

“Pilgrimage: An Interfaith Story”

Three speakers, from the Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions, spoke on the subject of “pilgrimage.”

April 7, 2019

(Sal Caraviello’s reflection “A Pilgrimage Wrapped in a Pilgrimage Surrounded by a Pilgrimage” will be added to this file when available.)

“Full Circle” by Sara Epstein

My pilgrimage began when I was 20, and in its own way ended when I was 45.

During college, I spent a semester in an agricultural village near Oaxaca, studying the role of women there. My secret mission was to learn how to be a woman with confidence and love.

Karen, a fellow student, and I stayed in San Antonino, with Irene and Josefina, older women who supported themselves by embroidering the colorful dresses sold to tourists in Oaxaca. They sat in the courtyard at the end of the day, catching the light while they worked. They taught us the rudiments of the craft, including elaborate crochet work on the sleeves. When we made mistakes, they cheerfully ripped out the work and told us to start over. If we groaned, they laughed, said we were lucky; the nuns who had taught them had hit the girls when they made mistakes. We stopped complaining and carried on, sharing stories in Spanish as rudimentary as our sewing.

One Sunday, they invited us to attend church with them. They inquired if I was Catholic. I tried to explain, “No, actually I’m Jewish.” They replied, “Yes, but of course you believe in Mary, Joseph and Jesus.” I stopped explaining, nodded vaguely, put on my rebozo (shawl) and went along to church.

Another day, we heard a rumble that got louder. Trucks would often rumble down the dirt roads outside the courtyard, shaking the metal gates. But this felt different. “Teremoto!” the women exclaimed. Never having experienced an earthquake, we asked our hosts what to do. Irene said, “you get down on your knees, hold onto the small tree in the courtyard, and pray, “Joseph, Jesus y Maria.” We joined them, repeating the phrase which became the mantra that calmed us while we waited for the quake to cease.

I felt completely accepted by Irene and Josefina, as if I had come home to a strange place in which whoever I was just fine. Having come from a competitive family where the major sport was reading, this life was confusing and comforting at the same time. I was amazed at the way in which complete strangers had welcomed me into their home. I knew they were earning important money in exchange, but that seemed beside the point. What I got in return was priceless. I felt unconditional love in a way that my constricted heart could feel.

When I returned home, I met my parents in New York at a fancy hotel, where my dad was giving a talk. The women in the lobby seemed like they were from a movie set or another world, with their makeup and their white faces and their fur stoles. I took the elevator to our room and threw up. I was in culture shock.

When the shock wore off I was back at school, with a new outlook. I enjoyed my studies and my friends more. I had a chance to integrate the different types of learning and love I had experienced.

Twenty-five years later, I returned to Oaxaca on a writing retreat. I went to San Antonino, to try to find out what had happened to my hosts. As I entered the marketplace, I noticed one woman at a stall, embroidering. I asked if she had known the women. To my surprise, she told me she was their sister-in-law Angela, that they had died, unsupported by their nephew who was supposed to have paid for their medical treatments. I told her how they had taught me some embroidery, how I had felt so welcomed. She started crying. I misunderstood her tears and said she must miss them very much. She corrected me: "No, that's not it, it's that they were very mean and unwelcoming to me when I married their brother. You see," she said, "I came from a neighboring village, and I hadn't been taught the fine work they were doing. I thought I could learn from them and also sell my work in the markets. But they hid their work up on a high shelf when I came over. It was terrible for me."

I returned to the retreat to reflect. "The women who had welcomed me were mean to Angela? The sweet nephew I had known had refused to pay for medical care for his aunts? At the same time I knew that the economic realities and needs in the village had offered few and difficult choices. I felt gratitude and a softening towards my own family, who had loved me in their own way, but that I had not always been open-hearted with, instead feeling the acceptance I craved from my hosts in San Antonino. And now with my marriage and children, was I able to give and feel the love? Why was it harder with those we are closest to? The whole thing was both liberating and very sad.

There was an opportunity at the retreat to have a traditional healing by a curandera, Dona Queta. When it was my turn, she conducted a limp, a ritual which began with her gathering my long hair in a bun on top of my head, murmuring words in Spanish and Zapotec, encouraging me not to be so sad, to release the sadness and ask for what I needed in my life. She pulled my hair so hard I felt like it was a natural face-lift, I could no longer frown in consternation. The treatment concluded by her taking water in her mouth and spitting three times in my face. As I wiped my face with the towel, I realized that I felt lighter, ready to write again.

