

Article

# Planetary Consciousness, Witnessing the Inhuman, and Transformative Learning: Insights from Peace Pilgrimage Oral Histories and Autoethnographies

Roy Tamashiro 

Webster University, 470 East Lockwood Ave., St. Louis, MO 63119, USA; tamashiro@webster.edu

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**Abstract:** This article describes insights and consciousness transformations reported in several contemporary peace pilgrimage oral histories and autoethnographies, including my own. Autoethnography is a form of autobiographical writing that stresses the interpretation of experiences in their psychosocial, cultural, and historical contexts. Peace pilgrimages are typically self-defined journeys and projects which may be inward and metaphorical, or which may involve actual travel to destinations that memorialize historical events of mass killing and profound suffering, and places that envision, cultivate and educate for global or inner peace. The insights and learnings include (a) the call to journey and other out-of-the-ordinary communications; (b) understanding the transformative learning process; (c) glimpsing the meaning of planetary consciousness; and (d) bearing witness to the inhuman. These paradigmatic themes may be applicable to one's personal search for meaning, and as signposts for collective, societal healing from psychic and social wounding and traumas. The themes may be useful for educators and researchers in peace studies, religious studies, history, biography, philosophy, psychology and consciousness studies.

**Keywords:** peace pilgrimage; transformative learning; planetary consciousness; bearing witness; autoethnography

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## 1. Introduction

Pilgrimage experiences are probably most valuable for the insights which lead to greater self-knowledge and to deeper understanding and connection with self, nature, society, and the eternal. In this article, I aim to describe four themes reported in peace pilgrimage oral histories and autoethnographic accounts, including my own: (1) The call to journey and distinctive out-of-the-ordinary communications are commonly highlight pilgrimage accounts; (2) The stages of the transformative learning process can serve as a model for following the insights and developmental learning on peace pilgrimages; (3) Pilgrimage narratives often describe the personal awakening to planetary consciousness and its widening definition; (4) Peace pilgrimage accounts often emphasize bearing witness to the inhuman and search for the deeper meaning of profound suffering. The themes reflect the universal search for identity and life's meaning, and they point a pathway toward collective healing from mass suffering, societal wounding and traumas.

*Autoethnography* is a form of self-narrative and autobiographical writing in which the writer-researcher's personal experiences are placed in their political, social and historical context. Rigorous self-reflection is applied to personal experience to find political and cultural meaning in the intersection between the self and social life. Autoethnographic research seeks to describe "people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (Bochner and Ellis 2006, p. 111). Describing the cultural and historical context in peace pilgrimage autoethnographies is valuable for the

underlying rationale, purpose and meaning of the pilgrimage. Peace pilgrimage autoethnographies are also distinctive in their quest for existential meaning.

## 2. What Are Peace Pilgrimages?

Peace pilgrimages are typically self-identified and named as such by individuals, groups or organizations. A peace pilgrimage may be defined on the one hand, as a project or event in an inward or metaphorical journey, such as meditation, self-study, research, psychotherapy, or self-examination process. This definition of pilgrimage as an inward journey applies to Hindu mystics and Sufis, for whom the “... sacred place is within themselves. Their pilgrimage may be a journey with no physical movement, but a personal seeking within mind and body” (Westwood 2003, p. 4).

On the other hand, the pilgrimage may involve actual travel with or without a geographical goal. Early Christians saw a pilgrimage as the search for a place of exile, reflecting the derivation of the word pilgrim from the Latin *peregrinus*, defined as a wanderer or stranger (Westwood 2003, p. 4).

Modern pilgrimages more typically involve actual traveling to historical sites, sacred spaces or other destinations associated with a search for meaning or for a purposeful mission like raising consciousness for global or inner peace (Cousineau 2012). Peace pilgrimages, like other kinds of pilgrimages, may involve the inner journeying or actual traveling with a spiritual or existential quest for self-understanding, wholeness, or wisdom (Morinis 1992).

Like religious pilgrimages, peace pilgrimages may involve traveling to historical sites, sacred spaces and other destinations associated with envisioning the sacred or advocating peace. But peace pilgrimages may involve travel to sites of atrocities or crimes against humanity, and other sites of profound suffering, sometimes referred to as “dark tourism” (Foley and Lennon 2000).

