

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Pilgrimage”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 24, 2019

Call to Celebration

Let us begin this morning with a little Chaucer, the beginning of the Canterbury Tales:

When April with its sweet showers
 Has pierced the drought of March to the root
 And bathed every plant-vein in such liquid
 As has the power to engender the flower;
 When zephyr also with its sweet breath
 Has in every grove and field inspired
 The tender crops, and the young sun
 Has run half its course in Aries the Ram,...
 Then people long to go on pilgrimages

What does it take to turn a journey into a pilgrimage? A pilgrimage often requires a lot of walking, covering large distances. There is both a challenge to walking on un-callused feet and a simplifying of activity and an opening to discovery.

Hear how Frédéric Gros describes that process in his book *A Philosophy of Walking*:

“None of your knowledge, your reading, and your connections will be of any use here: two legs suffice, and big eyes to see with. Walk alone, across mountains or through forests. You are nobody to the hills or the thick boughs heavy with greenery. You are no longer a role, or a status, not even an individual, but a body, a body that feels sharp stones on the paths, the caress of long grass and the freshness of the wind. When you walk, the world has neither present nor future: nothing but the cycle of mornings and evenings. Always the same thing to do all day: walk. But the walker who marvels while walking (the blue of the rocks in a July evening light, the silvery green of olive leaves at noon, the violet morning hills) has no past, no plans, no experience. He has within him the eternal child. While walking I am but a simple gaze.”

Spoken Meditation

Different Ways to Pray by [Naomi Shihab Nye](#)

There was the method of kneeling,
 a fine method, if you lived in a country
 where stones were smooth.
 The women dreamed wistfully of bleached courtyards,
 hidden corners where knee fit rock.
 Their prayers were weathered rib bones,
 small calcium words uttered in sequence,
 as if this shedding of syllables could somehow
 fuse them to the sky.

There were the men who had been shepherds so long
 they walked like sheep.

Under the olive trees, they raised their arms—
 Hear us! We have pain on earth!
 We have so much pain there is no place to store it!
 But the olives bobbed peacefully
 in fragrant buckets of vinegar and thyme.
 At night the men ate heartily, flat bread and white cheese,
 and were happy in spite of the pain,
 because there was also happiness.

Some prized the pilgrimage,
 wrapping themselves in new white linen
 to ride buses across miles of vacant sand.
 When they arrived at Mecca
 they would circle the holy places,
 on foot, many times,
 they would bend to kiss the earth
 and return, their lean faces housing mystery.

While for certain cousins and grandmothers
 the pilgrimage occurred daily,
 lugging water from the spring
 or balancing the baskets of grapes.
 These were the ones present at births,
 humming quietly to perspiring mothers.
 The ones stitching intricate needlework into children's dresses,
 forgetting how easily children soil clothes.

There were those who didn't care about praying.
 The young ones. The ones who had been to America.
 They told the old ones, you are wasting your time.
 Time?—The old ones prayed for the young ones.
 They prayed for Allah to mend their brains,
 for the twig, the round moon,
 to speak suddenly in a commanding tone.

And occasionally there would be one
 who did none of this,
 the old man Fowzi, for example, Fowzi the fool,
 who beat everyone at dominoes,
 insisted he spoke with God as he spoke with goats,
 and was famous for his laugh.

Reading

“Camino de Santiago” by Fred Boreali

On May 4th 2018 I began a walking journey from St. Jean Pied de Port to the city of Santiago de Compostela. This journey was the Camino de Santiago, the Camino Frances. The Camino is a 500 mile foot path which takes you over the Pyrenees from France and then meanders through the varied topography of northern Spain. Some 400,000 people do at least part of it each year. Pilgrims have walked

this path for over 1,000 years.

The Camino is a remnant from an era when pilgrimages were a more common spiritual exercise. The back drop of Chaucer's, "Canterbury Tales", for example concerns a group of English folk on a similar pilgrimage.

And what may you ask is at the end of the Camino pilgrimage? It is none other than the alleged bones of St. James the Apostle, a disciple of Christ, that lay in the Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela.

