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*We Pilgrims Through the Ages*

READING "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

*We Pilgrims Through the Ages*

Apart from this being a poem I like by the wonderful Mary Oliver, it starts with pilgrimage images without having to say what they are – we know the resonance. One of the things I want to say about pilgrimages is how central and important they are in our mental furniture, all over the world.

So we all have an idea of the word “pilgrimage”, and the usual definition would be “a journey, often a long one, made to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion.” If I ask you to give examples, you might well cite the Caminos in Spain to Santiago de Compostela in the Christian world, the Hindu pilgrimages to the river Ganges, or to Ayodeya, the great pilgrim journeys of Tibet or the Muslim Hajj. We are familiar with the concept.

In fact, if you look around the world, even today, there are major pilgrimages which have survived into modern times relatively unchanged. The Santiago pilgrimage, spectacularly revived since the 1980's, still exists in a largely secularized Europe with only a tiny fraction of the population in most countries attending church, and it still has many devout Christians making it for the same reasons they would have had a thousand years ago.

I'd like to give examples of how pervasive and important the idea and practice of pilgrimage has been throughout human history, talk a little about its golden age in Europe in the Middle Ages, then show how it has constantly been a very powerful metaphor for life itself, and how people have always undertaken these journeys with many different motives.

Let me begin with two true stories – both of very famous people making pilgrimages on their knees or prostrate in attitudes of great humility and prayer. (Remember how natural it was for Mary Oliver to summon up that image.) They are contemporary with each other, at the very end of the Middle Ages if one takes that flexible period as roughly 500-1500 in the Common Era, when most of Europe was what we – and they - called Catholic, the word meaning universal – everyone was Catholic, the only exception being the countries on the Eastern fringes, which had split away in the 11<sup>th</sup>. Century. The first is a young monk making a pilgrimage to Rome, who ascended the Scala Sancta, the Sacred Staircase, climbed by Christ and brought to the Vatican from Jerusalem as a holy pilgrimage site of its own, The second is a youngish man, one of the most powerful in all Europe, making a two-mile journey – on his knees, remember, with his devout wife of many years to visit a sacred well to pray for a son. The young monk was Martin Luther, the other man King Henry VIII of England, and by the ends of their lives they were certainly Catholic no more.

We've established one important fact about pilgrimages from these stories – they do not have to be those long treks in most people's minds. The majority of them undertaken, especially in the Middle Ages, would have been less than fifty miles, and the famous London to Canterbury pilgrimage described by Chaucer was only about sixty. In those days it was a big deal for most people to leave home for more than a day. The most common short pilgrimage would have been the 14 stations of the Cross at Easter – I've walked some outdoors that are quite steep mountain ascents, but they were often all inside the church, and could be walked or even just looked at by turning in your pew.

So what about the long ones ? From all over Europe they walked, rode if they were privileged, and sometimes took ship to Rome, Jerusalem when that was possible and Santiago de Compostela in remote Galicia. These were major life experiences, even for habitual travelers – any long journey entailed risk and a lot of time. Not everyone was going to get to their destination, and fewer made it home. At the peak, there were many thousands on the move, and in places where paths converged such as some of the river bridges in Spain, millions of feet polished the cobbles. Outside Conques in Southern France as you leave that magical small town largely unchanged since the 1300's, you climb up to a little chapel in the woods on the steep hill opposite as you head west for the Pyrenees, and on that rough, rocky narrow trail there are the indentations of feet worn into the stone a thousand thousand times – usually exactly where you would put your own feet. And, by the way, the average shoe size seems to have been about 8 or 9.

So why ? There were many motives, some easy for us to identify with, others more difficult.

Many pilgrims, being people like us, would of course have had a mixture of them. The sacred places themselves were sometimes ancient sites even in the Middle Ages – wells, groves, mountain caves of hermits. The church appropriated these “pagan” sites and

Christianized them, even inventing fictitious saints to sanctify some of them. Many lesser sites of pilgrimage were associated with or were the burial places of saints, often martyrs, some from the early days of Christianity, some much more recent, such as the Shrine of the murdered Thomas a Becket. The greatest destinations were the Holy Land, directly associated with the life of Jesus on Earth, and the main known or believed burial places of his disciples, Peter in Rome and James the Major in Santiago. I'll speak of the motives pilgrims had for visiting these places now, rather than all the detail of Catholic belief, especially about the Saints as intercessors and exemplars in Heaven.

People went to sacred sites to be healed by “miracles” - of conditions not susceptible to the medicine of the time, including witchcraft and black arts. They went to pray in holy places to implore the assistance of the saints in having their sins forgiven, especially if they were coming to the end of their lives – often sent by their priests as a penance. These actions in all their fervor often speak of a profound and truly agonizing belief in the torments of hell awaiting the unabsolved sinner - difficult for the modern mind to credit. Another aspect of this is the enormous importance placed on holy relics – the physical remains, and often partial remains, of this holy elite, down to hair and fingernails. To pray before them, and in some cases to touch them, were highly significant actions. And, especially in the case of Jerusalem and the other places where Christ lived and walked, the holiness of the place itself could also be overwhelming.

The powerful motives of healing, expiation of sin and ultimate salvation are at the top of the Catholic Christian list of motives. Many felt the onset of old age and death and that this was the last chance to end among the elect. The church established many hospitals/hospices/hostels/hotels – all these words have the same origin – run by all the main religious orders along the pilgrim routes, and in Spain there are “Doors of Pardon” in a few churches in towns and cities such as Leon and Villafranca, to which the pilgrim who couldn't make it all the way to distant Santiago over the last mountain range into Galicia could receive plenary indulgence and absolution of sins as a final act of God's mercy through the Church. Those who went on those last gruelling miles arrived at an extraordinary place, where one enters one of the greatest Romanesque cathedrals of Europe through the doors of Paradise, the masterwork of Matteo, who in my view thoroughly deserves to be up there with Michelangelo and Leonardo, whose sculptures are smiling, full of character and the opposite of the solemn icons of most of Medieval art and architecture. That is another subject, but I like to put in a plug for the great artists of the twelfth century, many of whose names we do not know.

