

ON PILGRIMAGE

The Path is the Purpose

James Aitchison

Emmanuel College – April 2021

Thesis Supervisor: Tom Reynolds

Second Reader: Johanna Selles

INTRODUCTION

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. – Thomas Merton¹

Pilgrimage is difficult to pin down. Full of twists and turns, it evades final definition. Fairly straightforward on the surface – a journey in search of meaning – it is the depths of pilgrimage that inspire so many to engage it. A profound part of most faiths around the world, pilgrimage runs much deeper than religion. Its significance is rooted not only in sacred sites or notable figures who made influential spiritual journeys, but also in contemporary journeys of personal and communal meaning, pilgrims coming to better understand themselves and their place in life. Working with a broad sense of pilgrimage, I will show that *presence* – as a way of being – is the deepest urge of any journey, including even our lives. More fundamental than the intellectual dimension of our lives, *presence* is the experience of the sacredness of this moment – the ground of being – a site of deep connective relation with oneself and all creation. Whether we know it or not, *presence* is our orientation – a place of profound rest, where all seeking subsides. Exploring this notion of *path as purpose*, I will investigate the relationship between *stillness and movement*, underlining the contrast and correlation of their apparent polarities and the wisdom one can derive from experiencing their variation. Alongside *stillness and movement*, I will examine thematic parallels between *inner and outer* and *particular and universal*, showing

¹ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958), 79.

notable overlaps and intersections. Drawing on illustrations from the lives of a few prominent examples as well as my own journey, I will reveal these tensions to be agents of transformation.

Though I will not examine many common forms or sites of religious pilgrimage – Jerusalem, Rome, Mecca, Bodh Gaya, the Ganges, Compostela, or others – I will observe both the pilgrim spirit and experience. In *The Art of Pilgrimage*, Phil Cousineau asserts that “pilgrimage is a spiritual exercise, an act of devotion to find a source of healing, or even to perform a penance. Always it is a journey of risk and renewal. For a journey without challenge has no meaning; one without purpose has no soul.”² Brett Webb-Mitchell, an experienced Christian pilgrim and pastor, says that “pilgrimage is monastic life on the road.”³ Cultural anthropologist and adventurer Wade Davis believes that “the whole idea of travel is that it’s a pilgrimage where the goal isn’t a destination but a state of mind.”⁴ However pilgrimage may animate us, people have forever been searching the world, finding wisdom and other rewards within themselves: “scholars who focus on pilgrimage and pilgrims have long understood that there is a connection between an outward bodily or physical experience of pilgrimage, and an internal, inner, or mystical experience of pilgrimage.”⁵ Along with Webb-Mitchell and Cousineau, I will incorporate a variety of voices, charting their experience and understanding of pilgrimage. Among these many perspectives, I will consider clinical views alongside theology, autobiographies, and novels, shedding light and offering insight into pilgrimage. Contemplating the value of contrast and reflection – whether experiencing polarities or generally stepping

² Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2012), xxv.

³ Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Practicing Pilgrimage: On Being and Becoming God's Pilgrim People* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 51.

⁴ Emily Donaldson, “For authors Wade Davis and Bruce Kirkby, travel is a state of mind,” *Globe & Mail*, Dec. 5, 2020

⁵ Webb-Mitchell, 68.

outside of one's 'normal' experience – I will illustrate how a path of *presence* can emerge, opening into understanding and transformation.

This paper is comprised of three main sections. In the first, I will highlight examples from select writings of Augustine, Thomas Merton, Parker Palmer and Mary Catherine Bateson, showing how pilgrimage is multidimensional, and can be a form of creative expression in navigating life. Noting common elements between these authors, I will delve especially into an examination of the duality of *inner and outer* – exploring the often-paradoxical relationship between humanity and God, and/or our deepest sense of 'true self.' A second section will deepen this conversation by exploring aspects of my own experience of pilgrimage. Primarily through narrative, I will note turning points, spiritual landmarks, and the role of God's guiding light, again with an eye for *presence* through the lens of *stillness and movement*. The final section will offer a reflective response, drawing out principles from the various journeys and perspectives explored, connecting key polarities and themes. As vehicles to reflect theologically on the material, I will engage authors Margaret Kornfeld, Sallie McFague, Letty Russell, Pamela McCarroll, Kenneth Pargament, and theorists Robert Kegan, Jack Mezirow and Carl Rogers. It is my belief that through pilgrimage, *presence* resolves apparent poles of paradox, revealing complementarity rather than incongruity. Further still, I believe that moments of focused *presence* reveal the common source of all dualities and all creation – the very ground of being. It is my hope that through this somewhat abstract exploration one may find realistic applications for their own pilgrim journey of life.

PART ONE

*[God,] You are the deep innerness of all things,
the last word that can never be spoken.*

*To each of us you reveal yourself differently:
to the ship as coastline, to the shore as a ship.*

– Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Book of Pilgrimage*⁶

Almost any life can be seen through the lens of pilgrimage. Though it has most often carried religious overtones, pilgrimage is by no means the domain of religion, even as it implies some degree of reverence. Surveying various facets of pilgrimage through four different voices, this section will explore how presence emerges as a guiding principle in one's life, through polarities, with or without a spiritual perspective. Moving sequentially by birth order – touching on one contributor at a time – I will move from youngest to oldest, exploring some of the ways each author speaks into pilgrimage, emphasizing how the dualities of inner and outer and stillness and movement both arise from and inform a pilgrim journey. Beginning with Mary Catherine Bateson, I will draw on insights from her multifaceted book, *Composing a Life* – stories of women 'improvising' unique and meaningful lives. Next, I will invite Parker Palmer into the conversation, reflecting upon wisdom from his contemplative book, *Let Your Life Speak*. After that I will focus on the pilgrim journey of Thomas Merton, examining his powerful autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Finally, I will consider the intense faith journey of Augustine's *Confessions*, exploring the paradox of relating with God. Unable to investigate each author in great depth, I will touch on each briefly, highlighting some of the ways pilgrimage emerges in their work and their lives, drawing out connections to presence.

⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* tr. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 177.

BATESON

Written in the late 1980s, Mary Catherine Bateson's *Composing a Life* examines the lives of five women, all leaders in their chosen fields, each navigating successful careers in a world built for men. Envisioning life as the ultimate creative act, Bateson considers each of these women artists, and the insights she weaves from their perspectives shed valuable light on pilgrimage (among other areas). Introducing these women as 'composers' of distinctive lives – Joan Erikson (an author, educator, dancer and craftsperson), Ellen Bassuk (a physician and psychiatrist), Alice d'Entremont (an electrical engineer and researcher), Johnetta Cole (an educator and school administrator), as well as herself (an anthropologist and author) – Bateson declares that "each of us has worked by improvisation, discovering the shape of our creation along the way, rather than pursuing a vision already defined."⁷ Even as many pilgrims move ritually toward a clear destination, Bateson's method remains true to the spirit of pilgrimage – which calls increasingly for openness and attentiveness to the movement of the moment rather than a fixed gaze on a set outcome. Bateson writes, "the knight errant, who finds his challenges along the way, may be a better model for our times than the knight who is questing for the Grail."⁸ According to Bateson, women's lives have seldom been central, often orbiting around husbands, families or communities, and their lives are more representative of a patchwork, offering unique insight into 'composing life' amidst multiplicity and ambiguity. Bateson proposes that this is a strength, which helps one develop the capacity to adapt (also crucial in pilgrimage). Further, she suggests that western culture has overemphasized the value of single-pointed focus: "our aesthetic sense, whether in works of art or in lives, has overfocused on the stubborn struggle toward a single goal rather than on the fluid, the protean, the improvisatory.

⁷ Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 1.

⁸ Bateson, 10.

We see achievement as purposeful and monolithic...rather than something crafted from odds and ends.”⁹ Affirming the virtues of improvisation – suggesting it is something one can practice – Bateson raises jazz as an example, cultivating presence, alertness and connection. She notes, “jazz exemplifies artistic activity that is at once individual and communal, performance that is both repetitive and innovative, each participant sometimes providing background support and sometimes flying free.”¹⁰ Emerging from this framework of improvisation, the relationship between continuity and discontinuity becomes a key theme in her book. Many women’s lives provide a great study in discontinuity and fluidity, the needs of homemaking and childcare demanding they “put together a mosaic of activities and resolve conflicting demands on their time and attention.”¹¹ In this way, with the external elements of life in constant flux, a state of inner presence can become one’s solidity, offering a sense of continuity. Paralleling life with pilgrimage in its capacity to present recurring themes – opportunities for transformation – Bateson continues, “one of the striking facts of most lives is the recurrence of threads of continuity, the re-echoing of earlier themes, even across deep rifts of change.”¹²

Amidst the rifts of change in our lives there are countless opportunities to arrive, to pause and to reflect. In terms of stillness and movement, the prospect of passing through or staying put is ever present: “of any stopping place in life, it is good to ask whether it will be a good place from which to go on as well as a good place to remain.”¹³ Promoting models of lifelong learning and adaptation, Bateson says that “continuing development depends on nurture and guidance long after the years of formal education, just as it depends on seeing others ahead on the road

⁹ Bateson, 4.

¹⁰ Bateson, 2-3.

¹¹ Bateson, 13.

¹² Bateson, 8.

¹³ Bateson, 14.

with whom it is possible to identify.”¹⁴ Seen in this light, pilgrimage is an opportunity to reflect on identity, noticing how our inner life is informed by the outer world, particularly as the outer landscape changes. In her chapter entitled ‘Opening to the World’, Bateson bemoans humanity’s servility to societal conventions, championing instead “the willingness to question and purposefully alter one’s conditions and habits, to learn by observing others.”¹⁵ This is very much the pilgrim way, leaving behind the known and opening oneself to the world. Through action and reflection – connecting with the world and integrating experience within – the continuity of presence allows one’s path to grow clearer (looking both backward and forward, as well as beneath one’s feet). Bateson believes that “composing a life involves an openness to possibilities and the capacity to put them together in a way that is structurally sound.”¹⁶ She later reflects that a “kind of spiral underlies the shaping and re-shaping of identity, as gradually we have more to work with and we become skilled in reconstruction.”¹⁷ In this way, composing a life is a journey of meaning-making, our own narratives like a pilgrimage, as we are often forced to revisit themes and reconcile disparate strands, or sometimes even make our way through complete fog. Such crises and crossroads are nevertheless pregnant with potential: “the most creative thinking occurs at the meeting places of disciplines...vision sometimes arises from confusion.”¹⁸

For Bateson, improvising and collaborating across difference are vital to creative navigation of life, both between and within individuals. Describing a writing collaboration, Bateson explains the importance of complementarity (another key theme with implications for pilgrimage): “we had the genuine differences that allowed each of us to meet a need in the other,

¹⁴ Bateson, 55.

