

# In Peril and Pilgrimage: Exploring the Experience of Suffering in

## Journeys Endured

*Simon Piasecki*

This chapter represents something of a new direction, for me at least. For some sixteen years I have been interested in the impact of diaspora on the nature of identity: in the physical sense the crossing of a territory, often fleeing across mountains and at night, the leaving and arrival, and in the spiritual sense the death of one thing and the birth of another. With this chapter, I shift from the need to endure a perilous crossing, to the wish to do this as an act of absolution or a seeking of enlightenment: a pilgrimage. The chapter only really opens that frame, introducing some of my intended objects and hypothesizing simply that in respect of pilgrimage, a sacred place is essentially activated by the journey to it. Having said this, it is also my aim to question the primacy of that sacred space over the embodiment of the journey itself. These elements are not mutually exclusive of course, but traditionally the journey is to and in service of the sacred space; but if we reverse this view, then we appreciate the cruciality of movement and endurance in spiritual transformation, while the space of arrival witnesses, 'publishes' and indulges this. One intention of this chapter is to problematize the opposition between the secular and the religious in the context of endurance and pain, but since this is a crucial element of transformation, we shall also see that the physical pragmatism of a secular journey may lead to a realization very similar to that of the religious pilgrimage.

I also wonder here whether the term 'spiritual' is inseparable from the 'romantic'. The latter is not often an esteemed term, indeed as an art student it was somewhat of an accusation that questioned the integrity or authenticity of work; it implied unnecessary embellishment, sentimentality and impracticality. Spirituality is also a contested term, particularly in its implications for healthcare, which is relevant here when one considers the pilgrimage on a basis of need, wishfulfilment and transition from one place in life to another. Pattison and Swinton considered the contestation of the value of spirituality in nursing, concluding that its cruciality is also formed out of the very subjectivity that causes it to be contested in the first place, even the ontology of its actual existence. Rejecting the pragmatism of post-religious pragmatism, in the context of healthcare, they tell us that 'the task is to listen and to understand the function and direction of the language of spirituality, not to question its validity or right to exist and be used' (Pattison and Swinton 2010: 229). To understand the function of spirituality as a term in respect of this chapter, we should refer its presence to the direction, difficulty and embodied imperative of endured travel. I will embrace the term, even the subjectivity of its romance. I rather enjoy the implication of a romance of hardship, because it has a long history, through many cultural systems of oral storytelling, both religious and secular. I will shift my mode then between the formal and academic, and the deeply personal and creative. In early 2019 I took Lowland Leader

training across Anglezarke Moor in Lancashire. We immersed ourselves differentiating lichens, discovered the spot of a Lancaster bomber crash, talked about the Industrial Revolution and came to the ghost hamlet of Higher and Lower Hempshaw's, its ruins lying in abandonment. These things are all at some level romantic and all food for the spirit, earned by miles of placing one foot in front of the other. We walk and we generate meaning.

Walking is the most fundamental of human actions; we place one foot in front of the other and in so doing take ourselves on potentially huge journeys at a pace that allows us to observe. Writing about the Camino de Santiago, Keith Foskett says that 'if [walking] weren't so normal [...], then I would consider it a revelation' (2012: 4). In 2009 skulls and bones from early hominin humans were found in Georgia, which reveal their migration out of Africa some 750,000 years earlier than *Homo erectus* as previously thought. Evolutionary primacy favoured the ability to travel and walk large distances over cognitive intelligence in the early development of mankind. Early human ancestors' success in survival was predicated on their ability to walk rather than the size of the brain. In this sense we can observe that nomadism was a key evolutionary strategy for humankind.

There is a constancy to nomadism, however, that might belie the importance of a particular space, but while we have always travelled, we have also always venerated particular venues and for many different reasons. For example, on a personal level it may be that we hold our birthplace in particular endearment, and any trip to that place revives memory and the 'ache' for it – a nostalgia, a return to the mother. But we also collectively agree on the veneration of certain spaces, again for historical reasons: sites of events that are commemorated. These may be battlefields, but may equally include sports stadiums or simply places where something significant has occurred. Tony Walter considers the fact that the Royal British Legion formed a Pilgrimages Department in the 1990s, aimed at tours for widows to their loved ones' graves abroad. While this activity is not surprising in itself, Walter observes that the use of the term 'pilgrimage' differs decisively from commercial operators' 'battlefield tours' and recognizes therefore the intentionality of tribute, the presence of grief and the recognition of the widow as pilgrim (2001: 65–69). In the conclusion of the same book, Ian Reader considers hardship and recognizes that while this might exist less in the travel associated with some contemporary pilgrimage, in an age of convenience, there remains the form of emotional hardship associated with the emotional pain of visiting sites of grief and loss. The pain of this should not be underestimated; Reader regards it as 'often vital [to] the development of a pilgrimage' – but can it also be viewed as a public act of penance (2001b: 225)? Pain, both mental and physical, was intrinsic to medieval pilgrimage, and while this is more ambiguous in contemporary and secular contexts, it certainly still plays a role. I will come to this later.

