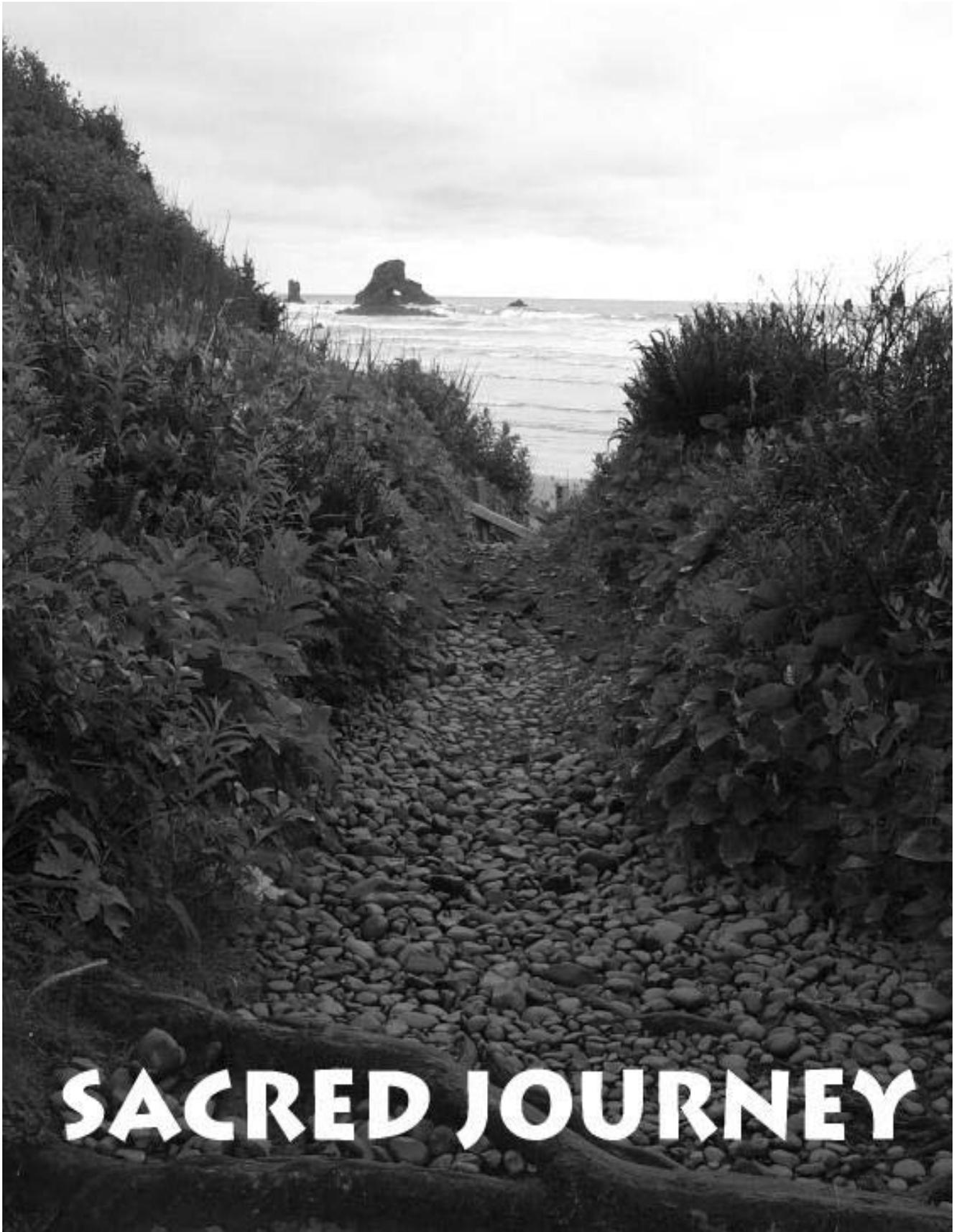


A Discussion Guide

West Hills Friends
Fall 2004



SACRED JOURNEY

Introduction

“Halfway through his life, Dante the Pilgrim wakes to find himself lost in a dark wood.” – Dante Alighieri

