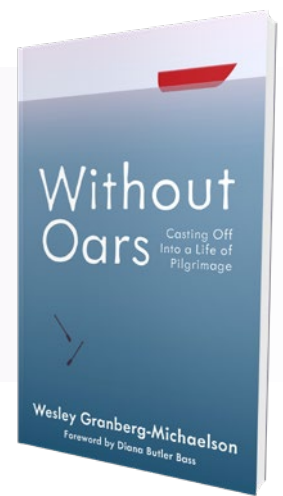


Without Oars: Casting Off into a Life of Pilgrimage

By Wesley Granberg-Michaelson

Reflection Guide



An Invitation

Whether you're reading this in a sea of tumult, roiling political waters, fierce climate changes affecting lands by fire and water – or during a pandemic – your life has likely been disrupted from whatever “normal” may have meant.

It's time to reset our souls. Can we learn to step away from the anxieties and crippling fatigue that seem to imprison us, and step forward in a journey to replenish our inner lives? That's the promise of a life of pilgrimage. Through courageous relinquishment, we can discover the ways of walking and being in the world that will strengthen our outward journey, walking into a promised future.

Those forces which have worn us down are formidable. Political toxins have invaded with ferocity the spaces where we think and live. Public life has been poisoned, almost mortally, by political schisms and elections. Pervasive fears seem overpowering. Inner anxieties have cascaded into the public sphere, fracturing many of our hopes for work toward the common good.

Further, criminal police brutality instigated a massive movement of racial reckoning in the nation's life. America's original sin of racism and white supremacy was revealed, once again, as a moral corruption chiseled into our corporate soul.

So of course we're exhausted emotionally, politically, and spiritually. Our inner resources seem sucked dry at a time when we are called on to have even greater strength for the work ahead. We thirst, panting for living springs. We hunger, longing for the bread of life.

Whether for an hour, a week, a few minutes, or the duration of reading a book, it's time for us to take a step back from the frantic and frenetic tumult that has swept over our society, and re-center our souls.

Already, we have experienced some hints of what this offers. Time for long-postponed walks on new trails, overdue connections via Zoom with treasured friends, dinners lengthened with leisure rather than punctuated by another urgent appointment. Perhaps we've rediscovered some of these deeper longings which now require space for exploration.

Re-centering our souls helps us know how to step forward, not in reaction or fear, but with intentional, courageous purpose, on a pilgrimage.

If this resonates with you, let me invite you on a journey of renewal. Decide to embark on a pilgrimage. This may include a physical journey to a holy place. Or it may be an interior journey, in a quiet, solitary space. But your life will move, with holy purpose.

Without Oars: Casting Off into a Life of Pilgrimage is not a book about pilgrimages, per se, although that is included. Rather, it's an invitation to begin the journey of renewal. My hope is that you will be challenged to work with the text and travel down its roads, trusting that you will discover a wellspring nurturing your life forward.

Casting off into a pilgrimage, whether real or virtual, beckons us to leave things behind. The book outlines ten such movements helping us discern what is essential to keep, and what baggage hinders us from moving forward. This reflection guides works with each movement, offering simple suggestions to prompt and probe your journey.

I invite you to walk together with me, with holy purpose, toward a holy and renewing place.

Suggestions for the use of this Reflection Guide:

Brief reflections, quotes, a question and an exercise are included for ten days, based on each chapter. You may choose to do this once a week, for ten weeks, or fit them into a season like Advent or Lent. You might go on a ten-day retreat. Better yet, I'd encourage you to embark on a ten-day pilgrimage. You could choose a destination that may hold sacred significance. Or you could decide to walk ten to fifteen miles a day, in various directions, planned or discovered, returning to a home base each time. Whatever you do, include some walking each day, because pilgrimage is an embodied practice.

The guide can be used in a solitary way, in dialogue with yourself, and hopefully God, assisted by your words in a journal. But you could also embark on this pilgrimage with a group. Perhaps you might meet once a week or once a month, working through the questions and exercises together. Or, to build community that would likely last a lifetime, you might choose to go on a ten-day pilgrimage together, using the book and this Reflection Guide to shape your time.

I'd welcome hearing your feedback. You can be in touch through my website: www.wesgm.com. You'll also find some other related resources there.

Buen Camino! Wes Granberg-Michaelson

Day One • The Restless Soul

The Gift of Disruption

Take a break. It's the first thing to do if you wish to embark on a pilgrimage. The routines of life, while serving their purposes, hem us in. We need to step out. A disruption is necessary. Sometimes that disruption comes from without (a pandemic, a lost job, a frenetic schedule, a devastating loss). We no longer can proceed as normal. Disquieting times ask for normalcy to be redefined. The question, however, is whether we embrace whatever our involuntary disruption is as the opening to move forward in our life's journey, or if we retreat to the shelter of our comfortable spiritual shell.

