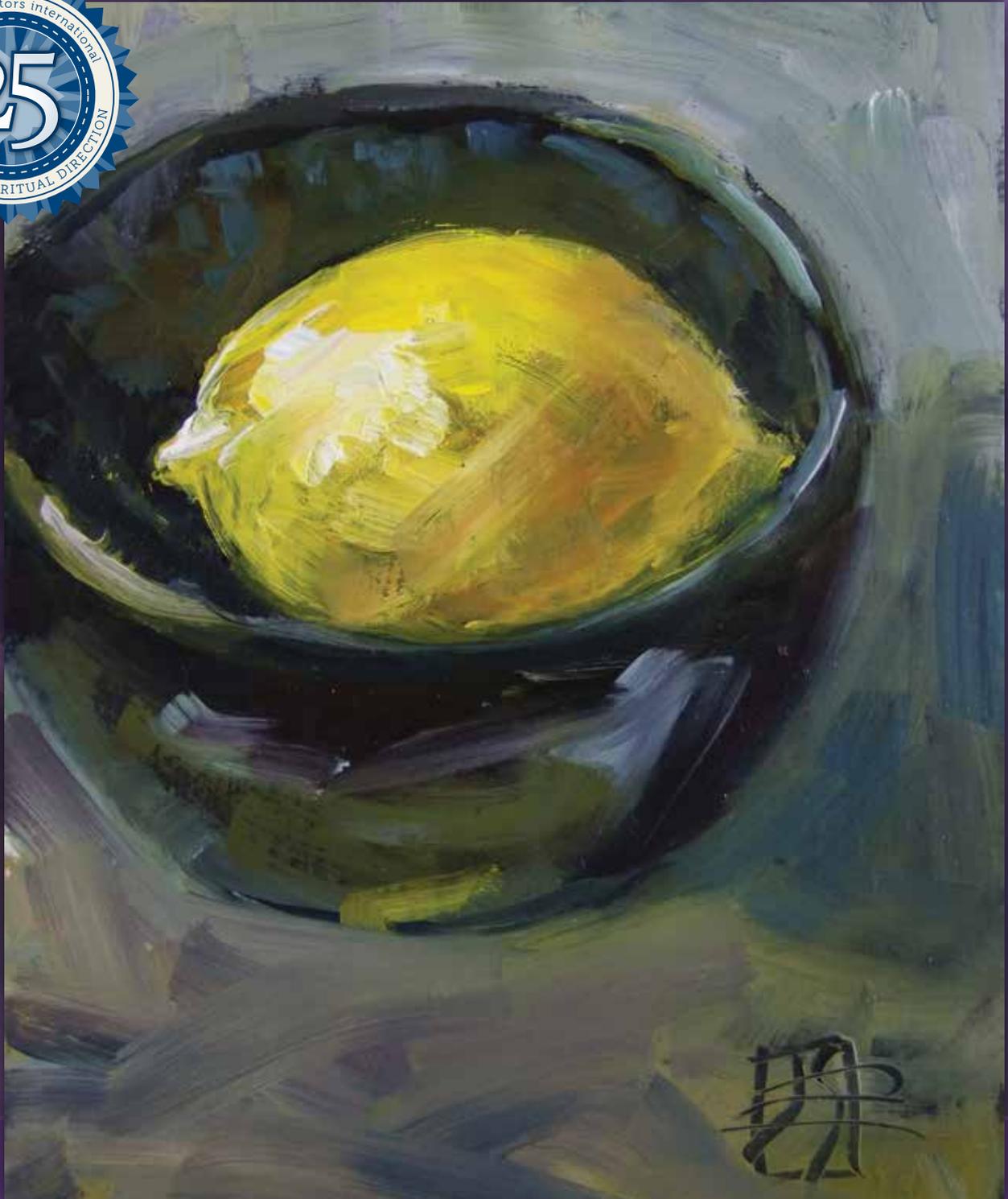


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# presence

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Contemplativeness and Spiritual Direction • Finding the Voice Within  
Embracing Wisdom: The Path of the Sage • Thomas Merton and Leonard Cohen

