

Leaves

from a pilgrim's journal

Dave Olson

©2004

E-mail: dwolson@attglobal.net

PILGRIM

Here
I stand
straining forward
with eyes
which see more by desire than experience;

bending backward
with ears
which hear but echoes
of the songs sung long ago.

The song of the past
knows the way ahead,
though its singers have not been where it leads.
Still, it holds my feet in the way
as I step by its sound.

The Light ahead –
far –
is bright beyond measure,
but diffused
as it nears my sight.
Its shine reflects on all about the way
so each becomes a lantern
to my journey.

Do you see?
Can you hear?
Will you go
into the pilgrim way?

dwo, 8/28/03

The longest journey is the journey inwards of him who has chosen his destiny.

Dag Hammarskjöld

ARE YOU A PILGRIM?

To be a pilgrim is not to perform an individual act of devotion, but to engage in humankind's dialogue with the divine, not in time, but eternity.

Jennifer Westwood, *On Pilgrimage. Sacred Journeys Around the World.*

I had been a pilgrim long before I realized that I am one. Ever since I “left home” at age 55 on my first extended journey I have been seeking sacred places. Some are sites made sacred because of the events in history which happened there or the lives of holy men and women who lived there. Others became sacred at my visit because of the encounter which I had there. It is by recognizing and receiving these encounters and by intentionally choosing these visits that my journeys have become pilgrimages.

A pilgrim is one who seeks the sacred in life and history. He sets out on a journey to find something, to engage a sacred encounter. She may know the destination or experience she seeks. She may know only that she must find “it.” He may be able to map out a direct route. He may just start and depend on leading to bring him to what his soul desires. There is a drive within which propels to go. A pilgrim is simply one who yields to this drive and sets out.

It was my first time in Oxford, England. Although my trip to England had been long anticipated, I did not realize that Oxford would be on the itinerary. I went primarily to visit friends, but when he suggested a day-trip to Oxford I was eager. I knew it only as the home of the great University and of much history. I was also aware that C.S. Lewis, one of my literary heroes had taught at Magdalen College there. Our day-long walking tour was fascinating and enjoyable, offset by the disappointment of Magdalen College being closed that day. We were sitting in a café while I checked the guidebook for any more sites to see when I came across a brief reference to The Eagle and Child pub with its historic “Inklings Room” I recognized this as the meeting place of Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and their fellow “Inklings,” as their conversation/writers group came to be known. This was a stop I could not miss. My host led the way and we came to the Eagle and Child. It is no more remarkable a building than any other pub in the city, but I entered eagerly. To my urgent question, “Where is the Inklings’ Room?” the gentleman at the bar pointed toward the back. It was just past the doorjam leading from the forward bar where we stood. I moved into a small, simple room with a few benches, a couple of very small tables, and an old iron stove for heat. There was no one else in the room, and my host left me alone to be with my reflections. As I sat there looking at the pictures of the Inklings that lined the walls, imagining the group gathered there in earnest conversation I heard a quiet voice within. “You belong here,” he said. The voice I recognized as Jesus, whose voice I have heard many times. I immediately protested, “I am not an equal to these.” The voice said no more, but the impact of his words stayed with me. I felt as if I had met these famous authors and had been received by them. I knew that I had experienced a sacred encounter – with Jesus, with the ideal of these authors, and with myself.

That day I just know that I was touched in a deep place in my soul. I was moved, but I did not know how I was affected. Now I do. Subsequent to that brief visit to the *Eagle and Child* a quantitative shift came in my writing and a new expression in poetry emerged. Furthermore, I am now comfortable with the description “writer,” which I felt no affinity with before. As I accepted the changes in myself I began to reflect on other meaningful moments which had gripped me in my travels. I found that there have been many “shifts” in my soul as a result of special moments in special places. Most are small movements, unnoticed at the time. A few are strong enough to record on my mental seismometer and the effect is more immediate. Yet, all are integral to releasing, or pushing, me into the man I am becoming.

A pilgrimage is not a vacation, although the change of scenery and pace will bring refreshment to mind and body. The goal of a pilgrimage is not to relax, unwind, get-away-from-it-all, or get recharged. It is not a recreational excursion or an adventure to renew a wearied life. Pilgrimage is a quest of the soul. It is motivated not by the need of old experiences but by the hope of new encounter. It is set not on restoring the self to a lost level of energy but on lifting the soul to a higher level of awareness. A pilgrim goes to a place not because he knows what he will find there, but because he looks for what is unknown. A vacationer travels so that she can return whence she came. A pilgrim journeys so she can go on from where she is.

A pilgrimage is not a tour, although what is learned on a tour can be very interesting. The purpose of a pilgrimage is only incidentally to learn – to learn about the home-life of a saint, for example. Rather, it is to enter into the life of that person or the dynamic of that event and let oneself be transformed. A tour is guided by plans, whether those of the traveler or a guide. A pilgrimage is led, by an urging within or a beckoning from without. It is not to know *about* persons or events or places, but to be *part of* the life or event. It is not a circuit to bring one back maybe a little smarter or wiser, but an open-ended expansion of the self. Pilgrimage once begun is never over.

