

Plymouth Rock on the Mississippi

Rebecca Chandler

"SO YOU'RE CONSIDERING A PILGRIMAGE," I wrote to someone I'd recently met and liked, "nothing would delight me more. You'd have some time away, you'd make new friends, get more deeply acquainted with familiar ones, and you'd discover a whole new source of strength and support for that rather extended pilgrimage we call being a Mormon. That is, I hope you would. . .I've noticed, however, that it doesn't always turn out quite that way. One year, a carload of ladies from a neighboring state joined us, expecting something along the lines of a BYU education week, as I understand, and left in something of a huff before the weekend was over. No one knows exactly what happened to them, but apparently they were distressed, and so, as a consequence, were many of us who stayed behind. I wouldn't want anything like that to happen to you. So let me undertake to explain what Pilgrimage is—or at least what it is and has been and what I certainly hope it will continue to be—for me.

"First, a little history: In the fall of 1981 with the 140th anniversary of the founding of Relief Society pending the following March, five women from Salt Lake City took it into their already over-committed brains to undertake a sort of national reunion of sisters the very weekend of March 17 right in Nauvoo, Illinois, for a sort of ultimate Relief Society Birthday Party. They found accommodations for 56 in the Nauvoo House *right* on the banks of the Mississippi River and invited a number of friends, colleagues, sisters-in-law, former roommates. . .former missionary companions. . .and a general board member or two who they thought would enjoy such an experience, and then basically waited to see what would happen when we all got together. Someone somewhere coined the term of 'pilgrims' to characterize all these women, and the guest list kept changing as some found they could or could not attend and others heard of the event and asked to be included. When the planners were advised of the vagaries of Midwestern winters, the date was changed to mid-

May, but it did occur. . .and those of us who finally did attend had one of the most memorable experiences of our lives.

"I've wondered if the format wasn't inspired—only because it worked so well that it has been pretty widely followed ever since. There was a large group meeting on the first evening for introductions. We agreed to simply offer trust as a gift, rather than acting like a group of strangers for the next 36 hours. The fact that we were in the upper room of the red brick store, on Water and Grange streets, sitting however uncomfortably on the floor of the very room where the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo had held its initial meetings, made this particular meeting of sisters seem all the more significant. A presentation of sorts had been prepared to re-enact that first meeting, and, I am sure, we sang together. The next day was a potpourri of presentations—mostly historical. There were also discussion groups, delicious meals and good snacks, strolls around Nauvoo, and, always and everywhere singing. The music, under the direction of Cathy Stokes, was worth the trip in itself. Her selections, which include early LDS hymns, spirituals, and Primary songs can leave you humming for weeks.

"Sunday morning, finding ourselves without the priesthood, we held a Quaker Meeting on the banks of the Mississippi River with sharing, testimony bearing, prayers and. . .more hymns. We also tried to figure out how we could do all this again—and also how we could ever find a way to share the experience with others. Clearly the two objectives were mutually exclusive, and it was eventually determined that we should break this vanguard group of ours up along regional lines both for proximity and practicality and so we could include others who lived near us in our wards and stakes in any subsequent comings together. Susan Rugh, who lived in Chicago at the time, took responsibility for the Midwest. Other Pilgrimage groups were quickly or have since been formed. There are Pilgrimages meeting in the Northeast, the South, across the Inter-mountain West, and on the Pacific coast. There is a Pilgrimage near you. . .or near enough.

"What are the virtues of Pilgrimage I particularly value? One is the virtual absence of pretension. Unlike any number of other 'reunions' I can think of, I always look forward to Pilgrimage without worrying about what I'm going to wear or fretting that I really ought to lose a few pounds before the weekend arrives. I can depend on finding friends who seem glad to see me no matter how I look—or feel—or what I think I've accomplished since we last met. Something else I value is the sense that, in this group, women somehow stand on their own. We identify ourselves not so much by our positions in the church, or by whether or not we are married, as simply by who we are. Nursing babies have always been welcome, but beyond that, this is not a group that focuses much on the presence or absence or relative wonderfulness of children. For two

and a half glorious days a year, it just feels good to think about ourselves, our concerns as individuals, and about each other. Despite our interest in Mormon history and our search for models among sisters who have gone before us, I also see a Pilgrimage as very forward-looking. This will not be a group that is afraid of change, clinging to a comfortable past. Someone at a Quaker Meeting put it very well when she observed, '...there is no stagnation here.' I find, in fact, that I derive tremendous energy in the free exchange of ideas; the challenging perspective that just talking with someone else, someone different can bring—which reminds me of something else: As stimulating, as entertaining or as touching as the planned program may be, the best parts of a particular Pilgrimage may be the ride there or a late-night conversation huddled in a sleeping bag, or meeting a new friend at lunch. . . or the ride home. You may find a kindred spirit three states away you would never have otherwise met, or get to know someone in your own area you barely knew, or deepen an already valued friendship just by sharing this experience.

"So why do I hesitate to extend an invitation to almost anyone? Why isn't there an announcement in my Ward bulletin and a stack of fliers in the foyer? Well. Because Pilgrimage has always been characterized as a 'safe place'—but safe in a scary way. It's a place you can take your doubts as well as your convictions, your discouraging failures as well as your triumphs—without fear of recrimination or social censure. And that's important. For someone to whom an LDS encounter with anything unauthorized or uncorrelated seems disturbing, Pilgrimage is likely to be. . . disturbing. I wasn't there, but I understand one legendary speaker in a nearby ward prefaced her Sacrament Meeting remarks by saying, 'Are there any investigators here? any brand-new members just getting into this? anyone with a fragile testimony? No? Okay then, I've got something to say.' At Pilgrimages we like to start with a similar set of assumptions—that we can speak, or maybe squeak without fear of giving offense. It is important to recognize that, overwhelmingly, this group of sisters is committed to church activity and to living the gospel. Participants typically include a goodly number of what Jan Shipps would call 'birthright Mormons' but also any number of converts of varying tenures. Mostly, these women are very involved in their home wards, often serving in Relief Society and Young Women's presidencies, teaching Sunday School and Relief Society, serving on stake boards. They are also, not infrequently, 'supporting and sustaining' husbands who are in ward and stake leadership positions. Others are inactive or not so active, perhaps because they've slipped under the institutional radar, or sometimes perhaps because they prefer it that way. But we're all sisters.

"I must acknowledge that we have discussed some pretty heavy issues over the years, but I can't remember an episode of serious male bashing. 'Are you still speaking to me?' Neal asked when I returned from

an early Pilgrimage. Far from having spent the weekend complaining about patriarchy, I returned grateful to him for manning the household, so I could get away. I did not tell him that the most spirited discussion I had heard or overhead or even heard about at that particular retreat—one that touched the very soul of orthodoxy, our very deepest commitments—was between two opposing camps of quilters: those who machine piece their quilt tops and who think it is okay to sit on a finished quilt, and those purists who do everything by hand and don't want anyone to go near the finished product. If you think an encounter of that confrontational intensity might challenge your testimony, you may want to think twice about attending. But, if after what I've told, you think this is a group of women you would enjoy and an experience you would relish, then go ahead: delegate the road show, re-schedule your son's baptism, make minimum payments on your bills, put off your breakdown, and join us.

"Despite all I've said to prepare you, I can't predict what will happen—but I can guarantee two things—you will return home overfed and underslept—and you will be welcome."