

Pilgrimage
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix
Sunday, July 1, 2018, 2018
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Opening Words

I can't remember how I first learned about the Camino de Santiago, or "the Way of St. James"...one of the three major pilgrimages of Christendom in the middle ages, after Jerusalem and Rome. In the 9th century, Santiago de Compostela in what is now the NW corner of Spain, became a center for pilgrimage after the discovery of the relics of the apostle Saint James the Great. Multiple caminos (or pilgrimage routes) sprung up in the Iberian Peninsula and even from Europe. You sense the thousands of pilgrims from all over the world and all walks of life who have trod this same path over the past 1200 years. There is a rhythm that takes over, this action of moving one's body in both a mindful and sometimes mindless fashion, that helps integrate what is going on in one's heart, head, psyche, soul—whatever you call that deep place for you.

But if the truth be told, my deep place at times was pretty shallow. My feet hurt and my backpack never seemed to get much lighter.

And BTW, though I'm going to be using abled body language, I met folks in wheel chairs, and who were visually or hearing impaired, who were my fellow travelers, feeling the pulse of the earth, the pulse of our ancestors, just as I was.

There are lots of pilgrimage places in the world—so identified by their religious or spiritual significance, the natural quality of the landscape itself, or perhaps a meaningful contemporary event. But you don't have to journey thousands of miles for your pilgrimage, although that's an amazing experience. Where I'd really like to journey with you today, is that place where you as the pilgrim engages in "liminal space." "Liminal" comes from the Latin word "limen," which means threshold. Says Richard Rohr, the very ecumenical Franciscan priest and educator, liminal space is an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where we can begin to think and act in genuinely new ways. It is when we are betwixt and between, when we are not certain or in control; it can be both unsettling and renewing. Liminal spaces are transitional or transformative spaces. They are the waiting areas between one point in time and space and the next. It is a space for journeying, for allowing ourselves to be open, for something genuinely new to happen.

So let's go on this pilgrimage together.

Reading

"Song of the Open Road" (adapted) – Walt Whitman

Afoot and light-hearted,
I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me.

Henceforth I ask not good fortune—
I myself am good-fortune;
Strong and content, I travel the open road.

I inhale great draughts of space;
The east and the west are mine,
And the north and the south are mine.

All seems beautiful to me;
I can repeat over to men and women,
You have done such good to me,
I would do the same to you.

Whoever you are, come travel with me
However sweet these laid-up stores—
However convenient this dwelling, we cannot remain here;
However sheltered this port,
And however calm these waters, we must not anchor here...

Onward! To that which is endless,
As it was beginningless,
....To see nothing anywhere but what you may reach it and pass it.
To look up or down no road but it stretches and waits for you—

To know the universe itself as a road—
As many roads—
As roads for traveling souls.

Sermon: *Pilgrimage*

It is said that the only thing that we pilgrims of the Camino de Santiago have in common is that we're not quite sure why we're there. It is an intimate question to ask another - why are you doing this journey? I felt it was a question I could ask only after we had shared quite a bit of ourselves. And indeed, one ran the risk of being asked the same in return. Probably the real reason for asking the question was to help me better understand my own reasons.

When you reach Santiago and go into the Pilgrim Office for your last stamp and your compostela or certificate, you are asked to declare whether your intention was religious, spiritual, or touristic/sportif. For those of us who walked the entire 800k route starting in France, or the 600k route starting in Lisbon, the response became more complex. Which box would we choose? Could we encapsulate pilgrimage in a box?

It seemed that many folks were in transition in their lives; not so much looking for answers, as just taking the time to BE in the transition, seeking inspiration, clarity, healing, direction, renewal. There were lots of folks who were in between jobs, either intentionally or unintentionally, and were contemplating what next in their careers. A young Israeli woman had promised herself that when she finished her mandatory military service, she would come walk the Camino, as a fresh start, the beginning of a new chapter. An Australian couple had embarked on the journey after the death of their son. There was a large contingent of Koreans, who noted they were there to enhance their resumes, that in a competitive work environment, it really made them look like they had resilience, stamina, leadership, a step ahead of other applicants. For others, it was just a great celebration, a travel adventure. For me, I just knew I had to do it at some point, probably initially as a personal and physical challenge, but as it evolved in my thinking, more of as an expression of gratitude. Gratitude for my family, friends, career, health, being a UU; a need to leave "the convenience of my dwelling," as Walt Whitman says, and embark on a physical way to give thanks, with perhaps some discomfort to remind me of my blessings.

I asked my friends on the Camino, what does pilgrimage mean? Do you have to have a destination? Can you do it at home, in your head, after a busy day, after the kids are in bed?

