

BEING A GUIDE AND COMPANION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TODAY

by Carlo Loots

1. Introduction

Every era and culture faces the task of bringing Don Bosco's legacy, his preventive system, up to date. It seems that in the Salesian world today, 'accompanying young people' is the new way of describing the core of the preventive system.¹ However, if accompanying young people is to be congruent with Don Bosco's *Da mihi animas*, an integral and integrative approach to accompaniment is necessary. This means that the young person under guidance should be given attention as completely as possible, in all dimensions: physical, psychological, relational, functional, spiritual. This 'personal accompaniment' is about the whole person and about the

¹ SCHAUMONT, Colette, LOOTS, C., (Red.), *Opvoeden met Don Bosco als gids en tochtgenoot*, Brussel, Don Bosco Centrale, 2015; ATTARD, F., GARCIA, M.A., *Spiritual accompaniment. An educational and spiritual journey with young people in the way of Don Bosco*, Bolton, Don Bosco Publications, 2018; FERNANDEZ ARTIME, A., 'Lord, give me this water' (John 4:15). Let us cultivate the art of listening and of accompaniment, in *Acts of the General Council of the Salesian Society of St. John Bosco*, 100(2018)426, Roma, Direzione Generale Opere Don Bosco, 2018; GRECH, L., *Accompanying Youth in a Quest for Meaning*, Bolton, Don Bosco Publications, 2019.

wholeness of that person, about his personal development and the (re)integration of all aspects of life.²

It is good to know that there is a wide range of accompaniment models, from occasional, spontaneous conversations to a series of meetings planned systematically through a formal agreement.

The important thing is that the person being accompanied finds and receives the form of accompaniment that he or she needs most at a particular moment in life and in the given circumstances.

In this article we will focus on the person of the accompanier.³ He himself is the main instrument of accompaniment. Then, we will outline what the accompanier should (or should not) do or be. We will look at some basic attitudes of the accompanier, will point out some of the pitfalls that he or she can fall into and some myths that need to be debunked. We will do this with particular attention to the ethical dimension of accompanying young people.⁴

By focusing on formal and systematised forms of personal guidance, it is possible to formulate things in all their sharpness.

2. What an accompanier does or does not do

The accompanier has his or her own role to play, taking on their own tasks and responsibilities in accordance with the goal of accompaniment:

² It is not by chance that the term ‘personal accompaniment’ is used in this contribution. Depending on the question, accompaniment may (temporarily) focus more explicitly on one of these aspects of life. But this facet is never isolated from the rest of the person. It comes to the fore, without losing sight of the other aspects. This also suggests that we have questions about certain forms of ‘spiritual guidance’ which isolate faith too much.

³ Inspiring publications were: STEVENS, J., *Gezien en beluisterd worden heelt de mens. Over persoonlijke begeleiding*, Antwerpen, Garant, 2003; STEVENS, J., HERREBOSCH, E., VANDENHOECK, Anne, *Praktijkbegeleiding van pastores met het oog op kwaliteit van werk en leven*, Antwerpen, Halewijn, 2006; LEIJSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden, rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening*, Leuven, Acco, 2011; ATTARD, F., GARCIA, M.A., *Spiritual accompaniment. An educational and spiritual journey with young people in the way of Don Bosco*, Bolton, Don Bosco Publications, 2018.

⁴ The whole forms a framework that gives direction rather than a set of specific rules of conduct. Guides and companions of young people must continue to think for themselves and make their own judgements. This is where ethical action begins.

the development and wellbeing of the person being accompanied. Guidance is meaningful only to the extent that it makes the person being guided more human. In this general objective of accompaniment, several sub-aspects can be distinguished. (1) The persons accompanied become more whole and come to some reconciliation with themselves, their life history, their potential and their limitations. (2) The individual being guided will be able to relate better to their surroundings: people and things, tasks and challenges, prevailing values and norms, traditions and current developments, etc. (3) Their personal life dynamics will be allowed to continue, and will be supported and strengthened. (4) They come to a personal recognition of the secret of their life and of all that exists.⁵

This goal is the touchstone for the work of the person who accompanies. It is what they should do, the way in which it is best done, and they will always be tested against it.

The most essential part of accompaniment is the meeting of two unique, equal human beings. It is precisely in this human contact that the young person experiences the basic attitude of the accompanier: 'You are worthwhile to me' and 'I believe that you too have a meaningful future.' It is about accepting the other as a human being in development.

