



July 2002

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Recommended Citation

Gillespie, Robert (2002) "A Pilgrim's Path: Larissa Taylor follows a route worn by faith," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 91 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol91/iss3/6>

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A pilgrim's path

Larissa Taylor follows a route worn by faith

BY ROBERT GILLESPIE

Larissa Taylor walks through the foothills of the French Pyrenees, trekking toward Santiago de Compostela, the sacred shrine on the northwest coast of Spain. Her wooden staff, which may come in handy to fend off the legendary Spanish dogs, signifies the wood of Christ's cross. To shield herself from the sun she wears a brimmed hat, the scallop shell on the front of the crown identifying her as a soul on pilgrimage.

Parts of the route are rugged. Walking along roads on the plain was easy until she reached the hills, but from here it's still several hundred miles to Santiago. For more than a thousand years, thousands of pilgrims from all over Europe have journeyed along "the shining way" to this holy shrine, in the early centuries braving many dangers, protected only by a stave and the sacred sign, the scallop shell. St. James's first miracle, legend has it, involved saving a scallop fisherman.



Stops on the pilgrims' route, above, looking toward the Pyrenees from a village in southwestern France; at right, in St. Jean on the River Nive.

Right now only sheep and cows graze in the distance, and Taylor revels in the long periods of solitude walking alone. At some point she thinks she'll happen on a group she met earlier along the route. Some are in their 80s and 90s, some suffer terminal illnesses; their bodies flag, their feet hurt. From Taylor's small, open backpack—symbolically, a pilgrim is open to experience—they may take out food or water; she may take food or water from theirs, signifying dependence on others and on God for sustenance. She also packs blister cream for ministering to sore feet. That, too, involves religious symbolism.

Taylor savors talking with her fellow pilgrims about their routes, their experiences, their reasons for giving themselves to some-

thing so "medieval." A historian of medieval Europe, Taylor has devoted herself to completing a book on pilgrimage comparing the medieval spiritual mindset with her own experience and the experience of others on pilgrimage today. When they meet, the pilgrims, like the pilgrims in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, share the story of their lives.

Those stories will be shared when the pilgrims return home. A pilgrimage is not fully realized until the pilgrims recount how their experience changed them or enriched or disrupted their lives.

Taylor turns back a few miles from the Spanish border. Four separate routes, each one hundreds of miles, wind through France toward Santiago de Compostela, and she's traveled them all, though never for the two to four months it takes to walk all the way.

It's the process, the going, that matters.

Life, the pilgrims say, is a journey you're always in the middle of.

As an undergraduate on scholarship at Wellesley, Taylor was drawn to canon law, then to Anglican theology under the tutelage of influential teachers. Divorced at 24, she transferred to Harvard after two years at Wellesley to immerse herself in the study of religious history. Initially it was the psychological aspect of belief that intrigued her.

"I found myself getting interested in why people believed what they did," Taylor said, back in her Colby office. "I was interested in why someone would want to be burned at the stake, why they'd be willing to die for theologi-

cal beliefs—interpretation of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper, for instance—or would want to burn someone at the stake. It made me wonder about people's state of mind."

While she attended Harvard Extension full time at night she held three jobs at once, including full-time work in psychiatry at Mass General Hospital as secretary for a program helping cancer patients cope with their illness. With a virtual minor in psychiatry she brought Freudian analysis to her first publication, an article on Elizabeth I.

When she graduated in 1981 as Harvard's class marshal she still wondered where her interest in religious history came from.

She never liked history in school, hated the memorization. Doing well in math "up to calculus," she wanted to be an astrophysicist or, because she's a Philadelphia native and a Flyers and Montreal Expos fan, a sports writer. "I'm good at writing," she said. "I thought I could write about things like that." She was told she could write about ladies' golf.

One day she picked up Anya Seton's *Katherine*, a historical novel set in 14th-century England in the reign of Edward III during and after the plague. As another and another period novel brought medieval life alive, she checked the history to see whether the fiction was accurate. Like the novels, medieval history came to life.

"Reading that historical novel was a moment of inspiration. It's influenced my teaching since then," Taylor said. The courses she teaches at Colby—Western and Central Europe, High and Late Middle Ages, Renaissance, Reformation, and early modern Europe religious, cultural and intellectual history—include historical novels and films. "I want to get students to experience history, to read good historical novels," she said, the kind that aim to get into the mind of the ordinary person in the past.

As a graduate student in Reformation Europe at Brown University, Taylor embarked on dissertation research in 15th- and 16th-cen-

tury books of published sermons in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and in regional archives in Dijon and Rouen. The sermons, full of animal stories and sexuality, surprised her. “The social commentaries they made, the humor they injected, were useful pedagogically for me. It has actually taught me a lot about teaching,” Taylor said. She’ll use statues, relics, a pilgrim’s staff or come to class in period costume to get students intrigued and “involved in a past that’s a mystery.” As far as most of those long-ago preachers were concerned, she says, the “perfect” or “ideal” sinner to be brought back into the fold was a woman who engaged in prostitution. Taylor had come to her research with the notion that all churchmen were misogynistic, but that’s not true at all, she says. The preachers said women attended church and were more devout than men.

