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To cite this article: Laura Béres (2018) How travel might become more like spiritual pilgrimage: An autoethnographic study, Journal for the Study of Spirituality, 8:2, 160-172, DOI: 10.1080/20440243.2018.1523048

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20440243.2018.1523048
How travel might become more like spiritual pilgrimage: An autoethnographic study

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ABSTRACT
This paper is based on an autoethnographic study of travel as spiritual pilgrimage. It includes a critical analysis of literature regarding forms of Christian pilgrimage over the ages, examining how time and culture impact upon conceptions of pilgrimage. The author reflects upon her own experiences and analyses field notes collected as she travelled over a seven-week period, including an eight-day pilgrimage across St. Cuthbert’s Way in the UK. Stages and themes of pilgrimage are discussed and suggestions are made as to how travel might become more like pilgrimage.

KEYWORDS
Pilgrimage; spirituality; travel; Celtic Christianity; social work

Introduction

Background

Many years ago, I attended a lunch-time talk on pilgrimage and was particularly struck by the speaker’s view that a major benefit of pilgrimage is that, on returning home, it is impossible to think that your way of life is the only way of life. Realizing that our way is only one of many ways of living and thinking can encourage a greater sense of humility and openness to difference.

Thus, on accepting an academic position teaching social work in a Canadian university, I was pleased to become associated with experiential social work courses that have subsequently involved travel with students to Mexico, India, China, Costa Rica, England, and remote fly-in Canadian First Nations communities. I recognized the importance pedagogically of preparing students for their experiences; engaging them in reflection while away; and encouraging thoughtful reintegration to ensure that what was learned would continue to have an effect. I believed these courses would assist students in becoming better social workers by having them truly experience the fact that their view of the world was only one of a range of perspectives.

Having recently reflected purposefully upon seven weeks of my own travel as a form of pilgrimage I have come to see the reintegration stage of pilgrimage as even more important than I had previously thought. It is through the process of reflecting while travelling – and then also continuing to reflect after travelling – that the most significant aspects of learning can be integrated and inform future behaviour.
As my primary focus in teaching is direct practice, I have been interested in the study of spirituality for many years and have stressed the importance of acknowledging and respecting people's spirituality within all counselling settings (Béres 2009, 2012a, 2012b, 2016, 2017; Rogers and Beres 2017). This professional interest has developed alongside exploration of my own ever-evolving personal understanding and practice of spirituality. Although I now live in Canada, I was born in England and continue to have a strong emotional connection to the British Isles. During my first sabbatical from teaching, I pursued a research project that allowed me to visit Iona in the Scottish Hebrides; Holy Island Lindisfarne in the northwest of England; as well as Inis Mor and Croagh Patrick in Ireland. This resulted in my writing about Celtic Christianity as a lens through which to consider spiritual practices generally and within the lives of people we counsel (Béres 2012a, 2012b, 2017).

In Spring 2017, during my second sabbatical, I engaged in seven weeks of travelling, participating in a range of different activities. Although the eight days when I walked St. Cuthbert's Way from Melrose, Scotland, to Holy Island Lindisfarne, England, fit most closely with traditional conceptions of pilgrimage, all my travel experiences over the seven weeks contained elements of spiritual interest. Reflecting upon these experiences, I have come to several conclusions. Most significant is the recognition that travel (even everyday travel at home) can be structured and approached to increase the chance of it containing elements of spiritual pilgrimage. The reintegration stage is crucial to ensure that time away is not merely ‘time out’ from everyday life, but might inform future ways of being.

**Approach**

I begin this paper by examining the academic literature regarding conceptions of pilgrimage and how they have changed over time, including a particular focus on Celtic Christian approaches to pilgrimage. I then review my own travel experiences through the framework of stages and themes of pilgrimage. Using an autoethnographic methodology allows for movement back and forth between academic literature and field notes, adding greater richness to the exploration of the idea of travel experience as pilgrimage than would be possible with either a purely academic review or merely a personal account. I complete the paper by summarizing the main points I have learned from my reflections.

