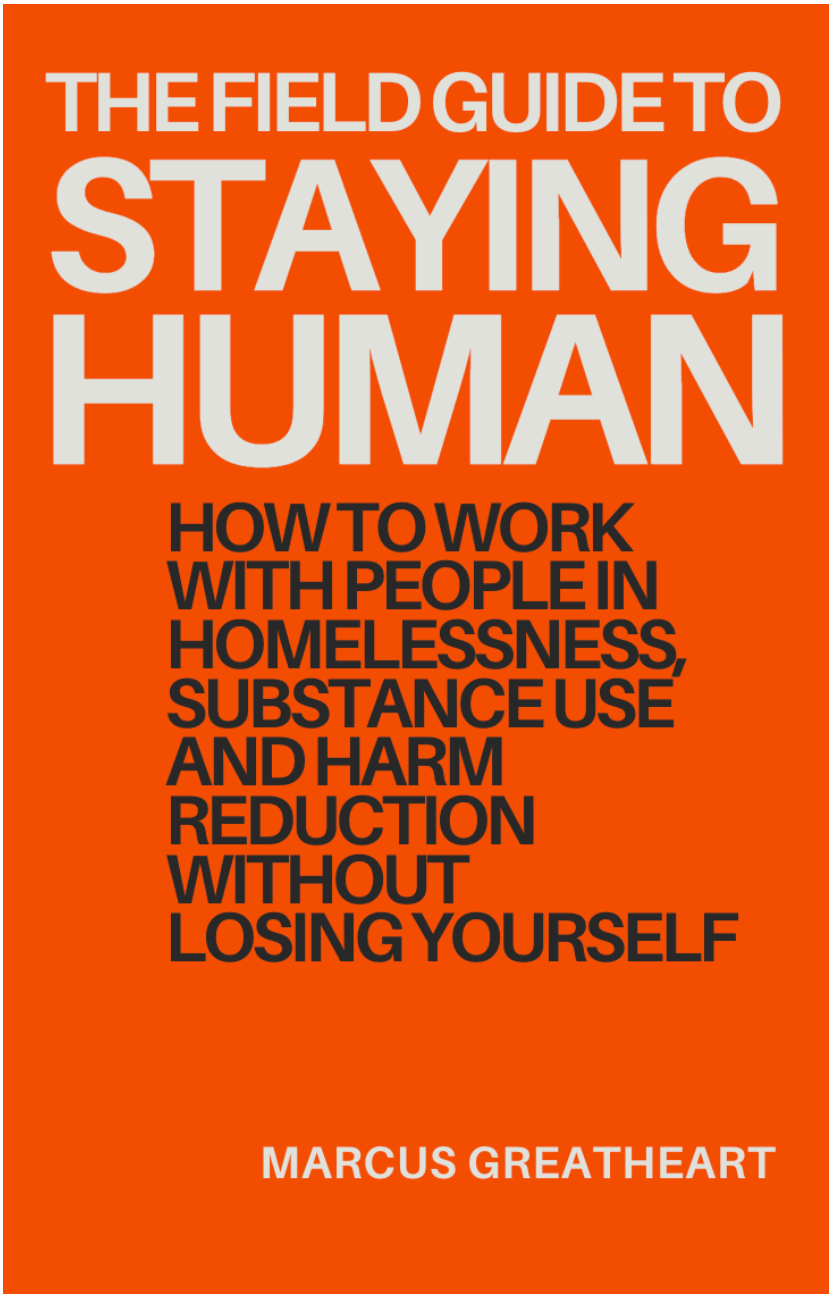


Advance excerpt. The text may change before publication. Includes the Preface, How to Use This Book and Chapter 1.

The Field Guide to Staying Human
How to Work with People in Homelessness, Substance Use and Harm Reduction Without Losing Yourself

Copyright © 2027 Marcus Greatheart. All rights reserved.

Published by Ethica Press.

ISBN 978-0-9917989-7-1 (paperback)
ISBN 978-0-9917989-8-8 (ebook)

This is an advance preview of the first chapter. The text may change before publication, and it may not be reproduced or sold in this form.

