedly notice?

How was I responded to when I named it?

What would it look like to respect my discernment without declaring myself infallible?

Chapter Eight - Your Body Was Paying Attention Too

Sometimes the body registers a situation before the mind has language for it. The stomach tightens before a meeting. Sleep changes before a shift. You become unusually alert around a particular person. Sunday afternoon carries dread because Monday is coming. You leave a conversation exhausted even though nothing obviously dramatic occurred.

The body is not a perfect oracle. Physical sensations can arise for many reasons. But neither is the body irrelevant. It is one source of information among others, and prolonged institutional strain often has a physical dimension.

Chaplains are sometimes encouraged to transcend bodily limits in the name of calling: stay available, be flexible, keep showing up, do not make it about you. Yet having a body is not a failure of spirituality. Hunger, fatigue, fear, tension, startle, tears and the need for rest are part of being human.

If your body learned that certain rooms were unsafe, it may continue reacting after the threat is gone. That does not mean you are weak. It means something was learned. Healing can include gently allowing new experiences to teach something different: this room is not that room; this conversation is not that meeting; this leader is not that leader; I can leave; I can say no; I am not trapped.

Sometimes people want the body to calm down without changing the conditions that made it alert. Safety is not merely a feeling to manufacture internally. It is also something environments either support or undermine.

Restoration may therefore involve both inner and outer changes: a slower schedule, fewer high-conflict relationships, medical or therapeutic support where appropriate, and time outside institutional settings. Movement, sleep, prayer that is not performance, places where nobody knows you as the chaplain

and relationships in which you are not the designated strong person may all have a place.

Pay attention without turning attention into another project. You do not need to monitor yourself perfectly. You are learning companionship with your own body rather than management of it. Your body may have been paying attention when your mind was still trying to be reasonable. You can listen now without panic and without contempt.

A quiet place to notice

What did my body repeatedly do around the work?

Which reactions reduced when I left or created distance?

What external conditions help my body understand that it is safe enough now?

Chapter Nine - When the Calling Became Contaminated

Perhaps chaplaincy once felt clear, even when it was difficult. You were there to care, listen, accompany, pray when invited, notice dignity and stand beside people in difficult places. Then other things accumulated around it: politics, funding, access, performance, reputation, institutional loyalty, provider expectations and conflict.

When those things become entangled with vocation, the calling itself can begin to feel contaminated. A word that once brought warmth now brings dread. A lanyard once associated with privilege becomes associated with pressure. Scripture that once nourished you becomes entangled with organisational language about obedience, endurance or sacrifice.

This can produce a particular grief because you are not only grieving a job. You may be grieving the meaning you attached to it. You may wonder whether the whole thing was naive.

It was not necessarily naive. The sacred moments remain sacred: the conversation in which someone felt seen, the lonely person who realised somebody remembered their name, the student who found a safe adult, the prisoner who spoke honestly because the chaplain was not a custodial officer, or the patient who did not have to perform courage. Those moments are not invalidated by structural failure around them.

The institution does not own those moments. The provider does not own your compassion. The conflict does not own your calling. What was beautiful can be separated from what became harmful.

This separation matters spiritually. If calling and institution become fused, leaving the institution can feel like leaving God. If service and self-erasure become fused, boundaries can feel like selfishness. If faithfulness and endurance become fused,

departure can feel like betrayal. Healing gently untangles those pairings.

Calling may be larger than a role. It may reappear in counselling, writing, friendship, teaching, advocacy, spiritual formation, ordinary kindness or a life that is quieter than before. It may even rest for a season without needing to be redefined.

You do not have to rescue the calling immediately. Let it be quiet. Let God, meaning, service and identity exist without a job description. You can acknowledge what was sacred alongside what was harmful.

A quiet place to notice

What parts of chaplaincy still feel sacred to me?

What became contaminated by organisational experience?

What if calling is larger than the role that once carried it?

Chapter Ten - Anger Is Not the Opposite of Compassion

Chaplains can become frightened by their own anger, especially Christian chaplains formed to value forgiveness, patience, gentleness and grace. Anger can feel like evidence that something spiritually important has been lost.

Anger is not automatically evidence that grace has failed. Sometimes it arrives because something precious was violated: dignity, safety, trust, justice or calling. Sometimes it is your refusal to keep calling wrong things harmless.

There are destructive forms of anger. Anger can become contempt, obsession, retaliation or a permanent identity. But the possibility of misuse does not make the emotion itself illegitimate.

