

Article

Pilgrimage as Self-Discovery in an Ecological Community

Kip Redick

Department of Philosophy and Religion, Christopher Newport University, Newport News, VA 23606, USA; kredick@cnu.edu

Abstract: Pilgrims become open to self-discovery in a Gestalt of the personal and communal. Traditional pilgrimage integrates pilgrims into a community of faith. Long-distance hikes through wilderness, such as the Appalachian Trail, may be interpreted from this lens. However, the environment/space/place of wilderness situates pilgrims beyond a traditional religious frame. The sacred does not manifest from a schema of established religious symbols because wilderness trails disrupt preconceptions, breaking through the self's strategies of centering. The disruption of one's prior orientation to community, customs, and conventions that form the self's symbolic schema opens the hiker to what Levinas references as "the delirium that comes from God [as] a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention". The other as transcendent presents herself and exceeds "the idea of the other in me," (Levinas). Pilgrims may discover an existential dialogue with the sacred other, the human or extra-human. The Gestalt of the personal and communal extends beyond traditional boundaries, encompassing human and extra-human beings.

Keywords: wilderness; Gestalt; environment; space; place; pilgrimage; sacred journey; self-discovery; ecological community



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1. Introduction

Nearly 45 years ago, I set out on a journey of self-discovery, healing, and meaning making. I had recently been discharged from the Marine Corps when my close friend, whom I considered my soul-brother, challenged me, claiming that he and I were in a "spiritual rut". He proposed a remedy to the malaise. We would purchase backpacks, give our possessions away, and embark on a long-distance hike in the wilderness, in this case the Pacific Crest Trail. The sojourn extended beyond that initial trail, lasting for several years, and served to integrate us into a community of faith.

Years later, I initiated a research agenda, studying the intersection of sacred journeys, the places/spaces through which they track, and transformation unfolding therein. I focused on comparing long-distance hikes in the wilderness with traditional pilgrimages such as the Camino de Santiago. On one of my first information gathering trips, I visited three key sites: the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (hereafter cited as ATC) headquarters as well as the David Lesser Shelter and a hiker hostel, the Bears Den, both on the trail itself.¹ In the shelter and hostel, I looked through the registers—notebooks wherein hikers leave messages. At ATC headquarters, I studied archives of various shelter registers, finding evidence of personal transformation, of hikers interpreting their journeys as spiritual, and of the importance of wilderness space and places along the way. One hiker, whose trail name was Famino,² left a lengthy testimony exemplifying the power of the Appalachian Trail (hereafter cited as AT) in personal transformation. He wrote the register entry while at Bears Den in northern Virginia, a little over 1000 miles into the journey starting in Georgia and finishing in Maine.

Famino writes that this is "My first serious entry in 900 miles!" Prior to his long-distance journey he had been homeless, living in Washington D.C. and addicted to drugs. He had two choices, "Sleep on the street or sleep in the woods". So, he had just enough money to take a train to Harpers Ferry, where he learned about the AT. He writes, "I took

five days and hiked to this shelter! The temperature was 17 the nite [sic] I stayed here, my bag was a cheap 45 [degree] bag". This was in December. He decided to hike the entire trail. He continues, "So this brings me to 12 April 2001, Springer Mountain, Georgia. Nearly a thousand miles later, I am back here, very excited to say the least!!!" He draws a smiley face. He continues to write, "Now for what I really wanted to write: I haven't gone down that many times [fallen] since I was hooked on crack and living on the street! See you in Maine!!" (2001).³ Clearly, Famino had been living outside of community as a homeless person. He made a personal decision to travel to Harpers Ferry, hike up to a shelter on the AT, and then go to the southern terminus of the AT at Springer Mountain, Georgia to begin a long-distance journey.

2. Personal Journey

From a Heideggerian perspective, Famino realizes his life is an issue. Heidegger writes concerning Dasein, "*Being* is that which is an issue for every such entity" (Heidegger 1962, p. 67). He continues, "Because Dasein has *in each case mineness* [*Jemeinigkeit*], one must always use a *personal* pronoun when one addresses it: 'I am', 'you are'" (p. 68). "Dasein is mine to be in one way or another. That entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue, comports itself towards its Being as its ownmost possibility" (p. 68). Gadamer uses horizon as a metaphor in relation to Dasein comporting itself to its ownmost possibility. He writes that Human life is "never utterly bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon" (Gadamer 1985, p. 271). The horizon presents various pathways among which to choose, and each choice opens Dasein's ownmost possibility of still more choices. Gadamer continues, "The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion" (Gadamer 1985, p. 271). In light of this moving horizon and Dasein's own possibility, it can choose itself and its journey, or not, it can live authenticity or inauthenticity.

