

## I

## A NEED TO RECONNECT

## PREPARING FOR THE PILGRIMAGE

Most mornings only poetry will do—  
 And a story, something that moves deep within me  
 like a jungle animal / stirring some figure in the darkness<sup>1</sup>

## O

SOME IDEAS die with a struggle; other ideas, desires, or inclinations have a longer shelf life in the soul. After cultivating a careful rhythm of an annual pilgrimage to the Gethsemani monastery in Trappist, Kentucky, for more than a decade in the 1970s, I stopped visiting retreat centers for more than fifteen years as my personal and professional life skidded and shifted and generally had no clear anchor. Nor did I have one secure academic position teaching literature and psychology. Up to the time I was fifty-three, four years before writing this account, I alternately drifted and was guided by a sure, invisible hand.

The rhetoric of Sunday sermons in the Catholic Church had grown flat and stale in me. The language of spirit and soul had been replaced by the sputtering speech of a second collection basket. My own spirit drained, and I left both language and liturgy to seek a spiritual life elsewhere. Yet I knew that part of my soul yearned for ritual, for renewal, and yes, even rebirth. I read voraciously, especially the works of Thomas Merton, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Meister Eckhart. I continued to teach many of the literary classics and found always a particular affinity with the grotesque, often dark, and beautiful spiritual realm of Flannery O'Connor's fictional topography, or the brooding landscapes and tenements of Dostoyevsky's unsettling world

where the human soul gnashed in anguish. But I also sought a renewal within the Church and a return to the rituals of grace and the poetry of sacrament.

As anyone who has spent a life in bookstores knows, oracles often speak through the titles one discovers. On an afternoon in Santa Barbara in 1996, with teaching done for the day, I wandered into one of my favorite bookstores and browsed. Dangerous business. I had heard many stories over the years from my students and others of drifting into a bookstore to chew up an hour's free time and in the process having one's entire life dramatically altered by a book that fell off the shelf onto their foot. But in a lapse of memory, my own guard was down for the moment. In a travel section I discovered a twin set of oracles: the two-volume *Sanctuaries: A Guide to Lodgings in Monasteries, Abbeys and Retreats of the United States* by Jack and Marcia Kelly.<sup>2</sup> At the sight of them, something awakened and quickened in me: the possibility of a lengthy and diverse journey through a range of sacred places, of time outdoors, of hikes alone in the wilderness. Not a weekend "shower" but a full, sustained immersion in the baths of monastic life beckoned me. I stood there and heard once more the Trappist monks singing in Gregorian chant the Psalms—love poems to God and from God to humanity—in the small hours of the morning at Gethsemani monastery. I smelled the grass and the river water and trees bursting with life in meadows spotted with butterflies and bees full of pollen, flies droning heavily in lazy summer afternoons. These volumes, I decided without hesitation, would be my guide in constructing an elaborate journey, months long, to reclaim something I knew I had lost but could not identify; for shorthand I called it a journey to retrieve both spirit and earth, even the spirit in earth.

Who has not felt this calling, this longing, for a journey, a reprieve, a pilgrimage to retrieve part of self long ago abandoned, no longer recognized? This conviction was so powerful that I could not resist or argue with it. The journey had chosen me; it gripped me with a keen desire to plan and execute a pilgrimage wrapped in such certainty that choice was not an option. My first sabbatical from teaching, still two years off, was sealed with a purchase. I bought the volumes and tucked my destiny under my arm.

But who really had found whom? If the origin of the word *vocation* implied "a calling," then I had just heard the voice; it had cleared its throat and whispered an invitation, less a suggestion than a summons. I hoped I had not drifted so far from adventure and the life of the spirit that I would refuse the call.

I read both volumes occasionally for the two years leading up to my sabbatical in the fall of 1998. My choices were made based in part on the distance between monasteries, but something more was at play. I asked God for the grace to help guide me to the right places and for the appropriate time I needed at each location. It seemed that no fewer than five days would suffice at each retreat center in order to feel the place, absorb its spirit, and exact its sacred presence. I knew from past experience that it normally takes a minimum of twenty-four to thirty-six hours upon entering a monastery to feel the shift in energy and the power of place penetrate me, to absorb the landscape and the sacred terrain, the style and rhythms of monastic life. Each monastery indeed had its own personality, as if God revealed His presence through the style which the order lived within.