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.”
– Robert Frost

“I went down to the crossroads, tried to flag a ride... Nobody seemed to know me, everybody passed me by.” – Robert Johnson

Arguably, the central event in Hebrew Scripture is the journey from Egypt to the promised land. These stories involve more than a change of scenery. A change in location often represents a change of heart. The story of Jesus begins with a traveling caravan of Magi. Jesus himself traveled through the wilderness, over bodies of water and through the gates of Jerusalem.

Clearly, we're not the first people to think about life as a *Journey*. What makes this metaphor so compelling?

Ultimately, this booklet is about you. I hope you will use the metaphor of Journey as a lense by which you can examine your own life. Do you feel stuck? Do you know where you're going? If your life is a journey, are you traveling by jet? By mule? By freight train or cruise ship?

I hope this booklet will generate a series of group discussions. Something powerful happens when we gather to listen as a group. Your group may decide to discuss one or more subjects each time you gather. You might decide to discuss some topics and skip others.

If you are reading this as a group, I suggest you follow a format of worship sharing. “Worship sharing” is patterned after the Quaker practice of open worship. Like open worship, worship sharing is a time for listening. There are some differences, however. In open worship, Friends tend to speak only if they feel compelled. In the context of worship sharing, you are *encouraged* to speak. Self-disclosure is an integral part of the process. Even if your thoughts seem unrefined, consider sharing them. Sometimes, catching a glimpse of someone “in process” can be more helpful than viewing their finished project.

Here are some general guidelines for worship sharing:

Listen to learn. Keep in mind that each person will speak from his or her own perspective. People will feel safest if they can speak from the heart without receiving any advice or correction. If your experience has led you to a different conclusion, there is no need to be anxious. Perhaps there is a larger truth behind the seeming contradictions. In any case, try to learn from what others have said.

Listen with patience. Allow a suitable interval of silence between each speaker. This pause will give everyone an opportunity to reflect on what has been said. In the silence, see if God will bring insight. In general, do not speak a second time until each person has had the opportunity to speak. No one person should speak at great length.

Speak from your experience. In a debate, speakers often quote outside authorities to “prove” their point. It is also common for people to generalize by saying, “we” or “they,” “everybody”, “always”, “never.” In worship sharing, it is more helpful to speak only for yourself and from your own experience. Try to describe the process behind your conclusions.

Some groups may have a hard time holding to the discipline of worship sharing. If your group just wants to talk informally about these things, that's okay – just be clear (so people don't enter the discussion with mixed expectations).

If you are reading this booklet on your own, I hope you will do more than read from cover to cover. Take time to sit with these questions. Lift your answers to God and see if the Spirit can bring further clarity.

However you use these questions, may God bless your efforts!

The Landmarks behind us

Please take a few minutes to center. When you are ready, the facilitator can read the following paragraphs aloud:

It would be convenient to think of **birth** as the beginning of our life's journey. But birth is more like the end of Chapter One. We begin our journey warm and secure inside the womb. What does it say about humankind that our journey begins *inside* another person?

There's another way in which our journey may start before we are born. To some extent, we enter the world with the momentum of our parents behind us. Whether we adopt the family tradition or rebel against it, we are shaped by our parent's journey (as they were shaped by *their* parents). What are some of the ways that your life's journey has been shaped by your parents?

Which childhood memories continue to shape your sense of self? What did you learn from your first mentors and role models?

The Book of Joshua tells of how the Israelites crossed the Jordan River and entered the promised land at last. In chapter 4, Joshua orders a representative from each tribe to take up a stone from the miraculously dry riverbed. From these stones, Joshua constructs a landmark. The landmark is to serve as a reminder of what God has done.

For this discussion, look back over your memories. If you can, recall a time when God was especially close. Or think of a time when something happened that shaped your understanding of God. Imagine this memory as a landmark on your spiritual journey.

