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Crossing the Water, Changing the Air



Ingrid Askew (back row, center) with fellow pilgrims and cast members in Crossing the Water, Changing the Air

I saw a very moving play Saturday at the Wesley Methodist Church in Hadley called Crossing the Waters, Changing the Air by Ingrid Askew. It was a combination of songs, dances, and recitations written by an extraordinary group of pilgrims who took part in the Interfaith Pilgrimage of the Middle Passage.

Back in 1999, Ingrid Askew was one of the many people who took part in a pilgrimage to the most significant sites of the slave trade. The group was made up of African Americans, Native Americans, European Americans and monks and nuns from the Peace Pagoda in Leverett from a Japanese order known as Nipponzan Myohoji.

The group walked from Leverett to New Orleans visiting places where people were bought and sold, as well as the lynching trees in Mississippi where slaves and later free African Americans were brutally tortured and killed. At each place, the party of 30 or 40 pilgrims — many people joined them for varying lengths of time — would interact with the locals, the nuns and monks would perform purifying rituals, and each of the pilgrims would commemorate the spirits of the victims of slavery in his or her own way.

Then they boarded ships and visited sites in the Caribbean and finally sailed to Africa, where they visited the stone fortresses where slaves were held before being crammed into the holds of ships bound for the New World on the infamous Middle Passage, one of the greatest crimes in the crime-filled history of humanity.

There they walked — in what I would call triumph — back through the infamous Gate of No Return.

Pilgrim Sky Halm described the enormous stone fortress on the island of Goree — the grim chambers where the captives were held, one for the men, one for the women and one for the children. From here they were taken through a gate that led down to the sea.

As the pilgrims walked back through that gate and began a ritual, the island had a power blackout and they found themselves in utter darkness... This must have been an amazing experience. Halm says she felt unmistakably a message of welcome from the spirits of thousands of people who suffered there.



Buddhist monks from the Peace Pagoda in Leverett. Sister Claire is at right.

The pilgrimage was first imagined when Sister Claire from the Peace Pagoda was visiting Sri Lanka and she had a dream that convinced her she ought to do something to bring attention to the slave trade and do what she could to dispel all the evil that lingers to this day. She talked this over with Ingrid Askew and they began to plan the pilgrimage.

Askew has captured the spirit of this remarkable pilgrimage in a brilliant dramatic presentation. She strikes a perfect balance between the narratives of pilgrims who felt direct communication from ancestral spirits and those who simply learn by walking about in the world, and it has set me thinking all week about my own beliefs.

Do I believe that it is pleasing to those who have passed on to be remembered and to have their stories told? I'm beginning to think I do. But I think remembering and telling stories is vitally important for the living as well, not to mention the children who come after us.

I think a lot of Americans would like to forget about slavery, especially the crack-brained imbeciles who believe in American Exceptionalism, the idea that America is uniquely suited to lead [read rule] the world. I believe we should never stop learning and telling the stories of slavery. No nation can possibly be considered great that seeks to forget its greatest mistakes.