

Every Step Is Home

A Spiritual Geography
from Appalachia to Alaska

Lori Erickson

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“A beautiful successor to Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley* and Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Lori Erickson’s *Every Step Is Home* illuminates our spiritual connection to the natural world. Her ‘pilgrimage of the heart’ reminds us that our future depends most of all on that connection.”

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“In this good-humored, rich blend of travelogue, spiritual reflection, and scientific inquiry, Lori Erickson asks and answers the question: If we engage deeply and intimately with nature’s sacred places, will we ever go back inside for spiritual experience? Using the author’s model of curiosity, wonder, and mindful attention, readers will be inspired to undergo their own spiritual quests to sacred sites near and far.”

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The Center for Spirituality in Nature

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“Movement and stillness, rhythm and silence, taking a trip and going home—this book will give you all that at once. Erikson creates a physical space with words. It’s a place where you can breathe deeply—in spite of everything. We all need more places like that.”

—Erin Wathen, pastor and author, www.homeandholler.com

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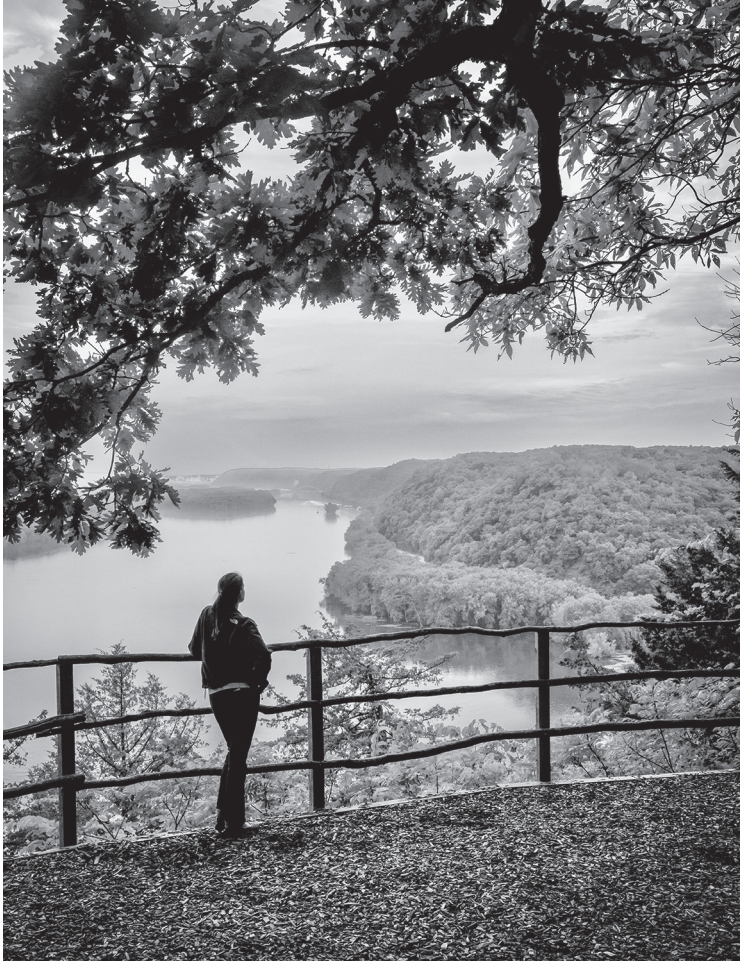
For Owen and Melissa

*But do not ask me where I am going,
As I travel in this limitless world,
Where every step I take is my home.*

—Eihei Dōgen

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Effigy Mounds National Monument in Iowa preserves more than two hundred prehistoric Indigenous mounds, thirty-one of which are in the shape of bears or birds. (PHOTO CREDIT: IOWA TOURISM OFFICE)

Prologue

The Marching Bears of Iowa



Not far from where I grew up in northeastern Iowa, ten bears march across a high bluff overlooking the Mississippi River. They've been marching there for at least eight centuries, in rain and snow and sunshine, through seasons of drought and rain, silent witnesses to an ever-changing world around them. Unconcerned by the occasional airplane flying overhead and the barges passing by on the river below, the bears continue their steady, mysterious march.

As a travel writer who specializes in holy places, I'm embarrassed to say that for most of my life I've ignored this spiritual treasure in my own backyard. I visited Effigy Mounds National Monument mainly for hiking, largely oblivious to its more than two hundred prehistoric Indigenous mounds, thirty-one of which are in the shape of bears or birds. And I'd never even visited its most significant site—the Marching Bear Group that stretches for nearly a quarter mile across the top of a bluff.

In my defense, it's easy to overlook earthen mounds like these, which are among the many thousands built by the native peoples of North America before Europeans arrived on

the continent. Through the past centuries the great majority have been plowed and bulldozed, and even those that remain require some effort and imagination to appreciate. Without a trained eye, a prehistoric mound, even a bear-shaped one, can look like just another small hill covered by grass.

But once I discovered those Marching Bears, once I'd walked and sat and prayed among them, I've come to realize that they carry a powerful spiritual message, one with multiple layers of meaning. In reflecting on them, I realize that this sacred site is from a culture that's not mine, and that I'm only a visitor there. But the sign at the entrance to the monument invites the public to experience Effigy Mounds as a sacred place, and I'm not one to refuse such an invitation.

One message from those bears is that the spiritual path calls for subtlety and discernment. Just as it's easy to overlook these mounds, it's easy to miss the sacred that threads through all of life. The Marching Bears appear quite different from overhead—the raptors that glide on the breezes above them, in other words, have the best view. So maybe the lesson here is that the sacred requires us to shift perspective, to get out of our ordinary plane of existence and find a new vantage point.