What does this landmark mean to you? Do you visit it very often? Do you look at it differently now than you did at some other point in your life? Take five to ten minutes of silence to reflect on this landmark in your life.

After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. If you could only use one or two words, how would you describe your landmark?
2. When everyone has shared briefly, describe your landmark more fully. What does it look like? How does it make you feel? What memory does it represent?
3. Without making a value judgement, what similarities or differences do you notice in how people describe their landmarks?
4. To what extent do the landmarks of others offer guidance for your spiritual journey?
5. Imagine a single landmark, constructed from the individual "stones" of each individual's experience. What would the larger landmark say about you as a group?
6. Can you think of a landmark that the whole meeting might have in common?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

After worship sharing, you may want to discuss what this process has been like. Would you like to make any logistical changes before your next gathering?

what you love

Please take a few minutes to center. When you are ready, the facilitator can read the following paragraphs aloud:

I've heard puritanism described as the nagging suspicion that someone, somewhere is having fun. Too often, we think of the spiritual life as life *without*: life without dancing, life without bright colors, life without fun.

Actually, joy can serve as a helpful guide on the journey. Joy is probably a sign that we're moving in the right direction. Frederick Buechner has said that your life's purpose is found at the intersection of "your deep gladness and the world's deep need." Another theologian has said that "What makes you come alive?" is a more useful question than "What does the world need?" because the world *needs* people who have come alive.

In several of his letters, the Apostle Paul describes the church as one Body with many different parts. In 1st Corinthians 12:4-6, he writes, "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all people." If God has equipped us for service, shouldn't we find great joy in doing what we were created to do?

In the film, **Chariots of Fire**, Eric Liddel says, "When I run, I feel His pleasure." In what activity do you feel God's pleasure? In what activity does your soul find its proper alignment?

For this discussion, reflect on what brings you joy. If you can, recall a time you felt the deep gladness of God's activity within you and through you. Or try to discern what makes you come alive.

Take five to ten minutes of silence to consider how this sense of joy may serve as a compass on your spiritual journey.

After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. Using just one or two words, how would you describe what makes you feel alive?
2. When everyone has shared briefly, offer a more complete description of what gives you joy. Does joy come quickly, or does it require patience? Is there something that *always* bring you joy? Is there something that brings you joy more often than not? Reflect carefully on your experience.
3. What skills have you developed by doing what you love? How might God use those skills to serve others?
4. What relationships have you developed by doing what you love? How might God be present to others through those relationships?
5. What gets in the way of doing what you love?
6. If joy is a compass on the spiritual journey, what can you say about your next steps?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

After worship sharing, you may want to discuss what this process has been like. Would you like to make any logistical changes before your next gathering?

finding Rest along the way

Please take a few minutes to center. When you are ready, the facilitator can read the following paragraphs aloud:

Being busy has become a mark of status in our society. Even our children face daunting schedules: from school to piano lessons to soccer practice to homework to bed. To the extent we value rest at all, it is often to make us more *productive*. Some people can actually say, “power nap” with a straight face!

In the Book of Exodus, we find the Israelites traveling through the wilderness after their escape from Egypt. Chapter 16 reports how this landless people found food: every morning, the Israelites found “flakes like frost” on the ground. People were instructed to gather enough of this manna to last them the rest of the day.

“Then Moses said to them, ‘No one is to keep any of it until morning.’ However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell.” (Exodus 16:19-20)

On the sixth day, Moses instructed everyone to gather a double portion. On this one day, manna would stay fresh overnight. This allowed the seventh day to be a day of complete rest. Clearly, rest was integral to this sacred journey. Furthermore, *no manna* would fall on the seventh day. Those who *didn't rest* gained nothing by their extra busy-ness. Is there a lesson here for us?

Instead of seeing rest as a tool for greater productivity, perhaps there is something inherently useful in rest. Does rest allow us to sink below the surface of our lives? When we're at rest, are we able to perceive things differently?

