

Life Is a Pilgrimage

The Goal Is to Find God

Nayaswami Jyotish





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When I think back about my pilgrimage, time gets very stretchy. I'm not sure whether what I'm about to share is a single meditation, an amalgamation of many meditations, or a year, or a whole lifetime. Maybe there actually was a walk, but maybe there wasn't. At any rate, here's how I remember it.

I'd read in an article that a pilgrimage was a good way to jump-start a spiritual search. I looked into a Zen-sponsored trip, but that seemed a little dry for me. I researched several other ones, and finally I found a pilgrimage called "The Path." It was connected to the teachings of Paramhansa Yogananda, and was supposed to take you to the ocean of bliss. That sounded good to me, so I decided to check it out.

There was a rudimentary website that gave some vague hints as to what it entailed.

First, it said that "The Path" could take as long as one needed, depending on how much effort one put into it. It also said that there would be no way to use money or credit cards, but you could exchange money for tokens that could be used along the way. There were no details and no map, only directions to the starting point.

I read all the reviews from previous pilgrims and noticed a strange pattern. Reviewers gave it either zero stars or five stars—hardly anything in between. The zero-star people claimed it was a financial scam, but none of them had gone beyond the first day. The five-star rave reviews were from those who had traveled the whole path. This

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intrigued me even more, so I decided to give it a go.

I imagined that this “Path” would be something like the Pacific Crest Trail or Camino de Santiago, or one of those long pilgrimages people take to holy places. I assumed I needed to pack lightly, so I bought a small camp stove, an all-seasons sleeping bag, a minimalist backpack, and the best walking shoes I could find. I was soon equipped and eager to get on the trail.



A Strange Beginning

When the bus dropped me at the entrance, I was both surprised and confused. I'd thought it would be a simple trailhead, but this was completely different from what I'd expected. It was more like arriving at Disneyland. There was a little “pseudo-village” with lights and shops. The entrance point was a gaudy arch with a flashing neon sign saying, “Exchange Money Here.” Some of the lights on the sign were missing, so it actually said “E chang Money ere.” Honestly, at this point the zero-star reviews were beginning to make a lot of sense to me, but it seemed too late to turn back. I also had a suspicion that this was done on purpose, as a way to get rid of the fainthearted and uncommitted.

Sitting in the exchange booth was a white-haired fellow with a long, white beard and bright eyes, looking like a caricature of Santa Claus. I'd saved up five hundred dollars and asked him if that would be enough. “That depends,” he said, using as few words as possible.

“On what?” I asked.

“On you,” he said with a chuckle—he was enigmatic, if nothing else.

I could see that further conversation wasn't going to yield anything, so I exchanged my money and got my tokens, which said “Good Karma” on one side and “Bad Karma” on the reverse. I worried a bit when I noticed that a few others were changing thousands of dollars, but five hundred was all I had.

After the booth came a bright-yellow turnstile that I entered a little awkwardly trying to squeeze through with my backpack and gear. Then things got even stranger.

Inside the gate it was like a miniature amusement park, where you could buy food, T-shirts, clothing, and trinkets. There were shopping carts, too, for those who wanted to bring their purchases along on

the trail.

Most people seemed content with only their backpacks like me, but a few were loading up carts, and two or three people even had roller bags. There was one fellow, big and red-faced, who had managed to strap together four carts all filled with goods, and he was getting ready to push them along the trail. All in all, it was a very bizarre scene.

In spite of the strangeness, I felt oddly elated and disconnected from my everyday world with its normal experiences and demands. It was a picturesque day, comfortably warm with a gentle breeze, which I could feel moving over my face and arms, almost as if it were alive. The path was wide, paved, and mostly shaded by huge old trees. Everybody seemed to be in a holiday mood, filled with excitement and expectancy. Once I started walking, I saw that only a few people were pushing carts. Most of the others were dressed simply, just as I was. Of course there was also the big fellow with his four-cart rig.

I noticed one man who didn't have anything at all, not even a backpack. He was wearing sandals, lightweight slacks, and a T-shirt that said "Plain Living" on the back, and "High Thinking" on the front. He had an aura around him that made it seem like he was kind of floating, and he was helping people pull their bags and push their carts. At first I thought he must be an employee, but after a while I decided that he was just another pilgrim.