My time among the Marching Bears has made me want to explore other sacred landmarks in America, this country that's so new in some ways and so ancient in others. That's an important lesson for me, especially, because I've made a career out of writing about spiritual sites around the world. I've loved my trips to places as far away as Egypt, New Zealand, and Peru, but increasingly I want to see the sacred everywhere, not only in distant lands. Just as pilgrims walk the sacred paths abroad with reverence, I think we can find hallowed routes in the United States, and in doing so perhaps find points of connection in a society that can seem hopelessly fragmented.

The travels in this book reflect a restlessness in my own spiritual life, a condition that I've ruefully recognized is probably a perpetual state for me. While I don't want to leave organized Christianity behind, too often it feels like a room with its windows nailed shut. It isn't that I disagree with its doctrines or

rituals: it's just that they feel stale. I want to get out and move, to explore, to feel the spirit moving through me in unexpected ways. That's why these sacred sites have been a beacon to me. Among them, I've eagerly sought out new vantage points, emulating those eagles soaring above the Marching Bears of Iowa.

Just after I began working on this book, the sudden, shocking spread of COVID-19 and the upheavals it brought to the world forced yet another vantage point on me. As many parts of the globe went into lockdown and fear and anxiety multiplied, one of my reactions was the entirely selfish thought of how I could possibly write a travel book during a time when I couldn't travel. (Yes, go ahead and cue the world's smallest violin. I realize that among those who deserve sympathy during a pandemic, travel writers rank near the bottom.) Even worse than not being able to research my book was that my soul was withering, and the longer I stayed home, the worse it got. As I grew ever more bored and dispirited while confined close to home, a new, deeper focus for this book came into being. I realized how much I was learning about traveling by *not* traveling, and how missing this much-loved part of my life made me appreciate as never before how wanderlust feeds my spirit.

I think my restlessness of soul has been shared by many people during the pandemic. Cut off from offices, churches, schools, restaurants, and other places where we normally interacted, millions of us have sought sustenance in nature. The outdoors has become a kind of *third place*, a term used to describe settings beyond the realms of home and work where people gather to play, socialize, and rejuvenate.

Even now that the pandemic has waned, I've found myself thinking more and more about how COVID-19 has changed our global spiritual landscape. Around the world, as more and more people are discovering the transformative power of nature, as campgrounds fill and parks overflow with visitors, there are changes percolating beneath the surface that I think will have profound effects on spirituality in the coming decades. What does it mean to seek the spirit outside the walls of a building, to study what the early Celtic Christians called

the Book of Creation, which they believed was as full of divine revelation as the Bible? What makes a place holy? And once we find spiritual inspiration outside, will we ever want to go back inside to worship?

Effigy Mounds National Monument is a good place to think about these questions. From its visitor center, a hiking trail leads up a bluff to a plateau high above the Mississippi, where it winds beneath tall oaks, maples, hickory and other hardwood trees. The path leads to Fire Point, where you can see the river four hundred feet below, its braided channels flowing past forested islands. In the winter, bald eagles soar on the updrafts created by the bluff; in summer, the woods are alive with birdsong.

Signs along the hiking trail point out the mounds, which blend seamlessly into the natural landscape. While the native peoples of North America built mounds in many places, effigy mounds—which are in the shape of an animal—are much more unusual. In this part of northeastern Iowa and across the Mississippi River in southwestern Wisconsin, bear and bird effigies are the most common, but elsewhere in Wisconsin are mounds in the shape of creatures that include deer, bison, lynx, turtle, and panther.

Here at the monument, the largest earthen structure is the Great Bear Mound, a huge creature lying on its side. If this bear stood up it would be seventy feet in height—a formidable animal indeed to encounter on an afternoon walk. There are less showy mounds here too; some are circular, others are in the form of rounded rectangles, and a third type is a combination of the two, so that the mound looks a necklace of huge beads. The mounds rise to a height of two to eight feet above the forest floor, their shapes delineated by grass that's allowed to grow to a greater height than the surrounding turf.

All of these earthen works were created between 850 and 1,400 years ago by hunter-gatherers who lived off the rich resources of this fertile river valley. They harvested fish and mussels from the Mississippi, hunted deer and elk, and foraged

for berries, wild rice, acorns, and other foods in the wetlands and forests of the region. In the midst of it all they found time to carry countless baskets of earth to form mounds, laboriously shaping some of them into animal forms.

Because these people left no written records, we can only guess why the mounds were built or how they were used. Many of the mounds contain human remains, but they likely had ceremonial uses as well. Perhaps mound-building marked celestial events or delineated boundaries between groups. Maybe it was a way to connect with ancestors, mark the arrival of a season, or affirm clan identities.

Sometime around 850 years ago the building stopped. The shift coincided with a change to a more settled agricultural existence, with people living in larger villages instead of small groups. Then in the late 1600s, European fur traders began arriving in the area, followed in the 1840s by an influx of settlers, who logged and plowed the land containing the mounds, oblivious to their significance. Surveys in the 1800s and early 1900s list more than ten thousand mounds in northeastern Iowa alone; within a century, fewer than a thousand were left. Thankfully, the ones at Effigy Mounds were preserved in a national monument in 1949.

President Harry Truman created the monument because of its archaeological significance, and throughout the 1950s and '60s, excavations were done on many of the mounds. In the 1970s Indigenous rights groups started speaking out against the practice of excavating native burials, which led to many changes in how archaeologists treat prehistoric sites. Especially after a criminal case in 2016 involving an Effigy Mounds superintendent who kept Indigenous remains in his own possession, today the U.S. National Park Service works hard to maintain good relations with twenty tribes affiliated with Effigy Mounds National Monument. Among them are the Ho-Chunk, Otoe-Missouria, Winnebago, Sac and Fox, Santee Sioux, and the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska. Ceremonies are occasionally held there, and prayer bundles, ties, and flags can be seen throughout the park.

