



My name is John and I'm retired (except for some freelance translation) and like to travel alone. I take lots of photos, look for second hand books which become part of the journey, keep a log and collect fridge magnets. I try to give my trips form and meaning with missions and quests. This is Part 17 of my **Pilgrim Chronicles**.

## Joshua Tree

It's Friday, April 6, 2018, and two family weekends in Orange County, California, will bookend a 5-day road trip to Palm Springs and Joshua Tree National Park, which I visited two years ago. Not likely to amount to a pilgrim story, but I've opened a small notebook anyway and maybe it will be the shortest documented trip so far. There's nothing else planned, except to take photos and walk in the desert to warm and dry out winter bones.

After so many visits, the Los Angeles region has come to feel like an alternate home that I often think I don't like very much but feels good to return to nevertheless. An alternate world of eternal sunshine. Arriving and picking up a car at John Wayne Airport in Orange County is simple and easy compared to Los Angeles International, and my son's house is only fifteen minutes away. I will be immersed in family until Sunday morning when Grandpa escapes to Fullerton for books and mass at St. Philip Benizi, a pleasant, suburban-working-class church where the first reading is from the book of Acts:

"The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they held everything in common. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need."

In the Gospel story, Jesus pops up, not for the first time after his death, in a room full of apostles. This is where Thomas does his famous doubting and Jesus invites him to feel the holes in his hands and side. “My Lord, my God,” says Thomas, acknowledging the truth. “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed,” says Jesus. I have lunch in downtown Fullerton and find two books at Half-Off Books: *Faith, Sex, Mystery: A Memoir*, by Richard Gilman, and *Nothing to Be Frightened of*, by Julian Barnes.

On Monday morning I begin my mini-road trip with the first stop being the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway that rises dramatically 8,000 feet in 15 minutes to the top of Mount Jacinto. But, aside from the steep and dramatic rise, there’s not much to see at the top, so I drive into the city to check out the Camelot Theaters in the Palm Springs Cultural Center where the American Documentary Film Festival is underway. Someone at the ticket booth asks if there is a senior discount. “*Everybody* who lives here is old,” says the old man in the booth, shaking his head.

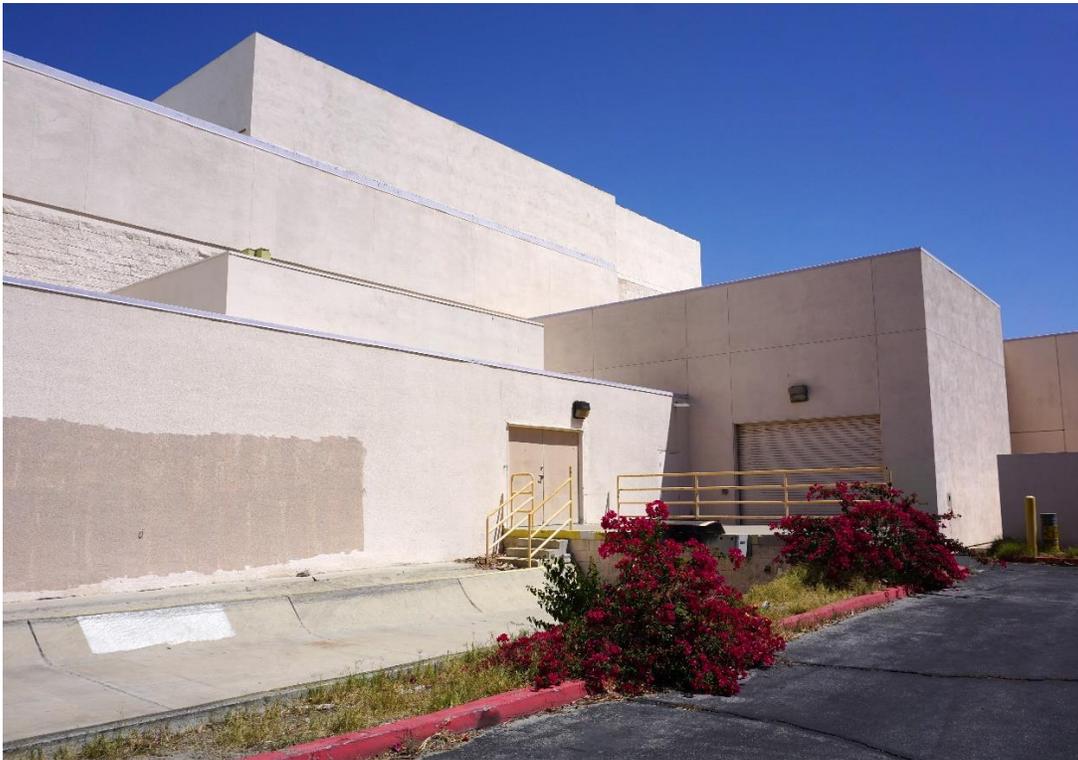
The local Panda Express, my preferred source of fast food in this part of the world, is weird and the food is disappointing. The fortune cookie says, “Your path may be difficult, but it will be rewarding.”

