

**Seeking Sacred Truths Through Pilgrimage**  
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First of all, let me congratulate you on this beautiful new worship space. As you heard, my husband Bob and I were members of the Unitarian Universalist Society more than 20 years ago. I remember that old building with fondness—but my goodness, this new space is gorgeous. And what an appropriate place to talk about holy sites and holy journeys, because this sanctuary is indeed a sacred place.

I've walked a winding path since leaving you, but I still carry some DNA from the UUs inside me. In particular, one of the things I've always admired about the UU tradition, and tried to follow in my own life and work, is your openness to inspiration from many faiths and traditions. Let me quote from your covenant of core beliefs: [We believe in] "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning [and] Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life."

In particular, I've long been fascinated by the role pilgrimage can play in the search for truth. I've come to believe that these sorts of journeys shouldn't be reserved just for those who consider themselves religious or devout. Instead, pilgrimage should be defined more broadly: a pilgrimage is a journey that changes our hearts. This kind of trip isn't just for rest and relaxation—though those may happen. Instead, the goal is to challenge yourself to grow. And that growth often happens when something inside us is broken in some way—a death, a divorce, a job loss. Those are the times when a journey can be something more than an ordinary vacation, when the experience can be truly life changing.

So let me tell you about some of the truths I've learned from my own travels around the world. The first relates to the Time For All Ages story that you just heard. I suggested we use it because it's one of my favorite stories about pilgrimage. It reveals the first truth I'd like to talk about: **Sometimes we have to travel a long way to find the treasures hidden at home.**



Let me tell you a story about one of the times this truth was brought home to me. Several years ago I visited Taize, a pilgrimage site in central France. Each year, many thousands of pilgrims, mostly young people, come to this small village, which is home to an ecumenical Christian community that was formed in the aftermath of World War II. Taize is famous for a style of meditative singing that's spread all over the world. Perhaps you've sung some Taize songs here in your services.

During my visit, early one morning I walked to the little stone church where the Taize Community had started. It's far too small to hold the crowds of people who now come to Taize, but it's still kept as a chapel for meditation. It was very early—maybe 5:00 a.m.—and I was looking forward to having this serene, historic stone building to myself.

I opened the door and savored the scene. The darkness inside was lit by just a couple of candles burning in front of an icon on the altar. The atmosphere was hushed and peaceful. I headed toward a bench that sat directly in front of the altar.

Only there was a problem: someone was in my spot.

It was incredibly irritating. There I was, ready to have a peaceful meditation, and there was an interloper trespassing in my place.

And then I realized how ridiculous I was being, because if there's anything that can make you feel small and petty, it's being jealous that someone took your spot in a church. A bit disgusted with myself, I turned around and walked out the door.

But on my walk back to the dorm where we were staying, I realized something obvious: I could create that same sort of space in my own home. And I realized that I had the perfect spot—a window seat in my bedroom, a place that for 20 years I'd used as a place to pile clothes. I'd walked by it thousands of times, never realizing it was actually a holy place.

So when I got home, I cleaned up the junk on the seat, and put up a little shelf, and bought a candle and a few icons, and now nearly every morning I have a lovely spot for my morning meditation. No one ever gets to it first, and it's always there waiting for me. And I never would have found the treasure hidden in my own home if I hadn't gone to France.

Sometimes we have to travel a long way to find the treasures hidden at home.

Which brings me to my second truth about pilgrimage: **Spirit is its own breed of cat.**



Think about it. Cats can be fickle and aloof. They keep their own counsel. You can't force them to relate to you. You have to approach them gently and with respect.

Spirit is like that too.

I know that on my visits to holy sites I've been sorely disappointed at times, times when the crowds or overwhelming or the weather sweltering or instead of focusing on what's important I get irritated and impatient.

But then the Spirit creeps in on little cat feet, like the fog does in Carl Sandburg's famous poem. And then it curls and coils into a totally unexpected form. The grand cathedral might have bored me, but then a shopkeeper sells me a trinket in a nearby gift store, and we get to talking and he tells me a story, maybe about his struggles with his children, and we end up having a real conversation, one that touches both of our hearts. And that's when I realize that the cathedral was just a lure to get me to this shop, this holy place that was created in the conversation I had with the shopkeeper.

