

# What Is Spiritual Companionship?

Andrea Hayes is a long-time member of Anamcharadas and describes its work.

A friend recently asked me, ‘What is spiritual companionship?’ It’s certainly not a one-stop shop for access to God but more of a life-long pilgrimage, a journey of taking small steps each day in the direction of the Divine.

Prompted by this question, when I looked back and considered my journey with Anamcharadas (Soul Friendship), a lay ministry of listening and accompaniment co-founded by Myles O’Reilly SJ, I was left with an abiding feeling of sacredness. Every step that I have taken, including my decision to train in this sacred practice, has opened me up to an even deeper way of listening to my inner wisdom and to God. The value of spiritual accompaniment in my life has been both profound and multifaceted; it has changed my life by offering a deeper connection to the divine, fostering growth, support and transformation in every aspect of my life. But crucially, it has linked me with a broader spiritual community, providing a sense of belonging and shared purpose.

Earlier this year, the Anamcharadas community came together to celebrate our fortieth anniversary with the theme of ‘Finding God in all life experience’. This milestone was marked with a gathering of over seventy-five former alumni associated with Anamcharadas over those four decades at

an event that took place in Milltown Park. The day of commemoration was opened by Colette Kane, a Dominican Sister from Cabra. She began with a reflection on the Universe Story, uniting science and the humanities in a dramatic exploration of the unfolding of our evolving place in the cosmos and the boundless possibilities for our future.

I believe in the Presence of God in all things. For me, God speaks in a mediated way, very often through nature and the challenge is to always be attentive to the experiences. Over the years, just having a place to name my unspoken, unearthly conversations and hearing God with the ear of the heart has enabled me to make sense of my personal relationship with myself and the Divine, the universe, and this ‘cosmic consciousness’. This realisation was a big breakthrough that changed the trajectory of my life, but it happened slowly, during my many spiritual conversations with my trusted director.

When talking about these ‘a-ha’ breakthrough moments, it can sound like a counselling session – which it is not. At the recent gathering to celebrate four decades of Anamcharadas, Dr Tony Bates, clinical psychologist and best-selling author of *Breaking the Heart Open*, spoke about his



own intimate and lived experience of completing the Anamcharadas training almost forty years ago. He explained clearly how it captured both disciplines of therapy and spiritual direction, which at first sight might seem to be the same. However, there is a distinct separation between the two. Spiritual companionship is non-directive and more about the art of presence and being present to the unfolding of 'grace.' Spiritual direction however, is a compassion-based ministry. We enter into this process out of our deep care for our sacred soul and empathy permeates the process. Anamcharadas provides a space where all are welcome, where all are held in the grace of contemplative curiosity and care. Essential to this sacred soul work is the awareness that the Holy Spirit is at work. In fact, we are creat-

ing a contemplative space of radical hospitality with the understanding that every session is rooted in God.

Another highlight of our fortieth celebration was the inclusion of music from former *Anamchara* and renowned songstress Róisín O'Reilly, who shared some beautiful music from her forthcoming album, *Listening to the Heart*. As she sang, I felt I was savouring every note, the music allowing me to fully slow down and meditate more deeply on my relationship with God and creation in all its blessedness. When we savour anything, it is so much sweeter, and I think 'savour' is the most appropriate expression to describe my relationship with Anamcharadas and spiritual accompaniment – for it too is just like feasting on delicious food: it nurtures my soul.