THE SECOND JOURNEY

By GERALD O'COLLINS

IT HAS BEEN a commonplace to describe human life as a journey or a series of journeys. Yet we need to distinguish one journey from another, if this language is really going to enlighten us. The present article aims to do two things. First, it briefly recalls how frequently 'the journey' has been used to express human experience, especially in its spiritual aspects. Then I want to identify and reflect on the phenomena of 'second' or mid-life journeys. Since publishing a piece on this theme eighteen months ago,[1] I have found how the image has illuminated what many religious and others pass through in their middle years. For a surprising number of people it has made their distressing experiences intelligible and brought renewed assurance. This image of the second journey is a piece of good news which should be shared with others.[2]

I

Secular and sacred literature has often exploited the language of a journey. The image describes equally well episodes of 'real' life or the 'fictional' products of man's imagination. The journeys of Ulysses belong to the dawn of western literature. After joining the expedition to destroy Troy, this middle-aged hero sets off home. But he must wander for a decade and survive an array of archetypal adventures before he arrives back at Ithaca and deals with his wife's suitors. Homer's *Odyssey*, which tells the story, has provided the classic term for a wandering life or a long adventurous journey.

The book of Joshua recalls the profession of faith made by the tribes of Israel. The forty years of roaming through the desert were over, Moses was dead, and they had seized the promised land. They proclaimed their allegiance to God:

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[1] 'The Religious and The Second Journey', in *Review for Religious* 35 (1976), pp 40–54.

[2] I wish to acknowledge my debt to Sr Bridget Puzon, O.S.U. In her 1973 Harvard University dissertation (in english literature) she created the term 'second journey' and used several novels to describe the characteristics of such a mid-life journey. I want to thank her also for drawing my attention to the *Odyssey*, Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism* and St Augustine's use of journey language.

> Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt . . . and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the peoples through whom we passed (24, 16–17).

This passage celebrates the exodus on which Moses led his people – that journey of liberation which shaped israelite consciousness for ever. In the New Testament the letter to the Hebrews looks back to Abraham and a great 'cloud of witnesses'. They lived as 'strangers and exiles' wandering across the face of the earth. Like them, Christians should act as pilgrims journeying towards that 'better country' to which God calls them (Heb 11, 13. 16; 12, 1). Vatican II took its cue from Hebrews and made 'the pilgrim people' of God a central motif in portraying the christian Church.

We can cite Pope John XXIII's diary which appeared under the title *Journey of a Soul.* Seven centuries ago, St Bonaventure's passage to mysticism produced his *Journey of the Mind to God.* St Thomas Aquinas contrasted the *viatores* on their earthly pilgrimage with the *comprehensores* enjoying the beatific vision. He wrote of the Eucharist as the 'food of wayfarers' *(esca viatorum).* Gabriel Marcel called his classic volume of existentialist philosophy *Homo Viator.* Both inside the jewish-christian religion and beyond we find this familiar theme – life as a journey. As much as any other Father of the Church, St Augustine took pilgrimage as his theme:

> We are all pilgrims. The Christian is one who both in his own home and in his own country knows himself to be a pilgrim. For our country is above; there we will not be temporary guests. Here everyone, even in his own home, is a passing guest.[3]

The image of the journey turns up in the legends of King Arthur, Sufi poetry, the preaching of Meister Eckhart and mystical writings of all kinds.

Evelyn Underhill surveyed the East and the West in her *Mysticism.*[4] The first of 'the three great classes of symbols' or 'three great expressions of man's restlessness', which 'only mystic truth can fully satisfy', she found to be 'the craving which makes him a pilgrim and wanderer. It is the longing to go out from his normal world in search

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[3] Sermon cxi, 2. I wish to thank Dennis McAuliffe for this reference.