Peace pilgrimages may also depart from the meaning of religious pilgrimages where “the journey is defined and circumscribed by a particular society: a predetermined expedition laid out by those who have gone before for those who will come after” (Senn 2002, p. 132). While religious pilgrimages typically carry prescriptive imperatives or guidelines, peace pilgrimages are not usually bound by prescriptions from a society (Senn 2002, p. 131). For example, Satish Kumar’s four-year, 8000-mile peace pilgrimage began from the grave of Mahatma Gandhi in New Delhi (India) in 1962. His destinations were Moscow (USSR), Paris (France), London (UK), and Washington (USA), which were the nuclear capitals of the world at that time (Kumar 2015).

My “Coming Full-Circle Peace Pilgrimage” which commenced in 2015, was associated with the seventieth anniversary of the first use of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The pilgrimage coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of my first, unacknowledged pilgrimage to Hiroshima. For me, the *call to pilgrimage* did not include specified destinations. In the first year, I traveled to 11 countries and 22 cities in Asia, North America and Europe. “Coming full-circle” meant I was revisiting memorial museums at sites of profound suffering, like Hiroshima and Nagasaki, massacres in Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Korea and the death camps of the Holocaust. I spoke at commemoration services and academic conferences, and gave lectures, seminars and workshops for University students in the US, Japan and Korea. Initially the pilgrimage was associated with the symbolic birth of the Nuclear Age. Later in the journeying I realized that my assignment in pilgrimage was to highlight the personal and collective global awakening to planetary consciousness. The meaning of planetary consciousness as well as of bearing witness to the inhuman became clarified as I researched and engaged in dialogue with witnesses and observers at historical sites of mass violence, atrocities, and unimaginable cruelty and brutality.

Mildred Lisette Norman, who adopted the name Peace Pilgrim, defined her pilgrimage, which began in 1953, as purpose driven, arising from a spiritual quest. “A pilgrim is a wanderer with a purpose,” she explained, “A pilgrimage can be to a place... but it can also be for a thing. Mine is for peace, and that is why I am a Peace Pilgrim” (Peace Pilgrim 1994, p. 22).

For some, the journey is identified as a peace pilgrimage post hoc. For example, university students who visited the Son Mỳ Memorial, the site commemorating the 1968 Mỳ Lai Massacre in

Vietnam, assigned the word pilgrimage to their visit to Mỹ Lai when they realized the emotional and visceral impact of their experience. Professor Carol Becker described how undergraduate and graduate students responded.

“Of all the sites we visited over our three-week journey, no other had the psychological and emotional impact of Mỹ Lai. We absorbed the nightmare that had occurred there, and left transformed. Without thinking too much about the weightiness of the term, some of us began to call the visit to Mỹ Lai a ‘pilgrimage,’ probably choosing this word because of our awareness that we wanted to know the place not just through the mind, but more deeply, in the body. This is the type of secular experience many of us associated with pilgrimage”. (Becker 2003, p. 56)

In 1981, Paul Gessier participated in an intercontinental walk called “A Walk to Moscow”, which aimed to raise awareness for peace and nuclear disarmament. Gessier considered the walk a spiritual journey of self-discovery, political and social activism, and authored stage plays and poems about his transformative experience. Thirty years after the walk, he published a compilation of poems titled *Peace Pilgrimage: Sacred Journeys*, which he “dedicated to the courageous men, women, and children who participated in A Walk to Moscow in 1981 and to Peace Pilgrim 1908–1981; Poets and Prophets, All” (Gessier 2011, p. v).

The World Peace Pilgrimage (Aetherius Society 2017) is an example of an organization’s self-identified and self-defined peace pilgrimage. The Aetherius Society has organized an annual open-to-the public, interfaith gathering at the summit of Mount Baldy in the San Gabriel Mountains, near Los Angeles, California (USA). The event has been a walking, singing and praying ritual with the aim of sending “waves of love and light to the world” (Aetherius Society 2017).

### 3. The Call to Journey and Other Out-of-the-Ordinary Communications

The call to journey and other out-of-the-ordinary communications and transpersonal experiences are often highlighted in pilgrimage accounts. Senn (2002) explains “the potential traveller must decide whether to answer the call to adventure, mystery or unknown; or not to do so. By making this choice, the protagonist becomes a hero who ‘sets forth from mundane home and role in life, lured or called forth by desire or crisis. The departure is heightened by a call to adventure in which the hero accepts a challenge, and is changed forever’” (Senn 2002, p. 129).

Peace Pilgrim reported that her call to pilgrimage was a spiritual awakening following over 20 years of meditation practice. She describes this awakening as a direct, mystical experience of the creator’s love (Peace Pilgrim 1994, pp. 9–21).

