

Companions for the Passage

M A R J O R I E R Y E R S O N

Companions for the Passage



*Stories of the Intimate Privilege
of Accompanying the Dying*

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To my children, Emily and Nicholas

With gratitude for their unwavering friendship and love



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Foreword

By Thomas Moore

Ever since I published *Care of the Soul* almost twelve years ago, people have been asking me, “What is the soul?” Each time, I’m silent for a moment. There is no adequate answer. I mumble a few words that I hope are not too abstract, but I realize immediately that they are far too inadequate. What I could do in response would be to give the inquirer a copy of this book by Marjorie Ryerson. If you want to know what the soul is, be a witness to the death of a loved one or even someone you don’t know.

The lively, emotional, and thoughtful stories in this book reveal to the reader the very essence of what it means to be a visitor on this planet. The sense of connection, purpose, wonder, and mystery intensifies at the moment of death so that the witness can’t help but be educated, in the deepest sense of the word. You discover that human life at its core is something you can never understand fully and can’t control. You learn the importance of being present to another. You sense that somehow nature is in accord with the most intimate events in your life. You may have an intuition that the dreams that have drifted into consciousness night after night during your life may have been significant after all.

As a witness, you may be affected for life by the passing of someone you love. Throughout this book you’ll find the words *sacred* and *spiritual* used sparingly to sum up the atmosphere of a peaceful death. Each death has its own shape and rhythm. Each is its own ritual. In the presence of death you stand at the edge of eternity and discover something of the essence of your own life.

My mother died last summer. She had had a minor stroke and then a hemorrhage in her brain. The last real conversation I had with her was a telephone call between these two events. She was nine months dying. From the time I left home at thirteen to enter a sem-

inary, I have always lived at a distance from my family. During her last illness, I visited my mother many times and spoke to her in her dementia and massaged her and sat silently with her for hours. When the end came, my wife and I had been teaching in England and were making a brief visit to Ireland to be with friends and relatives. As my mother died, I lay in bed in that country of her origin, talking to her inwardly across the ocean.

My father and I had discussed many times whether I should stay within reach. He thought I should go on living my life and spreading my message, one that he understands and supports. When I still feel some guilt about not being present at my mother's death, I remember my father. He is a deeply emotional man, but all his life he has taken an unsentimental position on everything, especially in matters of life and death. When my mother's condition first worsened, the staff at the nursing center called a meeting with the family. My father arrived with an agenda all typed up and copied. He passed it around to the surprised nurses, dietician, and chaplain and called the meeting to order. He asked for specific information and told them warmly but firmly that he wanted no heroics in keeping my mother alive. In his mind, she had begun her departure long ago.

We Americans live in a society where the people are full of heart but where the way of life is lacking in deep romance, mystery, ritual, and heartfelt connections. I think we treat each other badly—especially groups that are in any way different—because of our materialistic and mechanical view of life. We don't see through to the person beneath an accent or skin shade. Medical students are trained in a purely physical view of the body and are not always educated in the mysteries of illness, dying, and love. To be present at the death of our loved ones, we sometimes have to fight the system and deal strenuously with emotionally cool technicians and arrogant medical personnel. We have to be warriors defending the needs of the soul.

But sometimes a grace intervenes. When my mother was at the very end, the family called for a priest. No one could ever be as devout a Catholic as my mother, who was born on the feast day of the Annunciation and was named Mary Virginia, Virgin Mary. She said a rosary every day of her life, and when I was sorting through her things later, I found several well-worn devotional cards with

prayers for a happy death. In the hospital room, the elderly priest arrived, whipped out his harmonica, and played the tune “Going Home,” by Dvořák. My father, a musician and equally devout Christian, said he couldn’t have imagined a more beautiful death.

I wish everyone would read the stories in this book, feel them, take them in, and be affected by them. We all need this kind of education in soul. If we knew death with this kind of intimacy, maybe we would pause before advocating wars, even on behalf of freedom and peace. Maybe we would be radical initiators of conflict resolution at home and abroad. Maybe we would honor the precious lives of children who need to be educated in the human sensitivities described here. Maybe we would get over our religious excesses and prejudices and discover how deep a spiritual way of life really is. Maybe we would learn that nature is more intimate to us than we ever like to think and needs our care and protection.

The people who tell their stories in this book are incredibly alive to human connection. Their memories of love and loss have in them lessons that perhaps can only be learned by witnessing death. I believe that if we could all be exposed to these lessons, the world would be a far better place. For we learn from death how to live, and we prepare for our dying by the way we live.