As we walked, the big group from the entrance began to string out, everyone finding their natural pace. My senses remained strangely heightened. I could still feel the breeze tickling the hairs on my arm. The grasses and flowers emanated a sweet, almost heady perfume. In the distance, through the trees, I saw a red fox looking at me curiously and following along. Interestingly I've always thought of foxes as good omens and liked spotting them. I began to think, "This is going to be a really fine walk."

Around midmorning the man with the T-shirt noticed that I had been glancing at him occasionally, and came over to introduce himself. "I'm Walker," he said. I didn't know if that was one of those "trail names" or his real name, but it seemed to fit him somehow. I assumed he would strike up a conversation, but he seemed very self-contained and just walked along beside me. Someone had scribbled a little sign near the entrance that said, "If you can't improve on the silence, don't talk at all," so there seemed to be an unwritten

agreement to keep conversation to a minimum.

After a while, Walker said, "Would you like to help me push carts?" I paused, not knowing what to say, and I guess he saw my hesitancy. "You'll be happier if you do," he said.

So I figured, "Well, what have I got to lose?" and said, "Sure I'll help you push some carts."

Everything, as I say, was beautiful. The path was smooth, easy, and shaded by oaks and elms. After a couple of hours we came to a slight upslope that made it a bit harder. Some people, especially the guy with the four-cart rig, began to struggle, but after a short rise the slope leveled off again, and the rest of the day was easy going. During that part of the walk there was a constant buzzing of bees, though I never felt threatened or even saw one. Odd.

As evening came, we arrived at a guesthouse. I'd assumed that we'd be camping along the path, but here was a gorgeous guesthouse with lots of rooms, a big patio made of multi-colored paving stones, and a kidney-shaped swimming pool. It looked just like a high-end resort, and although very nice, it was completely unexpected (like most things on this pilgrimage).

A bell rang seven times announcing that the dining room was now open. Here we were met by a gorgeous buffet with every imaginable food that you could want, including a beautiful selection of fruits, vegetables, desserts, and even meat dishes for those who weren't vegetarians.

There was a railing with a gate and a sign that read, "Room, Board, and Access to the Store—Ten Percent."

People were confused. What in the world did that mean? Then someone figured it out: You had to give ten percent of your tokens for room, board, and store access. It seemed a high price to me, but I dropped my fifty tokens in the slot on the front of the gate.

But you can imagine the consternation of some of the others. I mean, I'd only exchanged five hundred dollars, but some had changed thousands of dollars, and everyone had to give ten percent. This was really upsetting to those with more tokens—they weren't used to the concept of tithing.

The group of big spenders began to gather together and complain about this outrage. The more they talked, the angrier they became, until many of them decided that no one was going to make them give up ten percent of their tokens. After milling about, they saw a

tearoom where they could at least get free beverages. They decided to spend the night there, having a kind of an angry tea party and making an irritated din all night long.

By the morning they had formed into an action group and were going from person to person trying to convince everybody that this whole thing was a scam, a plot to get our money. During the night they'd come up with a slogan that they felt certain would convince people to leave with them: "What is wisdom if not to keep what is ours for ourselves?" One especially pushy person focused exclusively on convincing this fellow Walker with his "Plain Living and High Thinking" T-shirt, but he didn't seem all that impressed with their slogan.

Many people turned back that morning, probably intending to write a no-star review. But for those of us who stayed, there was a sense of relief at their departure and a lessening of tension. After breakfast the time came for the "access to the store" that had been mentioned on that sign. I thought it would be, you know, a little mom-and-pop shop where you could get some trail mix, granola bars, and bottled water. But when I went in, it was more like a Walmart. It had a furniture section; it had appliances; it had all the clothing and camping gear you could ever want. And it was all free—part of your ten percent entrance fee from the night before.

You can imagine how excited the fellow with the four-cart rig was. He really piled his carts up with merchandise. There were big signs that read, "Feel free to take whatever you want. Return it when you're done." Near the exit was another, smaller, sign that said "Return Station ¼ mile." I got a few granola bars and some water but that was all, because I still wanted to travel light.