I was attending a conference in Switzerland whose theme was reconciliation between the Swiss Reformed Church and descendents of the Anabaptist movements of the 16th and 17th centuries. There had been much fear in the relationship of these two movements during those decades and the Reformed Church had actively persecuted the Anabaptists. The plenary sessions of the conference were very moving and full of the joy of a reconciling family. One of the activities offered was an excursion to a cave which had been used by some Anabaptists for gatherings and for worship. I joined the line of pilgrims winding our way up a hill, then along a ridge to an area hidden from outside view. At the end of a draw, above a stream, we found the cave. It was not large, but could hold maybe a fifty people, more if the children gathered in the back under the lower ceiling. As I stood on earth on which these spiritual ancestors had walked and sat and touched the stone walls which their hands had touched I felt a bond with them and a deep gratitude for their faith and courage.

Then, the group began to sing, and as our voices joined and rose in that cathedral in the rock the sacredness of the moment gripped me. We are one in faith and in one Lord, then, now, and forever.

Pilgrimages are often quests for a specific benefit: healing of an illness, release from some bondage, gain of success in some venture, etc. Such quests have propelled people onto pilgrim paths, often arduous journeys themselves, in all ages of human history. It is not these pursuits which I narrate here. I do not intend a guide to places with reputations for such benefits. My pilgrimages, which are the experiences which underlie this writing, are a desire for whatever blessings will surprise my soul. They are journeys to Bethel because I heard that “the Lord is in this place” (Gen. 28), and I desire to meet and be met by the Lord. What I specifically experience there is part of the adventure.

Many pilgrimage routes are religiously defined and well traveled. While walking along such a way one falls in with other pilgrims, and the varieties of experiences which come along with human contact and shared stories augment the climax at the destination. So, I am told. I have never joined a pilgrim band.

WALKING THE PATH

Pilgrims walk. Through the centuries pilgrimage has been equated with a journey on foot. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is his fictional rendition of the experiences and the stories told by a band of pilgrims in their way to Canterbury. The stories emerge as the travelers talk with one another during the hours of walking and in the evenings resting. Written in the 14th century, this classic reflects the pattern of pilgrimages until that time, and the pattern has continued to this day.

Modern transportation has made possible other forms of pilgrimage, shortening the distances by air travel, easing parts of the journey in rail cars, and adding flexibility with automobiles. Yet, it is in walking that the rich impact of a pilgrimage emerges. Walking takes the focus off the destination and opens the pilgrim up to the journey itself. Walking flexes muscles not only of legs and arms, but also of senses and spirit. Moving along at a slow pace one has time to contemplate the many observations of eyes, ears, feet, even nose.

Walking shifts one from being an observer looking through a window to being a participant, exercising an effort in the search. Walking slows down the pace, allowing more things to be seen and felt and giving time to consider these. Walking makes it easy to stop and engage whatever has arrested the attention. Walking incorporates multiple faculties in the moment by moment decisions of the journey. Eyes turn attention to an intriguing sight. Ears halt steps to gather in mysterious sounds. Hunger compels a different dining experience. Tiredness invites rest in an unusual spot. Feet sometimes pick out a new path (I often just "follow my feet" when picking a path). All these expand the experience and prepare the soul for a deeper encounter when the sacred place is reached.

The experience of the pilgrim in actually walking in the way of others enables them to become a participant in all that has happened. The pilgrim becomes one with all who have gone before.

Martin Robinson, *Sacred Places, Pilgrim Paths: An Anthology of Pilgrimage*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Walking is the pace of reflection. The mind is free from having to concentrate on where – when – how, and lets thoughts surface which are regularly pressed down by the pressures of constant decision-making. Ideas which seem random at first start to link up into a train of revelation. Memories awaken and take new shape as desires. Buried dreams sprout and ask for another chance to bloom. Crazy notions ask for a new hearing and are searched for genuine possibilities. Mind and heart enter into dialogue as time is available and the rhythm of body reminds one of being a whole person.

Above all, do not loose your desire to walk: Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts.

Søren Kierkegaard

Walking integrates me into the world in which I travel. The path becomes more than a road which I use briefly. It is *my way*, giving me support and receiving my gratitude. Farms and buildings become familiar faces through the time I have to observe them. People who come alongside are possible friends since there is occasion for a visit. Because of the close contact with land, towns, people, I form relationship with these, at the levels of understanding and closeness which I choose. And I realize that there is opportunity for more by giving the energy and attention to pursue more. Walking reminds me that the world is not just a place to move *through* but the place in which I dwell.

It was easy to find the hermitage of St. Nicklaus von de Flue, patron saint of Switzerland, for it was well marked and many other pilgrims were there. But, the account of his life said that he had followed St. Jacob's Weg (St. James Way), and I wanted to walk part of this ancient pilgrim path. I wandered up one path, then back another, until I located the one that had to be it. It followed the hillside, away from the hermitage, and away from the other visitors. I could not see where it led but the general direction was clear. As I made my way along the narrow path I pictured Nicklaus walking, alone. I listened for the chatter of other ancient pilgrims would have moved in small groups. I paused at the gaps in the trees to view the valley below and absorb the peace of place and pace. There was no revelation, no dramatic spiritual moment, but stepping in the footsteps of those who had walked this way before I felt that I belong in their company. I too am a pilgrim. In seeking the way, I am finding God – and myself.