[4] London, 1912.

of a lost home, a "better country", an Eldorado, a Sarras, a Heavenly Syon' (p 151). This is the journey from the world of illusion to the real world, the quest for some Holy Grail, the flight from the visible world of sense perception to that of inward, spiritual experience. Miss Underhill wrote:

> Under this image of a pilgrimage . . . the mystics contrived to summarize and suggest much of the life history of the ascending soul: the developing spiritual consciousness. The necessary freedom and detachment of the traveller, his departure from his normal life and interests, the difficulties, enemies, and hardships encountered on the road; the length of the journey, the variety of the country, the dark night which overtakes him, the glimpses of a destination far away – all these are seen more and more as we advance in knowledge to constitute a transparent allegory of the incidents of man's progress from the unreal to the real. Bunyan was but the last and least mystical of a long series of minds which grasped this fact (pp 154ff).

One final example comes from anglo-saxon and celtic Christianity. Many monks and some religious women imitated Abraham by going into perpetual exile and giving themselves to endless travelling. They abandoned the normal securities of a stable home and society to face the dangers and toils of ceaseless journeying. In place of anything like a benedictine *stabilitas loci* (stability of place) they adopted a *stabilitas in peregrinatione* (stability in wandering). Their life of faith literally took the form of a journey. Some went on vast travels overland. Others climbed into a boat and launched out into the deep, not knowing where their voyage would take them. According to the legendary *Navigation of St Brendan*, the saint explained what he and his group were about: 'We decided to wander all the days of our life'.[5]

There should be no need to pile up more evidence. The language of the journey has been frequently used to express human life and endeavour, especially in their spiritual aspects. Nevertheless, we are not dealing with one undifferentiated journey. If we look again at figures like Abraham, Moses, Ulysses and St Bonaventure, we may notice a common factor. In *mid-life* they moved from a familiar environment, attempted new projects and travelled strange roads.

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[5] Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., drew my attention to the material on *stabilitas in peregrinatione*. He has just published a remarkably interesting study, *Libérez les prisonniers. Du bon larron à Jean XXIII* (Paris, 1976). Some of the prisoners whom Dom Leclercq discusses obviously experienced a second journey.

Take St Bonaventure. He was around forty years of age when he was elected minister general of the Friars Minor in 1257. He left Paris to visit many houses of his order and Pope Alexander IV in Viterbo. Bonaventure reached La Verna in 1259, a visit which made him a mystic and resulted in his *Journey of the Mind to God.* This was the fruit of being 'in the middle way', as T. S. Eliot puts it in *East Coker.* That same poet warns us that we may have 'the experience' but 'miss the meaning'. What are the characteristics of a second journey? Can we clarify the meaning of such a mid-life experience?

II

If this were a book, there would be space to review in detail the stories of some historical and fictional persons who seem to have passed through second journeys. Many names suggest themselves: Aeneas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (on his 1939 trip to New York), Dante, St Ignatius Loyola, Jenny Isaksson (in Bergman's *Face to Face*), John Henry Newman, St Paul, Eleanor Roosevelt, Albert Schweitzer, St Elisabeth Seton, Gail Sheehy,[6] St Teresa of Avila, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and John Wesley. All these illustrate what a second journey can look like in the concrete. Such a journey is never found neat. It is always embodied in particular lives, particular pieces of literature or particular myths. Nevertheless, reflection on these people listed above, as well as on the experience of many contemporaries, suggests a general pattern. It seems that at least six major features of second journeys merit attention.

Thrust upon them

A second journey happens to people in their middle years. They do not voluntarily enter upon it. Or, if they do begin such a journey willingly, they do not fully understand what it will mean for them. They can be swept into it by different factors. We can classify many stories into two classes, according to whether the 'cause' is some observable phenomenon or is something 'inward' and less publicly apparent.

The death of a parent, a serious illness or some other 'external' catalyst can plunge people into an unexpected crisis. Left to themselves, they would never have chosen the pain of it all. It simply

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[6] I am thinking of *her own* experience rather than other material contained in *Passages* (New York, 1976). Her second journey began at the age of 35 when covering a story in Northern Ireland. She was standing next to a young man as a bullet blew his face off.

happened to them. The shooting on Bloody Sunday in Londonderry triggered off a second journey for Gail Sheehy. The battle at Pamplona and a long convalescence initiated a mid-life journey for Ignatius. His severe illness caused his world and his vision of the world to disintegrate. Without his wanting or planning it, Ignatius suffered that profound upheaval which he records in his autobiography, and his second journey got under way. Many deliberate choices stud the later stages of his story. But the beginning of the pilgrimage around the age of thirty was thrust upon him.

