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An Irish Spiritual Pilgrimage and the Potential for Transformation

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Abstract: *This paper discusses spiritual pilgrimage from a cultural-spiritual perspective on transformative learning, and analyzes the experiences of the three co-authors via an autoethnography methodology.*

The purpose of this autoethnographic research was to explore the possibilities for transformative learning within the spiritual/cultural experience of pilgrimage. Several writings within and beyond adult education address transformative learning (TL) in relation to spirituality as it intersects with culture and/or environment (Brooks, 2000; Dei, 2002; Kovan & Dirxx, 2003; Miller, 2000; Tisdell, 2003, Taylor, 2008), and women using story for change (Wiessner, 2005). Davis (2007) presented research on experiential learning via Holy Land pilgrimage of 40 pastors. But there is little research using the cultural-spiritual perspective of transformative learning. Neither has an anthropologic perspective been incorporated. This research addresses this gap, by centering three women's stories of their pilgrimage to a holy mountain in Ireland when they connected with place, history, story, spirit and each other.

Theoretical Framework

Pilgrimage, very loosely defined, is a journey to a destination. This destination can be exterior or interior, literal or metaphorical, material or spiritual; however, it will always be the location at which the ideal is situated. Our particular interest was a specific pilgrimage site, Croagh Patrick in Ireland, which has been climbed by thousands of spiritual pilgrims for centuries on Reek Sunday, the last Sunday of July. The mountain's combined legends, location, and cultural significances identify the mountain as sacred (Sheldrake, 2003). The emphasis of most *anthropological pilgrimage research* is on relationship between performance of pilgrimage and construction of social reality. Morinis (1992) concluded pilgrimage is important both to collective ideals and as personal experience. To support study of pilgrimage as structure and experience he defined six types of pilgrimage: (1) devotional, (2) instrumental, (3) normative, (4) obligatory, (5) wandering, and (6) initiatory; all consisting of journey and goal. The goal of the journey is to move from the familiar to the Other, or from home to the place of the ideal, thus locating Otherness outside time and space. The ultimate goal of the pilgrim is salvation, either as transformation /transcendence into the ideal, or acquiring solutions to life's afflictions.

In approaching pilgrimage as a potential site of learning, a cultural-spiritual perspective on transformative learning (Brooks, 2000; Dei, 2002; Selby, 2002; Tisdell, 2003) resonates with the qualities of traditional pilgrimage as just described. Using cross-cultural relationships and experiences to enhance spiritual awareness, this approach to transformative learning highlights an evolutionary storying of personal experience, and sees spirituality as a journey toward wholeness (Tisdell, 2003). It falls within the larger tradition of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), but highlights culture and spirituality and the role of body and emotions rather than a strict approach to rationality, to manage the impact of our constantly changing world, or an experience like pilgrimage, which is physical and embodied as well as spiritual.

Methodology

This is an autoethnographic study. Autoethnography integrates ethnography with personal story, using experience to gain insight into aspects of the larger culture. Its adherents promote self-reflection, understanding of multi-cultural others, and narrative writing (Chang, 2008; Davis & Ellis, 2008). In keeping with this approach, data for this study were collected through self-narrative writings as three American women, and consisted initially of individual written accounts of our experience of the 22-mile pilgrimage itself from Ballintubber Abbey to Croagh Patrick. Interactive self-observation data were included by intentionally creating interactions with others, either on the pilgrimage itself, or with those who had done it in the past, about the meaning of the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage in an Irish cultural context. This provided external data that gave contextual grounding to complement self-reflexive data. Further, we each read and analyzed each other's stories, noting the similarities and differences, and also reviewed photos, all of which prompted deeper reflection, further analysis, and a rewriting of our narratives. This incorporated what Davis and Ellis (2008) refer to as the "I" in our individual writing, and the studied self as "other" as we reflected more deeply in light of each other's reflections and comments, helping us achieve multi-vocality as we made further interpretations in light of the theoretical framework. Analysis considered the intersection of our ethnographic and pilgrim experiencing, and whether these were transformed by spiritual/cultural encounter. In what follows, due to space limitations, after a brief overview, we present our individual narratives separately, though our actual experience of writing was much more interactive.