I have found that the longer I walk the more I gain from my pilgrimage. In ancient times, the difficulty and hazards of the journey were part of the mission. Facing and pressing through obstacles better prepared one to experience the power of the sacred place. It is not necessary, however, to walk the whole way. Limitations of time, ability, and strength can be honored without hindering what each person gains on a pilgrimage. It is, after all, a personal experience, and should be followed according to each pilgrim's desire and ability.

FOLLOWING THE WAY

A pilgrim has a direction, but it is not defined by a destination. The destination is just the occasion for the journey. The direction may be toward the destination, but it is determined by the set of the pilgrim's heart. That direction is toward God. It is a journey to meet God in a stronger, more intimate way than she or he has yet experienced.

And God is not confined to a place, no matter how sacred the place may have become. God is met when, where, and how he chooses. The way of a pilgrim is merely an invitation to him to draw near. So, the direction of travel is guided by how the pilgrim senses God's presence or beckoning.

On a full pilgrimage one must abandon itineraries. Few seekers today have the luxury to do this, and yielding to some schedule will not negate the experience. However, the more one can be free from an itinerary the more open one is to the subtle motions of the Spirit and of discoveries along the journey. The travel of a pilgrimage opens the senses of the pilgrim, both physical and spiritual senses. He or she is constantly passing by enticements to explore places, to meet people, to ponder impressions. Traveling without firm itinerary allows her or him to engage these interests and to feel the touch of God which is hidden in them.

The personal style of preparation for travel which fits each pilgrim will shape how he or she goes about planning a journey. I like to learn just sketchy details about my proposed destination and route. I set out with these notes, letting what I learn on the way develop the substance of my journey. I feel like I am growing into the experience in a way similar to what the person or group whom I am pursuing would have done so themselves. I also like the adventure of turning down a path and discovering where it leads.

By this style I have also missed some things. I may return from a visit only to learn that there was something there I should have seen. However, these losses become for me invitations to return, so I hold them as my hope of doing so.

I have friends whose style is to thoroughly research a destination and the route, with all the alternatives and possible side trips. This preparation builds anticipation in these friends and enables them to move quickly into the significant elements of the journey and the sacred site and use their knowledge to enrich their experience. My friends seldom are able to do all that they planned or hoped, so they too will have an incentive to return.

The amount of preparation a seeker does will be dictated by the style he or she chooses. I encourage you to accept your own style and follow it. Your journey will likely flow according to this style, letting you be comfortable in the way and manner you go. Since a pilgrimage is an open journey, open to the motions of the Holy Spirit and to encounters with God himself, you need not fear that you will *miss* something. You are seeking whatever you find, what you receive. This is good. This is enough.

ALWAYS ALONE

Every pilgrim travels alone, even the one who is in a group. Pilgrimage is the pursuit of a deeper encounter with God, and this is a solitary experience. The company of other seekers can, and usually will, support, strengthen, enrich, expand and extend one's experience, but the intimacy is between two, the pilgrim and God. So, you always go alone.

Therefore, the choice of making a pilgrimage singly, as a couple or pair, or in a band is an incidental choice, guided by relationships (e.g. marriage), style (e.g. what gives adequate security) and opportunity (e.g. that provided by a church-sponsored tour). In whichever context you go on a pilgrimage, it is your personal journey.

Because this is a journey of personal experience, I urge you, as prospective pilgrim, to participate in the planning. Do not just follow a leader. Gain enough information about travel and about the destination(s) so that you will have the freedom to pursue your own interests and, to follow the paths which entice you. Particularly, observe the pace which allows you to take in what you are experiencing. Do not be afraid to skip a part of the tour. Do take the amount of time you need to absorb and reflect upon your encounters with the sacred, the ordinary, with God.

Pace is an individual thing. The time and manner in which you gather the significance of a visit, of an encounter, is yours alone. Plan to provide yourself this time and this manner, and allow your companion(s) the same.

When I have done pilgrimages with a companion, we have agreed to allow each other to follow his own pace. We determine what parts of the journey or route or site-visit we want to do together, then we set time and place for meeting up again after doing the rest separately.

On a week-long pilgrimage in a single city it took my friend Robert and I a couple of days to recognize that he is a "late night person" and I am an "early morning person." After these days of each of us struggling to fit into the other's pattern, we accepted the differences and gave one another liberty to be active late or early, respectively. These times then became our primary times of solitude, and the whole experience was strengthened for both of us.

TO RIDE OR DRIVE?

A pilgrimage is an experience, not a tourist trip. It is about encountering, receiving, reflecting; not about seeing, recording, and buying. It happens in the journey, not at certain sites. Therefore, transportation is part of the experience.

