Prologue

Day 0: Departure

March 1

"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man." —Heraclitus

What if walking could change everything?

At 3:00 a.m., my wife Betsy and I lay awake in the dark, hours before my late-afternoon flight. The condo was quiet except for the hum of the refrigerator and the occasional creak of the hardwood floors as the furnace kicked in. Outside, snow rimmed the sidewalk, crusted after a mild February thaw. We didn't say much. Just held hands. The anticipation was too big for words.

After nearly three years of dreaming and planning, the day had arrived: I was leaving for Japan to walk the eighty-eight-temple pilgrimage around Shikoku Island. This journey, weaving together past, present, and future, called to me.

The route spans roughly twelve hundred kilometers (746 miles), circling Japan's Shikoku Island. The temples, many founded or restored by the monk Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi), serve as more than destinations; they are markers on a spiritual path. For over a thousand years, this pilgrimage has drawn the devout, the curious, the grieving, and the seeking—each hoping to return changed.

The idea first came to me years earlier on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Flipping channels, I landed on a PBS documentary about modern pilgrims walking a Buddhist path in Japan. Misty forests, rice paddies, temple bells. People of all ages, some alone, some in pairs, circling the island on foot. I was transfixed.

When the credits rolled, I turned to Betsy. "I want to do that."

Without looking up from her book: "Sure, sweetie. You go for it."

She figured it was just another wild idea. I've had many. But she knew me well. If I committed, I'd see it through. "It'll be real when you buy the plane ticket," she added.

A lot had changed since I'd last been to Japan. Back then, in the 1990s, I was a young engineer traveling for business, finalizing muffler designs in Tokyo offices, dining on expense accounts, riding the *shinkansen* between meetings. I loved the food, the people, the rhythm of the culture, how ritual and order gave shape to even the smallest daily tasks. I was drawn to it, even then.

But life veered. I left engineering to become a teacher, chasing a different kind of meaning. I went through a divorce. My father died. I bought a house so my mother could move

in with me, and then, after several years together, she passed too. I remarried. My children grew up. My daughter married. A grandchild was on the way.

Somewhere in all that, Japan became memory. But the longing remained. This trip wasn't for business or tourism. It was something else.

Why would someone not fluent in Japanese, not Buddhist, take on such a journey? The answer was simple yet elusive: I felt called.

It's a calling not unlike the one I felt at age thirty-seven, when I left a successful engineering career to become a high school math teacher. In both cases, something deep within me stirred, urging me to step off the well-marked path and into something unknown but necessary.

The idea started as a whisper. Persistent, quiet, impossible to ignore.

I didn't fully know what I sought, but I sensed it was tied to this land, these temples, and the practices of Shingon Buddhism. Shingon emphasizes direct embodied experience: enlightenment through ritual, chanting, and meditation. It teaches that ultimate truth cannot be grasped by words alone; it must be lived, breathed, and felt.

I wasn't a Buddhist, at least not then. But I felt drawn to this path and its teachings. I believed walking this pilgrimage would reveal something essential about who I am, how I move through the world, and what it means to be fully alive.

At first, only Betsy knew. Gradually, I shared the idea with a few close friends. None of them had heard of the eighty-eight-temple route, and their reactions hovered between admiration

and disbelief. Seven or eight hundred miles on foot? At nearly sixty years old? It sounded reckless, perhaps even impossible. And yet, the very impossibility of it drew me in.

When my daughter Caitlin placed a copy of Oliver Statler's *Japanese Pilgrimage* in my hands, something in me quickened. I read it hungrily, carried along by his voice as he walked the path with a young companion, Morikawa Nobuo. Statler's pages shimmered with the weave of history and landscape, of Kūkai's presence echoing across centuries. What stayed with me most, however, were his encounters with the people of Shikoku: farmers, innkeepers, temple priests. Each offering a glimpse of the pilgrimage as not just a walk, but as a living exchange.

One passage in particular lodged in me like an ember: at an unnamed Bangai temple, Statler submitted to a ritual in which the priest held him over fire. The image startled me. This seemed part initiation and part surrender. I found myself wondering what forms of fire might await me. Not literal flames, perhaps, but the other kinds: the fire of aching muscles and worn feet, of loneliness and doubt, of hurt that still smoldered within me. And maybe too, the fire of unexpected kindness, flaring up from strangers' hands.

Somewhere in those flames, I sensed, was the work I needed to do. The path would test me. It would change me. And perhaps, if I gave myself over to it, the path might burn away what no longer served me and leave behind something truer, leaner, and more alive.

The pilgrimage is more than physical. It mirrors the Buddhist path from awakening to nirvana. As pilgrims pass through the island's four prefectures, they symbolically walk four stages:

Tokushima prefecture (Temples 1–23): *Hosshin no dō*, the Path of Awakening.

Kōchi prefecture (Temples 24–39): *Shugyō no dō*, the Path of Discipline.

