

**T**he human story is full of journeys. Part of this urge to travel, and the counter-urge to remain rooted and grounded – the imperative to be and to become – derive from our earliest peregrinations as a human race. This is not just an outward journey to new lands but an inward one as well. Our search for the transcendent, for meaning beyond ourselves, is enduring.

## Strangers in a strange land

Peter Gilbert

Even when society has remained relatively static, as in mediaeval times, people travelled, often arduously, even dangerously, to places they regarded as sacred. The writer Geoffrey Chaucer remarked that in April people go on pilgrimages. And well before Chaucer, Homer wrote *The Iliad* about the search for self, truth, courage and integrity. Modern texts also describe the pilgrimage, and some of the most potent, like Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, are also written for children.

The word 'pilgrim' is derived from the Latin *peregrinus* – 'foreigner' – and it is our modern predicament to find ourselves strangers in a strange land. The commentator Zygmunt Bauman describes this vividly.<sup>1</sup> His image is of human beings as small, singly sailed boats on a storm-tossed sea, without landmarks or lighthouses; the sailors having to make and re-make their identities as frequently as they furl and unfurl the sails, desperately seeking safe haven, anchor and rest. Perhaps because I come from a small island myself, I find images of sailing particularly redolent with meaning – often sailing alone but sometimes in the company of other boats, seeking the secret in the dark crystal within oneself and the depths of the sea.

For me, as a social worker, Bauman is at his most persuasive when he talks about the 'strangers of the consumer era': those people who, through their inability or unwillingness to consume, are seen as impaired strangers in a consumerist world. People with learning disabilities, those with severe and enduring mental illness and older people with dementia are the strangers in this strange land.

I identify with Lewis Wolpert, the developmental biologist who has suffered severe episodes of depression and, interestingly for a 'hardline materialist', depicts depression as 'soul loss'.<sup>2</sup> Initially during my own depression I felt that my pilgrimage had come to a juddering halt; my boat was floundering without an anchor. What renewed my pilgrimage was new friends I met and old friends, who brought the lifeboat alongside me and provided me with mental, physical and spiritual succour during my recovery.

Over the last few years the recovery movement has gained momentum as people who experience mental distress have been taking back the ownership of their experience from others, usually professionals. W.A. Anthony describes recovery as a 'deeply personal, unique process, of changing one's attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills'. It is a way of 'living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life, even with the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one's life, as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness'.<sup>3</sup>

As a sign of hope for the future, when one looks at the language used in the literature around recovery, one can see how closely aligned it is with spirituality. At the heart of the approach is a recognition and understanding of the recovery of our underlying spirit, the spark, the breath of life that gives us not just 'life' but what the Jews call *ru'ach* or 'invigorated life'. If individual recovery, and discovery, is to endure then services must engage the heart<sup>4</sup> and become organisations of recovery, where we all journey together.

1. Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
2. Wolpert, L. (2006, 3rd edition) *Malignant Sadness: The Anatomy of Depression*, London: Faber and Faber.
3. Anthony, W.A. (1993) 'Recovery from mental illness: The guiding vision of the mental health service system in the 1990s', *Psycho-Social Rehabilitation Journal* 16(4): 11–23.
4. Aris, S. and Gilbert, P. (2007) 'Engaging the heart of the organisation', in Coyte, M.E et al. *Spirituality, Values and Mental Health*, JKP.

The conference 'Spirituality, Culture and Identity: An Approach to Care' will take place on 24 June 2008. Contact Joanne Gibbs on 01905 855147 or j.gibbs@worc.ac.uk

# Pilgrimage

**I**n 2003 I undertook my first pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago in the northwest corner of Spain. It was both a religious and a spiritual journey. My aim was to continue my discovery of purpose in life. I wanted to practise physical, mental and spiritual discipline and, in the process, attempt a better understanding of myself. Planning, undertaking a journey, arriving at a destination and reflecting on this is only a small part of the greater journey of life. For me, the importance is not in the arriving but in the journey itself, as the travelling is continuous.

This was not my first encounter with the idea of pilgrimage. My father introduced me to the Hindi word *Musafir* that means a traveller. My grandfather travelled from India to Mauritius in 1883 to search for a better life and to escape the stigma of being an Untouchable. He was on his pilgrimage to search and discover. I travelled from Mauritius to England, and my children are already thinking of discovering their roots. Pilgrimage is a series of intergenerational journeys that allow us to connect and integrate our past, present and future. This interaction is what creates my personal narratives and my living history.

As a Hindu, my parents taught me the value of looking outwards to appreciate others. So at the age of six my mother took me on my first pilgrimage to a Catholic shrine. The two-hour hot and dusty bus journey was more than equivalent to a 20-mile walk for a young lad. I did not understand the notion of pilgrimage then, but it was my first lesson in the acceptance of other cultures, values and differences. This became the spur to my spiritual 'bus journey', as I felt compelled to venture through Buddhism and Catholicism, and I am now considering reconnecting with my roots. It is this spiritual restlessness that gives me the mental and physical energy to pursue the interconnected inward and outward journey of my pilgrimage.

