Things I carried with me…

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A good traveller leaves no track.
—Lao Tse, Tao Te Ching

When you forget all your dualistic ideas, everything becomes your teacher, and everything can be the object of worship.
—Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind.

Pilgrimage is a journey, usually of considerable duration, made by a pilgrim to a sacred place. But it’s not just a journey; pilgrimage also involves travellers confronting rituals, holy objects and sacred architecture (Coleman & Elsner, 1995: 6). A critical feature of pilgrimage, for many
religions, is sacred travel outside one’s own culture (Coleman & Elsner, 1995:6), as can be seen in the Latin origin for pilgrim *peregrin-um* “one that comes from foreign parts, a stranger.” And like the Odyssey, pilgrimage is as much about returning home as it is about leaving, returning home with the souvenirs and narratives of the pilgrim’s adventure to and through sacred geographies.

The physical journey through time and space resonates metaphorically with the reasons for undertaking pilgrimage—perhaps a desire for spiritual or physical healing; a rite of passage through a transformation; or a meeting of obligations. Pilgrims return home with objects of the pilgrimage, tokens that reconstruct the narrative of the journey, crucibles for the memory, textual accounts that interpret the experience for others. Sometimes pilgrims go “to a far place to understand a familiar place better” (Victor Turner cited in Coleman & Elsner, 1995: 206).

A classical image of the Western pilgrim is Christian, in John Bunyan’s (1993) *Pilgrim’s progress*, turning away from home to journey into the world with a book and a burden. I’m not a Christian and I didn’t carry the Bible but I began my pilgrimage with burdens, not all in my packsack. Pilgrimage embarks you on a sacred journey where you leave behind the demands of conventional life and experience a “temporary social death” (Turner cited in Coleman & Elsner, 1995: 200-201). To go on a pilgrimage is to leave behind the comforts of everyday life: freshly ground coffee, CBC news every hour on the hour, a street address, an office with a nameplate, a workday shaved into thin slices, and a grocery store just around the corner. A pilgrim walks away from these illusions of permanence, and this absence is only one of the burdens she carries.

Another is fear. On my pilgrimage, I feared my packsack was too heavy so I carried sticks. I feared hunger and thirst so I carried too much food. Just before the walk, my step-dad warned me about a truck driver who’d brutally murdered a woman in Edmonton, and who was still at large. I feared death. I feared being exposed to the stars and the relentless gaze of the video camera. I didn’t know how to walk, how to hold the sticks, how to breathe or what pace to keep. I didn’t know what to do with my eyes. I couldn’t stop talking. I couldn’t remember to wear a bra. I didn’t know how to be a pilgrim, and I didn’t know what a pilgrimage was. Most of all, I feared failure.

A pilgrim burdened fear, the ones she knows and the ones she doesn’t.

But a pilgrim never walks alone, and burdens are only some of what she carries. Classical and popular images of the pilgrim in the West evoke a peaceful, solitary figure—Christian in *Pilgrim’s progress* turning away from home with a book and a burden; Santiago walking to Compestela...
with his staff and his shell, cloaked in a dark cape and a broad-rimmed hat. But a pilgrim never journeys alone.

Pilgrims may travel in groups, such as the rowdy and somewhat motley crew in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury tales*. There were no other pilgrims for me to walk with, but at the last minute, my son decided to make a documentary about Lac Ste. Anne, and by video recording my journey to the pilgrimage site, Che had a potential character for his film. Although in the beginning, I was the pilgrim (and the character), and my son the filmmaker, in the end we made the pilgrimage together. Sometimes we walked side-by-side, sometimes a hundred meters, or even a kilometer apart. We spoke infrequently but sometimes, something about the walking, the presence of my son and his camera, the places we walked on and by, the spots where we stopped to drink and rest and sleep, periodically called me to tell a tale. Che penned my tales with digital video, and in those moments, I was reminded that I was not travelling alone. My son and his camera were my travelling companions, and so were the stories their presence provoked.

