

# J.F. PENN PILGRIMAGE

Lessons learned  
from solo walking  
three ancient ways



# Preface

“In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost.”

—Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*

Pilgrimage attracts the seekers. Those with a question to answer, a problem to solve, a sin to atone for, an illness to be cured, a prayer to be answered. Pilgrims walk with a desire to make a change, to mark a boundary from one life to another, to heal, to escape.

I needed all of these, and more.

Perhaps you do, too.

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In mid-October 2020, I walked the Pilgrims’ Way from Southwark Cathedral in London to Canterbury Cathedral in Kent, England.

The following year, in October 2021, as I recovered from COVID-19, I walked the St Cuthbert’s Way from Melrose in Scotland to Lindisfarne, Holy Island, on the north-east coast of England.

In September 2022, I walked the Camino de Santiago along the coastal route from Porto, Portugal to Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

These three solo pilgrimages helped me through a ‘dark wood’ in my life and changed how I see the way ahead.

In this book, I share my lessons learned and insights from walking these ancient ways, as well as historical, religious and cultural aspects, and plenty of tips. There are also questions for you to consider around your own journey.

**Part 1** goes into practical and spiritual preparation before pilgrimage, including how to make decisions about the route and whether to walk solo, as well as what to take with you, and how to face the fears that might hold you back.

**Part 2** covers the journey itself with the practicalities of the pilgrim's day, as well as how walking the path of history and facing the challenge of the way can give you a much-needed perspective on life — and perhaps even a glimpse of the divine.

**Part 3** addresses the arrival at your destination, and how to leave room for the gifts of pilgrimage to emerge after your return home, as well as how my three walks impacted my experience of mid-life.

At the end, you'll find appendices with practical tips for each of the three ways, as well as a gear list and bibliography for further reading.

I hope you find this book useful if you feel a call to pilgrimage, or a need for change in your life. These three walks have certainly been pivotal for me.

# Introduction

“There is an unrest in my gut that feels like hunger... I have learned to walk at these moments. I have learned to walk until the heat goes out of it.”

Katherine May, *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*

It was an early autumn morning, and a chill wind blew along the river Avon. Dead leaves in shades of rust spun from bare branches and spiralled into the rushing waters below. The river was swollen and high from heavy rain, running muddy and brown, thick with sediment and debris. Larger logs, toppled by the storm, drifted in the current. The air had a scent of smoke from a bonfire at a local urban farm, a pyre for what was no longer needed.

I stood on the footbridge over the river and looked down into the depths, thinking of how Virginia Woolf had filled her pockets with stones and walked into a river just like this.

How easy it would be to do the same.

It was September 2020, and I was not okay.

But then, who was at that time?

The World Health Organisation had announced the COVID-19 pandemic on my forty-fifth birthday in March 2020 and the world was mostly locked down, confined, sheltering in place.

I was lucky to have a home and an income and a loving husband, Jonathan. All I had to do was obey the rules and stay safe while the virus ran its course. I had no right to feel this way.

In those early months, countries closed their borders, and the media was filled with terrifying stories of rising deaths and debilitating sickness. There was madness in the air, fuelled by the incessant news cycle and social media contagion.

That summer, England had some glorious weather, and many people talked about being grateful for the pause the pandemic provided, for more time with their families, for the change to working from home. It was a vain attempt to reframe a situation that was unsustainable for such social creatures.

Yet sustain it, we did.

Everything was shut. Schools, restaurants, offices, cafes and shops. There was even yellow hazard tape over the playground in the park. It was quiet, except in the supermarkets, where there

was a barely controlled sense of panic. There were stickers and markers on the floor, so people stayed two metres apart, and constant reminders to wear a mask and use sanitiser. People weaved around each other on paths, avoiding even the most basic human contact.

I was angry at myself for taking the freedoms of life for granted, for assuming that everything would stay the same, for working on projects that didn't really matter in the grand scheme of things.

