

Chapter 3: You Are Where You Are

Chris

A few years ago, I was slated to meet with an amazing person named Linda at a coffee shop in Richmond, Virginia. Regarded as one of the best business consultants in the city, she was an excellent addition to my networking circle, and she'd graciously carved out some time in her busy schedule for a face-to-face meeting with me. But rather than feeling excited about the encounter, I found myself frantic and anxious before I even sat down with her.

I've struggled with ADHD most of my life. It's challenging for me to *not* to get distracted by simple, fleeting occurrences of everyday life, such as the familiar face of a neighbor passing by my window, the flat screen broadcasting sports behind the barista, the sound of a two-year-old boy giggling and playing patty-cake with his mother on the other side of a room. These kinds of things create a collage of alluring distractions, and it's an ongoing battle for me to (try to) ignore them.

On the day of my meeting with Linda, in addition to the constant distractions of my immediate environment, I'd also had several emotional encounters. I'd started my day by checking the news, where I'd read a disturbing article about a mother of two young children who'd gone missing near my hometown. My head was still reeling from that report when I got into a heated argument with my daughter about the inappropriateness of her wearing light canvas shoes on a bitterly cold day, which resulted in a full-blown temper tantrum (on her part... though I was close!). Next up was a tense discussion with my wife regarding the never-ending list of house renovations in need of completion. All these things in quick succession left me in an agitated state as I exited my house and headed off to meet with Linda. I'd taken in an excessive amount of stimulation, it was all pulling my attention in a million directions, and my brain was completely overloaded.

When I finally arrived at the coffee shop (five minutes late, thanks to getting stuck in rush hour traffic—remember what that was like?), I was still ruminating about my stressful morning, which now included being flipped off by some guy as I pulled into the parking lot. By the time I was sitting across from Linda, the swirling mess of events and the replaying of contentious dialogue in my mind was causing a loud, distracting hum in my head, and I found it impossible to focus.

I couldn't maintain eye contact. I had difficulty following her conversation. And I repeated myself... *repeatedly!* There was no question about it: My lack of attentiveness was *visible* to her. At one point, I even got distracted with the idea of picking up my daughter from school, and caught myself glancing at the clock on my phone while Linda was talking to me.

Considering my profession as a coach means I am essentially paid to provide people with my undivided attention, it's hard to imagine my inability to pull myself together, especially in light of this golden opportunity to network with a local business mogul. But that was exactly the case. I was lost in a mental fog, and I couldn't manage to snap myself out of it.

However, to my amazement, something transpired during that meeting that changed everything.

In spite of the fact that I was obviously distracted and pretty much wasting her time, Linda remained fully poised and engaged, and gracious, giving me her undivided attention. She leaned in and asked me what I did for a living. Even as I rambled, she remained intent on absorbing my every word, all of which helped me relax, and I began relating to her more as a friendly associate, not some high-rollin' tycoon I needed to impress. I shared a few tidbits of the madness I'd experienced at home before I left for the meeting and joked about the guy who flipped me off in the parking lot, and she laughed. Never once did she break eye contact with me, even when a server dropped a plate right behind her. And when a friend recognized her and began walking toward us, she politely let him know she'd be happy to speak with him when she was done with our meeting.

For the first time in a long time, I had the privilege of feeling *fully seen, listened to, heard, and respected*. Linda's commitment to making the most of this meeting and to being present in our conversation quieted my mind. I went from utterly distracted to clear-headed, readily able to formulate my questions and answers as I connected with her. Without even trying, I slowed way down and zeroed in on the topics at hand. Simply through her attentiveness and genuine interest, she gave me the feeling that nothing else in the world mattered to her but our connection, and it ended up being a truly enjoyable and fruitful exchange.

In short, Linda saved the day.

As a highly intelligent, successful businesswoman, I have no doubt Linda knew that day that she was in the presence of someone who was off his game. But rather than let the whole thing fizzle out, she chose to make the most of the circumstances and optimize her own time, simply by hanging in there with me and offering me 100% of her attention, which never waned or wavered. In doing so, she demonstrated her commitment and enormous compassion. She proved beyond a shadow of a doubt she was worthy of the praise she so often received.

As for *presence*, that's what it all boils down to. Linda was fully committed to the time she'd carved out for this meeting, and she was intentional with her every action. She was even graceful in the way she handled her friend who'd momentarily interrupted us, demonstrating a brilliant template of highly developed empathy and communication skills that served the entire situation for *all* concerned.

Everyone in this story *won*.

Now, before you tell me, "Chris, this is a nice story, but we're not really hanging out in coffee shops the way we used to, you know," don't worry. I'm already with you. Would it have looked *exactly* the same had we been meeting remotely? Probably not. But regardless of where you work, you can still be present, gracious, kind, committed, and compassionate, and it was those particular qualities that Linda brought to our conversation that changed me.

I can't help but think that if we all give our remote coworkers and clients the same gift of presence Linda gave me, then, maybe, just maybe, this new, virtual era can be one of genuine attention and intention.