

## Interview with Jana Reiss and Mark Ogilbee

*Jana Reiss:*

1. In the chapter on the Shrine of St. Jude, you observe that “we don’t leave our comfort zones because we crave adventure, but because we feel we have few options.” How does this reality draw people to this famous shrine?

St. Jude is the saint of last resort, the one you turn to when you have nowhere else to go. He’s utterly unglamorous, which is part of his appeal; he’s the saint who sees us when we are most raw and alone, so we need him to be accessible. Many people are surprised when they visit the National Shrine of St. Jude that it’s actually not as imposing or as grand as they had imagined; his shrine has nothing on some of the great cathedrals. But that’s precisely the point. We’re not there to be impressed; we’re there to pour out our hearts. Even the statue of St. Jude is relatively small and welcoming, not towering above us but almost down at our level. Jude is the saint we want to be with when our hearts are broken. He appeals to people of all traditions – I’ve lit a candle at his shrine myself, and I’m a Mormon. I think Jude is beautiful.

2. In your chapter on the Community of Jesus, you talk about the quality of honesty and openness that permeates the community. How does this quality distinguish the community from other places of pilgrimage? With its intense focus on lifelong process of transfiguration, what can a visitor take away from a short weekend stay?

It’s astonishing how transformative it can be to spend time in a place where people take great pains to live the gospel commandment of honesty. It’s not warm and fuzzy; it’s hard work! Honesty is bracing. But even someone who visits the Community for a short time comes away with a sense of how genuine honesty and the freedom from pretending—to be successful, to be a good parent, whatever—releases us to serve God and serve our own gifts. People remark on the outpouring of creativity at the Community, on its musical heritage and commitment to the arts, but what has struck me on my visits is that there is a direct relationship between that creative abundance and the Community’s unguardedness. Creativity flourishes when people are allowed to shed the masks they wear.

3. A couple of the book’s chapters deal with silent retreats. Why would people want to make a pilgrimage to a place of silence?

For me it is a question of clutter. So much of life is defined by verbal clutter – the gratuitous noise that surrounds us everywhere. It’s increasingly difficult to hear ourselves think, let alone attend to what God might be saying. At the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, which I write about in the book, some people enter with this very romantic idea of what a silent retreat is going to feel like, and sometimes they are pretty freaked out by what they find. Some even go home because they find silence, real silence, oppressive. However, if they give it a chance, as most pilgrims do, they will find it liberating. I love the freedom that silence affords—freedom to listen, freedom to read, freedom from having to make small talk. And I’m an extrovert!

4. Why do people flock to the home of a long-dead singer, Elvis Presley, to seek new life and spiritual inspiration? What is it that causes even non-religious people to treat Graceland with such fervent devotion?

The urge to go on pilgrimage is not restricted to those people who consciously define themselves as “religious”; it is universal. I wanted to include Graceland in the book to challenge the stereotype that “religious” people go on pilgrimages and “secular” people take vacations to tourist destinations. Graceland is a fascinating blend of the sacred and the profane, the holy and the worldly. What’s interesting about it to me, as a student of American religious history, is that Elvis is for many a kind of secular saint; we are bound to him not because he was sanctified, as a traditional saint would be, but because he was so very wounded and vulnerable. People are profoundly moved by Elvis. In the book I talk about how several new religions have sprung up in his name, but the real story is how much larger Elvis’s religious appeal actually is.

*Mark Ogilbee –*

1. You and Jana write in your foreword, “Pilgrimage is about opening ourselves to change and growth, and inviting new experiences to alter our perspective.” Can you share an example of how a pilgrimage experience altered your own perspective?

One thing I discovered over and over again was the value of simply *slowing down*, and each pilgrimage site I visited offered me an opportunity to do that in one way or another. And when I did slow down, I found that my mind made a fundamental shift—I ceased being a “writer working on a book” and instead entered into the pilgrimage or spiritual experience itself, which was mentally a much more expansive place to be.

