Dear Julie,

Thanks for your email and being open to continuing our dialogue. I also appreciated your interest and questions related to the idea of seeing your upcoming off-campus experience as a pilgrimage. As I read through your email, it seemed to me that you were asking the following questions:

* You wrote: The idea of being a pilgrim intrigues me, but if I am honest, there are times I simply want to be a tourist, to explore and experience something new. Can I be both pilgrim and tourist at the same time? Is the idea of pilgrimage just related to travel?
* If I truly want to be a pilgrim in my travels, how do I prepare myself? Are there specific practices or things I can do to prepare?

I will do my best to address these questions while also encouraging you to further prepare yourself for your upcoming adventures.

Thanks for your honesty about wanting to be a tourist at times. I can relate, as can others. Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, when asked about a pilgrimage he undertook to southeastern Cuba (in the mid 20th century), stated that his travels were 90% tourism and 10% pilgrimage. He then went on to say perhaps this is as much pilgrimage as most of us can stand; yet, it shouldn’t stop us from the striving. In many ways, I think that the idea of being a pilgrim is all about the striving, whether you are traveling or simply living your everyday life.

One of my favorite authors on pilgrimage (Jim Forrest, 20007), put it this way “No matter how short the distances and familiar the route you travel on a given day, you can do it as a pilgrim – and no matter how long the journey or how sacred the destination, it is possible to be nothing more than a tourist. Whether the journey is within your own backyard or takes you to the other side of the world, the potential is there for the greatest of adventures: a journey not only toward Christ but with him.”

I hope this clarification is helpful. Let me now try to move on to helping us both think about the process of preparing to go on a pilgrimage, addressing your second question of what are the specific practices of being a pilgrim. The specific practices I would like to share with you were inspired by a more global sense of a spiritual journey, and come from a 5th century conversation between Confucius and a friend that included the following practices:

**PRACTICE THE ARTS OF ATTENTION AND LISTENING**

As you prepare for your upcoming adventures, begin to strengthen your powers of observation. Begin to see the small things that happen in our lives every day that point us towards wonder. Begin to see the beauty and miracles in our everyday. Recently I was in Bergen, Norway, eating breakfast at a place that overlooked the drop-off location for children at an outdoor pre-school. As I watched families arrive by foot, car, and bike, I was hit by the realization of the core values that we all share. Watching the bonds of family, the love (and yes sometimes the frustrations), of sending a child off to school was a wonderful *God moment* for me. The moment came to me quietly as I watched and listened to the world around me. So in the weeks and months ahead, take the time to develop your power of observation, create time to let the world come to you, and begin to see new things in familiar paths. Practice the art of being surprised by God’s grace in your everyday life.

Our work of bearing witness to God requires that we be in deep relationship to a place, that we attend, perceive and listen with great discernment, and that we see clearly for the benefit of others, offering whatever is needed.

**PRACTICE THE ART OF RENEWING YOURSELF EVERY DAY**

Practice the art of creating space to think, to reflect, to wonder, and to get to know yourself. Prepare yourself physically, mentally, and spiritually for the opportunities that lay ahead. Take the time to walk and exercise so you can take advantage of upcoming opportunities to explore and connect to the people and places where you will travel.

Prepare yourself mentally and spiritually for the highs and lows you will undoubtedly experience. Take time to prayerfully set some goals for the upcoming semester related to your physical, mental and spiritual health. Practice the art of spending time with yourself – and enjoying it! Similarly, practice the art of engaging strangers in a variety of ways. Start a conversation on a bus, chat with the person in the check-out line at the local grocers, reach out to people you see everyday but have yet to say a word. By so doing, you are practicing the art of engaging those around you and being open to the possibilities that the moment might provide.

As you leave on your experience, remember: there is a critical need for you to develop practices that create health and balance in your heart, mind, body and spirit. Focus on what you need to be successful, what you need from others, and what you can give to the group and others you meet along the way.

**PRACTICE THE ART OF MEANDERING TOWARD THE CENTER OF EVERY PLACE**

The way of the pilgrim is the way of the seeker. The seeker embarks with a curiosity of the spiritual and the sacred, taking an inner and outer journey towards discovery, service and love. As you endeavor to prepare yourself for your upcoming travels, begin to read literature, study the visual arts, or listen to music that is of the place where you are going. Begin to feed your curiosity. Perhaps take some time to identify some specific places you want to include as part of your time away.

In addition, practice the art of meandering. As opposed to walking, meandering implies that the walker has no pre-determined destination, allowing for unexpected surprises such as fortuitous encounters with someone or someplace. In other words, take your soul for a stroll. Long walks, short walks, morning walks, evening walks, whatever form or length it takes. Meandering (or walking) is the best way to get into your head. Recall the invocation of the philosopher Kierkegaard, who said, “Above all, do not lose your desire to walk: Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness. I have walked myself into my best thoughts.” As if in his footsteps, Nietzsche also remarked, “Never trust a thought that didn’t come by walking.”