We started walking and I soon realized, for the first time, that the management of this place had a kind of weird sense of humor. Once we exited the store, we were back on the trail again. Around a bend about a quarter of a mile away, there was a return station—right at the base of a long flight of steep, roughhewn stone steps. Obviously nobody was going to take carts up those stairs, so people were already leaving behind most of what they'd gotten in the store.

Well, almost everybody. The big fellow left his carts, but he had two roller bags and a backpack that he'd swung around so that it was on his chest. And believe it or not, he had a plasma TV strapped to his back. As I passed him, I gave him a quizzical glance and noticed

that he had on a cap that said "San Francisco Forty-Niners." I think he was slightly embarrassed, because he returned a self-conscious smile and shrugged, saying, "The TV's for next year's Super Bowl."

That was the last time I saw him, as I climbed up to the top of the stairs. I don't know whether he ever made it up those steps or not. For those of us who continued, the path leveled off at the top and then continued on through gently rolling hills. The weather continued to be perfect that day, and towards evening we came to a guesthouse, which was much smaller than the first one.

Of course, the group had gotten smaller by this time, with maybe half already having turned back. This guesthouse too had a beautiful buffet and a huge dessert section as if to compensate for the trick at the stairs. There was a sign similar to the others that said, "Room, Board, and Access to the Store—Ten Percent." I paid my tithe—now only forty-five tokens because of my diminishing stash. As I did so, I began to worry a little about running out of tokens before the end of the pilgrimage. Others, too, were counting out their ten percent with worried expressions.

This store was much simpler, but you could still get whatever you needed. Again, there were the same instructions: "Feel free to take whatever you want. Return it when you're done."

The third day continued much like the first two, with a guesthouse at the end of the day's walk. When we entered the dining room, I found myself before a gate with the familiar sign about paying 10 percent. I noticed another gate also this time, with a payment slot and a sign that read, "For Those Who Want to Give More." Thinking it was a little more dark humor, I ignored it, and of course nobody else was lining up to go there either.

But as I was waiting in line counting out my ten percent, I started chuckling, and then laughing out loud. It had finally dawned on me what the game was with these tokens.

Walker came over and said, "Did you figure it out?"

I said, "I think so."

"Good for you," he said, smiling.

"What did you do when you figured it out?" I asked him.

"I upped my tithe," he replied.

"How much?" I asked.

"Everything I had," he said.

I thought for a moment and chuckled again before going over to

that other entrance. Taking my little bag of tokens, I dumped all of them in the slot.

I gave 100 percent, because I'd realized that once you've given everything, you could continue to give 100 percent without ever diminishing what you have. Walker and I were the only two to go through that gate that evening, but later on a few others also got the idea and followed us.



The Load Gets Lighter

As we walked day after day, it seemed that all kinds of burdens fell off. Our packs got lighter, but more importantly, so did our mood. A gradually growing group of people started walking along with Walker. At night when we would stop, he would sing songs and sometimes tell us about what lay ahead of us. It was obvious that he had walked the path before. Some nights he would talk about the attitudes that bring success along the path. Other evenings he would teach us some simple meditation techniques.

Gradually as we moved along, people became increasingly lighter. One person coined the phrase, "We travel light, and we travel fast." I wasn't very fond of this expression, since it sounded like a bad line from an old John Wayne movie, but we were a tolerant group and, since he seemed proud of his line, nobody pointed out how silly it was. Walker had told us that harmony was more important than having things "your way." It also became apparent that as the harmony increased and as possessions and attachments fell away, our group got happier and happier.

There were many other people on the path that didn't choose to walk with us, even though everyone was welcome. There were no rules. People could come and go as they pleased, but gradually more people came and stayed with our group, which we now came to think of as our little community. Each night a place to stop magically appeared, but now there were only little tents and campfires, rather than the grand guesthouses we had seen earlier. Being out in the open was helping me relax, and my mind was letting go of any remaining

preoccupations. The complete dark at night brought out a whole galaxy of new stars, and when my eyes looked up at them, my mind seemed to expand into their realm of endlessness.

You didn't use your own names along the path—everyone made up a trail name. Walker never seemed to use our aliases, but just called everybody "Pilgrim." He had the ability to put a certain intonation in his voice, so that everybody could tell whom he was referring to from how he pronounced "Pilgrim." For some people, his intonation had a little dose of humor and wisdom. There was one person who couldn't stop talking and was really annoying, and Walker tended to call her "PILL-grim." There was another person who was always dour, and he called him "pill-GRIM."

