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Pilgrim Coaches: a New Phenomenon

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This article introduces the relatively new phenomenon of the pilgrim coach, *i.e.* a recently developed profession whose practitioners help people along the mental trajectory of pilgrimage. Historically, the pilgrim was subject to ‘codified forms which governed conduct, termination, and purpose’ (Gros, 2015:107). Pilgrims were instructed by their local church how they best could fulfil their vows along the way and at the shrines. In the post-pilgrimage era (Munro, 2017), where tourism is integrated with pilgrimage, new pilgrim routes are being created for both the religious and non-religious for the purpose of connecting people to a goal or philosophy through pilgrimage. In Belgium and the Netherlands, the profession of walking coach or nature coach has become popular in the last ten to fifteen years, and accredited courses have emerged. The aim is to re-acquaint people with nature’s stress-relieving and health-bringing effects. Pilgrimage coaching is then a natural specialisation in this profession, offering nature coaching knowledge, supplemented with other academic disciplines added to the package to pilgrims, people who walk through nature with an added purpose. This article discusses new, circular pilgrim routes, and concentrates mainly on the Walk of Wisdom in the Netherlands. This route was initiated as a non-religious but spiritually-rich circular pilgrim route, driven by environmental sustainability, while simultaneously providing the services of professional pilgrim coaches. Besides confirming the benefits of pilgrimage as we know it, the pilgrim coach also offers new insights in the psychology and therapeutic values of pilgrimage.

Key Words: new pilgrim routes, pilgrim coach, spirituality, religious / non-religious, therapy

Circular Pilgrim Routes and the Walk of Wisdom

In the last decade or so, several pilgrim routes have been invented or revived in the Netherlands, among them new, circular ones, such as the rather untranslatable ‘Gelukkigerwijspad’ (roughly *Happier Ways*, www.gelukkigerwijspad.nl), designed by Wilco Kruijswijk and the Walk of Wisdom (walkofwisdom.org). The latter is a creation of Damiaan Messing, who, while he was reading a Bachelor’s degree on ritual studies at the Radboud University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands (Messing, 2008), worked closely together with one of his visiting professors, Ronald Grimes, who specialises in ritual studies. Messing was involved in a Dutch NGO, *De Kleine Aarde* (The Small World). Its goal is, among others, to create awareness regarding environmental sustainability. Messing’s research linked ritual, pilgrimage and environmental sustainability into a circular pilgrims’ route, constructed by linking country lanes, places of natural beauty and villages together into a single pilgrimage product. A central part of the underlying philosophy is to assume co-responsibility for

natural creation, and by allowing oneself to blossom, one may contribute to the development of the greater good. On the Walk of Wisdom’s website, one may read that: ‘all people are seedlings of Mother Earth, each with its own unique germination.’ Spirituality is here combined with an earthly goal of walking to save the world.

Circularity also suggests a smaller CO₂ footprint, as pilgrims only have to travel to one central point, both the beginning and the end of the pilgrimage route, although people can, of course, join anywhere. A small church, St Stephen’s Church (*Stevenskerk*, built in 1273) in Nijmegen, plays a pivotal role in this circular route. In the church, the reception desk is situated, run by volunteers. It usually takes about a week to walk the whole length of the Walk of Wisdom, 136 km in length (Figure 1).

In 2015, the Walk of Wisdom opened its route for pilgrims and at present already more than 6,000 people have completed the walk. The new route is open to all religions, but none is required, allowing a very personal approach to one’s religiosity, spirituality or philosophy of life. There are several spots along the route which are

Coaching the Pilgrim

In the past, contextual understanding and scriptural knowledge were readily available for pilgrims wishing to understand how to conduct themselves and what to expect from the road itself. Maraval (2002) adds to this that when pilgrims arrive, they do what they came for: they engage in specific prayers. Since they took the effort to come all the way to a particular place, the pilgrims would allow the place to colour, inspire, imagine and nourish their prayers, which

would be fortified by all that the place itself could bring and contribute, which is essentially to say by all that could be seen and touched (Maraval, 2002:71–2).