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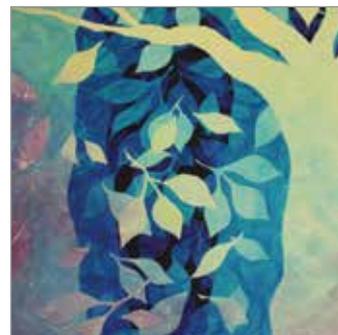
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## Pilgrim's Call: A Guide for Spiritual Directors

Valerie Brown

*Even before you sat down with them,  
broke bread and drank wine,  
wiped the wind-tears from your eyes:  
pilgrim they called you again. Pilgrim.*  
— David Whyte (Pilgrim, 11)

In this article, I will explore the sacred act of pilgrimage travel and especially how pilgrimage can support and enhance the work of spiritual direction. I will weave together the role of pilgrim and spiritual director, offering ways in which pilgrimage can support the path of faith. Through the cultivation of active listening practices, awareness, discernment, prayer and reflection, and heart-opening contemplative practices, pilgrimage can offer spiritual directors another way to grow their own faith. Spiritual directors from all religious traditions will discover the delights and the challenges of this type of travel and learn how pilgrimage journeys can open a lens to a deeper relationship to God in unexpected ways.

As a Quaker, when I refer to the word *God*, I am speaking of the Inner Light, a quality that is un-nameable and transcendent, an energy of God-consciousness. At first counterintuitive, through my own pilgrimage journeys over decades—the missed trains, the lost luggage, the crowded, sweaty long-distance cross-country bus trips—these moments of fear, vulnerability, and challenge strengthened an “inner spiritual muscle,” and informed how I encountered God along the way.

The article is structured to mirror the steps of a pilgrim's path:

- The Longing
- The Departure
- The Way
- The Arrival
- Returning Home

For each of the steps, I discuss elements, supportive practices, overcoming challenges, and end with queries. These Quaker-style queries—questions for inward discernment and outward action—are at the end of each

step along the pilgrim's path to invite deeper reflection on finding God in unexpected places and turbulent times, and to enhance the spiritual director's opening to God's affirming presence.

### Losing My Way; Finding My Soul

#### Pilgrimage Is My Passion

For me, pilgrimage is a way of putting my beliefs and my faith to the test, to seek meaning and purpose—being willing to change and putting aside lifestyles, comfort, likes, and dislikes. Growing in relationship with God can sometimes be painful and feel like hard work. Sometimes, my defenses are set at high alert against change that God invites into my life. Through the pilgrimage path, I learned to notice my own resistance, listen for clarity about my own experience, and discern with reflection a better path.

I was raised by people who traveled. My Cuban mother, Jamaican father, and Chinese Trinidadian relatives gave me an early appreciation of the world as a large and complex place. They were a liminal people, like many people who immigrated to the United States. They were caught in a sort of limbo. Having left their native Caribbean land, they no longer belonged to their homelands, and yet they were not fully comfortable in American culture. Like pilgrims, my parents' journey from their island countries to the United States was full of possibility. Their arduous journey, with little more than a suitcase, is not unlike the pilgrim's journey. My parents came to the United States bearing the collective consciousness of their parents and their parents' parents, again not unlike the pilgrim who travels with a sense of *communitas*, a quality of togetherness, a shared encounter.

Perhaps most of all, my parents came to the United States with hope. Hope propelled them to leave their island lands. Hope was by their side as they made plans. Hope inspired their vision and colored their motivation. However, the other side of hope is fear: the fear of an unknown land, of not knowing people, customs, language, and food. This could have kept them immobilized and small. The writer Margaret Wheatley says,

“Hope never enters the room without fear at its side.” But like a pilgrim, my parents endured the hardship, uncertainty, and insecurity. A pilgrim learns from doing, from experiencing, allowing the journey to be the goal. Fear and insecurity often provide energy and tools to figure things out along the way.