Findings and Discussion

Our pilgrimage experience as three American women was of participating in this annual, 22-mile pilgrimage to an Irish holy mountain, Croagh Patrick, following a path with roots in antiquity, in the company of an organized group of Irish pilgrims. Our entry was negotiated with the help of local residents, and was organized by Fr. Frank Fahey of Ballintubber Abbey. He provided a brief history of the pilgrimage and explained some of the rules of the journey. "No complainin'" he said, and then went on to say that when you step on cow "pies" we should simply exclaim "T'anks be to God!" With that, and the help of Sarah, who appeared at various places along the way, we were off on our journey. The weather was not exactly violent, but cold and wet, with the intermittent heavy rain and wind being enough to challenge dozens of rescue workers and result in many cases of hypothermia. The sheer physical challenge and painful aftermath for aging bodies (with two of us in our 50s) led easily to thoughts of the inevitability of death. In both these ways, the lived religion of this day was much more real than sublime, and thereby sacred and spiritual in its reassurance that we are capable of negotiating life's ambiguities (Orsi, 2005). Considering types of pilgrimage (Morinis, 1992), this normative event that occurs annually according to Celtic and Christian cycles was also for us devotional, as we sought to encounter the sacred in personal ways, and initiatory as it was ultimately transformative. We attempt to capture aspects of the experience in our individual narratives, where we will highlight the meaning of the journey itself from a spiritual and cultural perspective, and in light of transformative learning theory. In the process of the telling, the similarities and differences in our experience will become apparent.

Mira Johnson's Narrative

The morning of the pilgrimage my body was full of anxiety, so much so that I lacked my usual immediate hunger for breakfast. The pressure that my thesis research rested on data I would collect that day distracted me from the excitement of traveling a pilgrim track I had long fantasized about, and returning to a mountain I had come to love on my first trip to Ireland when I created deep connections to cairns or ruins, the one-time monuments of a community, now infrequently visited, ambiguously located somewhere between nature and culture.

My desire to seek out these places was driven by a desire to be confronted with something, to access an important presence that I could not define, but which seemed akin to a Platonic form or an essential truth that could be located in a physical place, if only I could find it. In the places most significant to me, the presence I would experience often translated into a sense of community, despite the site having been uninhabited or its original purpose abandoned hundreds of years ago. In the presence of a cairn, or the ruin of a cottage I could sense the existence of something that transcended a particular time or place, a deeper archetypal realm to which the site's liminality provided a material link (Rountree, 2006). I refer to this feeling as 'community', because the presence had a personal quality to it that allowed me to recognize it as well as be recognized. This sense of 'community' usually was not limited to a sense of identity with a particular historical people, or the Irish as a whole. Rather, literary or imaginative narratives, stories connected me to an imagined landscape through the physical site encountered.

Along the Tochar Phadraig my preoccupation with data collecting alternated with site confrontations that compelled me to forget academic intentions and interact with the pilgrimage more personally. When I reached the rolling bog-covered pasture after the Boheh stone, I felt as though I was walking into a landscape that I had met before in the stories of Finn McCool. Not that it reminded me of a particular story, but I felt I was walking through the archetypal setting of the story itself, feeling the presence of that reality as one and the same with my own. The Boheh stone and famine graves also struck me with a sense of presence, but in the bog pasture I had the strongest experience of embodied confrontation with that presence I am continually seeking.

The 'seeking' trope that characterizes my experience on the pilgrimage is reflected in a similar sense of seeking that characterizes my personal life. Perhaps my early experiences as an Army brat served to detach my concept of 'home' from any particular place, while attempts to negotiate my identity as 'bi-racial' have led me to have an unsatisfied understanding of what communities I can and cannot, do and do not belong to. The lack of clear foundations for these experiences of community and belonging offer some insight into the ways in which I have come to relate to travel, 'seeking', and specifically the Tochar Phadraig pilgrimage.

