

FOREWORD BY IAN MORGAN CRON

KELLY FLANAGAN

AUTHOR OF *LOVEABLE*



TRUE  
COMPANIONS

A BOOK FOR EVERYONE ABOUT THE  
RELATIONSHIPS THAT SEE US THROUGH



**Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn**

How can I feel connected to someone I have never met and in turn feel more engaged in my own real-life relationships from reading a book?

Therein lies the mystery and the magic of writing. When an author is authentic and shares their vulnerability and humility, their compassion and love openly, palpably, figuratively, and literally, the reach of their words knows no bounds. True, the reader must be open minded and open hearted, curious enough to willingly step into the author's world and feel the text, as both a bodily and a cognitive experience.



**When a book is crafted just right**, the author walks side-by-side with the reader through the text. Together they are immersed in the muck as well as in joyful laughter; they grieve losses and repent miscommunications and misunderstandings all the while forgiving the distances within one's self and others. The author must knowingly, yet subtly, offer their experiences as a mirror or perhaps as a shadow as they present ideas and feelings that both reveal themselves and entice readers to look deeper within and see themselves in the author's words. It cannot come straight away, like a sermon espousing the sense of I am greater than thou so follow me to the promised land. No, the writing has to flow from an inner place of knowing, of being, from a serenity that comes with stillness and silence that arises from doing the work to know one's self, to love and accept one's self wholly, completely. From this place they can reach outward, touch the hands and hearts of those in their lives and witness their presence without the need to fix or cure anything, without the drive to compete or protect with anger and withdrawal. There is a balance of me and thee within a larger sphere of all that is, Universal Love for some, God for others, Jesus for Dr Flanagan.



**Kelly Flanagan** is present on the pages of his newest book, *True Companions: A Book for Everyone About the Relationships that See Us Through*. His stories resonated deeply in my body triggering tears, gut swirls, and deep breaths as well as times where I found myself holding my breath. I also felt it in my soul as I sank into stillness, into moments of contemplation that led to surrender and acceptance.

## **The book is divided into three parts**

Grow Quiet: Befriending Your Loneliness

Grow Strong: Embracing Your Struggle

Grow Old: Cherishing Your Time

**Each part begins and ends with a letter to his wife,** also a psychotherapist named Kelly, who he nicknamed 'M' 20 years ago when they met because she is his miracle. The nickname was based on many personal reasons and to this day the reasoning has deepened.

**The stories he shares are personal.** They involve his wife and children (Aiden, Quinn and Caitlin) as well as their extended family, friends, neighbors, community and colleagues. They are poignant, down to earth. Humanness shines in their simplicity. Kelly offers his path seeking true companionship by sharing what he has learned even when it's messy. There is no rosy picture here, no promise for a remedy to make your life better, your relationships better. But there is a person willing to witness the journey with you if you are willing to try. There is also a companion study guide that invites readers to join a five-week Companion Camp to explore how to show up in their most important relationships that can be completed alone, with another person, or in a group setting. Having read the guide, I think doing it with someone or a group might yield a deeper, richer knowing.

### **On with the Review**

**As is my way,** when I read a book to potentially review it, I take notes, including choice comments, insights, and language use. I also capture what I am feeling while reading so I can reflect and weave my impressions in the review as appropriate. It is a concentrated, orchestrated effort. Today, however, having just finished the book in two sittings (I was immersed), my response thus far has flowed without the aid of my notes.



**I know I will turn to them** shortly to fill in and flesh out my experience with the book, and yet I wanted to sit in the flow of self and let the words come on their own accord, trust that what I was reading can become part of me as I take on some of the tasks Kelly offers to make changes within myself and thus my relationships.

**Near the beginning,** Kelly slays the myth of unconditional love and its hindrance in true companionship—it's not that it is a bad thing in and of itself. But in human hands it can become a shield to hide flaws and failures: "If you loved me, you'd accept me no matter what." It becomes a defense or a ramrod demanding someone love you even when what is happening should not be tolerated let alone loved.

**In place of unconditional love,** Kelly offers four types of love based

on the Greek conception: *agape*, *eros*, *storge*, and *philia*. *Agape* runs parallel to his conception of unconditional love in that it keeps going even when the other person is cruel, unresponsive, offense. "It is sacrificial, in the sense that it will persist no matter what" (15). In the Greek language it is used synonymously with divinity, not with human beings. *Eros* is passion, fleeting, intense. It cannot be sustained overtime, however, needing more balance, thus *Storge* comes in. *Storge* is loyal, devoted. It naturally arises, an inheritance within a tribe or family. And finally, there is *Philia*. If there were an English word for it, Kelly says it would be companionship.

***Philia* is** "about an abiding affection for the other. Yes, it is about loving, but it's just as much about liking. Unlike *storge* which happens spontaneously, *philia* happens intentionally. . . . *Philia* is about giving and receiving. It's about *mutual* sacrifices. It's about real-world love, the kind you have to fight for. It's about doing life together until our lives are woven together" (16)

***Philia* replays in scenes** throughout the book cementing Kelly's perspective and in turn possibly yours.





## **Befriending Your Loneliness**

**I started Part 1 a bit hesitant.** The crux of my drive to distract and avoid abysmal feelings is loneliness—it tears into the tenderest most vulnerable parts of me, leaving me in shreds. I felt old tears creep up from deep within while reading many paragraphs in Part One. My longing for connection, for a ‘true companion’, and my inability to fully experience it was laid out in this section with a clarity I lacked but clearly needed.

