

## Experiencing Pilgrimage

A Sermon by James R. Newby

Text: Psalm 84:1-5

As most of you know by now, I love the words *Pilgrimage* and *Journey* as I discuss my own spirituality or the development of my theology. Pilgrimage and Journey are “Process” words. They are words that are descriptive of a theology and spirituality that is “On the move...” or continuously “Working itself out...” This is why I was attracted to the Scripture Reading this morning from the 84<sup>th</sup> Psalm: “Blessed are those whose strength is in you,” writes the Psalmist, “**who have set their hearts on pilgrimage...**”

My spiritual life has been one of pilgrimage. My “heart” has been set on pilgrimage since before I can remember. With each experience of life through which I have been...With each place that I have lived...With each institution that I have served, I have been on *pilgrimage*, and, I feel, growing spiritually. I believe in a God of *process*, and a life of *process* where each experience remembered is an experience of spiritual growth. And it is only as we *remember*, which means “to gather the memories together,” that we actually can see how God is leading us.

During my tenure as Editor of *Quaker Life Magazine*, my Assistant Editor was Karla Minear. During her time there, she wrote an article, sharing these important words: *“Because life is as full of tragedy as it is of joy and love, our memories will be bittersweet. But there is meaning in each bump and rough spot, each bend in the road. Only when we look back can we see the pattern of sunlight and shadow. When we are in the midst of the dailiness of life we often miss the hand of God painting the landscape. We fail to see the mystical way our lives unfold until later, when we have time to reflect and to remember.”*

Last weekend the Burriss High School Graduating Class of 1967 met in Muncie, Indiana to reunite. I have not seen many of my classmates in 50 years. It was a joyous time of reconnecting....laughing together, and, at times, sharing some tears. The weekend began with a time of sharing with my oldest friend, Dan Mayfield. Dan is a well respected attorney in San Jose, California, but for me he will always be my friend from next door. Dan’s mother, Wathena, was also there. She is now 94 years old, but as sharp as I remember her when I was 10 years old.

As a part of the weekend, my brother and I toured our old neighborhood by car. A few years ago, as a way **to begin** “mining” my own personal mythology, I took a long, slow walk through that old neighborhood. There are special places in everyone’s life where you would like time to stand still. One such place for me is the neighborhood in which I grew up. When I was growing up, I knew every alley,

every yard, every tree, and every fence within a two-mile radius from my front door. I knew which opening in each fence I could pass my bike through, and which yards to avoid because of hostile adults or big dogs. There was a sense of security in knowing all of this. I knew that there was always one area of Muncie, Indiana where my knowledge of the territory provided a safe place. Upon my return not all was the same. As with all of life, the passing of time brings changes:

-The basketball court in Hannaford's driveway was completely overgrown with weeds, and the old basketball goal atop the garage was falling apart. In the early and mid 1960's this was the place to be. Basketball in my neighborhood, as in most Indiana neighborhoods, was always the first choice of sport.

-Our next door neighbors were the Mayfields. As I mentioned earlier, Dan Mayfield was my age, graduating with me in my class at Burris, and was the first one to greet me when we moved to Muncie from Minneapolis in 1958. He has remained a friend for over 50 years!

-The train tracks which ran behind my house were no longer there. It was a spur line of the Nickel Plate Road which went to the Schwartz Paper Company. I never "hopped" that little train, but many of my friends did. It was a dangerous form of excitement. I did put pennies on the track to be squashed by the passing train wheels.

-The blackberry bush by the side of the road is gone. I remember eating blackberries until I was sick.

-Westside Park is just two blocks away. There we spent many summer afternoons playing baseball.

-The alleys around the neighborhood were always fun. I slowly walked through one on the south side near the park, down Celia Avenue and then back to the corner of Ethel and Britain Avenues. This was the route of our “Little 500” bike race. It was never a scheduled activity, but when May would roll around and everyone was talking about the Indy 500, invariably someone would suggest a bike race around the neighborhood.

-Nichols Grocery Store was just three blocks away. Here you could get all of the candy you could eat in a day for just a quarter. For fifteen cents you could buy a big bottle of pop. Many summer hours were spent sitting on Nichol’s steps, eating cheap candy and burping cola.

There is an old neighborhood in each of us—a place where we were formed and which we helped to form. The only place where it has stayed the same since leaving is in one’s mind, for we know that time cannot stand still. The houses now look smaller and are in need of repair, the streets seem more narrow, the trees larger, and the people older...But it is still “My neighborhood.”

In his book, *All I Really Need to Know I learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum writes: “There are places we all come from—deep, rooty, common places—that make us who we are. And we disdain them or treat them lightly at our peril. We turn our backs on them at the risk of self-contempt. There is a sense in which we need to go home again—and can go home again. Not to recover home, no. *But to sanctify memory.*”

Quakers believe that all of life is sacramental. Whether this sacrament of God in one’s life is experienced in the quiet worship at the Meetinghouse, along the streets and alleys of one’s old neighborhood, or in an experience of worship at Westminster Abbey, it is the **REALITY** of the spiritual experience, not the *form* of the sacrament which is important. I have learned that the alleys, yards, and trees of my old neighborhood are a part of my very being. I am an Ethel Avenue, Muncie, Indiana boy, and I cannot deny that. Nor do I want to.

Being in touch with *who* we are, helps us to understand *whose* we are. At root, the process of remembering as we experience pilgrimage evokes a memory of a spiritual center, a holy place, an inner sanctuary, an inner “neighborhood” if you will, where we reconnect with the living God. It is, in the end, to this home, that we long to return. “Blessed are those whose strength is in you,” writes the Psalmist, “who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.” May we “set our hearts on

pilgrimage,” and as a result of our self-discovery, discover anew the transforming grace and love of the Living God.