

Walk a Mile in Her Shoes
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Peace Pilgrim's message was simple: 'Overcome evil with good, falsehood with truth, and hatred with love. This is the way to peace.'

She walked more than 25,000 miles, crisscrossing the country almost seven times. She ate only when food was offered and slept wherever she could. Without any organizational backing or money in her pocket, she carried one message for everyone she met: "Overcome evil with good, falsehood with truth, and hatred with love. This is the way to peace."

For 28 years, from 1953 to 1981, Mildred Norman Ryder, who became known as Peace Pilgrim, walked the highways and back roads of America, talking to people wherever she found them, reaching them on a personal level, those the peace movement may have passed by. And what she talked about was the "whole peace picture — peace among nations, peace among groups, peace among people, and most importantly, inner peace."

Peace Pilgrim's journey began when she experienced a spiritual revelation after having hiked the entire Appalachian Trail. She dropped her given name during the McCarthy era, after the FBI became suspicious of her message and investigated her family. From that point on, she never stopped — "I shall remain a wanderer until mankind has learned the ways of peace." Indeed, she walked her talk, encouraging thousands through heart-to-heart dialogue.

She was humble and ordinary. "She was like a best friend," said Ann Rush, a longtime friend and co-founder of the Peace Pilgrim Center in Hemet, California. "It was a joyful delight to meet someone so dedicated.... Those who met her were impressed by her intelligence, serenity, wit and genuine loving nature."

One admirer said: "I have never heard anyone express in a more beautiful and challenging way what it means to be a human being. And what is possible for each of us as a human being." Said another: "The greatest inspiration of all is that her life and her words were one. She was her message."

But Peace Pilgrim felt that she was no different than anyone else. If she could find inner peace, so could everyone.

"On foot and on faith," Peace Pilgrim taught people what she had learned. It wasn't a new message, she admitted, just the practice of it. "Only as we become peaceful will we be finding ourselves living in a more peaceful world.... Whenever you bring harmony into any unpeaceful situation, you contribute to the total peace picture. Insofar as you have peace in your life, you reflect it into your surroundings and into your world."

Today, her successor, Peace Pilgrim II, has left behind his own name and picked up where Peace Pilgrim left off. Beginning in 1989 from Oregon, he has traveled across the country eight times talking to children, church groups, prisoners and the media, and addressing issues such as discrimination and conflict resolution. "Peace begins with me," he said. "When you come from a place of inner peace, there is no fear and you live your life more fully."

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