

A Catskill Thanksgiving Pilgrimage

By Skip Doyle

Each Thanksgiving in the clove between Platte Mountain and Kaaterskill High Peak, neighbors celebrate a faith-filled dinner. In gratitude for the year's blessings, the self-sufficient Bruderhof community opens its doors. Hundreds gather: most from the Platte Clove Community of the Bruderhof, many are friends and neighbors, a handful are pilgrims from the Adirondack Mountain Club – this is their journey.

Who is an ADK pilgrim? Anyone who chooses to be. ADK membership does not matter. One's religion does not matter – after all the basis of this holiday is religious freedom. All that matters is the willingness to endure the hardships of a mountain trek for the rewards of fellowship and thanksgiving at day's end.

On Wednesday evening, the ADK group gathers in Woodstock at the KTD Buddhist monastery. By candlelight, the pilgrims share Zen meditation. There is no mantra, no guided imagery, no proselytizing; there is simply prayer without words, without sound, without motion, even without thought. In the present, and in our presence, we experience truly peace and quiet.

Daybreak of Thanksgiving morning begins with breakfast at the monastery. And despite no animal having sacrificed its life for our nourishment, there is a vast variety of food. We share the brief verse: "This is the day, the lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it." And we received our first kohan: What is this verse we are asked – that begins with "P"? A prayer... yes, but more. A Psalm... yes, but more. We then bundle ourselves bracing ourselves for the early morning Catskill chill, and commence our trek. All are prepared, all are warm, for there is no bad weather, only bad clothing.



Indian Head Mountain viewed from the Bruderhof



Buddhist monastery at Woodstock

In her book, *Zen Miracles*, Brenda Shoshanna writes, “This is the essence of a pilgrimage: faith in ourselves and in what is presented for us to do. We simply allow the situation to speak to us, accept the unpredictable, and from the depths of our heart, respond. The essence of a pilgrimage is to stop clinging to false habits, security, stability, and to be willing to surrender to the vast unknown. There is nothing comfortable or predictable on a pilgrimage. Here we endure discomfort gladly. As we do this, all kinds of doors open...” Hence, we embark on this Thanksgiving Pilgrimage, a bit fretful of what might unfold in the deep mountain woods of the Catskills, but ready to accept the trials and blessings of the day knowing that the kind, open doors of the Bruderhof await us.

While the two mile hike up Overlook Mountain is not steep, the incline is relentless and the 1,400 foot elevation-gain taxing. Along the way, exploring the early 20th century hotel ruins of the Overlook Mountain House provides a welcome respite. Atop the summit is a fire tower providing a vast vista of the Catskill Preserve and distant views of the Hudson River north and south. Here we embrace nature with all our senses.

Descending 1,000 feet to Echo Lake – whose surrounding amphitheatre rocks do indeed echo – we pause for lunch, and begin the mediation of Spiritual Directions. As a complement to Saint Ignatius’ *spiritual exercises* which bring a cerebral, Jesuit discipline to prayer, the Spiritual Directions are Franciscan *bodily prayers* which bring a visceral experience. To the east with our soul, we release fear and gain acceptance; to the south with our strength we dispel anger and replace with gratitude; to the west with our heart we lose jealousy and find compassion; to the north with our minds we let go of self-doubt and discover self-goodness. Our kohans: what does each of these impediments have in common, what does each of these virtues have in common?

Hiking the flat saddle between Overlook and Platte Mountain makes for a pleasant afternoon, and with the leafless trees of late autumn, provides panoramic views of the valley below. The trail skirts Platte Mountain, and as shadows become long, we commence our descent to Platte Clove. Having hiked 10 miles this day, after crossing a small footbridge over the Platte Kill, we are soon at the entrance to the Bruderhof’s Platte Clove Community. Here we are warmly greeted and



Platte Kill footbridge

whisked off to each of our host families to wash up and for conversation before dinner begins.

The past few years, I have had the honor of being the guest of the Harrison family. With dusk descending, the family is just in from gathering conifer branches; the room is filled with the scent of evergreens as together they weave their garlands and wreaths. Our conversation turns to the nature of the Bruderhof. "Our community is simply about living the Gospel, and the Beatitudes in particular." says the dad. And with the dinner bell ringing, the mom chimes in, "There have been times in our community when we have not had enough to eat, but now there is ample and we want to share that with our neighbors. Thank you for coming here." We are accepted without judgment; we witness love in action.

"There was an incredible aroma of roasting turkey and other foods that filled the night air as we approached the dining hall," recalls pilgrim Ingrid Strauch, "and the simple, homemade feast of turkey, stuffing, and cranberry sauce tasted as good as it smelled." In the dining hall are several hundred people. That there is so generous amount of food is amazing enough, but that it is all prepared and brought out



Pilgrims at the Platte Clove Community

simultaneously is quite a miracle. Marvelous, too, is the involvement of the children. A score of high school students are waiters, middle school students provide music and song, and the younger children take the microphone and express what Thanksgiving means to them – it is heartening how many express gratitude to their parents. After pumpkin pie dessert, we return to our host families, an evening chat, and then bedtime.

Friday morning at the Bruderhof begins before dawn. After breakfast with our host families, the Thanksgiving pilgrims assemble for the trek back to Woodstock. We hike back up Platte Mountain, across the saddle, and this time skip Echo Lake. Our time atop the fire tower is brief as all the pilgrims have "parking lot fever." After a full day of hiking, we reach the Overlook trailhead where we began our pilgrimage. Tired, but satisfied by our journey, and honoring our pledge to rejoice throughout this day, pilgrim Eileen Lawson enthuses, "A dose of mortification is the spice of life; this pilgrimage is seasoned just right!"

To participate in this Thanksgiving Pilgrimage contact hike leader Skip Doyle at SkipNewYork@yahoo.com. The only requirements are to charitably donate to our hosts and to have previously hiked some Catskill mountain or comparable terrain. For a list of other ADK outings, see midHudsonADK.org.