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Cindy Pavlinac

Introduction

Pilgrimage requires a journey. Humans are walkers, traversing the landscape seeking adventure and home. Walking pilgrimages along historic routes and concentrated journeys in a labyrinth all involve circling a centre. Places of natural grandeur have long attracted those undertaking journeys to sites of magic, prophecy, safety, hope and the supernatural. The landscape informs the journey and pilgrims notice things that can only be revealed by walking through that specific landscape. The boundaries between inner and outer landscape become blurred as the pilgrim enters an expanded relationship to the self. Walking engages the body while freeing the mind for deep contemplation and potential transformation. Following a labyrinth, a nature trail, or a saint's footsteps requires surrendering control and trusting the journey. Walking in a state of focused contemplation while holding a question or an intention of quiet attentiveness is a core pilgrimage practice. A heightened state of receptive self-observation can evoke an almost visceral recognition of one's own truth, a profound surprise of the potential for reimagining one's life as a coherent story of meaningful events and cohesive purpose. From the first step across the threshold of the familiar to the last step returning home to where the pilgrim began, we are called to the journey. Circling the centre, whether walking the labyrinth, circumambulating Mount Tamalpais, or following the devotional route of early monks around Iona, orients the pilgrim to a greater understanding of their place and role in the cosmos. In my own awakening to the power of place and the profound longing for fields of sacred landscape, I have come to describe all sickness as homesickness. The journey home is the central quest for wholeness. The land shapes the pilgrim just as centuries of pilgrims shape the land. Contemplative walking is a powerful practice to find one's way home.

Labyrinth Reawakening

Labyrinth images and tales of entrapment and escape have woven a meandering path through the human psyche for thousands of years. The challenge of solving a puzzle to reach a central treasure while avoiding death traps was built into palaces, temples and pyramids dating back to ancient Egypt. On Minoan Crete, the Priestess of the Labyrinth Dancing Ground, Ariadne, gave the warrior prince Theseus a ball of golden thread, a 'clew', so he could find his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth prison. This archetypal story of a hero's quest aided by a divine helper to show the way and the subsequent claiming of one's true purpose, has survived for millennia. Labyrinth designs were struck on coins, laid in medieval cathedral floors, dug in

English village greens and – more recently – re-imagined in modern mysteries, movies and computer games. Solving the labyrinth has often been central in the quest for self-knowledge, creative awakening, puzzle solving and transcendence of the ordinary.

The meandering labyrinth pathway could be seen as a metaphor for the journey of life. Walking with the intention to revisit one's life can invite memories to appear and reform with new connections in the neutral ground of the safe encircled place of the labyrinth. The act of attentive path walking could be considered a localized concentrated pilgrimage, an accessible alternative to fatiguing travel and the ensuing mental, physical and spiritual challenges usually required for breakdown/breakthrough growth.

A unicursal, single pathway design, like the seven-circuit Classical Cretan coin design and the 11-circuit Medieval Chartres Cathedral floor, engages the body in simple repetitive movement while freeing the mind to meander. The physical turnings of the path and the alternating right and left weaving quickly carry the walker through all the quadrants of their spacial awareness, immersing them in a heightened state of receptive discovery by opening all areas of knowing to contribute integrative coherence to the experience of the quest. Most recognize this state as one of pilgrimage. Disconnecting memories from habitual triggers and expected consequences sets up a state ripe for change. Life's desire to grow and thrive pushes past resistance into new organizations of order and meaning.

Each labyrinth walk begins with the first step across the threshold into the pathway, inviting a new beginning, an opportunity to discover fresh perspectives on one's story. The practice of repeated labyrinth walking can build an environment in which to loosen habitual pathways and offer a safe arena in which to reroute undesired ruts into a better course, to rewrite episodes in one's life, piecing together a more compassionate narrative. Rewriting physical, mental and emotional associations literally rewires the brain and promotes neuroplasticity and holistic health by building resilience and recovery.

Labyrinth walk participants have reported profound healing of painful memories as the turnings revealed different viewpoints, showing how each step is a new opportunity to begin again. They spontaneously rewrite, choose a different beginning, imagine a different critical choice, picture a different ending, or simply surrender into acceptance that whatever happened, happened. The re-empowering choice is to acknowledge, accept, forgive and re-frame in a way that retains the memory, or releases it, while freeing us from its unhealthy hold on us. We find our way out of the labyrinth to emerge victorious.

The reawakening interest in labyrinths in the last several decades and the resulting building boom of thousands in parks, churches, schools, hospitals, prisons and private homes speak to a deep need for personal pilgrimage (Pavlinac, 2012).

The epicentre of the contemplative labyrinth walking reawakening is at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, facilitated by the Canon for Special Ministries, the Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress. Beginning in 1991, a small group of seekers, myself included, laid a painted canvas replica of the 40-foot-wide (12 m) Chartres

Cathedral labyrinth in the nave of Grace Cathedral for monthly candlelit walks with live music. A permanent custom rug was installed in 1994, available for walking whenever the cathedral was open. Special events included Friday noon peace walks, women's overnight Dream Quests and 24-hour New Year's Eve vigils. In 1995 an outdoor terrazzo labyrinth was created in the cathedral close courtyard, allowing full accessibility to labyrinth walking any time, day or night. In summer 2007 a stone labyrinth was installed in the nave floor (Pavlinac, 2015) and programmes have expanded to include church services, weekend retreats and a popular weekly yoga class. Lauren Artress went on to found Veriditas, a non-profit organization that trains labyrinth facilitators and inspires labyrinth walking around the world. In 2016 the Labyrinth Society registered its 5,000th labyrinth on its International World Wide Labyrinth Locator (Vanessa Compton, Labyrinth Society Publications Chair, California 2016, personal communication). TLS promoted the first Saturday in May as World Labyrinth Day for walking as one at 1 p.m. local time, setting up a 24-hour rolling labyrinth walk around the globe. I have personally visited hundreds of labyrinths, photographing their artistry; and have hosted walks, installed new labyrinths, taught workshops and created site-specific performances projecting my images of sacred places onto 30-foot (9 m) hanging silk panels. The labyrinth invites creative collaboration as we traverse the circuits, and circle towards home.