Initially, I was uncertain that I had undergone any transformative experience during the pilgrimage, simply because I had been so preoccupied by my research, especially as it was not progressing as I had planned. It now seems to me that over the course of the pilgrimage I experienced a methodological sea-change. Originally I had formulated my research plan on an almost quantitative model, emphasizing the collection of recorded interviews and the number of perspectives they might represent. Over the course of the pilgrimage I adjusted my approach to be closer to participant-observation, emphasizing conversations rather than interviews, because my true interest lay in discovering what had made the experience of climbing Croagh Patrick so meaningful to me and why this sentiment was shared by thousands of other pilgrims.

Ann Swartz's Narrative

"The starting ritual, choosing a rough stone and a focus for the pilgrimage: coming to better acceptance of who I am, as a body and mind, at this particular time in my life, trusting to spirit to help make this happen." (from Ann's self-reflective narrative)

Just three weeks before climbing the Reek I had finished the corrections to my defended dissertation in which the closing thoughts included, "Recently I've been struck many times by the absurd irony of writing a big paper about bodies moving to stay alive while I keep myself sitting in one place and staring into an electronic screen. Often I've thought to myself, 'I'm a dying organism.' But I'm not. That would be the perception of an overwhelmed mind, and I am not overwhelmed past the point of endurance." It seems that I was unconvinced and needed to push myself to the edge of my endurance, where I thoroughly felt the touch of my own inevitable death, in order to embrace and act on the truth that I needed to get moving again. The dissertation process had washed away so many past, painful ambiguities, and the pilgrimage cleansed me of the remaining free radicals of bodymind memory. How perfect that I should be in the company of my daughter, who traveled with me as much of that old structure was built, and my advisor and friend who presided over my academic self-cure.

Without trying to explain why, I can state with great clarity that I attributed meaning to my pilgrimage through my embodied experience. If I sought anything in that mode it was transcendence of time and space that might afford me the chance to connect with whatever remained in that place in County Mayo from times past, like morphogenic resonance in some homeopathic remedy, an energetic holographic imprint. Morinis (1992) writes that physical challenge and pain are staples in the experience of organized pilgrimage because of their contribution to altering the state of consciousness. In altered states we are open to forms of presence beyond our usual linear separateness (Selby, 2001). Once in touch with our interconnectedness with all that lives, we may move deeper to a third form of presence that Bohm (as referenced in Selby, 2001) names 'implicate order.' At that level, we are all part of the same flowing energy, only emerging for our short lifetimes when there's a temporary wrinkle in the field. In this 3rd presence we are simply aware of being in the flow. My long periods of interiority during the pilgrimage walk moved me toward this place. The spirituality of that experiencing came through my understanding of it as spiritual nomadism (Berman, 2000). Before 2000 B.C., before political ideology, before doctrines, Berman (2000) writes that the sacred was perceived horizontally, located in this world. This consciousness that is paradoxically both focused and non-focused, individual and universal, fleeting and enduring, sounds to me like the presence of touching implicate order. In that 'place' I could be in both past and present, and for moments on that day's journey, I went there. Because this was happening in a place my ancestors moved through for specifically religious and political reasons, my journey also served me as a 'reclaiming of sacred face' (Abalos as referenced in Tisdell, 2003).

My possible transformation was as embodied as my day on the land. When I returned home I felt tremendous peace and noticed that whenever I began to think or feel anything slightly negative, my body would reject this, and supply instead the visual memory of the Croagh, along with a feeling of openness around the top of my head. I have no theories to explain this, only my experience. Over time, the response becomes less automatic, but responds quickly to my intention. I was surprised by the compassion it brought to some places where I had been less than charitable. The question presents itself: what pattern of compassion, or something like it, might emerge when one engages in this normative pilgrimage repeatedly at the annual cycle?

Libby Tisdell's Narrative

My experience of this pilgrimage has to be set in context of three significant elements: the beginning of a sabbatical where I was to spend much of my time in Ireland; my 89 year old father's failing health: my Irish-American Catholic background along with the importance and influence of many spiritual traditions on my current spirituality. As such I was approaching my entire sabbatical as a spiritual pilgrimage of sorts, and said goodbye to my dad knowing there was a chance I might never look into the light of those wise eyes again. I was reminded of Neil Douglas-Klotz's (1990) midrash on *Abwoon D'bwashamaya Netqaddash shmak*, (p. 10), the Aramaic words of the first two lines of the Lord's Prayer. According to him the phrase *Netquaddash shmak* (translated as "hallowed by they name") is equivalent to being hollowed out so that one's inner light (*schem*) can shine more brightly. This is how I was approaching my pilgrimage: hoping to be hollowed out to be full of a more vibrant light. In Ballintubber Abbey at the start of the pilgrimage, Fr. Fahey said that people sometimes do the pilgrimage for someone; in that spirit I lit a candle for my dad, who was a World War II veteran wounded in Normandy.

