



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Return from Pilgrimage”

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

I long for You so much I have even begun to travel where I have never been before. Hafiz

Ideally, a human life should be a constant pilgrimage of discovery. John O'Donohue

To journey without being changed is to be a nomad. To change without journeying is to be a chameleon. To journey and be transformed by the journey is to be a pilgrim. Mark Nepo

A circle is both diameter and circumference, compass and horizon, holding center and edge together, calling us to the heart and the wild borders. Christine Valters Paintner

Reflection:

St. Brendan the Navigator or Voyager, is the poster child for *peregrinatio*, the tradition of wandering for God. There are many tales about this 6th century Irish saint from Kerry, western Ireland. There is no doubt Brendan existed, but knowing fact from fiction in his tales of wonder isn't easy.

It's said Brendan and a few monks built a *currach*, a traditional Irish wood-framed, hide-covered boat with mast and sail, but theirs had no oar, nor rudder. The monks set off with no destination in mind, only a willingness to go wherever God, who directs the wind, would send their boat. The purpose of this journey into the unknown was to bring one closer to God—to find the God within by breaking apart their own expectations and control, to give birth to something new.

Peregrinatio is a total surrendering of one's body and soul to God. Introduced to Irish monks in the 4th and 5th centuries by Augustine of Hippo, the Celts embraced the practice of such holy wandering, a type of pilgrimage.

Brendan sailed with his little band for seven years, encountering strange new worlds, likely including North America. The most famous tale from their voyage was their celebration of Easter mass on what they thought was a tiny island in the ocean. But it turned out to be the back of a giant fish or whale who took exception to their building a fire on its back.

For my four months of sabbatical, from March through June, I too, surrendered to some holy wandering. However, my wandering was less about connecting to a concept of God and more about my connecting to creation itself, and ultimately to life itself.

My travels began when I set off on a plane rather than a hide-covered boat, though the tin can nature of a plane probably separated me from the elements no more than the hides of Brendan's tiny boat. My pilgrimage to Ireland was also a peregrinatio because I didn't really know where I was going or what I would encounter.

Although I managed to get the suggested advance reading completed before I left, I really hadn't examined our exact itinerary in western Ireland. I didn't know any of the 12 other pilgrims from the U.S. and Canada who were to be my spiritual companions. I didn't know the two spiritual directors who would lead us, though I was familiar with their published work and had checked out references before signing on. I, too, surrendered myself to wherever the spiritual winds would lead.

I chose Ireland because I was drawn to its pre-Christian, earth-centered spirituality. My heritage is Scottish and English and the myth and romance of these lands have tugged at my soul for years. After not finding what I wanted in Britain, I looked to Ireland and signed up for a Celtic pilgrimage led by Christine Valters Paintner and her husband John, who operate the Abbey of the Arts out of their home in Galway City.

To enhance our spiritual experience, we were sometimes accompanied by an archaeologist and a historian. They gave invaluable insight into the people, the times, and the uses of these sacred places. Each day we ventured to a different holy site, sometimes a prehistoric tomb marked by 3 massive stones forming a dolmen, or holy wells, or monastic ruins, or ancient church no bigger than my office. We also went to sacred and poetic locations. One day we climbed up the Maumeen Pass in the Maumturk Mountain range where, at the top, was a small church and holy well dedicated to St. Patrick. Another day we explored a coastal inlet called the Flaggy Shore, where our Irish historian read Seamus Heaney's poem 'Postcript':

And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightening of flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully-grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park or capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open

To 'catch the heart off guard and blow it open' was a regular feature of my holy wandering. I was most blown away by the land. I reveled in the colors of Ireland—the emerald green pastures; the

slate gray stone used for churches, homes, and endless walls lining roads and dividing pastures; the brilliant blue skies dotted with puffy white clouds and full-color rainbows that kept appearing throughout the day whenever the sun broke through following countless rainstorms. Even the white lambs, the yellow gorse shrubs, and the black Celtic crows, a unique Irish species, added to the visual drama.

The Irish landscape feels full of a spirit I've not experienced elsewhere. There seems to be no separation between the visible and invisible, spiritual and material, heaven and earth. I can believe fairies, sidhe, and leprechauns inhabit the emerald isle. I understand why the Irish have thousands of sites they call holy.

As I indicated last Sunday, I fear we, modern, hurried Americans have lost our spiritual connection to the land. In general, Americans spend far too much time inside schools, houses, and offices. Modern industrialized agriculture keeps few of us connected to the land. We ride in cars that insulate us from the elements and heat or air-condition our buildings so that we rarely pay attention to what's happening outside. Too few of us even take vacations much less a weekend outdoors.

I appreciate modern conveniences, especially in a hot climate like Athens. But they keep us apart from the land that sustains us. Climate change and the prevalence of fires, floods, and severe storms and tornadoes may be waking us up to mother nature, but this may only make us fear her, not revere her. Perhaps a once-a-century eclipse will return us to greater reverence.

Your theology or spirituality may be different from mine, but enough studies prove the physical and psychological benefits of being in nature. After returning from Ireland, I made a commitment to myself to spend more time outdoors. My holy wandering helped me see how much I need direct connection to Earth and to the divine I see in all things.

I went to Ireland hoping to hear the echo of ancient footsteps upon the land, to hear their voices, and be inspired by their rituals. I wanted this experience to *oscail mo chroi*, open my heart, and rediscover my soul. I returned with that and more.

My sabbatical wasn't only a trip to Ireland. After nearly three weeks overseas, I read my way through a stack of professional and spiritual books and articles. One topic I concentrated on was religious freedom and the first amendment. You'll be hearing about that in a few weeks.

I also explored issues around white culture and white supremacy. Given the appalling display of hate and violence in Charlottesville and elsewhere, the efforts of the Unitarian Universalist Association to decenter white culture mirrors the direction I believe our Fellowship and our nation must move towards. You'll hear more about this in a few weeks, too.

Finally, I spent time during my sabbatical increasing my connections with community and interfaith leaders in Athens. Some of you attended the interfaith panel I participated in at the Jewish synagogue or the *iftar* during Ramadan at the Islamic Center. As part of my work with the Interfaith Clergy Partnership of Greater Athens I've gotten to know well Rabbi Eric Linder, Imam Adel Amer, Pastor Abraham Mosley, and many other faith leaders. The Imam will be sharing the pulpit with me here on September 3rd. We've also invited members of his Muslim community to

join us so that you can develop a relationship with them, too. As Jews, Muslims, LatinX, and African-Americans become the target of white supremacist movements, it is important for us to be in right relationship with all people, stand beside all identities, and protect our collective human rights.

In keeping our UU tradition in the public square as a justice-seeking, welcoming faith, I recently participated in an hour-long radio show conducted by former Mayor Gwen O’Looney. Joining us were Rabbi Eric Linder and Mokah Johnson. Our conversation focused on current events and how we might avoid the rise of hate-based activity in Athens.

Post sabbatical, my spirit’s renewed, my mind’s recommitted to our shared values, and my heart’s ready to do some holy wandering with you.

Our future is as unknown as the destination of Brendan’s tiny boat centuries ago. But I look forward to the adventures that lie ahead, whatever they may be. I hope you’ll join me on our shared peregrinatio.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Have you allowed yourself to set sail to an unknown shore? How did or might that change you?
2. How might UUFA foster your own inner pilgrimage? What might encourage you to wrestle more with the deepest questions of your life?
3. Do you enjoy getting lost? Has getting lost taken you to new, wonderful, or challenging places? Share an experience of being lost or of going ‘where you cannot go’.
4. What connection do you feel to nature or the universe? Are you drawn to view the eclipse—why?