The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry - Rachel Joyce

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

There are a variety of issues that people face as they grow older, but one of the saddest and emotionally debilitating is when people are stuck in the past with emotional trauma or negative feelings of resentment and fear. It is one of the spiritual gifts of aging that people can potentially move on towards more whole and life-affirming postures of contentment, gratitude, and reconciliation with one’s own sense of self and disinterested friends and family. The sad reality, though, is that not everyone makes these moves. Research for understanding spirituality, religion and aging and expressing pastoral care may draw on psychological and therapeutic approaches, theories and stages of faith theories, and theological, sociological and cultural analysis. But there are also insights to be gained from literary analysis. This review identifies a recent British novel as a significant text for examining the experience of aging, religion and spirituality through the lens of its major character and his spontaneous pilgrimage.

Rachel Joyce, a British playwright, has tamed her hands to writing this novel. Her main character is Harold Fry, a recently retired school teacher who was abandoned as a child. He is now living with his estranged wife Maureen, and has not seen their son David for twenty years. His life starts to change, however, after receiving a letter from Queenie, a close colleague who disappeared from his workplace years ago after being found under suspicious circumstances. She is dying from cancer and thanks David for past kind words. David pens a letter of sympathy, sets it off posthaste around the corner, bulks up walking. Inspired by the people he meets and determined to have faith that Queenie can keep living, the walk becomes a pilgrimage from southern England to Queenie’s hospice in Scotland. Harold sets off with case Queenie, but looks for other things along the way. He struggles with what his life has meant and how his relationships have developed. Walking compatriots memories both fond and painful— of joy in romance and fatherhood, as well as abandonment and overwhelming secondary. He sets out simply— without a planned route or hiking equipment — and later simplifies further by giving away belongings and piling his walking shoes. He sympathetically listens to various characters and their dialogues, and offers listeners to listen and help them understand his issues. The reasons why some characters go on pilgrimage are not clear, and not all are intriguing. For example, while Harold is reticent to pray because of past hurt and disappointment, a fellow traveler for a time seems eager to pray at every opportunity. The openness (or not) to prayer reveals as much about the characters’ underlying anxieties as their belief (or not) in God. As much of the pilgrimage spreads Fry becomes, for a time, a kind of Poet Drum with a following of fellow pilgrims with various agendas and interpersonal conflicts. Fry and the group are a window into aspects of religious expression that are sometimes attractive and life-giving and sometimes repetitive and dysfunctional.

The result is a delightful fictional travel narrative and foil for love story and more. It’s a page-turner of a novel. It’s also a thoughtful reflection on how an older man journeys with life and spirituality and where he sees religion fitting (or not). Harold Fry set out spontaneously seeking one thing, and serendipitously develops in other needed directions of self-discovery, reconciliation and coming to terms with disappointment, tragedy and pain. He walks 627 miles over 87 days, and discovers insights for himself and others that he did not expect. The book addresses themes of work, discrimination, health, sexuality, family, social expectations and aging in entertainment and thought-provoking episodes along the road. The novel is relevant to aging in general, but has particular relevance for considering the implications of masculinities for aging. It explores how men navigate relationships and social expectations, gender and sexuality, aging and aging. These are important factors in men’s experience of religion and spirituality and in the pastoral care of men, as long as religious and pastoral care takes a broad interest in men’s lives and not be limited to narrowly devotional aspects.

Fry actually finds little time for cheerful prayer. He lets others pray but finds it hard, or incoherent, to pray himself. Yet his pilgrimage and walking evolve as an explicit expression of faith for his friend Queenie. And it provides space for his own meditation and growth in life-giving directions.

At the risk of cliché, Fry does find value in the journey rather than the destination. It is half-way through the pilgrimage and the book that he begins to really find himself transparently deals with his motivations and simply walk. In Joyce’s words: “Harold believed his journey was truly beginning. He had thought it started the moment he decided to walk to Berlin, but he saw now that he had been naive. Beginnings could happen more than once, or in different ways. You could think you were starting something anew, when actually what you were doing was carrying on as before. He had faced his shortcomings and overcome them, and so the real business of walking was happening only now.” (p.178)

Even the end of the journey becomes a fresh start for deeper reconciliation with meaning.

This reviewer especially appreciated the prompt-offering book to prioritise letter-writing it is too late, to find and pursue a vocation that really matters, and to have the courage to stand up against injustice and jingoism and think they can assert their own masculinity by belittling others.

Today thousands of millions of people travel the world as tourists. Typically they cover many miles in a few days, take their belongings in large suitcases and buy more products and souvenirs along the way. An alternative travel mode is pilgrimage — a more ancient tradition that is growing in popularity. Pilgrims usually travel longer to travel further distances than tourists, and do so with more intentionality for self-reflection and spiritual development. For many first-century spirituality, pilgrimage has potential to help people towards greater wholesomeness and self-awareness. The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry is an entertaining novel about a unlikely pilgrim who offers insightful insight into the challenge and potential to grow through relationships, spirituality, work and health issues, and to let older and wiser along the journey. The book encourages travel — geographic and metaphoric — that goes deeper than surface-level tourism but to pursue travel and life with purpose and transparency.