An autoethnographic research methodology is particularly valuable for areas of study involving concepts like spirituality which, as Cullen (2011, 43) points out, is a ‘fluid and deeply subjective concept’. In his study of spiritualization of a workplace, he explains how autoethnography has grown in popularity as a research methodology over the past 30 years, describing it as an approach in which ‘researchers conduct ethnographic study on a social or cultural grouping of which they have some claim or membership’ (148). Cullen explains that autoethnography has ‘come to describe studies which bridge the personal and the cultural. It varies in its emphasis on research/writing (graphê), culture (ethno), and self (auto)’ (Cullen 2011).

Tisdell (2017) has used an autoethnographic approach to examine her transformative pilgrimage learning on the Camino de Santiago; and I have previously used this approach when studying Celtic Christianity, spirituality, and engagement with place (Béres 2012a, 2012b, 2017). Autoethnography is also often used in research of professional practice (see Denshire 2014; Hamilton, Smith, and Worthington 2008). It is important for
researchers using this methodology to write autobiographically about their experiences in the field, showing how those experiences affect interpretations within the study (Cullen 2011). This addresses concerns that would otherwise be raised regarding ethnographic studies where researchers attempt to position themselves as neutral and objective participant observers without addressing the ethics and politics of power differentials or varying points of view when interpreting texts and field notes. (See Neumann [1996] for a thorough description of the cultural politics of, and distinctions between, ethnography, autobiography, and autoethnography.)

**Conceptions of Christian pilgrimage**

I am focusing on Christian conceptions of pilgrimage since this is the context in which I engage with faith and travel, but I acknowledge that other faith traditions also have their own literature and rich tradition of pilgrimage. In the summer between my undergraduate and first graduate degrees, I worked as a flight attendant for Nigerian Airlines flying Muslims from Nigeria and Tunisia to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, from where they then walked to Mecca on The Haj. After their pilgrimage, they returned to Jeddah and we flew them back home. In a way, as an outsider witness to their pilgrimage and faith, I experienced an element of pilgrimage myself as I returned to Canada knowing experientially, and not only intellectually, that my Christian ways and culture were certainly not the only ways.

**Christian pilgrimage across time**

Davies indicates that ideas about pilgrimage have changed across the ages as the purpose of journeying to particular places has taken on different meaning and forms:

> In the early Christian centuries pilgrimage was an allegorical journey, most suitably performed in Palestine, whereby the life of Christ was re-enacted and impinged upon the present, whereas by the late Middle Ages it tended to be a perfunctory rite undertaken for the automatic accumulation of thousands of years of indulgences. (1988, 168)

The interpretation of pilgrimage in every period is situated within a particular context and socially constructed reality. It is, therefore, important to examine various conceptions of pilgrimage over time, realizing that to understand contemporary pilgrimage it is necessary to consider the current context, and how today’s travellers make meaning of their experiences.

‘Until the fourth century it appears that pilgrimage was a practice of the elite; after that date, the phenomenon touched all layers of the Christian population’ (Post, Pieper, and van Uden 1998, 21). Beginning in the twelfth century and then further supported by the Reformation in the sixteenth century, pilgrimage was viewed as unnecessary because the faith journey was considered an internal process, related to the ’heart’ (Davies 1988). Harpur (2016, 119) suggests that the devastation of the Black Death in the mid-1300s would also have had a profound effect as it caused tension within society and worries about safety. He shows, too, how the Grand Tour of the eighteenth century, and the start of Thomas Cook’s package holidays in the nineteenth century,
would have begun the process of offering forms of quasi-pilgrimage (Dandelion 2013; Harpur 2016).