**When Kelly defined loneliness** by extracting what it was not: abandonment, shame and isolation, I felt it: a spontaneous awakening. The difference in his examples were mirrored in moments in my life; memories followed where I had felt abandoned, shamed, isolated, left alone with my feelings, my thoughts, my being. I always mistook loneliness for less than, not good enough, clearly not loveable. And when he offered that loneliness is human, essential, and in fact valuable, I felt a sense of relief. It changed my perception and in turn piqued my curiosity.

**When we befriend loneliness**, Kelly writes, it can become a “valuable space in the human experience, the quiet that our souls grow into, the fullness of the beauty, wisdom and capacity for love” (22).

**According to Kelly**, we are all alone on the inside, there is a place that exists that is uniquely our own where no one can really join us. Loneliness is God at first glance, he writes. “God comes to us disguised as our loneliness” (70) and offers us our “first taste of holiness” (71). Sitting in stillness, listening to the whispers that come in moments of loneliness, affords us time to be with ourselves, to delve within and explore the person we were at the moment of our creation, the person who lives and breathes within this bodily shell, the holy being that energizes our essence each and every moment of our lives.

**True companions then** afford the space where we can share our loneliness if we choose. Not to heal it, fill it, fix it, or cure it, but to witness it together and appreciate our uniqueness. To feel the connection as we stand with one another and honor the feelings, allow them to be. Instead of having to feel them alone, we can reach out and connect with another. There’s time for quiet personal reflection and time for shared communion. Loneliness is no longer the big bad wolf but rather a shining light, a beacon, a way to come home to myself.



**While reading**, I found the poetic prose engaging. Figurative language enlivened small moments. Snippets, scenes, flashbacks stood for expansive possibilities ripe for reflection and exploration. In Kelly’s hands, even rust takes on a new dimension—it is steadfast, enduring, beautiful: “When two things rust next to each other long enough, they rust together. Rusted things are almost impossible to separate” (197). His use of repetition creates a cyclical sense of familiarity, of knowing; stories, concepts and analogies reappear throughout the book becoming foundations to support expansion.





## Embracing Your Struggle

**Part Two focuses on core ways we disconnect** and how in turn to connect. For example, he shares how anger distances while focusing on our fears and speaking to them brings us closer together. Certainty creates an atmosphere of closure while curiosity opens our minds to explore, wonder, learn, grow. 'Yessing' and withdrawing, 'peacefaking', fixing, helicoptering, competition, and excitement versus ritual and regularity were discussed along with healthier ways to honor one's self, to be authentic and set honest boundaries, to move within and be mindful, to be present before reacting. Taking time to thoughtfully respond that honors both people in the interaction can change patterned behaviors that usually tear people apart.

**I believe Kelly has perfected the power of the pause.** Consider punctuation when writing, think of a comma versus a period. When you hit a full stop, when everything comes to an end, you get a period. There is nothing more to say in that sentence. Done. Final. Yet, a comma gives time to consider, reflect, perhaps add in a few more thoughts before moving forward to complete the sentence. Kelly uses pauses to go within and consider his feelings, his knee jerk reactions and how he wants to respond before interacting with the other person. He uses moments of silence to stay supportive of himself and others. Kelly calls this pattern of response IOU for inward (self-reflection), outward (connecting with others) and upward (acknowledging the existence of a higher power), which is introduced and discussed in his Companion Camp guide.



## Cherishing Your Time

**Part Three. Grow Old.** Because I am not that 'old' (although I think I am two decades older than Kelly), and I am not growing old with anyone as a true companion, I read this section with an eye and an ear for my parents. I live with my 92-year-old father and 91-year-old mother. We celebrated their 66<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary on November 23, 2020. During the pandemic, despite the fear that has kept them housebound since January of this year, we agreed to go to one of our favorite family restaurants for an outside, socially distanced brunch. Mom wanted to recreate a moment from their wedding day: the feeding of the cake. We brought their wedding picture with us and after a delightful meal, the waiter brought us a piece of chocolate cake. It took several tries to get things organized considering their mobility limitations etc. but we did it and in that moment of success the other diners applauded. I had no idea anyone was watching us. When I said it was their 66<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary I felt a communal sense of awe—here they were alive, certainly rusty, limited bodily and memory wise (Alzheimer's), yet loving one another to their fullest ability. Their hearts know one another even when memories go blank, when a word or a thought drops off. Their rituals constantly fill my being with love as they make their way through this pandemic like they have through all the seasons of their lives.



It hasn't always been easy, there have been years of indifference, divisiveness, externalized and internalized battles. And there have been years filled with love and compassion. Today they are true companions without knowing what it means or looks like. They just are. They have evolved together in ways that no one expected, planned for, intended. Yet they are here together letting their memories gather as Kelly writes, cherishing the time they have with appreciation for one another as individuals and as friends, lovers, and spiritual travelers. Reading this chapter in the light of my parents' relationship made it feel real and true.

### **In conclusion**

**To close this review,** I offer an invitation to read a special section, an SPT reader exclusive, excerpted from "True Companions" by Kelly Flanagan, taken from Chapter 6, "Observe Your Protections". You can get a feel for his voice, his presence on the page.

Please check the website for an active link at the end of the preview.

You can also follow Kelly on Facebook and sign up for his blog.

And no, I do not receive any compensation for my review or for any book sells. I write what I feel when I read a book; my intention is simply to share what I consider quality literature with colleagues. Although, I do appreciate readers who share their response to my writing, [Nancy@nancyeichhorn.com](mailto:Nancy@nancyeichhorn.com)

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