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 Arlington Street Church
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Pilgrimage

A friend's mother died just over a year ago. Days later, her father was hospitalized with chest pain – a false alarm heart attack. The cardiologist told us the technical term for it: “broken heart syndrome.” Brought on by stress, such as the death of a loved one, “a part of [the] heart enlarges and doesn't pump [efficiently].”¹ Her father limped along with his broken heart until, earlier this spring, he died suddenly, though not unexpectedly.

It was a very hard year for my friend – let's call her Greta. In the midst of family and work, she and her sister did most of the strategizing and care and worrying about their father; now, there is a great emptiness in its place. And there had been no time to grieve her mother; suddenly, that grief is compounded, grief upon grief, far too big to take on all at once. How to move forward, into this new life without mother or father, everything tinged with sadness?

In some form, this is familiar territory to many of us; and if it isn't, it will be. I have a new idea – a new old idea – that might just provide a container, a crucible, for grief and grieving. This morning, I'd like to reflect with you on pilgrimage.

Walt Whitman's *Song of the Open Road* – a song of pilgrimage – begins,
 Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
 Healthy, free, the world before me,
 The long brown path before me, leading wherever I choose,
 Henceforth I ask not good-fortune – I myself am good fortune;
 Henceforth, I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
 Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
 Strong and content I travel the open road.²

¹ Please see mayoclinic.com/health/broken-heart-syndrome/DS01135

² Walt Whitman (1819-1892), “5. Song of the Open Road,” in *Leaves of Grass* (1900)

In her book *The Singular Pilgrim: Travels on Sacred Ground*, Rosemary Mahoney writes, “*The Way of a Pilgrim*, [penned anonymously], is a nineteenth-century account of a homeless Russian peasant who, upon hearing Saint Paul's words, 'Pray constantly,' was forced to ask himself, 'How could it be possible for a [person] to pray without ceasing when the practical necessities of life demand so much attention?’

“The peasant set off across the country, struggling to find a practical answer. Along the way, a spiritual teacher instructed him to read the *Philokalia*, a [Greek Orthodox] compilation of texts on prayer and spiritual life ... [for] those who, at the prompting of G*d, hoped to develop their powers to 'overcome fragmentation ... achieve wholeness ... [and] attain contemplative stillness and union with G*d.’

“[In the *Philokalia*,] Saint Simeon [wrote,] ... 'Sit alone in silence; bow your head and close your eyes; relax your breathing, and with your imagination look into your heart; direct your thoughts from your head into your heart. And while inhaling, say, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,' either softly with your lips or in your mind. Endeavor to fight distractions, but be patient and peaceful and repeat this process frequently.’”

Note that except for the Christian prayer, these are almost identical to meditation instructions given in Buddhist practice! In the *Philokalia*, “The pilgrim was instructed to say the Jesus Prayer three thousand times a day in the beginning.” Later, that “number was raised to six thousand... For a week, he stayed in his hut and did nothing but pray. He found that prayer became easier and easier, [and] that when he wasn't praying, all he wanted [to do was pray]. Finally, he was saying the prayer twelve thousand times a day. 'I was joyful the whole day,' he reported, 'and seemingly oblivious to everything else.' He had begun without knowing how to pray, but simply by beginning, he had learned.”³

I wasn't suggesting to my friend Greta that she pray without ceasing, but I did think that choosing to make the journey through grief a *spiritual* journey might endow it with meaning and purpose. In this way, instead of these newly-empty days being an unremitting trial of sheer survival for her, they might be a time for the gifts that come from living with attention and devotion; a time to let shock and sadness wash away; to let disappointment and regret and anger have their way and be gone; and to let that emptiness fill with memory and gratitude.

3 Rosemary Mahoney, *The Singular Pilgrim*, pp. 124-125

First, she would need a starting place – marked, I suggested, by a kind of altar to her parents or, perhaps, an altar for each. This is all new territory for her; she was not raised with altars, but she loved the idea of choosing a place in her home where she could display some photographs and other mementos.

Next, I suggested she carry something in which to write, under the label “Memories.” The idea is that at the odd moments she is overcome with grief, or when she's simply in a reflective mood, she can write. Her parents were gone, but there were a host of ways in which they were with her still.

And finally, I suggested a plan to make time to visit places they had shared and loved, or to participate in activities they had enjoyed together. Greta chose to visit her hometown, and stop in on some of her parents' friends. She chose some causes that had been near to her parents' hearts, and made gifts – some new field guides and museum passes to the library in her mom's memory; her dad's power tools to the local YouthBuild chapter,⁴ and his car to the garage at the technical high school.

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Four stanzas down, Walt Whitman's *Song of the Open Road* continues,

From this hour, freedom!
From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
Going where I list, my own master, total and absolute,
Listening to others, and considering well what they say,
Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.