For thousands of years, pilgrimage has been thought of as involving a physical journey as well as an expression of faith, and both these outer and inner journeys require time. A pilgrim needs enough time to expose himself or herself to the possibility of sacred metamorphosis. If that is done, the destination […] will signify not the end of the journey, but the start: a gateway into a new way of being, of seeing life afresh with spiritually cleansed eyes. (Harpur 2016, 7)

Harpur admits that, for Celtic pilgrims, a destination was not actually necessary (a point to which I will return); and also that today it is often difficult to tell the difference between a pilgrim and a tourist because the ‘membrane between the sacred and the secular is porous.

Tourists might harbour “pilgrim feelings,” and pilgrims might have “tourist interests” (Harpur 2016, 8). Having admitted this, and in addition to the possibility of feeling fellowship with other pilgrims, Harpur also indicates pilgrimage may involve a symbolic resonance: ‘For every pilgrim making a physical journey, the sore feet, enforced detours, and anxieties, as well as the companionships and acts of generous hospitality, represent in microcosm the woes and weals of life’ (2016, 10). This is an important point.

Pilgrimage is also described as involving recognized stages:

[P]reparation, including putting one’s affairs in order before departing and acquiring the right travel clothes and accessories; the journey itself; the arrival, accompanied by sacred rituals (such as saying prayers and lighting a candle); the return journey; and reintegration into the world the pilgrim had left behind. (Harpur 2016, 1–2)

My travels certainly involved all these elements and stages of pilgrimage. I will use these stages as a structure through which to analyse my travels since they provide a framework for highlighting how my journey was not ‘merely’ a holiday from normal life, but contained the stages and themes of pilgrimage, as highlighted by the literature.

Celtic ideas of pilgrimage

As noted, Celtic Christian understandings of pilgrimage were quite different from those generally held in the Middle Ages (Bradley 2000; Harpur 2016). Early Irish monks had little patience with the view of pilgrimage involving a ‘purposeful journey to a particular place in order to gain a special spiritual buzz’ (Bradley 2000, 199). For them, pilgrimage was to involve an inner state of mind being expressed in a life of wandering. This was based on the ‘premise that Christians are first and foremost colonists of heaven’ (Bradley 2000, 201), living on earth but citizens of heaven. Therefore, ‘[m]any monks expressed their discipleship by becoming […] pilgrims for Christ and following the path of white martyrdom, perpetually exiling themselves from the pleasures, distractions and attachments of the world and especially of home and family’ (Bradley 2000, 201–202). Their wandering was considered an attempt to imitate Christ, and ‘the search by monks for their places of resurrection forms a major theme in the lives of the Celtic saints’ (Bradley 2000, 202; Sheldrake 2013). This place of resurrection would be the place which called to them to stop their wanderings and commit the rest of their lives to that place (Béres 2017).

Bradley (2000, 2009) comments also on how striking the resurgent interest in pilgrimage has been over the past several years. He understands the interest as having come about
due to an increased interest in spirituality versus religion. He describes several pilgrimage routes in various parts of the world (2009) and points out the footpaths that have been created so people can walk in the footsteps of Celtic saints, including St. Cuthbert’s Way (Bradley 2000, 212). Bradley (2000, 214) notes: ‘Common to them all, however, is that understanding of the value of pilgrimage, as a symbol of the journeying of faith as well as physical activity, which was so marked a feature of Celtic Christianity’. This is an important point but he also suggests that there is a blurring of the line between tourism and pilgrimage:

If, as has been said, the distinction between tourists and pilgrims is that the former bring back gifts and the latter blessings, then perhaps we are seeing the emergence of a new category of pilgrim-tourists who return from their Celtic travels enriched by the Bendithion [blessings] as well as laden with Highland knitwear and Waterford crystal. (Bradley 2000, 216–217)

Bradley (2000, 229) goes on to argue that today’s interest in spirituality and pilgrimage could be related to people wanting ‘other ways of praying apart from sitting with a book and kneeling in a church’. He points to the fascination with prayer walks and labyrinths as a further example of this, suggesting people within our postmodern culture move from one denomination to another, from one church to another, and are more apt to engage in a faith journey that mirrors the fluidity of Celtic pilgrimage.

