

THE ACT OF PILGRIMAGE

by

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Abstract

The Act of Pilgrimage discusses the identifying elements of both religious and secular pilgrimages and how a pilgrimage differs from other travel experiences. The author and 20 respondents to a questionnaire made a pilgrimage to one or more of four sacred sites in France: Buddhist Plum Village, the Christian healing waters of the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, the Goddess-worship-related labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral, and the dark pilgrimage site of Drancy Transit Camp where WWII French and refugee Jewish deportees were held. It became apparent to the author that intent and transformation are the core elements of a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a physical journey that can result in profound spiritual and psychological transformation. In a post-modern, consumer society a pilgrimage is still an effective catalyst for evoking experiences of reverence, defined here as heightened intellectual and emotional responses to the world, tinged with awe.

Keywords: Pilgrimage; Lourdes; Chartres Cathedral; Plum Village; Drancy Transit Camp

Subject Terms: Personal Pilgrimage; spiritual peak experiences; sacred journey; Holocaust

survivor

Dedication

Evan, *The Act of Pilgrimage* is dedicated to you for providing emotional, financial, and physical support looking after our busy household, in particular during these past three years when I was heading off to a GLS night class, or sitting in a corner reading, or at my desk working on a paper.

After 22 years, you can still make me laugh, whether the path we walk on is familiar or foreign. You're a keeper.

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One of the wisest decisions I made, just for me, was to apply for the SFU Graduate Liberal Studies program. I consider it a serendipitous moment when I sat with Dr. Patricia Gruben lamenting the fact I did not feel I was challenging myself or moving forward. “Have you heard of GLS?” she asked. Several months later, I was buying books and new pens. I am a flag-waving fan of GLS and it is with much appreciation that I say “thank you” to Dr. Jack Martin and Dr. Donald Grayston of my Advisory Committee, and to Dr. Ellie Stebner for agreeing to be the External Examiner; to Dr. Heesoon Bai, in whose class I wrote a paper that became the seed for this Final Project; to Dr. June Sturrock for her encouragement; and to Dr. Stephen Duguid for his humour and goodwill, evident even on days when I expect he would rather be walking in Rousseau country.

I want to thank the Graduate Liberal Studies Department for the very generous GLS Fellowship which allowed me to use one term solely for research, giving me the freedom to just sit and read some of the most wonderful books imaginable. Also, a special “thank you” to all the pilgrims who answered my questionnaire.

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INTRODUCTION:

Putting One Foot in Front of the Other

Journey's end. And what is a journey? Is it just distance traveled? Time spent? No, it's what happens on the way. It's the things that shape you. At the end of the journey, you're not the same. Mayor Richard Wilkins III.
Buffy the Vampire Slayer, "Graduation Day: Part 2".
Screenwriter Joss Whedon, 1997

Realizing the impact of both secular and religious pilgrimages on my life choices left me wondering about pilgrimage as a conscious act and about my fellow pilgrims. Where did this sacred journeying begin? Who is attracted to it? How have different cultures and religions encouraged or hampered this need for some of us to journey beyond our familiar horizon? What happens when a pilgrimage does not fulfill a pilgrim's expectations? Or when it does?

A pilgrimage is a sacred journey with challenges and a transformational experience at some point along the way. I define transformation as a meaningful emotional, physical, or psychological progression from one state of being to another. Pilgrimage is another term that is tossed about quite freely these days, used to describe the trip taken by a passionate Elvis groupie visiting Graceland as well as a Muslim's *hajj* to Mecca, and the walk Jewish and Christian pilgrims make to Jerusalem. I wonder, in a time when society values the freedom brought by technology-based knowledge, equipment, and toys, if there is a place for the simplicity of a pilgrimage in our busy lives?

To begin the search for this answer, it seems timely to consider just what a pilgrimage is, and how it differs from, say, a tourist visit. One of the primary elements that sets a pilgrimage apart from other types of travel is the intention of the journey,

which usually involves a longing, a search for reverence. I believe the act of pilgrimage includes an honouring of an object, a person, a particular location, or a memory. This feeling of reverence influences pilgrims by making them more receptive and heightens the influence of the object, place, or person being revered.

For instance, could a trip to Graceland, the home of Elvis Presley, be a pilgrimage? Absolutely, if the intention of the journey is to be in the presence of something considered sacred. The distinction between the religious and the profane is only one of subjective sanctification. A pilgrimage to the pubs and living quarters of Welsh poet Dylan Thomas is profane only because these places have not been recognized by an official church; they are no less powerful in their influence than the experiences reported to me by pilgrims visiting Chartres Cathedral.

Although different pilgrimages have different goals—some people seek physical or spiritual healing, others want to reaffirm their faith, walk in the footsteps of their guru, or visit the coastline where their great-grandfather died at Gallipoli—all pilgrimages involve a yearning for something more than what is experienced in daily life.

A secular question could be: Is a visit to Lourdes a pilgrimage or a tourist visit? It would appear that the answer depends on the intention of the visitor. Is the individual looking to discover or re-affirm his or her “relation to transcendence”? If the person is wishing to establish their faith in something other than themselves then, yes, a visit to Lourdes is a pilgrimage. If they are interested in visiting Lourdes out of curiosity rather than with a religious intent, then they are tourists.

According to psychologist James Fowler in *Stages of Faith*, “Faithis the most fundamental category in the human quest for relation to transcendence. Faith, it appears, is generic, a universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents of religious practice and belief” (Fowler 1981, 14). Fowler’s definition of faith can be seen to expand my definition of pilgrimage by saying that a pilgrimage is any journey in which the participant seeks to discover or re-affirm his or her faith. In many of my interview and participant questionnaire results I heard pilgrims express a hope that being close to a venerate object—listening to Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, touching the centre rosette stone of the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth, listening to a mass at Lourdes, or standing near a train car that had transported Jewish deportees to Auschwitz—would allow some of the sacred essence (feeling, belief, strength) to rub off on that individual. What is more, the act of pilgrimage presumes that whatever one is seeking is greater, more meaningful or more powerful than oneself, all essential qualities of reverence.

Another question I will talk about is whether there can be a failed pilgrimage. What happens if a person does not reach their pilgrimage site, or if they do reach it and there is no sense of the sacred, or if they do not experience the transformation they expected?

A final point has to do with the dark pilgrimage. One of the interviewees in this paper, Francine Christophe, is a Holocaust survivor who frequently visits the transit and concentration camps where she and other deportees endured fear, starvation, and beatings. Her yearning is to remember and to show reverence in

memory of those people who suffered. She has the strength to remain open to the memory of her suffering and that of fellow survivors and the dead. But her pilgrimages also allow a coming together with other survivors who share a common experience. Perhaps this sociological element in her pilgrimages allows her to feel less alone because the barriers separating her from others have been broken down.

The elements of pilgrimage I have talked about in this chapter are to be found in greater detail in the books of my bibliography but my purpose has been to re-discover these elements for myself through personal experiences and through interviews with fellow pilgrims. I wanted to share my findings of what pilgrims thought and felt while on their pilgrimage. I became particularly interested in finding out if they had what they would consider a transformational experience and what, if anything, had changed for them when they returned to their ordinary world.

As I began to do my initial research into *The Act of Pilgrimage*, I discovered very quickly that there is no lack of books to read on the topic of sacred journeys. I already had a passion for this genre and my bookshelves reflected my reading interest: non-fiction, and books involving someone heading off on their own on a journey that had personal meaning to them. My list of favourites is a long one, and constantly growing: Tony Horwitz' *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (he follows a trail of Civil War battlegrounds, even joining a group of dedicated "re-enactors"), Jan Wong's *red China blues: My Long Search from Mao to Now* (her 1972 decision to move from Canada to China and become a Maoist), Charles Montgomery's *The Last Heathen: Encounters with Ghosts and Ancestors in Melanesia* (his quest to uncover the truth about his missionary great-grandfather in Melanesia), and Linda Spalding's *A Dark Place in the Jungle: Science, Orang-utans, and Human Nature* (her attempt to learn the truth about anthropologist Birute Galdikas). Spalding

wrote that her decision to go to Borneo to find out about her hero, Galdikas, was based on “Rousseau’s prescription for us, who have drifted so far from our origins, to make two journeys: one to a place where life is still uncorrupted, and another into the self” (Spalding 1999, 3).

In Dr. Heesoon Bai’s Graduate Liberal Studies course “Worlds and Words”, I was constantly challenged to question how I make sense of the world around me. When my husband and I made the decision to move to France, I decided to expand my paper from Dr. Bai’s class into a personal journey to four sacred sites in France, and invite some people to (figuratively) walk with me. Sacred sites are traditionally places where people experience a heightened sense of a reality, an experience beyond what is normally experienced in everyday life. They seem to be able to facilitate this heightened sense of reality, an emotional response many of the pilgrims I interviewed reported experiencing. I choose three sacred sites based on personal interest: Buddhist Plum Village, Catholic Lourdes, and Goddess-related labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral. I was introduced to the idea of a “dark pilgrimage” by Dr. Donald Grayston who told me about “anti-pilgrimage”, the term he uses to describe a pilgrimage that is “a journey to a place of horror, but, as with pilgrimage itself, in the expectation of transformation” (personal communication, March 14, 2008). As an example of this, I choose Drancy Transit Camp as my fourth sacred site. I was curious to know how 76,000 French and refugee Jews could be kept in atrocious conditions—starved, tortured, and beaten—in the middle of a community of 35,000 residents, and in a suburb of Paris no less, without anyone stopping it.

I began to read first person, non-fiction, and fictional narratives written by pilgrims and travellers through the ages. I searched library data bases, combed bibliographies in the backs of books once I had read them, and happily accepted book suggestions from my committee members, SFU classmates, librarians, supermarket clerks, and anyone else I ended up talking to about this topic.

From there it was an easy step to start reading the pilgrimage classics, even as my book wish list grew daily. I started with Sir Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al Madinah and Mecca*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and prolific pilgrimage writers Paul Coelho, Phil Cousineau, and Jennifer Westwood. Each sacred site I had chosen took me down a different path. Drancy Transit Camp led me to books on the Vichy government and France's treatment of its Jewish population during WWII, such as Adam Rayski's *The Choice of the Jews Under Vichy: Between Submission and Resistance*, Primo Levi's pre-, during, and post-Holocaust autobiographies, *If This is a Man* and *The Truce*, and Agnès Humbert's *Résistance: A Woman's Journal of Struggle and Defiance in Occupied France*. I found two fictional stories about children's experiences of horror in Drancy, Tatiana de Rosnay's *Sarah's Key* and Matt Cohen's *Emotional Arithmetic*. Plum Village introduced me to mindfulness meditation and tempted me down a path of Vietnam War autobiographies because of Thich Nhat Hanh's peace work in the 1960s, a temptation I managed to ignore for the time being. Chartres Cathedral opened up the world of labyrinths and Goddess worship. Lourdes had the most written about it—much of it with a strong Christian agenda—and then I rediscovered a childhood movie I remember loving, Jennifer Jones in the 1943 classic black and white film, *The Song*

of Bernadette. I listened to Jennifer Warner's version of Leonard Cohen's "Song of Bernadette" over and over again, watched relevant documentaries, and searched databases for newspaper articles. (When I moved to France I ended up relying on email and websites more than I had initially planned; they were the most convenient way for me to double-check facts, find contacts and prospective interview subjects, and do additional research.) I wrote out my list of ten questions for my questionnaire, which I would present to five pilgrims from each sacred site, thereby providing me with a database of 20 different pilgrimage stories to draw from for my paper.

I planned to ensure that the questionnaire respondents represented a varied range of age, gender, culture, education, and religious affiliations. Some of my email contacts and in-person interviews resulted in what Robert Weiss, in *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Subjects*, called "snowball sampling" (Weiss 1995, 25), a method I came to rely on for the Drancy Transit Camp site in particular. When quoting from questionnaire respondents in my paper, I have used a combination of first names and pseudonyms (if they were given to me) put into quotation marks, as per the directions of the SFU Office of Research Ethics. (In fact, this became an unexpected fun element at the end of several interviews. I gave everyone the option of picking their own pseudonym, which often resulted in animated discussions as people considered different names before settling on one.)

I decided not to tape my interviews. Having worked as a journalist for many years, followed by 15 years of doing television documentary research, I felt confident relying on my notes to record responses and any additional observations.

Now that I had the pilgrimage sites chosen, and had begun the research, I needed to think about the structure of my final paper. Working in the world of documentary, television series, and film as a screenwriter, story editor, and teacher, the *Mythic Journey* has played a large role in my professional and creative life. I decided if I used a version of the *mythic journey*, it would allow me to write this paper as though we were all going on a series of pilgrimages together, ending with my “elixir” or “boon”, which in this case I thought of as this narrative analysis of my pilgrimage experiences. Author and filmmaker Phil Cousineau’s recurring use of the “Seven Stages of Pilgrimage” was similar to what I had in mind, but I chose to focus on five specific *mythic journey* elements. I have used this model because it reflects my experience and that of the others I have interviewed in response to the awakening or calling forth to be a pilgrim:

- The Ordinary World gives us the hero/heroine/pilgrim’s backstory, and introduces us to his or her inner and outer problems. In a pilgrim’s life, this could be illness, new love, lost love, or work challenges.
- The Call to Adventure is when something happens and emotions like discomfort, anger, or love tempt you to change your life direction. It is at this time that a Mentor often enters into your story, someone—your spouse, best friend, boss, priest—who helps you prepare for what is ahead. A pilgrim may experience a serendipitous event that results in internal and external preparation. Obstacles may have to be overcome, and there is a stripping away of everyday life. In this state of being open to whatever the world has to offer, the unexpected may happen. And this unexpected

happening may be a spiritual experience.

- Crossing the Threshold is the “turning point”, when you take up the Call to Adventure and echo TV character Jack Gage in 1984’s *Legman*, “The journey of a thousand miles begins by finding your shoes.”_ One important aspect of the pilgrimage experience is almost a cliché: it is the journey that counts, not the destination. By focusing on something other than oneself and in looking for the elixir or talisman, the pilgrim is distracted from egoistic self-focus and is wrenched away from regular routine life.
- The Ordeal means you have come to a dangerous place on the journey. Maybe you are fed up with the weather, or chattering travelling companions, or finding out there is civil unrest and increased army activity near your pilgrimage site. You start to think about turning back and giving up. This is often when something given to you by your mentor comes to the rescue: a wise saying, spare cash, or the address of a family friend with a hot shower. To complicate matters, you will often find yourself dealing with still more Tests, Allies, and Enemies, which can translate into challenges and temptations of all kinds as you walk your pilgrimage path. And while making the sacred journey and meeting people along the way who both supported (allies) and challenged (tests and enemies) you, the journey often becomes more meaningful than the actual arrival at the sacred site. People who set out to do sections of the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage trail from France to northwestern Spain usually

report it is the journey that changed them, not the arrival at the Santiago Catholic Church.

- The Return with the Elixir or Boon means you are back in your ordinary world but now you have a treasure from your journey: you are rested, you have completed a promise made to your father (or yourself), or you know what to do about that unresolved relationship issue. The treasure or reward may be something tangible, like a relic from the sacred site you visited (for example a piece of the Berlin Wall) or an emotional shift relating to a decision made, or even a physical manifestation if you return with improved health. This variety of responses points to the fact that the difference between an officially religious and a profane experience is only a matter of definition, not necessarily of intensity. Both can inspire a sense of awe and reverence. Some people may experience awe in the presence of great works of art or ancient ruins. The pilgrim who travels to Paris to be close to the ex-pat writers of the 1930s has to open herself up to re-imaginings, to sounds, smells, feelings and the spirit of place. She has to have a sense of reverence in order for her to experience something different outside of herself. What became of increasing interest to me was not just the initial pilgrimage journey and the reported journey experiences but specifically the effects these experiences had on people after they had returned home, when they re-entered their ordinary world: did the impact of their elixir stay with them long after the journey ended?

I continued with my reading and research and from September to December 2008. I visited the four pilgrimage sites. In my interviews with an eclectic range of people—Catholics, Unitarians, gay, straight, married, single, middle-aged, elders, Europeans, North Americans, men, women—I became even more aware of how people choose to blur the boundaries between the sacred and secular in their lives. My initial question—“Is there a place for the simplicity of a pilgrimage in our busy lives?”—began to become less important as I heard more and more pilgrimage stories. I started to wonder if folklore scholar Jennifer Westwood’s statement that we all had “an inborn yearning for an encounter with the divine” (Westwood 1997, 19) was the simple answer. Did these encounter somehow relate to American psychologist Abraham Maslow’s term, “peak experience”? I knew that the encounter moment was something I sought. I had an embarrassing thought: Was I a peak experience junkie?

I found plenty of kindred spirits along this pilgrimage path. A woman who picked the pseudonym “Snail”* (for the sacred spiral) for her questionnaire name wrote to me about her pilgrimage to Chartres Cathedral:

[I went] to feel the sacred, the divine, more intensely. The sacred is in everything, no matter what it is, good and bad, but sometimes we can’t feel it or experience it unless we go to a place that has a special energy, something that jolts us, it’s like a big battery that we can use to recharge our own batteries. Experiencing this energy and recharging changes us, allows us to see and feel differently. Also there’s the energy that others bring there and [there is] something about seeing others on the same path, on the same but different quests.

(*The names of all questionnaire respondents are presented in quotation marks and are either pseudonyms or first names only as per SFU Ethics guidelines.)

I acknowledge that I came to the subject of pilgrimage with my own biases, experiences, fears, and attractions. As David Myers and Malcolm Jeeves wrote in

PSYCHOLOGY Through the Eyes of Faith: “When combined and interacting, our biology, our past experience, and our current situation powerfully influence our behaviour” (Myers & Jeeves 2003, 72). They also influence our beliefs. I was gathering questions faster than I could read books or talk to people.

This is a good time to state that *The Act of Pilgrimage* has not been written with any scientific research intention. I approached each site visit as a personal sacred journey. This paper is a narrative analysis of personal experiences combined with observations and response comments from both my pilgrimage adventures and that of the pilgrims I met and interviewed and who answered my questionnaire. I have indulged myself in one particular area of this paper. I confess to a passion for collecting quotations and had assumed I would include numerous wise sayings in each section; but I found, reading book after book that used well-intentioned and oh so earnest quotations, I was losing interest. I decided to turn to my work world and have therefore assembled an eclectic selection of fun-but-relevant quotations from movies and television shows. Since we are all on this pilgrimage together, we might as well have some laughs along the way.

THE ORDINARY WORLD:

“I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For”*

*Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, ‘cause “the West is the best.” And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the Great White North. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild. Alexander Supertramp/Christopher McCandless, *Into the Wild*. Book by Jon Krakauer, Screenwriter Sean Penn, 2007 (*1987 U2 song)*

In her GLS “Worlds and Words” course outline, Dr. Heesoon Bai invited the class “to examine how we, *you and I*, engage with the world and make sense of it.” I found that sentence personally relevant. The non-fiction books I have read, the professional and volunteer work I have chosen, even the men I have been attracted to (nomads all), reflect this need of mine to go beyond my home territory, to push myself out of my comfort and safety zone and settle down in one unfamiliar place after another.

One of “Elizabeth’s” questionnaire comments illustrates how letting go or opening up can create a space in our lives to allow in new meanings: “[Pilgrimages] rock our world so that we can make room for something else, something new, and let go of the old that no longer serves us.” Cousineau asks, “What is the treasure we so vainly seek?” (Cousineau 1998, 23). Looking back at the first 17 years of my life, it is obvious to me both why I have an urge for travel and why there is a spiritual component to it. My family owned isolated fishing tourist camps in Northern Quebec where we would spend three to four months each year. In the spring, we would leave

Ottawa, Ontario, and fly in progressively smaller planes from one progressively smaller airport to another, finally boarding an Otter float plane in Labrador City, NFLD. One hour later, our bones rattled by the shaking plane and our ears numbed by the loud vibrations, we would land on the Kaniapiskau River in Quebec, 1690 kilometres north of Montreal.

We spent our bush months without electricity, hot running water, or flush toilets, living in cabins my parents had built, preparing meals using a propane fridge and stove, keeping warm with wood stoves, and using gas lanterns at night. Two or three times a month a bush plane would land at the camp, bringing in the food order, the all-important mail bag, a new box of books from the Montreal library, and a keen group of city fishermen. When autumn arrived, it was time to head back to civilization to attend school. Those 17 years of spring and fall family migrations planted a need in me to move on a regular basis. Exploring unfamiliar territory and experiencing change is my way of engaging with the world and making sense of it.

The spiritual component of that migration need came into the picture after I nearly died in a car crash when I was 17. As I lay unconscious in a ditch far from where the tumbling car finally landed, I had a spiritual experience that showed me what I believe awaits me when I die. It is glorious. It was an epiphany that left me wanting to search out other similar faith experiences of profound joy and peacefulness. Myers and Jeeves wrote: “To have a religious experience is thus to assign to sensory experience spiritual significance” (Myers & Jeeves 2003, 63). They quote psychiatric researcher Ronald Siegel, who dismisses the idea of near death experience, calling it a ‘hallucinatory activity of the brain’” (Myers & Jeeves 2003, 106). To which Myers

and Jeeves countered, “Even if the near death experience is hallucinatory, might it not also be genuinely mystical, an authentic and rare opportunity for spiritual insight?” (Myers & Jeeves 2003, 107).

When I was in the hospital recovering from the accident, I told some people what I had seen and heard. They listened and nodded in all the right places but I remember thinking, “They aren’t getting this.” I discovered many people are uncomfortable talking about faith-based experiences. One friend said, “Unless it can be scientifically proven, it ain’t so.” How could I begin to prove what I believe I had experienced? It was many years before I talked about that life-enhancing time, though I never forgot it and believe it shaped my life. In J.D. Clift and W.B. Clift’s *The Archetype of Pilgrimage: Outer Action with Inner Meaning*, I found a helpful Carl Jung reference: “Jung always accepted the psychic reality of religious experience, viewing it as part of the data of human personality” (Clift & Clift 2004, 83).

