



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Holy Journeys”

© by The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

And Hajj [pilgrimage to Mecca] to the House [of worship, the holy Kaaba] is a duty that mankind owes to Allah. Qu’rān 3:97

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

Life is a pilgrimage. The wise [person] does not rest by the roadside inns [but] marches direct to the illimitable of eternal bliss, [the] ultimate destination. Swami Sivananda

Travel is more than the seeing of sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in the ideas of living. Miriam Beard

Sermon

You and I may feel we are living on a long and winding road (*Note: this sermon followed the choir singing an anthem of the Beatles’ song by that name*). Most of us have no idea where we are going, even when we try very hard to control or direct our lives. But for at least once in their lifetime, during the Hajj able and observant Muslims know exactly where they are going.

Today begins the first of five days for the Islamic pilgrimage called the *Hajj*, which means ‘to intend to journey’. The cover calligraphy on your order of service is stylized Arabic for the word Hajj. Muslims do not make images of God or Muhammad to prevent someone from worshipping a picture that necessarily limits God or mistakes Muhammad as someone to worship. Instead, Arabic lettering has developed into beautiful art forms.

Undertaking the Hajj is one of five requirements of Islam. At least once in a Muslim’s lifetime they must journey to Mecca if physically and financially able. During this annual pilgrimage millions of faithful will travel to the holy house in Mecca, called the Kaa’ba, a word related to ‘cube’ because of its shape. Made of granite from nearby hills, the interior is an open space with three columns or pillars to the ceiling and an altar.

In the easternmost outside corner lies a collection of black stones, which at one time were all one piece. The original stone is said to have been placed at that spot in the desert by God to indicate where the very first temple to God should be built.

The stones are secured to the temple by black pitch and a broad silver band. They mark where a pilgrim begins the traditional counterclockwise walk made seven times around the temple. Stones frequently appear in Middle East and Jewish traditions to mark holy sites. Jacob, for example, marked with a rock the location where he envisioned a ladder that angels climbed back and forth to heaven and where he wrestled with God. The ancient practice of marking special locations with stone cairns in the wilderness or on mountainsides remains a tradition intrepid hikers carry out today.

Muslims do not worship the stone in the Kaa'ba. They revere its understood connection to God. Muhammad once was observed kissing it and others have copied this. One Muslim pilgrim, Muzaffar Iqbal, described his Hajj experience in *Dawn in Madinah: A Pilgrim's Progress*:

At the end of the second [circum-ambulation of the Kaa'ba], I was granted one of those extraordinary moments which sometimes occur around the Black Stone. As I approached the Corner the large crowd was suddenly pushed back by a strong man who had just kissed the Black Stone. This push generated a backward current, creating a momentary opening around the Black Stone as I came to it; I swiftly accepted the opportunity reciting, *Bismillahi Allahu akbar wa lillahi-hamd* ["In the name of God, God is great, all praise to God"], put my hands on the Black Stone and kissed it. Thousands of silver lines sparkled, the Stone glistened, and something stirred deep inside me. A few seconds passed. Then I was pushed away by the guard.

His feelings echo my own experience two years ago when a group from this congregation and I visited the very first Unitarian Church ever built, in 1568 in Kolozsvár, Transylvania. I touched, rather than kissed, the circular stairwell that led me to the elevated preacher's perch overlooking the pews below. And like the Hajj pilgrim, I felt something stir within. I felt a connection in that moment to the many early Unitarian ministers who blazed the trail for religious freedom and right of conscience that we enjoy and I sometimes take for granted. I felt a sense of oneness with all that had come before me. I felt a sense that we pilgrims from this UU Fellowship were each drops of water in the larger stream of Unitarian Universalism. That feeling of being a droplet did not diminish me, but made me feel bigger through our connectedness. Some might describe their experience as moving from being separate from God, the Spirit, or Mystery to being one with the ineffable. Sufi Muslims might say Lover and Beloved become one.

When Muhammad taught those who surrender themselves to God that they should undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca, he did it to emphasize devotion to the one God and to develop community identity. Arabs were fiercely tribal and practiced vendetta killings. An eye for an eye for an eye in a never ending cycle of retribution. Muhammad worked to break down blood and tribal ties. Islam gathered people from different tribes into one community based on shared beliefs and a shared desire to end the tribal warfare. Muhammad believed a shared pilgrimage experience during the annual hajj would increase their sense of belonging to one another.

