On Pilgrimage...

a way of living and telling our story in later life

Jane M. Thibault, PhD
Clinical Professor Emerita
School of Medicine, University of Louisville
We experience life as story...

Storytelling – a fundamental aspect of being human
We create who we are – we create our own reality – by the stories we tell ourselves and others about our lives!

Stories hold present fact + future possibility
Meaning is created and re-created over the lifespan
Our stories interact with others’ and exist within the larger stories of Creation, religion/philosophy, social norms of country, families
(Kenyon, Clark, devries, 2001)

We even DREAM in stories!
The stories we tell about ourselves -- to ourselves and to others -- influence (may even create) who we become!
We [frame] our stories...

We structure or frame our stories – put them in context – with **metaphors**

eg. *My aging is like*…

  a journey, a glass half-full (or empty)
  a disaster waiting to happen, a beautiful painting, a gift

or, *I am* …

  part of the universe becoming conscious of itself, a burden, a victim, a survivor, a blessing, a child of God
Stories emerge with life phases...

- First Third: learner: child–student
- Second Third: worker: householder–community member–citizen
- Third Third: elder – post formal work
  In Hindu culture, ‘forest dweller’, monk, contemplative, wisdom–sharer, sage, volunteer sufferer
Ponder...

What story (or stories) are you are telling yourself (and others) about your experience as an aging person?

(note: we are all aging, regardless of specific age!)

What metaphors are you using? Are they ‘working’ for you?
What!!! – ME – Aging ???

Let’s share stories….

What experience or event caused you to realize you were not as young as you thought (or felt) you were?
“Thoroughly unprepared we take this step into the afternoon of life...on the false presupposition that our truths and ideals will serve us as they have so far.

But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life’s morning – for what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie. “ Carl Jung, 1933
What might the evening’s program be?

No definitive answer.

Many religions and philosophical stances offer guidance via stories: eg.

Hebrew scriptures: Gen 17: Abraham and Sarah
and John 21:17–19: Peter as frail old man
Genesis 12, ff:
“Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran…and they set for to go to the land of Canaan.”

Genesis 17, ff: “When Abram was 99 years old …he fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is 100 years old? Can Sarah, who is 75 years old, bear a child?’”
Christian Scripture– Luke’s story

Luke 2: 25–38  Two elderly characters, Simeon and Anna

Simeon -- ready to die, fulfilled -- God has granted his lifelong desire to see the Messiah before death. Represents the elder who come to integrity of life.

Anna, 84, re–fired by recognition of the Messiah, lives to tell a new story. Represents the healthy elder, still engaged with life.
John’s story...

Jesus said to him (Peter), “Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”

(He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) Represents worth of the frail person with memory loss.
Challenge!!!

How do we live the ‘evening’s program’ with grace and dignity – even with dementia?
Psycho–Spiritual Tasks of Last Phase

Theme: “Letting Go” of earlier identity

Ego Differentiation vs Work–Role Preoccupation
Body Transcendence vs Body Preoccupation
Ego Transcendence vs Ego Pre–occupation

Richard Peck

Also: Interdependence vs Independence
Last Third is often ‘I’ – shattering

Our stories may change – FAST– and unexpectedly! Frailty, sensory losses, chronic or life-threatening illnesses, loss of friends and work and other unwanted changes shatter our ego by challenging the illusions that we are:

Invulnerable
Independent
Immortal

(And offer an opportunity to grow!)
My story changed...overnight!

Old Story: I *was* a healthy 62, + enjoyed many roles -- gerontologist/professor, wife, grandmother, friend, spiritual director, writer, etc, etc...content with life, happy

New Story: I *became* a patient – a person with a life-threatening disease – Stage 4.5 non-Hodgkins lymphoma, congestive heart failure and neuropathy from chemo, macular hole in eye -- frightened
SUDDENLY....

The secret belief -- *the illusion* -- that I would remain an active, healthy, productive ‘middle-aged person’ til age 120 was gone forever!

