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The lure of the pilgrimage

Becky Hood Becherer

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THE LAST WORD

The lure of the pilgrimage



A pilgrimage is not your typical vacation.

Pilgrimages differ from other types of travel in that the physical demands create a strong and unique camaraderie with fellow travelers, as well as the opportunity to viscerally connect with

your surroundings and engage in a spiritual adventure.

A pilgrimage enables your mind and body to seemingly disconnect and find a new and entirely different association. With most luxuries left behind, the distractions of everyday life are minimized, enabling a liberating clarity of mind and spirit. The intent of the journey is not only the exploration of the destination, but the very personal and internal exploration of the individual.

Thanks to Furman's Lilly Center for Vocational Reflection and its commitment to the exploration of individual calling, alumni have twice been given the chance to pursue pilgrimages. The first time, two years ago, was along the Camino de Santiago in Spain. This summer, two alumni groups traveled

to Ireland to explore Celtic spirituality. The lives and legends of St. Patrick, St. Brigit and St. Brendan provided the backdrop and context for our weeklong journey of mind and spirit.

I have been fortunate to participate in both programs. My traveling companions, most of them fellow alumni, came from varied faith backgrounds and spanned nearly five decades, which strengthened our sense of communion.

The Ireland group began its trek at Ballintubber Abbey in southwest rural Ireland, at the very site where St. Patrick first baptized new Christians in his adopted country. From there we journeyed by foot more than 20 miles on the ancient Tochar path, which dates from approximately 350 A.D. We walked through many a field and pasture, enjoying the company of sheep, cattle, horses, and the occasional household pet.

The 2,500-foot climb to the summit of Croagh Patrick, followed by a harrowing descent, was for the majority of us the most strenuous and treacherous endeavor of our lives. Slippery rocks beneath our feet, thick fog, wet bogs and cold winds proved formidable.

On Inis Mor, the largest of the Aran Islands, we explored the ancient practices of monastic life in Ireland. Hanging over the edge of the jagged cliffs, we experienced the exhilarating beauty of crashing ocean waves, while envisioning how ancient peoples once survived on

this tiny, remote island. The 3,000-foot Mount Brandon, on the Dingle Peninsula, proved to be less harrowing than the terrifying slopes of Croagh Patrick — but challenging nonetheless, and incredibly beautiful.

For some of us, the lure of the pilgrimage was the unknown, the interest generated by not knowing what we would learn, see or experience. Others went in search of something that they could not name.

In no other type of travel have I experienced the opportunity to focus on, discover and fulfill such a deeply personal spiritual covenant. And throughout our Ireland pilgrimage, the hospitality of the Irish people and their eagerness to teach us their rich history were overwhelming.

The Lilly Center plans to continue to support a pilgrimage every other year, alternating with a summer alumni retreat on campus. The opportunity will be there for all of you to explore your vocational calling at various points of personal transition. What's calling you now?

— BECKY HOOD BECHERER

The author, a 1989 graduate, also provided the photos accompanying this article. She is a physician in Louisville, Ky., a former member of the Alumni Association Board of Directors, and a member of the Lilly Center Task Force. With her husband, Tom, she endowed the center's alumni programming component.