As we walked farther, I noticed that the "pilgrims" began to let go of things they had been clutching to themselves. One woman had written in a journal for an hour or so every night along the way. Then, one morning as we were leaving the campsite, I saw that she had left the journal behind. On the cover were the words, "Mistakes and Regrets."

There was another person who worked on some architectural plans nearly every evening. Several times he had called me over to show me detailed drawings of what he was going to build after he finished his pilgrimage. Then one night I saw him use the plans to light the campfire.

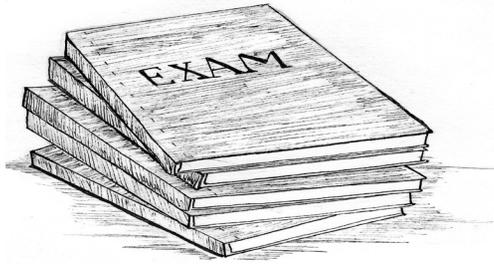
Another woman had a big photo album with pictures of her kids and family, her friends, her grandparents, and even her great-grandparents. Some of the photos were of people who'd passed away. It was obviously very precious to her, but one day I saw that she had made a little altar-like shrine of stones and flowers with the album as the centerpiece. For the first hour or so after we set off again, I would see her slow down and half turn, as if thinking to go back for her photos. But she must have decided that she'd carried her past with her long enough, and after that she had a little bounce to her step that hadn't been there before.

Another day, walking by a little stream, I saw a diary floating along in the current. My immediate thought was to pull it out, so it wouldn't pollute the water. Then I saw an open page, which had a bucket-list of "Unfulfilled Desires." I realized that a diary like this would pollute its owner a lot more than it would pollute the stream.

We kept walking day after day. As I say, time was stretchy. I don't

know how much time passed during this section of "The Path," but it felt like this was the first part of a long journey. For some reason whenever I hear the trickle of a stream or a flute sound, it reminds me of this part of the journey.





The Exam

One day we began to see people on the other side of the stream, a river by this time, walking back in the other direction. We were curious to know why they were going the other way.

Somebody called out, "Why are you turning back?"

One of them said, "We didn't pass the exam."

"Exam?" we gulped.

Then we saw a sign that read "Exam Ahead 25 Miles." We got nervous seeing so many people turning back so we immediately went to ask Walker about it.

"Yes," he replied, "there's an exam."

We asked, "What's it about? We haven't studied for any test."

"You can't really study for this one, and besides, I think most of you are pretty well prepared," he reassured us.

Every five miles there was another sign reading, "Exam Ahead 20 Miles," or "Exam Ahead 15 Miles." In spite of Walker's vague reassurance, we were becoming increasingly anxious about it.

Finally, we got to a rustic bathhouse with a changing room for men and another one for women. When I went in, there was a large pool of water, a kind of extension of water flowing from the river, with bars of soap around the edge. Instructions said to take off all your clothes and scrub down very thoroughly. They suggested you repeat the whole process three times. After that, we found steps that led down to the river we'd been passing, and saw steps leading up from the opposite bank.

I assumed that this was the test we had been warned about. Were you ready to leave *everything* behind? It was a natural extension of

the "raise your tithes" challenge. But somehow, this far along, it didn't seem very intimidating.

As I entered the river, it felt very, very cleansing, almost as if the river had become sacred water, like the Ganges, or the River Jordan. It felt more like a baptism than a cleansing.

This was a transition point, where you came out feeling absolutely clean and unattached. On the other side of the river, we found slacks, sandals, and T-shirts that said "Plain Living" and "High Thinking." So we all ended up being dressed like Walker now.

After we'd dressed, we saw a stone house with a sign that read, "Exam Room." So the cleansing wasn't the exam after all, but only the preparation for the exam. As we went in, there was a table and a stack of booklets. I don't know whether you've seen the little blue-covered booklets that are used for college tests, but these were like that. Each was made of several sheets of paper, folded in the middle and stapled. The blue cover was thick and stiff with the title "EXAM" on it. The font was large, bold, black, underlined, and quite intimidating. Each booklet seemed to have about 20 pages, but I couldn't tell exactly because there was an official-looking seal to keep the book closed. On the bottom of the cover in smaller print, it also read:

1. Answer honestly.
2. You may return to retake the exam as often as you like.
3. Begin when you hear the conch.

We each took a booklet and went into a large room with desks where we could work. Everyone was nervous, but there was no talking or whispering, just a tense silence. At each desk we found a large pencil with thick lead and a big rubber gum eraser, like you see in art stores. Apparently it was permitted to erase an answer. This was a serious test!