The description of the wandering form of pilgrimage, not aiming for a particular physical endpoint, and the ability to learn spiritual lessons along the way, are useful ideas to keep in mind. Devereux and Carnegie’s (2006) grounded theory research of pilgrimage and wellness tourism found that, for both pilgrims of the Camino de Santiago and participants in Charity Treks, the journey was also far more significant than the arrival, which many described as an anticlimax.

**Researching pilgrims and pilgrimage**

Explorations of the purpose of pilgrimage over time suggest a distinction can be made between primary (religious) motives and secondary (non-religious) motives. This distinction could already be found among many of the early church fathers:

The search for something to hold on to, for reconciliation, mediation, salvation and healing can be thought of as among primary motives; escape from workday life, seeking communal experiences, establishing connections with nature, recreational/touristic aspects (‘having a day out’) and ‘magical aspects’ can be considered among the secondary motives. (Post, Pieper, and van Uden 1988, 22)

There are many aspects involved in pilgrimage and it is important not to define it rigidly. Research in Social Sciences must be careful not to fall victim to ‘clichéd ideas about the profile and motives of pilgrims’ (Post, Pieper, and van Uden 1988, 25). Drawing upon Brückner’s work, Post, Pieper and van Uden ask ‘for caution in the employment of various stereotypes and categorizations concerning pilgrimage, and for clear differentiations between participatory elements such as the social aspects, and specific supportive elements’ (Post, Pieper, and van Uden 1988, 225). They stress the point of departure should be ‘that pilgrimage is that which the pilgrims themselves find it to be, that their interpretations must be central’ (Post, Pieper, and van Uden 1988).
Warfield, Baker, and Foxx (2014), conducting a grounded theory study, also privileged the meaning-making of pilgrims. They interviewed 10 people who had engaged in various forms of pilgrimage, transcribed the interviews, examined the transcripts for themes and reported their findings regarding the therapeutic value of pilgrimage. Their results showed people experience pilgrimage as therapeutic in biological, psychological, social, and spiritual areas. Considering overlaps between their findings and my own experiences, I found in relation to the biological aspects of pilgrimage that aspects of walking and eating with others were both important to me also. With regard to psychological aspects, reflecting, gaining perspective, and feeling welcomed were elements I also experienced. Related to the social aspects, I also experienced being moved by others, forming a sense of group identity, and feeling at home. Finally, in relation to spiritual aspects, connecting with others with similar beliefs and practices was significant.

Pilgrimage themes within my travel experiences

My schedule


May 7–8: Train travel to Salisbury. Attended a David Tracy conference, Interrelations: Spirituality and Theology, at Sarum College.

May 9–14: My husband joined me for one week. Drove to Devon to holiday.

May 15–18: Attended course on Mass Culture and Spirituality at Sarum College (Salisbury) as part of an MA programme in Christian Spirituality.

May 19–20: Train travel to Edinburgh. Joined my walking companion, Chrisy; then on to Melrose.

May 21–June 2: Chrisy and I walked St. Cuthbert’s Way over 8 days (Accommodation and luggage transfers were arranged by a holiday company, but we walked without a guide or other walkers). Picked up a rental car; spent a few days in Whitby and York.

June 2–4: Drove to Northumbria. Spent weekend at the motherhouse of the Northumbria Community, a dispersed Celtic Christian Community.

June 4–8: Drove to West Yorkshire to visit friends.

June 9–11: Drove to Bath (SW England) to visit a friend. Walked each day; attended a Quaker service on Sunday.


June 18: Coach travel from Salisbury-Heathrow; air travel to Toronto and London, Canada.