That spring day in 1972, begun in innocence and ending with what I believe was the gift of my life, has led me to travel extensively around the world, visiting religious, spiritual, and secular places. I have shared in an early morning flower, rice, and incense ritual in Bali, chanted *bhajans* (devotional songs) in Indian ashrams, and camped during a mouse plague in the shadow of Australian’s Uluru (Ayers) Rock in order to visit sacred Aboriginal women’s caves. Even though each journey has nourished me in experiencing the sacred, my theme song continues to be U2’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” Is this a common response among other pilgrims, I wonder, and just how many pilgrims actually find their elixir or boon during or at the end of their journey? Is that even necessary? Could it be that some of

us continue to go on pilgrimages in order to have what psychologist Abraham Maslow called “a peak experience”, an awareness of happiness and being at peace with the world? He wrote, “peak-experiences can be so wonderful that they can parallel the experience of dying....It is a kind of reconciliation and acceptance of death” (Maslow 1994, 65) in *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences*. He added “perhaps this amounts to saying that fear disappears” (66) and “death may lose its dread aspect” (76). Those are powerful words. What I felt when I regained consciousness an hour later in that ditch was total peace and joy, and I have never lost faith in where I am going when I die. I knew what Maslow meant when he wrote “people during and after peak-experiences characteristically feel lucky, fortunate, graced” (Maslow 1994, 68) because when the fear of death is lessened, the world is a wide-open place of possibilities. I have spent much of my life searching out those possibilities.

Travel writer Rosemary Mahoney, in *The Singular Pilgrim: Travels on Sacred Ground*, considers it an even deeper hunger. Mahoney is not interested in people’s religion but in their faith, what she calls “that palpable surge of the soul” (Mahoney 2003, 3). Dr. Bai’s course helped me begin to put a collage of images and experiences together. I began to get an inkling of the role pilgrimage has played in my life. I found a kindred spirit in “Greg”, a Plum Village respondent. Greg, who has two young children at home and tries to juggle activism work with a peaceful meditation practice, said he didn’t think that pilgrimage places were as important as the journey we take to reach them: “There is a saying in Spanish, ‘Peregrino, no hay camino. Se hace el camino al caminar’ (‘Pilgrim, there is no road. You make the road by

walking'). For me pilgrimages are ways to make the road." Our ordinary world provides us with all we need to start our sacred journey.

**THE CALL TO ADVENTURE:
“A Traveler’s Shade on My Head”***

*Fine Sheriff! Trots off on a pilgrimage to Canterbury at the first sign of
trouble! Prince John. Robin of Sherwood, “Rutterkin”.*
Screenwriter Richard Carpenter, 1984
(*a Haiku line by Japanese poet Basho)

It was only after my husband, Evan, our 16-year-old son, Alyd, and I had moved to southern France in August 2008 that I discovered how far we were living from all four of my research sites. This was regretful as I very quickly learned there are over 6,000 pilgrimage sites in western Europe, some very close to our village of Beaurecueil. Another WWII transit camp, *Les Camp des Milles*, and the breathtaking Basilica Sainte Marie Madeleine—as she is called in France, and where her supposed skull and a piece of forehead skin are on display in the crypt—are both under 30 minutes drive from our farmhouse. I had taken a harder route by choosing sites that were seven to ten hour’s drive from our village, definitely turning them into (sacred) journeys.

The word “pilgrimage” has Latin roots, coming from *peragrar*, “to go through the fields”, or *peregrines*, “a wanderer” (Westwood 1997, 20). Cousineau wrote: “The Bible, the Torah, the Koran, the Holy Texts of Hinduism and Buddhism, all admonish their followers to flock to the birthplace and tombs of the prophets, the sites where miracles occurred, or the paths they walked in search of enlightenment” (Cousineau 1998, xxiv). These are what most people consider traditional pilgrimages, where the pilgrim’s journey is related to his or her faith. It was also a journey that required money, courage, and strong shoes. “Much more time was spent going to and from the

sacred goal than in the holy place itself” was how Simon Coleman and John Elsner phrased it in *Pilgrimage Past and Present in the World Religions* (Coleman & Elsner 1995, 88). It was not an easy journey. Consider the pilgrims who walked the Santiago de Compostela route, The Way of St. James:

Untold millions made the journey south from every corner of the Continent and the British Isles, over the Pyrenees and across Iberia to Santiago. They were exposed to disease, highway robbery, battles between Moorish and Christian armies, false prophets, and swindlers, but still they ventured forth, seeking penance, invoking prayers, paying homage, and gaining questionable indulgences at the tomb of St. James (Shrady 1999, 167).

But not all pilgrimages had a saintly intention. By the 11th century, Christianity was divided “between Pope and Emperor in the west, with generations of antipopes being nominated by the emperors and the papacy itself often having to flee Rome” (Coleman & Elsner 1995, 95). These political and religious quarrels led to “a transformed attitude to the relationship between religion and war” (Coleman & Elsner 1995, 95), an approach intensified by an angry Pope Urban II whose obsession with getting the Holy Land back from the Muslims led him to declare the first Christian Crusade in 1095. Suddenly, a pilgrimage was no longer just a way to repent of one’s sins. It now involved massacres and bloodbaths. The Crusades may have started under the guise of a sense of religious right but they turned into a military expedition resulting in thousands of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim deaths. The Crusaders were promised instant salvation—indulgences were basically freedom cards for Purgatory, like Jail Free cards in Monopoly—if they died while fighting in the Holy Land, a promise that has a modern day equivalent in Islamic extremist suicide bombers.

The eventual loss of the Holy Land led “to increases in pilgrimage centres, churches and shrines in eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe” (Cousineau 1998, 104). Chaucer’s 14th century novel, *Canterbury Tales*, is just one example of pilgrims learning not only about themselves but the world around them as they travelled together from one town to the next.

Interest in pilgrimages continued to expand into the 20th century, as improved transportation methods eased access to even the remotest of pilgrimage sites, from the Hindu’s Mount Kailash Yatra in Tibet to the Inca’s Machu Picchu ruins in Peru.

A sideline benefit, both in the past and present pilgrimage experience, is that pilgrims have been directly involved in helping develop local and long-distant trade. They have also made some sacred sites the equivalent of tourist hot spots, with hostels, restaurants, and stalls selling religious artefacts springing up around the sites. Three hundred thousand people visit Machu Picchu each year, arriving by foot, bus, or train. When the *Sex and the City* film premiered on theatre screens, tours were quickly underway in New York City to let TV pilgrims visit some of the locations used during the show’s six seasons. Somebody can always figure out a way to make money off the dreams—and desperation?—of pilgrims. On any Christian festival day, it would be hard to distinguish the numbers of the faithful at Lourdes from the numbers of the faithful at Disneyland, the crowded streets in both places overflowing with people carrying souvenir bags.

Different religions have different views on, and expectations of, their followers and the practice of pilgrimage. According to Coleman and Elsner, Jesus did not make any specific references or recommendations to his followers regarding pilgrimages.

That has not stopped millions of Christian pilgrims from visiting Christian pilgrimage sites associated with Jesus' birth, life, crucifixion, and death. Dr. Donald Grayston told me "the meaning of [Jesus'] career trajectory has recently been interpreted as a pilgrimage: from God, i.e., home, through history to death, resurrection and ascension (the boon, as it were), and then returning to God" (email correspondence, February 24, 2009). Other Christian pilgrim destinations include Portugal's Shrine of Our Lady of Fatima and the Shrine of the Holy Shroud in Turin, Italy. One of the largest Christian gatherings took place on April 2, 2005, when three million travellers—many considered the trip a pilgrimage and called themselves pilgrims—congregated with four million residents of Rome at Vatican City for Pope John Paul II's funeral.

There are two distinct groupings of Jewish pilgrimage sites. First there are those places that go back to biblical times and are mainly in Israel, specifically Jerusalem. This is the case, even though historian Nicholas de Lange holds that "Jewish theology has tended to insist that God is not to be understood as 'present' in one spot more than in any other, and to reject any need for the mediation of saints, or any 'superstitious reverence for sacred spots'" (De Lange 1995, 3). Hundreds of thousands of tourists and pilgrims visit the Dome of the Rock or the Wailing Wall each year. Jerusalem is an anomaly in the world with three major religions, each with its own sacred texts—Christian, Jewish, and Muslim—laying spiritual claim to the same ground.

The second group of Jewish pilgrimage sites ensures we do not forget the Shoah and includes Holocaust museums located in many cities around the world, the concentration camps open to the public, and memorial sites like the small Mémorial de

la Déportation at the eastern end of Île de la Cité in Paris. “Thomas”, one of the Drancy Transit Camp questionnaire respondents, said he thought visits to dark pilgrimage sites were important because they allowed people “to feel and reflect on the mystery of being human, to commune with history in a tangible way and make it personally meaningful.”

Islam has one of the strongest expectations for its followers to complete a pilgrimage, making pilgrimage “the last of the great [five] pillars of [Islamic] faith . . . exceptional because its performance is necessary only once in a lifetime. This is the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia” (Coleman & Elsner 1995, 53). There are numerous rituals around the *hajj*, from wearing two plain white sheets (so everyone is equal in status) to purification rituals such as washing one’s body and cutting one’s hair and nails. The pilgrims walk around the Kaa’ba, the small building housing a sacred black stone in the centre of the square, kissing it if possible. Travel writer Bruce Chatwin called the *hajj* a “Sacred Journey, a ritual migration: to detach men from their sinful homes and reinstate, if temporarily, the equality of all men before God” (Chatwin, *The Songlines* 1987, 201). Coleman and Elsner explained it was not assumed all pilgrims would return home, since they faced disease, thirst, and warring tribes both going and coming from the *hajj*. The *hajj* has a modern set of difficulties in terms of the economic cost and the distance that most people must travel to reach Mecca.

A book that introduced the *hajj* to much of the world was written in 1853 by explorer Sir Richard Francis Burton. Burton disguised himself as a *pashtun* healer, a man of Afghan and Pakistani origin (this would explain any slips in his accent) and

travelled for four months to reach Mecca, becoming one of the few non-Muslims to ever set foot near the Kaa'ba. In his book, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, Burton comes across as racist, misogynist, and bigoted but he was also curious, patient, and knowledgeable in his pilgrim role.

Like American Mark Twain's book about his travels to the Middle East, Burton was a skilled storyteller, and his eloquent and visual writing introduced the rest of the world to places they could never hope to see as he described everything from the smells, noises, and food to the chaos of a port and the multitude of diseases—plague, smallpox, eye ailments, malaria, dysentery—and their local cures. He did not leave out the days of boredom that were as much a part of his travels as the dramatic interludes, all relayed in entertaining personal observations that often did not spare his own impatience and prejudice. He found himself in clan fights, on crowded ships, surviving on bad food, and making friends with rich sheiks and poor camel drivers.

He saw the other side of the pilgrim experience, the negative impact on the locals, writing that the Beni-Harb men of the Hyazi Tribe had become “corrupted by intercourse with pilgrims, retaining none of their ancestral qualities but greed of gain, revengefulness, pugnacity, and a frantic kind of bravery, displayed on rare occasions” (Burton 1965, 247).

Like all good pilgrims' journals, Burton included skilled sketches of desert villages and pilgrimage sites, and described, in great detail, the rituals pilgrims had to undergo before entering a tomb or a mosque. He even commented on the early graffiti he kept finding in sacred places: “We English wanderers are beginning to be shamed out of our ‘vulgar’ habit of scrubbing names and nonsense” (Burton 1965, 431).

American humorist Mark Twain published a book of travel articles in 1869 after completing his five month “pleasure pilgrimage” of Mediterranean Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. In *The Innocents Abroad or, The New Pilgrims’ Progress*, Twain wondered if travel was “broadening,” or “whether it is ‘narrowing’, meaning that it verifies prejudices and reinforces stereotypes,” wrote Jane Jacobs in the book’s introduction (Twain 2003, xxvi). “I do not think much of the Mosque of St. Sophia” Twain wrote. “They made me take off my boots and walk into the place in my stocking feet. I caught cold” (Twain 2003, 261-262). Not all pilgrims are, or claim to be, as adaptable as Burton.

Hinduism, which is as much a social system as it is a religion, is unique in that, unlike Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, its followers do not honour one but a series of sacred texts, including the four Vedas—Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharya—which contain ancient hymns and rituals. Dr. Grayston explained that “typically, Hindus express their devotion to God, the One, through worship offered to a particular avatar or face of God—Vishnu, Shiva, and so on” (email correspondence, February 24, 2009). Pilgrimages and holy events are scheduled on the basis of “astrological conjunctions” since Hinduism “distinguishes between auspicious and inauspicious times for performing important actions” (Coleman & Elsner 1995, 138). Coleman and Elsner remind us that over 90 percent of the world’s Hindus live in India and the majority of the Hindu pilgrimage sites—1800 and counting—are also in India, unlike the experience of Christians and Baha’is who must travel to other countries on their major pilgrimages.

My husband and I backpacked around the world with our children from July 2001 to July 2002. During our three months travelling through India, we visited many holy sites including the Fort Rock Temple in Tiruchirapalli, where three Hindu temples are literally carved out of rock. We met an elderly Hindu man, his middle-aged son, and two teenage grandchildren, all of them barefoot and dressed in black. We learned that the family came from Hyderabad and were on a 41-day pilgrimage to the shrine of Lord Ayyappa at Sabarimala to fulfill a vow. When the 14-year-old grandson was two years old, he had become very sick and the family had prayed and promised to take the boy to the Lord Ayyappa temple if he lived. They were now fulfilling their vow, 12 years later. This was day seven of their walking pilgrimage, with 34 days ahead of them of not wearing shoes, eating only vegetables, and spending their waking time concentrating on good thoughts. When we parted company, both families were left wondering if “we” could do what “they” were doing.

Each religion has its pilgrimage site rituals, which J.D. Clift and W.B. Clift describe as “a way of bringing symbolic meanings into our everyday reality” (Clift & Clift 2004, 15). Those words reminded me of mornings in Bali, Indonesia. Every day at dawn the Hindu Balinese people set out small, bright green palm leaves on the streets and sidewalks, each leaf filled with a few grains of rice, petals of vibrant red flowers, and a burning stick of incense. As scooter, car, and foot traffic increase, the leaves and their contents are crushed beneath tires and feet, or quickly eaten by a starving dog. It seemed a waste for such beautiful objects set out with a faith intention only to be destroyed, but it was explained to me that those squashed leaves and their contents, put down on the street and sidewalk each morning with love and gratitude,

had done their duty. They were still a part of the world, and new ones would be set out the following morning and the morning after that. Nothing was lost, I was told.

In India, devotees leave money and flowers on the statues, as well as touching and circumambulating the stupas (the dome shaped structure where sacred relics are kept), similar to the Muslim action of walking around the Kaa'ba seven times.

Canadian First Nations rituals often begin with a smudging, a cleansing of mind and body with sweet grass smoke, while Roman Catholics cross themselves when they enter a church or begin to pray, actions that show their respect for their religion and help them prepare their bodies and hearts to spend time in a spiritual place.

Buddhist pilgrimage sites are associated with Buddha's teaching and are found in India and Nepal at the four places related to his birth, enlightenment, teaching, and death. Other Buddhist sites can be found all over the world, from South Korea's Three Jewel Temples to the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan (destroyed in 2001 by the Taliban), and the stunningly beautiful Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia. In filmmakers Joanne Hershfield and Susan Lloyd's 1994 documentary, *Between Two Worlds: A Japanese Pilgrimage*, we are given the opportunity to meet pilgrims who are completing the 88-temple, over 1440-kilometre long pilgrimage around the Japanese island of Shikoku in honour of the Buddhist poet turned saint, Kôbô Daishi. Some of the pilgrims are doing it fast-food style, by bus and hitting as many of the temples each day as possible. Others walk all 1440 kilometres, either in stages or all at once. This pilgrimage circles around the island so that a pilgrim ends at his beginning point. Rather than walking, prostrations are another form of spiritual practice performed by Tibetan Buddhists as they approach shrines, believing it is not only good

for their heart and body health, but that it also brings peace and quiet to busy bodies and minds. Coleman and Elsner write, “for the Buddha, pilgrimage was a spiritual practice capable of easing the heart, bringing happiness, and taking the practitioner to a heaven-realm” (Coleman & Elsner 1995, 172). Such a description was similar to the way walking meditation was later described to me at Plum Village.

In the late 1600s, Japanese Haiku poet, Matsuo Basho, kept a pilgrimage journal that was turned into a little travel book, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North or The Narrow Way Within*. Using prose and haiku poetry, he described his five month journey in 1689 in the northern provinces of Japan:

another year is gone
a traveler’s shade on my head
straw sandals at my feet.

He used his journey as a metaphor for his inner process, writing down his reactions to things when they went wrong, or right, what translator Sam Hamill called “a long journey into the soul’s interior” (Basho 1991, xxiii). When Basho found it hard to find a particular religious monument, he implied that the difficulty was part of the process and made its eventual discovery much more meaningful. He found the struggle to find the monument worthwhile, as it “returned us to memories from a thousand years before. Such a moment is the reason for a pilgrimage: infirmities forgotten, the ancients remembered, joyous tears trembled in my eyes” (Basho 1991, 36). Finding a temple he wanted to visit bolted shut, he decided to sit nearby, noting that the “silence was profound. I sat, feeling my heart begin to open” (Basho 1991, 58).

Not everyone in history has been a fan of sacred journeys. Westwood mentions Martin Luther and his aversion to pilgrimages. Luther believed that not only was there “no theological or scriptural basis for the practice” but they might lead to the “sin of idolatry” (Westwood 1997, 115). Luther “believed that the only legitimate ‘pilgrimage’ was the journey that comes from reading the Scriptures, and that, instead of walking about, the true Christian should through prayer and meditation engage in introspection” (Westwood 1997, 144).

Although this paper is about people who have “gone away” to do their pilgrimage, we do not always have to travel to have a similar experience. GLS classmate “Rosa” stressed the importance of inner pilgrimages, saying we could just as easily “read a book or do therapy”. It is good to be reminded just how simple an act of pilgrimage, and our call to adventure, can be.

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD:

Flâneur Days

“Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will, To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” I’ve been thinking about that poem a lot lately. And I think what it says is that, while it’s tempting to play it safe, the more we’re willing to risk, the more alive we are. In the end, what we regret most are the chances we never took. And I hope that explains a little this journey on which I’m about to embark. Dr. Fraser Crane. Fraser, “Goodnight, Seattle: Part 2”. Screenwriters Christopher Lloyd, Joe Keenan, 1003 (*from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “Ulysses”)*

One recurring comment in the pilgrimage books I read and in the stories of the people I interviewed was “the call to a sacred journey...will not arrive in a logical way” (Cousineau 1998, 39). A pilgrim’s reason for setting forth may be that he wants to pay homage to a heroic or sacred person, place, or event, fulfill a vow, do penance, visit a place in nature renowned for its beauty, or experience a spiritual renewal. She might want a change from her ordinary routine and may choose to follow the path of someone else, like the thousands of pilgrims who walk or ride a bike from a few days to several months along one of the four traditional routes of the 800 to 1600 kilometre long Santiago de Compostela trail. This takes them from southern France or northern Spain and then west to the cathedral at Santiago where the remains of St. James are allegedly buried.

“Karen”, an American woman who has been involved in Goddess worship for many years, visits Chartres Cathedral often in her role as priestess, and regularly brings groups of women from the United States to visit what she believes is an important pilgrimage site: “Perhaps because so many of my sacred pilgrimages have been overseas and have been great sacrifices in energy, time, money, emotion and

effort I consider these trips the high points of my life and probably some of the most important things I've done personally I feel these trips are a great privilege and honor, as well as an obligation and duty.”

Or perhaps the pilgrims will forge their own way, like Norwegian ethnographer and explorer Thor Heyerdahl. Heyerdahl's decision to build and sail his Kon-Tiki raft across the Pacific Ocean, to prove that ancient Polynesians could have done the same in search of trade, began “by a fire on a South Sea island, where an old native sat telling legends and stories of his tribe” (Heyerdahl 1950, 29). His book, *Kon-Tiki: Across the Pacific in a Raft*, brings us back to the question: Was he doing a pilgrimage (he was travelling with intent, suffered hardships, reached his goal, and had a transformational experience) or was it a voyage of discovery (new information was found and history impacted as a result)? Is it enough to call it a pilgrimage if the journey has both an interior (the necessary skills to survive) and exterior (the sailing route) challenge, along with a specific goal (make it from South America to the Tuamotu Islands, 7000 kilometres away)? Maybe one man's pilgrimage can just as easily be another man's quest for adventure.

This leads to the old question: What is the difference between a pilgrim and a tourist? Must the definition of a pilgrimage always include a religious aspect, a need for penance, a journey of trials and tribulations? The answer seems quite clear-cut to the Clifts: “What distinguishes the pilgrim from the tourist is the pilgrim's ability to relate the experience to a larger framework of meaning” (Clift & Clift 2004, 75). Cousineau added to that statement, saying it is “the intention of attention, the quality of the curiosity” (Cousineau 1998, 99). It seems equally possible that any of the words

used above could overlap; a voyage of discovery could become a pilgrimage or a pilgrimage could also include tourist side-trips. We do not have to have a spiritual “aha” with every moment of the journey, something Mark Twain understood: “I used to worship the genius of Michael Angelo...But I do not want Michael Angelo for breakfast—for luncheon—for dinner—for tea—for supper—for in-between meals” (Twain 2003, 206).

So by considering intent, not outcome, it is easier to differentiate between the tourist and the pilgrim. For example, the tourist who visits many of the world's pilgrimage sites not with the intent of transformation but solely out of intellectual interest is not a pilgrim. The opposite can also happen. A tourist can travel to a pilgrimage site without any intention of having a transformational experience, and if one happens, they move from tourist to pilgrim. SFU professor Dr. Jack Martin saw this as a further definition of pilgrimage since it “seems that it is either the intent to have or the actual experiencing of a transformational experience (even without intent) that defines a pilgrimage” (email correspondence, April 24, 2009).

