

SPIRITUAL TOURISM

Once, years ago, Mariana and I went to Puerto Vallarta and acted pretty much the tourist. However, with minor exceptions, we had never gone the pure tourist route together up until a couple of weeks ago. I'm simply confessing that it was a rather new experience for me. We "toured" Alaska, as much as we had time and money for. I had been eager to see Alaska for a long time. It was wonderful, and I thoroughly enjoyed myself. Taking a cruise tour is also special. It's a unique way to see a place of such vast distances and sparse population yet still never get lonesome for rush-hour traffic.

On the other hand, I don't think it would be possible to see so much, learn so much, or do it with such ease and comfort in so brief a time in any other way. It is crucial to what comes later that I emphasize this point. I *enjoyed* the journey. I am glad I was a tourist in Alaska, and I am happy we took the cruise that we took. It was a marvelous experience, and it already feels like another one of those special memories that are so pleasant to have and to look back on over the years.

One of the things I liked best about Alaska was the long days. It is wonderful to be able to stay up eighteen to twenty hours a day and not have to feel guilty about it. Somehow if the sun doesn't go down, your conscience is clear. I'm still chuckling about a tour sign I saw advertising a sight-seeing excursion to Nome, Kotzebue, and Barrow. It began: "FOUR DAYS, NO NIGHTS." Wonderful! I never made it to Kotzebue, by the way. That's the second time I haven't made it to Kotzebue. My folks were offered the chance to be missionaries there when I was in about the fifth grade. It's fun sometimes to wonder what our lives would have been like if ...

Anyway, with the days so long and time to stare out the window, you think lots of thoughts. I got to thinking one day about "spiritual tourism": all the many "places" and things and experiences and wonders there are to see in our time in the area of spirituality. Alaska is surely one of the last physical frontiers left on the globe, but the true frontier today is not Alaska. The true frontier is the realm of the spirit – the vast, uncharted domains of spiritual awareness: consciousness of the dimensions beyond the physical, and consciousness of God.

The two can go together, of course. Seeing new sights, especially Alaskan-type sights, can prepare the way for awareness beyond the physical. Mighty mountains, vast oceans, and the canopy of the stars can turn our thoughts to the realms beyond. Stories of the frontier, the gold-rush days, and what winter is like can remind anyone with imagination of the forgotten link between nature and survival. Dependence makes us think of God. Even the realization that our luggage is in the hands of college students from Bellingham is enough to give us pause.

Nevertheless, the number of “tours” and “cruises” being offered into the realms of the spiritual that are being advertised today is truly endless. Not only do we have an endless array of churches and denominations, but for the first time in history most of the world religions have heard about each other. That in itself constitutes an endless array of tours being advertised and offered for our spiritual exploration. With various promises of excitement and comfort, we can pick almost any spiritual tour or combination to match our tastes and pocketbooks. And that’s only the beginning.

What has truly mushroomed in our time is not only the number of groups and gurus a person can join up with, but the number of short-term encounters or retreat experiences that are available. From workshops to weekends to specialized courses to two- or three-week intensives, the array of spiritual tours being offered is astonishing.

I think we should see this as really wonderful and consider ourselves fortunate to be able to participate in such a time of awakening. And we should be encouraging each other to go on as many of these spiritual tours as we have time and money for. So many people are too cautious and afraid of having new experiences in this regard. Part of it is an ingrained warning that all established religions seem to put out against any exploration beyond their own familiar borders. All religious institutions require a certain amount of loyalty and allegiance from their adherents in order to survive. We get jealous if people start finding “the goods” outside of our territory. So each religious group tends to foster taboos against fooling around outside the fold.

It’s amusing, perhaps, to listen to Adventists talk about what’s wrong with Nazarenes, or listening to Pentecostals talk about how far away from God’s plan they think Jehovah’s Witnesses are. But I also

hear UCC people wondering if somehow they will be “ruined” if they try Transcendental Meditation or Four Springs. Will they be corrupted if they go on a retreat with a Catholic friend? Will they be irreparably lost if they have an astrology chart done, try Hindu meditation techniques, or study Buddhism? I did not realize that taboos and superstitions were still so strong until I came to the Northwest, which is the least “churched” of any area in the country. How do you figure that? I know several of our members who are fascinated about “speaking in tongues” yet are “afraid” to visit some nearby meetings where people do that. What a shame if our faith has degenerated into such fearfulness that we are no longer willing to take any risks. What a shame if our faith is so stagnant that we think we no longer need to explore new terrain.

No one person can begin to keep up with all the spiritual tours being offered today. But every one of us should be taking some of these tours as occasion permits. And we should be telling each other what we are finding. That really is one of the proper and fundamental functions of the church: each of us exploring, and each of us sharing what we are finding.

There is no way to work it, but if I could figure out a way, I suspect I would try to make it a requirement for membership that every one of us sometime each year would go on some kind of spiritual tour: a workshop, a retreat, a conference, a course of some kind – preferably outside our own church’s borders. Even when we stumble into bad experiences or sheer baloney (there is a lot of that on most tours, spiritual or otherwise), wouldn’t that still teach and enrich our fellowship? Don’t we sometimes learn as much from the negative as from the positive?

If I take a tour to Alaska, what is the point? I have to bring something home with me or there is no reason to go. I must come home with a new understanding, a new insight, a different dimension to my thinking – or the trip was for nothing. It has to impress me, move me, expand me in some way – or I should have stayed home. At the very most, of course, I will be so impressed that I will decide to stay in Alaska, or come home only long enough to prepare to move there. In any case, either I have to bring something of Alaska home with me or I have to move myself to Alaska – or the tour was a dud, a waste.

