

The Pilgrimage Dimension

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What is a pilgrimage? Usually it is thought of as a journey involving time and distance to a holy place or a place of some special significance.

Such a journey may require an effort that can be transformative, making the pilgrimage life-changing. This gives a pilgrimage a dimension that makes it more than simply a tourist excursion or a sightseeing trip.

Inherent in the idea of pilgrimage is the idea of the specialness of place, the idea that certain places hold distinct energies or qualities not found elsewhere. We don't think of going to the supermarket or the neighborhood bookstore as a pilgrimage in the way we might think of journeying to Mecca or to Lourdes.

But maybe we should. Without subtracting from the uniqueness and specialness of Mecca or Lourdes or any other holy or significant site, perhaps there are ways of thinking about place and journey that allow us to access a dimension of pilgrimage in the context of our everyday lives.

In the first place, is it fair to claim that one place is inherently more Sacred than another? Certainly places differ in the energy they contain either through their own history or through association. The place where a holy person lived and worked, for example, is likely to have a unique quality of spirit present that would not be found to that degree or in that way elsewhere. And in such a place, because of that energy, we might find it easier to access the Sacred than in our neighborhood grocery store. But a holy shrine is not innately more sacred than the grocery store. A junk pile and a hardware store both contain the same nuts and bolts I may need, but I will find them more easily in the latter due to its organization and arrangements than in the former; still, with sufficient attention and diligence, I can find what I need in the junk pile, too.



Likewise, when I set out to go to a place of pilgrimage, I have a certain mental, emotional, and spiritual attitude and expectation that probably aren't there when I head out for my favorite restaurant or walk from my living room into my bedroom. That attitude will orient me to my world in certain ways and attune me to certain kinds of experiences. I am immersing myself in a "pilgrimage dimension." But aside from the distances involved, does my body discriminate between walking to a shrine and walking to my bedroom? Do my muscles differ in their actions when I kneel before an altar or when I kneel to pick something up from under the bed?

Note that I am not saying these activities are all the same, that there is no qualitative difference between kneeling before an altar and kneeling to reach under the bed. I am saying that they possess characteristics in common. The muscles in my throat do not know the difference (or at least do not act differently) when I swallow the Host in a Communion service from when I swallow a piece of toast at breakfast. And in that commonality, there is a dimension that I can enter that can tap the blessings within the ordinary and everyday world as fully as a pilgrimage may let me tap the blessings within a holy place.

In exploring this, my intent is not to diminish the unique and special transformative quality of pilgrimage and render it ordinary; my intent is to discover the unique and special qualities of spirit around us that can fill the ordinary with the power of pilgrimage. In other words, can our everyday journeys and actions be portals for us into the dimension of pilgrimage?

The best way to explore this is to try it out. Pilgrimage, after all, is not a philosophical concept. It is an action. It is something we do which in turn allows us to experience something. So let's take a very simple action and see what we can discover. Let's consider walking from a living room into a bedroom. What "pilgrimage dimension" might we experience here? It's not going to be like going to Mecca or to Lourdes, so we shouldn't expect that. But it can be more than just going from one room to another in a mindless and automatic way. For one of the qualities of a pilgrimage is the quality of mindfulness we bring to the journey, the attention we pay to the process of going from here to there. Yet mindfulness and attentiveness are not in proportion to distance. I can be mindful and attentive in a single step. After all, pilgrimages could be seen as simply a chain of mindful and attentive single steps that blend into a wholeness of connection and attunement with the

environment in which one is and through which one passes.

So the steps I take into the bedroom from the living room can be mindful and attentive ones. They can be steps of spirit, steps of blessing. Why not? Shall I pass along a highway en route to a holy place and bless the landscapes through which I travel, the things I see, the people I encounter, and then ignore and not bless the familiar walls and floors and furniture and objects I pass moving from one part of my house to another? Why should my spirit be open to the one and not to the other? Familiarity is no excuse. The power of pilgrimage should not rest only in the experience of novelty.

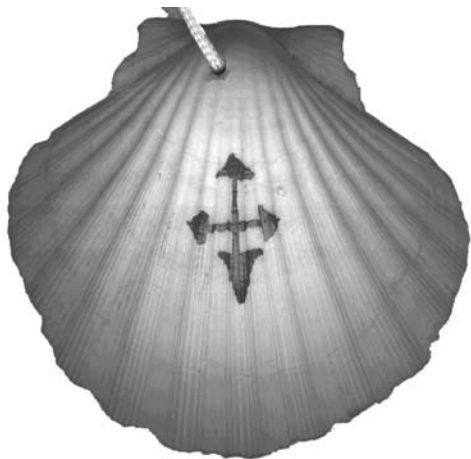
Let's consider a bedroom for a moment. What a magical place it can be. It is a place of rest and rejuvenation. It is a place of healing. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare wrote of the power of sleep to knit up "the ravell'd sleeve of care." The bedroom is where that knitting takes place. And when we sleep, many believe we leave our bodies and visit realms of spirit to receive guidance, insights, wisdom, and the blessings of non-physical allies. That makes a bedroom a potential (or actual) portal into the inner realms. And then there's sex. The bedroom is often the place where the wonders of polarity and intimacy are explored and creative energies invoked, opening pathways for spirit and matter to conjoin and new life to enter the physical realm. Surely this makes it a place of holy mystery.

