

“BECAUSE I WALKED IT”: Pilgrimage as Spiritual Practice During Life’s Transitions

by Lynne McNaughton

The mossy grass was slippery as we set out in the wet, windy June morning, 2005, on the medieval pilgrim path known in Irish as *Cosan na Naomh*, the “Path of the Saints”. It’s a trail on the Dingle peninsula leading from the beach to the top of Mt. Brendan. Fog enveloped the top of *Borna Killa*, a hill we would climb above the ruined church of *Kilmalkedar*. Every 500 meters or so, the path was marked with waist-high brown posts. A bright yellow image of a pilgrim monk and an arrow pointed the direction; these had been very visible that sunny day when I had scouted the way several months before. Even then, there was no visible trail, no trodden grass or footpath, simply markers over the vast hill. Now, we squinted in the direction of the arrow, and in the drizzle and fog could not make out the next marker. I pondered the group, hardly recognizable under their rain gear, and wondered how they would endure such a miserable day. Even so, we set off in the direction of the arrow, across a field of tall grass, rocks and sheep. Eventually a call came from someone ahead: “I see it!” The pilgrims trudged towards the next marker which slowly emerged out of the fog. We helped each other over the slippery stile into the next field, to follow another arrow and discover the pilgrim post beyond that. Seeing only one signpost at a time, we went the whole way.

We completed a section of the pilgrim path that dreary day only to discover the pub where we planned to rendezvous was mysteriously closed! Adding insult to injury, the hot water at our hotel was turned off for the afternoon (a commendable energy-saving practice). The hotel quickly turned on the heat as everybody hung to dry drenched socks, shoes, and coats. One might have feared they would consider the day a disaster, but after 10 years of leading pilgrimages, I was not surprised when I began to hear later that the ordeal itself had provided lasting spiritual sustenance to them.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is the practice of intentional travel to a holy place, with the hope of experiencing a blessing: an encounter with God, with one's faith tradition, or with those who have gone before us. Pilgrimage is a centuries-old Christian practice, which disappeared almost entirely from the Protestant landscape at the time of the Reformation. It is also a practice in other faiths. In recent years, many have embarked on this type of spiritual journey. Since 1997, Gerald Hobbs and I have joined in leading pilgrimages entitled "Claiming our Spiritual Heritage". We are both on the teaching staff of the Vancouver School of Theology (VST), he in church history and I in spirituality. The pilgrimages have been organized through VST and Peregrinatio Studies, Inc. (Peregrinatio is the Latin word for pilgrimage). We have been privileged to hear many stories of spiritual transformation. Wanting to explore the meaning of pilgrimage more deeply, I undertook a research project. I chose to do a case study of a 2005 pilgrimage to Ireland. I interviewed people and heard their stories, before, during, and after the pilgrimage, and then again almost a year later.

I will give here one person's story, changing only the name to protect the identity. Ted, a successful professional, active in church, came on the pilgrimage facing great uncertainty in mid-life. Because of a chronic illness, he had been forced to give up his career. His spouse was now completing a theology degree and within the next two years they would be required to move to an unknown location for a new job, leaving an established home, community and church family. The day after the hike over the hill of *Borna Killa*, he talked about "posts that point you in the right direction, but you can't see the next post. The whole pilgrimage is like that; it equips a control freak to go back into the world."

I was curious about how the pilgrimage might function to nurture him spiritually in the midst of this major transition, so ten months later I asked him for an interview. When I inquired how he experienced the pilgrimage, he immediately spoke about the post-to-post experience as a metaphor for this uncertain and scary time of his partner's career move.

I carried this home with me, that I could go the whole way in the fog and I can experience grace in this.... It has become a metaphor for giving up my place of security. It calmed me. It was an experience, not just a metaphor.

He named this as a huge change for him spiritually; he described himself as having been a risk-avoider before, wanting certainty and clear plans. The walk that day “addressed my fear” of “having a problem with no answer”.