I find that public transportation and walking facilitate the journey. I have written about the values of walking elsewhere in this essay. Using public transportation also helps me enter into the posture of a pilgrim.

Public transportation integrates my pilgrimage into real life. I do not insulate myself from life in the cocoon of car or private motor coach. I let my journey be part of the daily travel of the people working, shopping, visiting and studying along the way of my pilgrimage.

Public transportation moves me at life's common pace, reminding me that sacred encounters arise in the ordinary flow of life. I also find that moments waiting at train and bus stops are gifts of empty time into which unbidden observations and thoughts can jump and entertain and instruct.

Public transportation grounds my pilgrimage in the world of *that* place. Private cars and buses too easily allow me to carry my world along, encumbering my view and prejudicing my experience. Sitting – and standing – in often crowded trains, trams, and buses relates me very directly to the world I am in and the people who live in it.

The first time I missed a train connection was a jolt to my itinerary-based security, especially because the station at which we were “stranded” seemed remote from lodgings or restaurants. But, we soon learned that there would be another train along in an hour; we would arrive at our destination (this was a trip for a seminar) in time. The hour spent waiting “with nothing to do” settled my anxiety into trust and let me observe the ordinary people and lifestyle of that location, opening my understanding to the people whom we had come to serve.

AN OPEN SOUL

Since you are reading this paper I can assume two things about you: 1) you have an interest in pilgrimage so there is an opening in your soul to receive; 2) you read English and have been schooled in a Western cultural setting, so there is a determination to make things happen in your mind. The first is essential to a meaningful pilgrimage. The second is detrimental to one.

A pilgrimage is an adventure of mind and body toward discovery and a turning outward of soul toward new experience. One can plan a quest but not determine what one will find. Likewise, one can hold open one's soul but not predict what will be offered to it. A meaningful pilgrimage will take a person into places and encounters which reveal distinctives of the world and life which were unknown. It will also expose a soul to opportunities for receiving insights and perceptions to which it was blind. The attitudes which will facilitate these are an eagerness for different encounters and situations, and readiness to adapt to them, and an openness to receive from that which you enter: places, relationships and experiences.

Openness of soul accepts that I can learn from any experience and gain from any encounter. It looks at a simple dwelling with the same interest as a great cathedral. It observes a street artist's work with the same expectation as a famous painting. It listens to a local merchant's comments about the city with the same inquiry as to an expert guide. Openness of soul waits easy and expectantly at a bus stop as well as in the line for an exhibition. It absorbs truth and beauty from the liturgy and from the silence which precedes the service. It is entertained as much by the audience as by the concert which is being enjoyed. Openness of soul expects that there is something good to receive, and is alert that this may come from any direction or source.

The guide book recommended the Russian Orthodox Church in a city I was visiting because of its ornate exterior and the display of icons in the interior. So, I directed my way to the church, without any thought of the time of day. When I arrived, a priest and several women were busy with some kind of preparations. I took my time to view the icons and meditate on the message in them. Then the preparations ceased and a service of prayer began. It was obvious that visitors need not leave, so I took a place at the edge of the circle and shared in the service – in spirit, because the language and form were unknown to me. In the clarity of the cadence the prayers and the beauty of the harmony of voices chanting I received a gift of God's grace carried in these words and form for centuries.

Openness of soul is best carried by moving slowly and looking reflectively. It needs to pause so one can just absorb what is in the space and time. It looks not for camera angles but for how to see deeper into the meaning or history of what is being observed. It considers not, "What was it like for them then?", but "What am I experiencing *with them* as I abide in their place, in their presence?"

Openness of soul starts on the way to a site and continues on the path away. Coming toward the site it lets the child-like excitement emerge: "What will I find there?" Moving away from the site it gently holds onto the images, feelings and inner motions,

letting them seep into the subconscious for ongoing processing. I find that I must be silent in both movements in order to release my soul into openness. Talking with my companions, even the chatter of strangers around, keeps my soul busy with these external things and delays my ability to become open.

A pilgrim is an artist, discovering from what is seen externally the beauty and intrigue that is within. Openness of soul means being open to the external, gathering from the observations and sensations pouring in, as the iris of your eye gathers in light and images, and letting these reveal elements of self within which have not yet emerged.

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light.

Jesus (Matt. 6:22)

Openness of soul is developed by practice, not by study. It is learned more from dialogue with a person of open soul than from a procedure. It grows as much by the disappointed recognition, "How did I miss that?", as by the excited realization, "I did not know I would feel that way?" It can be exercised anytime, anyplace. One does not have to be on a pilgrimage or in a sacred space to practice coming open in soul. It grows by learning to be alert to the motions within and the subtle observations which try to claim one's attention while focused on "practical" things. It increases by turning toward those "distractions" which intrude into one's "important tasks" and letting them speak, at least momentarily. It matures by reflecting, at later, leisure times, on the things which affected one's emotions and sense of well-being during the day.

For the Christian pilgrim, this openness of soul will be always directed toward God the Father and the Holy Spirit. He is the source of truth and beauty, as well as the creator-redeemer of the beauty within the self. Looking for and listening to God in all visits, all encounters, all conversations, keeps the soul tuned to the voice of Truth and open to the vision of Beauty. Then will follow the conversation within with Jesus, the Son who reveals what is of truth in one's self and one's genuine emerging beauty.