In fact the accompanier makes a 'relationship offer', one in which the whole person and the necessary expertise is committed.⁶ The one accompanying is there for the person being accompanied.

The guiding relationship is a temporary one in principle. Partners and friends have long-standing relationships, but the accompaniment relationship should be for a specified period of time.

The guiding relationship, then, must be characterised as a functional cooperative relationship. The accompaniment relationship is not an end in itself. It is entered into 'in function of' the optimal development and the greatest possible wellbeing of the person being accompanied.⁷ It is always

⁵ Personal guidance is essentially different from therapy, even though 'therapeutic' effects are often undeniable. Counselling tends to be developmental; therapy is complaint-oriented.

⁶ See: STEVENS, J., HERREBOSCH, E., VANDENHOECK, Anne, *Praktijkbegeleiding van pastores met het oog op kwaliteit van werk en leven*, Antwerpen, Halewijn, 2006, 74-79.

⁷ Out of concern for this 'functionality', the guide will also restrain his curiosity. He does not need information about the person being accompanied and his situation that is not relevant to the accompaniment. Under no circumstances will he ask for such information. See: STEVENS, J., HERREBOSCH, E., VANDENHOECK, Anne, *Op. Cit.*, 280-282.

an asymmetrical relationship in which one person asks for guidance and the other tries to respond to that request as responsibly as possible with a view to the development of the person being guided.

Finally, the relationship between the accompanier and the person being guided is one of trust. Entrusting oneself freely to the accompanier presupposes a fundamental trust on the part of the person being accompanied. In turn, the guide must have a deep respect for the story of the person being accompanied. In this way, a climate of safety is created in which the accompanied person gradually comes to see their own reality better and to deal with it in a more satisfactory way.

More than any technique, it is the personal authentic presence of the guide that makes the difference for the young person. If the young person does not experience this as such, they will understandably break off the guidance.

Of course, it is not enough that the accompanier is a ‘good person’, psychologically healthy, with the necessary social skills, an open mind and the necessary sense of reality, with a lot of life experience and wisdom. Accompaniment also requires expertise. Here we distinguish three components, namely: thoroughly tested insights, practised skills and clear ethical standards. These are, of course, completely intertwined.

Anyone who regularly accompanies others must at least be able to explain their views on the subject to anyone who may be interested. In other words, they will have developed their own vision on becoming human, on relationships and communication, on accompaniment. This vision is not only based on their experience, but has been substantiated by a systematic study of relevant literature.

A guide must also possess a number of practical skills. They need to be able to enter into a relationship of cooperation and trust with very different people, to be able to take up this relationship again and again, and to be able to carefully phase it out and end it in time.

Structuring the accompaniment process is also part of the job. And, of course, listening and speaking ‘as an accompanier’.

This means consciously and selectively influencing (i.e. taking into account the goal of the accompaniment and the personality of the person being accompanied) through supportive, affirming, but also confrontational interventions that are offered opportunely and in the appropriate measure. These and other skills can be acquired through

practice, both in the practice of accompaniment itself and in the context of formation and training.

An accompanier will provide the greatest possible clarity and security for the person being accompanied. This is related to all of the above, but also to reliability on an ethical level. Genuine care for the person being accompanied implies personal **integrity**, which is always evident in ethical correctness.⁸ The person accompanied must know what they may expect in this respect and be able to trust the accompanier completely.

The accompanied individual tries to express (fragments of) his or her story through conversation with the accompanier. It is precisely this work of articulation that proves to be enlightening and liberating. The one accompanying is present as authentically, respectfully and as open-mindedly as possible, listens, and puts in the 'right word' at the most appropriate moment so that the accompanied individual comes to a further recognition of who they are and what are the light and shadow aspects of their life.⁹ The non-verbal dimension must not be lost sight of in all this. After all, all behaviour is communication.¹⁰ Therefore, the accompanier must be a good observer, someone with a trained ear and eye, and with a formed intuition.

Accompanying a young person is always a **unique event**.¹¹ An accompanier creates something new every time. This evokes surprise and

⁸ Many values are associated with the concept of integrity: honesty, fairness, reliability, incorruptibility, love of truth. Integrity also implies an inner component: 'knowing the truth about oneself'. This self-knowledge includes the purification of one's own motives and the willingness to explore one's own deeper motivations and unconscious mechanisms that may permeate the accompaniment work. The boundary between the accompanied person's interests and the self-interests of the accompanier is sometimes blurred. The accompanier's blind spots can be projected onto the accompanied person. Cf. LEIJSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden, rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening*, Leuven, Acco, 2011, 79-104.

