

Travelling through life?

Subversive journeys

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THE IMPACT OF TRAVEL ON THE HUMAN SPIRIT fascinates me. As a child, my imagination was captured by stories told by older family and friends who had travelled extensively or lived overseas. Since then I have been fortunate to travel quite widely myself. So it was interesting to read recently *Sacred journeys*, a book by Jennifer Westwood on journeys to sacred places that described itself as 'the essential reference guide to transformational travel'.¹ Transformational travel? It appears that westerners now have a choice between mere travel and something more. The 'something more' suggests greater spiritual depth and moral worthiness.

The experience of parochialism

There was a time when all travel beyond the next town was to some extent 'transformational'. In some places the boundaries of 'home' were very narrow. In Yorkshire, for example, there were differences of dialect between villages in adjacent dales. These were separated during winter months by snow and for the rest of the year by high moors and mutual suspicion. Differences of dialect expressed distinctive histories, experiences and loyalties. In much of Europe from the Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution, and even until recently, the parish was the boundary of many people's worlds. The parish was both a geographical and a social reality. There were inextricable links between where you came from and who you were.

The parish tended to dominate other human associations. You belonged to it from birth to death and beyond. Your ancestors were already in the churchyard and you would doubtless be buried there in your turn. This 'sense of place', shaped by social and religious ties as well as landscape, was intense. Even the next valley was 'other', strange and foreign. People felt spiritually and humanly dislocated when they moved, voluntarily or not, beyond their familiar turf. This state of affairs was undoubtedly secure but could also be stifling and controlling. In case some readers think this is rather quaint in our ultra-mobile age, it is worth recalling what a high

proportion of contemporary Americans do not possess passports and how few travel outside their home state. Such a narrow experience of the world raises spiritual issues – a factor that seems to have been recognized even in the period of the early Church.

Monasticism as changing places

In the origins of monasticism a change of place was an important medium of personal transformation. The early Christian ascetics in Syria, Palestine and Egypt, from the late third century CE onwards, deliberately sought out the empty spaces of the wilderness as the context for inner spiritual combat. Their motivation was complex but one element seems to have been a desire to be freed from an identity provided by normal social and economic ties. Costly discipleship implied making oneself a stranger and outsider. Yet there was a paradox. The lives of the great monastic founder, Anthony the Great of Egypt, and also of Simeon Stylites, the wildly eccentric ascetic on his roadside pillar near Antioch, reveal that holy men and women did not leave social or public roles behind. By standing (geographically and spiritually) outside normal social boundaries, the ascetic became accepted as a spiritual guide and social arbitrator.

From the fifth to the eighth centuries, this tradition of ascetic movement took on a specific form in Celtic lands and particularly in Ireland. Self-imposed exile, *peregrinatio pro Christo*, led to a pattern of lifelong 'pilgrimage'. One result was the spread of Irish monastic settlements across western Europe. Columbanus, a great Irish monastic founder, wandered across modern-day France, Switzerland and northern Italy. He employed 'road' and 'journey' as metaphors for the Christian life and preached that life is a roadway that the Christian must travel as a perpetual pilgrim. To be a pilgrim was to be a *hospes mundi*, a guest of this world. That speaks both of the transitory nature of human life and also of the dependence of the pilgrim on charity and gift rather than on status or wealth. The Irish Christian had a strong attachment to kin and familiar turf. Freely to turn one's back on these was a deliberate statement that God alone determines real identity. By leaving their native settlement they also left their 'place in the world', their status. Beyond the normal boundaries of religious and social life there was no recognized position and no protection. As displaced persons, the early ascetics and wanderers witnessed to the radical equality of all people before

God. So the early monastic ascetics not only changed their physical place but their identity and 'location' in human society.