Modern pilgrims are returning in the thousands to medieval pilgrimage sites like Chartres Cathedral, west of Paris. Drawn by the 13th-century labyrinth in the entrance to the nave, they dive deep into early Gothic cathedral practices by circumambulating the building, its crypt and the labyrinth. Groups from San Francisco's Grace Cathedral and Veriditas regularly host week-long retreats centred on labyrinth walking as personal pilgrimage.

Stepping into a labyrinth crosses the threshold from the ordinary into the extraordinary. A journey is initiated that follows a meandering path of archetypal integration that millions have walked before. The labyrinth walker is invited to surrender their individual self to merge into the flow of lucid, luminous humanity. The single pathway labyrinth holds the walking pilgrim in the unifying context of sacred space, opening an accessible route into the heart of grace. Pilgrimage teaches compassion and the recognition and appreciation of walking one's path with presence, heart and peace. We are called to the journey. Through pilgrimage, we find our way home.



Image 1: Chartres Cathedral Labyrinth Pilgrimage, Chartres, France
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Labyrinth Paradox

Labyrinths embody duality and paradox. Our perception of them flickers between the pattern and the path. Inherently unstable, labyrinths appear to simultaneously show order and disorder, clarity and confusion, unity and multiplicity, structure and story. Change your perspective and the labyrinth itself seems to change. What you see and feel and understand in one moment can shift completely in the next. Encoding the very principle of contrariety, the major paradox inherent in the labyrinth is that it is simultaneously an ordered work of artistic geometry and a frightening maze of endless wandering.

Labyrinths are characteristically cryptic, holding both the clear pattern and the unclear path. Viewing the design from above, one can map the journey, trace a single route from the first step across the threshold to the last step into the centre. Seen as a whole, the design embodies order. Seen from the path, however, one sees only disorder. On the ground, one quickly loses the aerial viewpoint, falling into ambiguity and courting confusion as the circuitous path doubles back repeatedly on itself. Dazed and disorientated, the walker's only choice is to keep walking and surrender trust to the path. The labyrinth walker's vision of the way forward is limited by the turns to just a few steps ahead and behind. This fragmentation is fundamental to the process of the journey. By leaving the familiar, one is forced to innovate and release attachment to set patterns, to become vulnerable and invite transformation.

Labyrinths are simultaneously fixed and in motion. They are perceived as a static pattern from an onlooker's point of view or a dynamic path from a walker's perspective. What you experience depends on where you stand. The dilemma of acknowledging that the labyrinth path is a fixed pattern everyone can see yet everyone experiences differently, is the same tough acknowledgment that every

person is somehow the same while being simultaneously unique. This paradox is at the heart of identity, the quest for meaning and of being human.

By stepping into the labyrinth one enters an agreement with oneself to go on a journey of discovery. This receptive state promotes trust in the process and encourages letting go of expectations and specific results. The simple task is to follow the path and continue to the centre, no matter what appears, external or internal. As with any pilgrimage, initial clarity of intention will be challenged by the subsequent twists and turns of the actual journey, of physically walking the path, of moving through unfamiliar and unpredicted circumstances. Unexpected considerations will arise as interior concerns collide with exterior reality and conflicted priorities roil over each other. As challenges bring up memories of the past and hopes of the future, everything eventually collapses into a singular moment of surrender and vivid presence where all there is, is now. All we know is now. And all there is to do is to keep going, to continue on this unknown trajectory, grasping for balance, reaching for meaning until even that last desire is released in complete surrender. Labyrinths ask for the most profound trust. Cross the threshold from the known into the unknown. Step into the path and continue to the centre. Trust the architect, trust the pilgrims who have trodden this way before, trust yourself, trust whatever you define as the divine, trust the process, embrace the enigma. Life is a mystery. Pilgrimage is a path to awaken one's core self at the centre of mystery.

Walking a unicursal labyrinth in a state of focused contemplation can emulate pilgrimage effects. Stepping into a well-worn design drops us into precincts sourced from nature and sacred geometry that can facilitate profound realignment. Labyrinth walkers experience shifts in world view, from the small personal to the grand transpersonal, connecting to greater purpose, mythic story and global perspective. Labyrinth walking emulates traditional pilgrimages circling around revered objects, temple structures and sacred mountains. It resonates with transformative walking practices of circling the centre to arrive at the core of aliveness.

Pilgrimages are journeys of metacognition. Contemplative walking in the sacred space of a labyrinth can facilitate a pilgrimage state and resulting benefits. The labyrinth blurs the boundary between the known and the unknown, encircling a safe place to explore the unfamiliar, be held in the centre of grace and return to the known refreshed and with expanded perspective. By physically meandering left and right, backwards and forwards, towards the destination and away, the labyrinth touches, teases and awakens awareness in every direction.

A balanced yoga practice could induce similar effects. Many people notice similarities between breath focused yoga and descriptions of contemplative labyrinth walking. Both practices draw the thinking mind into the feeling body for a unified holistic experience. Many people turn to yoga and labyrinths for personal healing and mindful physical exercise can expand ordinary movement into transformative experience. Walking on a pilgrimage is walking for metamorphosis.

The meandering labyrinth path echoes life's ever turning road, carrying us through the challenge of constant change and shifting perspectives.

Walking a labyrinth with the cultivated attitude of a pilgrim can deepen the circling centre feeling and amplify the sense of arrival home. A powerful meditation is to begin by walking in, focusing on shedding that which no longer serves. Continue the journey inward through the private interior landscape of personal memory. Pause in the centre, held in grace, solace and quiet, cradling oneself in an expanded resonance of receptive expectation. Walking out, thoughts rebalance and turn memories into healthier alignment, revealing fresh connections held in a transpersonal context. Experiencing one's life story in a context larger than oneself shifts focus to greater meaning framed in acceptance, forgiveness and gratitude. Mythic knowledge reactivates and sings its song anew.

