

Pilgrimages

by William N. Kennedy

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Readings

From *Travels*, By Michael Crichton

Often I feel I go to some distant region of the world to be reminded of who I really am. There is no mystery about why this should be so. Stripped of your ordinary surroundings, your friends, your daily routines, your refrigerator full of your food, your closet full of your clothes--with all this taken away, you are forced into direct experience. Such direct experience inevitably makes you aware of who it is that is having the experience. That's not always comfortable, but it is always invigorating.

I eventually realized that direct experience is the most valuable experience I can have. Western [people are] so surrounded by ideas, so bombarded with opinions, concepts and information structures of all sorts, that it becomes difficult to experience anything without the intervening filter of these structures. And the natural world--our traditional source of direct insight--is rapidly disappearing. Modern city-dwellers cannot even see the stars at night. This humbling reminder of [their] place in the greater scheme of things, which human beings formerly saw once every twenty-four hours, is denied them. It's no wonder that people lose their bearings, that they lose track of who they really are, and what their lives are really about.

So travel has helped me to have direct experiences. And to know more about myself.

from Rilke's Book of Hours, Love Poems to God. The Book of the Pilgrimage, #25

All will come again into its strength:
the fields undivided, the waters un-dammed,
the trees towering and the walls built low.
And in the valleys, people as strong
and varied as the land.

And no churches where God
is imprisoned and lamented
like a trapped and wounded animal.
The houses welcoming all who knock
and a sense of boundless offering
in all relations, and in you and me.

No yearning for an afterlife, no looking beyond,
no belittling of death,
but only longing for what belongs to us
and serving earth, lest we remain unused.

I'd like to begin this morning with a brief survey. Only one question. How many folks here this morning don't know what Transylvania has to do with Unitarians, or this congregation? A show of hands, please. Thank you. I'm asking because I mentioned Transylvania recently at my home church, the UU Fellowship of Redwood City, and some people didn't know what I was talking about. I forgot that congregations are not static objects but living organisms. New people have arrived since we spoke last on the subject. Transylvania is a beautiful place in central Europe where the Unitarian Church began in the sixteenth century, which is why I went there, and why I mentioned it in another context a month ago. Thanks for helping with the survey.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should tell you that important parts of this story do not take place in Transylvania. This is about pilgrimage. What does it mean to be a pilgrim? How do we do that, and what's possible? What might happen if we do?

The best way I know to talk about that is to tell you my story. So, we'll be journeying to South San Francisco in the '50s and '60s, to contemporary northern California, as well as the Little Homorod Valley.

Being a Seminary student, I wanted to find some text to use in this, some Bible verse to be the basis of the story. That's the traditional thing to do. So I went to Strong's Exhaustive Concordance. James Strong assigned a number to each and every word in the King James Version of the Bible, and listed where each word appears. You can look up a word and find the passages and choose the verse that fits the occasion. There are Hebrew and Greek dictionaries in the back, so you can see what the original word means. I looked up pilgrimage. The word in Hebrew is maw-goor, and it refers to a temporary dwelling place. Not a journey at all, but a place of residence, where you live as a guest, a stranger.

Okay, so then I looked up pilgrim, and the word for that is Lem-oo-ale. That's somebody's name, Lemuel. Like Lemuel Gulliver, a traveling man if ever there was one. But the Hebrew names in the Bible all have meanings, and Lemuel means "belonging to God". Okay. Belonging to God, in a temporary home, where you are a stranger. Let's see how that works with the rest of the story.

What do we mean by pilgrimage? What do we think of when we hear the word pilgrim? Since I went to school in North America, there are those people in the funny hats with big buckles on their shoes. They came over on the Mayflower and caused me to make turkeys out of construction paper 300 years later. Or perhaps you've seen one of those amazing photographs of thousands upon thousands of Muslims on the hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, a religious obligation to be fulfilled once in the life of the faithful. Two million Muslims make that trip every year. People go to holy places, seeking to be healed of their afflictions, or to gain wisdom or to find peace

Pilgrimage is a spiritual exercise. Pilgrims are seekers who journey to holy ground in search of roots and connections.

You might say it's the external component of an internal journey.

Dedication, discipline, and being fully present in the moment are all requirements of pilgrimage. The constant flow of information, career demands, family and community

obligations, all the distractions of modern life serve to insulate us from our surroundings. Here in northern California, we drive on the phone, e-mail from everywhere, and stand in front of the Microwave oven, tapping our feet because it's taking so long! When we leave that behind we have a chance to show up and pay attention.

Revisiting Michael Crichton in the introduction to *Travels*:

"Often I feel I go to some distant region of the world to be reminded of who I really am. There is no mystery about why this should be so. Stripped of your ordinary surroundings, your friends, your daily routines, your refrigerator full of your food, your closet full of your clothes--with all this taken away, you are forced into direct experience. Such direct experience inevitably makes you aware of who it is that is having the experience. That's not always comfortable, but it is always invigorating."

