

The Evangelist: Spiritual Companion¹

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Alberta—Spiritual Companion

I never have known Alberta's last name. Yet for several years in my early childhood she was in my home when I first awakened and there when I went to bed at night. I used to love to watch her black hands in the white flour as they produced biscuits that were so tender and light I expected them to float. Alberta was my first *Anam Cara*, my first soul friend. To her all of creation was sacred. She would hold up an eggplant and smile, saying as she began preparation, "Oh, Miz Bahbra, what a God!" I heard that exclamation about trees, bushes, flowers, every fruit or vegetable and especially about me—and my baby sister, Beverly.

Alberta left our family's employ when Brookley Field Air Base opened in Mobile, Alabama, USA. There she could make a good salary, a fair salary for eight hours of work, rather than the pittance pay black people received for servant's work.

Whatever I understand about spiritual companionship began in those early years with a woman whose spirituality exuded from everything she did. And today, sadly, I realize I never knew her husband, her children, where she lived, or anything other than that she loved me and my family deeply and was with us completely when she was there.

Anam Cara, Soul Friend

In the early Celtic church an *Anam Cara*, a *soul friend*, acted as a teacher, companion, or spiritual guide, someone with whom you could share your innermost thoughts. Such a friend is one who loves you as you are and with whom you feel safe and blessed. John O'Donohue, author of the book, *Anam Cara*, helps me understand the power of this kind of love in which understanding is precious. "When you really feel understood, you feel free to release yourself into the trust and shelter of another person's soul."

This relationship is God's gift, because "friendship is the nature of God....Jesus...said, 'Behold, I call you friends....Jesus is the secret *Anam Cara* of every individual.'" O'Donohue believes that friendship with Jesus allows us to experience a relationship with God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus. "In the embrace of this eternal friendship, we dare to be free."²

As ministers of blessing, to become openly an *Anam Cara* with the Divine is to provide and embody a climate in which spiritual companionship with God and others is as natural as breathing.

For when our relationship with God continually grows, deepens and opens us to new understandings, our friendship expands. Because we are more open to God, God—in God’s way—becomes more accessible to us. Alberta showed me this by her capacity to live above the bigotry that was in the air we breathed in the 1930s in southern Alabama. Her dignity and strength arose from her relationship with a God in whose love she dwelt every day.

So one expression of spiritual companionship is *Anam Cara*. Let’s explore several ways in which we develop spiritual companionship as suggested in O’Donohue’s book. These practices are essential to our own spiritual life and will enrich those with whom we minister.

Gift and Discipline of Silence

One way to become such a friend is to begin in silence. I had no idea of the power of silence until I became part of a spiritual-direction group with three friends, two of whom are spiritual directors. Those nights when we spent long periods of silence brought me into an awareness of God unlike any experience I’ve ever had. I am a lover of words. Silence was a new experience. When Dick told our eldest son that I’d gone to a silent retreat, our son’s response was, “Isn’t that an oxymoron: Mom and a silent retreat?” However, silence is an essential part of my life now. For me, it is the significant beginning of spiritual practice.

Howard Thurman, author of many books on spirituality, including *Deep Is the Hunger*, and *Disciplines of the Spirit*, describes in the latter book how as a child he would go fishing alone. He would be in complete silence except for the sound of the water lapping against the boat. He felt all the creation around him was “one beat of the same pulse.” In that silence

There would come a moment when beyond the single pulse beat there was a sense of Presence which seemed always to speak to me....There was no voice. There was no image. There was no vision. There was God.³

This then is the power of silent listening, of emptying ourselves to be with the Presence, asking for nothing, simply being.

The value of emptying ourselves and sitting in the silence is the rich depth of prayer that can follow. A spiritual companion lives in the path of prayer. The discipline of prayer is practiced by all who live with a sense of the greatness of God. Muslims pray five times a day, wherever they are. Some Catholic monasteries

are sanctuaries for praying orders, religious orders whose members simply spend most of each day in prayers.