There is no precise contemporary definition of pilgrimage, but clearly a visit undertaken as tribute is not explicitly penitential, while in the context of pilgrimage something endured usually is. But what then is endurance in this context? I would regard pilgrimage as an effective example of Merleau-Ponty's post-Cartesian view of mind-body unity because the two are inseparable; that is to say, from this perspective, any work taken out on the body is also work taken out on the mind. Parallel to Sartre's *Being & Nothingness* (2003), Merleau-Ponty refers to the context of a 'being in itself' and a 'being for itself' (we might think of this as body and then mind) as constituting the 'very essence of existence' and continues with the observation that 'by taking up a present, I draw together and transform my past, altering its significance, freeing and detaching myself from it' (1970: 455). This describes very well for me the efficacy of the pilgrimage, particularly as a meditation. By 'present' in this context I am referring to the importance of the present moment in a pilgrimage, the context of placing one foot in front of the other, the meditative practice of 'nowness'.

I noted in Simon Reeve's fascinating documentary series *Pilgrimage* the number of people on pilgrimage interviewed that described themselves as secular, but also referred to one's inability to escape Self while on the journey (O'Mahony and Mitchell 2015). When Reeve asked what they thought about and felt, the answers were seldom concerned with joy, but much more with the process of guilt, of anger and of loss and a wish to renew. Pilgrimage is a running towards oneself, not away, and the honesty of introspection, the psycho-mirror created by the steady and long footfall of a walk, is an endured space at least inasmuch as we have to face ourselves.

There is a tension between the status of the specific route and the final sacred space in pilgrimage. Some pilgrimages, such as the Kailas yatra in Tibet and Shikoku Island pilgrimage in Japan, are circumambulatory. Having travelled in the high Himalayas, I read multiple books concerning what is considered a mystical mountain in Tibet, a place of pilgrimage for a fifth of the world's religious population – Mount Kailas, sacred according to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and the older Bonism. In Kailas, we might consider that the sacred space is untouchable, since it is the Kailas mountain that the route surrounds. To complete a *kora* around it takes a Westerner up to five days, walking to altitudes of 18,600 feet (the Everest base camp is at 15,000 feet). Pilgrims die around the mountain on an annual basis because of being ill-equipped and unprepared for the extremes of high-altitude walking. At the most extreme level of pilgrimage, Tibetans perform a prostrated circumambulation of the mountain, laying themselves flat out on the ground throughout the journey. The journey takes the pilgrim up to the plateaus, where cloud burials take place, and across the *Vajra Yogini* field of metaphoric death, where the ground is strewn with the cast-away symbols of attachment and pilgrims can often be seen to rehearse their own death, lying still among the boulder field. Reaching Kailas is in and of itself the largest hurdle, and I wrote an article recently about the pilgrimage concerning the number of pilgrims that die annually, many en route and some around the mountain itself (Piasecki 2019). During 2018 some five hundred pilgrims were trapped due to bad weather on the route back from Kailas, and a similar event had occurred in 2017: in 2017 alone some twenty pilgrims died, many of acute mountain sickness (altitude sickness) that causes cerebral and pulmonary oedemas.<sup>1</sup>

The travel writer Colin Thubron (2012) wrote an engaging account of the journey in *To a Mountain in Tibet*, which while secular and observant in style, contains an unexpected account of his reflections of family, loss and pain while conducting the route, set within or conjured by the spiritual constancy of the pilgrimage. There is a sense that here is a stillness and the permanence of rock stands as a metre to the state of constant change that constitutes life in its journey to death.

Thubron talks about the secular pilgrimage today in the context of self-absolution as a matter of personal survival, although 'a journey', he says, 'is not a cure' (9–10). Perhaps so, but there is also a huge contemporary growth in secular participation across well-known religious pilgrimage routes. Thubron also reflects that there is an aspect of travelling to a place beyond one's own history (10) and certainly this creates a reflective objectivity; I have a place that I have visited throughout my life, and each time I stand on this particular hilltop, about once a decade, its timelessness raises my own awareness of change.

Like Kailas, the Shikoku Island pilgrimage in Japan is also circular, but while its 88 temples are numbered, the pilgrimage can start wherever the pilgrim chooses, or perhaps disembarks; the point of Shikoku is the completion of the circle, which

is eternal. Shikoku, like the Camino de Santiago, concerns distance, being around 750 miles, while the Kailas yatra is 54 miles. Having said this, the journey to Kailas itself is far longer and more remote. Endurance there also concerns surviving at extreme altitudes, and, as I mentioned, every year pilgrims die en route to the mountain. At Shikoku, the *henro* (pilgrim) walks with the spirit of Kōbō Daishi to whom the pilgrimage is dedicated and wears the motto of the pilgrimage: 'We two – pilgrims together' (Statler 1984: 24). Pilgrims wear white clothing, the colour of death, and collect the red temple stamps en route as they visit each temple. While the walk has no single destination, it does require a completion of the circuit. These days some complete it in parts over more than one year, while others use transportation, the physiological ease of which seems to undermine something of the ascetic objective.