Perhaps anger needs to be allowed to speak before it can become quiet. What are you protecting? What happened that should not have happened? What did you lose? What should have been different? What responsibility was displaced onto you? What truth was repeatedly softened so other people would remain comfortable?

For people who have spent years understanding everyone else, anger can restore moral proportion. It says: my experience belongs in the story too. My safety mattered. My voice mattered. My calling was not an unlimited resource. My goodwill did not entitle anyone to endless access.

Christian language can sometimes be used to hurry anger toward forgiveness before it has finished telling the truth. Forgiveness may be deeply meaningful, but it is not the same as declaring the wound unimportant. It does not require restored trust, renewed access or the removal of consequences.

Anger can also reveal grief. Beneath ‘How dare they?’ may be ‘I trusted them.’ Beneath ‘They should have known better’ may be ‘I thought I was safe there.’ Beneath ‘I will never let this happen again’ may be ‘I wish it had not happened the first time.’

You do not have to build a permanent home in anger. But you may need to visit long enough to recover what it was trying to protect. Anger can then inform a boundary, clarify a truth or give you courage, and may eventually become something quieter.

Compassion that cannot include compassion for the chaplain is incomplete compassion.

A quiet place to notice

- What is my anger trying to protect?
- What grief sits underneath it?
- What boundary or truth becomes clearer when I stop treating anger as a spiritual failure?

Chapter Eleven - Grieving the People You Could Not Save

Chaplaincy places us beside people whose circumstances we cannot fix. You may remember the person who returned to the same environment, the student whose home life remained difficult, the staff member who stayed under the same leadership, the prisoner who was transferred, the patient whose prognosis did not change, the person who never came back.

The intimacy of pastoral presence can create a strange illusion of responsibility. Because someone trusted us with the truth, we can begin to feel responsible for what happened after the conversation ended.

But presence is not control. Listening is not omnipotence. Care does not grant jurisdiction over another person’s life, family, institution, illness, sentence, choices or future.

Some chaplains carry a private archive of unfinished stories. There may be names you still remember, faces that return unexpectedly, people whose outcomes you never learned. Confidentiality means these stories are often carried quietly. There may be no public ritual for the grief.

You are allowed to grieve people you could not save without turning grief into an accusation against yourself. You were present inside limits. Sometimes that presence changed everything. Sometimes it changed one hour. Sometimes you will never know what it changed.

There is humility in acknowledging: I was present, but I was not omnipotent. I did what was mine within the authority, information and capacity I had. Where I failed, I can learn; where I was simply limited, I can grieve without self-condemnation.

If faith is part of your life, perhaps there is also a spiritual act of returning people to God. Not as a way of avoiding responsibility, but as a recognition that they were never yours to possess. Their story exceeded your chapter in it.

You may remember them with tenderness. You may honour what they taught you. You may let the fact that you could not control the ending coexist with the fact that your presence mattered. You were never given responsibility for every outcome.

A quiet place to notice

Whose story am I still carrying as though I was responsible for the ending?

What was genuinely within my control?

Can I honour the relationship without claiming ownership of the outcome?

Chapter Twelve - Before You Were Useful

Who were you before the institution needed you, before the roster, ID card, accreditation, provider and reporting structure, before people began seeking you out? There was a person.

Perhaps you were quieter, playful or prayerful. Perhaps you liked coffee, gardens, books, music, dogs, paint, cooking, driving, the ocean, old churches or ridiculous conversations that had nothing to do with human suffering. That person matters.

Caring professions can make usefulness intoxicating. Being needed gives shape to the day. People trust you. Problems come toward you because you know what to do. The institution may praise flexibility and reliability. Soon it becomes difficult to distinguish vocation from availability.

But usefulness is a poor foundation for identity because there is always more need. If worth rises and falls with how much you can carry, rest will feel like failure and boundaries will feel like a reduction in value.

The Abbey asks a different question: who are you becoming when nobody needs anything from you? This can be surprisingly uncomfortable. Silence may reveal how accustomed you became to being summoned by other people’s urgency.

Recovery of self is often ordinary rather than dramatic. It can begin with relearning preference: what do I actually like, where do I want to go, who do I enjoy and what makes me laugh? What am I curious about when it does not have to become a ministry resource? What do I want to make simply because making it delights me?

There may be grief here too. You may notice how much of yourself was deferred. That grief does not need to become another accusation. Let it become information about how you want to live now.

