

Travel as a Spiritual Practice

By Christina Nealon



The campfire crackles, sending flames into the dawn sky. Cream-laden espresso steams, a journal is by my side. This is the beginning of my day: the distant howl of a coyote as birds awaken. No traffic. No internet chatter. No daily news. I pick up my journal and begin to write.

Quiet and stillness are the essence of creating a space for the unknown to drop in, a central tenet of spiritual practice. Think of a womb, where germination takes place. This is where you want to be. One can create a womb of receptivity in many ways – sitting meditation in a peaceful room, walking meditation in a park, cocooned in one's uninterrupted candlelit bedroom.

Travel, however, allows for its own gateway to the soul. There's a reason monks and saints journeyed solo to the desert to seek direction and wisdom. Indigenous peoples continue to fast and seek vision in remote, wild places. Nature informs. Emptiness invites spirit. In the case of travel, the emptiness of leaving familiar habits behind in favor of unforeseen possibility.

NOTE TO SELF: turn off phone ringer and text alerts. Your phone is now your emergency contact, not ego's constant companion. Camera and GPS okay. The less the better.



Now, the journey. Picture yourself driving down the road. Who has not cranked up the radio and sung out loud? Clenched the steering wheel and rage-screamed? Sobbed out loud or yelled in joy? Our vehicle is a therapeutic bubble. Once behind the wheel we carry on imaginative conversations; put our everyday lives in the rearview mirror. It may take a few or a few hundred miles, but away it goes.

Two lane highways are the best. They allow for a slower pace and follow the contour of the earth ... the hypnotic road takes over. We soft focus and take notice of the natural world. The distant waterfall. A field of purple lupine. A horse in the field, rump to the wind. An old prairie cemetery. It is easy to pull onto the shoulder, exit the vehicle and take a deep breath of crystalline air. We smell the arid desert; the damp pine forest. Our body chemistry begins to change as stress levels dissipate.

NOTE TO SELF: Travel light; leave the heavy baggage behind, i.e. drama, toxic relationships, whatever does not bring out the best in you.

The natural world, the **real** world, is the backdrop. What allows for spiritual revelation, however, is our nakedness. Naked because we have left our roles behind. We are no longer defined as mother, girlfriend, wife, waitress, real estate broker or pickleball pro ... the roles that defined and supported us are gone, rendered mute in a novel setting. We come face-to-face, spirit-to-spirit with our core and begin to ask, *Who am I, outside of my roles?*

If one seeks to integrate travel and spiritual practice I suggest the following:

- Travel alone. There are no distractions, no chatter, and it allows optimum freedom to choose your route and stopping places.
- Carry many maps. I prefer to park on public lands away from other people. Your GPS isn't going to get you there. I carry a Benchmark Map book for every state I travel. The more detail, the better.
- Tune into the senses: witness, smell, listen, touch.
- Never, ever override intuition. If you feel uneasy or in danger, leave. If you sit by a lake and something doesn't feel right, leave. Don't analyze the feeling. If you hike a trail and feel uneasy, turn around. I once pulled into a rest area with my travel trailer prepared to spend the night. I turned off the motor, relieved to have found a pretty, treed spot. I sat quietly and began to feel edgy. Despite being exhausted I turned the key and continued up the road to a casino that offered free overnight parking. Not my preference, but it was there when I needed it. When I mentioned the rest area to the attendant, he looked me in the eyes and said, "Good you left. There was a murder there last night." Our bodies and bones "know" before our brain registers.
- Trust signs and omens; pay attention to dreams. They are a secret language. Note repeating themes. There are no coincidences. If a stranger at a gas station happens to mention a hot spring nestled into sand dunes, follow up! There may be something very special there for you.
- Travel without an itinerary to allow for spontaneity. A necessity for signs and omens. Even if you have a destination in mind, say, a favorite camping spot, try to keep a flexible travel schedule.
- Keep a journal and write in it every day. Do not edit. Let your inner feelings and thoughts flow onto paper. Pen to paper is multi-sensory. It takes you into the right side of your brain. This is one of the benefits of journaling as opposed to using a laptop which lights up the left, linear side of the brain, and removes you further from emotion.
- Discover the time of day when you most connect with your muse; kiss the crepuscular. Early morning is my most creative time of day, when I am most receptive to messages and insights from other realms. Find yours.
- Find a private sitting spot and return every day. Witness nature. You will be amazed. The longer you are there the more wildlife will trust you and come forth. My sitting spots are usually under trees. Trees actually produce a chemical that lowers blood pressure and changes body chemistry. Buddha and his sacred tree shared many secrets. Buddha knew that smiles change body chemistry.

You can personalize these points in myriad ways. To the spiritual traveler, however, all roads lead to the same place -- the pursuit of awe, that all-encompassing experience that lifts one from our little ego selves and into contact with spirit, that which is beyond and unexplainable.

NOTE TO SELF: Trust the unfolding.

About the Author:

Christina Neelson is a spiritual seeker and self-proclaimed Womad (woman nomad). She has been on the road for eighteen years, from Alaska to the tip of the Baja. She is author of five books and photographer for four. Her forté is risk.

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