

## *On Pilgrimage*

*The Lord pleads with you still.  
Ask where the good road is,  
the godly path you used to walk in, in the days of long ago.  
Travel there,  
and you will find rest for your souls.*

Jeremiah 6:16

What is a pilgrimage? What is it that makes people leave the familiarity of their environment and travel into unknown territory - either external or internal, or both?

Pilgrimage is not restricted to any one culture, religion or historical era, although it seems there has been a resurgence in recent years in undertaking this ancient practice. The number of pilgrims walking the Camino de Santiago for example has risen dramatically: in 1986, 2491 pilgrims received their Compostela; in 2017 the figure reached 301036.



*Our band of pilgrims enters Assisi*

Mary Ann Brussat ([www.spiritualityandpractice.com](http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com)) reflects... "When lived with intention, all of life becomes a sacred journey." She quotes Rabbi Rami Shapiro. "We think of a pilgrimage as a journey of great moral significance -- yet our whole life's course can be seen as a pilgrimage. A simple walk from your home and back can become a ritual to enact these sacred quests."

Brussat continues: "Pilgrimage cuts across all cultures and is part of nearly every religion. For some, pilgrimage may mean a journey to a place where holiness is apparent or where some divine-and-human encounter took place. For others, the passage is symbolic of the soul's journey to God, an inward experience of alternative sacred geography."

Alan Jones (*Passion for Pilgrimage* 2009, p 81) writes that “passion for pilgrimage leads us into the mystery of lostness from which we learn a new way of loving.”

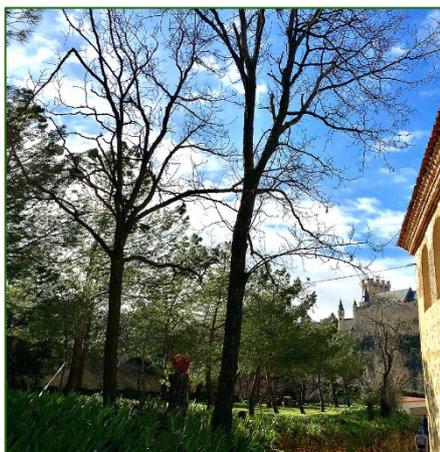
And Joseph Dispenza in his book *The Way of the Traveler* (2002, P3) quotes 15th Century Leonardo da Vinci: “Once you have flown, you will walk the earth with your eye turned skyward; for there you have been, there you long to return.”

I like that.



I've just returned from Camino. Not to Santiago, and not with a motley crew of pilgrims as described by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*; although pilgrims we were: 25 of us, coming together from all parts of our country. Ours was a Camino for the heart. Kerrie Hide, modern mystic steeped in medieval mysticism, took us to the other side of the world to meet, in their own locations, those long-ago mystics whose voices have not been silenced by Time, so true and universal is their message: Julian of Norwich, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Francis and Clare of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen and the three mystics from Helfta - Mechtild of Magdeburg, Mechtild of Hackeborn and Gertrude of Helfta.

It's one thing to encounter a mystic via the written, spoken or sung word. It's quite another to stand on the ground on which they stood, be it monastery, cell, church, town or countryside. For the ground *is* holy. It speaks to you - of silence and prayer and suffering and faithfulness and, most of all, of love. Whether it was sitting in Julian's anchorage in Norwich, at the tomb of St Francis in Assisi, amidst the ruins of the abbey at Disibodenberg in Germany where Hildegard spent half of her life, or in the Monastery grounds at Helfta - the Presence of the Divine was palpable.



Whether it was experiencing the scent of violets at Clare's monastery, the peace in John's private garden, the medieval pageantry of Holy Week in Spain and Italy, or the groundedness in Germany - regardless of what our individual intentions were for undertaking this pilgrimage, there is no doubt that our little community of Pilgrims was being carried by Love. Even at the in-between places of airports and on bus trips we were being carried: the Beloved knew that this practical down-time was as necessary for our souls as visiting the sacred places.

It was no accident that our pilgrimage began the week before Holy Week and ended the week after Easter. Each day we were offered time for personal reflection and group meditation, sensitively led by Kerrie through word and music appropriate to the Mystic we were meeting. Like pilgrims everywhere we all had our stories, our reasons for this movement beyond ourselves, both externally and internally, which, like pilgrims everywhere, we could share if we chose...or not.