Having grown up less than an hour away from Effigy Mounds, I've visited the monument many times through the years, but it wasn't until I discovered the Marching Bear Group that I began to better understand why tribal nations value it so highly as a spiritual landmark. These mounds are located in a part of the park that gets less use than the trails near the visitor center. On top of a high bluff, a row of ten bear-shaped effigies runs through a corridor of green grass bordered by trees. Though the individual bears are about twenty feet shorter than the Great Bear Mound, if they got up and started marching past me the line would stretch beyond my line of sight, an ursine parade of massive power.

I have a lot of questions about these bears. What did they mean to the people who built them? What rituals were done here? Why are there so many bear effigies in one spot? Why are they all facing the same direction? I'll never know the answers to these questions, but on a summer day it's pleasant to speculate on them, giving me something to think about as I soak up the sun, the view, and the fresh air.

As I settle deeper into the silence, the quiet holiness of the site laps at the edges of my consciousness. I've been to sacred sites around the world, from ornate cathedrals and temples filled with devotees to sacred mountains with their tops wreathed in clouds. The sense of holiness at Effigy Mounds is subtler, perhaps more in keeping with midwestern sensibilities, but there's an undeniable sense of the sacred here, fully as palpable as at any of those other landmarks. I get the sense of being part of a long line of pilgrims who have traveled here for renewal and inspiration.

The fact that the Marching Bears appear to be walking is a spiritual lesson in itself. It makes me realize how sedentary much of contemporary religion is, even before COVID-19 sentenced many of us to the soul-sapping miseries of Zoom worship. With rituals that typically have us sitting quietly inside buildings, we seem to believe that God won't pay attention to us unless we act like well-behaved schoolchildren in a class led by a strict teacher.

This runs counter to the fact that humans are designed to *move*, both in our ordinary routines and in our spiritual lives. Millennia ago, our hominid ancestors began to walk upright, igniting an evolutionary transformation that's still being played out. Walking on two legs is more energy efficient than on four, allowing these early humans to cover greater distances. It helped them spot predators and prey, and it freed their hands to carry burdens and use tools. There are disadvantages to be sure, as anyone with a bad back realizes (since walking upright puts a lot of weight on our lower back and hips). But the benefits of walking far outweigh the disadvantages, and you can make a good argument that no other evolutionary change was more important in creating *Homo sapiens*.

We've evolved a long way from our hominid ancestors, but we continue to benefit from walking. It strengthens our heart and lungs, improves the functioning of our immune system, enhances digestion, strengthens bones, and pumps blood to our brain. The feel-good hormones released by it improve our psychological health, lightening mood and easing depression. A walk helps us step off the hamster wheel of anxiety, even for just a short time.

I think all those millennia of walking have shaped our souls too. A walk, especially in a beautiful natural setting, allows for open-ended thinking that doesn't happen as easily in the midst of regimented daily routines. As the scene before us slowly shifts, our eyes drift from one view to another, inviting contemplation and reflection. Walking isn't as conducive to linear thought—you're unlikely to be able to solve a complicated mathematical equation while strolling—but it lends itself instead to intuitions, flashes of insight, and making connections between seemingly disparate things. Walking, in other words, allows our consciousness to expand and deepen. Echoing the experiences of many, St. Augustine of Hippo put it this way: *Solvitur ambulando* ("It is solved by walking"). No matter what "it" is, it's usually made better by taking a walk.

Looking around the global religious landscape, it's clear that many faiths have a sense of the importance of walking as

a spiritual practice. Buddhists do walking meditation, Muslims circumambulate the Kaaba in Mecca during the Hajj, and Hindus make a reverent clockwise circuit around sacred places as a form of prayer. “Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet,” said Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh.

In Christianity, the Bible is full of walkers, which isn’t surprising given that it was written in a premodern age. But walking often has powerful symbolic meanings, including when the Israelites wandered for forty years in the desert or when Jesus went into the desert to pray (where he encountered the devil, which is a reminder that not all walks are harmless). Jesus often invited his followers to walk with him, and in his final hours he walked through the streets of Jerusalem on a path that came to be known as the Via Dolorosa, which pilgrims follow to this day. Another great walker was Paul, whose missionary journeys covered many thousands of miles. God himself promises to walk among his people, a promise that the psalmist recalls as he walks through the valley of the shadow of death. Christians are told to walk in the light, though when they’re not welcomed in a particular area, they’re told to shake the dust from their feet and keep on walking.

The practice of pilgrimage is another testimony to the transforming power of journeys on foot. Through the centuries the classic pilgrimages in many faiths have required weeks or months, and sometimes even years, of walking. These trips were often so dangerous that pilgrims would put all their affairs in order before they left, not knowing if they would return. And for Christians who couldn’t make the long journey to Rome or Jerusalem, a labyrinth was constructed in Chartres Cathedral in France, whose twists and turns allowed people to make a symbolic walking pilgrimage.

The contemporary world is rediscovering the power of pilgrimage. Even in an age of high-speed travel in many forms, modern pilgrimages often involve considerable physical effort, which is actually essential because the journey is as important as the destination. Some walk the Camino de Santiago in Spain; others take a more secular version of a pilgrimage along

the Appalachian or Pacific Crest Trail. The labyrinth has been rediscovered as well, with many retreat centers and churches installing one as a meditative tool.

