

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Pilgrims and tourists

“The art of travel is the art of seeing what is sacred.” That’s what Phil Cousineau claims in his intriguing book *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker’s Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (Conari Press, 1998). Cousineau writes about a kind of journey that travelers have made for centuries. It’s usually a physical journey, but it’s also a spiritual journey and one that pictures the journey of life.



“I believe in pilgrimage as a powerful metaphor,” Cousineau explains, “for any journey with the purpose of finding something that matters deeply to the traveler.” Reading Cousineau’s book and traveling a lot during the past several months has made me think about how my travels compare to pilgrimages.

Finding what reveals God

A trip last fall took me to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, in Spain. It has been a goal of pilgrims for centuries because of a legend saying that the body of James (Santiago, in Spanish), one of Jesus’s disciples, miraculously emerged from the sea and was buried there.



I went to Santiago not as a pilgrim but as a tourist, the way I go on most trips. I go looking for things that matter to me—nature’s beauty, mainly, and the works of uniquely creative people—but usually not for God, who matters most of all. Some of what I find reveals God anyway, as did the mass I attended at the cathedral of Santiago, but I rarely find God at places that are famous for being sacred. My searches for what is sacred, and my experiences of finding it, rarely relate to particular physical places.

What about you? What do you consider sacred? Where do you look for it? Where do you find it?

Wise travelers seeking Jesus

An epiphany is an appearance of a god. In the Christian year, Epiphany commemorates the time when the Three Wise Men found the baby Jesus. Today many Christians consider the Three Wise Men part of the Christmas story. In the Christian year, however, Epiphany is January 6 and the weeks after that date are the Epiphany season.



An unfamiliar word for many Christians

For many churchgoers today, “Epiphany” is a meaningless word. I was reminded of that last year when the word “Epiphany” was on my church’s Sunday morning bulletin every Sunday during the weeks of Epiphany. A lifelong church member commented to me that although he’d always heard the word “Epiphany,” he had no idea what it meant.



Later I got another reminder of how unfamiliar it was. I phoned a pastor and he was out. His secretary said, “He’s gone to the Epiphany.” This was a couple of weeks after January 6, so I didn’t think he’d gone to an Epiphany worship service. I considered the possibility of his having gone to some other kind of appearance by God. “Has he gotten a direct message from God saying God is making a public appearance today?” I wondered. “Has the Second Coming happened without my knowing it? Has the ‘rapture’ occurred and left me behind?” I still don’t know where that pastor had gone that day.

Their pilgrimage can picture ours

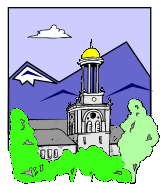
The Three Wise Men get only brief mention in the Bible so we know little about them, but their journey was a pilgrimage. They were looking for God and they found God, in the form of the baby Jesus. They experienced an epiphany.

That’s a good symbol of our spiritual journeys and the journey that we all make through life. At whatever time of the year we think about them, the Three Wise Men can remind us of the journey of every wise person who searches and finds God.



Something sacred waits to be discovered

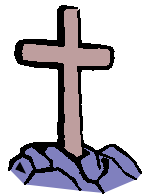
“The deepening of our journeys,” Phil Cousineau says of both spiritual and physical journeys, “begins the moment we begin to ask what is sacred to us.” Here’s how he defines that. “What is sacred is what is worthy of our reverence, what evokes awe and wonder in the human heart, and what when contemplated transforms us utterly.” It’s God. What makes a journey a pilgrimage is looking for evidence of God’s presence and finding it.



Pilgrimage has traditionally meant a transformative journey to a sacred place. For some Christians, that has meant places like Santiago de Compostela, Lourdes, and Assisi. In general, however, a pilgrimage is travel that’s mindful instead of mindless. It’s soulful instead of soulless. “If we truly want to know the secret of soulful travel,” Cousineau finds, “we need to believe that there is something sacred waiting to be discovered in virtually every journey.”

Journeys of risk and renewal

Pilgrimage has another important aspect, too. Says Cousineau, “It is a journey of risk and renewal.” A journey without challenge has no meaning, he finds, and one without purpose has no soul.



Does your journey through life have purpose? Are you traveling in a way that involves risk? Are you looking for what is sacred? In your spiritual journey, do you deliberately expose yourself to new experiences that might bring renewal and reveal God’s presence? Or do you take only the predictable, familiar route that’s comfortable and safe?

The reward can make a risk worth taking

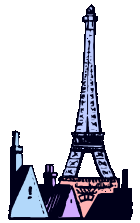
On physical journeys I try to avoid risk and discomfort. I prefer places that, like home, are clean, air-conditioned, relatively well maintained, and free of constantly clamoring souvenir-sellers. I often prefer to see scenery through car, bus, or train windows instead of by getting out into it. I prefer sticking with roads that are on the map, too.



Before I start out, I want to

know where I can expect to end up, and how long getting there is likely to take.

I realize, however, that some of my memorable travel experiences have come only because I did something that felt risky. I remember going to a mathematics museum in Paris when I was a college student majoring in math. Seeing original manuscripts of the famous mathematicians whose work I’d previously seen only in textbooks was a powerful experience. To get to the museum, however, I had to go alone by subway and depend on my very meager knowledge of French. That little journey felt very daring to me, and if I hadn’t risked making it I would have missed a rewarding experience.