The physical endurance and suffering involved in great walks can be read in the musculoskeletal impact on the body. Hopper describes the medieval pilgrim, found and disinterred from his tomb beneath Worcester Cathedral's bell tower in 1986. He wore sturdy thigh-length boots and carried a seven-foot staff, known at that point as a *bourdon*. His physiology itself bore signs that described the use of this staff: he had well-developed shoulder muscles, in particular on the right side, and Hopper adds that there is evidence of inflammation of the shoulder joint, pointing perhaps 'to constant use of the staff and repeated lifting, throwing forward and pushing down on the right arm and shoulder'. This is consistent with long hours of walking, but Hopper adds that 'the heel of the right hand, which would have incurred direct pressure from such a movement, shows evidence of arthritis' (2002: 81). There is something here of the efficacy of repetition in spiritual practice, particularly of a devotee. These physiological marks are evidence of hundreds of hours of repeated movement, that one foot after the other.

Finally, Hopper adds a commentary on his feet, describing the 'take off' movement consistent in walking that deploys a large tendon connected to the big toe; 'in the case of the Worcester Pilgrim, this has formed a significant groove in the bone, much more than usual' (83). I believe that Hopper is referring here to the hallucus longus extensor tendon, and injuries or inflammations associated with this are common among ultrarunners. I enjoy this comparison because I am certainly making a case here for marathons and ultra-events positing a contemporary equivalence to pilgrimage. Diana Webb, also describing the Worcester Pilgrim in her book *Pilgrimage in Medieval England* (2000), points out that he would not have been capable of walking far at the time of his death, in his sixties, but was buried and therefore likely known as a distinguished pilgrim. 'In earlier life', she notes, 'he had been robust and muscular' (212).

The Worcester Pilgrim was in his 60s at the time of his death, and his burial, adorned for pilgrimage, might suggest that he had been very active in this regard as an older man. In their paper titled 'Physiology and pathophysiology in ultra-marathon Running', Knechtle and Nikolaidis (2018) describe the typical ultrarunner statistically as being 45 and educated; as I spoke to ultrarunners myself at the beginning of the Midnight Mountain Marathon at Brecon Beacons, I certainly observed that age was a significant factor. These rather weathered runners struck me in much the same way that Butoh dancers and Body Weather training practitioners have in the past: their bodies are lean, thin even, and the muscles sit in an almost transparency of tone at the surface of the skin. One woman in her late fifties told us that she commonly ran 50-mile races cross-country and lived in a mountainous place. With age comes endurance rather than speed, it seems. One embraces the familiar aches, pains and injuries almost as an embodied kinship. For my own part I suffer from a crumbling fracture of the sixth vertebrae and conduct daily exercises to keep it in place, but the pain, which can be considerable, is so familiar it seems a part of my identity. Do I still suffer it then, or is the experience something else?

That the Worcester Pilgrim was an older, arthritic man, buried in his pilgrimage attire, with his *bourdon* at his side, brings me back to Shikoku Island in Japan. It is still a common practice for Japanese pilgrims to be buried in their full attire, which, as I said earlier, is white (although these days most will wear contemporary hiking trousers and shoes on the lower half). Ian Reader describes the traditional clothing for a Shikoku pilgrimage, with the *hakui* (shirt) symbolizing the burial shroud and therefore being fastened on the opposite side to normal, as with the traditional dressing of a corpse. He adds that the broad-brimmed hat, so effective in rain but impractical for modern transport, symbolizes the coffin. Like our Worcester Pilgrim, the *henro* walks with a traditional staff, the *tsue*, which represents the body of the Kōbō Daishi and the foot of which is washed each evening in symbolic washing of the saint's own feet. The staff is also symbolically the pilgrim's own grave marker, and in previous times literally, if they died en route (Reader 2001a: 107–36).

The hero walks in the presence of death on the Shikoku pilgrimage, facing impermanence in the eternal circle of constant change. In this sense, undertaking the pilgrimage is also a relinquishing of the grasping of life. The Shikoku pilgrim's journey represents in itself a fourfold journey to enlightenment that mimics Kōbō Daishi's own story until his death; Reader includes a useful description of this route as a process of travel (2001b: 110),<sup>2</sup> whilst Statler reminds us that the route can be started at any of the temples, so long as the circuit is completed (1984: 26).

Notwithstanding the Shikoku and Kailas pilgrimages, it is tempting to think of pilgrimage as being to somewhere fixed, because of the final sacred space, the object, which is also of course often synonymous with the institution, such as the church. Kailas and Shikoku Island are still places to be reached in and of themselves, and that stasis, that settled permanence, can therefore take on a definite primacy over the issue of movement, and yet it is the movement that is surely the most transformative spiritual aspect, while the space of arrival 'publishes' the fulfilment and the completion and confirms the indulgence.