The Camino is steeped in history. The Knights of Templar once guarded this path from thieves and marauding Moors. You walk on bridges and roads built by the Roman legions. You see churches filled with gold and silver, in dusty old villages.. You see monuments to those that died in the Spanish Civil War. And much more...

The Camino also has its own traditions and stories. There is an ancient tradition of laying stones at the foot of the Iron Cross. The stones are supposed to symbolize the burdens you carry. So many stones have been left, that there is now a formidable hill surrounding the cross.

When doing the pilgrimage it doesn't matter if you are a non-believer. There are people of many beliefs doing the walk for their own reasons. In fact when you register for the walk, they ask only if its for recreational or spiritual reasons.

Like the people in the Canterbury tales, you meet other pilgrims along the way. You say Buen Camino to each other, and you often walk together. You talk about yourselves, you tell stories and ask each other the reason for your Camino. You share your thoughts on the beauty of the country side, the local culture and food. You also talk about practical matters such as local accommodations, where to eat, and treatments foot blisters.

Meeting fellow pilgrims from all over the world, is a fascinating experience, you learn from each other and you form special bonds. There is a richness in the mutual sharing that comes from the common experience of walking this ancient path. You come to realize, that people really are of the same family.

A tradition of the Camino is that you make an intention for doing it. It can be for any reason. Often it is a quest for an answer to a personal dilemma. What it is, is up to you. There is ample time to meditate, take in the landscape, and to socialize. And you may eventually find the answer to your personal quest.

Why did I, a Unitarian Universalist do this Pilgrimage? I have to admit that it was just for the adventure! but I found it a truly unique and magical adventure. I will sincerely mull over the memories I have from it, for the rest of my life.

Sermon

I spoke two weeks ago about packing as a way of beginning a journey. This week I will be talking about a journey that has a sacred destination. The movie "The Way" released in 2010 and celebrities like Shirley MacLaine and Paulo Coelho (Quail-o) walking the Camino Frances and writing books about it has raised the profile of this thousand year old pilgrimage. This pilgrimage is likely much older than a thousand years. One can follow the Camino using the Milky Way as a guide, as prehistoric peoples may have done to find their way from the Pyrenees to the sea.

Many well known pilgrimages may already be familiar to us that millions of people take on a yearly basis. Muslims are commanded at least once in their lives to go to Mecca for the Hajj. Once a year over two million people gather, strip down to simple white ceremonial garb that makes everyone look the same, walk counter-clockwise around the Kaaba, drink from the Zamzam well, stand vigil on the plains of Mount

Arafat, spend a night on the plain of Muzdalifa, and perform the symbolic stoning of the devil by throwing stones at three pillars. Then they feast for three days. One can do all this at other times of the year, called Umrah, but that doesn't exempt the Muslim from doing the Hajj.

Before the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 CE, Jews were commanded to visit Jerusalem for three festivals including Passover. All adult men were required to visit and offer sacrifices at the Temple. Christians have made pilgrimage to the Holy Lands from the beginning and then to Rome when it became the home of the Holy Roman Empire, the seat of the Roman Catholic Church.

In India, the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna rivers draws many, many Hindus for purification. Naked sadhus, or holy men wearing only marigold garlands lead millions of people, as many as 70 million into those waters, for the "Ardh Kumbh Mela" the 45 day festival or the Half Grand Pitcher Festival to wash away their bad karma and free them from reincarnation. They chant, "Har Har Gange", long live Ganges.

Buddhists have many sites important to remember the life of the Buddha including Bodh Gaya, the location of a descendant of the Bodhi tree under which he sat when he was enlightened. During my visit to Sri Lanka five years ago, I visited Anuradhapura that also has a descendent of the Bodhi Tree. It was inspiring to see the tree, sit near it, and experience the excitement as part of a festival day as long processions of monks led by men in traditional garb playing loud reed instruments circled the tree.