"Well, that's a pretty good question," said my friend Anne from France. She said she would think about it and get back to me by email after she got home. For her, Anne said, this

pilgrimage of the Camino “represents a way of expressing out loud the emotions we have deep inside. A way to confirm the emotions that need to be confirmed, and find the ones that are hidden. It is definitely a beautiful way to access our own spirituality, to test our convictions and overcome our limits. It’s an accomplishment of an objective we had planted. It’s a new step, a step to a new, fresh energy. It’s a peaceful break if we are tired, and at the same time, a strong jump ahead if we are paralyzed. It is really both at the same time. As we keep walking, it’s a way to remember to always keep a foot in front, and remember to take a moment thinking before talking or acting. It’s an amazing way to reconnect to the reality we sometimes forget to look at...because of stress, pollution of many negative emotions, work, etc. In this bubble, cut from our regular life, but reconnected to new faces, different souls, different landscapes, and most of all reconnected to nature, we can reach ourselves...test our resistance, learn our limits, and push them most of the time, to find the right direction...”

Wow, I thought, this can be my whole sermon! There’s something for everyone here! Then I looked at my own notes from my pilgrimages, looking for something equally profound that I could share with you. On a couple of occasions, I had written: “This pretty much sucks.” And when my mom asked me, a couple of hundred miles into my journey last year, “Do you think you’ve changed?” I thought about it and said, “I think I’m just becoming more like myself.”

So I’d like to share a few reflections; maybe your journeys and mine with intersect.

So where does your head go, when you make your head be by itself?

This year, as I walked out of Lisbon, I had less of a clear response to people asking me why I was doing this again. I said, “Well, it’s not ‘again’...it’s a different place, a different journey.” I craved the rhythm of it, the freedom of making up my day from scratch every day, of just journeying to the next place, of filling in that space. I didn’t know that I would have THAT much space. I saw no one for the first 5 days, and then only a scattering of other pilgrims for the first 250 miles. I asked myself if I was lonely, and just decided not to be. It was a delicate, peaceful, comforting, yet slightly unsettling state—this state between loneliness and aloneness - a liminal place.

I realized that being literally alone on the trail, I had to be more present than I usually am. Some of you are very good at meditating; I am not. But here, my mind did not wander. I focused on the undulations of the earth I walked on, trying not to step in occasional puddles up to my ankles, feeling developing blisters and throbbing feet from the miles and miles of cobblestones and ancient Roman tracks, feeling connected to a millennium of Camino ancestors. I passed some graffiti: “Everything will be OK in the end; if it’s NOT OK, it’s not the end!” I was conscious of breaking cobwebs in the morning, the first person on that path, on that day, forever. Rather than breaking the tape at the end of a race, I was thanking Spider Woman for reminding me of the start of an amazing new day. **GRATITUDE.**

I learned to stop and look backwards, marveling at my accomplishment; or, sighing at the vistas and opportunities I had missed. I talked out loud, feeling a little self-conscious at first, but I began to like the honesty of it, of not hiding from my thoughts by not giving them an actual (out loud) voice. It was hard to get away from myself, so I decided to enjoy my company.

One day, despite my most dedicated efforts to stay present, I missed a sign (the yellow arrows and scallop shells). I walked several miles out of the way before I figured out my dilemma. I was really tired. My norm would have been to swear, or maybe even shed a few frustrated tears, but there was no one to swear or cry TO or WITH. And thus, no satisfaction in the effort. There was no use wasting the energy. I kept thinking of the liminal zone, the place betwixt and between. I’d screwed up, but it felt really calm - and I remember giving myself a literal pat on the back for at least now knowing where I was. I moved on to my destination -

some 24 miles that day. What I remember most about that day was the kindness of the owner of the hostel where I stayed that night. He rattled away at me in Portuguese, and some part of me understood every word he said; he took my backpack off my back, insisted I sit down and have a beer before we did any transaction, gave me a hug, and later brought me a glass of wine in my room.

Occasionally, I noticed a familiar tension down my neck and back, a reminder that I was somewhere in the boonies of Portugal, a woman alone. I subconsciously kept looking over my shoulders. I had a firm grip on my hiking poles and was ready for...whatever. NOTHING. There was nothing to be fearful of; indeed, as I told my mother, I was far safer in Portugal than in Phoenix. But I am an American Woman, and carry the neurotransmitters of unease, of self-protective flight or fight vigilance, of a highly weaponized and short-fused society; I could not escape it. My European women friends did not understand this tickle down the spine and tension in the shoulders; they do not carry the same subconscious fears of violence to our bodies - of being alone on a forest track, a quiet early morning tunnel under the road - at least not in the same way of the American Woman. I thought about what this culturally-derived fear does to our American Woman bodies...to other bodies, how it might impede or temper our journeys - unless we could figure out a way to be mindful of it without it coming to possess us.