Focusing on the nomadic, Careri (2005) points out in *Walkscapes* that the earliest architectures of any permanence (monoliths, barrows, circles) were between settlements, rather than within them and as such referred to impermanence and human movement, positioned en route as places of convergence from multiple origins. These were the earliest pilgrimage sites.

These Neolithic sites were consecrated spaces of worship that often also venerated the dead, that is, threshold sites. Recently I visited Newgrange and Knowth in Ireland, both huge burial temples. Before the carved entrance stone of Knowth is a phallic stone, surrounded by a field of stone eggs, and it is believed that these eggs were the pilgrimage offerings of couples wishing for a healthy child, an assumption of its significance perhaps. But this raises also the relationship of the sacred space to an inherent intention for liminal travel; the idea that we will leave, walk and somehow attain something in arrival that makes the journey an essential facet of our experience of that sacred space. If that journey has degrees of difficulty, then the attainment or realization is higher. I imagine the difficulty of carving and carrying those stones to that hillside, distant on foot, as I said, from any settlement, coupled with the pain of a childless marriage and the indulgence of fertility requested. I imagine this childless couple undertaking such a journey and generate a feeling of solidarity with their penitent action – I had recently run a mountain half-marathon with my wife at Brecon, albeit for different reasons, coming down hand in hand (I will write about this shortly). My imagination of this childless couple, as I stood looking at those egg-shaped stones, was of course wholly romantic, but isn't the ardour of the pilgrim also the romanticism that drives the harsher physical reality of their endurance? Pilgrimage places the romance of the spiritual in partnership with physical asceticism. I linked romance to spirituality in the introduction, but it

can be reasonably argued to have an etymological link to pilgrimage anyway. Partridge tells us that 'romance' is derived through middle English and French from the vulgar Latin *rōmānicē* (in the roman way) (1966: 572), but more fascinatingly, for me, he also suggests that the word 'roam' may derive similarly because of the 'pilgrimages to Rome', although he accepts that there has been some scorn for this (c.1958!) (567). This is one of those tantalizing moments in research, to discover that pilgrimage, roaming and romance *might* share a root in language. Certainly the etymological link between 'romance' and 'novel' originates with verses of adventure in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; Partridge does tell us as much in his etymological dictionary (572). Adventure implies a journey.

The liminality of movement, of the journey, has long been associated with philosophical exploration, and this is no truer than in religious texts that present the notion of becoming in respect of their iconic protagonist: the lives of Christ, Muhammad and Buddha all involve the journey as a crucial vehicle to revelation, dissemination and conflict. The penultimate component of the Passion is a journey under great duress, up to the place of crucifixion, and is often played out within promenade performances of 'The Stations of the Cross', wherein the movement of the audience is as of an embodied realization of the meanings of the Passion. Peterson's guide to this combines maps and architectural description of the stations with spiritual meditation and prayer; presented as a walk, it shifts back and forth from religious instruction, meditation and prayer to factual description of the locations, closing the gap between a physical and metaphysical tour of the Passion (1998). But I should take greater care with my application of the term 'liminal' here, if only because the most influential work on pilgrimage in publication, or at least the one most often cited in other works, is *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* by Victor and Edith Turner (1978). The Turners take care to define the 'liminoid' separately to the 'liminal'. If the liminal is regarded as a mid-stage cultural ritual, a rite of passage as such, then the liminoid is more 'optational', undertaken by choice, perhaps in free time, and is therefore, according to the Turners, associated with more complexly developed cultures (231). I am reminded here too of Coleman and Eade's theory of voluntary displacement in *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (2004). I might well refer, in a more generalized way, to the liminal qualities of a journey, as many performance studies scholars do, but this context of the liminoid is particularly useful here because the matter of choice is at the heart of pilgrimage. Reading Hopper's research on the medieval period, I was struck by how relevant to modern times the problems of wishing to undertake a pilgrimage in the fifteenth century are. Hopper gives the example of Brother Felix Faber (also spelled Fabri), who made two pilgrimages to the Holy Land and recorded his journey closely. He writes about the difficulties faced before leaving, which would remain familiar even today:

Moreover it was a serious matter for me to ask for leave for so long and so unusual a wandering, and it appeared to me to be almost impossible to obtain it. Nor could I form any idea of how I should raise the money for such an expensive journey.

