



The Heart's Journey

By **Jay Ramsay**

I was born in Guildford and my childhood home was on the Pilgrim's Way. At the bottom of our street a sandy path led up into The Chantries, mixed deciduous woods, and all the way up to St Martha's Church. From there you could see over towards the Weald of Kent, and I used to imagine that path going all the way on to Canterbury.

It left an indelible impression on me, with a sense of the journey of life, in feeling and imagination; and 'the journey' being basic to life. Whenever I go on a long walk now, I think of that. Even a two- or three-hour walk can be a pilgrimage.

I even went to a prep school called Pilgrim's in Winchester where we sang John Bunyan's hymn in assembly ('He who would valiant be...'), so the whole concept for me came in very early. It set a tone for my life.

I grew up with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; my inspired English teacher at Charterhouse declaiming their wonderfully florid opening lines in an English you will no longer hear, but which is still music to the ear:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu is egendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tender croppes and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,
And smale fowles maken melodye
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So priketh him nature ein hir corages)
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages...

(General Prologue—opening lines)

Pilgrimage, as Chaucer also teaches us with the inclusiveness of what the *Tales* represent, is *par excellence* the opposite of a static or closed belief system. Pilgrimage – as we would say now – is fundamentally open to experience and the mystery... – but only when we journey in feeling and imagination.

It is that movement from head to heart, to hands and moving feet, leaving your study or office or house to go outside into Nature.

This is the movement of our return.

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In the summer of 1990 I was part of an Interfaith Pilgrimage to Iona, an enormous and amazing experience; partly by minibus (because of the older members of the group – especially the octogenarian Quakers!), partly on foot. I always remember walking the last 20-odd miles from the ferry port across Mull towards the Sound of Iona.

Out of that journey some years later, working with my friend Martin Palmer on his book *Sacred Britain*¹ (1997; a guide to the pilgrim routes of the UK), I named a series of stages for the pilgrim journey as a distillation:

The first stage involves feeling what it means to be a pilgrim and how different this is from travelling between A and B.

The second stage has to do with reading the signs, seeing that journeys are entities and that they take on a life of their own.

The third stage is becoming aware of our companions and why we are in the company we are in. This isn't always easy!

The fourth stage relates to the history, the 'story' we are witnessing, and its social, spiritual and political implications.

The fifth stage is about losing our role as observer and becoming part of the landscape, part of the story.

The sixth stage leads into a more visionary appreciation of the land, seeing it as a place where Heaven and Earth touch. Here we are seeing with the eyes of spirit.

The seventh stage is an affirmation that we are all God's people, whatever we understand by that phrase. We are a spiritual people, and pilgrimage is a way of opening ourselves up to that in

a way that is both confronting and revealing.

When I think about them now (as a practising psychotherapist) what I also see is a journey not only from head to heart and 'greater heart', but from ego to Self – and, we might say, Higher Self.

Perhaps such a movement was always implicit within the idea of a *beginning* (person becoming pilgrim) and an *end* (sacred place and sacred space, also with others).

The intention, the naming, is vital. This is not just a car journey or an abstracted stroll somewhere. I remember thinking that as I set off from the coach station in London towards Ilkley Moor, where our three-week journey to Iona began.

The second stage is all about attentiveness. A pilgrimage is a journey in consciousness, eyes wide open rather than shut. And it's starting to see *how everything is written on air around us*, literally, symbolically, synchronistically.

John Moat (of *Resurgence* fame as 'Didymus') once said to me that 'journeys are entities'. He was right.

Stage three is that (assuming we are part of a group) we start to become aware of each other. It is a social journey that, given our interactions, is also a psychological one. We bring up stuff for one another! (Projection of one kind or another....).

Stage four is about getting interested in the story of what we are travelling through, that is history (and 'herstory', the latter not usually so well recorded!).

Already there is a deepening of awareness here from the present moment into memory stemming from an expanded version of 'the Now'.

It's about what we need to remember, with the generations and our own ancestry behind us. This is not simply a self-centred activity, then. It took 500 years of history to create something like democracy in this country, something we can easily forget.

Stage five is crucial: it's about a deeper participation that is only possible when we lose a certain self-consciousness, just as when we're dancing. It's the difference between observing the dance and *becoming* the dance (which is where all the pleasure lies). We pass a threshold here: a portal into the heart.

As the Scottish poet Kenneth White puts it in a poem from *The Bird Path*:

the loveliness is everywhere
even
in the ugliest
and most hostile environment
the loveliness is everywhere

at the turning of a corner
in the eyes
and on the lips
of a stranger
in the emptiest areas
where is no place for hope
and only death
invites the heart
the loveliness is there
it emerges
incomprehensible
inexplicable
it rises in its own reality
and what we must learn is
how to receive it
into ours

Through this, we enter (in stage six) into the realm of being, of being the 'seer'. This is pre-eminently the task of poetry, and it belongs to the poet inside all of us. (My book *The Poet in You*² goes into all of this in more detail).

