

The Art of Pilgrimage  
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My whole life, I've been mystified by movement. Travel. Seeing new places, experiencing new things. Whether it was the great American family Pop-up camper expedition to Mount Rushmore, or simply a hike through the woods to go and sit in a bog; for me, there has always been a spiritual element to the great, intentional journey.

When I was young, I was taught how to sit in a field by a man named Mark Ulfers. It is not as simple as it sounds. Mark would take us, a pack of 8 year old boys, hike us into the woods of Wisconsin, and somehow get us to sit still and quiet for an hour at a time, always with the hope of discovering a glimpse of the natural world. I can still remember the thrill of seeing a bald eagle swoop into a giant red pine tree, not 30 feet above our heads.

From an early age I was taught to walk with my eyes open, with my senses outstretched, in hopes that God would somehow grant me a brief glimpse of grace. And I have rarely been disappointed.

There are so many elements to the spiritual life, with so much advice and so many suggestions, that sometimes it can be easy to be overcome by the sheer volume of disguised possibility. But I want to suggest to you today that you don't need specifics to be receptive to pilgrimage. A spiritual journey can be as simple as an evening walk with the dog. All that matters, what makes pilgrimage an 'art' is simply allowing ourselves to

be open to and receptive of God's power and grace in our midst. Because sometimes the destination or the desire that we set out for is not the desired destination we come to.

Take, for example, one of the most famous stories in the gospel narrative.

Here is Mark's account of the story. To put it in context, Jesus is just revving up his ministry. He has completed a successful preaching tour of Galilee, and in the process has called a few disciples along the way. After they have been with him, he sends them out to try a little preaching on their own. It's a relatively successful mission for most, and when they return to him, he says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." You can just imagine seeing the relief ripple through the disciples. Finally—a break.

So Jesus piles them into boats, and they went away to a deserted place, and again, the gospel reiterates, 'by themselves.' You can probably imagine what happens next. Mark's gospel continues, "Now, many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them." Just when you think you're getting a break, along comes one more thing to take care of. Jesus, never being one to shy away from a crowd, begins to preach and teach the gathered pilgrims.

"When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'this is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages to buy something for themselves to eat. Jesus responds, 'you give them something to eat.' But they had almost nothing to give. Five measly loaves of bread, and two fish. And I believe you know what happens next.

From my reading of this story, it appears that Jesus and the disciples had no idea that 5000 people would show up at their rest stop. But that doesn't stop Jesus from seizing the opportunity to preach and teach to the hungry masses about the Kingdom of God. Not only that, they were obviously unprepared for these unexpected visitors. Five loaves and two fish are barely enough to feed Jesus and the disciples. But what happens next, the unintended consequence of these unexpected visitors is one of the most famous miracle stories ever circulated about Jesus. The miracle of the loaves and fish.

With a little investigation, I was surprised to discover that some of the best-known accounts of the miracles of Jesus happen as a direct result of an interruption, or an unintended consequence of something completely different from what was initially expected.

Sometimes it is something as extreme as four friends, who believe so strongly in the healing power of Jesus, that they tear a hole in a roof of a home that Jesus was teaching in, and they lower their friend in to Jesus, so that he may be healed. I would imagine that if Jesus knew the passion that these friends had for their fellow man, he'd have been kind enough to walk out of the house to meet them half way, rather than destroy a good persons roof.

Another time, in one of the most beautiful stories in the gospel narratives, Jesus comes in to shore by boat, and begins teaching. A man, Jairus, a leader from the synagogue forces his way through the crowd and begs Jesus to come heal his daughter, whom he fears is near death. Jesus is persuaded; but while they are making way to Jairus house, a woman, a woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years, reaches out and grabs his robe. She is

immediately healed. Jesus stops, to see who it was. He's surprised, because this woman was healed, and he didn't even know who she was. That had never happened before, and I think it shocked Jesus more than it shocked her. But while he was talking with the woman, word comes to them that Jairus daughter has in fact, died. But Jesus, with a new perspective on healing power, reassures Jairus that his daughter is in fact, only sleeping. They go, and Jesus performs what is again, one of the most famous miracles accredited to him. He brings the girl back to life.

In both of these healing stories, we the reader, and Jesus are not expecting the events that occur. They come as a shock- and I love that. Because it reminds me that some of the greatest blessings in this life come when we least expect them.