(Fabri 1892: 3)

The context of personal choice here is crucial and Faber's problem was to account for how a personally auspicious gain was in the interest of others. The other, rather serious, consideration here though is that of chosen danger. To travel has long been associated with taking risk. In its pre-dissimilated Latin form, 'pilgrim' comes from *peregrinus*, and I am interested in the preceding three letters forming 'per'; I have written about this before, with original reference to Careri and am not surprised at the relationship to the

pilgrim. 'Per' is variously connected to the journey across or rather through space and of course is also contained in peril, experiment, experience and performance. Careri points out that there is also a natural link to terms that confer a state of knowledge, such as 'well-travelled' (2005: 41). Looking again at my rather coveted copy of Eric Partridge's etymological dictionary,<sup>3</sup> the 'per' prefix, essentially meaning 'through', has an interesting coexistence in a very broad base of languages from the Sanskrit *pari*, old Persian *pariy*, Hittite *para*, Greek *peri* and even Russian *pere*. This notion of 'throughness' does not necessarily always equate to danger directly until we return to the Latin *periculum* and the Greek *peria*, both meaning 'to try' or 'attempt' (Partridge 1966: 485). When we take a contemporary view of a pilgrimage, however arduous, it is useful to recognize that such a journey also involved mortal danger through other lands during centuries past.

Returning to the Latin word *peregrinus*, the 'r' was dissimilated into an 'l' in late Latin, forming *pelegrinus* and meaning simply 'foreigner' (Harper 2018: n. pag.). Therein lies the implicit peril of a long journey to the sacred; to leave ours and to travel through theirs, to negotiate permissions. Pilgrims would often bear emblems in the medieval period that declared their spiritual and non-threatening objective. Famously, the pilgrims of the Camino de Santiago would wear the scallop shell, and this spread to other routes. Such a declaration could also create a fear of divine retribution in those that considered an attack upon them while undertaking a sacred task.

There is fellowship in pilgrimage, despite any original intention to undertake a journey of reflective solitude; certainly as the popularity of pilgrimage increased in the fifteenth century, so did the attraction of its social aspect (Hopper 2002: 11; Stopford 1999). Along with this of course came criticism and the satirical humour described so richly in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (Morris 1985). Chaucer's observations draw out the absurdity of celebration and comfort in the refinery and behaviour of some of his pilgrim characters, including the richly furred monk, the proud bejewelled nun and the wife of bath dressed in fine scarlet: 'in felaweshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe of remedies of love she knew perchaunce, for she koude of that art the olde daunce [*sic*]' (5). Chaucer underlines this critical satire by setting characters such as these against the piety and poverty of others. He illustrates very well that while many undertook the pilgrimage, not all observed or even recognized the efficacy of basic discomfort, whether physical or mental, so were any indulgences earned at all?

Most of the contemporary accounts that I have read, including Colin Thubron's circumambulation of Mount Kailas, refer to fellowship as something found but not sought, particularly in the context of a need for self-reflection. This is evident in Thubron's account but also in the key documentaries concerning pilgrimage (O'Mahony and Mitchell 2015; Smith 2015), wherein the social fellowship of travellers is always an irresistible support; they meet along the way, in hostels and camps or in Thubron's case, because they are employed as guides and support. There is also a freedom to be found in being able to confide freely in a stranger, whom

there is no obligation to see in the future, and I imagine that routes such as the Camino de Santiago in Spain are a constant space for the exchange of personal testimony. Martin Sheen's fictional portrayal of Tom Avery, walking the Camino in Emilio Estevez's *The Way* (2011), is a moving study of such fellowship overcoming its own resistance in the grief of a father who has lost his son.

The Camino de Santiago is one of the world's oldest continuous pilgrimage routes and certainly existed as such before the Christian context; the route follows the line of Milky Way and, in pre-Christian Celtic history, was most likely undertaken as a walk to the 'ends of the earth' where the sun set over the sea (Hopper 2002: 50). Hopper also suggests that a symbol appearing in the stone-masonry of churches along the route can be interpreted as the sun. This syncretic quality is not surprising though; as with the walk around Kailas or Shikoku, the pilgrim climbs upwards

towards the sun, towards the heavens, and is removed from the contexts and rhythms of their regular mortal life. Hills still hold this quality for the weekend walker, the climber, the explorer.

While we refer the pilgrim to holy places, the term also has more secular origins, etymologically speaking, as I described earlier; I am as interested here in reasons for undertaking extreme travel as I am in religious travel. I will perhaps economize the two as spiritual, if we accept that the journey is as key as the arrival, if not more so. I wonder whether the sacred place in and of itself cannot reveal an aspect of potential realization in the visitor without the endured journey to it. The journey then, the endurance of it, is a necessary process in order to gain a level of enlightenment, whatever we believe that to be. For the ultrarunner this is embodied, but no less spiritual in its potential and achievement, and equally a secular walker of the 500-mile Camino de Santiago, stretching from France across the Pyrenees into Spain, will experience something meditative through their aches and pains, just as a religious pilgrim will. The final object, the bones of the apostle St James in Santiago de Compostela, might hold a different import for each, but as the point of arrival after four weeks of arduous walking, it is a spiritual achievement as much as a physical one; the path is necessary.