I had identified with Angela. I knew what it was like to feel scapegoated or unwanted. I had wanted my parents to teach me the secrets of embroidering my life, but they weren't always able to in a way that I could absorb. However, unlike what had gone on for Angela, my parents had been willing to teach me and sponsor me, even letting me study in Oaxaca. I felt the weight and the light of this strange pilgrimage that had come full circle, and was just beginning.

"A Journey for a Lifetime" by Fehmida Chipty

Bismillah Hirrahma Nirahim

I would like to thank Reverend Heather for asking me to participate in today's interfaith service. It is an honor to be here with you all today to share my personal journey of faith as a Muslim woman.

When Reverend Heather asked me to speak on the topic of Pilgrimage, as quite a literal person, I

immediately thought of my journey to Mecca in 2006. It is one of the most well known Pilgrimages in the world.

During the Islamic month of Zilhaj, I travelled to Mecca with my Father, Husband and dear friends. This pilgrimage is called Hajj. It is considered a pillar of my faith to take this journey if health and finances permit. I have always believed that one does not simply do Hajj, rather, one is called to Hajj. In bygone days, it was a journey of months and extreme hardship. Now while travel is easier, it remains a complex and difficult journey with millions of worshippers making it together.

We first went to Medina, the city to which Prophet Mohammed (Peace be upon him) migrated from Mecca. Now the vast, majestic, Masjid un Nabavi, or Mosque of the Prophet, is home to his tomb. We were able to offer prayers in the Masjid and pay our respects at his grave.

From Medina we donned simple white garments, all pilgrims, rich and poor, black, brown, and white, from different countries of origin, equal in the eyes of the Almighty. We journeyed by bus to Mecca. We entered the holy Masjid or Haram Sharif where the Kaba stands. The Kaba is the large black stone toward which Muslims face in daily prayer.

The awe I felt when I first saw the Kaba is indescribable. We believe it was built by the father of all our faiths, Prophet Abraham (Peace be upon him). In a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people, we walked around the Kaba 7 times. Thus began our pilgrimage.

It is a pilgrimage steeped in ritual and shared with humanity. As I circled the Kaba, I was humbled by the sea of devotion around me....simply humbled. I felt the presence of the Almighty with deep clarity.

After I returned from Mecca, I was asked by a friend to share my journey with her church community. When I described my emotions she called my experience a "Mountaintop Experience."

I wondered, where do I go now from this mountain... how does this experience guide my life.

After returning from Mecca, I made a commitment to learn my faith more deeply. In addition to reading the Holy Qur'an, I began classes in theology to study of the vast myriad of holy texts within my Fatemi Shia Muslim faith. But that was not enough, I needed to bring God into the fabric of my daily life consistently.

So I make a deep personal commitment to daily prayer.

Muslims believe their faith is supported by pillars...called the "Pillars of Islam." One of these is regular Salaat or Prayer. We are taught to pray 5 times a day ...at dawn, high noon, afternoon, sunset and night. Salaat is set of specific ritual prayers in Arabic that involves standing, bending and full prostration. Salaat times are times to pause, reflect, and show gratitude to our Creator. They are times to humble one's self and supplicate.

This commitment is not always easy in our complex, busy world of raising families, working, and maintaining friendships. Single-minded concentration on the words and actions of prayer is hard for those us who survive by multitasking. And certainly, given the ritualistic nature of Muslim prayer with prostration, its not always easy find a "place" to pray.

But I try... I try every day to be faithful in Salaat, in prayer. Whether I am alone or with a large community, whether I am in a Mosque or at work, whether I am home or travelling, I try. When I miss the appointed time of prayer, I make it up with intention.

For me this regular commitment to gratitude and supplication has been life altering. It reminds me everyday, that I am blessed beyond belief, that I not alone, and that I can ask for help.

This daily prayer has guided me and centered me in the basic activities of life, the adventures I have taken, and the difficult decisions I have had to face. In recent years, prayer has helped me find the courage to seek the truth and live a life of integrity. It has helped me make a life altering decision about my faith community.

My day is not complete without prayer. I am not complete without prayer. This is my journey for a lifetime, as I seek to feel the presence of the Almighty with deep clarity... as I did on that pilgrimage to Mecca many years ago.