

Sunday 30th August 2009.

Glasgow Unitarian Church. Service by Lyanne Mitchell.

PILGRIMAGE

Christian legend tells that St. James the Elder, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, had traveled widely on the Iberian Peninsula, bringing Christianity to the Celtic peoples. Following his martyrdom in Jerusalem around 44 AD, his relics were supposedly taken back to Spain and enshrined. Due to Roman persecution however, the early Spanish Christians were forced to abandon the shrine and, with the de-population of the area following the fall of the Roman Empire, the location of the shrine was forgotten. In 813 or 838 AD, so the legend goes, a hermit led by a beckoning star and celestial music discovered the location of the buried relics.

Historians however, doubt that St. James ever visited Spain and the idea that his relics were transported to Iberia is thought to be a fabrication of the Church. The 'discovery' of the relics provided a convenient rallying point for Christian Spain, then confined to a narrow strip at the north of the Iberian Peninsula, most of which was occupied by the Moors. In addition to the story of the relics discovery there were also reports of Santiago Matomoro, or St. James the Moorslayer, appearing on a white horse in 844 AD to lead Christians into battle against the Moors. These two legends are interpreted by scholars of the Age of Medieval Pilgrimage as attempts by ecclesiastical authorities to gather popular support for the overthrow of the Arabs. Furthermore, it is known that officials of the Cathedral of Santiago actually hired storytellers to travel about the European countryside spreading 'news' of the miracles of St. James and his relics.

While this deceit and corruption of the Church may be shocking, it is a well-authenticated historical fact that many of the founding legends of medieval pilgrimage shrines were nothing more than tall tales. Such stories were conjured up by enterprising church administrators who recognized that the number of pilgrims visiting and donating **money** to a shrine was proportional to the miraculous nature of the founding legend and the degree to which that legend was promoted. Over the tomb where St. James' relics were 'found', the first church was constructed in 829 AD and within 100 years Santiago de Compostela was attracting pilgrims from throughout Europe. By the twelfth century it had become the centre of the greatest pilgrimage in medieval Europe.

Jerusalem and Rome were considered the two most important pilgrimage destinations for Christians, but because Santiago de Compostela was closer and much safer to visit, it received far more visitors. Four major land routes to Santiago developed over the centuries. Originating in northern France and meandering south - the routes joined, crossed the Pyrenees Mountains, and then headed to northwestern Spain. When we were driving through Galicia and Asturias, we often saw the signs - the golden scallop shell, the 'Camino de Santiago' the Pilgrims' Way. In fact there is a saying in Galicia that 'All roads lead to Santiago'.

The Benedictines built monasteries and hostels to host the pilgrims journeying the routes to Santiago, creating what is perhaps the first major European tourist industry and the birth of the hotel. (in fact, the hotel in the square by Santiago Cathedral, boasts that it is the oldest hotel in the world.) The scallop shell symbol was adopted by the Shell oil company, as a logo for travellers and later, drivers.

The emotional appeal and morale boost provided by the cult of the saint swept through Europe as pilgrims journeyed to the 'Field of the Star' for centuries. While most came as true believers, a large number came as a stipulation to inheritance, as an alternative to prison, or simply in hopes of doing a brisk trade with the great numbers of visitors. The famous stone sculpture of St. James is wearing the garb of a wandering pilgrim. The seashells fastened on his cloak were the badges of the medieval age, signifying a pilgrim's visit to the shrine of Santiago.

The old city of Santiago de Compostela and its grand crusty cathedral are among the most beautiful medieval sites in all of Europe. Besides the visual beauty of the place, the atmosphere is charged with devotion and holiness. The institution of the Church may have resorted to some unscrupulous tactics in advertising the site yet the many millions of pilgrims who visit the shrine still came with love and sincerity in their hearts. We saw a group of teenagers arriving and singing what was obviously their tramping song on the journey - just bursting with joy and pride that they had made it. The presence of that love and enthusiasm is still strongly felt at Santiago de Compostela. It is infectious. I caught it too, and was inspired to write my poem.