WALKING TOWARD UNDERSTANDING

A pilgrimage is a journey toward understanding. It can begin with a feeling that something or someone is important to you, yet you do not know exactly why. You feel an affinity for, or have a desire to be like, a certain saint, or you set out to get a closer look at a location momentous in your heritage. It may have no more substance than the feelings, “I just want to see where she lived,” or, “I would like to see the place where it happened.” You begin your pilgrimage to understand why you have these feelings.

The question, “Why is this important to me?” remains in the back of your mind and in a corner of your heart as you plan your journey and while you take its steps. Even if you recognize significant influences from the life of the saint whose home you are seeking or in impressions about the location of the event you want to memorialize, the suspicion that there is a more desperate need of understanding heightens your awareness.

As your journey brings you closer to your destination, this question prompts another: “What am I feeling?” You become aware of hopes and fears, of expectations and doubts, all relative to your convictions. As you explore these issues – done best in solitude – they sort into degrees of more or less critical, more or less influential on your beliefs and behaviors. Old answers surface, and get evaluated. New possibilities suggest themselves, and get criticized. An inner dialogue is taking place, spurred by the very journey toward an answer.

The external activities of planning and traveling cause an internal examination, and expose or develop reasons in mind and heart which were not clear before. It is like the dreams you have in the minutes just before waking. Experiences of the past are brought up and merged with events of the present in a sorting by which your subconscious tries to bring understanding to something which just happened. Walking toward a pilgrimage goal has a similar effect. It allows perceptions of the past to mingle with observations and feelings of the present, and your soul works at integrating these. A search for understanding is taking place within, which you may not have been aware you sought.

This development of understanding flows from the physical exertion of the pilgrimage. Ideas and perspectives emerge while traveling, and especially while approaching the sought-for site, which do not arise in an armchair reflection. Relative priorities of theories and rationales sort into different rank than during a fireside debate. Your true convictions settle into clarity with surprising simplicity as you sit quietly in a chapel. Your primary values rest more confidently in your heart as you absorb the purity of a holy place. You may gain understanding as answers or reasons. You may only have a sense that your soul is at rest. By making the pilgrimage you have engaged the search for understanding as fully as you can. You have done it yourself. This in itself grounds the issue, whatever it is, more securely in your heart. However thoroughly you can explain it, you know at a deeper depth what you believe and who you are.

You come to encounter a holy person or see a historic site, but it is yourself whom you meet, at a more profound level.

When I started to live in Switzerland for a few months of the year, I soon heard about Nicklaus von de Flue, partron saint of the nation. What I heard intrigued me, and I thought it would be interesting to visit the site of his home and hermitage. However, a couple of years passed before I decided to make the pilgrimage. In those years I traveled a lot in Europe and discovered that I enjoyed the experience and the adventure. Yet, there was that sense of “there is something more to this” lurking in my soul, without definition of what the “more” is.

I approached the home of St. Nicklaus in my usual way, on foot, taking in as much as I could of the scene and trying to picture it in a 15th century style. I picked up a pamphlet telling his story, which I knew only from snatches told to me by my Swiss friends. When I entered the home where he lived, preserved in its original form, I found that I was the only visitor. I always feel that it is a special gift from God when I get to be in my destination site alone. It allows me to enter fully into my own reflections.

I sat in the main room of the house, with its large stove and simple benches. I read how “Bruder Klaus” nurtured his dream of going on pilgrimage for many years, how he prayed in this room in the night hours, when the family was asleep, that God would release him from obligations of family, farm and village to follow his heart. Then, I read that he was 50 years old when release finally came, including consent by his wife Dorothy. I was 55 when a change in my life situation loosed me to travel and seek new places to serve. Here was a point of identity with Bruder Klaus which bonded me to his experience. The impact went deep into my soul. And in that moment I heard, “You are a pilgrim,” spoken simply in my heart.

With those words my experiences of travel became more significant. The pleasure and spiritual depth I found in them found their cause. What had sometimes felt like lost-ness, like I was wandering without a focus, in that moment became centered in purpose. I had come to Flueli to meet Bruder Klaus, and when I did, I met myself.

FINDING THE PRESENT

Sometimes the way of a pilgrim seems to be just wandering. You wonder if you have turned off the path. You cannot find the destination you were seeking, or what you find has no relevance to the historic person or event you are pursuing. You feel lost, foolish and discouraged. You are tired, and you dread the walk back. Your expectations of a spiritual encounter get crushed into a sense of futility.

This is the moment to look around. Pause, and just look. Your very tiredness will loosen the focus of your eyesight from what you were seeking so that your view range can widen and let you notice something unexpected. Your disappointment in not finding the treasure can soften you to appreciate something very simple and discover a gem at your feet.

These are often the moments when you find beautiful signs of God's activity in the present. Since pilgrimage aims at past eras, a pilgrim can miss the drama being lived in the present. However, having been made sensitive to evidences of God at work by your search into the past, you become more able to recognize the signs of his work around you today.