It’s hot in the desert today. I slip into a Starbucks for coffee and to book a room at the Stardust Hotel on my phone. By the time I get to nearby Indian Canyons, hoping to take a short hike, it’s almost closing time, so I decide to turn back and drive slowly up and down empty streets lined with pristine, shuttered houses. Taking photos for the first time in months in beautiful sunlight in a strange place with absolutely nothing else to do is good enough after months of cold, dark, colorless winter. It’s too hot to walk very much anyway; I can feel the sun burning, even through my shirt.

The music on the car radio, from the heyday of this former holiday mecca (Sinatra, etc.) sounds 100% fresh, like I’ve moved back in time. My wandering takes me back to the Palm Springs Mall, the abandoned shopping center next to the Camelot Theaters. More of the faded glamour that lingers here. *Living in the Future’s Past* is the film playing at the festival tonight.



Fullerton, California



Palm Springs Mall

I don't like the film at all, a celebrity eco-documentary narrated and produced by Jeff Bridges, definitely not my favorite genre. It's overlaid with ominous music and the usual visual clichés of, for example, time-lapse shots of clouds moving fast across the sky or cars streaming along freeways that are made to look like rivers or arteries. And of course, there's the single monotonous tone of inescapable doom. It's too late - there's no hope! Anybody who will take the time to watch this film probably already believes this, so why produce a depressing documentary to preach the obvious to the converted? It's the type of virtue-signalling that makes progressives feel both guilty and like they doing something about a life-and-death issue.

The one point made by the film that seems directly aimed at making me feel personally guilty is the fact that if you're receiving a pension, like me, the fund is almost certainly based on investments that keep the doomsday machine running. Wonderful! We're all going to die and it's my fault.

In the evening I continue reading *Faith, Sex, Mystery*. The book is a memoir written by a New York Jewish atheist intellectual who converted to Catholicism for eight years at the age of twenty-nine. This is how he explains his conversion:

He says he didn't go to the church, the church came to him. It was a hot and humid summer day in New York and he was bored. He wanted to read something but nothing on his own bookshelf appealed. He decided to take the Lexington Avenue bus to the Cathedral branch of the New York Public Library. He found five or six books but on the way to the checkout desk was pulled by an invisible force against his will towards an alcove of the library he had never visited before, which turned out to be the section on religion, a subject he had absolutely no interest in. Something compelled him once again against his will to take *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* by Etienne Gilson off the shelf three or four times before deciding that, if he wanted to ever leave the library, he would have to take the book with him.

On the way home, on the Lexington Avenue bus, he held the book out the window and the only reason he didn't drop it was that he couldn't afford to pay for it. Once home, he tried to ignore the book but was, once again, compelled by a mysterious force to read it straight through over the next two days. It changed the way he saw the world and ultimately led to his conversion.