In the spring of 1998, the orientation manual for the Project Harvest Hope Pilgrimage included the following admonition, "It is important to remember that this is not luxury travel. It is not even economy travel. Our emphasis will be on connection with and experience of a way of life that is very different from our own." I said, "That's for me," and signed up for that trip. I had been taking self-improvement courses at Landmark Education, and making some real headway in getting free of the cages I had built for myself over the years. I was seeing possibility everywhere. A Transylvanian Partner Church seemed like an ideal expression of the future I was inventing for myself. This from someone who thought his first European trip would be to strange lands where they spoke a foreign tongue. Like Scotland. Nevertheless I was ready to do something deliberate, so I signed up.

We met several times in Oakland to discuss the trip, and to learn a few words of Hungarian. Then July arrived and we were off to Romania.

I started my first journal on that trip. It's an amazing little document. There is no way I would have remembered all the ways I resisted, avoided, whined and trivialized. I complained to myself in writing about the strange food, the cold water, the first 90 minutes before the translator arrived, the way he mumbled once he did arrive, and endlessly about the outhouse, across the road, between the two pig pens. Eventually I just had to give it up. I was worn down by hospitality. Mrs. Benedek, my host was a major force in the village. "The woman in black", they called her. To me she seemed to alternate between frail as a bird, and tough as old rope. Born in the 1920's she had lived through the great depression, World War II, and the whole Ceaucescu regime. Her husband had been a prisoner of war, held by the Soviets for 5 years. Her daughter (about my age) had died of lung cancer two years before, and she mourned every day. She showed me the Hungarian flag they brought to the church to put on the coffin, but they were afraid to use it. All those years of oppression, being the official object of hate had worn her down. Still, she had enough energy to worry about me. Well fed as I am, she was sure I would sicken and die if I didn't eat meat. So, with every vegetarian meal, there would be one extra plate. Some fried chicken, a little homemade pork sausage, just in case I came to my senses.

One afternoon without the translator, we just sat in the kitchen with my tiny Berlitz phrase book, sharing pictures of our families. A word or two translated, a gesture, a tear, hands held and smiles exchanged. From that point on, I thought of her as my

Transylvanian mom. Most of the people in the village were like that. Shy and cautious, even suspicious at times but mostly gracious, welcoming, and generous hosts. Back in Oakland, we were warned not to admire anything too vocally, or it might turn up in our luggage. In his book *The Hole In The Flag*, Andrei Codrescu describes this as "the hospitality game". Your host wins the game by standing naked in the snow and waving goodbye to you as you walk away wearing his clothes and bent double under the weight of his possessions.

Once I got over my little insecurities, I was able to be present to the people around me, and other things as well. You can tell by reading the journal. There's a point where I suddenly stop writing about the plumbing. It just ceases to be an issue, and I stop being trivial and start writing about the people, and the village, and how the light in the evening, when the cows are coming home, just pours over the hills and houses like a thick golden liquid.

It was an amazing experience, sweet, painful, somber, hilarious. There were some long, emotionally draining days. We visited Torda where the Diet was held, that led to the first edict of religious tolerance in Europe, and Méskö the alabaster village, where my friend Zsuzsa is Minister, and where Balazs Ferencz tried to change the world in the nineteen thirties and inspired generations of Ministers to come. One day was spent visiting the terrible beauty of Böszödújfalú, the drowned village that once was home to the last surviving Sabbatarian congregation. Now there's a story. One of the main ideas of the early Unitarians was that Jesus was to be emulated, not worshipped. Some believed that the ultimate expression of this emulation was to keep a kosher home and observe the Sabbath. Eventually, many of these congregations converted to Judaism. There's an object lesson on the subject of a chosen faith. When that choice carries serious risk. The village was drowned by a dam project, in the 1980's. The village was scattered, instead of being re-located. Somehow, the loss of that village communicates to me in a way that all those centuries of persecution cannot.

With all those spiritual riches to explore, all that sacred ground to walk upon, the time we spent in the host village was the richest for me. That is where I received the greatest gift of this journey.

Our first Sunday morning worship in Homorodujfalú was a very special occasion. The congregation was confirming 6 of their children. The steeple and doorway were decorated with green branches, the six teenagers were dressed in their traditional Szekely outfits, and we few Americans joined about 200 other folks in that little village church on a hot summer day. They have to answer a 150-question catechism. This they did, with the minister, Arpad Ilkei feeding them hints, silently mouthing the answers when they got stuck. It was incredibly sweet to witness, particularly for those of us who are parents. Then, we shared communion. Bill and Barbara Hamilton-Holway from Berkeley served the newly confirmed. Then Arpad and the president of the congregation served us. Something happened in that moment that changed things for me forever. We still had the rest of the service to go, and there were speeches. Berkeley brought a beautiful tablecloth celebrating the relationship. We sang "May Nothing Evil Cross This Door." We were there for 2 hours, much of it spent with tears running down my face listening to my sports coat make sponge-like noises, and waiting for an appropriate time to blow my nose. I was a mess. It's not surprising that I didn't understand what happened right away.