By losing your way into the past you may find yourself in the present in a way you would not otherwise see. Pilgrimage is about discovery, and discoveries are wherever you find them. Disappointment in one search is simply a catalyst to look for something you would not otherwise notice.

IN A MONASTIC COMMUNITY

Monasteries often took as one of their primary functions providing hospitality to pilgrims. From the earliest years of the Christian church believers took up journeys to see for themselves the *holy land* of Israel/Palestine and the holy sites where saints lived and died. For those wandering toward these destinations, with little in the way of resources – and often few directions – the next monastery became the destination of a day's travel. The *Rule of Saint Benedict*, developed in the sixth century and soon the dominate guideline of monastic communities, specifically provides for hospitality to strangers, with the pilgrim in mind:

Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for He is going to say, "I came as a guest, and you received Me" (Matt. 25:35). And to all let due honor be shown, especially to the domestics of the faith and to pilgrims. In the salutation of all guests, whether arriving or departing, let all humility be shown. Let the head be bowed or the whole body prostrated on the ground in adoration of Christ, who indeed is received in their persons.

The practice continues today, although updated by reservations and restrictions of community's schedule – and frequent use of the facilities by religious groups on retreat. So, with advance notice, a 21st century pilgrim can participate in the ancient blessing of monastic hospitality and the ageless treasure of the liturgy, often rendered in Gregorian Chant.

A visit to a monastery or convent – the terms *Abbey* and *Kloster* are also used in Europe – takes planning. After locating a monastery at or near your pilgrimage destination, first determine if it accepts guests, and if this includes men and/or women. Make contact, by telephone or e-mail (many monasteries are now accessible through the internet) and arrange for your stay. Be aware that some weekdays may be “off” days for the community and weekends are often the busy times, because of retreats being hosted at the monastery. You will make arrangements through the *Guestmaster*, and even in European countries this person frequently speaks English. Set the times of your arrival and departure and clarify which meals you will take in the monastery.

Serving meals to guests is part of the hospitality of a monastic community, and one they take seriously and do graciously. Some of the best meals I have had in my travels have been in monasteries, and some of the nicest dining rooms also. The refectory of a European monastery may well be an ancient work of art.

You will learn when you arrive when meals are served and in what room. In some communities guests eat with the brothers or sisters and in others there is a separate dining room for guests. Both experiences can be wonderful, although in most monastic communities meals of members are eaten in silence. Be patient, be observant, and become a part of the community. You are there not just for a place to sleep and eat, but to enter into the life of a praying community.

The life of a monastery is ordered by the Hours of Prayer, the *Daily Office*. The *Office* will occur from 3 to 7 times a day, depending on the style of the monastic order.

Guests are welcome to observe and/or participate. In some locations guests are invited into the “Choir” where the brothers or sisters have their places for the *Office*. In other locations guests join the local community in the chancel of the church or chapel. Usually books or leaflets are provided with the text of the *Office*, and, where guests are invited into the Choir, often a brother or sister will guide the guest along. The text will be in the local language.

When staying in a monastery I always make sure that I am present for *Compline*, the last service of the day. It is a quiet, soothing close to the day, and, by its use of Psalms 4 and 91, it calls me to lay down the cares and adventures of the day and enter into rest in Jesus. At the close of *Compline* the community enters the *Grand Silence*, in which there is no talking until after breakfast the next day. Do respect this, and it is healing to your own soul as well. Even though the hour may be early for a Western active person, it quiets the soul and brings rest to the body to go to one’s room and prepare for sleep.

In one of my early visits to a monastery I had with me many things to read and some papers for preparing messages. That day I had done a lot of praying about issues which concerned me, and I was a bit overwhelmed and intense about it all. I went to Compline intending to return to my room and use the remaining evening hours (Compline ended at 8:30 PM) to study. However, as the brothers read through Psalms 4 and 91, and I with them, I realized that I was laying all my affairs and worries on the Father. I could not take them up again, for that would be disbelief. I walked quietly to my little room with growing contentment and came in and rested in peace.

A monastery or convent is a house of prayer. You will feel this when you are on the grounds and in the buildings. The atmosphere is one of quiet, peace, and faith. I find that my own prayers seem more clear and meaningful and my own reflections go deeper. Take advantage of this atmosphere. Take lots of time in silence. Sit in the church or chapel. Walk and pray the stations of the cross. Depending on the weather, enjoy a walk in the garden or a long sit in one of the outside places. There are many spots on the grounds of a monastery for just sitting and being present to God, to yourself, and to the earth. It is a place to lay down your busy-life case or backpack, so do so intentionally. Take the opportunity to just be, be a person, a soul, a being of spirit. The order of the place, of the community which moves by a rule of prayer, will help you center and discover a blessed core in yourself that you have not yet known.

There are two books which describe monasteries and convents which accept guests, although they are not exhaustive. You may find others by searching the internet or asking in appropriate places.

Europe’s Monastery and Convent Guesthouses, by Kevin J. Wright. Liguori, MO: Liguori Press, 2000.