One way of interpreting the history of Christian spirituality as a whole is in terms of a tension between the contrasting human and spiritual virtues of rootedness and journey. The classical western monastic vows of stability and *conversatio morum* ('conversion of life') neatly express this tension. Stability counteracts our tendency to be spiritual butterflies or restless wanderers but only makes sense if it liberates us for an inner journey. Equally, journey and pilgrimage open us to inner conversion and change and prevent us from being complacent or from clinging to false securities. Wherever we are, we are always inexorably heading for somewhere else. The Christian spiritual tradition has always understood that a change of place or life on its own does not automatically liberate us from negative forces. As an anonymous ninth-century Irish epigram reminds us, true pilgrims must already carry with them the God whom they seek. 'Coming to Rome, much labour and little profit! The King whom you seek here, unless you bring Him with you you will not find Him.'

Are we natural travellers?

The late Bruce Chatwin, in his book *Songlines*, suggested that we are natural nomads.² This contrasts with ancient Greek philosophy where perfection was thought to lie in a state of rest. In one sense, we westerners today are a restless people. We need change and variety to a degree that our ancestors, locked into the rhythms of season and soil, would have found it hard to grasp. Yet in another sense we are as conservative about change as they were. 'I want a change' is by no means the same as a radical openness to transformation. In fact the increased rootlessness and mobility of contemporary western culture may *decrease* our willingness to change rather than otherwise. The sophistication of modern technology enables us to seek variety without great disturbance. Because of my involvement in discussions about setting up a Website or 'home page' for a particular organization, I have been reflecting on the ambiguity of the process. On the World Wide Web we have 'homes' and 'sites' and we 'visit' other people who, except in a virtual world, are thousands of miles away and culturally distant. It is a journey without movement. We visit someone else's home without leaving our own. If our

'journeys' are increasingly shaped by virtual worlds, I wonder about the long-term impact.

To journey in a virtual way without leaving home reflects elements of what modern tourism does to many physical journeys. How and where we travel is not incidental or irrelevant because journeys are one of the elements that shape the kind of people we become. Bruce Chatwin is perhaps too romantic about our pre-urban origins and also reflects something of the restlessness and rootlessness of late twentieth-century western culture. Yet, given these limitations, he makes a serious point. Journeys are natural to us. At a very basic level, most of us have to 'leave home' at some point either physically, metaphorically or both. That is part of the necessary journey towards adult identity. We leave home to find home and there is a complex process of transformation involved. More broadly, almost everyone makes at least one significant outward journey at some point.

Pilgrimage

If we leave aside trade and warfare, most personal journeys in the western world were, until relatively recently, 'pilgrimages' in some sense. Leisure travel in our modern sense was unknown because 'leisure' is a relatively recent concept that I will explore in a moment. Pilgrimage is a universal phenomenon. People in all world cultures go on pilgrimage, whether far or near, in search of some special place associated with completion, fulfilment, and even eternal life. The myths surrounding such places in some way concern human identity and human origins. Sacred places may be where the gods live or where our ancestors came from. The Christian tradition has understood the ultimate theophany to be in the person of Jesus Christ and so places associated with his life and ministry have historically had a special power. Even early modern tourism had the quality of pilgrimage as wealthy and educated northern Europeans (and later, Americans) went on the 'grand tour'. There they visited what were thought to be 'the sacred places of origin' of western culture, especially Italy and Greece.

Physical journeys act out our experience of an inner journey. In the past, people *expected* to be changed by pilgrimage and even to be transformed, completed or 'finished' by the 'grand tour'. The purpose of travel was in some sense to move us on to another stage of life. Pilgrimage might be a short journey to a local shrine or a

long, physically tough one across the width of Europe to Compostela, Rome or Jerusalem. In either case it placed a vast psychological, social and even spiritual distance between the pilgrim and 'home'. What mattered was *the departure* – a movement away from familiar landscapes and established ties. Stripped of role, status and property, the pilgrim became a learner and a receiver. Explicitly spiritual pilgrimage was to be a foretaste of heaven. This was not merely a question of splendid liturgies, glorious art and the riches of the great shrines. There was also an ideal (if not always the reality) of a mixed company that transcended normal social constraints and allowed spontaneous relationships to develop that anticipated the communion of saints.

