

Prayer is Companionship

written for Life/Work Direction's December 2018 *Companions*

We chose the word *companions* deliberately. It softens the relationship—erasing the dualism of *you* and *me*—placing emphasis on *being with*.

That concept lies behind our choice to meet with you in Life/Work Direction at a *round table*—putting three people together as equal, leaving space for an Other to enter. We listen together—a sacred companionship, and Jesus is part of that.

I ask now: do *words* help deepen that companionship? Or are we listening in the silence? I was taught that it was prayer that linked me to God, and that meant using words: words I was taught; words said with others in worship; and over the years the endless chatter of my brain expressing the urgency of my needs, fears, desires, hopes.

But over time, words stood in the way. They were not adequate. After all, God had promised “*that before we are speaking, God hears.*” I am to listen. (“*To hear You, I keep silent.*”) What I began to hear was something deeper than words—yearnings, anxious fears, inarticulate desires—all of them expressed by tension in my body if I stopped to pay deep attention. Was it possible that this was also prayer? And if so, was it God praying in me?

With relief I read:

“We do not know how to pray as we ought, so the Spirit prays within us with sighs too deep for words.” (Romans 8:26)

A whole new way of experiencing prayer opened up—much more intimate than I had known when I thought it was all up to me to “pray without ceasing.” *God within my body expressing my feelings!* How much closer and more constant could a companion be?

I was soon to find out. The “dark night of the soul” comes to us in moments of crisis. It is when we are forced to confront *our essential flaw*. In my case, it is my eternal *hunger to be seen*—as competent/effective/attractive/humorous—you name it. To feel unknown or uncared for, or worst of all, misunderstood—feels like a death knell. In my shame and embarrassment in recognizing this, my first impulse is usually to offer stumbling words of apology and confession to God, pleading for grace. It is an unending exercise, and I am tired of it.

In a dark moment recently, I read the poet’s lines in Psalm 142 echoing this complaint:

*“I look to my right hand and find no one who knows me;
I have no place to flee to, and no one cares for me.”*

This time, I suddenly stopped in my tracks. My body relaxed as I breathed a huge sigh of relief! I wondered, “is the Spirit praying within me ‘with that sigh too deep for words?’ Why am I *relieved?*” Oh! I suddenly felt the *separateness of my self from others—and from their opinions*. I was free to enjoy the underlying *music of existence*—which lies in the very separateness that makes companionship possible. I am not in existence to be seen, but to be a companion, regardless of how others see me.

And I have no need to plead with God who receives me as I am and who inhabits my body, praying within me with sighs too deep for words. No closer companionship exists.

A few lines from Rilke’s *Love Songs to God* remind me of the devastatingly intimate companionship we have with a God who speaks to us, and who is as close to us as breathing.

*God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.*

These are the words we dimly hear:

*You, sent out beyond your recall,
Go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.*

*Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.*

*Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror,
Just keep going. No feeling is final,
Don't let yourself lose me.*

*Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness,*

Give me your hand.

Whatever you may be facing this Advent season, keep aware of that intimate companionship—God's hand holding yours.