

A pilgrimage of Virginia Woolf readers

Walking together through Sussex and *To The Lighthouse*.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [August 29, 2018](#) issue



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Some readers of this column will remember Vanessa Zoltan, who, as a divinity student, experimented with reading Charlotte Brontë's novel [Jane Eyre as if it were a sacred text](#): praying with it, listening for how it spoke to the world around her, wrestling with it until it gave her a blessing. These days, Vanessa hosts the popular *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* podcast, in which she and her friend Casper ter Kuile [explore the Harry Potter series](#), chapter by chapter, using sacred reading practices from the Jewish and Christian traditions. To read a sentence of these books with them, using *lectio divina*, or *Pardes*, or *havruta*, is to feel the joy of following meaning as it unfolds and expands. It is to remember what it felt like the first time you experienced a book as a passageway to the vast world around you and the hidden world inside you.

Vanessa continues to imagine ways to help us live more consciously and fully by reading more deeply. What if, she asked me more than a year ago, we organized a reading and walking pilgrimage around Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*? What if we gathered a group of pilgrims for a journey through the novel and through the Sussex countryside Woolf loved? What if we used sacred reading practices to deepen our understanding of her novel and created rituals to help us draw closer to the significance of our experience?

She had me at "Virginia Woolf." So, in partnership with Liz Slade—a brilliant Londoner animated by a quiet confidence in the holiness of books, landscape, and community—we made a plan. And in early June, we found ourselves on the porch of St. Paul's Cathedral, nervously waiting for our pilgrims to arrive.

We spent seven days together in the South Downs National Park, discussing the novel for an hour or two in the morning and spending the rest of the day walking through that ancient landscape, following in Woolf's footsteps. Each day, one hour of this walking time we spent in silence, listening to the skylarks, meditating on a phrase or a sentence from the novel, quietly cherishing each other's company.

We integrated other rituals into our days as well. We learned a sacred reading practice each morning and lowered it like a ladder into Woolf's novel. We organized one of the many meals we shared together as a ritual meal, with structured conversation about the table practices that have shaped and sustained us. We walked together to the bank of the river where Woolf died, read her final letter to her husband, and built a small cairn of treasures we had picked up on our walks. Mourning her death opened space for the grieving of other losses. "I finally buried my mother this morning," one pilgrim told me as we walked home at the end of the day.

Our favorite sacred reading practice was the creation of *florilegia*, which is what medieval monks called the collections they created out of fragments from their reading, the "sparklets" that had shone out of the page. Vanessa gave us each a notebook in which to collect our own sparklets, and, at the end of every day, we each shared one—sentences from Woolf's novel, things we'd heard each other say, images we'd seen, sounds we'd heard. These ranged from the sublime to the deeply silly. Some sparklets captured something so true that we fell still and silent as we listened, while others made us laugh so hard that tears ran down our faces.

On our last morning together, everyone shared a sparklet for the week—a sparklet of sparklets, as it were. Vanessa wrote them all down and then read them aloud as a single text, everyone’s contribution made even more meaningful by being set down next to everyone else’s. Many people contributed a line or two from the novel, but one pilgrim—a middle-school Latin teacher—offered a line from a psalm to express what the week had meant: *Abyssus abyssum vocat*. Deep calls to deep.

That felt right, to have created a *florilegium* in which a fragment of the Bible sat alongside Virginia Woolf’s sentences, each illuminating the other, each interpreting the other, together troubling the boundaries between “religious” and “secular.” Deep calls to deep without regard for such categories.

Pilgrimages draw their power from the wisdom that religious traditions have passed down through the generations: how walking together can create a community out of strangers; how a book can become a portable, generative sacred space; how a shared meal can express our desire to know and to be known. Surely this is wisdom that belongs to all of us, wisdom to be shared, part of our human inheritance.

We had begun our pilgrimage on the steps of St. Paul’s Cathedral in honor of a scene from Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which an unemployed man holding a bag of pamphlets stands on those same steps and thinks about going inside. There’s company inside, he thinks, a place to belong. But he doesn’t enter, perhaps because he believes it would mean setting down not only his pamphlets but “seeking and questing” as well.

We didn’t enter either but stayed on the threshold as we introduced ourselves to each other for the first time. And then, bringing along with us practices of seeking and questing that have been passed back and forth across such thresholds for centuries, we walked together into the city.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “A pilgrimage of readers.”