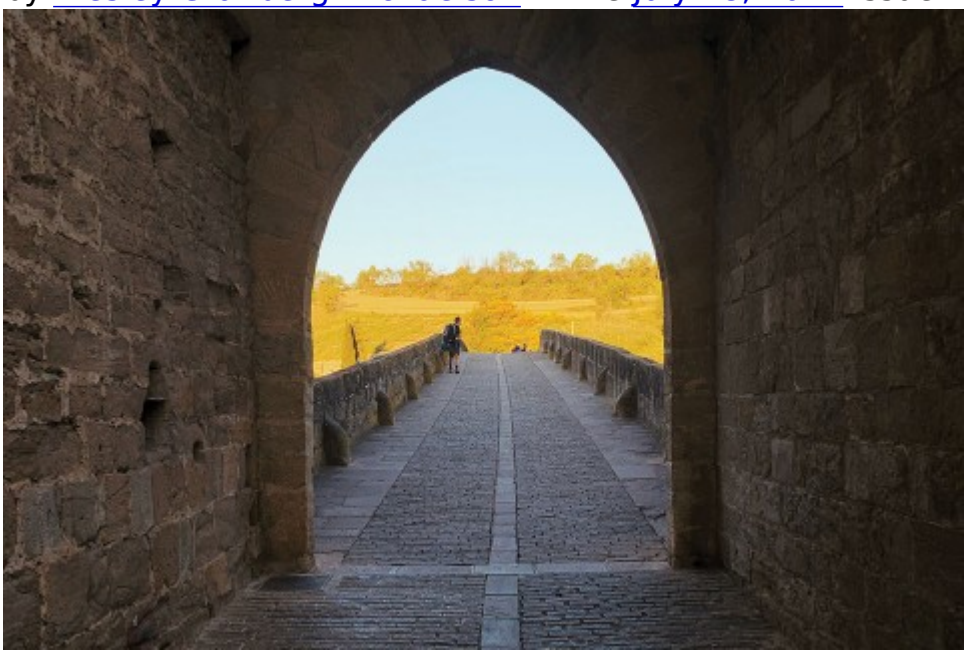
Has the pandemic prepared us for pilgrimages?

We’re hungrier than ever for physicality, place, and embodiment.

by Wesley Granberg-Michaelson in the July 28, 2021 issue



(Photo by Jon Tyson on Unsplash)

Ever since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that fully vaccinated folks could safely get back on airplanes, travel is surging. But where will people go, and why? What difference will our long sabbatical from travel make? And how might people of faith respond to our liberation from sheltering in place?

To many of us, “leisure travel” now sounds strange. If we are not essential workers and have not had school-age children at home, we may have had more leisure than we could bear. Travel, however, can also embody a spiritual quest. For centuries spiritual seekers and faithful followers practiced this: they embarked on pilgrimages. I’ve come to regard pilgrimage as a journey with a holy purpose to a place of spiritual significance.

In 2019, a record 347,578 pilgrims received their *Compostela*, an official certificate signifying they had traversed at least 100 kilometers, and usually much more, on

the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain. They came from all corners of the world—including more than 20,000 from the United States, where interest in the Camino has dramatically increased since the 2010 film *The Way*.

My own ten days and 140 miles on the Camino were enriched through encounters with fellow pilgrims. From our conversations I'd guess that only one in ten were active in any church. Yet nearly all were captivated by the spirituality embedded in this ancient path. In a time when religious convictions and practices are increasingly marginal, interest in pilgrimage is growing.

Alienated from systems of rational belief and disillusioned by hypocrisy within religious institutions, many yearn for formative spiritual practices and pathways rather than propositions. So they try to walk their way, step by step, into faith. It's this focus on embodied practice—on where you walk, what you see, how you greet others, whether you share, who you trust, and how you are led—that seems to make pilgrimage compelling. Abstract belief systems get deconstructed as your feet, your mind, and your heart stay on the ground.

For the faithful, no longer intrigued by the novelty of virtual worship and hungry for physicality, a pilgrimage can be a portal for the presence of God mediated not through Zoom but through material reality, through koinonia that breaks in as on the road to Emmaus, and through unexpected grace arriving as generous hospitality along the way. Certainly, we can welcome the opportunity to physically gather again in our congregations as we emerge, cautiously, from pandemic restrictions. But perhaps this long physical absence can also replenish our hunger for an embodied faith expressed by deciding where we want to walk, and why, on a pilgrimage.

