

Before I was married, before I was ordained, I took a trip to Asia. The purpose of the trip was to visit my best friend Barbara, and her husband, Brad, who were missionaries at Jesus Abbey in the mountains of South Korea.

On the way we stopped in Hong Kong, visited south China, and spent time in Japan. We went on to Seoul, Korea where Barbara met us. We began the adventure of the trip to Jesus Abbey by going to the main Seoul train station at 9 o'clock at night where we caught a train and spent the night in a sleeper car.

It was all fine and well except our bunks were directly under the train whistle which went "whoo-whoo-whoo" all night long as we passed through and stopped in the various towns on the way.

When we got to our stop at daybreak, about 5 in the morning, I was exhausted, cranky, and quite annoyed. We had to jump off the train with our baggage in about one minute, because the train only stopped that long. About 20 or 30 Koreans jammed the door with us and we all jumped off and began to sprint toward the public bus at the other end of the parking lot which was the next part of our journey.

The bus started out on a 2 lane paved road until we got to the town closest to Jesus Abbey, which was a coal mining town.

As we looked out the entire town was clothed with black coal dust, except for the schoolchildren dressed in their white uniforms. God bless their mothers.

At this point the road became dirt as it headed into the mountains, and the bus slowed way down as it lumped and bumped over the ruts and potholes dried into the mud from the rainy season.

We traveled on this way deeper and deeper into the mountains until we reached our stop, which was really a snack shack set by a local resident who made a little money selling sodas and gum to people arriving with, and departing on, the bus.

From there we began walking on a dirt trail which crossed a river and then went up up up the mountain. We passed through fields of 15 ft. tall marijuana plants, which was quite a sight, but they were not fertile, and were used to make hemp rope, the local cash crop.

We finally reached Jesus Abbey which was a stone abbey perched on the side of the mountain, built by the American Anglican priest who founded the place with the assistance of Koreans. To go from one room to another, you literally went up and down stairs because the mountain side was so steep.

I learned a lot from the Koreans who came to Jesus Abbey: we observed morning and evening prayer and weekly Eucharist for which we prepared on Saturday. Groups of 80-90 came every

weekend. About 30 Koreans lived there along with 12-15 Americans, Canadians, and Australians. The Koreans were very devout, and I absorbed a lot of this deep spirituality.

One thing I remember very vividly is the young men who went out on the mountainside to pray at night. It was a Korean custom to call out very loudly to God: Ju-yo! Ju-Yo! (God, God) and I can still hear their voices punctuating the stillness of the night.

We are all on a spiritual journey, even though we may not have thought of it, or care about it, or even want to think about it. We are all on a journey towards greater wholeness, greater holiness, and a deeper understanding of our own gifts and destiny and calling, and how to live them out. Our spiritual journeys have many qualities similar to this pilgrimage to Jesus Abbey.

Sometimes we have something in our life like the train whistle, which is annoying, and difficult, and which won't go away and which leaves us exhausted, tired and annoyed. It is ironic, but while we may feel that God is far away, it is in fact the opposite. These can be the times when God is closest: These are the experiences that cleanse us, and burn away the dross and the chaff, and deepen our relationship to God.

Sometimes, we are rushing around, so busy and frantic that we have no time for spirituality, or thoughts, and much else but doing what we have to do.

Other times, it is like we are on the bus: going through the routines, sometimes a little bored, lumping and bumping along, just going through daily life with it's little ups and downs.

Other times we ascend the mountain, and this is when we feel we are really being spiritual. We feel close to God, and we pray, and have our spirits lifted. From these experiences we take moments which continue to inspire and nourish us as we go back to daily life. Coming to church on Sunday can provide this: a weekly experience of spiritual glory which carries us through the week.

Jesus was on a spiritual journey too. We don't know when and how he came to fully understand his own gifts, and destiny, and calling but surely this time on the Mount of Transfiguration was a big part of it.

Matthew knows exactly who Jesus was and tells us in his gospel. "After six days..." Jesus is the 7th day of Creation, and the fulfillment of that creation. Elijah and Moses appear on the mountain. Elijah, the greatest of all prophets, Moses the lawgiver who led the people out of captivity in Egypt. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. And the great light: Jesus becomes a light-being. Jesus is the embodiment of the Divine Light of the Universe.

The disciples are like us. They were terror-struck when they saw this display and they fall to the ground and cover their heads. It is not until Jesus comes over and touches them on the shoulder, and says "Get up" that they open their eyes. When they do, they see that he is alone. We too would be overwhelmed by the magnificence of the divine if God came in all his glory, and we too we have Jesus alone. Through him, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we understand and worship God. It is Jesus who travels with us on our spiritual journey.

Back to the young men in the middle of the night on the mountain in Korea calling out "Ju-yo!" "Ju-yo!" (God!). Here is a poem by the Sufi (Islamic) poet Rumi from the mid-13th century:

One night a man was crying: Allah! Allah! (God! God!)
His lips grew sweet with the praising until a cynic said,
"So! I have heard you calling out, but have you ever gotten
any response?"

The man had no answer to that.
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.

He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,
in a thick green foliage.
"Why did you stop praising?"
"Because I've never heard anything back"
"This longing you express is the return message"

The grief you cry out from draws you toward union.
Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup.
Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.
There are love-dogs no one know the names of.
Give your life to be one of them.

The Illuminated Rumi Coleman Barks & Michael Green