Ricoeur explores Dasein and the movement of various horizons of meaning through textual hermeneutics, "What is to be interpreted in a text is a proposed world, a world that I might inhabit and wherein I might project my ownmost possibilities" (Ricoeur 1995, p. 43). When readers project themselves into the text, they distance themselves from the everyday, the natural attitude. Ricoeur writes, "The world of the text . . . is not therefore the world of everyday language. In this sense it constitutes a new sort of distanciation that we can call a distanciation of the real from itself" (Ricoeur 1995, p. 43). If we insert a long-distance hiker or pilgrim in the place of a reader, the journey becomes the occasion of reading, and the space/place through which it tracks, the text. Persons encountered along the way, including the pilgrim walking, become characters in a story. Ricoeur writes, "Through fiction and poetry new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality" (Ricoeur 1995, p. 43). So long-distance hikes, or sacred journeys, present pilgrims with new possibilities.

The liminality of the journey, the distanciation of the real from itself or from previous structure, distances pilgrims and hikers from the natural attitude. A sacred journey, versus a mere vacation hike, separates them from a marketplace reality, a reality of negotiated valuation, and gives them space to reinterpret their life stories in an alternate value situation, a new horizon of meaning, which is also a new orientation of faith. Similar to the distinction between a recreational hike and a sacred journey, Gadamer distinguishes an episode from an adventure and points to the liminality of adventure, its symbolic orientation. He writes:

Episodes are a succession of details which have no inner coherence and for that very reason have no permanent significance. An adventure, however, interrupts the customary course of events, but is positively and significantly related to the context which it interrupts. Thus an adventure lets life become felt as a whole, in its breadth and in its strength. Here lies the fascination of an adventure. It

removes the conditions and obligations of everyday life. It ventures out into the uncertain. (Gadamer 1985, p. 62)

Every venture out into the uncertain involves faith. Famino may have begun his excursion to Harpers Ferry as an episode, but it became an adventure. He entered into the liminality that interrupted the pattern of events in his life up to that point. He felt life as a whole, saw a new horizon of meaning, and set forth on an adventure, a walk of faith. Gadamer writes, "'Reality' always stands in a horizon of the future of observed and feared or, at any rate, still undecided possibilities" (Gadamer 1985, p. 101). In this way, reality requires an act of faith.

So it is in sacred journeys. The pilgrim's being-in-the-world becomes pregnant with new possibilities and then birthed in the opening created by a pathway across Spain or through the wilderness of the Appalachian Mountains. During the journey, they might attend a rescripting of their ownmost possibilities in the context of their life story, open themselves to a new horizon of meaning. In so doing, they walk in faith toward the uncertain horizon.

Another example comes from a hiker whose trail name is Sugar Daddy. He writes, "Before doing this hike, I was extremely obsessive about my job, to the point of costing me my wife—I thought the company deserved everything I could give it b/c [sic] they had hired me, but didn't extend the same courtesy to my wife" (David Lesser Shelter Register, 9 July 2001).⁴ He becomes introspective and wonders whether this hike has been helpful. The ordeal of the journey causes him to open himself up, to examine his life story, a hermeneutic of his own person. He continues writing, "There is no point in beating myself up over past mistakes, but I will not allow myself to repeat them over and over again either. At what point do I become special enough to like myself? To quit caring more about the opinions of others than of myself?" Clearly he is distancing himself from the marketplace, questioning the value that this prior reality framed for him. He goes on to write, "I thought I was hiking, partially, to answer these questions. I've been walking wounded since my first day, and that has helped heal my heart, but when does my mind get fixed? My brother[,] for those that have heard the stories[,] and I are very similar people—we've just chosen different routes for self-destruction [and] those are blazes I don't want to follow any more". Blazes reference the white paint marking trees, rocks, and posts that guide hikers on the AT. A pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago may have written, "those are arrows I don't want to follow any more" in reference to the yellow arrows marking the way to Santiago de Compostela. One interpretation of Sugar Daddy's register entry is that he is rejecting a previous incarnation of himself. He is questioning his place in a previous faith community. The new blazes lead toward another horizon, a shift in faith and a realization of another community.