Ehime prefecture (Temples 40–65): *Bodai no dō*, the Path of Enlightenment.

Kagawa prefecture (Temples 66–88): *Nehan no dō*, the Path of Nirvana.

Even if one begins for personal or cultural reasons, the stages guide the journey inward.

While many pilgrims travel by car or bus, a smaller group chooses to walk the full distance *Tōshiuchi*. From the start, I knew: I would walk. No shortcuts.

I would go *Junuchi*, clockwise, the traditional way. My journey would begin at *Ryōzenji*, Temple 1, in Tokushima. From there I would set out to follow the path around the island. The goal was not only to reach all eighty-eight temples, but to return to the place where I started, to close the circle. In pilgrimage, endings are never just endings; they fold back into beginnings, like breath returning to itself. To walk the circle was to trust that I too might be reshaped, that I might come back to myself by way of leaving.

Knowing I would walk was not the same as being ready.

I began with research: books, blogs, videos. I studied maps, read pilgrim accounts, learned what to pack. Kat Davis's blog, *Following the Arrows*, was especially helpful. I hoped to thank her one day. Later I learned she had passed away.

Each story made the pilgrimage more vivid. More real. Harder to turn back.

But I wasn't in shape. In my mind, I was still twenty, not pushing retirement age. My knees and back weren't fooled. They carried the truth, along with thirty-five extra pounds.

Though I had always lived an active life that included hiking, biking, and swimming, I had never walked for weeks on end. I trusted the road would shape me, that I would walk myself into readiness. So, I trained. I walked with a pack, sometimes in rain and snow, six miles a day round trip to the school where I taught. I learned that shoes matter and that walking is a discipline.

Each step whispered: *This is what it will feel like*.

I'd spent the last two years researching ultralight gear options, slowly collecting the right mix of equipment. But it wasn't until I purchased my plane ticket that the trip became real in my mind.

I chose March, when the air still carries winter's edge and the cherry blossoms begin to bloom. The path would lead me through cities and cedar forests, mountains and rice fields. I would sleep in temples, huts, business hotels, tents. Sometimes with others. But mostly alone, with the sky, the road, and my thoughts.

I didn't know what I would find. But I trusted the walking. Step after step, temple after temple, I believed the noise would fall away. And whatever remained, however small, would be enough.

Not grand revelations, but the ordinary gifts of the road:

A steaming bowl of udon after a long day. A silent bow shared with a stranger.

The weight of a warm can of coffee pressed into cold hands.

I thought I was preparing myself for the smallest of blessings. I didn't yet know how fierce or tender they could be, or how even a stranger's bow or a shared meal could crack

something open in me. What began as minor comforts would, over the weeks, become revelations in their own right.

In Japan there is a phrase: *mono no aware*, the bittersweet awareness of impermanence, the beauty that lives only because it will not last. At the time, I didn't know this phrase, much less the depth it carried. But step by step, temple by temple, I would come to understand. The pilgrimage would become less a journey around the island and more of a walking meditation on *mono no aware.* A way of learning to bow before the fleeting, to honor both the ache of loss and the quiet miracle of renewal.

Three years earlier, Betsy and I had started planning our exits from teaching. She taught physics on the fourth floor of Madison West; I taught math on the first. Most students didn't even realize we were married. We liked it that way. We met on my first day at West and married three years later. But Wisconsin's political climate had become hostile to public education. The joy of teaching was being eroded by budget cuts, legislative attacks, and endless paperwork. We began looking ahead. Betsy returned to school to become an accountant; I rekindled my love of photography.

By the time I left for Japan, she was deep in tax season, working long hours at a local firm, and I was freelancing as a sports photographer, covering Badgers games, Brewers games, and anything else that paid.

On the day I departed we got up as usual at 5:00 a.m. Betsy headed to her morning workout, and I drove to Starbucks to meet "the boys," a ritual as consistent as any spiritual practice. The same crew showed up every morning: Dr. John with his oatmeal, George sketching

in the corner, John L. tapping away on his laptop. Karl (with a *K*) filled my cup with my usual dark roast without asking.

George confirmed he'd pick me up at 2:00 p.m. for the airport. Dr. John asked if I'd broken in my shoes. (I hadn't.) John L. wondered if I'd survive on sushi and rice. Bill and Tony dropped by too. Bill, who was training for Mt. Rainier, had spent the past year trading gear tips with me. We toasted my trip with coffee. He was going higher, I was going farther, but at least I didn't have to pack out my waste.

Back home, Betsy and I ate breakfast and said our quiet goodbyes. We mostly talked logistics, like where she could park the truck overnight without getting a ticket. Condo living meant no more snow shoveling, but winter still brought complications. She didn't cry. Neither did I. We're not big on dramatics. But the goodbye settled heavy between us, like the snow outside.