The most common historical motivation for undertaking the Camino was for redemption, the forgiveness of all sin; the pilgrimage was seen as one of only three that could forgive all sins, the others being Rome and Jerusalem, and after the Muslim armies took control of Jerusalem, the Camino reached its zenith between 900 and around 1350 (Mitchell-Lanham 2015). But this notion of the forgiveness of sin, the indulgence, is arguably not exclusively wrapped up in the remains of St James, but rather in the redemptive suffering of the journey endured, as if one is physically and psychologically paying a price as it were. The walk is long enough for knees to swell, feet to hobble and tendons to become inflamed. There is therefore also typically a journey from energy to its opposite, from comfort and confidence to pain and unsurety and therefore from self-belief to disbelief. These secondary states have to be transcended then if the Camino is to be completed, and it is this transcendence in the diminishment of ego that brings a new understanding and peace to many people. The source of this transcendence is also a communion of spirit with mind, body, weather and landscape; the harmonizing effect as the walker overcomes, finds a rhythm and experiences the care of other pilgrims along the way. A sense of catharsis and love for the beauty and tragedy of life emerges for many and naturally, for the religious, this is a closer proximity to God.

Mitchell-Lanham reflects that during the walk, the word 'camino' is itself deployed to ask for directions or distances and becomes in itself 'semi-sacred' to the pilgrim inasmuch as it stands for that embodied endurance by the end of the journey (2015: xi). Walking huge distances concerns pain and the overcoming of it, and this decisive act bridges the physical and the metaphysical, wherein the *camino* (path) of sand and stones and hills and mud becomes also the inner *camino* of regret and struggle, of pain, beauty and a wish for truths. In the documentary *Walking the Camino* (Smith 2015), there are many spiritual reflections that are not exclusively religious in the Christian context. I was also struck by the number of people that take a pilgrimage, not because they are religiously dedicated, but rather because they have lost a loved one. This is not to deny the specifically Christian context and origin in any way but rather to say that there is a deep human efficacy in the undertaking of pilgrimage, which can be transcendent in a spiritual context, if not a divine one.

In their edited study *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, Reader and Walter (2001a) conclude that contemporary pilgrimage has evolved away from the aspect of penitence, with, for example, transportation replacing walking, even in the Japanese circumambulation of Shikoko Island. They make the point that in the medieval era, ascetic hardship was synonymous with the

pilgrim, but in the contemporary pilgrimages their book covers, 'and certainly within secular forms [...], the idea of hardship appears to be almost entirely absent, at least in physical terms' (225). Since its first publication though, in 1993, I would reflect that there has been a phenomenal development of endurance-based fundraising, often performed by people that have lost someone or wish to raise money for the unwell: fun-runs, marathons, triathlons and ultra-events, such as marathons on mountains, at night. I wonder that the development of this is synonymous with the growth of the online business because of course the availability of materials and events is now as immediate as the fundraising itself, sited in specialist social media formats such as Justgiving, or standard online crowd sourcing.

Many people approach these events as amateur athletes, but many also approach them as a physical challenge that embodies an offering to the lost. There is penitence in this because there is often guilt in loss – a helplessness concerning whether we could have done more, a wish perhaps to have said or unsaid things, but also a sense that a physical undertaking gains indulgences against the causality of suffering; it is as if what we ritually endure physically stands in contestation or even battle against that which we have no power over. However secular in nature, fundraising attempts of this nature are deeply spiritual and cathartic. This difficult and self-endangering passing of the body through space concerns 'the necessity for a tangible, visible object' to achieve atonement (Hopper 2002: 30). After I lost my stepfather, whom I loved dearly, to leukaemia, my wife and I did this ourselves, signing up with Brutal Events to run the midnight half-marathon up the Brecon Beacons and raise money for blood disease. I had no idea if I would make it; more- over, the majority of our training had been on flat ground. I certainly suffered the event but was also driven greatly by the 'presence' of my father in a place that he loved; it is not unreasonable to say that we were drawn up ridiculous inclines by loss, memory and a genuine sense of fighting the unfightable. However, we were also drawn by a beautiful sunset and magnificent landscape that felt themselves like a tribute to him, a lovely man; it is this aspect of landscape that creates a space of objective reflection, as we repeat our steps like the stanzas of a prayer, breathing rhythmically through the object of aching pain and burning lungs, feet crunching, knees pounding. As we dropped into the final stretch along the single road of Talybont-on-Usk, pub-goers and spectators applauded. We held hands, in loss and solidarity, I think, and stumbled across the finish line, in quiet disbelief that we had made it at all and a catharsis of tears for my father. We also raised a thousand pounds, and while that money is contributed as a real and active resource to charities working to combat illness or support the sick, there is also the aspect of the votive offering, the coin tossed in the well and the wish made to the unseeable, the unknowable, the unfightable. There is pain and regret in such an undertaking.