After we were all seated, there was a loud sound of a conch blown four times, as if in all four directions. I opened up my exam, and at first I thought I'd gotten a defective copy, because the first page was blank, and the second, and the third. It was blank page after blank page after blank page until the very end.

On the last page there was one statement, the one you were supposed to answer honestly. The statement was, "From now on, I embrace as the only purpose of my life the search for God." You had to circle "True" or "False." People were thinking about it—taking it seriously. After a time many people, especially from Walker's group,

circled “True.” We finally realized that he had been quietly preparing us for this all along the path.

Many others were really struggling with this question, knowing they had to be honest. Besides, the instructions had said, “You may return to retake the exam as often as you like.” Quite a few decided that this was as far as they wanted to go on this pilgrimage, so like the ones we had seen on the other side of the stream, they circled “False” and headed back downstream.



The High Passes

After the exam, the path changed and became steeper and rocky, and much more challenging. We could feel that we were getting up into higher altitudes. Breathing became a little labored, and we had to take long, slow breaths and more frequent rest breaks. At the next evening rest area, there was a small store with a sign, “Colder Weather Ahead. Please Take What You Need. Return It When You’re Done.” There were insulated jackets, warm sweaters and socks, and hiking boots.

We soon started coming to high passes, which needed our total focus. It wasn’t so much that the path was dangerous, but it was narrow, steep, and jagged, and it took all of our concentration not to slip. We still found rest areas for the night, but often they were little more than a level patch with rock outcroppings to block the wind. From time to time, as we crested a ridge, we were met by stunning views of snow-clad mountains with sunsets unlike anything I had ever imagined. At night, when everything was quiet, we could hear the wind blowing through rock crevasses and making a sound that reminded us of a cello or violin.

The climbing went on for many days, and the focus needed was so intense that it blocked out any wandering thoughts or feelings. Somehow, although the physical effort was intense, it felt like the deep concentration helped our energy become very internalized.

Then we came to a tricky, dangerous stretch where the path was especially narrow and slippery. On our right hand rose a sheer, wall-like cliff that continually seeped moisture, making the path wet. On the left was a downslope of about twenty-five feet that ended in a

gully. The trail here was covered with a fine blue-tinted clay that was really, really slick, almost like ice, making it very easy to slip off and slide down the slope.

It wasn't all that dangerous if you fell, because the slope was gradual and made of small pieces of shale. But it was frustrating, because once you started to slide there was no way to stop, and you went all the way to the bottom. From there, it took a lot of effort and time to clamber back up onto the path. A few people gave up in despair after several falls and headed back the other way.

Everybody had scrapes, bruises, sore muscles, and frustration from their falls. Walker had warned us about this part of The Path, and I remembered something that he had said: "If you slip, stay centered in your spine, and relax completely." He used the example of a good skier, who moves in a flow down the slopes. I tried his advice and during one of the times I slipped, I was actually able to stay on my feet and schuss all the way to the bottom.

Staying centered also helped me navigate the slippery slopes. I found that when I stayed relaxed and centered in my spine I also stopped slipping off the path. When the trail hit a downslope, you could slide down it like a snowboarder (without the snowboard) as long as you stayed completely centered. As I got the knack of going with the flow, this section of the journey actually became enjoyable.

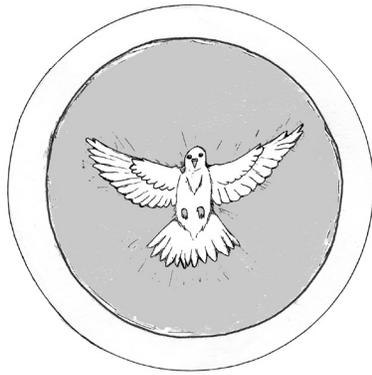
Then the cliff on the right fell away abruptly and the path became very narrow, almost knife edged. With no wall for protection the strong, swirling winds made this section terrifying. Here you had not only to concentrate deeply, but also to fight against your inner fears.

