

Pilgrimages: Journeys of the Heartⁱ

Looking Back Down the Path

It was a beautiful day in western Ireland. In front of us stretched a long green valley beyond which a path climbed up to a rocky pass through the mountains of Connemara. David Whyte, the Celtic poet and our guide, told us to walk slowly and upon reaching a small waterfall and beginning the mild ascent we were to stop talking until our return. I had no idea what awaited; but in the pass at the top there was a small pilgrimage spot with a tiny chapel and the Stations of the Cross scattered roughly around the rocky, boggy site. In the distance, on one side was the ocean and on the other, mountainous sharp-peaked quartzite ranges loomed beyond another valley. Imagine yourself with David Whyte, in that place, when he says,

Be infinitesimal under that sky,
... look back down the path as if seeing
your past and then south over the hazy blue
coast as if present to a wide future.
Remember the way you are all possibilities
you can see, and how you live best
as an appreciator of horizons
whether you reach them or not.
[Imagine that once you have]
taken the path up high
beyond the ordinary, you have become
...the pilgrim
the one who will tell the story
and the one, coming back
from the mountain
who helped to make it.ⁱⁱ

The entire week with David was for me a pilgrimage and on that day, as shafts of sunlight burst through the mist, sending rays dancing on the Stations of the Cross, I was taken back to the times in the 15th and 16th centuries. These were the times when pilgrims, who could no longer go to Jerusalem because it was too dangerous, began instead to walk the Stations, a 14-step Catholic devotion that commemorates Jesus's last day on Earth.

Pilgrimages throughout History

Pilgrimages have been part of humans' searching for millennia. One of the earliest recorded pilgrimages may have been Abraham's, 4000 years ago, when he went seeking the presence of God in the vast desert. Imagine him with his wife, Sarah, traveling through ancient Mesopotamia from Ur up the Euphrates River through Babylon and north to the ancient city of Harran, in modern day Turkey, where he settled with extended family. Then following the death of his father Tarah, Abram (for that is what he was called then), hearing God's call at the age of 75, left Harran for the Land of Canaan. Passing Aleppo and Damascus in modern day Syria, he stopped a while in Shechem (next to today's

Jerusalem), and eventually went on to Egypt at which point he and Sarah backtracked through the Negev desert to settle in Hebron in today's Israel. A lot of wandering and lot of searching.

Had they had today's GPS, they would have known that the trip to Harran was 777 miles, to Shechem another 565 miles, and the final round trip to Egypt and back an additional 477 miles. Now imagine traveling those miles on your own with your partner, sheep, and a few goats. How many miles a day? How many stops at good watering holes? How many days?

What is it that called to this Aramaic nomad? We are told that their initial journey to Harran was in response to the fall of Ur to the Elamites. They were refugees. Does this sound familiar? But Abram, unlike his contemporaries, was not a polytheist. Instead, he believed in a single God, who was not a local deity superior to other gods but the One God, as the Shema in Judaism testifies, "**Listen, Israel: Our God is Being Itself; the Oneness of All-Being!**" *Sh'ma Ysrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ekhad.*ⁱⁱⁱ Abram's God was personal. He was the One whom Abram called El and who in turn named Abram, Abraham.

This was no ordinary walk for Abram but rather a very long, spiritual pilgrimage to discover the one God. And this walk has been repeated throughout millennia by persons of many religions.

Abraham's descendants: Moses, Paul, Mohammed each had their own sacred journeys. The *Torah*, the *Bible*, and the *Koran* as well as Hindu and Buddhist texts all inspire followers to go to the birthplace and tombs of their prophets, sites of miracles, or paths their founders may have walked. In the 4th and 5th centuries, pilgrims journeyed to the Holy Land and by the eighth century Muslims began to make the hajj to Mecca and Medina which is one of the five pillars of Islam. With Hinduism, there are a diversity of sacred sites with the Ganges being the most sacred one of all. "The traditional Hindu term for pilgrimage is *tirthayatra*, which literally means 'a journey to the ford.' In this case, the ford is a liminal place where pilgrims cross over the river from the profane to the sacred."^{iv}

Christianity has a long 2000 year history of pilgrimages beginning with the story of the three magi. And not only is Bethlehem a pilgrimage site but there are hundreds of others among which are Rome, Jerusalem, Lourdes dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Iona from where Christianity spread throughout the British Isles, Guadalupe where a miraculous image of the virgin appeared, and of course Santiago de Compostela with *peregrinos* from around the world walking the *Camino de Santiago*. Some of you here today may have been one of these *peregrinos*, which means strangers or foreigners.

As Jeremiah said, "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies, and walk in it, and find rest for your souls."^v

There are many tales of pilgrimages, one of the earliest being *The Canterbury Tales*, recounting the stories of medieval British pilgrims traveling to Canterbury, the shine honoring St. Thomas a Becket who was murdered at the behest of King Henry II. Had we been 14th century folk speaking Middle

English, we would have heard Chaucer's story of folk who longed to go on "pilgramages" and we might have seen pilgrims who

... from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were
seeke.