Returning to Partridge's etymology the listing for 'penitent' directs us straight to that for 'pain'; there is a huge variation of words evolving from the Latin *poena* – the old French *penal*, the middle French *penalité* but also *punnisant*, which is of course the root of the modern English 'punishment'. But the Latin *poenire* also evolved through *paenitēre*, meaning 'to cause to repent', and so in middle French and English became 'penitent': '*me paenitet*, it causes me regret or repentance' (Partridge 1966: 463). The more Gallic Old French *peneance* became the modern 'penance'. I cannot resist adding that the Latin *poena* that we started with became

the Old English *pīn*, meaning penalty or pain from whence Partridge tells us *pīnian* (relating to 'pinion' perhaps?) meant to torment and to suffer torment. From this we also derive other words of sufferance, such as to 'pine'.

While penitence is clearly at the heart of human motivation for the pilgrimage, the devout can also earn indulgences. In Rome Catholic pilgrims may, on auspicious dates, be offered a plenary indulgence, removing all of the temporal punishment of sin after death, in return for worship at the correct places, confession, voluntary work and an offering made. This is penitential inasmuch as the body endures in order to make the requisite offering. Of course, while the efficacy of fundraising is clear, the religious offerings also maintain the institutions of religion – pilgrimage has always been lucrative and this generated a huge industry in medieval relics, which continues even today. Like the fundraising for charities, money is given to support morally good work. In medieval Santiago de Compostela, Hopper tells us that only cash and jewellery were acceptable (2006: 49).

Whatever this monetary offering, in pilgrimage there is also a proportionate 'worthiness' gained by a long, arduous route and means of travel; an absolution. From the theological standpoint a pilgrimage serves to absolve through the endured journey, reaching towards spiritual enlightenment, achieving an auspicious blessing through an act of endurance that visits and therefore serves the sacred place. In the medieval context the pilgrimage may even have been ordered by a higher office; as early as 853 AD 4-year-old Alfred (the Great) was sent to Rome by (and possibly with) his father, the Saxon King Aethelred. The arduousness and peril of that journey is difficult to imagine now.

From a secular perspective there is an equal power in achieving the ends of an endured journey, perhaps simply the first half-marathon of a new runner or the growing community of ultrarunners. Certainly there has been an increase in the past decade of online fundraising for events of this nature, often associated with the illness or death of a loved one, as mentioned earlier. We raise impressive amounts that correlate with a need to reconcile ourselves with powerlessness in the face of illness, an expression of defiance against the nature of things. While the money is pre-given, the endurance of difficulty is now intrinsic to a feeling that we have done something with our whole physical and spiritual beings in a meta-battle of our morality against that which is without cognisance. In its attempt to communicate with the incommunicable, this is quasi-religious.

What develops also contains the possibility of a physical addiction, growing in scale and challenge; having run that first half-marathon last June, over the Brecon Beacon mountains, I talked with fellow runners who considered it purely practice for the 50-mile runs that they regularly undertook; lean, weathered people with knotted muscles. Perhaps this development of ever greater challenges is subject to a law of diminishing returns and the liminal gain is relative to the perspective of the individual. While writing this I realized that the most moving example of gain was so close to me that I had not considered its clear relevance, because it concerns my youngest children.

For 53 years children, young Scouts, as a matter of fact, have taken part in the Cheshire Hike, navigating themselves across the county over a two-day period. This sounds modest until we consider the relative scale of its achievement. The hike is undertaken by teams comprising of two children each, carrying full packs weighing 13 kilograms, including camping and cooking equipment. The juniors, 11-year-olds, walk 40 kilometres over two days, self-navigating the byways and footpaths using compass and map. My son started out this way and continued until at age 15 he undertook the senior-plus challenge of 60 kilometres. My younger daughter has now

followed suit on the junior and intermediate routes. They train for some months prior, building up their physical resilience and learning to follow grid-referenced routes, pacing and compass bearings. While the training is adult led, the destination of the actual hike is kept strictly confidential until the day of the event. On that day, parents must drive their child to a starting point and leave. The children have their equipment checked and weighed and have to plan their route under close inspection, but at their individual start time they are simply sent on their way. Five hundred children are sent out in twos, from three starting points, on routes across Cheshire, parents and leaders alike placing their trust in the children's self-sufficiency for the first time in their lives. They walk, they make mistakes, they retrace their steps, adding miles on in some cases, and they are counted through sporadic checkpoints at 6-kilometre intervals. From the parent's perspective, which I have experienced, this is all rather traumatic; contact is prohibited and so we go about our weekend, worried, aware of their synchronicity moment by moment, on some pathway or in their thin sleeping bag on a cold night. Their arrival at the finish is therefore an emotionally charged event for the parents, as the children emerge from the countryside, often limping and mud-ridden. There are really two liminal realizations to this 'pilgrimage'. For the parent the realization that their child can cope on his or her own acts as a rite of passage; they have grown up in some fundamental aspect and astonish us as we see them anew. Children tend to take things rather more in their stride, and the development in them is more subtly realized, but no less impactful; they have taken responsibility for their navigation of unfamiliar space, for food and shelter.