Just like a cat, you can't ever control the Spirit. But you can pay attention when it shows up.

Which brings me to truth number four: **Lost is good.**



By lost I mean, first of all, that's it's good to cut yourself off from home as much as possible. Forget social media. Forget about trying to take the perfect selfie. Forget about scanning the news on your smart phone. All those details, all that news, all those relationships, will be waiting for you when you get home. Because your job, right now, is to get lost. Sometimes that can be scary, especially when you're in a place unfamiliar to you. But there are certain truths you can learn only when you're scared and uncertain.

Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of myths, told a story about a woman who came up to him after a talk. She told him in great detail about her upcoming pilgrimage to Greece, how she had everything all planned out, and she'd be at this temple at this particular time, and another when the moon was going to be full, and at this holy site on this particular day. And Campbell patted her on the arm and said, "Dear Lady, I sincerely hope your trip doesn't go entirely as planned."

Campbell knew that being lost can be good. It's good to get shaken up on a pilgrimage.

Which is directly related to the next truth I've learned, which is **Getting turned upside down can be a good thing.**



One of the reasons why travel can be so difficult, and yet so rewarding, is that it puts us out of our comfort zone. It's a liminal zone, a time of betwixt and between.

So why should we put ourselves through hanging upside down over a river? Because sometimes it's the only way we can find our way. Sometimes it's the only way we can recognize we're on a pilgrimage. We may think we're on a visit to a friend, or even a business trip, but there was a deeper reason why we left home. As Martin Buber says (and this line is quoted in your bulletin): All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.

Next comes this truth:

### **Solitude is your friend.**



Some of my best travel experiences have happened when I've traveled alone; and some of my worst travel experiences have happened when I've traveled alone. Either way, I learned valuable things about myself.

One of the things that happens when you travel by yourself is that you're much more likely to recognize kindred spirits. You never know who you're going to meet on the road. Sometimes they have messages just for you. Sometimes you have messages just for them. But you'll never know that until you talk to them.

I remember when my husband was traveling on a plane, for example, at a time when we were debating whether we were going to have a second child. Bob sat next to an elderly woman on a plane and they struck up a conversation. Bob told her about our ruminations about whether to have another baby. She leaned forward in her seat, looked him in the eye with an intense gaze, and said, "Have a second child. You won't regret it."

Bob came home from that trip and told me that a good witch had given him a message about having another child. He was kidding, and yet he was serious.

Now I'm not saying you should believe everything a stranger tells you on the road, but sometimes, messages come along channels you don't expect.

And the witch on the plane was right: we didn't regret having that second child.

**Next: Don't be afraid to blow the sand away.**



The picture is of some Tibetan monks creating a sand mandala at a temple in Colorado. They'll spend days laboriously creating a beautiful image, dropping colored grains of sand into an intricate design. Notice these men are wearing masks so they don't accidentally disturb their work.

But when the design is completed, the monks do something that seems foolish. After saying the proper prayers, they take their carefully constructed mandala to a river, and they pour it into the water. All that work and effort and beauty, gone in an instant.

The best travel experiences are like that too. They're ephemeral. That exquisite sunset, that remarkable meal, that encounter with a transcendent work of art—they're not going to last. Neither will you. And knowing that, deeply, means that you can live more fully in the moment, before the sand slips into the river.

Fortunately, you don't have to go far away to have a life-changing journey. **Because a pilgrimage of the heart can take place anywhere**, which is my next truth. Let me show you some sites you can go to within a short drive. Here's a sunset at Jester County Park near Des Moines, for example.



And here's a shot of northeast Iowa on an autumn morning, not far from Effigy Mounds National Monument, which is one of the most remarkable holy sites in North America.



And this picture that looks like a villa in Tuscany is actually the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in LaCrosse.



All of these places are within a few hours drive.

So let me end with a final truth: **morning coffee is a sacred ritual.**



Or for you it may be a glass of wine at sunset. Or the gelato in the sidewalk café. Or your afternoon tea overlooking your backyard. Because if a journey, or a place, is going to change you, it has to catch up with you. And it can't do that if you're constantly moving.

So these are a few of the truths I've learned from my travels. I could go on, but really, the most important thing is that you discover your own truths. Whether you travel near or far, I wish you life-changing experiences....the sort you can only find on a pilgrimage.