So when we walk to our bedroom, we are traveling to a threshold place where spirit and matter meet in a variety of powerful ways that could easily be seen as sacred, or at least as significant to the process and mystery of our incarnation. If I could really see the forces of regeneration, healing, creativity, and journeying to other worlds invoked in this place, would I not fall on my knees and cry out in reverence and wonder?

Similar correspondences could be found throughout our homes where the various rooms house everyday activities of eating, cleansing, reading, recreation, socializing, connecting, and engaging that all embody elements of the mystery and spirit of incarnation. With the proper frame of mind, we can see that as we move throughout our day, we are indeed traveling from sacred space to sacred space.

This is not just a game of imagination. Very real energies are involved, and if we overlook them in our everyday settings because of their familiarity, this does not make them any less powerful or potentially transformative.

In our everyday world, we continually walk over a sea of frozen blessing which the heat of our attention and awareness can melt, plunging us through into ecstasy and presence. Pilgrimages can take us to places where the ice is thin or indeed melted away beneath the heat of a saint's life, but by going to such a place, the gift of pilgrimage is to enable us to return and melt the ice where we live. But even without this gift, if we can look with love upon the rooms of our homes or the familiar places we visit in the course of our day, we can find this melting already underway.



Again, none of this is to diminish in any way the power of that combination of intent, effort, reverence, and uniqueness of place that manifests as the power of a pilgrimage. But it is to invite us to consider that the art and mystery of being a Pilgrim, of engaging the sacred dimension of pilgrimage, may be more inclusive and immediate than we may expect. All places hold sacredness. It is often only the film of familiarity and inattentiveness that hides this from us.

In this regard, if a pilgrimage traditionally achieves some of its transformative power from the effort a person puts into it, consider the transformative effort involved in truly perceiving the passage from a living room to a bedroom as a mini-pilgrimage, an attunement to the sacredness within each space. To break through the familiarity of the ordinary to see the wonder and sacredness around us is no small achievement.

There is one other factor as well.

A pilgrimage is a gift. It is an opening and giving of ourselves to the world as we journey to a place that has opened and become a gift of the world to us. But all too often we see a pilgrimage as a transaction: if I put forth this effort, travel these miles, spend this money, journey to this place, then I will receive grace, healing, illumination, blessing, or something. We may not think

of going somewhere simply to give ourselves to that place with no expectation of gaining anything; we may not think of a pilgrimage simply as a gift.

Thus there is a way in which we already do think of holy sites as the spiritual equivalents of supermarkets or hardware stores, places to receive something from the Sacred or from whatever Source that place invokes for us. I think of Lourdes as a place to go for healing, not as a place where I can give healing. Or I think of that saint's shrine as a place to go for blessing, not to give blessing. And I pay for these things in the coinage of pilgrimage.

But there is a pilgrimage of the heart in which our love goes forth from us to enter the world, to engage the world, and to bless, without thinking of what we will receive in return. There is a pilgrimage of the heart in which we are a gift, giving ourselves from the inexhaustible richness of our Souls.

This dimension of pilgrimage sees each step we make into the world around us, each action we take, each word we speak, each thought we think, as an opportunity to give. What can I give to my living room, my bedroom, my hallway, my favorite restaurant, my grocery store, my office, my car? What can I give of my love that these places remember the Sacred within them and may delight in a holy moment?

That is a worthy and powerful dimension of pilgrimage indeed!

So often the places of our everyday lives veil their power from us because we ask what they will give us, and when they don't deliver the fullness of their sacredness in ways we recognize as such, we dismiss them in our hearts. The space becomes just a bedroom, just a restaurant, just a grocery store. No saints there. No holiness. Nothing to invite a pilgrimage.

We can change this when we remember that pilgrimage is an act of giving and an act of remembering. We do not journey as much as we inhabit. We could travel long distances to a place of holy repute and never really be there. Our hearts and minds may be locked in our needs, distant in our longings, lost in our memories. To inhabit a place is to give ourselves to it, freely, with love, with attention, with honor. And that we can do anywhere, anytime, anyplace. We can be pilgrims into the moment, pilgrims into blessing.

That is the pilgrimage dimension.

