Pilgrimage as activism and tool for transformation – an autoethnographic exploration

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Proposal type – flexible – can be a presentation, paper or expanded into a workshop

In his book, *The Art of Pilgrimage* (1998), Phil Cousineau outlines the stages involved in making a pilgrimage, from the initial longing to a call to action followed by the eventual departure and all that entails. I will argue that research and activism follow a similar arc. All three endeavours – pilgrimage, activism and research – can be a struggle for what is good and beautiful. As someone engaged in all three, I will look at the common ground and the differences between them using two examples.

In 2009, I made a pilgrimage to Santiago which resulted in a book-length memoir in which I documented and processed the events of my first marriage (Field, 2016) using the frame of pilgrimage. Both the walk and the subsequent writing-as-inquiry were focused on my own self-knowledge and self-healing. However, pilgrimage can be seen as a form of activism (acknowledging that this is a contentious term) in that it is non-consumerist, counter-cultural and has a minimal environmental footprint. Whilst it may not directly address damaging political processes, it is clearly related to ‘doing’, and is, in the same way as people eschewing flying and private cars, a positive move towards building community. On the level of deep ecology, the pilgrim’s unmediated bodily engagement with others, including the putative ‘persons’ of paths, plants and non-human creatures means that it is impossible not to live as part of an interconnected system. (Here, it may be relevant to explore the concepts of ‘passive activism’ and slacktivism which have both positive and negative connotations.)

In November and December 2018, I became, to my own surprise, an activist in a more clearly defined way. I initiated a demonstration, found support from local groups, printed fliers at my own expense and leafleted hundreds of homes in Canterbury. I wrote to Prince Charles and public figures soliciting support and on the 29th December, found myself standing on walls and benches near St Dunstan’s Church and Canterbury West Station, addressing a crowd of three hundred people through a megaphone. Significantly, for me, I framed this activity as a pilgrimage and felt a need to embed our individual, local concerns (specifically for better air quality in Canterbury and against the building of the £10 million multi-storey carpark) in a
spiritual and historical context, as well as one concerned with environmental and social justice. Whilst many of my friends have participated in Extinction Rebellion protests, I have found myself unable to do so, seeing them as essentially nihilistic and vague. An autoethnographic question is therefore: Who is this self that I find able to commit fully to one kind of activism, and not to another, and what does this have to do with pilgrimage and research?

**Question from the call:** What it means to be an activist and whose values we represent?

**Key words:** Good, beauty, pilgrimage, activism, Canterbury

