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Accompaniment, a tool for transformation

by Abigail Dawson

*In this fragile frontier place, your kindness
Becomes a light that consoles the brokenhearted,
Awakens within desperate storms
That oasis of serenity that calls
The spirit to rise from beneath the weight of pain,
To create a new space in the person's mind
Where they gain distance from their suffering
And begin to see the invitation
To integrate and transform it.*

John O'Donahue - extract from *For a Nurse
To Bless the Space Between Us*

Community health care workers at Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) go door-to-door every day. They bathe, feed and provide basic healthcare services for chronically ill and displaced persons across the Johannesburg and Pretoria metros.

Paulina*, a JRS client, came to South Africa from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), fleeing conflict in her hometown, hoping for a more peaceful life. Four years ago, Paulina was diagnosed with breast cancer. Estranged from her family and unable to access chemotherapy due to her documentation status, she relied on community healthcare workers to dress her wound, feed and clean for her. Multiple attempts have been made to get Paulina treatment in a public hospital, to no avail. She has spent the last three months in a hospice receiving pain medication, which seemed to be not working. Paulina died and was laid to rest last Saturday. The healthcare worker who has accompanied Paulina into her death painfully explained that Paulina had asked that JRS be the family at her funeral. They had become her family in a country that was not her own.

This is one encounter, an instance in which someone's suffering has been shared. Paulina's life in South Africa and suffering relating to her illness have largely been shaped by being other, marginal to systems that she has needed to access in order to live. Healthcare workers accompany people, in everyday life and into death, as part of their work.

John O'Donahue describes the work of a nurse bringing lightness into 'fragile frontier place(s)'. How might we understand accompaniment in the places we live and work?

Accompaniment is a welcoming, walking alongside and an invitation to share the burden of suffering - a call for solidarity.

As suffering continues to shape our neighbourhoods and cities and the margins of inequality deepen, we are called to listen to how we can walk alongside or be in solidarity with the marginalised. Relational accompaniment is an invitation to close the distance between us, which systemic inequality and injustice perpetuate. The invitation to see the likeness in one another in hope will transform how we all live.*Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of individuals.



For more information

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