

The Way of Companionship

by Craig Rennebohm, D.Min.
The Mental Health Chaplaincy
Seattle, Washington

Hugo had been on the streets for more than a year, struggling with symptoms of schizophrenia. He was invisible to most passersby, a quiet man foraging in dumpsters to survive and sleeping in alleys and doorways. Janey was plagued by mood swings and an untreated bipolar disorder that often made it difficult to access shelters or meal programs. David was deeply depressed, withdrawn into his room, not talking. Hugo, Janey, and David were caught in their illness worlds, unable to accept or reach out for care, but not ill enough to meet criteria for involuntary care.

The Mental Health Chaplaincy offered companionship, a ministry of presence on the street and in the community, which builds a trusting, one-to-one relationship as a basis for long-term healing. I gently introduced myself to Hugo and shared the journey with him from the street to stability. A volunteer companion befriended Janey and made the pilgrimage with her through the community mental health system into housing, part-time work and increasing wellness. Several of us in the chaplaincy, along with his family and pastor, companioned David, helping open the doors to treatment, and continuing our support as recovery proceeded.

Over the last 20 years, we have developed companionship as a way of ministry with individuals facing mental illness. Companionship is an intentional relationship in which we respond with empathy, compassion and understanding to the suffering and struggles caused by a brain disorder. We teach companionship as a capacity in us all and a calling for us all, a way of approaching each other as human beings and souls of infinite worth and value.

Companionship begins with the practice of *hospitality*, creating, as Henry Nouwen calls it, “safe space” with each other, moments of simple kindness, tenderness and nurture. We practice solidarity, sharing the journey *side by side*, looking out at the world together, honoring each other’s unique and particular experience and perspective. We practice a *seven-fold listening*: receiving the other as they are; tuning to the troubling emotions and difficult themes of life that illness presents; listening also to what is coming up in ourselves; taking care with responses; listening over time and in the context of community; listening especially for the authentic words of faith and possibility; and listening, finally, for the movement of the Spirit at the heart of our lives. We listen for the larger story in which all of our lives have meaning and purpose, promise and hope. We practice *accompaniment*, going out into the world together, step by step, to meet others and widen the circle of care, keeping each other in thought and prayer.

Companionship is a way of faith, ever open to the deepest levels of life, a way rooted in love and in the belief that a healing tenderness is at the heart of every moment.