I also intuited that engaging this outward journey for the three and a half months of the sabbatical would include a more unsettling, and perhaps difficult, sojourn within; the spiritual, emotional, and psychological terrain I was opening myself to would require more than my Ford pickup and sure-grip tires to negotiate its rough, ragged landscape. I prepared for this journey in the spirit of both excitement and fear. Was I to imitate on some critical level the pilgrim/poet Dante Alighieri's own birthing awareness when, at the beginning of his *Commedia*, he finds himself conscious, perhaps for the first time, but now lost in a dark wood, a *selva oscura*,<sup>3</sup> midway through his life? I knew that at least the time was right, for at age fifty-three I felt a kinship with his midpoint.

The interior dark woods with no clear path both frightened and attracted me. Like the pilgrim in his poem six hundred years earlier, I was waking up to a desire, to a calling, to become more conscious, to enter a path of greater and deeper awareness of myself and the invisible worlds that I knew existed, the world of spirit, of soul, as well as the visible landscape of nature that I used to love camping and hiking in years ago but had alienated myself from in recent years. I wanted to reimagine my life from the point of view of eternity. To do so meant stepping outside of the familiar and safe confines of a small conventional space to allow a larger realm of grace to have space. Perhaps one manifestation of grace was to begin to see possibilities where only certainties seemed present.

My ambitions were so much lower than attempting to achieve any semblance of immortality. I wanted to think about and define for myself my own mortality, why I am the way I am, why I have had this desire for the sacred all my life, stretching back to serving Mass as a sixth grader at Holy Cross parish in northern Ohio, and what pleasure hiking in the dark

woods always revealed. I felt a deep desire to uncover and recover a spiritual life that had been lost in the woods of my own personal and professional activities, or buried under mindless motion disconnected from meaning. The question haunted me: Was I even worthy to enter the silent, deep woods of the sacred? Did I possess the courage it would require?

The desire to be successful, to be at the top of my field as teacher and student of literature and psychology, had shoveled some deeper needs way below ground level. At times ignoring my sons and my wife, I would choose to write yet another paper for yet another literary conference instead of nurturing family, friends, and myself. Staying busy professionally monopolized most of my waking hours. Feeling insecure and always vulnerable in my teaching and my writing, and being in the public eye at conferences and social gatherings, had jaundiced my view of the rich gifts of sons and wife; they suffered from neglect. *Neglect*: what a guilt-ridden word! The desire for success had often trumped any desire to take my sons to the park, my wife to a movie, or myself into some quiet time unstructured and without tension with the frequency I knew was needed. It was time to find truer balance in the wobbly center of my life.

Far from fading over time, the desire to make this journey had ripened into a glowing resolve to honor the calling, which was affirmed in the stories of the adults I was teaching at Pacifica Graduate Institute. So many were there, on either side of midlife, because they were called to continue their education; to study mythology, depth psychology, or counseling psychology; to shift careers or pursue their bliss, with the accompanying blisters they knew would be part of the program. When I mentioned my desire to engage the pilgrimage I had planned, in unison they responded: "Do not wait. Go!" Oracles in stereo! I could not *not* heed the energy in their insistence. I knew I was listening to kindred travelers.

I prepared in the spring of 1998 for the journey that fall by structuring a schedule of dates at eleven monasteries and one Zen Buddhist center that I found in the guidebook; I kept in mind that the more varied and diverse the places that beckoned to me, the better. I listed sites founded by Benedictines, Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans, Russian Orthodox, and Trappist Cistercians, as well as followers of Zen Buddhism. I then aligned times with distances between them to allow some days to camp in state and federal parks, to step out of the sacred sites for a day or two by sleeping, cooking, hiking in the forest or a state park. The entire trip arranged itself into a snug period of three and a half months, long enough for me to feel that I had truly slipped out of the knots of life's familiar patterns.

I continued to read in areas new to me. In the *Upanishads* I struggled to take the words into the heart; instead, they remained outside of me,

refusing to enter any fleshy place of deep memory: “When the five senses of the mind are still and reason rests in silence, then begins the Path supreme; this calm steadiness of the senses is called Yoga and emerges when all the desires that cling to the heart are surrendered, when all ties that bind the heart are unloosened, then a mortal becomes immortal.”<sup>4</sup> I found as well in the writings of the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, in the desert Fathers and Mothers, the Dalai Lama, the writings of Evagrius Ponticus on monastic life, and of course St. Benedict’s *Rules* (which founded the monastic tradition in the West) eloquent outlines of the monastic attitude, of an ascetic presence to the world. I was drawn to this simplicity in the sacred, to their openness, and to their generous spirit.