You are more than your usefulness. Service can flow from personhood; personhood should not have to be earned through service. Before you were useful to the institution, you were already worthy of care.

A quiet place to notice

Who was I before I became useful in this particular way?

What do I enjoy that produces no pastoral outcome?

Where has usefulness become confused with worth?

Chapter Thirteen - Be Still

There is a kind of stillness in which internal authority can begin returning. The world has stopped shouting instructions. Nobody needs a decision, needs you to mediate or needs you to keep the programme alive.

‘Be still, and know that I am God’ is often quoted as though stillness were simply a technique for becoming calmer. But stillness can also be a reordering of authority. I am not God. The institution is not God. The provider is not God. The crisis is not God. The need in front of me, however real, does not make me omnipotent.

For a chaplain accustomed to responsiveness, stillness may initially feel unproductive. The mind produces lists. The body remembers urgency. Silence can feel like an empty space that should be filled with prayer, study, service or improvement.

The Abbey does not require performance. Stillness can be sitting by a window, walking slowly, reading one line rather than a chapter, lighting a candle, listening to birds, praying without producing insight, or simply noticing that no one is asking anything of you in this moment.

Over time, quiet can separate God from institutional noise. You may discover how much spiritual language became attached to organisational expectations: calling, faithfulness, submission, sacrifice, mission and service. These words may need time before they feel safe again. Do not force them. God does not require you to repair your spiritual vocabulary on a deadline.

In that quiet, there may be room for your own rhythm, thoughts, prayer, desire and discernment to return, and for a relationship with God separate from the organisations that once connected that relationship with calling and service.

Stillness is not withdrawal from life forever. It is a place where you can become available to life again without first becoming available to everybody else. The Abbey waits - not as another demand, but as home.

A quiet place to notice

What happens inside me when nothing is required for a while?

Which spiritual words became tangled with institutional expectations?

What form of stillness feels like welcome rather than discipline?

Chapter Fourteen - God Is Not the Institution

When the organisation is religious, or the provider speaks the language of calling, obedience and ministry, organisational injury can become spiritually confusing. A disagreement with leadership can begin to feel like a disagreement with God.

Was I disobedient? Did I fail God? Am I rebellious? Did I leave because I was not strong enough? Did I abandon my calling? These questions can linger long after employment questions are settled.

One distinction must eventually become clear: God is not the organisation. No provider owns your calling. No institution has authority to define your entire spiritual worth. No organisational rejection proves divine rejection.

Religious institutions are capable of wisdom and folly, courage and fear, humility and self-protection, just like other human systems. Their sacred language does not make every decision sacred. Their leaders can be sincere and still wrong; their policies can be well-intended and still harmful. Their disappointment can be real without becoming God’s verdict.

This distinction protects both faith and accountability. When God and institution are fused, challenging an institution can be framed as spiritual rebellion. When they are separated, the institution can be evaluated like any other human structure: by its fruit, conduct, governance, justice, safety, truthfulness and treatment of people.

You may need to meet God outside the language of ministry for a while, away from rosters, mission statements, performance reviews, commissioning services and provider expectations. Perhaps you will find room in ordinary life or silence, in scripture read slowly without searching for instructions, or among people who do not need you to return to a role.

The institution may have been one place in which you served. It was never God. Leaving a structure can sometimes be the very thing that allows faith to breathe again.

If your relationship with God feels wounded, you do not need to pretend otherwise. Spiritual restoration can include lament, anger, silence, doubt and the refusal to use easy answers. The God of lament is not frightened by an honest sentence. God is not the institution. That sentence may be one of the doors home.

A quiet place to notice

Where did institutional approval become entangled with divine approval?

Which organisational messages still sound like God’s voice in my head?

What might faith look like outside the machinery of the role?

Chapter Fifteen - Is There No Balm in Gilead?

Jeremiah’s question is haunting: ‘Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there?’ It emerges from lament. The question does not deny the wound. It looks directly at devastation and asks whether healing is still possible.

That matters for chaplains. We are often fluent in hope on behalf of other people. We know how to sit beside grief without rushing it. We know how to hold possibility when someone else cannot. It can be harder to extend that same patience toward ourselves.

Perhaps the first balm is truth: the version that can admit you were affected, lost something, feel angry or relieved, miss the work or never want to go back. You may still love the work while no longer trusting the structure. You may not know what you believe about calling now. Conflicting feelings can coexist while healing unfolds.

