Pilgrim

Kate Bird

It rained hard through the night, but by morning the sky is clear blue and the sun shines strong and bright. It's day six of my eight-day walk on the Northumberland Coast Path in northeast England, my last day of beach walking before the route skirts the tidal estuary of Holy Island. Day after day I've walked north, the roiling might of the North Sea, dangerous and unpredictable, my steady companion. Hour upon hour I put one foot in front of the other, alone with my sometimes challenging and sometimes peaceful thoughts, as waves crashed relentlessly on the golden beach under a glorious expanse of ever-changing sky.

Two days before I leave home I learn that my best friend and traveling companion can't make the trip. How will traveling alone for a month be? Recent illnesses and surgery have left me feeling puny and vulnerable, my confidence knocked back, and, still grieving the deaths of two close friends and a beloved uncle the previous year, keenly aware of my own mortality. I'll be fine in the cities but I'm trepidatious about the walk. Will I turn my ankle in the middle of nowhere and be undiscovered for days? Have I read too many British murder mysteries?

In the chaotic hours before I bid farewell to my husband and son I decide to view this journey as an opportunity to contemplate my life, take stock, envision a way forward. I remember a quote from Alistair Moffat's book *To the Island of Tides: A Journey To Lindisfarne*—"now, I realized, I had come to this beautiful place to learn how to leave them, to learn how to live what remains of the rest of my life and how to die when the time comes…."

Newcastle

My sunlight-filled room at the historic Royal Station Hotel, located beside the train station in Newcastle upon Tyne, overlooks Newcastle Castle and the High Level Bridge spanning the River Tyne. I fall asleep to the soothing clatter of trains arriving from somewhere and departing for someplace else.

On display at the Great North Museum at Newcastle University is an exhibition of Egyptian artefacts from the British Museum. On this cold and rainy day, jetlagged and weary, I contemplate how far from home these objects are. An exhibition on mummification explains the Judgement of Osiris, a ceremony where the heart of a deceased person is weighed on a scale balanced by the feather of Maat, the goddess of truth, justice, and cosmic order. If your heart is as light as Maat's feather, you continue on to the afterlife, otherwise it's devoured by Ammit, the

goddess of divine retribution, and you cease to exist. I imagine my heart, more stone than feather, tipping the scales.

Durham

St. Cuthbert, the patron saint of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, entered the monastery at Melrose Abbey in Scotland in AD 651, lived as a hermit on Inner Farne Island, and became bishop of Lindisfarne on Holy Island, where he died and was buried. Eleven years later, when Cuthbert's coffin was opened and his body found to be perfectly preserved, he was canonized as a saint. In 875, Lindisfarne was attacked by Vikings, and the monks fled with Cuthbert's remains and hid in St. Cuthbert's cave. Finally, in 995, St. Cuthbert's remains were buried at Durham Cathedral, where, for a thousand years, pilgrims have sought protection and healing at his grave. I join a tour of the cathedral, light a candle for my loved ones, and rest for a time on a pew in the filtered light of the magnificent stained-glass windows. In the cathedral museum, I admire a display of intricate metal pilgrim badges, once worn as symbols of a journey undertaken. I realize that I'm a kind of pilgrim, too, and find myself longing for a pilgrim badge of my own.

Willington

The first waystation on my personal pilgrimage is the village of Willington, a short bus ride south of Durham, where my maternal grandfather, William Newton, was born and raised.

Trained as a radio operator in the Royal Engineers in the First World War, my grandfather later worked as a radio operator in the Merchant Navy before finding work in Montreal.

Researching my family's history has given me insight into my grandparents' lives before they immigrated to Canada, and has conjured a renewed familiarity, even a closeness, with my long-dead forebears. Because although I have my own memories of my grandfather, who died when I was ten, it's my mother's memory of her father as the person who loved and understood her best that I recall with haunting clarity. I remember her profound grief, which would take me years to fully comprehend and appreciate.

I locate Moorsley House, where members of the Newton family lived for half a century. The front garden is wildly overgrown, the burgundy paint on the front door chipped and peeling, but carved into the stone lintel are the words Moorsley House. I think of the photograph, taken during a 1954 visit, of my grandfather standing in this doorway with his brother and sister and their spouses, their smiling faces, happy to be together again. I visit the family's other homes, their church, the primary school my grandfather attended, and the grave of my great-grandparents in Willington Cemetery. I tidy my grandparents' grave and place pink carnations, my mother's favourite flower, on the headstone.

