

ACCOMPANIMENT AS A RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

By Laura McDowell

There is much value in action. Yet there is also much value in what our society would recognize as ‘inaction’; the ‘inaction’ of accompaniment. We are a culture of a can-do mindset, trained to fix the problem and move on to the next. But this mindset runs the risk of inviting us to focus solely on the problem, or what we perceive as the problem, and completely miss the human component. While there is certainly value in the ‘building a house’ form of service, there is another way to serve those who live in the reality of poverty. In place of *doing* something *for* others, there is the action of *being* for others. This action is accompaniment.

To accompany is to invest. It is taking the time necessary to develop the *confianza*¹ with which we can then chisel away at the walls that protect our hearts. As Thich Nhat Hanh would describe this, accompaniment is a practice of true presence. He speaks about loving the other, suggesting: “To love...is above all to be there. But being there is not an easy thing. Some training is necessary, some practice. If you are not there, how can you love? Being there is very much an art, the art of meditation, because meditating is bringing your true presence to the here and now”(Hahn 3). If we continue on this line of thought, one might ask how it is that we are present in the here and now. Hanh suggests the simple practice of mindful breathing: “Breathing—I know that I am breathing in; breathing—I know that I am breathing out” (Hahn 5-6).² Mindful breathing helps us return to the present moment, and to unify our mind and our body. Much of the time we focus on the past or the future and we are not truly present to what is happening right in front of us, or in is for that matter. This is where the idea of presence intersects with accompaniment. As we slowly learn to be present

¹ Trust

² Ibid., 6.

to that which is happening at this moment, we are able to become more and more present to those around us.

Hanh then specifically addresses presence to the other when they are suffering:

When you are living mindfully, you know what is happening in your situation in the present moment. Therefore it is easy for you to notice when the person you love is suffering. At such a time you go to him or her, with your body and mind unified, with concentration[...]what we can do—right away—is to manifest our true presence to the beloved person...Even before you actually do something to help, the person you love is relieved. Your presence is a miracle, your understanding of his or her pain is a miracle, and you are able to offer this aspect of your love immediately. (19-20)

There is much understanding that comes from a practice of deep listening. And in addition, there is an element of walking with the other. This is, ideally, an immersion into the context in which the person is living.³ Here, there is room for an even deeper connection in shared experience. How well can I really accompany Salvadoran or Nicaraguan women if I am not riding the bus and walking the streets and personally feeling the ground pulled swiftly from beneath me as *machismo* pushes me to fall backwards onto powerlessness? It is one thing to hear the story of a woman's teenage daughter who refuses to walk down the street half a block to buy something from the *pulperia*⁴ because of guaranteed catcalls from the men who sit in a group on the corner. It is quite another experience to have a male quietly come up behind you and brush your right thigh with his palm, and then slowly drift away.⁵

³ Which is most likely already a given in that we develop *confianza* with those whom we are around, which in many cases would imply a shared cultural experience. However, there can be line we should be aware of concerning crossing lines of gender, culture, age etc.

⁴ 'Little neighborhood store'

⁵ This idea of walking in the same context is one that is important. Yet here it is also important to realize the reality, which Ivone Gebara explains, "It's very difficult to be in both worlds. I think all we can ultimately do is build bridges. We can't fully assimilate. Still, I would recommend that other theologians have more contact with impoverished persons. When we speak of theory, we need to know for whom we're speaking and of whom we're speaking. I'm never going to feel exactly what the poor feel, but I can draw near in sympathy trying to feel what they feel" (qtd. in Puleo, 207-208).

Accompaniment, a far cry from in-action, calls us forward, to an immersion, and to a piece of solidarity, in which we fully invest ourselves and begin to understand.

Accompaniment can take many different forms. It can be an important response to suffering. When we are with a friend who is struggling with a sudden death of a family member, for example, what is our response? We want to make things better, to take away the pain. We want to come up with some word or thought that would allow us to ease the pain, even just a little. And yet so many times, what can we do? We hold their hand. We embrace them. We pick up and throw away the snot filled tissues from the floor. And we hurt along with them. We cannot “fix it.” We are useless, aside from our presence.

