

Pilgrimage as Practice

preached by Rev. Colin Bossen, April 15, 2012

At least three times a week, sometimes more, I walk here from my house on Berkshire. I walk in all weather and seasons: the hot summer sun, damp spring rain, clammy winter slush and crackling autumn cool. Sometimes as I walk snatches of classical Chinese and Japanese poetry come into my head. On a stark winter night it might be this anonymous verse:

Bitter cold. No one is abroad.
I have been looking everywhere for you.
If you don't believe me,
Look at my footprints in the snow.

The poems that come are not tied to my mood. They are derived from the weather. A happy winter afternoon might bring me the memory of melancholy words about snow. In spring the words will be tied to flowers--the layered papery blossoms of trees. This week, on an early morning walk, Meng Hao-Jan's "Spring Dawn" came:

Spring sleep, not yet awake to dawn,
I am full of birdsongs.
Throughout the night the sounds of wind and rain
Who knows what flowers fell.

This week I have especially been enjoying my walks. You see, this week is one that I anticipate throughout the year. For this is the week that the cherry trees bloom. Specifically, it is the week that two cherry trees on Washington Blvd. bring forth their pale pink flowers. I pass them each day walking from my house to the Society and back again. The trees arch over the sidewalk. They are of the right size and age that their vivid branches form a perfect floral canopy above my path. Even on a clear day, when I gaze up through their opened buds I can only see wisps of cerulean sky.

Walking as I do is a type of spiritual practice that has been part of our Unitarian Universalist tradition for at least one hundred and seventy-five years. It was used by our transcendentalist ancestors, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. The discipline is best described in Thoreau's essay "Walking." Of it he writes, "...you must walk like a camel which is said to be the only beast that ruminates when walking." Thoreau continues, "When a traveler asked Wordsworth's servant to show him his master's study, she answered, 'Here is his library, but his study is out of doors.'"

Within that passage is captured the whole of the transcendentalist discipline: rigorous study of the best of the humanities and sciences, the keeping of a regular journal and direct experience of the natural world. The discipline's object was to discover the highest self. This object built upon the Unitarian theologian William Ellery Channing's insight that we all contain within us the likeness of God. The purpose of religion, in Channing's view, was to help us actualize that image.

The similarity between Channing's theology and transcendentalist philosophy should not be surprising. Before he became a writer and a lecturer Emerson had been a Unitarian minister. He

studied for the ministry under Channing. Fuller, who came from a Unitarian family, occasionally attended Channing's church.

The transcendentalists believed that Nature and human nature were both unchanging. We are made of the same stuff as the ancient poets who wrote the Iliad and Aeneid, they argued. Therefore, there is nothing to stop us from achieving similar spiritual and literary greatness. As Thoreau wrote in "Walking," "I walk out into a nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in."

Read the words of any of the transcendentalists and you will find reflections upon and snatches of the world's classical literature coupled with lucid descriptions of the natural world. A passage from Fuller reads: "A few steps will take you into the thickets, and certainly I never saw so many wild roses, or of so beautiful a red. Of such a color were the first red ones the world ever saw, when, says the legend, Venus flying to the assistance of Adonis, the rosebushes kept catching her to make her stay, and the drops of blood the thorns drew from her feet, as she tore herself away, fell on the white roses, and turned them this beautiful red."

The mystical reveries of such passages reveal the transcendentalist truth about walking. For them, any walk could become a pilgrimage. Thoreau observed that any walk is an opportunity to go to the Holy Land. The Holy Land of which he speaks is not a physical destination, like Jerusalem or Mecca, the sort of place that a pilgrimage usually has its goal. Instead, it is a state of mind or a way of looking at the world. That such a Holy Land can be found when we seek it echoes words attributed to Jesus in Luke, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed: nor will they say, 'Look here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is amongst you." For the transcendentalist the Holy Land is all around you..

The ubiquitous nature of the Holy Land means that we can practice pilgrimage everyday. What matters is the intention behind our walking, not the destination. In "Summer on the Lakes" Fuller suggests that having a destination may undermine our ability to be on a pilgrimage. Towards the beginning of her book she describes how preconceived notions about where we travel can inhibit our experience of them. She writes of first view of Niagara Falls, "the magnificence, the sublimity of the... [Falls] I was prepared by descriptions and by paintings. When I arrived in sight of them I merely felt, 'ah, yes, here is the fall, just as I have seen it in picture.'"

It is when we ruminate, that is think, while we walk that travel becomes a pilgrimage. The thinking and the walking bring about a contemplative state. When coupled with significant study of literature and the self-reflection that journal writing can bring, this practice of walking will reveal the self and the self's relationship with the natural world. Walking, in other words, was a path to the divine that was available to all. For the transcendentalists Nature itself was a cipher for the universal spirit.

Given their belief in the power of walking, it is perhaps not surprising that many transcendentalist texts have a meandering sense to them. Thoreau's essay "Walking" is structured not unlike a good walk. It starts upon one subject, the journey itself, and then gently weaves from philosophy to literary and historical speculation before returning to its starting point.

Only Friday I took a similarly meandering walk. I left my office at just before ten and headed down Coventry to Superior determined to find some path I had yet to explore. Across Superior I

discovered a back entrance to Forest Hills Park. Trash strewn, the path was under a thick carpet of leaves. Fallen logs still carried autumn's dried out mushrooms.

I made my way down the side of a hill and passed into a mowed meadow. A small stream ran through it. Two wading ducks indicated the waters limit. Finding a narrow point, I hopped from one bank of the rivulet to the other. Fifteen minutes further I found a larger creek, channeled and dammed by stone. Not long afterwards I came across a barking dog and the park's exit.

