

SPIRITUALITY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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I propose that 21st Century spirituality is significantly determined by the yearning for primary experience. Primary experience concerns the patterns of one's life that directly define and shape the self in its self-realization. So-called "secondary" experience is inherited experience, the cumulative framework of values, beliefs, and mores, that provide the broad outlines of human life patterns within communities. These norms, these dogmas, are by their nature foundational and assumptive, and hence removed from direct awareness and as such at best abstract if not irrelevant to the maintenance of a vibrancy for selfhood.

Selfhood is not an autonomous center of consciousness, but a web of relationships, a center that seeks to become and actualize itself. The requirements of post-modern selfhood are no longer served purely by adaptation his to external norms as described by Heinz Hartmann through his notion of the ego as "the organ of adaptation". The self now seeks transformation, in other words, a deeper engagement with the fabric or essence of its life, in short, with its self. The ego, having now been relativized, seeks grounding in a fuller, richer, and deeper sense of itself.

ENCOUNTER WITH LIMIT

Limit experience(s) offer a measure of resistance for the self that generates enough friction for a self to slow down, to face itself, and to find itself. Any life limitation has the effect of bringing the self-system up short, stopping it in its tracks, and driving the self into itself. This is a moment of awakening when new data about life and the self's experience thereof becomes visible. As highly complex creatures, we seek equilibrium and balance for selfhood even within change, particularly at emotive and ideological levels. Perhaps hinted at within Freud's Pleasure Principle, this desire for comfort, for homeostasis, runs headlong into the fluidity of life and the ever-present changeableness of reality. Nothing is ever nailed down for long, not even the self in its experience of itself.

From the point of view of intersubjectivity, selfhood is constructed and sustained by the multitude of the relations it internalizes. This engagement with the otherness of the world is

both necessary, yet frightening. Such otherness while needed and sought after, also represents a threat given the self's unfinishedness. This open-endedness is the source of its vulnerability, yet also its hope.

Limit experiences are the felt boundaries that awaken awareness for selfhood to what exists internally and externally. D.W. Winnicott describes this boundary encounter beautifully through the phrase "optimum frustration." Within the engagement with limit resides the potential for new life, a new form for a self seeking release from outgrown modes of itself. The power of limit becomes visible when we come up against an inner or outer obstacle that no longer allows for business as usual. Any limitation can serve this purpose and for most persons it appears as an unexpected crisis, loss, failure, or trauma. Many things can cut across a life thereby shaking its equilibrium: illness, loss of relationship, a crisis of meaning or purpose. In short, any life contingency can serve the purpose of driving the self more fully into itself thereby bringing the self into fuller encounter with itself.

Beyond the ever-present contingent moments of life which are thrust upon one, there are many moments for which the engagement with limit is chosen. This is the path of intentional growth and is the hallmark of the spiritual seeker who intentionally enters into the disciplines that transformation seems to require. It is this mode of self-expansion I seek to offer as a vital element of emerging spiritual seeking for the 21st Century. For most intentional seekers, their current state of life and personhood is perceived to be exhausted, empty, and devoid of meaning. This state can be mild or severe, but in most cases leads to some attempt at change. One knows a shift, a new direction must be sought, even if that awareness is not initially framed as a quest for transformation.

I propose that Contemporary pilgrimage has emerged as a vehicle for such limit encounters and the self-transformations thereby actualized. Around the world literally millions of persons embark on one or more of the pilgrimage modes named above. One of the most popular at least as far as Western traditions is concerned is the pilgrimage to Santiago (the Camino). In the last two decades, this route has been walked by over 100,000 pilgrims annually, including the author. These numbers include only those who have received the "compostella" the certificate of completion, while many more tens of thousands walk only a portion of the 500+ mile trek in any given year, to return in subsequent years to continue their journey.