I met Larry, an American fellow, who had completed several caminos. His wife had died of cancer 4 years before, a woman he had profoundly loved. He had walked his first camino out of grief. He had walked his second camino for his body. And now he was walking for love. He said that he was finally able to survive his grief by turning it into profound gratitude; thanking his wife for having provided him and his children such a wonderful life. Indeed, he said he did not think he could ever be hurt again, as he was able to convert seemingly hurtful experiences into compassion and gratitude...compassion for another person's pain or fear or ignorance, gratitude for lessons learned, for being able to feel alive with emotion, gratitude for the day, as it might be his last. I thought, how wonderful it would be to be able to do that. I wonder if I could maybe make that choice the next time I felt some hurt or sadness.

Then he asked me what my life purpose was. I had the same momentary panic as when someone asks me to explain Unitarian Universalism. I thought maybe I should say something profound, channeling my inner Susan Goldsmith or Ellie Anderla. I said, "I don't know...maybe for me it's to live authentically, be happy, feel love and gratitude; to somehow leave the world a better place." I really appreciated Susan's sermon last week, when she spoke about our purpose being to add to the sum total of blessings in the world. And I thought, wow, I have THIS community (UUCP) to come to, as part of my weekly journey. We can talk about this stuff without self-consciousness, and get insights on how to live our lives. Because sometimes it's just hard to know, and you might need a little help in overcoming inertia on your pilgrimage. It's nice to do pilgrimage in community.

From Santarém I took a side-trip to Fátima, the world-famous Catholic shrine, which came about, supposedly, when The Blessed Virgin Mary appeared 6 times to 3 shepherd children between May 13 and October 13, 1917. She came to the little village of Fátima which had remained faithful to the Catholic Church during the recent persecutions by the government. I saw many people on their life pilgrimage to Fátima, far more popular than the Camino, some crawling the last part on their knees. The Message of Our Lady was one of concern for the world, a practical plan for world peace, a promise of Heaven, an intervention to save the world from persecution, martyrdom, war, enslavement, or annihilation. I must admit that I didn't really grasp that message. Perhaps it was my mood after having been by my secular humanist self for so many days, but I viewed the shrine somewhat cynically, as a commercial spectacle, a money making venture....probably 3 kids who were goofing off one day, made up a story, and the story took off. A couple of days later I met Marie from Holland, a self-described atheist. She had also been to Fátima, and I asked her how she viewed it. She thought it was spectacular, wonderful, very moving. But how could this be? Did she really believe in the

miracle? She said that wasn't the point; she was moved by how other people were moved. She saw the depths of their beliefs - in what can only be good - peace, the light of love. I realized I had really missed the point, missed a profound learning experience, missed the blessing that was being extended. I thanked her.

And I had a similar lesson some 200 miles later. I had a day where I just had this overwhelming urge to cry, even sob. I still don't have a clear idea why, though the next day felt rejuvenated. Perhaps it was just my body regrouping, in a way that my conscious brain could not fathom, from walking the balance of the liminal zone. A woman at my hostel was so kind to me, and urged me to go to the Pilgrim Mass that evening. I had enjoyed the pilgrim masses I had been to in Spain the year before, observing that no matter what the language, any Catholic knew what to do, knew what to say and when to say it, knew not to clap after the music, and when to kneel or stand up, even without asterisks in the program. I thought - how cool is this - how comforting to have this global connection, this web of community, this shared spirit and tradition. For Brother Josi, it didn't matter that I was the only one there, wasn't Catholic or even Christian. He was so genuinely joyful that I had come. So of course, I started to cry again. I told him I'd been doing that all day, and wasn't sure why. I had now walked 272 miles to my 400 mile destination, had made some good friends, and my blisters were mostly calloused over. I chalked it up to "just being the Camino." Brother Josi didn't try to contradict me, but he offered gently that perhaps it was Jesu Cristo, Jesus's love watching over me, protecting me, caring for me, loving me. It made all the sense to him; he had no doubts.

