Advent 2016

Tonight I am going to talk about silence, solitude, retreats, and pilgrimages. Like Advent, they each are opportunities to turn inward and examine our inner lives.

We entered this space tonight in darkness and in silence. It is a sacred time. We almost never allow ourselves to sit quietly in a dark space. It is as if we are afraid of what hides in the darkness or what we might discover about ourselves in silence. We are all too eager to turn on the lights, turn on the TV or radio, or computer, pick up the phone or even read a book. This Advent service tonight is a time for sitting still, for solitude, for quieting the constant noise of our daily lives, and for observing our inner chatter, fears and disquiet. For me, this time in silence, in solitude and in darkness, never lasts long enough. It is a form of prayer: sitting still, in the dark with our eyes shut, and waiting silently for what the spirit will say.

If we close our eyes and listen carefully, we can hear our own breath, in and out, and then gradually we may hear the sound of others breathing. We share this air with the people here, and across the world with babies, old men and women, even people huddled in refugee camps. The same air once was once breathed by our ancestors and also by all the other creatures that walk this earth. But to know this miracle, we must be silent. We must stop our running commentary, our judging and the narratives we have been telling ourselves. Just sit in silence and listen.

Why not set aside time regularly for silence like tonight? Gradually the noise of both our outer world and inner world will become quieter. We will not be disturbed as easily by other's words or the incessant clatter outside ourselves. And our inner noise will settle down as we let go of our monologues and the tapes we keep replaying. Eventually, a peace will settle around us.

Solitude, being alone with ourselves, is another blessing we need to give ourselves. Shutting our eyes or sitting in darkness like this allows us to

stop the frantic busyness of our world, its constant distractions, its marketplace attractions, and the stress that comes from our hectic pace. In darkness we can turn inward and let peace surround us.

Advent is a time that encourages silence and solitude. Sadly, we have turned the season into a time of anticipation, of gift buying, of extravagant lighting, of replaying old tapes and CDs, and not a time of reflection and silence and solitude. Advent is supposed to be a meditation on the spiritual, an exploration of our inner life. Advent is a kind of retreat or pilgrimage you can take without leaving home. A retreat often means leaving home for several days or weeks, and pilgrimages usually are strenuous walks in distant places. But like the solitude and silence of Advent, they lead us to exploring our inner life.

As most of you know, in 2014 June and I walked the Camino de Santiago, an ancient 500-mile pilgrimage across northern Spain. On the Camino you leave behind all the daily busyness, all the minor conflicts with colleagues, all the planning and adjustments, and focus instead on walking each day mindfully. It is an opportunity for silence, for dropping the incessant chatter of our minds. It is an opportunity for solitude each day as you walk at your own pace, paying attention to the abundant space around you. In other words, a pilgrimage is like an extended Advent service.

During the thirty-nine days we walked, I wrote at least one poem a day to record my reflections on the way. I would like to read some of these poems tonight, in hopes that they may take you on your own pilgrimage and retreat.

The first day we crossed over the Pyrenees. It was a breath-taking experience, a walk into a new world. The poem I wrote is called "Words Float Away."

Words Float Away

A new sun wakes up the world,
uncovering what has not been seen before.
The green rises up as mountains,

its color like sea waves in the morning light.
The sheep on the hills no longer puffy dots
but radiant and glowing with white.

To walk here is to take a sacred path
whose stones were turned to gravel by ancient feet.
The very ground sparkles with an inner light.
The cows, silhouetted against the grass,
occur outside of thought, as if
they were new creations just birthed.

The winds pluck the leaves
and lift them and all our thoughts
into the air like the ten thousand things
suddenly apparent swirling all around.
Words float away and ideas disappear.
All that remains is a wordless silence.

The fog that rose up the mountain now clears,
exposing the layered peaks beyond this horizon
revealing a different life unfolding like a map.
From here we walk in mystery
where each step opens into a new dimension
and we enter our life for the first time.

On the second day of the pilgrimage we set out before dawn using headlamps. We could not see the arrows and markers pointing the way that had guided us the day before. We were literally in the dark. As we all are.

In the Dark
Roncevalles to Espinal

We always begin in darkness
no matter how many torches we hold.
The maps we carry as guides
do not assure us as we walk
and are pointless without light.

We look for signs, arrows to point the way,
but stumble over stones and roots.
We think we know the way.
but what we think won't guide our feet.
All that matters now is right here.
Each step leads beyond where we are,
beyond what we know, somewhere else.
Stop. This is where we are now.
Beyond is in the dark.
The blazes we look for
were made in the dark
for those who walk this dark way
by those who walked in darkness before.