It has long been suggested that pilgrimage is archetypal, namely, that it represents a universal human impulse within human experience (Clift, 1996). As archetype it has the capacity to "rearrange

psychic elements” thereby producing psychological, spiritual, and social effects (p. 9). This seeming capacity to rearrange psychic content is why pilgrimage is so universally present in all its many historical and contemporary forms. Pilgrims often seem profoundly compelled to go on their journeys as if an eruption from deep within resonates and intensifies the desire. Most pilgrims know the road will inevitably bring certain hardships and struggles yet this deters few. No true pilgrim considers their journey a vacation, or a disengagement from the challenges of one’s life, but rather a journey toward the transformative possibility that the journey itself contains.

Because pilgrimage engages a “higher space” and “higher time” (Taylor, 2007, p. 96), it introduces the factor of transcendence in direct and immediate ways. Since the prompting for pilgrimage is generally very concrete and driven by a particular need or vulnerability, pilgrimage becomes a means whereby the transcendent possibility enters one’s immediate lived experience. This, I believe, is at the heart of its power to transform the sojourner. Said another way, there seems to be a direct correspondence between pilgrimage as a spatial and temporal event and the current unresolved, and inner, spiritual dimensions of the pilgrim’s life (McConville, 2004, p.19).

Pilgrimage Typologies

It is possible to classify pilgrimage into types. This ordering is not based on the physical parameters of the journey such as duration or destination, but upon the motivations and yearnings of the pilgrims themselves. In other words, the purposes for which pilgrims embark on their journeys are the most reliable mode of classifying them. I have adjusted the six distinct types of pilgrimage offered by Morinis to reflect the following possibilities: (1) Devotional, (2) Healing, (3) Ritual/Life Cycle, (4) Obligatory, (5) Wandering, and (6) Transformational, (Morinis, 1992, p.10).

Transformational Pilgrimage

While most pilgrims likely experience some degree of change or transformation for themselves, this final typology addresses the specific and intentional purpose of transforming the self-state of the pilgrim. It could of course argued that transformation is an overarching and unifying framework that would include all the above modes of pilgrimage. I propose that certain life thresholds require an intentional self-transformation process for which pilgrimage may be uniquely suited thereby serving as a highly useful experiential process for 21st Century spirituality. For this typology, then, one could presume that some aspect of life or personhood has come under serious challenge, erosion, or even collapse. This loss of life equilibrium in some fundamental sense activates an often deeply felt internal

urge to find a wholeness that lies beyond one's current life boundaries. This type of pilgrimage thus represents a journey toward the establishment of a new self-state, which is grounded in a spiritual reality which carries the self-realignment process forward in some fundamental way, and thereby establishes new conditions for life.

An example of this mode presented itself to me very unexpectedly in the life of a client some years ago. This man, a forty-five year old Christian minister, was undergoing a painful divorce and toward the end of his therapy announced one day his intention to travel to as far a distant a boundary as he could, seemingly enacting at various levels of his being his experience of loss and limit, and return to life from his so-called dead zone. His virtually spontaneous decision was to buy a used VW Jetta and drive from Chicago to the Alaska Highway and on to the Arctic ocean and return. This he did in the span of less than three weeks, staying at the Arctic ocean only long enough to jump in, enacting a baptism of sorts, and then proceeding to return. He returned feeling cleansed and free of many of the emotional burdens he had been carrying. Something profound had happened to him that seemed to accelerate and bring to closure what he could not achieve in his immediate everyday world. A transformational event had occurred with a birth into a new sense of himself within the context of his new reality.

Elements of Transformational Pilgrimage

The journey of a pilgrim who is seeking transformational possibilities has elements in common with the journeying undertaken by the shaman and hero (Senn, 2002). Many readers will recognize within this mode the classic structure of (1) Separation, (2) Initiation or awakening, and (3) Return. These mark the rough outlines of being called/initiated out of a static state of some sort into the luminosity of the wilderness where the encounter with the sacred transforms the hero/shaman into the agent who returns to impact the society in healing and transforming ways.

For the typology of pilgrimage as transformational which I am considering, there is a variation to the pattern in that the journey is not necessarily "chosen." For many such pilgrims it is not so much that a quest beckons, to which one responds, but rather that life "throws" one onto the path of separation/alienation. To experience a trauma in the form of a radical personal loss, or a collapse of a communal or relational web, one is hit with a loss of the wholeness that formerly confirmed one's sense of self. One's spiritual compass is thereby correspondingly harmed if not shattered. Furthermore, this loss can so rupture the intactness of one's self that one's core is imperiled. It is this deepest of all existential challenges that intentional transformational pilgrimage can specifically address.