⁹ See in this context: MONBOURQUETTE, J., *Apprivoiser son ombre. Le côté mal aimé de soi*, Novalis Publishing, 2001.

¹⁰ See in this context: WATZLAWICK, P., BEAVIN J.H., JACKSON, D.D., *Pragmatics of human communications*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1967.

¹¹ Every human being we meet - man or woman, child or adult, intellectual or illiterate, immigrant or native, in the position of superiority or inferiority ... - is a unique person. There is the concrete physical appearance of this fellow human being; his or her own life history and their particular living environment with its typical language and customs; their possibilities and limitations of head, heart and hands; their opinions, value scale, beliefs and lack of such; their successes and

often admiration at the same time. Accompaniers realise very well that they are not in full control of the event. It transcends them. Basically, they are a servant. A true guide and accompanier is sensitive to the deep mystery of human existence. The openness and sensitivity to this is therefore an essential element of the competence of a personal accompanier.

Now that it is clear what the accompanier should and can do, it is also clear at the same time what this person should not do in principle.

In any case, the accompanier does not aim to change (the behaviour of) the one being accompanied in a particularly desired direction. On the contrary, their influencing presence and interventions serve the one being accompanied on the path that they themselves wish to follow.

Nor does the accompanier offer the person being accompanied ‘good advice’ whether asked for or not. On the contrary, they allow the person to discover their own way (out).

Nor is the accompanier so naive as to spontaneously add their own story to that of the young person. The important thing is that the person being accompanied has the opportunity to tell their story and to develop.

It can safely be assumed that the person being accompanied is not served by theoretical considerations, however valid they may be in themselves, or by moralising.

The above principles are formulated in absolute terms. Nuance is therefore appropriate. Good advice, for example, may be relevant and welcome at a certain point, if that is what the person being accompanied is really asking for. A short theoretical clarification can sometimes place the experience of the guided person in a meaningful framework. Personal accompaniment is not a straitjacket. There is also a place for playfulness and humour.

In fact, much is possible, as long as the purpose and nature of the accompaniment is maintained. The accompanier may be expected to guard this carefully.

The accompanier obviously makes the greatest effort during the dialogue itself, but also prepares the meeting in his or her own way and lets go of it again. In any case, they make sure that they are fit (e.g. not too

failures in the family context and professional sphere ... We recognize in them a subject with their own concretely situated freedom and responsibility, with their own life project. See: STEVENS, J., *In gesprek met een ander*, Averbode, Altiora, 1990, 101-102.

tired), that they make themselves mentally free enough in advance, that they are aware of their own value scale ... In this way, they adjust to the specific nature of the accompaniment process. Moreover, if they have previously met the person being accompanied, they now prepare to meet this person as an accompanier.

At the end of the meeting, they take the necessary distance from it. Taking a few notes for oneself can help to give the experience a place. They serve the accompanier's own process of coping, possibly also learning. They are also useful for keeping certain things in mind for the next meeting.

3. Ethical diligence as a basic attitude of the accompanier

Guiding and accompanying young people is something that requires commitment. In addition to theoretical, methodological and practical issues that arise, there are also ethical questions that require reflection, consideration, choice and justification. After all, ethical aspects are explicitly or at least implicitly linked to every (inter)human action. In the context of this article, we will consider four basic ethical attitudes that apply to the accompanier. The first basic attitude concerns the fundamental respect due to the person being accompanied from the accompanier. This thorough respect for the one being accompanied takes concrete form in the recognition of the young person's autonomy and self-determination. Adequate information and clear agreements, as well as the guarantee of privacy are two further basic attitudes that are expressions of the ethical diligence that should characterise the accompanying process.

A foundation of recognition and respect

The work of accompaniment stands or falls with the recognition of the person being accompanied as a person and with the deep respect that the accompanier has for that person. This means: respect for what the accompanied person is going through and what they have experienced, for the way they live, for what they can and cannot (yet) do, for the story they tell at any given moment, for the mystery of their being that can never be fully expressed. It is always about a fellow human being, fundamentally equal to the accompanier and in many respects similar but at the same time different, unique.

