

Introduction

A Journey of Hope

When an elder is physically challenged or emotionally alone as he or she journeys toward death, what does our society offer? The time has come for a new vision in eldercare—and this book reflects that vision, at the core of which is the Healing Companion. This book is about touching lives, about the aspiration of the human spirit, about seeking wholeness. It is an odyssey that speaks about triumph over obstacles—a journey of hope.

As an adjunct to traditional caregiving, Healing Companions® services were created to support elders. This service honors the inner life of elders through intimate dialogue, music, movement, storytelling, art, dreams, poetry, and prayer. Doctors, nurses, aides, ministers, and family members often do not have the time or training to relate holistically to an elder's needs. Healing Companions® are trained to listen to an elder's innermost longings, to offer spiritual and emotional support—and most important, to share love.

Healing Companions® touch a level rarely reached by mainstream eldercare activities. A Healing Companion offers the opportunity to strengthen and encourage an elder's resolve to be thankful instead of lamenting, to seek beauty and joy instead of continual grief and despair, to experience peace and a deep sense of well-being in the midst of physical pain and anxiety about what the future holds.

So often we view old age as a disease, a time when physical and mental functioning declines, leaving a worthless shell and not a real person. While some cultures revere elders, ours often perceives them as unwanted children. We think if we feed, clothe, and entertain our elders, that is enough.

What we miss is the inner person, the beautiful soul. We forget that within each worn-out body is a spirit that yearns for recognition and acceptance before death finally removes all opportunity for expression. By relegating the role of elder to that of a helpless child or, worse, a nonentity, we lose their rich heritage, which should be treasured by all of us. As an elder's soul cries out to be recognized, the Healing Companion concept addresses that need by valuing the uniqueness of every human person.

Although healing implies physical cure, the purpose of healing is not simply to affect bodily change; it is to celebrate inner wellness in spite of bodily ailments. At a time in life when elders have less to do and spend more time in an interior world, Healing Companions® are prepared to travel with them on this soulful journey. Companions and elders share joy, hope, and compassion.

Many books honor the process of dying, but few focus on the need for living more profoundly during the aging process. The experiences recorded throughout this book offer a unique view of elders rarely seen by families and health care providers. The stories reveal the fascinating, funny, complex, and spiritually alive human beings who live inside the elderly bodies we tend to dismiss.

Joy in the Evening of Our Lives inspires us to undertake our own Healing Companion journey, not only with the elders in our care but also in the care of our own selves.