I discovered a pilgrim’s heart and mind when I left home at eighteen after my mother’s early and sudden death. Dazed and scared, I took very little with me—some clothes, a few dolls. I threw them in a sheet in the back of my boyfriend’s pick-up and hit the road. Overnight I left the safety and security of home and started my journey as a pilgrim to find the sacred center—a new home, my place in a complex world—without a guidebook, compass, or map.

I searched for a sense of home, a place of belonging in graduate school and law school, losing myself again and again in a well-ordered work life, on the straight and narrow path of an over-ambitious race to succeed in my career as an attorney. I rushed everywhere. I craved control and predictability, trying to think my way out of the box I had created. Terrified by childhood memories, which I left behind, I wanted to get going while the getting was good. I forgot, or perhaps never learned, how to *be* in the world, how to listen to myself and others, how to love, and feel fully alive. All the while, my sense of incompleteness persisted like a nagging cough.

Divorce years later forced me to look deeply at my ever-present incompleteness and unfulfilled longings. I studied meditation and yoga, enrolled in weekend courses on forgiveness, active listening, and authentic movement, returned to graduate school to study theology, found the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master, and became a Quaker. Slowly the fault line of fear and doubt that held me tight began to crack open, and I sensed a new possibility.

I would learn that leaving home was the formative ground for my interest in pilgrimage. Leaving home was many things: a painful break with security, a time of self-discovery, an act of rebellion, a joyous adventure, a deep mystery, and a moment of wide-open risk. Starting out on this journey, I was filled with hesitation and dark clouds of doubt, and yet I knew I was being called down an uncertain road. Leaving home transported me out of the comfortable and familiar and into a wild card of fear,

awe, terror, and wonder. I learned the language of vulnerability, taking a leap of faith in some instances, testing my courage in others, and sinking into uncertainty and doubt.

Interestingly, dark places and dark paths on my journey helped me reclaim my authentic voice. Revelation came in gulps or sometimes with painfully slow insight. Step by step, I gained little glimpses into what I did not know or did not see was there all along. I was in a dynamic, living relationship with change and uncertainty on the footpath to transformation.

Initially, my interest in traveling to faraway places was like many tourists: to pack it all in. I wanted to “see the sights,” to be entertained, to get away from it all. I traveled from one must-see sight to another—the Taj Mahal, the Great Pyramids, Machu Picchu. Journeying from sub-Saharan Africa to Wales to Cuba became a search for entertainment, penny-pinching every step of the way. Each sacred shrine and each place of devotion was just another curiosity stop. My passive metropolitan body sought a momentary recovery in these power places where I could get back to nature.

After a much-anticipated tour, arriving by bus and train at Cardiff Castle, in the Welsh capital, my schedule was so tight I barely had time enough to take in this ancient place. After all the planning, waiting, and traveling, I saw very little and felt even less. The truth of the place was lost in the blur of hurry and left me feeling like a run-down toy. In that moment I knew it was time to change.

My urge to take pilgrimages was fueled too with the need for rest, for more than a vacation, for real healing. I wanted to travel without a destination or agenda, to allow the luxury of time to unfold, to be lost in the small, ordinary moments and know that this is enough. I wanted to walk the pilgrim’s path, to allow the uncertainty of the road—the bad weather, the getting lost—to strip me of the illusion of control and shatter my small self.

Gradually, traveling as a pilgrim challenged me to look deeply at myself, at my gritty individuality, my practiced cynicism, at the status and resources I worked hard to acquire. Each pilgrimage journey broadened my horizons of faith, helping me to understand my own spiritual journey, growing gradually in awareness. Slowly,



I looked beyond where to go or how to go to the deeper question of why to go. Pilgrimage allowed me to see beyond the cultural barriers (race, language, and custom) that divide me from others to look at the universal truth of all people, not only with a backpacker's spirit-ness, but also with a wise heart.