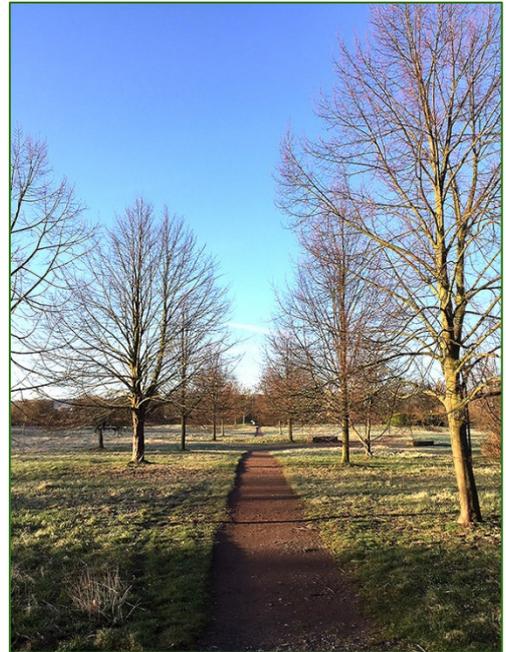


Photos  
Top: Altar inside Julian's cell  
Centre: John of the Cross Garden  
Bottom: Holy Week in Avila

What I, for one, had not reckoned with, was the way my interior journey mirrored the events of Holy Week. The plunging into the grief of personal loss on Holy Saturday as we joined the processions at St Francis' Basilica; the surge of greening love on Easter Monday as we entered the *veriditas* of Hildegard's Rhine Valley. And, throughout it all, as I met each mystic, they continued the journey with me, so that by the time we reached Helfta, they were all there, providing nurture and love and wisdom and comfort. And joy. Don't forget the joy!

*How long the road is. But, for all the time  
the journey has already taken, how you would have needed  
every second of it in order to learn  
what the road passes by.*

Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*.



Phil Cousineau, in his beautifully crafted book *"The Art of Pilgrimage"* (1998 p211-217) recounts a legend to highlight the importance of noticing who it is that has been bestowing gifts upon us on our journey. He suggests that it doesn't matter if we never find out, that we let Mystery rest in the giving and us in the receiving. The value is, however, in being able to identify the 'boon' that we bring home with us.



What boon have I brought home with me? Were my intentions met? Did I learn to fly? Have I learnt a new way of loving? I've left a shell, a pilgrim symbol, with each mystic as a symbol of personal surrendering or of prayer intentions offered for others. My final gesture was to ask. Standing before Gertrude of Helfta, our final mystic in this pilgrimage of the heart, I asked for a specific blessing. I'd walked the labyrinth each day for the three days we'd been at this beautiful ancient site, lain under the bare branches of its central arbor- it will be beautiful in summer - surrendering to the love, compassion and mercy of the Beloved.

I can't answer that question fully yet. I'm still sitting with it, resting in the stillness and deep peace of what I encountered on the road. I do know that in some indefinable way, I've grown up a little - crossed over into something new; come more into my place in the cosmos. What I also know is that this pilgrimage - with people I'd never before met but found unity with because of our shared

intentions - will not let go of me. The messages of those mystics - from Hildegard, born in 1098 to Teresa who died in 1582 - of the universality of Love; of connection with and care for the environment, commitment to contemplation and works of charity; of absolute delight in the love of the Beloved; of the invitation to join in the cosmic dance - ring as true today as they did 870 years ago.

Top: Early morning at Helfta monastery Germany  
Bottom: The labyrinth at Disibodenberg



*View of the valley below Assisi*

Each mystic has made a home in my heart. And as I reflect on the essence of wisdom of each, I'm left with the timeless nature of our Creator God, who delights that we, once again, are discovering the truth of Divine Intention and Love in and for all God has made. I'm impacted by the allegory of Pilgrimage: that, even after I leave my personal 'sacred spaces' where I experience deep connection with Love, the Beloved carries me still on my metaphorical bus rides through my days.

Our community of pilgrims has also made a home in my heart. As I reflect on our time away, I've come to see that our pilgrimage has been a microcosm of a macrocosmic journey; that we are in fact an integral part of a global *morphogenic field*. We are connected with others across the *noosphere*, seeking to change the violent and hurting situations in our world through, as Alan Jones writes: "learning a new way of loving..."

*Christine Howard*



*A pilgrim meal*

## MESSAGES FROM THE MYSTICS

Julian (1346-1420) of Norwich: *All is well and all will be well and all manner of things will be well.*

John of the Cross (1542- 1591): *With flowers and emeralds chosen on cool mornings, we shall wear garlands flowering in your love, and bound with one hair of mine.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582): *Let nothing trouble you: God alone suffices.*

Francis of Assisi (1182-1226): *make me an instrument of peace....*

Clare of Assisi (1194-1253): *our wounds become pools of light, mirrors of eternal love.*

Hildegard von Bingen ( 1098-1179): *go in the way of truth, where you will find in your heart the newness of the sparkling heavens, and where you will have in your spirit the newness of living breath.*

The Mystics of Helfta: Mechtild of Magdeburg (1208-1282), Mechtild of Hackeborn (1241-1298) and Gertrude of Helfta (1256-1302): *I cannot dance Lord, unless you lead me. If you want me to leap with abandon you must intone the song. Then I shall leap into love, from love into knowledge, from knowledge into enjoyment - beyond all human expectations.*