This part of accompaniment can be slightly terrifying. Here, there is a distinction between what Gerald May refers to as “willfulness ” and “willingness .” We tend to spend much time in attempting to control our lives and the situations into which we walk. This is “willfulness.” We attempt to “will” the reality before us: “Willfulness is the setting of oneself apart from the fundamental essence of life in an attempt to master, direct, control or otherwise manipulate existence” (May 6). For fear of vulnerability and fear of our true selves, May argues we attempt to control our settings. This fear of vulnerability could then easily be expanded to a fear of the vulnerability of others. When a friend is in front of us, filled with raw emotion and is expressing him or herself with half-thoughts and quarter-thoughts, it can be scary. Try as we might, we cannot control the situation, though we may attempt to. Yet, when we try to control in this way, we easily distort the reality the other is experiencing. We risk putting him or her in a box or identifying their “problem” as something to be “fixed.” For some, what can be even more unsettling is the mirror an experience like this puts up to our own life, reminding us of the fragile nature of our own reality, of our own vulnerabilities and inadequacies. Though we may attempt to gain control,

these ruptures in ourselves or in others remind us of our lack of control. As Jerome Miller writes: “The will to control, which tries to prevent anything tragic from happening to us, is itself tragic because in exercising it we end up confining ourselves inside a world from which everything Other than ourselves has been drained. We do not realize that we are ourselves the victims of our own desire to be safe. In control of everything, we live in the smallest and most narrow of all possible worlds” (14).

Professor Mark Chmiel, who teaches a social justice course at St. Louis University, speaks to the distinction that is being made here. He writes about his late wife Mev Puleo, and her experience of returning from a trip to Brazil. She returned to Brazil to reconnect with some of the people she knew from her first trip; yet, she ended up cutting the trip short and returned raw and broken:

Later, eager to help, or uncomfortable with her fragility, or both, I decided to boost her flagging spirits. ‘You’re not a coward, Mev. It takes a lot to know when you’ve had enough. No, it would have been silly to stay and really do damage to yourself.’ She glared at me, and said slowly: ‘No, you don’t understand.’ And I didn’t. So much of Mev’s identity was invested in her work, her abilities, her success—the one thing to avoid, the number one calamity to stave off at all cost was failure. She didn’t take too kindly to my efforts to shore up her self-assurance and I learned very quickly that she hated it when she perceived that I really wasn’t listening. That’s all she wanted—just to have me *hear* her anguish, confusion and self-doubt; but, true to the social construction of my pragmatic American gender, I wanted to fix her problem. There was no fixing this. Mev came home from Brazil broken, emptied, weary. (74)

It can be terrifying to realize that there are moments when we are not in control. So terrifying, in fact, that we call these moments by different names, such as “problem,” in order to provide ourselves with the illusion of control. Yet, in stark contrast to this idea of “willfulness” is one of “willingness”: “Willingness implies a surrendering of one’s self-separateness, an entering-into, an immersion in the deepest processes of life itself” (May 6).

It is an acknowledgement that we, in fact, are not in control at all. We *willfully* attempt to

control our reality, and our culture successfully provides us with a multitude of ways to believe we succeed in this. Yet, we do not know how to be honest in recognizing our fears and shortcomings. When we approach life in a way that is ‘willing’, “...this notices...wonder and bows in some kind of reverence to it” (May 6). It is a spirit of openness in which we do not have to fix anything. We learn to make ourselves available to others and to create a space in which we acknowledge the legitimacy of their emotions—a space, perhaps, in which we simply listen.⁶

Accompaniment, as a response to suffering, is clearly not the easy path. The call to accompaniment, is in a sense, a call to a spirit of “willingness.” It is allowing a space for others to be who they are, and even at times for ourselves to be who we are. It recognizes the dignity of the other and welcomes him or her just as he or she is. It refuses to label the experience or the person herself as problem.

How do we learn to accompany?

Through accompanying. It is not a theological concept that can be studied, bunkered down in a B-School breakout room. Perhaps we can study accompaniment in the different forms it takes and under the different synonyms we use to describe it, yet there is always a sort of artificial-ness to it. If we remain in the classroom, we cannot truly understand or enter in. Accompaniment is not something that has to start big. In fact, it rarely does.

⁶ This is to say for example, ‘you are broken and raw, and that is ok’. This is not to legitimize the situations or things which have brought the other to this point. If a woman experiences abuse, the abuse itself and the surrounding injustices are not ‘ok,’ however the fact that the woman experiences the emotions of grief and anger is ‘ok.’ She is not told to pick up, move on and put a smile on her face. Rather, she is received, listened to and affirmed in what she feels.

