



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

The worshipping life is a journey that leads to the experience of paradise. We discover by God's grace that we have always been in our Father's house and heart.

The Rev. Ralph Peterson interim pastor, St. Mark's, 1995-96

It was at St. Mark's that I began to think of my life as a pilgrimage.



The Road to Compostela

I'd encountered this concept years earlier - and rejected it.

It was in 1955, as my depression deepened, that John's parents had come out from the city for dinner. With the heightened perception of the blind, Dad Sherrill was unusually sensitive to people's moods. His question to me that day, however, seemed dismally unrelated to mine.

"Have you ever heard," he asked, "about the treadmill, the saga, and the pilgrimage?"

When I said I had not, he explained that these were the three basic ways of looking at our lives. The *treadmill* sees existence as meaningless, an endless round of activity repeated over and over. I looked at the sink full of dishes, the laundry piled on the washing machine. I could relate to treadmills!

The *saga*, he went on, while agreeing that life is basically without purpose, sees nobility in the way people cope. Heroes of all cultures, from Homer's Ulysses to John Henry who died with a hammer in his hand, live out the drama of human courage. *Nothing heroic*, I thought, *in my defeat before ordinary domestic challenges*.

Only in the *pilgrimage*, Dad concluded, is life, all of it, past and present, the good, the bad, the seemingly indifferent, seen as going somewhere. The pilgrim is not

simply reacting to events around him or her - a child with mumps, the next payment due on the car - but seeing beyond and through these things to a goal. The particulars of daily life become stepping stones to a destination.

Pilgrims

In 1955 the concept of pilgrimage was even more alien to me than the heroics of a saga. How could I concern myself with some way-in-the-future goal? My problem was how to get through the next twenty-four hours.

The conversation stuck in my mind, however, and as the clouds began to lift, I started to read about pilgrims, especially accounts from the Middle Ages, when pilgrimage meant a literal journey. There were three principal destinations, I discovered, for the millions who took to the roads-Rome, Jerusalem, and Santiago de Compostela.

Like many seekers, John and I, in time, went to Rome and Jerusalem. But these trips, in medieval times, would not have made us pilgrims. People who'd been to Rome were "romeros," those who went to Jerusalem, "palmers," from the palm branches they brought back. Only travelers to the remote shrine of St. James at Compostela in the northwest corner of Spain were "pilgrims."

The more I read about this most demanding of the three journeys, from Paris nine hundred miles across mountains and forests, the more it seemed to me the perfect pattern for the pilgrimage of the spirit. And so in 1999 as our millennium ended, John and I set out to retrace - in the comfort of a car - the route taken by pilgrims in 999 at the close of the last millennium.

In a trip filled with discoveries, the most surprising one, for me, came at the very beginning. The staging area for pilgrims setting off from Paris, we'd learned, was the church of St.-James-at-the-Butcher-Stall. All that's left of it today is the bell tower, the *Tour St. Jacques*, the Tower of St. James, with a small park around it. Why, this was the very spot where we'd so often come with lunch makings when we lived in Paris in the late 1940s!

The Road Unseen

From the little park in 1999, John and I walked the pilgrim route across the Seine and through the Latin Quarter on the *rue St. Jacques* - once just a street name to us. Old maps indicated a hospice nearby for travelers bound for Compostela. Only the sanctuary connected to the hospital remains today --

another Church of St. James. Coming to it, John and I exchanged looks of astonishment: The church was half a block from that walk-up apartment where I'd felt the waves of nausea as I climbed the stairs.

We'd walked past this church every day, taken the first steps along the old pilgrim way countless times. And never seen the road to Compostela literally beneath our feet. And I thought of Dad Sherrill's words, so meaningless to me once, so significant now. Whether my life is treadmill, saga, or pilgrimage depends not on where my feet are, but where my heart is.

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