

Skiff Lake¹ Pilgrimage

Synopsis:

A pilgrimage is often described as experiencing faith in the natural world. Traditionally, pilgrimages were a common part of spiritual disciplines but there has been a decline in their popularity in North America. Events such as the Skiff Lake pilgrimage and other yearly events offer symbolic substitutes to the pilgrimage of Jesus to Jerusalem. In the everyday world, the act of the pilgrimage may be seen as a very individualized activity. Outsiders may interpret it as a secular act of seeking physical activity; a mere walk in the woods while trying to develop the spiritual self. However, for pilgrims, the act is highly religious, done in the name of the community, the church, and the self. The pilgrimage is recognized by members of the church as a highly sacramental act. Individuals embody the central values of belonging to God and doing it as a service to God and community while developing the spiritual self through sacrifice. Sacramental acts such as a pilgrimage can be briefly described as a religious act that is a visible outward sign of inward grace and divinity.

The overall goal of any pilgrimage, including the one depicted in this photo-essay, is to both renew and strengthen a pilgrim's faith through sacrifice and self-discovery by means of physical travel. The travelling is much more than simply reaching a destination. It is about having a means to access a deep spiritual state through challenging the physical being. This journey, it is understood, is undertaken with a heightened expectation than that of a hiker or a typical tourist. The passage is undertaken for sacrificial gain. The outward gain for pilgrims is to spend time in nature while demonstrating their devotion to the church and others; the sacrifice is the physical ailments and challenges experienced throughout. The inward gain for pilgrims is described by partakers as an opportunity for their drawing closer to God.

According to many participants in this journey, it is not so much the walk itself that they anticipate. It is the transforming potential of sacred travel, of entering the unknown and seeking exertion that enlightens spirituality. It is about the benefits of uncovering the quiet, contemplative, and serene connections with the self; becoming refreshed, renewed, and transformed. Many describe having the Stations of the Cross along the way as a reminder to take the time to pause and reflect during the journey; to use these opportunities as a time of spiritual growth. This particular experience ends with an outdoor mass where participants are allowed a celebration with the community after a long travel, a symbolic gesture of thanks by the church and the community for the pilgrims' sacrifice. Community members who are unable to participate in the pilgrimage join those who have been awarded a special symbolic walking stick upon first completion of the journey to celebrate the achievement. Elders who have experienced the passage take the opportunity to share their knowledge and tradition with others – particularly the younger, newer travelers. Afterwards, pilgrims often describe a closer connection to God on an individual level and a renewed appreciation of their faith.