My anxiety increased until finally I remembered a line from a poem by Paramhansa Yogananda: "When boisterous storms of trials shriek, and when worries howl at me, I will drown their noises, loudly chanting: God! God! God!" So I started to continually chant "God! God! God!" and it worked. The noises gradually faded away along with the worries and fears, even though the winds continued to howl. Even the deep bell-like sound I had been hearing seemed to fade away.

Nevertheless, this section was still worrisome. I thought back to an evening much earlier when Walker had taught us the technique of Kriya Yoga. On that occasion he'd quoted something from the Bhagavad Gita, which said that it was more difficult to control the mind than to control the wind. But Walker had told us that Kriya,

the control of the breath and life force, was the way to control the mind. I wondered if Kriya could work in reverse—maybe it could also control the wind. So I started doing the Kriya breathing technique as I walked, and sure enough, as long as I was doing Kriya, the winds quieted down, and the path actually became quite easy. At this point, I started to make rapid progress.





The Walls

Finally, we came to a section where the path ran between two vertical walls. Have you ever seen photos of sandstone formations in Arizona, where beautiful steep walls have been formed by erosion? Well, it was like that, except that this rock was golden yellow, made of some material that seemed almost luminescent.

As I went farther along, the walls began to close in, nearly touching each other at the top and getting very narrow at the bottom, almost like a tunnel. The only way I could get through was by crawling, fully prostrate, pulling with my hands and pushing with both feet. The way was so narrow that I had to drop my pack, my canteen, and everything else I had been carrying. It felt like the wall was a conscious entity, scraping me clean, like the baptism at the river but much more intense. It was taking me down to my absolute core. I don't think the distance was that long, but that section and the scraping process seemed nearly interminable.

Looking ahead I could see that the walls finally opened up and at the end was a circular exit. I still don't know if it was a natural formation, or if it was man-made, but it ended in a perfect circle. The light increased here, and the golden rock seemed to glow from within. And then, through that circle you could see a deep-blue sky. The profound blue of the sky was surrounded by the golden halo of the stone, and right in the center fluttered a white dove, forming a silvery, star-like shape. It was the loveliest sight I'd ever beheld.

I intuitively knew that this was the end of the pilgrimage. When I exited, I came out into a heavenly scene that I can hardly describe.

There was a lush green valley with rainbow-colored waterfalls ringed by snowy mountains. In some ways it reminded me more of a fictional scene than of a physical place, as if I had been transported into the movie *Shangri-La*, or the Elven kingdom of Rivendell from *The Lord of The Rings*. And yet it felt more like I was experiencing a reality within myself, rather than just looking at an outer scene.

I paused for a moment, feeling a curious merging of realities within me and around me. My heart was experiencing a kind of bliss it had never known before, and the thought crossed my mind that maybe this was the ocean of bliss that had been promised before I ever started on this journey.

In any case, the scene was gorgeous and vast. Then, perhaps the most wonderful experience of all began when I walked over to a cliff that I'd spotted. On the cliff's edge was a pure-white marble table with a kind of flying suit on it. I intuitively understood that I should put it on, and that then I could sail off the cliff: As soon as my feet left the ground, wings would snap out from the back, and I could soar.

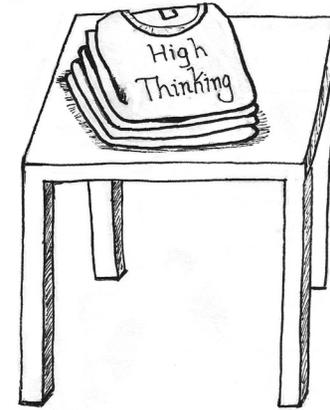
In the distance I could see a few others doing this, but, frankly, it looked really scary to me. The first time I tried, I went out about twenty-five feet, and then came right back and landed. As I gained confidence, I was gradually able to go farther and farther.

Over time I began truly to fly, and there was a tremendous sense of freedom and joy, beyond anything I'd ever imagined. For days on end I would sail off the cliff and soar. I soon learned that there were thermals—columns of rising warm air—that I could catch. With a thermal I could circle higher and higher, like ascending an invisible spiral staircase.