Along with the intent that may start a pilgrim taking his or her first steps on their journey, setting out for a pilgrimage requires preparation, everything from financial planning to perhaps a ritual or ceremony. In medieval Europe, a pilgrim was easily recognized in his outfit of a long loose smock, hood, cape, broad-brimmed hat, and staff while today's pilgrims might dress in hiking boots and shorts, in *ihrams* (the simple white cloth worn by *hajj* pilgrims), or designer running shoes. The one historical item that remains consistent is some sort of staff, made from either wood or metal.

GLS Cohort member “Brad” believes what we choose to leave behind is as important as what we pack and bring with us. He describes pilgrimage as “an act of shedding”, resulting in pilgrims who are “ready to receive” at the end of the journey. I heard an echo of Brad’s comment months later from Vancouver Buddhist “Jenna”, as we drank tea and talked about mindfulness meditation. She thought of this shedding as an act of renunciation, of giving up something old to make room for something new.

This openness that results from shedding physical and emotional clutter gives a pilgrim both internal and external space to experience a transformation, and to be filled with something revitalizing. Basho sold his house before he set out on the first of many long journeys. “Karen” made a related comment in her questionnaire:

“Pilgrimage demands a certain level of commitment to open oneself to the unknown and to the change that may develop as a result of the journey.” Regardless of the reason for the call the pilgrim hears, there is a recurring pilgrim experience, which Brian Bouldrey discussed in detail in *Travelling Souls: Contemporary Pilgrimage Stories*: pilgrims are challenged to cross cultural, geographic, language, and physical borders.

After reading Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah’s 2006 book, *Cosmopolitanism*, I wondered if a pilgrim is just naturally cosmopolitan at heart, especially if it is the pilgrim’s curiosity that leads him or her on a search for something not found in their own lives. Appiah writes “cosmopolitanism is about intelligence and curiosity, as well as engagement” (Appiah 2006, 108). I hunger for that engagement and actively search it out, an action I heard had been repeated in many of the pilgrim stories I was told. But is this just another way of reminding people to be

open and thoughtful, to practise a kind of Buddhist mindfulness? And if mindfulness is our constant attempt to bring ourselves back to the present moment and revel in the sacredness of it, then perhaps pilgrimage is just one of many ways—including voyages of discovery and even an extreme sport like rock climbing that demands intense focus—to bring us back to what writer and spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle calls the “now.”

“A cosmopolitan openness to the world is perfectly consistent with picking and choosing among the options you find in your search,” Appiah had said early on in his book (Appiah 2006, 5). This would certainly explain why many people include elements of different faiths in their lives with seeming ease. I am a Unitarian Universalist but I regularly participate in a First Nations’ sweet grass cleansing ceremony and now often do a Buddhist walking meditation.

Living in France has added a word to my pilgrimage language—*flâneur*—used by Edmund White as the title of his book to describe “the aimless stroller who loses himself in the crowd, who goes where-ever caprice or curiosity directs his or her steps” (White 2001, 16). That is a more gentle approach than Cousineau’s: “To set out on a pilgrimage is to throw down a challenge to everyday life” (Cousineau 1998, xi).

J.D. Clift. and W.B. Clift mention another element regarding pilgrimage.

On a more unconscious level. . . the ‘difficulty of access’ of the pilgrimage site may be expressive or symbolic of the fact that all growth, all change in life requires effort, requires a movement away from the place where we have been, requires a willingness to leave the comfort of the status quo behind (Clift & Clift 2004, 70).

Or maybe people just need to take a break from how they have lived their lives so far. As “Joy”, a Plum Village resident told me, pilgrimage “means to get away

from my daily life. To have time to rest, to heal, to make some decisions about my life.”

Writer and photographer “Michelle” wondered if pilgrimages were the lazy person’s approach to transformation, as just another way to externalize change: “I go [to the pilgrimage site] expecting to be healed or spiritually awakened by an external force instead of doing the work myself. I bathe in the water of Lourdes hoping to walk again and because it beats spending five years in physiotherapy.” She has travelled extensively around the world visiting many pilgrimage sites representing a variety of religions and has come to believe that pilgrimage sites can be a religious crutch for some people.

It may take an emotional, physical, or spiritual turning point of some kind to force people to cross the threshold and leave the comfort of their regular lives, but we are also the ones who decide just how hard, or easy, our leaving will be.

THE ORDEAL:
Dancing Lessons From God

The trick is to keep moving forward, to let go of the fear and the regret that slow us down and keep us from enjoying a journey that will be over too soon. Yes, there will be unexpected bends in the road, shocking surprises we didn't see coming, but that's really the point, don't you think?

Mary Alice. *Desperate Housewives*, "Remember: Part 2".

Screenwriters Marc Cherry, Jenna Bans, 2004

"The middle stage of a pilgrimage is marked by an awareness of a temporary *release from social ties* which in itself can contribute to a sense of renewal and refreshment. We tend to feel 'freer' when we are away from home. . . . This liminal period also involves difficulties, perhaps even dangers, a sense of isolation" (Clift & Clift 2004, 13). Another way to look at it can be found in a comment from one of the characters in author Kurt Vonnegut's 1963 novel, *Cat's Cradle*: "Peculiar travel suggestions are dancing lessons from God."

"Heidi" is a Canadian woman who has travelled extensively all her life, both for work and play. In 2003 she found herself going through what she called a "protracted and painful" divorce (email correspondence, February 16, 2008) after 30 years of marriage. She had also developed a debilitating auto-immune disease. One day she walked past a travel agency and saw a poster advertising a cheap flight to Spain to do the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage walk; she impetuously booked a seat on the first available flight.

She prepared herself by reading memoirs, blogs, and travel books, and talked to anyone who knew about this world-famous, 1200-year-old pilgrimage on which

convicted criminals were once sent as a form of penitence (Westwood 1997, 30).

Heidi read of others who had trained for weeks, but she chose to prepare differently:

My training consisted of one day on a treadmill. The pilgrimage I embarked upon was not motivated by religion, or even with the goal of completing the entire Camino Frances. I looked upon it as an experience wherein I would hopefully reclaim my personal and physical strength, and rediscover my character. Ultimately, I saw it as a vehicle through which I would have no alternative other than to face my deepest fears.

Westwood wrote that “pilgrimage is a journey *to*, not an escape from”

(Westwood 1997, 51), and although Heidi might have taken her first pilgrimage steps in order to get away from her illness and divorce, she quickly found herself on the road to health and a joy of life once again. It has been five years since she completed her pilgrimage and she continues to feel blessed and rejuvenated by the experience.

Heidi’s story is an example of the important role intention plays in a pilgrim’s journey. Another example is found in Canadian writer Margaret Atwood’s short story “To Beechy Island”, as quoted in Katherine Govier’s *Solo: Writers on Pilgrimage*. Atwood’s narrator wonders, “How much of the essence of a pilgrimage resides in the intention, rather than in the journey as such? Motion is involved, relics not necessary. But the motion has to be protracted—a stroll to the corner store for a loaf of bread wouldn’t qualify” (Atwood, in Grover 2004, 205).

Heidi is not alone in being someone who set out with an intent “to escape from”, in direct opposition to Westwood’s previous comment. “John” is a biologist who takes an annual spring trip, travelling by canoe, to reach the North Arm of Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories where he camps for three weeks on a rocky shoreline outcrop. He started going in the summer of 1982, having just ended an

intense relationship and needing “to purge my system” (email correspondence, February 16, 2008). “It didn’t work [at first]...but it did open my eyes to a lot of things. I have been going down that creek to the North Arm just about every spring since. Sometimes on my own, sometimes with company. It feels like I am going to a sacred place; it somehow rejuvenates me inside.” He has had a transformation experience in a place that has become sacred, and which he now chooses to share with others.

John’s experience of pain leading him to search out—and find—a place to heal is similar to that of “Joy” from Ireland. Feeling suicidal, she went to Plum Village for three months, turning to daily meditation and a calm environment as one way of coming to terms with her problems. When she left, she felt more able to deal with her life.

What many people forget initially, when they take that first pilgrimage step, is how monotony, fear, and discomfort are often part of the path during this ordeal time of the mythic journey. There are also the hours of boredom or the exhaustion that comes from trying to get to—and see—everything along the way or at the sacred site. Mark Twain, in his typical acerbic style, knew there can be too much of a good thing when you are going from pilgrimage site to pilgrimage site: “We consulted the guide-books and were rejoiced to know that there were no sights in Odessa to see: and so we had one good, untrammelled holy-day on our hands” (Twain 2003, 283). When people leave the comfort of their lives and travel to other lands, part of their journey test is to see how they adapt to the new world they have entered. Twain wrote that he found it hard to travel in Syria, seeing one starving child after another: “I shall never enjoy a

meal in this distressful country. To think of eating three times every day under such circumstances for three weeks yet—it is worse punishment than riding all day in the sun” (Twain 2003, 334). This is one example of a pilgrim’s internal ordeal—the suffering of doubt and guilt.

Another problem that pilgrims face is found in Australian writer Kate Grenville’s story, “Mr. Wiseman’s Villa”, also quoted in Govier’s *Solo: Writers on Pilgrimage*. Grenville’s character describes her search in what sounds like uncomfortably familiar language to me: “I came here wanting—to put it crudely—some kind of thrill” (Grenville, in Govier 2004, 21). Grenville adds:

People asked what I was looking for. I wasn’t particular, I said. Just—high stakes. Suffering, surrender. Ennoblement, or the hope of it. Humiliation, always a danger, because to be in transit is to lose dignity; locals regard passing pilgrims, like all tourists, as pests. Farce, no doubt, because hopes for transformation through travel are bound to be dashed (Grenville, in Govier 2004, ix).

Then there is the mother of all problems: You arrive at your pilgrimage site and suddenly you experience a different kind of stress from what you supposedly left behind. What if you arrive at your destination and nothing happens? Or, what if you experience a moment of powerful connection, that flush of happiness or lightening of your emotional load—whatever the moment most desired is for you. Then what? I found some answers to these questions when I interviewed pilgrims from Lourdes and their answers are in the Lourdes chapter.

To extend the pilgrimage idea outside a faith-based box, let us consider some secular journeys to what have become sacred places not directly related to religion or God in the traditional sense. This kind of pilgrimage could include the thousands of

20- to 30-year-old Australians who annually make the long, overseas trip to Gallipoli, Turkey. They come to participate in a dawn ceremony on April 25, ANZAC Day, to commemorate the WWI sacrifices made by their relatives. Then there are the passionate fans of The Doors rock musician Jim Morrison who visit—and often deface—his gravesite in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. (I was told by “Snail”, who is writing a book about secular pilgrimages, that Morrison’s grave is the third most visited site in Paris.)

Can the secular be separated from the sacred? This led me to wonder about a “dark pilgrimage”, a journey that is painful, with the endpoint sacred for all the wrong reasons, such as Auschwitz Concentration Camp or a POW Memorial Camp in Vietnam. SFU professor Dr. Don Grayston introduced me to the concept, which he calls “anti-pilgrimage” and defines as “a journey to a place of horror but also in the expectation of transformation” (personal communication, March 14, 2008).

Vancouver Buddhist “Jenna’s” dark-pilgrimage story came unexpectedly into her life after her minister father was brutally murdered in Bermuda. Although the murderer was caught and jailed, Jenna found it hard to find any peace or acceptance in dealing with her father’s death. Five years later, the murderer became a born-again Christian and started writing to her, asking for her forgiveness. Their correspondence is now part of a very powerful story that Jenna has told to different religious and secular groups over the past four years. As a Buddhist, she was challenged to practice forgiveness, and had to wrestle with some strong personal demons (she would never use words like “challenge” or “wrestle”) but, eventually, she reached a point where she felt able to return to Bermuda and meet the jailed man. It took many meetings for the

two of them to reach a common ground of understanding. She says that process of pain gave her the chance to understand what forgiveness really meant for the first time in her life.

Forgiveness is a potent elixir to bring back from a pilgrimage. I wondered if Jenna had any overwhelming “aha!” moments, any peak experiences that might have come with such a powerful change of heart. I told her about my near death experience and asked her what she thought of the incident. She just shook her head, “You can’t have a judging mind and a peak experience at the same time.”

But what if it doesn’t work out, if you are not healed at Lourdes? “Then we say something is wrong with me, or this place,” Jenna said. “We try to recreate what will give us that peak experience and that peak experience is available to us right now! A pilgrimage is giving up something. Being a renunciant.”

I was reminded of Jenna’s comments when I read more of Maslow: “The problem with someone craving a peak experience is that, stronger and stronger stimuli are needed to produce the same response” (Maslow 1994, ix). As celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain said in Episode One of his 2002 TV series, *A Cook’s Tour*:

As a cook, tastes and smells are my memories, and I’m in search of some new ones. So I’m leaving New York and hoping to have a few epiphanies around the world. I’m looking for extremes of emotion and experience. I’ll try anything. I’ll risk everything. I have nothing to lose.

“The two religions of mankind tend to be the peakers and the non-peakers,” Maslow wrote, “those who have private, personal, transcendent, core-religious experiences easily and often and who accept them and make use of them, and, on the other hand, those who have never had them or who repress or suppress them and who,

therefore, cannot make use of them for their personal therapy, personal growth, or personal fulfillment” (Maslow 1994, 29). He wrote later in his book: “The world seen in the peak-experiences is seen only as beautiful, good, desirable, worthwhile, etc, and is never experienced as evil or undesirable” (Maslow 1994, 63). Yet I was left wondering about horrible peak experiences, such as rape. Can a peak experience be “bad”? Or does the action of rape mean the experience cannot be considered a “peak experience”? I was still not sure, even after reading Maslow’s comment, “In the peak-experience . . . the bad things about life are accepted more totally than they are at other times. It is as if the peak-experience reconciled people to the presence of evil in the world” (Maslow 1994, 64). Dr. Grayston helped me find a clearer answer with his response to my question about bad peak experiences by stating that “a peak-experience can reconcile someone to the evil in the world. . . . This is not to say that evil is no longer evil, but somehow one accepts its reality while continuing to oppose it, rather than expend energy in resisting its very existence” (personal communication, February 26, 2009). That is a comforting perspective on how peak experiences can not only impact lives in a positive way but also give people additional tools of acceptance and reconciliation to help deal with future challenges.

Return with the Elixir:

The Awakening Visits to Four Pilgrimage Sites

Have you come home from your journey? Have you come home from your path? Dream, dear one . . . dream. Narrator. *Andromeda*.
Screenwriter Robert Hewett Wolfe, 2000

What about the end of a pilgrimage? Are individuals any different? Does each pilgrim achieve what he or she set out to do, to feel, and to see? And what happens if, at the end of a pilgrimage, there is no transformational experience? I keep coming back to that question. What if praying to the relics of Mary Magdalene do not cure your illness, sorrows, or fears? Or, what if, as novelist Linda Spalding relates in *A Dark Place in the Jungle*, her non-fiction book describing her travels to Borneo to meet her hero orang-utan scientist Birute Galdikas, she discovers her superstar has feet of clay? Is it still a pilgrimage? There has been a transformation, but it is one of disappointment rather than renewal. For Heidi, the Santiago de Compostela journey was a complete success: “The pilgrimage awoke an insatiable desire in me for adventure and travel. My creativity was brought forth. In the five years since, I have travelled extensively. My career took off. I am empowered. I am fulfilled creatively.” But could it be that, rather than finding a new understanding of life, her pilgrimage allowed her to uncover a strength and joy that had always been there but which was submerged under her life choices up to that time? Heidi did not really care about the how and why. For her, it has been enough that “my pilgrimage changed my life. I feel blessed.”

“John” experience of bringing friends to his sacred space on Great Slave Lake introduced me to the possibility that a sacred site can be desacralized. He believes

that the actions of the people he brings can change the physical energy of the place sufficiently to render that sacred energy impotent. When I asked him if he thought he would ever stop taking friends—including his new girlfriend—to his isolated Great Slave Lake campsite, he said that would only happen “if the sacredness of the space becomes tainted by a visitor’s disinterest. . . . it means so much to me, I want to share it and the more I share it, the less special it can become, depending on how the people treat it.” It would seem then as people change, so can the places they call sacred.

Westwood wrote that “the awakening” that can happen as a result of a pilgrimage “may be wonderful or painful—it is always enlarging” (Westwood 1997, 185). My four pilgrimage site visits were not easy journeys; each one, in its own way, brought me face to face with my judgements, my fear of failure, and my discomfort at possibly appearing intrusive and bothering someone when he or she was in the middle of a spiritual moment. I found it initially uncomfortable to arrive at a sacred site with an agenda, to be always taking notes, making observations, and trying to find people who would talk to me and maybe answer my questionnaire, while also keeping track of my own pilgrim experience. I realized after my first pilgrimage site visit—to Lourdes—that it felt as if I was always *on*, always looking for visual, aural, and tactile elements to add to my site report, and checking people out to see if they seemed approachable. I wandered often and rarely sat. I felt sometimes like a pilgrimage stalker. In the beginning, there was no *flâneur* ease about my site visits. It was only at Plum Village, and by the time most of my research field work and interviews were completed, that I started to relax.

The elixir I brought back had a plural element to it: a re-affirmed belief in the good will of people and the beginning of an understanding that my peak experience search is not an unholy one, and is something I will be on for the rest of my life because there will always be another sacred site just down the road, or in a valley, or up that mountain.

CHRISTIAN HEALING WATERS OF OUR LADY OF LOURDES:

Hope Made Visible

*Yeah, I'm gonna give him one more year, and then
I'm goin' to Lourdes.* Alvy Singer. *Annie Hall*.
Screenwriters Woody Allen, Marshall Brickman, 1977

My visit to Lourdes resulted from a spur of the moment decision. Evan, Alyd, and I had just moved into the 200-year-old farmhouse in southern France which would be our home for the next 12 months, but the sun was shining, the road was calling, and we still had traveller's itchy feet. None of us felt ready to settle into domestic life. Within 24 hours of talking about it, we were in the car and on the road for the seven-hour drive (each way) to Lourdes, in the foothills of the Pyrenees. The Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes became famous in 1858 after the Virgin Mary reportedly appeared to a poor, chronically ill 14-year-old girl named Bernadette. Lourdes was the second oldest pilgrimage site of the four I researched. Chartres Cathedral labyrinth was built around 1200 but the site had originally been used for pagan worship for hundreds of years before. In contrast, Drancy Transit Camp's time of infamy was from 1941 to 1944, while Plum Village is celebrating its 27 birthday in 2009.

The history of Lourdes is well known and has been written about in thousands of books in many languages, and told in movies and songs. I have a childhood memory of watching actress Jennifer Jones forever looking heaven-ward in her Hollywood portrayal of Bernadette and loved the story of a young girl who claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary in a grotto that is now one of the most visited pilgrimage sites in the world. "Lucille", a retired teacher who has been to Lourdes on many

pilgrimages, said she also remembered seeing the Jennifer Jones film and as a result, felt “Lourdes would be an experience that would give me spiritual healing and peace.” She set out with an intention of experience and found it.

The drive to Lourdes in southwest France involves long winding highways and roads through beautiful rolling farmland. If you go in the fall, you’ll pass fields of faded sunflowers waving in the strong winds alternating with fields of five-foot-tall corn stocks. The first thing you’ll notice when you get close to the town of Lourdes is the number of lodgings offered: Bed and Breakfasts, apartments for rent, campsites, hostels, and self-catering residences. Add in over 300 hotels in this town of only 15,000 permanent residents and you get a sense of the millions who visit each year.

Although it was once just a small farming community, 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous’ claim to have been visited by the Virgin Mary 18 times over several months in 1858 eventually turned the town into a world-renowned site. During one of the apparitions by Mary, Bernadette was told to dig in the dirt at the grotto, which she did, and a spring of pure water appeared. To this day, the spring has never run dry and is considered one of the most sacred of Christian healing sites. Bernadette’s story was not accepted at first telling, or the second, or third. She was ridiculed and threatened with arrest but her gentle persistence and a growing number of miraculous healings at the spring eventually resulted in the Roman Catholic Church decreeing that the Virgin Mary had indeed appeared at the grotto site.

Bernadette’s vision forever impacted the town. The sanctuary site was cleaned up to receive pilgrims, a broad avenue was cleared, the river diverted, and a railway built. But for Bernadette, being on the receiving end of such a miraculous event did

not mean her life became any easier. She continued to suffer from tuberculosis. She hated the attention her fame brought her and joined the Sisters of Nevers when she was 22 years old, living at the Saint Gildard convent for the next 13 years until her death in 1879, just four months after her 35 birthday. Pope Pius XI declared Bernadette a saint and this once isolated village now hosts five million visitors a year according to the Lourdes *Office de tourisme*.

In *The Christian Travelers Guide to France*, University of Calgary Professor of Religious Studies Irving Hexham writes about the formation of the Bureau of Miracle Verification in 1885. Out of the thousands who have claimed to have been cured by the holy waters of Lourdes, only “60 miracles have been officially recognized by doctors” (Hexham 2001, 128). The church does not make it easy for a cure to be called a miracle. “The illness or condition healed must be serious and incurable, the healing must be sudden and be irreversible, and no medical treatment must be given” (Crawford 2008, 18) wrote Kerry Crawford in *Lourdes Today: A Pilgrimage to Mary’s Grotto*.

The millions of pilgrims who come to Lourdes are searching for everything from improved health and spiritual peace to joy and forgiveness. Deacon “Bill” has been to Lourdes 12 times. He has written extensively about his pilgrimages to this site and is an expert on the history of Bernadette Soubirous, as well as the bureaucracy of the Lourdes religious community. In one of several emails he sent to me before he decided he would answer my questionnaire, he described the people involved in keeping Lourdes going. Thirty chaplains, five communities of religious sisters, 292 permanent and 127 seasonal employees serve and maintain the sanctuary. Tons of

candles are burned each year. The sanctuary has 26 places of worship with the largest, the underground Basilica of St. Piux X, accommodating 25,000 worshippers. Bill wrote that “preference in every activity at the sanctuary is given to the sick, the elderly, [and] mothers with young children. The vulnerable are not only accepted at Lourdes, they are honored.”