Showing respect means seeing and appreciating someone as a person, regardless of their merits or mistakes, regardless of the difficult

situation they find themselves in. Every ‘human being’ deserves this unconditional respect.¹² No avoidable harm should be done to them. On the contrary, every available opportunity must be given for their personal development. The person being accompanied is seen and listened to as he or she is, here and now. This is precisely what heals a person the most. Judgement, let alone condemnation, is suspended. This *unconditional acceptance* may not, however, be interpreted as approval of everything the person being accompanied does or does not do.

In this context, we should mention *empathy*, in which the accompanier consciously sets aside their own frame of reference in order to observe and feel with the frame of reference of the person being accompanied. They try to understand from within how the one being accompanied experiences themselves in their world and how they attempt to express themselves at this moment. This willingness to put oneself in the other person’s shoes does not mean that the accompanier must be completely absorbed in this. It is important for them to be themselves and stay with their own experience and perception. By being close yet maintaining distance, this attitude offers the person being accompanied opportunities for growth.

Next to and linked to unconditional acceptance and empathy is *authenticity* as a basic attitude. They belong together.¹³ Those who are being accompanied do not need a neutral screen or a neutral talking point, but they do need authentic human presence. An accompanier is someone who is in a personal way there for the person being guided, and who realises at all times that this is the way to influence the person being accompanied. On the other hand, it is of the utmost importance that the accompanier has learned to register what the person being accompanied touches and moves in him or her, and also know how to deal with it. What should be shared or not? At what time? In what way? The main criteria to be considered are the personal development of the person being accompanied and the quality of the accompanying relationship. The accompanier is therefore never completely transparent. It is a case of practising selective authenticity,¹⁴ of

¹² Cf. LEIJSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden, rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening*, Leuven, Acco, 2011, 21-25.

¹³ See: LEIJSEN, Mia, *Gids voor gesprekstherapie*, Utrecht, De Tijdstroom, 1995, 34-72.

¹⁴ Ruth Cohn speaks of ‘selective authenticity’ to indicate that you have to: (1) select and (2) make sure that what you say is congruent with what you experience internally. See: COHN, Ruth, *Von der Psychoanalyse zur themenzentrierten Interaktion*, Stuttgart, Ernst Klett Verlag, 1975, 125.

only communicating what is useful in the context of the accompaniment at that moment.

These basic attitudes must have been largely developed by the accompanier. They are the fruit of practice and experience, of reflection and contemplation. They are never definitively acquired, but need to be constantly nurtured and refined with dedication.

Respect is shown, first and foremost, by everyday actions, such as keeping appointments; the use of language appropriate to the one being accompanied; not asking unnecessarily probing questions if there are no clear reasons for doing so; the way in which the importance of the trusting relationship is explained to curious third parties – who may often have good intentions; the care with which notes are kept ...

Right to self-determination

Every human being has inalienable freedoms and responsibilities. They decide for themselves as much as possible in matters that concern them and their situation. They have the right to self-determination.¹⁵ This right to self-determination – properly understood – must be respected at any cost.¹⁶

Respect for the right to self-determination applies in a special way to personal accompaniment. Accompaniment is first and foremost the business of the person being accompanied. They decide on matters concerning their wellbeing and optimal development. They choose to be accompanied, decide what to bring up during the conversation, and it is they who decide what they will do with it afterwards.

At the same time, by asking for guidance, the individual becomes dependent on someone else, wanting to be influenced by the accompanier in a targeted way. However, the influence that the accompanier inevitably exerts on the individual is of a process rather than a content-related nature.

¹⁵ Under normal circumstances, you do not take over control of another person's life. If, in crisis situations or periods, individuals are unable to exercise that right, then it is given back to them as soon as it is possible and responsible to do so. See: LEIJSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden, rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening*, Leuven, Acco, 2011, 64-77.

¹⁶ However, in this day and age, where individuals take great freedom of choice in almost all areas of life for granted, this right to self-determination needs to be properly understood. An absolute interpretation ignores the reality that a person lives only in relation to others.

It is not up to the accompanier to say what the person being guided should do during or outside the session.¹⁷ Refraining from doing so requires constant attention since everyone is tempted to do so anyway, based on their own opinions and convictions. This is where restraint is expected from the guide, who is only a temporary companion for the one being accompanied. This person is called to (re)find and follow their personal path. The accompanier is at the service of the one being accompanied in their personal exploration.