I have come down with some sort of cold. I am warmer than usual and have curled up early for the night on my bed. My body needs sleep and so I decide I will just sleep it off. Meyling, my host sister, comes in, pulls the damp tissues from under my runny nose and lets out a sigh of both pity and care. She alerts her mom who is watching TV in the other room, and Dona Maria immediately switches into “mom worry mode.” They anoint my feet with some variation of Vaseline, and put me in wool socks so as to help me sweat out the cold. Meyling and Maria then bring in the simple wicker basket from the kitchen table and, sitting on Meyling’s bed (which is next to the one I am in), deliberate about which unmarked baggie of pills I should take. I try to tell Maria that I have just taken Tylenol, but she reassures me enough time has passed. Not sure what I am going to do about taking these mystery pills, Maria stands next to my bed, her right hand exposing the pills, she closes her eyes and invokes a blessing on them, asking Father God to take care of me through the medicine. And my heart settles as faith and love come to the lips of this anxious mama, llena de fe.⁷ Whether or not I buy into the Catholic faith at this point in my life, there is something about Maria’s faith that is calming and reassuring. She takes care of me the best way she knows how, both physically and spiritually, primero Dios.⁸ They make sure I am taken care of. They take me to the doctor, make sure I have a comfortable place to sleep and check to see that I am drinking the agua del mar⁹ that has been prescribed. Dona Maria even shares a bit of her own home-remedy, a mix of rum and honey. She too has a cough and we find ourselves in the early evening sitting in the living room together, clinking glasses, bottoms-up!

It is just the beginning of the semester in El Salvador and Trena’s father has just died. She was able to make it back to the states to say goodbye, and now she has returned to her home in El Salvador. The Salvadoran community she, her husband, and their three (now four) young girls have built has come together

⁷ A mother, full of faith.

⁸ Roughly translated, ‘God first’ or ‘If God wills it’.

⁹ ‘Sea-water’-This is recognized by many as helpful in treating illnesses.

*and insisted on having a mass in his honor. I dress in a blue woven shirt and a flowing white skirt with sequins that have crumpled up from drying in the sun. And I sit off to Trena's right as I watch dozens of Salvadorans make their way onto the outside porch where chairs have been strategically placed in the shade, so as to avoid the inevitably oppressive heat. Sophie, seven years old with glasses that make her eyes bug out, makes her rounds. She acts as a proud yet kooky hostess who greets everyone with energetic arms and a bright smile. She has chosen me as her favorite, at least for the day, and decides to sit in my lap. And the mass begins. There is singing, and the Spanish words, *confianza* and *apoyo*¹⁰ take on new meaning. And then we come upon the homily, as we always do, and I settle in a bit, with Sophie on my lap, and listen as Trena begins to speak in wonderfully accented Spanish. And as she reflects, her thoughts eventually move to Sophie. And she begins to talk about how Sophie was present at the funeral and was weaving in and out, providing comfort to tearful friends and family. And as she is speaking, Sophie moves slightly as if she is going to get up and bug her mom, but Trena places her hand out and says a silent "No," as if her daughter's comfort at that moment would cause her to lose control of her tears. And so Sophie remains calmly in my lap. And I enter a moment of wonder. Listening to how this vivacious little girl seems to intrinsically understand and know accompaniment. I sit, for this moment, with the pride and joy and hope of a mourning mother in my lap. And I have somehow stumbled into this moment of interconnection and by no thought, action, or will of my own, this child who accompanies waits patiently on my blanket of crinkled white sequins until her mom finishes. And then she pops up, with a kiss and embrace that attests to her gift.*

It is the last night of my return trip to El Salvador. It is the 20th anniversary celebration of the martyrdom of the Jesuits, and Celina and Elba. The procession and the mass are over and now all those who are left settle in for the six or so musical groups who will play throughout the night into the early morning. I

¹⁰ Trust and support

*finally find myself with some time alone with Luis.¹¹ We sit next to each other on a hill that overlooks the stage and listen to Sombrero Azul. It is clear that something is weighing on him, though I do not know what. I curse my insufficient Spanish to tactfully pursue this and cringe as I hear myself ask “What’s wrong?” and can only hope my tone of voice saves a shard of my Spanish-speaking dignity. He turns to me, smiles and says, “a veces pienso demasiado en las cosas.”¹² It is clear there is little *confianza* between us, not having communicated for over a year and a half. It is clear to me that though we may be able to discuss some things, in this moment, I am unable to be there for him in my common role as listener. I let it go, knowing I cannot engage him in a meaningful dialogue with my inability to catch the connotations of his word choice. Instead, we both start to dance, still seated, pretending we can pop-lock our shoulders. One thing leads to another and we find ourselves standing and up and dancing as the base pulses through the ground. The music then stops and the live feed cuts to the announcers who are seated a few feet to the right of where we are. They miss their cue and stare, blank-faced into the camera as several seconds pass. It becomes our running joke. Luis and I laugh as we imitate their ‘deer in headlights’ look a few too many times.*

He later pulls out his camera and I assume he wants to take a serious picture. (Salvadorans generally do not smile for group photos). I plan to sabotage the photo-op—who needs a serious picture of me anyway? Uno, Dos, Tres, the flash is blinding under the 1AM stars, and as he turns the digital camera we are both overcome with child-like laughter as we realize we both made the most unattractive faces possible, and neither of us expected the other to do so. This turns into another twenty minutes of goofing-off on the hillside, a short distance from the rose garden, embraced by the chilly humidity.