3. An Alternative Community

These accounts of self-discovery also allude to an alternative community. Not all hikers use trail registers, neither writing in them nor reading the content. Some hike for reasons that have little to do with a spiritual journey and will become less involved in the evolving alternative community. Those who do use the registers know that their entries will likely never be read in the marketplace reality. They write for an audience of fellows. They share confessions of the deepest secrets, opening themselves to one another in what the Turner's refer to as *communitas*, the social aspect of pilgrimage that is "social antistructure,"

a relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances. It is a liminal phenomenon which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship. (p. 250)

Self-discovery happens in the nexus of the personal and communal. The philosopher William Ernest Hocking points out a relational expanse of three in the phrase "Here we

are": "I exist," "we exist," and the "meeting ground" (Bugbee and Rodick 2017, p. 125). Pilgrims and long-distance hikers come together in this relational expanse wherein bodies interact. Merleau-Ponty writes:

Sensation is intentional I am brought into relation with an external being, whether it be in order to open myself to it or to shut myself off from it. If the qualities radiate around them a certain mode of existence, if they have the power to cast a spell and what we called just now a sacramental value, this is because the sentient subject does not posit them as objects, but enters into a sympathetic relation with them, makes them his own and finds in them his momentary law. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, pp. 213–14)

In this way, those who journey together form a community of faith, even when they do not share the same religion.

Though the Camino de Santiago is steeped in Christian tradition and surrounds pilgrims with its religious iconography, it has begun to attract those from other faith traditions as well as those who have no faith tradition. The Appalachian Trail is associated with no faith tradition, being a National Scenic Trail. However, given the mythic grounding of wilderness and its unique American expression, voiced by Thoreau, many long-distance hikers embark for religious reasons. Thoreau wrote, "in Wildness is the preservation of the world," (Thoreau 1957, p. 609) and tapped into a mythic account of wilderness stretching back to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus. Wilderness is presented as a space of reorientation, renewal, of birthing a people. Wilderness is the space beyond human culture giving rise to a new community whose values are not circumscribed by a marketplace system.

4. Symbolism of Sin

Traditional pilgrimage allows pilgrims to distance themselves not only from the marketplace but also from sin. Turner writes, "On such a journey one gets away from the reiterated 'occasions of sin' which make up so much of the human experience of social structure" (Turner 1974, p. 7). It is sin that bends the world, giving rise to a need for preservation, an unbending. Thoreau looks to Wildness for preservation, or unbending. Turner continues, "One piles up a store of nagging guilts, not all of which can be relieved in the parish confessional, especially when the priest himself may be party to some of the conflicts. When such a load can no longer be borne, it is time to take the road as a pilgrim" (p. 7). Unbending is a goal for traditional pilgrims. Turner writes in this regard that the journey brings about "salvation or release from the sins and evils of the structural world, in preparation for participation in an afterlife of pure bliss" (p. 8). But what of contemporary pilgrims who do not share this faith tradition? What of those who do not use a vocabulary that includes sin? What of those who do not imagine their journey as a preparation for an afterlife? On the other hand, these pilgrims from another tradition may understand the journey as sacred in the sense of release from various "evils" of the structural world, or as a preservation of the world.

A closer examination of the symbolism of sin indicates that non-traditional pilgrims share commonality with those more familiar with the vocabulary of sin. If a hermeneutics of sin shows it to be a kind of alienation, encompassing the symbolism of alienation, then pilgrims without faith traditions share a similar religious journey described by Turner. Christian Norberg-Schulz gives an example of alienation characteristic of the modern condition. He writes, "In general, man no longer forms part of a meaningful totality, and becomes a stranger to the world and to himself" (Norberg-Schulz 1988, p. 11). He points out a resolution to this alienation in rediscovering "the world as a totality of interacting, concrete qualities" (p. 16). Given this hermeneutic of sin, pilgrimage presents an opportunity for release from the meaninglessness of alienation and a reorientation to the world as a totality of interacting concrete qualities. This release is an unbending of the world that has been twisted by sin. Frederick Law Olmsted, one of the architects of Central Park in New York City, characterized the health benefits of the park as making possible an "unbending of the

faculties" (Olmsted 1997, pp. 79–111). He points out two key elements common to parks that produce the desired "unbending of the faculties": "scenery offering the most agreeable contrast to that of the rest of the town", and in conjunction, a place of gathering (p. 87). The interacting concrete qualities of landscape and those gathered in that place serve to reorient participants toward a renewed sense of meaning. In such parks, as well as along pilgrimage paths and wilderness trails, persons from faith traditions and those without such traditions, while walking, participate in journeys of transformation. Whether the place of transformation is realized as a sacred site or as catalyzing transformation without acknowledging anything sacred, the environment/space/place along the route interacts with the person who is on a journey. Religious or not, pilgrims encounter what Turner refers to as "critical points in the ecosystem—contact points with other worlds" (p. 207).