To explain this part we now need to go back to St. Paul's Methodist Church in South San Francisco. That's where I grew up. That congregation was my extended family. When I was a little Methodist boy in Sunday school, religion was simple. I believed in God, and God believed in me. I believed that God sent his son, Jesus down to earth to teach me how to live right and be a good person. I call this my "Yes Jesus Loves Me" period. As I grew older, I began to modify that simple understanding with new ideas, and to ask new questions about what I was being taught. For example, I never accepted the idea that Jesus died for my sins. It seemed so unfair. When I was little it made me sad to think that Jesus died because I did something bad. Later I decided it just didn't make sense. Jesus died two thousand years ago for something I hadn't even imagined yet. I always liked the Christmas story. I used to lay on the floor and watch "Amal and the Night Visitors" on TV every year, and I sang all the Christmas Carols and thought about baby Jesus, camping out in the manger. Later, I began to argue with virgin birth. It seemed like they wanted to make Jesus special, to set him apart in some magical way. I always thought He was special because of what He taught. Later still, I had a similar problem with the whole idea of resurrection. It just seemed unnecessary. The miracles were interesting stories too, but they were not to be taken seriously were they? I was willing, for a time to just wait and see about the things I didn't believe. I was willing to be proved wrong, or to just ignore the stuff that didn't fit.

Until my confirmation class, that's when I learned that all those things that I had the most trouble with were mandatory. I got the distinct impression from our pastor, Reverend Lundy, that I had no choice about virgin birth, walking on water, raising the dead or rising up to heaven after a horrible slow death, and he would be much happier if I stopped asking questions. I had to accept those things. They were important to the church's definition of Christianity. For me, these things just got in the way. What Jesus taught about how to live together in the world, that mattered. By the time I stood at the rail for my first communion, I was miserable. When it came time to answer the few simple questions, I said "Yes" and then I drank my little holy shot glass of Welch's' grape juice. It was what I was supposed to do, what my family and my community expected, so I did it. I lied. I lied about God, to God and to everyone else. Then I spent the next few years looking for a way to make the lie come true, trying to find the faith that I swore to. One of my Catholic friends told me I should "act as if I had faith, and faith would be given to me". It seemed like I was doing that already, and it didn't work. Eventually, I gave up and left the church behind. I was a teenager, it was the '60's, and it seemed like the thing to do. I got married. I went off to college. I left religion alone, for the most part. Occasionally trying this idea or that. Taking "Bible as Literature" and "Religions of the World" courses in college. I didn't find any new truth that spoke to me, and eventually I gave up the search.

Twenty years go by. I have become the embodiment of a Unitarian Joke. Perhaps you've heard it. What's the definition of a Unitarian? An agnostic with children. It's true. My partner, Geri and I wanted our kids to have some sort of moral grounding, like we got in Sunday school, without the fear, or shame or exclusivity. Geri did the research. She found the UU Fellowship of Redwood City right down the street from us. She visited a couple of times and said, "You should come see this." I did. I was delighted. I was allowed to have doubts. I was expected to question. I was at home.

Ten more years go by. I'm in the hot, crowded sanctuary of the Homorodujfalu Unitarian Church. Arpad makes eye contact, and holds it. Everyone is very serious about this

ritual. People died for the right to hold the communion cup. When he is sure I am fully present, he hands me the chalice. Keeping eye contact, I drink, a sip of sweet white wine. I hand it back, the whole world changes. Months later, I figure out what happened.

Transylvanian Unitarian Christianity is not about the crucifixion. That's why you find no crosses in their churches. It is about Jesus, the teacher, the prophet, and the son of God, but fully human, as we are all the children of God. I'm not saying it's a perfect match on all points, but on the issues that mattered most to me, there was enough agreement that I could, at last, say "Yes". The communion I shared in the Little Homorod Valley that day completed the ritual that was broken when I was a teenager.

It was the first honest "YES" I was able to say to God, my true First Communion. As a result of that completion, I was able to reclaim the faith that I put away. I found a powerful, passionate religious life, and the desire to share it.

Now, I can't promise you that kind of pilgrim's experience. As they say, "Your mileage may vary." Perhaps your path leads you not to Transylvania but somewhere else. I don't know what you're looking for, or where you will need to go to find it. I believe that if you travel with an open heart and an open mind to where you are the stranger, you will be changed by the journey. May it be so. Amen, and Bon Voyage.

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