¹⁵ Bateson, 57.

¹⁶ Bateson, 63.

¹⁷ Bateson, 214.

¹⁸ Bateson, 73.

pursuing mysteries that only the other could unravel, with a delight in mutual teaching and learning.”¹⁹ Unlike the typical male-female dynamic of her day, “for complementarity to be truly creative, it is not sufficient for need to run in both directions; it is necessary to acknowledge that both contributions are of equal value and that both are freely given.”²⁰ Highlighting the value of complementarity encourages us to not only acknowledge the gifts and limits of those we live and work with, but to also be attentive to the many aspects of our own selves. This naturally leads to Bateson’s final major theme of *caring*, which one of her subjects describes as “a quality of attention, a total commitment to looking and listening...you have to be unencumbered, so you can really listen reflectively...and not be cluttered with other things.”²¹ This attentiveness in caring (reminiscent of improvising) aligns effortlessly with presence, a sense of openness to the moment and connection with whomever or whatever one may be engaging. Bateson would say we can be open to much at once, not only holding one object in our caring gaze. Capturing much of her book’s essence as she discusses women’s capacity for multitasking – simultaneously challenging Kierkegaard’s notion that ‘purity is to will one thing’ – Bateson illustrates a way of being that women have been pioneering for ages:

Perhaps the issue is not the fixed knowledge of the good, the single focus that millennia of monotheism have made us idealize, but rather a kind of attention that is open, not focused on a single point. Instead of concentration on a transcendent ideal, sustained attention to diversity and interdependence may offer a different clarity of vision, one that is sensitive to ecological complexity, to the multiple rather than the singular. Perhaps we can discern in women honouring multiple commitments a new level of productivity and new possibilities of learning.²²

¹⁹ Bateson, 100.

²⁰ Bateson, 100.

²¹ Bateson, 158.

²² Bateson, 166.

Alongside her spirit of attentive improvisation, complementarity and care, Bateson encourages us to embrace our *whole* lives, receiving even unloved parts within the wider frame. She suggests, “part of the task of composing a life is the artist’s need to find a way to take what is simply ugly and, instead of trying to deny it, to use it in the broader design.”²³ Living in this way, we can remain radically open to the path we are traveling, both embracing and learning from even the bumps and the dips.

PALMER

Early in his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer muses on his chosen title – an old Quaker saying – understanding it much differently later in life than he had as a young man: “before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you.”²⁴ I am convinced that pilgrimage is a great way to do just this, allowing space for one’s inner wisdom to emerge. Palmer’s book illustrates how pilgrimage can bring us into our own life – becoming attentive to “the life that wants to live in [us].”²⁵ Describing this ‘life that wants to live in us’ as the *image of God* – or Thomas Merton’s *true self* – Palmer cautions how easily we can lose touch with this gift, becoming distracted by the world.²⁶ Attuning to true self calls for focused moments – or even extended stretches – of stillness, as “the soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting, and trustworthy conditions.”²⁷ It often takes a pilgrimage to recover this original gift of true self. As Palmer discusses the discovery of true self and one’s sense of vocation, he suggests it is “akin to the ancient tradition of pilgrimage – ‘a transformative journey to a sacred centre’ full of hardships, darkness, and peril.”²⁸ Briefly quoting Phil Cousineau,

²³ Bateson, 211.

²⁴ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 3.

²⁵ Palmer, 2.

²⁶ Palmer, 11.

²⁷ Palmer, 7.

²⁸ Palmer, 18.

Palmer sheds light on the important and often overlooked role of darkness and difficulty in self-discovery. Elaborating further, he illustrates how hardships can be valuable in such a journey: “challenges of that sort, largely beyond our control, can strip the ego of the illusion that it is in charge and make space for true self to emerge. If that happens, the pilgrim has a better chance to find the sacred center he or she seeks.”²⁹ Both in pilgrimage and within oneself, Palmer encourages us not to shy away from the shadows we are so tempted to eschew. He opines, “an inevitable though often ignored dimension of the quest for ‘wholeness’ is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident and proud of.”³⁰ Not unlike Bateson, he advocates a deep acceptance of all we are, honouring even our flaws, for “as pilgrims must discover if they are to complete their quest, we are led to truth by our weaknesses as well as our strengths.”³¹ This hint of paradox fits pilgrimage quite naturally, leading into even deeper mysteries, charged with opportunity. Discussing how ‘way’ opens or closes on one’s path (another wise Quaker approach to navigating life), Palmer observes that “as often happens on the spiritual journey, we have arrived at the heart of a paradox: each time a door closes, the rest of the world opens up.”³² Again Palmer invites us to be attentive to our lives, to embrace apparent opposites, “to live in a creative tension between our limits and our potentials.”³³

One duality, which when its aspects are at odds can be hard to survive, is the relationship between inner and outer. Instead of generating creative tension, this can create harmful division, tearing us apart from the inside, putting true self at a great distance. By contrast, harmony

²⁹ Palmer, 18.

³⁰ Palmer, 6.

³¹ Palmer, 22.

³² Palmer, 54.

³³ Palmer, 55.

between inner and outer can have a beautiful impact not only within but also in the world around us. Describing those who become so attuned to true self that they manifest it in the world – those who ‘plant the seeds of movements’ – Palmer claims they make a critical decision (what he calls the ‘Rosa Parks decision’), to live divided no more. He writes, “they decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside.”³⁴ As much as we may try, we can never effectively become something in the world that we do not feel within us. Reflecting on seasons of depression, Palmer suggests that when we try to be something we are not, or try to give something we do not possess, we set ourselves up for an inevitable ‘fall back to earth’ – often quite jarring and harsh. The hidden beauty in this descent is its capacity for grounding, allowing presence to emerge as a priority. Instead of trying to rise up out of ourselves, to be something else, we learn to embrace who we are, where we are, honouring the path we are *on* rather than aspiring to someone else’s journey. He observes, “when you truly possess all you have been and done...you are fierce with reality.”³⁵ This kind of sincerity is not only good stewardship of our gifts, but it also allows us to address the needs of the world. He goes further, offering a sense of vocation: “some journeys are direct, and some are circuitous; some are heroic, and some are fearful and muddled. But every journey, honestly undertaken, stands a chance of taking us toward the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”³⁶ The importance of patience on such journeys can neither be overlooked nor understated, as “the pilgrimage toward true self will take ‘time, many years and places.’”³⁷

³⁴ Palmer, 32.

³⁵ Palmer, 70.

³⁶ Palmer, 36.

³⁷ Palmer, 36.

Discerning and learning from the many dualities (and their intersections) at work within us – inner/outer, stillness/movement, particular/universal – calls for a pilgrim’s patience. For Palmer, patience is naturally demonstrated in the wisdom of the seasons, especially autumn. Pondering the presence of beauty and elegance in death, he finds himself again exploring paradox (and balance), quoting Thomas Merton: “in the visible world of nature, a great truth is concealed in plain sight: diminishment and beauty, darkness and light, death and life are not opposites. They are held together in the paradox of ‘hidden wholeness.’”³⁸ Merton’s sense of ‘hidden wholeness’ holds our dualities together, or as Palmer says, “in a paradox, opposites do not negate each – they cohere in a mysterious unity at the heart of reality...if we allow the paradox of darkness and light to be, the two will conspire to bring wholeness and health to every living thing.”³⁹ In a similar way, I am convinced that the apparent opposites of stillness and movement are held by a ‘hidden wholeness’, each nourishing us as they rotate, and whether we are pausing or passing through, I sense our purpose can be seen in the very path beneath our feet.

MERTON

Built on the structure of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Merton’s book *The Seven Storey Mountain* is often compared to Augustine’s *Confessions*, showing a life of empty pleasure saved by God’s grace, inspiring a deep commitment to faith. Reflective of pilgrimage, Merton’s journey involves considerable paradox – deep struggle alongside deep joy, extensive traveling and socializing alongside a longing for stillness and solitude. His book shows a young man still brimming with the zeal of his conversion yet yearning for the completion of his spiritual path. Even before his conversion, he was craving the peace of presence: “I was tired of passing

³⁸ Palmer, 99.

³⁹ Palmer, 99-100.

through places. I wanted to get to the term of my journey, where there was some psychological possibility that I would stop in one place and remain.”⁴⁰ In the midst of his travels, he describes the impact of his fascination with Byzantine mosaics: “and thus without knowing anything about it I became a pilgrim. I was unconsciously and unintentionally visiting all the great shrines of Rome, and seeking out their sanctuaries with some of the eagerness and avidity and desire of a true pilgrim.”⁴¹ Narrating his departure from Cambridge and subsequent journey to the US, shifting prayerfully into conversation with God, Merton depicts his pilgrim trail: “I was not sure where I was going, and I could not see what I would do when I got [there]. But you saw further and clearer than I, and you opened the seas before my ship...to a place I had never dreamed of, and which you were even then preparing to be my rescue and my shelter and my home.”⁴² Faith is obviously a key theme in Merton’s journey to God, learning to trust the path beneath his feet, relinquishing his appetite for knowledge and prioritizing a deep surrender to God’s love. After reading Blake, Merton felt that “the life of the soul is not knowledge, it is love, since love is the act of the supreme faculty, the will, by which man is formally united to the final end of all his strivings—by which man becomes one with God.”⁴³ Poetically describing God’s grace (arguably his principle theme), Merton paints a portrait of transformation: “the soul of man, left to its own natural level, is a potentially lucid crystal left in darkness...when the light shines in it, it becomes in a manner transformed into light and seems to lose its nature in the splendor of a higher nature, the nature of the light that is in it.”⁴⁴ This image of grace as an agent of transformation parallels the spontaneity of the sacred encountered during pilgrimage. Whether in moments of

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 116.