The power of God, and the mystery of life should never be taken for granted. But the surprise of life, the chaos that almost always forces it's way to the stage at some point in the production, should not be a total surprise, either. I have found that the many of the greatest disappointments in my life have often come as a result of my preconceived expectations placed unrealistically high, only to be detoured by an unfortunately timed event or action that causes an entire plan to self destruct. I believe that there is a gentle balance that needs to be maintained, like getting in or out of a canoe, so that either the joy or the sorrow of events that transpire don't cause us to slip in the drink.

I think a perfect indicator that illustrates these potentially chaotic events is travel. I would imagine that we could entertain each other for hours if we were to begin a discussion with ‘what went wrong on our trip to...’ you fill in the rest. Like Clark W. Griswold in the movie ‘Vacation’ sometimes the quest to praise the proverbial Marty Moose in our lives turns us into victims of a harsh reality that bears the brunt of whatever deep seeded issues we thought we could keep hidden in the luggage rack under a plastic tarp.

When Tracy and I were younger, we backpacked through Europe. And, after spending three days and three times as much money as we intended to in Rome, we had had enough. So we bought our train tickets, and got to the station early in the morning, for our afternoon train. We spent the last of our Italian currency on useless trinkets and postcards and waited, patiently for our train to be called. It never happened. We waited and waited, and when I finally asked a conductor which track we were supposed to go to, he pointed out that we were in the wrong train station. We ran, took the subway, and ran again; but we missed the train. That bottle of chianti we were saving for a special occasion didn’t make it through the night. But the next morning, we left town on the right train.

In a similar vein, a pilgrimage, when undertaken, also requires us to find balance to be receptive to the presence of the holy. Because a pilgrimage, like any well intentioned trip we may take, guarantees that there will be major challenges and obstacles that will need some time and will need to be addressed before they can be overcome. Those of us who have ever participated in the 40 day pilgrimage of Lent can most certainly testify to initial promises that somehow go dastardly wrong. I can’t even keep track of my plastic purple bracelet this year, and my quest to read a book of the Bible a week has given me two and

a half weeks to try to cram in four books. I haven't given up yet; but I have to admit I doubt I'll achieve my goal.

And that's a funny thing about pilgrimage. That it's ok if we don't go 40 days without eating chocolate, or if we never make it to the shrine of the famous saint. What's important is that we try; and we keep our hearts and minds open for the true grace and blessing that may occur. Sometimes the goals that we set out to achieve are not the ones that God has in mind for us.

Part of the blessing of the interrupted pilgrimage are these moments of realization, temporary times of clarity when the presence of the holy is tangible.

But to every measure of grace, there is an equal measure of challenge.

While Jairus might have convinced Jesus to come heal his daughter, he also had to bear the terrible news that she had died, when he was not by her side. But Jairus' mourning is short lived. We, and many people we know, are not as fortunate.

A pilgrimage is not only blessings and joy. Sometimes a pilgrimage brings us through the valley of the shadow of death, of disappointment, of despair. And we have to be prepared for that unintended consequence as well.

While in our Lenten journeys, it is unlikely our lives will require us to feed 5000 people—but already today we've asked if you could make a pot of chili to feed the hungry. I don't foresee any of us having to tear off a roof to heal a friend, but chances are

good that each of us had a friend in need, who could use a word of support, or encouragement, or your healing presence.

You never know when a deed or an action you've done will release someone from a heavy burden, and who knows? Maybe YOU are the grace that interrupts someone's life, and brings in an unexpected blessing.

Let us pray.

Oh God,

You are a mystery to me.

In the busyness of this wild world, when I am afraid that you are far from me, I see that it is I who am far from you.

Your presence is all around us, God.

Your presence is within us.

And I feel it; sometimes I feel it like a warm embrace, releasing my soul from the confines of this body, and floating through the love that exists in this world.

And sometimes I feel your presence like a cool breath of comfort, soothing my soul and easing my worries for a while.

I sing your glory, God, and praise your name. You great Creator; you mysterious, unknowable one. Thanks be to you for the blessings of your creation.

Thanks be to you for the men and the women who have come into our lives, shaped our understanding and given us great blessing and grace, at times when we may not have even known we needed it. Thanks be to you, oh God, who leads us on like a gentle shepherd, guides us forward like the North Star, encourages us on like a faithful companion, and provides support and strength, like an oaken staff. As we continue on our Lenten pilgrimage to that beautiful day of rebirth, we humbly give thanks to you.