

### Chapter 3

## Limits and Boundaries

Companions have limits. We are physically limited; none of us can be a companion 24 hours a day for weeks on end. Mostly, we companion in small amounts of time — a few minutes here, a half-hour there, a few times a week or a couple times a month. We have emotional limits; we can't be fully present with all people we see struggling. Sometimes, even, a single individual's struggle may be too close to our own wounds and we simply cannot bear, in addition to our own sufferings, to hold a similar process of healing with another person. We have intellectual limits; we don't know everything and cannot be expected to have the answers to all questions. I don't have all the answers to all of the important questions even in my own field. In companionship, we proceed with humility, trusting that answers and solutions will come as we make the journey together.

We have social limits, as well. We aren't connected with everybody, and we don't immediately know all of the systems and services within our community. It took me several years, working full-time on the streets of Seattle, to become familiar and get comfortable with the maze of city, state, and federal service agencies; to learn which church and nonprofit

organizations could be counted as partners; and to gain the confidence of people in the mental health professions. We start with who we are and what we know, and we go from there.

We have our personal limitations. You are one human being, as am I. We each have our unique personalities, our unique set of gifts and abilities — and our disabilities. The late Carl Rogers, a psychologist and the author of a book titled *On Becoming a Person*, wisely wrote that “it doesn’t help, in the long run, to act as though I were something that I am not.”<sup>6</sup>

And we have our spiritual limitations. No matter how strong our faith, no matter how deep our trust in God, there will always be moments of doubt along the way of companionship. We remain always open to a larger love at work in the world.

An honest acknowledgment of our limitations as human individuals can help us set workable boundaries on what we can expect to do as companions — and what we can expect from the person we are companionshiping.

#### Advice from Miss Manners

A woman once wrote to Miss Manners, the newspaper columnist and authority on etiquette, complaining that she and her husband were receiving so many dinner and party invitations that they didn’t have any time for themselves. What could she do—what was the proper way to say no when she

<sup>6</sup> Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Psychotherapist’s View of Psychotherapy* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 1995, orig. Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 16.

was asked to come to dinner, volunteer for a fundraiser, or serve on a board or committee? Miss Manners’s wise advice “Simply say, ‘I’m not able to do that.’ If someone asks why, simply say, ‘I’m not able to do that.’ If someone asks if you aren’t well, simply say, ‘I’m not able to do that.’ If someone asks if you’re going out of town, simply say, ‘I’m not able to do that.’ Pretty soon,” Miss Manners said, “people will stop questioning your disability.”

When you, as a companion, want to be honest and conscientious about drawing the line when asked to be helpful in a way you don’t feel comfortable about, or you don’t have time for, or in fact for any other reason, simply say, “I’m not able to do that.” If the person follows up by asking if you’re not feeling well, repeat, “I’m not able to do that.” If you are then asked whether you’re going to be out of town, or if you have guests coming, or any other guess, just say, “I’m not able to do that.”

Saying no is something you, as a companion, will find most useful. I learned this early in my experience with people on the street. I was talking with Kenny, a homeless man, when he asked me, “Craig, do you have a house?” I said yes, I live in a house. Kenny said, “How ’bout I come stay in your house tonight?”

I should have been prepared for a question like that, but I wasn’t. Not wanting to hurt Kenny’s feelings, I said, “Well, I’d have to check with my wife. We’ve got kids, and a lot of things constantly going on —”

He said, “That’s okay. Do you have a car?” I said yes, I have a car. Kenny said, “How ’bout I stay in your car?” I said, “Well, I park it on the street, and I don’t know how safe that would be, and —”

He said, "It would be safe. Nobody's going to break into your car if I'm in it." I again hemmed and hawed until he finally said, "That's okay. Have you got 50 bucks? I'll get a motel room."

I realized then that Kenny was testing my limits, and I could have been stuck in that conversation, hung up on my guilt, for a long time. Finally, I just said no.

Miss Manners is right. You don't need to give a reason for not agreeing to render an act of kindness that pushes against your boundaries. There's no harm in this as long as you reply politely and make it clear you do not mean to disturb the companion relationship. At the heart of companionship is not an obligation, but the grace simply to be with another.

Remember what you *can* do. You can create a safe space for companionship. You can exercise hospitality by having a cup of coffee or sharing some food. You can show your respect for the person and make it clear that you honor them as worthy and valuable. You can be a good neighbor, share the journey side by side, be a good listener, and offer support for creating a network of care. That's what you can do, following the practices of companionship, and those are your boundaries. You are not obligated to go beyond the call of companionship.

This is important. It is up to us to model the act of establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries. If you give the impression to someone that you can take care of everything or you cannot say no, that can lead to problems. We cannot be good companions if we do not take care of our own needs, and the need to know where the boundaries are, the need to manage our time, the need to have lives for ourselves and our families — these are all essential to our own well-

being. None of us — not you, not I — can even pretend to provide all of our own needs, and we should not be drawn into thinking we can do that for somebody else. Always remember that your role is to be a part of a circle of care that includes others who all have their particular gifts to offer.

So be honest about your own needs, and be equally honest, with both yourself and the person you companion, about your limits and boundaries as a companion.

### **Don't be discouraged**

Around 10:00 one evening, I received a call about Dora, a woman who had been sleeping outside, in the doorway of City Hall. Dora was seven months pregnant and hacking and coughing with an obvious respiratory ailment. I took her to the E.R. of a nearby hospital, where a member of the staff examined her. Dora had bronchitis, but nothing physically worse than that — yet. It was clear that she was mentally disturbed, and so the staff called in the county mental health professionals (MHPs). The MHPs, however, determined that Dora was not gravely ill and was not posing an immediate threat to herself or anyone else, and therefore, by law, they could not commit her to the hospital. If her bronchitis progressed to pneumonia, they said, she could be involuntarily committed.

Dora insisted on returning to her place in the doorway of City Hall. Reluctantly, I took her back and left her there. I told her I would return in the morning and, meanwhile, keep her in my thoughts and prayers. She was worse the next morning, so I called the MHPs in again, and again, they were unable to determine that her life was in danger. This time, however, they went before a judge and requested that Dora

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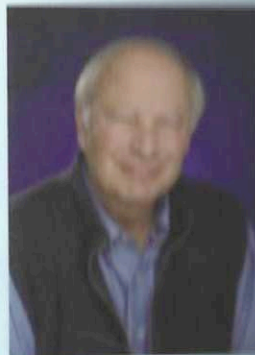
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with David Paul