Respect for the self-determination of the accompanied person, their autonomy, removes guidance from the sphere of abuse of power and manipulation and leads to their emancipation.

Providing information and making agreements

Out of respect for those being accompanied, their inalienable autonomy and their right to self-determination, those who provide accompaniment have the duty to inform them, in understandable terms, how they see personal accompaniment: its purpose, their methodological approach, the space they are given, the boundaries they do not want to cross, the respective roles of the person being accompanied and of the accompanier, their basic philosophy ...¹⁸

Informing the accompanied person appropriately is necessary but not sufficient. Another necessary condition for fruitful accompaniment is the establishment of clear agreements. These are usually established in an initial exploratory conversation. The accompanier takes the lead. A counselling contract is concluded more or less explicitly. People then know what to expect from each other and how they will work together towards the goals of accompaniment, especially if the necessary agreements are also made regarding the period of time the accompaniment will run for, the frequency of meetings, their duration, and so on. This agreement is at the

¹⁷ Cf. Ruth Cohn's statement: 'Giving less than you need is theft, giving more is murder'. COHN, Ruth, *Living-learning encounters: the theme-centered interactional method*, in BANK, L., GOTTSEGEN, G., GOTTSEGEN, M., (Eds.), *Confrontations*, New York, Macmillan, 1971, 270.

¹⁸ In the context of therapy, there are increasing calls to inform the client explicitly about the therapist's personal value orientation, especially concerning religion and sensitive moral issues such as sexuality. After all, in a positive working alliance the client increasingly adopts the values of the therapist. See: LEIJSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden, rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening*, Leuven, Acco, 2011, 26-27.

same time an ethical commitment: each of the parties undertakes to do their part in the accompaniment to the best of their ability.

Such a 'contract' provides clarity, brings structure and offers security. For the person being accompanied, such a framework has the important effect of reducing unnecessary and disabling uncertainty and insecurity. But there is more: formalised agreements also introduce the reality principle into the accompaniment. Real development is only possible when those being accompanied feel that they are accepted together with their wishes and desires, and at the same time are confronted with boundaries and restrictions. Wrestling with inevitable limitations and the frustrations necessarily associated with this, is just as fundamental to growth as is the deep respect for everything going on within.¹⁹ A dedicated guide and accompanier handles this with care and patience. They know that by doing so, they increase the chances of learning, growth and integration for the person being accompanied.

Duty of confidentiality

The accompanier's duty of confidentiality is also a way of acknowledging and respecting the one being guided, especially his or her privacy.²⁰ In principle, the accompanier will not tell third parties what the person being accompanied reveals within the confidentiality of the accompaniment. The accompanier is bound to secrecy, an obligation which extends beyond the period of accompaniment and even beyond the death of the one being accompanied.²¹ Because of the relationship of trust that underlies the accompanying process, the accompanier is privileged to share the ups and downs of the person being accompanied. To talk freely about information obtained in the accompanying process is a breach of trust and means that the nature of the accompaniment relationship has not been properly appreciated. Secrecy is the cornerstone of a relationship of trust.²²

¹⁹ See: BIXLER, R.H., *Limits are therapy*, in *Journal of consulting psychology* 13(1949) 1-11.

²⁰ See: LEIJSSSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden, rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening*, Leuven, Acco, 2011, 42-64.

²¹ See: LEIJSSSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden, rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening*, Leuven, Acco, 2011, 57-59.

²² Knowing about confidential matters gives additional power, which could be used to blackmail the one being accompanied. This is why there are laws to protect secrecy and privacy, and why accompaniers can be called to account when they are careless with confidential information.

It may happen that the accompanier is asked or even pressured, either by the one being accompanied or by their surroundings, to disclose something to third parties. This is not to be done lightly, because the duty of confidentiality is sacred. If, exceptionally, something is to be revealed, (what exactly, and how) this will need to be discussed thoroughly with the accompanied person, and agreed upon.

4. Vigilance required

Accompanying young people is a delicate matter. It requires not only great dedication and expertise from the accompanier, but also the necessary alertness and vigilance.

