

The Desert Woman
April 5 96

BOOKS THAT INSPIRE

Walking Your Talk

By Janis M. Wolff

As I re-read "Peace Pilgrim," which I have done frequently since its original publication in 1982, I was again struck by the apparent similarity of this extraordinary woman to a modern-day saint. If, by definition, a saint is a person of great holiness, virtue, or benevolence, this exemplary being emulated the ideal.

Like other contemporary examples - the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, and Thich Nhat Hahn - "Peace Pilgrim" demonstrated the ability of a human being to extricate herself from egocentric pessimism and worldly entanglements to attain the ultimate heights of human existence. "Peace" transcended the narrow and arbitrary boundaries of gender, race, age, nationalism, religion, politics, and materialism. She demonstrated throughout her life that the way to freedom, simplicity, and serenity lies in unconditional love.

Born in the early 1900s in the eastern United States (no one knows for sure how old she was), in 1938 she began preparations to "live to give instead of to get." On January 1, 1953, with the Korean War and and McCarthyism at its zenith, she took the name "Peace Pilgrim" and began the first of seven cross-country pilgrimages for peace, zigzagging the contiguous United States.

Later she journeyed into Canada, Mexico, Alaska, and Hawaii. Completing 25,000 miles on foot by 1964, she stopped counting the miles. For almost 30 years she walked, spreading the message of peace and love informally to whomever wished to listen - to individuals she met along the way, to colleges and universities, churches, truck stops, radio and television audiences.

In "walking her talk," she took the vow of simplicity. "I shall not accept more than I need while others in the world have less than they need." She wore what she owned - her signature navy blue pants and shirt, and a tunic lettered in front with

"Peace Pilgrim," and on the back, "25,000 Miles on Foot For Peace." A compartmentalized tunic held her worldly goods: comb, folding toothbrush, ballpoint pen, map, copies of her message, and her mail.

Peace accepted no money. Food and lodging were provided by nature or the hospitality of those she met, which she accepted as offerings sent from the hand of God. "I am equally thankful for the stale bread I received at a migrant worker's home as the sumptuous meal presented...at the Waldorf Astoria." She never went longer than three days without food, except for a self-imposed 45-day fast for peace. "I walk until given shelter, fast until given food. I don't ask - it's given without asking. Aren't people good!"

The book is a compilation of her autobiography, her message, interviews, photographs, and letters that are at once simple and profound.

"My pilgrimage covers the enter peace picture: peace among nations, peace among groups, peace within our environment, peace among individuals, and very, very important inner peace - which I talk about most often because that is where peace begins."

The French writer, Maurice Barres, was asked, "What is the good of the saints?"

He replied, "They delight the soul!"

Your soul shall not be disappointed.

"Peace Pilgrim: Her Life and Work in Her Own Words." Ocean Tree Books, 1991.

Janis Wolff, M.F.C.C., is a psychotherapist in Palm Springs. Studying and practicing meditation and spiritual sciences for 25 years, she has also worked as a professional writer and editor since 1969. She can be reached at (619) 770-3467.