Though others have gone before us and left signs, each of us must find our own way, different from anyone else's. We are alone, especially on the inner path. What are the markers? Walking day after day you become very well acquainted with your body, its aches and pains and delights. In the solitude of walking at your own pace your thoughts turn inward, where the signs are not so obvious.

The Inner Path
Burgos to Tardajos

The physical way is blazed in the flesh.
You know where you are
and how far you have gone
by bodily evidence.
Blisters form and heal,
knees ache with each step,
shoulders, hips, and backs
mark each day's progress.
But on the inner path
the signs are less clear.
For moments you have great peace
and lose yourself in all,
floating away with the clouds.
Or you meet someone
who needs to tell you

a new version of their life
so you listen and smile.
Or you lament the life
you have let slip away
as the clouds darken.
Where are the markers
for the inner path?

If you meditate or spend time in solitude, you will soon realize that it is your ego mind that is the source of your daily dissatisfactions. Always having to protect the image we have of ourselves is exhausting. It is like dragging a ball and chain. This poem is about our shadows and our egos.

Shadows
San Anton to Castrojeriz

In the mornings
with the sun behind me
my shadow is tall.
Its long legs
stretch as far
as my ambition.
As the sun climbs
my shadow's legs
grow shorter.
By noon it seems
I am walking in place.
In the afternoon
I have to drag
my shadow behind.
At dark my shadow
has quit, refusing
to move anymore.

If we are committed we can stop dragging our old stories and worn out versions of self behind us. Then we are free. At one point on the Camino, I tried to take a selfie with my camera. Here is what happened.

Self-portrait
Beldorada to Villafranca Montes de Oca

I stopped to take a self-portrait
standing on this beautiful hill.
When I turned the lens around
there was no me—
just the wheat fields,
and on the horizon,
a faint rainbow.
How free. How free.

Why do we go on retreats? Why go on pilgrimages? Something tells us that there is more to life than getting and spending and that we have to change our life. Toward the end of my pilgrimage, I wrote this poem.

Penance
Hospital Alta da Cruz to Melide

Three days from Santiago
and I am still wondering why
I'm walking all this way.
A thousand years off Purgatory?
I don't think so.
Forgiveness for mortal sins?
I've practiced all seven
too many times.
The penitence I seek
is for not paying attention
to this one life I have.
For example, sunrises like this one—
I've slept through or ignored thousands.
Occasionally I've noted the rings
around the moon,
but I have not learned the night's
mythology or constellations.
How many times have I watched
water bugs walk over clear streams

where the sand dances like gold flakes
and the small rocks flutter in the current?
I have just shooed away a fly
without observing its gossamer wings
and faceted eyes alert to my threats.
Those are bad enough,
but mostly I seek penance
for inattention to those
who wanted me to hear them:
children, family, dogs,
and strangers like you
who read this poem
who have stories and regrets
and seek penance too.
What I want is atonement
for not paying attention to
this abundant life of mine.

Advent, like a retreat or a pilgrimage should open our hearts to compassion. This is the last poem I will read.

Saying the Names
Melide to Arca

As you walk on your path, here is what you must do:
with each step call out the names of those who suffer,
whose lives are slipping from them because of cancer,
disease, despair, hunger, abuse, loss, desperation,
drugs, remorse, or for the absence of love in their lives.
Some names you know because you have watched
them slowly shrink from how they were before.
Start there. Slowly, one by one say their names
to the stones waiting beneath your feet,
to the tree limbs leaning over to hear,
to the air that echoes the names you say.
Just do it, one by one say their names clearly
so that they are not forgotten in this space you walk.
There is more. There are names you have forgotten,

names you never knew, names no one knows.
Give them a name now and carefully utter it
so that forgetfulness and ignorance
are undone by your words on their behalf.
Stop, pick up a stone and give it one of their names.
Leave it on the path so that by the time you come to the end
there will be a pebbled trail of names left behind in plain view.
Pick a flower and whisper the secret name of someone
who has wanted their name spoken in love instead of hate.
Leave each flower on a post or bench for others to see.
Leave quotes, poems, or words of encouragement
all along the way you are walking.
Now say your name. Yes your name. You suffer too.
Say it aloud and listen now to all the names of those who suffer.
Let their names echo in your heart as you walk the Way.