Her every notion of the medieval church challenged and her curiosity about medieval prostitution piqued, her interest turned toward the so-called “harlot saints” like Mary Magdalene, who preached to and converted

large groups of men and women in southern France. Taylor later gave papers on Mary Magdalene at universities and conferences but has left off working on her. “I’ve been going different directions,” she said.

During her two years reading the sermons of those long-gone male preachers—some 22 of them, whose 1,600-plus sermons are the material of her first book, *Soldiers of Christ: Preaching in Late Medieval and Reformation France*—she lived among medieval cathedrals that made the “feel” of medieval religion palpable. Catholicism, she says, intrigued her. Although Taylor’s parents were non-practicing Presbyterians and she didn’t know church history, theology or the Bible, she started attending masses. “I was drawn to the beauty of the

services,” she said. “I was going but I didn’t know why.”

One midday in the mid-’90s, sitting in the 12th-century Romanesque basilica in the hilltop town of Vézelay, the site of Mary Magdalene relics, she “really felt transformed,” Taylor said, by the beauty of the tympanum sculpture depicting the story of Christ’s life, the 200-foot long and 60-foot high nave, the majesty of the gothic choir that filled with light.

“The light looks as if it’s leading the way to the altar. It changed my life,” she said. She began academic work on pilgrimage.



The year after graduating from Harvard, Taylor completed a non-degree program in theological German at Harvard Divinity School, then began a secular sort of path as an “itinerant scholar,” teaching at Wellesley for four years, Harvard for two, Assumption for one, MIT for one semester.

In the years since she arrived at Colby in 1994 she has proven herself on various professional boards and has published three books. *Soldiers of Christ* was followed by *Heresy and Orthodoxy in Sixteenth-Century Paris: François Le Picart and the Beginnings of the Catholic Reformation* and the recent *Preacher and Audience: Sermons in the Reformation and Early Modern Period*, a book she edited. Recently she was elected to the Executive Council of

the American Catholic Historical Association. Her reputation is international.

She was so focused on a professional career, Taylor says, that when she became ill with neurosurgical problems in her neck she was literally laid out flat. In a slough of despond, she read psalms, which, turning as they do on life and death issues, proved enormously comforting. This on the heels of her experience at Vézelay, Taylor says, was the turning point of her life.

“Where had my study led me? I wanted something more meaningful,” she said. “I wanted to write more on spirituality, getting

to know the people in the pilgrimages. I wanted to know things that have happened to people and have been turning points, obstacles that became challenges.” She approached Father Phil Tracy, the Catholic chaplain at Colby and local parish priest, who worked with her on the catechism in her candidacy period. Confirmed, she took full communion in April 2000.

Her quick initiation into the church was “a personal pilgrimage,” Taylor says.

Associate Professor of Religious Studies Debra Campbell, remembering the attention her students paid the day Taylor spoke in her course on the history and culture of the Catholic Church during the last century, says the term “pilgrimage” is used widely today “in the informal sense to refer to an individual’s spiritual journey.” Taylor’s “journey” and “conversion,” meshing with her academic study of pilgrimage, set her steps along the pilgrim path.

“A pilgrimage is a personal journey,” Taylor said, “whether a person realizes it or not.” People go because something in their life is wrong. They go at a time of crisis—perhaps a relationship breakup, perhaps a failure of faith, perhaps the recognition of not living up to

potential, perhaps an emptiness like the “dark wood” the poet Dante comes to that sends him on his journey in the “Inferno.” Taylor’s crisis came by way of her medical experience.

The real journey begins when a person no longer knows where to turn.

“People talk about finding their way,” she said. “But it’s not always what you thought you were looking for. Every pilgrimage is unique and almost always what you don’t expect it to be. I can think of no pilgrimage book I’ve read that doesn’t say that.”

a letting go of attempts to control your life.

At Mont St-Michel, in the Chappelle St-Aubert, a little chapel reached by a causeway and totally surrounded by water at high tide, she sat down to write in her journal. “I wondered why had I come there. I wondered what was to happen next,” she said. “That’s when I was inspired to walk in the quicksand—to take a little risk because of the tides.”

She walked out and quickly felt herself sinking. People have disappeared in the quicksand.

In her apartment in Waterville, amid the modern furniture, hang a Gothic architectural mirror, Gothic sconces, a 16th-century replica tapestry of Burgundian wine pressing and several large photographs of Vézelay, all focused on light shining into the basilica. Candles stand all about. Cat toys and trees dominate the little study, “essentially my writing room,” she said, “but mostly my cat’s.” In the living room a tall bookshelf stores only cookbooks (“I adore gourmet cooking and wines,” she said), and the walls of the tiny

on each pilgrimage, you have to expect the unexpected. for some, the experience can be joyous, life-giving, renewing, but others come away in disarray, confused, their lives disrupted, asking new questions about where they are going because they can’t go back to the place they came from. “you’re not quite the same after,” she said.