For this discussion, reflect on where you find rest. Recall a time or place that you associate with rest. Take five to ten minutes of silence to consider how this particular memory fits into your overall spiritual journey.

After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. What are one or two words that best describe the time or place you associate with rest?
2. Is your home a place of rest? What is the most restful place in your home? What is the least restful place?
3. What is the most restful place you know? What about this place is restful?
4. What was the most restful time of your life? What made this time restful?
5. As you think about your typical week, when do you find rest? When do you find rest in a typical day?
6. What keeps you from resting?
7. In your experience, is there a difference between “vegetating” and “resting?” Is there a difference between sleeping and resting?
8. How could you make rest a regular part of your spiritual journey?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

After worship sharing, you may want to discuss what this process has been like. You can talk about loose ends from worship sharing or consider logistical changes before your next gathering.

Traveling light

Please take a few minutes to center. When you are ready, the facilitator can read the following paragraphs aloud:

Americans today are much wealthier than we were 40 years ago.¹ Today, we have twice the number of cars per person. We spend more than twice as much in restaurants. Today, 50% of us have a dishwasher (up from 7% in 1960), 71% of us have a clothes dryer (up from 20%) and 73% percent of us have air conditioning (up from 15%).

Despite our increased wealth, Americans report *less* happiness. Over this same period of time, the number of people who described themselves as “very happy” has declined from 35% to 30%. The number of Americans saying they were “pretty well satisfied” with their financial situation dropped from 42% to 30%.

It’s even more shocking to compare today’s 25-year-olds with today’s 75-year-olds. Compared to their grandparents (who lived through the depression and a world war), today’s young people are much more likely to remember a time in their lives when they felt despondent. We have twice the wealth, but less happiness.

Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters. On our life’s journey, we must decide which road to take: we cannot pursue both God and money. Most of us would acknowledge there is more to life than money. Still, it is worth reflecting on the lure of wealth. If life is a journey, then we should be mindful of all that we accumulate. How much of our stuff helps us move forward? How much of our stuff simply weighs us down?

For this discussion, reflect on the assumption that a *little more* money could buy a *little more* happiness. Take five to ten minutes of silence to consider how your attitude toward wealth shapes your overall spiritual journey.

After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. Do you ever feel relatively affluent? What makes you feel this way? Is it comfortable or uncomfortable to feel relatively affluent?
2. Do you ever feel relatively poor? What makes you feel this way? Is it comfortable or uncomfortable to feel relatively poor?
3. Do you have stuff that gets in the way of your spiritual journey? Do you have *attitudes* about stuff that gets in the way of your spiritual journey? How can you lighten the load?
4. Do you have stuff that serves as a valuable resource on your spiritual journey? How will you know if this stuff loses its value?
5. Somewhere between a new candy bar (for \$.35) and a new house (for \$135,000), many of us find ourselves seeking God’s guidance before we make a purchase. Under what circumstances do you pray before making a purchase?
6. How much is enough? How much is too much? How do you know when you’ve crossed this line?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

After worship sharing, you may want to discuss what this process has been like. You can talk about loose ends from worship sharing or consider logistical changes before your next gathering.

¹ All statistics in this section are from **The American Paradox**, by David G. Myers (2000, Yale : New Haven)

A fork in the road

Please take a few minutes to center. When you are ready, the facilitator can read the following paragraphs aloud:

At some point in our lives, we all find ourselves at a fork in the road. We find ourselves at the juncture of two (or more) possible futures. Which way do we choose?

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus talked about two very different roads. “Broad is the road that leads to destruction... But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life.” With this verse in mind, many of those who follow Jesus assume the most unpleasant road is our best option. According to this policy, our misery assures us we are on the right path.

Others have adopted the opposite policy. Based on the assumption that a loving God would want our every happiness, they declare that our contentment assures us we are on the right path.