My teenage son Alyd had been shocked when we had first entered the lobby of our hotel and he saw that there were more parked wheelchairs—he counted 40—than available chairs for sitting. It turned out we had timed our visit to perfection. Although the sanctuary stays open all year round, and everyone and everything was gearing up for the Pope’s upcoming visit, I was told by our hotel manager that most hotels close in October for five months, and there are no more pilgrimages until four days in February, after which everything closes again and does not open until Easter. Lourdes is a prime example of how some sacred sites are seasonal.

When we began to explore the town, it seemed as if people using canes, walkers, wheelchairs, and stretchers, outnumbered the walking visitors. There was an interesting buzz in those crowded streets where loudly talking schoolchildren of all ages mixed with laughing, habited nuns, striding brown-robed monks, intense white collared priests, gabbing nurses in white lab coats, and serious-looking volunteers in blue jackets, along with the fashionable, the out-of-fashion, the skeptics, and tourists jostled for limited space on the surprisingly dirty and narrow sidewalks. Many people walked in the middle of the single-lane streets causing even more chaos for the cars, huge tour buses, small darting scooters, and the constant stream of wheelchairs pushed by helpers. We were told by our hotel manager that these narrow, winding, one way

streets change direction every two weeks, allowing for an even distribution of access to all the shops.

We stopped in several of the souvenir stores that line the roads or are tucked into every building and street corner. These shops seem even more numerous than the hotels and restaurants, and sell anything that can hold a picture of Bernadette or the Virgin Mary, or is large enough to have the word “*Lourdes*” stamped on it. There are thimbles, rosaries, paintings, books, crosses, bracelets, t-shirts, glow in the dark Jesus statues, candles of all sizes, coffee mugs, purses, pill boxes, crucifixes made of wood, bronze or silver, key chains, baby bibs, picture frames, and bags of candy. There are all sizes of vials and bottles—both full and empty—for grotto spring water. If you have a group of friends you want to share this memory with, you can buy full or empty gallon water jugs. One of the four original black and white photographs of Bernadette is visible everywhere. The angelic face of the French actress who portrays Bernadette in French filmmaker Jean Delannoy’s film, *La passion de Bernadette*, seems to be as visible as the real Bernadette on plates, ashtrays, and post cards. This is the kind of experience that Nicholas Shrady called “harried religious tourism” (Shrady 1999, 245). Coleman and Elsner wrote that an intense focus on sites and relics was a “way of heightening the importance of a famous icon or statue . . . [resulting in] many reproductions of it” (Coleman and Elsner 1995, 33).

At one of several theatres in Lourdes, Delannoy’s film is shown three times a day, each time in six different languages (the listeners wear earphones which project a dubbed version in either French, English, Italian, Spanish, German, or Dutch). My 16-year-old cynical son went out of his way to find irreverent sacred objects for sale and

felt he had achieved a four star moment when he found a shelf with long-handled wooden backscratchers sitting near switchblades, both with a picture of the Virgin Mary displayed prominently on the handle. If ever one wanted an example of how tacky the relics of a pilgrimage site can be, Lourdes is it.

As I was listening to my son ask why a place so important to the Christian religion could also be so commercially driven (“money grabbing” was his expression), I was aware of the enthusiastic energy in the people around us. Anyone I made eye contact with quickly gave me a big smile. I heard laughter at all times and saw more people hugging than at a family reunion. I looked around 360 degrees and thought, this place is hope made visible. Later, at the grotto, we saw that the sacred spring water, the one item that could have made millions annually for the town, is free to everyone. So there are limits even here to what will be sold.

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, also known as the Domain, consists of the tiny Crypt (the first church, built in 1866), the upper Gothic style Basilica of the Immaculate Conception (finished in 1872), the lower Basilica of the Rosary (1901) built in a Byzantine architectural style with mosaics and brick and mortar instead of just stone, and the grotto of Massabielle, the most sacred of the Lourdes sites and the place where the Virgin Mary appeared to Bernadette in 1858. Next is the Basilica of St. Pius X, a bare concrete, almost uninviting, underground church that can hold 25,000 worshippers and was apparently quite controversial when it was finished in 1958. There is also the Chapel of Reconciliation where pilgrims can go to one of 48 confessionals with priests available to speak to you in one of seven languages, the smaller St. Joseph’s Chapel, and an almost 1.5 kilometre steep road that follows the 14

Stations of the Cross. The baths, where you have a quick immersion in the waters from the sacred spring, had a very long and slow-moving line-up the two days we were there, which discouraged us from joining the crowd. In Jennifer Westwood's *Sacred Journeys*, she explains that the Roman Catholic Church "often prefers to stress the spiritual rather than physical benefits to be gained by pilgrimage, since it feels uneasy with the magical implications of the latter. Bathing [at Lourdes] is therefore depicted in official literature as involving the purging of sins" (Westwood 1997, 129) rather than promising, or acknowledging the possibility of, any healing taking place.

I found the grotto the most interesting place in the sanctuary area. The rock face has been "polished smooth by millions of hands" (Crawford 2008, 88) touching it over the past 150 years. It was constantly filled with a steady, every changing group of people coming to hear a mass conducted in their language (masses are offered in English, Italian, Spanish, German, and Dutch throughout the day) or to buy devotional candles, small ones that fit in the palm of your hand to large ones over five feet tall. The candles were lit and set in holders in a number of places around the sanctuary or could be kept as a souvenir to bring home. People were alone, in pairs, or in large groups. There were ill people on stretchers pushed by volunteers and large groups being led by a man or woman striding in front and holding aloft a flag representing their country, church, or choir. I saw people of all nationalities talking, singing, laughing, holding hands, hugging, and weeping. It is an emotional spot and yet not maudlin in any way. "Lucille" had a religious experience the first time she visited:

The streets were very narrow, crowded and lined with shops . . . Then I entered the grotto through St. Michael's Gate in to this quiet holy place. It was simple and peaceful. We took part in the evening procession along

with thousands of other pilgrims on foot, in wheelchairs, and on stretches, proudly holding our candles in little white and blue paper shields. We prayed the rosary and sang “Ava Maria” as we wound our way to the Sanctuary. I felt I was part of the heavenly hosts of angels praising God. [I left with] a deeper devotion to Mary and the rosary . . . Pilgrimages take you away from the cares and worries of the world. You come away with a refreshed outlook on life.

The big news while we were there was that 2008 was the 150 year since the apparitions. In two weeks time the Pope would be arriving to lead a special Jubilee ceremony and to preside at a mass to commemorate the anniversary.

Everywhere we went, we heard a multitude of languages and dialects: Irish brogue followed by swearing British cockney and elite Eton tones along with French slang, plus German, Italian, and Polish. In the lower Rosary Basilica, we listened to a German mass. In front of me, two middle-aged women were marks in contrast: one had covered her face with her hands as she wept, the other kept looking at her watch.

We walked past the large square block filled with long white and blue-tipped candles for sale, past the water taps where you could wash yourself and fill bottles and jugs with grotto water. In the actual grotto, we stood amid a large crowd taking part in an Irish priest-led English-language mass. The priest said “May our hearts be open to prayer and penance.” My resistance to Christian dogma that implies presumed guilt and sin reared its head on more than one occasion during my Lourdes visit and I realized at one point that I was putting unnecessary barriers in front of me. My judgements were the cause of some of the discomfort I occasionally felt. At the same time, I loved the idea that miracles of healing had taken place here.

We walked up one side of the impressive huge winding staircase that led to the upper Basilica of the Immaculate Conception. It was very dark inside, with only a few

people sitting in the pews. I walked along the smaller side chapels, each one dedicated to a different saint, stopping at one chapel to light a votive (small, white beeswax) candle for my family's health. Later, as we were leaving, we stopped at the water taps and each of us took a drink. I made a point of wiping water across my neck, hoping it would help my arthritis, and then gently sprinkled Alyd around his heart area. For Evan, he needs healing on his left shoulder, which even after the operation continues to give him pain. I did not feel as sceptical as my son. It is hard to dismiss faith when it has a palatable presence all around you.

As I was writing up my day's notes in more detail back in our hotel room, I realized that by not making the time to go to experience the baths, I had repeated a personal pilgrimage experience I have had during previous visits to sacred sites. I thought of many other times—in India, Indonesia, Turkey, England—where circumstances, timing, companions, energy, or even seasonal weather affected what I made the effort to see or miss on my visit. Perhaps “Brad's” earlier comment that what we choose to leave behind is as important as what we include could also relate to what we give priority to seeing and experiencing on our pilgrimage journey.

Continuing with Brad's comment, if what gets left behind and what gets brought along by each pilgrim influences their pilgrimage, then this would also relate to their transformational experience. Can the journey still be considered a pilgrimage if there is a transformation but it involves disappointment rather than renewal? I found several answers in the experiences of “Barbara” and “Peter”, a retired couple from Bristol, England. Barbara and Peter have been active volunteers in an organization that takes mentally and physically handicapped and socially deprived and abused

children to Lourdes for one week each year. More than 5,000 people—caregivers, volunteers, and the children—attend what is called “Happy Week” in Lourdes right after Easter. Barbara, a practising Catholic who converted to Catholicism 50 years ago, says she receives much more than she gives on these trips. “You experience joy, humility, love, and compassion for those you are supposed to be helping. And there is so much laughter.”

She was initially worried about how she would be with the handicapped children but found that by the time the group had travelled by train from Bristol to Dover then caught the ferry to France where they got on another train to Lourdes, “they were individual children, not individual handicaps.” She was often exhausted by the end of the week yet found each year’s experience “uplifting, rewarding, humbling, and fulfilling.”

She didn’t have a clear answer for my question, “Did you leave anything behind?”:

[Not] really isn’t a true answer. Problems don’t go away. Lourdes is a place of many small miracles. What does happen is that you are somehow renewed, you cope a little better, have a new perspective, [feel] stronger to pick up the load and feel closer to God. It doesn’t always last but while it does it helps. I never feel cheated [or] that anything was missing in any pilgrimage I undertook.

She believes people go on pilgrimages looking for something that many find at Lourdes: faith, courage, support, and community. She continually finds herself learning lessons of patience and having her faith renewed by the faith she sees in the handicapped children and their parents.

The letting loose of anger, the joy of forgiveness given and received, selfless devotion and God-inspired compassion, and the confirmation that

there is so much good in people, especially the much-maligned youth of today, which never makes the news. On pilgrimage, you . . . renew your faith in human nature. . . . So many [handicapped children] gained in confidence. The thing they all said was that no one stared at them in Lourdes; they felt special.

What did happen at Lourdes, she found, was that “you feel renewed, you cope a little better, have a new perspective, [feel] stronger to pick up the load and feel closer to God. It doesn’t always last but while it does it helps.”

It was not easy to take in all the overheard conversations and the activity around me in just one visit. I was also conscious of my disbelieving son and my own baggage around Christian doctrine. I realized I needed more time to just sit and watch, more time to absorb sights, smells, sounds, and feelings. I was reminded of how we can be affected and distracted by the people we have with us on a pilgrimage. How did I come to terms with all the stalls that line the street leading to the shrine at Lourdes selling everything from beautiful small silver crosses to flashing neon statues of Jesus? It took a few hours to change my impression, to move on from my judgments and start really watching where I finally got an inkling that the numerous tacky objects are more than the sum of their parts—they are memories of this time when the pilgrim returns home, they are signs of both the pilgrim’s love for his or her religion and for this sacred spot. It was not just a shot glass with a picture of Jesus on it that my son was packing away in his bag; it was a tangible item filled with the energy of faith from this site, and one that would forever remind him of this visit.

In the Middle Ages, pilgrims would bring back “little flasks of oil . . . lead and clay ampullae filled with water from the Jordan, boxes with earth from a sacred tomb, or ‘blessings’ as they were known” (Coleman & Elsner 1005, 85). Now that Heidi has

walked the Santiago de Compostela trail she can wear a scallop shell, the symbol of that particular pilgrimage.

Mark Twain looked back on his 1869 around the world trip and questioned the ethics of the people he was travelling with, many of whom considered themselves pilgrims, and the value of relics. After visiting a mosque one day he wrote, “we entered, and the pilgrims broke specimens from foundation walls though they had to touch, and even step upon, the ‘praying people’” (Twain 2003, 104). He wondered what would happen if “a party of armed foreigners were to enter a village church in America and break ornaments from the altar railings for curiosities, and climb up and walk upon the Bible and pulpit cushions” (Twain 2003, 404). One could interpret this to mean there are “bad” pilgrims on sacred journeys too, people who do not act in a respectful manner toward different countries or customs. I expect we are all guilty of that at some time or other, more often through innocent ignorance than through intentional disregard of local customs or laws.

In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, cultural historian Jay Winter looked at the ways different cultures mourn their dead after a war: “War memorials are sites of symbolic exchange, where the living admit a degree of indebtedness to the fallen which can never be fully discharged” (Winter 1995, 94). Considering the gaunt figure in the statue of the Unknown Prisoner at Dachau Concentration Camp, and the simplicity of the newly equipped children’s playground in Stanley Park in honour of the 82 children who died in the 1985 Air India bombing, it would appear that memorials are as much recognition of future possibilities as they are of past horrors. We were living in Germany in 1989 when the Berlin Wall was torn down and for a

few days the autobahns were bumper to bumper with cars as people rushed to the site to chip away at a piece of history. (Supposed rock relics from that historic wall can still be bought on eBay if you are so inclined.) Pilgrims seem to need to carry something home in their hands.

I wanted to tell Alyd what Leila Castle had written in *Earthwalking Sky*

Dancers: Women's Pilgrimages to Sacred Places:

Creating art works is not the only way to acknowledge the sacred. The objects of ritual are always at hand. Stones are altars. Sunlight shining through leaves is stained glass. Trees are pillars holding up the vaulted sky. Rivers are baptismal waters. Flowers are incense of the Earth. I worship the sacred when I lie with my back against the soil, my eyes gazing into the blackness of night (Castle 1996, 216).

Instead, I reminded him of his Gallipoli treasure. We had been travelling through Turkey in 2002 and arrived in Gallipoli just days after the North Beach ANZAC Day event, where thousands of young Australians and New Zealanders had turned up to acknowledge the sacrifices of their relatives and countrymen. (I cannot think of a Canadian equivalent.) Alyd, who was nine years old at the time, spent a happy 30 minutes running through the WWI trenches, imagining himself dodging bullets. When he finally began to tire and climbed out, an elderly Turkish woman stopped him and put a lump of metal in his hand, telling him it was a WWI bullet that had been found in the very trenches he had just been running through. Did the supposed bullet really come from the claimed place and historical moment? Did it even matter, I wondered at the time, watching Alyd as he stared down in wonder at that small blob of metal in his palm. Seven years later, he continues to keep that token in a special cup on his dresser. One of my relic experiences involves a braided

bracelet given to me by a Buddhist monk at a temple in Thailand. The monk told me it would ward off illness and accidents, and then, because he was not allowed to touch women, he passed the bracelet to the temple guard to tie around my wrist. A bullet and a bracelet, two modern day pilgrimage relics far removed from a pope giving an indulgence.

Our Lady of Lourdes Questionnaire Results Overview

I had no trouble finding people willing to talk about their Lourdes pilgrimage experience and interviewed Roman Catholics, an Anglican couple, an enthusiastic trans-denominational woman who was an ordained minister with the Seminary of Spiritual Peacemaking, a woman who described her religious practice as one of meditation and prayer, and another woman who had grown up in a fundamentalist family.

Their definitions of a pilgrim ranged from “being a seeker”, “travelling consciously, on the inner and outer planes, with the primary objective of union with the Divine and the honouring of that Essence in service to all creation”, to “one who travels usually to a holy place or in the footsteps of a holy person”. Several people talked about pilgrimage as being one way they could recharge their spiritual batteries.

There seemed to be a general consensus regarding the importance of the community found at Lourdes. “I went to . . . resonate with the energy of the site and to mingle with others of like mind” said “Becky” from Texas.

“Sekhmet” had a personal healing miracle at Lourdes. “Even now, more than two years later, I can only speak in superlatives about this pilgrimage experience . . . where all else can be measured as either ‘before Lourdes’ or ‘after Lourdes’”. She had gone to the Lourdes baths and felt the water “cleansed and purified” her cells:

Two months later I fell down a flight of stairs, crashing into a metal base-board heater, which broke (and punched holes in) many parts of my face, including my right eye orb and the rear of my right jaw. After being sewn up by an ER doctor, I was scheduled for surgery a week later, for titanium implants to reconstruct my face. When the surgeon opened my face to do the work, he found all the bones had healed [and] all he had to do was gently manipulate the healed bones back into place.

“Bill” said his reason for going to Lourdes changed the first time he went and he has since returned 12 times. “I went initially as a ‘Catholic tourist’. I went looking for ‘what is in it for me?’” His reason changed when he discovered many “sick and suffering people and knew it was not and could not be just about me.” His answer to the question “what did you leave behind” was simple: “A lot of attitude I had about myself that was not worth taking home.” He now returns regularly, helping with the sick and also working “with the volunteers who are helping because many of them have invisible wounds themselves.” He feels pilgrimages are important, “there is nothing quite like a pilgrimage” to bring about a confrontation with both “one’s God and oneself”.

Lourdes surprised me, and changed my idea of what a transformational experience could be, especially after listening to Barbara’s story. She talked with such joy about her experience at Lourdes, where even without physical miracles, without any visible healings, she saw an abundance of emotional miracles take place. She believed that reflected in the faces and hearts of the handicapped children and their

parents were the same feelings of love, joy, and acceptance that she re-learned and re-experienced each year at Lourdes. Lourdes was always a place of celebration for her, and her strong belief that transformations, which she felt comfortable calling miracles, happened all the time at Happy Week. She always returned home celebrating not only her life but that of the handicapped children and their families. Her optimism and faith left me thinking of Lourdes as a place where both hope and transformation experiences are made visible.

GODDESS WORSHIP LABYRINTH AT CHARTRES CATHEDRAL: 11 Circuits of Magnificence

And I stormed out and slammed the door! Of course, it was that fourteenth century Bavarian cathedral door, so I had to get two of the servants to help me slam it, but what it lacked in spontaneity it made up for in resonance.

Niles. *Frasier*, "The Last Time I Saw Maris."

Screenwriter Ian Gervitz, 1993

It was a bleak, overcast, drizzling day in Paris when Alyd and I boarded the train to Chartres. If ever Paris could look depressing, today was the day; the grey apartment buildings and concrete sidewalks adding to the weight of the damp, cold weather. It was not an auspicious beginning to the 75-minute train trip from Paris' Gare Montparnasse station to Chartres. Alyd was adamant he does not want to hear anything about Chartres. "I don't care" he said when I started to give him some historical facts. I tried again. "It's got flying buttresses," I said hopefully. There was a time when those last two words would have had him falling off his seat in laughter, but every boy grows up and he just stuck his iPod earphones in and looked out the window.

Alyd does not know this but he is one of the reasons I made the labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral one of my pilgrimage sites. From the time he was five until he turned double digits, he had an ongoing fascination with mythology. We worked our way through book after book of Greek and Roman myths and watched 1950 and '60 films like *Jason and the Argonauts*, *Ulysses*, and *Hercules*. Although the Greek myth of Theseus killing the Minotaur in the labyrinth was not Alyd's favourite, we read it often enough that I was also caught in the drama of Theseus using string to find his

way out of the cave. I remained curious about labyrinths but it was not until three years ago, when a friend invited me to a New Year's Eve event at St. Paul's Anglican Church in Vancouver, that I had my first personal experience of walking a labyrinth. I was immediately touched by the joyful, calm, spiritual atmosphere in the labyrinth room, the soft candle light and gentle background chanting adding to the sense of mystery and wonder. I walked the labyrinth twice, and found myself caught up in another world. From that day on, I had the idea of building one in our backyard (which I have yet to do). To show how serendipitous life can be, it was only when I was researching labyrinths for this paper that I found out the labyrinth on the floor of the parish hall of St. Paul's Church is a replica of the labyrinth at my Chartres Cathedral pilgrimage site.

After zooming through one small train station after another without stopping, we start to pass a series of large fields, the earth lying in fallowed rows waiting for spring. Suddenly we could see the cathedral looming above the fields.

“Thomas” felt his spiritual experience started from the moment he was first able to see the cathedral at Chartres:

When you drive towards Chartres, either from the West or from the East, the very first thing you see sticking out of the fields of grain is this immense cathedral. For me, beholding this scene . . . is always a very spiritual moment. From a pilgrimage point of view, anyone walking or driving there will have to include this spiritual vista in their recollections.

Alyd and I walked the five minute distance from the Chartres train station to that stunningly beautiful world heritage Gothic cathedral. Unfortunately for us, it was undergoing both exterior and interior renovations, resulting in blocked off entrances to the cathedral, and sections of the exterior wall covered with wire fencing and heavy

weather protection cloth. We could still see the armed buttresses, rose windows, and the sculptures all over the exterior of the church but for all its grand size, it felt hemmed in by the closeness of the scaffolding and surrounding buildings.

Entering through the North Porch of the cathedral, it was quickly evident to me that my destination, the labyrinth—once available to pilgrims as a symbolic pilgrimage and meditative walk to the Holy Land—was not going to be easy to see. It was covered by rows of wooden chairs. I was not surprised but I was disappointed. I had read that this was the standard state of things, except for special occasions when the chairs are removed and the labyrinth exposed. I had thought I might be able to move the chairs, which I had read of others doing, but that was no longer possible. Each row of wooden chairs was kept in place by two separate wooden poles shoved through the chair legs, effectively locking the chairs in place. I had a suspicion that the cathedral had done this on purpose; it must be annoying to find the chairs stacked against the side of the building. I was told by one man on site that they might move the chairs the next Friday, if I could come again at that time.

The cathedral is famous for its 152 medieval, predominantly blue stained-glass windows, from the rose-shaped window in the north transept to the biblical stories represented in different window sections along the sides of the church. The windows are breathtakingly beautiful. I have heard them described as “glowing like jewels” and they do; the vibrant, unique blue glass is mesmerizing.