Question: Have you ever seen disruption as a gift? When and how did you experience both the disruption and the gift?

The Speed of Love

Slow down. We live accelerated lives, and that gets us places. But we miss a lot along the way. Often, perhaps unknowingly, we are hurling away from ourselves. Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama says this:

Love has its speed. It is an inner speed. It is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It is 'slow' yet it is lord over all other speeds since it is the speed of love. It goes on in the depth of our life, whether we notice or not, whether we are currently hit by storm or not, at three miles an hour. It is the speed we walk and therefore it is the speed the love of God walks.

A pilgrimage starts with our slowing down, both the pace of our mind and that pace at which we move. Gradually, those become connected. We can do this by walking.

Exercise: Take a walk, even aimlessly. Slow down your mind. Notice what comes, both without and within in your intentional slowing. You might even slow your walking pace. Then share these reflections with your group or write them in your journal.

Day Two • Real Presence

Walk Away from Screens

Let's face it. We're attached. Our faces are glued to our screens. This "irresistible attraction to screens is leading people to feel as though they're ceding more and more of their autonomy when it comes to deciding how they direct their attention." (Cal Newport in *Digital Minimalism*) But when you walk on an unfamiliar path, it's nearly impossible to have your eyes riveted to your digital screen. You're likely to trip, and you'll certainly miss wonders being revealed on your path. "The invitation to walk brings us to a place where we can slowly clear away the constant preoccupations running in the background, and sometimes the foreground, of our minds." (*Without Oars*, p. 39) Our attention turns to basic questions. Like this one.

Question: Why are you who you are where you are?

"Wisdom is not the result of mental effort"

Those words of Richard Rohr's are a valuable guide. A pilgrimage is a confession that we can't discover our true self or maintain a vital connection to God, just by thinking. Our busy minds won't get us there. An inward journey of the whole person uncovers layers far deeper than just thought. Three steps are necessary in our pilgrim walk.

- Detachment, as we step away routine obsessions.
- Attention, another name for prayer, open to inner promptings.
- And connection, discovering our true self, hidden with others in a love behind and within all things.

Those steps can help us touch our soul.

Exercise: Decide how long you can detach from screens. Try just a day. Or three. No phone. No computer. No iPad. No TV. Detach. Pay attention. And discover where you connect. Write in your journal or share with your group.

Day Three • Persistent Patience

Don't Grab the Marshmallow

We want it now. Instant gratification is the drug of our consumer culture. But as shown among young children in the famous marshmallow experiment, developing patience is key to emotional development. For our inward spiritual journey, it's a necessity. "We're so attuned to instant gratification in our daily life that we want it in our spiritual life too: instant wisdom, instant growth, instant clarity, instant wisdom." (The Samaritan Song blog, L. Phillips) A pilgrimage is like a drug rehabilitation program from our addiction to instant gratification. We practice watchful waiting, getting there step by step.

Question: What am I waiting for?

Does Your Anchor Hold?

Patience requires the development of memory and attention span. In our inward journey, we remember our story in the sweep of God's story. And we hold our focus, freer from distractions. A pilgrimage helps. But also, retreating to a contemplative space. Either way, it's how our anchor holds. In the Middle Ages, some withdrew to hermitages called "anchor-holds." In Pilgrim at Tinker Creek,

Annie Dillard writes,

...some anchor-holds were simple sheds clamped to the side of a church like a barnacle...I think of this house clamped to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchor-hold. It holds me at anchor to the rock bottom of the creek itself and keeps me steadied in the current.

Exercise: Select a word or theme, like God’s love, or peace, or hunger, or forgiveness...whatever draws your deep curiosity or your inner disquiet. Hold your attention there, either while walking or retreating to a safe space. When your mind wanders, just observe what passes through, and then gently return. See how long your focus can be grounded. Write and if you’d like to, share.

Day Four • The Strength to Let Go

Leave it Behind

Pilgrimages are as much about what we leave behind as about where we are headed. Relinquishment precedes destination. At a literal level, a pilgrim learns to leave unnecessary things behind to lighten his or her load. More deeply, pilgrims walk away from familiar versions of their self to discover their soul. The “first half” of our lives are shaped by necessary external securities, providing structure and formulas of belief. But religion often stops there, freezing us in place. The test of faith is to walk forward into our “second half,” in a journey of service expressing our true self, mysteriously hidden in God.

Question: Whose life am I living?