Of course there are numerous other sites people from all the religions of the world venerate and visit. In Ireland, I learned from Philomena's sister and sister-in-law about one that St. Patrick may have discovered called Lough Derg. There was a cave like structure revealed to him as the gateway to purgatory to help convert the Irish to Christianity. Some like to call it the Ironman of pilgrimages, reputed to be one of the most challenging Christian pilgrimages. Pilgrims fasts for 15 hours before arriving. Shedding one's shoes and socks, 289 prayers are recited while prostrating, kneeling and bending at sacred sites. Then one walks around six stony circular tracks (barefoot, remember) while reciting another litany of prayers. Lots of kneeling soon draws blood on the sharp stones, but also awakens compassion for those around you sharing your suffering. This 40 hour pilgrimage that my sister and sister-in-law both have done is hard to forget!

The call to pilgrimage is ancient. Stone Hedge was likely visited as a holy site for healing long before any recorded history. Recent research has suggested the bluestone that was moved there from a quarry far away might have been used for healing or had magical properties.

Though the pull to go on a journey to a holy shrine is ancient, pilgrimage lost some of its luster during the Reformation and the Age of Enlightenment. As their focus became the word and the mind, the physical ordeal of pilgrimage lost some of its allure among Protestant Christians. It wasn't until the resurgence of interest in the last 50 or so years has pilgrimage regained popularity among Europeans.

So why do people go on pilgrimage today? Fred has given you a taste. For some it is like climbing a mountain, just for the enjoyment, challenge, adventure and sense of accomplishment. Many people from Asia who are not Christians come for the pleasure of the hike and not with any spiritual goal. Many bring questions or big decisions they are contemplating hoping for some clarity by the end of their journey. Others bring grief and loss they hope to come to terms with over the miles. Whatever reason people begin the journey all of them experience tests and challenges.

For any long walk, the feet will be a problem as will the legs, hips, back, neck, just about every inch of the body will have something to complain about after a few days on the road. Everyone gets blisters, stumbles, gets bruises and sore muscles. When groups of people sleep together dormitory style, there will be lots of snoring.

Parts of the journey, like carrying a heavy pack, will be physically difficult. It will likely rain for several days. Then the wind will blow. Then it will get hot as the sun glares down from the heavens. In the mountains it might even snow. Pilgrims must face being uncomfortable over and over again. And yet somehow, over a week or two, pilgrims get into the rhythm of the walking and find their legs and their strength.

Then comes the emotional challenge of dealing with the contents of the mind. When pilgrims have long stretches by themselves in silence, long suppressed feelings and hurts have a way of coming up and wanting to be looked at and dealt with. Restlessness and doubt can be torturous when the path becomes empty and boring with little pleasant stimulation. As the wind chills and the rain fills the shoes, the lure of giving up, going home, having a hot bath and sleeping in a warm, comfortable bed becomes very tempting and seductive indeed.

The gold at the end of these physical and emotional ordeals is the experience of insight and self-discovery. A common experience for many pilgrims is the “ah, ha” moment when a difficult problem becomes easy to penetrate and understand. A sense of meaning and purpose becomes palpably present when it was missing before. A feeling of love and connection spontaneously arises.

These can be life changing and orienting moments that point the pilgrim in new directions or confirm the direction they are now following.

As I was reading about this common pilgrimage experience people have on the Camino de Santiago, I was impressed by the ways it paralleled my experience of being at a meditation retreat. Often, during the first several days, there is a lot of physical discomfort but for the opposite reason. Instead of moving more than usual, the meditator moves much less and much more slowly than normal. Being still can be very uncomfortable too, but without the blisters, except maybe where your rear end meets the cushion. Once the body quiets down, the mind struggles with restlessness, sleepiness and doubt, along with wanting what isn't present and rejecting what is present. Emotional pain from the past suddenly appears out of nowhere to torment the meditator. But as the meditator patiently feels and lets go of emotional baggage by returning to the breath again and again, the mental turmoil gradually releases its grip. And some of the more pleasant meditative experiences like peace, love, joy, clarity and insight can arise.

