



1. LISTEN TO YOUR LONGING

The call to pilgrimage begins with a deep longing. Something within us longs for some sort of change. We may have had change suddenly thrust upon us. The change we long for may be a rediscovering of security, assurance, or familiarity. We may be feeling hurt or stagnant in our life; we may have an imaginative vision or dream that is beginning to assert itself; we may have learned something new, or evolved in our life, and we want to learn more, take the next step, create some sort of experience or life practice that more aligns with our new sense of being. We may be feeling some incongruity in our life – that the old ways we’ve lived are not fitting anymore. Longings often begin subtle and almost imperceptible, easy to ignore or dismiss. But then they can grow more intense and disruptive. At some point, they demand we take notice. As human beings, we don’t often willingly take on the discomfort of change unless parts of our lives become unmanageable or even more painful than the change itself. When we become aware of our longing, we can take a more active and creative part in recognizing and responding to it as a call to transformation.

2. GOD MEETS US IN THE UNKNOWN

We fear the unknown. We’re afraid of what it will require of us. We feel out of control, lost, off balance. We fear dangers and the risk of being hurt or abandoned, or worse. There may be strangers in the unknown who do things in different ways, have different understandings, may speak different languages. We may feel utterly alone and helpless. We fear the shame that comes with helplessness and embarrassment. In the unknown, we don’t know where the limits are, what is acceptable and unacceptable. We may offend, and then turn a potential friend into an enemy. However, a pilgrimage comes by invitation, a call. There is something in that unknown that we need to encounter. There is something in that discomfort that will be a source of growth and transformation. There is something greater than ourselves that is calling us, is already present where we are going, and will meet us in that very place of unknowing with what our heart desires. In the unknown, we may be required to do things we’ve never done, or in ways we haven’t done things before. We may be required to learn something new, to trust a stranger, to ask for help. And, by doing so something within us expands.

3. BY ENGAGING OUR FEARS, WE EXPAND OUR LOVE.

Pilgrimage invites us to engage our fears. The old adage that FEAR is False (or Fantasy) Events Appearing Real challenges us to discern what our primordial brains may be telling us is dangerous and threatening, but may actually be keeping us stuck in a stagnant place in our lives. During a pilgrimage, we must open our understandings, open our willingness, try something new, learn something new. By doing so, by engaging our fears - we are often surprised to find that our fears were much more out of proportion than any real “threat.” In fact,

the perceived “threat,” was in truth the path to what we most longed for. We may find we indeed have the skills to learn something new. We may find that strangers have more in common with us than we imagined, or that their unique differences actually enrich us. We may find that in times of discomfort, need, being of the control – we encounter kindness, help, compassion, and perhaps even a better experience than what we had originally planned. It is our heart that expands when we do not allow our fears to dissuade us, but instead engage them and move through them to what is beyond.

4. TRAVEL/TRANSITION IS A SPACE OF TRANSFORMATION.

Transition is changing from one thing, one experience, or one place to another. Travel is physically moving from one location to another. It is possible to travel and transition without truly *transforming*. We can go on vacations or lose a lot of weight, or undergo an illness, or live through a pandemic, and hold on to our old identities, our usual behaviors, our expectations, and “return to normal” when the experience is over. A pilgrimage invites us to understand that this travel or transitional experience is rather an invitation to *NOT return to normal*, but to be *transformed* into a new being because of the experience. A pilgrimage invites us, from the moment we start planning, preparing, or experiencing it, to be an open and creative space where we will be transformed from deep within ourselves. This requires both some surrender and some intentionality. It requires some expectation on our part that we will not return the same as when we started, that we will indeed surrender some of our own control and plans to new things that we will encounter, and that we will intentionally *look* for those opportunities. When we feel our fears creeping in, we pay attention to them, acknowledge them, but do not allow them to dissuade us. When we are exhausted or feeling powerless by the journey not going our way or the way we expect, we surrender to it, and begin looking for the new opportunities that may be presenting themselves. When we return to our homebase, we discern what is now different about us, and how do we live into our new identity.

5. STORIES ARE SACRAMENTS.

Sacraments are tangible symbols or practices that convey the intangible grace of God. At the very heart of the Christian faith: a meal of bread and wine conveys the hospitable gracious presence of God. Water – in its washing, its quenching and its flowing conveys the deep grace of God that is all-loving, forgiving and welcomes everyone into belonging. Stories can also be understood as sacramental. The sacred stories of all religions convey the presence and activity of the Divine to and through human experience. During pilgrimage, it may be through our stories shared with our companions, other fellow pilgrims and especially strangers that convey the powerful presence of the Divine. In sharing our stories – and particularly in *listening* to the stories of others - we share ourselves, our beliefs, our expectations, our lives with other human beings. We learn about each other. We begin to see through each other’s eyes in new ways. We find God meeting us in places and ways we have not experienced before. Our Judeo-Christian scriptures are filled with stories of pilgrimages, of travelers encountering the Divine on the road – most unexpectedly, but always leaving the experience transformed. Love-expanded, grace-filled, forever-changed moments and encounters have been recorded, told and retold for centuries, and continue to convey the very presence of God in people’s lives to this day. A pilgrimage opens many opportunities for us to listen and share our own stories with each other. By doing so, we become open and ready for transformation.

6. RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE THE WORLD

The world most often does not change in fell swoops. It changes little by little, small step by small step, over many lifetimes. As a pilgrimage opens us to listening to our longing, meeting God in the unknown, engaging our fears, expanding our love, opening ourselves to transformation and sharing our stories with one another, we grow in our relationships. We find connections where there were none before. Others experience the gift that is us that they would not have met if we hadn't made this pilgrimage, and we encounter the gifts of others. In the power of these relationships, the world changes. Our eyes open, our hearts grow more loving and empathetic; our minds become more understanding, tolerant, creative with new ideas and expanded insights. If we have taken the time to break bread, share or hear a story, be hosted or helped by a stranger, we will not be as quick to make a law that harms, or drop a bomb, or make a judgment about their country. Suddenly political issues now have personal faces. Their wounds become our own wounds. The gift of our own self may be exactly the thing that meets someone in their longing, and vice versa. Answering the invitation to Pilgrimage is answering the invitation to new relationship. And where relationships exist now, the world is different than when there was no relationship.

SPIRITUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND/OR REFLECTION QUESTIONS WITH PILGRIMAGE:

- *Think back in your life and list the experiences/journeys that engaged these pillars. In other words, what pilgrimages have you taken in your life and for what purposes?*
- *Take one particular LONGING in your life, and explore the details of that pilgrimage journey and how you encountered and engaged the other pillars, leading ultimately to some transformation, meeting God or changing yourself and the world.*
- *Look for patterns in your longings and identify perhaps a larger longing or theme you have worked through many pilgrimages.*
- *Take one of the pillars, and describe how in your life you've experience and engaged that pillar in a number of different ways and times.*