All of these practices reinforce the timeless truth that in the steady rhythm of putting one foot in front of another, our souls slowly change. Perhaps it's because at some deep level we feel the pull of gravity with each step and know that we will one day return to the earth beneath our feet. Or maybe in walking we connect to a circuit of energy that allows the holiness of creation to flow more easily through us.

In this book I describe landscapes and experiences scattered across the United States from Appalachia to Alaska, most outside and many best experienced by walking. Some are clearly sacred in origin, while others require us to look more deeply beneath their surface to see the holiness. In each of these sites I reflect as well on a seemingly ordinary element such as air, fire, water, and stone that becomes sacred within the context of that place. Even if you can't travel to these destinations, I hope my reflections will prompt you to be more attuned to the sacredness of your own daily routines and your own neighborhood.

In these pages I invite you to travel with me to El Santuario de Chimayó in New Mexico, where pilgrims gather dirt that's said to have healing properties, and to Nebraska to see one of the world's most spectacular bird migrations. In Ohio I discover a huge serpent that's been coiling its way down a bluff for many centuries, and in Minnesota I explore a place where sacred stone is quarried. I wander through a cathedral of forest giants in California, soak in holy springs in Oregon, penetrate deep into a sacred cave in Tennessee, and learn about sacred animals from South Dakota bison. After marveling at Alaska's northern lights and Hawai'i's volcanoes, I end my journey in New Mexico's Chaco Canyon, where I ponder the intertwining of earth and heaven in sacred astronomy.

Through all my explorations, I've returned regularly to Effigy Mounds. On one of my visits, I wasn't surprised to learn that when park officials invited native elders to perform a

ceremony at the park after a hiatus of many years, the religious leaders chose to conduct their first ceremony at the Marching Bears. Something about them is sacred, as anyone who spends time among them with an open heart will realize.

As for me, during the time I've researched and traveled and written about the holy sites in this book, I've felt those bears walking with me, reminding me to look beneath the surface to see the extraordinary hidden in the ordinary.



People come to El Santuario de Chimayó in New Mexico for dirt that's said to have healing properties. (PHOTO CREDIT: LORI ERICKSON)

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Dirt: El Santuario de Chimayó in New Mexico



Few substances are as maligned as dirt. If we're dirt poor, our only option is to get things dirt cheap. We can treat someone like dirt, which may include digging up dirt on them. We take off our shoes so we don't drag dirt into the house, we let dirty dishes soak in the sink, and we throw dirty clothes in the washer. Just don't air your dirty laundry in public—that's a big no-no.

But in Chimayó, New Mexico, the dirt is holy—and as I began a quest to find the sacred in America, that's the place that drew me first. If even dirt can be considered holy, surely anything can.

There was another reason why I wanted to visit the healing shrine of Chimayó: my mother's death at the age of ninety after several years in a memory-care unit in a nursing home. A month after that loss, the thought of visiting this pilgrimage site, famed for its sacred soil, came out of nowhere and wouldn't let me go. Perhaps it was tied to the fact that my mom had been an Iowa farmer's wife with deep roots in the earth, and so, in the paradoxical logic of the spiritual realm, Chimayó would be the perfect place to say goodbye to her. Or maybe it

was simply that I needed healing, now that I was an orphan—a middle-aged one, to be sure, but an orphan nevertheless.

The weekend before I flew to New Mexico, a funeral director handed me a box that contained my mother's earthly remains. "Here's Mom," he said with incongruous good cheer.

I took the box, gingerly, and wondered what I would do with it until we held her service in the spring. The mantelpiece in my living room? It didn't seem right to display it in public. Storing it in the basement felt disrespectful, and I definitely didn't want it in my bedroom. So finally I settled on my office, a little upstairs room that once was a walk-in closet. I put the box of cremains next to a statue of the Virgin Mary, then draped a scarf over both Mary and the box so it looked like it was tucked under her arm. I would glance at it occasionally as I worked, wondering when I'd have the courage to open its lid and look inside.

As I was packing for my trip, I briefly considered taking some ashes with me to Chimayó, following the example of friends who'd scattered the remains of loved ones in beautiful sites around the world. But my mother had disliked traveling when she was alive, and I guessed that her thoughts on the matter probably hadn't changed after her death.

Chimayó, which is sometimes called the Lourdes of America, has long been on my radar as one of the most significant holy sites in the United States. My first two visits were separated by ten years, and during that time the shrine had grown in popularity, with the addition of a visitor center and outdoor spaces where groups can have services. I was a little hesitant to return for a third time, hoping that it hadn't become too commercialized or gentrified—but then I remembered that the whole shrine was centered on dirt, which would make it hard for it to get too uppity.

Long before the Spaniards arrived in the region, Chimayó was considered holy by the Pueblo people, who believed that healing spirits inhabited the hot springs in the area. After the springs dried up, people came for the dirt where the water had

once been. The miracles, apparently, didn't mind whether they came through water or soil.

Chimayó's fame spread to the larger world around the year 1810, when a story began to circulate of a local man, Bernardo Abeyta, who saw a light springing from one of the hills near the Santa Cruz River. After following the light to its source, he found in the earth a crucifix bearing a dark-skinned Jesus. The local villagers paid homage to the relic and then took it to a church in nearby Santa Cruz. Mysteriously, during the night the crucifix returned to its original location. After this happened two more times, the locals received permission to build a small chapel to house the crucifix in Chimayó.

Our Lord of Esquipulas, as the figure on the crucifix is known, is also linked to a shrine in Guatemala associated with healing earth. Franciscan friars helped spread devotion to this icon throughout Mexico and New Mexico. It must have seemed natural to them to link the Pueblo people's stories about the site's healing earth to the Catholic devotion to Our Lord of Esquipulas.