Perhaps another balm is right responsibility. The wound often remains inflamed while we continue carrying blame that belongs elsewhere. Giving responsibility back creates space for the self to stop defending against an accusation it should never have owned. Another balm may be safe relationship. Not everyone needs the full story. But healing often requires at least one place where you do not have to protect the institution, protect the provider, protect the people involved, protect your professional image and protect everyone else from your anger at the same time.

There may be practical balms: sleep, therapy, medical support, supervision that is genuinely independent, spiritual direction, time, creativity, nature, laughter, work that does not consume your identity, people who know you outside the role. None is magic. Healing is often cumulative.

Spiritual balm does not require you to use prayer to bypass anger, demand forgiveness before truth or send yourself back into endurance. The balm of God is not another organisational performance measure. It is presence that does not need you to be useful.

Healing may not mean becoming who you were before. Perhaps it means becoming more integrated: compassion with boundaries, discernment with authority, faith without institutional approval, service without disappearance, kindness freely given rather than structurally extracted.

The balm does not make the wound imaginary. It offers the possibility that the wound will no longer be sovereign.

A quiet place to notice

What has actually felt like balm to me?

Which forms of ‘help’ felt like pressure to become functional again?

What would healing look like if usefulness were not the measure?

Chapter Sixteen - Healing Without Returning

Restoration does not automatically mean restoration to the role. This can be difficult in cultures that treat return as proof of recovery. We like stories in which the wounded person heals, goes back and does the same thing with better boundaries.

You may return to chaplaincy. You may become a different kind of chaplain. You may work outside institutions, teach, write, counsel, create resources, provide spiritual formation, volunteer occasionally, or never work in chaplaincy again. None of those outcomes determines whether healing occurred.

Returning can be beautiful when the person is free enough to choose it. So can not returning.

A role can be meaningful and still no longer belong to you. A calling can change form. A season can end without becoming a failure. You do not owe an institution a sequel simply because it once occupied an important chapter.

There is particular freedom in discovering that the skills formed in chaplaincy are portable. Presence, listening, discernment, calm, ethical reflection, the ability to sit with complexity, the instinct to see the person beneath the category - these do not vanish when the lanyard does.

You can carry the wisdom without recreating the environment, and honour the vocation without returning to the structure. What you learned in the barracks can travel with you without requiring you to remain there.

If you do return, return as a person who knows that access is not ownership, calling is not captivity, compassion is not endless capacity and institutional approval is not the measure of faithfulness. Return because the conditions are sound enough and the choice is genuinely yours, not because you need to prove the wound did not defeat you.

Healing is not measured by whether you become useful to the system again. It is about becoming free to choose how you live.

A quiet place to notice

If nobody expected me to return, what would I choose?

Which parts of my chaplaincy formation can travel with me into other work or life?

What conditions would have to be present for any future return to be genuinely free?

Chapter Seventeen - Compassion Without Self-Abandonment

The goal is not to become hard. After being overused, misunderstood or left unprotected, hardness can feel safe: never again, I will not care that much, let people close or be the one who notices.

Protection matters, but it need not cost you your tenderness. Compassion can coexist with discernment and boundaries. Forgiveness need not force reconciliation, grace need not require pretending, and empathy need not become over-functioning. You can be present without absorbing everything around you.

Self-abandonment often disguises itself as virtue. We ignore fatigue because someone needs us. We override discomfort because we do not want to disappoint. We accept ambiguity because raising it may threaten the relationship. We keep explaining because perhaps one more explanation will produce understanding. We stay available because being unavailable feels unkind.

Compassion without self-abandonment changes the sentence. I care, and I cannot do that. I understand, and the answer is no. I forgive, and access is not restored. I can sit beside you, and I cannot take responsibility for your decision. I can see the organisational problem, and I am not the person with authority to fix it.

This is compassion that tells the truth about what you can offer. It refuses to make promises you cannot sustainably keep.

Boundaries are sometimes described as walls. They can also be doors with hinges. A healthy door can open and close. It allows welcome without abolishing the home. The fact that another person wants entry does not create entitlement.

The same is true institutionally. Your capacity, conscience, time, faith, body and relational skill are not common property. A role may legitimately ask something of them. It does not own them.

You can care deeply without becoming responsible for everything you perceive. You can love people without allowing institutions to consume you. You can remain tender without becoming undefended. Perhaps this is one of the great restorations after institutional harm: not becoming less compassionate, but becoming compassionate from a place where you remain present to yourself as well.