At the Angel of the North, Antony Gormley's towering sculpture near the freeway south of Newcastle, I'm surprised to discover it's a memorial site. Sheltered under the Angel's fifty-four-metre-wide wings are hundreds of tributes to teenage suicides, car crash victims, stillborn babies, and sufferers of every imaginable disease, all gone too soon and missed very much. It's a moving and almost unbearably sad place, the photographs, stuffed toys, artificial flowers, notes, poems, and children's drawings soggy and tattered from the harsh northeast weather. A steady drone of freeway traffic hums in the background as I shed tears for my own beloved dead.

Northumberland Coast Path

Day 1 – Cresswell to Warkworth

Then it's time to set off on my eight-day journey on the Northumberland Coast Path. Initially uncertain about walking solo, I'm now excited and eager to be on my way. After a two-kilometre walk to Cresswell, the official start of the path, I step onto the broad expanse of beach and know everything will be fine. The long sweeping curve of Druridge Bay stretches north and to my right the North Sea heaves like the chest of a sleeping giant. White-crested waves crash on shore with the soothing thud of a metronome and common terns swoop and whirl under a moody bruise-coloured sky. I walk on the hard packed sand near the shoreline in a light rain past an old man fishing, a young guy with a surfboard, a few dog walkers.

I settle into the comfortable rhythm of a steady pace. The *Official Guide to St. Cuthbert's Way* notes that "St. Cuthbert found great solace and true refreshment in walking, since travelling at a natural pace on foot allows time for contemplation and for the cares and worries of daily life to be forgotten." Indeed, I find the regular unhurried motion of putting one foot in front of the other for hours unleashes my thoughts, frees my mind to wander its own terrain.

After five kilometres a shelf of jagged black rocks forces me to slog through deep sand dunes before returning onto the beach. I sit and eat my lunch on one of the many Second World War coastal sea defence structures along this stretch of coastline and look out to Croquet Island. From the village of Amble I head inland to Warkworth and my B&B. After walking more than twenty kilometres, with only two short breaks, I'm knackered.

Day 2 – Warkworth to Craster

The pretty village of Alnmouth is sleepy on this rainy Sunday morning. When I rejoin the coast path at Fluke Hole, the path skirts a golf course then snakes between two fairways, where frequent signs warn of flying golf balls. On a high bluff above a stretch of rocky coast I pause amid a giant stand of pink fireweed.

All day long the North Sea surges with a rhythmic hypnotic beat of wave on shore, wave on shore. In photographs, I attempt to capture the sky, a moody and painterly study in grey and white. The rain eventually lets up, and the cloud patterns change from brooding and dramatic masses of nimbostratus to scattered wisps of cirrus.

Near Howick I come upon a magnificent stone cottage perched high on a cliff. Built in the nineteenth century by the 2nd Earl Grey as a bathing house for his sixteen children, it's available to rent. I imagine a month spent at a desk under a picture window, writing furiously as a winter gale batters the coast. The sun finally peeks out at Craster, a fishing village famous for kippers. I relax on a bench overlooking the tiny quaint harbour until it's time to walk inland to the inn at Dunstan.

Solo travel forces you to face aspects of your personality that might go unnoticed in everyday life. Painful self-consciousness at being the centre of attention is one of mine. That evening at the inn's pub, full of warring dogs snarling and barking at each other, I draw stares from the locals. I remind myself that people are just curious, that no one really gives a rat's ass. I wolf down my meal and get the hell out of there. Back in my room I breathe slowly and deeply until my anxiety subsides. Rat's ass, I tell myself. Rat's ass.

Day 3 – Craster to Seahouses

After a night of steady rain the azure morning sky is daubed with puffy white tufts of cloud. The coast path winds through a pasture where a herd of sheep graze, then leads off to a tall point of land where the stunning ruins of 14th-century Dunstanburgh Castle stand. The golden sand of Embleton Bay, glittering in brilliant sunshine, stretches north to the quaint village of Low Newton-by-the Sea, where the path again climbs sharply to the towering bluff of Newton Point before descending back onto the beach at Beadnell Bay. I find I've quit thinking and just walk.

I've booked a sunset cruise from Seahouses, where I'll spend two nights, to the Farne Islands, an important breeding habitat for puffins, guillemot, and other seabirds. St. Cuthbert lived alone on Inner Farne Isalnd before becoming bishop of Lindisfarne, and later lived and died there. The initiatives he introduced in 676 to protect seabirds are thought to be the earliest known bird-protection laws.