And so through the years, the story of the crucifix became intertwined with earlier Indigenous beliefs, a story repeated countless times through history. The stones from pagan temples get reused for churches; cathedrals are built over earlier sacred sites; churches whose congregations have dwindled become houses of worship for other faiths. The Holy Spirit seems to love recycling as much as environmentalists.

Humble Chimayó's reputation for miracles gradually spread, drawing an increasing number of pilgrims to the simple adobe church whose official name is El Santuario de Chimayó. After World War II, survivors of the Bataan Death March made a walking pilgrimage to the church on Good Friday in gratitude for their deliverance. The tradition of Holy Week pilgrimages continues to this day, when more than thirty thousand people walk to the church before Easter. Many travel the eight miles from the town of Nambé, while others walk from as far away as Santa Fe or Albuquerque.

My own pilgrimage began with a flight to Albuquerque in February, followed by a two-hour drive north, first on a broad highway and then on narrower roads that led me into dry, brown hills covered with sparse grasses and scattered junipers. At last I reached Chimayó, a village of about three thousand in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. When I pulled into the parking lot at the shrine there were just a couple of other cars there, a consequence of visiting in the low season of February. The wind was chilly as I walked past deserted outdoor shrines to the Virgin Mary and alcoves holding statues of saints. It all looked a little forlorn, like a party room after the celebration is over.

But once I entered the church, I found it as warm and inviting as I remembered from my previous two visits. The adobe church with twin bell towers is one of the finest examples of Spanish Colonial architecture in New Mexico, with a timbered ceiling, rough-plastered interior walls, and simple wooden pews. Five *reredos* (panels of sacred paintings) done in colorful folk-art style adorn its walls, one behind the altar and two on each side of the nave. Above the altar hangs a six-foot crucifix, said to be the same one found by Bernardo Abeyta.

On my previous visit I'd attended a mass during which a priest gave a wonderful homily, full of good humor and kindness, to a church in which every pew was filled. Many of the people had seemed like locals, but I also heard Japanese and French conversations on my way out of the sanctuary. Today, in contrast, the church was empty except for me, though a stand with flickering candles near the altar showed that other pilgrims had been there before me that day.

I sat for some time in the simple sanctuary, grateful to be at my destination and pondering what had drawn me here. I wasn't seeking a miracle, unlike many who come here. My mother had lived a good and long life, and amid my sadness at her death I felt relief that her twilight journey through dementia was over. But I also sensed a fissure inside me, a recognition that some primal link had been broken. I was trying to find my bearings as I learned to live the rest of my life without either

parent. My eye was caught by a wooden bust of the Virgin Mary looking down from a windowsill, and I felt grateful to have her maternal gaze rest on me.

I stood up, walked past the altar, and exited the church to the adjoining small room known as *El Pocito*, which in Spanish means “little well.” By tradition, this is the spot where Abeyta found the crucifix in 1810. Bowing my head at the low entryway, I saw the small hole in the ground that I remembered from my previous visits. About a foot in diameter, it’s filled with fine-grained dirt. This is the spot where thousands have knelt, ladling handfuls of powdery soil into containers they brought from home. I crouched down to pick up my own handful of dust, feeling its coolness sift through my fingers, thinking about the fact that I’d been to many shrines with holy water, but never one with holy dirt.

Holy places where miracles are said to occur are pretty common in the religious world, from the Christian shrines of Lourdes in France and the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico to sacred sites in many other faiths. I’ve visited such places across the globe with great interest, curious about what draws people to them. I remain an agnostic on the claims of inexplicable physical cures, but I have no trouble believing that genuine healing does happen at such shrines, though it most commonly takes the form of a mending of hearts rather than a dramatic cure.

Even at Chimayó, a certain matter-of-factness reigns. In a 2008 interview, Father Casimiro Roca, who served as rector at the church for more than five decades, said that the dirt is replenished each day by human hands, not miraculously replenished as some believed. “I always tell people that I have no faith in the dirt, I have faith in the Lord,” he told a *New York Times* reporter. “But people can believe what they want.”

The room adjacent to El Pocito gave ample evidence of the piety of those who come here seeking healing. A row of crutches hung on one wall, presumably left by those who no longer needed them, and photographs lined the walls testifying mutely to the prayers that have been said here. I stood for

a long time looking at the faces of those in the photos: soldiers in uniform, elderly women in hospital beds, fresh-faced school children, tattooed motorcycle riders, babies with oxygen tubes. I spotted one that looked like my mom, an elderly woman with a kind smile. Blinking back tears, I pulled my jacket closer in the chilly room and then left the church.

THE BEAUTY OF BONES

Georgia O’Keeffe went searching for flowers, but instead she found bones.

The famed artist was on my mind as I set out from Chimayó for an afternoon of exploring. Her iconic images of whitened animal skulls, multicolored cliffs and canyons, and high desert vistas are indelibly linked to the region surrounding Ghost Ranch, which lies an hour north of Chimayó. I was longing to see for myself those stark panoramas so different from the tidy farms and hills of my native Iowa, wanting an outer landscape that matched my inner mood.

O’Keeffe became fascinated by New Mexico on a visit to Santa Fe in 1917 when she was twenty-nine years old. “From then on, I was always on my way back,” she later said. For a number of years that meant summer visits from her home in New York, but in 1949 she moved permanently to the region, first to a house at Ghost Ranch and later to one in the small village of Abiquiú.

For years O’Keeffe’s life was overshadowed professionally and personally by her husband, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz. In 1933 she experienced a crisis caused by his infidelities, though the two remained married until his death in 1946. Their marital difficulties accelerated her need to redefine herself in the starkness of the New Mexico desert. There she found new directions in her art and an inner strength that sustained her for a future that would be largely solitary. Keenly attuned to the power of nature, she sought out the strangeness hidden in the familiar, removing what was nonessential

by emphasizing color and shape. The dramatic countryside of northern New Mexico, a landscape stripped down to its barest essentials, became her artistic and spiritual home.