Walkers exit the labyrinth path where they entered and know it for the first time. Refreshed and renewed, many feel they have been on a deep journey and have been long away. They have travelled in mythic time. The simple act of walking a labyrinth can have a profound lasting effect. By leaving the ordinary to step onto an unfamiliar pathway, we can touch the extraordinary. A focused labyrinth pilgrimage can lead us to know our deep, authentic self. It can channel our heart's longing and seeking into a quest and return us to the self we long to be. Pilgrimage returns us home.

Journey into Nature

Travel to places of powerful natural forces and formations have long attracted brave explorers. The mere mention of exotic locations can evoke a sharp intake of breath, an uncontrolled collision of fear and desire. Idiosyncratic destinations like the North Pole, Antarctica, and Mount Everest, spark respect for those who can say they have been there. The adventurers among us long to claim they have been there too, to join an exclusive club that only other insiders can appreciate. Travellers chase the thrill of accomplishment, hoping themselves strong enough to meet physical challenges and reach their goal. Successful pilgrims overcome obstacles, both outer and inner, personal and communal, that rise along the path. People go to extremes to test resolve, build character and reveal core strength. Journeys into wilderness awaken primal connections with natural forces bigger than human concerns. Topography, weather, seasons and natural events from unpredictable storms and eruptions to expected eclipses and migrations shape lifelong travel dreams and plans.

The legendary philosopher and poet of ancient China, Lao Tzu, is credited with saying, 'The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step' (Lao Tzu, Feng and English, 1997). The response to the call, the deliberate answering, 'yes!' and agreeing to begin the journey is the true first step. Lao Tzu also wrote that a good traveller has no fixed plans and is not intent on arriving. The journey is the pilgrimage, as is the destination. To travel as a pilgrim is to shift awareness into the present, raising awareness with every footfall.

The historic Lao Tzu is obscured by overlapping layers of legend and translations. Thought to have lived in 6th-century BCE China, Lao Tzu was the curator of the Royal Library of Chou. Disillusioned by corrupt political systems and the resulting suffering of the populace, he set out to leave China when he was 80 years old to find a fresh place of peace and solitude. On the western edge of the country, the Guardian of the Gate of Tibet asked Lao Tzu to record his knowledge before passing into the western wilderness. The resulting book is the *Tao Te Ching*, The Law (or Canon) of Virtue and its Way (Feng and English, 1997). A central premise of the *Tao Te Ching* is that tranquility is achieved by observing the Tao, the natural flow of vital energy in the universe. By living the Tao (a term meaning ‘the way’ or ‘the path’) one would reconnect to and maintain one’s natural state of harmony and be at peace. Treading the path to inherent human goodness is achieved through solitary contemplation of nature. It is a road of passive influence and powerful integrity.

Also translated as *The Way and Its Power*, this book is the foundation teaching of the philosophical system of Taoism. The Path of Tao, this formless, unfathomable source of all things, is found only by contemplating the natural landscape unaltered by humans. Balance and peace could be achieved with awareness in every step, with observation free of distinctions or judgement, with a return to flowing with natural forces. Of the world’s great philosophies, Taoism has an individualistic and mystical character, greatly influenced by the belief in a universal force, manifest in nature and lived by the act of continual peaceful pilgrimage.

Land Shapes the Pilgrim: Circumambulating Mount Tamalpais

Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, California, has an unmistakable powerful presence and is a natural pilgrimage attraction. Located just north of San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, it rises majestically 2,574 feet (785 m) out of the Pacific Ocean. Largely composed of serpentine rock with its distinctive olive green, smooth, marbled appearance, Mount Tamalpais has been revered throughout time as a special place. Formed by geological movement along the San Andreas Fault, the mountain is considered one of the Sleeping Woman mountain forms with its female in repose profile. The indigenous Coast Miwok Indians referred to the mountain as a Sleeping Princess, the enchanted guardian of the land. Known locally as Mt. Tam, this conspicuous landform is a unifying influence for all who live and travel here.

Mount Tamalpais has been a magnet to San Francisco Bay Area artists and writers for almost two centuries, serving as muse to writers from Alan Watts, who died in his cabin there, to beat poet Jack Kerouac. In *Opening the Mountain: Circumambulating Mount Tamalpais, A Ritual Walk* (2006), Gary Snyder has written about his lifelong relationship to the mountain and his awakening to ancient traditions of circular walking pilgrimage. From his first hike on Mount Tamalpais in 1948 he recorded his rambles in journals and poems. When he left to study Zen

Buddhism in Japan he was introduced to the walking meditation practice of *Kaihōgyō*, or circling the mountain, an extreme ascetic spiritual training involving the circumambulation of Mt. Hiei for a 1000 days. Only a handful of monks have ever completed the course and Snyder joined a less vigorous Shinto-Buddhist mountain walking brotherhood, quickly drawing parallels with his walks on Mount Tamalpais.

Walking meditation and circumambulation of temples is an integral part of Hindu and Buddhist devotional practice. In Nepal, Snyder and traveling companion Allen Ginsberg encountered *pradakshina*, the sunwise ritual circumambulation of holy places. They thought to bring devotional hikes to North America and, when they returned to San Francisco in 1965, they defined a 15-mile (24 km) ritual walk around the base of Mount Tamalpais. Inspired by Tibetan and Indian practices of walking clockwise around a venerated landform, they ceremonially ‘opened’ the mountain by completing the first ritual circumambulation. They were soon joined by other spiritual explorers and the quarterly walking pilgrimage practice has continued for over 50 years. The ceremonial walk and celebration mark the four quarters of the year, and includes contemplative stops at way stations for chanting and prayer. This spiritual practice of circumambulating Mount Tamalpais has enriched local tradition and attracts international pilgrims including the Dalai Lama.