... from every shire's end
Of England they to Canterbury wend,
The holy blessed martyr there to seek
Who helped them when they lay so ill
and weak.^{vi}

Bravo for Chaucer!

And pilgrimages may also be to places which are not specifically religious but all the same are imbued with a deep sense of the holy: Stonehenge, Machu Pichu, Ayers Rock of the Aborigines, Glastonbury – the legendary burial place of King Arthur, Thoreau's Walden Pond, Muir Woods or Yosemite, and for many a home, cemetery, or landscape remembered from childhood. In any of these places we may feel the ancient and holy unfolding - "what the wandering [Japanese] pilgrim-poet Basho called 'a glimpse of the underglimmer,' an experience of the deeply real that lurks everywhere"^{vii} Next month, I too will be on a pilgrimage searching for ancient megaliths in the Outer Hebrides and prehistoric tombs in Ireland.

In the Middle Ages, the act of walking through a wilderness was thought to bring one back to God. Is it any different today?

Life as a Sacred Journey

When lived with intention, all of life can be seen as a sacred journey, just as all travel can be a pilgrimage regardless of whether we do it by leaving home and returning changed or by staying home and greeting each new day as one filled with possibility. M. Scott Peck, the psychiatrist who wrote *A Road Less Traveled* quotes a sociology professor he had who commented, "We are all of us in a rut and there are two ways to get out of it. One is to travel and the other is to work in a mental hospital."^{viii} While, I am not recommending the latter, I am urging us to consider pilgrimages as not only outward journeys but inward ones.

Pilgrimages can be a risk but they can also bring renewal. Let us remember T. S. Eliot's well known words when he says, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go. So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing. We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive back where we started and know the place for the first time."^{ix}

Pilgrimage is about finding deeper meaning and a place of belonging. It is a journey of the heart with a conscious awakening. For some this may come gradually; for others there may be a wake-up call such as the end of a relationship, retirement or premature loss of one's job, the onslaught of illness, or the need to downsize and move from a home we've loved. Pilgrimages may be spurred by entering a different stage of life when we may sense a loss of meaning which the "[t]he ancients called this 'soul loss,'"^x a hunger for a renewed sense of purpose, a desire to feel something deeper. Whatever the

source of the feelings, it can bring— as Steve^{xi} shared – “an acute awareness that life and time are precious” when we find ourselves compelled to change the rhythm of our lives. Mary Oliver shared her wake-up call in her poem, “The Journey,” saying,

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting their bad advice –
though the whole house
began to tremble
“Mend my life!”
each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
... little by little,

as you left their voices behind, ...
there was a new voice,
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determine to save the only life
you could save.^{xii}

When I hear someone say he or she yearns for something - whatever that may be – I mirror that back. “Listen,” I say. “Listen to the yearning. This is your soul’s whisper.” While a pilgrimage may be an outward journey of travel more important it is an inward journey, “*a turning of one’s heart to the sacred.*”^{xiii}

“There is an old Hasidic saying, ‘Carefully observe the way your heart draws you, and then choose that way with all your strength.’..... In spiritual terms, when we speak of the ‘heart’ of a person, we are referring to the inner self, the interior life, the deepest longings, and the fondest hopes....”^{xiv} It is often through heart to heart talks or our personal writing that we connect with our innermost self. It is for this reason that, beginning in October, there will be a number of new opportunities here at Northbrae for worship, study, creative writing and retreat.

Whether our pilgrimage is one of living more intentionally into our life and/or one of travel, it requires that we step aside from our daily life so that we may see more deeply into ourselves and probe what we feel may be beckoning.

The Irish poet John O'Donohue guides us on such a journey saying,

When you travel, you find yourself
Alone in a different way,
More attentive now
To the self you bring along,
Your more subtle eye watching
You abroad; and how what meets you
Touches that part of the heart
That lies low at home

When you travel
A new silence
Goes with you,
And if you listen,
You will hear
What your heart would
Love to say.^{xv}

Each morning, upon waking, we have opportunity to ask, "What is my heart telling me?" ... Can we sit with unknowing, waiting to see what unfolds or do we fill our days with projects and tasks, missing the chance to live with the questions? I have long been drawn by Rainer Maria Rilke's advice to a young poet when he said "... be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and ...(I)live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."^{xvi}

Embedded in the word "question" is the word "quest." Opening ourselves to a pilgrimage embedded in our heart's desire can be done simply by taking time – intentional time to read poetry, sit still, meditate, journal, or perhaps create mandalas. Mandalas have been a form of pilgrimage for centuries. Only recently I learned that the center of Eastern religions' mandalas symbolically represents Mt. Meru the "sacred five-peaked mountain of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist cosmology that is considered to be the center of all the physical, metaphysical and spiritual universes."^{xvii}

Photography can also serve as a portal to the holy. Taking or viewing photographs can draw one into a particular landscape, grounding us in the present at the same time it takes us beyond it. Thirty-five years ago when I felt a restless churning, I went for early morning walks before my family was awake. At the end of that summer, my camera was filled not with numerous photos of our family having fun – which we had had – but with photos of fungi, deer footprints, otter slides down a bank, dead branches, and of course cairns which I loved to create beside creeks and along paths – all of which touched something deep inside.