Planning the first journey to Santiago was generated by the

need to fill an emptiness created by our two children leaving home. Transitions in the intergenerational journey leave challenges, gaps and opportunities. A group of close-knit friends were in the same situation and we hit on the idea of a vacation together, and then someone suggested that we could combine this with a pilgrimage. We dropped the notion of a vacation and agreed to undertake a pilgrimage every two years. So far we have undertaken two, and a third is now being planned.

The planning for the journey has become an important aspect of the pilgrimage. We get together, discuss our routes and explore the challenges and how to overcome them. It has allowed a better understanding of each other and affirmed our friendship. The actual journey has taken us through some breathtaking scenery. As we passed through tough terrain the spiritual intent of the journey would come alive, and my inner needs, hopes and expectations more apparent. The painful knees, the sore blisters and the tiredness became insignificant as I blended the outer landscape with my silent inner reflections.

Pilgrimage has affirmed that I can make my own choices and that I am in control of my life. I can decide the pace of my walk, and walk alone or join the group. Arriving at my destination after a particularly difficult and painful walk will give me a great sense of achievement. The difficult walks come to symbolise the difficult challenges of our lives, and the belief that we can overcome them gives us mental strength and the capacity to be positive.

Visiting so many places and meeting so many people has taught me that despite the differences in culture, values, beliefs and language we have the same needs and a shared humanity. By refocusing from our differences to this shared humanity we come to understand our interdependence.

## Musafir

Jay Boodhoo



**I**t is a very human thing to want to make sense of that which appears to make no sense at all. There are some things we can't speak about directly, so we have constructed languages of symbol and metaphor. Psychoanalysis does this and so does religion. They both also use ritual as a tool. Pilgrimage could be seen as one of those rituals, and while psychoanalysis takes us on a pilgrimage to our past in order to understand our present, religious pilgrimages can take us to many places in many ways. The journey can be just as significant as its end point.

## The pilgrimage of recovery

Sarah Carr

Despite the fact that I have rejected conventional worship and doctrine (rather, it was a mutual rejection), the Catholic culture I grew up with has given me a wealth of metaphor and reference which I have tried to use to understand my experiences

of deep mental distress. My personal understanding of pilgrimage now is that it is a ritual to make sense of suffering and even transform because of it. The suffering of the pilgrim can be physical and existential, temporal and spiritual; it can take place as an exterior journey or an interior journey into an apocalyptic future. It can certainly reflect deeply the journey of perpetual recovery from a time of mental trauma.

Mediaeval Catholic society had religious structures to contain experiences of mental distress and ways to manage and explain altered states of mind. The pilgrimage was one of them, and the story of the 15th century English mystic, Margery Kempe, illustrates how someone with mental health problems turned to this tradition for stabilisation and healing. Kempe would now be diagnosed with postnatal depression or even puerperal psychosis (she had 14 children), but her experience of being 'hindered by the devil' and her long episodes of crying were interpreted as mystical experiences reflecting Christ's suffering. After several periods of intense mental suffering, she felt called to go on pilgrimages and visited Jerusalem, Santiago de Compostela and toured the English shrines as a way to manage and understand her distress.

A period of madness or mental distress can be seen as a disconnection from the world, just as pilgrimage has been recognised as an experience of apartness from the world. But does the pilgrim return the same or changed? In the opera *The Cricket Recovers*, a cricket wakes one morning

with a 'gloomy feeling' in her head. At one point she asks, "What if this feeling never goes away?" to which her friend replies, "Then you will be someone else."<sup>1</sup> At the end of the opera the cricket does recover, but because of her experience she is not the same as she was before.

Pilgrimage was a journey towards the point of revelation (such as the shrine), but revelation in madness is perhaps the darkest hour, the depth of suffering from which we struggle to return. We are often not aware of our journey towards that point when we are on it, but as we move away from a period of distress we can suffer like pilgrims crossing a formidable landscape. We strive to come to terms with the transformation that has taken place as a result of the experience and continue to negotiate the sometimes painful interaction of our new identities with a seemingly unchanged world.

The pace of life is increasing and as a result people have the expectation that things should happen quickly, including recovery from mental health problems. But if you are recovering from a serious episode of mental distress or a complete breakdown it can take years before you discover who you are and what you can do. Just as the mediaeval pilgrimage was arduous and long – a year on average overland before the sea routes opened up – so you have to learn patience. You have to sit through the pain. And then you learn about what it really is to be a 'patient', a term that derives from the Latin for suffering.

The pilgrimage can be a metaphor for the slow, often arduous journey towards the person you are becoming after a period of mental distress or breakdown. It can be helpful for those of us who recognise a spiritual or existential dimension to our mental health in the face of confusion and suffering in our lives.

1. Hirs, R. [trans. John Irons] (2005) *The Cricket Recovers* libretto.

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