This collapse of core-ness is akin to what has been called a “breached structure” (Moronis, 1992, p. 19). Such self-loss can also come in the form of a de-structuring of self. One no longer knows who one is, because the defining self-objects have been lost to one. Often, from within such a devastation of the flattening of self, a yearning for Sacred Presence is felt. The very stirring of this need reveals its absence, and it is this very tension that may provide the impetus for such a journey. While the experiential framework may be grief, loss, sorrow, or devastation, etc., for such a potential pilgrim, the journey is not primarily about fixing the pain or moving the grief along, but encountering the transformational power of the Sacred in the midst of what is being lived.

Pilgrimage in this mode seems to gain its power when the intensity of the two poles of experience which one could call “Sacred Absence – Sacred Presence” comes into awareness and asks to be addressed. Pilgrimage becomes a way of engaging this polarity by intentionally entering into it. Pilgrimage, as it is being proposed in this study, is nothing else if not an experience of enacting the Absence – Presence dynamism, and undergoing movement within it. The intentional journey into Absence - Presence gives it a physicality and an embodiment that allows for new alignments at multiple levels of our being.

Paradoxically when persons enter into such journeys it reveals that a deeper and perhaps more direct engagement with loss or limit is being sought. Many persons suffering loss find the first phase of grieving well supported by the participation and support of friends, family, and community. After a period of weeks or months, however, a vacuum of participation often occurs, with this shrinking of the pool of support paralleled by the emergence from shock, and a lessening of the waves of feeling, to be replaced by a growing emptiness and parallel hunger for a meaning to emerge, that allows the loss to be hopefully integrated into a reborn self.

A pilgrimage-structured journey is not embarked upon so much for solace, as for more direct engagement with reality, and the reconstruction of a self that the new reality demands. To be reconstructed in our selfhood of course requires the necessary catharsis and expressions of pain, etc., but it also requires a facing of one’s self that is now emptier and more impoverished than before. To face one’s empty self also means facing a self eroded of key meaning-providing sources, in particular the Sacred fabric of one’s life. If that fabric has been torn, as it likely has, then Sacred Absence in all its pathos must now also be faced. And yet, the very intensity of the Absence signals the yearning for what was once known, and is now sought, albeit in new form.

Enacting Absence/Presence

Transformative pilgrimage, as the intentional journey into one's current state of lost-ness and disorientation, becomes a journey into an owned consciousness of Absence/Presence. For the one suffering from an emptied self, whatever its cause, such emptiness takes one toward the Sacred mystery of Divine Absence/Presence. Monastic traditions have long known the paths and patterns which cultivate such awareness, but for the model I am proposing in this study, it arises out of life's contingencies, not out of regular spiritual practices

A journey into one's own lostness, done with the right preparation and the right intention and holding capacity, takes one toward the heart of God. The heart of God is that power in the Universe which takes all fragments of its life and holds them secure ***in their alienated form***. Because the loss and alienation is real it must be met and held as such. This holding of Absence secures it, incubates it, making it available for future use and eventual return to the larger whole, understood both individually and collectively. A pilgrim enacts this on a very physical and embodied level through the sheer physicality and intensity of immediacy. The bringing of the void into time and space in this most grounded fashion, gives it a solidity and directness that is the source of its power.

This physical embodied journey allows one to gain a greater consciousness of how one's inner state is reflected not simply in the outer physical realm, but echoes in the Universe with a great and encompassing depth. This depth encounter with what "is" potentially unifies it with great clarity and power. One thereby gains an awareness of how one's own personal path is mirrored by the Sacred, and is contained within the Sacred, even in its rawest forms. To come to know that Sacred mirroring and containment is profoundly strengthening, and offers sojourners the possibility of being deeply met on the road to restoration, renewal, and re-birth.

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