

Pilgrim Heart, by Sarah York

reviewed by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

I read Sarah York's *Pilgrim Heart* while I was on vacation two miles above sea level in the Rocky Mountains--a great place to read an elevating book. One of the pilgrimages York writes about so eloquently took her to far loftier heights. She writes of the rigors and rewards of trekking in Nepal and Thailand, where deep poverty and hospitality exist side-by-side. She helps us to experience the extreme challenges of being far outside one's climate-controlled comfort zone.

If vacation is a time for rest, then pilgrimage is a time for restlessness. York, a Unitarian minister, travels to Asia and Ireland on a sabbatical that indirectly prompts and directly precedes a great personal change. As York presents and experiences it, pilgrimage is about opening eyes--to our fears, to what we consider important, to what we wish to change, to what we think we cannot do without and to what happens once we are without it. Pilgrimage is about leaving home to figure out what home is, and then returning home with a changed heart. Travel is the platform for spiritual self-exploration: for encountering the wildness within, for accepting the baggage--often heavy--of our bodies, for savoring the kindness of strangers.

For the most part, Western Christians have long since stopped treading the ways to Canterbury or Compostela. Chartres has become a destination for tourists, not worshipers. Why kneel humbly for a boon when you can leverage a windfall on Wall Street? But pilgrimage is enjoying something of a revival as part of the search for spiritual significance in thoroughly secular times. York is one of a number of writers who have revisited the value of pilgrimage for both seekers and believers. When seen through new lenses, every place can become a landscape for encountering the holy.

York's book opens with a vivid epiphany. She is sitting at rest in the high Himalayas, experiencing what a Unitarian colleague calls "cosmic vertigo," a disorienting homesickness, when a Nepali horseman engages her in brief conversation. The question he asks her comes to stand out in relief in her assessment of her travels: "Where do you come from?" That question opens the way for her to focus her own

yearnings and insights.

The whole book is better at questions than answers, but this is hardly a flaw. Prompting questions is the hallmark of a good teaching text that leaves room for one's own individual answers. Pilgrimages flow from the questions; a pilgrimage is a quest. Answers are what we bring home with us as souvenirs, to incorporate into our spiritually renewed lives.