But it is the labyrinth I had come to see. Labyrinths have been around for a long time though many people confuse them with mazes. Carved labyrinth drawings were originally found on rocks and ancient pottery. Jungian analyst Jean Shinoda

Bolen, in *Crossing to Avalon: A Woman's Midlife Pilgrimage*, said “labyrinths were originally associated with caves and were usually situated at the entrance” (Bolen 1995, 24). According to Jeff Sawyer, founder and editor of *Caerdroia—the Journal of Mazes and Labyrinths*, labyrinths were first used as a sign of protection and can be found today above doorways of Roman buildings. Sawyer was one of several experts interviewed in the Michael Miner directed documentary, *Labyrinths: Their Mystery and Magic*, where he talked about the variety of labyrinth types, from classical and medieval designs to the hedge style. Most labyrinths are built low on the ground with their paths separated by stones or as a design in a floor, hence the difference from a maze which has high walls making it impossible for you to see where you are going, and which often has dead ends or false leads.

Labyrinths have been found in native religions ranging from Arizona and Nepal to Sweden, and are believed by many to improve one's health and spirit. They can even be places of remembrance. The City of Winnipeg, Manitoba, built a labyrinth to commemorate Pulitzer Prize-winning author Carol Shields, an idea that came about because the fictional hero in her 1997 novel, *Larry's Party*, was labyrinth and maze designer Larry Weller.

Another expert consulted in Miner's *Labyrinths* documentary was labyrinth builder Robert Ferre, who said “labyrinths put us back into balance after overdoing work and life.” Labyrinth user Jazmin Gilking agrees with Ferre, adding “so much information is coming at us at such a fast rate and our nervous system is having a hard time keeping up with what is going on . . . the labyrinth keeps us in a balanced, peaceful state.” After watching the video and later talking to several regular labyrinth

users, I discovered that people who regularly walk the labyrinth believe they are means of healing every illness, solving all relationship struggles, and assisting in any major or minor life decision.

Chartres Cathedral—*La Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Chartres*—is an example of a Christian church built on what was originally a pagan site. Built around 1200, the cathedral's 11-circuit labyrinth is still evident on the floor of the church nave, pieces of spiral sections visible in-between the rows of chairs or in the aisles, both in the middle and along the sides. The pattern is not so easy to see but I know from my reading that there are twelve rings and the path makes 28 loops (seven on the left and right sides of the centre, and seven on the right and left sides of the outside sections).

I started taking pictures, something that always makes me feel slightly guilty; it never seems quite the right thing to do in a church, let alone in a cathedral. I tried to follow as many of the labyrinth sections as I could, stopping to admire the unique crescent-shaped edges of each partial circle, pausing to reach down and touch the floor in places, imaging all the people who have walked over those stones in the last 800 years. I stood in the very middle of the rosette-shaped centre of the labyrinth, now a bare circle that could be easily missed as nothing remains of what was once an ornate brass plate, ripped up and melted down for cannon fodder during the Napoleonic wars. I closed my eyes, and concentrated on my breathing. Nothing happened. There were noises everywhere. The renovation workers were not worried about being quiet and there was a large group of Italian tourists behind me. Earlier I had imagined the tour guide's lengthy talk and finger pointing to be about the exterior flying buttresses, used in order to support the high vaults, the highest in France at the time. The guide had

spread his arms out wide and made sweeping gestures as he pointed in different directions, probably telling his somewhat restless listeners that the nave was 28 metres long and 36 metres high, with an unbroken view right down to that stunning apsidal dome and the high stained-glass windows.

Other visitors were speaking in hushed tones but their murmurs still added a constant background noise, broken first by a child running shrieking away from his mother and then by what I was sure were Alyd's heavy sighs. He sat in a nearby chair, waiting with a martyr's patience for me "to get this thing over with."

I discovered that the *Sancta Camisia*, the tunic allegedly worn by Mary at the birth of Jesus and housed in the cathedral since 876, had been put in storage while its normal area of display in the church was renovated. Relics like the *camisia* are an important part of sacred site attractions for pilgrims. They are also portable, unlike stationary tombs. Body parts of saints often get spread across the globe. When I was in India in 2001, I visited the huge Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa where the body of the patron saint of Goa, Spanish Jesuit St. Francis Xavier, is on display in a silver casket. Before his remains were put into the casket in 1554, St. Francis' hand was cut off and divided further, with parts being sent to different parts of the world. His body used to be brought out and displayed every ten years: but one guide told me a passionate Portuguese pilgrim had bitten off one of the saint's toes, and as a result, this practice had been stopped. Apparently part of St. Francis' right arm was also cut off and sent to Japan in honour of the missionary work he had done there in the mid-1550s.

I walked over to the crypt entrance but was disappointed for a third time. The crypt, called the "heart of the Chartres Cathedral", was closed so repairs could be done

near the downward step entrance. I felt cheated: no labyrinth, no tunic, and now no crypt, which meant in turn no chance to see the underground Well of the Saints-Forts or the replica of the Black Madonna. Journalist Philip Coppens wrote that the original Black Madonna had been destroyed during the French Revolution. Coppens believes that the cathedral is built on what was once a pagan site. On his website, in the feature article entitled, “Chartres: The Virgin Mary’s Seat on Earth,” he writes that the name “Chartres” comes from a Druid tribe, and “it is stated in Roman records that it was the forest of the Carnutes where all the druids of Gaul would gather once a year. Some believe that the precise location was here, deep beneath the present cathedral; that there was a cave, which symbolised the realm of the Mother Goddess” (Coppens www.philipcoppens.com/chartres.html, 2009).

It can be argued that three of the major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have a male dominated influence. However, there are certain forms of Christian practices that have re-introduced the feminine principal in the semi-deification of the Virgin Mary and the prominent role of Mary Magdalene in some Mediterranean churches. It appears that Goddess worship, unlike the major monotheistic religions, draws its inspiration from the female principal, exemplified by the primary role of Gaia as the Earth Mother.

I tried my best to ignore my scowling son and my disappointments. I changed my focus and started to look at those amazing stained-glass windows located throughout the cathedral. It was dark inside and hard to see the West, North, or South Rose windows clearly but I could still enjoy looking at each glass panel. Images in the windows represent “all the social stations to which its pilgrims would have belonged . .

. an ideal portrait of him or herself (whether peasant, knight or burgher, king, priest or bishop)” (Coleman & Elsner 1995, 113, 115). It is the large rose window in the west, named “The Last Judgement” that catches and holds my attention. It portrays Jesus surrounded by angels as he sits in judgement. There are also angels blowing trumpets and visions of heaven and hell. Psychotherapist and Episcopal priest, the Reverend Lauren Artress, in *Walking a Sacred Path*, wrote that if that particular stained-glass rose window was lowered in an arc, it would land perfectly in the centre of the labyrinth.

“Snail”, an American writer living in Paris, initially came to Chartres Cathedral to pray for a sick friend: “I found it beneficial to me also. It made not only my friend feel better, knowing I was praying [here] for her, but it made me feel better about my life, too. . . .When she recovered, we were able to visit the place together, which was very special for both of us.”

Earlier than I would have liked Alyd and I had to catch the next train back to Paris. I could easily have spent several hours sitting first in one chair then another, making my way around the cathedral as I studied each window and the story it told. Those windows must have made the Bible stories come alive for the cathedral’s earlier, mainly illiterate, congregations. I bought postcards and a candle with a picture of one of the stained-glass windows (just as I had bought postcards and a small vial of water from the grotto at Lourdes, and later, postcards and bookmarks with a photograph of the lily pond at Lower Hamlet from Plum Village); bringing home a relic or a religious artefact, even when it is a tourist item, is another pilgrimage ritual.

When we finally got come from Paris, I checked the pictures I had taken of the interior and exterior of the cathedral. Some were too dark and I deleted them. It seems fitting that of all the pictures I took of the different rose windows, the one that turned out clearest was the West Rose Window, “The Last Judgement”, the end, the one that if it were lowered would lie flat in the exact centre of the labyrinth.

Chartres Cathedral Labyrinth Questionnaire Results Overview

The pilgrims who agreed to talk to me about their Chartres Labyrinth experiences came from a number of different faith experiences: a former Catholic who now follows a Goddess-centred, earth-based spirituality, a woman who said she practises a “Catholic, Hindu, pagan” combination, and a man who said he “just loves a beautiful city and perhaps the world’s most beautiful building.”

“Elizabeth” told me she does not have “specific religious beliefs,” but came to Chartres Cathedral to start what she hoped would be some major life changes:

I felt it was time to completely change the way I was living my life, to follow a simpler, more spiritual path. . . . Going to a place where I knew no one and didn’t speak the language really gave me the opportunity to go within and seek Source there. I later realized that I had thought I would meet someone special, get married, and remain in France, which didn’t happen.

Her transformational experience remains strong in her life. “My heart is much more open and loving toward others but more importantly, toward myself. I am grateful everyday for the adventure that is my life. I am more peaceful and grounded.”

In the second of several chatty emails he sent to me, “Kevin” wrote:

I always thought that the ‘pilgrimage’ to Chartres was begun by a clever young monk, in the employ of the Chartres Chamber of Commerce in

conjunction with the Chartres Tourism office back in mediaeval times, as a way to drum up tourism business after a slow winter. Put a turnstile at the beginning of the labyrinth, sell some tickets, offer a few plenary indulgences as prizes and you've got yourself a SRO hit!

“Karen” has made the act of pilgrimage her life work. She regularly takes groups of women to sacred sites, and has written books, made documentary films, and has both a radio show and an active blog where she discusses Goddess worship and all things related, including labyrinths. She sent me five, single-spaced pages filled with her passionate thoughts about the cathedral and its labyrinth which she believes is “filled with divine feminine energy.” She found it “wickedly heretical” that a Christian place of worship, which had originally been built on a pagan well of the Druids, should also house a Black Madonna. The presence of this Black Madonna meant to her the cathedral was filled with “veiled imagery of the Sacred Feminine.” Her letter included a list of specific reasons she believed the cathedral to be a sacred Goddess worship site.

The cathedral, built by the Freemasons and Templars is replete with sacred geometry and hidden symbols of Mary Magdalene and the Grail myths. The lancet windows are believed by some to represent the sacred vulva, the portal to the womb of birth and regeneration—certainly aspects of Goddess spirituality. Clothes of the Virgin Mary are thought to be kept here and on display. There are also statues from this area that depict a multi-breasted Isis, as if a conflated version of Isis/Artemis, both who passed along many of their attributes to Mary as Christianity outlawed pagan worship. Finally, on the floor is a brass plaque depicting the Goddess Ariadne, associated with Minoan myths, which are a direct connection to the Goddess.

Chartres Cathedral is one place I plan to visit again, a quite introspective sacred building that invites you to sit down and daydream, pray, or meditate. Next time, I'll go on a day when the chairs have been moved and the labyrinth uncovered and

available for walking. I want to wander around the outside, which will hopefully be clear of all the renovation covers. And next New Year's Eve, when I'm back in Vancouver, I will walk the St. Paul's labyrinth in memory of this amazing place.

BUDDHIST PLUM VILLAGE:

Where Mindfulness Equals Windows and Walking

Sweetie, you wouldn't say that if you knew how much we owe to my chanting, darling. A lot of things in this house, this HOUSE wouldn't be here, darling. I chanted for this gorgeous house! I chanted to be successful and believe in myself. . . . [aside] Please, let me make some more money so I can buy Saffron some more books and a car. . . . Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding! Please. [to Saffy] In Buddhist, obviously, darling, not in English, when I do it properly. Eddie. Absolutely Fabulous, "Fashion" Screenwriter Jennifer Saunders, 1992

Of my chosen pilgrimage sites, Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village, located in the southwestern corner of France, near Bordeaux, was the one that made me the most apprehensive. I am a type A personality, a borderline workaholic, and if they gave out awards for multi-tasking, I'd have a good chance of being nominated. I operate at what is called buzz level, which is probably why I have found working in the television industry such a good fit. The idea of spending time in a place where I would be concentrating on putting one foot in front of the other was almost terrifying. What if I could not do it and ran screaming across the surrounding vineyard-filled countryside? And yet this was the one site that had a personal meaning for me, first of all as a way to honour my mother (more about that later) and second, I knew it was time to rest, to find some balance in my overflowing, action-packed, ginger-sharp life of family and friends, teaching and writing contracts, and volunteer work. Even my playtime involves doing something such as being steersperson for three years on the North Shore Sirens dragon boat team and hiking mountains with Evan. My daily life is overwhelming at times and I know I am not unique in this experience. I also know I am the one making the choices that result in such a busy life. It was time for a change. One

foot in front of the other. Breath. How hard could it be? I remember underlining a Mark Twain quotation in *The Innocents Abroad*: “Day by day we lose some of our restlessness and absorb some of the spirit of quietude and ease that is in the tranquil atmosphere about us and in the demeanour of the people” (Twain 2003, 13). I could do with tranquil atmosphere resulting in a spirit of quietude.

Although Buddhism is not my faith practice, I have enjoyed listening to tapes of Thich Nhat Hanh’s talks about the value of sitting and walking meditation (one Plum Village lay person described walking meditation as “action meditation”) and the importance of daily mindful living. Nothing dramatic, just everyday aids to living our life as meaningfully and compassionately as possible.

Which led me to Plum Village. I have read several of the 100 books Thich Nhat Hanh has written (40 in English), including *Peace In Every Step*, *Buddha Mind*, *Buddha Body*, and the collection of personal stories in *I Have Arrived, I am Home*. Exiled from Vietnam in 1966 for his opposition to the Vietnam War, he has only been allowed to return for two government and police monitored visits, one in 2005 and one in 2007. Martin Luther King nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. “Thay” (“teacher” in Vietnamese) continues to establish monasteries in the United States, France, and Vietnam where his monks, nuns, and lay followers are frequently the victims of local scorn or, as in the case of Vietnam where he is still considered a subversive, his followers often experience police harassment.

I choose to visit Plum Village near two important dates for my family: December 3 was my mother’s birthday and she died on December 11. I usually spend the weekend in between those dates with my father, taking the ferry over to Vancouver Island, armed

with a new book or two for him and some store-bought desserts because my pies just aren't as good as my mother used to bake. My father and I spend our time together telling funny family stories, share different parent-child memories of the same event, and go for rambling walks along the same ocean shoreline where my mother walked at least once, sometimes twice, a day for the last 20 years of her life. Even though it has been four years since she died after an unpleasant, drawn out illness, her loss is still a hard thing for my father to talk about. Fifty-seven years of marriage and 61 years of friendship have left a gap that is hard to fill. But this December, I am living in France and too far away to share this time of remembrance with him.

My Plum Village sacred site visit became a personal pilgrimage in honour of my mother. I was also lucky enough to time my retreat when Thich Nhat Hanh was in residence. As possibly the world's second most famous Buddhist (after the Dalai Lama) he travels constantly, giving talks and workshops, and visiting his monasteries around the world. I scribbled a quote from his book, *Buddha Mind, Buddha Body*, on a yellow sticky pad and stuck it on my laptop: "When you walk in mindfulness, you are in touch with all the wonders of life within you and around you" (Hanh 2007, 1). I went to Plum Village looking for some mindfulness.

This retreat would also give me another chance to see how my personal experience fit into my definition of a pilgrimage: A journey to a sacred place, often including difficulties or hardships, with the possibility of a transformation at the end. There was nothing I felt in need of transforming (well, there was all that busyness) and my initial difficulties seemed minor, only involving organizing family and household needs before I left. The journey also gave me an excuse to do several of my favourite

pre-pilgrimage trip rituals. I bought a new journal to write in. I pored over maps of the roads I would take. I reread *I Have Arrived, I Am Home*. I cleaned my house and did laundry so when I walked out the door, and then walked back in days later, my home space would be clean and uncluttered (I choose to ignore the fact my husband and son were staying behind). Lightening my world has become a metaphor for travelling light, an image I heard from several people I interviewed.

In driving to the tiny village of Dieulivol, where New Hamlet is located, my first day challenges came from having to deal with European drivers racing up behind me and flashing their lights. I was obviously travelling too slowly for them by going only 130 km in the monsoon-like weather, my car pushed about by gusts of wind and pounding rain. After six hours, I left the highway and although I had received email directions from the New Hamlet office, they quickly proved useless as I drove down what seemed to be standard single-lane French country roads with few sign posts. I stopped several times, asked directions of people walking on the road or sitting in a café, turned around, retreated to a crossroad, and set off again. I spent almost an hour trying to find New Hamlet. The town of Dieulivol, given as a reference point in my directions, was not mentioned on any of the road signs. Suddenly, I saw a wooden board, with “New Hamlet” painted on one side. I drove down a small dirt road, turned into a gravel parking area, and knew I had come to the right place when I saw rows of brown nuns’ robes hanging from laundry lines.

Plum Village is made up of four hamlets of residential monasteries—New Hamlet, Upper Hamlet, Lower Hamlet, and Son Ha—each one self sufficient in terms of accommodations, kitchen, dining area, meditation hall, and bookstore. I was assigned

shared accommodation in New Hamlet where about 50 women live: 40 Vietnamese, French, and American Buddhist nuns and novices, and 10 lay people and visitors. It is rustic, both inside and out. My room consisted of a sloping roof, two single beds, four hooks on the wall, and a colourful altar area filled with flowers, stones, and an intricately-twisted piece of wood from a grapevine stem. I quickly learned that I needed to wear every item of clothing I had brought since the dining hall and front work room were unheated. There was an old-fashioned fireplace in the dining hall but even when it was roaring away it barely warmed the area in front of it. The beautiful meditation hall was only heated enough to take the chill off during our early morning and evening sitting and walking meditations. During my stay, I got up at 5 a.m. for morning meditation and went to bed by 9 p.m., ate delicious vegetarian meals, and met some lovely women from all over the world.

Within hours of arriving I learned my body was not as flexible as I had hoped. I do not have a regular meditation practice and as I sat on a meditation mat, I was quickly aware of my aching back, sore knees, and my thighs shooting pain into my hips. I shifted. And shifted again. Sitting for long periods of time in silent meditation left me fidgeting to find a less painful position (fidget: to move restlessly, a word I remember my mother using to describe me as a child). By day two, I was thinking I should probably go and apologize to the nuns around me who were able to settle into a full lotus position and stay that way, seemingly in comfort, for hours. They practised another of Thich Nhat Hanh's sayings: "I no longer need to search or run after anything. My path is the path of stopping." I was most definitely not at that stage.

It was fun living in a community of Buddhist nuns, even if only for four days. There was so much laughter, affection, and consideration shown to everyone. Every day at 3 p.m., we met for Community Gathering in the (unheated!) dining hall. Everyone would turn up wearing hats, gloves, and coats; all the nuns wore brown robes, brown winter hats, and brown jackets, brown being the colour for Vietnamese Buddhist nuns and monks. The next hour was a mixture of learning Buddhist chants and covering community business such as schedule changes and misplaced van keys. The biggest problem turned out to be hearing what the incredibly soft-spoken Vietnamese nuns were saying. Even the translators strained to hear. If a nun started talking in Vietnamese, another nun quietly stepped up behind nuns and visitors who might not speak that language and began translating into English or French or German, as needed. If a French nun spoke, someone else started translating quietly in Vietnamese or English to those around her. There was a constant undercurrent of translations happening all the time so in this very international community everyone received the same information at the same time. The only time everyone paused was when the phone rang, a bell sounded, or the kitchen clock chimed, at which point everyone stopped what they were doing and took three breaths of awareness and gratitude for their life.

Dinner was at 6:30 p.m., a delicious vegetarian meal of pasta and vegetarian tomato sauce, spiced rice soup (*cháo*), several kinds of fresh green salads, and a variety of cooked and raw vegetables, all served buffet style. The first 20 minutes we ate in complete silence, chewing each mouthful for 40 bites. Most people had a small bowl that they filled to the brim and then took 20 to 30 minutes to eat. After 20 minutes, whispered conversations were allowed.

When we had finished our dinner we took our bowl and cutlery out to the large front room and stood in line to wash our dishes, then we had to clean our space, everyone taking on an extra cleaning job—sweeping the hallway, cleaning the toilets, or washing the floors—until it was time to go to Evening Meditation. It is only 40 minutes long, as compared to the 1.5 hours in the morning. As on two occasions during my stay, it was accompanied by guided meditation but the Vietnamese nun who spoke did so in such a quiet voice I gave up trying to hear what she was saying and concentrated on her soothing, soft sound. I thought I heard “breathe in calm, breathe out peace” and that became my mantra for the rest of my stay.

I was aware of the nuns behind me as I faced the wall (we all faced the side walls, visitors in the front row, novices and nuns behind us, none of us allowed to face—and look at—the blindingly-bright golden Buddha statue set into a large recess in the front; it might prove distracting during meditation). I shifted. I tried, but never did find a comfortable way of sitting. At 9 p.m., Noble Silence begins during which time no-one is supposed to talk until after breakfast the next morning. My roommate found this a hard adjustment. She was silent for about five minutes then she decided to have a shower in the communal shower room near the entrance to our floor. I could hear her, dropping her soap, closing doors loudly, stomping down the hall. “This woman is going to help me learn about compassionate thinking,” I wrote in my journal. Jennifer Westwood showed a similar understanding: “Chaucer’s mixed bag of saints and sinners on the road to Canterbury is a lesson to all of us not to be too precious in our notions of who makes a sacred journey and why” (Westwood 1997, 28). Some Buddhist in the making I am, I thought as I tried to ignore the glaring room light and my roommate’s stage whispers.

Every day at Plum Village had a focus, from No Car Day to Vietnamese Day or, as on my day of arrival, French Day, where everyone was to try and speak in that language. There is even one day a week, usually Monday, called Lazy Day, when nothing is planned and the only work done relates to preparing and cleaning up meals. It took me two days to even begin to slow down, to get into the rhythm of the place. I imagine multi-tasking is Plum Village's version of a dirty word; mindfulness practice is to be aware of every moment and every action as we are experiencing them.