pilgrim age - definition

1 (First definition) a journey to a holy place for religious reasons

The idea of sacred travel runs deep in human religion, dating back to when early humans would climb hilltops to be closer to God or the sky, or go to a specific spot to dance around in circles. One of the many great spiritual discoveries of Judaism is that we are all pilgrims, strangers seeking God. Even God's chosen had to wander the wilderness to get their souls right. Spiritual talk is full of the language of travel : walking the walk, leaving behind and stepping forward, processing and recessing (that is, moving in and out) or following God's paths on our spiritual journey of life. The most common effect of a pilgrimage is that it solidifies something that is growing within you. Perhaps you're doubting what you're doing now with your life: the pilgrimage may end that doubt, or may give it shape so that you can change course with confidence.

Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and the Sea of Galilee -- to Jews, Christians and to some extent Muslims, it is 'the Holy Land'. Muslims do their key pilgrimage to Mecca, the hajj, at least once in their lives. India and the East abounds with holy shrines - Hindu and Buddhist pilgrim routes too numerous to list.

2(second definition) - a journey to a place connected with someone or something famous:

eg - Elvis Presley's home 'Graceland' has become a **place of pilgrimage**.

September 11, 2006 was the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. But it is also the 100th anniversary of the beginning of Gandhi's first non-violent campaign. Mahatma Gandhi launched his first campaign of non-violent direct action in South Africa on September 11, 1906. To commemorate the Centennial of that event, Interfaith Paths to Peace, an independent non-profit group sponsored a five-day, 52-mile "Gandhi Pilgrimage for Peace and Non-Violence." The pilgrimage aimed to bring together pilgrims representing all of the world's great religions who are committed to non-violent work for peace and justice. There have been many pilgrimages for Peace, all over the world.

So I have been wondering what pilgrimage means to Unitarians? I think there are several inte-

gral elements within an authentic pilgrimage experience - they are :-

Travelling / making a journey - traditionally, on foot

Following signs - or a planned route - perhaps broken up into stages

Some physical hardship or discomfort or effort

Faith - in either a person or a cause

Penance or sacrifice of some kind

Spiritual reward or some kind of healing

Courage or endurance in facing difficulties / danger / or getting lost.

Fellowship - sharing the journey with people of like-mind.

Last week, our Humanist guest speaker was talking about Faith...and the idea that it can be non-religious. It is like HOPE in ACTION. Surely the key feature of FAITH is that it cannot be proved....it is beyond or above or outside any kind of academic authenticity. Cynics may sneer at the misguided pilgrims, flocking to Santiago to pay homage to St James...who probably never set foot in Spain. But surely they miss the point? It is the EXPERIENCE of the pilgrimage that is important. The destination is merely the focus of that experience.

I must confess here, that I used to use the word 'FAITH' without much understanding of what it really means. I was brought up with it in the Church of Scotland. But real faith cannot be experienced 'second hand' through anyone else. It can be described. It can be demonstrated....but I really only began to understand what FAITH is when I trained as a Reiki healer. Several years of learning about Meditation had led me to train as a Reiki practitioner and teacher. It was the *experience* that brought me to some understanding of what faith means. Reiki - is the Japanese word for 'Universal Life Force or Energy' . It is a physical experience, and an active meditation as well as a spiritual path. It is higher energy channelled mainly through the palms and the soles of the feet. It is very akin to what is known as 'spiritual healing'. The only difference is that it uses a slightly different vocabulary, symbols or tools. Once initiated, there is no denying it. *I don't understand it - I can't prove it* - I just know that it flows through me and to my patients. It humbles me. It has shown me a new way to think of and experience what others might call God. It can be sent mentally, as a form of 'Distance Healing' as well as physically given....and I have come to realise that this is another form of prayer - prayer in action - which is inclusive and universal, without being attached to any one religious creed. Perhaps that's why my Unitarian heart and soul has opened to it. Reiki can be practised and received by everyone. And like meditation itself, it is as simple *and as complex* as breathing!

Pilgrimages can take many forms. They can be taken in a group, or taken alone. Some Unitarians may consider their annual trip to GA meetings as a kind of pilgrimage? Regular attenders of Unitarian Experience Week at Great Hucklow, may also have a sense of making an annual pilgrimage to a place which supplies inspiration and a re-charging of their spiritual batteries.