In addition to writing a traditional journal and compiling fieldnotes en route, I developed a blog which can be accessed at https://dialogueinmotion.wordpress.com. (Tisdell [2017] also wrote a blog regarding her time on the Camino.) I began the blog to post reflections in preparation for the walk, each day of walking St. Cuthbert’s Way, sharing the daily posts to Facebook, and am continuing to use the blog as a place to consider aspects of spirituality and pilgrimage in daily life. As Liutikas (2017, 220) points out: ‘[s]ocial media has become one of the biggest ways by which travellers document their journey’. Park, Seo, and Kandampully (2016) conducted a survey of 304 participants regarding their use of social networking sites in relation to their engagement in ‘pilgrimage tourism’. Their results highlight the motivations for participating in pilgrimage and for sharing posts to social networking sites for both religious and non-religious travellers. Although the authors’ main purpose in researching this area was to inform marketing practices, what I found interesting was the link between pilgrimage and social networking of a friendship motive.
**Preparation stage**

In July 2016, my friend Chrisy mentioned wanting to do a long walk to mark her 50th birthday in May 2017. I suggested we walk St. Cuthbert’s Way, knowing that I would already be in England in May. Due to her Irish heritage and my interest in Celtic spirituality, this idea continued to grow in our imaginations and over the next few months, we committed to this plan.

Harpur (2016, 76) discusses, in relation to medieval pilgrims, that a ‘pilgrim’s traditional clothes and accessories […] had to be obtained’, and this was no less true for Chrisy and myself as modern day pilgrims on St. Cuthbert’s Way. We booked our walk and then spent many months deciding on the best backpacks and wicking clothes. We also used our Fitbits to motivate us to walk more each day to ensure we were ready for the long-distance footpath.

**The pilgrim’s intent**

As discussed above, only the pilgrim can tell for sure whether she is on a pilgrimage rather than merely on a holiday (Harpur 2016). On the ‘About’ page of my blog I wrote that I was planning to walk St. Cuthbert’s Way and hoped that walking and talking along the way would bring about both trivial and not-so-trivial reflections. I used images of hedgehogs on both the ‘About’ and first blog pages, referencing Teresa of Avila’s use of this metaphor for the inner journey of faith (Avila 1577/2013, 70). I was hoping that the walk would involve elements of spirituality and pilgrimage but, having previously written about the importance of mindfulness (Béres 2009), I was approaching each element of my travels hoping to stay as mindful as possible and open to new learning from each part of the seven weeks away.

Having met Ben Pink Dandelion during the course at Sarum College, I bought his book and found his discussion of the possibility of everyday travelling becoming more mindful (Dandelion 2013, 125) further added to my interest in engaging with all aspects of my travels in a more receptive manner. I cannot overstate the impact Dandelion’s work has had on my engagement with my travels and my thoughts during the reintegration stage. I was struck by how he asks himself in regards any possible travel whether it will build community or not. If not, and especially if it would have negative impacts on relationships, he will not travel. As Liutikas (2017) suggests, reporting on his study of the manifestation of values identity in travelling, a person’s values impact upon their choice of travel, engagement while travelling, and will also influence the ongoing negotiation of their identity. Being conscious of this and explicitly making decisions about travel based on those values have become all the more important to me.

**The journey**

**Delays and lack of control**

Having travelled between England and Canada numerous times without any particular difficulties, I was surprised at the number of challenges encountered when travelling with my students. The initial flight from London to Toronto was rescheduled, turned back, and delayed again, resulting in us missing our flight to Heathrow. Further effects of these delays were two unexpected stays in airport hotels. As soon as we were alerted...
to the delay on our initial flight we became aware of the building anxiety in fellow passengers as we all calculated whether we would miss flights. One of the students suggested we could become wealthy designing mindfulness programmes for delayed passengers.