Travel as leisure

Nowadays, personal travel is more likely to be straightforward 'tourism' and tourism is predominantly part of the leisure industry. We go away less to be self-consciously completed than to seek a brief rest in the midst of frenetic lifestyles or to be entertained by something different. But not *too* different. Even journeys to places beyond Europe and North America that, until recently, would have been considered exotic are nowadays protectively packaged. It is interesting to reflect on the spiritual quality of package tourism when it is largely cocooned from the aggravation of strange diets, health hazards, insects, uncomfortable climates and the persistent attention of 'natives'. It is not unfair to suggest that most tourists do not wish to be overly burdened with guilt-inducing reminders of political or social issues. We may continue to avoid the high-profile 'cases' such as Myanmar or East Timor. However, similar questions arise much closer to home if we allow our eyes to be opened. I only have to recall the sharp reminder of justice issues given by a Native American guide which so embarrassed a predominantly white group of us visiting the Pueblo site of Acoma in New Mexico. Protected ways of travelling may well reflect a more general desire in contemporary western culture to avoid anything that reminds us, in our postmodern condition, of the fragility and uncertainty of human existence. We sense our mortality but do not wish to confront it.

If much modern travel is more explicitly concerned with leisure than with transformation, does it always matter? Before attempting to answer that question, it is important to say that I do not believe that everything in life, including travel, needs to be treated with

utter seriousness. Christianity has a tendency to become too earnest in its discussions of human experience. It may be argued that religious faith is a matter of life and death. Christian faith has a particular preoccupation with 'sin' and 'salvation' that historically has often been unbalanced. This communicates a deeply pessimistic attitude to the created order and especially to human nature. As a consequence Christianity has developed a very limited agenda of issues and topics that fall into the 'life and death' category and therefore merit attention. Leisure, pleasure, humour, delight and play have rarely if ever been promoted as significantly life-giving – let alone eternally so. As a result they do not usually appear in books of theology or even spirituality. One form of behaviour that is closely related to these absent topics is laughter. Jorge de Burgos, the murderous monastic librarian in Umberto Eco's *The name of the rose*, argued: 'Christ never laughed!' Jorge may be fictional but his attitudes are not. Laughter was indeed viewed with suspicion and even condemned by many patristic theologians and medieval monastic writers.

There is an unspoken assumption that 'leisure', like laughter, is superficial. I believe differently. In Eco's tale, Jorge de Burgos condemned laughter precisely because it was subversive. It stood for the attitude of carnival which deliberately subverted the established order in a celebration of the grotesque. Leisure, like laughter, may itself subvert our normal ways of seeing, judging, behaving and justifying our existence.

Leisure liberates us from daily anxiety. It enables us to lay aside our normal agenda and to be simply open to what is. It possesses a healing and humanizing quality. Medieval pilgrimages often sought miraculous cures. Leisure, too, expresses a more inchoate quest for well-being, health and recovery. Specifically leisure *travel* is thought to be good therapy after serious traumas such as bereavement. 'It'll take you out of yourself!' Leisure involves, like sleep, letting go of control and so it demands that we make an act of trust in life itself. Leisure actually focuses on *life* rather than on destiny and enables us to take pleasure in *life* rather than in productivity or worthy activities. This does not necessarily mean treating life in an unreflective way. In many respects leisure actually enhances our capacity to notice and this may subvert our presuppositions and assumptions. Much of our life is conducted under pressure and at high speed. This tends to make us inattentive to what seems less crucial and to what does not force itself on our attention. When I was on sabbatical

on the Isle of Iona in 1992 I was cut off from all my normal concerns and responsibilities. True, I was trying to write a book, but the timetable was my own. I found myself spending countless hours ambling along the beaches or sitting and staring into rock pools. Rather than lifting my eyes to the hills and sensing the world of the Spirit in the awesome grandeur of overwhelming landscapes, I found it by looking down to earth and at the subtle variations of colour of the pebbles under water that I would not normally have noticed. It took a journey to reach this place and this experience. This was a journey not only across physical space but also away from the structures that normally constrained my ways of seeing and thinking.