Mount Tamalpais and its watershed are protected State and National public parkland. Its characteristic profile is a steady presence throughout the county. Mount Tamalpais embodies the spirit of place, the *spiritus loci*. Its distinctive atmosphere and ambience serves as a Guardian of the Spirit of Place, the *genius loci*. Like many great world mountains, it might be considered a world pillar, the centre of the world, the connecting place between earth and sky, the *axis mundi*. It seems to be a place where local spirit manifests, the *spiritus loci*.

Pilgrims to a mountain discover things only noticed by walking. We switch from viewing the profile of the mountain far away to being in the mountain. Like walking a labyrinth, we can no longer see distance perspective. The image of the whole, the macro, flips to the micro. We see things only visible when we stop and focus closely. A hidden fawn, a mouse-gnawed bone, a songbird feather spring into visibility. Human life is most deeply experienced and observed at nature’s speed. By walking, sitting, picnicking, camping, sleeping overnight and waking for dawn, we reconnect to the universal. Always changing and somehow unchanged, connection to specific places references the whole. We expand to hold the paradox. We touch greatness inside and outside. We are transformed into pilgrims and return down the mountain, carrying a bit of the mountain forever inside.



Image 2: Mount Tamalpais, Marin County, Northern California, USA
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Mount Tamalpais is always changing yet also somehow always unchanging. Weather and seasons rage around it yet it appears unaltered. Elements roil over themselves, light rain, distant fog, coastal pine trees, fern canyon waterfalls, rock outcroppings, dirt trails, tiny wildflowers, meadow irises, buzzing insects, soaring hawks, cautious deer and wily coyotes. Continually changing light chases sun and shadow around the rocks and trees. Subtle differences recur throughout the year, drawing visitors to summer sunsets, Easter sunrises, full moon rises, new moon crescent sightings, eclipse chasing, stargazing and to seek nature's silence. There are grand scenic vistas from the summit and, depending on air and light pollution, views for hundreds of miles in all directions. Local amateur astronomers gather near the summit, hoping for low lying fog to blanket city lights and reveal the dark night sky. People are drawn here to experience nature untainted by human intervention beyond a single paved road and groomed fire trails. They sense there is something to learn, something to reconnect with that remains bigger than their immediate mundane concerns. They bring their lovers, they bring their children, they bring their pets and they always bring their visitors.

When we visit Mt. Tam our senses are heightened and awakened. Webbed with trails, we set out to explore, to experience being on the mountain, to get to know this place. Ocean breeze mingles with hot manzanita chaparral. Our steps release scents of grasses, bay laurel leaves and madrone twigs. Hawk cries draw our eyes

to search the sky while distant rustling reveals deer trotting along the tree-line. We seek the shade of an oak grove and sit like lizards warming ourselves on warm rocks. We marvel that there is so much nature life and activity all around, just beyond our urban pavement. By getting acquainted with Mt. Tam, we reacquaint ourselves with the natural places in ourselves. We feel a deep peace, a sense of belonging to a greater community of the natural world. We promise ourselves we will return, often. Our animal body comes alive and we are deeply nourished by wild nature.

Those of us who live here and walk the mountain landscape create sensory memories that are activated and re-experienced when we later glimpse the mountain from afar. We connect to the mountain, the mountain connects to this place, and experiencing the mountain connects us to both external place and our inner home. We connect to the Tao and carry it with us. Mount Tamalpais serves as initiator, conduit and reminder of continual pilgrimage to universal force, manifest in nature.

We have visited a place where we cannot live. We return to the familiar, refreshed by the natural world, kissed by the wild divine. We left home and returned home, imbued with Spirit of Place, *spiritus loci*.

Call to Pilgrimage

There is an attraction to remote places. There is an inherent understanding of the challenge of the journey, and in many traditions the degree of uncomfortable difficulty is correlated to the degree of reward. Change requires sacrifice of the habitual comfortable, moving past the edges of the familiar, the known and the easy. Real change requires an instigating event to launch a transformative journey.

The move to change can come from within or without oneself. These two directional sources for change, internal impulse or pressure of external circumstances, relate to classic story structure. Great tales usually start one of two ways: either a stranger comes to town, or a person goes on a journey. These two possible instigating events involve fundamental shifts of what was considered normal, safe and familiar. A stranger's arrival brings unpredictability and challenges the status quo. Going on a journey invites adventure and risk in unfamiliar surroundings and circumstances. Pilgrimage is the merging of both; we are strangers on the road meeting other traveling strangers and local foreigners.

The landscape defines the outer physical journey as the pilgrim struggles with the inner journey. Traveling challenges assumptions and inevitably tests expectations. Pilgrimage holds a mirror to our hidden presumptions and illuminates dark corners. At some point along the journey the shadow self emerges and the persistent pilgrims proceed to wrestle with their demons and angels, to burn away what no longer serves, and to emerge transformed. It is an escalating process of refining discernment.

As the director of a collegiate study-abroad program, Megan Havard relates the challenges of chaperoning American students on the Camino de Santiago. Her stories of packing lists are hysterical, and although designed for overprotective

parents, they illustrate the multiple levels required for pilgrimage preparation. She observed the inevitable priority changes as her student pilgrims discarded expensive possessions they thought they couldn't live without and sought what they never anticipated would be remotely important.

Both internal and external journeys involve the fundamental change in stability inherent in home. Both remove comfortable habits and unconscious routine to wake up the mind to see surroundings with fresh eyes. Both strip away superficial façades to call forth deeper character traits that challenge one to make conscious choices that are often life changing. Pilgrims seek to reveal deeper personal purpose and greater life meaning. Deep down we long to grow. It is the fundamental impulse of life, to grow or die. Pre-pilgrims may have attempted transformation comfortably at home. We might call them couch pilgrims. Although they may achieve minor insights, the true transformational process awakens a hunger for still greater change. They begin to see the relentless pull of familiar surroundings. Perhaps their friends and family support them in theory but reinforce the status quo. Perhaps they have joined a change club that congratulates members on measurable progress. But there comes a moment when people longing for transformation, consciously or unconsciously, hear an indubitable call to adventure, a call to the journey, a call to leave home, a call to leave the familiar to find what is truly fundamental to themselves. A call to leave oneself and travel the unfamiliar, is the path to return to oneself. T.S. Eliot's poem 'Little Gidding' comes to mind:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time (1971).