A Life of Prayer and a Life of Service

Each person has his or her own pattern of prayer. It seemed to me that Alberta's every act of life was a prayer of praise. Jesus began his ministry by time alone in the desert. Then he seemed to model this life of lived prayer in that he sensed the needs of those around him as witnessed in so many stories of healing that fill the gospel. His many acts of service conveyed a deep sensitivity to those he served. Note these three examples:

- The woman crippled for eighteen years, who was liberated on the Sabbath from bondage of body and circumstance⁴
- The Syrophenician woman, who was empowered to know that her own faith had healed her daughter⁵
- Blind Bartimaeus, who ran to Jesus to beg for healing, and then followed Jesus, knowing that his faith had cured him⁶

Evangelists whose lives of prayer undergird their ministry are countless. Once at a reunion in Northern Ontario, Canada, we met an evangelist who had attended camps for children and youth all of his adult life. His cabin door was always open, and young people would stop with some concern, and they would have prayer together. He required preparation for blessings, and testimonies often reflected the power of that preparation. His primary ministry seemed to me, however, to be the ministry of prayer. Many young people bore witness throughout the week of the influence of prayer with this evangelist. While he is now deceased, his ministry continues through the lives of those young people he influenced.

Varieties of Prayer

Companionship with God is the beginning of spiritual companionship. Prayer is as necessary here as breathing is to life. Richard Foster in his book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, suggests some types of prayers to help us stay in relationship with God:

Simple Prayer: In this kind of prayer, Foster writes, we just bring everything to God. We simply share all our concerns and hopes.

Prayer of Examen: There are two aspects of this prayer. In the first part, we examine the ways God has been with us through the day and how we have acted on that awareness of God. In the second part we examine "those areas that need cleansing, purifying and healing." This prayer usually is done in the evening before we retire.

Covenant Prayer: This is a significant call to commitment. It takes us to "the crossroad of personal decision." In this prayer we offer our unyielding commitment: "We promise holy obedience to God." This carries a power such as our covenants of baptism or marriage.

Unceasing Prayer: This is a lived-out-continuous prayer in which one senses God's presence throughout each moment of the day. The Apostle Paul enjoined, "Pray without ceasing (I Thessalonians. 5:17)." This counsel is replete in the scriptures and becomes a way of living. It need not be a burden, but a joy.

The Prayer of the Heart: We need not speak in this prayer. The silence of this prayer permits us to realize, as the Apostle Paul wrote, "The Spirit intercedes for us in sighs too deep for words" and we simply allow the Spirit to pray with and for us.

Praying the Ordinary: This prayer might best describe how my beloved Alberta lived. For her, everything was sacred. Her words of praise, "What a God!" were uttered often, and only in recent years have I realized the power of those prayers and the power of the pray-er.

Meditative Prayer: This kind of prayer is similar to the *lectio divina* in that we use scripture and allow it to become our personal story, and we internalize its meaning. In this prayer, we often need only a short passage of scripture, and we sit or walk with that passage to allow it to flow through us and become part of us.

Contemplative Prayer: Again we are silent before God. We let go of thoughts and allow our heart to speak. "The goal is union with God." This is not an easy form of prayer and might take time to develop as a practice.

Petitionary and Intercessory Prayer: When we pray for our own needs we are petitioning God for ourselves. When we pray for others we are interceding or acting on behalf of them. "The one is an expression of love for ourselves, the other is a way of loving others."⁷

Perhaps the danger in any of these prayer disciplines is the possibility of self-righteousness developing. David Steindl-Rast, author of *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*, has said on numerous occasions, "When you think you are praying, you probably are not." He emphasizes living our prayers, being our prayers. A prayer life that is lived has little time to focus on one's own ego (the false self). Instead, people who live their prayers seem most comfortable with themselves and freed from the need to judge others.

Prayer and Discernment

Thus, a life of prayer leads to another spiritual gift: the gift of discernment. A.D. McCall, an evangelist in the South (USA) from 1947 until his death in 1976, was known for his remarkable gift of discernment. For several years he was the only evangelist in the Southeast from Kentucky to Florida. A school superintendent, he spent his weekends traveling, preaching, offering administrations, and giving blessings.

His grandson, Gary Howard, now an evangelist in the Alabama/Northwest Florida Mission Center, describes A.D. McCall's commitment to people:

“During reunions our family stayed in the only two-bedroom cabin on the reunion grounds. The extra room was curtained off, and this is where my grandfather gave blessings. Right after lunch we would all get ready for swimming and were not allowed to return to the cabin until after supper. Once when I was very young I needed something and was allowed to go into the cabin quietly to retrieve what it was. I could not hear what was said in the other room, only the murmur of my grandfather's voice, but there was an incredible sense of something spiritual happening. Then one night at the end of the week, as my grandfather prepared for bed, I watched as he took off his socks and saw that his feet were so swollen I could not see his ankle bones. He had stood each day throughout the week to give blessings.”