What to do?  How to be?
When your ship, long moored in harbor, gives you the illusion of being a house, put out to sea!
Save your boat’s journeying soul, and your own pilgrim’s soul, *cost what it may.*”

Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Brazil
We must mourn, say Kaddish for the self who was...and will never be again.

(Kaddish prayer promises that despite the loss, we will continue to praise God.)
“There are circumstances that must shatter you; and if you are not shattered, then you have not understood your circumstances.

In such circumstances, it is a failure for your heart not to break, and it is pointless to put up a fight, for a fight will blind you to the opportunity that has been presented by your misfortune.
Do you wish to persevere pridefully in the old life?

Of course you do: the old life was a good life. But it is no longer available to you. It has been carried away, irreversibly.

So there is only one thing left to be done...
Transformation must be met with *transformation*!

Where there was the old life, let there be new life. Do not persevere.

Dignify the shock. Sink, so as to rise.
The challenge...

How to ‘dignify the shock’?

How to ‘sink, so as to rise’?

How to ‘dignify my pilgrim’s soul’ and ‘put out to sea’?
Action #2: Find or Make MEANING!

View changes through a different lens, make sense of what is happening, frame this change with a new image, for

“To live is to suffer; to survive is to make sense of the suffering.”

NT Times, 2013

“He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how.”

Nietzsche, Frankl
I needed and searched for

An *organizing principle*, a *metaphor* to encompass all of my experiences –

a ‘*unified field theory*/*a new story*’ for my present and future life -- for *both* the *joys* and the *suffering*.
Asking...

What am I being pulled from?

What has been the most constant aspect of my life?

Where am I now?

What am I being nudged, invited to?
Using ‘re-framing,’ or ‘cognitive re-appraisal’

After my bout with lymphoma in 2009 I chose to view and tell the story of my current and future life -- my aging -- through the framework or metaphor of pilgrimage,

interpreting everything that happens to me for the rest of my life as part of my pilgrimage to completion --- and beyond.
My old metaphors weren’t ‘working’ well any longer:
  natural monastery
  gift
  journey
  entrance into passion of Christ
I needed a different structure for my new story...
Why ‘pilgrimage’?

I’ve found pilgrimages *profoundly helpful* at times of crisis or great suffering – began with death of parents at 15 and 16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Merton/Combermere Ontario</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisville/Gethsemani</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monastery Ruins/York Minster</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oberammagau/Dauchau</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chartres/Lisieux /Marburg</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So...what IS a Pilgrimage?

“A journey or search of great moral significance, pointing to a life of meaningful intent and spiritual intensity.” (Webster)
Pilgrimage is a spiritual exercise, an act of devotion, to find a source of healing, or even to perform penance. Always, it is a journey of risk and renewal. For a journey without challenge has no meaning; one without purpose has no soul.” Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*
An ancient practice, a pilgrimage is

an intentional setting out from one’s familiar, everyday perception of existence

into an unknown, often mysterious, uncontrollable – often even dangerous–inner and outer realm

in order to find something of great spiritual value: God, one’s true Self, the meaning of one’s life, vocation, atonement for sin… whatever deepening/transformation one is seeking.
Pilgrimages are found in almost all religions… usually thought of as a *physical trek* to a sacred, geographical destination.
Examples:
Taoism and Buddhism: 9 Sacred Mountains China
Hindu, Buddhism, Jainism: City of Varanasi on Ganges
Buddhism: Bodhi Gaya, India, Buddha’s place of enlightenment
Judaism: Jerusalem – Western Wall, Temple Mount, Masada
Christianity: Holy Land, cathedrals, sites of miracles, visions, burial sites of saints (Way of St. James : Martin Sheen – The Way)
Islam: Mecca -- hajj on 8, 9, 10th day of Muslim year
An Inner Destination...

Pilgrimage can also be a *solely inner* venturing into the depths of one’s soul or psyche while in one’s own place, alone or with others via: contemplation/meditation, prayer, on-line retreats, sacred reading, yoga journaling, music, art, dance writing, labyrinth, therapy, spiritual friendship, etc.
The Pilgrimage into one’s heart and soul...