The late Christine Mackenzie was a much loved member of this church and my close friend. Her daughter Kathryn and I, along with Cathy (another close friend of Christine's who many of you know) made a kind of pilgrimage to Kilmartin Visitor Centre, where Christine's pictures had been exhibited and to the surrounding landscape of sacred sites, standing stones, and

carvings which had so inspired her work. The shared journey together, remembering happy times, swapping stories and recalling Christine as she was, before she became ill - when she was full of health and creative energy....and the trip, taken in her honour, gave us all great comfort and a degree of 'closure' since her untimely death last November.

A dear friend of mine is shortly about to embark of a very special kind of pilgrimage - flying to Canada to meet up with the father she has not seen since early childhood. This physical journey is just the last stage in her lifetime journey....recovering / accepting / and dealing with abandonment and learning to deal with a lot of pain. She had to handle a deep fear of confrontation / rejection and doing without a father's love and support. She *could* have made this physical journey much earlier in her life but she knew she wasn't ready - emotionally and psychologically. But she has worked hard on her 'inner journey' - she has strengthened her inner core and grown immeasurably - and now, she is ready for the final stage of the journey. She doesn't know what will happen. She doesn't even know if she will LIKE her father very much! She takes this journey in faith - and perhaps most importantly, *in forgiveness*. And I believe, she will not only fill an aching hole in her childhood and adult life, she will also experience a deep kind of personal healing.

Another old friend has frankly admitted that she has got lost on her inner journey. She can't find the right sign posts. She doesn't know what path to follow. She needs to find a *new direction*. I believe that Unitarianism *can* be a very useful 'pit stop' sometimes, when people lose their way or become disenchanted with the faith of their upbringing. Some of us stay for life - but some may just need to travel with us for a while until they become sure which direction they need to take. Because we are FREE travellers and we don't need to sign up or promise to follow a set of rules, we are all free to 'move on' - in fact, we positively encourage it!

Pilgrimage can be taken as a physical journey - and it is also a metaphor for our **inner journey** to find truth and meaning in our lives. I wonder if any of you have had the experience of walking a labyrinth? There are many forms of labyrinths, one of the most famous being on the floor of Chartres Cathedral in Northern France. It is a meditational pilgrimage or journey - walked slowly and mindfully. I first experienced it at Hucklow at one of our Unitarian Earth Spirit gatherings. The social hall was mapped out in the circular labyrinth maze with tea lights and it was a very beautiful and moving experience. You reach the centre which symbolises the inner centre of your being where you are invited to take a small gift, then, you return slowly, carrying this giftand as you retrace your steps, you pass other pilgrim walkers on the path and silently greet them. It can be a transforming experience for some people. It can be very powerful.

Unitarianism must be almost unique as a religious path which encourages 'inner travelling'....because Unitarians are not tied to any creed, our understanding has room to grow and change, as we make our journey through life. When I joined this church, around 30 years ago....I was very different to who I am today. I was searching mainly for FREEDOM - to develop and experiment with my own ideas and beliefs.....and to learn from others. I considered myself to be some kind of Pantheist, moved and inspired by nature (and also music) but had lost any real faith in a personal God. For some years, I had turned away from my early church connections but as I matured, I had come to realise that I missed being part of a religious community - and that I needed a much wider and freer spiritual path than is offered by the Church of Scotland. I went on a *personal pilgrimage* to many churches within the Christian faith - also to temples and synagogues, and very nearly became a Quaker (!) before I discovered this church and was delighted to find I no longer needed to 'edit' out large chunks of

hymns and prayers and sermons....because this place was *open* to questioning, to debate, to doubt, to curiosity, to exploration, to honouring a wide variety of religious ideas, to diversity....and respecting each person as an individual with the right *to think for themselves*.

My expectations of Unitarian worship are very different now. I have grown and changed quite dramatically - taken various different directions - have been influenced by a variety of guides and mentors in my long search for peace of mind and inner healing. But despite all these twists and turns on the road.... I can still call myself a Unitarian and I can still belong to this family.

I think that is pretty special!