

Sacred Encounters: The Art of Pilgrimage

The Sufi mystic Mevlana Rumi wrote seven centuries ago, "Don't be satisfied with the stories that come before you; unfold your own myth." His poetic brother here in the West, Walt Whitman, put it this way: "Not I—not anyone else, can travel that road for you. You must travel it yourself."



Together, these musings aspire to the idea echoed in the work of seekers everywhere, that travelers cannot find deep meaning in their journey until they encounter what is truly sacred. What is sacred is what is worthy of our reverence, what evokes awe and wonder in the human heart, and what when contemplated transforms us utterly.

The Knot of Eternity

Surely, a voice whispered to me one night in the ruins of an old castle in Donegal, Ireland, surely there is a secret way. The moon was rising like a celestial mirror over the heathery hills. The sea slapped at the peculiar basalt rock formations along the coast. The wind howled like Gaelic pipes. From a distant farmhouse came the sweet smell of burning peat.

I stood shivering in the stone archway of an ancient chapel. Turning my head, I saw the weathered carving of a centuries-old Knot of Eternity. Each thread wandered far from the center, then whorled back in again. The ancient Celts believed this to be a potent symbol of life's journey, and the desire to return to the source that replenishes the soul.

Slowly, I followed the old stone path with my finger. Around and around went my hand, feeling the ancient chisel marks, the abrasions of wind, rain, and sun, and the tender burnishing of time. I thought of all the travelers who had come there, step by step, prayer by prayer, and wondered if they had discovered what they had been seeking, if their faith had been restored.

Slowly, the moon lit the ancient stone. The night air stung my eyes. My hand kept moving across the eternal knot, seeking out the hidden pattern beneath the whirling stone. In the sublime moment I felt an ancient presence rise in my heart, and in my fingertips the unwinding spiral of joy.

Pilgrimage as Art

This is the path that **The Art of Pilgrimage** follows, one carved out by the simple beauty of a handful of practices, tasks and exercises that pilgrims, sojourners, and explorers of all kinds have used for millennia. In each of us dwells a wanderer, a gypsy, a pilgrim. The purpose here is to call forth that spirit. What matters most on your journey is how deeply you see, how attentively you hear, how richly the encounters are felt in your heart and soul.

Kabir wrote, “If you have not experienced something, then for you it is not real.” So it is with pilgrimage, which is the art of movement, the poetry of motion, the music of personal experience of the sacred in those places where it has been known to shine forth. If we are not astounded by these possibilities, we can never plumb the depths of our own souls or the soul of the world.

Whether we are on vacation, a business trip, or a far-flung adventure tour, we can look at the trying times along the road as either torment or chances to “stretch” ourselves.

But what do we do if we feel a need for something more out of our journeys than the perennial challenges and pleasure of travel? What happens if the search for the new is no longer enough? What if our heart aches for a kind of journey that defies explanation?



Centuries of travel lore suggest that when we no longer know where to turn, our real journey has just begun. At that crossroads moment, a voice calls to our pilgrim soul. The time has come to set out for the sacred ground—the mountain, the temple, the ancestral home—that will stir our heart and restore our sense of wonder. It is down the path to the deeply real where time stops and we are

seized by the mysteries. This is the journey we cannot not take.

The Purpose of Pilgrim's Journey

Imagine your first memorable journey. What images rise up in your soul? They may be of a childhood visit to the family gravesite, the lecture your uncle gave at a famous battlefield, or the hand-in-hand trip with your mother to a religious site. What feelings are evoked by your enshrined travel memories?

According to the dictionary, the word pilgrimage derives from the Latin *peligrinus*, meaning foreigner or wayfarer. It refers to the journey of a person who travels to a shrine or holy place.

The pilgrim's motives have always been manifold: to pay homage, to fulfill a vow or obligation, to do penance, to be rejuvenated spiritually, or feel the release of catharsis. The journeys all begin in a nervous state, in deep disturbance. Something vital was missing in life: Vitality itself may be lurking on the road or at the heart of a distant sanctuary.

The ritual act of pilgrimage attempts to fill that emptiness. It can happen halfway around the world, as it did with a very kind priest I know—Father Theodore Walters of Toledo, Ohio, who began leading groups to the Marian Shrine at Medjugorje, Yugoslavia, because he believed that modern people desperately needed “a healing vision from the Mother of God.” He also confessed that he believed a war-battered country might need the kindness people on pilgrimage convey from the sheer gratitude brimming in their hearts.

Sacred & Personal Tours

Pilgrimage can also occur just down the road, as it did to a married couple I met briefly, who had reached an impasse in their creative endeavors. They said they had lost their voice and needed “to hear the voice of commitment to words again.” In response, they decided to reinvigorate their love of literature by traveling to the poet Robinson Jeffers' stone house in Carmel, California. My old friend Michael Jajuga was under so much stress in medical school that once a month he would rejuvenate himself in what he called his “nature pilgrimages.” He would drive all night in his 1970 Challenger into the woods of northern Michigan so he could go trout fishing for a few hours before returning home. That brief contact was his “golden time,” he used to say—his sacred time.



Participation can be communal, as was China Galland's march with a million other pilgrims to the Shrine of Our Lady of Czestochowa in Jasna Gora Monastery, Poland. Or it may be solitary, as with the World War II pilot I met in Tokyo in the mid-1980s, who had just returned from a sorrowful visit to ground zero in Hiroshima.

What unites the different forms of pilgrimage is intensity of intention, the soul's desire to respond to return to the center, whether it portends ecstasy or agony. What makes a pilgrimage sacred is the longing behind the journey, reminiscent of the famous sixteenth-century woodcut of the Pilgrim Astronomer, who pikes his head through a slit in the dome of the sky so that he might gaze at the machinery behind the sun, stars and moon and so unveil the mysteries of creation.

(Extract from 'The Art of Pilgrimage')

By Phil Cousineau

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