Then I spread all my gear across the living room floor and began methodically checking each item against my list. My Hyperlite pack was a marvel of engineering, frameless and waterproof. But despite my best efforts, my base weight was thirty-three pounds. Add 3.5 liters of water and a day's food, and I'd be hauling close to forty pounds. Nearly half of that weight was electronics: my Canon 5D Mark IV, a 24–70mm lens, a Surface Pro computer, a solar panel, and chargers. My photographer friends Steve and Andy had tried to talk me into a lighter setup. Steve even brought two point-and-shoot cameras to a Badgers game to tempt me. I didn't budge. I wanted quality. I wanted control. In hindsight, I wish I'd listened, especially on the rainy days.

I transferred the computer and camera into a smaller Hyperlite pack for the flight and stuffed my main backpack inside a Zpacks travel sack, which would double as a rain cover on the

trail. I shaved, showered, got a last-minute haircut and beard trim, and then sat alone in the quiet, waiting for George to arrive.

The doubts started circling like birds. Had I forgotten something? Would my knees hold out? Would my money last? Would I be lonely? Would I be afraid?

George pulled into the driveway right on time. I heaved my pack into the truck bed and climbed in. The drive to the airport was smooth. I checked my bag, hugged George goodbye, and headed toward the gate.

And so I stepped onto the path to walk the circle. To see what remained when everything else fell away. To begin.

The flight to LAX was uneventful. I spent the layover in the United Club, drinking beer and watching planes take off. Suspended between lives. Between continents.

My mind wandered.

I thought back over the past year, my first year after retiring from teaching. It was supposed to be a new chapter, a break from the rhythms of lesson plans, grading, and the endless demands of the school day. But almost immediately, my old high school called me back. They needed someone to fill in for nine weeks while they searched for a permanent replacement in the math department. I agreed, partly out of habit, partly because I still cared about those students and the work. It felt familiar, even comforting in a way, to return to the classroom, even if only temporarily.

Then, before I could fully settle back into retirement, a middle school reached out. One of their teachers was facing a long illness, and they needed help covering the position. I told them I

could stay until mid-February, but that was my limit. I had my ticket to Japan, and I knew that once I left, I would be gone for the rest of the school year. The promise of the pilgrimage was like a beacon, pulling me away from the familiar and into the unknown.

It was strange to balance those two worlds: the classroom, with its daily chaos and youthful energy, and the quiet anticipation of the journey ahead. Each day teaching reminded me of the life I was stepping away from—the routines, the friendships, the sense of purpose. Yet, underneath it all was a sense that something else was waiting for me out there on the road.

I kept my promise. When mid-February came, I packed up my classroom one last time. It felt both final and freeing. No fanfare. Just a quiet goodbye to students and staff. I knew I wouldn't be back. I left with the sense that I was closing one chapter to open another, one measured in footsteps rather than school bells.

The pilgrimage wasn't just a physical journey. It was a break from all that I knew, a chance to shed the old and discover something new, something deeper. And with each step I would take in Japan, I hoped to find a way forward, both on the path and within myself.

At midnight, I boarded my flight to Tokyo. Somewhere over the Pacific, Friday vanished into the international dateline. I dozed off and on, crammed into economy class, limbs stiff, mind spinning.

By Saturday morning, I was back in Japan after nearly twenty-five years.

After clearing immigration and enduring a long delay at the airport, I boarded a small regional flight to Tokushima. Once I landed, I repacked my bag right there in the terminal, adjusting straps, cinching the hip belt tight. My hotel check-in wasn't until late afternoon, so I

caught a local bus toward the coast, eager to see the famous Naruto whirlpools, natural tidal currents that swirl with surprising force between two islands. This was my first real test carrying the full pack. It threw off my balance. Twice, I nearly toppled over. How was I going to carry this weight for seven weeks?

Still, the whirlpools were breathtaking. A glass walkway stretched over the strait, offering a dizzying view directly down into the swirling sea. For the more adventurous, boat tours roared right into the current, but I stayed dry and watched from above. The water twisted in unpredictable patterns—powerful, yet contained. I wondered if this journey might also feel chaotic at times, but always circling back to something ancient and still.

Eventually, I made it back to town and checked into the Toyoko Inn, my last real hotel for the foreseeable future. At the front desk, a package was waiting: the Wi-Fi hotspot I'd rented to stay connected along the way. The room was clean and spare, just a hot pot for tea, a pair of slippers by the door, a firm bed, and a window that looked out onto the blank wall of another building. But I wasn't here for the view. It was cheap, close to the train station, and warm.

I unpacked just enough for the night, then went out in search of dinner. I found a modest restaurant serving *katsudon*, breaded pork cutlet with rice, noodles, and egg in a steaming bowl, which I ordered along with a cold beer. I savored each bite, sipping slowly, grateful for something warm and familiar. I didn't know when I'd eat this well again.

Back in the room, I messaged Betsy. She was already at work, so I didn't call. Just a short note: *I'm safe. I've landed. Tomorrow, I start walking.*

I turned off the light and lay back in the dark, exhausted, jittery, and wide awake.

Tomorrow, the real journey would begin.