In a journal entry (May 19), as I was reflecting back on this time, I commented that I was reminded of something Fr. Frank from Ballintubber Abbey in Ireland had told me on my first sabbatical visit. He explained that as he prepares teens for the pilgrimage from the Abbey to Croagh Patrick he tells them that complaining is not allowed; rather they are encouraged to say ‘Praise be to God’ whenever frustrated. As I walked to Croagh Patrick that October in 2010, I remember my foot sinking into mud and the cold mucky water seeping up and over the edge of my hiking boot. My companions looked at me waiting for my response and I laughed and said, ‘Praise be to God’. As we experienced delay after delay, this memory reminded me not to complain but rather ‘to go with the flow’ with an attitude of non-attachment. The student’s comment regarding mindfulness programmes was also an amusing reminder that it would be beneficial to stay in the moment, surrendering to the fact we had no control, despite all our best-laid plans. This was a metaphor for learning from life even in this mundane form of travel prior to anything remotely ‘pilgrimage-like’ as I reflected on the ‘woes and weals of life’ (Harpur 2016, 10). There were further similar moments of learning. I wrote about one in my blog post titled ‘Not quite smooth sailing to Edinburgh’ (May 19) where I describe learning through finding myself on the wrong train and thankful for helpful co-passengers; and again in a post, titled ‘A trying sort of day’ (May 26) where I describe becoming lost in the Cheviot Hills.

It is interesting to consider what hindered mindfulness on even the more traditional pilgrimage part of my travel. Dandelion ‘in classroom discussion May 16 2017’ argues that travel is closer to pilgrimage the less distanced we are from fellow travellers. He suggests walking and bicycling, followed by bus and train travel, will engage us as pilgrims more easily than air travel or driving alone in a car. However, he has also noted that many people disconnect from their immediate experiences even if travelling on public transport by overly engaging with technology, putting up a wall between themselves and others. I was aware Chrisy and I used our iPhone cameras often, posting updates to Facebook and to my blog most evenings; yet, because I was attempting to be mindful and purposeful about my use of technology, I did not experience it as disrupting my ability to engage with the travel experience.

What did interfere was having to be aware of timing. This occurred one day when we had to anticipate our arrival time in a town for a transfer ride to our accommodation; and on another when we were attempting to reach our hotel prior to the thunderstorms that had been forecast. The physical and psychological effects of the time demands felt very familiar since I experience these often in my day-to-day life, and negatively impacted my ability to stay in the moment. The highlight of the trip for me, on the other hand, occurred on an unrushed day when I was able to take time after lunch to just lie in the sun. I wrote in my journal:

I now understand the appeal of hill walking. […] The best part of today for me was lying in the grass after my lunch and while Chrisy carried on fiddling with her phone and photos I shut my eyes. All I could hear were birds singing and sheep baaing, and the wind. I could feel the grass, the heat of the sun … and the wind. It was totally wonderful – spiritual. I felt connected.’ (Journal entry, May 24)
Engaging with fellow pilgrims and those we met along the way

The significance of other people on my travels was one of the biggest surprises for me; it was something that I had not anticipated since I think of myself as an introvert, but which, having reviewed research literature, I now see is consistent with other pilgrims’ experiences (Warfield, Baker, and Foxx 2014). Dandelion (in classroom discussion May 16, 2017) first drew my attention to the fact that many people support the pilgrim’s travel, including those who stay at home and those who offer hospitality along the way. This is no small element of the whole structure which allows for some to travel and engage in pilgrimage but, given space limitations, I will focus here on my surprise regarding the significance of people I met along the way.

Prior to walking St. Cuthbert’s Way, while in Devon, my husband and I spent time exploring the places where my grandmother had grown up and we spent a lovely lunch-time visit with my mother’s cousin, of whom I only had a dim memory from childhood. Not only was her hospitality much appreciated, but the sense of connecting with family and place contained elements of pilgrimage for me. As we spoke, it became clear we both were very fond of donkeys and the next day my husband and I visited the local donkey sanctuary. It was a beautiful day which I mention in a blog post titled ‘Imminent and Immanent.’ We walked the grounds, patting hundreds of donkeys, made our way towards the sea, looking over a field of sheep and blossom trees, and I felt very grateful for the chance to take the time to experience the place in a mindful manner, which added elements of spiritual pilgrimage to an otherwise vacation-like day.