The spirit of place can thus be an incentive to the prayers and the fulfilment of the visitor.

According to Gros, walking is ‘dull, repetitive, and monotonous’ (2015:207), but never boring, due to the regularity of the cadence involved: exactly all the immersive ingredients one needs to work on the self without distraction when walking. Effortless repetition places the mind in overdrive, enabling the pilgrim to go deep inside their own mind, defragmenting, repairing and creating order out of chaos. Experienced pilgrims know this all too well (Whitehouse & McCauley, 2005), while a first timer might not be prepared fully for that. Pilgrimage researchers have written about the therapeutic value of pilgrimage and its healing qualities have been known for millennia (Elsner & Rutherford, 2005).

At the present time, much of the historical context of the blessings of pilgrimage has been lost, and that loss is now being repaired, albeit with a modern approach, among others, through mindfulness-based treatments, such as yoga, meditation and several cognitive and behavioural applications. These are often inspired by Buddhism or other Eastern wisdoms (Mirdal, 2012). This realisation has also, for the last 15 years or so, been part of the products and services offered by nature walking coaches (wandelcoach.nl), a serious and flourishing form of coaching. For those in current times who are unfamiliar with this, there have been certain developments in this field in the form of pilgrim therapists, to help people finding the road to themselves again (Warfield, 2012). The pilgrimage appeal among people who are non-religious but are at the same time open to the transformative effect of pilgrimage and nature (Collins-Kreiner, 2009). These walkers now have a possibility to walk while

contemplating environmental change and sustainability, and at the same time finding professional support to work on themselves, a quintessential issue also supported by the research of Winkelmann and Dubisch (2005).

Along with the creation of the Walk of Wisdom, based on the premise of environmental sustainability, the phenomenon of the pilgrim coach came along. The organisers of the Walk of Wisdom realised there was a need for pilgrim support, as for some participants the result of the pilgrimage experience was overwhelming. One of the reasons pilgrims give is that walking a pilgrimage provides spiritual renewal, while not everyone knows what to do with that renewal.

Although the idea of pilgrim coach derives from the by now established specialism of walking coaches and nature coaches, it still can be regarded as an avant-garde phenomenon. According to Jørgensen *et al.*

pilgrimage walking as therapy is largely an unexplored ground within health science / care / interventions notwithstanding millennia of human experience (2020:33).

Jørgensen *et al.* continue to state that pilgrimage on foot is becoming increasingly popular as self-therapy, dealing with mental and physical issues as well as to address gaps in spiritual matters.

One of the applied methods in walking and nature coaching, and also present in pilgrimage coaching, is Attention Restoration Theory (ART), which aims to bring to the attention of people the restorative forces of nature, but not just related to physical or mental fatigue (Hartig, Mang & Evans, 1991). While walking in a natural environment, some restorative effects are quickly noticeable, such as calming down, increased concentration, lower blood pressure and heartbeat (wandelcoach.nl). Pilgrims are confronted with a number of natural phenomena, such as ‘soft fascination’. This occurs, when nature naturally and effortlessly attracts attention to its endlessly repeating fractal structures. The idea of ‘being away’ is quickly achieved in areas of natural beauty, allowing the mind to entertain fresh perspectives and reflections on experiences, thoughts, emotions, stress and the self. When one is perceptive to nature’s full-sensory powers, it is easy to please the senses - visual, audible, olfactory, palatable, tangible. This is easier for some than for others, and thus the Walk of Wisdom initiative of pilgrim coaching could be regarded as *accompanied self-therapy*.