I have to pause here to ask you to consider one extraordinary case that demonstrates the power of these prime motives and their occasional spurring on of human beings to almost superhuman feats. There was a German knight called Gunther who had done terrible things in his life, even by the standards of his age, and he went to his priest to make a full confession. As his penance he was told to walk to Jerusalem in chains, with two servants with him to make sure he didn't cheat. Stop there – if he walked the whole way it was roughly two thousand miles, and even if he took ship we have to allow a thousand. The priest probably didn't imagine that he would see this troublesome member of his flock again, but one day a year or two later Gunther arrived home. The chains were still on, and the priest must have been impressed, but not as much as perhaps you or I would have been. There was of course no press to meet him and ask stupid questions,

although not surprisingly his story was remembered. The priest took Gunther back into the confessional, and told him to do it again, and he did. That's four or five or six ATs in chains. If you want to see a version of this, watch the great film *The Mission*, where a similar thing happens on a slightly less epic scale.

I'll have to be brief with the rest of my list of motives. Pilgrimages offered many opportunities, only a few of which were by our standards religious. Some are obvious, others a little hard to get our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds around.

Let's first think about walking itself. By the way I don't think that we know whether any of the pilgrims ran instead of walked. The 8-foot staff with the water gourd attached facilitated a swinging gait which does help one go at a good pace. And we bipeds, unless we are in a running culture, walked as our prime method of moving around until the twentieth century.

We live at a time when the ultra-marathoners have reopened our western eyes to human abilities as to what we can achieve. Recent feats have been astonishing, but I still regard the record of Alexander the Great's crack troops as the unsurpassed record – several thousand men marching across the desert one hundred and eighty miles in three days and fighting a battle on arrival at Multan, their packs maybe forty pounds, and many of them soldiers from Alexander's father Philip's army, fifty or sixty years old.

Well, they certainly weren't pilgrims. But they had a mental technique to keep them in the zone – walking meditation. Now we enter the pilgrim sphere – a pilgrimage could be regarded as a long meditation, which fed the walking which in its turn fed the meditation. The religious would be the most likely to fall into this mode of prayer, but it would have been open to all.

Others would have been spurred on by what we now call the Guru complex – if our Guru is up a mountain or a very long way away, we might believe in him or her more than in a local guru from the village next door, and make a more sustained effort to reach our goal.

Others – although always I think a minority, might be following the lines of telluric force, or ley lines – not the lines of the Earth's magnetic field, although some have identified them as such. Modern science is largely silent on these patterns of energy, which are like the dragon lines of Chinese medicine. If you are a modern skeptic, I can tell you that we have had very skeptical scientists hold dowsing rods in their hands and have seen the rods twist and turn as they approach neolithic standing stones in Avebury, England. I really don't believe that these people were subconsciously willing the rods to move – in fact they wanted to prove it was all mumbo jumbo.

I suspect that many of the millions had far more mundane motives – adventure, curiosity about the wider world, to take up commercial – and sometimes criminal – opportunities, to look for a social mobility denied them in their narrow, circumscribed lives, more basic escape from overpowering debt or the law, or perhaps what we'd think of as the bucket list vacation of a lifetime. New ideas also spread along the pilgrim routes, even new heresies hostile to the teachings of the Church. That's another big subject. There is also the deceptively simple opportunity of joining a new social group, of forming attachments with a different group from

the usual range of possibilities, so limited for most people.

I've saved till last another very powerful motive, summed up in the Latin phrase "Ambulare pro Deo." (Repeat.) You don't need much Latin to translate this to "Walking for God." But, like many of those nuggety Latin phrases, the ideas within are much more complex than they appear. A better translation would be "Walking on God's Behalf", walking as God might – or has and will forever – through His creation. (I'll say His here because it's a medieval idea.) What does that mean – isn't God immanent, always? Why should we think of God walking the Earth? I might compare it with a lesser, much more modestly human experience of my own.

At night in the quiet hours sometimes I take mental hikes in Europe, usually ones I have done many times – if you are a guide you are careful to remember sequence and detail. With no group puffing behind me, I can actually enjoy them more this way! Sometimes this experience is intense, and full of wonder – then perhaps I am walking PRO Deo – the force of the phrase is in that little word "Pro". It is indeed a powerful feeling. It would be a very Medieval thought to say that God rejoices in my little hikes. Jacapone, my favorite poet of those Christian centuries, would embrace that thought.

I hope that I've given you enough evidence to see why the analogy of the pilgrimage became such a ubiquitous image for life itself. I'll close with three quotations from different centuries: First, Sir Walter Raleigh, writing in the early seventeenth century on the eve of his execution in the Tower of London:

GIVE me my scallop-shell of quiet,  
 My staff of faith to walk upon,  
 My scrip of joy, immortal diet,  
 My bottle of salvation,  
 My gown of glory, hope's true gage;  
 And thus I'll take my pilgrimage.

Second, Henry David Thoreau, writing in the nineteenth century about a "Walk" - but we know what he means:

"If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again – if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and sealed all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk."

Last, Geoffrey Chaucer, another underestimated Medieval figure, one of the greatest English writers, who lived through the event nearest to a nuclear holocaust in European History, the Black Death, and survived it with a deeply wise and humorous view of the world:

This world nis but a thoroughfare of woe  
 And we ben pilgrims passing to and fro.

His listeners would know the comfort and the depth and the bite of these words.