By traveling, we find our way home.

The initial call to pilgrimage often comes as a surprise. We may feel a vague restlessness, a dissatisfaction with our present level of living. We initially dismiss such dangerous stirrings because of obligations, fear, age, or any variety of excuses real and imagined to delay transformation. We may remind ourselves to be grateful, satisfied. Society certainly tells us often to keep complacently in our place. We may suppress our stirrings, turn away from adventure until one day something ambushes us when we least expect it. We may see a notice, hear a news story, read something casually in passing or even by mistake. But the rightness of it stops us cold. Our ability to reject is disabled. It is almost as if the choice has already been made and the universe is holding its breath waiting for our affirmative response, our shout of 'YES!'. This singularity freezes our excuses as if time collapses in on itself and we glimpse infinite possibility, the promise deep in our psyche to excel, to mature, to claim our birthright, to live our potential.

Everyone's call is different, steeped in individual belief of the possible. Shift occurs when we reach towards our impossible, in small or great steps. When we do

what we believed was impossible, we increase our belief in what is possible. The call to our greatest potential must be forged physically to ground in lasting change and transformation. The physical act of pilgrimage is the universal archetype for finding our truth.

Historic Pilgrimage

Many traditional pilgrimages and destination sacred sites have roots in natural formations. As pilgrims traverse a landscape, the land begins to respond to the pilgrims. Large formations such as mountains may be big enough to absorb human visitors and retain their distinctiveness, thereby preserving the very essence that attracted pilgrimage in the first place. Other locations may succumb to over-popularity and become touristy, overrun and ruined for serious seekers.

Historic routes draw with centuries of power and promise. One cannot help but feel a tingle of excitement to walk the Sacred Way at Delphi, to follow in St Paul's steps through Ephesus or to join an unbroken stream of pilgrims past, present and future along the paths threading across Europe. The exploding popularity of the Camino de Santiago through Spain is redefining modern pilgrimage. This external motivation for pilgrimage draws people who need to join something bigger than themselves. Often religious-based, popular pilgrimage destinations are very willing to supply visitors with trinkets and mementos. I've seen displays of hundreds of empty bottles in dozens of sizes and shapes strategically placed along the path to a sacred spring. I may have even purchased a few to carry home the power-infused water personally collected. Lesley Harman's discussion of the feminist perspective of pilgrimage particularly resonates with my own. The element of water has long been associated with cleansing and healing. Lesley's stories of women's quest for home on the St. Lawrence River were powerfully transformative. The continuity of a personal connection to place, renewed with annual journeys, is an ancient practice.

To journey through historic landscape brings the past alive. Visiting the actual locations where important people walked and notable events occurred inserts us in their narrative. We can imagine their personal heroism or tragedy, visualizing how specific people and events formed the present, whether traveling a saint's path to salvation or the last steps of the condemned. Pilgrimage through historically rich landscapes strengthens relationships to tradition, tribe and humanity's collective story.

Pilgrims journey for all manner of reasons. Some travel to remember, some travel to forget. Others journey to never forget, retracing the grim routes of mass death marches so injustice will never happen again. Some journey to reconnect with their interrupted heritage or to claim a real, or imagined, birthright. They travel for their elders and bring their children. They walk as witnesses, to understand, teach, memorialize, and bring closure.

Pilgrims often carry a secret quest. They may be on a personal mission to fulfil a promise to themselves, a loved one, their tribe. They may be carrying survivors' guilt and long for forgiveness and peace. They may emulate a hero to draw courage

for an important decision, or the strength to face another day. At the heart, pilgrims seek themselves. The path of the artist is to depict the details of one's individual life in a way that informs the universal and relates beyond the personal. Inventing creative solutions to life's challenges is important work to be shared. A returned pilgrim shares traveler's tales while resettling into a new sense of home.

Pilgrims Shape the Land: An Iona Pilgrimage

Places where religious figures lived often inspire devotional communities and attract pilgrims long after the historic person is dead. The remote island of Iona in western Scotland has been a pilgrimage destination for almost 1500 years. Lying low off the south-west coast of the island of Mull in the Inner Hebrides, Iona is only 1.5 miles (2.4 km) wide by 3 miles (4.8 km) long. Most of the land is ancient stone, some of the oldest exposed rock on earth. The Atlantic Ocean pounds its beaches and coves while weather passes right over to be snagged by the mountains of neighbouring Mull. It is a remote place, 530 miles (853 km) north of London, that requires serious commitment and two ferry crossings to visit. There are limited services, one main hotel and travel by foot upon arrival. The main attraction, besides the land itself, is the Abbey. Over 130,000 people visit each year, most just for the day. However brief the visit, travellers are transformed into pilgrims and depart the island feeling deep peace. It is a remarkable place, what the Celts called a 'thin' place, where worlds mingle, limits drop away and time seems to expand beyond normal perception.

Iona successfully blends the nature awareness of ancient Celtic spirituality with early Christianity. Perhaps the remoteness of the location has protected it from too much tourism. The constant presence of elemental force is incontrovertible. The sound of the sea and continually changing weather demand attention. References to St Columba, Iona's patron saint, abound.

Celtic spirituality honours equally the visible and the invisible. The material and the spiritual intertwine in human experience and the divine is understood as manifest everywhere in everything. It is a gentle way to view the world. Modern Celtic spirituality mystic John O'Donohue wrote often in his teachings and poetry that beauty is the illumination of the soul (2008), a gentle but urgent call to awaken, to open our eyes, hearts and minds to the wonder of our own life. Putting attention on beauty is a powerful way to shape the world one sees and paying attention to beauty thereby beautifies the mind and consequently the world.