Palm Springs



Palm Springs

It's a remarkable story, verging on supernatural, but what made it even more *inter-dimensional* was what happened the following summer when he once again found himself in the same alcove in the same library and this time he was compelled to take out *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton's famous autobiographical account of his own conversion to Catholicism and eventual ordination as a priest and monk. In the book, Merton tells an identical story of being bored one day and taking the same Lexington Avenue bus to the same library and feeling the same compulsion in the same alcove to take out the same book and then taking the same bus home and feeling the same urge to throw the same book out the window. Once home, he also reads the book straight through in the same obsessive way and ultimately it leads to his conversion.

It's been an eventful day and I find myself wondering again in my room at the Stardust Hotel if, after all, this will be the shortest pilgrimage story ever. Not unthinkable, if each day is like today.

I'm back at Indian Canyons early the next morning, thinking I'll avoid the mid-day heat, but I'm pretty much fried after a two-mile desert hike. On the way out, I ask one of the park rangers what it's like to live here and he says it's not for everybody. It used to be abandoned in the summer but now, with air-conditioning, people stay all year round, never leaving their houses in summer, except to get in the car or jump in the pool, just like we stay indoors most of the winter back home.

It's already 90 degrees by 10:30 when I set out for Joshua Tree National Park. There are two places I want to visit on the way and both are a bust. I would need to have kids with me to enjoy the kitschy dinosaurs at Cabazon, and the Institute of Mentalphysics in Yucca Valley, where I thought I might book a room for the night, is New-Agey and unwelcoming. There are no accommodations available and I don't have the suitable hair and magic white clothes anyway. For a place that promised to be beautiful (building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and scenic desert pathways) it's in a weird spot, just off an ugly stretch of highway.



Palm Springs



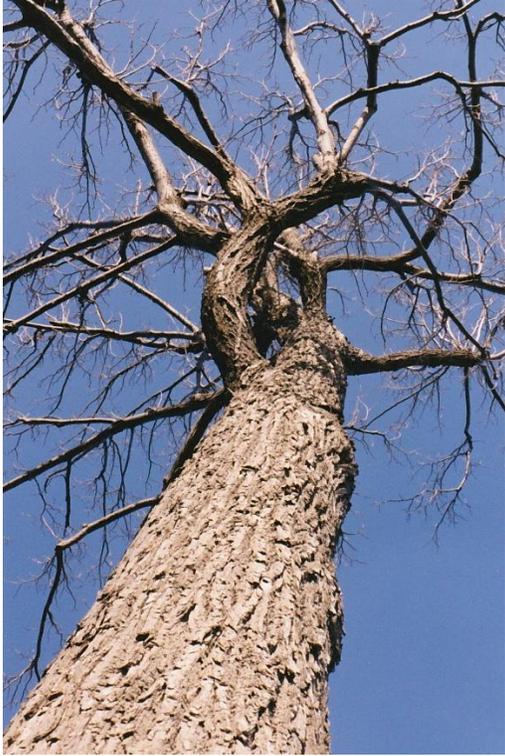
Indian Canyons, Palm Springs

Instead, I find a room at a low-brow motel on the main drag in Yucca Valley. More my style. I'm thinking I'll linger in Joshua Tree for the next two days. But before I leave for the park, twenty minutes away, I'm surprised to discover there's a used bookstore directly across the street from my motel. The Cactus Wren Bookstore is a bit mouldy, and for some reason the books are shelved sideways, which I really don't like. I find an ancient, almost crumbling paperback copy of Groucho Marx's autobiography, *Groucho and Me*, and the friendly owner, an Orange County native, tells me that when he was a child a hundred years ago he saw Harpo (the silent Marx brother) speak in public for the first time ever. There's a yellowed, folded, type-written note in the book which suggests it hasn't been opened in fifty-seven years. The note is from U.S. Air Force Captain Leroy G. Miller to SBBB, a response to a query about parking at Norton Air Force Base.