At best, the point about *leisure travel* is that it is not concerned with productivity. What is unconstructive about much leisure travel these days is not the *leisure* but the fact that it does no more than reproduce the way we live the rest of our lives in another form. The system transports us somewhere as fast as possible so that we can maximize our time at the destination. This easily turns leisure into another conveyor belt that leaves no space for transition or to attend to what lies 'in between'. Yet it is often the spaces 'in between' rather than simply the destination that have the power to subvert the way things usually are.

The importance of transition

Spiritual pilgrimages have traditionally allowed for this 'in between' experience because the movement and the journey were so important. Although Chaucer's *The Canterbury tales* would not be considered as spiritual literature in a direct way, they show how the companionship of the pilgrim journey itself was of central importance. Some people became so bound up with the 'in between' that they never arrived at the pilgrimage shrine. There is an ancient tale about one young Byzantine pilgrim called Daniel who did not bother to travel on to Jerusalem once he had met Simeon Stylites on his pillar outside Antioch!

I have never walked the great pilgrim routes to Compostela or Canterbury. Even so, modern transportation cannot totally eliminate the transitional experience in journeys to remoter places. Travelling from London to Iona off the West Coast of Scotland is relatively long and complicated for a city-dweller accustomed to the speed and relative simplicity of modern travel. Iona is not a place you

visit by accident or as a minor detour. I have travelled there several times. It involved a fast train from London followed by a slow train through the snow-covered Highlands, a journey totalling nearly nine hours. There was an overnight stop in Oban and then the early ferry to the island of Mull. We crossed the island by a long bus trip that included rescuing a coffin (and two undertakers) from a hearse that had broken down. Finally, there was another journey by a small ferry over the choppy waves of the Sound to Iona itself. This experience enhances the sense of stepping beyond familiar boundaries not simply to another place but into another world.

Perseverance

If attending to the 'in between' is an important feature of journeys, the idea of perseverance is another. An interesting symbol of this is the medieval labyrinth. Labyrinth designs still exist in a number of French cathedrals. The best known is at Chartres. The pilgrim entered the great west door and in walking towards the High Altar entered a large labyrinth on the floor of the nave. Unlike a maze with its many false paths, a labyrinth has only one route. However complex its directions, pilgrims are assured of reaching the centre as long as they persevere on their journey. The Chartres labyrinth was known as *la lieue* or 'league', which highlights the notion of distance. These medieval labyrinths undoubtedly had several layers of meaning. They symbolized pilgrimage to the earthly Jerusalem and the pilgrimage of life towards the heavenly Jerusalem. Perseverance was the key to these, physically and spiritually. Traditionally, religious pilgrimage in all ages has included an element of penance. The theology behind this probably builds upon some deep human instinct. In certain kinds of modern tourism penance has been secularized into a more general sense that the length and toughness of a journey stretches a person. Some kind of conquest of self is achieved. Trekking and mountaineering, for example, seem to share in this 'no pain, no gain' philosophy.

The quality of surprise

The book I referred to at the beginning on 'transformational travel' was explicitly about modern pilgrimages to sacred places. This 'value-added' leisure travel includes an explicit desire to seek deeper meaning and to be changed by the power of the sacred places we visit. Pilgrimage can undoubtedly be a powerful spiritual

practice. However, modern notions of 'transformational travel' can sound rather contrived. The Christian spiritual tradition of pilgrimage reminds us of three crucial things. First, the journey itself is as important as the destination. Second, pilgrimage is not automatically subversive and sacred places are not automatically powerful or transformative. Third, real subversion undermines even our best spiritual intentions! In other words, another really important aspect of 'transformational travel' is that transformation is always a *surprise*. People often find that what gains their attention at their destination was not what they expect or what they had travelled for.