After A.D. McCall's death, Roy Cheville visited Gary Howard. Dr. Cheville recently had become the World Church presiding patriarch-evangelist. In their conversation, Dr. Cheville indicated that after his ordination he had read through a great many blessings. “I noticed that often a patriarch would have a pattern to his blessings, something like a template. A.D. never did. I read a number of his blessings, and each one was uniquely for that individual, unlike any other blessing he had given that I read.”

This unique gift of discernment, this keen awareness of the other, permitted A.D. to be a real peacemaker in congregations where difficulties existed. People often mentioned how he seemed “to know the needs of the congregation” when he arrived to preach.

Discernment is not some magical gift of insight. It is the power to listen carefully to what is happening, to pay attention to the nuances and to understand the context. Wendy Wright believes that discernment is “paying attention.” She elaborates by indicating that it is “not identical to problem solving” but “about discriminating: sifting through and evaluating the evidence of our focused attention....It is more like the turning of the sunflower to the sun, or the intuitive hunch of the scientist seeking new and creative solutions for unexplainable, contradictory observations.”⁸

Spiritual friendship is enriched by discernment, both by the evangelist and the one receiving ministry. It is very valuable to share times in which discernment is practiced together. The time spent in this spiritual discipline can enrich a relationship of trust.

Journaling and Spiritual Companionship

Another spiritual practice that enhances spiritual friendship is journaling. This is a beautiful way to explore one's concerns, to record discernment experiences, to muse on the practice of *lectio divina*, to write one's prayers, to open one's heart to God with language. I have a friend who told me that her journal is mostly letters to God. She said, "They're not exactly like prayers. I know that God knows my heart and my life, but sometimes I just want to write to God like I'd write a friend. I tell God my concerns, then I write about how beautiful creation is that day and thank God for the beauty. In fact, many of my entries are just love letters to God."

What a marvelous collection that must be! Perhaps it is like my friend who is creating psalms as her journal practice. I have another friend who has kept a journal all his adult life. He records the events of each day, usually his feeling about the events. It probably is unlike my other friend's journals, but represents a discipline he has kept, and he treasures the moments he has recorded as a source of frequent reference.

A journal of events is different from a spiritual journal, however. In the spiritual journal one reflects on one's life. Often the journal follows the *lectio divina* exercise in people's lives. Or, a person might use a spiritual journal as a private retreat—a place to write one's feelings and thoughts about their own personal relationship with God. One also might note music or books that have enriched their spiritual journey. There are no set rules for spiritual journaling, but the discipline becomes an illuminating way to understand one's friendship with God as a growing process.

An evangelist might want to journal as he or she is ministering to someone who seeks a blessing. The person desiring the blessing also might be encouraged to keep a journal during that time. As the two develop a spiritual friendship, they may decide to share passages on occasion with each other. If they are in an *Anam Cara* relationship, this might be particularly meaningful and influence the content of the prayer of blessing.

Not all blessing relationships will be that close. This does not negate the one against the other. *Anam Cara* is a unique friendship. It is rare. When it develops, it is particularly precious.

Anam Cara with God

Importantly, evangelists also might encourage anyone with whom they are giving ministry to develop an *Anam Cara* relationship with God. A spiritual friendship with God is possible for everyone. God's love is so powerful and abiding, so accessible and accepting that one always is blessed by such a

relationship. *Anam Cara* with God also means a reciprocal relationship. The human being, in response to God's boundless grace, offers God full love and acceptance into his or her life.

I have shared here in some detail about the spiritual practices that enhance the ministry of a spiritual friend because when someone comes to us for the ministry we are called to offer, we already are connected to them. Our ministry as spiritual companion is to acknowledge this connection and create a climate in which the person senses the relation between us, but also the *Anam Cara* between us and the Creator.

Birth-Partner Model of Spiritual Companionship

The *birth-partner* is a good model for spiritual companionship. When an expectant mother chooses a birth-partner, she is asking someone to be with her in classes where she learns about childbirth as well as practices to help her throughout her pregnancy and during the delivery. The birth-partner is equipped to support the expectant mother.

Similarly, evangelists need to be equipped for ministry. Classes on the spiritual disciplines, workshops and scripture classes equip us for more-creative ministry, thus better support. The birth-partner knows the mother's history, the caregivers, her environment, her fears. As evangelists we should work to know the person who comes to us. Gone are the days of the "drop-in" evangelist who goes to a congregation or district gathering and offers blessings to people with whom the evangelist has had little or no previous contact. The Order has sufficient ministers that we can make certain we have ample time to get to know and support the person who comes for ministry.

