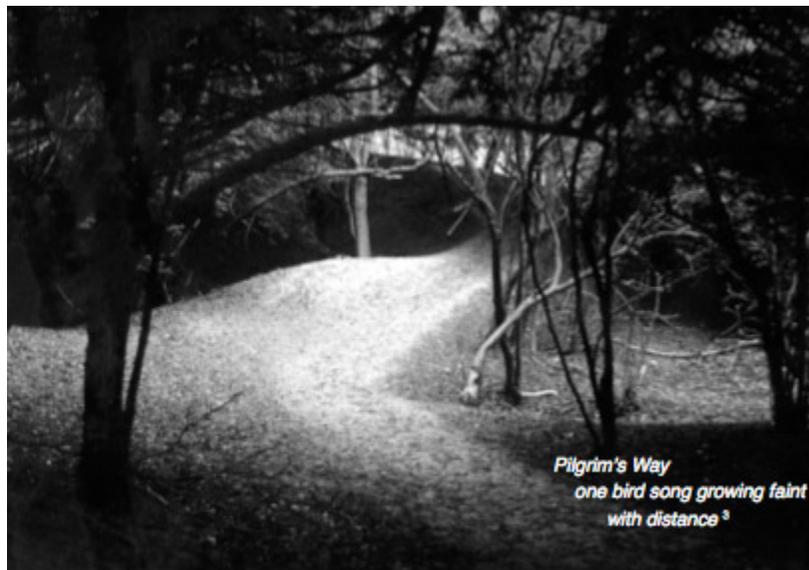


Marjorie Buettner

The Return Message: A Pilgrim's Way of Longing [1]

The pilgrim-poet Bashô called it looking for a “glimpse of the underglimmer.” Goethe called it the “holy longing.” For the Sufis it was the ability to see with “the eyes of the heart.” Emerson looked for “the undersong” in things. For the Muslims it was Mecca and for Christians and Jews it was a journey to Jerusalem. For the holy men of Japan or hijiri it was following the solitary way. For Buddhists paying homage to Buddha it was visiting those sites of Buddha's birth and enlightenment. For Australian aborigines this journey was called a “walk-about” which follows the dreamtracks or songlines of the ancients. For American Indians it was a vision quest. [2]



A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place; on a more poetic level the term pilgrim has its roots in the Latin *per agrum* or “through the field.” For centuries to go on a pilgrimage was an obligatory act which was essentially one of penance or contrition. Fundamentally, however, it is a calling, this idea of a pilgrimage; it is a transformative journey physical, spiritual or psychological to a sacred place, to the heart of what is holy.

looking for your grave
prairie grass rippling
all the way down hill [4]

This idea of pilgrimage is a poetic endeavor, too. For Bashô — who was a pilgrim the last ten years of his life — this idea of traveling to the places that Saigyô traveled or alluded to in his poetry was an obsessive joy. Bashô in *Narrow Road* calls it “seeing into the hearts of the ancients.” Standing in the place where poets of the past stood is always inspiring and

rewarding. We breathe in the power and magic of those who came before us.

moonless night
guided by the fragrance
of the garden [5]

So, we need to ask ourselves what is our pilgrimage? What is our holy and sacred center to which we must pay homage and honor out of respect? We must listen deeply to the calling; we must learn to slow down. As Lao Tsu said, “the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”

loon calls
my daughter drawing circles
near the fire [6]

Our steps today lead us here to honor those poets whom we have loved and admired. Last year for me it was a journey up north to the boundary waters area in search of Jun Fujita’s cabin. It was a journey that made me see anew, touch and smell and taste anew; it stimulated my senses and it acted as an impetus to get back in touch with meaning. Now, I have found out that two professionals from Hiroshima — a journalist and a professor of history — will make that long pilgrimage to Fujita’s cabin as well — researching his life and poetry. It is a deep calling for them, honoring Fujita’s spirit and creativity, for as Rumi said “this longing you express is the return message.”

seeing it now—
how the morning sun belongs
to the summer grass

If you listen to the calling your life will be changed:

as if we could
change our lives ...
summer moon [7]

Perhaps like the early Christians, a physical pilgrimage is too dangerous to take and so you must develop a substitute pilgrimage such as walking a labyrinth — even in your own backyard.

walking in the dust
of dandelions
summer’s end

In either case, we seek healing and inner transformation, yet it is traveling which often is a travail:

lunar eclipse ...
I step into
my own darkness

The Tao Te Ching says it well: “Who will prefer the jangle of jade pendants if he has once heard stone growing in a cliff.”

picking up stones —
i listen for stone-wind
i touch stone-warmth

This travail may often lead us off the path where no “trace of the trail” remains; Saigyô’s tanka reflects this:

With blooms of pampas grass as marker
I push my way along,
No trace of the trail
I vaguely remember

Sometimes this off the trail travel leads you to inexplicable questions:

Perseid showers —
has it been a life falling
forward or away ? [8]

But it will always be poetry that calls to us in this dark, wayless part of the path guiding us in the right direction of understanding. Bashô knew this when he wrote:

Set off on a journey —
And then, one night
Take out my poems and understand ...
The autumn wind

For Bashô it was that “wind-swept spirit” or that special something inside which called him to poetry; in this haiku, Bashô knew his name:

I’m a wanderer
So let that be my name
The first winter rain

I reply:

winter rain
finding that part of silence
which speaks to me [9]

Perhaps at this point of our wandering we are able to glimpse for the first

time Elliot's "still point" where he says in *The Four Quartets*: "the end of our explorations will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

chasing the sunset
that rides the highway
this pilgrimage home

And did not these poets help us in our explorations in order to arrive where we started knowing our craft for the first time? These poets helped us see into our art, see into the craft of poetry and hone it well. In an interview for *Hermitage*, Ion Codrescu asked me whom I admired as a contemporary haiku poet. I told him it was Robert Spiess. Here is one of my favorite haiku by Bob followed by a brief excerpt from the interview:

Firefly
wakens
me

Before I even knew I needed one, the teacher appeared as if out of nowhere. In 1995 my ineptitude as a writer of haiku was never discussed, but, by example and selection, I learned the haiku way through Robert Spiess's patient tutelage. He opened up so many worlds for me by accepting my poetry, critiquing it and inspiring improvement. He taught me without teaching; he guided me without making me follow him — though I always will; he was to me a

Firefly in the deep, summer
night, waking me. [10]

Today our pilgrimage to honor these poets is a small yet essential homage to them. We who follow in their poetic footsteps see the torchlight of their poetry as beacons in the night, fireflies that rival the stars.

deep summer night —
the light of fireflies
bridging the pond

Notes:

[1] This work was presented at “The Cradle of American Haiku” Festival, Mineral Point, Wis., August 22, 2008.

[2] Some of these references are discussed in detail in Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage* (New York: MJF Books, 1998).

[3] Haiku by Marjorie Buettner; photo “Pilgrim’s Way — Near Reigate” from Landscapes by Bob Trubshaw. Charnwood Arts Web Works site, <<http://www.charnwoodarts.org.uk/webworks/webworkshaiku.php?imageid=1166>>. Used with permission.

[4] *Frogpond* 23:2 (2000).

[5] James W. Hackett International Haiku Award, 2003, honorable mention.

[6] Harold G. Henderson Haiku Award, 2002, first place.

[7] 5th Suruga-Baika Literary Haiku Contest, 2003, honorable mention.

[8] 7th Suruga-Baika Literary Haiku Contest, 2005, honorable mention.

[9] Robert Spiess Memorial Haiku Award, 2005, honorable mention.

[10] Hermitage, *A Haiku Journal* III:1&2 (2006).