As I say, time was stretchy. I don't know how long I stayed there, but one day the thought came to me that no matter how beautiful the valley and the cliffs were, as dusk descended, I still had to come back and land. I knew that my feet had to touch ground again, and it began to weigh on me, because somehow I knew there was something more. Finally, one day I decided, even though I'd never seen anybody do it, that I was going to try to fly over the mountains.

I started as soon as there was enough light, and quickly found a powerful thermal that I rode higher and higher until I was above all the mountains. From that height I could see a landscape that looked like the one we'd walked along, with the river sparkling in the sun. In the distance I could see the shimmering effect of thermals rising here

and there as the morning sun heated the air. So I flew from thermal to thermal, rising to the heights, then dropping down gradually until I could catch another one, rising with it again in a great spiral.



Going Forward

Whether it was the wind, or the way the hills were arranged, I was constantly pushed back in the direction of where the pilgrimage had begun. Finally, in the late afternoon, I could see the same Disneyland-like entrance to the path where I had started such a long time ago.

Then I saw Walker, standing there as if he'd been waiting for me. I circled down and landed next to him. His eyes were gleaming, and he had a gentle smile on his face. In his understated way, he said, "I see you found your way over the mountains. I thought you might, so I've been waiting for you. I wanted to say goodbye."

Very puzzled, I asked him, "Why are we back right where we began?"

Walker said, "Certainly you didn't think this pilgrimage was about taking your *body* from one point to another?"

"No, but I didn't expect to end up back at the same place," I replied, still confused.

Looking at me lovingly, he said, "The place may be the same, but you're not the same."

"Well, true. But why are you here? And, what do you mean by wanting to say goodbye?" I asked.

Walker said, "I'm going to start the next stage of my journey, where you can't take anything with you, not even your body. In that realm you have to travel at the speed of light."

"Can I go with you?" I asked, with hesitation but great longing.

With deep wisdom and love in his eyes, he replied, "If you're ready."

But the way he said it, I intuitively knew that I wasn't yet prepared.

Then there was a noisy commotion at the entrance of the park that caught my attention, and I looked away for a few moments. When I looked back, Walker had disappeared, and all that remained was his pair of sandals and a little pile of his clothing. He had left a note that said, "Use these clothes if you want. When you're done, pass them along to someone else." It was signed "Walker." I realized that it was the first time that I'd ever seen his name written. He had squiggly little handwriting, and he'd crossed the loop of the "k" so that it looked like a "t," and ended with a little loop. When written, the name looked like "Walters."

I took off the wingsuit and put it next to a variation of the now familiar sign that said, "Please Return Everything Now That You're Done."

I decided—in fact, felt almost compelled—to put on Walker's T-shirt, an old blue one saying, "Plain Living and High Thinking." Then I noticed there was a whole stack of his T-shirts. He had left enough for anybody who wanted to put one on.

It seemed like both the end of that pilgrimage and the beginning of my next one, a bittersweet mixture of completion and anticipation. I wondered what to do next. Then, I glanced at the entrance to the path, and saw a group of newcomers gathered there. I thought to myself, "I guess I'll go help push some carts."



Epilogue

This fellow "Walker" wrote a lot of books to help pilgrims along on their journey. I'd like to share from one called *The New Path*:

Everyone in this world is a pilgrim. He comes alone, treads his chosen path for a time, then leaves once more solitarily. His is a sacred destination, always dimly suspected, though usually not consciously known. Whether deliberately or by blind instinct, directly or indirectly, what all men are truly seeking is Joy—Joy infinite, Joy eternal, Joy divine.

Most of us, alas, wander about in this world like pilgrims without a map. We imagine Joy's shrine to be wherever money is worshiped, or power, or fame, or good times. It is only after very distant roaming that, disappointed at last, we pause in silent self-appraisal. And then we discover, perhaps with a shock, that our goal was never distant from us at all—indeed, *never any farther away than our own selves!*

This path we walk has no fixed dimensions. It is either long or short, depending only on the purity of our intentions. It is the path Jesus described when he said, "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you." Walking this path, we yet walk it not, for the goal, being inward, is ours already. We have only to claim it as our own.