How one looks at the world shapes what one sees. Personal cognizance is the most powerful force in shaping one's life. Pilgrimage shakes us up, both amplifying our habitual conclusions while challenging tightly held belief patterns. Pilgrimage is the act of fundamentally reinventing oneself by rediscovering who one really is in one's most private heart of hearts.

The ancient Celts believed that nature is the direct expression of the divine imagination. It is alive and living all the time in the embrace of its own unity. Connecting to the elemental can be a way of coming into rhythm with the universe.

Surrounded by Nature we come to remember the wisdom of our own inner nature. This outer presence, through memory or imagination, can be brought inward to become a sustaining thing.

The landscape of Iona is a gentle balance of elements. Hard rock emerges from soft earth. Lambs frolic in fields of wildflowers as seabirds soar overhead. The sea is always visible, bright currents and moody depths mingling in shifting shades of azure, cyan, cobalt, indigo, sapphire, beryl and ultramarine. The sky is also capricious as puffy white clouds zip overhead chased by sudden downpours and sudden rainbows. To walk Iona is to walk in the weather, experiencing rapidly changing conditions as if all the seasons were trying to happen at the same time. Pilgrimage to Iona requires traveling on nature's terms, with passage determined by tides and weather. Once there, the route to the Abbey is powered by one's own feet, following the ancient pilgrimage trail through the Nunnery ruins and past the medieval high crosses to enter the quiet sanctuary of stone cloisters and the church itself. Walking on Iona, nature influences and blesses every step.

Iona is considered the cradle of Christianity in Scotland. A church was founded there in AD 563 by St Columba. Arriving from Ireland, Columba and his followers had fled their homeland after a fierce battle over their right to copy and keep manuscripts for their own library. They carried their illuminated manuscripts away, finishing the Book of Kells on Iona and continuing across Scotland to found Lindisfarne and produce the Lindisfarne Gospels. The distinctive Iona and Irish/Celtic knotwork design of a cross in a circle represents early Christian ideals of spirituality, continuity, connectedness and eternity on earth.

The present Iona Abbey sits on the site of Columba's original 6th-century monastic huts. In the centuries following Columba, the settlement survived waves of Viking attacks. Around AD 1200 a Benedictine monastery and Augustinian nunnery were established by the King of the Isles. Both were important places of worship and pilgrimage for several hundred years. During the 1560 Reformation, Charles I reintroduced bishops to the Scottish Christian Church, making Iona the seat of the Bishop of the Isles. The Bishops were abolished by the end of the 17th-century and Iona fell quiet until 1938 when the Iona Cathedral Trust and the Iona Community undertook repairs to restore the Abbey to a working church. The organization Historic Scotland now manages the Iona properties for modern pilgrims, retreatants and casual visitors.

Circumambulation Pilgrimage of Iona

The UK-based Sacred Space Foundation organizes week-long pilgrimage retreats on Iona. A highlight of the programme is a contemplative circumambulation of the island. It takes most of a day to walk around the entire island, stopping at waypoints attributed to St Columba and subsequent followers. Moving through a landscape rich in pilgrimage associations, we draw from a deep well of historic records and local folklore. Our modern hunger is fed by blending personal experience with the historic route. The outer landscape influences the inner landscape.

From the first call to the idea of Iona to the first step off the ferry, the Iona journey permeates thoughts and actions. Pilgrims understand that the journey begins with the call, and the affirmative response of ‘yes’. Reality seems to morph around our decision to undertake a transformative adventure. Increasing coincidences and synchronicities demand acknowledgment as we prepare. What we are pulled towards also seems to pull us towards it, and the unmistakable gravity of the pilgrimage process is well underway by the time we actually arrive at distant shores. Getting to Iona is always an adventure itself. Once on the island and settled into a hotel, the work deepens.

For its 20th anniversary in 2015, the Sacred Space Foundation booked the main hotel on Iona and invited its Companions for a week-long retreat around the summer solstice. I had the privilege to be invited as both a labyrinth presenter and pilgrim participant. The highlight, as always, was the day-long circumambulation of the island. Stephen Wright, Director of the Sacred Space Foundation, has identified 13 waypoints which we have used over the years to deepen our connection to Iona’s history and landscape.

We begin where we are, the sunroom lounge of the Columba Hotel where we hold all our gatherings. This morning we are bundled and burdened for a day of hiking that will range between sunny and rainy, dry and soggy, warm and chilly. Someone reads poems of beginnings and anticipation, cultivating a gentle expectation of purposeful journey. We pause in silence to fix our intention before filing out the door and up the steps from the hotel gardens to the ancient medieval lane connecting the Abbey and the Nunnery with the harbour. We’re treading the ancient *Sràid nan Marbh*, the Street of the Dead, and the 15th-century medieval track marked by MacLean’s High Cross.

The lane hugs a low rock outcropping before opening into a flat meadow, the site of the medieval nunnery ruins and our first waypoint stop. Holding the gate for each other as we enter the stone-walled enclosure, we step with respectful approach. Established around AD 1200 with the Benedictine Abbey, the Augustinian nunnery ruins are among the best preserved in Britain. The first prioress was sister to the founding abbot of the Benedictine monastery, and we cluster in a quiet corner of the cloister gardens to contemplate the balance of opposites: sister and brother, female and male. The final resting ground for centuries of women, the nunnery ruins are a particularly tranquil place and the favourite of many visitors. We linger in the peaceful atmosphere before processing out past guardian gargoyles and a weathered *Sheela Na Gig*, a nakedly brazen pre-Christian fertility female, high in the outer protective wall. The road becomes steep as it leads down to the ferry landing and tiny harbour village of *Baile Mòr*.