There are other kinds of inner journeys besides meditation. Many people begin their spiritual awakening process through using mind altering substances. Richard Alpert was experimenting with LSD before traveling to India, then meeting his Guru and becoming Ram Dass. Krishna Das did peyote mushrooms before also traveling to India and finding that same teacher that Ram Dass did. The mind altering experiences with psychoactive substances can make people question their sense of reality and want to explore what else is out there, what might be true that isn't apparent in mundane daily experience.

There are many other ways to induce trance like experiences that alter consciousness than using psychoactive chemicals. The sweat lodge for native peoples was a way to open up their minds. A vision quest, going out alone into a natural setting, fasting and waiting for a message. Drumming can be a great source of entrainment that can help people travel beyond ordinary time and space on a shamanic journey.

So there are a rich variety of ways to do a pilgrimage that can reap for us a great deal of value, growth and meaning. Unfortunately those paths of pilgrimage haven't been well developed in Unitarian Universalism... yet. And I say “yet” because I believe we need to do that work for our benefit and the benefit of future UU generations.

If you ask UUs where they would go on a UU pilgrimage, many would say a trip to Boston would be the first place that would come to mind. Before the UUA headquarters moved into a more conventional building, 25 Beacon Street was the place we would head with our Rite of Passage youth as the capstone of our coming of age program. That building sitting a few doors away from the Massachusetts State House

on the Boston Commons was the Unitarian Universalist axis mundi. Some of our most historic and beautiful churches are in downtown Boston. Then a short trip out of town takes the UU pilgrim to Concord where the Transcendentalists congregated and Walden Pond is located. This is where one can feel the heritage of our UU tradition.

Many have found visiting the Hungarian Transylvanian region of Romania is a way to connect with our Unitarian heritage that goes back 450 years. This is part of the appeal of visiting our partner church in Szőkefalva. Though the religious practices and beliefs differ from much of what one might find in our congregation, there is a sense of connection we feel that transcends those differences.

There are other ways, though, to experience pilgrimage in a UU setting. A simple one is a trip to Barnevelt on Fathers Day in June to gather at the old Universalist Church there. Our camps and conferences are especially meaningful places to discover and deepen our UU identity. One treasure for our children and youth is Unirondack camp. I was shaped by attending Murray Grove youth camp in the late 1960's and early '70s. There are several popular week long summer institutes with hundreds of UUs that meet for a week or two. Any one of these experiences can be very helpful in deepening one's faith.

One area of pilgrimage is provided by our UU affinity groups like the UU Christians, UU Buddhists, UU Pagans, UUs for Jewish Awareness, UU Muslims, and others that gather for events. The UU Buddhists have Convocations every two years to deepen our connections and appreciation of our synergy with Buddhist values, practices and ideas. I am helping to organize a Convocation in Garrison, New York this April 25 to 28 to examine how Buddhism can help us work through issues of race.

One especially valuable yearly experience is attending our Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly at the end of June. This long weekend experience can be transformative. Meeting so many like minded people in the general sessions and in workshops and worship can be very meaningful and inspirational.

But if none of these opportunities attract you, there are inner journeys you can take by staying right here in our congregation. The classes I offer, the Meaning Matters program, UU Weekend in the fall, and our Wellspring program for spiritual growth and personal development are all ways to participate in the growth that pilgrimage can stimulate.

And who knows what may appear in the future. I've been a UU all my life. I've seen so much growth and development during that time. We are a young faith, the merger of two young religious traditions in 1961. We are still growing and developing as a religious tradition. In fact that is one of our strengths – adaptability and willingness to change with the times. Just seeing how much has happened in the last couple of years is amazing. Not that there aren't problems – we love to be self-critical and judgmental. Yet I see our ability to change as one of our greatest assets in a time of tremendous social change. So different from other denominations that are stuck on things we've settled years ago.

In a sense our UU denomination is itself on a pilgrimage to see if people with diverse beliefs can travel together with shared values as an enriching path. That, for me, is just what happens on the Camino de Santiago as so many different people travel together with the same destination, sharing their common humanity. If we can re-create that experience in our congregations, we will be forging **a new way** to be religious.

Let us, together, make it so.