And you know, that was OK with me. Seeing the many pilgrims to Fátima, their profound tears of joy, the message of peace, of receiving the light which is God. Hearing Brother Josi's joy at sharing the love of Jesus. It was all translatable to my UU sensitivities, to my humanism. The exact language used seemed much less important than what was in their hearts and deeds. And I reflected on our UUCP vision, of being a spiritual community for our time: theologically diverse and radically inclusive. I wondered if I had truly grasped what that means in practice. I thought of the times some of our members bristle when words like God and Amen and Blessing (as Susan Goldsmith said last week) and (name your term) emanate from the pulpit, while the same words resonate lovingly and deeply in other members who define themselves as being Christian or Christian UU's. Both Marie and Brother Josi reminded me, without knowing it, of how much of this shared journey of love and compassion and oneness I would have lost if I had not opened up to others' ways of describing their journeys. I thought about if we are to be **radically inclusive**, we might need to **radically LISTEN**, and think I am going to challenge myself to do that better.

It was not infrequent to see folks walking the Camino alone, though for the majority who went with others, it was a curiosity. The question would arise, "Are you married?" because it was hard to imagine anyone traveling alone if they were partnered in life. Yes, I would say, with always that little ping of trepidation...will they ask the next question? And will they ask it in the correct way? "So what does your husband think about your doing the Camino alone?", or "Did your husband not want to come?" There was that moment when I would think, do I just fib a little bit, or do I just try to speak in genderless language - my spouse, or mi pareja? Will there be an uncomfortable silence if I gently speak about my spouse being a "she;" will we walk a bit farther until there is an easier way for one of us to say "Buen Camino." have a good journey, and peel off in discomfort? This happened a couple of times; I had spent a lovely day with a Mexican couple and was making good headway in my Spanish. We were laughing a lot, and had already passed the point of sharing phone numbers and email addresses. Then the spousal question came up. The conversation pretty much stopped, and I realized it was time to move on. I texted them a couple of times, but never heard back. And there is that liminal zone again - that threshold between hurt and sadness, and compassion and gratitude. Which way do I choose? I had had a great day with them before the chill set in. Yes, it was a great day and a great time. I was grateful to them.

These are just a few mental meanderings I had on my pilgrimage. I wish I had time to tell you my reflections after hearing an American Pilgrim say: “I love Trump and I love Jesus.” Or how a group of us from about 5 countries, over several bottles of wine, were remarking about words that were just perfect and untranslatable in each others’ languages, and the “sounds” of our languages, and how grateful we all were that we didn’t have to say “I love you” – Te quiero – Ti amo – Je t’aime – in German: ICH LIEBE DICH!

So what about YOU, my fellow pilgrims? Will it be necessary FOR YOU to travel a long distance for your pilgrimage? Will you even need to travel physically at all? Will you have a physical or mental destination, or goal, or will the value lay in the journey itself? What will pilgrimage mean for YOU?

I return to my friend Anne from France. She suggested that your camino, your journey, your pilgrimage, is really all about TAKING THE TIME...TO TAKE TIME. No matter what you are doing, and how long it might be. TAKING THE TIME...TO TAKE TIME.

It might be, to take the time for NOTHING. For clearing the brain. For just sitting on your threshold, just BEING in that place. Your thoughts might be messy ...humbling... upliftingchallenging... elucidating... weird...unsettling. Try saying them out loud. This is your very own “pilgrimage-in-place,” your spiritual journey in-situ.

So let me leave you at the threshold of your pilgrimage, with these words from Elle Bieling, the author of “The Pilgrimage Traveler” website and blog. Just a heads up, here -- she uses the word “God” here...that will be meaningful to some folks here; others may want to translate that as “spiritual journey” or something else.

“I am beginning to love this concept of pilgrimage-in-place,” she says. “I feel it deep in my bones. **I even allow it.** I can imagine a traveling pilgrimage, in my mind's eye, even without traveling anywhere. Instead, ***it is discovering a new frontier within myself.*** This is comforting for me. It is about Love. It is about resting in the love and warmth of the unknowing of what is attempting to be born. It is resting in the nature of God and the spiritual journey itself. It is all there for me in the spiritual journey, if I can recognize it and accept it.”

Blessings on your pilgrimage. May it be so.

Closing Words

Blessings on Your Journey adapted from “Behold Your Life: a Pilgrimage Through Your Memories” by Macrina Wiederkehr

As you begin this pilgrim journey
May your heart be open to surprise.
With reverence, gratitude, and acceptance
May you behold your life each day.
On every step along the way
May hidden goodness come to meet you.
In meditating on your memories
May courage be your companion.
As your life-stories rise up to greet you
May you welcome them home with love.
On every step of your pilgrimage
May you find new grace for living.
From unexpected places in your life
May blessings rise up to anoint you.
As you walk the memory road
May it become a path of transformation.
Blessings on your journey!