The call to pilgrimage for Kumar was secular. It arose out of his moral outrage that 89-year-old philosopher Bertrand Russell was put in jail for the “breaching of peace” by participating in an antinuclear demonstration in London (Russell 1967, p. 157).

The call to pilgrimage I received in 2015, coming 50 years after my first visit to Hiroshima, was a cryptic transmission inviting me to embark on a “Coming Full-Circle Peace Pilgrimage,” to revisit Vietnam, Hiroshima, and other sites of profound suffering and the memorial museums associated with those sites. I questioned whether the voice I heard was merely my imagination, a hallucination, or other perceptual or cognitive malfunction.

The voice reminded me of my 1965 visit to Hiroshima as an adolescent, during the height of the American–Vietnam War. At the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Museum, I was overwhelmed with the exhibits with images of violence, destruction, and death. The photos and reports of people screaming and burning, and with skin and flesh melting were horrifying and unbearable. The exhibits and their interpretive captions seemed to highlight the darkest side of human nature. I had an emotional meltdown. I shut down, numb and withdrawn, for about three days.

Mentally and viscerally, I kept recycling the profound and meaningless suffering, the never-to-be-recovered losses, the insanity, the hypocrisy, and the injustice of it all. I could not wrap

my mind around this in any rational way. When I emerged from the meltdown, I had only a vague awareness of what I experienced. Fifty years later, I realized that while in that altered state, I heard voices that whispered, “You were meant to come here to Hiroshima. Welcome. This is the culmination of your first peace pilgrimage. There will be many more in your lifetime.” These seemed to be the same voices that invited me to embark on the 2015 pilgrimage. (Tamashiro 2015).

I encountered the voices and other out-of-the-ordinary communications coming in various forms throughout the pilgrimage. The memories of atrocities seem to be held by the soil, the wildlife or the trees at the memorial sites. For example, I gave the title “gratitude of the souls” to a repeated experience in Hiroshima:

“Stepping off the *shinkansen* onto the train platform, a wave of feeling comes over me. I recognize that these are the souls of those who perished here. I feel their hurt, their pain, their cries. But also their gratitude, compassion, and hope. The souls say, “Thank you for coming to Hiroshima and remembering us.” (Tamashiro 2015)

The transmission implored me to honor Hiroshima is a sacred place.

The city of Hiroshima formally recognized its own specialness in 1947. On the second anniversary of the bombing, Hiroshima’s Mayor Shinzo Hamai announced the first Hiroshima Declaration of Peace that stated: “... on 6 August 1945 ... Hiroshima turned into a city of death and darkness ... But now, mankind shall remember August 6 as the day that brought the chance for World Peace ... We ... commemorate that day [with] a Festival of Peace, despite the limitless sorrow” (Hiroshima City 1947).

Hiroshima City proclaimed this insight as a “revolution in thinking” that can open pathways toward peace, reconciliation, and the restoration of dignity, despite limitless sorrow and continuing suffering (Hiroshima City 1947).

Another example of out-of-the-ordinary transmissions involves crows on Jeju Island in the Republic of Korea. “The Crows at Jeju” refers to a pilgrimage journal entry, about my leading a summer 2015 peace academy at the Jeju 4.3 Peace Park. The Park commemorates the Jeju 4.3 Massacre, in which over 30,000 islanders were killed in a seven-year nightmare (1947–1954). I wrote in the journal,

The tour guide points across the Park to five monuments, like gravestone sculptures: Bodies with no heads. “The monuments represent those who perished in the Jeju 4.3,” she explains. At that moment, five crows appear, circling above us, cawing loudly ... Later I reveal to the students: “The crows were cawing the enormous sorrow and horror of Jeju 4.3. But they were also bringing great strength, compassion, gratitude and affirmation. They were cawing: *Thank you for coming to Jeju and learning about what happened here.* They were happy to see you, young adults here, blessing you to go forward in your lives as peace envoys.” The students nod in quiet recognition.

At a pilgrim talk to a student assembly at an American public university, I learned how the memories of what happened in Nazi concentration camps were held in trees and in the soil and transmitted to visitors. A student reported:

“I was at Dachau last summer. Most of the buildings aren’t there anymore. It was mainly the museum with many photographs. I noticed one photo of the barracks with trees in rows. As we were leaving, I saw the same trees as the ones in the photos; only much bigger now.”