⁴¹ Merton, 120.

⁴² Merton, 143.

⁴³ Merton, 209.

⁴⁴ Merton, 186.

contemplation, ecstasy or otherwise, grace enables a clarity of presence in us, standing with neither past nor future, our inner and outer worlds aligned, God as the ground of being suddenly perfectly clear – if only glimpsed momentarily. Merton’s conversion and his broader journey of faith align with these characteristics of pilgrimage.

After his conversion, Merton portrays the peace of surrendering to God’s will: “I was free. I had recovered my liberty. I belonged to God, not to myself: and to belong to Him is to be free, free of all the anxieties and worries and sorrows that belong to this earth.”⁴⁵ Through sincere surrender, this sort of freedom occurs for many pilgrims in moments and extended passages of presence, a sense of one’s identity merging in the divine. Writing several years later, Merton conceives of this process of sanctification (merging in God) somewhat differently: “for me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.”⁴⁶ This ‘true self’ (what Paul Tillich would call ‘the ground of being’) is frequently accessed through pilgrimage, one’s intentional and attentive movement uncovering a deeper inward stillness. Toward the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton intimates how the rootless movement of his youth set the stage for the sacred stillness of his monastic adulthood: “first comes the active life...which prepares us for contemplation. Contemplation means rest, suspension of activity, withdrawal into the mysterious interior solitude in which the soul is absorbed in the immense and fruitful silence of God.”⁴⁷ It is this sense of deep interiority which opens to the pilgrim, and which Merton claims is essential in any life: “even the active vocation is sterile without an interior life, and a deep

⁴⁵ Merton, 406.

⁴⁶ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 31.

⁴⁷ Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 454.

interior life at that.”⁴⁸ Continuing to reflect on vocation in his epilogue, noting some of the stress and strain of the spiritual journey, Merton uses the imagery of fire (a recurring theme), depicting the ‘furnace of contemplation’: “there is only one vocation...no matter who you are or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to a deep interior life perhaps even to mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others.”⁴⁹ Paradox is at the heart of much of the struggle of the pilgrim trail, and spiritual life in general, which Merton clearly knows well: “we cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are travelling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light.”⁵⁰ Addressing God, he continues, “I dwell in Your light, that is, Your darkness, where I am lost and abashed. I cannot explain to any other man the anguish which is Your joy nor the loss which is the Possession of You, nor the distance from all things which is the arrival in You, nor the death which is the birth in You.”⁵¹ It is no wonder that contemplatives require so much silence and space to discern such deep nuance in the spiritual path, and to abide quietly in their ‘true selves’, undisturbed by attempts to explain what will always remain a mystery. Short of becoming a monk or a nun, pilgrimage is an ideal opportunity to afford oneself this same interior space, if only for a time.

Through grace and faith, and alongside considerable tension, Merton’s journey parallels the way of the pilgrim, a deeply demanding yet deeply rewarding life. His book approaches its end through a long, impassioned address to God, articulating his burning desire for solitude, to completely erase the gap between God and himself. The final passage of the book is God’s

⁴⁸ Merton, 456.

⁴⁹ Merton, 458.

⁵⁰ Merton, 459.

⁵¹ Merton, 459.

response, summoning Merton to faithfulness and vigilant presence: “I will lead you into solitude. I will lead you by the way that you cannot possibly understand, because I want it to be the quickest way.”⁵² Regarding the end of Merton’s journey, God’s voice continues, “do not ask when it will be or where it will be or how it will be: On a mountain or in a prison, in a desert or in a concentration camp or in a hospital or at Gethsemani. It does not matter. So do not ask me, because I am not going to tell you. You will not know until you are in it.”⁵³ God could just as easily be speaking to any pilgrim here, calling for patience and faith – which is ultimately a call to attentive presence. In the solitude of presence, a pilgrim is called to surrender the desire to know what comes next, allowing movement to open into stillness, allowing one’s inner and outer worlds to meet, entrusting even paradox to the silent aliveness that is the ground of being.

AUGUSTINE

Augustine set the standard for confessional autobiographies of faith, his *Confessions* more prayer than memoir. Even as Augustine narrates his profound faith journey – rife with struggle and paradox – he ultimately shows us more about God and how God works in his life. One of the key polarities he grapples with is the relationship between his inner and outer worlds, which at its core is the relationship between God and humanity. In a similar pattern Merton later replicates, Augustine must prioritize his faith, surrendering the pursuit of pleasure, knowledge, and any sense of certainty, leaning out into the unknown – just as the pilgrim must do to journey forward in faith. Augustine continually points to God’s role in ordering his path, addressing God directly:

You were always with me, mercifully punishing me.⁵⁴

⁵² Merton, 461.

⁵³ Merton, 462.

⁵⁴ Saint Augustine, *Confessions* tr. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2.2.4.

Yet very secretly I was being governed by you.⁵⁵

For in your hidden providence your hands, my God, did not forsake my soul.⁵⁶

Then little by little, Lord, with a most gentle and merciful hand you touched and calmed my heart.⁵⁷

Quoting Psalm 36:23, Augustine nods again to God's providence – “the steps of man are directed by the Lord, and he chooses his way”⁵⁸ – yet leaves space for free will, suggesting that ‘he’ and ‘his’ refer to humankind choosing ‘his’ way freely, albeit with God's guidance.

The trail of the pilgrim often cuts right through the heart of this enigma, the distinction between God's will and one's own remarkably hard to grasp. Despite this note of paradox, Augustine is confident that God is the root of all being: “without you, whatever exists would not exist...I would have no being if I were not in you.”⁵⁹ Reflecting on how close God was to him even through his years of sin, Augustine says to God, “you were more inward than my most inward part,”⁶⁰ and that “you were within while I was on the outside, seeking you there.”⁶¹ Augustine later describes God's relationship to humanity by saying, “you alone [God] are always present even to those who have taken themselves far from you.”⁶² Even for those who do wander astray – as is the case for many would-be pilgrims – Augustine declares God's immovable presence: “one does not go far away from you or return to you by walking or by any movement through space.”⁶³ In this light, the physical journey a pilgrim undertakes is at best an instrument for a much subtler inward transformation – the recognition of God as one's ‘most inward part.’

⁵⁵ Augustine, 4.14.23.

⁵⁶ Augustine, 5.7.13.

⁵⁷ Augustine, 6.5.7.

⁵⁸ Augustine, 5.7.13.

⁵⁹ Augustine, 1.2.2.

⁶⁰ Augustine, 3.6.11.

⁶¹ Augustine, 10.27.38.

⁶² Augustine 5.2.2.

⁶³ Augustine, 1.18.28.

This puzzling relationship between God and humanity, inner and outer – which Augustine explores in depth and describes in several ways – is something most pilgrims wrestle with in their journeys of faith. The Apostle Paul’s words speak to the heart of this mysterious metaphysical reality, that in God, “we live and move and have our being.”⁶⁴

Narrating his path toward transformation, Augustine describes his life before conversion absorbed in appetite of body and mind, oblivious to God as the ground of being. He states, “my soul was in rotten health. In an ulcerous condition it thrust itself to outward things, miserably avid to be scratched by contact with the world of the senses.”⁶⁵ Admitting to God the depths to which he had sunk – “I abandoned you to pursue the lowest things of your creation”⁶⁶ – Augustine was trapped in his own inner chaos: “I had become to myself a place of unhappiness in which I could not bear to be; but I could not escape from myself.”⁶⁷ This is exactly the sort of state which often provides the impetus for pilgrimage, a deep yearning for peace, or some form of release. Rarely short on words, Augustine later expresses his anguish in another way: “I vigorously pursued my quest, inarticulate sufferings of my heart loudly pleading for your mercy. You knew what I endured; no human being knew...that was inward, while I was still in externals...fixing my attention on things contained in space, and there I found no place to rest.”⁶⁸

Revisiting his earlier pain and confusion in the course of writing *Confessions*, it seems even the act of composition becomes a form of pilgrimage, transmuting the struggle of his ‘rotten life’ into total praise and service of his redeeming God. Augustine’s purpose in this work is clear: “I intend to remind myself of my past foulnesses and carnal corruptions, not because I love

⁶⁴ Acts 17:28 (NRSV)

⁶⁵ Augustine, 3.1.1.

⁶⁶ Augustine, 1.13.21.

⁶⁷ Augustine, 4.7.12.

⁶⁸ Augustine, 7.7.11.

them but so that I may love you, my God.”⁶⁹ As a pilgrim may discover – and as Bateson and Palmer both raised – by naming our shortcomings, including past faults, we journey closer to truth, which Augustine considers synonymous with God. Envisioning the transformation he so desperately craves, Augustine again probes the relationship between inner and outer: “the mind needs to be enlightened by light from outside itself, so that it can participate in truth, because it is not itself the nature of truth. You will light my lamp, Lord.”⁷⁰ On the verge of his conversion, Lady Contenance graces Augustine with sage counsel: “why are you relying on yourself, only to find yourself unreliable? Cast yourself on him, do not be afraid.”⁷¹ It is precisely this type of messenger that reaches out to pilgrims nearing the end of their tether, human desperation only a breath away from divine transformation.

In poetic language which surely inspired Merton, Augustine also credits the ‘higher nature’ of God’s guiding light, which opens eternity to him: “I entered into my innermost citadel, and was given power to do so because you had become my helper. I entered and with my soul’s eye...[saw] the immutable light higher than my mind.”⁷² Describing how God eventually ‘shattered his deafness,’ Augustine cries out to God in praise: “you were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and now I feel hunger and thirst for you. You touched me and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”⁷³ Moments of grace such as this – glimpses of insight and release along the pilgrim trail – inspire the depth of fervour Augustine shows, being positively on fire and determined to abide in God’s love. Augustine gives us the sense that God is ever calling

⁶⁹ Augustine, 2.1.1.