Before O’Keeffe fell under the spell of New Mexico, many of her paintings had featured lush flowers. But because blooms are sorely lacking in the high desert, here she turned instead to collecting and painting bones from animals whose carcasses had been picked clean by scavengers and then bleached by the sun. “To me, [bones] are as beautiful as anything I know,” she said. “To me they are strangely more living than the animals walking around. . . . The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even though it is vast and empty and untouchable.”

O’Keeffe loved the angles and shapes of the bones and was fascinated by the ways they could be used to frame and dramatize the landscape. Some of her best-known paintings show skulls she’d collected on her walks through the desert. We may see these works as meditations on mortality, but for her the skeletons were more a symbol of endurance and strength than of death. While bones eventually decompose into soil, in the desert they can last for many decades. And just as bones show the underlying structure of an animal—the reality hidden underneath its surface—O’Keeffe’s paintings hint of deeper meanings hidden within the New Mexico landscape.

As I drove past the red cliffs and canyons near Ghost Ranch, I saw many scenes that were familiar to me from O’Keeffe’s work. The mountain known as Pedernal loomed in the distance, a peak sacred to the Navajo and Jicarilla people and one that O’Keeffe painted many times. She said she thought that if she painted it often enough, God would give it to her, though in the end the opposite became true. After her death her ashes—which were actually pulverized bones, like all cremains—were scattered there, so that she became part of the mountain.

I could see why O’Keeffe felt so at home in this wild and open countryside, a landscape perfectly suited to her need for solitude. I felt my own deep craving to be alone here. Normally I seek out conversations with people on my trips, eager to learn

about the place from their perspectives. On this journey my impulse was just the opposite. As O’Keeffe had realized before me, this is a good place to be alone.

I remembered touring O’Keeffe’s home and studio in the small village of Abiquiú on my previous visit. She’d purchased a rundown house there in 1945, and after restoring it, she made it her home for all but the last two years of her life. On my tour, I was amused by the docent’s reverent attitude toward the artist and her military-style enforcement of security measures, including forcing us to relinquish all the pens and pencils we had in our bags, as if we were likely to start drawing on the walls like kindergarteners. But as I listened to the story of O’Keeffe’s life there and her almost-religious devotion to her art, I could see why she has become a kind of secular saint in this part of the world. Like the desert hermits of the third century in Egypt, she was often cantankerous and odd, which I guess are good traits to have if you’re seeking meaning in a desert.

I pulled into the long drive leading to Ghost Ranch, which is now a spiritual retreat center that attracts visitors from around the world. A cold wind had sprung up, and a light dusting of snow covered the landscape of red, yellow, and gray badlands. I walked the paths between its rustic wooden buildings, thinking of the many pilgrims who find their way here each year. (Chimayó isn’t the only magnet for spiritual seekers in this region.) While the house where O’Keeffe lived isn’t open to the public, simply soaking up the atmosphere and scenery made me feel connected to her.

As I meandered, I thought of one of my favorite O’Keeffe paintings. *From the Faraway, Nearby* shows an antlered skull floating in the sky above a desert landscape. At first it looks like an ordinary skull, but then you realize it has a mythic quality, with far too many points on its antlers for any real animal. I love the painting’s juxtaposition of the familiar and the dream-like, the near and the distant. Its mood evokes something relating to what I was searching for: a deeper perspective on life,

one that's comfortable with paradox and is rooted in a sacred landscape that only appears ordinary at first glance.

On the drive back to Chimayó I could see Pedernal in the distance, and I thought about O'Keeffe's ashes, gradually being incorporated into the mountain she loved, and my mom's ashes, tucked beneath Mary's arm in my office.

THE TREASURE BENEATH OUR FEET

Amid the array of ordinary substances made sacred in Christian rituals, dirt takes a back seat to bread, wine, and water. The major exception is Ash Wednesday, when many denominations hold services that include the imposition of ashes, which is a fancy way of saying they smear dirt on people's foreheads. Traditionally the black soot is created by burning the leftover palms from the previous year's Palm Sunday service, a reminder of the cyclic nature of all life. The shouts of praise and hosanna inevitably fade; the green branches become brittle. And on Ash Wednesday, they're pressed into service again to remind us that we're going to die. Too often in the religious world we sugarcoat reality, but not on this day. From dust we came, and to dust we will return.

But my time in Chimayó made me realize that the Christian understanding of dirt is more multifaceted than that. Sure, there are plenty of Bible verses that speak negatively of dirt, and I've known more than a few altar guild members with an evangelical zeal for removing it. But Christianity actually has a pretty good relationship with dirt, starting with the fact that in Genesis God creates the first humans from it (a creation story whose broad outlines are echoed in many traditions across the globe). The word *humus*, a synonym for soil, shares the same Latin root as *human* and *humanity*. These words are also related to *humility*, which is just what you're supposed to feel when the smudge of ashes on your forehead disintegrates into tiny black speckles on your nose, cheeks, and chin.

In the Gospels, a story that makes neat freaks uncomfortable is when Jesus spits into the dust, forms a paste, and puts it on the eyes of a blind man. Go wash it off, he tells him, and when the man obeys his eyesight is restored. Whatever Jesus was up to—and despite his divinity, he should never be put in charge of sterilization protocols in a hospital—it's obvious that he wasn't afraid of a little dirt. For most of human history that was a nearly universal characteristic.