A Guide to Monastic Guest Houses, by Robert J. Regalbuto. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1992. [For the US and Canada]

I once made a trip to the home city of a medieval mystic whose writings I love. Even though I knew the city had been leveled by wartime bombing and then rebuilt, I hoped that I would find some point of remembrance, some satisfaction of my desire to touch a link to this woman's life. My normal means of inquiry produced nothing. There was no mention of her on the city's website. The staff of the tourist information bureau knew nothing of her (she is from the 13th century, and these people are interested in showing a modern city). The only thing they could suggest was, "Try at the cathedral." So, to the cathedral I went. But, this city had more prominent historical figures than my precious mystic, and these took the places of honor in the cathedral. I found no mention of her in the brochures, no pictures or postcards. I did find a guide who knew of the woman and was able to take me to one spot in the church which was mentioned in her writings, a non-descript corner where she meditated. I remained in the spot alone and did my own mediation.

This was good. I did not come up completely empty, but I was disappointed. Further investigations in the city were futile, and I wondered, "Did I come all this way for a vacant corner?" So, I turned my attention away from my search and looked for what I might see. As I wandered through the city I was attracted to the doors of a church. Following this small interest I went inside, and entered a building that had been beautifully reconstructed into a concert venue. When I pursued the story I learned that the church had been almost totally destroyed in the bombing. The restoration incorporates the remnants in a way that adds beauty yet reminds of the horror of war damage. The building again serves the spiritual life of the city, through the arts. I was lifted in my own spirit by the faith and hope expressed in the idea and the design of the building. I discovered a living, contemporary expression of faith. My visit was not in vain.

HOW TO FIND A PILGRIMAGE DESTINATION

1. Read history, any that claims your interest and follow the threads that emerge from this. Identify places of significance in that history and listen for the, “I would love to see that place,” in your heart. Locate the place and search for related spots nearby or on the way. These may be referred to in the history or you may learn of them by discussing your intention with others. Checking the tourist information site on the internet for the city of your destination may also reveal other possible sites to visit.

When visiting sacred sites in Europe there are often monasteries nearby which may offer guest accommodations and also be a place of spiritual encounter themselves. For information on monasteries, refer to *Europe’s Monastery and convent Guesthouses*, by Kevin J. Wright, Liguori, MO: Liguori Press, 2000.

2. Look for the source of a form of spirituality which inspires you. If music, research its origins and the person or people who developed the form and see if it is possible to visit their home or center. For example, if J.S. Bach’s music opens your soul to the majesty of God, plan a visit to Leipzig, Germany. If the worship music of Taizè carries you into the presence of God, go to Taizè, France. If the poetry of George Herbert and/or John Donne inspire you, visit London, trace their footsteps and meditate in the churches which nurtured them. If the life story of a martyr stirs you toward obedience, make a journey to the martyr’s places of birth and death.

3. Do some investigating about the source of your inspiration, and let more information about it come to you. This will, because that’s the way it works when we are alert to something: we see references to the subject which we did not notice before.

Gregorian chant is a sound which helps me meditate on God when worshipping. I looked for CD’s of chant, but did not want to get one just because it was in the display. I wanted a personal connection to the music or the place it was recorded. Then, on one of my one-day pilgrim journeys, I was visiting a monastery which is no longer active but has a good museum. While viewing the exhibits I could hear the music of chant flowing through speakers. I inquired about what this was, and when the guide showed me the CD I saw that it was recorded at another monastery at which I had made a retreat. When I was there I had not seen evidence of formal chant or of this CD. I rushed to the nearest music store and rejoiced to find that this CD was in stock and I could take it with me. Both monasteries are in Switzerland, and I had found the one where I made a retreat by following a thread of connections in Southern California, USA.

4. When pursuing a pilgrimage destination, one place will lead to another. A picture on a wall will show you the place from which the one you are visiting has its origin, and you can plan to go on to this place. A conversation in which you are telling about a pilgrimage visit will prompt a listener to ask, “Have you been to ____?” Then you have a new place to explore. A travel brochure about the region where your primary destination lies will suggest further places of sacred history. Sources of information and

suggestions of possibilities will emerge all around you as you pursue your goal of finding places where people have met God in a deep way.

5. Lift your dreams to the Lord. When you feel an interest in a special location, turn your wish, as in, “I would love to visit that place,” into a prayer to God: “Father, I ask you to give me a visit to this place.” Trusting your Father with this simple prayer will begin to prepare your heart to receive his answer when it is time for you to go.
6. Listen to conversations of travelers – pilgrims and others. You will hear of places which peak your interest. Follow up these ideas and see what spiritual connection may be related. Since your heart is set on pilgrimage, the Holy Spirit will bring possibilities to you from many directions and sources.
7. The internet is a great way to search for places to explore. Do a search on a person or place of interest to you, and the links will lead you on. Be specific in your search. Typing in the phrase, “pilgrimage sites” will bring you a lot of offers for tours.
8. Take seriously the teasings which stimulate you. Books, plays and films offer fascinating hints of places to visit. I have taken some of my pilgrimage dreams from *Beckett*, *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*, and many others. Hold these suggestions to your heart. Offer them up to the Lord. Watch for possibilities to visit; push the possibility toward an opportunity; bring it into a reality.