In my blog post titled ‘Learning with fellow travellers’ (June 7), I describe the conversation with fellow walkers as we ate dinner together. I was struck by the depth of conversation, although we had only just met and each had quite different motivations for the walk. When we met one of our fellow dinnertime guests on Holy Island Lindisfarne a few days later he shared a poem that he had written about an experience he had described to us. (The poem is included in my blog post of June 7.) Although there were many pleasant conversations with fellow walkers at breakfast each morning and when we met them along the way, the act of eating dinner with this small group of people provided the length of time in which strangers were able to share emotions and thoughts with one another, which seemed a special element of these travels. This is another example of the impact of time on the ability to engage fully with experiences.

Not only did I experience this special connection with people on St. Cuthbert’s Way, I journaled about my appreciation of the support from, and engagement with, people on trains, especially when I was on the wrong train, in taxis and in our accommodation. Additionally, I experienced a sense of being welcomed home at the Northumbria Community, although I had never been there before (also consistent with Warfield, Baker and Foxx’s [2014] research) and of engaging in meaningful conversations with the friends I visited.

Arrival

Consistent with Celtic forms of pilgrimage, and Devereux and Carnegie’s (2006) research, I found the journey more meaningful than the arrival at Holy Island Lindisfarne at the end point of St. Cuthbert’s Way. Although the walk along the Pilgrims’ Way across the sand to
Holy Island (a tidal island only reachable when the tide is out) was a lovely experience, Holy Island itself was an anticlimax. I had visited there before, which may have taken away some of the special elements of arrival, but it was a let-down in comparison to the days of walking through forests and hills. After days of sunshine, it was overcast and the castle was not as impressive as usual since it was covered for renovations. We visited the local Anglican church and Abbey ruins, but it seemed more meaningful being part of the Northumbria Community for a weekend retreat, attending a Quaker meeting with my friend in Bath, and spending some time alone in the church in Avebury on my way from Bath to Salisbury. These latter events were more purposefully spiritual whereas visiting Lindisfarne’s church felt more like a tourist event as we were surrounded by many others on weekend outings. Devereux and Carnegie (2006) similarly report how pilgrims arriving into the hubbub of Santiago de Compostela often wish to be back walking and out of the crowds.

There were, however, specific moments of arrival at places other than Holy Island that were meaningful. Having never been to the Northumbria Community before, I had booked a weekend visit but, at the last minute, felt unsure of my decision. As I drove into their parking area, a group of people on the lawn waved and beckoned me on. I was offered a cup of tea and some of my anxiety started to slip away as everyone seemed pleasant. I was given a tour and felt moved to tears when I was told I could do my laundry, which was a relief after travelling so long. I was provided with a private room and invited to participate in activities as much or as little as I liked. In a journal entry (June 2), I quote from the Northumbria Community’s Celtic Daily Prayers book (2016, 8) in which it is explained that the community developed so that members are ‘alone together’. My tour guide of the motherhouse explained that this idea comes from the ebb and flow of the tide at Holy Island, where day visitors come onto the island but, as they leave, those living and staying longer on the island can be alone and peaceful again: there is a natural flow to needing to be with people and needing to be alone. Another moment of special arrival occurred at my friends’ home in Cleckheaton. Their two dogs welcomed me by jumping up and I exclaimed how lovely it was to know that I had almost a week of just ‘being with’ friends. Looking back, I see they also offered an opportunity for being ‘alone together’. Finally, every time I arrive in Salisbury I experience a sense of arrival home, having been born and grown up there. I experience a spiritual connection although my home is now in another country.