Historically, Friends have been suspicious of following a *policy*. Who can negotiate the twists and turns of life by *always* turning to the right? Or to the left? Rather than rely on some abstract policy to guide us, Friends look to the Spirit of Christ as our “present teacher and guide.” If we stop at the crossroads and listen, we find that the living Christ will direct us one way or the other. As Quakers, an important aspect of the spiritual journey is learning to wait and listen for this guidance.

For this discussion, reflect on where you have been at a crossroads in your life. If you can, recall a time you felt God’s guidance in choosing a direction. Or think of what internal compass tends to nudge you one way or the other. Perhaps you can reflect on a decision you are facing right now.

Take five to ten minutes of silence to consider what guides you on your spiritual journey.

After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. What was the most difficult decision you ever made? What made that decision so difficult? What did you learn from that experience?
2. When standing at the crossroads, do you tend to feel you are choosing between the *right* way and the *wrong* way? Or do you tend to see the road ahead as a choice between good (but mutually exclusive) opportunities? What has led you to one perspective or the other?
3. Have you ever experienced God’s guidance in making a decision? If so, what was it like? How did you know it was God guiding you?
4. What are some decisions that you face in the near future?
5. For what type of decision are you most likely to seek God’s guidance? For what type of decision are you least likely to seek God’s guidance?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

After worship sharing, you may want to discuss what this process has been like. You can talk about loose ends from worship sharing or consider logistical changes before your next gathering.

Traveling companions

Please take a few minutes to center. When you are ready, the facilitator can read the following paragraphs aloud:

Faced with the daunting prospect of his own death, Jesus spent a restless night in the Garden. He prayed through the night. He also asked his friends to stand vigilant by his side. In his darkest hour, Jesus felt a longing for companions.

Christian spiritual practice is a team sport. Throughout the New Testament, we are told to pray for one another, forgive one another, submit to one another, be accountable to one another, encourage one another, etc. Clearly, we need “one another” in order to live as the church.

Even more than this, we are the Body of Christ *together*. While each one of us has a vital role to play, no single person can embody the fullness of Christ. We need the dynamic of interacting with one another in order to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Remember that Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered, I am there in the midst of them.”

Despite the overwhelming thrust of Scripture and Christian tradition, we tend to think of our spirituality journey as a *private* matter. Why is this?

For this discussion, imagine that you have gathered around a campfire along the side of the road. Although you have come to this spot from different directions, you all saw the warm glow of your host’s campfire and decided this would be a good stopping point. As people settle around the fire, someone is excited to describe what she saw. Someone else asks for help in understanding a section of road still ahead of him. Another person has a piece of equipment to pass on. Take five to ten minutes of silence to consider what you bring to this gathering. What do you hope to take with you when it is time to move on?

After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. In a word or two, what do you bring to this gathering? What do you hope to take away?
2. When everyone has had a chance to speak, offer a more complete description of what you bring to this gathering. Have you seen an important landmark? Have you escaped some danger?
3. What do you hope to take with you from this gathering? Are you looking for information? Are you looking to be inspired by someone else’s story? Are you looking for a place where it is safe to be yourself?
- 4.. Under what conditions do you find it easy to talk about your spiritual journey? Under what conditions, do you find it difficult?
5. Who is the “one another” in your spiritual journey? With whom do you connect as part of the Body of Christ? How did this connection come about? How do you feel about this connection?
6. Are there people with whom you’d like to connect spiritually? What gets in the way of doing so?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

After worship sharing, you may want to discuss what this process has been like. You can talk about loose ends from worship sharing or consider logistical changes before your next gathering.

Strangers and Neighbors

Please take a few minutes to center. When you are ready, the facilitator can read the following paragraphs aloud:

Jesus told the following story:

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?

How we respond to the wounded stranger along the side of the road is an important aspect of our spiritual journey. The wounded stranger could be someone we meet face-to-face. It could be a whole group of people we've read about but never met. The wounded stranger might even be something like "the wilderness."

