

## 11 Tenets of Caring for the Bereaved

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

I've always found it intriguing that the word "treat" comes from the Latin root word "tractare," which means "to drag." If we combine that with "patient," we can really get in trouble. "Patient" means "passive long-term sufferer," so if we treat patients, we drag passive, long-term sufferers. Simply stated, that's not very empowering .

On the other hand, the word "companion," when broken down into its original Latin roots, means "messmate": com for "with" and pan for "bread." Someone you would share a meal with, a friend, an equal. I have taken liberties with the noun "companion" and made it into the verb "companioning" because it so well captures the type of counseling relationship I support and advocate. That is the image of companioning—sitting at a table together, being present to one another, sharing, communing, abiding in the fellowship of hospitality.

Companioning the bereaved is not about assessing, analyzing, fixing or resolving another's grief. Instead, it is about being totally present to the mourner, even being a temporary guardian of her soul.

The companioning model is anchored in the "teach me" perspective. It is about learning and observing. In fact, the meaning of "observance" comes to us from ritual. It means not only to "watch out for" but also "to keep and honor," "to bear witness." The caregiver's awareness of this need to learn is the essence of true companioning.

If your desire is to support a fellow human in grief, you must create a "safe place" for people to embrace their feelings of profound loss. This safe place is a cleaned-out, compassionate heart. It is the open heart that allows you to be truly present to another human being's intimate pain.

As a bereavement caregiver, I am a companion, not a "guide"—which assumes a knowledge of another's soul I cannot claim. To companion our fellow humans means to watch and learn. Our awareness of the need to learn (as opposed to our tendency to play the expert) is the essence of true companioning.

In sum, companioning is the art of bringing comfort to another by becoming familiar with her story (experiences and needs). To companion the grieving person, therefore, is to break bread literally or figuratively, as well as listen to the story of the other. Of course this may well involve tears and sorrow and tends to involve a give and take of story: I tell you my story and you tell me yours. It is a sharing in a deep and profound way.

### COMPANIONING PHILOSOPHY

1. Companioning is about being present to another person's pain; it is not about taking away the pain.
2. Companioning is about going to the wilderness of the soul with another human being; it is not about thinking you are responsible for finding the way out.
3. Companioning is about honoring the spirit; it is not about focusing on the intellect.
4. Companioning is about listening with the heart; it is not about analyzing with the head.
5. Companioning is about bearing witness to the struggles of others; it is not about judging or directing these struggles.
6. Companioning is about walking along side; it is not about leading or being led.
7. Companioning is about discovering the gifts of sacred silence; it is not about filling up every moment with words.
8. Companioning is about being still; it is not about frantic movement forward.
9. Companioning is about respecting disorder and confusion; it is not about imposing order and logic.
10. Companioning is about learning from others; it is not about teaching them.
11. Companioning is about compassionate curiosity; it is not about expertise.

From *Understanding Your Grief: Touchstones for Hope and Healing* by Allan Wolfelt, Ph.D., Center for Loss and Life Transition, Boulder, Colorado