Pick up stitches

Since nothing human is alien to an accompanier, such a person can drop stitches at any moment. It is up to them to pick them up again as quickly and as well as possible. For example, it was not made sufficiently clear to the person being accompanied how personal accompaniment is to be understood and what can therefore be expected of it. Or the agreements made at the beginning are not clear and strict enough. Or again, at certain moments, the very nature of the accompanying relationship is overlooked and the inequality of roles is disregarded. Or too much good advice is given, resulting in theorizing or moralizing. The accompanier may have placed themselves too much or too little in the shoes of the person being accompanied, or keeps little or too much distance. Guidance becomes friendship unnoticed ...

Cui bono – to whom is it of benefit?

It is clear that the accompanier serves the development of the person being accompanied. Of course, there is nothing to stop them enjoying this kind of work and deriving job satisfaction from it. However, there are also some pitfalls that are best avoided.

For example, when the accompanier starts to identify strongly with the person being accompanied and through the experience of the person being accompanied begins to deal with his or her own issues and personal problems.

The accompanier can also 'spare' the person being accompanied, so to speak, by not really going into what is being said or by refraining from confrontation that would be appropriate. It is possible that at that moment something is touched that is sensitive for the accompanier him or herself, that they cannot (yet) face up to or want to face up to, that they are not (yet) reconciled to. Who then is to be spared, if necessary?

The line between the interests of the person being accompanied and the self-interest of the accompanier is sometimes blurred and many of the accompanier's blind spots can be projected onto the one being accompanied. For this reason, accompaniers must be prepared to reflect again and again on how they function: to dare to face openly and honestly what is going on in their inner world, to explore their deeper motivations in order to purify them.

The accompanier's contribution during the accompaniment process should always be characterised by considered selectivity. This involves not simply confiding personal matters to the person being accompanied. And when personal information is shared, it is always with a view to the wellbeing of the one being accompanied (the aim of all accompaniment) and/or the quality of the accompaniment relationship. Selective openness is a concrete form of respect for the person being accompanied.

When the person being accompanied turns to the accompanier with real ethical or philosophical questions, the latter is careful not to formulate an answer on the basis of personal ethical, political or religious convictions. Instead, the accompanier will help the person to make their own choices based on their convictions, and to grow towards independent functioning. In this way, the accompanier respects the freedom and responsibility of the person being accompanied and their right to self-determination.

In any healthy relationship, the people involved seek an optimal dose of closeness and distance that is appropriate for them at this moment and in this context. It is about the closeness needed to understand the other and to empathise with their experiences. This includes distance that gives the other person space. This applies in full to the accompaniment relationship. After all, its primary aim is to serve the person being accompanied in their development. In concrete terms, this means, for example, that an expression of tenderness, in words and/or gestures, may be appropriate in the accompaniment.²³ But this is not done naively or thoughtlessly,

²³ The prohibition of sexual contact has also inspired some conscientious clinicians to the far-reaching conclusion that all touch in therapy should be avoided. However, there is sufficient scientific evidence that non-sexual touching benefits the client and is ethical. See: LEIJSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden*,

certainly not on the part of the accompanier. What is of the utmost importance is the meaning that the initiator (in this case the person being accompanied or the accompanier) gives to it on the one hand, and the meaning that the other person (presumably, possibly, probably) derives from it on the other. In any case, the accompanying relationship will always be characterised by a well-considered and fundamentally debatable optimum of distance and proximity.

Against the background of the rumours, testimonies and figures that are circulating today about sexual abuse in pastoral relationships, care and accompaniment, the issue of ‘sexuality and personal accompaniment’ deserves extra attention.²⁴ There are two aspects to this: (1) The experience of sexuality as part of the history of the person being accompanied and (2) the experience of sexuality in accompaniment itself. When the person being accompanied brings up their experience with sexuality, the accompanier deals with it in the same way as with other aspects that can be brought up.²⁵ In other words, they listen with as little inhibition as possible and support the one being accompanied in their expression, with the intention that this will lead to greater clarity and personal integration.

The other aspect is the experience of sexuality within the accompaniment itself. Of course, sexual feelings, desires and fantasies may be awakened both by the accompanier and the person being accompanied. The one being accompanied is free to express these feelings to their accompanier as feelings of gratitude or annoyance that experienced at a certain point in the accompaniment. And an accompanier who is prepared for the task knows how to handle this in a respectful and purposeful way. This is actually quite normal (I am not saying easy) in counselling. The question of whether or not the accompanier should reveal something of their own experience in this regard is, in principle, just as easy to answer. The most important criterion is and remains that this really serves the person being accompanied.