And who among us has not paid such attention, collecting a particular rock or shell which later brings back memories of a special place or time? It is as if taking time out to pay attention and stay in the moment opens a window into the universe.

“Time out from what?” we might ask. To quote the author, Paul Cousineau, “It is down the path to the deeply real where time stops and we are seized by the mysteries.”^{xviii} This is time out from chronological time as we know it, into a sense of timelessness where as the Celts would say, we experience a *thin place* which opens to the luminous, a veil between heaven and earth where we suddenly experience acute awareness. The Celts never questioned the interconnection between heaven and earth nor perhaps do children, if they are fortunate. Is this why we have loved reading stories that take us into other lands? *The Wrinkle in Time*, *Wizard of Oz*, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, and of course *The Hobbit* where Bilbo Baggins who views adventures as nasty, finds “something tookish” overcame him and ventured out on a quest.^{xix}

Sacred Awareness

Pilgrimages invite us to become aware - aware of whispers from the past, stories in our dreams, poetry longing to be written or shared, music waiting to be composed or heard, the wisdom of ancient texts, yearnings in our heart. Listening with both our mind and heart coaxes the pilgrim soul in us. Sometimes this is a solo journey and other times it is with others where we experience deep community with those who share the pilgrimage.

What fascinates me about pilgrimages is that often it is only at the end of a journey that we see ways in which it has transformed us. We may have thought we knew the purpose of a course, trip, retreat, vision quest, daily meditation practice and perhaps even our life, but on looking back we find ourselves in a different place, with a different purpose. If we can view our life’s journey as a pilgrimage, perhaps we can ready our hearts to receive we know not what, for in the words of the poet Rumi,

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows ...
treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight....
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.^{xx}

We need to be open to this surprise and listen to what calls to us. “Our lives are woven from a melody of calls that draw us out and help us to define ourselves.”^{xxi} Buddhist monks are taught that all of life is a pilgrimage. Pilgrimages serve as powerful metaphors for any journey of discernment in which we discover something that touches us deeply and through which we may be transformed. Pilgrimages are

sacramental in that they offer us the opportunity to reconnect with our soul. May we be open to hearing our soul's call. Amen.

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- ⁱ I give credit for this sermon's title to Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook who offered an online course, "Pilgrimage as a Journey of the Heart," April 29-May 24, 2018. I am grateful to be reminded of how much I have valued pilgrimages throughout my life.
- ⁱⁱ David Whyte, "Mameen," *River Flow: New and Selected Poems*, (Langley, WA: New Rivers Press, 2007), 286.
- ⁱⁱⁱ "Sh'ma," *Siddur*, (Berkeley, CA: Chochmat Helev), 34.
- ^{iv} Kujawa-Holbrook, May 10, 2018.
- ^v "Jeremiah 6:16," *The Holy Bible*.
- ^{vi} Edwin Duncan, "An Electronic Edition of The General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales," "The General Prologue," *The Canterbury Tales*, online: <https://tigerweb.towson.edu/duncan/chaucer/duallang1.htm>.
- ^{vii} Paul Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*, (San Francisco, CA: Conari Press, 1998), xix.
- ^{viii} *In Search of Stones: A Pilgrimage of Faith, Reason, and Discovery*, (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 212.
- ^{ix} "Little Gidding," *The Four Quartets*, 1943.
- ^x Cousineau, 36.
- ^{xi} Steve Ronfeldt, "Sacred Story," Northfield Community Church, August 19, 2018.
- ^{xii} *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 349.
- ^{xiii} Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, "Pilgrimage as a Journey of the Heart," *Spiritual & Practice E-Course*, May 1, 2018. . My italics.
- ^{xiv} Kujawa Holbrook, May 1, 2018.
- ^{xv} John O'Donohue, "For the Traveler," *To Bless the Space Between Us*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 53-54.
- ^{xvi} Rainer Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1962, 1934 ©), 35.
- ^{xvii} "Mount Meru," *Wikipedia*.
- ^{xviii} Cousineau, 9.
- ^{xix} J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1978), Chapter 1. Also, many thanks to Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook who invited me to view fantasy books as stories of pilgrimages.
- ^{xx} Rumi, "The Guest House," *Teaching with Heart*, eds. Sam M. Intrator & Megan Scribner, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 153.
- ^{xxi} Cousineau, 53, quoting David Spangler in his book *The Call*