I physically tried it out, the unusual terrain, slippery, drizzling, to physically not see the next marker. I loved it; it seemed like God was singing.... I have confidence I will be provided for. I walked through metaphor. Once I'd experienced it, I saw it play over again.

Later in the interview, when I asked why he thought this new sense of fearlessness had endured for ten months after the pilgrimage, he responded “Because I walked it.” At his spouse’s convocation, two years after the pilgrimage, he approached me to say that as they move to their new town and congregation, they regularly invoke the image of “the next pilgrim post”.

Transition and Pilgrimage

Over the years we have heard many such stories. Most people who have joined the pilgrimages are in some kind of major life transition in adulthood: recently retired, recently widowed, recently re-married, seeking something new around a significant birthday or anniversary, contemplating a move such as down-sizing in later life. They often speak of some kind of spiritual transformation on the pilgrimage, an experience that gives them insight, sustenance and strength for their transition. How does this happen?

My working definition of spiritual transformation arises from study of current adult experiential education and spiritual direction models.¹ Transformation means a life-giving re-definition of one’s operative understanding of self, community, world, and/or God.

¹See, for example: Sharon B. Merriam and Rosemary S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999, p. 318. J. Mezirow and Associates, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000, p.18. L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1999, pp.182-185.

This re-definition arises from an encounter with the Holy, an experience that opens one to live in hope and gratitude, free from fear.

My experience and research indicate that people undergo this transformation because during pilgrimage they experience God being present with them in the journey, they physically act out moving into the unknown (walking in the fog) and encounter God and community in a tangible, memorable way (together finding the marker that guides the next stage of the journey). The metaphor of God walking with us becomes what Sharon Daloz Parks calls a “lived metaphor”. Ted’s story of moving from post to post is an example of lived metaphor. The pilgrims have lived out first-hand what Sarah and Abraham and Hagar, Jacob, Moses and Miriam all learned: God can be discovered and trusted in the midst of desert wandering. Because the experience is embodied, it is deeply embedded in their spiritual life, a lasting transformation “because I walked it”.

Pilgrimage as “liminal journey”

Anthropologists who have studied pilgrimage in many religious traditions have noted that pilgrimages have three stages: first, separation, leaving home; second, the journey itself, called the “liminal journey”; and third, the return to home and daily life. As we shall see in a few moments, all of these stages refer to stages of human transitions.

It is useful when thinking of transitions to reflect on the meaning of “liminal”: pertaining to threshold, doorway, in-between space. The boundaries of time, space and mortality are translucent, penetrable. The Irish Celts speak of “thin places” where the veil between one world and the next is transparent or permeable. A pilgrimage embodies the act of leaving something behind and moving to an unknown destination, traveling in the “in-between”.

Biblical Images of Liminality

The principal Biblical metaphor for this place of liminality is wilderness or desert. The most formative is the Exodus wandering:

“God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness” (Exodus 13:18). The fugitive slaves have left behind the secure, familiar although oppressive Egypt, but before they finally are able to cross the river into the new country of promise, they meander through no-place, travelling in frustrated circles. Scripture holds the tension of this ambiguity: this is a time of learning to trust God’s tender care for their needs as well as a time of worshipping false gods. It is no-time, 40 years, 40 being the mythical biblical shorthand for *enough*, an unspecified fullness of time. Somehow this state of wandering aimlessly is necessary for discovery of who they are as people of God.

Moses, Elijah, and Jesus each encounter God on a wild mountain. Mountains are liminal, the meeting of heaven and earth. Each spends the requisite 40 days of wilderness no-time and no-place (Exodus 24:18; 1 Kings 19:8; Luke 4:1-2). Jacob’s trickery thrusts him into an unwanted wilderness journey; he flees his past and heads into an uncertain future. In between, in the vulnerability of the middle of nowhere, he discovers the house of God, with angel messengers ascending and descending a ladder to heaven, a thin place, indeed (Genesis 28:10-17). Hagar, outcast, “wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba” (Gen. 21: 14); God meets her there, revealing a well of water to quench her thirst and pledge a future. Abram is commanded to enter wilderness uncertainty: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). Obedient, he enters the desert on a circuitous route to fulfillment of promise. His name changes to Abraham, and he becomes the archetypal pilgrim (Heb. 11:8-16). Liminal space, wild, in-between space and time, seems to be vital for formation of God’s people, essential for entering new life.