I recall fulfilling my ambition to visit the desert and to spend time in its empty spaces. New Mexico may not be the Sahara but the small monastery I visited was remote enough. There was no dramatic wrestling with the demons in memory of Desert Fathers and Mothers! If anything I was lulled into a sense of security by the beauty of the landscape, the leisure of solitude and the rhythms of the liturgy. Then, one afternoon towards the end of my stay, I was meditating under a tree by a river running through the canyon. No thoughts, no images, merely deep stillness. Into this tranquil moment came a sudden, quite unanticipated certainty that the whole of my life was about to change – *had* to change. This was not a matter of decision; it was simply a matter of knowing it would be so. On the face of it, this completely subverted the identity that had been mine for nearly thirty years. Yet, after the initial surprise, the aftermath was not panic but peace. To this day, through all the pain of change, that has never left me.

One of my favourite feasts in the Christian calendar is the Transfiguration on August 6. One important element of the story is surprise. All of us seek in special places the space to be ourselves. That, too, is one of the values of holidays and one of the potentials of leisure travel. Sometimes, this space is overtaken by the unexpected. In the Transfiguration story (e.g. Matthew 17:1–13) Jesus takes his closest disciples aside in a secure, intimate group to find space for themselves away from the crowds. The one whom they know is transfigured before their eyes and shown to be far more than they had ever thought. Alongside Jesus appear two figures from the past: the great symbol of the Law, Moses, and the great symbol of prophecy, Elijah. The event points forward to the journey up to Jerusalem and to the passion. The disciples go back down the mountain to their normal world but with their personal worlds turned upside down and their sense of meaning transformed.

Travel, change and freedom

It must be clear by now that I am suspicious of the notion that, to be transformational, travel *necessarily* needs to contain some intentional extra quality. The history of Christianity reminds us that the matter is more complex. The New Testament stories of the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35) or of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–19) concern journeys that ended up radically different from their original purpose. The central question is not ‘what constitutes “transformational travel”?’ but *how can we be transformed by travel?* What is crucial is *how* we travel. The ‘how’ is shaped by the life experience, the agenda and the underlying values we carry with us as we journey. The most transforming travel experience of my life was the nine months I spent in India nearly twenty years ago. For the first time I lived outside my own western culture. This profoundly challenged all my assumptions and ways of seeing. My secure but narrow world-view was irrevocably turned upside down, although I did not appreciate that until later. I remember at the time that an Indian friend commented about the many western seekers of the mystic East, ‘You have to know where you come from to be safe to travel’. That phrase has haunted me ever since.

So an important part of *how* we travel is *who we are as we travel*. To be changed by travel we have to possess a fundamental sense of identity. For all of us, I suspect, travel is an ambiguous reality. It frees us and it frightens us. Perhaps that is why the idea of ‘the traveller’ is also ambiguous. ‘Well-travelled’ is a metaphor for wisdom and moral authority. On the other hand, the people called ‘travellers’, the gypsies, *gens de voyage*, are amongst the most feared and disliked of people in much of western Europe. Their freedom from social constraints, their standing outside our normal boundaries, is profoundly disturbing.

To be capable of being transformed by travel there needs to be a degree of inner freedom already present in us. This partly concerns the intensity of our desire. If we know ‘where we come from’ at some deep level we do not need to be defensive when we move beyond our familiar landscapes. Xenophobia and racism are not signs of strongly held identities but the opposite. People with roots are free to take risks and to acknowledge that what they have is not everything. They can face their incompleteness because it is not the same as emptiness. A sense of incompleteness feeds desire. Desire is the power within us that opens us to what is other than ourselves

and to what is beyond our boundaries. It prepares us for possibilities, for what is more, for the future. In the journey of life both this inner freedom and this desire are what ultimately lead us to God.

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NOTES

1 Jennifer Westwood, *Sacred journeys: an illustrated guide to pilgrimages around the world* (London/New York, 1997).

2 Bruce Chatwin, *Songlines* (London, 1988).