Besides their own stories, pilgrims carry with them the narratives of other pilgrims. Leroy Alphonse has made the pilgrimage from his home on the Sampson Reserve to the Lac Ste. Anne pilgrimage—a journey of three days—every summer for ten years. The night before I began my journey, Leroy offered to show me the route that he and his fellow pilgrims had walked. He drove and told stories, with the windows of his old pick-up rolled down, while I scrambled to record road names, signposts, and landmarks, from his stories, on my map. Leroy knew each turn of the road by heart, and every place he’d ever stopped. Each site occasioned a story. He showed me the corner where, just when he wanted to give up, an invisible presence grabbed his T-shirt and dragged him onward. He pointed out farmhouses with vicious dogs, sources of clean drinking water, and groves of poplars that offered shade. Leroy said every year after making the pilgrimage, all of his toenails fell off; and the first year he made the journey, he wept every step of the last four miles. Eventually, I put down my pen and my maps and just listened to Leroy’s stories and felt the hot evening air blow through the truck.

A pilgrim carries questions: Are topography, pilgrimage and ecology merely provocative concepts, part of a discourse, more words in a language game of power and authority? When did I begin to write and talk about what I think is meaningful instead doing what I know is meaningful? Why did I leave my home, the northern lights and the boreal forest, to work in a concrete bunker with recycled air? How do I face children without turning my back on the ancestors? What is my responsibility to the past and how ought I live into the future? Is the land a living Being, with a capital B—my true lover, the one I continue to betray? And what really matters in
A world besieged by war? A pilgrim carries intentions. She makes the pilgrimage for a reason. If she’s Muslim and can afford it, she must make the hajj, travel to Mecca once in her life and circumambulate the Ka’ba (Coleman & Elsner, 1995). When asked, why are you making this pilgrimage, my pat answer has been, “I’m walking for my mother and her memory.” But the truth is I didn’t think a great deal about her when walking. For my mother, the pilgrimage was an opportunity to hold a garage sale; to make a few extra dollars selling crafts, used plastic containers and well-read pocket books; to sit at a card table in her large-brimmed pink straw hat and make small talk with potential buyers. The pink straw hat still sits on a shelf in the family cabin at Lac Ste. Anne. The years she lived on the lake, Mother would tell me stories of the thousands of pilgrims who came, and how they waded into the waters to be blessed and healed. But Mother was an atheist, only recently turned agnostic, and she wouldn’t have used words like blessed or healing or pilgrim. So to say I was walking for my mother is probably not the whole story. Perhaps, I was walking to find out why I was walking, and my mother was kind enough to join me.

Grief is some of what a pilgrim carries. Not just because the dead are gone, but because they’re dead; negotiations have ended; c’est tout fini, kutà in Dogrib, kàkitít in Cree. Gone ahead of us. Left the living behind to carry on.

Pilgrims are known to have visions or dreams, especially at the sacred site. I had my vision before I ever left Lethbridge. Out for a practice walk with my packsack, I glanced to the west and saw a solitary cloud, like a cotton ball, so odd, so alone, suspended in the thin blue heat. At next glance, the cloud began to unfurl around the sun, and a cirrus angel appeared, face prairie radiant, wings filling the western sky, wing tips spread from the northern to the southern horizon. I looked around but there was no one else on the walking path. I looked at the Safeway parking lot, across the highway, to see if anyone else was facing west, arrested on the spot by this vision. But the few shoppers visible were hurrying their carts of groceries across the hot asphalt to their air-conditioned cars. I dropped my walking stick and stumbled into the ditch and fell on my knees. Face down, I squeezed my eyes shut, and waited for the coast to clear. Through the grass, I could hear the cars whizzing by, the mosquitoes buzzing, and the magpies telling stories.

A pilgrim walks with names. I walked with the names I knew—Hobbema, Samson, Louis Bull, Ermineskin, Montana; Pigeon Lake, Ma-Me-O Beach, Four Bands Reserve, Rundell’s Mission; the North Saskatchewan River, Lake Wabumum, Duffield; Alberta Beach and Lac Ste. Anne.

But I also carried with me names I didn’t know. “Say the names,” wrote Al
Purdy. “Say the names.” Mamayiwiw Sakahagan, Mulhurst, Thornsburg, St. Francis Corner, Telfordville; Genessee, Paul Band; Alexis and Manitow Sakahagan, Lake of the Creator, an other, older name for Lac Ste. Anne.

Pilgrims walk with histories—their own, their family’s, those of places along the way, and those of the places they are travelling to.