A quiet place to notice

Where did compassion become self-abandonment?

What sentences allow me to care and remain intact?

Which doors in my life need hinges rather than permanent openness or permanent closure?

Chapter Eighteen - What I Will No Longer Carry

A rule of life is not another set of demands. It is a way of naming the conditions under which you intend to remain human. After the barracks, that may begin with what you will no longer carry.

I will no longer carry organisational conflict that belongs to organisational leaders. I will no longer mistake proximity for responsibility. I will no longer preserve relationships at the cost of my own integrity. I will not make my silence the price of belonging. I will not surrender my physical or psychological safety because I am called to care.

I will not confuse forgiveness with unrestricted access. I will not accept responsibility for fixing systems I do not govern. I will not allow another organisation to tell me that my distress proves I am deficient before examining the environment in which that distress developed.

I will not treat every need I can see as an assignment. I will not assume that because I can solve a problem I am therefore responsible for solving it. I will not turn my competence into an argument for endless availability.

I will not make myself smaller to preserve somebody else’s comfort. I will not confuse being easy to manage with being faithful. I will not call chronic ambiguity flexibility when it is actually a failure of governance.

I will not surrender discernment simply because a person with greater positional authority interprets events differently. I will listen, test what I think and remain open to correction. And I will retain the right to think.

I will not use spiritual language against myself. Calling will not mean captivity. Sacrifice will not mean disappearance. Grace will not mean the removal of accountability. Unity will not mean uniformity. Peace will not mean silence in the presence of harm.

And I will not hand another institution authority over my relationship with God.

These are not vows of bitterness. They are boundaries around what experience has taught you is too costly to surrender. They make room for a different kind of service - one in which the chaplain remains a human being too.

A quiet place to notice

Which burden needs a clear ‘I will no longer’ sentence?

What old virtue-language was used to keep me carrying too much?

Which boundary protects something sacred rather than merely keeping something out?

Chapter Nineteen - What I Will Carry

Release is only half the story. You are not leaving the barracks empty-handed. There are things worth carrying forward.

I will carry compassion, but differently. I will carry tenderness, courage, humility, discernment and appropriate responsibility. I will carry gratitude for the people who allowed me to sit beside them. I will carry what I learned.

I will carry the knowledge that people are always more than the category a system assigns them, whether patient, prisoner, student, staff member, client, officer, manager or chaplain. Each category may be administratively necessary; none is the whole person.

I will carry respect for presence. Not every problem needs a solution in the moment. Sometimes the most human thing we offer is our refusal to look away.

I will carry a sharper understanding of power. Good intentions, spiritual language and helping roles do not remove it. Institutions need accountability precisely because sincere people can still participate in harmful structures.

I will carry discernment without making it a weapon. I will notice patterns, ask questions, test assumptions and remain willing to be wrong. I will also refuse to call myself wrong merely because the truth is inconvenient.

I will carry my limits as wisdom. The boundary is not evidence that compassion ended. It is part of how compassion remains possible.

I will carry the wisdom gained through pain without making pain my identity. What happened can become part of my knowledge without becoming the organising centre of my future.

And I will carry myself: my body, humour, preferences, voice, faith, questions, creativity and ordinary life. That may be new.

The aim is not to emerge untouched. It is to emerge integrated: able to remember what happened without handing it permanent authority over what happens next.

A quiet place to notice

What do I genuinely want to carry from chaplaincy?

Which lessons can become wisdom without becoming fear?

What parts of myself am I deliberately carrying forward now?

Chapter Twenty - The Chaplain Comes Home

Perhaps the final movement is home.

Home to your body, your voice, your own company, the people who know you outside the role, laughter, rest and the parts of yourself that became quiet while everybody else needed something. Home to God outside institutional machinery. Home to the Abbey.

Coming home is rarely one dramatic moment. You may notice that you went a whole day without rehearsing the old conversation, that a name no longer tightens your chest, or that you can enter a similar building without becoming the person you were there. You may find yourself laughing freely, wanting something again or becoming curious about the future.

You may discover that the person returning is not the same person who left. That is all right. The barracks taught you things, some through beauty and some through pain. You know more about systems and yourself, about the difference between service and disappearance, the cost of silence and the sacredness of right responsibility.