That ministry may extend beyond a blessing. The good Canadian brother offered the ministry of prayer to anyone at reunion. The young people who knew him from camp were among the many who spent time with him. His connection to them sustained them when they needed a birth-partner to be there when they were giving birth to new ideas and new ways of being, when they were moving from childhood into adolescence or from adolescence into adulthood.

The birth-partner is one who keeps in touch with the expectant mother. Keeping in touch is an essential part of the ministry of presence, one of the special ministries of an evangelist. Sometimes a blessing is given and the person never hears from the evangelist again. This may be unavoidable, but ideally a relationship comes from ministry, and future opportunities for shared ministry take place.

The birth-partner does not deliver the infant. The evangelist does not really give the blessing. The blessing is given through the evangelist. The blessing is

given by the Spirit of God. Just as ministry comes through the Spirit, we are vehicles for ministry

Danger in “Writing Scripts”

A tendency to avoid in the ministry of blessing is placing on the one being blessed our own desires and specific convictions about their future. Daniel Day Williams reminds us that

The refusal to accept the other’s freedom to be and to decide is a failure in love, for we deny that in the other which is essential to love itself.⁹

There was a time when the Evangelist’s Blessing was looked upon as some kind of road map to the future career and life of the one being blessed. Some tragic experiences have taken place when the one giving the blessing allowed feeling to overrule wisdom. Counsel should be given, but it must be counsel that offers spiritual support and frees one to choose for one’s self what direction life will take.

Being prepared, equipped, makes possible a greater sense of the Presence. We are there to be with a person as they grow. Their decisions can foster growth. Our role is to serve as support and guide. Always, we remember that when a person is in Christ, that person is a “new creation.” The old has gone. The new has come.”¹⁰ This knowledge can keep us humble.

The Pilgrim and Spiritual Companionship

A useful image of the evangelist as spiritual companion is the *pilgrim*. A pilgrim is a person on a sacred journey. We are on such a journey. Our ministry as spiritual companions is to be on the journey with another, a pilgrimage to a sacred place. This place is within the person and within ourselves.

Significant to our journey as a spiritual companion is the sense that we are not in a fixed place. The counsel given us to in *Doctrine and Covenants* 161:1a, “Lift up your eyes and fix them on the place beyond the horizon to which you are sent,” calls us to journey together, trusting God’s presence as we move into the unknown future. A pilgrimage leads us to new sacred places beyond our present setting. We travel with those with whom we give ministry and with those whose ministry has deepened and enriched our own lives through the years. In large measure we bring to every moment of experience something from every life that has touched our own. Therefore, we never travel alone, but often in the company of beloved persons whose discipleship supports us on our own journey.

Companion is a late Latin word: *com* “together” and *pan* “bread.” Our service of communion is a coming together to share the sacramental bread, and in

such a sacrament we sense we are truly together, or as the hymn expresses, “We are companions on the journey, breaking bread and sharing life, and in the love we bear is the hope we share, for we believe in the love of our God.”¹¹

The ministry of the evangelist has moved into new and exciting directions. Where once the patriarch, the “spiritual father” was one who gave direction to others’ lives, we now are called to be present to those with whom we share a faith journey in a richer, more creative style. It is not wisdom and experience alone that we bring to the companionship. We share the combined gifts—our own and those of the persons with whom we walk—to create the ministry needed.

Everett Graffeo, former presiding evangelist, defines this relationship as “spiritual kinship.” He has said, “Any sacred journey is a journey shared with others.” He then suggests that a spiritual companion is mature, compassionate, respectful, discreet about confidences, self-disclosing, scholarly, and discerning.

The Paraclete

These qualities might be expressed in the definition of the Greek word, *paraclete*. Marjorie Suchocki, an American theologian, spoke in a stewardship lecture in Florida during the 1980s. She said that as a seminary student studying scriptures in Greek, she encountered the word *paraclete* in John 14:14-15: “If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter (*paraclete*) that he may abide with you forever.”

Suchocki said that she no longer could think of the comforter as a spirit that came in and out of her life—dropping in when it was needed. Instead, she said that we are called to be comforters to each other. “the Spirit of God is given to me in the one who is alongside of me—who is you. The Spirit of God is given to you in the one alongside of you—who is me.” There is in spiritual companionship a giving and receiving principle, a mutuality beyond words to describe.