A flash of recognition came with knowledge that the original poplar trees were planted by the death camp inmates in the mid-1930s along the dirt road to the barracks. Like the prisoners who were exterminated, the trees did not survive. New trees were planted when the barracks were reconstructed for the memorial site. Nonetheless, the memory remained in the soil, and the new trees faithfully held the memory of what happened here. The student sensed the living remembrance in the poplar trees at Dachau. “For me,” she said, “visiting Dachau was rather dull and uninspiring. Except for those trees.”

Although out-of-the-ordinary encounters may be expected at sites of religious pilgrimages, they are not expected at memorial sites of mass killing and profound suffering. Visitors to these places

where unfathomable brutality and atrocities occurred, can sometimes “hear” or sense the cries of those who were tortured, assaulted, mutilated and killed and where the soil, the stones, the trees and the wildlife still hold memories of the death and destruction here.

Other voices were human, but which validated the extraordinary encounters. For example, several citizens of Hiroshima told me “When you go back to America, or wherever you go, be sure to tell those stories, because the voices you heard of welcome and of gratitude—that is what Hiroshima is really about.”

#### 4. Peace Pilgrimage and Transformative Learning

Inasmuch as encounters with the sacred are characteristic of peace pilgrimages, encounters with the inhuman and the barbaric also contribute to transformative learning in and from the pilgrimage experience. Disorienting dilemmas, cognitive dissonance, emotional traumas, and existential crises are situated in a psychosocial, developmental stage framework for self-awareness, spiritual awakening and consciousness development. Psychosocial models like transformative learning theory (Mezirow 1991, 2009) and radical forgiveness (Tipping 2002) explain the developmental process that individuals (or groups) may journey through upon witnessing, surviving, or otherwise encountering mass suffering and the inhuman (See Table 1). They describe the inner journey and learning process in peace pilgrimage experiences, toward widening consciousness, social healing and wholeness.

Stage 1 in the transformative learning and the radical forgiveness models involves a disorienting dilemma—an experience in which one’s values and beliefs are challenged (Mezirow 1991; O’Sullivan et al. 2002, p. 18). For survivors and witnesses of wars, massacres, genocides and other mass traumas, the repeated replaying of memories compound the wounding. Disorienting dilemmas that are suppressed or remain unexpressed can progress to reoccurring traumas, as in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or transgenerational trauma. For Kumar, reading about the unjust treatment of Bertrand Russell was the disorienting dilemma that inspired him to embark on his pilgrimage (Kumar 2015). For Peace Pilgrim, it was a growing discomfort in observing the social conditions in her US environment. “As I looked about the world, so much of it impoverished, I became increasingly uncomfortable about having so much while my brothers and sisters were starving,” she observed (Peace Pilgrim 1994, p. 7).

**Table 1.** Psychosocial models for transformative learning.

	<b>Transformative Learning</b> (Mezirow 1991, 2009)	<b>Radical Forgiveness</b> (Tipping 2002)	<b>Description</b>
<b>STAGE 1</b>	Disorienting dilemma	Telling the (victim) story	Recall and report traumatic, unexpected or dissonant experiences and memories.
<b>STAGE 2</b>	Questioning and deconstruction	Feeling the emotions	Feel and express painful emotions. Question and deconstruct long-held values, identities, and beliefs.
<b>STAGE 3</b>	Reframing and restructuring	Collapsing and reframing the story	Shift perception to consider the possibility that there may be deeper meaning behind what happened.
<b>STAGE 4</b>	Shift in consciousness	Integrating the new story	New integration in thinking becomes a catalyst for transformative learning in others.

In the second stage, one explores the disorienting dilemma by questioning oneself and deconstructing long-held values, identity, core beliefs and ways of thinking. (Mezirow 1991, 2009). It involves “feeling the pain” which usually arises as a result of telling the story in Stage 1 (Tipping 2002). Within the social constraints of everyday life, the opportunity for expressing the painful emotions are often self-censored, as they may be unbearable or they may be culturally and politically suppressed and silenced. In the context of a peace pilgrimage, however, one can be freer to experience, acknowledge and express the painful and difficult emotions, and allow self-questioning and deconstructing one’s belief system.

Stage 3 involves reframing and restructuring beliefs and ways of thinking (Mezirow 1991, 2009). Instead of seeing the situation only as a tragedy or oneself as victim, one is willing to consider the possibility that there may be a deeper meaning behind what happened. We come to know that what made us feel victimized was essential to our growth. Tipping explains, “It is a matter of giving up the need to figure it out and surrendering to the idea that the gift is contained in the situation whether we know it or not.” (Tipping 2002, p. 163) In this vein, Peace Pilgrim says, “I felt a complete willingness, without any reservations, to give my life—to dedicate my life—to service. ‘Please use me!’ I prayed to God. And a great peace came over me” (Peace Pilgrim 1994, p. 7).