“Let Go and Let God”

Honestly, that phrase can sound like one of those superficial spiritual formulas. But it holds a deep truth. Truly walking away from accomplishments which inflate the ego, and comfortable securities of belief which smother questions, requires relinquishment and faith. As James Hollis writes in *Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life*:

In the second half of life the ego is periodically summoned to relinquish its identifications with the values of others, the values received and reinforced by the world around it. It will have to face potential loneliness in living the life that comes from within....No wonder so few ever feel connected to the soul. No wonder we are so isolated and afraid of being who we are.

Exercise: Review the story of Charles de Foucauld (pp. 69-71) and then pray his “Prayer of Abandonment.” (Change the gender language if you wish.) Pray it again. Listen to what it may ask of you. Record in your journal, and share, if you feel free to, with others.

Day Five • Walking into Faith

Faith in a Box

We try to capture God with rational formulas and rigid beliefs. Some of that is necessary. We want our faith to make sense, so we construct a box to hold it. It’s sealed with rational propositions, holding the box shut like packaging tape. But for Christians, an infinite God present in every molecule of Creation can’t be so conveniently contained. Further this God’s incarnate human presence in the form

of a wounded, suffering servant doesn't make sense. Neatly organized propositional systems requiring belief as a ticket of admission may bring rational comfort and clarity, but do they yield faith?

Question: Will Belief in Beliefs Save You?

Reconnecting Heads and Bodies

Reacting against superstition, infallible religious authorities, and corruption, the Reformation reconstructed Christian faith, with coherent rational systems. The Enlightenment's sovereignty of reason fit well most of the time. But too easily, heads were severed from bodies. In Edwin Muir's words, "The Word-made-flesh here is made word again." In reaction, religion for some retreated into unvarnished emotion. The whole person was left unintegrated. When we begin walking on a pilgrimage, however, the physical and the spiritual connect intimately. Body, mind, and soul are woven back together. Faith burns in that crucible.

Exercise: How do you experience faith beyond rational belief? Make a list of those ways, practices, or activities when your religious faith finds expression beyond thoughts and words. Write in your journal, or share with a group, what helps you walk into faith.

Day Six • Reckless Spirituality

Predictable Piety

The Holy Spirit makes many of us nervous. Especially if we're used to forms of piety that can be controlled, with predictable results, in our spiritual comfort zones. Yet, "the Spirit yearns to break out and to break open our old practices, our protective shells of comfortable spirituality, connecting our inner selves more deeply to God's love and to God's world. Your soul no longer stays still. It's moving with God in the world, and moving toward God, revealed in signs or shrines or saints or surroundings. The pilgrim's walking body holds incarnate this inner journey of the soul, often recklessly." (*Without Oars*, p. 94)

Question: How might the Spirit yearn to open up our lives? How do we resist this?

Extroverted Mysticism

Pilgrimages are at once inward and outward journeys. They can open a unique space of spiritual discovery. "Pilgrimage may be thought of as extroverted mysticism, just as mysticism is introverted pilgrimage." Whether a physical trek or an interior exploration—and at best, both—one's pilgrimage goes to the root of faith experience, to that intimate spiritual intersection. As Richard Hauser, Jesuit scholar of the Holy Spirit, says:

God's Spirit joins our spirit; it does not replace it. The good acts we perform are truly our acts, not simply acts of the Holy Spirit in us. The deepest part of the self is the spiritual dimension. From the center flows all our freedom and love; at this level we remain free to choose to move or not move with the Spirit.

Exercise: Read pages 95-99 again, the description from the Book of Acts of the reckless work of the Spirit in the formation of the early church. Reflect, and write or share about where you see evidence today, within or beyond the church, of a similar recklessness of the Spirit, breaking boundaries and forming unexpected community.

Day Seven • Unpredictable Grace

The Myth of Control

We're programmed to believe we can control the circumstances of our life. Often we can, to good effect. But then each of us will reach a point where our best plans and intentions fall apart. Such inevitable moments either shatter us or can transform us. Richard Rohr explains it this way:

We must stumble and fall, I am sorry to say. We must be out of the driver's seat for a while, or we will never learn how to give up control to the Real Guide. It is the necessary pattern. Until we are led to the limits of our present game plan and find it to be insufficient, we will not search out or find our real Source.

Those are the times when grace is not a doctrine, but a lived experience.

Question: When has your life become more than you could plan for?

A Guest at the Table

For those of privilege and power, hospitality is far easier to offer than to receive. We remain in control through our resources and what we offer and we learn nothing of grace. When we are hosted by others in ways unexpected, present in our vulnerability, we are the recipients of unmerited favor. In the story of Abraham and Sarah, the drama comes when the tables are turned, and they are now hosted. The famous Orthodox icon of this scene by Rublev places the eucharistic cup at the center, with the presence of Trinitarian love welcoming the guests. A pilgrimage reveals hospitality as embodied grace, intersecting our lives in moments unpredicted, underserved, and life-giving. That's how we walk.