Transitions

Psychological theory echoes this Biblical wisdom about the need for liminal space in order to negotiate a healthy transition. William Bridges, who has done extensive research on people undergoing change, in his classic work *Transitions*, proposed an

in-between stage after the “Ending” (Stage One) and before “the New Beginning” (Stage Three), a time when the past is left behind and the future is yet to be revealed (not necessarily in neat chronological stages). This second stage he calls “The Neutral Zone”, when one has “crossed some kind of threshold. . . . and there’s no going back”², an important but fearful time of chaos, lostness, and “fallow emptiness”. Human beings resist this stage because of its ambiguity. In our society of instantaneity, we often try to skip immediately to the new, but the uncertain, ambivalent stage catches up with us and gets in the way of new life.

There is little social support for a person in the turmoil and confusion of the Neutral Zone, so the person may deny the inner experience or be overwhelmed by it. There must be opportunity to integrate the events of this phase in order to receive the enrichment, the potential spiritual awakening, to be found here.

To thrive in the midst of transition, people need to flesh out and actualize their inner experience of the neutral zone. Pilgrimage is one way to embody and therefore tend carefully what is going on inside. Journey, going somewhere new, dramatizes the sense of vulnerability of being in the unknown.

Bridges draws from the wisdom of “rites of passage” in tribal cultures to suggest elements that help to open one to transformative learning during transition. These elements include a physical ordeal, chanting, movement, and ritual connected with myth. Many of these elements are potentially present in pilgrimage. Obviously we do not plan an ordeal when we plan the pilgrimage; inevitably travel, weather, or unforeseen difficulties provide this. I have even seen pilgrims push themselves beyond their personal limits to create their own sense of ordeal. For example, one woman climbed a mountain one free afternoon, and later, exulting in her new-found sense of “I did it!” confidence, told us that she was terrified of heights.

Chanting is universally an integrative practice in “rites of passage”. Chanting psalms in monastic style, and repetitive singing

²William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. Don Mills, ON: Addison-Wesley, 1980, p 11.

as in the Taizé style, seem to fit naturally in a Christian community travelling together. The repetition creates space for contemplative silence, for listening to God. The physical breath involved in singing opens us, expands us, reminds us of the breath of the Spirit, breathing new life at Creation. Pilgrims sing songs frequently along the way. In the darkness of Gallarus Oratory, a bee-hive stone chapel dating perhaps as early as the 8th century, we sang Psalm 84 (How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord ...even... the swallow finds a nest for herself) and we were joined by a bird up in the peak. The physical sense of praying where others have prayed for centuries, of joining with the saints, suddenly included a wider non-human chorus! Pilgrims spoke in awe of this sense of expanded community.

The ritual enactment of myth involved in “rites of passage” is also an obvious part of pilgrimage, for example, walking an ancient pilgrim path, or sharing eucharist on the stone wall of a monastic ruin. One pilgrim described our day on the Isle of Inishmore as life-changing for her. It was the anniversary of the day her husband’s body had been found years earlier. We enacted a Celtic practice of encircling prayer, in procession around a holy site. She wrote afterwards:

... when we circled the sacred spot seven times, throwing in our stones and chanting a prayer for new life, I knew with the last stone that when I stepped out of that circle I would truly begin my own new life. I had circled those June dates three years in grief; now was the time to step out alone and ready to take up life in fullness again for myself.

The ritual gave her a container in which to process her transition.

Pilgrimage gives people a sense of belonging to community, both now and over time. On Inishmore we saw the miles of stone fences built by early Christians, who made miniscule fields fenced off from the relentless winds and created soil by carrying seaweed to spread on the fields, a painstaking process that took generations. For one woman who came on pilgrimage to sort out how to live into the next stage of retirement, this became a powerful image of her work being part of a much larger picture. This was a physical metaphor for her. As she said, “their endurance on the rugged rocks

gives strength”, an example of being “faithful in small things and everydayness”; even talking about it months later gave her “encouragement to ‘keep on keeping on’.”