Turning south along the coast past the few shops, we gather around our second waypoint, the memorial cross at Martyrs Bay. The Bay was named for the monks lost in Viking raids in the 9th-century but the modern cross is engraved with the names of local boys who left for the two World Wars and never returned. We think about death and letting go of loved ones. The sun weaves blue hues in the channel

water around the dark shapes of the Torran Rocks to the south. Distant islands, Colonsay and Islay are laced with swaying sea foam. This was the departing view for those leaving Iona. They would have sailed up Loch Linnhe past the Eilean Musdile Lighthouse built by Robert Stevenson in 1833. I spotted a prehistoric standing stone on the high point above the modern lighthouse when our ferry from the mainland passed there earlier. Here at Martyrs Bay an old weathered bench faces the cross for those who waited. The narrow beach is black rock covered in bright green seaweed and *Trivia* shells, those small sea snails known locally as cowries. This is the only shell beach on Iona, and I've explored the beach drift and collected tiny sea treasures on other sunny mornings. Today, clouded by memories of the losses of war, we turn away from the shore and solemnly continue along the track past the last cottages to turn inland between fields carpeted in wild yellow buttercups.

Halfway across the island is a crossroads between the farms, our third stop. Between the bleating of lambs, we think of choice points and decisions that change the course of one's life. A bit further along the farm track is our fourth waypoint, a rounded mound called the Hill of the Angels, with a clear view of the western ocean. It is said that St Columba often sat here in prayer surrounded by angels, with his monks nearby straining to hear the angelic messages. Columba's evening prayer practice was to watch the great light of the sun descend into the Atlantic. Sunset and sunrise, the portals between night and day, are ancient times of observance and prayer. Columba's Hill of the Angels is also known as Sithean Mòr, a fairy hill in the Glen of the Fairies. Folklorists associate this knoll with both pagan and Christian rituals, another blend of ancient elemental beliefs grounded in the landscape woven with centuries of supernatural reports of otherworldly messengers of light. Invited to listen for our personal angels, we open our hearts to whispered messages.

At the end of the track we reach the Machair, a dune grassland characteristic of Western Scottish islands. This windswept western side of the island was cleared in prehistoric times and enriched by farmers over the centuries with shells and kelp. The resulting common grazing land is a fertile range for livestock, birds and rare wildflowers. This being Scotland, the Machair also hosts the island's 18-hole golf course. We sit and rest, marvelling at the dramatic changes in landscape as sea spray and sand blow into our snacks. Some among us are spent and will be driven back to the hotel while the rest continue beyond the lane into rough terrain. We hug and smile our farewells, contemplating partings and separations at our fifth stop.

Hiking south across the Machair, our diminished group stretches out along the grassy coast bordering the Bay at the Back of the Ocean. Due west is icy Labrador, but here the Gulf Stream warms the waters of Britain. Serious walking has begun as we climb the marshy plain towards the south shore. Stepping over the remains of ancient strip farming ridges, we wait for each other at the top of a steep, rocky crevice. High above the sea is a surprise pond, Loch Stanoig, the water supply for the island before a pipeline was laid from Mull in the 1980s. Our sixth waypoint is

here beside the Tarn. Gazing into the lake we ponder the unseen depth of feelings and the steadfast nourishment of simple water.

Excitement grows as we crest the last climb before the decent into St Columba's Bay, believed to be the place where Columba and his followers landed from Ireland in AD 563. Sent into exile after causing a war over the ownership of copied manuscripts, Columba had vowed to sail with his monks in small light coracle boats until they could no longer look back and see Ireland. The hill in the bay is known as the Hill of the Back to Ireland, where Columba confirmed Ireland was no longer visible. Satisfied that they had travelled far enough, they crossed to the leeward side of the island to settle their community. Since we began at the Columba Hotel this morning, arriving at the bay seems a full circle, a renewed beginning and celebration of finding a new home.

Here at the edge of the world, we stand where sky meets water, drawing deep breaths of fresh sea mist and give thanks for the gifts of this day of walking pilgrimage. The shore is an astonishing riot of multicoloured pebbles, every colour of mineral moulded together in the wave-polished beach stones. Particularly striking is the green and white Iona marble, sometimes called Mermaid's Tears, so named for the legend of unrequited love between a mermaid and a monk who could never meet nor live in each other's world. Among the many stories of the special properties of Iona stones is one that claims if you carry a stone from Columba's Bay in your pocket you will never die by drowning, forever protected by the promise of the mermaid's gift. The stones visually hold paradox and duality, hope and gratitude in solid form.

Pausing at the seventh waypoint I suggest we each select three specific stones, one to keep, one to cast and one to place in gratitude. The first stone is to take home. The second is to be thrown into the sea containing everything ready to be released. The third stone is to be carried and placed somewhere on the island in thanks for one's pilgrimage sojourn. An optional fourth stone may be collected here at the lowest place of the island to be carried to the top of Dun I, the highest point on Iona. We spread out along the beach, filling stone-gathering pouches with precious coloured gifts for ourselves, our friends and family.

Iona stones have a powerful draw. Nearly everyone who hears a pilgrim is crossing to Iona requests a stone memento. Waves swish and clank stones about the shallows as we select our special stones, bright colours brought alive with translucence when wet. The beach is covered with organized rock designs, arranged by previous pilgrims, which draw our eyes and feet. A seven-circuit labyrinth has been joined by spirals and circles. Our group adds and rearranges stones in the impromptu grooming of people everywhere meeting stacked stones. As it starts to rain, we turn our back on the bay and begin the second half of our day-long trek.

After lunch at the Machair and the departure of a few more companions, the remaining dozen turn into the stinging rain and trudge north through the peat bog. Our eighth waypoint is a medieval hermitage, a low stone enclosure on the wild

north end of the island. There are no trails here, just the deceptive bog that meets each step with a gamble of solid ground or ankle deep water. We try to guide each other's steps until everyone is stuck in the muck and shaking with cold and laughter. Wet from top to bottom, we wonder what drove monks to isolate themselves and choose to live outside community in the harsh open elements. After climbing several stiles we arrive at the hermitage. Sitting in soaked silence we think on community and solitude. Someone passes around chocolate and we gratefully accept.