Their arrival at the finish line is certainly marked by exhaustion and parents are far more excited for them than they are at that moment for themselves; they just want to sit! Some have fallen in streams, some are covered head to toe in mud, many have suffered severe blisters. It is all very moving. The site of course is not sacred intrinsically, usually a school field with an arena roped off. The children, having arrived, are brought together into this arena to be applauded by families and awarded neckerchiefs. In this fashion something important is consecrated, and perhaps the slow effect is both a growth in confidence and collaboration but also an extended spatial consideration of their relevance 'out there'.

In this way, as with the Camino de Santiago and the meta-death of Kailas, something is left and something else is born anew. These kinds of pilgrimages are a gestation that leads to a re-emergence, only after a process of formation, forging if you will, through degrees of sufferance. What is certainly difficult for the parents whose children undertake the Cheshire Hike is to relinquish the helping hand that would ensure their success. The children themselves have to cope with the prospect of *not* completing the route; some simply need a little talk at the base camp and a slightly firmer urging off into their second day. In this way, in 2018, I saw a young Scout, tired and lacking self-belief, in tears at the prospect of beginning that second day of walking, receive a few words from leaders at the camp that were enough for her to decide to try. As I arrived at the closing ceremony in the late afternoon I was deeply moved to see that not only had she found the courage and tenacity to complete her walk, with her teammate of course, but they had won both the shield and medal for their junior category. The evident transformation was not lost on any of us, not least her parents I suspect, and this was very much a big moment for a small person.

Ultimately we walk alone in life, in an embodied sense at least, and this is a difficult truth for the parent, but the efficacy of suffering (or pain if we wish for that link to penitence) has both a physical and a mental aspect. In pain on the walk the pilgrim faces mortality, thinks and walks, as I wrote earlier, towards themselves, which is not necessarily a pleasant or easy undertaking. In sixteenth-century Japan, the master swordsman Yagyu Munenori wrote that as the foundation of thoughts, 'the mind is initial. The mind is prior. The very first thought is the initial act. Therefore it is the initiating initiative. This is the ultimate. The very first thought is the

foundation of all acts' (2003: 44). Munenori illustrates the evident recognition of the power of 'right' mind in a physical endeavour, but refers this to a phenomenological decision in the present moment – mind the 'initiator'. Evidently it was the mind of the young Scout, who found herself in physical and mental difficulty, that initiated action despite this on that second day. But the post-Cartesian view of Merleau-Ponty removes mind as the primer, because the body and mind are in unity, because all knowledge begins in embodiment and suffering therefore becomes knowledge. Rebecca Solnit (2002), who writes so prolifically on walking, reflects on pilgrimage in her book *Wanderlust*. She discusses here a reconciliation between the spiritual and the material, since 'pilgrimage unites belief and action, thinking with doing', and while we remain bewildered about 'how to walk towards forgiveness or healing or truth, we do know how to walk towards an object' (50). While the premise of a pilgrimage might differ, then, the necessity of the journey remains as a crucial and intrinsic activation in the pilgrims' final proximity to the (sacred) object of their travel, whatever or wherever that may be. I'm reminded again of Pattison and Swinton's (2010) defence of the crucial, cloudy subjectivity of spirituality in its application to nursing, because it serves the destination, which in that case is recovery and, like any journey, is something to be endured. Ultimately, as we walk, we generate meaning out of the meaningless of nature, we compose and recompose those stories and connect our aches and pains to the catharsis of a 'liminoid' transition (Turner 1982), a meta-death intending to raise or renew us. The endured journey is by its very definition a romance, published as it were by its destination at the point of completion. In this very real sense, the route itself, with its latent history of footfall and suffering, becomes the genuine sacred space.

## NOTES

1. This was variously reported by news agencies such as NDTV: <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/kailashmansarovar-yatra-over-500-pilgrims-stuck-while-returning-from-kailash-mansarovar-1878678> (www.ndtv.com); Business Standard: [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/two-pilgrims-dead-1-500-stranded-along-kailash-mansarovar-route-in-nepal-118070301268\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/two-pilgrims-dead-1-500-stranded-along-kailash-mansarovar-route-in-nepal-118070301268_1.html) (www.business-standard.com); and India.com: <https://www.india.com/news-travel/kailash-mansarovar-yatra-faces-yet-another-hurdle-gets-suspended-3228513/>.

2. Temples are numbered and split between four provinces, some close by and others up to 60 kilometres apart. The fourfold process begins with *Hosshin* wherein the mind becomes awakened to the path to enlightenment (temples 1–23), followed by *Shugyō* which provides the spiritual and ascetic training necessary to awaken the mind (temples 24–39). Then *Bodai* represents the dawn of realization (temples 40–65) before full enlightenment is achieved with *Nehan* (temples 66–68).

3. Partridge's *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (1966) was first published in 1958 and, despite the title, is a large volume that traces words through a huge number of linguistic origins, including those as broad as Manx and Finno-Ugric, but also more obviously Anglo-Saxon, Latin and Old German.

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