Part of the Frontline Field Guides series.

Preface

Frontline work changes people. That’s not a criticism or a warning. It is simply true. In *The Field Guide to Frontline Care*, I wrote about the practical skills of this work: assessment, communication, de-escalation, documentation and clinical decision-making. Those skills are vital and they save lives.

This book asks a different question. What is the work doing to us? Spend years working alongside homelessness, substance use, poverty, trauma and mental illness, and you are not going to be the same person who arrived on your first day. Those changes deserve the same attention as any clinical skill, and they rarely get it. This book is my attempt to unpack and explain the psychological adaptations of frontline work before they shift the way you understand yourself, without avoiding the difficult emotions or becoming endlessly resilient. My hope is that these pages help you identify experiences that often remain invisible and that, in naming them, it becomes a little easier to remain thoughtful, compassionate and effective however long you decide to do this work.

How to Use This Book

This book is about what happens to us over time.

We work with people experiencing addiction, homelessness and mental health crises, credentialed or not, sometimes with lived experience ourselves. We might work nights at a shelter; do outreach, peer support or case management; or work as paramedics, nurses or physicians doing low-barrier work. The pace is fast, the resources are thin and the losses stack up.

Over time, the work changes us, not always obviously. Our tone shifts. We notice we’re more impermeable, we stop feeling things we used to feel or we hear ourselves sounding like someone we swore we wouldn’t become. We work harder than we should and carry losses that are hard to set down. This book names what’s happening and offers ways to stay ourselves while we keep doing the work.

One idea runs through every chapter, and it is worth stating at the start rather than saving for the end. Staying human in this work isn't softness, or a trait some workers have and others lack, even if it comes more naturally to some. It's a discipline: the repeated, unglamorous practice of noticing how the work is changing us while we continue to do it. This book calls that gradual change drift. Nothing in this book is a cure, because the pressures that cause it do not go away. Everything in it is maintenance, and maintenance, it turns out, is the only version of this that lasts.

The chapters are short because our time is short. Each begins with a moment from a shift, names what sits underneath it and offers one adjustment: not a transformation, more a calibration, a way we might show up differently next time.

Each chapter ends with three questions, meant to be asked again and again rather than answered once.

What is happening in me?
Our own state: irritation, detachment, urgency, protectiveness. These aren’t problems; they’re signals that this question helps us read.

What might I be calling something else?
This work produces constant mislabeling. We tell ourselves we're being efficient when we've actually stopped noticing the person in front of us, or that we're being realistic when we've

actually stopped expecting anything to change. This question checks the story we tell about our own reaction, where most of the drift hides.

What's one small shift for my next shift?
A single adjustment: a sentence said differently, a boundary named earlier, a pause before reacting. Small shifts accumulate. That is the entire theory of this book.

Read this book straight through, or open it anywhere; the index at the back is organized by what the day felt like, not by chapter number. Teams can use chapters in meetings or supervision, with a guide at the end for that purpose. All these strategies work.

Nothing here will change the structural pressures we work under, and the work will stay hard in ways that have nothing to do with us. What this book does is simpler: helps us notice how the work is changing us while there is still time to adjust.

Chapter 1: Hardening

We filled out the same ID application together in March, and again in June after his backpack was stolen outside the pharmacy. Now it's October and only four days after receiving it, the card is gone again, this time in a camp cleanup, along with the birth certificate we waited eleven weeks for. We pull up the application form, explain the process, the supporting documentation, and the guarantor section. Then, somewhere in the middle we notice our own voice sounding flat, the sound of someone reading a script. The client nods along because he's heard this droning voice before, from other workers in other offices. We promised ourselves we would never sound like that.

Hardening, here, means becoming less responsive to other people's distress over time, as a result of repeated exposure to it. It begins with tightening, a reduction in attention and patience that happens gradually, in ways that we might not notice. It starts with reasonable adaptation to work that exposes us to constant volatility: missed appointments, relapse, anger, desperation, people in withdrawal, people whose lives were shaped by systems that failed them long before they met us. If every relapse, every crisis required us to feel it as intensely as the first time it happened, we couldn't keep showing up for the next one, so our nervous system adjusts. We become a bit more efficient, conversations move faster and we learn to stop asking follow-up questions once we already have enough information to act on.