But as the months passed by, and we walked the same paths near our home over and over, I wore a groove in my life. It grew deeper every day and became harder and harder to climb out of.

Life was comfortable and safe if we just stayed at home. So many people were worse off than me. I didn't have any right to be angry or depressed — and yet, I couldn't seem to escape the misery.

In the time before, I would never stay still for this long. I would always have another trip planned, another place to visit, another itinerary to be excited about. The pandemic destroyed the joy of travel, although of course, that is the least of what it has stolen.

As the months of restrictions continued, my wanderlust shifted into *fernweh*, a German word meaning 'a longing for far-off places.' The time of enforced stillness intensified it so much that, at times, it spilled over into frustration and anger — at the world, at the virus, at myself — for not being able to quiet the need to get away.

Much of the time, I maintained an outwardly positive attitude, but inside, I was a ball of rage. Jonathan said I seemed sad all the time.

I'd been struggling with insomnia for almost a year by then, waking just after two a.m. every morning and often not sleeping again. I began doom-scrolling on my phone, incessantly following the latest news and opinions on Twitter as the death toll grew. I knew it wasn't helping, but it became a compulsion, a connection to the millions of people round the world going through the same thing.

We were collectively experiencing the stages of grief around the pandemic: denial, anger, bargaining, depression — and perhaps, one day, acceptance. I was a caged bird bashing my wings against the bars, desperate to get out and back to freedom. I had to do something before I damaged myself beyond repair.

I could not control the pandemic, but I could walk out the door with my backpack. I could take one step at a time all the way to Canterbury Cathedral. Perhaps I could walk my rage and grief into submission and find a new path for myself in mid-life.

## **Resources:**

- WHO announces the pandemic, March 2020 — [www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020](http://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020)
- That discomfort you're feeling is grief by Scott Brinatto, Harvard Business Review, March 2020 — [hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief](http://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief)
- *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* — Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler
- *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief* — David Kessler
- *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* — Katherine May

# Why pilgrimage?

“*Solvitur ambulando*. It is solved by walking.”

—Saint Augustine

Historically, pilgrimage has been defined as a journey to a sacred place, taken for a religious reason. But perhaps it needs to be redefined for our increasingly secular age. Many of today’s pilgrims seek meaning from their journey but don’t adhere to a particular religious tradition.

Pilgrimage is a physical journey to a particular place, but it’s also an exploration of what it means to be human in a temporal body. Walking day after day breaks down the outer layers of the modern world through hardship in the elements. It reduces each day to walking, eating, sleeping — the basic acts of a human life. We are part animal, part spirit, and pilgrimage engages both sides.

It’s also a linear journey with a beginning and an end and a way to get from one to the other. Life itself is never so straight-forward and clear-cut, so pilgrimage provides structure and boundaries for periods when life feels storm-tossed.

There is always hardship, but the pilgrim determines the shape of the challenge by their choices of where to sleep, what to carry, who to go with, and how much preparation to do. The way will provide surprises and the pilgrim will have to adapt, but the resilience gained can pay huge dividends for the rest of life.

## The call to pilgrimage

“In the moment of darkness, the call comes.”

—Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*

I first heard about the Camino de Santiago in my late teens. *The Pilgrimage* by Paulo Coelho made its way into my hands and sparked something in my imagination that would rear up many times over the following years. Whenever life challenged me, I wrote in my journal that I would walk the Camino some day, in the hope of a transformation.

I still have all my journals and I find mention of pilgrimage sporadically over the years. When I burned out in London at the Millennium and left England for Australia. When my first husband left me and I struggled through divorce. When I hated my corporate job so much, I cried in the bathroom most days, trying to find a way to escape those golden handcuffs.

Each time, I resisted the call to pilgrimage and found solace in other travels: The desert of Western Australia and the shores of New Zealand, the ancient places of Egypt, and eventually, back to London for a new life as an author entrepreneur.