One example of someone who loved working in the dirt is St. Phocas, the patron saint of gardeners. During the third century when the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians, this kindly man grew food for the poor. One day a group of soldiers knocked on his door, asking for directions to the house of a Christian named Phocas, whom they were to arrest and execute. He cordially invited them in, offered them food, and put them up overnight. In between his hospitality duties he went out into his garden and dug a man-size hole in its rich loam. The next morning he told the soldiers that he was the person they were looking for, then asked them if they would be so kind as to kill him next to the grave he'd dug, so that his body could fertilize the garden.

The story of Phocas underscores the fact that death is intricately tied to soil, which is the greatest recycler on earth. Without its regenerative power, the corpses of once-living things would overwhelm us. Instead, the soil's microbes, fungi, and invertebrates take what is given to them and return the nutrients and carbon back into forms that can be used again. Thus, all of us are recycled plant and animal material, the culmination of many trillions of lives, large and small.

To learn more about what science can tell us about dirt, I turned to my friend Art Bettis, a geologist who specializes in soil. The first thing he did was set me straight on terminology. "Dirt is the stuff you get on your shoes," he said. "Soil is a living substance that sustains all terrestrial life. It's the most valuable—and the most unknown—ecosystem that we have.

And it's full of information about the past, both the recent past and the distant past."

My crash course in soil science from Art gave me a much greater respect for the element I'd formerly ignored. The thin layer of soil on the outside of the earth—just 7 percent of the surface of the planet—was formed over millions of years from the weathering of rocks into mineral particles that gradually became mixed with organic matter, air, water, and living organisms. In wet tropical climates, it takes about two hundred years to form one centimeter of soil; in milder climates it can take twice as long—and to create truly rich, fertile soil takes several thousand years.

Once it's formed, that fertile topsoil is a miraculous well-spring of life. In addition to growing plants, it acts as a kind of lung, releasing and absorbing water vapor, carbon dioxide, and other gases. Billions of species dwell within soil, from molds and fungi to bacteria; in fact, just a single handful of soil contains more organisms than the entire human population of the earth.

Art opened my eyes as well to the tremendous diversity of soils across the globe. Scientists divide them into twelve orders, though those classifications are in a continual state of flux as research reveals more information. I was pleased to learn that states have official soils, just as they do state birds. Connecticut has the regal Windsor; North Carolina, the bow-tied Cecil; and Minnesota, the next-door-neighbor Lester. Less amusing, but more authentic to the Indigenous origins of the regions, are Idaho's Threbear and Rhode Island's Narragansett.

I don't mean to brag, but my own state of Iowa's official soil, Tama Silt Loam, is some of the best in the world, at least if you're trying to grow things. It has an intense, dark color and is teeming with nutrients, microbes, and animals from earthworms to mites. And according to Art, it didn't even exist eleven thousand years ago. "Tama Silt Loam began its evolution as a thin soil in Iowa's late glacial evergreen forest, then became thicker, but still organic poor as the vegetation shifted

to deciduous forest,” he said. “During the past six thousand years it became much richer after all the organic material of the tallgrass prairie ecosystem became incorporated into it. When it was first plowed, the prairie’s topsoil was more than three feet deep in Iowa.”

Art’s words emphasize the dynamic nature of soil. Its composition changes depending upon factors such as rainfall quantity, what’s decaying on top of it, and what’s living in it. Despite being a substance with no legs or wings, it also has a surprising ability to move. It’s estimated that twelve million tons of dust from the Sahara drop onto the Amazonian rainforest each year, for example, where its minerals help replenish rainwater-depleted soils. Other soil movement is much more negative, including the many tons of fertile topsoil that get washed away every year in the Midwest. While the thick roots of prairie plants once held midwestern soil in place, modern farming practices too often lead to significant erosion; as a result, that thick layer of topsoil that existed when the pioneers first came to the Midwest has been reduced by more than half. Given how long it takes to regenerate soil, that’s an unsustainable phenomenon.

Of course, agriculture is just one of the ways in which soil benefits humans. Many of our most important medicines come from the soil, including more than five hundred types of antibiotics. Conversely, health researchers speculate that our rising rates of allergies and asthma may be linked to too much cleanliness. One piece of evidence is that children raised on farms have lower rates of these medical issues. As a farmer’s daughter who ate more than her fair share of dirt while growing up, I suspect that my immune system benefited from the many workouts I gave it.

Although I appreciated my crash course in soil science from Art, I don’t want to give up on that homely word *dirt*. Like many short, English words that derive from Old Norse, from *sky* and *lake* to *bug*, it retains a Viking earthiness—in fact, its original form of *drit* means “excrement.” Because manure makes great fertilizer, that’s not necessarily an insult. For

thousands of years the main fertilizer on farms was manure, which adds nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium to the soil. It was so valuable that in Europe young women's dowries were sometimes calculated according to how much manure was produced on their childhood farms.

What would it mean if we viewed dirt not only as valuable but also as holy, and not just at Chimayó but everywhere? If we did so, we'd be much less likely to let it wash off our fields and into rivers, like foolish spendthrifts who throw their money away without a care. Instead we'd be like St. Phocas, deeply conscious of our need to nourish and protect it. I think of the people of Effigy Mounds carrying countless baskets of earth to form ceremonial mounds. I suspect they had a sense of the preciousness of what they were carrying.

All of this reminds me of a joke. A group of scientists form a delegation to meet with God to give him his marching orders. There's no need for a divine being anymore, they claim, given all we know about science. "We can clone animals and manipulate genes to create living creatures faster and better than you can," they say. So God challenges them to a human-making contest, which they eagerly accept. After he invites them to go first, one of the scientists reaches down to scoop up a handful of dirt, until God interrupts him.

