

Spiritual Practice for May – Pilgrimage (Part 2)

Last month we considered various kinds of pilgrimage and what distinguishes a pilgrim from a tourist. Now we'll start to look at the three stages common to pilgrimage and how the outward journey and inward journey intertwine.

Joseph Campbell described pilgrimage as a hero's journey encompassing a rupture with the past, the experience of an ordeal, and a return to daily life. In the process transformation occurs, the ultimate effects of which radiate out into the world. What does this look like in practical terms?

Stage 1: Call and Separation. A pilgrimage usually begins with some kind of inner prompting. It may originate as a feeling of vague dissatisfaction, a wondering if there is "something more." Or it may be a response to the awareness of having been blessed in a special way. Perhaps the call to go on pilgrimage has been with you a long time, but only now do your circumstances allow you to respond.

In the years my husband and I have been leading pilgrimages, it's not unusual for a pilgrim to discover a larger, or even a different reason for their journey than they had first understood. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, is filled with stories of sacred travelers (often reluctant ones!) who eventually discover a greater divine purpose to their journey.

Whether the call be dim or clear, answering it requires the pilgrim to separate to some degree from the routine and familiar. In medieval times, pilgrims wore special badges, such as the scallop shell used to this day on the Camino de Santiago, symbolizing their spiritual intent. As another modern-day example, I know a woman who in the course of a pilgrimage chooses not to wear any makeup.

More radical still are those who decide to "fast" from the Internet and their cell phones during pilgrimage. Living without Facebook for a week or more may feel like Joseph Campbell's experience of an ordeal, but it is precisely the kind of disengagement which allows us to be more responsive in the second stage of pilgrimage (not to mention a good practice which can help in discerning the call to pilgrimage before choosing to undertake one.)

Stage 2. The Invitation. The point of any kind of fast, whether from food, habits, or accustomed comforts, is not to suffer for suffering's sake but to open us up to hearing the still, small voice of God. Isn't that the point of pilgrimage – to see and hear the Divine in a new way?

Pilgrimages are frequently, though not always, undertaken in the company of others. The Spirit's invitation can come in the voice of a pilgrimage guide or of a fellow pilgrim. We just have to be quiet enough to listen. "Quiet" doesn't mean only refraining from speech; it often means refraining from activities which, though good in themselves, can be distracting. Taking pictures can fall into that category; that is why, for example, that when docents accompany pilgrims in Durham Cathedral, no photographs are allowed.

T. S. Eliot, himself a pilgrim, wrote of "kneeling where prayer has been valid." He also reminds us of another reason why pilgrimages often center on places that have been hallowed for generations. We not only hear the invitation of God in the voice of an earthly companion, but also (or perhaps even more) in the voice of one who has lived before our time.

*And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.*

Next month we'll consider the third stage of pilgrimage, The Return.