In the last stage we really enter into the Self that is connected to and within the Divine, whatever 'God' means for us. It is (as He is) a state of expansion, a raising of vibrational energy, and an awesome appreciation of both Creation (through Nature), and Love. For the Celtic Church these were always inseparable: I will say a bit more about that later.

If I can just reprise this now for you. Martin asked me to write a poem which runs through *Sacred Britain* – under its 18 chapter headings; so I wrote 'The Sacred Way'. Here's a section of it, also published in my book *Places of Truth*.³

7. postcards for pilgrims

a.
Start here (or anywhere you are) seeing
That to call this journey *pilgrimage*
Means an echoing in your heart
That changes it

Meaning who you are, too

Suddenly in your innermost unnamed self
That has always called itself you –
Being who you were always meant to be

b.
And as you go, read the signs
What is gathering around you?
Everything is secretly written on air
To feed, sustain and awaken you

The journey is itself, and it is your eyes
And something vaster than us is speaking

Through the intricate text of Its Being
Beat by beat and breath for breath –

c.
And as the journey grows
Weaving you in with your companions
Why these people? This motley bunch, seemingly
random
But assured... as boundaries soften

Bringing up all you need to see and feel, until
We are all One Body – straggling or smiling
We are messengers for each other, like a medicine
We are stories to be told and heard: a cargo of
treasure

8.

What are these ruined shells? Shrine or castle
Where the sun warms or the wind blows –

What does it mean for us to remember
Injustice and power, beside true loving?

These stones speak for themselves: but we must read
To see what our history could be again

As it hangs in the balance of our wakefulness
To stand up and be counted, to renew and mend

9.

Soul that breaks the mould
That sees what a far-flung landscape is
And blends to it

That gets out and walks
The whole way to feel –
To witness the unforgettable

Heron-bird of life and death
And the light on the longed-for island raying down

10.

And can see then
As the borderland becomes the Summerland
Where we are drawn into the light beyond:

Ascending light, like a dream within us
Dissolving the black ganglia that hang over Britain

In this sacred each and only moment
Where inner and outer are one

What we see here is that the heart is central not only to our individual experience but to our experience together in relationship. Lovers are pilgrims, then; intimate relationship itself is a pilgrimage towards Love – and from conditional love with all its ego-restrictions (as well as demands, defences and manipulations) towards the unconditional love that is both Divine *and is our own evolution as beings*.

'It is better to journey than to arrive', as D.H. Lawrence said. He may be right, although it doesn't sound very orgasmic or surrendered!

Perhaps the truth is that we are always arriving, and then having to journey again.

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Before I went to Iona, I was travelling in Western Argyll and found one of the most extraordinary and exquisite places I know – the ruined medieval church of Kilneuair, on the south shore side of Loch Awe.

I visited that place several times, and then again two years later on our way to Iona I took a group of us up there in silent walking meditation. It was a completely different day, but the feeling of the place and its 'thinning of the veils' was the same.

Two extracts from it, like call and respond. Here's the first, which describes discovering the place:

And if you come here, in the rain
As we came off the map by the edge of the road
To a wet tractor-track leading up out of sight,
Slow walking, steep, among stones –
The old path, long unused, untrodden

If you come this way, in the pine-scented air
In the quietening, gathering, waiting air
You may feel something coming to meet you
Stirring under your feet and clearing in your eyes
Though there is nothing you can see

But pines and bracken; until you glimpse – walls,
Fringing the green – low, bleached, lichen covered
Walls, and a skirting wall where the gate once was:
And we paused there, without knowing why –

Wading through the bracken, to it –
To the left portal with its Devil's Handprint

To gaze at it, roofless, among fallen masonry –

Overgrown, now given back: given to bracken, to
ragwort
Flowering, thistle-heads, bees – and a butterfly

Given in the arms of a dead tree, leaning
By the far wall, with one branch of it alive –

Given to light, and intact – the font intact
Aumbries and piscina, and our steps
Unsure of what we were about to tread on;

Stone, or earth, or gravestones – carved, abandoned
Asleep in the rain and the light, among the flowers
By the sanctuary of the walls, where no one comes,
And there is no more death and no more time –
And what is dead, and alive, are one

And by this font, I want to be baptized:
To be born here, married here, die here, feast here –

This is the place of the heart's wild baptism,
The heart's own, its own way

Baptism, and faith in the broken –
Faith, broken the heart's way to resurrection
There is no service here, no solemn congregation –
Baptism, among the bees and the trees for witness

Baptism, and you touch me on my forehead
Baptism of touch, with all that matters most
Baptism, and he bows and cannot speak

Baptism of fire and of blood – and it's all beauty,
All of it, every fallen stone – none of it, wasted –
None of it, ever