### **Pilgrimage as Spiritual Direction for the Soul**

Pilgrimage is a universal, ancient practice, and is a central feature of most world religions. Pilgrimage is an outward demonstration of an inward calling. Pilgrimage is travel with a spiritual, holy purpose, and is a kind of prayer. It is travel as an expression of the Holy to a sacred place with a sacred purpose. It is an inward and outward journey of spiritual significance and with devotion toward the Holy. Often, pilgrimage destinations are places of spiritual significance: places made holy by saints, the natural and elemental quality of the landscape itself, or places of shrines, temples, burial grounds, or meaningful contemporary events. For the pilgrim, the journey is engaged with a sacred purpose. Pilgrimage carries with it physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and geographical characteristics. The pilgrim engages liminal space: leaving, journeying, arriving, departing, and returning.

### **Pilgrimage as Prayer: An Embodied Experience**

*The heart carries the feet.*

—Hebrew proverb

Pilgrimage expresses a yearning of the heart to be in God's presence, the presence of the Holy, which is continually self-revealing. It is the physical embodiment of inclining the heart toward God. For spiritual directors, pilgrimage invites us into this Presence and into a form of prayer: prayer with our feet.

I have long believed that nearly everything we do can be a form of prayer: drinking a cup of tea, having a conversation, baking bread. Prayer is dynamic, responsive, inclusive, and portable. It is the gateway to the interior life. While there are many modes of pilgrimage travel—on foot, on a bicycle, and on horseback—one of my favorites is walking. Walking as a form of embodied prayer engages us on every level if we are attentive. In

our crazy busy lifestyle, the immediacy of life is often lost to us. While walking we begin to slow down, allowing our heart and head to catch up to our feet, experiencing the world at three miles an hour. Pilgrimage can be a form of Ignatian prayer, using the landscape as the object of our meditation to hear, see, smell, taste, and feel every aspect of this moment. Passing through landscapes—rough paths, cliff tops, meadows, valleys, city streets—we begin to realize that our lives, too, take on many varied terrains.

I love the simple intimacy of walking: planting feet on the ground, feeling the solid ground beneath, moving at a human pace. Intimacy is at the core of our prayerful attention as spiritual directors. We awaken to the closeness of the others, to ourselves.

The spiritual director helps us to notice God's presence, which is often subtle, sometimes "hidden in plain sight" of ordinary events and interactions. Pilgrimage offers the spiritual director the unique opportunity to practice seeing God's grace in the landscape, in the act of walking the pilgrimage road. Since pilgrimage is largely about dynamics of the heart, these journeys enhance the spiritual director's awareness of how God speaks to us.

Before seeking to change powerful emotions like fear or anger, I want to get really intimate with them, to look at them carefully, to listen, to understand. In welcoming, listening, and understanding my own fear, I regain a sense of wholeness and appreciation for life's fullness and messiness. The spiritual director's capacity for listening deeply is enhanced on the pilgrim path. The landscape becomes a tool of awareness, a *terra divina*, a way of praying with the land as one might engage in *lectio divina*. From ancient times, poets, mystics, saints and ordinary folk have used the natural world, wild terrain, the desert, the oceans, nightfall, and daybreak as metaphor for the interior life. The pilgrimage is an opportunity to stop, to feel, to listen, to reflect, to sense a place. Too often because of the intensity and complexity of daily life, we are unaware of our deepest longing, unresolved issues, questions of passion and purpose. We have little time to listen deeply. The heightened spiritual experience of pilgrimage offers spiritual directors the opportunity to listen deeply to one's still small voice, and then help others articulate thoughts, feelings,

questions, and experiences in relation to God.

### Spiritual Director, Pilgrim, Navigating the Interior Life

There are many reasons to take a pilgrimage: to mark a life transition, fulfill a promise, accumulate merit, make a sacrifice, or to experience spiritual penitence. Others undertake a pilgrimage for the sake of adventure and curiosity or to escape routines of daily life. Still others embark on a pilgrimage as a means of self-purification. For the spiritual director, a pilgrimage is a way of understanding the soul's journey and helping guide others on their journey to unite the soul to God. The obstacles along the pilgrim path—lost luggage, missed planes, bruised feet—are not unlike the obstacles of a spiritual life. The spiritual director helps spiritual directees on the faith journey to interpret significant markers on the road, to encourage us, especially in difficult transitions and valleys of our pilgrimage. As spiritual directors, we are human. We screw up at times. Our spiritual maturation is strengthened as we come to accept this and not give up on ourselves and those we guide. As a journey of the heart, pilgrimage invites the spiritual director to remember that we are instruments of peace. We listen prayerfully to the prompting of God's presence, and we strive to listen to and understand the spiritual directee. As the pilgrim path challenges us, we may challenge spiritual directees out of love to be open, honest, and accountable in their commitments and faithfulness to what God is asking of them.