⁷⁰ Augustine, 4.15.25.

⁷¹ Augustine, 8.11.27.

⁷² Augustine, 7.10.16.

⁷³ Augustine, 10.27.38.

us to the true rest of divine presence, even as we can become so confused and entangled by the world and our appetite: “you stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you,”⁷⁴ later reiterating, “you alone are repose.”⁷⁵ Pilgrimage has the power to open us from within to this rest in God’s presence. Our journeying and our purpose can merge in this attentive and connective rest, a deep inner silence mysteriously animating our surroundings. Even as Augustine explains that nobody returns to God by ‘any movement through space’, paradoxically, he also says, “solvitur ambulando. It is solved by walking.”⁷⁶ In this way the pilgrim journeys on in faith, closing the gap between oneself and God in every step, even to the point of realizing there never was any gap, God holding all creation all along.

⁷⁴ Augustine, 1.1.1.

⁷⁵ Augustine, 6.16.26.

⁷⁶ Cousineau, 104.

PART TWO

I am a pilgrim, but my pilgrimage has been wandering and unmarked. Often what has looked like a straight line to me has been a circling or a doubling back. I have been in the Dark Wood of Error any number of times. I have known something of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, but not always in that order. The names of many snares and dangers have been made known to me, but I have seen them only in looking back. Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. – Wendell Berry⁷⁷

Just as Augustine sought God through the twists and turns of his pilgrim journey, I have also found myself seeking God’s guiding light. Like Augustine, I have felt a great distance from myself, continually turning away from God and trying to ‘go it alone.’ Yet I too was raised in the church, surrounded by God’s love throughout my life, and I have felt called to keep turning back toward the light, to keep seeking God. Like Bateson, I am learning to improvise much of my life – composing on the go, amidst discontinuity – and like Palmer, I am frequently inclining my attention inward for the wisdom I sense there, often craving the same solitude Merton sought, yearning to draw closer to God. This longing for God has often found me on the road, living the pilgrim way. As I set out cycling across Europe in early 2011, I could never have conceived of the transformation that the journey would bring about in my life. I encountered countless pilgrim souls on my path – many walking the way of Saint James – but had the strong sense that my own course was uncharted, calling me to discern and design it as I went. As Cousineau says, whether you are “embarking on a gruelling walking pilgrimage a thousand miles across Europe to a famous shrine, setting off on the long-delayed journey to your ancestral roots, or taking the first step on the long spiritual journey into a creative project, your journey is about to change you.”⁷⁸

While my twists and turns of change are ongoing, I can at least look back to confirm that my pilgrimage has most often been ‘wandering and unmarked,’ though nevertheless focused on

⁷⁷ Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow: A Novel* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 133.

⁷⁸ Cousineau, 88.

God. Employing my own experience to map out some of the contours of pilgrimage, this part of the paper will shift into narrative, exploring a journey of both stillness and movement – inner and outer landscapes reflecting each other. Along the way, I will note how these polarities point toward presence. Inviting only a few other voices into the conversation, this section will be grounded mostly in my own experience. After incorporating several peripheral reflections throughout the narrative, I will focus more directly on drawing out key themes toward the end of this exploration.

I had been cycling for a few months already when I reached Amsterdam, having covered nearly 4000 km. I was in no rush, stopping often, taking regular rest days, exploring cities, sometimes for even a week or more. I was getting used to the ups and downs, both literally and figuratively. My body was strong. My faith was growing stronger. Before I set out cycling from Madrid, my father had shared a scripture with me, responding to my anxiety and uncertainty about my sense of direction. Words from Matthew 6:25-34 continued echoing in my heart throughout the ride, urging me on, calling me from fear toward faith. The final verse of that passage stood out especially: “so do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”⁷⁹ These words had already carried me through a lot to that point in my journey. I had seen some tough days – sometimes feeling as though I had no direction, sometimes unable to sit still, other times feeling unable to move – as though I was simply out of energy. I also experienced incredible moments – and even extended stretches – of connection and alignment, feeling blessed to be so free and so open. I frequently felt a sense of peace (indeed passing all understanding), even as it occasionally came alongside struggle.

⁷⁹ Matthew 6:34 (NRSV)

Amsterdam was mostly rainy, and I was feeling a bit low, yearning for a lost love. After staying a few days (including my 28th birthday) with friends I had met years before in Australia, I knew it was time to press on, even though I was not quite ready. I had felt this a few times before on the journey, knowing I had to move yet not really wanting to. I was feeling tense. Four other friends I had also met in Australia were encouraging me to hurry north to Stockholm so I could attend a farewell party for one of them who was soon moving to the US. I looked into planes and trains but neither felt right. Even though flying was the fastest and cheapest choice, it felt like cheating, somehow tainting the ‘purity’ of my journey. I took pride in covering this distance over land. The train seemed complicated, with several transfers and extra charges for bringing my bike on every successive connection. I had no idea what to do. But I knew I had stayed long enough with my hosts in Amsterdam, so I set out again into the unknown, riding beneath a ceiling of dark, heavy clouds. Thunder rumbled as I approached the train station, where I stopped to consider my options.

As I spoke with a clerk at the ticket window, my bike sitting unlocked just outside the door, the train still seemed too confusing and expensive, and would not even get me halfway to Hamburg that day. More importantly, it felt wrong. I had come to cycle through Europe, not hop trains. I thanked the clerk and left. Standing in front of the station, completely lost, I watched hundreds of people pass by. I wondered how they were all so sure of where they were going. With their bags in hand, over their shoulders, or rolling behind them, they marched forward purposefully. I found their certainty disconcerting. I felt so alone in my unknowing. I was frozen, in a state of suspended depression – aware of my sadness but unable to address it, strangely detached. After a while, the people whisking by me became a kaleidoscopic haze and I felt a sort of amplified gravity, my body firmly anchored to the concrete beside my bike. In the heaviness

of my body, I realized I could feel its aliveness, the pulse of life coursing through me. This feeling eclipsed my sense of aimlessness and it suddenly dawned on me that in my absence of direction, I was absolutely present. There was no confusion about where I stood. Embracing this single shred of certainty, I watched it blossom.

I became so engrossed in the moment that I could see the stark contrast on almost every face that passed me. At first in a blur, but then somehow slowed down, I watched dozens of people at once – almost all of them in a daze – stepping forward from patches of pavement they had never really been on. In their minds, some were so far ahead of themselves as to have already arrived wherever their train may be taking them. Others were still walking through their hallways at home switching off all the lights, wondering if they had locked the door. I could see all of this in their eyes. People were either more conscious of where they stood or their general trajectory – there seemed to be a spectrum. Those looking backward stepped slightly slower than those looking ahead, but I could see that few knew presence, tending instead to matters ahead or behind. It felt like I was watching bundles of blind momentum moving through time. And I realized that I was a part of this too. A distressing thought crossed my mind: *we are avoiding life, trying to get somewhere else*. Somehow, this troubling recognition lifted the last of the cumbersome clouds from within me. Though the sky remained dark, I now felt as if I could stand clear of the frenzy around me, firm on my own ground. Remarkably, ‘my own ground’ opened into a sense of connection with a deeper common ground – something fundamental to all of us, even those passing by in a blur.

A peace came over me. I realized I already had all I needed. There was no hurry to do anything. I was in Europe riding a bike, as I had been for nearly four months. *I will get to Stockholm when I get there*, I decided, *if I get there*. I stood under the long awning of the train

station with a renewed sense of freedom, and I began gearing up to get moving again. I had no map for the day, nor any clue where to go, but I trusted I would find my way. With only my compass as a reference, I pressed on toward the forest northeast of the city, stopping to glance at local maps along the bike trail. As I rode, I realized the previous weeks had pulled me back into the pressure of the calendar and the map – arranging to meet with several friends here and there, coordinating couches to surf (all at appointed times and places), and now being urged north to Stockholm. As grateful as I was for the chance to connect with friends, and for the generosity of my hosts, I had let the everyday necessities of travel eclipse the simple peace my journey had been establishing in me. Riding along smiling, alone in the woods, the warm air carrying the scent of pine, I laughed as I let go of any lingering stress about *where* I was or *when* it was. With Jesus' words still ringing in my ears – *do not worry about tomorrow* – I was committed to living *here and now*.

This freedom deepened over the next weeks of riding – exemplified particularly in two (separate but connected) instances. One sunny afternoon, riding peacefully along a quiet country road, I found myself *so present* that I did not know what month it was. I laughed and asked myself, *when is the last time I knew what month it was?* After more than a minute of conscious effort, pedalling all the while, I remembered it was early August (my birthday having recently passed). Still chuckling aloud to myself, my heart swelled as I savoured this curious occurrence. A few days later, it dawned on me that I did not know what country I was in. Again I laughed as I asked myself, *when is the last time I knew where I was?* After mulling it over for a minute or more, I remembered I was in Germany. Thoroughly amused, I realized that maps and calendars were nothing more than frameworks we had collectively negotiated (and to some extent agreed upon) to shape and contain our experience of time and space. I saw that they did not need to be

believed in so much as *related with* – they served a practical purpose, enabling us to track progress and coordinate with others. These two instances struck me as auspicious – indications that my path could unfold without me constantly controlling it. A sense of stillness was developing within me as I traveled in this way. I was gradually relaxing and releasing the need to know what came next – finding my way deeper into the freedom of presence – increasingly feeling (and feeding) faith in a greater frame than I could see. I was coming to trust both the road ahead and the wisdom within to respond appropriately as the moment ordained. This inner wisdom was not a personal possession but an intuitive access to creative intelligence.

Nearly two months passed. I made it as far north as Stockholm and rode very freely through Sweden, camping in the bush and reading W. Somerset Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*. I found Larry Darrell's life inspiring – traveling the world in search of truth and meaning. That same search was alive in me – “a passionate craving to know Reality.”⁸⁰ I was also writing a lot more by this point in the journey. Having told people for months I was working on a novel, reality was catching up with my claims. My cycling tour ended abruptly – I was badly beat up in Munich (stepping in to defend two young gay guys being harassed by a group of five). I took the train to nearby Salzburg and convalesced with family friends for a few weeks, letting my broken ribs heal and getting dental work done on a tooth that had been kicked in. While I was deeply grateful for the hospitality and care I was being shown, I generally felt rather low. The momentum of my grand adventure had been jarringly halted. Still, I trusted the struggle was a part of the larger arc of my expedition. As Cousineau says, “if the journey you have chosen is indeed a pilgrimage, a soulful journey, it will be rigorous.”⁸¹ One of the few bright spots in these

⁸⁰ W. Somerset Maugham, *The Razor's Edge* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 270.