“I do not go to see sacred shrines of pilgrimage, or bathe in the sacred waters;

I do not bother any beings or creatures.

The Guru has shown me the 68 places of pilgrimage within my own heart, where I now take my cleansing bath.”

Sikh Holy Text
Guru Granth Sahib
The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer journey. One can have one without the other, it is better to have both.

_Mystics and Zen Masters_
Pilgrimage is NOT:

a vacation,
a journey,
or even
‘spiritual
tourism’
“Pilgrims for pork: 26 sizzling spots to sample best bacon”
What’s the difference?

We *journey* to reach a goal -- but on a pilgrimage, *the goal is present at every step.*

Br. David Steindl-Rast OSB
The pilgrim’s understanding is that the journey, inner or outer, will be filled with unexpected events, persons, challenges, some of which will be pleasant and others unpleasant, even painful, penitential, or sacrificial, and that ALL of these events will have spiritual import for the pilgrim’s quest and future life.
When on pilgrimage, one must...

Give up expectations, control
Surrender to whatever happens

Realize that **EVERYTHING** becomes laden with message and meaning and teaching for one’s transformation.

*We don’t pick and choose what is meaningful.*
*We seek or make meaning of whatever comes.*
Story: the telling of a happening or a collected series of happenings, true or fictitious. Narrative refers to type of prose that recounts happenings.

We use stories, narratives to talk about, to describe and explain our lives. We even dream in stories!

In our stories, we often use metaphors (figure of speech containing an implied comparison, in which a word or phrase ordinarily and primarily used of one thing is applied to another) analogies, similes to create the mood, image better than pure description.

C’est moi à L’Oratoire…OUCH!!!!
How can our *aging* be a pilgrimage?

By envisioning the experiences of late life *not* as a *random series of sometimes positive but often negative events* that must be suffered, endured, or adapted to, but as an *intentional* embracing of all experiences in a movement toward our ‘final fulfillment’ (however we choose to define that).
When we elders are pilgrims...

Whatever situation and whomever we encounter each moment of each day + or – becomes …

an encounter with the Holy, an event that can transform us, a signpost that points the way, leading us to our ultimate completion.
**WHY use ‘pilgrimage’ as metaphor?**

Too many aging metaphors are aversive, portraying despair... we need images of hope.
Instead of fear...

“Take me behind the barn and shoot me if I end up like that....”

Patients, Geriatric Assessment Program
We need attractive images to create new stories

Of aging as opportunity for growth in wisdom, grace abundant life --- come to fruition fully lived fully developed (Even in the experience of memory loss)
‘Pilgrimage’ is a positive image...

Both present and future oriented
Transforms – into +
Promotes and supports transformation
Full of adventure
Allows ‘starting anew’
Enables caregivers to accompany as mutual pilgrimage
Others?????
We *re-frame, re-contextualize* our view of aging when we *define and honor* later life as a pilgrimage.

Thibault & Morgan, 2009
To envision late life as pilgrimage,

1. **We choose** to acknowledge that we *no longer have to maintain the illusion that we are still young.* (We don’t even need to use the euphemism, “young at heart.”) We may need to actively **grieve the loss of our youth.**

Why? What served us well earlier may impede our growth in later life. (Jung)
We choose...

2. To acknowledge that *our time is limited*.

3. To believe we are following a *call to advance* – to go forth from the known and comfortable into the unknown and often uncomfortable -- even *painful* -- for our ultimate benefit (and *the benefit of society*).
We choose...

4. to re-fire (despite low energy) into new life.

5. to interpret all positive and negative physical, intellectual, social and spiritual changes as new territory to traverse in our advancement to wisdom.
We choose....

6. to embrace inter-dependence: we invite others to go on pilgrimage with us, we help them along their new path and accept their help.

“Alone + Together “
We Choose....

7. to see the aging process as the *final pilgrimage of this life*---the one that will ultimately lead us to our ‘Pearl of great price’ our Beloved, our source, fulfillment, our ‘true self,’ our completion, whatever Meaning we seek!
PART 2

Guidelines for Pilgrims...
Attitudes for a Pilgrim:

**Observance:** willingness to *pay attention* to everything that happens

**Openness:** willingness to *welcome* the experience, avoiding negative judgment, taking a non–dualistic approach to events, persons, etc.