Change involves disruption, and the pandemic has been disruptive for all of us. For many, it has been traumatic. Decades ago, psychologist Richard Tedeschi began researching what he called "post-traumatic growth": the significant personal development that takes place as one response to trauma. For Christians this should be no surprise. It recalls what Richard Rohr names as the wisdom tradition's pattern of "order, disorder, and reorder." A pilgrimage, as both a metaphor and a physical practice, can usher us through that transforming journey.

Travel is back. What kind of travel will we choose?

Pilgrimage possibilities today are rich and plentiful. In Europe, along with the Camino there are Norway's revived pilgrimage routes—nine in all—to the Nidaros Cathedral

in Trondheim, with a supportive infrastructure of hundreds of places to stay. The Taizé Community in France is known worldwide for its enchanting music. One cold, rainy November week at Taizé, I watched in awe as hundreds of Portuguese young people arrived in buses and entered into more silence than many had probably experienced in their lifetimes.

European travel expert and TV host Rick Steves, who is a practicing Lutheran, calls Taizé one of his favorite places. As travel began to open up this year, Steves was interviewed by Tammy Gieselman, of the United Methodist Church's General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, on "Travel as a Spiritual Act," including the role of pilgrimages. "The road is church," says Steves. He advocates traveling "in a way that is transformational." We can be just tourists or even travelers trying to educate themselves. But "pilgrims trek today to get closer to God, and to better understand themselves. . . . There's more to life," declares Steves, quoting Gandhi, "than increasing its speed." Pilgrimages always slow you down, and their destinations invite you in. When Steves first visited the Iona Community in Scotland, he says, it made him want to move in.

Lourdes, France, is the most frequented Catholic pilgrimage site outside Rome, drawing 4 to 6 million visitors a year. Located in the foothills of the Pyrenees, the town of 15,000 has more hotels than any city in France except Paris. Before I visited, I harbored typical Protestant stereotypes of Lourdes, regarding it as a place of mythological healings supported by tourist shops with every imaginable souvenir of the Virgin Mary.

But why are millions drawn there? Apparitions of Mary in 1858 to an illiterate 14-year-old peasant girl, Bernadette Soubirous, centered around water and healing. It's the physicality of today's pilgrimage experience that moved me. Pilgrims trace their hands on the moist stone grotto and enter the waters that first burst forth in a spring at that time and have flowed ever since. Physical healings claimed today are carefully investigated. But the experience of pilgrims making this journey is often deeply transformative in more holistic ways. When I immersed myself in the spring's waters and emerged, material and spiritual realities felt connected.

Pilgrimage destinations, of course, don't require the luxury of a flight across the Atlantic. The Santuario de Chimayo is 28 miles from my home in Santa Fe (holy faith), nestled in the Santa Cruz (holy cross) Valley of the Sangre de Cristo (blood of Christ) mountains. It's probably the most visited Catholic pilgrimage site in the

United States, drawing 300,000 people a year prior to the pandemic and nicknamed the “Lourdes of America.” Most Protestants have never heard of it.

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Chimayo attaches the pilgrim to holy dirt. Tradition holds that in 1810 a Franciscan friar saw a light beaming from a hillside and began digging on the spot, unearthing a large crucifix of a black-skinned Jesus. It became known as Our Lord of Esquipulas, associated with a miraculous crucifix from Guatemala, where it probably originated many decades earlier. As people were drawn to this discovery, miraculous healings were reported, linked to the dirt which had entombed the crucifix. This became the site of the church, the Santuario de Chimayo.

Thousands stream there, not only from the region but from around the world. To the left of the altar that holds the six-foot Our Lord of Esquipulas crucifix, a tiny adjoining room encompasses a pit of dirt. Pilgrims come with Tupperware, old prescription bottles, or plastic bags to take some dirt with them. Prior to the pandemic, 25 to 30 tons were removed each year. For the past two Holy Weeks, the processions of thousands of pilgrims walking along New Mexico’s highways toward Chimayo were suspended. But the Santuario and its grounds—which include a Native American chapel, a shrine for those of Vietnamese descent, and much more—are now preparing to reopen and to welcome visitors and pilgrims.

Pilgrimages connect physical and spiritual realities in ways that are tangible and tied to the material world. I don’t pretend to know anything with certainty about the effects of water, or dirt, or tracing stone at a grotto, or dry bones said to still live. But I know this: these experiences, and so many more opened up on pilgrimages, explode the myth of a world rationally comprehensible, composed just of inert matter and mobilized molecules. I’m willing to wonder about the myths undergirding pilgrim stories and practices. It’s the myths of modernity and rationality that need to be destroyed.