The orientation modules don't discuss this adaptation directly, but the job trains it into us anyway. In the first month, it seems like every story gets to us, and we go home and talk about work whether or not anyone wants to hear about it. By the end of the first year, we have developed a necessary filter because without it we could not do intake after intake, attend to crisis after crisis, and still function. The question this chapter asks is whether we still know what we are filtering out.

Hardening uses the same skills that help us, which is part of what makes it hard to spot. After the tenth ID application this month, we ask the questions in the same order, in the same tone, without waiting to hear whether this person's situation is different from the last one. The first time, we would have asked why he needed the birth certificate this time, whether something else was going on underneath it. By the tenth application, we don't ask.

"Here we go again." "I already know how this ends." "Why am I explaining this again?"

These thoughts are understandable because anyone exposed to repeating patterns starts anticipating them; that is what pattern recognition is for. The risk is in what anticipation does to listening. When we assume we already understand the situation, we stop taking in new information, and the conversation becomes something we are performing rather than an exchange that could still surprise us.

It is worth separating hardening from boundaries, because the two get confused frequently (and sometimes deliberately). A boundary is a decision about what we will do: not giving out a personal number, ending a conversation that becomes abusive, declining to do the housing office's job for it. Boundaries are chosen, specific and visible, and good ones make longevity in this work possible. A boundary limits what we do. Hardening, on the other hand, limits what we see. A worker with firm boundaries can stay deeply curious about the person in front of them, while a hardened worker might have weak boundaries, work sixty hours a week and feel almost nothing while doing it.

The people we serve can often tell the difference before we can. Most of them have spent years being processed by systems, and they're very good at detecting whether the person across the desk is present or performing. When our tone goes flat, they adjust by giving shorter answers and holding back on details that could change our assessment. As a result, the interaction becomes more efficient and less informative at the same time.

Most hardened workers remain fully competent; the forms still get completed, the referrals still happen, the beds still get assigned. The danger is the tightening of attention and patience we discussed earlier. We manage someone's behaviour but stop noticing the person producing it. Over time, it spreads beyond clients: colleagues feel more irritating, new staff seem naive and meetings feel like performances of concern. People blur together, and eventually, the blur includes almost everyone.

The earliest reliable signal of hardening is frequently contempt, something smaller than open hostility: a quick internal eye roll, a sarcastic thought, the sense that the person across from us is wasting our time. These moments happen on occasion to nearly everyone who does this work long enough, and the moments themselves are not the problem. The goal isn't to stop having these moments, since that's not realistic. It's to notice them early, because once we're sure we already know how someone will respond, we stop listening to find out.

When we catch ourselves in those moments, one question is often enough to address it. What might I be missing because I think I already know their story? Sometimes no new insight appears, the pattern is exactly what we expected and that question cost us thirty seconds. But

sometimes the conversation opens again. The man replacing his ID for the third time mentions, when asked one more question, that the camp cleanup also took his father's ring. Suddenly we are talking with a person who lost something that mattered to him instead of processing a form for someone who loses things. That small expansion, from a form to a person, is what this chapter is asking for.

Hardening narrows the range of the work, and interrupting it widens the range again. Both happen frequently, in tiny increments, which is exactly why they need our attention.

What is happening in me? Am I bracing for frustration before the conversation has even started?

What might I be calling something else? Am I calling this efficiency or thick skin when it might be contempt?

What's one small shift for my next shift? Notice the first moment of internal eye rolling. Ask one more question before moving the conversation forward.

The Field Guide to Staying Human

The full book comes out in early 2027.

To hear when it is available, and to get Notes on Staying Human, join the list at greatheart.ca.

Marcus Greatheart, MD, MSW, practises frontline and low-barrier medicine on Vancouver Island, British Columbia.