

## November Theme

### *Pilgrimage: The Practice of Risk*

Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.

~T. S. Eliot

#### **Introduction**

Jerusalem. Mecca. Lourdes, France. Bodh Gaya, India. Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Many people make journeys to various places of importance, often for religious reasons. They go on pilgrimages, that is, long journeys or searches of great spiritual significance.

In this month of Thanksgiving we think of the Pilgrims, who did not become known as ‘Pilgrims’ until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century when historians noted what Governor William Bradford had written about leaving Holland to come to America: “They knew they were pilgrims, and looked not much on those things, but lifted up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country; and quieted their spirits.” Bradford did not emphasize the inevitable hardship and risk of leaving England and then Holland, but instead was focused on the faith that their journey would be worth it.

Bradford also referred to Hebrews 11 in describing his group of travellers as “strangers and exiles...seeking a homeland.” Indeed, “strangers and exiles” matches the Latin root of pilgrim – “peregrinus” meaning “foreign.”

A major element of going on a pilgrimage is taking oneself out of the familiar and encountering the foreign. All pilgrims – no matter the type of pilgrimage – leave behind the known, and usually the comfortable. There are many risks – the risk of spiritual disappointment, of not having your wish fulfilled, of physical hardship, of losing something, of being lost. Of course, no one ever left home without taking a risk. Whenever you take a risk in hopes of achieving something, you end up having to give something up in order to get it.

Many famous pilgrimages have been traveled over the centuries, indeed millennia, and in their traditional form are supposed to exact a toll on the pilgrims – long days of walking in all kinds of weather and lodging each night in modest circumstances. Yet, pilgrimage is not traditionally about the journey for the sake of journey. Pilgrimage involves a deep longing for the destination - that sacred place. A longing so powerful that hardship will be endured to get there.

There are no Unitarian-Universalist shrines; instead, our faith emphasizes “the holiness in the eye of the beholder”. But each of us might hold a time or place sacred – a time or place for which we would endure significant risk to get there.

Unitarian Universalists also affirm and promote “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” which could be akin to going on a pilgrimage. We constantly take risks, we leave our comfort zone, and we go out and search – for ourselves, for meaning, for truth, for justice.

#### **Questions for discussion and discernment on your own, or with each other:**

1. What pilgrimages have you been on? What risks did you take when you went?
2. If you were to go on a pilgrimage, what would you do / where would you go?
3. What do you pack to go on a pilgrimage? What do you leave behind? When you get back home, what do you unpack?

This month’s theme was composed by Nevin Shanabrook and Maria Kempner with the Worship Associates.

4. Under what circumstances can you / would you abandon a pilgrimage before reaching the end?
5. Is it riskier to go on a pilgrimage alone, or is it riskier to go with others? Why?
6. What makes something or someplace worthy of going on a pilgrimage to it?
7. In what places or contexts have you been a wanderer, a foreigner, a stranger?
8. What are the risks of not taking risks?

## Quotes and Short Readings

Pilgrimage to the place of the wise is to find escape from the flame of separateness.

~ *Rumi*

Life isn't defined by the safe decisions, it's made by the risks, the hard truths and reaching for the slightly unattainable.

~ *Paulo Coelho*

Not until we are lost do we begin to find ourselves.

~ *Henry David Thoreau*

The pilgrim's steps take on great significance. The pilgrimage symbolizes our life. It means that you do not wish to be completely settled, that you do not resist all that tends to dampen your energy, to suffocate questions, to close off horizons. To be a pilgrim means, before all, accepting one's fragility while at the same time confronting one's obstacles and persevering to the end.

~ *Pope John Paul II*

These all died in faith [note: a reference to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants], not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared them a city.

~ *Hebrews 11: 13-16, Revised Standard Version, referred to by William Bradford in thinking of the Plymouth settlers, or Pilgrims, as "strangers and exiles on this earth"*

I think everybody has their own way of looking at their lives as some kind of pilgrimage. Some people will see their role as a pilgrim in terms of setting up a fine family, or establishing a business inheritance. Everyone's got their own definition. Mine, I suppose, is to know myself.

~ *Eric Clapton*

You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You can't get there by bus, only by hard work and risk and by not quite knowing what you're doing. What you'll discover will be wonderful. What you'll discover will be yourself.

~ *Alan Alda*

Go on a Unitarian Universalist Pilgrimage! Go to the following link to see where to "visit the scenes of our tradition's great stories." <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/uu-pilgrimage>

For some people a place is made holy by the historical significance or the religious tradition of a place. Perhaps this site was built by architects and artists who had the intention of creating holy space and perhaps over time thousands perhaps even millions of people have visited this site with reverence. For such pilgrims, holiness could be inspired by a sense that you are not alone. You are standing toward the end of a long line that reaches back through many years, many centuries even. And as you settle into such a space you may realize that holiness is not innately present in a building, a city, or even an entire area of land. Holiness in the eye of the beholder. One person's pilgrimage site is another person's sightseeing.

~ *Susan Maginn, UU Minister*