Case Study: Lidia van Engeland, Pilgrim Coach

This paper examines the practice of a Dutch pilgrim coach, Ms Lidia van Engeland, as a case study. Lidia is closely connected to the Walk of Wisdom. Her profession is coaching and training people in their personal and professional development. She has studied psychology and career management, with additional training in Gestalt therapy, biographical and narrative work, and power-oriented coaching (www.overdenoordzee.nl). Being a coach is a free profession in the Netherlands, meaning that there are no controlling authorities, although sector associations have some weight. She is a member of the international career management institute (CMI) (www.cminl.nl), and every three years she has to be re-certified, having to undergo continual professional development training and must submit five declarations of customer satisfaction. She is also a member of the NOBCO (www.nobco.nl), a trade association for coaching in general. For two years she has trained with a nature coach during all seasons, engaged in nature-themed walks as a guide. However, she does the pilgrim coaching 'sitting' in her office, which actually feels great as a preparation for the many kilometres to walk for the pilgrim. Together with another pilgrim coach, Ted van Rijt, they work with pilgrims of the Walk of Wisdom and have created pilot projects. As a result of the success of pilgrim coaching, much interest has been developed in relation to the profession. Currently, several pilgrim coaches are undergoing training, ready to be sent out into the field.

Meeting people who are open to new experiences and are willing to share these with others, is very much appealing to her. It goes without saying that there must be a mutual trust relationship between the coach and coachee. She strives for pilgrims to re-experience themselves, to reconnect feeling and mind with the physical sensation of walking. Once trust is created and intimate conversations are taking place, there is less need to answer all the questions and choices that people impose on themselves. Often coachees become silent and experience peace when the pieces of the puzzle are coming together. Lidia labels this as 'fulfilment', being full of oneself in a positive way.

A pilgrim coach needs an open attitude, being able to listen without judgment. We also need to love the coachee to a certain extent, meaning looking at the other person with eyes of love, because then you get to see more and can help them better.

The Way to Yourself

Although Nijmegen and its surroundings have a history of Catholicism, the Walk of Wisdom is not Catholic; it is rather a spiritual experience, a reflection on personal life. Lidia clarifies that she wants people to ask certain questions, 'Who am I? How do I give meaning to my life? Where do I stand and where do I want to go?'

In periods of uncertainty about your life and yourself, walking a marked route gives a grip on life [explains Lidia]. While walking, you will also find the way to yourself.

Although the walk is getting increasingly popular, the route remains fresh. We hope it stays that way and will not become as busy and crowded as, for instance, the Camino. Participants are placing more and more symbols along the way, pieces and places of value and meaning, giving depth to their own experience. Knowing that others have gone before you and will follow you, can give connectedness. You are not walking alone, you are one of the pilgrims, part of a whole, and that gives strength. Although you have to take each step yourself, that connection can be tangible and it is certainly uplifting.

Lidia acquired personal wisdom from ritual accompanist and theologian Christiane Berkvens-Stevelinck, who stated that there are five possible key moments in a pilgrimage: natural moments in the journey, where you can add depth by thinking about what is going on inside you. These are:

- (1) **Preparation:** The time before you go on the road;
- (2) **Begin:** The moment you take the first steps on the route;
- (3) **Middle:** When you have found your feet and still have a long way to go;
- (4) **End:** When you have completed the journey;
- (5) **Beyond** (Preparing for the next pilgrimage?).

Coaching Trajectory

The pilgrim coaching program supports some of the key moments mentioned above. The coaching trajectory consists of two conversations: a conversation at key moment 1 or 2 and a conversation at moment 5. Lidia explains:

The purpose of the first conversation is to clarify the question why someone is going to walk, a life event that makes people decide to walk,

which does not always have to be problematic, such as death, divorce, or illness; there may be also something to celebrate: a friendship, a birthday, or a parent-child relationship, among others. The pilgrimage is then a marking of the transition from one to the other. In that first coaching session, I will ask for the reason to walk the Walk of Wisdom. Then, together with the coachee, I will investigate the connection between this cause and someone's personal development. What does this life event mean for the pilgrim? I work with an inner and outer lifeline. The outer lifeline is about life events, the inner lifeline is about someone's personal development. During the conversations, we are making connections between the outer and inner lifeline. We will try to break through the self-erected barriers around the problem and build on their character strength for a sustainable solution (see also Kortehagen & Nuijten, 2015).