Pilgrimage is a way of rooting oneself in past events of our faith. This seems to increase courage, not only for personal transitions, but also for the ambiguous uncertain time in which the church finds itself today. Seeing how past generations have lived out their faith in different circumstance gives pilgrims renewed hope. By immersing themselves in ancient holy sites, pilgrims experience how the Church in the past has been threatened by various circumstances, evolved radically in the face of change or even died, and been re-born.

One pilgrim had just retired a few months before the pilgrimage and was in the process of working out a new ministry. She embarked on pilgrimage very aware of being in transition. In the follow-up interview, she said she experienced the pilgrimage as finding “a tap root” that “freed me up”, “connecting me more deeply with my spiritual roots”. She quoted T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”: “To make an end is to make a beginning.” She said, “To go on pilgrimage is to make this conscious.” On pilgrimage she discovered “life is a pilgrimage” of always seeking the next step. Again she described the Path of the Saints, “walking on a mere foothill, ...[the] summit when you get there isn’t summit, so you take it as it comes.” She was not able during pilgrimage to complete her goal of discerning her own next step for retirement, but “pilgrimage enabled me to not be afraid; I don’t know the right thing, but it is okay not to know, in fact, it’s exciting. Not fearful, exciting.”

This sense of letting go of fear was wider than her own personal life, extending to the uncertainty in the life of the contemporary Church. On pilgrimage and afterwards, reflecting on the spiritual roots of Christianity, she confided she was no longer concerned about whether the Church survives as it is.

“It’s okay not to know; in fact it is exciting,” she repeated several times, naming this new release from fear as the essential point of the pilgrimage for her. “The experience of the pilgrimage

took away my fear of even the possibility of the Church dying. It freed me up.”

Anthropologists used to think of pilgrimage as a conservative enterprise that rooted people more firmly in their faith, but they are starting to realize that rooting people vividly in past experiences actually frees them to let go of the present institutional form of their religious tradition. My observation, from many accumulated stories, is that pilgrimage, in connecting participants with the roots of their Christian tradition, deepens their faith at the same time it allows them to live more lightly with the contemporary institution!

Perhaps the most common experience on pilgrimage which gives people strength for facing transitions is the profound sense of community that develops. We help each other find the markers. In ordeal, we have to depend on each other. We open up to strangers and have our burdens eased. Reflecting on a challenging trail, one woman observed, “Because of community, we went through the mud laughing.” Another pilgrim remarked that he discovered that everyone else was also going through some kind of transition in their lives, so he didn’t feel alone.

I am reminded of a line from Shirley Erena Murray’s hymn “Come and Find the Quiet Centre” (*VU* 374): pilgrimage is about “Raising courage when we’re shrinking”. It helps us to gain space, to find a new framework which sets us free. Each of the pilgrims may have had a different “lived metaphor”, but the spiritual growth that all of them named included having less fear about entering the unknown of their transitions. They discovered for themselves the holiness of the “liminal” journey and the renewed courage they had for living in the in-between uncertainty. They were freed to let go of trying to control the unsettled parts of their lives. To be able to live fearlessly in the midst of change, whether personal, ecclesiastical or societal, is a priceless spiritual quality in our time. Pilgrimage may help root this quality of fearlessness in people undergoing transition.

When at the end of the pilgrimage Ted was asked to describe one important thing that happened for him on the pilgrimage, he

responded: “I am less afraid of entering the uncertain path ahead in my life, and I recognize that in place of that fear is a promise of ‘thin places’ with opportunities of learning, growth, and being closer to God.”

For further reading:

Bridges, William *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. Don Mills, ON: Addison-Wesley (1980).

Countryman, L. William *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse (1999).

Daloz Parks, Sharon *Leadership Can be Taught*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press (2005).

Turner, Edith “Preface” in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. New York: Columbia University Press (2000).