#### Queries for Reflection

- How might pilgrimage enhance your ministry of spiritual direction?
- How might the physical landscape of pilgrimage enhance your capacity for prayerful listening?

Take a few moments to journal or jot a note about insights, surprises, observations, learnings, or challenges.

Let's turn to the steps or stages along the pilgrim's path:

- The Longing
- The Departure
- The Way
- The Arrival
- Returning Home

Although each of these stages are listed in sequential order and appear to be discrete, the process is not linear or sequential. We may experience the call to pilgrimage before there is a longing, or we may be on the way even before we have fully discerned the longing.

### Step One: The Longing

*What in your life is calling you?  
When all the meetings are adjourned  
And the lists laid aside  
And the wild iris blooms  
By itself  
In the dark forest,  
What still pulls at your soul?  
— Tewa Collective<sup>1</sup>*

As spiritual directors, we respond to God's call to live in faithfulness, to abide in movement toward our true self. This movement is similar to the first step on the pilgrim's path: the Longing. The essence of the Longing is a quality of tension: a moving toward and a moving away. This is a moment of risk, uncertainty, and doubt. We question: "Should I engage this longing or not?" During this stage, you can talk yourself out of your pilgrimage plans by minimizing or discounting your own true voice. At times, the Longing—our deepest motivations for participating in a pilgrimage, is unknowable or unnameable to us. It resides as an impulse, a voice that feels truthful deep down in our bones, or perhaps a sense of the sacred unfinished. The Longing is a gestational period sometimes marked by hesitation and procrastination, and may feel not only unsettling but internally destabilizing. Rather than moving away from these feelings, which at first may appear to be a sensible strategy, the pilgrim is called to engage these feelings. This kind of engagement mirrors spiritual companioning. Some spiritual directees enter spiritual direction never knowing a relationship in which they felt comfortable talking about God. They confront a moment of trust. Perhaps they were raised in

<sup>1</sup> The Tewa are a group of Native Americans living in rural northern New Mexico (USA) pueblo villages. They transmit traditional teaching orally along maternal lines. The name Tewa comes from the words "wi don gi mu," which translates to "we are one."



“Heart of Oscar Romero” — by Shirley Cunningham

a family where talk about God was private, distant, or taboo. They confront a moment of risk. Perhaps the spiritual director's family or environment was largely rigid, with forced values or unconscious and unquestioning beliefs. They confront a moment of doubt. As spiritual directors in these challenging relationships, we are invited toward the journey of trust, freedom, and authenticity, exploring God in our lives and our own long-held beliefs. The spiritual direction relationship explores these questions and many others: Who is God for us? What is our

awareness of God's presence in our daily life? How do I respond to God's presence? Through pilgrimage and passage through the Longing, the spiritual director enters this critical stage of spiritual discernment. We come face to face with our own growing edge. The growing edge in the Longing stage involves feeling fear, doubt, and hesitation, and allowing this to be while holding the tension creatively and generatively. Doubt is a core element of faith and is the fruit of tenderly and vulnerably holding tension.

I longed to travel to the sacred island of Iona in the Hebrides islands of Scotland. At the time, my heart was knotted around a string of failed romantic relationships that cut into me like a river chisels out a path through a mountainside. In taking a pilgrimage to Iona, I responded not only to an adventurous soul, but also with a seeker's heart and a desire that is hard to articulate. The sacredness of the yearning distinguishes the pilgrim from the mere tourist. The Longing is like a knock on the door. It is the voice of the pilgrim's soul. As spiritual directors, we are called over and over to listen to the deepest longing in others and in ourselves.