We miss paths that God wants us to travel

Some of us stick to the familiar route by focusing only on Bible verses that confirm what we already believe about God, instead of considering others that might show us more of God. We look only at scriptures that comfort us, and avoid those that challenge us. We refuse to try ways of praying and worshipping that have been widely used throughout Christian history but aren’t familiar to us. By limiting ourselves to what is familiar, we may miss paths on which God wants to lead us.



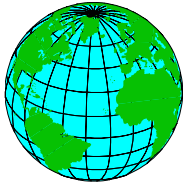
... by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light ...
—Isaiah 42:16

Physical risks and spiritual risks

I’m much more willing to take risks on the spiritual journey than on physical ones. In the realm of ideas, beliefs, and religious experience I don’t mind exploring unfamiliar territory or being temporarily uncomfortable. In fact, I find that kind of exploration helpful.



I see, however, that unlike me many other people like to explore unknown roads in the physical world, and they like active involvement more than mere sightseeing, but they avoid spiritual exploration. On the spiritual journey they want to stick with what’s familiar and predictable. They don’t even want to consider new information about the Bible or Christian history, or new ways of understanding God.



Which of these is your way of traveling? On your spiritual journey are you missing rich rewards by not venturing into territory that's foreign to you? Does not knowing traditional religious language keep you from exploring? Or do you rely on maps like the Bible and the writings of other Christians, and go bravely forward? Even when you feel temporarily lost, you can usually get help from knowledgeable people along your route. The reward is often worth the risk.

Why travel without seeing what's there?

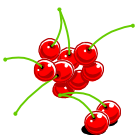
I'm amazed by travelers who ignore the main features of the places they travel to. Traveling on ships I've been astonished by how many people never get off in the ports the ship stops at, or if they get off, it's only to do things they could have done at home. That's how some of us treat religious practices, too. We may be surrounded by some that could be helpful for our spiritual journey, but we avoid trying them or even learning what value their adherents see in them.



Many churches tend to offer only the most familiar religious practices, too. That makes the spiritual journey resemble an experience my family once had on a car trip in the northwestern U.S. We kept passing cherry orchards and cherry-juice canneries,

but when we asked for cherry juice at breakfast in a local restaurant, the waitress looked at us in astonishment. The only available juice was orange juice.

On your spiritual journey, are you like the travelers who ignore what the places they visit have to offer? Are you feeding yourself only the spiritual equivalent of orange



juice, instead of sampling the variety of spiritual foods that the Christian tradition includes? If so, you may be missing experiences that would nourish your faith and reveal God to you more fully.

Finding our ancestors

We often think of pilgrimages as travels to places where a religious leader was born or experienced God in a striking way, or where healings have reportedly happened through the influence of a holy person. Phil Cousineau, however, reminds his readers of the many travelers who make what amounts to a pilgrimage to trace their ancestry. They may look for legal records, gravestones, and other evidence of who their ancestors were and what kind of life they lived, or they may find distant relatives.

Some travels take us where our spiritual ancestors rather than our biological ones lived. I remember how inspiring it was to be at the site of Ephesus and other places in Greece and Turkey where the apostle Paul preached and started churches.



Seeing those sites made parts of the Bible come alive. Seeing where Martin Luther supposedly put his ninety-five theses on the church door in Wittenburg was an inspiring experience too.

Have you gotten acquainted with your spiritual ancestry? Traveling to other countries isn't the only way. Reading and talking with other Christians about people who have taken brave steps in response to God's call will show you some spiritual ancestors.

Venturing off the spiritual tour bus

Staying only a short time in a place, or being limited to where a tour bus takes you and what a tour guide tells you, can give a false picture or at least an

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

incomplete one. That's true of spiritual travel, too. Staying on the "tour bus" of familiar church practices shows us some of the spiritual landscape, but it may keep us from finding our best route to God.

... the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

—Matthew 7:13-14

Age doesn't limit the spiritual journey

I've gotten more fearful about travel as I've gotten older, yet in my better moments I know that aging doesn't have to keep me from going to new

places. I keep remembering the 94-year-old man who whizzed past me every time I stopped, panting, on the way to the top of the acropolis of each Greek city I visited on a trip last year. I want to be like him on the spiritual journey. Even when it's a rocky, uphill trek, I hope to keep going, plunging ahead to whatever new territory God may call me to investigate.



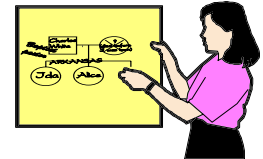
What about you? This beginning of a new year and a new century might be the ideal time for taking some daring new steps.

Barbara

Would you like to share your experience?

Some *Connections* readers have written me about their rewarding experiences using the method of sharing "spiritual family trees" that I described in *Connections* last July and August. If you've tried that method and haven't

told me about your experience with it, I'd like to hear from you. I'm writing a book about using this method, and I might like to include some of your impressions of it. (If you missed those issues of *Connections* and want to see them now, you can get them at www.connectionsonline.org, or let me know and I'll mail them to you.)



The book's coauthor is Larry Easterling, the clergyman who suggested using the method in the Sunday School class he and I were in. Our book, published by The Alban Institute, is due to appear late in 2001. We're writing now, so I need to hear from you right away. If you'll phone me (254-773-2625), fax (254-773-2923), snail-mail (505 Cherokee Drive, Temple TX 76504) or e-mail (BCWendland@aol.com), I'll contact you to ask you some questions and see what you'd be willing to share. Thanks!