5. Gestalt of Meeting Ground and Others

Returning to Hocking's relational expanse of three in the "Here we are", with a focus on the "meeting ground," David Rodick writes, "Within this 'meeting ground' or 'zone of adhesion,' we breathe intersubjective, native air" (Bugbee and Rodick 2017, p. 125). Gabriel Marcel comments on the meeting ground, the "here we are," writing, "In all of these situations the encounter does not take place in each of the participants, or in a neutral unity encompassing them, but *between* them in a most exact sense, in a dimension accessible to them alone" (Bugbee and Rodick 2017, p. 125). Plato's *khôra*, that space out of which the created order emerged, providing "room for all things that have birth" (Plato 1975, p. 52b) or "providing a situation for all things that come into being" (Plato and Cornford 1985, p. 52b) gives a picture of the meeting ground. The "I exist" and "we exist," Heidegger's *Dasein*, unfold in the spatial womb, the space through which the journey passes. The journey ushers pilgrims into a spatial event wherein persons who discover a community of faith find meaning together.

So, the nexus of the personal and communal cannot be understood in abstraction from the meeting ground. Both the Camino and the AT become the meeting ground, forming a Gestalt with persons who are not isolated unto themselves but relate through *communitas*, which gives rise to a community of faith. Self-discovery happens when the self and other selves come together in the meeting ground, which in the case of pilgrimage is sacred space, formed out of places constituted by indigenous bodies. In other words, it is formed by concrete, embodied persons interacting versus being conceived. In addition, places along the way are embedded in the Gestalt formed by their own constituents, elemental forms that cannot be analyzed apart from their emplacement, their habitat. Aron Gurwitsch writes regarding the constituents of a Gestalt, "What they are as constituents of one Gestalt they are not as constituents of a different one. The way they look, their 'physiognomy,' their entire *habitus*, changes, and this holds regardless of whether they are subordinate or dominant in the new structure" (Gurwitsch 1979, p. 209). They manifest themselves, give themselves in relation to the surrounding environmental milieu. Each place along the Camino or the AT is uniquely formed through the interplay of constituents, pilgrims with one another and indigenous bodies, and in relation to the organic whole. Gerardus Van der Leeuw writes, "It is an organic whole which cannot be analyzed into its own constituents, but which can from these be comprehended" (Van der Leeuw 1963, p. 672).

Levinas points out that what happens to the I in forming the identity does not derive from abstract reflection; "It is not to be fixed by reflecting on the abstract representation of the self by self; it is necessary to begin with the concrete relationship between an I and a world" (Levinas 1969, p. 37). The primordial relation between the I and the world wherein the I is revealed, writes Levinas, "is produced as a *sojourn* in the world. The *way* of the I against the 'other' of the world consists in *sojourning*, in *identifying oneself* by existing here *at home with oneself*" (Levinas 1969, p. 37). The "at home" in this description "is not a container but a site where *I can* where, depending on a reality that is other, I am, despite this dependence or thanks to it, free" (Levinas 1969, p. 37). In discussing the identity of the I, Levinas writes, "The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being

whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it" (Levinas 1969, p. 36). What is happening along the way in the interplay between sojourners, in the encounters sojourners have with other body-subjects who are indigenous to the places through which they sojourn, and in relation to the meeting ground itself, shapes the becoming of the I and Thou. As becoming unfolds, sojourners, each a "complex, intentional 'Body-Subject in-the-world'" (Lanigan 1975), forming a Gestalt in a field of "Body-Subjects" in dialogue, give themselves to meaning making and a community of faith (Lanigan 1975, p. 131).

6. Manifestation of the Sacred

It is in the formation of a community of faith while sojourning that the sacred breaks in through a realization of one's responsibility to one's fellow. Levinas writes, "I begin to ask myself if my being is justified, if the *Da* of my *Dasein* is not already the usurpation of somebody else's place" (Levinas 1989, p. 85). I do not realize my responsibility until I question my being, whether I am justified when I have usurped the place of somebody else. Until this questioning, I am the center of Being, and others, who are mere objects of use and not "complex, intentional Body-Subjects," orbit me. But the sacred disturbs my centering of myself, calling me to another center I share with others. A voice calls out to Moses from the burning bush, "put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). Though Moses seems alone on this wilderness mountain, the Other whose presence appears in the fire disturbs the vortex Moses had created for himself.