**PRACTICE THE RITUAL OF READING SACRED TEXTS**

Reading the Bible and other spiritual writings can help prepare you for the inner journey of your outward travels. Reading stories and other pieces of history from the places you will be living and visiting can also create a rich connection across generations of practitioners and pilgrims, in the recognition that we share so much of our human experience with others.

An important aspect of this practice is grounding your own faith. Students who study off-campus can often feel adrift at times as staying true to your faith and nurturing it while you are away can be difficult, so begin to assure a strong foundation for your faith before you leave. Such grounding can take place by talking with trusted friends and mentors about what you believe, and creating some goals of how you want to grow spiritually while you study off-campus. The more grounded you are, the more prepared you are to share and engage with others of different faith traditions, opening yourself to listen to the faith journeys of others while also being willing to humbly share your own journey.

**PRACTICE THE ART OF GRATITUDE.**

When my family and lived in Hong Kong for a year, I was able to work briefly with an organization called “I Will Not Complain.” Their mission was to inspire people to take responsibility, to fulfill their potential, and to work together to overcome challenges and achieve success for themselves and their organization. They did a variety of teambuilding activities to help organizations increase their effectiveness. I always like the image that this organization’s name created for me, and I encourage you to think about how you might incorporate this philosophy into your off-campus experience. This image recognizes that hardships will come on any pilgrimage, but that how we respond to these hardships will make all the difference.

Yet in some ways the art of gratitude asks us to take this idea one step further, to see God working in and through every aspect of our lives; and, in gratitude, turn all our joys and concerns over to him. As you prepare to leave, work to keep things in perspective and develop a joy and gratitude for living in the moment and not sweating the small stuff. Cultivating this mindset can only enhance your time away and your life overall.

In addition to these ancient practices, I would also encourage you to think about seeing your experience (and the experience of others) as a part of a story of what God is doing in this world. Donald Miller, in his book *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: What I Learned While Editing My Life* states the following about the stories you create:

*If we want a feeling of meaning in our life, I don’t think we have a choice but to live a good story…and remember the point of a story is never about the ending. It’s about your character getting molded in the hard work of the middle.*

Consider Miller’s bike trip across the country. *On the night before my friends and I rode into Washington D.C., we were reflective. It didn’t feel like we’d ridden across the country. It didn’t feel like the ocean was only two days away. We’d grown into the lifestyle and gotten lost in the story and even to some degree grieved that it was ending. When you fly across the country in an airplane the country seems vast, but it isn’t vast. It’s all connected by roads one can ride a bike down. If you watch the news and there’s a tragedy at a house in Kansas, that guy’s driveway connects with yours and you’d be surprised how few roads it takes to get there. The trip taught us that we were all neighbors, that my life is connected to everybody else’s, that one person’s story has the power to affect a million others.*

There you have it, some thoughts on ways you can transform your study abroad adventure into a pilgrimage to see the sacred all around you and to claim the promise of Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you," says the LORD. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”

It is my hope that you will let God take the journey of the next few months and use it to transform you to His purposes.

Blessings,

Don

Questions for you:

1. As you read through the practices of pilgrimage, what practice will be hardest for you? Easiest?
2. How might you begin to incorporate these pilgrimage practices in your life both here and now and also while you are studying off-campus?
3. Think about your own life story. After reading the following excerpt from the book *River Teeth* (below), answer the following questions:
4. What are the river teeth of your life? What are the river teeth of your faith journey?
5. Think about your own life story and what you might be willing to share as one of your “river tooth” or significant life stories. Your story should communicate “This is why I am who I am.” This is a story that could be about someone, someplace, some event, or sometime that has been extremely formative in your development. How might you share some of these river teeth moments with others (those who will be pilgrimaging with you and those you will meet along the way)?

River Teeth is a term coined by Duncan to explain the decomposition process of a tree in a river. Initially the tree slowly decomposes, releasing its nutrients back to the river and soil. *“There are, however, parts of every drowned tree that refuse to become part of the cycle. There is, in every log, a series of cross-grained, pitch-hardened masses where long-lost branches once joined the tree’s trunk. Knots, they’re called, in a piece of lumber. But in a bed of a river, after the parent log has broken down and vanished, these stubborn masses take on a very different appearance, and so perhaps deserve a different name. River teeth is what we called them as kids, because that’s what they look like.”*

Think about river teeth as a metaphor for our own lives. *“Our memory of experience, our individual parts, are like trees fallen in a river…and a story – a good shared story – is a transfusion of nutrients from the old river log of memory into the eternal now of life. But as the current of time keeps flowing, the aging log begins to break down. Once-vivid impressions begin to rot, years run together…chunks of the logs begin to vanish, completely…there are, however, small parts of every human past that resist this natural cycle: there are hard, cross-grained whorls of memory that remain inexplicably lodged in us long after the straight grained narrative material that housed them has washed away…these are our river teeth – the time defying knots of experience that remain in us after most of our autobiographies are gone. These are the moments and stories that are the core of who we are.”*