Lourdes came into my life at Plum Village. While waiting to get registered, I had met a young French nun who had just returned from a pilgrimage to the Pyrenees with a small group of Plum Village nuns. On the way back, they had decided to stop in Lourdes. Once the hotels realized that not only were they a group of Buddhists, but a group of Buddhist nuns, no-one would rent them rooms; after numerous rejections, they eventually succeeded in finding a place to stay. When they came back to Plum Village they brought gallons of holy water from the spring, which they shared with the other nuns, monks, and visitors. The young Buddhist nun had been raised Catholic and felt happy to have visited a sacred site she had heard about so much in her youth. She just shrugged her shoulders at their initial Lourdes reception. "We're Buddhist nuns and it's a sacred Catholic place," she said.

My roommate, a zealous activist for a number of worldwide causes, continued to provide me with the chance to practice compassion and non-judgment as she seemed clueless about the world around her. (Oops, another judgment just slipped out.) That woman was definitely an example of someone who tested me on my pilgrimage. It took me awhile to realize how my reactions and judgements—in particular to "that woman" as

I had begun to think of her—were putting roadblocks in my Plum Village experience. My justification was that I found her what my mother would have called a “pain-in-the-neck”. She spoke during times of silence, slammed doors, tracked mud into the living quarters, and thumped everywhere she walked. She wanted to know where all the money came from and where it went. She asked questions without any preamble in a loud voice. “How do you shave your head?” she asked Sister Pine. “With a Mach Three razor,” Sister Pine replied with a smile, “once a week”. “How much less are you paying by staying in your own camper?” she asked an elderly French woman one morning. The woman smiled politely and turned to the window without answering her, a non-response that my roommate later told me was very rude.

If “that woman” was triggering something in me, maybe it was an echo of something familiar inside me? That wasn’t fun to think about. (A week later a friend reminded me that “at the end of the pilgrimage road we find ourselves.”) What did I do in my life that might be similar to her bull-in-a-china-shop approach? I began to think about my multi-tasking and the speed at which I operated. I had to admit to myself there were probably times when I had come across as inconsiderate (but surely never loud?). My reasoning had always been that you couldn’t get things done if you just sat and daydreamed. (But surely I was more aware of the world around me? Wasn’t I? But surely....) As always happens at moments like that, certain memories came quickly to mind. They weren’t fun to think about either. This mindfulness stuff was tough on the ego. (A week later, I appreciated reading “Greg’s” questionnaire responses. His initial reason for going to Plum Village had caught my attention. “I was an activist for a number of years. I was always adverse to ‘angry activists’. I didn’t see Plum Village as

a holy place so much as a place to learn from those who were activists with a peaceful spirit.” He responded to my question, “Were your expectations met?” with “Change usually doesn’t come at the speed of light. So yes, I didn’t expect immediate quick fixes and I didn’t get them, but the experience was great.”)

One afternoon, a tiny, elderly Vietnamese nun named Sister Bamboo took a small group of us on a walking meditation, all of us trying to ignore the cold rain seeping down our necks and soaking our gloves. Europeans and North Americans have a history of mispronouncing the nuns and monks’ tonal Vietnamese names so badly that everyone now has an English name for visitors. Sister Bamboo had been living in the Deer Park Monastery in California for the past five years and had only moved to Plum Village two weeks ago. Off we went, one foot in front of the other; heel down first, taking four steps to breathe in (“I breathe in calm), and four steps to breathe out (“I breathe out peace”). I watched Sister Bamboo perform her walking meditation, each step the exact distance as the last. She seemed to glide along the country road, her small figure a beacon of serenity that the rest of us followed. Near her, almost in a semi-circle, walked three other nuns and a novice, one of them wearing a Vietnamese bamboo hat. We passed an old stone farmhouse where three men in quick succession came out, pausing momentarily at the sight of us. I smiled, nodded, and said “*bonjour*”. They nodded back, without smiles. I wonder what the neighbours think of this community. They must be used to it after 20 years, or are they?

I walked behind Sister Bamboo, realizing I finally had a rhythm. I concentrated on my breath—“I breathe in calm. I breathe out peace”—and thought about my mother, Effie Margaret Thierry. She would have liked these Vietnamese nuns, this community

living, and I could imagine her sitting on a bench under one of the many plum trees that give this place its name listening to someone's life story. People always found it very easy to talk to her; you knew she was listening, really listening, to you when you were with her.

The single lane country road we walked on so slowly and methodically climbed through rolling hills and bare vineyards harvested clean last month. Suddenly, the calm of the countryside was shattered by one, two, three gunshots. I looked over at the edge of the nearby field and saw several hunters yelling in glee as one of them pointed toward another field just out of our line of vision. Sister Bamboo did not pause, but just kept gliding along, one foot set down gently then the other. A fourth and fifth shot, this time accompanied by someone blowing repeatedly on a hunting horn. Dogs began to howl in excitement. It was a cacophony of sounds. How was one supposed to keep going with "I breathe in calm, I breathe out peace" while hunters shot a sixth and seventh time? The men continued to yell excitedly to each other, their dogs going wild at what I presume was the scent of blood. Sister Bamboo stopped, faced a vacant vineyard, her back to the hunters, everything about her still and quiet. I imagined this was something she heard on every walk during hunting season. How was she able to block out the sound and the knowledge of what was happening behind her? Sister Bamboo turned, bowed to us, gave us all a loving smile, and began her walking meditation back to the Hamlet, the rest of us falling into a ragged order behind her. I was left baffled, adding to my ever-growing list of questions that I eventually took with me—unasked—when I left.

After our meditation walk, we were given the experience of work meditation. My roommate and I were assigned to the window washing group, and along with three young

and giggling Vietnamese nuns, we cleaned the windows of the entrance room where we also wash our dishes after each meal. I am an expert window washer; I even have a technique. Growing up in a family run tourist business gives you skills you will use for the rest of your life. It was a first time experience for my roommate though and she was not happy. I got the impression that since she was paying to stay there, she did not see why she also had to work. Her windows were a mess of streaks and blobs. She looked at mine, and even she admitted they were works of art. I was not being very Buddhist in my window pride, but I actually like work meditation, especially when it is done in a group setting like that. I enjoyed listening to the young nuns chattering away, with three of the five resident cats waiting patiently by their individual food bowls. I also got warm for the first time in hours.

Later, my sleeping bag pulled up tight around my neck, my roommate and I talked about the adulation of Thay that we saw and heard all around us. This was not my faith community but I had no trouble saying “Namaste” and bowing with my hands in a prayer position during and at the end of meditation. She refused to do either, saying she does not bow to anybody. (When I share this story in an email with my friend “Jenna” several weeks later, she is the one who responds with, “Looking to the everyday irritations is key in the spiritual path—it seems to be a test really. At the end of the pilgrimage road we find ourselves, all of them, the attached and the free.”)

The next morning, I went to a beautiful, wood-floor room built on top of the old barn to do Qigong before breakfast. The room was filled with Vietnamese nuns of all ages and the nun leading us did yet another version of gliding as she led us through a series of fluid Qigong posture stretches. I left at the end of 30 minutes feeling flexible

and warm for the second time at Plum Village. After breakfast—porridge, fruit, bread, and left-over rice soup—we drove for 25 minutes to Lower Hamlet to spend the day doing sitting and walking meditation with Thich Nhat Hanh and to hear him give a talk—in Vietnamese today (he alternates languages for each talk)—on Buddhist practices. Sister Ann, a mid-40s, very tall African American woman who described herself as a “baby nun” since she was only ordained three months ago, drove us on winding country roads, the world still pitch black at 7:30 in the morning. Three hundred of us—nuns and monks from all four hamlets, novices, lay followers, and the curious—congregated in the large Assembly of Stars Meditation Hall at Lower Hamlet. I found a place to sit where I would be near enough to an English translation box to plug in my headphone’s extension cord. (There were connection boxes scattered around the room providing French, German, and Spanish translations of Thay’s talk.) A small booth at the back of the meditation hall held nuns and monks waiting patiently to begin their translating.

When Thay enters or leaves a room, everyone stands and bows. That morning, he had already been sitting silent and still on a slightly raised platform at the front of the large meditation hall when we entered. As we began our meditation practice, I focused on my breath but was distracted by a woman coughing in the corner. I focused on my breath and found myself thinking about how uncomfortable I was. I focused back on my breathing in and out and thought that, even wearing a long sleeve shirt and two sweaters, I was cold. Eventually I relaxed and was able to focus on my breath and not the noises and people around me. By the time Thay stood up 60 or 90 minutes later, I felt calm and quiet inside. Joseph Campbell blissful. Meditating really does do something to our brain waves. I had an epiphanic moment, finally understanding the difference between a peak

experience (such as my car accident) and what Maslow calls a “plateau experience”, which he described as “serene and calm, rather than a poignantly emotional, climactic, autonomic response to the miraculous, the awesome, the sacralised” (Maslow 1994, xiv). He continues to distinguish between a peak and plateau experience by saying that there is a cognitive element to plateau experiences, while peak experiences can be solely emotional events. Cousineau suggests another way to look at it. He says that in order for a pilgrim to be in touch with life, she or he must risk everything they know and in doing so, they will find “confirmation that mystery exists . . . in the modern world” (Cousineau 1998, 18). Perhaps it was not a peak experience I had been seeking all along but mystery? Or maybe it is just semantics, and one is similar to the other. Cousineau went on to quote the Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, Alan Jones: “We need to be introduced to our longings, because they guard our mystery” (Cousineau 1998, 24). Peak experience to mystery to longings. Semantics again?

They began to do some simple Qigong stretching exercises. Everyone joined in, following his arm and leg motions. It felt great and I could feel my body getting looser, unkinked, stretched in all the right places.

As he prepared for his talk, several young nuns brought up a tray of tea things, made sure his microphone was working, and repositioned the white board for easier access. I cannot begin to imagine how many of these talks he has given over the years. He has been a monk since he was 16 years old and he is 82 now. He proceeded to talk to us, his low voice soothing and at times almost hypnotically soft, about mindfulness and compassion and how we are seeds that need healthy ground to grow in. He drew on the white board, told parables and made small jokes. His language was simple, the

translation by an enthusiastic Vietnamese nun flawless in my headphones. Then he was done, saying with a smile he would continue with the second part on Thursday. We all rose as he left, almost everyone bowing in his direction. I saw that my roommate was not the only one who did not think there was a difference between *submission* and *surrender*, two words defined on a Sufi website as submission, meaning to give up your personal will for a payback of some kind, while surrender resulted “in a deeper union with God and a sense of who we are” (www.surrenderworks.com/library/imports/submission-or.html).

Lunch was served in a heated (lucky Lower Hamlet residents) dining hall, men and women lining up at separate buffet tables. They went first then after him, in order of their ordination date, the nuns and monks. The novices came next, everyone filling their bowl from a choice of rice dishes, raw and cooked vegetables, and several plates of sweet cakes. The lay people and visitors went last. I took my bowl of food and walked back to the meditation hall to find everyone else who had filled their bowl before me waiting patiently; no one would begin eating until all were served and seated. The mats and some chairs had been set up in two crescent shapes facing each other, the women on one side and men on the other.

Once everyone was seated, Thay said a few words of welcome in English, French, and Vietnamese before we ate in silence. Except my stomach grumbled. The Irish woman beside me gave me an understanding smile. My stomach grumbled again. I tried to concentrate on my eating, each mouthful to be chewed 40 times, but was distracted by my noisy stomach. When most people had finished Thay again spoke for a few

moments, making jokes in French and Vietnamese that caused a lot of laughter in the hall and made me wish I were further along in my French comprehension.

We had a two-hour break before getting into small groups to talk about our meditation practice and any questions and comments that had come up because of Thay's talk. As I left the kitchen, where I had deposited my bowl and fork, I noticed people were congregating around the flagpole behind the dining hall. It was bitterly cold out, the freezing wind blowing through every buttonhole and open space at wrists and ankles and throat. I passed several people who had wrapped blankets around their shoulders and others who were wearing hats, gloves, scarves, coats. The people beside me began to part and Thay appeared with a young French nun walking beside him carrying an umbrella to shelter him from the drizzling rain. I had a flash of a similar image of Gandhi. There is a hierarchy here, but no more so than in most religious or spiritual, business or academic, organizations. Thay was wearing his standard brown monastic robe and an overly large brown winter jacket, the hood pulled up. He smiled around at everyone and began to walk and I realized we were doing a walking meditation. I was near the front by lucky coincidence. Within seconds there was a *National Geographic* photo opportunity as Thay glided by me past the Lower Hamlet Peace Bell hanging from an open pagoda-style building. But I hesitated, feeling too North American bold as I envisioned myself pulling out my camera and pointing it at his back. Then it was too late and he had walked past the large Peace Bell. But there was still the lotus pond with the bare vineyards in the background, the vision of 300 people walking slowly behind him. I stopped my busy head and started moving, finding my walking meditation pace with relative ease.

At one point, as the line of people turned at a U shaped corner, They stopped and looked at the people walking slowly opposite him on the other section of the path. And then he waved, causing several of the people to grin and wave back. It was such a fun moment for its spontaneity: that pause, his look, his friendly wave. He soon left us, heading into one of the nearby buildings. The line faltered for a second but the majority of people continued walking silently along the twisting path, only a few dashing across the lawn to get back inside the warmth of the dining hall.

We met in small groups of 15 to 20 people for a two-hour Dharma (teachings of the Buddha) talk in the afternoon, each specific language group moderated by a senior nun or monk. My English language group consisted of several North American and European Buddhist monks and nuns, the rest of us lay people and visitors from all over the world: Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Australia, South America, the United States, and Southeast Asia. One of the women was a Korean Catholic abbess who had just spent five years working in Italy and was taking her annual three weeks holiday at Plum Village before returning to Korea. Two people turned out to be from Jackson Hole, Wyoming who had each arrived separately, not knowing the other person. They were already talking about starting a Buddhist *sangha* (community) when they returned home.

I got up early on Monday morning. It was Lazy Day so no one was up at 5 a.m. and breakfast would not be served until 8 a.m. I was able to get a cup of hot tea, the hot water always being available and the tea bag selection changing daily. I quietly carried my small backpack and sleeping bag outside. Passing the meditation hall on the way to my car, I see several of the older nuns already sitting in a lotus position; some nuns don't take Lazy Days it seems.

I got lost (again) when I left New Hamlet. The world was so dark I had to drive with my high beams on to make sure I did not miss a turn. I drove down country roads, my car chased by a farm dog for one long stretch, and at one point I even had to turn around and try a different route. In some future quiet moment, it might be interesting for me to think about why I got lost both coming to and going from Plum Village. Or maybe the whole thing was similar to the quote attributed to Freud, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar”; sometimes you just get lost on dark, unfamiliar country roads with few road signs to show you the way.

My drive home to Beaurecueil was as freedom inspiring as my initial drive to Plum Village had been, though it took me an extra hour as a result of getting caught in morning traffic near Toulouse, which I took as a chance to practise breathing in and out. Johnny Hallyday (a French rocker whose voice is giving Sting some competition in my fantasy-land) and I sang together all the way home, my one CD of his music playing over and over.

I was going home feeling refreshed and keen to return to Plum Village. There is a teen meditation program in July and I was going to propose to Evan and Alyd that we spend a week in Plum Village before we return to Canada. This will let Alyd, who is interested in Buddhism, experience Thich Nhat Hanh and this unique community. Evan had a delicious meal of fish and greasy fried potatoes, with an accompanying glass of wine, waiting. I even got a caveman grunt of welcome from Alyd. I sipped the tart local Côte d’Aix wine and counted my blessings, thinking my mother would have been happy at how I was living my life. The only after-pilgrimage shock I discovered later that night

was that I had bruised knees, as though the blood had collected during my hours of meditation and stayed there.

I also had an eye-opener thought about my mother. Effie Margaret (nee Leslie) Thierry was a Manitoba farm girl who married Ron Thierry and followed him into isolated northern bush camps where she worked as radio operator, cook, and nurse for Cree guides, geologists, and later, American tourists. She had probably never heard the word “mindfulness” in all her 84 years and yet, I realized, she practiced it all her life.

Buddhist Plum Village Questionnaire Results Overview

Plum Village is where I received the most comments about the importance of community. “Richard” from Vermont wrote to me in a follow-up email, “I can’t overemphasize the *sangha* [company, community] dimension of pilgrimage.” He said the first time he went to Plum Village and took part in a three week teaching by Thay, “my heart was enlarged, and I left part of it in Plum Village.” The experience left him eager to return and to bring family members with him. He has since gone back with both his wife and his grown daughter.

The issue of health also came up. Once very ill with bladder cancer, “Jerome” decided to visit Plum Village, something he was adamant he did not consider a pilgrimage. In fact when asked what pilgrimage meant to him, he said, “not much” but he did think pilgrimages to sacred sites were important as a way “to get a sense of spiritual ancestors.” His commitment to Plum Village is because of his faith. “To me, it was simply a part of my practice and deep commitment to Buddhism. Thay has been my model for many years now and he inspired me to use sitting, lying, and walking

meditation as part of my cancer treatment.” His experience was so profound, and his healing so successful, that he started a Buddhist *sangha* in his California town.

“Mitchell” came to Plum Village initially on a pilgrimage but has since come back 12 times over the past 20 years, and says “I go for the teachings, the community, and the chance to live in an environment that supports mindfulness.” He and his wife have just completed a three month, 1600 kilometre pilgrimage on the Santiago de Compostela route. They started their walk with a week-long stay in Plum Village (one of the Compostela routes begins at St. Foy, just a few miles from Plum Village), which “helped us communicate more deeply and honestly during our walk.”

“Joy” talked about her recently ended marriage and the severe depression that followed. She had been brought up Catholic but had left that religion years ago, and although interested in Buddhism, she was not ready to call it her religion. When I met her, she was nearing the end of a three month stay at Plum Village, where she had come hoping to “heal and make some choices. To hopefully find some peace.”

[A pilgrimage] site is probably somewhere I can find some wisdom or teachings or meditation practice. I have been to many sacred sites. I am always searching for something that I don’t necessarily find. I had been depressed and I did not want to continue the life I was leading. I wanted to make a new start in France. I took a year off work in Ireland to come to France to improve my French and find work hopefully. I thought I would go to Plum Village to begin with to try to let go of my ex, to get healthy and happy, to learn a bit of French. I certainly got healthier and more peaceful. I didn’t let go of my ex unfortunately. It was difficult to hold onto the peace when I returned to the real world. I was very suicidal before going to Plum Village. I think now I will not harm myself. That’s a big change. Perhaps these times are an opportunity to pause, to rest, to think about the future.

As Joy and I had left the meditation hall after Thay’s talk, she looked so happy and had given me a big grin as we headed toward the kitchen area for a hot cup of tea. I

hoped that the definition of pilgrimage that she had given me was just what she needed in her life: “[Pilgrimage is] a time to step out of the everyday humdrum existence. To find meaning in life.” Simple words. Not so simple to put into action.

**DRANCY TRANSIT CAMP:
A Dark Pilgrimage**

Giosué Orefice: “No Jews or Dogs Allowed.” Why do all the shops say, “No Jews Allowed?”

Guido: Oh, that. “Not Allowed” signs are the latest trend! The other day, I was in a shop with my friend the kangaroo, but their sign said, “No Kangaroos Allowed,” and I said to my friend, “Well, what can I do? They don’t allow kangaroos.”

Giosué Orefice: Why doesn’t our shop have a “Not Allowed” sign?

Guido: Well, tomorrow, we’ll put one up. We won’t let in anything we don’t like. What don’t you like?

Giosué Orefice: Spiders.

Guido: Good. I don’t like Visigoths. Tomorrow, we’ll get sign, “No Spiders or Visigoths Allowed.”

Life is Beautiful (La Vita è Bella)

Screenwriters Vincenzo Cerami, Roberto Benigni, 1997

I had to step into unfamiliar territory with my Drancy Transit Camp research and site visit. It would be presumptuous of me to claim I had a close understanding of the struggles, displacement, and hatred Jewish people have had to face over and over again in their history. In 1989, Evan and I, along with our daughter Emily who was six years old at the time, had been living in Germany for awhile before we decided to make a trip to Dachau Concentration Camp. I had been uncomfortable about going, especially with Emily, but “the visit” began to nag at me as unfinished business. Looking back at the camp visit, I see that is where I began to believe that there are places on this planet where evil seeps into the soil. J.D. and W.B. Clift, in *The Archetype of Pilgrimage*, made a short reference to a Carl Jung comment that I have not been able to track down to its original source: “When the god had left a place, it never returned” (Clift & Clift 2004, 96). That was my experience of Dachau.

When I decided to include a place of dark pilgrimage in this paper, Drancy Transit Camp stood out for me because of where it was located—in the middle of a community of 35,000 people and just a short transit ride from downtown Paris. What I was not expecting was how this specific pilgrimage topic would become a passion, with a fascination that almost threatened to take over all my research and reading time. The topic of Jewish persecution was not one I knew a lot about, other than information learned from books and movies. My research for this site involved a delicacy, as well as respect and patience, as I reached out into a faith community where I was a stranger asking for favours. I read books and looked at numerous websites, met with the president of one of the Aix en Provence Jewish organizations, and emailed archivists and historians at four different Jewish Holocaust museums and memorial centres around the world. I tried to glean what information I could on the Drancy camp, the Jewish situation in France during WWII, and the Vichy government. There was not much available to read on Drancy as little has been translated from French into English, which means I missed out on two important books, Antoine Sabbagh's *Lettres de Drancy* and Maurice Rajsfus' *Drancy: Un camp d concentration tres ordinaire*. I did find two fiction novels about children growing up in the camp. The most powerful experience I had was interviewing a Drancy Camp survivor and her story is told at the end of this section.

