

PILGRIMAGE AND THE MEANING OF LIFE
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
Alumni Weekend, October 7, 2012

I want to echo Patricia's welcome to all alumni who have joined us at University Public Worship this morning at the Stanford Memorial Church. As you know this is a special interfaith service and one that addresses you as members of the living Stanford community but also remembers those who were active among us and are now deceased. The readings from the Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Hindu traditions all speak to the concept of pilgrimage, and I consider all of you as pilgrims visiting this very special site on the face of the earth – Stanford University and this edifice that was designed to be at the very center of the campus.

Webster defines a pilgrimage as an “act of journeying, especially as a devotee seeking a shrine.”^{vi} The American Heritage Dictionary adds, as its second definition, “Any long journey or search, especially one of exalted purpose or moral significance.” Far beyond Stanford, that could, of course, be describing the story of our life, to the extent we consider it through moral or spiritual lenses. But consider a Stanford alumni weekend experience in relation to this Encyclopedia Britannica explanation of what a Hindu pilgrim does upon reaching his or her sought destination. See if it has any resonance for you as an alumnus or alumna, either when you first arrived on campus in the last few days, or sitting here this morning: He or she “will usually bathe, circumambulate the temple or holy place, make an offering, carry out a rite such as the ceremony performed in honor of dead ancestors, have his name recorded by the priests who specially cater to the needs of pilgrims, and listen to [special] music and religious discourses.” But there have also been pilgrimages, like that written about by Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*, which are full of revelry and debauchery. Which may be some peoples' experience of Stanford

Reunion Homecoming. It's not surprising, then, that pilgrimage, although part of all world religions, has also had its active religious opponents, who accuse pilgrims of placing too much faith in particular places and images, becoming distracted by the temptations of travel, and of seeking purely material blessings rather than spiritual enlightenment.ⁱⁱ

But I think true pilgrimages always help us explore the meaning of life: why are we here, what's our real purpose and aim, how can we find fulfillment, what are we supposed to do and be? I've actually taught a course in the academic curriculum here for a number of years, humbly and modestly titled, "The Meaning of Life." It's subtitled, "Moral and Spiritual Inquiry Through Literature," and we read novels, plays and short stories, asking how their characters struggle with and attempt to answer the great questions of existence. I don't lecture, but I teach Socratically, engaging students in dialogue with each other and with me based both on their reading of the texts and an examination of the texts of their own lives. I just finished teaching an intensive three-week version of the course as part of Sophomore College in September, but I've also taught it to older students in the Masters of Liberal Arts program – to students who for an average of four years attend evening classes after full days of work life outside the university.

One of my MLA students, now in his early sixties, wrote his final paper about his recent experiences on an ancient pilgrimage route from Switzerland across France and across northern Spain to the Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela. Let's call him Jacob, although that's not actually his name, but he happens to be Jewish and not Christian. Some of the sayings he learned about this pilgrimage route, known as the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, are: You start with your feet; you end with your heart. The Camino always surprises. (And) The Camino gives you what you need, not what you want." What Jacob got by the end was a clear recognition of how consumed he had become with success in his career, flying all over the world

for his business and working very hard, but missing his own role in relationships that went astray and amiss, at work and at home. His deep self-reflection over many weeks on the road on what he came to call his prideful animus, led him to see, appreciate, and begin to return what he calls unconditional love, especially with his wife, as the meaning of his life. In particular, he grasped that realization itself doesn't create a meaningful life. One must act out of love in every moment possible to find that meaning.