Each part of the walk brought something new, some subtle shift in the landscape. With the shifts came gentle turns in my mental ruminations. When I started through the woods I was disheartened by humanity's tendency to leave refuse everywhere. Styrofoam, newspapers, plastic bottles and even the better part of my desk reminded me that the transcendentalist's philosophy was at least partially wrong. Nature is not unchanging, human ignorance and willful blindness are changing it.

As I left the first part of the forest the trash largely disappeared and my thoughts turned. The water fowl and slender stream reminded me of my childhood visits to Minnesota when my grandfather would take me fishing. I marked the brambles past the stream as a place to return for black raspberries in the summer. The gentle magnificence of a waterfall was a reminder that beauty is never far off if we open our eyes and look for it. That reflection led me to the closing words of James Wright's magnificent poem "A Blessing:"

Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

Not long afterwards, I returned to my office, the starting point.

The transcendentalist practice of pilgrimage was rigorous. Thoreau is reported to have spent four hours each day walking and another four reading and writing at his desk. Such time allowed for ample contemplation.

I suspect that such time cannot be afforded to all of us. I know that even I, whose job it must be admitted partially includes time for such activities, struggle to make sufficient time for reading and writing. Sauntering, truly walking and wandering, rather than just traveling from place to place, is a frequent casualty of the demands of family and parish life.

In contrast, Emerson's discipline was supported by his household of servants. Thoreau was a confirmed bachelor and rejected most of the comforts of a conventional life. At times, he was largely supported by Emerson. Fuller's regime of studying, writing and walking was such that she could be probably accused of the neglect of her son.

This leads to the question: Where are we to find time for such a spiritual discipline? I know that many of you lead very busy lives. Some of you have families. Some of you work sixty or seventy hours a week. How, then, can you possibly time find for a deep engagement with self-reflection and study?

It can hardly be said that our culture encourages it. Television, computers and other technological inventions offer us plentiful distractions from the natural world. Our country has a mean anti-intellectual streak and those who engage with a sustained practice of self-education are often met with disdain. Self-culture, discovering our highest selves, has no material value. It cannot be commodified and in a capitalist society that which cannot be commodified is often portrayed as worthless.

If you want to be counter-cultural and nurture such a discipline of self-culture it is helpful not to do it alone. Despite their reputation for individualism, the transcendentalists did not work in isolation. Fuller, Emerson and Thoreau were all friends. They were part of a circle that stretched the Atlantic Ocean and included dozens of other writers, social reformers and religious leaders. They encouraged and aided each other in their practice. Frequently, they took their walks together.

Pursuing a spiritual practice as part of a community also has the benefit that it allows you to learn from others. Though I can't prove it, it seems that Emerson may have taught the discipline to others. There is documentation, from journals and correspondence, that suggests that he told Thoreau about it when Thoreau was a recent college graduate.

I can tell you that the secret to nurturing a spiritual practice has to do with starting small. Do not expect that overnight you will be able to find time each day for four hours of reading and writing and four hours of walking like Thoreau did. Instead, begin with goals that are easy to accomplish. Pick up a book of poetry, I would recommend an anthology, and set the task for yourself of reading one poem a day. If you keep at it you will read almost four hundred poems a year. Some of them are sure to stick with like Tu Fu's poem "By the Winding River I" has stuck with me:

Every day on the way home from
My office I pawn another
Of my Spring clothes. Every day
I come home from the river bank
Drunk. Everywhere I go, I owe
Money for wine. History
Records few men who lived to be
Seventy. I watch the yellow
Butterflies drink deep of the
Flowers, and the dragonflies
Dipping the surface of the
Water again and again.
I cry out to the Spring wind,
And the light and the passing hours.
We enjoy life such a little
While, why should men cross each other?

You can also start small with the next part of the practice. Buy a cheap notebook at a pharmacy and commit to writing one paragraph a day. It doesn't matter what you write about. Don't worry if your words aren't eloquent. Some of my journal entries, like those of some of the great transcendentalists, are inane. On occasion, I have even written passages that being, "I am sitting down to write in my journal and I have nothing to say." If you're afraid of writers' block, or the task

of writing in a journal seems too monumental, you can also set a time limit for how long you are going to write. This can make journal writing feel manageable. I usually commit to write for fifteen minutes a day. Sometimes, if I have a lot to reflect on, I will write for longer. If I am struggling, I will just stare at my journal for a few minutes. I actually set a timer so I don't have to worry about the clock while I am writing.

The walking portion of the practice can start small too. Depending on where you live you can integrate it into your daily routine. Walk, instead of drive, to the grocery store. Commit to walking once around your block each day. Use five minutes of your lunch break to go outside. Find a friend who would like to walk with you. The key, whatever you do, is to unplug while you walk. Turn off your cell phone. Don't bring your iPod. Just walk. If you are with a friend you can talk. But otherwise just walk.

We will be exploring this practice more later in the month at a special day long retreat on the practice of walking. It will be a good opportunity for you if you are interested in exploring this Unitarian Universalist spiritual discipline. There will be time for reading and reflecting and there will be ample time for walking.

My hope is that together we will learn how to be better saunterers. Together I think we can prepare ourselves for the meandering routes we might take. And together we can reflect upon the journeys that we have had. Such reflection is a lot like the life of this religious community. Our faith has been described as the practice of walking together through the journey that is life. Cultivating the discipline of walking, or the practice of pilgrimage, is simply another way to journey together.

Who knows on that journey we may find ourselves suddenly in the Holy Land. It might even be where we started or close to home, a park off Superior Road or a couple of trees in full bloom. If we find it then we will remember that every walk can be a pilgrimage. And within that reminder comes the ultimate lesson, when we cultivate ourselves then each moment has the possibility of being holy.

May it be so for each of us.

Amen.