Accepting the call to take a pilgrimage is an act of faith and courage. There is a thirst and willingness to take risk that sometimes feels like a knock at the door of your heart. In listening and acting on the Longing, we commit time and resources and ignite imagination, vision, and clarity.

Honoring the Longing and acting upon it, the pilgrim begins the work of preparation for departure on the journey: reading, writing, exploring food, culture, customs, and language.

### Queries for Reflection

- Recall a time in your life when you were invited to creatively and vulnerably hold tension.
- What happened and what did you learn about yourself from this experience?
- Reflect on the poem from the Tewa Collective.
- Underscore or circle a word or phrase that seems meaningful to you.
- Journal or jot a note about your observations, insights, and surprises.

### Step Two: The Departure

*"Thresholds"*

*We are forever*

*Standing on*

*Some threshold,*

*Looking out.*

— *Judy Brown (41)*

When you depart on a pilgrimage, you may confront resistance and fear of the unknown. This is a time to

clarify intention and purpose of the pilgrimage. We put our affairs in order and may engage in rituals around leaving. This is a time to connect with family and friends. We are entering *kairos* time, a flow state, a feeling of time standing still. We may ready ourselves with purification rituals; fasting, praying, and even packing our luggage as a spiritual practice. The common wisdom on the pilgrim's path is that what goes into the bag goes into your heart, so pack wisely.

Many pilgrimage writers describe departure as crossing a threshold from the inside to the outside, from the known to the unknown, from the past to the future. The essence of the Departure is standing on a threshold, poised to cross a boundary from this to that. Crossing a threshold has several components that invite reflection:

- A reading of one's inner landscape: What emotions and feelings are present?
- A reading of the outer landscape: What do you see?
- A pause before crossing the threshold: How do you bless the journey?

Imagine yourself preparing to depart on a pilgrimage. What would you take and what would you leave behind? In the Departure stage, a time of planning and organizing, we ready ourselves and ask big questions:

- Why go?
- Where and when to go?
- Why now?
- What do I hope to learn from the pilgrimage?
- How might this pilgrimage support my ministry and service as a spiritual director?

As spiritual directors, you know this moment of risk and resistance. You could be challenging a long-held assumption, leaving work that no longer aligns with your deeply held beliefs, or befriending unknown and discarded parts of yourself.

In the Departure stage, we ready ourselves for the journey into the unknown and may continue to feel the vulnerability of being a stranger in a strange land. The invitation is to make peace by acknowledging it. One way that I make peace with fear is finding creative way to make strangers into friends during the pilgrimage. I



prepare by bringing photos of family and friends that I can share. It has been a great way for me to make an instant connection. In offering myself to others in this small way, I am never a stranger. Our gift as spiritual directors is to offer spiritual hospitality to others: listening attentively for God's presence.

### Queries for Reflection

- How might the Departure stage be a preparation time to offer spiritual hospitality to another?
- Reflect on Judy Brown's poem.
- Underscore or circle a word or phrase that seems meaningful to you.
- Journal or jot a note about your observations, insights, and surprises.

### Step Three: The Way

*Every day is a journey,  
and the journey itself is  
home.*

— Matsuo Bashō (ix)

Being on the Way is a rebirth and rediscovery. We have the chance to experience life with a new way of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and being. On the Way, we temporarily leave behind our old identification to take on a new identification as a pilgrim. I am reminded of two meaningful moments of rebirth on a pilgrimage to Bali in Indonesia and to Spain's El Camino. On a pilgrimage to Bali, I discovered the spirit of creativity within me. In Bali, there is no word for artist. Instead, everyone is considered artistic. Everyone expresses creativity in some way: music, dance, painting, gardening. When I returned home, I rediscovered a new sense of color, which was expressed in planting an herb and flower garden.

From my book *The Road That Teaches: Lessons in Transformation through Travel*, I share this recollection from my pilgrimage of El Camino. In this moment of the pilgrimage I was invited into a rebirthing, a new way of thinking and being.