So far we have been talking about the articulation of sexual experience. It is something else to experience it *de facto*. An accompanier who goes along with the person being accompanied or who encourages it is profoundly mistaken. Here, a boundary – so essential to accompaniment

rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening, Leuven, Acco, 2011, 110-116.

²⁴ See: STEVENS, J., *Gezien en beluisterd worden heelt de mens. Over persoonlijke begeleiding*, Antwerpen, Garant, 2003, 101-102.

²⁵ Among other things, the accompanier will need to know themselves well, including their own sexual orientation, view of gender issues, attitude to the opposite sex, their own norms of sexuality, possibly their own frustrations in that area.

– is clearly crossed.²⁶ Any accompanier worthy of the name should not be led to believe that such behaviour is desirable or necessary for the accompanying process. Sexual experience and accompaniment simply cannot go hand in hand.²⁷ This is a fixed rule in counselling and psychotherapy.²⁸ This position has nothing to do with a puritanical attitude. The specific purpose and nature of the guidance relationship and dialogue do not allow for such a boundary to be crossed. The person being accompanied is always the victim.

5. Some myths debunked

Some demythologising remarks are appropriate to the accompanier's dedication to 'the cause of the person being accompanied'. This is out of concern for the guide himself, but also with a view to the wellbeing of the person being accompanied. The main question always remains: what really serves the latter? Surely not limitless availability, unlimited expertise or boundless sense of responsibility on the part of the accompanier.²⁹

Limiting availability

An accompanier who does not clearly demarcate their availability will not only have scheduling problems overall, but will also run out of

²⁶ Sexual abuse in the professional relationship can be placed on a continuum ranging from subtle abuse, in which the one being accompanied has to meet the emotional needs of the accompanier, to a sexual atmosphere of veiled innuendo, seductive behaviour, lingering sexual fantasies, to more overt sexual abuse. In practice, sexual abuse usually involves a gradual shift on that continuum. See: LEIJSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden, rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening*, Leuven, Acco, 2011, 105.

²⁷ Within a relationship, healthy sexuality presupposes equal partners who mutually consent. A professional relationship is an asymmetrical relationship, in which the client is in a more dependent and vulnerable position. In this context, sexual acts become expressions of abuse of power, of exploitation of blind spots and of incorrect handling of transference. See: LEIJSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden, rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening*, Leuven, Acco, 2011, 105-110.

²⁸ However, this does not mean that every psychotherapist follows this rule in practice. This is clear from research carried out on the subject. See: VAN DETH, R., #MeToo onder therapeuten en counsellors, in *PsychoSociaal Digitaal* (2018)1 31-34.

²⁹ See: STEVENS, J., *Gezien en beluisterd worden heelt de mens. Over persoonlijke begeleiding*, Antwerpen, Garant, 2003, 103-106.

things to say. Worst of all, he or she may be convinced that they are really helping the person being accompanied. This is a pitiful illusion.

It is extremely important that the person being accompanied also experiences, in the accompaniment process, that there are limits to everything in life. This reality principle provides the one being accompanied with the necessary security and safety, both within and outside the accompaniment.

The accompanier should therefore limit availability, not only out of necessity (given personal limitations) but also on the basis of conscious choices, taking into account the goal of the accompaniment.

It is precisely the limits placed on the frequency and duration of meetings that allows the accompanier to be optimally available. During the agreed time, the accompanier is completely available to the person being accompanied. It is precisely this limited availability that has its own effectiveness.

Accepting one's own reality

Not every accompanier is the ideal guide for every potential individual seeking accompaniment. It is essential that the accompanier has a clear idea of what he or she can and cannot do in the area of accompaniment, of who he or she is and is not as an accompanier. This implies that the accompanier does not have to respond to every request for guidance. When someone thinks they are not the most suitable person for the requested accompaniment or do not have the necessary expertise, they can refer the one seeking accompaniment to someone else. The one seeking accompaniment does not need (despite feeling this way at some point) an 'Übermensch', but a fellow human being of integrity (who is also familiar with accompanying).³⁰

A good accompanier is not equally skilled in all aspects of accompaniment. Accompaniers are by no means perfect. This means that accompaniment always involves searching, failing and making mistakes. It is up to the person concerned to face up to this honestly, to recognise it, to apologise for it and to limit and repair the negative consequences, as far as possible. Someone seeking accompaniment is not served by someone who

³⁰ See: LEIJSEN, Mia, *Gids beroepsethiek. Waarden, rechten en plichten in psychotherapie en hulpverlening*, Leuven, Acco, 2011, 79-118.

is supposed to be perfect. What they need is someone who clearly knows where they stand and can accept that.³¹

Every person who is accompanied inevitably forms an image of their accompanier, an image that evolves in the course of the accompaniment. This image also determines how they behave in relation to the accompanier. And that in turn has repercussions on the latter.