In these connections, Lidia explains, often several personal themes emerge:

- How do I stay true to myself (internally) and, e.g. in my career choices (externally);
- How do I deal with emptiness (internally) e.g. after a divorce (externally);
- What do I find important (internally) in my friendships (externally).

I will then help the coachee in the first conversation to contextualize the personal development question of the pilgrimage to be walked. It is usually the case that someone's personal theme will also present itself during the pilgrimage.

Lidia also provides some practical pilgrim philosophy:

Slowing down the pace of life and simplifying matters usually leads to a deepening of one's spiritual life while gaining fulfilment. Slowing down brings depth and time to look at the infected layers of the self. I want people to focus, narrow down with that magnifying glass towards that 'square inch' of their soul, their essence, deep inside.

Being on a circular route also may prevent people getting lost in themselves. They are walking for their own benefit.

This is not selfish, but necessary for inner re-organisation. Walking for yourself to find yourself again.

As much as 'clothes make the man', the pilgrims make the route, may be an applicable aside to Lidia's work:

Several contrasting things happen to the pilgrim when on the road. Walking is a multisensory business. On your way through nature, just follow your own nature. Read your own manual and carry out its instructions. Give synchronicity as chance. Walking does something to you, physical movement leads to psychological movement. Once things from your manual are being named and labelled, you realise that naming is the trigger for things to happen.

Synchronicity is an important word in pilgrimage as a healing tool, i.e. the coincidence in time of two or more, not strictly causally related events whose meaning is equal or related. The pilgrimage is a synchroniser, as it brings the pilgrim in contact with vistas, people, one's own limitations which can work as a catalyst for change. Walking then increases the momentum of change.

This concept of synchronicity appears in many pilgrimages, often in a religious context. Sedat Çakır and Iris Berzuijen, founders of the Cross-Anatolian Sufi Trail, comment about *tevafuluk*, divine synchronicity, and *nasip*, divine provision, which often befall pilgrims on this linear route from Istanbul to Konya (Brehmer, 2020). The Good Samaritan is a sample of divine provision, or a person who selflessly and generously provides the pilgrim with water when thirsty. In the ancient Christian pilgrimage context, hospitality had to be given to a pilgrim, because, in a test of tests, this pilgrim could be Christ himself (Melczer, 1993).

Some Samples

Lidia presents some samples of her cases. A man in his mid-50s wants to walk the Walk of Wisdom, having discovered walking a few years ago and noticed that it is a nice way to get in touch with like-minded people. In his family, he feels like an outcast. He yearns for kindness and is eager for attention, willing to give a lot of it in order to receive the same. He is out of balance, the fulfilment he yearns for is unattainable as long as he derives his self-esteem from the attention he is missing. In the first conversation, the beginning of a shift takes place. An awareness that he 'alone' can walk his path, like everybody else, and that he also needs attention for himself in order to be able to walk consciously and in the here-and-now, a balance of his wants and actual needs. This gives him strength and independence. As an

exercise on the road, he will try to make contact with other pilgrims on the basis of this independence and hopes to experience the balance between giving and receiving. The walking, the contact with his body and the earth helps him to stay together. A different man goes out Lidia's door than the man who came in.