The return journey

Lack of control again

Travel plans were aimed to have me home the night before my son’s university graduation ceremony, but again I experienced delays between Toronto and London, Canada. I was reminded again that I have no control as I had to go with the flow and contend with the time pressure and need to get home ‘in time’. However, I took the time I had to wait to reflect upon the end of my seven weeks away, wondering what, if any, the effects of my travels would be. The time on the coach from Salisbury to Heathrow and all the waiting in airports and on flights provided ample opportunity to be mindful of this return journey.
Reintegration

The reintegration stage takes time and, when I first returned home, I wondered whether it might be the stage that truly contributes to moving travel closer to pilgrimage. However, as I write this, having completed two further periods of travel, I recognize the importance of committing, each time I travel, to making the journey as much like a form of pilgrimage as possible. Since I travel for work and study regularly, I am beginning to think that, if my travelling is going to incorporate elements of pilgrimage, it may be far more similar to a Celtic form of wandering pilgrimage than I initially realized. This is because my travels will not have a spiritually significant physical destination each time. If the stages of pilgrimage are therefore going to be a useful framework for informing my travel as pilgrimage, they are going to be most useful in a cyclical sense, with reintegration deliberately informing preparation for the next trip each time I travel.

Nonetheless, I will present some points here which sum up my main learning from the seven weeks of travel described in this paper. Since then, I have travelled again, moving between hotels for a week prior to renting a home in West Yorkshire for a month, followed by another week in a hotel in Madrid. From Madrid, I took a tour to Avila and Segovia because I wanted to see the birth place and convent of Teresa of Avila. Following that trip, my 92-year-old mother fell and broke her hip and I took on caregiving responsibilities as my husband and I cleared her apartment and moved her to a nursing home. As with many elderly people, breaking her hip was the beginning of a very fast downward spiral for my mother. She became palliative just before Christmas and I sat with her each day, as she turned 93 on January 1st and then died January 4th. I mention these additional details as part of this autoethnographic study, since I also added a blog post on December 29 about my mother and the sense of life as a journey; and because these occurrences have further impacted upon my reflections in the reintegration stage.

Summary of my learning

For me, the following points make any form of travel (including the everyday) more like a pilgrimage:

(1) Being mindful and reflective about my experiences, taking time to journal and engage in contemplative practices.
(2) Examining the impact of my travel on relationships, asking myself if the travel builds community at all, and being open to engaging with people I meet along the way.
(3) Minimizing the use of hotels. Renting homes where I can live in the community, or staying in retreat centres. Staying at Sarum College now feels like going home as I have built relationships with people there.
(4) Attempting to tread lightly, considering the environmental impacts of various forms of travel, and on a day-to-day basis being committed to avoiding the traps of consumerism. We can only take so much with us on a journey, and nothing at all as we die, so William Morris’s adage of only surrounding myself with what I know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful, comes to mind often.
Conclusion

Literature shows that notions of pilgrimage change, and that definitions of pilgrims and spiritual tourists are porous, shifting across contexts. Although eight days of my seven weeks of travelling involved a walk along St. Cuthbert’s Way, and another weekend involved staying at a Celtic Christian Community, other aspects of my travel which were not primarily spiritual in nature, also contained elements of pilgrimage and opportunities for learning about my spiritual journey. This reinforces Dandelion’s (2013) proposal that even everyday travel in our local communities can involve mindfulness and a spiritual openness to learning and engaging with others. I have also suggested that the effects of pilgrimage do not end with the physical arrival at a pilgrimage site, but continue to develop through the lengthy reintegration stage as learning informs further travel at home and away.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Laura Béres is Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at King’s University College at Western University, London, Canada. Her most recent books include an edited collection, Practicing Spirituality: Reflections on Meaning-making in Personal and Professional Contexts (2016) and a monograph, The Narrative Practitioner (2014). Her research and teaching interests intersect narrative therapy, critical reflection of practice, and Christian spirituality.

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