The mythic grounding of wilderness as sacred space manifests my responsibility. This myth of the Chosen People receiving commands outlining ethical relationships and thereby forming a community of faith becomes a symbolic fire calling from the bush that will not be consumed, from the sacred journey. A key *mitzvah* from the Torah reads, "You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21). Deuteronomy 10:19 reads, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt". Leviticus 19:34 reads, "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God". Israel becomes a community of faith in the *liminal* space of wilderness where an identification with the stranger brings about a shared center and where the capacity to give hospitality to the stranger is discovered.

In giving and receiving hospitality, the usurpation of someone else's place ceases to divide. God invites Moses into the sacred place, giving him hospitality and showing him the way of invitation. Sacred ground becomes a place for all to find fellowship. Levinas discusses this relationship while reflecting on Psalm 119, verse 19, "I am a stranger on the earth; do not hide your commandments from me". Levinas points to Leviticus 25:23 as a hermeneutic frame of reference for the Psalm: "No land will be alienated irrevocably, because the land is mine, because you are but strangers, housed in my land" (Levinas 2002, p. 66). The commandments in Psalm 119 emphasize one's obligations to the other. Levinas writes, "the condition—or incondition—of strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt brings man closer to his fellow man. Men seek one another in their incondition of strangers. No one is at home" (Levinas 2002, p. 66). No human is home in the wilderness, nor while on a sacred journey. In the liminality of this space beyond culture, the Chosen People find their responsibility to one another. So those who practice sacred journeys find their responsibility to a wider community of faith. They sojourn together in the Gestalt of an ecological community of faith. It is a faith community in the unfolding of a mutual journey to a sacred destination.

In the wilderness, we are all strangers who receive the hospitality of the extra-human inhabitants who dwell there. Through the sacred journey in the wilderness, I learn to open myself to the Other, to receive hospitality from those who open their home to my sojourn. Levinas writes, "To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object" (Levinas 1969, p. 49). In the encounter of body-subjects giving and receiving hospitality, objects of use fade. Cavanaugh writes, "The term *peregrinus*, from

which ‘pilgrim’ is derived, recognizes this liminal status: the meaning of the term in Latin includes foreigner, wanderer, exile, alien, traveler, newcomer, and stranger” (Cavanaugh 2011, p. 82). As fellow strangers, transcending the centering of ourselves by ourselves, we look into the faces appearing before us. Levinas writes, “The Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question” (Levinas 1989, p. 83). Calling me into question includes my ideas, my thematizing of others, my projecting a net of conceptions on the others.

Wilderness itself has been thematized. The space birthing the Chosen People had already been thematized as evidenced in the unfolding mythic journey. Max Oelschlaeger points this out in relation to the meaning of wilderness in this context. The Hebrew word for wilderness, *midbar*, carries with it a thematized meaning. He writes:

The shepherd-farmer mythology ‘bespeaks a deeper psychic conflict’ than any simple antipathy between herders and farmers. It represents a persistent opposition to civilization. In this mythology the wilderness assumes a deep symbolic meaning, representing both (in Genesis) the shepherd’s departure from the detested city (itself symbolic of the high cultures) and the exodus from slavery into the desert to face Yahweh’s challenge. (Oelschlaeger 1991, pp. 48–49)

Midbar was the space beyond the cultivated fields that Nomadic tribes, “shepherd-farmers,” inhabited. Moses leads his people from the high culture of Egypt and into the solitary space of *midbar* in a temporary sojourn. The shepherd nomads who sheltered Moses during his exile from Egypt would not have referred to their own dwelling place as *midbar*. The mythic perspective comes from a people of high culture who venture into a perceived wasteland as evidenced within the myth. The sojourners complain to Moses for leading them to the *midbar* to die. They cry out for civilized food: the fish, melons, leeks, garlic, and onions of Goshen.