"Oh, no," God says. "You have to use your own dirt."

HEALING EARTH

I spent three days hanging around Chimayó, walking its meditation path near the Santa Cruz River, browsing the weaving shops for which the area is famous, and sitting quietly in the adobe church. Although about three hundred thousand people visit the area each year, my arrival in February meant that I had it largely to myself most of the time. Occasionally others would wander through, older people mostly, usually spending just a few minutes in the church before heading to El Pocito, the room with the holy dirt. I watched the other visitors, trying

to guess what they were praying for. Recovery from illness, a pregnancy for a daughter, healing of a troubled marriage, comfort after receiving a terminal diagnosis? The flickering votive candles lit by pilgrims bore witness to their silent prayers.

I could see, too, the ways in which the shrine has ties to a variety of spiritual traditions. In its outdoor meditation gardens, for example, there's a statue dedicated to Our Lady of La Vang, which draws pilgrims of Vietnamese and Filipino descent. Her story dates back to 1798, when a group of Catholics who were fleeing religious persecution hid in the forest of La Vang in Vietnam. While praying the Rosary under a banyan tree, they saw a beautiful lady with an infant in her arms. She spoke words of comfort to them, promised to be with them, and directed them to gather leaves from nearby bushes to make a drink that would heal their illnesses. Mary appeared in the forest a number of times after this initial apparition, and La Vang became a famous holy site. I loved seeing her serene statue at Chimayó, her features reflective of her origin in Asia, a reminder of the many ways in which the holy is expressed here.

Nearby is a small chapel that reflects the Indigenous roots of the shrine. The word *Chimayó* comes from *Tsi-Mayoh*, which in the Tewa language refers to one of the four sacred hills that overlook the valley. The chapel's iconography incorporates Native American images and symbols, from the altar's candleholders shaped like ears of corn to a tableau of the Last Supper featuring people in the dress of various tribes.

I found it curious that the native traditions surrounding healing earth remain so strong here. I remembered Art telling me about the widespread practice of eating dirt in traditional cultures around the world, especially in areas where the soil provides essential minerals lacking in people's diets. In past centuries pilgrims ate the holy dirt here, too, though that practice has fallen out of favor. Instead, pilgrims are advised by the clergy to pray, confess their sins, and ask God for guidance and healing. If they like, they can then rub the blessed dirt over the parts of their bodies in need of healing, which actually

isn't much weirder than a lot of medical folklore and would certainly help stimulate the placebo response, if nothing else. At some deep level we seem to know that the earth has healing powers, if we just pay attention to each step we take.

A block away from the shrine, I found another church that draws nearly as many visitors as the Santuario: the Chapel of the Holy Child of Atocha, whose devotion has roots in a story from Spain. In the thirteenth century, some Christians were being held captive in the Madrid neighborhood of Atocha. Their captors wouldn't allow any adults to bring them food or water—just children, whom they didn't see as a threat. That meant that those who had no family were suffering greatly. One day a young boy showed up with a basket of food and gourd of water for the prisoners. The soldiers let him through, and the next day he returned again, and then again and again. His basket and gourd miraculously remained full, despite the many men who ate and drank from them. The prisoners took this as an answer to their prayers, believing that the child was Jesus. The Holy Child of Atocha, as he was known, became a figure of devotion throughout Spain and later in Mexico.

In 1857 a resident of the Chimayó region, Severiano Medina, made a vow that if he recovered from an illness, he would make a pilgrimage of more than a thousand miles to a shrine in Zacatecas, Mexico, that is dedicated to the Holy Child of Atocha. After recovering and making the trek there and back, he built a chapel dedicated to this manifestation of the divine.

At the chapel I learned why survivors of the Bataan Death March started making pilgrimages to Chimayó. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, nearly two thousand members of the New Mexico National Guard fought valiantly with Filipino soldiers against the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. Defeated after seven months of battle, the soldiers were forced to walk sixty-five miles to POW camps, a brutal march during which many died of exhaustion, dehydration, starvation, and violence. Of the seventy-five thousand U.S. and Filipino troops who began the march, an estimated ten thousand died

along the way. The survivors spent forty months in a variety of POW prisons and slave labor camps, enduring harsh conditions that led to many more deaths. By the end of the war, only about half of the members of the New Mexico National Guard were still alive. Many attributed their survival to the Holy Child of Atocha, whom they believed watched over them in their time of greatest need.

Sitting in the church dedicated to the Holy Child, I realized it would be easy to misinterpret its iconography, which in contrast to the more somber, rough-hewn mood of the Santuario is much brighter and more modern, with an emphasis on the innocent Holy Child rather than the suffering Christ. But learning the story behind the Good Friday pilgrimage made me realize how the two churches are linked. Darkness and light, illness and healing, suffering and redemption are intertwined in both.

The World War II story also gave me new insights into the small statue of the Holy Child of Atocha that rests in a glass case behind the church's altar. The young boy is sleeping, his head propped up against his hand. The faithful believe he's dozing because each night he walks out from the church in search of those in need. Many pilgrims to this church leave small shoes as a gift, because the Holy Child wears them out so quickly in his travels.

It's not just pilgrims who walk in search of God, I realized as I sat in that quiet church. God walks in search of us as well.

A few weeks after returning from Chimayó, I attended an Ash Wednesday service at my Episcopal church. As a priest put a smudge of ash on my forehead, she repeated the familiar words, "From dust you came, and to dust you will return." I thought of my time in Chimayó, of the faithful who come day after day seeking the healing earth, a substance that just like the ash on my forehead was formed from the remains of countless living creatures and from elements sourced from distant stars.

I walked back to my seat, sanctified by holy dirt, making my own pilgrimage of the heart.

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