Sometimes this took me completely by surprise. A good example is my first few minutes in Sedona. I had driven many, many miles that day and arrived in town in a foul mood. I checked into my hotel, and as I walked through the parking lot back to my Jeep, I became suddenly aware that my mood had utterly changed in the space of five minutes—I now felt remarkably relaxed, at peace. I looked up and, wouldn’t you know it? There across the way was a red rock formation glowing in the setting sun. Was it mysterious red rock energy that altered my frame of mind just then? Was it my soul’s response to the beauty? Or simply relief at the end of a long drive? I’m not sure. When I think back on that moment, I’m not sure I want to be sure. But the change was real.

2. You write that the walk to Chimayo “encourages a fundamental shift in perception, from seeing the world in strict rational categories, to perceiving it through the lens of *possibility*.” How is this appealing change in our viewpoint possible?

We are so frequently tied up by the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves: I’m this, I’m not that; I can do this, I can’t do that—and these become a kind of shorthand for our

identity. We believe them, and don't often take the time or energy to ask if these stories about ourselves are actually true. So these stories limit us.

But when you get outside and start walking and don't stop for hours or even days, you create for yourself a large space and large time, and your mind starts to play with this kind of stuff, and you begin to wonder if this or that story has, in fact, created a barrier in your mind that isn't actually there.

The walk itself represents this kind of mental barrier for many Chimayo pilgrims. "I never thought I could do it!" they say—yet there they are, in the courtyard of *el santuario*, having walked all night. And if that barrier proved to be imaginary, what other barriers might be likewise illusory?

3. What is the difference between "faith healing" and "divine healing" as evidenced at the Healing Rooms of the Santa Maria Valley?

This is an important distinction that everyone who visits the Healing Rooms is careful to make. The healing they experience there is not a result of how much, or how little, faith a person may have. Rather, the healing is understood to flow out of the depths of God's goodness, loving, and healing nature. This is freeing, because you never have to wonder if your doubts or fears are somehow short-circuiting the healing process—which of course would only lead to more worry and fear.

4. In the chapter on Sedona, you note that "beauty can transition you from rushing tourist to contemplative pilgrim . . . beauty helps you surrender distractions and timetables and explore what's really going on in your own heart." Can you give a couple of examples of how beauty has affected the people who make a pilgrimage to the Red Rocks of Sedona?

It happened to me (see above). Another example is a couple from Canada who were simply passing through as tourists, not expecting to spend any significant time in Sedona and certainly not to look for a spiritual experience. Yet they spotted the Chapel of the Holy Cross from the road and felt compelled by some internal drive to go up to it. Once there, up among the beauty of the rocks and the striking architecture of the Chapel, they found themselves spontaneously slowing down, opening up, and beginning to get in touch with the grief they had been experiencing—or perhaps hadn't yet been really experiencing—over the sudden death of a friend. Unexpected—and healing.

5. What is the appeal of Thich Nhat Hanh's immensely popular outdoor talks? How is it possible for people living such stressed-out lives to truly be "in the moment"?

Living in the moment is a challenge, isn't it! As I understand them, Thich Nhat Hanh's words encourage people to not *try* so much—don't try to fix or change anything before beginning to practice. Instead, simply pay attention: right here, right now, wherever and whenever that happens to be. If you're stressed out, that's not an enemy of mindfulness; just pay attention to the stress. In my mind, this is the power of the slogans written on

those red banners such as “You have arrived” and “You are home”—you are already right where you are supposed to be. It’s OK. You’re OK. Pay attention.

Though, really, it’s more than just Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings that encourage this understanding—it’s just as much his example, in the way he walks, sits, even eats. He is one of those rare people who have a such a *presence* about him—sweet, but direct; relaxed, but purposeful; experienced, but innocent, too. His actual presence is at least as eloquent and compelling as his talks themselves—which, I think, helps account for his enormous popularity and why people return year after year to go on retreat with him.