When James Tootoosis, my daughter’s great uncle, and the oldest living member of the Poundmaker First Nation, tells stories about Lac Ste. Anne, he remembers the buffalo. And he doesn’t call it Lac Ste. Anne. The Cree call this lake, manitow sâkahikan, Lake of the Great Spirit. One night at his kitchen table, James Tootoosis told my daughter about the lake’s name and its famous power. “Once the buffalo herds were so vast, once their hunger and thirst so relentless,” James said, “that they could drink a small prairie lake dry in a single, collective gulp.” But the size and power of manitow sâkahikanhk was such that no matter how many buffalo came, no matter how dry the prairie, or how sparse the rain, the waters of this lake never receded. And as the buffalo knew of the lake’s great power, so did the people. But part of this story has a familiar ending. In the 1870s, the people gather at the lake, and wait, but the buffalo no longer come. By then the Oblate missionaries had translated manitow sâkahigan as “Devil’s Lake” and then it became Lac Ste. Anne.

Stones that fall directly from heaven are venerated around the world, as they are often believed to explain the origin of life. The most widely celebrated meteorite in the world is al hadjar alaswad inside the Ka’ba at Mecca. This famous “black stone” is embedded in a wall about two feet from the ground inside the Ka’ba. An essential ritual of the hajj, or the pilgrimage to Mecca, is to kiss the black stone in emulation of the Prophet Muhammad. Meteorites, such as al hadjar alaswad, fell on the prairie landscape as well, and indigenous peoples revered these stones from the sky no less than today’s followers of Muhammad. One particular meteorite, Canada’s third largest, goes by many names: the English call it the Iron Stone or Iron Creek meteorite (Ronaghan, 1973). The Crees call it papamihaw asinîy (flying rock), manitow asinîy (spirit rock) and Old Man Buffalo Stone. The people of the Blackfoot confederacy are more likely to call the meteorite the “Black Face” stone (Charland, 1994: 87-88) because it is black and holds the image of a face.

Nineteenth century European writers document the indigenous people, the Cree in particular, travelling long distances to the meteorite, not unlike the hajj to Mecca. The rugged old stone was in every sense a living spiritual being who was deeply respected, venerated. Few would pass in the vicinity without making a pilgrimage to the meteorite. The earliest English written reference to the stone is in the journals of the Northwest Company fur
trader and explorer, Alexander Henry. On September 2, 1810, he writes: “This afternoon four Crees with their families arrived from the Sarcee camp on the S. side of the Battle River, at the Iron Stone” (622). Fifty years later, the Methodist missionary to Fort Edmonton, Thomas Woolsey, noted: “When with the Crees last August, I visited the locality renowned for having a large piece of iron there…”

However, the stone was not simply a landmark. Maskipiton, the famous Cree chief—referred to as the Ghandi of the prairies for his commitment to peace—rendezvoused with other Cree bands at the site of the meteorite to hold the annual thirst or sundance. In the summer of 1865, the Methodist minister, Rev. John McDougall, travelled with Maskipiton’s band and recorded the event in his diaries.

By the very next summer, the old stone was gone. A friend of the Methodists hauled the 400-pound iron stone one hundred miles from where it lay on the summit of hill by Iron Creek to the McDougall’s mission. When Sir William Butler toured the “great lone land,” for the Canadian government in 1872, he noted the sacred iron stone laying in the McDougall’s farmyard. He writes:

In the farmyard of the mission-house there lay a curious block of metal of immense weight; it was rugged, deeply indented, and polished on the outer edges of the indentations by the wear and friction of many years. Its history was a curious one. Longer than any man could say, it had laid on the summit of a hill far out in the southern prairies. It had been a medicine-stone of surpassing virtue among the Indians over a vast territory. No tribe or portion of a tribe would pass in the vicinity without paying a visit to this great medicine: it was said to be increasing yearly in weight. Old men remembered having heard old men say that they had once lifted it easily from the ground. Now, no single man could carry it. And it was no wonder that this metallic stone should be a Manito-stone and an object of intense veneration to the Indian; it had come down from heaven; it did not belong to the earth, but had descended out of the sky.