This idea between giving and receiving, of goods and experiences, has been a common occurrence in pilgrimage for millennia, the sacrifice and the reward. It was famously worded by Cicero's legal principle of *do ut des*, a principle of reciprocity, meaning 'I give so that you may give' (Bijsterveld, 2007). Even in the non-religious form of pilgrimage this principle still applies, governing the behaviour of pilgrims among themselves. In this respect of sharing experiences, Lidia says;

In the second conversation (moment 5), pilgrims feel the need to tell their experiences. Often there is some excitement about the unexpected character of such experiences. Usually there are positive surprises and sometimes difficult encounters, but it is always about the intensity. Together we try to find out if it can be given a meaning. When the first arousal of the journey has subsided, I will give more attention to certain matters in detail. A short relaxation exercise can help the coachee to get back to the present. I sometimes ask to visualise the trip with a drawing. We will look at how the experiences relate to the question someone started the walk with. Has the question changed? Have there been any answers? Has the question behind the question been clarified? Nothing is right or wrong, the coach must make this very clear. Sometimes, I go one step further and invite the coachee to make a connection from the pilgrimage to the outer lifeline. What does your experience mean for tomorrow, the next week, what you are doing, or what do you want to be doing?

The conversation at key moment 5 is crucial for achieving closure of the pilgrimage. This is where conclusions are drawn, decisions made and experiences told. Sometimes it leads to beautiful but fleeting encounters with nature, while the synchronicity of the moment leads to important decisions. A middle-aged couple is doing the walk together. He, a general practitioner, has recently retired from his very hectic practice, while she had already retired and does voluntary work. Together they want to think about their third phase of life, their golden years,

especially how they should give shape to their new future plans. In the first conversation, the ideal picture is painted: making long haul trips and engaging in voluntary work abroad. Probing this topic, a question arises. For him:

Do I dare to let go and step into the void, having confidence that new things will automatically come my way?

For her:

How do I keep my own space where I can stay close to myself?'

Both questions are about trust in oneself and each other. While walking, they both realise that it is so nice just to take a trip close to home. The global tourist aspect thus disappears from their future plans. One does not need to read all the captions and signs or admire the sights. One can really focus on the self and the surrounding natural landscape. And then, the moment of synchronicity happens when they notice a single mushroom which, although a little damaged, nonetheless remains bravely upright. Not only the beauty of the damaged mushroom, but also the relativity of their ideal picture brings intense enjoyment of what can be seen right in front of their feet. In their diary it reads:

On the last part of the walk, while I was nearing home, at the same time I felt so far from home that it was uncanny. But it is not about our actual home, it is about coming home to yourself and each other. The walk has done that.

In this sample, synchronicity, dressed up as a Homeric simile, has found its way into this narrative, where a matter of gravitas is set off by a compassionate account of something vulnerable, in this case, the damaged mushroom. Deciding not to go on holidays to faraway destinations, also an environmental sustainability issue, is positively confirmed and rewarded by their ability to notice small and tender things.

To accommodate the reader who might not have samples of Homeric similes to hand, two samples from Catullus. Here from Elegies XI. 19-27 (translation Kline, 2007):

*...just as on the meadow's edge
a flower has been touched by the passing
plough...*

(unfortunately, unlike the mushroom, the flower did not survive).

Catullus was well known for his eye for details. In his *Carmina* 64:61-67, he observes the predicament of Ariadne. She is standing on the shoreline of a sandy beach, while her lover Theseus sails off, abandoning her on the island of Naxos:

Alas! She fixes her gaze after him, heaving with great waves of sorrow. No longer does the fine-spun scarf bind her yellow locks, no longer is her light veil screening her hidden bosom... all has slipped from her body, scattered about, while the salty surf plays them around her feet.
(author's translation)

The purpose of this digression into Classics is that walking and pilgrimage on foot are able to bring out such wonderful aspects of people they did not even know they had. This is synchronicity at its best, bordering on providence.

