Pilgrims together on St. Cuthbert's Way

Every step of my sister’s pilgrimage was a prayer, and I tried to follow in the path she made.

by Stephanie Paulsell in the August 2, 2017 issue

On St. Cuthbert's Way near Grubbit Law in Scotland. Some rights reserved by Walter Baxter.

Chaucer wrote that spring inspires people to go on pilgrimages. But it was in the dead of winter that my sister and I began dreaming of unfolding our legs from beneath our desks and walking, as Thoreau once put it, “through woods and over the hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements.”

We knew absolute freedom wasn’t an option, but we thought the woods might be within reach. We searched the Internet until we found St. Cuthbert’s Way—a 100-kilometer walk through the Scottish borderlands that begins in the ruins of Melrose Abbey and ends on the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. The route would take us not only through woods, hills, and fields, but also across an old pilgrim route over the ocean sands at low tide. We would put our feet in the salty mud just as earlier pilgrims did.

St. Cuthbert was a seventh-century holy man whose life was documented in verse and in prose by the Venerable Bede. Bede described the energetic holy life that Cuthbert lived as a young man, his journey toward greater solitude at Lindisfarne, and his practice of standing in the North Sea to pray. According to Bede, when Cuthbert finished his prayers otters would follow him out of the water and warm his feet with their breath.

Cuthbert was also a walker. As both monk and bishop, he would walk for weeks at a time, stopping only to preach and pastor in the villages tucked among the hills and valleys. When he was at home on the island, Bede wrote, Cuthbert “relieved the tedium of his long vigils and psalm-singing by walking about.” Making his rounds of the island, asking people how they were getting along, was part of his prayer. After he died, and Vikings repeatedly attacked his monastery, the broken-hearted monks fled Lindisfarne with Cuthbert’s body and carried it around Britain for nearly a decade. Cuthbert was a saint on the move, both in life and in death.

My sister and I climbed hills covered in yellow gorse. Cuthbert might have watched over sheep here as a boy, and we could easily imagine him falling in love with the silence. We peered into a cave where the Lindisfarne monks might have laid his body. Some days the only living creatures we saw on the path were sheep and cows. Other days, we experienced the sweetness of *communitas*—the intimacy that can arise among strangers on the road when they’re unstructured by the social hierarchies that mark their lives at home.

But mostly it was just my sister and me walking side by side or single file, spending more time together than we had since we were children. Our journey was not only a journey into Cuthbert’s life, but a journey into our own: into childhood, as our memories awakened, and into each other’s present lives, as the things dearest to us worked their way into our conversation.

My sister has spent much of her life protecting and aiding refugees, particularly children who arrive at our southern borders unaccompanied. It’s impossible for her to take a walking trip without thinking about the children and people across the world who have been displaced by violence and poverty. Imagine, she said, that we had to walk 20 miles today instead of ten; imagine that there was no bed waiting for us at the end of the day or if there were predators along our route. Imagine not knowing how our journey would end. Every step of her pilgrimage was a prayer, and I tried to follow in the path she made.

Sometimes we got lost, and flashes of our childhood selves would appear: the little sister wanting the big one to slow down until we could figure out where we were; the older one convinced she knew what she was doing even when she didn't. We had a map, and a book that described the route. Often we needed to reorient ourselves, or consult with other pilgrims on the road, and get an assist from St. Cuthbert, to whom we occasionally called out.

This is how we should navigate back home too, my sister said to me one day, as one spread out the map and the other read aloud from the book. We should stop and consult with each other frequently along the way. And we should use our maps and our books—scripture and history, hymns and prayers, the wisdom of communities, and a vision of where we should be heading.

Eventually we reached the sea and saw the Holy Island of Lindisfarne across the water. Poles driven into the sand marked the pilgrim's path, and two boxes on stilts waited ready to assist any pilgrim who might get stuck out there at high tide. As we waited for the tide to withdraw, a fog rolled in, obscuring the poles and the island, and covering the sands with mist. But we knew where we were going. We took off our shoes and waited.

A version of this article appears in the August 2 print edition under the title "Pilgrims together."