But the Camino kept calling.

It is a mythical pilgrimage, the idea of it perhaps more powerful than its reality, compounded by the romanticised books of countless writers since Coelho.

When the pandemic hit and the world locked down, my desire to walk the Camino rose once more. But by then the virus raged, and it was impossible to travel. I had taken for granted the fact that I could walk it anytime, putting off the decision for decades, and now the opportunity might be lost forever.

Since I couldn't travel far, I researched pilgrimages in England and decided to walk the Pilgrims' Way, a medieval route from London to Canterbury made famous by Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. It would be my first solo multi-day walk and my first step towards walking the full Camino.

There is never a right time to go on a pilgrimage, but if you feel the call, then heed it. You never know when it might become impossible for you.

## **If you've lost direction in life, pilgrimage can help**

A pilgrimage is a specific task with a clear direction.

You have a starting point and a destination and, if you follow the way-markers, you have a route to get there.

Once you are on the trail, whichever that might be, the pilgrim's day is much the same — pack up, walk, eat, rest, sleep. You might get lost for a short time, but if you keep going, you will reach the end.

A pilgrimage journey may be the clearest path you will ever follow in life, with only a few basic choices to make each day. That minimalism can be a great comfort in difficult times.



You have no purpose but to get up and walk, and if you make it to your destination for the night, you have achieved your goal. The daily difficulties of normal life fade away as you deal with the immediate issues of pain and hunger and exhaustion. You sleep satisfied, and tomorrow you get up and do it again.

## **Pilgrimage brings perspective**

Walking every day shrinks life down to its basic elements. You appreciate the simple things — shelter from the rain and wind, a hot shower after a long day, painkillers and blister plasters, coffee in the morning or a cold beer when the sun is high, local bread and olive oil when you're hungry, an encouraging smile from another pilgrim.

Once you step away from your normality and see how other people live, once you experience being uncomfortable, or in pain, somewhere you can't control your environment, you will be grateful for what you have and what you will return to. It's too easy to take these comforts for granted until they are lost, even temporarily.

I travel partly because it helps me see how insignificant I am on the face of the world, and walking intensifies this feeling as it is so slow. When I look at a map at the end of the day, I have only crossed a tiny part of a tiny area in a little corner of the world. I can only move at my pace, which for me is what English walkers call 'bimbling,' a relaxed gait, stopping regularly for photos, taking notes, or coffee when available.

When at home, the daily grind of life makes everything feel important and urgent, and I have to operate at an ever-faster pace to get everything done. It's easy to get stressed about a deadline or the emails that pile up, or the jobs that always need doing. Perspective narrows, even as we worry about the bigger things we can't control — the economy, climate change, war, disease.

But when on pilgrimage, I am just another human walking on the face of the world, a tiny speck in the grand scheme of things, a flash of light gone so quickly. The waves of the Atlantic will continue to crash on the shores of Portugal after my Camino footsteps have washed away. The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela will welcome more pilgrims after I have gone. The same words of the Mass will be spoken by the next generation. I am comforted by my insignificance, and I return from pilgrimage with a new perspective on what is truly important.

“Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts, and I know of no thought so burdensome that one cannot walk away from it.”

—Søren Kierkegaard

### **Questions:**

- Why are you interested in pilgrimage rather than another kind of journey?
- What might pilgrimage give you? Why do you need that?
- Do you feel called to a particular pilgrimage? Why is that?

### **Resources:**

- *The Art of Pilgrimage: The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred* — Phil Cousineau

## Enjoyed the sample?

I hope you enjoyed this sample from *Pilgrimage: Lessons Learned from Solo Walking Three Ancient Ways*.

You can find the limited-time Kickstarter project at:

[www.jfpenn.com/pilgrimage](http://www.jfpenn.com/pilgrimage)

Pilgrimage: Lessons Learned from Solo Walking Three Ancient Ways

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