Some more samples are provided by Lidia: A woman, let us call her Ariadne for this occasion, goes on a pilgrimage because she is between relationships. There is a new love in her life while she is still saying goodbye to her previous one. This causes her considerable tension and confusion. At the same time, it is a recognisable situation in her very chaotic life. During the coaching sessions, it emerges that she has difficulties being alone. She acknowledges this and decides that she wants to undertake the Walk of Wisdom by herself. Still, she questions if she can have fulfilment on her own. Lidia asked her to visualise in detail what could possibly be the challenging moments during the walk. For example, the chance of getting lost somewhere along the way, or the arrival at a bed & breakfast, or the imagined solitary, quiet evenings. Slowly, the fear of being alone turns into curiosity about what kind of different person she could be when she allows herself to do what she wants and needs. When Lidia talks to her again at the end of her pilgrimage, Ariadne thinks back to the start at St Stephen's Church. There, she lit a candle, symbolising that she left her old love behind, as the burning candle would extinguish itself in her absence. She talks about resisting the temptations of social media on the way, succumbing only a few times to it, but also about the enjoyable evenings in the village cafés, only accompanied by a good book and matching glass of good wine. Likewise, she recounted about losing her way in the forest and the relief and pride when she found a road sign again, a mild case of divine provision. She experienced the struggle of being alone, but also its peace and joy. In summary, she mastered her solitude rather well.

Another person, burdened by worries for others, told Lidia that at some point during the walk she stumbled upon a field full of blooming flowers and that she was, for the first time in ages, overwhelmed with joy. The discovery that she still could have happy feelings was so liberating and freed her of guilt of not having worries. This kind of synchronicity fits in with an unusual source of wisdom, that of the artist Bob Ross, both famous for his iconic permed hairstyle and broad-brush painting technique. In his 1980s/90s television series *The Joy of Painting*, he would encourage his viewers to imitate his techniques. With his characteristic soothing voice he assured them that 'there are no mistakes, only happy accidents' (www.bobross.com).

Most pilgrims, during evaluation, highlighted that pilgrim coaching had given depth to their journey, which they otherwise would not have experienced so explicitly. As a result of the coaching, they walked the way more consciously and recognised situations because they had been made aware. The walk was also confrontational, forcing them to make different choices during the trip and to experiment with new behaviour. At times, those attempts were more successful than others, but their initiatives still gave them a good feeling, and as a reward, they discovered new sides of themselves.

Conclusion

The Walk of Wisdom is a prime sample that a pilgrimage route can be invented without losing any of its 'pilgrimage' significance and relevance. The lack of historicity and religiosity is not regarded as a negative but as a positive issue. Newly designed routes or trails need to have an extra dimension or drive, otherwise it is just an empty path. In this case, environmental sustainability was the inspirational drive. Of great importance was the circularity of the walk, a comfort on its own.

Motivations for going on a pilgrimage do not seem to have changed much, the yearning for fulfilment seemingly unaltered. Millennia-old pilgrimage phenomena are still very much alive in the experiential world of the recently invented Walk of Wisdom, including near-revelatory appearances of Homeric similes, moments of synchronicity, (divine) provision and providence. Spaces are provided for recognisable rituals, similar to those developed over time along the historical pilgrim routes and trails. What does seem to have changed for many people, is the purpose and content of pilgrimage,

shifting from walking to come closer to God, to come closer to oneself, not to save their soul but to save the world. Fulfilment has made great strides in the register of meaning, as now the celebration of good things in life are added as motivations to embark on a pilgrimage, while in the past, the emphasis rather was on sin, injustice or illness. Secular pilgrims are discovering the spiritual benefits of pilgrimage to overcome the inadequacies of some of their character traits, their insecurities or fears.

Due to secularisation and loss of knowledge of pilgrimage, its preparation and execution, the services of a pilgrim coach are a welcome addition to the field of pilgrimage and pilgrimage studies. In the past, the established Church prescribed what a pilgrim should do and feel. At present, people may feel at a loss what to do, as those prescriptions have been spirited away by secularism. Nonetheless, human needs and the human need for fulfilment remain the same. Pilgrim coaches are filling a large need gap, providing new insights and managing to give old remedies new relevance. Since psychology and health sciences have taken an interest in pilgrimage, it is foreseen that this will lead to a new direction in pilgrimage research over the coming years and the application of its findings by healthcare and health insurers.

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