But the accompanier has also formed a self-image. Hopefully this is realistic. If this self-image is too small, it will slow him or her down. If, on the other hand, it is too big, he or she is plagued by the concern not to disappoint (him or herself). In both cases, the accompanier does not function optimally.

Delineating responsibility

The responsibility of the accompanier is not unlimited either. That is not possible (given real limitations) and it is not necessary. It is not allowed because the freedom and responsibility of the person being accompanied and their right to self-determination must be respected. In their involvement with the one being accompanied, the accompanier may indeed be tempted to feel responsible (and behave accordingly) for what the one being

³¹ An experienced accompanier testifies to this self-acceptance: 'I have to know and accept myself, and this is a process that is never finished. I have to be prepared to see not only my talents but also my limitations, my inabilities and my failures, not to be unhappy about it but to be amazed and grateful that I am allowed – as I am – to be a companion. I must be able to admit to myself that I cannot do everything, that I cannot 'help' everyone, that I am not a wizard. I have also experienced that my limitations have their own effect on the person being accompanied. Sharing a bit of powerlessness can sometimes (always taking into account the very nature of accompaniment) even be very fruitful and it certainly breaks the myth of the all-powerful accompanier. More than once I have experienced that it was precisely by sharing my powerlessness that the one being accompanied was able to bring out the most vulnerable part of themselves – which had sometimes been lying like a stone on their heart for many years, without being able to tell anyone – and how this had a truly liberating effect. When, as an accompanier, I dare to be an accessible and vulnerable fellow human being, the other person is given the safety to confide their vulnerability as someone being guided. In doing so, I must always be aware of my own motives and needs, and of course keep the wellbeing of the person being accompanied in mind.' Taken from: STEVENS, J., *Gezien en beluisterd worden heelt de mens. Over persoonlijke begeleiding*, Antwerpen, Garant, 2003, 105.

accompanied does and does not do. However, this makes the person being accompanied more dependent than necessary and is contrary to the principle of personal accompaniment, namely, that the person being accompanied should be in charge of their own life as much as possible. A reserved closeness of the accompanier, including a well-defined responsibility, is what the accompanied person needs, to be able to develop further.

This, of course, does not diminish the responsibility of the accompanier as accompanier. He or she must be there in the accompaniment as that person with their specific role. The accompanier will keep the focus on the goal of the accompaniment itself, will invest in the accompanying relationship, carefully guarding its nature. The accompanier will prepare properly for each meeting, and will maintain and enrich his or her expertise in accompanying. These are all areas of responsibility for the accompanier, who has to be as conscientious as possible. It is not desirable, however, for the person being accompanied or for the accompanier to increase responsibility or develop a sense of responsibility that leads beyond the necessary limits.

6. The privilege of being an accompanier

It is a privilege to serve as a personal accompanier. You are asked to do this by the person interested in accompaniment. You are 'called'. This fact alone is a special experience. On the one hand, it strokes your vanity, you experience it as confirmation. On the other hand, the question inevitably arises: Who am I that I...?

As an accompanier, you invest a great deal of yourself in personal guidance, but you also get a great deal in return. Because of your personal involvement in the accompanying process, it will inevitably have an impact on you, both on your current experience and (over the years) on your whole life.

You may mean something to others in a special way. This is an important source of life fulfilment. Moreover, it is an opportunity for personal development. Above all, you learn to really listen, to understand the other person's message as well as possible. You also learn to stop judging others too easily, for example, formulating answers to questions, whether asked or not, giving cheap advice and solutions ... The practice of personal accompaniment can make you not only more skilled but also wiser. Among other things, it provides you with a lot of knowledge about people. It brings you back again and again to the question of what is really

of value in a person's life, and in your own life. It sharpens your ethical sensitivity. It confronts you with the mystery of life. And all this reaches deep into your soul and translates into your own lifestyle.