Phil Cousineau’s *The Art of Pilgrimage*, for instance, is replete with episodes in the lives of recent pilgrims who embarked on sacred journeys of regeneration or purification—a dancer to goddess sites, two poets to reinvigorate their love of literature, many to “reconfirm the ‘presence’ behind sacred mysteries.” While all the pilgrims experienced the same centuries-old pattern of the sacred journey—the “longing,” the “call” that beckons a pilgrim onward, the drama of “departure,” the treading of the “pilgrim’s way” and beyond into the “labyrinth,” the “arrival” and, finally, coming full circle, the challenge of “bringing back the boon”—they also experienced the unexpected. Cousineau calls it “a gift briefly disguised as a disturbance.”

Taylor said, “You think you know what you’re doing, only to find yourself on divergent paths, experiencing what you didn’t expect to experience, not finding the things you did expect.” A pilgrimage, then, should be not planning things far ahead; it should be

“It felt like something I might not do in a safer circumstance. The tide came in like galloping horses,” she said. It was as if the rock of faith provided the rock Taylor hopped onto to save herself.

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Taylor walks everywhere. At Harvard, at night after her job at Mass General, she walked five miles along the Charles River rather than take the MBTA. She walks to and from the Colby campus, she walks downtown to mass or to shop. She took driver’s education at the age of 44 along with 15-year-olds and finally got her license; parallel parking was easy, but traffic was a trial. “I’ve saved a lot of lives by not driving,” she said.

kitchen are adorned with posters of French cheeses, French breads, French wines and liqueurs and culinary devices for cooking. At home she turns in a 7 or 8, rises at 4 a.m., and makes her big meal of the day at 1 or 2 in the afternoon, but on pilgrimage she makes Spartan meals, mostly bread and cheese, and puts up in budget hotels. What with her cervical spine problems, her everyday walking and walking on pilgrimages—usually eight to 10 days each and as much as 20 miles a day on her eight different journeys so far—she says she has “lost many dress sizes.”

Taylor has traveled by bus, taxi and train as well as shank’s mare on pilgrimage and doubts that walkers are the only true pilgrims. At Lourdes she stopped in a shop, explaining her health problems when the proprietor asked why she was there. The woman told her, “It’s the intention, not whether you walk or not that makes a true pilgrim,” Taylor said.

Taylor’s intention is to get her feet on the ground.



A map distributed to pilgrims who trek through the border region of Navarra, Spain.

"Historians are attracted to place," she said. "Being on that ground, feeling what happened there, feeling history as living lends to passion in teaching about it. You feel the place you work on. You feel inspiration for your work."

Most comfortable traveling alone in the countryside, she exults in the chance to take it all in, delights in the sheep and cows on the route, even one of those vicious Spanish dogs she was told to watch for. "He was fine," she said. "For me, religion is also seeing creation in everything—my cat, the leaves, the beauty of nature."

The great blessing of journeying alone on pilgrimage, she says, is chancing upon generosity.

She speaks of complete strangers at hotels going out of their way to help, calling ahead for her to all sorts of places to hire cabs whose drivers tell her stories, give little tours and often charge her nothing to go long distances. French bus drivers offer "petit detours" off their routes to show her medieval sites.

Seeing the crucifix she wears, people initiate conversations that transform into informal interviews about life experiences. Fluent in French, she's exchanged reasons for existence with an ancient woman at a bus stop. On the bus after an hour-long conversation, Taylor said, "She held her hand against my cheek and said, 'You're a good woman.' It felt like a blessing."

"People are forthcoming. I've found people will talk about spiritual yearnings as often as not," she said. "It's the contact with people, the talking, that seems to make the connection I'm dwelling on. . . ."

"I was very much the hermit, Taylor said. "I found myself through this process. I'm becoming more community involved. I got involved with people."

She can be found "bringing back the boon," giving talks to the Newman Club and other groups on campus or speaking with local church gatherings, sharing her experience and her academic research on

pilgrimage, saints and shrines, the pilgrim's motives for going on pilgrimage, the change that transpires in the pilgrim heart. Whether we travel a route to a holy shrine halfway around the world or out to our own backyard, we may look on each day as a pilgrimage. Do something however small every day, she says. It's "the very little, ordinary things" we do or that are done for us rather than grand gestures for good or ill that give a soul fresh life.

At a time when religion is generally not in fashion on college campuses across the country, she talks about her religious beliefs in her classes, not embarrassed,

she says, to be an academic who, through research, became religious.

When she spoke two years ago in Debra Campbell's course, "The students were fascinated," Campbell said, "to discover that a woman who had been out in the world and experienced many things would become a Catholic in early middle age. It gave them a whole new perspective on Catholicism." Students said to Taylor, "Someone your age, a professor, saying why you wanted to become a Catholic! It's nice to have a professor say, 'I believe in God.'"

"I don't know why I came to this particular path," Taylor said. "My own belief is, we experience what we need to, where we need to, at a time we need to. But the idea that each thing that happens to us for good or ill is part of that journey, and how we act in response or don't act can make all the difference."

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