

The Art of Pilgrimage  
A Sermon to ASUC, Sunday, January 7, 2001

The “Art” of Pilgrimage, writes Phillippe Cousineau in his book by that title, is the “art” of seeing as though for the very first time. Of believing that in curiosity -- there’s a “cure.” That we all -- as the Buddha said -- must “Come see for ourselves.”

A pilgrimage -- as in John Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress -- begins with a vague longing -- the faint but insistent whisperings of a call -- then finally the decision to set out, the encounters on the way, the inevitable treading of the labyrinth, the arrival at the destination, the return, and bringing back the boon.

Key to this ancient and arcane practice of pilgrimage is the “call” -- or “calling” -- the summons heard only by the one answering it -- the summons to an elusive -- perhaps spurious and self-delusional -- “Something” which promises to end our longing, requite our loneliness, heal our brokenness, take us up in the Rapture!-- unite us with whatever is “God” for us.

One’s call -- or calling -- like Annie Dillard’s eagle in our reading this morning -- something that overwhelms -- over-powers -- its prey -- swooping down unexpectedly out of thin air. The “call” like life: “what happens when you’re planning something else.”

And when that winged fate “seizes” us -- we, like Annie Dillard’s weasel -- can do nothing but seize back and hold on for dear life. Like Jacob at Jabbok wrestling the angel of death crying, “I will not let thee go ‘till thee bless me.”

The “call” or “calling” is particularly perplexing in that pilgrimage called “ministry.” UU Minister Earl Holt III of The First Church, St. Louis, writes that historically:

“(T)he seriousness with which both prospective ministers and prospective congregations approached this issue was extreme. The journals of those preparing for the ministry in the 17th and 18th centuries reflect long, anguishing, and prayerful consideration of whether they had indeed received an authentic call from God...

And the issue for the church was equally momentous,” Holt continues. “Keep in mind that for most of the time, the calling of a minister meant a lifetime appointment -- a binding commitment on the part of both the minister and the church, which well might last for 30, 40, 50 years or more.

[Installation] -- which oftentimes did not take place until some considerable time, even years, after a ministry was begun -- symbolized the sealing of a covenant as sacred (and as difficult to break) as the marriage vow.” (EKH,III, June 9, 1991?)

So tentatively did I acknowledge the possibility of my having a call to ministry -- that when I first set off for Yale Divinity School -- now eight years ago, I told no one. My family -- several of whom live on the same Vermont road as I -- were used to seeing me leave for my work in Boston early Monday morning and return late Friday night. They would notice nothing different.

But that fall, instead of driving East to Massachusetts, I headed South to Connecticut, speeding down Interstate 91, arriving in New Haven just in time for an 8:00 o'clock class on "Church Patristics" -- the history of how the Trinitarians became the "Orthodox" and we Unitarians the "Heretics."

During the week, I stayed in the Yale Div School dormitory with kids half my age; ate all of my meals at the refectory, and was so "taken in the Rapture" that tears frequently threatened to well up and spill over.

I was able to keep my secret life secret until Christmas, when my friend, our Vermont village post-mistress, spilled the beans to my youngest sister, the lawyer. Carole, of course, telephoned and demanded to know, "When are you going to tell us about Yale?" I told her that she could ask me what I was doing -- and even wonder with me how I was going to do it--financially, emotionally, physically -- but she was not to ask why I was doing it.

I didn't want anyone -- especially not my family -- asking questions I was struggling to answer myself: "Was I worthy?" "Why me?" "Why ministry?"

I had thought I'd end up in some little New England church. But my calling found me -- like Annie Dillard's eagle swooping down from the heavens so that there wasn't much else I could do but sink my teeth and hold on for dear life -- wherever it might carry me. My calling -- which draws upon everything I have done in my life before --which brought me here this year with you -- my calling as an Intentional Interim Minister.

I'm a peripatetic parson -- or what some of our colleagues -- having fun -- on our Chat Line have been dubbing The Wandering Ministerals, The Perennial Annuals, The Year-Links, The Momentary Messiahs.