In the fourth stage, there is a shift in consciousness that can alter one’s way of being in the world. One becomes a catalyst for transformative learning in others, where personal change becomes collective and global change. Reflecting on her transformative learning process, Peace Pilgrim explains,

“And so I went into the second phase of my life. I began to live to give what I could, instead of to get what I could, . . . I attained the great blessing of good health; I haven’t had an ache or pain, a cold or headache since . . . it’s a point of no return. After that, you can never go back to completely self-centered living”. (Peace Pilgrim 1994, p. 7)

## 5. Planetary Consciousness

The mindset resulting from the shift in Stage 4 of the transformative learning process could be called “planetary consciousness.” The meaning of planetary consciousness unfolded for me through conversations in the pilgrimage and the concurrent research. I came to define planetary consciousness as: “the awareness that everything is profoundly connected: All of humanity, all of nature, and all energies in the universe, where everything has meaning beneath what appears” (Tamashiro 2015).

Planetary consciousness is an epiphany that changes how one thinks of the world and oneself. It is an awareness that embraces the rational, logical, scientific, analytical—as well as the intuitive, emotional, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions, which are embodied and deeply grounded (Tamashiro 2015).

Peace Pilgrim describes how consciousness ascends to the point through which she is able to view the universe with her own God-centered nature. She reports, “The feeling accompanying this is that of complete oneness with Universal Whole. One merges into a euphoria of unity with all life: with humanity, with all the creatures of the earth, the trees and plants, the air, the water, and even earth itself” (Peace Pilgrim 1994, p. 129). She further explains:

“[This is] the realization of the oneness of all creation. Not only all human beings—I knew before that all human beings are one. But now I knew also a oneness with the rest of creation. The creatures that walk the earth and the growing things of the earth. The air, the water, the earth itself. And, most wonderful of all, a oneness with that which permeates all and binds all together and gives life to all”. (Ullman and Reichenberg-Ullman 2001, p.150)

Kumar applies the awareness of the interconnectedness and interdependence in planetary consciousness to practice in daily living. “If we can have a holistic view of soil, soul and society,” he says, “if we can understand the interdependence of all living beings and understand that all living creatures—from trees to worms to humans—depend on each other, then we can live in harmony with ourselves, with other people and with nature” (Kumar 2013).

## 6. Bearing Witness to the Inhuman

In peace pilgrimages, the quest to know and cultivate personal and global peace includes bearing witness to the profane and inhuman, as well as to that which is the essence of humanness. “Bearing witness to the inhuman” in the context of pilgrimages is an unexpected, if not jarring theme: One might expect pilgrimages to be about connecting with divinity and with humanity, and not about facing the morbid or the inhuman. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s statement, “Human beings are human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman” (Agamben 2002, p. 212), emphasizes the importance of facing atrocities and the inhuman as essential to one’s humanness. Agamben’s statement is from *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, in which he looks at the literature of the survivors of Auschwitz and probes the philosophical and ethical questions raised by their testimony (Agamben 2002).

Agamben’s statement suggests that bearing witness to the inhuman is necessary and essential in the search for knowing what it means to be human. Bearing witness to the inhuman means coming to know or remember an experience in which the very humanness of one’s being has been assaulted and stripped away. The inhuman refers to violence, assault and trauma to the body, mind, psyche, and spirit. This dehumanization smashes the capacity to think, to feel, to speak, and to be conscious and aware at all, as exemplified by the numb state of the brutally tortured prisoners at Auschwitz (Agamben 2002).

Witness-bearers are both those who describe their first-hand experiences and memories, as well as those listening to and learning about the experiences. At peace pilgrimage sites that memorialize profound suffering, such as the Son Mĩ Memorial (Vietnam), the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park and Museum (Japan), and the Jeju 4.3 Peace Park (South Korea), witness-bearers include all those who were involved—villagers, the unarmed civilians, the aggressors who committed the mass killings alike—who could describe their experiences. In the peace pilgrimage itself, the pilgrim-protagonist who visits the site of mass suffering is a witness-bearer by “listening” to the memories told in actual testimonies and communicated through artifacts and exhibits. Testimonies include recorded oral history narratives or written journal and diary accounts, as well as remnants, artifacts, photographs and other evidence from the scene of the massacre.

