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## **A Call to Healing**

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For 25 years I worked as a chaplain on the streets of Seattle, with individuals who were homeless and struggling with mental illness. My particular concern was for persons like Terry, who slept hidden on the doorstep of the church, silently going through the meal line, fearful and disconnected from care.

Symptoms of a mental illness can greatly reduce an individual's capacity to communicate and connect. Stigma can diminish our capacity as family, friends and neighbors to reach out. Yet we have this calling to welcome the stranger, to engage the outcast, and to help each other heal and become whole. As congregations we are called to be home, to bind up our brokenness and find new life together.

As a young man, I experienced a prolonged episode of major depression. I felt utterly lost, greatly ashamed and deeply hopeless to the point of suicide. Over the years of recovery, I have learned that our brains are the most complex organs in our bodies. Billions upon billions of cells are intricately connected through incredibly subtle networks of energy and biochemical communication. Overwhelming experiences or just minute shifts in brain chemistry can profoundly impact and alter our feelings, thoughts, behavior and relationships.

In biblical times persons who suffered symptoms of mental disorder were often shunned and the most ill banished to chains and nakedness to the graveyard. Even today the lack of adequate mental health services and housing leaves our streets and jails filled with individuals whose brains and being require great tenderness, not neglect or punishment.

I was first helped by our pastor, Dick, who simply sat gently, making no attempts to fix or give advice. He came to the house, invited me for coffee and we occasionally had lunch together. Dick looked for what we had in common, including an interest in books and theater. He listened, especially through pauses and silence, and without judgment to my story. He went with me to see a doctor. He spoke honestly of his limits and related to me as one human being to another. He helped me build a sense of self and soul larger than my illness. I still am vulnerable to symptoms of depression. I take medication, and have benefitted from several good counselors and have the love

of my family and friends, but Dick's early companionship laid a basic foundation for recovery and emerging well-being.

We are created for connection. Nothing ultimately separates us from one another or from God. Developmental challenges, trauma, mental disorder, drugs and alcohol, dementia can all deeply disturb our soul, selfhood and social supports. Then is the gracious presence of another human being so helpful, so crucial. The companion is an outward and visible sign of God's unceasing love for us in every moment of our existence. The companion reminds us, despite our illness, we are never lost.

Three gifts in human beings each ready us for companionship. We are naturally sensitive. Our eyes see the sadness of another; we hear a person's muttered groan, their almost inaudible cry. We can smell the odor of an unwashed body, a wound left festering. We can taste in our own mouth the half-eaten sandwich fished from a garbage can or dumpster. We can feel on our own skin, the heat and cold of street, or days, weeks and months without human contact, hug or handshake.

We are naturally "feelingful." Each of us has a capacity for sympathy, empathy and compassion. We know what it is like to be lonely, to be humiliated, afraid or helpless. We can feel in our own being what another is experiencing. We can share with another person their condition, be near and at hand in the place of suffering.

Our sensitivity and feelingfulness give rise to concern. We register the difficulty, the trouble, the need. We think about what kind of help we can offer. We wonder who else might be able to assist. Our concern is the working of the Spirit within us, awakening the possibility of response and service. On the street I found myself concerned about more people than I could ever care for. I learned how to companion four or five people at a time, perhaps forty or fifty each year as a full time chaplain. I did what I could, coming alongside one person at a time.

Companionship is a way of acting on our concern for a person who is suffering or struggling or alone. The way of companionship includes five basic spiritual practices which help build a relationship of trust and mutuality.

- Hospitality—creating a safe space with another, offering respect and refreshment
- Neighboring—beginning with what we have in common, meeting as equals
- Side by side—looking out at the world together, honoring our unique experiences
- Listening— hearing a person's story, their language of faith, hope and love
- Accompaniment—holding the person in thought and prayer, going with a person to a meeting or appointment

In every congregation, as clergy and laity, we can act on our concern for another, responding to companionship opportunities. Our hospitality may be as simple as a nod or a smile, our neighboring the willingness to linger a moment nearby rather than pass by on the other side. We may choose to share the pew, or share the table at a meal program instead of remaining behind the serving line.

We may follow up a hello with a “how is it going?” and a willingness to hear a person’s story however they may be able to tell it. We may remember the stranger in our prayers, or help an individual add to their circle of care and support.

In every congregation a small group of companions can meet regularly and share with one another this basic ministry of presence. Companions can be present at worship and coffee hour, available to members of the congregation as needed, or serve as community companions at shelters, meal programs, and other points of human need. Companions gradually seed into the life of the congregation growing knowledge and understanding, and provide an incarnate alternative to the stigma surrounding mental illness.

Companionship training resources for clergy and congregations are available from Pathways to Promise ([www.pathways2promise.org](http://www.pathways2promise.org)), a national interfaith mental health ministry.

Companionship is not an “add-on” to congregational life. It is at the heart of becoming a caring community.

Terry came in from her isolation. She became minister of communion, sharing the gift of bread and cup and companionship with others. Her church grew and God rejoiced.