

A Life of Pilgrimage

A reflection for Alumni Weekend

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Five years ago I had the unusual opportunity to travel to the tiny island of Iona off the West Coast of Scotland. Iona has a significant place in the early history of Christianity in Britain and Ireland, because it is known to be the place where St. Columba and his band of followers came to bring the light of Christ in the 6th century. For this reason, through the centuries Iona has become and continues to be a very popular destination for those on a pilgrimage—as Scotty defined as a journey to a holy place or shrine.

The Celts—as people like St. Columba and his band of followers—saw pilgrimage as an experience in search of the edges of life, where God, the Holy, might be more deeply known. Indeed, they saw all of life as a pilgrimage toward that place that sense of home in the Divine. The journey itself would tell them more about who they were. They traveled in small boats called coracles that had sails but no rudders and believed that God accompanied them and would direct them through the winds and tides. Can you imagine? Most of us would agree that our present world is intensely mapped and we would not consider setting out in rudderless boats. But the question for us remains—what forms of journey can we take in our own lives? Are there specific ways we can let go of the illusion of being in control and practice a sense of trust and abandonment on our spiritual path? Is pilgrimage more about traveling with the intentionality of being met by something beyond or greater than us?

One of the most compelling insights from that pilgrimage to Iona that remains to be quite instructive for me and I suspect the companions I had on that journey, which included two adults and 11 lively, energetic teenagers—is that Iona, and many places like it, are described as “thin places.” A “thin place” is a Celtic term for that special place between this world and the other, between one level of consciousness and another, where people search for deeper meaning, presence and wholeness to life.

While it is true that only a few of us, unfortunately, would ever have the opportunity in our lifetime to make a pilgrimage to Iona or travel to India and live with a Brahmin priest—I do believe that there are countless “thin places” that we encounter in the living of our ordinary lives. If indeed pilgrimage is also about our journey as a course of life on earth, then what and where are those thin places along the way? Can we stop long enough to be aware and to pay attention to those moments—that conscious sense of deepened insight, a newfound awareness of clarity to our purpose, an overwhelming sense of peace in the midst of chaos and confusion, a deliberate act of being truly present to someone or something when anxiety seems to be the overarching emotion that fuels our surroundings, or the appearance of the right person at the right time that intervenes in a potentially harmful or challenging situation.

Perhaps for many of you Alumni here this morning, your time at Stanford may have been its own “thin place” in your life—a place where you were called and came—invited to come and meet yourself in a new way—to be “upset,” so to speak, from the ways of the world as you knew them and had grown accustomed to them. I like to think of this very

chapel as a thin place, as we prayed this morning to “Come into this place of peace and let its silence heal your spirit; Come into this place of memory and let its history warm your soul; Come into this place of prophecy and power and let its vision change your heart.”

Let us, dear friends, pay attention and be open to those thin places in our lives. Whether tangible, as in a particular place or location, or intangible, where in each day lies the recognition for the mystery of the journey itself - - that holy longing that inspires us to explore and remain open to discovering new ways of reaching for and sensing that which is greater than and beyond us.