The life of an Interim Minister is a constant pilgrimage to far-off, sacred sites -- paying homage at the holy shrines -- sometimes exorcising holy ghosts -- polishing up and dusting off holy relics -- even sacrificing a sacred cow or two. Ours is the art of always seeing for the very first time.

At our best, we're like John the Baptist -- preparing the way for the one who comes after -- the next called minister. But -- unlike John the Baptist -- we try to do the job without getting our heads handed to us on a brass platter!

Here at All Souls you are now beginning in earnest the search for a new Associate Minister -- someone -- woman or man -- who will hear the call as "proffered necessity" on their life's pilgrimage -- something to which -- after wrestling with those same niggling questions (Am I worthy? Why me? Why this ministry?) -- he or she must answer "Yes!"

He or she will be called to serve this church as the second of two settled ministers -- someone whose talents will lie in those parts -- those arts of ministry central to church life: Pastoral Care, Adult/ Life Span Religious Education -- Religion in Action Social Outreach.

But at a recent Branches dinner, someone asked -- (considering both long-past and recent history here) -- "Why can't we keep our Associate Ministers?" Her husband suggested that it was because it's difficult to find someone willing to be "second."

But I respectfully disagree. There are plenty of examples in our denomination of long-term, collaborative ministries -- New York's All Souls Church, for one.

But for myself, I've wondered if the answer to her question isn't found in how you see -- or fail to see -- the ministry here. For times and things have changed. What one minister used to do -- one extraordinary minister could almost do by nearly killing himself -- now is work enough for two or three. No lone ranger runs this church -- nor could -- nor should.

What's needed is a collaborative, team effort -- a systems approach. Each minister drawn -- called -- by instinct and training to different -- but complementary and equally important tasks. Not one hired to serve as the poor substitute for the other -- but mutually-respecting colleagues tending their own, well-defined responsibilities. And together, they cover the field.

Let go! Let go of the old notion that one must be a star, the other, a satellite. For both are essential. What happens to one affects the other -- affects both.

But, of course, the search process is more art than science -- and subject always to that ineffable something called "chemistry." Truly complementary ministry (with an e) must also end up truly complimentary -- a working relationship sealed by good-will and affection.

This is Epiphany Sunday -- the first Sunday after January 6 -- the so-called "Twelfth day of Christmas" -- the day on which the Magi were said to have reached the goal of their fabled pilgrimage and delivered their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the baby Jesus.

But the wise men could not return to their homeland without bringing back a boon -- a gift to those who awaited their return. According to a version of the story first reported by Marco Polo, the gifts of the Magi were designed to test Jesus: if he accepted the gold, he was a king; if he took the frankincense, he was a god, and if he took the myrrh, he was a sage. Jesus took all three -- the story says -- proving him at once -- god, king, and wise man.

And the boon the Magi brought back was this knowledge of a new world dawning -- one in which a child would lead them and kings would be humbled by one born in a lowly manger.

For the aim of pilgrimage is not ecstasy for oneself -- but the wisdom and power to serve others.  
(Art, 217)

And so, too, the aim of ministry -- also a pilgrimage -- is wisdom, self-knowledge, and the desire to serve others. The one who comes now -- following -- not mine -- but Suzanne Meyer's -- footsteps -- will bring gifts -- boons from prior pilgrimages -- that well may test -- like the gifts to the baby Jesus: Are you worthy? Are you ready for the care and nurturing of two called ministers -- neither one the Messiah -- nor god, nor king, nor sage -- but both a humanly mix -- as we all are -- of prodigious gifts and prodigious failings. Good people trying to do good things among good people

for as long as this interim life -- this one wild and precious life -- the only life any one of us will ever have -- will allow.

Make way! Make way! A Pilgrim comes! Make way!