Rain blinds us as we seek a way up Dun I, the highest point of the island. Huddled against the driving rain at the bottom of the rocky hill, the ninth waypoint's theme of challenges is painfully present. We feel lost in the mist. Cold, wet, tired and miserable, we cannot go back, only forward. And forward is straight up the back of a 333-foot (100 m) rock mountain with no path. People set off in various directions, seeing how far they can get. Tall men go one way while short women choose another. We scramble and seem to have stopped helping each other. It is as if we have become solitary hermits, attention reduced to finding the next foot perch and handhold. The rain subsides to drizzle as each finds their way up the vertical wall. Someone calls out for us to follow as they pull themselves over the last ledge to the summit. Then we are all at the top, circled around the cairn, the tenth waypoint. The sun reappears and, before we catch our breath, we are whooping in celebration, exuberant in our achievement. We throw back rain hoods to take in the panoramic view. Islands shimmer in the sea, and we call them out, the Treshnish Isles, Tiree, Coll, Skye, even Staffa with Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave*. We can see Iona's beaches, the White Strand of the Monks in the north, Martyrs Bay, Columba's Bay, the Bay at the Back of the Ocean and the Machair. The Abbey sits nestled below and we gaze in longing at the promise of the end of our journey and a hot cup of tea. We each place a stone carried from St Columba's Bay on the summit cairn and pose for photos with smiles as big as if we've climbed Mt. Everest. Our individual limit of what is possible has expanded and trampled down the edges of impossible.



Image 3: Labyrinth Walking near Iona Abbey, Isle of Iona, Scotland
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Just off the summit is our eleventh waypoint, the Well of Eternal Youth. Reputed to have been blessed by 6th-century St Brigid, we all take a little splash before beginning our descent. We almost fly down the mountain, tiredness and wet feet forgotten. Regaining the paved lane, we pass the Duke of Argyll's High Cross. Our next and twelfth waypoint is the high cross of St Martin in the Abbey green, where it has welcomed weary pilgrims for almost 13 centuries. Rejoined by our entire company, we encircle the 8th-century stone cross in the ancient tradition of dancing sunwise around a revered object. The Sacred Space Foundation director Stephen Wright welcomes us all back, weaving celebratory poems of nature and scripture into our thanksgiving reunion. St John's High Cross, a restored replica of the 8th-century cross now in the Abbey museum, casts its distinctive circle and cross shadow onto St Columba's shrine. In AD 597 Columba was buried just to the left of the Abbey's entrance, and his relics enshrined in the 700s.

Our company turns into the ancient cobbled track of the Street of the Dead, leading from St Columba's shrine to Reilig Odhrain, St Oran's burial ground. In use since at least the 8th-century, the cemetery is a legendary burial place of Scottish kings and powerful clan chieftains: kings from Ireland, Norway and France; kings of the Picts; and kings of Scotland, including Macbeth. The 12th-century chapel is the oldest standing ecclesiastical building on Iona. Inside St Oran's Chapel, the Sacred Space Foundation co-director Jean Sayre-Adams reads

T.S. Eliot's words to welcome us home. 'We shall arrive where we started and know the place for the first time' (Eliot, 1971). Our 13th and final waypoint is a chapel in a cemetery. The place in which everyone living eventually ends is a burial ground. The conclusion of life's journey, our own individual pilgrimage, ends in death: a return to earth, the final resting home. In the quiet shelter of the stone chapel we meditate on earthly and eternal home.

Back in the warm hotel lounge with clean dry clothes, we show each other our precious stones, drink tea and raise several toasts to a good Iona pilgrimage. We marvel that the summer solstice sun still illuminates the landscape as if time has stretched and gifted us extra days this week. We have installed a portable labyrinth on the hotel grounds and use it to contemplate, integrate and deepen this amazing journey. We join services at the Abbey, held twice daily at 9 a.m. and 9 p.m., retracing our steps along the medieval lane, joining a long procession of Iona pilgrims attracted by the legends of Columba and the unique topography of this remote place. We answered the call to pilgrimage. The landscape of Iona is now a part of us, and we are forever a part of Iona's landscape.

Conclusion

An awakened pilgrim notices the blurring between the boundaries of invited adventure and unanticipated takeover of expected experience. Surprise is often the catalyst for greatest growth. Opportunity for non-habitual reaction is created when the familiar disappears. Pilgrims place themselves deliberately in the stream of new possibilities, venturing into unknown physical and social situations that demand invention of fresh responses.

Pilgrimage magnifies habitual responses to life's stress. Answering the call to pilgrimage sets in motion the unpredictable. Pilgrimage challenges the normal while providing opportunities to notice and act with awareness. Words like gratitude, love, hope and God seem to require expanded redefinition. Sometimes pilgrimage delivers our imagined delightful journey. Sometimes pilgrimage presents an entirely different, unexpected adventure. Always we are dared to leave home, to walk a blind meandering path, to twist back on ourselves before reaching the centre, while building resilience and recovery. Carrying duality and paradox, we enlarge what we believe to be our personal possible, treading the labyrinth path while holding the pattern in mind, struggling to not lose our heart as we forge our soul. And in the centre we rediscover grace, and know home for the first time.

Pilgrimage reminds us that each of us is the artist of our days. Pilgrimage quickens our integrity and awareness, facilitating originality and creativity. And at the end of our exploring, we return home, carrying each step as a sacred gift. The aliveness of connecting with nature on Mount Tamalpais, the achievement of circumambulating Columba's Iona and the gifts of inner pilgrimage walking the labyrinth path unite to awaken the sleeping traveler into a fully alive pilgrim.

We are called to the journey. The land shapes the pilgrim and the pilgrim shapes the land. Through pilgrimage, we circle the centre and find our way home.

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