

PILGRIMAGE
By Sands Hall

Recently I tried to persuade an acquaintance to examine the idea that she is a pilgrim. The notion made her uncomfortable, perhaps because the word “pilgrim” sounds religious and, like many who consider themselves intelligent or intellectual, Alice is afraid that the idea of “religiosity” might attach itself to her and diminish the idea that she is intelligent and an intellectual. I am sympathetic. I’ve wrestled with this myself, especially during the years I was a member of the Church of Scientology.

Alice is a reporter. Her goal as a writer, and a huge source of self-respect, is her objectivity. She is also very proud of her ability to “find the story.” But she has been working on a volume of essays about the astonishing adventures enjoyed in pursuit of those stories, and the book reads like a series of pilgrimages: to religious sites, certainly (cathedrals, pyramids, dolmens), but also what appear to be quests for a sense of self. While each essay is intriguing and well written, the collection isn’t working as a book—it has no throughline, no overarching (or inner) story. By the end of the pilgrimage that the book itself represents the reader wants a summing up of the meaning of Alice’s metaphorical, even spiritual journey, and there isn’t one.

I offered this notion to her: that the book is a pilgrimage and the reader wants to know what it is that the author is seeking and if, by the end, she finds it. But Alice doesn’t like the idea of creating a piece of writing that is subjective. An essay that reveals the author is anathema to her. She decided to send out the manuscript as is. But a number of agents rejected the manuscript, telling her that it needed some

larger glue, and so she called me, interested to hear “that thing you said I was, that the book was.”

A pilgrimage, I told her. You are a pilgrim.

Still she resisted, and as I encouraged her, a bit emphatically, not to limit her understanding to a religious context, I pulled a dictionary from my shelf and—this is a phrase used in Scientology courserooms— “broke down the word.”

Although I’m sure I examined the word during my sojourn—my pilgrimage—to, or through, that church, I did not remember that its root comes from the Latin for foreigner: *peregrinus*, from *per*, through + *ager*, land. The landscape this evokes is not so much bleak as empty, except for silent hooded figures limping, trudging, crawling towards something both tangible—shrine, summit, water source—and abstract—enlightenment, sanctuary, meaning. From this same root, *peregrinus*, also descend both *peregrinate* and *peregrine* (so called because these birds are caught in flight, unlike falcons, which—the dictionary further illuminated—are taken from their nests). As I was conveying all this to Alice, who on the other end of the phone was waiting, I could tell, for something other than what I was telling her, it occurred to me that not only might a pilgrim be considered “foreign” to the country through which she is passing, but foreign to her own culture as well; it is precisely because of this sense of foreignness that a pilgrim goes wandering at all. This gave me a stunned sense of acceptance about my own “pilgrim problem,” the one that led to my involvement with Scientology so many years ago.

A pilgrimage is not so much about the destination as the journey. This is exactly the promise Alice’s manuscript held within its pages, and I fear I was

vehement with her, and I was vehement because I was in the process of realizing that what I was saying “should” be true for her and her manuscript was in fact true for me; I was proselytizing. Not about Scientology, the word never entered the conversation, but about the idea that we all are pilgrims. As I held the phone between ear and shoulder, flipping through the dictionary (*pilgrim* led to *quest*, to *goal*, to *sacred*; there was *religion* to examine); as I offered certain definitions I thought particularly apt, and rooted about in the roots of the words, a light regarding my own pilgrimage began to glow. The ideas I was throwing down the phone-line seemed to baffle, even exasperate Alice, but they enthralled me, including the notion that a pilgrim is on a quest for a goal “believed to be sacred,” and that a pilgrimage has an “exalted purpose,” more words I flipped to find. The root of exalt is *ex + altus*: up + high, to elevate, lift up, with the marvelous caveat “no longer used in a physical sense.” Here, too, an image rose: the priestess, the rabbi, the worshipper lifting high the goblet, the torah, the branches of yew.

As I paged through the dictionary, noting words within each definition to check and recheck (*word chains*, the Church called them), roots to explore, I divined for the umpteenth but always ecstatic time that words are believed by me to be sacred. Words I *ex + altus*. It may seem the height of irony that a cult helped me discover and explore that truth, yet what religion (and cult) does not rely on words, written or spoken? I exalt, too, that these abstract shapes called letters can be scribbled or typed onto a page or a screen, that the words so created, whether read silently or spoken aloud, can make a reader laugh or cry or comprehend something newly: that meaning can be gleaned from them.

Alice ended her call to me by asking me to email her a list of the words I thought important to the notion of pilgrimage, and I did so, with a thorough, scholastic delight. I don't know if Alice did much with the list, or with the idea, but the exercise allowed me to reexamine my own peregrinations. From childhood on, I've been a gatherer of words: cherishing them, sharing them in both written and, as director, actor, singer/songwriter, audible forms. Perhaps this would have happened without my pilgrimage into Scientology, but I can't know that. I can be grateful, now, to the learning that took place at those large sunlit wooden tables piled with dictionaries, even though at times I still feel as if I squandered almost a decade of my life. Which leads to another thought regarding pilgrimage, as ancient as the concept itself but worth repeating: Whether or not a pilgrim arrives at the destination is not as important as the transformation that occurs along the way.