If you come here, come in your heart: only that

As I sat on one of the ruined walls near the baptismal font, these words came:

*Think of all the ways the heart needs cleansing,
For this new birth to take place –
It is not enough that the mind is made light,
The heart too must be made light*

*All mind-work now needs to be heart-work:
And this is the new education of earth.
For too long spirit has been understood in mind,
And this is why He came to earth*

*To show you the way of the heart
To show you that the way of heaven is earth's.
When you understand this, your lives will be released
In ways almost inconceivable to you now.*

*This wild place speaks it –
Fallen stones and rising ground –*

*And the font where heaven and earth meet, and in
you.*

And this is the task of speech:

*To be of the heart, to be of your whole body,
That the heart alone can hold and contain
Every level within you – become mind in heart,
And heart in mind, though you have no word for it*

*No word for what the mind is to become.
And this is the place of fire –
To be brought into the heart and its cleansing,
And the meaning of birth and the heart are the same:*

*The heart is incarnation. It never forgets.
What it has lived, it always remembers ... rose.
The soul-mind comes closest.*

*So in this place of prayer and peace,
Let your prayers be for the heart of the people,
For the heart beyond all barriers and barricades,
And the fear of the mind and its defences*

*Pray that the walls may fall as they are falling,
Now the wind is blowing – and remember*

*That the heart's way is resurrection:
To re-connect means the same.*

*Now go on your way and be glad,
And know that to be a pilgrim is to walk
in the heart
– for the heart.*

This place is your beginning.

This place is our beginning and our ending.

Kilneuir, let no harm come to you:
Be sacred, be wild, be free.

This came through 25 years ago, but it feels like yesterday, and it seems to me it is still the transition we are in – from mind to heart to heart-mind, or (D.H. Lawrence again) 'the intelligent heart' as a resolving of the mind-heart split in our wider culture and all its implications for intimacy, relationship and sexuality as well as our capacity to feel what is around us... – in other words, ecology.

Our time may be a crisis of resources and survival, but it is fundamentally a crisis of feeling... – a crisis that goes on, for example, rationalizing the existence of war... – which means the heart's journey is the only way for us.

There is a new birth, or second birth, through the heart.

Syria is open-heart surgery for the rest of the planet. And now the Philippines. Before that, Japan. Before that, Haiti. And look at human rights abuses in China... – it is everywhere.

Meanwhile the world is on fire
and we are on fire with it
feeling it as we never have
intolerable as it is

(there's nowhere to turn
a blind eye to any more...

issues come out
of every crack and door –)

all in one crucible, flask, athanor
the gold of a thousand mornings
hidden in the blackening
and this saltwash of tears.

Earth, our circumference
and wholeness in Creation
we have to return to,
the wisdom of ages

the living Book of Nature
burnt to our reading
until we break free
of our techno-idolatry

coming back to soul, source
the Living Word, love
breathing here among us
within all our names for it

beyond all our conditions
freed from manipulation
become the thing itself
in manifestation...

Love, our salvation
one church across the world
one faith, one turning
in the ground of our being

Love in this turning
of everything between us
from hate into seeing
all we have been

and these fragile flames of hope
tealights lit in a line
quivering in the morning sun,
back in the Garden of Life

the evening lights of the town

glittering, bejewelled, neon
in the whitening dark
that is Bethlehem and birth.

This is our story
where we all have a place
in how we live and choose
and move through every day

beyond you, me and she – we
unfolding this tapestry
that is all we can be
in truth and beauty.

One World People
among the diamond seeds of dawn.

But where has this left the Church? And what does this mean for us as a Christian people? 'Christendom' is where we live in this country, after all.

In a word, it leaves us outside: or many of us, unless we're fundamentalist or Catholic. As I found myself reflecting in the church at North Stoke, in another section a subsequent long poem called 'Summerland', which Martin Palmer commissioned for his 'Sacred Land' project:

12. Pilgrim Soul

So with the old pagan temple walled off
become a secret holy of holies,
we had the Pulpit Word of God
the Bible translated on common view...
all that Langland and Tyndale had dreamt,
the Word among the people.

And somewhere in that shattered window
what we also lost: miraculous powers
St Christopher whitewashed over...
the convivial pilgrim become a solitary soul
borne on a journey of struggle
through a slough of Suffering and Illusion

where Faith hovers like a flame
any drunken breath can negate,
and no woman can be trusted
in a world of pitiable men
whose envy is their damnation –

a church with no female soul.

The church is on its knees here because of seeds that were sown long ago, that we could trace right back to the dispute between St Augustine, who advocated original sin, and Pelagius, who advocated original blessing. We know which route the Church took – also via the persecution of women, especially powerful

women who were also healers. Even now, women have to join a boy's club in being part of common (or traditional) worship.