If I am to encounter the face of the other, I must bracket these preconceptions. Opening myself to the liminality of the wilderness means not casting a net of conceptions. Merleau-Ponty characterizes phenomenological bracketing as turning “back to the things themselves” in a “return to that world prior to knowledge of which knowledge speaks” (Merleau-Ponty 1956, p. 60). The *liminal midbar* is the space prior to knowledge for the Hebrews, a primordial turn that opens them to transformation, to becoming the Chosen People, ethically bound in a relationship with the God of this wild space, a relationship not conceived in the high culture of Egypt. A sojourn on the Appalachian Trail wherein long-distance hikers turn to the world prior to knowledge of which knowledge speaks becomes a journey of transformation. The face of the Other for Moses and the Chosen People was the God of the wild space. The face of the other for long-distance hikers is the face of the Other, actually many Others, who dwell in the wild that is not wild to those who dwell there. It is their place. A relationship with these extra-human inhabitants of the wilderness, these who are radically other, requires a primordial turn to the world prior to knowledge of which knowledge speaks.

7. Manifestation of the Other

How does a human being steeped in a marketplace reality, whose conception of the extra-human constituents of wilderness holds them as either standing reserve for use, objects of aesthetic pleasure, or some romanticized ideal, realize a relationship of I and Thou? Levinas, interacting with Buber, writes, “The I-Thou relation consists in the confronting a being external to oneself, i.e., one which is radically other, and in recognizing it as such. This recognition of otherness, however, is not to be confused with the *idea* of otherness. To have an idea of something is appropriate to the I-It relation” (Levinas 1989, p. 64). Levinas shows the importance of bracketing conceptions, of the impossibility of encountering the face of the other through a screen of ideas. Dialogue only happens between beings who are radically other, who have ceased from throwing the net of conceptions over the other, turning them into one’s ideas, which is really turning them into one’s self. Again,

Levinas quotes Buber, “Man can become whole not by virtue of a relation to himself but only by virtue of a relation to another self” (Levinas 1989, p. 66). In the relation with the other self, the face, dialogue unfolds and the ethical presents itself. Levinas again says, “Only a being who is responsible for another being can enter into dialogue with it” (Levinas 1989, p. 66).

In bracketing preconceptions, this ethical relation of responsibility extends to extra-human beings. Levinas writes, “the tree, too, instead of being of use to me or dissolving into a series of phenomenal appearances, can confront me in person, speak to me and elicit a response” (Levinas 1989, p. 70). It is in the primordial turn, always already present prior to my thematizing, that the face, even of a tree, confronts me, calls to me. Levinas describes a subjectivity prior to the play of consciousness, prior to self-consciousness, which does not “resemble self-consciousness. It has meaning only as an upsurge in me of a responsibility prior to commitment, that is, a responsibility for the other” (Levinas 1989, p. 93). The oneself, the subjectivity prior to the play, “cannot form itself; it is already formed with absolute passivity” (Levinas 1989, p. 94). Prior to casting my net of knowledge, the tree shows itself, confronts me. I begin to realize a wider community.

8. Conclusions

While journeying through the meeting ground, the sacred manifests as a responsibility for the one whose face gazes at me. The liminality of the spatial wilderness releases me from a prior cultural hold, a marketplace thematizing value on the objects within its purview. Levinas writes, “the delirium that comes from God . . . is a divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention” (Levinas 1969, p. 49). The Other as transcendent presents herself and exceeds “the idea of the other in me,” which Levinas calls the face. “The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure” (Levinas 1969, pp. 50–51). Pilgrims may discover a new community formed in the existential dialogue of the journey. In the dialogue with the sacred Other, who might appear as the human or extra-human face encountered in the journey, I am measured, and in the measuring, I ask whether the *Da* of my *Dasein* is usurping the place of the Other? In this way, the Gestalt of the meeting ground, the personal and communal, extends beyond traditional boundaries, those prescribed by the marketplace, and encompasses human and extra-human beings. In the context of pilgrimage, or a long-distance hike in the wilderness, I discover myself as a member of an ecological faith community. I become ethically bound to my fellows.

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Notes

- ¹ The ATC is located in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, about 1025 miles north of the southern terminus and about 1168 miles south of the northern terminus. Bears Den is 1005 miles north of the southern terminus and 1188 miles south of the northern terminus. The David Lesser Shelter is 1016 miles north of the southern terminus and 1177 miles south of the northern terminus.
- ² There is a long-standing tradition on the AT wherein hikers receive “trail names”.
- ³ Bear’s Den Trail Register, 2001. Note that entries remain in the form from which I transcribed them. I added square brackets to clarify the notes.
- ⁴ All of the register entries in this paragraph are from Sugar Daddy, David Lesser Shelter Register, 9 July 2001.

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