As I began the walk, I thought of my great grandparents and all my Irish ancestors and wondered if they too had walked this path, and if the cells of my body knew this journey. The road was rough, with bogs, wind, and rain, and many cow "pies" that I tried to dodge without success. Climbing the mountain and seeing the beauty of the valley below was literally and figuratively a high; but getting down a 2-3 mile steep incline in one piece after 20 miles of walking *up*, was extremely challenging. Throughout the journey, I meditated on various poems and prayers from childhood to adulthood that I remembered, and used centering techniques I had learned in Zen meditation and Tai Chi. When the going got really tough, I meditated on the mysteries of the Rosary, particularly the Sorrowful Mysteries, a bit reframed in light of my experience, which kept me focused on something besides my misery. (I had fallen and cut my hand, developed a terrible blister on the sole of my foot.) So the "Agony in the Garden" became "The Agony in the Bog on the Way to the Mountain." Worrying about Ann, who wasn't looking so good, helped me focus less on my own misery. (Mira on the other hand could have gone another 22 miles!) I took comfort in the hospitality and concern of the many Irish pilgrims who would check on the two "American ladies" holding up the end. But all three of us made it. I felt triumphant as well hollowed out--the way of the pilgrim. *Netqaddash shmak*.

My dad died nearly four months after the journey to Croagh Patrick. I returned home from my sabbatical two months early due to his frailty, and witnessed how he was hallowed out to the point of radiating a special light, *schem* in his dying process. Was my Croagh Patrick pilgrimage a transformative learning experience? Indeed. But it is one that can't be separated from the rest of my life context. It gave me a larger perspective on my Irish cultural heritage, to walk the land of my Irish ancestors, and to find myself meditating on the mysteries of the Rosary as they had before me. I was struck by the power of cultural memory, ever present as it is reframed in the context of community, culture, and environment (Dei, 2002). While the physical challenge was nothing of what my father experienced in Normandy, it made me feel more united with him in his own journey in life and death. But it was also traveling with my sister pilgrims Ann and Mira, the bonding of doing something so difficult at such a transitional point in my life was part of that experience of transformation. It made me re-member the spiritual and cultural are deeply connected to the relational, emotional and physical, and unites and deepens relationships with pilgrim friends, fathers and daughters, cultures and communities. Hollowed. Hallowed... *Be thy name(s). Netqaddash shmak!*

Conclusions

It seems strange after writing such personal reflections, we should now move to the colder theoretical voice of academia to discuss theoretical insights. But in a sense this is precisely the point of a spiritual cultural perspective on transformation theory: it is of the heart and of the spirit, and is thus best expressed in a medium that speaks to that connection, which is why we chose to write in such a personal voice. While theory is more ideological and rational it certainly has its place, including here. In many respects, Mezirow's (1991) emphasis that TL is about the rational world of critically reflecting on assumptions, doesn't at all speak to the heart and soul of our spiritual cultural pilgrimage experience. But in other respects, we did ultimately give voice to, and did critically, spiritually, meditatively, culturally, environmentally reflect on assumptions, and gave voice to ourselves and to each other about that experience. The giving voice (talking/writing/reflecting) would have been impossible without the physical, spiritual, and cultural experience, which doesn't mean that it all goes back to the head (rationality). Indeed, this is Selby's point: the whole works all together, a point that Berman (2000) also highlights in his discussion of the paradox of pilgrim spirituality. Through the mutual inscription (Rountree, 2006) that occurs during physical engagement with place, new meanings are created for the pilgrim and new stories associated with the site, leading to a transformed understanding of the world and one's self.

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