Then it's off to the Park where it feels wonderful to be back with the wacky Joshua cactus-trees and it occurs to me almost immediately that I could weave into this little trip an old story about a mysterious interaction I had with four special trees almost twenty years ago. I encountered these trees in Montreal on May 5, 1999, when I walked into nearby Jarry Park after signing a lease for an apartment on Rue Jules Verne where I would live alone for the first time in my life at the age of forty-five.

Entering the southeast corner of the huge park, I wondered if any of the older trees were already here when I used to come often to this same spot at the age of thirteen. I could vaguely remember sitting on the grass and "talking" to them as a teenager. I sat at a picnic table, saw only four old-enough trees, and wondered if they remembered me. An airliner climbing into the sky was passing high above my head, but low enough that I could feel the earth rumble under my feet, grounding me in a way for what would happen next.

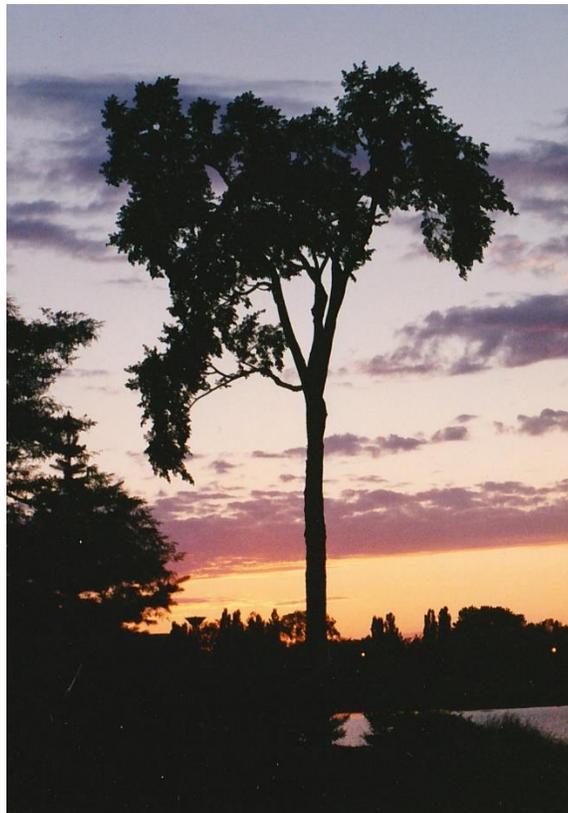
The airliner turned in the sky directly above me, flew over the tree to my left, its taillight the same orangey-red as the star (which I confirmed later to be Mars) next to it. In that moment, somewhere in my solar plexus, I felt personally connected to the four trees and instantly gave them names. The tree to my left, leaning over gracefully to one side, I called *Dancer*. To my right was *Number One*, with another bright star (confirmed later to be Venus) hanging above it. Ahead of me, across the lake, was the tall, elegant tree I named *Beauty*. And finally, directly in front of me, just a few feet away, was the tree I identified as *Me*.



Dancer



Number One



Beauty

Something would happen the next time I visited the park two weeks later that would leave me feeling permanently connected to the trees, and over the next few months I would be moved to ask a question whenever I entered what I would come to call the Prayer Wood. It was also when I started taking pictures of trees.

The Joshua Trees at the first stop in the park are as photogenic as ever and I'm looking forward to spending two days with them. They've got so much character and individuality, and they don't crowd each other, giving themselves plenty of space to stand alone in the desert.

The Joshua Tree is actually a yucca plant that the Mormons named after the Prophet Joshua who, as the Bible story goes, raised his hands up in prayer. Some of the trees really do resemble people. Under the bark, the trunks are not actually wood, consisting instead of thousands of small fibers with no rings to tell their age, but the trees are said to be capable of living up to a thousand years.

I decide to walk the one-mile loop-trail into Hidden Valley and get lost twice, walking the wrong way, counter-clockwise instead of clockwise like everyone else. Both times I feel the panic rising, lost among boulders in late afternoon, with the sun dropping low in the sky. I don't want to find myself alone with the rattlesnakes after dark.