⁸¹ Cousineau, xxix.

weeks was a moment of clarity during an intense, meditative sauna session; a mantra emerged from my very centre and the words spoke themselves through me, aloud, my body awash in shivers, hairs on end. *Do your work through me, God, at any cost to me.* I repeated these words frequently thereafter, usually until I could speak them from a depth of sincerity. Looking back, I see in these words a willingness to acknowledge and release blockages to the movement of God's love within and through me – allowing my inner and outer worlds to communicate more freely. In that moment of meditative stillness, there was deep movement within, inspiring and instructing me to surrender my own will to God's (admittedly far more mysterious) will.

After doing some odd jobs and earning a bit of money, I set out to explore Italy, where my journey began opening up in earnest. Having traded my bicycle for a guitar, I traveled mostly by train. I began reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, a book I had started and abandoned years before, but with which I was now connecting deeply. The main character, Phaedrus, was obsessed with trying to understand and define *Quality*: “Quality is a characteristic of thought and statement that is recognized by a nonthinking process. Because definitions are a product of rigid, formal thinking, quality cannot be defined...but even though Quality cannot be defined, *you know what Quality is!*”⁸² Somewhat like Phaedrus' quest for *Quality* (intent on dissolving the distinction between subject and object), I found myself drawn to *Light*, seeing it as something transcending extremes – a fundamental element of life. As the Book of Genesis says ‘in the beginning,’ God said, “let there be light.”⁸³ Watching the sun set on Lago di Garda outside of Verona, I was deeply stirred and began reflecting in my journal on the power of perspective:

⁸² Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 207-208.

⁸³ Genesis 1:3 (NRSV)

Traveling light moves in all directions, issuing outward from the sun (and all stars) as a continuously flowing, massive expanding sphere. The universe is entirely infused with light. It is only our human perspective that is limited, perceiving darkness. Even where a celestial body casts a shadow, it's only briefly blocking the most dominant source of nearby light. There is other light, however distantly issued, still reaching that space. Pick any 'dark point' in space – if you go there, you will find light. The vacuum of space cannot swallow light.

Here on Earth, a shadow cast is lifeless, moving only as the light allows. If I step to the left, the shadow doesn't change. But the light is alive, we relate – the rays laying on the water are still casting themselves, dancing, able to adapt and reach out. When I move to the left or right, the light follows me on the water, always pointing straight to me, offering itself and broadening as it reaches the horizon, drawing me forward. This light is an invitation, kindling something kindred within me. It is empowering, and connective, simultaneously personal and universal.⁸⁴

The book I was writing found its name around this time – *Traveling Light*. I liked the multiple meanings it could convey. My journals show that I was thinking about light almost constantly, even taking up a casual yet concerted survey of quantum physics. I was profoundly fascinated by the phenomenon of wave-particle duality – a quantum reality of light outlining its defiance of definition (much like Phaedrus' *Quality*). Essentially, light is simultaneously a wave in motion and an isolated particle, detached and static. I found this intriguing, and somehow, it made intuitive sense to me. I was curiously proud of light, cheering on its evasion of conclusive scrutiny. Another quantum reality that resonated deeply with me was Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, explaining how the surer you are of the location of a given particle, the less sure you can be of its trajectory (and vice versa). This reminded me of my moment of clarity standing outside of the Amsterdam train station. As I read and wrote, I found dots connecting along the nomadic path behind me, and occasionally even projecting ahead. Somewhat like the mysterious nature of light, I saw that my journey, and my whole life, oscillated between stillness and movement, and that the two were inextricably linked – one necessitated the other.

⁸⁴ Personal journal, Italy, 2011.

The light became a daily source of inspiration for me – I began seeing myself as a pilgrim of the light, seeking clarity and truth. While cycling, I had encountered several pilgrims, or *peregrinos*, most funnelling toward the Camino de Santiago from some tributary or other. Without fail, we always recognized one another as kindred spirits, each of us seeking some form of truth, meaning, or freedom (if not explicit salvation). Cousineau reflects that “the pilgrim’s motives have always been manifold: to pay homage, to fulfill a vow or obligation, to do penance, to be rejuvenated spiritually, or to feel the release of catharsis.”⁸⁵ Now in Italy, traveling by train, I was on a pilgrimage without a fixed destination, yet my purpose was clear – I was seeking God, the *Light*. Despite no distinct ‘eureka’ moment, the character and contour of my journey was gradually growing clearer to me and I could see that God had always been my goal. It dawned on me that both the realms of science and spirit (in their respective quests for knowledge and meaning) were converging on light – as was my quest, seeking the ultimate horizon. Still mindful of my journey’s founding scripture (Matthew 6:25-34), the light amplified my desire to explore, express, and generally exercise my faith. Recognizing the many instances of God’s wisdom and provision at work in my journey, fear for tomorrow was fading. Referring to that same scripture, Webb-Mitchell says, “pilgrimage can help us focus on the pathway before us, to be where our feet are planted, rather than worried about what happens tomorrow.”⁸⁶

As I continued to be inspired by that scripture, it occurred to me one day in Rome that I might stop planning for a while – just to see what doors would open. *Something has to happen*, I thought. It felt like a fun experiment, seeing how one thing might lead to another. It also stretched me, not knowing ahead of time where I would stay every night. Essentially prioritizing

⁸⁵ Cousineau, 14.

⁸⁶ Webb-Mitchell, 51.

presence through this decision, I became much more observant, adaptable, and responsive in this period. I was improvising life, exercising a greater depth of courage and sincerity. As Cousineau observes, “we can only plan so much. Then we must let go and trust in Kairos, the old god of synchronicity.”⁸⁷ One night, surfing the web at a hostel in Rome, I noticed a couch-surfing bowling night was taking place nearby. Feeling a curious urge to attend, and with just enough time to get there, I decided to go. I met some wonderful people, had great fun, and based on a conversation with another traveler, I was suddenly eager to see Naples. I spent several inspiring days reading and writing my way through Naples and Salerno, also stopping into Pompeii for a day, frequently feeling the subtle presence of a guiding *light*. When I made my way back to Rome, I ended up staying a few days with one of the local bowlers, a doctor named Roberto. He showed me around ‘his Rome’ over the next few days, cruising around on his Vespa. I also took plenty of quiet time to slow down and write, reflecting on my journey to date. Even just over a week into my ‘no plan’ experiment, I still felt a sense of higher guidance tending my course.

Having been in Italy nearly a month already, I was falling more and more in love with it, and I felt drawn to explore more widely. Dreaming over a map, I tried to listen for my intuition, trusting the way would open. Roberto insisted I visit Siena, a city I had not heard of before. My father had recently encouraged me to see Assisi, a place I *had* heard of, and was very interested in. Envisioning a smooth road leading from Rome to both places, I prepared to set out. Freshly finished reading *Zen*, I wanted to get another book before leaving the city.

Based on a conversation about the novel I was writing, my cousin had just recommended a book by one of my favourite authors, Paul Auster. I felt fortunate to find *Oracle Night* in the

⁸⁷ Cousineau, 116.

English section of La Feltrinelli, a book chain I frequented throughout Italy. Another book caught my eye on my way to the cash register, one that had been on my short list for some time. Without a second thought, I grabbed Thoreau's *Walden* and walked out feeling keen on a pair of new books to explore. I opened *Oracle Night* as soon as I sat down on the train for Assisi. It seemed to be written just for me, in just that moment. Like my *Traveling Light*, it also contained a book within a book, following the story of a writer. I could not put it down. Still toward the beginning of the book, I was amazed and elated when I turned a page to see Auster – coincidence his principal theme – mention *Walden*. In a moment even as simple as this, I felt God speaking to me. A notion that had been emerging during my cycling came rushing to the surface – *God speaks to us in our own language*. This kind of alignment was exactly my language. And it struck me as far more than mere chance. My conviction in God's providence deepened in these instances – a sense of God bending our paths toward the light, generally working things out for the good, within a broader scheme of possibility. Like I had done in moments of similar synchronicity while cycling, I felt the joy of connection and alignment, and simply 'tipped my cap' to God, not trying to extract any particular meaning or significance. Without any sense of a fixed forward course, I just trusted I was on my path.

Although there were many people on the train, there was little movement, everyone settled into their own world. When the train inexplicably came to a stop and sat still for some time, I became fascinated by people's movement around the car, increasing incrementally, as though holding to some sort of ratio of stillness-to-movement; the more the train moved, the more relaxed the passengers were, but the longer the train sat still, the more agitated the passengers became. On one level, this was obvious and understandable, yet I sensed something deeper in it as well. People struggle to sit still. We have a hard time just being with ourselves. I

felt I was gradually breaking free of this discomfort through my journey, making peace with being wherever I was. Without a fixed destination or timeline (nevertheless committed to presence), I was open to life, traveling without stress or strain. It increasingly felt like God was speaking to me through this simple way of being. After passing peacefully through Assisi – traveling in just this way, letting one thing open into the next – I met an important character on the train to Siena. Franz stepped in to translate a fumbling conversation I was having with a Sicilian sculptor (whom I had just met on the train platform, both of us staring at the setting sun between distant clouds). Reaching Siena at night, in the rain, Franz invited me to stay on his farm. Without anything else arranged, I took a chance and accepted his offer. The adventure grew only stranger when his ex-mother-in-law picked us up in a 15-seater van. I wondered who this guy was. Little did I know as we pulled up the long, winding dirt road to his farm that I had just found my new home in Europe, from which I would come and go for the next ten months.

