

## PROLOGUE

# A FARMER'S DAUGHTER ON THE BANK OF THE NILE

I'm sitting on the top deck of a boat docked on the bank of the Nile. Earlier in the day I'd toured its ancient temples in brilliant sun and fierce heat, but the evening brought air that was blessedly cooler, as soft as a pashmina shawl against my skin. A full moon hangs above the city, illuminating the outlines of dust-colored buildings. As stars multiply in the velvet sky above, I savor the scene below me, one that has changed little in thousands of years.

And I find myself wondering: how did an Iowa farmer's daughter get here?

The short answer is that I fell in love with pilgrimages, the sacred journeys that can begin in any corner of the world and eventually lead to Jerusalem, or Lourdes, or Machu Picchu, or to a boat docked on the bank of the Nile.

The long answer is this book.

My passion for pilgrimage springs from a fascination with religion in all its many weird and wonderful permutations. What makes some people handle snakes and others fast for Lent? How do Mormons get young people to devote two years of their lives to knocking on the doors of strangers? What's it like to go to Mecca? Why do Orthodox churches

have those slightly scary looking icons? Do Trappist monks ever burst out laughing in the middle of the Great Silence? Do many people really believe that pieces of the True Cross exist? Why do people crawl on their knees to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City? What do nuns wear under their habits and Buddhist monks under their robes? All of it, the big and little questions, intrigue me.

In my search for the holy, I've wandered down many paths. I've been a Lutheran, a Wiccan, a Unitarian Universalist, a Buddhist, an Episcopalian, and a great admirer of Native American traditions. I've been spiritual-but-not-religious and religious-but-not-spiritual. I can read tarot cards and balance chakras. My spirit animal is a bear, which is a great relief because for years I thought it was a raccoon, an animal that while perfectly fine lacks a certain gravitas.

After many years of spiritual wandering, I'm now a committed Christian, but one who frequently flirts with other religious traditions. I like to think I'm in an open marriage with Jesus—we're both free to spend time with other faiths, but at the end of the day we always come home to each other.

Through it all, the spiritual practice that's most shaped me is pilgrimage. My journeys have given me essential keys to understanding what was happening in my inner life. They've challenged my assumptions, forced me to confront my fears and prejudices, and deepened my faith. Among other changes, they eventually led me to become a writer specializing in spiritual travels and to ordination as a deacon in the Episcopal Church.

This book describes not a single pilgrimage, such as a six-month trip along the Pacific Crest Trail or the Camino de Santiago, but instead a dozen shorter ones. I think my experiences mirror those of many travelers today, people who don't have time for an extended retreat or journey, but who still feel a yearning for something more than the ordinary routines of work and family and the pleasures of a week at Disneyland.

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I hope in reading about my pilgrimages, you'll be inspired to make your own, whether you're Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or someone who kinda-sorta thinks there might be something more to ordinary reality than is immediately obvious.

A warning: once you set out on trips to holy places, if you're paying attention at all, your life will change.



This may appear to be a trivial detail, but it's actually a key part of my story: I grew up on a dairy farm. This meant that we never traveled, because cows need to be milked twice a day.

My family never went anywhere for other reasons as well, including the fact that my parents didn't have much money, and they weren't the sort of people who'd have traveled even if they did have it. To them it was mystifying that anyone would want to leave home for pleasure. Think of the multiple ways things could go wrong, including restaurants where we didn't know what to order and food that could upset our stomachs. More serious dangers lurked, too. Early in their marriage my parents took a trip to the Wisconsin Dells, where my dad was stung by a bee on his face. That's just the sort of thing that could happen again if we ventured very far afield.

And the roads! My hometown of Decorah (population 8,000) was busy enough, but traveling involved driving on highways with more than two lanes. I remember how scared I was riding in the back seat of our car on my first trip to Minneapolis, where my sister had recently moved. My mother drove down an entry ramp onto the interstate and then stopped, waiting until all three lanes were completely clear before venturing out. I was startled to see people cursing at our car, because I'd never witnessed such rudeness in my quiet, well-mannered town.

My childhood was, in its own way, almost nineteenth-century. In the early years of my parents' marriage, my father farmed with horses.