There may still be scars. Healing is not amnesia. You may remain more alert to certain patterns. You may ask harder questions before trusting an organisation. You may leave earlier when governance is unclear. This does not necessarily mean the wound is still in charge. Wisdom often remembers what innocence did not know. Home is not a return to naivety. It is a return to inhabiting yourself.

Perhaps your calling will reappear. Perhaps it already has, wearing different clothes. Perhaps the humanising presence you once carried into institutions now appears in writing, counselling, friendship, advocacy, teaching, prayer, community or the way you refuse to reduce another person to a function.

The Abbey and the barracks no longer have to be enemies. You may enter structures again with a clearer understanding that

systems are tools, not gods; roles are functions, not identities; authority is real, but not absolute; and care is sacred precisely because the person giving it is also human.

The barracks taught you things. But it does not get to keep you.

Come home.

A quiet place to notice

What signs tell me that I am already coming home?

What wisdom do I have now that I did not have when I entered?

Where is the humanising presence appearing in my life now, whether or not I ever wear the title chaplain again?

CONCLUSION

Balm for the One Who Became Balm

Chaplaincy asks something unusual of a person: to enter someone else’s difficult place without needing to own it, remain close without taking control, offer hope without manufacturing certainty, and see dignity where systems sometimes see categories.

Perhaps you did that hundreds or thousands of times. You sat beside people in places they did not choose. You listened to stories that could not be fixed. You walked into rooms where the atmosphere changed because somebody knew you were there for the person rather than the process. And perhaps somewhere along the way, nobody remembered that the chaplain was a person too.

This book has been an invitation back to the person who carried that work, with no requirement to become useful again.

There is no shame in discovering that an experience wounded you. There is no spiritual failure in acknowledging that your limits were exceeded. There is no lack of calling in recognising that something around the calling was unhealthy. There is no virtue in remaining broken simply because the breaking happened while you were serving others.

You are allowed to heal, become quiet and grieve. You are allowed to feel anger and, in time, put it down. You are allowed to forgive slowly, choose not to reconcile, leave doors closed and open new ones.

You can remember without remaining inhabited by what happened, carry wisdom without carrying the institution, and let responsibility return upstream. You can trust your discernment again without pretending it will always be perfect.

Perhaps this is the Balm of Gilead for the wounded chaplain: not forgetting, not pretending, not returning everything to how it was, but the gradual restoration of right order within.

The wound may remain part of your story. It does not have to remain sovereign over it.

You were formed in the Abbey. You may have been harmed in the barracks. But the barracks does not get to keep you.

Come home.

A Rule of Life After the Barracks

I will remember that I am a person, not merely a pastoral resource.

I will serve people without surrendering my right to safety.

I will honour confidentiality without participating in secrecy that protects harm.

I will respect legitimate authority without confusing authority with wisdom.

I will remain compassionate without becoming endlessly available.

I will listen for patterns without violating trust.

I will name what I can see through appropriate channels.

I will not accept responsibility for contradictions created by organisations with greater power.

I will seek supervision that strengthens discernment rather than enforcing compliance.

I will receive feedback without automatically accepting blame.

I will distinguish repentance from self-condemnation.

I will distinguish forgiveness from removal of accountability.

I will allow institutions to experience consequences of their decisions.

I will not make my silence the price of access.

I will remember that leaving can be wisdom.

I will remember that my worth is not determined by whether an institution knows how to receive me.

Healing is not measured by whether you become useful to the system again. Healing is measured by whether you are becoming free.

About Sharon Mackenzie

Sharon Mackenzie is a counsellor, chaplain, reflective safeguarding practitioner, author and educator whose work explores the places where pastoral care, dignity, governance, power and human vulnerability meet.

Her work grew from lived experience across counselling, chaplaincy, churches, schools, governance and institutional settings, and from a persistent question: what happens when the structures designed to support people begin placing the weight of those structures onto the people within them?

Through Spirit Led Counselling, Sharon works with people to untangle complex relational and institutional experiences, restore internal authority and place responsibility rightly. Her wider body of work includes the Reflective Safeguarding Framework™, The Sanctuary Within™, structural discernment resources, books, teaching and professional formation.

The Humanising Presence™ is Sharon’s chaplaincy collection, exploring the human person within institutional systems, the structures surrounding chaplaincy, and the restoration of those who have carried care into difficult places.

Explore the wider work

Spirit Led Counselling

Sharon Mackenzie - Author

Spirit Led Institute