From a critical philosophy viewpoint, there are no true witness-bearers to testify or report the experience of being killed in Holocaust, genocide or massacre. Those who survived the massacre are considered imperfect proxies to those who fully experienced the torture, mutilation and killing (Agamben 2002, pp. 33–35). The ones whose humanness was completely obliterated and ultimately killed have no voice. The proxy witnesses—the survivors and their descendants, the observers, reporters and scholars—carry the impossible responsibility to give testimony about an ultimate death experience which they did not have first-hand (Tamashiro 2018).

Knowing the imperfection of the testimony underscores the insanity and the incomprehensibility of the event. As the pilgrim-protagonist-observer, one is poignantly aware that one is indeed witnessing the inhuman. The witness narratives of the brutality, the atrocities and the “crimes against humanity” are of unconscionable, unbelievable and emotionally unbearable actions. The events, the experience, and the memories are literally unthinkable and unspeakable. Lederach and Lederach (2011) explain that these massacres and collective traumas are “violations that so destroy the essence of innocence, decency and life itself that the very experience penetrates beyond comprehension and words” (Lederach and Lederach 2011, pp. 1–2).

By bearing witness to the inhuman—as imperfect, unbearable and impossible as it may be to do so—one comes to know and accept the reality of the experience and memory, even though the narrative violates expectations and ethical imperatives of what should be. Authenticating and owning these truths give affirmation and bestow honor to the suffering and hurting as valid, albeit difficult, human experiences (Tamashiro 2018).

Bearing witness to the inhuman requires keen observation, mindful attentiveness, and empathic, non-judgmental listening. It involves holding space with quietude or silence that allows multiple channels of perception and knowing, including the cognitive, emotional, intuitive, sensual-physical,

aesthetic, spiritual and metaphysical, to open. With this approach, the traumatic experiences and memories can be seen, known and understood in the paradigm of wounding and healing. Through this process, bearing witness to the inhuman contributes to social healing (aka., collective healing), the process that enables individuals, communities and nations to at least partially relieve emotional, spiritual and interpersonal wounds and traumas.

“*Social healing* is a paradigm that seeks to transcend dysfunctional polarities that hold repetitive wounding in place. It views human transgressions not as a battle between the dualities of right and wrong or good and bad, but as an issue of wounding and healing . . . ”.  
(Thompson and O’Dea 2012)

In witness bearing, the acknowledgement of the experience, including the suffering, can relieve deep wounds, soften transgenerational trauma, restore the dignity that was shattered, and return wholeness to self. Listening is a means of holding space that makes the pain and trauma gradually bearable and faceable. The emotional burden may be lightened and the dissolving of wounds may progress (Pikiewicz 2013). Like the peace pilgrimage itself, bearing witness to the inhuman turns into another out-of-the-ordinary encounter as it bestows existential legitimacy to the experience and supports personal as well as communal, societal healing. The witness-bearing process can deepen and fortify the soul (Kumar 2014) and claim one’s humanness per Agamben (2002) call.

## 7. Conclusions

As a variant of sacred journeys and religious pilgrimages, the peace pilgrimage genre involves self-defined odysseys associated with bearing witness to atrocities and the inhuman, as well as the cultivation of planetary consciousness that make it possible, per Agamben (2002) to claim one’s humanness. Oral history and autoethnographic accounts of peace pilgrimage reveal existential insights and world-view paradigm shifts, which may be valuable for educators or researchers in peace studies, religious education, history, biography, philosophy, psychology and consciousness studies.

Experiences involving out-of-the ordinary transmissions and encounters are instructive for self-knowledge and understanding of the unity of the tangible physical, natural worlds, and the less tangible psychic, social, intuitive, and metaphysical worlds. In peace pilgrimages, one has opportunities to glimpse the honor, respect and dignity that define the core of humanness, as well as to face the inhuman: the violent; the cruel, vicious, brutal and barbaric; the darkest side of human nature.

The meaning and value of insights and revelations from peace pilgrimages can be realized by being open to messages and voices from ordinary and extraordinary sources; by bearing witness to the inhuman; and by struggling through the stages of transformative learning to awaken to planetary consciousness. This process enables one to feel connected to the legacy of humanity and history and to taking ownership of one’s role as a global citizen. To know and appreciate profound suffering through a peace pilgrimage is to first question, and then freely choose whether or not to affirm faith in self and in life, despite darkness and unending suffering. In this way, we can cultivate the wholeness, honor, healing and the dignity we seek. This gives a new meaning and a redefined purpose to our lives as beings, whether human, inhuman, or something else.

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