This opened up a whole other phase of my journey. Ebbio was a refurbished 13th Century farmhouse now serving as a yoga retreat centre, freshly into its offseason. Cradled in an age-old caldera, it was situated along the Via Francigena, an ancient pilgrim trail leading from France to Rome. Signposts marked the historical path, and I frequently saw people walking along it. My time at Ebbio became a season of deep transformation. Franz encouraged me to invite someone to come and stay, so I asked Tiago, a friend I had met at a hostel in Madrid (having initially connected over our shared name). On the day he arrived, I got word from home that my ‘lost love’ (the woman I had been pining for throughout the journey) was now with one of my oldest friends – my roommate in Montreal and my brother’s business partner. I felt dizzy and winded, as though I had been punched in the stomach. As we went to bed that night (Tiago and I sharing a room with twin beds), Tiago revealed that he had just broken up with a woman with the same

name (Clara), who also had the same birthday (February 8). My body was again buzzing with synchronicity, God speaking to me in my own language. As Tiago drifted off and I remained awake, laying there eviscerated, I finally acknowledged to God that I could not manage on my own. For the first time in my life, I surrendered, a peace strangely wrapping itself around my excruciating pain. In the next days, several other layers of alignment surfaced around this heartbreak, which felt like the fulcrum of my entire journey, if not my life. I was being invited to trust the pain, to let go and to face my ego – an invitation I accepted. As the path to Clara closed, clarity grew nonetheless, exemplifying Palmer’s wisdom: “there is as much guidance in what does not and cannot happen in my life as there is in what can and does – maybe more.”⁸⁸

Life on the surface was simple at the farm. Franz fed us and housed us, asking for only occasional help with basic tasks (feeding the animals, stacking firewood). Not only did I have the time and space to reflect on the path behind me, integrating unexplored elements of my journey and my life, but I had the opportunity to go deeper within than I had ever gone before. I cocooned. I read and I wrote, spending hours a day in the ‘yoga cave’, exploring ancient Hindu texts alongside new age self-help books, letting my pain dissolve walls that had been built up over years (lifetimes?). Though tender, I felt incredibly alive. I began experimenting with fasting and meditation, acknowledging strong patterns of addiction and aversion within me. I explored the power of intention and gratitude, allowing myself to feel grateful in advance for things I wanted to realize, orienting myself toward healing, growth, and service. My faith far surpassing my fear, I took the next step in Jesus’ sermon on the mount – asking, seeking, knocking, opening myself more fully to God. Months bled together in this rhythm. Life on the farm brought calm and clarity. It healed me in more ways than I am likely aware, opening into moments of deep

⁸⁸ Palmer, 39.

inner stillness. Words from *Walden* speak to my experience at Ebbio: “there can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature, and has his senses still.”⁸⁹ As the Tuscan spring began, Tiago hit the road again. I left a few days later, and after stretching my legs around Italy for a few weeks, I returned to work the yoga season with Franz. My life on the farm this time around could not have been more different, often working up to 14 hours a day. But my heart was happy. Week after week, new yoga groups arrived, and we would start the program all over again. I spent a few more months on the farm in this pattern, with occasional jaunts around Italy and Eastern Europe.

Toward the end of my time at Ebbio, a Shaman visited the farm and invited me to join Franz and two others for an Ayahuasca ceremony – an entheogen traditionally used in the Amazon. The experience remains difficult to describe. At one point (perhaps nearly an hour in) I noticed my entire body was vibrating at an incredibly high frequency. When I realized that the air surrounding me was vibrating at that same frequency (somehow able to feel sensations beyond my body), any sense of separation dissolved. To put it as simply as I can, my heart exploded – viscerally – in complete surrender. Intuitively, I knew I was feeling the whole of existence vibrating in harmony, at once perfectly still yet positively buzzing with aliveness. Merton might say I was ‘lost in the splendor of a higher nature,’ yet there was no division between inner and outer or particular and universal. I *was* existence, vibrating in harmony with itself. There was no other – just one. I had never felt such complete bliss. This oneness was also utterly obvious – I had known it all my life. Augustine’s words ring true to this sense of knowing: “the person who knows the truth knows it, and he who knows it knows eternity.”⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2012), 117.

⁹⁰ Augustine, 7.10.16.

Though I did not sense ‘the truth’ was rooted in my *person* – my ‘James-ness’ – I knew I *was* existence, the very ground of being.

As I reflected on this in the next days, settling back to my more-or-less ‘ordinary’ state of consciousness, my conviction of this unity remained rock solid – the ceremony had not created a new experience but simply removed obstacles, allowing me to perceive fundamental oneness. Noting commonalities between mystical experiences, William James’ words resonate deeply with my experience – *ineffability* (can only be experienced, not imparted), *noetic quality* (implying transmission of knowledge), *transiency* (brief, fleeting) and *passivity* (abeyance of will).⁹¹ The insight of that night led me to focus my life. I felt I had glimpsed the purpose that all my seeking and journeying had been pointing toward (whether or not it was defined). My sense of who I was suddenly opened in new ways. I had to adjust. Surrendering dependencies, I gave up alcohol, sugar and meat, intent on tapping back into this clear, connected presence free of external substances. Even years later, my conviction of fundamental unity remains as sturdy as it was then. James agrees that “mystical states, strictly so called, are never merely interruptive. Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject.”⁹² Having been reading and writing about transcending dualities at the time of this ceremony, my first experiential glimpse more than eclipsed any concept I had encountered or conjured, yet affirmed my intuition; “it is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity.”⁹³

I traveled from the farm as free as I had ever been, alternating between stillness and movement, solitude and community. After waking and before bed I sat in intentional meditation,

⁹¹ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 295.

⁹² James, 296.

⁹³ James, 301.

and often spontaneously in between. I sat in stillness on buses and trains as landscapes slid by my window. At times I kept to myself but also found myself mixing and mingling with locals and other travelers. Even as freely as I moved, I was living with considerable discipline, fasting regularly, limiting my intake of certain foods, books, entertainment, and company. I had a sense that inner discipline somehow led to outer freedom. Even my commitment to presence was a discipline, abiding in vigilant awareness. As Bateson says, “self-care should include the cold shower as well as the scented tub. Real caring requires setting priorities and limits.”⁹⁴ Merton would describe the purpose of my discipline very differently, claiming that “the creative and mysterious inner self must be delivered from the wasteful, hedonistic and destructive ego that seeks only to cover itself with disguises.”⁹⁵ Nevertheless, as I traveled in this newfound discipline, my priority was clear, and I repeated it to myself frequently: *ride the road you’re on*. I had the instinctive sense that my purpose was in every step of my path. Any notion of destination as ‘elsewhere’ found no foothold in me. I knew deep down that everything I could ever need or want was somehow already *right here*. No outward goal could bring greater fulfillment than the ground of my own being. I had never felt so consistently grateful in all my life, and I could point to no specific source, though my gratitude often landed on almost anything around or within me.

Moving in this way, hitchhiking and busking through Eastern Europe, I encountered several free spirits traveling to a Rainbow Gathering in the woods of southern Slovakia. I joined them and spent a couple of months in the wild, sharing, dreaming, and expanding – stabilizing in presence all the while – nearly every day awash with a sense of synchronistic alignment. In the midst of this community, albeit provisional, I had the opportunity to see some of my lingering

⁹⁴ Bateson, 155.

⁹⁵ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 38.

inner obstacles and I was given the encouragement and the space to work through some of them. After our community peaked at over three thousand during the full moon, a few new friends began visioning our forward course. A dream of a three-man canoe trip down the Danube to the Black Sea morphed into a raft adventure with five of us. After about two weeks of building the raft on the outskirts of a small Hungarian village, we set out, feeling as free as could be. Life on the raft had a natural momentum. We were traveling, but relaxing, letting the river do much of the work. Whenever we set up camp on shore for the night, we all savoured the feeling of the ongoing flow of the river – somewhere inside – noticing the movement especially when we sat still. It was a peaceful feeling – it seemed connected to a deeper stillness within, a stillness that yet had a pulse to it, a sense of aliveness.

I eventually felt called into solitude again and began traveling on my own, gradually and casually finding my way to Istanbul (intending to fly from there to India). The layers of alignment that greeted me upon arrival are stunning still in hindsight – as is the broad and solid rainbow that welcomed me – but I cannot begin to describe them all here. It is enough to say that one day a simple but powerful feeling arose in my heart – *the search is over* – and I stood in the street weeping, seeing my *true self* reflected in every set of sparkling eyes passing by, everyone simultaneously emanating and marinating in presence, in God. Nothing was lacking. There was no friction or contrast, no polarity. There was no distance between anything, my heart a centre without edge. I was standing firmly on the bedrock of reality – an unassuming yet unassailable unity – undisturbed by apparent paradoxes or dualities of inner and outer or stillness and movement. My journey ended at that moment, my pilgrim trail held in the clear light of God's presence, the ground of being, common to all. It was not as though I had found any sort of answer, but the burning questions which had spurred my journey were nowhere to be found,

having burned off into oblivion. I simply was myself – as I had always been – not a personal self to be possessed, but the aliveness of life itself. The only difference seemed to be that now I could see it, no longer caught up in the quest.

Looking back, I realize that the goal of any pilgrimage can be a bit like a moving target. Whether stirred by desire, restlessness, or a sense of being ‘out of place,’ the key seems to be finding something to get you moving and then allowing the nature of the journey to bend its course in its own way, inclining itself with its own wisdom. Having left Canada lovesick, adrift, and generally afraid, my journey started with Jesus’ words – *do not worry about tomorrow*. This scripture served as an anchor, something to hold when everything else felt unsteady. Amidst inner turmoil and tension in Amsterdam, I stumbled upon a moment of embodied presence – a deep stillness – glimpsing something there that gave me the strength to carry on without any need of a fixed course ahead. Moving in this way freed me from the perceived pressures of time and space – the calendar and the map – eventually losing track of where I was or when it was, nevertheless moving freely, happily, at my own natural pace. Stillness and movement alternated in turn – nothing was forced – and my attention meandered from my surroundings to within, and then back again. A sense of inner tranquillity developed as my pilgrimage carried on in this way, seeking truth and light, accepting struggle, and learning to surrender what I could not control. As I focused on the pathway itself, rather than any idea of a finish line, my faith grew more and more. Just as many pilgrims discover, I came to see that God’s providence is known only in a backward glance, the path of life calling me ever forward, summoning a sense of trust in the unknown. There was a juxtaposition of polarities at play here, a creative tension between having ‘no fixed course’ yet living into a clear purpose – *presence* – ultimately walking somewhat of a pathless path. I came to recognize a subtle sense of movement in my stillness (a deep inner

aliveness) and a sense of stillness in my movement (a grounding calm). Paradox no longer struck me as problematic. Even committing myself to the moment and ‘abandoning’ plans was itself an orientation, an inner ‘direction’ which led me into sacred spaces – places, relationships, and experiences meeting deep inner needs. In the absence of long-term plans, I was still navigating and sustaining my life in the world. In this light, my pilgrimage was a recalibration of sorts, releasing past frameworks of time and movement, opening to a newfound freedom, at once centering and nourishing.