Why tell these stories? In telling them they come to life. In sharing our personal encounters and through the sharing of the stories of others, we can gain bits of

¹¹ The Salvadoran who served as a guide during my semester in Las Delicias

¹² ‘Sometimes I think too much’

understanding into this concept that is accompaniment. In these specific stories there are three different ways in which we can see accompaniment as a response to suffering brought to light. There are moments in life when we are not in control and we find we are completely vulnerable. When we find ourselves sick, especially in an unfamiliar setting, it can be an unnerving experience. Yet at times, we can find ourselves *being* accompanied. In being accompanied many times we are humbled. It is many times much more difficult to receive than to give. Here we can learn about accompaniment through the gift of others. We can be humbled in our inability to take care of ourselves. All we are able to do is to receive from others, to allow our head to be stroked and our feet to be anointed. From this we can learn.

We can also gain insight into accompaniment through the example of others. How many times as young adults can we gain insight into life through the life, eyes and experience of a child? Sophie is a normal girl in many ways, and yet, at moments, it is clear she has a sense of accompaniment. In numerous stories, too numerous to share here, she is in tune with the suffering of others. In moments like these, simply who she is, and in the innocence that still unconsciously clings to her as a child, she demonstrates the mystery of loving accompaniment. It is clear through this story that the walk of accompaniment is not something that has to be studied and it is not a difficult concept to understand. It is simply being with others and offering our presence. It is Sophia allowing her grandmother to hold her as long as her grieving heart needs.

Finally, it should be mentioned that, as is hopefully clear, accompaniment can take many varied forms, including presence to a friend or acquaintance who is simply having a bad day. To view accompaniment as being present solely in those moments when the other is completely raw and falling apart, would be a mistake. While the “bad day” Luis was having may not be considered “suffering” per say, there is still an invitation to accompany. I can

help to cheer up a friend for the evening. It makes a small difference in that moment, and friendship is shared. There is something shared in this community, in this moment. It is also possible that a gradual accumulation of moments and interactions will then lead to a deepening sense of *confianza*, of trust, into which both sides can be called into a deeper sense of accompaniment. Yet, this should not be a 'goal' looked forward to. This would run the risk of distorting the sacredness of the moment of taking sassy-faced photos, if I do this only in anticipation of something more in the future. If nothing else, this inhibits my ability to fully enter into the moment at hand and my accompaniment here becomes intricately complicated. I can even risk being in two places at once; present to both this moment in front of a blinding flash and to my specific thoughts and desires for the future. This is, in itself, a contradiction in that, in being in two places at once, we are really in neither.

And here, it is important to note another essential piece to this idea of accompaniment: time. Very rarely do we meet people who let their guard down right away. Normally, there is a process of developing a relationship. It takes time to get to know the other person, to develop trust and to eventually let down the walls that exist on both sides.

There are times too when we can be invited into a moment of accompaniment when we do not expect it. I find myself at St. Cecilia's Parish after Spanish mass, walking downstairs to take part in the *intercambio* program. English speakers and Spanish speakers begin by exchanging pleasantries. And as the afternoon continues, one woman begins to tell about her experience crossing the desert, traveling from Mexico to the United States. She is incredibly open to telling her story to all who have gathered. She speaks about walking for miles and miles with no food or water, and when finally across, unable to walk for several days because of the extent of the blisters on her feet. She also speaks to the reality *de estar*

secuestrado.¹³ She relates the story that there are many people who cross the border into the United States who are then kidnapped by other Latinos, who then hold them for ransom. It is a way of making a profit, at the expense of others.

These moments, when we are invited into the reality of another are unique in the way they can call us. In these moments we are invited to listen, to be present, and to accompany. And at the same time, these moments can point to injustice. It is here that we are called to “be with” others, as they tell their stories, as they provide a window into the injustices they have suffered. We then are called forward, *with* those that we have come to know. We are invited forward, in communion, to speak out *with* one another, with the context accompaniment has provided us, and to work for change.

¹³ Being kidnapped

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