

# Companionship: Gift and Practice

Companionship is a relationship that responds to difficulty and suffering of another, and is supportive of healing. It is a social relationship, a relationship which affirms we are part of a larger community of care and accountability, and helps enrich that community.

## I. Three Gifts at the Heart of Companionship

- A. Sensitivity** Companionship begins with our senses, as we see the struggles or pain of another person, as our ears hear the whisper of need, as the challenges or hurt of another touches our life. At this point, social messages may arise in us: “don’t get involved;” “let someone else handle this,” “just pass by.”
- B. Compassion** If we don’t fall for those social messages, we find the difficulty and distress of another stirs something else: the Spirit at work, kindling our kindness and compassion, our capacity to *feel with* another the burdens of their journey.
- C. Concern** Our gifts for sensitivity and compassion evoke concern, a conscious reaching out in empathy toward another’s struggle or pain. We may want to express our care, to act on our compassion, to understand the social dimensions of brokenness and injustice, we reach for a way to be of service.

Sensitivity, compassion and concern are natural in each of us, gifts we all have.

## II. Approaching Another

- A. Observation** I find it helpful to pause in my concern to get a sense and feel for how a person is responding to the environment and others who are around. This is a meditative moment. I consider issues of safety, and propriety.
- B. Centering** It helps to be aware of any distractions of our own that might tug on our ability to be present. It is often possible to simply acknowledge them, and let them go for a time. It also helps to be aware of our expression, body language and tone of voice, and to let them reflect warmth, respect and encouragement.
- C. Reflection** I try to put myself in the place of the other person and consider what he or she might find supportive or helpful. I consider my role, my responsibility – and my “response ability” – in this moment. Am I being called to companion?

## III. The Practices of Companionship

- A. Hospitality** Companionship begins with hospitality, what Henry Nouwen calls “creating safe space with the stranger.” Hospitality can be as simple as a few moments of greeting, a matter of finding a quiet place to walk or sit for awhile together, or an invitation to share refreshment. Companionship comes from the Latin *cum panis*, ‘with bread.’ To companion is to nurture, encourage, strengthen.
- B. Neighboring** Often in life, we introduce ourselves in terms of a specific identity – the work we do, our official title, our assignment. But we have two more basic roles in the world: we are human beings; and we are neighbors, we share this space together as persons. As a neighbor, I may simply smile, nod or say hello and be open to how the other person responds. As a human being, I may simply be present, honoring the fact that we share a common existence and world. The way of companionship begins at this most basic level, affirming our common humanity and our intrinsic worth as persons.

- C. Listening** Each of us has a story. Our stories have elements in common: we are here in the present; we have a past; we are moving into a future. As companions we hear the other person's story, as best they can tell it. We listen for the spiritual dimensions of the journey, the language of faith, hope and love. We listen not only for the places of brokenness, but also for strength, for healing, for growth, for root causes and connections. We listen for the gifts and the good in each person.
- D. Side-by-Side** On the way of companionship we walk together. We do not stand behind another and push in this direction or that. We do not stand face-to-face to interview, direct, persuade or debate. We don't stand above, in superiority. The stance of companionship is to proceed side-by-side, looking out at the world together, sharing the journey as equals, exploring the horizon of possibility, letting choices and decisions unfold freely, in grace. We walk side-by-side, in solidarity.
- E. Accompaniment** We understand and affirm the value of simply being present; and we listen for next steps, for helpful and healing impulses. We may invite a person to go with us, or simply offer a possibility to be explored, a destination that may be helpful or of interest. We may assist someone to find their way. Always as companions, we can hold another in our thoughts and prayers.
- F. Advocacy** We care about underlying causes of the brokenness and injustices in our world that affect those we accompany. We seek to expand our understanding and look for ways to share what we learn within our communities, to express and tact on what we learn from accompaniment in relevant social and political arenas.

#### **IV. Partnerships: Helping Create a Circle of Care**

- A. Community** Companionship reaches out to a person, not only one-to-one, but also with an invitation into life together: to welcome the beloved stranger, the person who is alone or isolated or hurting, into a supportive communion. One aim of companionship is to encourage the person we are companioning to build or strengthen a growing circle of care. We may simply make an introduction. We may help someone find assistance, a resource or service helpful to their journey. We need not know every program available (and are careful to be responsible about what we don't know). Together we discover and help create fresh connections to service resources and as appropriate, to advocacy resources and communities.
- B. Limits and Boundaries** The offer of companionship is similar to, but not the same as friendship. In reaching out to a person in need, we recognize our limits of time and strength, knowledge and skills. We set healthy boundaries. We help others build and rely on an appropriate circle of support, to not become dependent upon us, but to find healing and growth as part of the larger community.
- C. Collaboration** As a person continues their journey with a growing company of others, we as companions can serve as a listening post and a continuing source of encouragement. It is a challenge for any of us to enter into new relationships, become part of a group and develop a sense of neighborhood. Companionship offers a trustworthy experience of human relationship which can serve as a bridge into caring community. It is a gift to the one in need, the one reaching out, and to the community as it models and encourages others in compassion and concern.