Last Thursday night I was asked to participate in a dorm program at Ujamaa with Pamay Bassey, a 1993 Stanford graduate who's had a book published this year called "My 52 Weeks of Worship: Lessons from a Global, Spiritual, Interfaith Journey."ⁱⁱⁱ Her pilgrimage also led her to the realization that love – Of God, her fellow human beings, her family, and her friends – is what provides a firm anchor for her life, after she'd been buffeted by the death of her grandmother and her father and the end of her relationship with her fiancé, all in the same year. In her case, although she never questioned her personal commitment to Christianity, she journeyed through worship experiences with Buddhist, Baha'i, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Wiccan, Zoroastrian, and a host of other traditions, including many different kinds of Christian churches, with this result: "I faced my grief and pain head on...[Now] I see evidence of goodness and divinity all around me. Healing came through my journey."^{iv}

Important to our gathering today also in memory of so many of our Stanford companions who have died, Pamay Bassey speaks of how important remembrance was to her throughout her pilgrimage -- how deep emotional experience of her losses and the love that had been there for her, at least for a time, led her to find new kinds of connections, heal, and ultimately experience personal transformation.) By meeting as many people as she could who believed that they were moving closer to God, however differently they defined God, and were becoming more of who

they were born to be, and were gaining strength to deal with whatever hand life had dealt them – good, bad, or ugly, Pamay found how deeply inspired she was by the interconnectedness of all spiritual pursuits.^v “One of the great gifts of my 52-week journey,” she writes, was the development of this spirit of openness within me.”^{vi} Through that openness, she found an entirely new way of experiencing love and then acting upon it reciprocally with others.

“Walking along the Camino [pilgrimage route]”, wrote Jacob, “it seems like you’re always climbing a hill.” He often came to think poignantly of losses in his life: “I reflect on my father[’s death], with many issues between him and me unresolved, on my wife’s father whom she loved dearly, and on her mother who passed after a long illness for which my wife was a long-distance caregiver, and how much that passing weighed on her. I think of the day when we learned that something we thought might require her to undergo a significantly invasive procedure turned out to be nothing at all. That was my traumatic event, the event that got me to reflect on my life, though it took this walk and this meditation for the reflection to occur... The Camino has a way of changing people... I [now] recognize how I had become prideful through my work and how that made me feel set apart from others. I feel my life has been empty of community: I have only a few friends; I belong to no congregation. I met and enjoyed the company of many people on pilgrimage: writer, businessman, construction worker, housewife, some simply on a hike, one having made a vow... It is easy to make the statement that love is important for a meaningful life, but it is difficult to believe it at the core of your being... My physical pilgrimage enabled the spiritual one... [But] recognition [alone] is not sufficient. One must act on the products of self-reflection... to live a meaningful life.”

“Our true home is in the present moment,”^{vii} teaches Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh... Peace is all around us... Once we learn to touch this peace, we will be healed and transformed.

It is not a matter of faith; it is a matter of practice.”

“For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land,” teaches Moses. “You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God by failing to keep his commandments.”

“Proclaim among all the Pilgrimage,” it is written in the Qur’an, “and they shall come unto thee on foot and upon every lean beast... that they may witness things profitable to them... Let them finish with their self-neglect.”

“Therefore I tell you,” teaches Jesus, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?”

“I traveled the old road every day,” writes Hindu poet Tagore. “One morning...suddenly there was a tremor in the air, and the sky seemed to kiss me on my forehead. My mind started up like the morning out of mist... My everyday wisdom was ashamed... It was the best luck of my life that I lost my path that morning, and found my eternal childhood.”

May we never forget the impetus for pilgrimage. May we so reflect on our lives on the road that we may find them transformed in compassion and love for other people, for the earth itself, and for God, by whatever name we use for our ultimate concern and the ground of our being. And may we find our way home again, in life and in death, for how amiable are thy dwellings, thou Lord of Hosts... our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.^{viii}

Amen.

NOTES

ⁱ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1961), p. 639.

ⁱⁱ "Pilgrimage" at

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/460445/pilgrimage/274973/Pilgrimage-and-the-world>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ekpedeme "Pamay" M. Basse, *My 52 Weeks of Worship: Lessons from a Global, Spiritual, Interfaith Journey* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2012).

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 367.

^v *Ibid.*, pp. 98, 158.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 342.

^{vii} See the order of service for today's University Public Worship for the full text of the following five readings.

^{viii} See the words of the anthem by Ralph Vaughan Williams, "O How Amiable" (1934).