Remember, a pilgrimage is a journey more than a destination. As you get into the way, as you are going, the direction will come. It may not always seem like a good direction, yet since you are following your heart and the Spirit of God, it will lead you well. Jacob was a pilgrim, although he was on the run. His way led to Bethel (Gen. 28) where he discovered, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” From there he went on to more adventures, then came to Jabbok where, wrestling with God, he gained a blessing and a new name.

GOING ON

Reading today in the book of Acts I found a brief comment that traveling from Troas to Assos Paul sent his team ahead by ship and he himself chose to walk (20:13). Why? He was on his way to Jerusalem, “not knowing what will happen to me there”, v22. Did Paul need desperately a time to himself, alone with the Father, to walk through what he was facing? Was this like what Jesus needed when he sent the crowds and disciples away and went up the mountain by himself?

I need times alone now. I need to send others away, or just move myself away, while I walk alone and meet with Father.

These times are different than what I sought before. Before my need was to be away from people. Now it is to be alone with Father. The former is a desire for quiet and the freedom to concentrate. The latter is from the ache of separation. The former comes from being too busy. The latter comes from being pressed so far into aloneness that I discover my soul’s need of him alone. The former is helpful. The latter is essential. The former I do for relief. The latter I do for sustenance. The former is a choice. The latter is a gift. And, for me, the gift came through loss.

You can make the choice for the former, and it is good to do so. For the latter you can only ask for the gift.

A pilgrimage is an acted metaphor for life. You may think of your first pilgrimage as a “trip,” as a holiday-type of excursion for which you will interrupt your normal life, but going on the pilgrimage will transform your “normal life.” When you let out the pilgrim in your soul this part of you will beckon you to seek the sacred encounter every day, in every setting. You will notice potential saints among people in your neighborhood and workplace. You will become aware of sacred spaces in the corners of your city and in the paths of your woods. You will become a seeker after the sacred, one exploring for the spiritual treasures in ordinary places.

Pilgrimage opens your eyes to see beauty and depth behind the façades of the material world. It tenderizes your sense of touch to feel movement of the spirit in common-looking gestures. It tunes your ears to hear music of praise amidst the sounds of daily life. Pilgrimage alerts you to the sacred everywhere.

So, you continue your pilgrimage when traveling to your workplace, when caring for house and family, when gathering with other seekers in worship, when entering a new program of study. Pilgrimage moves from an adventure you take to a lifestyle. It may be subtle, not visible to others, nor even very much to yourself, but it will emerge in quiet moments of reflection or sudden observations in the course of regular activities.

After making your first pilgrimage you will desire the next. Do plan this. Go. Yet, you will not have to make a long journey to experience the pilgrim way. You can walk it any day, every day. In the new openness of your soul you will receive touches of

the sacred again and again, and you will realize that the sacred is not a place. He is a Person. You will meet Jesus, the Sacred of God – everywhere.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS
FOR GOING AS A PILGRIM

PILGRIM'S APPROACH TO A SACRED PLACE

1. Approach slowly; gather in the whole of the site, with all your senses.
2. Orient yourself – to the center of the locality, to the sacred site, to your lodging.
3. Plan your visit:
 - Identify the different spots relevant to the saint or the location
 - I leave the “big” spot till last. It is usually gaudy, overdone, & full of souvenirs. This is distracting to me.
 - Don't hurry. Make no time schedule, but allow yourself to absorb whatever is there for you in a spot.
 - Observe the routes you walk from spot to spot. These would have been used by the saint or earlier pilgrims. This helps connect with the person whose memory you are invoking.
 - Allow yourself time to re-visit a spot.
4. Take time to reflect in a quiet place, and to record impressions in your journal.

VISITING A MUSEUM THE PILGRIM'S WAY

1. Read ahead about the museum's collections so that you know what is there. Select what is most interesting to you.
2. Go **early**, or late, to avoid crowds.
3. Do **not** use guides – audio or group. I want to have my own encounter with the art and artist, not observe what I am “supposed to see.” [Note: I observe that in most group tours, the focus of the people is more on the guide talking than on the art itself.]
4. Go directly toward your primary objective but on the way, look out for other objects which might attract you. Come back to these later.
5. Take all the time you need before the artwork. Take it into your soul.
6. Look at a few more pieces, either from your list or from what caught your eye.
7. Take a break (I always stop for a cappuccino), look through the guidebook or catalogue to determine what else you want to see.
8. Go on with your tour.
9. Do not fret over what you might miss. What you take in fully is enough.
10. Later, read up on the art you viewed. This will explain what you saw and felt without distracting your attention when actually viewing it.

Suggestions for reading.

The Gospels, Bible

The Hobbit, J.R.R. Tolkien

Pilgrim's Progress, John Bunyan

The Journal of John Woolman

A biography of Saint Patrick

Lives of the Desert Fathers/ Mothers, Benedicta Ward