

Excerpt from “True Companions” by Kelly Flanagan
Taken from Chapter 9, “Observe Your Protections”

At the time, I was completing my doctoral degree at a veterans’ hospital in the suburbs of Chicago. I’d mostly enjoyed my training there, but I was beginning to feel frustrated with almost every client. My supervisor at the time was a wise senior psychologist, just a few years from retirement. One day, I walked into his office and exclaimed, “All of my clients are stuck!” He turned in his chair to look at me. A smile played at the corners of his mouth. Then he said something that has, over the years, saved almost every relationship in my life, both personally and professionally.

“When you are stuck with a client, it’s because you don’t have the same goals.”

At first, it seemed too simple. Then I began testing it out, and he was right. When I asked my clients directly, I discovered their goals were entirely different from mine. For instance, sometimes I was wanting to help them feel happy, while they were just needing to feel their grief. Or I was trying to save their marriage, while they were trying to exit it. Every time, once we clarified and agreed on our goals, our relationship and the therapy thrived.

It’s true of every kind of companionship. If you and your companions feel mired in anything from staleness to combativeness, it’s probably because you don’t share the same goals. This wisdom can be invaluable on a day-to-day level as we figure out how to do life together. However, my supervisor’s wisdom is even more essential as you shift your attention from *what* you are fighting about on a daily basis to *how* you are fighting about it over time.

We all need to agree our goal is to fight like butterflies.

The fight of a butterfly’s life is not against another butterfly but against its own protection. When a caterpillar first spins its cocoon, the cocoon is a thick and opaque exoskeleton, like armor within which it can safely undergo its metamorphosis. However, by the time the butterfly is ready to emerge, the protective chrysalis has become a thin and nearly invisible prison.

The butterfly can’t see it. The butterfly can only sense it when it bumps up against it. Then the butterfly pushes back on what it cannot see, until the old protection finally gives way. To our detriment, we human companions resist the central tenets of this struggle in three significant ways.

We often fail to perceive our own protections. There are several reasons for this. First, in the beginning we wielded our protections clumsily, so they were easily noticeable. Over time, however, we become skilled at using them to stay safe. Our protections become habits, and habits are hard to notice. They don’t feel like a choice; they feel like a given. Second, our protections were originally necessary. They preserved us as we were growing up, so it’s easy to overlook the moment when they tip from help into hindrance. Finally, our protections are often woven from the gossamer thread of our worthiest traits, so it can be difficult to perceive them as problematic. My ambition, for instance, produces a lot of good things, so it’s not easy to admit that it can become too much of a good thing. For these reasons, we often remain unaware of our protections, even as we try to love right through them.

So, instead, we focus on our companion’s cocoon. It’s easier to see someone else’s protections, so we take it upon ourselves to tell the ones we love about the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are protecting and imprisoning them. This is almost always a waste of time. Unless we have been invited to

give such feedback, it is unlikely to penetrate the cocoons of the ones we love. Furthermore, it is quite likely that if we are giving unsolicited feedback about the protections of another, the feedback itself may be one of *our* protections. It's easier to push blame onto the cocoons of everyone else than to push our way out of our own chrysalis.

Then, we try to free our companion from their protections. This usually breaks bad too. First of all, we are totally unequipped, from within our own cocoon, to free another human being from their protection. We lack the freedom of movement to do so. We lack the grace that comes through our own struggle. Furthermore, even if we could free the ones we love, it would be crippling to them. A butterfly cut from its cocoon prematurely will never fly. It is a loving thing to allow the ones we love their own strengthening struggle. As Jesus once said, it's better to focus on the plank in our own eye than the sliver in our companion's.

True companionship must be the mutual agreement to make the observation of our *own* protections the goal of our days.

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