Hymn #20 "Be Thou My Vision"

Benediction: "Good Words" How soon we've forgotten last year's apprehensions about Y2K -- and the debate whether the "new" millennium began last January 1 or this! The Dalai Lama apparently believes that it's this year because he has sent out this message: "Instructions for Life in the New Millennium." -- some good words worth sharing this Epiphany Sunday with all Pilgrims setting out into the next 1000 years: He writes:

- 1) A loving atmosphere in your home is the foundation for your life.
- 2) Take into account that great love and great achievements involve great risk.
- 3) Judge your success by what you had to give up in order to achieve it.
- 4) When you lose, don't lose the lesson.
- 5) Remember, sometimes not getting what you want is a wonderful stroke of luck.
- 6) Follow the three R's: respect for self, respect for others, responsibility for all of your actions.
- 7) Remember the rules -- so you know how to break them properly.
- 8) When you realize you've made a mistake, immediately take steps to correct it.
- 9) In disagreements with loved ones, deal only with the current situation.
- 10) Don't bring up the past.
- 11) Don't let a little dispute injure a great friendship.
- 12) Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.
- 13) Remember: the best relationship is the one in which your love for one another exceeds your need for one another.
- 14) Approach love and cooking with wild abandon.
- 15) Spend some time alone every day.
- 16) Be gentle with the earth.
- 17) Once a year, go someplace you've never been before -- go on a pilgrimage.
- 18) Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values.
- 19) Live a good honorable life. Then when you get older and think back, you'll be able to enjoy it a second time.

Go now, with a prayer for peace in your hearts -- and the work of being at home in your own soul, in your own hands. Go in peace, to be peace. Shalom. Amen.

First Reading:

"The object of pilgrimage is not rest and recreation -- to get away from it all. To set out on a pilgrimage is to throw down a challenge to everyday life. Nothing matters now but this adventure...a rough, wild path in the landscape where everything is new...So target a distant place -- your Mecca, your Jerusalem...and set out. You needn't don a hairshirt, for obstacles enough will erupt. But by attending to them now --(openness, attentiveness, and responsiveness are the essence of pilgrimage) -- you will be able to surmount them by yielding to them in the way that life always

requires that we yield to it...(D)raw the resilience you will need from those who have preceded you, for pilgrims are a hardy breed...

The naked glitter of the sacred mountain (ahead) stirs the imagination; the adventure of self-conquest has begun.”

[Adapted, Huston Smith’s Introduction to The Art of Pilgrimage, Philip Cousineau]

Anthem: Enya, Pilgrim

Second Reading:

“Once ... a man shot an eagle out of the sky. He examined the eagle and found the dry skull of a weasel affixed by its jaws to the eagle’s throat. The supposition is that the eagle had pounced upon the weasel and the weasel had swiveled and bit as instinct taught -- tooth to neck -- and nearly won...

I would like to learn -- or remember -- how to live...That is -- I don’t think I can learn from a wild animal how to live in particular -- (how to suck warm blood, how to hold my tail high, how to walk with my hind-prints precisely over those of my fore-paws) -- but I might learn something of the purity of living in the physical senses and the dignity of living without bias or motive. I would like to live as I should -- as the weasel lives as he should. And I suspect that for me the way is like the weasel’s: open to time and death, noticing everything, remembering nothing, choosing the given with a fierce and pointed will.

Could we live that way?...We could, you know. We can live any way we want. People take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience -- even silence -- by choice. The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and vital spot (and to seize it!) I think it would be well, “On the Great Pilgrimage, let us be at peace with our bodies and in our minds. Let us seek the path of return which brings us to ourselves, that we may become wholly ourselves. Let us sense the source of all being -- the Great Compassion -- and let us fill our hearts with compassion for ourselves and for all living things. Conscious of the sufferings and the necessities all around us -- let us pray with humility that we ourselves may cease to be the cause of suffering for any other. On the lonely pilgrim’s path -- the road to find out who we are -- though beset by trial and tribulation -- let us practice peace in our hearts -- peace in ourselves. Let us be still -- and know.” [Adapted, Thich Nhat Hanh, #505] [Silence] [Choral Amen] Amen.