Not everyone I talked to was touched by the Drancy Memorial Site. Dr. Alan Marty, a retired American heart surgeon, wrote about his disappointment in the site in one of a series of emails we exchanged after meeting in Paris in October 2008:

One needs to feel, to touch such places, to make them personally meaningful, so that they enlarge a window through which you can experience your soul. The [Drancy] memorial site was a bit Disneyfied for

me, too clean, too abstract – except for that closed black train wagon. The arrival at the RER commuter train station at Drancy evoked more of what it may have been like, seeing rusted trains, weeds and unused tracks, a graveyard for what might have been a busier train yard.

Three hundred thousand Jews called France home when the Germans invaded France in May 1940. Six weeks later, the armistice was signed between the Germans and Marshal Phillippe Pétain and France was divided into two parts: the occupied north and the unoccupied zones in the south. Although the numbers vary depending on the source material, anywhere from 86,000 to 90,000 French Jews were sent to concentrations camps, and of that number, only 3000 survived. When Drancy was liberated in August 1944, only 1500 remained.

Drancy Transit Camp, a U-shaped building with six levels, existed for four years, from August 1941 to August 1944, and yet in those four years, 76,000 Jews passed through its gates. A few stayed for extended periods of time but the majority were shipped on to Auschwitz and other camps to the east. “The world is a dangerous place to live,” said Albert Einstein, “not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don’t do anything about it” (quotationsbook.com/quote/2657). The camp—and even that word, looked at from our Canadian experience of family gatherings by lake shores, is a giant misnomer—was located in the centre of the town of Drancy, a suburb of Paris, surrounded by apartment buildings that looked down into it, and opposite cafes and stores where patrons could easily see the starving prisoners through the barbed wire fence. Looking at it now, it is hard to imagine that people did not rise up in anger (or at least sympathy). Stephen Trombley’s 1994 documentary, *Drancy: A Concentration*

Camp in Paris, 1941-1944, however, highlights the insights of Renee Emboulas, who was nine years old when the first Jewish prisoners arrived at Drancy.

You didn't know [the Jewish prisoners]. You couldn't speak to them. You couldn't stop. Everyone was afraid of being denounced and sent to join them. . . . The main factor wasn't human indifference. It was fear. We were frightened.

Drancy was being built as a state of the art housing complex but before it was finished, it was taken over by the local French police and used to hold 4000 Jewish men rounded up on August 20, 1941. The round up was a complete shock. Many of the people arrested had been born in France and considered themselves Parisians first, then French, then Jewish. In the *Drancy* documentary and in my interview with Drancy Camp survivor Francine Christophe, I heard about the disdain held by educated French Jews for the more conservative immigrant Jews; even within the Jewish community, there was an "us" and a "them". French Jews would not have been surprised to have heard of immigrant Jews being detained, but never expected to suffer the same fate.

Although Drancy was built to house 700 people, 7000 deportees were often being held inside, at first 50 to a room, then as deportee numbers increased, 70 and more. There are 22 staircases and each staircase had a Jewish prisoner who was responsible both for handing out the meagre bread and soup rations and for making up the lists of those who would be deported in the next shipment. But as one survivor said in the documentary, even those with the coveted title of Head of Staircase were eventually deported and their job given to someone else.

On July 16 and 17, 1942, the French police instigated what has been called the Great Raid of the Vel D'Hiv. Almost 13,000 Jewish men and women, including 4000

children under the age of 12, were rounded up, forced onto buses, and taken to the Velodrome d’Hiver stadium, famous for its bike races. They were kept there for five days without food and water. For those who survived (some died, others committed suicide), a few were taken directly to the Bir-Hakeim Metro station and put on trains to the east; the rest were bused to Drancy Transit Camp. It would become the last stop before Auschwitz for most of them.

Paris-based journalist Tatiana de Rosnay, in a July 2008 interview in *Nextbook: A new read on Jewish culture*, described her initial experience visiting the Drancy housing complex when she was doing research for *Sarah’s Key*, a novel she wrote about a young Jewish girl separated from her family after the Vel D’Hiv raid and abandoned in Drancy:

I went in 2002 with a friend, whose entire family was deported, except for her mother, who was hidden. It was a very cold November day, and Drancy looks exactly like it did in 1942. It was built to be one of the first public housing projects. When I went inside, the stairs are exactly the same as in the photos, and you know you’re in this place where horrible things happened. My friend felt completely overwhelmed. I felt sickened and also terribly moved by her reaction. We came across some young people moving in, and we said we’re writing an article about Drancy, “Do you know where you’re living?” “No. Why?” We told them, and the young man said, “But that’s in the past, all that, no one cares about that anymore.”

Approximately 76,000 prisoners passed through Drancy Camp between August 1941 and August 1944. The stories that haunted me involved the children who were separated from their parents when they arrived and walked to a separate area and then ignored, with little or no food or water and no adults to care for them. The parents were sent on to Auschwitz. Eventually, the children who survived were also marched onto buses and taken to the Le Bourget train station to be shipped to Auschwitz.

Around Drancy the German and French administrations had set up a network of ‘annex camps,’ of which the chief were the children’s home, the

vocational school on the Rue des Rosiers, and the Rothschild Hospital, with its orphanage and home for the elderly. In practical terms the sick, elderly, and very young formed a reserve for the convoys (Rayski 2005, 142).

The camp was liberated in 1944 and the building made into social housing; it was not until 1976 that a memorial was erected on the site of the beginning of the interior courtyard. Part of the political agenda after the war was to move forward, an understandable position when so much had been lost, so many killed, and the survivors emotionally and physically affected by the hard years of the war. One of the ways the moving on could happen was to ignore the role that the French police and government had played in the rounding up and deporting of their Jewish fellow citizens. It was only in 1995 that French President Jacques Chirac “publicly recognized France’s responsibility for deporting thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps during the German occupation in World War II” wrote journalist Marlise Simons in the July 17, 1995 issue of *The New York Times*.

When it came time to visit the Drancy Transit Camp site, I found it to be a more complicated process than expected. In one of many serendipitous moments I experienced while on this pilgrimage path, a Unitarian Universalist minister friend wrote to me with the email address for a retired doctor she knew who lived in Paris and was an amateur historian. When I contacted Dr. Alan Marty, I learned that since his retirement he has been researching and writing a detailed guidebook on the living and working sites of WWII French collaborators in Paris. He was immediately interested in talking about pilgrimage. I asked him how he had started on his research path.

When we moved into our apartment in the 6th Arrondissement, close to the Hotel Lutetia and near the prison memorial at #38 rue du Cherche Midi, both sites presented mysteries. What actually happened at the prison

besides what is marked there? What happened at Lutetia? No one at the hotel seemed to know. That it was the *Abwehr* headquarters, that it was from here that half the black market activity in WWII Paris was administered, that it was from here that the bordellos were administered, etc., no one who worked at the hotel seemed to know this so the book started out as a mystery to solve.

One stumbling block I must mention is that although I was living in southern France, I did not speak or read French with ease and it was difficult to find research sources for Drancy other than the internet. I turned to two sites: “ushmm.org: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum” and “A Teacher’s Guide To The Holocaust”.

Dr. Marty had done some research on the Drancy Camp but had not yet visited it. After several weeks of animated email exchanges and numerous phone calls, he offered to keep me company on my trip to the Drancy Memorial Site. I arrived in Paris one cold November morning and the two of us began our travels at the St. Placide Metro station, changed trains to the RER (B Line) at St. Michel, and reached the Drancy train station about 40 minutes later.

That dreary day, as wet and windy as my trip to Chartres and Plum Village, seemed an appropriate setting for our visit to the Drancy site. When we arrived at the Drancy Station, there were miles of abandoned railway tracks, grass growing between the ties, and abandoned train cars visible rusting in the distance. Everything was gray cement and bleak, bleak, bleak. I could feel my stomach tighten, and wished I could look at this experience, right in that moment, with the same understanding as “Thomas”, an American questionnaire respondent. He had told me that pilgrimage was “a spiritual journey sprinkled with outward obstacles and inner heartaches that imprints my soul, rejuvenates my spirit, and leaves me with honest inner knowledge I can come home

with.” It was too early on this trip to feel any rejuvenation of spirit. Trappist monk Thomas Merton said something similar: “The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer pilgrimage. One can have one without the other. It is best to have both” (Merton 1967, 168).

All the buildings we saw looked like they needed some repair work, for both cosmetic and safety reasons. Every inch of wall space appeared to be covered in graffiti, while garbage bags and empty “coca” (as it is called in France) plastic bottles and fast food wrappers were littering the streets. The sidewalks were dicey in spots, filled with ruts that invited an ankle-twisting experience. A young couple from Guyana confirmed we were waiting for the right bus to get to the *Hotel de Ville* (City Hall) and even checked with the bus driver to make sure they are correct. They were definite “allies” in our pilgrimage to the Memorial Site. When we arrived at the *Hotel de Ville*, hoping to get a map and possibly some brochures, the office was already closed for the standard French two-hour lunch break. While we waited for the office to open, we sat in a nearby park and ate the picnic lunch that Dr. Marty has brought and talked about Drancy and the German occupation of Paris.

Dr. Marty spent hours doing on-site research for his guidebook. Want to know where the French Resistance fighters were sent to a Court of Justice and then tortured? That is at 12 rue Francois Miron, the residence of collaborator Pierre Laval. Care to see the site where Louis Renault lived in style, his company getting richer every day making tanks and trucks for the Germans? Get out at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Metro Station and walk to 51-53 Avenue des Champs-Elysees. “The Paris-based American

collaborationists and war profiteers were blatantly defying the US and the Trading with the Enemy Act,” Dr. Marty told me. “At 29-31 rue Cambon, the Chase Bank acted as the official bank for the German Embassy and its Ambassador Otto Abetz. Or, IBM’s French branch was at 360 rue St. Honore.” It was a fascinating, depressing conversation.

When two o’clock arrived and we entered the front room of the *Hotel de Ville*, it quickly seemed like our wait may have been wasted. The two clerks behind the reception desk had no idea what we wanted. Dr. Marty can hold his own in a simple French conversation but the receptionists claimed to know nothing about any Drancy Memorial Site. “What is it?” the female clerk asked. Ah, now we were definitely in a time of pilgrimage testing. No, they did not have a map of the city. Dr. Marty countered with, “What about a copy of the city map behind your desk?” The male clerk turned and looked at the map on the wall as though seeing it for the first time. He just shook his head.

I had the address of the memorial site—at the corner of Esplanade Charles De Gaulle and Avenue Jean Jaurès. Dr. Marty calmly and politely stepped behind the desk and started looking at the map for the street names. The man sighed, saw we were not going to go away, and pointed to the street with his finger, a motion mirrored immediately by the woman who motioned toward the exit: “*Avenue Jean Jaurès, par là.*”

We walked in what we hoped was the right direction, and at one point on the main street passed a statue (by artists Jean and Christian Moisa) dedicated to the victims of slavery: an entwined African man and woman, chains hanging from the wrists of the man, hands raised skyward. We finally saw the tip of the memorial sculpture visible behind a well-kept hedge, making the site almost invisible from the street. Behind it we could now see the original Drancy U-shaped apartment building.

As I looked around me, I had the thought that very few people come here. The town may look after the memorial site but the local government officials do not seem to go out of their way to make sure it is visible or that people know where it is. The anti-slavery statue had more prominence. It was easy to understand de Rosnay's experience of talking to people and finding out they did not know and did not care about the history of this area, what she went on to call "a forgotten, dejected part of the world." Not forgotten by everyone, however. On January 20, 2005, the "wagon" (train car) on the memorial site was set on fire and a piece of paper decorated with a Nazi swastika left nearby.

The Drancy Transit Camp memorial site consists of a wagon, a train car used to transport people to Germany; it is closed today, only open by appointment to see the small museum inside though I have not been successful in getting anyone to respond to my requests for a tour; a sculpture by Shelomo Selinger; three plaques (one plaque describes the escape tunnel, a second is from French youth promising never to forget the horrors that took place on this site, and a third is a promise that the French Republic will never forget), and a stone path built over the route of an escape tunnel that was discovered before it could be used.

"Thomas" said he found the place "sanitized" with the flowerbeds and mowed grass. Adam Rayski, author of *The Choice of the Jews Under Vichy*, stated that Drancy was called "The Parisian Dachau" in the underground Resistance newspaper during the war years.

Dr. Marty and I left Drancy feeling disheartened and I had more questions than answers. Can pilgrimages provide people with a place to go in order to lay ghosts to rest?

Maybe even find redemption, or hope? How can people deal with grief at such a deep level, where the memory of evil acts permeates every tree leaf and brick wall?

American historian Jay Winter looks at this topic in relation to WWI in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*. He explores the many ways different nations mourned their dead before, during, and after WWI. “Remembrance is part of the landscape. Anyone who walks through northern France or Flanders will find traces of the terrible, almost unimaginable, human losses of the war, and of efforts to commemorate the fallen” (Winter 1995, 1). He explains how people deal with their grief through film, literature, poetry, art, monuments, and sculptures. His list also includes travelling back to the place where the painful experience or loss occurred. “Many parents and wives had to face the arduous task of making the pilgrimage to find the graves of their dead sons and husbands; some wanted to take the bodies back, others felt the dead should rest where they had fallen. They had died for the land. It was sanctified by their sacrifice” (Winter 1995, 24).

Adam Rayski does not stop at calling Drancy a transit camp and labels it “a French concentration camp on French soil with only one purpose: to serve as the transit point through which foreign and French Jews could be deported to the extreme hell of the extermination and other camps in the East. The name Drancy will live on in infamy as long as human memory in France and elsewhere reaches back to the 1941-44 era of inhumanity and terror” (Rayski 2005, 143). In infamy, if people know about it and do not forget.

Drancy Transit Camp Survivor Interview: Francine Christophe

Between the age of nine and thirteen, Mrs. Francine Christophe was a prisoner in six Nazi transit camps in France—La Rochefoucauld, Angouleme, Poitiers, Drancy, Pithiviers, Beaune-la-Rolande—and in the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in Germany. Christophe has made it her life mission to ensure that people do not forget, and has written six books about children’s Holocaust experience, including her own autobiography, *From a World Apart: A Little Girl in the Concentration Camps*. In October 2008 I was given her name by an archivist at the *Mémorial de la SHOAH Musée* in Paris; the archivist was just one of numerous people I had been corresponding with in my search for a Drancy Transit Camp survivor. The archivist offered to act as go-between and forward a letter to Christophe at her Paris home. I gladly accepted but several weeks passed without my receiving any response. My introduction letter to her was one of many I sent out to different Jewish organizations and individuals, though I received few replies.

I understood completely. I was a stranger, a non-Jew, asking questions about a time most people want to forget. I continued to contact a number of Jewish organizations in the hope of finding a Drancy Camp survivor who would agree to talk to me and answer my questionnaire. Then, one Sunday night in November, Christophe’s husband, “Jean-Jacques”, phoned and asked me a number of questions: Why was I in France? What was my family doing? What was this university paper I was writing? He was polite but reserved. Over the next few months, I (with Evan’s French to English interpreting help) exchanged a number of phone calls with Mr. And Mrs. Christophe. Jean-Jacques and I could communicate easily in emails as his written English was excellent. His sense of

humour quickly showed itself and the initial reserve I had experienced disappeared. His notes were always funny and often quite personal, emails that I answered in kind. In hindsight, I can see it was a testing time, allowing them to find out if I was legitimate in my interest.

Finally, in January 2009 Evan and I were invited to join them for lunch. They were coming to spend a few days at their summer house in a small village near Cannes, which is only an hour and a half drive from our house. It was during our eventual lunch and interview that I realized just how protective Jean-Jacques is of his wife. Not everyone who wants to talk to her does so with a friendly intent.

Christophe was called “Anne Frank’s little sister”, their resemblance to each other obvious in the few remaining black and white photographs of the two young girls. Christophe, an 11-year-old French girl, and Anne Frank, 14 and from Holland, had arrived at the infamous Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp by different paths. Frank’s story of having been in hiding for two years with her family until they were betrayed is familiar to many people. During that same time, Christophe had been held at five different camps, including Drancy. Anne Frank died of typhus in early 1945, just months before the camp was liberated by the British 11 Armoured Division. Her story eventually became known worldwide after her father had her diary published. Christophe and her mother had been caught trying to escape from Paris in 1941; her father was already in a German POW camp. Along with her mother and father, she survived. Today she is a 76-year-old woman with a lively attitude and appreciation for life, with her seventh book about the Holocaust about to be published.

Christophe and her husband, also a Holocaust survivor, now move between their home in Paris and this cosy apartment near Cannes. Evan and I spent part of a cold, sunny January day with them, my minimal French and Christophe's minimal English meaning that Evan had to come along as interpreter. It was an enjoyable, unsettling, laughter-filled, and haunting four hours as we ate pizza and salad, drank red wine, and listened to Christophe and her husband talk about their experiences during WWII.

Christophe grew up in an affluent family in Paris. Her father was a historian and writer, her mother was involved in theatre, and that although they were Jewish, they were not religious. They considered themselves French first and Jews second. Her father had been mobilized and was working in a factory for the war effort when he was captured and put into a German POW camp. He managed to get a note out to Christophe's mother to leave Paris immediately but Christophe and her mother were captured as they tried to escape and sent first to Poitiers Transit Camp, then Drancy, and five other transit camps before spending almost two hellish years in the infamous Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in Germany.

Here is a transcription of the BBC radio archival recording of journalist Richard Dimbleby who was with the British soldiers on 15 April 1945 when they liberated Bergen-Belsen ([news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/4445811.stm](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-4445811)):

Here over an acre of ground lay dead and dying people. You could not see which was which. The living lay with their heads against the corpses and around them moved the awful, ghostly procession of emaciated, aimless people, with nothing to do and with no hope of life, unable to move out of your way, unable to look at the terrible sights around them. Babies had been born here, tiny wizened things that could not live. A mother, driven mad, screamed at a British sentry to give her milk for her child, and thrust the tiny mite into his arms, then ran off, crying terribly. He opened the

bundle and found the baby had been dead for days. This day at Belsen was the most horrible of my life.

In 1945, Christophe, her mother, and hundreds of other Bergen-Belsen camp inmates were put on a train, all of them sure they were going to be taken somewhere and killed. However, at some point, the German soldiers abandoned the train and the prisoners were freed, rescued by Russian soldiers who then took care of them. “If the war had lasted six months longer, we would have been dead,” she said. Her father, released from his German POW camp, spent a month searching for his wife and daughter, and his persistence paid off, though by that time, Christophe’s mother was seriously ill with typhus and almost died. Christophe’s family was an anomaly: “We were seen as strange animals, just think, all three sent away, all three returned” (Christophe 2000, 157).

Christophe was returned to France in 1945, a skeletal 13 year old, with health problems that continue to bother her today. As we look through the six books she has written so far, she asks me if I have been to Drancy Transit Camp site and seen the museum. I tell her I have been to the memorial site but was unable to see inside the wagon museum since I still had not heard back from the person in charge. She shook her head and went to get her address book. It turns out I had been caught in the middle of a political struggle. Apparently, there are two museums on the site but in competition with each other and run by different organizations. This was the first time I had heard of a second museum. There was a pilgrimage lesson in all this—about persistence, or patience, or maybe the power of luck. Christophe started flipping through her telephone

notebook, giving me new contact names and the phone numbers for the two men who are in charge of the second museum.

Christophe has dedicated herself to making sure that people do not forget about the Holocaust but this is a fairly recent activity, begun in 1995. Up to that point, she had never spoken about her experience in a public setting, but a Ravensbrück Concentration Camp survivor friend had gently pushed her into speaking at a conference held in an elementary school, and for five days in a row she went from classroom to classroom telling her story. The first day she was shaking as she stood in front of 32 *Sixième* students (11-12 year olds). She told them she had never spoken in front of a group before and she was scared and asked them “to be sweet” with her. They were, even though she began to cry two or three times, something that rarely happens these days now that she has told her story so often. “I have a wall of sorts when I talk about it,” she said. At the end of that first hour and a half talk, each one of the 32 students kissed her twice on each cheek, and when she returned the next day, that same class lined the hallway and clapped and gave her words of encouragement as she walked toward her second classroom. That week changed her life and now, 13 years later, she has talked “to tons of people” as she says, laughing. She gets calls asking her to speak about her experiences from teachers, friends of teachers, and a variety of associations. In the city of Perpignan alone, she has talked to over 1000 students. “There is no question I will not answer,” she said. Once a quiet member of the *Fédération Nationale des Déportés et Internés et Résistants et Patriotes* (National Federation of Deported and Imprisoned Resistance Fighters and Patriots), she now tells her story to anyone who wants to hear it. She says that talking

about those times is not something she does for her own healing, but feeling the children's love is important.

She would have liked to have been a comedian or an actor but her father talked her out of it. Looking back, she now thinks it was a wise decision, adding that maybe talking to the students is one way of having her time on stage. While her children were growing up, she at first assisted and then led the local school theatre group, something she loved immensely. In 1944 the children of Bergen-Belsen put on a play, which was a dangerous thing for them to do. Jean-Jacques told her to take that story out of her first book because it could be used by revisionists to show it was not that bad at the camps if the children could do theatrical pieces. She has since published the story behind the play, and excerpts from it in a separate book.

Jean Jacques is keen to speak English. He owned a number of successful shoe stores before he retired ("I followed in the feet of my father," he says with a grin), but his dream as a young man had been to study English and teach Elizabethan literature. He has regrets about the career decision he made, although he says as a store owner he ended up making more money than he would have as a teacher, which was better for his family. He has a mixture of forgiveness and loathing for Germans. "We told our children they could marry anyone they wanted, even a German, as long as their grandparents were not living," he said. He also wanted it understood that, although he lost most of his family, he still owed his life to the Frenchmen—"our compatriots" he called them—who had hid him and his parents on a series of farms. "I think of my killed family all the time, every day, more often than I think of my own dead parents, who died after the war," he said. He got up and left the room soon afterwards.

In Jean Jacques's family, no one ever mentioned their wartime experiences, while Christophe wanted to talk but found that her children, like many children of Holocaust survivors, did not want to hear about it. She has gone back to the Drancy Transit Camp site many times, sometimes with family members, sometimes with school children, sometimes with different Jewish organizations, and always on the anniversary of the deportation. She says it is important that these stories be told.