As I absorbed their wisdom on the nature of spirit, which was inseparable from an embodied psychological and emotional life, I felt the conviction grow that such a pilgrimage offered an opening perhaps no bigger than the eye of a needle through which to pass if I were to complete, reconnect with, make conscious some unacknowledged and uncultivated terrains in my life. In retrospect I would call it a quest, for I was full of questions as I approached my mid-fifties; this threshold was calling me to be crossed, to bridge parts of myself. In traveling more than four thousand miles in my pickup truck, I would in some small measure make the crossing over the largest freestanding bridge of my life, a bridge that linked parts of myself that had become stranded on the side of success, recognition, fame, and promotions to the exclusion of a life lived in joy, generosity, peace, selflessness, and service to others. I felt this bridge swaying long before I set footprint or tire tread on its shaky surface.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* became one of my early mentors in my plans. In fact, as the patterns of a life began to emerge to reveal their invisible powers, I noticed that my guides throughout my life have just as often been a book or a passage I tripped across at just the time I needed to hear it, as they have been persons who offered me words or an example I needed at a strategic moment where I felt necessary a profound shift in direction. A few weeks before I left at the beginning of August, I meditated on the idea of nonattached action in Michael Novak’s fine anthology, *The World’s Wisdom*: act earnestly but without attachment to results.<sup>5</sup> To identify with one’s actions, to desire and then force certain results, traps one, in effect, to that pattern of action. The truth of this insight helped me realize that I desired to enter into the monastic life with some unarticulated results already at hand. I needed to surrender something of my own desires to the larger reality of the pilgrimage. It had its own life that I needed to discern. Once I succeeded in doing so, if only partly, it would be enough to free me to make the journey. From this point on, I never looked back.

The entire trip was undertaken with a few insights into my limits. I don't consider myself necessarily a spiritual person, or one deeply so. Quite frankly, I am uncertain whether I know what being spiritual even means. I have seen some of the deepest reverence for divinity in its various forms from those who have no established institutional belief system. I also do not know how to pray, or pray fervently, or well. I am easily distracted and have great difficulty meditating, calming the mind, eliminating desires, dissolving destructive thoughts, curtailing anger, stifling resentments, muting comparing myself with others, or squelching mean or self-lacerating thoughts; I live a good part of each day in the future or the past rather than in the present. Armed with such a panoply of deterrents, I decided to engage in the pilgrimage anyway. Jumping into, facing head on, rather than skirting around or avoiding opportunities that present themselves has been central to my way of responding to life from as far back as I can remember. Why change now?

The language of the Catholic Church in its homilies and sermons had long lost its connection to mystery. It seemed divorced from any imaginal grasp of how and what I lived; it was rational and uninspired in its descriptions, as if it had lost its source of inspiration and energy. Instead, what I sought were the numinous shadows hidden in the light of the gospels' words. The Church preached Main Street theology; by contrast I needed the back alleys, hidden piazzas, and deserted side streets filled with puddles, of a faith in crisis and confusion. The language of church doctrines was that of the garden and salvation, of order and degree, of certitude; my soul sought the harsh arid climate of the desert, the space of austerity and simplicity, the movement of lizards on hot stones, the slow ingestion of a little morsel, not the manic craving of a dizzy consumer. I felt crucified by clarity, rationality, and an absence of what my soul sought, a sense of awe in mystery, laced with a shaky faith. I longed to feel the sharp sting of Christ's pierced side, not the comforting glory of resurrection and immortality. Not Christ's light-infused *risen-ness* but God's ineffable wounded darkness is what I thirsted after. Belief had become musty, even a bit moldy; it needed some dusting off, if not a thorough spring cleaning. I thought of packing a vacuum cleaner.