I eventually make it back to safety, finding a souvenir on the way: a hand-sized piece of bark similar to a relic I recovered from the 1999 trees. This piece is slightly larger and much thicker, but so fragile and light it's almost weightless. The sun is setting in front of me as I leave the park, silhouetting the trees in the desert surrounding the car.

Halfway through this mini-trip, I leave the next morning with a prayer and a desire to make this second day in the Park contemplative. I return to Hidden Valley to do the loop-trail again, this time clockwise, the right way, with more people on the path, so little possibility of wandering off and dying in the desert. At one point about ten people are stopped, looking at something beside the path. A rattlesnake is slowly making its way over a large boulder about ten feet away and all of us are excited with the encounter, especially the children. Ten minutes later a young boy passes me on the path and says, *It was great seeing a rattlesnake, eh?* I wonder why he even noticed me, maybe because I stepped off the path and got a little closer to take a shot. Maybe he was expecting me to get bit.



By late morning it's 95 degrees and, for lunch and to escape the midday sun and heat, I return to Andrea's Restaurant in the town of Twentynine Palms on the other side of the Park where I did the exact same thing two years ago. After lunch I linger in the air-conditioned restaurant with coffee and my notebook.

Whenever I entered Jarry Park to visit my trees after my first encounter back in 1999, I don't know why but I would immediately ask a question and receive an instantaneous answer. Usually, the questions were related to the new independent life I was about to construct. Once, I simply walked around the small artificial lake, laying a hand on each tree and asking for advice. Beauty said, *You can't have me*, which I understood to mean *don't grasp*. Number One said, *Let me go*, which, since I understood the name Number One to refer to the external persona (so-named by Carl Jung) that we present to world, I interpreted to mean: *Release your true self into the world now that you are free*. And, finally, Dancer said simply, *Move*, which I understood to be an emphasis on action as opposed to thinking and feeling: *All that matters is what you do in the world, not what you think or feel or say*. The Me-Tree at this point was no more.

The rest of the afternoon is spent driving around the park, doing my favorite thing, taking pictures of trees and landscapes. By five, I've had enough and I'm waiting for the sun to set at Keys Lookout directly above the San Andreas Fault, wondering where to go tomorrow. But it's so windy I can't think straight so, for the second day in a row, I catch the sun setting on the way out of the park.

The wind is just as bad in Yucca Valley, with tumbleweed bouncing across the main road and sand stinging your face when you try to walk, so I reluctantly get back in the car to search for supper. In the evening I research the Joshua Tree and learn that some people don't consider it a tree at all because it's not woody. One entry describes it as "tree-like in habit". It lives only here, in the Mojave Desert.

Thursday is cooler and I decide I will see the ocean today at Carlsbad in San Diego County. I drive back west through the desert with powerful, scary winds pushing the car from side to side on the road.







I've booked a room at the Motel 6 on Carlsbad Village Drive, with everything I want to see within walking distance, including two used bookstores. The pretentiously named Lhooq calls itself a "vintage bookstore" and is 100% California. At first it looks wonderful, even perfect, but then the smugness seeps through and it loses me. No wonder the woman behind the counter didn't even glance at me when I walked in. Just like at the Institute of Mentalphysics, I don't have the appropriate look and air of faux peace and love and enlightenment. In the end there is no book for me here anyway.

Further down the road, Fahrenheit 451 is much friendlier but again I find nothing. But I do find the ocean at the end of the street, which is a surprise because I thought it was to my left. The waves are huge today and, as always, the ocean is spectacular and the air is fresh. There's a strong breeze, just brisk enough for perfect hoodie comfort, and the light is perfect too.