Alongside the relaxation of planning, my avid pursuit of *the light* grew gentler. No longer trying to capture the light, I was instead learning to commune with it, simultaneously tuning into a depth of divine guidance I never could have dreamt or intended. On the farm, I let my pain express itself more fully than I ever had before, slowing down and entering a deep cocoon of healing. Emerging transformed, I came to relate with the road in an even subtler way still, my movement softer and less frenetic, my focus grounded increasingly upon God’s fundamental, connective presence. My time on the Danube exemplified this malleable model of pilgrimage, both vessel and destination changing; a canoe trip bound for the Black Sea became a raft adventure to *wherever* – Istanbul for me. Responding to life as it emerged along the way, I remained a pilgrim – living a prayerful life out in the elements, my begging bowl in hand. By this point, the movement of pilgrimage itself had become a kind of stillness, lighted by the presence of God, giving each moment a depth of its own, much more profound than anything that could have been anticipated or planned. My arrival in Istanbul (and the astounding layers of alignment enveloping it) brought about a kenosis within me, an emptiness that became flooded by light. As countless pilgrims have tasted before me, any notions of path or purpose, inner or outer, stillness or movement were absorbed by the simple and stunningly obvious ground of

being, the living presence in every presence. These polarities – which had caused such strain along the way – were suddenly stripped of their oppositional power, left at best to be relative, inverse images of the other. I stood blissfully alone, connected to all creation, with only open space echoing like far off waves on a distant inner shore. (If only it could have stayed that way.)

PART THREE

The words ‘pilgrim’ and ‘pilgrimage’ have become, at least to secular ears, tainted with a tiresome piety. But the people I was meeting on my walks were inspiring and modest improvisers. All were using walking to make meaning for themselves – some simply, some elaborately; some briefly, some life-dominatingly – and I couldn’t find a better name for them than pilgrims.” – Robert Macfarlane⁹⁶

There are many ways to *do* pilgrimage. In the examples I have examined thus far – mostly religious, though not all – pilgrimage has emerged in unique ways, yet with many common threads. I have explored the complexity of understanding our inner and outer worlds – how God relates to humanity, how we relate to ‘true self’ – alongside the contrast of stillness and movement. I have shown how each of these polarities calls us to the underlying ground of presence, whether beyond or between them. This brief final section of the paper will invite a few other voices into the conversation, reflecting on these themes theoretically and theologically. Incorporating several different perspectives, I will seek to both deepen and focus engagement with the themes, eventually moving the conversation toward some form of temporary ‘resting place’, perhaps from where the exploration can later continue.

In his 1982 book *The Evolving Self*, developmental psychologist Robert Kegan describes people as synonymous with the process of meaning-making. For him, the person is “an ever progressive motion engaged in giving itself a new form.”⁹⁷ Simply put, he believes “the activity of being a person is the activity of meaning-making...we literally make sense.”⁹⁸ Whether intended or not, pilgrimage often serves as a vessel for such meaning-making in people’s lives, pilgrims releasing the past or coming to grips with trauma while journeying forward,

⁹⁶ Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), 236.

⁹⁷ Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 7-8.

⁹⁸ Kegan, 11.

approaching new horizons of hope or healing one step at a time. Ultimately, this is about gaining perspective on oneself and one's place in the world. Similar to Bateson, Kegan posits an upward-spiraling view of human development, driven by the interplay of *subject* and *object* – navigating successive 'evolutionary truces' (or balances) – our very sense of self evolving as we objectively subsume what we once took ourselves to be (but could not then see). Kegan depicts an ongoing 'panorganic' conversation between a person and their environment, asserting that the back-and-forth between *integration* and *differentiation* is the grounding phenomenon in personality.⁹⁹ The process can more simply be understood as the alternation between *independence* and *connection*, never settling for long (each evolutionary truce simultaneously an achievement and constraint for meaning-making): "we move back and forth in our struggle with this lifelong tension; that our balances are slightly *imbalanced*."¹⁰⁰ This back-and-forth can also be seen through the lens of stillness and movement, inner and outer – or solitude and community – people reflecting within themselves before and after engaging with the world. This opportunity to digest one's past and intend one's future only ever emerges on the fertile ground of presence, the realm of the pilgrim.

In her *Cultivating Wholeness*, pastoral psychotherapist Margaret Kornfeld uses the metaphor of gardening to help people face change and open to healing, reminding us of our innate wholeness. Asserting that community is not just *where* healing happens, but *how*, she encourages communication as a channel for connection and integration: "when we communicate, we are in deep relationship, communion, with others. We give. We receive. We do this with our total being – body, mind, soul. We think and we feel. We are whole. We are ourselves."¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Kegan, 44.

¹⁰⁰ Kegan, 108.

¹⁰¹ Margaret Kornfeld, *Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000, 21.

While community for most pilgrims is provisional – whether passing through or passing by – a degree of brevity and unfamiliarity (with either locals or other travelers) can paradoxically open space for greater depth and sharing. Affirming not only the importance of external communication, I would also encourage space for allowing different parts of our inner selves to connect, express, feel and heal. In the solitude more common to pilgrimage, it is often deep inner communication that can be most revealing and healing – whether communing with God or one’s ‘true self’ – inspiring lasting growth. Studying peacemakers in the midst of global conflicts, Marc Gopin raises the importance of *self-reflection*, a capacity “to engage in profound and extensive internal conversations in which we evaluate the good, the bad, what could be better, where we are going ethically and spiritually, and where we long to go.”¹⁰² The capacity and proclivity for self-reflection are perhaps among the most archetypal traits of the pilgrim, both leading to deep growth. Distinguishing between first and second order change, Kornfeld suggests the latter is more enduring, which I believe to be rooted more inwardly than externally: “in first order change, people adjust to their present situation, [whereas] second order change is transformation.”¹⁰³

Founder of perspective transformation theory, Jack Mezirow, like Kegan, also explores the intersection of the individual and social, trying to understand and articulate the inner workings of the meaning-making process. Just as Bateson advocates models of lifelong learning, Mezirow urges adults to develop a continual awareness of their assumptions and expectations. Naming three layers of change – psychological, convictional, and behavioural – Mezirow stresses contextual understanding for interpreting and responding to events in one’s life:

¹⁰² Marc Gopin, *Bridges Across an Impossible Divide: The Inner Lives of Arab and Jewish Peacemakers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

¹⁰³ Kornfeld, 7-8.

“formulating more dependable beliefs about our experience, assessing their contexts, seeking informed agreement on their meaning and justification, and making decisions on the resulting insights are central to the adult learning process.”¹⁰⁴ Again, we see the interplay of inner and outer, moving from solitude to community, seeking both clarity of perception and informed agreement. Discussing H. Richard Niebuhr’s idea of ‘Christ transforming culture,’ feminist theologian Letty Russell declares that “transformation is a two-way street.”¹⁰⁵ Similar to Bateson, Kegan and Mezirow (albeit through a theological lens), Russell says, “culture is always changing, and we are constantly needing to give an account of our [beliefs] in new circumstances.”¹⁰⁶

Concerned with the metaphor of Christ as ‘God’s Welcome,’ Russell advocates a supple faith that is in ongoing conversation with culture, as “both our culture and our Christology are being transformed.”¹⁰⁷ Moving in this way, the pilgrim allows their inner and outer worlds to be in relationship, challenging and enriching one another. By contrast, holding rigidly to archaic beliefs or theological doctrines, one risks not only irrelevance but a lack of capacity to connect or communicate with others. Healing trauma, as pilgrimage often facilitates, is one way to continue growing again, bringing limiting beliefs and prior struggles into the steady light of awareness, where perspective can transform even one’s past. In his book, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy*, Kenneth Pargament says, “positive spiritual reappraisals of negative events help people conserve not only their sense of benevolence and meaning in the world, but also their

¹⁰⁴ Jack Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 4.

¹⁰⁵ Letty Russell, *Just Hospitality: God’s Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 115.

¹⁰⁶ Russell, 115.

¹⁰⁷ Russell, 115.

relationship with the sacred.”¹⁰⁸ In this light, pilgrimage can open perspective and deep healing, mending our connection to God and one another, helping us to make sense of life.

Another clinical theorist who sheds considerable light on transformation (and inadvertently, on spirituality) is Carl Rogers. He says, “the curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I change.”¹⁰⁹ Theologian Pamela McCarroll puts this slightly differently, discussing a subject’s debilitating illness: “paradoxically, often when he accepts his limits, the limitlessness of grace opens up.”¹¹⁰ Most pilgrims straddle the chasm of this paradox in nearly every step, reaching out for some form of horizon, yet increasingly falling in love with the journey, and through it, themselves. Presence is not only a place of authenticity and rest, but also of deep healing and reconciliation. Presence dissolves and resolves the pressure or heaviness of any polarity. Science journalist John Horgan affirms that “one side effect of [presence] is that one becomes comfortable with paradoxes...they lose their polarity.”¹¹¹

Making a strong case for presence as a means of transformation (even advocating a degree of faith), Rogers later elaborates: “this process of the good life...involves the stretching and growing of becoming more and more of one’s potentialities. It involves the courage to be. It means launching oneself fully into the stream of life.”¹¹² Just as Augustine and Merton strive to ‘launch’ into life and faith, every pilgrim is invited to step beyond certainty, again and again, one step after another. McCarroll would lean into this bravery and faith, suggesting that “such

¹⁰⁸ Kenneth I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007), 101.