The catalyst can be something interior and less 'physically' obvious. Some people may go away for a summer programme or a sabbatical semester to find themselves hit by a sudden crisis that leaves them feeling confused and even lost. They cease to define themselves by their marriage, their career, their priesthood or their religious commitment. Their world has come apart at the seams. Present roles and obligations start looking absurd. Self-doubts and fears leave them inwardly wandering in a state of suspended being – like ghosts from some unquiet grave. They would never have entered into such a state of their own accord.

A man can have piled up half a column of material for his national *Who's Who* and then wake up one morning thinking, 'is it all worth it?' He may feel abruptly compelled to change, to give up his profession and start all over again – perhaps at high financial cost and at an even higher cost to the stability of his family. Competent teachers, nurses and tradesmen can reach the top only to discover that the job no longer fascinates. There is nowhere higher to go. They find themselves terrified of stagnation and demanding: 'Should I and can I switch careers? Would study at an open university help?' Whether the causes which come into play are visibly apparent or less 'tangible', one feature emerges clearly. Seemingly of their own volition, second journeys simply begin.

Crises of feelings

We do not need to collect and diagnose many cases before observing that a second journey entails a crisis of affectivity. Such a crisis may concern primarily some current personal failure (John Wesley's mission to Georgia) unresolved conflicts from the past (Jenny Isaksson) or fears for the future (Gail Sheehy). The last case offers a way in for reflection on this second feature of mid-life journeys. In fresh and compelling language, Gail Sheehy reports her tumultuous feelings about the passage of time and the loss of youth.

At the age of thirty-five she suddenly realized that life was running out. Death waited at the end of a shortening road. Her physical powers were beginning to slip. She glimpsed darkness at the end of the tunnel.

A crisis of feelings may cluster around the way one perceives time and the passage of time. Yet we would be misinterpreting this experience, if we viewed it as 'nothing more than' a restlessness provoked by the loss of youth. It would be a silly and dangerous form of reductionism to insist on approaching the phenomenon *merely* from that point of view. There is much to be said for Jung's notion that for people over thirty all problems are spiritual rather than psychological.

The past has a privileged place in the crises of feelings that shape and accompany second journeys. This seems especially true of those who have set themselves clear goals, repressed emotional reactions deemed unsuitable and pushed ahead relentlessly with the search for 'success'. Social workers can care for unmarried mothers, nuns can help to heal the sick and comfort the dying, doctors can work superbly for their patients, priests can absolve the guilty and minister splendidly to huge parishes. But all the time they may be protecting themselves from facing their own feelings. Public success can blind them to their own needs. These unwitting self-deceivers must eventually admit and cope with parts of themselves that got left out on their road to success. Deliberately chosen motivation and a resolute will can prove strong enough for years, until anger, hunger for affection and other suffocated emotions simply erupt from the depths of an outraged nature.

The heroine of *Face to Face*, Jenny Isaksson, has to let such suffocated feelings really break through for the first time. She must admit and grapple with aspects of her life which she had neglected. She finds nightmarish images rising up to confront her, as she faces an agonizing self-reappraisal. She has spent her energy in being responsive to others. Now she feels forced to attend to herself. She has cared competently for her patients. She now experiences the compulsive need to care for herself. As Gail Sheehy suggests, Jenny Isaksson and other such experts with the answers for others need 'time out' to become pilgrims with questions for themselves (*Passages*, p 200).

The emotional material that has been hoarded unheard can frequently concern our relationships with *people or institutions close to us*, as in Jenny's case. Hateful things done to her in childhood

abruptly arose to torment her and throw her world into confusion. To face up finally to the cruelty, dishonesty or corruption of some persons or institutions can let deep anger burst through. Or else it may be a question of feeling unappreciated and unloved by the family, the spouse, the organization, the religious congregation or the diocese to which one has given one's life.