On the beach, close to the waves, I spot a large pebble shaped like an asymmetrical heart sitting in the smooth wet sand. I pick it up to move it out of my shadow for a shot and immediately have to jump away from an incoming surge of surf. When the surge recedes, it looks like the pebble has landed naturally in its place with a glint of sunlight reflected in the wake and nice highlights at the edges. I decide the rock is mine – I'll take it home. I wait for it to dry before placing it in a small plastic bag, without removing any of the sand still clinging to it.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to live here, in a beach community where every day is a beauty? Of course, this is just one part of California - pagan California. It's very different in the desert, especially the High Desert which can be bleak and depressing and where there seem to be more Jesus radio stations than in the Bible Belt.

The restaurants near the beach are expensive so I decide to drive south for food. I'm thinking I should give up on books - I've got more books than I can read on this trip anyway – but then further down the coast in the more down-to-earth town of Encinitas I find *Painting as a Pastime*, by Winston Churchill, at Book Tales.



The friendly lady behind the counter recommends Captain Kenos a little further up the coastal highway for fish and chips, and I love the place immediately. The food is cheap and you order it at a counter between a restaurant area and a bar. They bring my order to the bar-side of the establishment where I'm enjoying a cheap pint of Modelo beer among a bunch of regulars who look like they live here.

I start the tiny Winston Churchill book which is short enough to read in one sitting. The book is older than me, the pages dark brown at the edges and creaking like they're going to crack or turn to dust when you turn a page. It's a 1950 reprint of an essay on the value of a creative hobby, originally published in 1932. There are only 32 pages of text, with another 18 pages of paintings on individual plates.

Winston says reading is a legitimate pastime and advises younger people to "not read too much, chew it well." He says nothing makes a man more reverent than having his own library. The library should be organized, and you should browse it every now and then, pick up a book, read a few words, then pick up another. Great advice: from now on I'll try to remember to browse my own small library, which could definitely be more organized.

I make my way slowly up the coast back to Carlsbad, anticipating a cheesy beach sunset, finally finding a parking space right next to South Pinto Beach to wait for the lightshow. It's crazy windy so I sit in the car for a while to avoid the blowing sand, with the sun pouring through the side windows directly onto the dry, decomposing pages of my old book.

Winston makes a good case for the benefits of a creative hobby, pointing out what I know to be true about photography – that "when you try to reproduce a scene, you become more observant of nature." But his first word of advice concerns Audacity with a capital A, praising the unschooled confidence of the Amateur with a capital A.

Don't take any lessons or courses, he says, just forge ahead and do it with all your heart. There's no time for any mortal to learn everything about any one thing anyway. You get better each day no matter when you start, and the process continues forever. "When I get to heaven I mean to spend a considerable portion of my first million years in painting, and so get to the bottom of the subject," says Winston.



He ends with thoughts about painting as a spur to travel and a practice that can set one apart from the tourist buzz. “The painter wanders and loiters contentedly from place to place, always on the lookout for some brilliant butterfly of a picture which can be caught and set up and carried safely home.”

The sun falls closer to the edge of the horizon in the west just above the ocean and I get the best cheesy shot of the trip, standing on the beach in cold wind waiting for a platoon of pelicans to fly by. I didn’t think they would be low enough to be in the shot but four of them end up almost perfectly placed, a nice piece of luck. It was so windy on the beach I can taste sand in my mouth as I drive away.

I’m feeling lazy the next morning after a poor night of Motel 6 sleep. After two hours of trying to fall asleep with noisy people talking in the parking lot below my room, I finally concede it’s too cold in the room and walk over to the office to get an extra blanket. The noise from the I5 Interstate behind the motel is also a problem: more of a constant roar than a whoosh.

I decide to have a calm reading day, moving slowly up the coast to Orange County. I’m really appreciating the sunshine this morning, the best thing about this part of the world. It doesn’t feel like much of trip - like it’s just getting started - but I’m still thinking that adding the 1999 story of *The Trees* is what could make this a pilgrim story.