Sometimes, even when our heart is inclined to help, it isn't clear what course of action is the most helpful. Why is it often awkward to offer help?

For this discussion, reflect on where you have encountered woundedness on your journey. Recall a time you offered to help. Recall a time you didn't. Take five to ten minutes of silence to consider the wounded strangers you have encountered on your spiritual journey.

After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. When was the last time you found a "wounded stranger" on the side of the road? What was your first reaction? What happened in the end?
2. What would have happened if the Samaritan had found a second victim of robbers on his way to the inn? Or a third? Do you ever feel overwhelmed by "wounded strangers?"
3. How do you decide whether a wounded stranger is your responsibility?
4. The Samaritan had bandages, oil & wine, a donkey and enough silver to pay the innkeeper. What resources do you have for helping a wounded stranger?
5. What makes it easy for you to offer help? What makes it difficult?
6. Have you ever been the wounded stranger? What did you learn from that experience that helps you give aid to others?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

After worship sharing, you may want to discuss what this process has been like. You can talk about loose ends from worship sharing or consider logistical changes before your next gathering.

Legacy (Journey's end)

Please take a few minutes to center. When you are ready, the facilitator can read the following paragraphs aloud:

Inevitably, life's journey will come to an end. What will be the legacy of your journey? Some of us will raise the next generation of travelers. Some of us may leave behind a body of research or enduring works of art. Perhaps the course we set for ourselves will offer guidance to later travelers. Do you hope something of yours will extend beyond the scope of your lifetime?

Legacy (like life itself) is subject to decay. In Shelley's famous poem, **Ozymandias**, the poet describes the crumbling statue of a forgotten tyrant:

And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

To paraphrase, Jesus: "Those who get their names on statues or public buildings have received their reward." Jesus taught his followers to view their lives from the perspective of eternity. Even if our legacy is never known in this world, God sees the good we do in secret. The choices we make have eternal consequences.

It's also worth remembering that the word *martyr* originally meant a *witness*. Perhaps our truest legacy will be a life that bears witness to something greater than ourselves.

For this discussion, reflect on your life's destination. Where do you want to be at the end of your life? How do you want others to remember you? What will you leave behind? Take five to ten minutes of silence to consider the completion of your spiritual journey.

After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. How do you want others to remember your life? And yes, it would be funny to say "long." But now I've said it, so say something else... How do you want others to remember your life?
2. What do you hope you will learn before your life is over?
3. What do you hope to accomplish before your life is over?
4. What would it take to make your life "complete?"
5. How might your life influence future travelers? What is your greatest hope in this regard? What is your greatest fear?
6. Consider your life as an extension of someone else's legacy. Who has been a mentor or guide on your spiritual journey? Was this person famous? Was he or she relatively unknown?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

While your journey continues, this book is at an end. As a group, take some time to celebrate the time you have invested in one another and in your spiritual development. Perhaps it is worth discussing whether or not the group will continue to meet – and what you would like to discuss in the future.

Happy trails to you!

"Listen. Your life is happening. You are happening.... A journey, years long, has brought each of you through thick and thin to this moment in time as mine has also brought me. Think back on that journey. Listen back to the sounds and sweet airs of your journey that give delight and hurt not and to those that give no delight and hurt like Hell. *Be not affeard*. The music of your life is subtle and elusive and like no other – not a song with words but a song without words, a singing, clattering music to gladden the heart or turn the heart to stone, to haunt you perhaps with echoes of a vaster, farther music of which it is part.

"The question is not whether the things that happen to you are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak – even the walk from the house to the garage that you have walked ten thousand times before, even the moments when you cannot believe there is a God who speaks at all anywhere. He speaks, I believe, and the words he speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and our own footsore and sacred journeys.... He says he is with us on our journeys. He says he has been with us since each of our journeys began. Listen for him. Listen to the sweet and bitter airs of your present and your past for the sound of him."

– Frederick Buechner, **The Sacred Journey**