

*The New York Times***Opinionator**

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JULY 7, 2012, 3:00 PM

**Reclaiming Travel**By *ILAN STAVANS and JOSHUA ELLISON*

What compels us to leave home, to travel to other places? The great travel writer Bruce Chatwin described nomadism as an “inveterate impulse,” deeply rooted in our species. The relentless movement of the modern world bears this out: our relative prosperity has not turned us into a sedentary species. The World Tourism Organization, an agency of the United Nations, reported nearly a billion tourist arrivals in 2011. Some 200 million people are now living outside their country of birth.

This type of massive movement — the rearrangement, temporary or permanent, of multitudes — is as fundamental to modern life as the Internet, global trade or any other sociopolitical developments. Certainly, many of our most intractable collective challenges as a society are directly linked to our mobility: urbanization, environmental depletion, scarcity and, of course, immigration. An immigrant is a traveler without a return ticket.

In the Bible, the human journey begins with an expulsion. God’s chosen people are also those condemned to wander. Not only wander, but wonder: Why are we in exile? Where is home? Can this rupture ever be repaired? “Gilgamesh,” the Icelandic sagas and “The Odyssey” are all about the itinerant life. Yet these characters don’t see travel as we moderns do. They embark on journeys of mythic significance — the literature of travel in the premodern era did not recognize travel for leisure or self-improvement. Today, our approach to travel is defined not by archetypal imagery but, rather, according to our own mostly prosaic trips. Literature, to be sure, still produces grand quests; likewise, there are still many people whose journeys are precarious and momentous on an epic scale.

For the most fortunate among us, our travels are now routine, devoted mainly to entertainment and personal enrichment. We have turned travel into something ordinary, deprived it of allegorical grandeur. We have made it a business: the business of being on the move. Whatever impels us to travel, it is no longer the oracle, the pilgrimage or the gods. It is the compulsion to be elsewhere, anywhere but here.

St. Augustine believed that “because God has made us for Himself, our hearts are restless until they rest in Him.” We often think of restlessness as a malady. Thus, we urgently need to reclaim the etymology of restlessness — “stirring constantly, desirous of action” — to signal our curiosity

toward what isn't us, to explore outside the confines of our own environment. Getting lost isn't a curse. Not knowing where we are, what to eat, how to speak the language can certainly make us anxious and uneasy. But anxiety is part of any person's quest to find the parameters of life's possibilities.

The act of traveling is an impossibly broad category: it can encompass both the death march and the cruise ship. Travel has no inherent moral character, no necessary outcome. It can be precious or worthless, productive or destructive. It can be ennobling or self-satisfied. The returns can be only as good as what we offer of ourselves in the process. So what distinguishes meaningful, fruitful travel from mere tourism? What turns travel into a quest rather than self-serving escapism?

George Steiner wrote that "human beings need to learn to be each other's guests on this small planet." We usually focus on the ethical imperative of hospitality, on the obligation to be a generous host. When we travel, though, we are asking for hospitality. There's great vulnerability in this. It also requires considerable strength. To be a good guest — like being a good host — one needs to be secure in one's own premises: where you stand, who you are. This means we tend to romanticize travel as a lonely pursuit. In fact, a much deeper virtue arises from the demands it makes on us as social beings.

Travel is a search for meaning, not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of others. The humility required for genuine travel is exactly what is missing from its opposite extreme, tourism.

Modern tourism does not promise transformation but rather the possibility of leaving home and coming back without any significant change or challenge. Tourists may enjoy the visit only because it is short. The memory of it, the retelling, will always be better. Whereas travel is about the unexpected, about giving oneself over to disorientation, tourism is safe, controlled and predetermined. We take a vacation, not so much to discover a new landscape, but to find respite from our current one, an antidote to routine.

There are still traces of the pilgrimage, even in tourism, though they have become warped and solipsistic. Holy seekers go looking for oracles, tombs, sites of revelation. Tourists like to visit ruins, empty churches, battlefields, memorials. Tourist kitsch depends on a sterilized version of history and a smug assurance that all of our stories of the past are ultimately redemptive — even if it is only the tourists' false witness that redeems them. There's no seeking required, and no real challenge, because the emotional voyage is preprogrammed. The world has become a frighteningly small place.

The planet's size hasn't changed, of course, but our outside egos have shrunk it dramatically. We might feel we know our own neighborhood, our own city, our own country, yet we still know so

little about other individuals, what distinguishes them from us, how they make their habitat into home.

This lack of awareness is even more pronounced when it comes to different cultures. The media bombards us with images from far-away places, making distant people seem less foreign, more relatable to us, less threatening. It's a mirage, obviously. The kind of travel to which we aspire should tolerate uncertainty and discomfort. It isn't about pain or excessive strain — travel doesn't need to be an extreme sport — but we need to permit ourselves to be clumsy, inexperienced and even a bit lonely. We might never understand travel as our ancestors did: our world is too open, relativistic, secular, demystified. But we will need to reclaim some notion of the heroic: a quest for communion and, ultimately, self-knowledge.

Our wandering is meant to lead back toward ourselves. This is the paradox: we set out on adventures to gain deeper access to ourselves; we travel to transcend our own limitations. Travel should be an art through which our restlessness finds expression. We must bring back the idea of travel as a search.

*Ilan Stavans is a professor of literature at Amherst College. Joshua Ellison is the editor of the literary journal *Habitus*.*

*This article appeared in print on July 7, 2012.*