The Trees in Jarry Park eventually got tired of me and my questions and release me, returning to their dimension of silent stillness. I don’t know what was going on with these questions and answers but the miracle, in my opinion, was how the trees eventually led me back to prayer, something I had been unable to do for many years, the result, I thought, of leading a false life.

When I returned to the park two weeks after the initial encounter, I was shocked to discover that one of the old trees – the one I had identified as *Me* – had been cut down. I circled the stump left behind and picked up the largest remnant, a small, wedge-like slice about a half-inch thick with bark still attached. I put it in my jacket pocket and later that night, wondering if the shape held any significance, placed it on my left hand and saw what might have been obvious from the start: it fit my hand perfectly as long as I held my fingers close together.



The wood felt warm and natural sitting in my hand until it occurred to me to place my right hand on top of my left, sandwiching the wood in between, and quite naturally, with no thought or decision taken, my pressed hands moved up into a prayer position and the miracle was revealed. The ability to pray would be given back to me from that point on and I noted that it was centered in the same place – the solar plexus – that I had felt the connection to the trees.

I'm happy I cancelled all plans for the day to do just this: stop at every seaside hangout, read a little, and absorb the California air and atmosphere. I drive down from the coastal highway to the marina at Oceanside to take a stroll among the boats and then, thinking I can continue along the highway, inadvertently drive up to the entrance of Camp Pendleton where a young soldier takes my drivers license and says he'll give it back on the way out after I enter and circle the roundabout just inside the gate. There are three armed soldiers guarding the entrance: proud young men comfortable in their roles. It will take thirty minutes to drive past the closed-off section of the coast occupied by this massive marine base.

I get tired of Gilman's writerly, stretched-out sentences and pick up Groucho instead, a grammar school dropout whose writing is refreshingly clear and efficient, even though mostly about showbusiness. But there's something to be found in each book I pick up on the road and Gilman's professed motivation for writing about his religious experience – the small miracle that led him to conversion – is invaluable because it opened a door for me to talk about the miracle of my Trees with no concern about how silly it might sound.

After stopping in San Clemente for lunch, I'm back in Orange County and practically alone (despite it being free-entrance Friday) in the Orange County Museum of Art. My son and his OC friends will not even know this place exists. I spend the weekend with family, still happy to be exposed to California sunshine. The body seems to crave it (the brain cells too).



My last day begins with a morning of missed connections, an abandoned mass, and a fruitless search for breakfast in Old Santa Ana. St. Thomas More Church in Irvine is packed with well-to-do OC worshipers, enough children and infants to disrupt the service, and a glib priest preaching a sermon of “imagine success”, the kind of nonsense that presents Jesus as a path to riches when his only words on the topic, his only thoughts on who would be the most “successful”, were about the meek inheriting the earth, not the fucking rich and famous. The sermon in this rich parish is the exact opposite of the sermon delivered in the working-class church last week in Fullerton.

The Gospel story is about the recently crucified Jesus once again popping up suddenly in a room full of frightened apostles. They think he’s a ghost; he assures them he isn’t and asks, “Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts stirring in your hearts?” This sudden pop-up is what the priest uses to kickstart his “Imagine success” sermon. “To be successful at anything, you have first to imagine it. Imagine heaven, like you would imagine success,” he says. “In heaven you can do what Jesus did – just imagine you’re wherever you want to be and *poof*, faster than a Star Trek transporter, there you are, standing beside a friend.” This is my cue to transport myself out the door and back into my car.

I have lunch at yet another Asian fast food restaurant in a strip mall where the cookie says, *You will be better in real estate than in stocks*. Someone gave me the wrong cookie. I linger at lunch at a table with a view of the parking lot and nothing else I need to do before meeting my son back at the house in an hour. An adorable Hispanic four-year-old in a frilly Sunday dress is running back and forth laughing, stopping every now and then to punch her little brother. It doesn’t feel right to be going home tomorrow. A normal trip would just be getting underway.