The air was sharp, clear, and full of wetness as we rounded the deep bend in the road just outside of Estella, Spain, but I didn't notice. It was the third day of our pilgrim-

age journey along the thousand-year-old El Camino de Compostela, the Way of Saint James, along Spain's northern coast. I walked until the weight of my backpack began to rest heavy on my shoulders. I walked with three other women, all of Cuban descent, all new friends, sharing a common bond of ancestry, culture, music, language, and land. My attention was brought back momentarily to the road when I felt the heaviness in the air on my face. I stooped down on the side of the dirt road to unload my backpack from my shoulders and to search for my rain jacket buried at the bottom of the pack under a wedge of hard Spanish cheese and a large Snickers bar. Before I could get it out, the rain began—not a polite misting, but a torrential downpour, lashing my legs, arms, and face. Water quickly soaked the cracks in my boots and droplets plopped off the tip of my nose and dreadlocks into puddles around me. I cursed the sky and the plans I made and carefully calculated. I blamed my walking mates: the downpour was Nature's revenge for not keeping up a steady pace. I chided myself for the decision to keep walking despite the weather forecast. Inwardly, I resented my inattention to the road. I made up stories in my head about sleeping in wet clothes, coming down with pneumonia, and returning home, defeated. There was no shelter to run to, no farmhouse or farmer in sight—just us and the road and the rain. And in that moment I became clear: My tendency when faced with hardship of the road or in life is to solve or fix the person or the problem quickly to avoid feeling the tension of not knowing what to do, what to say, or what to be, and to avoid feeling fearful and inadequate. "The mess" provides an opportunity to learn about myself: my values, my fear, my habit of going on autopilot. By extension I learn about who I am, what I stand for, and why I'm here. (18)

Many religious traditions hold that spiritual growth, spiritual direction, and discernment often arise out of these moments of challenge, tension, and fear. Beneath the tension is an impulse that can lean into something deeper. Allowing one's self to feel the tension and the uncertainty produces a kind of "inner ferment," where one feels raw, exposed, tender, and vulnerable. In these moments, something new is born.

Paradoxically, the downpour was a call to a kind of rebirthing, to a rediscovery within me, an opportunity

to change. I could continue my fixing habit, or I could discover a new way of being, to give birth to a new type of listening within me. On returning home, I began the practice of active listening, listening with all my senses. For spiritual directors, listening is a critical competency. Deep listening is not a magical formula. It is a hopeful effort. It is prayer.

### Queries for Reflection

- Reflect on the Matsuo Bashō's poem.
- Underscore or circle a word or phrase that seems meaningful to you.
- Journal or jot a note about your observations, insights, and surprises.

### Step Four: The Arrival

*You are not leaving ...  
you are arriving.*

—David Whyte (*The House of Belonging*, 37)

After all the planning, you arrive at the sacred center—a tension-filled, profound, and sometimes strangely overlooked moment of Arrival. In the moment of Arrival, you may have a fantasy about escaping life's messiness: pilgrimage is effortless; you never get lost; the weather is always perfect. Instead, you come face to face with the facts on the ground, which may or may not meet your expectations. On a solo trip to north India, my missionary zeal to see the Taj Mahal was tempered by hordes of people with the same idea.

In arriving, the pilgrim's spiritual practice is to be fully present to the best of your ability, to use all your senses, and to notice the impulse to want things to be different. Being present in this way is similar to attentive listening in spiritual direction. The attentive ear and heart open an inner door for the both the spiritual director and spiritual directee, allowing both to take their words and their listening more seriously, deeper. For some, the Arrival is anticlimactic. The key is to approach the sacred center with humility and awareness. Rituals of arriving at the sacred destination—prayer, washing, fasting, making an offering—create a tone of spiritual awareness of the sacredness of the moment.

Take in the presence of the place. Allow your senses to

take in the land, sky, and sea. Allow for awe and wonder of the moment. Place your awareness on people and the landscape—what do you notice? According to poet Mary Oliver, “attention is the beginning of empathy” (Tippet). Without empathy, attention is merely reporting. Notice, with a quality of empathy, the elemental qualities of the surroundings. What qualities do you sense about the place and within you?

### Queries for Reflection

- Repeat the lines from David Whyte's poem several times silently to yourself.
- Pause and notice emotions and thoughts, bodily sensations.
- Journal or jot a note about your observations, insights, and surprises.