**Self–Reflection:** willingness to *claim/examine/mine* the experience for its opportunity for bio–psycho–social–spiritual transformation
Rules for a Pilgrim
Adapted from Edward Hays

- Rule 1: Face the Unknown
- Rule 2: See it as an Adventure
- Rule 3: Travel Simply
- Rule 4: Welcome both Hardships and Joys
- Rule 5: Travel with a New Set of Eyes and Ears
- Rule 6: Face Danger
- Rule 7: Use a Different Compass

Pray All Ways
The reality...

“As for the backpack’s weight, the pesky, blistered feet, and the considerable pain and bruises I had endured, they were along for the adventure, just like I was, and so we tolerated each other.”

Mary O’Hara Wyman
Grandma’s on the Camino
7 Gateways: helpful spiritual disciplines

7 ‘gateways’, or entrances into specific, age-old, tried-and-true spiritual practices help to guide us on our pilgrimage into aging…
Gateway #1

Facing Aging and Dying

Imagine your life after death, then your death and dying, and work forward to the present.
Gateway #2

Living with Limitations

Tasks:
- Learning to accept help graciously
- Exploring ways to re-fire
- Practicing self-compassion
- Transforming powerlessness into strength
Gateway #3

Doing Inner Work

Rummaging for God/meaning at end of day
Practicing loving-kindness/compassion
Facing up to envy, pride, and greed
Believing all that is, is GIFT
Gateway #4

Living In and Out of Community

Practicing hospitality, interdependence, stability, kindness.

Welcoming companions on the way; smiling with face and voice.

Seeing wherever we live as a ‘natural monastery.’
Gateway #5

Living Contemplatively

*Savoring* life: enjoying slowness, silence, solitude
Believing that one’s *presence* is a gift
Finding a *practice*: mindfulness, reading, prayer/meditation, yoga, etc
*Caring* for the body/mind as the temple of spirit
Gateway #6

Redeeming Loss and Suffering

Recognizing *gifts* of diminishment, loss;
Dedicating suffering
Helping suffering others – generosity
with presence and companionship
Leaving a Legacy

What will our ‘spiritual footprint’ be?
Determining how we want to be remembered.
What will we leave behind that will feed the lives and spirits of others and will nurture the planet?
A BLESSING:
For our pilgrimage into our future
May your pilgrimage into aging be drenched with the joy of new wine...
full of adventure....
graced with companions on the way...
and contribute

in some mysterious way – to the well-being of all things abiding on our home planet!
Who Knows?

Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this!

Esther 4:14
“God has created me to do God some definite service;
He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission – I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next...I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. God has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep the commandments.
Therefore, I will trust God.

Whatever; wherever I am, I can never be thrown away.
If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him.
If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him…
God does nothing in vain…
I simply ask to be used.”

John Henry Cardinal Newman, Meditations on Christian Doctrine
The biological lifespan (not average life expectancy) is about 120 years. People 100 and older – ‘super centenarians’ – are members of the fastest growing population in Western society.

Considering that you might be gifted with more years than you expect, how might the metaphor of ‘pilgrimage’ be useful to you?
Recommended...


Sheiko, MA. *Pilgrimage (Hajj): The Fifth High Grade of At-Taqua (Seeing by Al-Ilah’s Light)*. cAmin Scheiko


Bunyan, J. *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Buffalo: Geo H. Derby& Co., 1853


**THE WAY:** a film written and directed by Emilio Estevez, son of Martin Sheen.

Martin Sheen, lead actor

Lewis–Krause, G. *A Sense of Direction: Pilgrimage for the Restless and the Hopeful*. NPR Interview with author @NPR Shop
Author Contact Information

Cc: Jane M. Thibault, PhD
13803 Bel Vista Court South
Prospect, KY 40059

Cell: 502–645–2441
Email: j.thibault@att.net
jmthib01@louisville.edu