

*The Road to*  
**Emmaus**  
PILGRIMAGE as a WAY of LIFE

Jim Forest

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# The Road

*Consider well the highway, the road by which you went.*

—JEREMIAH 31:21

*[The road] was the most imperative and first of our necessities. It is older than buildings and than wells.*

—HILLAIRE BELLOC, *THE OLD ROAD*

*Now my body seemed to walk itself, the road walking my body.*

—AN AMERICAN PILGRIM RECALLING HIS JOURNEY  
TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

One could spend long hours making a list of great human achievements—from the wheel to the great cathedrals to the discovery of DNA and the development of computers—and yet leave out one of the most important attainments because it is too obvious, too ordinary, and too ancient: the road.

Roads are the circulatory system of the human race and the original information highway. From times long before the written word, roads have linked house to house, town to town, and city to city. Without roads there are no communities. Roads not only connect towns but give birth to them. They pass through all borders, checkpoints, and barriers, connecting not only friend to friend but foe to foe. Far older than passports, the road is an invitation to cross frontiers, to start a dialogue, to end enmity. Each road gives witness to the need we have to be in touch with one another.

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There was a time before roads when the world was pure wilderness, but even before Adam and Eve there would have been countless tracks and paths created by animals that moved in packs or herds, following their prey or migrating with the seasons. With the arrival of human beings, many of these pathways would have become roads for hunters, here and there providing ideal sites for encampments and villages.

Supreme collective endeavor that they are, roads reveal the cultures that made them. Roman roads tend to run straight as Roman laws, but in many cultures roads take many turns as they search out fords, avoid marshes, find higher ground, touch wells and pubs, and seek holy places.

Roads are life giving. They provide the primary infrastructure of social life. Without them, there is no commerce. Without roads and the delivery systems they support, we would starve. Even more important than safeguarding weights and measures and punishing those who watered down the beer, it was the primary task of kings and queens to maintain and keep safe the highways.

Human history is the history of roads. Empires have been ranked according to the quality of their highways. Roman highways were so well built that even today, two millennia later, portions of them not only survive but remain in use.

Roads mark the way to safety. Paths tells the traveler how to get round a chasm or find a ford to cross the river. They point the way through marshes and around quicksand.

If roads sometimes speed armies on the path of destruction, more often they guide pilgrims toward encounters with the sacred. They connect not only capital cities and great cathedrals but remote churches that house the relics of saints. A saint's relics have many times widened a road or even created a new one.

Roads not only take us toward each other but, when we need to be rescued from society, they lead us to solitude.

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The same road that leads to Rome is, in reverse and at its furthest reaches, a route to the desert.

Roads have a sacramental aspect: a road is a visible sign of a hidden unity. Roads are a map of human connectedness.

The road is a primary metaphor. In the gospel Christ speaks of choosing the narrow path rather than the broad highway. Early Christians called themselves followers of the Way.

The road has often been a place of religious breakthroughs. Two disciples walked with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, unaware of who he was. Later they took the same road back to Jerusalem, where they related how Christ had revealed himself to them in the breaking of the bread.

Paul—Christianity's first great pilgrim—encountered Christ on the road to Damascus. Traversing the highways of the Roman Empire, Paul became one of history's great men of the road.

Old roads still exist. In some cases they are quite visible and still in use; in some they are hidden under modern highways; in still other cases they are grassy pathways once again; and in some places they are hardly more than faint indentations in the soil.

The old pilgrim road from Winchester to Canterbury is in turn all of these. A road as old as England, some parts are now rarely walked, while other sections have become major motorways. Yet, in part thanks to a steady trickle of pilgrims still making their way to the church where Saint Thomas Becket was murdered in 1170, the pilgrim path still exists from end to end. In 1904 Hillaire Belloc published *The Old Road*,<sup>1</sup> in which he managed to stitch together the road's fragments into a continuous whole, which he himself walked in one of his many acts of pilgrimage.

One of the pilgrims of recent years, Shirley du Boulay, walked from Winchester to Canterbury in the early 1990s

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and has left us one of the best contemporary memoirs of pilgrimage, *The Road to Canterbury*. Old roads, she writes,

are hallowed by time and the footsteps of men and animals. . . . We respond to old roads as to old buildings. Even their names—Watling Street, Ermine Street, the Fosse Way, the Maiden Way, Stane Street—echo in the imagination. I remember as a child being told, as we walked the Berkshire Downs, that we were on a Roman Road called Icknield Street. I remember too my pride thereafter in recognizing a long straight road as Roman. . . . A road does not just appear. It is the fruit of long years of trial and error. It is the supreme collective endeavor, a long experiment in which the individual can only be subsumed.<sup>2</sup>

It's a special feeling walking an old road. The pilgrim may see no one else behind or ahead and yet be profoundly aware of not being alone. Hundreds of thousands of others have passed this way, generation after generation. At times the multi-generational river of travelers seems almost visible. If a file of medieval pilgrims were to appear before us on small horses, Chaucer himself among them, it would hardly be surprising.

Among those who walked or rode before us, not all were pilgrims heading toward a shrine, but many were, and even those on more prosaic errands may have traveled with the God-alert attitude of a pilgrim. Many were people aware that each step they took was an act of prayer. Roads that have been intensively used by people at prayer seem afterward to hold a rumor of prayer. The road itself becomes a thin place.

One of the celebrators of the road was the Oxford don J. R. R. Tolkien, through whom an invented history of Middle Earth made its way into the modern world. Both *The Hobbit*

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and *The Lord of the Rings* are a celebration of roads. For Tolkien, it wasn't *roads* in the plural but simply *the Road*, singular. However many intersections, however many forks along the way, however many rarely walked paths reach out from it, all the tracks human beings walk are connected and form a single system, like the body's capillary system, through which a single river of blood makes its way away from the heart to the remotest cell and back again.

Tolkien's Bilbo sang the song of the road as he took his first step along a path that led at last to the edge of death in his encounter with a dragon. Bilbo's heir, Frodo, sang it as he stepped out the door of his snug burrow on his way to overthrow a kingdom of evil, though at the time all he was aware of was his hope of delivering a magic ring to a place of safety: Rivendell.

The core text of Tolkien's tales is Bilbo and Frodo's song, which celebrates stepping out the door into the unknown without the certainty that one will ever see one's home again:

*The Road goes ever on and on  
Down from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the Road has gone,  
And I must follow, if I can,  
Pursuing it with eager feet,  
Until it joins some larger way  
Where many paths and errands meet.  
And whither then? I cannot say.<sup>3</sup>*