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

I am larger, better than I thought;
I did not know I held so much goodness.⁵

Pilgrimage comes in many forms. Many of us know of Lourdes in France; the 1,000- year old, 450-mile *El Camino de Santiago* in Spain; The Holy Land – all famous pilgrimage sites. But the potential for pilgrimage is seemingly endless:

⁴ Heartfelt thanks to Rev. Vera O'Brien for this suggestion. Vera gave her husband, Joe's, tools to Habitat for Humanity. *¡Joe, presente!*

⁵ Walt Whitman, *ibid*

*In Mexico, there's a place “where drug traffickers annually pay homage to a dead bandit.... Their hit men ... ask him to bless their bullets.... Lighting votive candles, [they seek] the bandit's intervention for a healthy harvest for the cocaine and marijuana farmers, as well as blessings for the safe passage of drugs into the United States.⁶

*The plot of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* culminates, I'm told, in a scene in which three drag queens, who have been crossing the Australian Outback on a bus, climb King's Canyon in full drag.

From Mexico to Australia, these are both stories of pilgrimage, and no, I really don't have something different in mind! It's hard to imagine the Mall of the Americas on the list of pilgrimage sites, but not impossible. The point is that it's not *just* “all about the journey;” it's all about the spirit in which the journey is undertaken.

In this poem I'd like to share with you now by Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, he refers to the Laestrygonians. They're a tribe of giant cannibals from ancient Greek mythology. Odysseus, the protagonist of Homer's *Odyssey*, encountered them on his journey back home to the Greek city of Ithaca. The Laestrygonians ate many of his men, and destroyed eleven of his twelve ships by launching rocks from high cliffs. Only Odysseus' ship was not destroyed, as it was hidden in a cove near shore.⁷ Here is Cavafy's poem, *Ithaca*.

When you set out on your journey to Ithaca,
 pray that the road is long,
 full of adventure, full of discovery.
 The Laestrygonians and the Cyclops,
 the angry Poseidon – do not fear them:
 you will never meet such as these on your path,
 if your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine
 emotion touches your body and your spirit.
 The Laestrygonians and the Cyclops,
 the fierce Poseidon, you will never encounter
 if you do not carry them within your soul,
 if your soul does not raise them up before you.

Then pray that the road is long,
 that the summer mornings are many, when,

6 Jennifer Westwood, *Sacred Journeys*

7 Please see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laestrygonians

with such pleasure, with such joy,
 you will enter ports seen for the first time;
 stop at Phoenician markets,
 and purchase fine merchandise,
 mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
 and sensual perfumes of all kinds,
 as many perfumes as you can;
 visit hosts of Egyptian cities,
 to learn and learn from those who have knowledge.

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.
 To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
 But do not hurry the voyage.
 It is better to let it last for many years;
 and to anchor at the island when you are old,
 rich with all you have gained on the way,
 not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
 Without her, you would never have taken to the road.
 But she has nothing more to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.
 Wise as you have become, with so much experience,
 you must surely have understood by then what Ithaca means.⁸

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This week, as spring gives way to summer, and the program staff and **Kem** and I head out on vacation, I invite you to join me in entering deeply into the possibility of making this beautiful season a pilgrimage in your life. Is there a place, or the memory of a time, to which you want to return? Or where is it that you haven't been? What's been left undone; what grief unhealed? Is there a pilgrimage of making of your house a home, of building altars from which to begin and where to conclude your days? The last time I asked similar questions from this pulpit, a man wrote to tell me he'd finally become a foster parent. Another took his family china and silver out of storage, and began to use it at dinner time, lighting a memorial candle each night before the meal was served. To face her fear of surrender, a woman learned hang gliding, and discovered that she loved letting go even more than holding on. A family undertook the work of a lifelong dream

8 Constantine P. Cavafy, 1911; composite of translations by Rae Dalven, Edmund Keeley, Philip Sherrard, and others

and moved to Hawai'i. *What will be the shape of your pilgrimage?*

Author Rosemary Mahoney ends her pilgrimage to Patrick's Purgatory in Ireland with these words:

“I hadn't considered yet what I thought... When I tried to think of it, all I could see was a woman stretched out on her seat on the boat leaving the island ... saying, with great satisfaction, 'Well, we've said our prayers, and we've done our penance, so we're all right, so....'”

“It was hard,' I said... 'It was amazing....'”

“It was not just a pilgrimage to a place; it was a psychic sauna filled with the steam from your own person. It was you, the soul, the vaporous essence of consciousness and conscience.... The physical body ... [moved] constantly, ... while within it the soul percolated, inviting G*d in, inventing [G*d].... I didn't, for the time being, feel like crying. Everything that had seemed impossible before seemed a degree easier now. My problems weren't solved, I was still alone, but, for the first time in a long time, I felt peaceful.”⁹

Beloved spiritual companions, I commend to you the making of a pilgrimage, to serve as a container to carry what has gone before, and a crucible for that which comes next. It's all about the spirit in which it is undertaken. To arrive is our goal, but let's not hurry the journey! May it bring you peace.

Walt Whitman's *Song of the Open Road* concludes,
Camerado, I give you my hand!
 I give you my love, more precious than money,
 I give you myself, before preaching or law;
 Will you give me yourself; will you come travel with me?
 Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?¹⁰

9 Rosemary Mahoney, *op cit*, p. 404

10 Walt Whitman, *ibid*