Disaffected and of no account, my life journey had grown obscure, out of reach, distant, disconnected. It needed to be anointed by the ineffable again, oiled back to life, massaged back into meaning that was palpable. My story had become despondent; it needed to be prodded along in its sluggishness, even allowed a transfusion. I felt less compelled to save my soul, more interested in seeking my soul's shadows. I asked myself one day, *What are you most alive to?* I sought aliveness, coming to life in this

journey, some wise blood that would increase circulation to counter my spiritual anemia.

The one authentic desire I believed in was to explore this spiritual life by retreating from as many distractions and comfortable impediments as possible so as to see what would arise within a cauldron of scarcity and simplicity. If nothing came of it, then so be it; I would rest content exploring a sizeable chunk of America on a grand motor tour. One cannot know the feel of mountain cold water until one steps into the stream. I simply wanted to get my toes wet in the flow of spirit because I felt some deep and intangible life force moving through me. Something was howling with real gusto to be reclaimed, and only the journey would allow it to speak with the definition it sought. I needed sustained motion to shake loose the meaning that lay dormant. Were my motives too excessive, too grandiose?

The year prior to my sabbatical, my father died and I returned to Ohio for his funeral. As I planned my trip now, I began to feel that I was repeating not my father's acute alcoholism but his excess, his preoccupation with one thing to the exclusion of family. I didn't blame him; but I balked when I realized I might have simply mimicked his behavior, his addictive patterns of thought and action through a disease that disallowed a healthy and full life for any longer than a few days at a time. With a shock of recognition I discovered that, with his death, I felt the grief of his loss for the first time fully and knew that living with his disease throughout childhood and young adulthood now needed to be confronted and explored, if not outright forgiven. Little did I know how large a part the presence of his spirit would play in this journey.

I kept foremost in mind that I was on sabbatical. It is a curious word with an engaging history. A colleague recommended the famous classic by rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*. I used his words as a primer for my pilgrimage. "One of the most distinguished words in the bible," he writes, "is the word *qadosh*, holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine."<sup>6</sup> I read as well in the spiritual writer Wayne Muller's book on Sabbath that the practice of Shabbat is "designed specifically to restore us, a gift of time in which we allow the cares and concerns of the marketplace to fall away."<sup>7</sup> Rest, refuge, restoration, renewal, retrieval: these five "R" words I wrote in my journal as a kind of road map to *qadosh* and revisited them for the entire voyage; they guided me in staying focused on what this pilgrimage might restore.

I had bought a new tent and sleeping bag for those days and nights when I was between monasteries. I took far too many boxes of books (five) and a secondhand laptop that I bought for the journey but discarded

almost immediately. More excess? I took light and heavy clothing, knowing I would first head north into Oregon and Washington, places that might bring early snows, and then south toward Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona to outrun winter's insistent emergence. I packed notebooks, pads of paper, a bag of pens, as if none of these things could be purchased once I departed Santa Barbara. In one instant I thought of packing my passport. I took a cooler, a butane stove, some plastic ware and cooking utensils, raingear, two pairs of boots, tennis shoes, sandals, two cameras, binoculars, and two plastic containers of clothes. One would have thought I was heading into the Alaska tundra for a year.

At the close of the first week of August I said good-bye to my wife and headed onto 101 north, less than a mile from our home, and drove toward San Luis Obispo and on to Big Sur and the New Camaldoli Hermitage, my first destination on the pilgrimage. I wondered if the cash and travelers' checks I had brought and hidden in my gear would last me, but I decided that since I was going to receive a check each month while on sabbatical, I would not concern myself with money. Best to be frugal, to avoid debt.

Doubt was already draining my energy.

These and other practical concerns, however, receded in importance with each mile I put between home and me; I was now on the road full of expectation, open to the future and free, for a time, of the exaggerated cares that often kept me distracted and submerged from living more consciously in the spirit of God and other people. I sensed I would be gone long enough for the Novocain of a numbing life to wear off. I called to God for protection, to reveal to me what He wanted me to understand about my own place in the cosmos. In William Blake's catalogue that he created for a showing of his own art in 1809, he suddenly exclaims: "The human mind cannot go beyond the gift of God, the Holy Ghost."<sup>8</sup> I prayed for this gift, the presence of the Holy Spirit, to guide me in these next few months toward who and what I was destined to meet.

Such exhilaration heading into the unknown! I felt already both more alive and more anxious than I could remember. Now my days would be open, not full of schedules, and I wondered if I were capable of handling so much loose and wild reality at one time.