By the way, I suspect that connects with the motivation behind the curio shop. Sometimes maybe it is just a substitute, but more often perhaps it is a symbol. Either way, there is the strong urge to carry home something physical from a trip – a reminder, a memento, a symbol of that other higher thing we also need to bring home from every trip: a new awareness, a larger or wider truth. I also found myself wanting to bring home a memento for almost everybody I know. Curious feeling. Kept having to remind myself, “What would so-and-so do with a carved walrus tooth, even if I could afford it?” Not being in Alaska, it would not have the same value for him anyway, would it? But still the urge remained. Fascinating. We have some of the same problems trying to bring back something from our spiritual tours, don’t we?

So I think the spiritual tours are wonderful, and we should all be availing ourselves of those that appeal to us and sharing what we can of them with each other. It is the new frontier, and it is a marvelous time to be alive and to be part of opening up this particular frontier.

The second thing we need to know and remember is that the tours can never do for us what we hope they will do. They can bring or renew enthusiasm. They can inspire and give us a taste of new horizons. They can send us home with new vision, and sometimes with new awareness of potential we have been missing at home. Occasionally they may even inspire us to move altogether from where we are to some new place. But a tour can never do for us what we hope it will do. The empty place – the thing we really seek – well, a tour may heighten the longings, but touring itself is a longing to *find* home. It is not a way to *go* home.

This is not a put-down on tourism, physical or spiritual. We just need to know and remember what a tour is for and what it is not for. Traveling for two weeks in Alaska does not make me an Alaskan. It may capture my interest and feed me a lot of information and experience. For a while, in my imagination, I partake of just a bit of what it might be like to be an Alaskan. But I am not. I am a tourist passing through. I have never spent a winter there. I can imagine a lot, but I still do not know what it would really be like, and I never will unless I go and live there for many years.

Going on a spiritual tour does not make me spiritual either. It may capture my interest and give me a lot of information and experience. For a while, in my imagination, I partake of what it might be like to be a spiritual pilgrim. But I am not – not from simply going to workshops, retreats, intensives, whatever. Even if I start taking lots of spiritual tours or start going on longer ones, that still cannot turn me into a spiritual pilgrim. I might even get really fascinated, study up, learn the information, and become a tour guide every summer, taking other tourists on the tour. That still does not make me an Alaskan – or a spiritual pilgrim. The tour cannot do it for us. It has its place and function, and that's fine. But it cannot do it for us. No matter how much we get into touring and tourism, it never progresses beyond a certain point or graduates us into what we are really seeking.

There is that phrase in Paul's letter to the Philippians that moves beyond all tourism: "*I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.*" (Philippians 3:12) Paul is still on a journey, but there is no tourism left in that phrase. Paul is not looking; he has bought it. Paul wants the reality. He is still searching, but he has also found enough to know he wants it. He is no longer passing through. He wants it for his own – he wants it to be part of him. He wants it to be his whole life!

Many strange things occur when we move beyond tourism and want to "make it our own." They are not all pleasant, at least at first. Suppose I keep touring Alaska until its vast beauty and potential seem familiar, I get a feeling for all the wondrous breadth and scope of it, and then I cross that fatal line and decide I want to be an Alaskan. I think of all the places I have been in Alaska and all that I have seen, and I pick a place to settle. That in itself is a whole fantastic process. Nevertheless it is conversion, is it not? In religious language, the line between touring and deciding to live there is called "conversion."

But to live in Alaska, I have to settle in somewhere. And what is the very first thing that happens the moment I make that decision? I lose the vista, the vastness, the scope of the very thing that drew me. I plunk myself down to make it my own, to mean business, to become part of it. I plunk myself down and dig in – in Anchorage or Fairbanks or Juneau or some *place*. Instantly I have lost the thrill and excitement and splendor of the great land – the larger picture that drew me there. And so I have to dig in to make it my own. I have to learn to survive

in a specific place, learn the ropes, and become a very small part of a very large place. To make it my own, I have to do that. Otherwise I am only a sight-seer forever. And it is exactly the same way with spiritual tourism.

As a tourist, I can keep wandering through: seeing what others are building; seeing what others have accomplished; imagining all the things that could be done and might be done (and probably will be done) by others. But the moment I *invest* myself, another kind of reality sets in. It is not nasty; it is just necessary: After every conversion, the next thing we have to do is learn to survive the winter. We go back to humility – after what seemed grand and expansive. We go back to daily things and daily disciplines – after the excesses of tourism. We go back to being a very small part of a very vast enterprise – after feeling that everything was being done for us. We come off of even the most inspiring retreats and still have to dig in someplace with our own daily living in order to make it our own.

The funny thing is, despite the come-down, it feels much better. Tourism is a wonderful, necessary, important phase, but there is something empty about it. Coming home to something real is better. Being part of something authentic is what we are really after. Not always on the outside, but always on the inside, what we want is an authentic truth – something for which and about which we can “press on to make it our own.”

Nobody can say our prayers for us, study the Scriptures for us, come to know Jesus for us, or learn to walk with God for us – not after we move beyond merely “touring” Christianity. There comes a time when we have to “move in,” stake our own claim, learn to survive the winters, and learn our own territory and the neighbors who really live here too. If it is ever going to be our own, it has to get deeper than the fancy stuff and steadier than the flash and fluff of touring.

Somehow God keeps giving us glimpses, but God never lets us into the Kingdom until we want it for ourselves and want it more than we want anything else – until we want to make it our own, and all the way.

After the initial shock and dismay, isn't it wonderful that God does it that way?