Exercise: Write and share what you were taught, learned, or think about the idea of grace. Then reflect and share about those moments in life when you have experienced grace. Is there a difference, and what have you learned?

Day Eight • A Reenchanted Word

Holy Water

In Western culture we take for granted the separation of the material world from the spiritual world. It's nearly subconscious, engrained in how a secular society views reality. But at times something breaks through this dichotomy. At Lourdes, it's water from a spring. God's presence becomes connected to a common element, needed every day for life. It might be experienced at baptism, or when wading into a clear flowing stream with a fly rod. Natural water becomes infused with a sacred presence. We thirst for such living water, and that is the pathway to the earth's preservation.

Question: Where have you experienced "thin spaces"?

Destroying Modern Myths

On pilgrimages, our encounters with the natural world frequently become supernatural. When we celebrate sacraments, common elements, like bread, wine, water, or oil, take on a holy quality. On a pilgrimage, spirituality becomes embodied through our encounters with the concrete stuff of creation

as all of life becomes sacramental.

“I can’t pretend to say anything, with any certainty, about the effects of water, or dirt, or tracing stone at a grotto, or putting an arm around a statue over an apostle’s grave, or taking shoes off on holy ground. But I know this. These experiences, and so many more opened up on pilgrimages, explode the myth of a world rationally comprehensible, comprising inert matter and mobilized molecules in diverse forms. I’m willing to wonder about the myths undergirding pilgrim stories and practices. It’s the myths of modernity and rationality that need to be destroyed.” (*Without Oars*, p. 127)

Exercise: Set off on a walk without a destination. Go where you feel led. Pay particular attention to the parts of creation you encounter—a tree by the side of the street, a butterfly, grass under your feet, rocks on the path, wind in your face, rain on your hat, the sky, a beetle...Be present, and let your thoughts wonder about what you see, or touch, or sense, or hear, or feel. Write and share.

Day Nine • Leaving the Empire Behind

Walking Away

Our lives are emmeshed in society’s economic web. It has its own faith in the golden idols of materialism, endless growth, and technological triumph. It can seem comfortable until the truth of this emmeshment is revealed. The coronavirus pandemic has done this, highlighting the depth of income and health inequality, and exposing the extreme vulnerability of Black and brown people. Sometimes we discover that our “normal” circumstances and sense of security have long been blinders we’ve placed over our eyes and callouses over our hearts. Then we should find a way to walk away. We may retreat to a secluded place to get detached from the Empire’s grasp, and reattached to the searing truth of the present, with a vision of God’s preferred future.

Question: Are you living in the modern Empire’s captivity?

Returning to the Fray

A strategic spiritual withdrawal to regain a truthful perspective on the world, resetting our inner moral compass is the easy step. More challenging is our reentry, where we live out of that truth. This is the “rough test of faith.” Doing so can take the form of a pilgrim journey. We walk in ways that embody our convictions. It’s not just what we say, but where and how we move. Think about it. Protesters always march. They move toward some destination, like a state capital building, and move with a holy purpose. It’s what happened in Leipzig Germany, and at the Edmund Pettis Bridge, and so many other places made sacred in memory, and pivotal in social change, because of where and how pilgrims walked.

Exercise: Select a secluded place and go there, if possible, by walking. Reflect there on today’s question about your captivity to the Empire. Then, try to ask God, where should you be walking, and with whom? Write and share.

Dying Before we Die

What is a pilgrimage, finally? It's a journey where we walk away from a settled past toward a future infused with a spiritual presence. What we leave behind frees us to step forward, discovering our true self, resting in the mystery of God's love. That requires dying to our false self, to all the imprisonments of the inflated ego, of vain-glory, and of self-righteous control. In that dying, we discover life, and our truest identity. A faithful pilgrimage continues this pattern to the time of our physical death, when we are embraced by the fullness of Life. We remain afraid of death as long as we do not know who we are.

Question: Are you afraid of death?

Laying Aside Our Oars

When those three Irish pilgrims in 891 cast off in a currach—a boat made of hides, without oars—they were relinquishing themselves to the currents of divine Love. Their eventual destination was the one intended, and they were welcomed by God. The end of life requires a similar relinquishment. The oars we rely on to empower, guide, direct, and control our lives are never adequate. Storms overpower them, setting us adrift. Over time on our pilgrimage we learn how to set them aside, preparing us for that final crossing over the Jordan. And then we remember lyrics by Marty Haugen: “Blessed the pilgrim who learns to embrace, that all is gift, and all is grace.”

Exercise: Imagine your funeral. Think of the song, or hymn, or reading you most would like those who gather to hear. Write it down, and then share, in your journal or with others, what you hope those who hear this would understand, and take away with them.