The outer journey

Characteristically a second journey includes also an outer component – some specific journey or perhaps a physical restlessness that keeps one travelling in the hope, 'if I relocate, I will find the solution'. Wesley's voyage to Georgia, Bonhoeffer's second visit to New York, Newman's Mediterranean tour in 1833 exemplify a longer journey which can significantly change a person's consciousness in the middle years. Ignatius's wanderings belong here: from Spain to the Holy Land, back to Spain, north for studies in Paris, back again to Spain and, eventually, journey's end in Rome. Jenny Isaksson's shift from one suburb to another and Mother Teresa's 1946 train ride out of Calcutta typify less notable outward journeys which create contexts for interior journeys to take place.

Of course, it is the *inner* component which brings about a genuine second journey. The external travelling has only a subordinate function. All the same, some shift from place to place appears to be a steady feature of authentic mid-life journeys.

Meaning, values and goals

The afternoon of life, according to Jung, brings 'the *reversal* of *all* the ideals and values that were cherished in the morning'.[7] These are strong words. Gail Sheehy is content to speak simply of facing 'the spiritual dilemma of having no absolute answers' (*Passages*, p 30). Whether we press the point strongly or make it more gently, second journeys bring a search for new meaning, fresh values and different goals.

Very many people choose external goals to define their existence. They aim at becoming head of their department in the public

[7] C. G. Jung, *Psychological Reflections: A New Anthology of his writings* (ed. J. Jacobi, London, 1971), p 137.

service, a bishop in a large diocese, principal of a high school, a journalist for a leading newspaper or some other 'top' person. They move upward in society and then one of two things may happen to them in their thirties, forties or fifties. (i) They reach their goal and it bores them. (ii) Or they realize that they may never attain it and panic sets in.

If (i) occurs, then the roles by which they identified themselves no longer seem important. The old purposes fade. The values and goals which gave meaning to life lose their grip. The second alternative fits stories like those of John Wesley and Ignatius of Loyola. Wesley set his heart on being a dedicated and successful missionary. But his dream shattered and after two years in Georgia he had to return to England. The wound Ignatius suffered during the battle at Pamplona healed but left some bone sticking out in an ugly fashion. He was so anxious to retain his role as an elegant officer that he persuaded the surgeons to cut away the protruding piece of bone. Without a murmur he endured the primitive surgery – driven on by the fear that he would lose an identity by which he had defined his existence. But then his second journey led him to find other values, new goals and a different identity.

In one way or another persons on a second journey want 'more' out of life. Questions come flooding at them: 'What have I done? Has my life been productive or stagnant? Would it be worth doing it all over again? What is the "more" I want?' In his mid-thirties Paul Gauguin gave up a 'good' job as a banker, left his wife, launched himself into a second life as a painter and settled in the South Seas. A painting he did at the age of forty-nine shows attractive people and a pleasant panorama, but carries these words in lieu of a title: 'Where did we come from? What are we? Where are we going to?' Like Gauguin, Ignatius Loyola looked at past, present and future. But his second journey questions took this form: 'What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What ought I to do for Christ?' With Calvary before his eyes, Ignatius scrutinized the values and goals by which he had previously identified himself.

The answers to the questions may turn up fairly quickly. Wesley sailed back across the Atlantic – a deeply troubled man. Only a few months later he felt his heart 'strangely warmed' at a meeting in London, and found new and decisive purposes. The way ahead became clear. Fresh goals and satisfying meaning may, however, take time to appear. The second journey's end may loom up only after long searching and patient waiting.