One practical way in which this happens is sharing a meal together, for often when we eat together, intimacy unfolds. Such moments create a genuine time of vulnerability, and often during a meal together, burdens are shared. Denise Levertov reminds us:

**“If I bear burdens
they begin to be remembered
as gifts, good, a basket
of bread that hurts
my shoulders but closes me
in fragrance. I can
eat as I go.”¹²**

The story of the disciples who met Jesus on the road to Emmaus is an example of the intimacy of eating together. (Luke 24:13-35) It was as they broke bread to eat together that they recognized Jesus. The intimacy of eating together, of breaking bread, is always sacramental when done with grateful hearts.

Daniel Day Williams affirms that when burdens are shared creatively both the one burdened and the one with whom the burden is shared are strengthened. A spiritual companion grows through the relationships of ministry, and when living in the Spirit is strengthened through each encounter.¹³

The Gift of Humor in Spiritual Companionship

A spiritual companion keeps a sense of humor. One danger we face on a spiritual journey is that of taking ourselves too seriously. Years ago, shortly after my ordination to the office of evangelist, Dick and I attended a reunion where priesthood office seemed too important for its own good. The continual emphasis on offices was seen in every class, on every bulletin, and often in conversations.

Throughout the week we were both addressed and listed as high priests. I had been ordained, just a month or so before, so rather than explain or correct, I left the impression as it was. One afternoon, a good friend, who knew about my ordination invited me to share an activity being sponsored for the evangelists. One of the brethren saw me there and hastily came over, "Oh, Sister Howard," he said. "This is for the *evangelists*." My friend explained that I did hold the office. "Oh," the brother said, "I thought you were just a high priest." I waved my hand indicating that each was equally valuable and that the highest office probably was member. "Oh, no," the good brother said, "an Evangelist is a *high, high* priest." We have had many laughs about our enormous elevation. Little did we know.

The man who said this, sadly, was serious. He needed to relax, enjoy his ministry, not take life so seriously that he elevated any office over another. Priesthood is service. The minute we begin to elevate any position, we have lost something vital.

One of my favorite evangelists was the late Richard Zmyslony, who ministered at a Michigan reunion we attended years ago. He directed the prayer services each day. His theme talk was always a humorous story, not always an experience, sometimes a joke. One outstanding example was a story about the illness of the pope in Rome. It seemed the pope needed a new heart.

When the cardinals announced this to the waiting crowd below in St. Peter's Basilica, cries of "Take-a-my-heart" ascended. One cardinal decided to toss a white feather over the crowd, and the one on whom it landed would be selected as the heart donor. Then, Richard Zmyslony, in his marvelous fashion stood and looked upward, held up his arms, and shouted repeatedly, "Take-a-my-heart! Each time he

shouted the plea, “Take-a-my-heart, he followed immediately with a strong, audible puff from his lungs. He then sat down. The theme for the prayer service that day was “Take My Heart, Lord Jesus.” The power of that humorous story stays with me still. The response of the congregation was joyful and immediate.

Not all of us have the style of a Richard Zmyslony. We will not always achieve our desired goal. We will not do our ministry perfectly. We will make mistakes. We will fail. We are frail, broken humanity, loved inexplicably, unconditionally by the Creator of the universe. We might remember this when we question the worth of our ministry. For it is as important to love one’s own soul as to love another’s.

Laughter at our mistakes might be one of the healthiest ways to love ourselves. We have an incredible calling for a magnificent God. The love that surrounds us is beyond ever comprehending fully, and we waste time when we spend it lamenting something we’ve done that might have been done better.

In these moments, laughter will lead us to seek the Divine, to sense the love that shapes us, and to find companionship in the Spirit of the One who calls us. This companionship is at the heart of all spiritual companionship. It is from this place that we begin our ministry.

Endnotes

¹ A revised and enlarged edition of an essay originally printed in Everett S. Graffeo, ed., *The Order of Evangelists Training Resource; Blessed to Be a Blessing* (1995): 34-41.

² John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara* (New York: Cliff Street Books, Harper Collins, 1997): 15.

³ Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963): 96.

⁴ Luke 13:10-17.

⁵ Mark 7:24-30.

⁶ Mark 10:46-52.

⁷ Richard J. Foster, (San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1992).

⁸ Wendy Wright, “Passing Angels: The Art of Spiritual Discernment,” *Weavings*, November–December 1995): 12.

⁹ Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and Forms of Love* (New York, Harper and Row, 1968): 116.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

¹¹ *Sing a New Song* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1999): 7.

¹² Denise Levertov, *Stepping Westward*, from <http://www.squidoo.com/poetry-by-denise-levertov-4>.

¹³ Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and Forms of Love*, p. 117