—Butler, 1872:304

Once they realized the missionaries had stolen the stone, the Cree bitterly regretted having shown it to John McDougall the year before. The Cree prophesized deeply sad and dire consequences for the stone’s removal. Sir Butler (1872) wrote:

When the Indians found that [the medicine-stone] had been taken away, they were loud in the expression of their regret. The old medicine men declared that its removal would lead to great misfortunes, and that war, disease, and dearth of buffalo would afflict
In 1870, the buffalo never came but smallpox did. By the end of the summer, over one-half of the indigenous people of Alberta were dead. While the buffalo returned briefly the next summer, by 1876-1877 the buffalo herds were gone forever (Drouin, 1973: 53). Those same years, the Cree and Blackfoot signed Treaties 6 and 7, and the people moved to the reserves. It seems the Cree prophesies—for removing the sacred stone—were fulfilled.

Sir William Butler called the history of this manitow stone “a curious one.” By all accounts, the history becomes curiouser and curiouser. Just as the buffalo disappeared, McDougall shipped the meteorite to Methodist officials in Toronto who later donated it to Victoria College in Cobourg. The iron stone sat in the science building alongside a well-preserved Egyptian mummy. When Victoria College joined the University of Toronto, the meteorite was donated to the Royal Ontario Museum where it sat for almost a century. Eventually the stone was returned to Alberta, where it sits in open public display at the Provincial Museum in Edmonton. The meteoric rock is touched and visited by those on a secular, modern form of pilgrimage, museum visiting. People in the museum are encouraged to touch the old rock, much as visitors are encouraged to touch the moon stone at the Air and Space Centre. These stones, often the revered objects or relics of the museum, puts the visitor in touch with a tangible embodiment of all that the place and time from which it comes might represent. The stone embodies the visitor’s almost mystical relationship with history.

And this relationship may be more mystical than what at first appears. Based on the stories that elders have told him and his archival research, Stanley Knowlton (personal communication, 21 June 2002), the Peigan rock historian, believes that there was more than one meteorite. These stories say that once the indigenous people discovered the missionaries had removed one meteorite, they sought to protect the second such stone by secretly transporting it to Lac Ste. Anne and hiding it in the lake. Thus, in this story, papamihaw asiniy, also called spirit rock, manitow asiniy, now resides in Spirit Lake, manitow sakahikan, Lac Ste. Anne. The land too has stories and sometimes those stories compete with official versions.

Pilgrims travel with histories they don’t know, as well as the ones they do. They travel with their own shadow; and whatever they’ve never taken the time, or had the opportunity, to learn. They walk past places they don’t know and sometimes don’t even notice. They travel to stories they’ve never heard.
I didn’t know that anthropologists consider travel to Graceland, Tennessee or the Royal Ontario Museum, contemporary pilgrimages. I didn’t know that the water I brought home from Lac Ste. Anne—to give to others—was like the gifts brought home from a holiday (or holy day). Or that the rosary bought at the Lac Ste. Anne pilgrimage gift shop was like sending postcards while on vacation, proof of a journey. I didn’t know that the festivities at Lac Ste. Anne are part of the postmodern world where distinctions are blurring, like those between the secular and the sacred, between tourism and pilgrimage. I didn’t know that when the Cree journeyed hundreds of miles to offer their prayers and intentions at the papamihaw asiniiy (Flying Rock, the Iron Creek meteorite) or manitow asiniiy the powerful waters of manitow sákahagan, they were pilgrims, too. That for the Cree there were no postmodern boundaries to be blurred, the secular and the sacred were part of one universe.

When I began this pilgrimage I didn’t know that I loved walking, how simple it is, and how hard it would be. I didn’t know that every step, “every move is a prayer.” I didn’t know that “No matter what road I travel, I’m going home” and that no matter what road I travel I am never alone.

References

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Born in Vancouver BC, Cynthia Chambers spent her early childhood in Edmonton, Alberta. From the age of six until her early twenties, Cynthia lived various communities in the Canadian North. She completed her Bachelor of Education in 1978 at the University of Saskatchewan. With her three young children she returned to the north to work for the Government of the NWT, Department of Education and the Fort Good Hope Dene Community Council as a curriculum developer and Dene language specialist. She and her children moved to Victoria BC in 1983, where Cynthia completed her M.A. in Language Arts and her Ph.D. in Curriculum Studies. In 1989 she joined the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge. She teaches courses in curriculum studies, teacher education and literacy education, supervises graduate students and continues to write autobiographically about various topics including colonization, identity, race, language, marriage, love and death and the relationship of these matters to education.

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