In the afternoon I ask a friend of my son’s, who has lived all his life in Orange County, how he would sum it up in one word. “Status”, he says. Everyone is conscious of status. When I think of this place, I picture heavily manicured houses and lawns, piles of money, and lots and lots of cars. And, unless you happen to be homeless, no walking, except from car to shop or restaurant, and even then, just about everything can be done at the ubiquitous drive-thrus, restricting your pedestrian exposure to door-of-house to car-in-driveway (or zero exposure if your car is parked in a garage). The opposite of pilgrimage.



Tree in Jarry Park, Montreal



225 million-year-old tree, Petrified Forest National Park, Arizona

Aside from Churchill, the books I picked up on this trip were not very engaging. The only thing I took from the Gilman book is the Audacity (Winston's capital A) to talk about miracles. He says he did not decide to go to church, the church literally came to him in the form of a personal miracle, and yet eventually he would come to regard his conversion as an "illness" and his inter-dimensional experience as I don't know what. I guess he just disregarded it.

The only thing I would take from the other book I picked up in Fullerton, *Nothing to Be Frightened of*, by Julian Barnes, dealing with the mystery of death (which it has been said is the basis of all religion), is something Sigmund Freud wrote: "It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so, we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators." Maybe this is why Gilman gave up on his miracle: the impossibility of ever understanding the great mysteries or seeing clearly what's happening when we get the occasional glimpse into another dimension can make these things seem irrelevant to daily living.

As for my own inter-dimensional experience, on the surface, what happened in Jarry Park with my trees was a series of ordinary events, but in my world they were mystical. I know this because I experienced them in real time and space, and yet, like everyone else, I rarely act like such things are real. Even when our senses are given physical evidence of the supernatural, we almost always ignore it. The space between knowing and understanding. When I travel, Pilgrim John understands more than I do the potential of each day, the significance and meaning in each moment. He actually acts like he believes in miracles. What ultimately matters in my tree story is the result, the return of prayer, which has been with me ever since.

A day after I get home I take a long walk on a cold, cloudy day to absorb the gloom just like I absorbed the overabundance of sun in California. Gloomy weather can be restorative too. In a warm local café I ask my phone about trees and the Web tells me most of the trunk (except for thin outside layers) is dead and serves only to support the crown. Wood we process from these trunks is everywhere we look – even books are made from trees. The long list of things they provide includes: timber, food, decoration, fuel, shade, and of course habitats for countless living creatures. They are our sustaining filters, absorbing harmful gases like carbon dioxide to produce oxygen, keeping us alive. There's the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge and the Family Tree, to name just a few

important metaphors and symbols. And finally, the roots of the tree extend deep into the ground, connecting sky to earth.

For years I used to visit my trees often to pay my respects and take photos. My favorite shot is one of my feet fitting perfectly on two pieces of the stump of the Me-Tree that projected outward. When I stood on the projections I was facing away from the park, in the direction of my apartment and the old tree (gone now as well) in front of my bedroom window on Rue Jules Verne. And so I imagined the old tree to be a replacement, restoring and extending the quaternity to encompass the place where I lived and slept. This metaphor was an important factor in my first two years of independent living, until I moved to an apartment further away from the park.

There's also a tree in front of where I live now that gives me shade in the summer and drops its leaves to let the sun shine into my living room in winter. I've never heard it speak but I appreciate its presence and sometimes feed the squirrels that call it home.

It makes sense that something that stands still in one place, for decades, sometimes centuries, would accumulate spiritual wisdom and energy. Herman Hesse says it well:

*Nothing is holier, nothing more exemplary than a beautiful, strong tree. Trees are sanctuaries. Whoever knows how to speak to them, whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth. They do not preach learning and precepts, they preach, undeterred by particulars, the ancient law of life.*

A few years after my 1999 encounter in the park, Dancer and Number One would suffer the same fate as the Me-Tree and for many years now Beauty has been the sole survivor. She's more elegant and beautiful than ever and I'm still taking pictures of her.



Beauty