The ocean and sky are matching gunmetal grey in the dull evening light. Cormorants, oystercatchers, and seagulls fill the sky, and grey seals and dolphins swim nearby. The dark and fathomless North Sea surges beneath us, its pitching swells powerful and unpredictable, its spray salty on my lips. Even on an early September evening like this the formidable sea and treacherous coastline conjure images of a thousand shipwrecks. In 1838, local heroine Grace Darling, the daughter of the Farne Islands lighthouse keeper, helped rescue survivors of the shipwrecked SS Forfarshire. We motor past Bamburgh Castle, which, for a brief incandescent moment is perfectly silhouetted against the setting sun.

Day 4 – Holy Island of Lindisfarne

The Holy Island of Lindisfarne is accessible only at low tide. The traditional route, known as the Pilgrim's Way, is a five-kilometre long path across the sandy estuary marked by tall wooden posts completed by thousands of pilgrims each year. However most people arrive by vehicle via the tidal causeway. I've booked a half-day boat cruise from Seahouses that includes a two-hour stopover on Holy Island. The rain falls in sheets the whole way there but just as we dock, the sun, suddenly and miraculously, breaks through the clouds.

The honey-coloured stone of the ruined twelfth-century Lindisfarne Priory glows in the midday sun, highlighting its dramatic arches and ornately decorated doorways. A pilgrimage site for 1,300 years, it was here that St. Cuthbert served as bishop, and where the illuminated manuscript known as the Lindisfarne Gospels, one of Celtic Christianity's greatest treasures, was created. In the gift shop, I buy a metal fridge magnet of St. Cuthbert's cross with the word Lindisfarne, a pilgrimage badge for my journey.

In *To the Island of Tides*, Alistair Moffat wrote that "on this little scrap of rock" Cuthbert was "beginning to leave the world and learn how to die…like him, I would begin to spend more time alone, not working or writing but thinking, talking to myself, confronting honestly the darknesses of past wrongs, failures and regrets and accommodating them. If I could do that, then what is left might just be happier, saying goodbye…easier to bear.

Day 5 – Seahouses to Belford

From Seahouses I wander along a grassy headland above a stretch of rocky foreshore known as The Tumblers, then scramble down a path lined with sea grass onto Bamburgh Beach. The vast stretch of tawny sand is patterned by thousands of intricate lugworm casts and stamped with the runic script of bird footprints. In the distance the conical shape of Holy Island and the pale green mounds of the Farne Islands rise from the sea. Shreds of wispy white cloud skitter across a sky blue sky. After Monks House Rocks, I catch sight of majestic Bamburgh Castle in the distance.

I stop to photograph the elongated shadow of my body on the empty stretch of beach in front of me, the long snaking line of footprints behind me. I pick up a stone in the shape of an owl that fits perfectly in the palm of my hand, a memento of this moment and this place.

After six days of walking my legs feel strong, my stamina has increased, and I feel a renewed confidence in my aging body. Invigorated by the North Sea's rambunctious energy and fresh air, blood thrums through my veins and I feel vitally alive. Slow travel in this fast-paced world, days spent in replenishing quiet, in the magnificent elemental splendour of nature, has buoyed my spirits and calmed the jangling tangle of my mind. A wave of gratitude washes over me and brings tears to my eyes. I am so lucky. So very lucky. A month ago I lay in a hospital bed, wondering if and when I'd ever feel well again, and now here I am, striding along one of the prettiest beaches I've ever seen. If I can do this, I think, I can do anything. If we're not tested to our limits—emotionally, physically—how do we learn what our limits are?

Day 6 – Belford to Beal

After the mindless simplicity of walking the beach with the North Sea over my right shoulder, I find navigating the sketchy and sporadic wayfinding in farmer's fields a challenge. A fierce-looking bull stands sentry behind a sign warning Bull In Field. I tramp through long grass in search of the path, take wrong turns, and repeatedly get lost. When I finally reach the turnoff for St. Cuthbert's cave I'm tempted to skip the detour. Although following in St. Cuthbert's footsteps hasn't been a religious pilgrimage for me, I find his solitary hermit life off this remote and rugged coast admirable. The cave is further than expected and hidden under a hill in the gloomy shadows of a leafy glade, but I'm happy I made the effort. The complex of sandstone caves, in the middle of nowhere, has the hushed atmosphere of an empty cathedral.

