

Companionship: A Ministry of Presence in Quaker Context

Companionship was developed as a set of practices at the heart of outreach to individuals who were homeless and struggling with symptoms of mental illness - depression, bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Companionship teams were formed in local congregations to welcome individuals on the margins, encourage healing and recovery, and support a person in building an ongoing circle of care. Companionship is a way of mutual wellbeing in which we grow together in a life of inclusive community.

Companionship rests in an understanding that we become persons, not in isolation, but in community. Companionship is rooted in love for our neighbors and our capacity to see “that of God in everyone.” Companionship is an intentional form of friendship exemplified by diverse and caring souls down through the ages. It is a spiritual experience rooted in our potential for relationship with every human being.

Companions serve at the door when the community gathers for worship, welcoming especially the stranger and the individual who may come in distress or with troubled heart. The companion serves as a bridge into the quiet of the meeting, may sit with a newcomer, and stands ready to help as a concern or need arises.

Companionship begins with a sense of being prompted, nudged or led, perhaps drawn to reach out. We may simply nod or smile, or let the moment pass, simply trusting that for now, we are not called to act or engage. Companionship is a free and personal choice, not an assignment or obligation. We never need get out ahead of our guide. If we do choose to engage, we have at hand seven basic practices of companionship to help us nurture the relationship with another.

Often the first practice of companionship is an act of *hospitality*. In the words of Henry Nouwen, hospitality is creating safe space with the stranger. That means being aware of the distance between us, leaving room for us both to be comfortable, not rushing in, but letting this initial approach be marked by a little “seasoning” of our steps. We approach with the deepest possible respect for the other person and their sacredness. We offer the warmth of welcome, a place of calm and quiet to be at rest, perhaps some small refreshment. We witness with hospitality to our essential community, the “givenness of our togetherness,” as Whitehead puts it.

A second practice of companionship is often *neighboring*. In neighboring we affirm what we have in common as persons. As much as possible we set aside frames of relationship in which we might have power over another by virtue of some particular status. We seek to meet on level ground, greeting one another in testimony to our basic equality.

A third practice of companionship is *a side-by-side stance*, a witness to our peaceableness. We do not face off against one another in confrontation, nor do we

see ourselves as behind another directing them as to next steps and where to go, or out in front, saying follow me. We look out at the world together, sharing our personal perspectives, knowing that our focus may be different, seeing things according to our own particular upbringing, traditions, culture and capacities.

A fourth practice of companionship is *listening*. Our aim in listening is to understand and appreciate the other person's story, however they may choose to tell it. In listening we witness to simplicity, neither imposing our own narrative nor requiring detail or coherence from the other. Our focus is on the fundamental feeling, the central theme, and the spirit moving in us each and in the space between us.

A fifth practice is *partnering*. Our interest is in connecting in such a way that we can help grow a circle of sharing and support. In companionship, I want to be of service. The service I offer is an introduction to others. Companionship is not a profession. I do not diagnose, treat or refer. I am not a banker, landlord, grocery store, taxi service, lawyer, counselor, social worker or any one of a hundred things someone might ask for or want. Identifying needs becomes an occasion to consider where in the larger community assistance and help may be found.

A sixth practice is *intercession*. Undergirding companionship is grace. What I can best do as we part at the doorway or after worship begins, and at each point along the way, is to hold the person I am companionshiping "in the light." In so doing I am witnessing to what makes for integrity in us each, the loving care and kindness of which is at the heart of all life and in the core of every moment. We are none of us ever alone, but always in tender hands. All is taken up in a divine gentleness, transformed and offered back as possibility for new life.

The seventh practice is *mutuality*. Increasing occasions of authenticity, personal responsibility and social solidarity mark the path of companionship. As companionship proceeds our integrity with each other grows. We speak forthrightly, attend as best we are able to our own needs and health, and take on roles of cooperation, caring and calling with others. What started perhaps as a moment of possible and tenuous connection one morning, leads over time to a shared journey in which we celebrate our unique and overlapping circles of friendship, support and life.

Within the life of the meeting, a team of companions most closely resembles a care committee, available to all who gather for worship, with special concern for the stranger or newcomer who is alone or struggling. Companions create a doorway of tenderness and assurance, and embody a calm and abiding spirit of welcome, helping make the meeting truly available to all.