Loneliness

People on second journeys repeatedly betray a deep sense of loneliness. This loneliness should eventually turn into the aloneness of a quiet and integrated self-possession. But before that happens they will find themselves in Dante's 'dark wood'.[8] In *Passages* Gail Sheehy put her sense of loneliness this way: 'A powerful idea took hold: *No one is with me. No one can keep me safe. There is no one who won't ever leave me alone*' (p 4). Coupled with this loneliness can also be the feeling of breaking new ground, of travelling in a strange direction with no signposts on the road just ahead. A second journey can encourage the sense of being without a guide and being like an Abraham called forth from one's settled place in society to undertake odd adventures.

In many cases, it is a group of people or society in general that creates and sustains the sense of loneliness. Someone who shows dissatisfaction with the group consensus can hardly expect anything else. The suburban wife who abruptly finds that ordinary values and goals no longer work will appreciate the lone frustration of one woman on a second journey who told me: 'My friends never know what I am talking about'. A nun realizes she cannot keep playing her accustomed role. Her congregation will want to know, 'Why can't she stick at the good work she's doing?' A doctor or a priest on a second journey may seem to have zigzagged off the normal course. Medical colleagues and diocesan authorities will demand: 'What the hell does he think he's doing? He's chasing self-fulfilment – in his own way and on his own terms'. Anyone who does not match society's expectations will hardly find much support from others.

Eventually, the person who has passed through a mid-life journey may transform the consciousness of his or her community. Many of the people mentioned above finally prodded their societies into attaining higher viewpoints and more generous commitments. The hero or heroine of a second journey may even resemble Aeneas in fashioning a whole new community. However, much loneliness, deep suffering at the hands of society or even, as in the case of Bonhoeffer, death may have to intervene before the individual reshapes in one way or another his world.

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[8] The *Inferno* begins: 'In the middle of our life's road, I found myself in a dark wood – the straight way ahead lost'.

Journey's end

The sixth and last feature in the pattern of second journeys touches the journey's end. There exists a clear danger of settling for some counterfeit destination rather than moving towards that true journey's end to which the traveller is called. Such unauthentic solutions can occur in many ways. Let me mention two possibilities. First, a counterfeit destination could take the form of *cutting the journey short.* It may need much time and patience to pass through all the frustrations, inner tensions and confusions to final self-identification. One pilgrim put it to me this way: 'I simply have to tough it out'. T. S. Eliot's words in *East Coker* suggest the same point: 'In order to arrive there . . . you must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy'

Even if we respect the proper timing of our second journey, we may literally *choose the wrong goal.* This is the second shape an unauthentic solution could assume. It might mean something extreme like the suicide to which Ignatius Loyola felt drawn when he struggled with his mid-life journey. More often such unauthentic solutions entail publicly abandoning serious commitments with which in fact we should stick. We fail to face and resolve the painful issues that set our second journey going. We run away and clutch at something else in the spirit of 'I can't take it any more'.

Here, of course, we may find ourselves extremely puzzled. False choices can occur when we do real harm to others. But how can we know that *this* choice will mean damaging people in an unacceptable way and is not simply failing to meet their expectations? Like forged cheques a counterfeit destination can look like the real thing. Pilgrims need prudence to find their way through. Ignatius of Loyola's Rules for the Discernment of Spirits aimed to help people cope with just that – picking their way through a turmoil of feelings and a play of motivations to find the true choice and the genuine destination. Nothing less than a steady willingness to be enlightened by God's Spirit can safeguard their choice. And this of course, means regular prayer. Nothing less than a deep and prayerful experience of God can ensure that the second journey will lead somewhere in the end. Dante gave us the classic description of such a journey. But it was Newman, emerging from the sickness and solitude of his mediterranean tour, who left behind the classic prayer for a person on a second journey.

> Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
> Lead Thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead Thou me on!

Such prayer brings one to the true stability and final integrity which is the fruit of a genuine second journey. People with authentic mid-life journeys behind them enrich the world. For the benefit of others they live out what they have experienced for themselves. They embody the conviction of Newman who headed home from Sicily, sensing that he had 'a work to do in England'.

This then is the pattern and meaning I see in one form of human travelling – the second journey. Ultimately it is the reading public who must take sides and determine whether this terminology has the effect of making the experiences it describes less threatening and more intelligible.