My experience in Transylvania increased my own sense of belonging to the stream of Unitarian Universalist history and tradition as well as current faithful. UUs who travel to General Assembly where thousands of UUs come together say little compares to the profound experience of being part of the larger whole. You realize you are not alone, especially if yours is a small, sometimes isolated UU fellowship. General Assembly can be a profound UU pilgrimage experience, as is going to Transylvania, Boston or Concord, Massachusetts. Having personally experienced how impressive and inspirational General Assembly can be, I can begin to imagine how powerful it must be to join the millions who gather in Mecca for the Hajj.

Similar pilgrimage traditions can be found in every religion and culture. Aboriginal Australians go on walkabouts following creation stories written in the landscape. Buddhists journey to Bodh Gaya, India, where Buddha sat under a fig tree and reached enlightenment. Jews travel to holy sites in Jerusalem and Christians in Bethlehem. Many types of faithful feel the call to visit Stonehenge and experience the awesome power of the standing stones.

Some pilgrimages are undertaken as a penance for sins. By following a difficult or challenging road with humility you may show repentance. Some journeys might help you process a crisis or face a transition, others might heal or inspire. Some allow you a period of intense prayer, as in Buddhist walking meditations or labyrinths. Some allow for an encounter with God or the sacred that permeates all.

The Hajj shares a common theme with many religious pilgrimages – that of walking in the footsteps of a holy person or generations of holy persons. By wading in the footsteps of early spiritual leaders, by seeing what they might have seen, by responding to the landscape and the people as they might have, the pilgrim can bring that historic person to life. You can embody their spirit as you undertake the journey. It is a communion of spirit that brings you closer to that person's holiness and to all they believed, hoped for, and perhaps died for. Peter Walker, in his book *The Way Is Made By Walking* (page 192), writes that pilgrimage offers 'the opportunity to reflect on the historical roots of one's faith and to make an appropriate, personal response, such as renewal and revitalizing one's faith. He adds that taking a pilgrimage is 'historical enquiry bathed in prayer.'

Oftentimes this communion of spirit expresses itself as awe and wonder, even mystery. To stand before the majesty and mystery of Stonehenge, the Grand Canyon, the Grand Mosque and Kaa'ba in Mecca, or the preacher's balcony in the world's first Unitarian Church can be awesome, inspirational—breath-taking. To feel and touch what holy people felt and touched hundreds and thousands of years ago can be overwhelming. Something may stir within.

But an emotional or spiritual high such as this is not the only thing one can receive from following holy footsteps to a holy place.

We often say life is a journey and the path is more important than the destination. Our UU Fourth Principle demands we walk a path seeking responsible personal truth and meaning. But a pilgrimage turns this idea on its head. Reaching the destination is as important as the intentional steps you take to get there and back. *Intention* being the key factor.

A pilgrimage is undertaken with forethought and planning. You select your destination for a reason. The journey itself is conducted with mindfulness and awareness of the historical events and the current activities going on around you. It usually is limited in duration—long enough to offer substance, short enough that you return to normal routine at some point. A pilgrimage is a moment in the larger journey of life. When you return to what you left, you usually return changed in some way. Reflecting on the experience informs who you are and may direct you to follow new paths, new commitments, new understandings.

Whenever we travel somewhere outside of our normal routines, whether it's around the world or around our town, we meet different people than we usually would. Their norms may challenge your norms in some way that cause you to stretch and grow your mind or spirit. Hiking up a mountain or crossing a desert presents physical hardships that may challenge your sense of competency, self-sufficiency. Going to a foreign country may confront you with cultural norms you have to accommodate yourself to. Whenever we recognize ways different from our own, we

learn about ourselves. We learn what is important to us. Our values may become clearer in contrast. When we go on a pilgrimage we learn about others, but mostly we learn about ourselves.

Religious studies expert and author Huston Smith claims humans are embodied souls and that we have to act out our faith. This is why we humans have been undertaking spiritual journeys as far back as history has recorded and beyond even that. Wherever your embodied soul takes you, I hope you return to a safe place where you can reflect on your experience, be welcomed home, and be assisted in assimilating the changes your pilgrimage might demand of you.

May this sanctuary, this house of love, be such a place for you. May it always be so.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What path have you walked and what have you discovered about yourself?
2. Where did your spiritual journey begin and where has it taken you?
3. What is most difficult about the journey of life you are living?