I carry on, lose my way, eventually locate the path, walk for hours in light drizzle through varied terrain, and get lost a few more times. I remember Rebecca Solnit's quote that "never to get lost is not to live." I must be really living today.

In the afternoon I meet Ed from Leeds, who's on his final day walking St. Cuthbert's Way from Melrose Abbey to Holy Island. We stroll and chat, go our separate ways for a time, then run into each other again. Even with the GPS on Ed's phone we lose our way a few times. A sudden downpour turns into a torrential deluge and in minutes we're drenched and freezing cold. We put our heads down, finally reach the road from Holy Island to the highway and trudge up it before two women from Edinburgh stop and offer us a ride. They drop us at the inn where I'm staying, but poor Ed must wait for low tide before a taxi can take him to his hotel on Holy Island. After a long hot shower, I crawl under the covers and turn on the television only to learn that Queen Elizabeth has died. My last thought is for Ed from Leeds, my guardian angel, without whom I'm not sure I'd have found my way.

Day 7 - Beal to Berwick-upon-Tweed

In the morning, still exhausted from the previous day's adventure, I decide to catch the bus to Berwick-Upon-Tweed, check in early at my B&B, and rest. There's one more section of beach I'd love to walk, but it's still bucketing down with rain, and I can't face another day of being wet and cold.

I arrive early at the bus stop. Being early is a longstanding habit and what I've come to recognize as an expression of my anxiety. Walking alone for hours, beyond the borders of my everyday life, has revealed challenging patterns in my thinking and behaviour, laid bare my tendency to dwell on past mistakes and regrets or to plan ahead instead of staying grounded in the present. I've realized how pressed for time I feel. How time is whizzing by, the years shortening before me, with still so much to do. I recognize that I must learn to let go, enjoy the ride, for however much time I have left.

Edinburgh

My rented Edinburgh apartment is on the Royal Mile, which is lined with security barricades in preparation for the arrival of the Queen's cortège from Balmoral Castle. At the Palace of Holyroodhouse, the Queen's official residence in Scotland, a huge swathe of floral tributes, children's drawings, and notes, express love and thanks. From my window I watch the Queen's cortège pass by as the crowd solemnly sings God Save the Queen. There must be a thousand reasons why people choose to stand for hours for a momentary glimpse of the hearse or to file past the Queen's casket at St. Giles Cathedral. Is it curiosity, a desire to be present at a

unique moment in history, or is it that after the isolation of Covid lockdown it feels good to gather with others in a shared experience? Perhaps the communal sorrow of the Queen's death has unleashed people's private feelings of bereavement and grief.

Each morning after breakfast I pack a lunch and set out on my day's walk, just as I did on the Northumberland Coast Path, only now it's city streets I wander. To Miller's Row on the Waters of Leith, near where my great-grandfather, Robert Learmonth, worked in Herdmann's Flour Mill. To the museums and libraries and art galleries not closed in honour of the Queen.

Portobello

I ride the bus to Portobello, the seaside town just outside Edinburgh where my maternal grandmother, Nan Wood, was born and lived until she emigrated to Canada to marry William Newton from Willington. I explore the beautiful seafront promenade, visit the cottage where my grandmother was born, the tenement flats on the High Street where the family later lived, and the school and church they attended.

At the Portobello Cemetery, the headstone is engraved with the names of my great-grandparents, William Wood and Jessie Learmonth, but family research revealed that my great-great-grandmother, two infant great-uncles, and another unidentified infant are also buried there. I tidy the grave and leave the flowers, perhaps the last bouquet of flowers in Edinburgh, on behalf of my mother and my dear grandmother, who lost her parents within a few months of one another during the Second World War, when she was far away on Canada.

Other than my great-grandparents in Willington and Portobello, whose graves are marked with headstones, my other forebears are either buried in unmarked graves or their burial site is

unrecorded. These days, most people are cremated, their ashes scattered to the wind, making a pilgrimage to visit family graves impossible. I used to want my ashes sprinkled on the ocean but now I think I'd prefer a grave marker at Mountainview Cemetery in Vancouver, so my son, my future grandchildren, or others, can find me.

Edinburgh Castle, and the Scottish War Memorial, another waystation on my personal pilgrimage, finally reopens after being closed all week in honour of the Queen. The young woman who helps me find the names of three family members who died in the First World War happens to be from Portobello.

All my dead, from my ancestors to my recently deceased loved ones, whose faces and voices and memories I cling tight to, who form a layer in the foundation of who I am now, and the loved ones who are yet to leave me, I must somehow let them all go. Don't die with the dead, the saying goes. Stay alive with the living.