At the same time, just as 'there is no such thing as a perfect Sangha' (Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk), that must also apply to the Church. The veil can still be lifted, even in a mausoleum:

16. the Rose

Imperfect church
anywhere, everywhere, like life.
We walk on through our days
and in an unforeseen moment, it comes.
The fabric opens, the heaviness is gone.
Light is the reality... love
the Rose that opens, its emanation.

It gently closes, a child falling asleep
that world's visitation
echoing in our dreams.

And the liturgy continues...
what was he saying ?

For a moment his mouth was Pentecost
someone else was speaking –
and it wasn't in prose.

And you were there, witnessing.

I was always astonished, after what I experienced in the Abbey on Iona with its female celebrants, its own creative liturgy, and the sheer creativity of its services (at moments like something out of a film by Fellini!), that its influence didn't spread right through the existing structures. It may still do, but it is a centuries' old story –and I would say, a karmic process involving lifetimes that is still unravelling.

Meanwhile, we have a crisis (in the absence of God, materialism and financial anxiety fills the hole); but also an opportunity.

There are two aspects to this:

The first is to 'heal' our Christian beliefs through remembering and understanding what the Celtic Church has always stood for.

Seven statements here which are central to this faith:

- the light in the world is the Love of God
- the wildness of God is the energy of life
- the fecundity of God is the fertility of life
- the harmony of God is the connectedness of life
- the creatureliness of God is that we are all God's creatures
- we are created in the image of God
- our peace is the stillness of God

The second is to see that with the church metaphorically 'in

ruins', the *Church is Life* and that everywhere is sacred; and that within that our own chosen spiritual practice and path is also a pilgrim path, reaching beyond dogmatism and into the heart of our experience, our personal relationships and our relationship to the bigger picture around us.

This is where the creativity can and must come in; through the re-sacralizing of our lives with or without an officiating priest or pastor.

As Non-Conformists have always told us, there is a Direct Path: and that is to Jesus in your heart – or Buddha in your heart, or the Tao in your heart (as any Chinese person will tell you).

The heart becomes the place of unification in which we are One World People. Any religion that operates outside the heart enters into travesty, as we have seen with extremist Islam and the insanity of jihad.

Hatred only divides, and further divides (like splits in the psyche): only the heart can re-unite.

And then we may see

11. *The Glory*

Stand in the presence
Though you cannot name it
By any name, or only one

Stand in the presence
Where the bread is given
Stand and sing –
Where all our names are sung

Stand and see
At the harvest of time
That as we build in the light
Your Will shall be done

And in the temple between us
That is a ruin of light
That is a man and a woman
Made of naked light

As the veil is lifted –
We shall see the beginning
That lies hidden in the end

That we are all a part
Of each other, in ourselves
Everyone, everything, everywhere sacred
Living on this pilgrim star

Then we shall find each other
In the Glory.

References

- 1 Martin and Nigel Palmer, *Sacred Britain: A Guide to the Sacred Sites and Pilgrim Routes of England, Scotland and Wales*, Piatkus, London, 1997.
- 2 Jay Ramsay, *The Poet in You*, O Books, Ropley, Hants, 2009.
- 3 Jay Ramsay, *Places of Truth: Journeys into Sacred Wilderness*, Awen Publications, Bath, 2009.

Jay Ramsay (1958–2018) co-founded Angels of Fire in London (1983) with its Festivals of New Poetry, and in his lifetime published over 30 books of poetry, non-fiction, and classic Chinese translation, including *Psychic Poetry – a manifesto*, *The Poet in You* (his correspondence course, since 1990), *Monuments*, and *Agistri Notebook* (both 2014), and a poetry-music album, *Strange Sun* (2012). Editor of six poetry anthologies – most recently *Diamond Cutters* (with Andrew Harvey: www.tayenlane.com), and many collections for other poets under Chrysalis Poetry imprint – Jay was Poetry Editor of *Caduceus* magazine, a UKCP-accredited psychotherapist and healer, and ran workshops worldwide (www.jayramsay.co.uk). His

last books were *Pilgrimage – a Journey to Love Island* (www.awenpublications.co.uk) and *The Dangerous Book* (see goo.gl/AYMkx6).

Julian Nangle, S&S poetry editor, writes:

The piece is extraordinary to me personally as it gives me information about Jay which provides startling coincidences within our lives. While he was at Charterhouse (he was 11 years younger than me) I was in my first 'home', with my first wife, living in a flat right next door to the school on Frith Hill Road, in Godalming, which led down into Charterhouse (1972–5). I was raised in a village two miles from Guildford, Bramley.

Guildford was my home town, and Pilgrim's Way and St Martha's Church (where there was a fabulous natural sand pit and 'climbing tree' for the young Nangle) are both hugely familiar and bring up plenty of nostalgia for me. When a young man I used to go to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at St Martha's church.