

A LIFE OF PILGRIMAGE

A Reflection by Dean Scotty McLennan
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Stanford Memorial Church
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Many of you here today have taken a pilgrimage back to your alma mater, Stanford University. My Webster's dictionary defines pilgrimage both as a journey to a shrine or holy place and as the course of life on earth.ⁱ The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion emphasizes that the focus of pilgrimage is open, rather than intending a permanent change of status. Unlike certain other religious rituals, the expectation of resolving issues in a permanent way is not a characteristic of this kind of religious journey.ⁱⁱ

University reunions are wonderful because they mark both return and renewal. We come back nostalgically to a place where we used to live, and which was formative in who we are, but we come back changed, and find the place itself changed, along with our classmates. Reunions become markers in our life's journey -- markers of that which we value deeply as well as markers of transformation. And a service of remembrance like this also helps us mark and honor those traveling companions who are no longer with us, at least on this side of what many religious people would call the divide between mortality and immortality.

During college I traveled to India and lived with a Brahmin priest in order to learn about the Hindu religious tradition. One of the strong images which I carried away and which continues to influence me today is that of life as a journey up a spiritual mountain. The priest emphasized two points in this image: the importance of getting on a path with others, rather than bushwhacking alone, if I wanted to make progress, and the importance of understanding that the

flora and fauna will naturally change as I reached higher altitudes on the mountain. He and his tradition affirmed that there are a number of different paths -- different world religions -- which lead to the top of the mountain. Yet it's important for each person to be on a particular path, with travelling companions, in order to make real headway. His path happened to be Hindu. He also explained that as one spirals upward around the mountain -- periodically returning 360 degrees to the same view -- the view will in fact have changed. Being higher on the mountain means a different vantage point, even when looking in exactly the same direction.

Seeing our lives as a journey up the spiritual mountain, including those of you who might say you're spiritual but not religious, has several advantages then. Whether or not any of us ever reach the top -- and perhaps none of us do until after our physical death -- being on a pilgrimage gives our lives a positive sense of meaning and purpose, even if it can't be fully apprehended at any particular point. Being on a pilgrimage brings with it a strong sense of camaraderie with those with whom we've spent some walking time, even if we see them only periodically. If we lose companions permanently, it becomes important to mark their passing and to keep their memory with us as we proceed. Being on a pilgrimage also means that we shouldn't fear change, for it will be a constant, and through it we will grow and develop. Our new visions, as they're shared, will deepen our camaraderie with our traveling companions as well.

Welcome back to Stanford, those of you who are alumni. May you, in the words of the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, experience the miracle of walking on the green Earth in the present moment, appreciating the peace and beauty that are available now. May you also remember and honor those who have walked with you in the past, but are no longer here. And may all of us see our lives as pilgrimage -- a blessed cycle of journeying, homecoming and

renewal.

i. "Pilgrimage" as defined in Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1997), Tenth Edition, p. 882.

ii. "Pilgrimage" as defined in Jonathan Z. Smith, The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 841.