Stirling

Despite having tickets for the opening evening of the Bloody Scotland crime writing festival in Stirling I almost decide not to go. Not for the first time, I miss my travelling companion and best friend, and feel sad at how much she would have loved to be here.

At the gala reception, I sit on the sidelines and leaf through a book, prickling with self-consciousness, but surprisingly, rat's ass calm. Then it's time for the annual torchlight procession through the streets of Stirling. A crowd gathers in the parking lot of Stirling Castle, long medieval-looking torches are distributed and set alight, and with bagpipers leading the way, we're off down the hill through narrow winding cobblestoned streets, torches ablaze. Exhilarated

by the electrifying energy of the wacky and slightly dangerous procession, I hold my flaming torch aloft, a bright light against the inky darkness.

Glasgow

My father was born in Glasgow, where his family lived for generations until they emigrated to Canada, and there's a part of me that belongs to Glasgow, too. I hear the accent and feel surrounded by family, by the memory of my beloved grandmother, Lizzie, who lived to the age of ninety-nine-and-a-half, and whose stories echo in my ears. There's a word, hiraeth, which means a nostalgia, a yearning, for somewhere you've never lived but feels like home. Each morning after breakfast I leave my lovely tenement apartment with twelve-foot ceilings that make me feel like a little girl again and spend the day wandering the city until I can barely walk another step.

Maryhill

One morning I walk to Port Dundas, the terminus of the Glasgow Branch of the Forth and Clyde Canal, then wander north on the canal path to my family's home place, Maryhill. My journey into family history and genealogy was sparked after years of listening to my grandmother's stories about growing up in a cottage at Lock 25 on the Forth and Clyde Canal, where her father, John Smith, worked as the lock keeper. The lock cottage where members of my family lived for more than fifty years is long gone, but after years of research I finally found an old photograph of it. I adjust my position until the scene in front of me matches that of the

photograph, then stand on the spot where the cottage once stood and let my dear grandmother's stories, so vivid it's as if I experienced them myself, flow through me.

Nearby, on Balfour Street, the building where my grandparents Lizzie and George lived after they married, and where my father was born, was torn down in the 1970s, but from old photographs it's easy to picture the street lined with tall grey tenements.

Following in the footsteps of my family's stories began with a desire to learn more about my grandmother's life in Maryhill. Now, after waystations in Willington and Portobello and the War Memorial at Edinburgh Castle, Maryhill is a fitting place to complete my pilgrimage.

Hope Street

It's only when I check in to my flight home that I realize recent changes to my flight itinerary have made my Heathrow connection too tight. I search for earlier flights but end up buying a ticket for the 4:28 a.m. train from Glasgow Central to London Euston. I book a taxi for 3:45 a.m. but I have a bad feeling about it, can't sleep, and sure enough, the taxi's late. After ten minutes I have to decide whether to wait a bit longer or walk/run all the way to the station. I have thirty-three minutes to get there.

Garbage from late-night takeaways skitters down Sauchiehall Street, rowdy with bladdered young people weaving home from the bars. Three guys, each more "oot their tree" than the next, stage a foot race. One young man almost staggers right into me, then stops and barfs. I ask directions from a helpful young couple, glimpse the time in a shop window, and hightail it, my wheeled suitcase bumping and bouncing over the cobblestoned streets. I turn right onto aptly named Hope Street, which unlike busy Sauchiehall is deserted and dark, menacing

shadows lurking, and I race downhill for several blocks. For all my years, and in all my travels, I've never had an experience quite like this. There's a thrilling madness to it that makes me feel young, or younger, a feeling that I never want to forget.

I arrive at the station, locate my train car, and slump into my seat, sweating and exhausted, with only minutes to spare. At 4:28 a.m. precisely the train departs the station. A message over the intercom announces that the café is open but the credit card machine isn't working. I have less than a pound left in cash. I sit back in my seat, laughing.

Months later I often remind myself of the feeling I had in the middle of the night on Hope Street, on Bamburgh Beach, and at other moments during those four weeks. How I was forced to confront the challenges my body and mind presented. How by the time I returned home I'd somehow put the past few years behind me and it was the future I couldn't stop thinking about.

I remind myself to push past my comfort zone, beyond what I assume are my limits. To not just survive but thrive. To be brave, bold, take risks. And to do everything in my power to honour, and bring to bear, all the life still left in me.