¹⁰⁹ Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), 17.

¹¹⁰ Pamela R. McCarroll, *The End of Hope – The Beginning* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 128.

¹¹¹ John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Spirituality Meets Science in the Search for Enlightenment*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 130.

¹¹² Rogers, 196.

paradoxical open-endedness requires trust, courage, perseverance, and an eye for hidden possibility.”¹¹³ At least for Christians, as exciting or as frightening as this prospect may be, this is precisely the kind of open-endedness Jesus has commissioned. Noting how Brother John of Taizé calls Jesus ‘the Pilgrim God,’ Webb-Mitchell reminds us how Jesus “called his disciples and other followers to assume the pilgrim life, carrying as little as possible, which would sustain them for the journey ahead.”¹¹⁴ In his survey of Christian mystical theology, Episcopal priest and theologian Mark A. McIntosh agrees that the pilgrim path “demands a willingness to let go...of the grasping for guarantees and for knowledge as a possession. It demands a moment of vulnerability.”¹¹⁵ The pilgrim is invited, through this vulnerability, into relationship with their ‘true self,’ with God, none other than the ground of being.

Much like Augustine and Merton struggle to discern God’s relationship to humanity, feminist theologian Sallie McFague wrestles with various potential metaphors and perspectives in her book *Life Abundant*. Promoting a relationship with a panentheistic God, at once transcendent *and* immanent, she frames the trinity in an eminently practical way: “the trinity is an attempt to express the full dimensions of the experience of God as the One in whom we live and move and have our being; the One from whom we come, to whom we return, and in whose presence we live every minute.”¹¹⁶ Affirming the radical intimacy of God in the world, McFague calls for a ‘double-vision,’ claiming “God is always present in mediated form, through

¹¹³ McCarroll, 6.

¹¹⁴ Webb-Mitchell, 38.

¹¹⁵ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 125.

¹¹⁶ Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 143.

something or someone else.”¹¹⁷ Aligning with the way many pilgrims relate to nature, McFague suggests that, “as the body of God, the world is a sacrament.”¹¹⁸

Using very different language and speaking from a very different context, Ralph Waldo Emerson nevertheless calls for a similar double-vision, also sensing God reflected both within us and in the world around us: “Nature is the [mirror image] of the soul, answering to it part for part...[Ultimately,] the ancient precept ‘Know thyself’ and the modern precept ‘Study nature’ become at last one maxim.”¹¹⁹ This ‘feedback loop’ of inner and outer worlds beautifully reflects the way many pilgrims move through their journeys, particularly out in nature. A sense of hope and wonder animates Emerson’s words as he narrates the merging of the particular and universal, even the broadest of polarities eventually grounding in the power of presence. Akin to the pilgrim’s poetic way of seeing life, McCarroll conveys a similar sense of hope and wonder in the light of creation’s incredible interconnection: “the opening of hope may come...in relationship to the community of creation when a sense of awe makes one aware of participating within the interconnectivity of all things...when eyes are opened and the world is seen with eyes of love.”¹²⁰ Making our way along a pilgrim trail, it is the grace of such moments of rapture that calls us from the chattering factions of our minds into the astonished silence of an attentive heart.

¹¹⁷ McFague, 150.

¹¹⁸ McFague, 150.

¹¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 56.

¹²⁰ McCarroll, 50.

CONCLUSION

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*
– T.S. Eliot, Little Gidding¹²¹

Like the journey of life, pilgrimage is rife with paradox, the interplay of polarities leading many to distraction and even destruction. Despite these hazards, this back-and-forth can also bear precious fruit – stretching and testing us yet offering clarity and focus. The tension between any of these polarities – stillness and movement, inner and outer, particular and universal – is positively buzzing with possibility. Serving as a steady backdrop upon which to register the contrast of these opposing pairs, pilgrimage offers an opportunity for invaluable insight; the pilgrim can at once gain perspective on who they have been in the world, and make meaningful changes going forward. Even greater than insight, experiencing these tensions can open to an encounter with the underlying ground of presence – a site of not only rest and connection but deep healing and transformation.

Most pilgrimage is not lasting, usually being a distinct journey. Even if important principles come home with the pilgrim – ideally they will – one is usually returning to some sense of normalcy, though they may be radically changed. Integration requires patience. Whatever sense of ultimacy one may encounter through pilgrimage – even presence – it can never be imposed onto or expected of others. Each person can only experience the ground of being for themselves, its implications as unique as the twists and turns of each pilgrim trail. *God speaks to us in our own language.* There is no one way to walk the pilgrim path. Through

¹²¹ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 59.

improvisation, Bateson depends upon presence to carry her across rifts of discontinuity, bringing care to her life, her family, and her work. Palmer calls for a deep sincerity, listening intently for inner wisdom, and having the patience to allow paradox to resolve itself, even yielding wholeness and health. Both Merton and Augustine model faith, surrendering certainty, and both express to God their deep gratitude for grace. In seeking the solitude of his ‘true self,’ Merton enters the ‘furnace of contemplation,’ and ultimately the freedom of God’s love. Augustine similarly struggles through his paradoxical relationship with God, eventually coming to trust God’s provision and to take rest in God’s presence. On my own meandering path, I have followed God’s light through glimpses of serendipity – layers of alignment and synchronicity summoning me to surrender into the sweet simplicity of presence. Yet the journey continues, as it does for us all, the river of life carrying us forward and showing us more ways to see and be. The subtlest, most fundamental pilgrimage will not end as much as change shape, forever refining itself through our seeking and conceding.

Amidst the many objectives that might drive any given pilgrimage, the ultimate ground will always be presence. This ground is stable enough to accommodate any short-term intentions, making no demands, yet endlessly extending the invitation of attentive rest – a state of grace. Whether we journey with a more spiritual or more scientific perspective, the ground of being will not discriminate, wholly open to one and all. We are invited to exercise faith – or at least trust – embracing the unknown, recognizing we can never contain or satisfyingly frame the very heart of life. However we journey and however we reflect on our changes – whether we talk about *transformation* or *conversion* (or something else) – it is our inner shift that most reflects in the world. The pilgrim’s progress is measured in presence. There are endless ways to name it – each pointing only as far as words are able. Where Pargament might say that, through

presence, “the discovery of the sacred...can begin to offset [the] forces of fragmentation,”¹²² Rogers would say that presence is simply “to be that self which one truly is.”¹²³ How we communicate matters, yet even it remains provisional, a vessel at best. The intellect can carry us only so far on this journey of becoming who we are, ushering us eventually to the edge of a persistent mystery. Cousineau says, “stepping into pilgrimage is like going into one’s own unknown.”¹²⁴ The Christian mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing* imparts that “the godliest knowledge of God is that which is known through ignorance.”¹²⁵ As ever, a step of faith is essential – leaning out to collaborate with all creation.

Emerson says that “art is the path of the creator to his work.”¹²⁶ He was confident “that process mattered more than product.”¹²⁷ From the Creator down to the most delicate creature, the moment of creation eclipses any outcome. It is no different for the pilgrim. Process is the priority – resolving the poles of paradox through presence. There is no destination beyond the ground of being already sustaining us – ever alive, ever still. This presence is a stillness *beyond* stillness and movement, the river of life gently tending its own course. We can neither dictate its flow nor choose how it will change us. At best, we can be grateful and engaged navigators, expressing our care and our need, sharing our hurt and our hope. Living together in this way guarantees support even as it demands surrender. Near the end of her brilliant novel, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard writes that the world boasts no guarantees, only that *our* needs *are* guaranteed, “by the most stringent of warrantees, in the plainest, truest words: knock; seek; ask.

¹²² Pargament, 73.

¹²³ Rogers, 163.

¹²⁴ Cousineau, 118.

¹²⁵ Unknown, *The Cloud of Unknowing (and other works)* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 96.

¹²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 56.

¹²⁷ Robert D. Richardson, *First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 38.

But you must read the fine print. ‘Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.’ That’s the catch...for you will come back transformed in a way you may not have bargained for.”¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York, Harper Perennial, 1998), 275.

Bibliography

- Augustine, Saint. *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Bateson, Mary Catherine. *Composing a Life*. New York: Grove Press, 1989.
- Berry, Wendell. *Jayber Crow: A Novel*. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000.
- Cousineau, Phil. *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred*. San Francisco: Conari Press, 2012.
- Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.
- Donaldson, Emily. "For authors Wade Davis and Bruce Kirkby, travel is a state of mind." *Globe & Mail*, December 5, 2020.
- Eliot, T.S. *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The American Scholar." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte. New York: Library of America, 1983.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "The Poet." In *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, edited by Joel Porte. New York: Library of America, 1983.
- Gopin, Marc. *Bridges Across an Impossible Divide: The Inner Lives of Arab and Jewish Peacemakers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Horgan, John. *Rational Mysticism: Spirituality Meets Science in the Search for Enlightenment*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- James, William. *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Kegan, Robert. *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, , 1982.
- Kornfeld, Margaret. *Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000.
- Macfarlane, Robert. *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012.
- Maugham, W. Somerset. *The Razor's Edge*. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.
- McCarroll, Pamela R. *The End of Hope – The Beginning*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014.
- McFague, Sallie. *Life Abundant*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- McIntosh, Mark A. *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.
- Merton, Thomas. *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York: New Directions, 1961.
- . *The Seven Storey Mountain: An Autobiography of Faith*. Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1998.
- . *Thoughts in Solitude*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958.

- Mezirow, Jack. *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Palmer, Parker. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Pargament, Kenneth I. *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2007.
- Pirsig, Robert M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*. New York: Harper Collins, 2005.
- Richardson, Robert D. *First We Read, Then We Write: Emerson on the Creative Process*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. Translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005.
- Rogers, Carl R. *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961.
- Russell, Letty. *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2012.
- Unknown. *The Cloud of Unknowing (and other works)*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.
- Webb-Mitchell, Brett. *Practicing Pilgrimage: On Being and Becoming God's Pilgrim People*. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016.