Going back to Bergen-Belsen was harder. It was filled with memories too horrible to imagine. In her book, she shared her story of being a child in that concentration camp. "I'm not hungry anymore. My hair is stuck together, matted with lice eggs. My pants are stiff with diarrhea. I smell of rotting flesh" (Christophe 2000, 122). She felt she had to go back but did not want to unless she had Jean Jacques' company and support but he refused, saying "It was too hard." Finally, in 1994, while on a holiday, they found themselves in Hanover, near Bergen-Belsen, and Christophe repeated her request that Jean Jacques go with her. He again said "No!" but finally relented when she talked about her desperate need to see it again. The next day, accompanied by a vicar they had met, they walked through what remains of the camp entrance. It was a profound visit for them both. Christophe said the whole site is now a large grass field. Nothing remains of the buildings. The British soldiers had to burn them in 1945 because of the typhus epidemic, which killed 35,000 in one year alone. "I could hear birds singing," she said. "Never in the two years I was there did I hear a bird sing." She said she lives better now. She has been back several times, and even made a "special visit" with one of her grandsons.

“We are a community of sufferance,” she told me. When referring to the children deportees, she said, “I can hardly believe this happened to me. This,”—she motioned to the four of us, drinking our coffee in tiny white cups set on saucers and eating chocolate-coated cookies—“this is trying to communicate the incommunicable.”

Christophe and her mother were sent back to Drancy several times, including a long one year stretch: “Drancy again. Drancy-the-hell-hole. Drancy-the-crowded. Drancy-the-noisy. Drancy-the-louse-ridden. Drancy-the-bad-joke” (Christophe 2000, 48).

Living those four years in different camps, especially in Bergen-Belsen, “was surviving from second to second. It was the unexpected. Things would happen without warning. [The Nazis] were very intelligent. They knew how to create and sustain terror.” By this point, Jean Jacques had left the room again. Christophe had explained earlier that he is very emotional and finds it hard to talk about the war, and he had started crying at the dinner table when he was telling us the events that led up to his family members being killed. Christophe started to take over telling his story but he just shook his head, saying, “Sometimes I get emotional, it’s all right.” Telling “gets rid of the weight,” he said. He came and went throughout our four hour visit; when talking about it got too much, he left and read the newspaper in the back room. Christophe, on the other hand, was glad to find people who were interested.

She was not always so willing to share her story, in particular for many years after her return to France. Along with many returned deportees, she was brought back from Germany to the Lutétia Hotel in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district of Paris, scarred and

scared. Using that particular hotel had a definite ironic element to it. It had been *Abwehr* (the counterintelligence agency of the *Wehrmacht*) headquarters during the occupation.

The deportees quickly discovered they had come home to a country that wanted to celebrate the end of the war. France did not know what to do with these walking skeletons. “We had a look in our eyes, a haunted look,” while France just wanted to forget. She herself was a dangerously thin 13 year old, with sinus and digestive problems from her years in the camps. She also had problems with her legs, the result of spending four childhood years being starved and forced to stand outside in snow and rain for hours at a time. “Roll calls in the snow are worse,” she wrote in her book. “One hour, two hours, three hours, or more, without moving, on an empty stomach” (Christophe 2000, 95). Her legs continue to bother her to this day. “Psychology was a word I did not know,” she said. “The doctors didn’t know how to deal with all of us and our camp diseases. Teachers didn’t know what to do with us.”

There was little assistance given to any of the returning deportees. Christophe still possesses the piece of paper that lists the things she was given at the Lutétia Hotel before being sent on her way to her grandmother, who had come out of hiding to get her: one bar of soap, one pair each of galoshes and socks, a sweater and underwear, a dress, and a package that held sugar, a can of sardines, a can of condensed milk, and a small bit of money. A collaborator had taken over their apartment and they had to borrow money to buy it back from him.

For years, when people asked her what she had done during the war, she replied, “I was in the countryside.” At one point, when she was 17 and talking with a woman

sitting near her, she even denied being Jewish. “I told nobody. I felt shame about being deported and imprisoned.”

“The children of survivors suffer a lot,” Christophe said. Both of her children have married non-Jewish spouses. When she published her first book, her son’s best friend ran a bookstore. Christophe suggested that he tell his friend about her book and he could put it in the front window of his store. Her son refused. Her daughter showed her support by going with her mother to the “Children of Bergen-Belsen” survivor meetings and as a result she has found support and friendship among other children of survivors. Her son refused to allow Christophe to give any talks in the schools her grandchildren attend. “Anti-Semitic things are happening, bombs being thrown at synagogues, windows of Jewish businesses smashed. My daughter is afraid.” Evan asked her what she thought her daughter feared. “She picked up the fear from me,” Christophe said. Her grandchildren are more accepting. One 13-year-old grandson saw one of her books on his teacher’s desk. “Do you know who wrote that book?” he asked his teacher. “My grandmother, and I can ask her to come in and talk about it,” which Christophe did. Her daughter was furious with her.

Returning to Drancy memories, she drew an outline of the site on the coffee table, showing the northeast side where she and the other children had been forced to stay inside their barracks. The windows were all painted blue but they ran their fingernails along the paint and made slits of light where they could look out into the interior courtyard to see what was going on. They had heard of the torture cells in the basement, heard the screams of the tortured, and knew prisoners were kept naked and sprayed with freezing cold water two or three times a day, as well as having their arms broken.

One day she saw a barefoot man, naked except for a blanket thrown over his shoulders, being escorted by a German soldier across the inner courtyard to the southwest corner where all those about to be deported were kept. The blanket fell off the man's shoulders and landed at his bare feet. He stood and looked down at it, but made no other move. "I could see he could not use his arms to pick it up so I knew the story about breaking the prisoner's arms was true," she said. Another time, as she was crossing the courtyard, she looked over at the barred windows of one of the cells and saw a woman, obviously in pain, clutching the bars. "We knew people were being tortured. We could hear them." The woman's pain-filled face was an image that haunted her for years. Christophe was 11 years old at the time.

Her community of fellow survivors is of help to her. In 2007 4000 people met at Auschwitz Concentration Camp. At one point in the ceremony a Jewish cantor began to sing the Requiem for the Dead and she said it felt as though 4000 people took a deep breath together and moved in close to one another. "It was a profound moment. A pilgrimage is like that moment of shared religious experience. Where you feel something. Maybe God, maybe not. I'm not religious. That shared moment made it a pilgrimage."

We did not talk about forgiveness. I will save that for my next visit with her. Myers and Jeeves wrote a relevant passage that I could use as a starting point for another conversation with her about it: "Forgiveness—at least for significant offenses—does not involve a literal forgetting. . . . Instead of forgetting, forgiveness involves remembering graciously" (Myers & Jeeves 2003, 140). But as people have learned in the past, and as they continue to learn through the murder of two million Cambodians by the Pol Pot

regime and the slaughter of 800,000 Rwandans, Christophe's passion for telling her story over and over is based on her belief that people do forget about evil, or at least find it easy to ignore. "Sometimes reconciliation is inappropriate," Myers and Jeeves say, "yet we can forgive—a move that paradoxically frees us from the shackles of resentment and rage" (Myers & Jeeves 2003, 140).

"Think of her on January 25," Jean Jacques had said, leaning close to me at the lunch table earlier. "That is the Dinner of the Children" referring to the now grown children who had been at Bergen-Belsen together. In 1945 200 women and 80 children were brought back to Paris from Bergen-Belsen. This year 25 to 40 of the now grown elderly "children" will turn up. Getting together "is a form of happiness," Christophe said. "We can laugh about those experiences." She is proud of her group. "All those 'children' who had that awful experience, they've made something of their lives." She tried to temper what she was saying but she has strong feelings about the youth and immigrants today demanding that the government help them. "They have everything, we had nothing, and yet we went on to make something of our lives."

Her speaking work is an important part of her yearly schedule. Jean Jacques grumbles that because she is so busy they cannot travel, and Italy is so close. She feels her visits with students are important and told us of two separate times when her talks were cancelled: once when she was supposed to speak at the University of Nantes and the local police refused to escort her or guarantee her safety when there were threats from a pro-Palestinian group on campus (the Euro was being introduced and the police were needed to escort the new Euro money to banks); and the second time was a high school teacher in whose class she was scheduled to speak who told her that a group of students

were offended by her presence and it might be dangerous if she came. “People use the words ‘genocide’ and ‘holocaust’ so flippantly these days, it cheapens them.” This was the first and only time during our visit I heard a hint of anger in her voice.

On our drive home Evan said it felt like a privilege to have been told their stories. He asked me if I had understood the phone conversation that took place not long after we arrived. I remembered the phone ringing and Christophe excusing herself and moving into the kitchen, her voice trailing off on “*aller à Auschwitz*”. Evan told me that Christophe had been asked to go to Auschwitz with a group and as they would be travelling by train, they needed to make reservations. “Make sure you go first class,” Jean-Jacques had apparently interjected. Christophe then told the person on the phone to “book me a first class ticket. As a survivor, I get a 75% discount.”

Some statements just move out of irony and into the heart. Like the last two lines in Christophe’s autobiography. Returning to a now green, peaceful Bergen-Belsen after 50 years, she entered the camp museum where she saw “photos of the mass graves, the cart for transporting the bodies, people dying in the mud. Then I relaxed. I had found my childhood” (Christophe 2000, 168).

Drancy Transit Camp Questionnaire Results Overview

Finding people to interview for the Drancy Transit Camp site was difficult. Not being Jewish made it harder for me to approach people without any prior relationship and have them respond. I found people willing to answer my questionnaire by writing to anyone who had even a remote connection to Drancy Transit Camp: a Paris high school

teacher who regularly takes her students to Drancy as a history field trip; and three people who had done research on the Drancy camps for films and books. They were an eclectic group: Unitarian Universalists, an atheist, one man who said he had no religion or faith practice at all, and a Jewish woman who does not practise regularly.

When asked “What does it mean to you to be a pilgrim/visitor to a sacred site?” several people talked about the emotional impact. Filmmaker “Stephen” said “[it is] an opportunity to imagine the suffering of others and make an attempt to understand the lessons that should be derived from that.” He added there was nothing missing at the Drancy site, “sadly, it was all there.” “Thomas” had the opposite response, and found the lack of available written material left everything “to one’s imagination.” One man said he had wanted to go “to see Drancy . . . a place where much evil was done . . . a place where maybe a few random acts of kindness may occasionally have occurred.”

“Estelle”, a teacher who regularly brings students to Drancy, was brought there herself when she was 14 years old. She started leading these Drancy field trips because “it is important to understand the historical events, and to experience the feelings of others.” She did not think Drancy was a pilgrimage site, as “the religiousness of the term does not agree with how I interpret this visit.” Coming repeatedly had helped her “feel more comfortable in talking about this subject with students . . . because [a visit helps] you take more time to think about the historical significance of the place, and you can be permeated by the feel of the place.”

Magazine writer “Talia” has been back to Drancy Camp three times “and will no doubt go back there again with friends who wish to go there with me.” She believes that visiting a sacred site means “feeling a certain emotion” while a pilgrimage to that

particular site was all about “Remembering. Respecting. Honoring. . . . To never forget.”

PERSONAL REFLECTION:

Next step--Transformation

Journey's end. And what is a journey? Is it just distance traveled? Time spent? No, it's what happens on the way. It's the things that shape you. At the end of the journey, you're not the same. Mayor Richard Wilkins III
Buffy the Vampire Slayer, "Graduation Day: Part 2".
Screenwriter Joss Whedon, 1997

I started *The Act of Pilgrimage* curious to talk to other pilgrims and hear their stories. Looking back at one of my many questions—"Is there a place for the simplicity of a pilgrimage in our busy lives?"—I can see it did not actually address what I was interested in finding out. Did I really expect anyone to answer "No"? But the question was valid in starting a discussion that let me the people I interviewed: 1) "What started you on your pilgrimage path?", and 2) "Did your pilgrimage result in a transformational experience, and if so, what was it?"

The answers to the first question were varied, and almost predictable: the end of a marriage; wanting a change from everyday routine; a religious, spiritual, or secular desire to see where the god, guru, Zen Master, apparition, or rock star had lived and died; or a desire for introspective time. I was surprised, though, by two recurring themes. First, the majority of the people I interviewed and who answered my questionnaire mentioned the importance of finding and spending time with like-minded people, be it in a *sangha* at Plum Village, a mass at Lourdes, a quiet moment in the middle of the Drancy Camp compound, or standing silently in the centre of the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth but with others nearby. This desire to find others on a similar path was something I heard repeatedly, regardless of differences in religious backgrounds, gender, age, country of

origin, and initial reason(s) for setting out on the pilgrimage. It reinforced for me how hungry many people are for a community of kindred spirits.

Second, I was often told that sacred sites, including my four research sites, had a special energy that reached into the hearts of the pilgrims, giving them a feeling, an experience they were searching for and open to—a sensation of grace and gratitude. This was something that didn't have any tangible proof but it was a feeling valued everyone who mentioned it. Perhaps this is the moment of reverence or awe that many of us seek.

Although I had initial concerns about unresponsive participants, or getting responses that were too similar, or finding my lack of French language skills would prove a hindrance, none of those things turned out to be a problem. I learned fairly early in the interview process that my biggest difficulty involved needing to be conscious of time. It turns out that people are eager to talk about their pilgrimages and their spiritual experiences, and were also as interested in hearing other people's stories as in sharing their own. Many of the people who said "no" to my questionnaire request still took the time to send a follow-up email with some thoughts about sacred journeys and their own pilgrim experiences. "Bill", for example, sent me three emails saying "No, I don't have the time to answer the questionnaire but I was thinking about" before he did a 180-degree turn in his fourth email and wrote, "Oh, send the questionnaire."

I found myself in the opposite end of the story-sharing spectrum during my struggle to find people willing to talk to me about their present day or 1940s Drancy Camp visit experiences. Whereas Plum Village, Chartres Cathedral, and Lourdes can be seen in a positive light, Drancy Camp is a dark pilgrimage site: abandoned, isolated, and depressing. It does not invite laughter or leave one with feelings of peace. It does invite

introspection though. I wondered if my part in the resistance I met was my own shyness and hyper-sensitivity to the fact I was stepping into the Jewish faith community as a stranger, without any history or connection, and asking people to share very personal stories. I spent much of my Drancy research time building relationships, sending out one letter and email after another to people who were mostly referrals from other people—snowball sampling—and then not hearing back from most of them.

As stated at the very beginning, this is in no way a scientific paper. I was an integral part of each interview, sharing my story, exchanging news of children, favourite movies, and future dreams. I was asking people to share what were often perceived as very intimate, private moments, and it was important for them to trust me and what I would do with the information they were giving me. I was also asked not to include certain things in this paper, a request I respected.

Out of the approximately 60 people I approached in person and via email to complete my questionnaire, about 40 responded. Of this number, 20 answered the questionnaire. The majority of my questionnaire respondents are in their 40s to 60s. I ended up with a smaller age range in my respondents that I had planned. I approached younger pilgrims but most of the people who agreed to fill out a questionnaire were middle-aged and older.

The word “pilgrimage” carried a negative weight for some people who initially perceived it as having a Christian bias. I learned to give the definition—a sacred journey with challenges and a transformational experience at some point along the way—soon after beginning a conversation about my paper, and that usually took care of any bristling of neck hairs that had started to occur.

People's transformational stories interested me the most. I love hearing about the journey part of any pilgrimage but "then what?" is where my curiosity jumps 100 percent. I found myself leaning forward, or avidly re-reading, as respondents talked and wrote about their post-pilgrimage experiences and plans.

It became clearer to me that another distinction could be made about the sociological and psychological aspects of pilgrimage since a pilgrimage can be either, or both. If a pilgrim's transformational experience is triggered by an encounter with another, then I would consider it more of a sociological experience. For other individuals it is more of a psychological experience when the transformation is the result of an internal encounter with the Self, a "felt sense of being other than the ego" as my husband Evan Llewellyn described it. The psychological and sociological experiences are not mutually exclusive however, but one often has more impact than the other. Just as some extroverts are highly influenced by the people around them, and introverts have a more internal experience of life, pilgrims on their pilgrimage can have either or both internal or external experiences of transformation.

When I asked one of my GLS classmates, "Ali", to talk about his pilgrimage story, he said he preferred to look at pilgrimage "as an introspective journey. . . . I am often . . . returning to places, to see how the place or the journey affects me now. Will [I] re-experience the 'magic' by returning?" His comments tapped into a childhood memory of mine. I had loved getting ready to head north into the Quebec bush for the summer at our fishing camps and was always happy to start sorting and packing clothes and books. But when I turned 17, I was no longer keen to go. My interests had changed. There were some great summer parties planned and this cute new guy had just moved to our school,

and I was going to spend the summer in an isolated bush camp? Where was the adventure in that? I was not a pleasant 17 year old to be around. Up to that point, I had always loved my time in the bush. I grew up with a freedom that few children experience, but I did not want it anymore. Now, I cannot think of any place I would rather go back to and explore again. Ali's comments led me to consider the natural next research step for this paper, if I were to do a Part B. I would find people on sacred journeys that had returned to the same sacred site over a number of years and ask them how—if at all—things like age, and changing family, professional, and financial circumstances, had shifted their pilgrimage choices and experiences.

I started out at the beginning of *The Act of Pilgrimage* wondering if I was a peak experience junkie. My answer after this year long research process? A resounding “maybe”. It might be that the peak experience buzz is a legitimate component of any spiritual journey, and that moment of heightened energy, that second or two of touching the divine, is a valid way to recharge one's spiritual batteries, helping one to prepare for the return to one's ordinary world. I also discovered that these days I am more attracted to plateau experiences than peak experiences. I value the calm and the contentment that I can find with walks, with meditation, and with time spent sitting by the ocean more than feeling any need for the intensity of a peak spiritual moment.

The joyous news is that we don't have to do any of this alone. There is always a mentor or an ally at our side. I had my husband Evan, Dr. Alan Marty, Francine Christophe, Dr. Jack Martin and Dr. Donald Grayston of my advisory committee, the wonderful pilgrims who shared their stories with me, and my computer whiz buddy Michelle Demers who walked me through thesis formatting hell. I relearned that our role

as pilgrims on a sacred journey is to remain curious and compassionate, with ourselves as much as with others.

My own pilgrimage experiences, along with the stories I heard from other travellers, constantly reminded me that it is good to be prepared, but it is the serendipitous moments that matter most. During a recent trip to Paris I visited the Père Lachaise cemetery, which made me one of 1.5 million people who come each year to pay their respects and get their picture taken by one or more of the 300,000 permanent gravesites of artists, philosophers, opera singers, scientists, politicians, writers, actors, Nobel Prize winners, soldiers, and courtesans. I bought a map of the cemetery grounds from a street vendor and used it to find the gravesite of rock star Jim Morrison. I moved on to the graves of lovers Heloise and Abelard, writers Balzac and Oscar Wilde, but could not find Chopin, Sarah Bernhardt, Isadora Duncan, or the now empty urn of opera singer Maria Callas. The plus side is that my searching led me unexpectedly to the graves of Colette and an actor named Ticky. Two hours later, it was time to leave and I still hadn't made it to the northeast corner to visit Edith Piaf's gravesite. Those two hours in that cemetery could easily be seen as a metaphor not only for pilgrimage but for life: you may have a map, and it will take you where you want to go, but it is the lost paths and found sites that make life interesting.

My husband Evan had a more basic version of his pilgrimage experiences. He felt that part of the success of any pilgrimage is the simple fact the pilgrims "got up off their butts and actually did it, broke out of routine and allowed for the unplanned and improbable to happen." At the same time, he said there is a safety net in knowing "a pilgrimage is usually limited, it implies a going home again."

SFU professor Dr. Ellie Stebner wondered if pilgrimage was a metaphor for life itself. I would say yes, especially the times when we seek to break down individual boundaries and dig deeper inside ourselves to uncover meanings to personal life questions. My decision to take the Graduate Liberal Studies program at SFU came from my desire to move out of my life routine and experience a transformation. Even my decision to write this paper on the *Act of Pilgrimage* was a pilgrimage in its own right, providing me with internal and external obstacles, enemies and allies, and transformational experiences. I have participated in deeply meaningful events with others and opened myself to reverence. I am now at the stage where I am reflecting on what my pilgrimage journeys have meant. What, if anything, has changed? How has the last 54 years, in particular the last three years of involvement with SFU and the GLS program, affected me, and how will my life be now that I'm returning back home with the boon of new experiences, a piece of paper confirming I have my master's degree, and a much deeper understanding of the possibilities of my life on the rest of my journey?

Did I find my elixir? Yes! Talking to so many people about their pilgrimage experience, and having a chance to share and think about all of my travels in new ways re-affirmed my belief in the goodness of people, in the power of faith, and in the numerous possibilities of change and healing that are available to all people. As sidekick Marcus Brody so wisely said to Indiana Jones in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (speaking the words of screenwriters Jeffrey Boam and George Lucas): "The search for the Grail is the search for the divine in all of us. But if you want facts, Indy, I've none to give you. At my age, I'm prepared to take a few things on faith." So am I.

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Appendix 1

The Act of Pilgrimage Questionnaire

The Act of Pilgrimage

Simon Fraser University MA Final Project Interview Questions

Joyce Thierry Llewellyn joycethierry@vfs.com

Pilgrimage Site:

Date:

Name:

Address:

Email and Phone number contact:

Age: 19-30 _____ 31-40 _____ 41-50 _____ 51-60 _____ 61-80 _____ 81+ _____

1. Do you have a religion or faith practice?
2. What does it mean to you to be a pilgrim to a sacred site?
3. What does pilgrimage mean to you?
4. What was your initial reason for going on a pilgrimage to this site?
5. Did your reason change?
6. Were your expectations met?
7. Did you leave anything behind during the pilgrimage?
8. Was there anything missing for you?
9. Now that you have completed your pilgrimage to the sacred site, how has it impacted your life?
10. Why are pilgrimages to sacred sites important?



Plum Village Walking Meditation