I grew up without indoor plumbing and can vividly recall the thrill at the age of 11 of taking a shower *inside* the house. I was 16 before I stayed in a hotel, courtesy of a high school field trip. My family occasionally had dinner at Decorah's A&W Root Beer stand, but otherwise we didn't eat out. I recall long summers when the only excitement was a once-a-week trip to town, where I visited the public library and stocked up on books.

This may sound like a woe-is-me litany, but it isn't, because I had a happy childhood. I never doubted for a minute that I was loved by my parents and older sister and brother. I lived in an idyllic part of the world, a place with ample beauty and strong bonds of community.

I was also, to use the current jargon, free-range. I knew every square foot of our farm and spent endless hours exploring our woods and making up imaginary games in a playhouse I built under a stand of boxelder trees. The barn had a never-ending supply of kittens to play with before they got sick, lost, or run-over. Inside the house, I had my long-suffering cat Butterball, whom I dressed up in doll clothes for more years than was probably healthy for either her or me.

Every adventure I've had as an adult—the trips to holy sites near and far—I experience through the lens of this childhood. It was an ideal preparation for a life of wandering and wondering.



Growing up, my most influential friend had been dead for 40 years by the time I met him.

We got together on Sundays at my grandparents' house. As the adults visited, I disappeared into a set of books kept on a shelf in a corner of the living room. The faux red-leather volumes of the *John L. Stoddard Lectures* were written by a Victorian adventurer who traveled the world from Boston to Bombay. He delivered reports of his travels to packed lecture houses throughout America and then turned his presentations

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into books. I read each of these volumes over and over again, their musty, moldy smell floating up to my nose each time I turned a page.

Thanks to Stoddard, I learned that traveling to Spain was so dangerous that people should prepare by visiting a priest for absolution, a doctor for medicine, and a lawyer to make a will. In Jerusalem, I joined him in shuddering at the sight of lepers begging in the streets. In Kyoto, we marveled together at dancing geishas, their dark, elaborately coiffed hair shining like a raven's wing.

Stoddard had a boundless enthusiasm for whatever he saw, and it thrilled me even from the distance of a century. In describing an Austrian cathedral, for example, he wrote:

Today, perhaps, the mournful grandeur of the requiem yields to the joyous splendor of the nuptial mass—where bright eyes and resplendent gems relieve the somber shadows of the church with the warm glow of youth and radiance of love; and these again tomorrow may give place to some display of gorgeous vestments, flashing in the light of countless tapers, when a distinguished prelate shall be consecrated, or one of Austria's sovereigns be crowned.

I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but I knew it must be splendid.

Even more than the breathless prose, I loved the photographs and engravings. The sepia-toned illustrations showed worlds removed from me by time as well as distance. I knew that these places had changed since Stoddard had traveled there, but in some mysterious way I felt that they were still intact and that if I stared at the images long enough, I could stand on the Palace Quay in St. Petersburg or climb aboard an elephant in India.

Looking back, it was John L. Stoddard who turned me into a travel writer, though it would be years before I'd get the chance to follow in his footsteps. In my own writing I try to avoid his insensitivities (for

example, unlike him, I've never used the phrase "idol-worshipping, ignorant natives"). But what he did then is what I do now: experience faraway places and then tell other people about them.

There's another curious thing about Stoddard, something that makes me wonder if there's not some karmic connection between the two of us. Raised as a Protestant and at one point a seminarian, he was an agnostic for 30 years before becoming a Roman Catholic. He wrote a book about his conversion called *Rebuilding a Lost Faith*, a work of apologetics that was popular for many years.

I suspect something happened to Stoddard that also happened to me: when you travel, your heart and soul open. And that's when the real journey starts.



Several years ago, I got an email from my friend Marian. "Come with me to Istanbul," she wrote. "You can't call yourself a spiritual travel writer without visiting there."

"Actually, I've already been there with my friend John Stoddard," I wrote back. "But I'd love to go again."

I felt his presence most strongly on a cruise we took on the Bosphorus. Bundled against the cold, I watched as the major landmarks of the city passed by, recalling how Stoddard had been enchanted by them. I could see the outlines of Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque and the opulent palaces where sultans once dined overlooking the water.

And after we docked, as we exited the boat into the bustling commerce of the centuries-old Spice Bazaar, for a moment I swear I saw a tweed-clad Victorian gentleman ahead of me, walking with a gold-tipped cane. He looked back at me with a half-smile on his face, clearly glad to see me again, and then he disappeared into the crowd.