Why then have Protestants been largely absent from the practice of pilgrimage? In short, it’s because of the Reformation. In their necessary rebellion against the corruption, authoritarianism, and transactional, self-serving practices of the medieval church, the Reformers wanted to purify both the theology and the lived experience of faith. You couldn’t earn God’s favor, and communion with God didn’t need the help of saints, relics, or holy sites.

Luther was characteristically blunt: “All pilgrimages should be stopped. There is no good in them; no commandment enjoins them, no obedience attaches to them.” Calvin was nervous about how the fusing of the physical and spiritual could lead to idolatry. My late friend and colleague Gregg Mast, who died from COVID-19, once drew my attention to a startling phrase from the Westminster Directory of Public Worship: “No place is capable of any holiness.” As Scottish poet Edwin Muir says, “The Word made flesh here is made word again.”

While the Reformers had their reasons, the effect was a retreat from embodiment. When meshed with the Enlightenment, the result left much of historic Protestantism spiritually deprived and imprisoned to the sterile dichotomy between spiritual and material reality that shaped modernity. Today, of course, much of that is changing, particularly through theological approaches to the creation as our life-sustaining environment.

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Moreover, the resources of Catholic spiritual formation have been rediscovered in mainline denominational seminaries. With certificates from specialized training, Protestants are now offering spiritual direction and asking Ignatian questions about consolation and desolation. Prior to the pandemic, many Catholic monasteries were receiving as many Protestant as Catholic retreatants. Thus, a Protestant reappraisal of pilgrimage, long overdue, should mark our steps beyond the pandemic, addressing our hunger for physicality, place, and embodiment.

In that reappraisal some will ask how pilgrimages, however edifying, are related to the imperatives of seeking God’s justice. Powerful models have done just that. Beginning in 1998, the late John Lewis worked with the Faith and Politics Institute and its leader at that time, Doug Tanner, to begin the congressional civil rights pilgrimages to historic sites in the South. Framed intentionally as pilgrimages and attracting bipartisan participation from members of Congress, these have had transformational impacts on many who have participated. They have been journeys with a holy purpose to a place of spiritual significance.

Sankofa Journeys have been transformational pilgrimages as well. Named for a West African concept symbolized by a bird that flies forward while looking backward, a Sankofa Journey starts in a bus from a northern city, with an interracial group, and

travels to places central to the civil rights struggle in the South. Deep interaction, sharing, confession, prayer, and worship in this purposefully intense, interracial experience are portals for transformation. Sankofa Journeys originated in the Evangelical Covenant Church and were adopted by other denominations and groups. When we begin sponsoring them in the Reformed Church in America, my time on a Sankofa Journey was the most probing and transforming antiracist training I had ever experienced. We were traveling as a spiritual act on a life-changing pilgrimage.

New sites as well now beckon pilgrims seeking pathways toward racial justice. Most notable are the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery. Pioneered by Bryan Stevenson, author of *Just Mercy* and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, these sites reveal in moving ways the history of racial terror, including the hundreds of lynchings of Black people by White people, following the end of slavery as White supremacy has continued its enduring reign. A sign by the museum's entrance quotes an enslaved man, Aaron, with a plea "to learn the greatness of the sin."

Many churches and Christian organizations have sponsored trips to the US-Mexico border to focus attention on the plight of migrants caught in the polarizing politics of immigration. Often these include powerful pilgrimages which move across the border and embody a solidarity that tries to break through political, geographical, and national walls of division. Beyond talking and writing, these pilgrims want to demonstrate their convictions by where they walk, unveiling the realities of the injustice they desire to confront.

Pilgrimages always involve an inward and an outward journey, making them a unique religious form of travel. Victor and Edith Turner, who wrote the classic academic study of pilgrimage, put it this way: "Pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage." Walking on pilgrim paths for days allows us to leave psychological baggage and mental distractions behind, opening inner space for probing questions amidst changing landscapes. Questions like, *Why am I who I am where I am?* God's Spirit can breathe wisdom with our steps.

Perhaps COVID-19 has prepared us for pilgrimage. Maybe sheltering in place has inoculated us against the virus of shallow frenzy. As we begin to be given freedom from the restrictive hold of the pandemic, I think it's time to walk, to receive, to discover, and to learn that following Jesus calls us to travel as a pilgrim. Songwriter

Marty Haugen sings it well: “Blessed the pilgrim who learns to embrace that all is gift, and all is grace.”

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Hungry for physical places.”