### Step Five: Returning Home

Returning Home from a pilgrimage to Japan's 88 Temples of Shikoku, I felt lighter, cleansed. It was not just the pure and beautifully prepared vegetarian temple cuisine. I felt emotionally unburdened. I had embarked on the journey wanting to explore Buddhism, having practiced with a Buddhist sangha for many years, following the teachings of Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. I wanted to see the world through Buddhist eyes.

Temple after temple, I chanted the *Heart Sutra*, one of the most sacred Buddhist texts. The custom is to chant the *sutra* in Japanese upon entering a temple. Initially, I felt odd, out of place, and insecure. I wrestled with old fears of being unwanted. Yet as moments gave way to hours and then to days, I learned a lot about faith and hope. My struggle to be accepted and to understand Japanese culture and custom yielded to a connection to people and to Spirit, to harmony and beauty within myself. The feeling took me by surprise. There was no figuring things out, no trying to be “good enough.” I allowed myself to accept it all: the frustrations, the losses, the unsettled business back home. A door opened inside me, and I walked through.

I learned an important life lesson that is central to our work as spiritual directors: Feeling “at home” is not a destination. It depends on our state of mind. As spiritual directors, we are called again and again to “return home,” to be present to ourselves, to deepen our connection to



our work in the world by coming home to what really matters.

Returning Home is the final aspect of the pilgrimage. At this stage, resist the temptation to show what you know, and recall the words of poet and novelist Vita Sackville-West: “There is no greater bore than the travel bore.” Prepare yourself for reentry and take time for reflection. Vow to continue the spiritual practices you committed to on the pilgrimage journey of prayer, fasting, keeping a journal, and deep listening. You’ve come full circle. Find ways to remember this special time. Paradoxically, we don’t know a place until we leave it. The meaning and fullness of your pilgrimage may not be available while you travel and not even available immediately upon your return home. Instead, you may only begin to sense the profound depth of the journey with time and reflection. Share your spiritual experiences in appropriate ways with your spiritual director.

### **Blessing for the Armchair Pilgrim**

Know too that even if you do not walk a single mile or take a pilgrimage to a distant land, that the blessing and beauty of pilgrimage is available to you as an armchair pilgrim. We can bring the pilgrimage spirit and practices of active reflection, deep listening, and prayerful attention into our daily lives. Pilgrimage is a not so much about a journey of miles as it is a journey of the heart and soul, which largely depends on how we show up to life, to the sacred that surrounds us. A sacred journey is very close, as close as our own backyard, our own home. There we can find the sacred in pausing to notice the sky, to see a tiny weed pushing through the cracks in a cement sidewalk, to hear the wind through the pines, to taste fresh, cold water, to listen for the sacred.

### **Queries for Reflection**

As you return home to daily life, consider these queries:

- Where did you find God in your journeys today?
- How does your deepest longing inform your action today?
- How has facing a deep-seated fear yielded to fresh understanding?

### **Closing: Pilgrimage Home**

To take a pilgrimage is to risk, to face obstacles, to sur-

render control, to test our gentleness and kindness, and to face fear. It is a liminal experience where you leave the familiar in search of the sacred. For spiritual directors, there is one central question: “Where is God?” Spiritual guidance is everywhere, beginning with your own life and values. Can you find God in the faces of strangers? Is God present in the cancelled flights and rude cab drivers? How do you meet God in the street vendors and ticket takers?

Pilgrimage is a search for meaning. It is the path of action and presence, offering spiritual directors and spiritual directees the opportunity to learn yet again the path of letting go, showing up, trusting, slowing down, listening, facing fears, and learning the pleasure of play. Pilgrimage is the art of attention and intention. Spiritual directors and pilgrims share a common path: we are called to be present to the here and the now. This is a call to an inward journey even while engaging in outward activity. The Holy is calling us here and now, in this moment, in this path. ■

### **Note**

This article is related to an SDI webinar on pilgrimage presented in January 2015 and available online at [www.sdiworld.org](http://www.sdiworld.org).

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