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Pilgrimage to Dollywood

Every year around this time, some 50,000 people flock to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, a tiny town that sits in the shadow of the Great Smoky Mountains. Some travel a few states' distance, others a bit farther. Still more make it an international voyage.

All have one goal: to be present for the annual Dolly Parade and for the opening of Dollywood, the theme park named for country music icon — and cultural phenomenon — Dolly Parton.

Among recent attendees was Helen Morales, associate professor of classics at UC Santa Barbara and an avid Dolly Parton fan. In her new book, "Pilgrimage to Dollywood — A Country Music Road Trip through Tennessee" (The University of Chicago Press, 2014), Morales chronicles her journey from Santa Barbara to Tennessee, the stops she made along the way and what compelled her to go in the first place.

"I'd always wanted to do this," said Morales, who also holds the campus's Argyropoulos Chair in Hellenic Studies. "Ever since I'd heard that Dollywood exists I thought it was outrageous and wanted to visit." Morales grew up on Parton's music thanks in part to her father, a Greek Cypriot immigrant. "He used to say this is our music — country music and the music of the working man," she recalled.

As a classicist, Morales has studied pilgrimage — the Greeks made pilgrimages to Dodona and Delphi to consult the oracles; and in the early period of Hebrew history, pilgrims traveled to Shiloh, Dan, Bethel and Jerusalem. The concept isn't new. "I

know the theory of pilgrimage, and it was intellectually interesting to take a modern-day version," she said.

"We started at Graceland and then went to other sites of importance for country music," she continued. Among them were Loretta Lynn's ranch and museum where Morales saw a replica of her father's coal mine ("I'm proud to be a coal miner's daughter," as the lyric goes); the Grand Ole Opry and the County Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville; and, finally, Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede Dinner Attraction and Dollywood.

For Morales, the pilgrimage was both academic and personal.

"The real answer as to why I went when I did is that I'd moved here from Cambridge and I was a bit disoriented," she recalled. "I found it hard to make connections in California. I wasn't embedded. I was thrown by the economic crisis, and thrown by not making the same kind of friendships I was used to making. And there was something about being in disarray or disoriented that made me do things differently."

Suddenly it just seemed the right time to make this pilgrimage, this journey of spiritual significance. "The Greeks call it 'kairos,' which means the right time, the opportune moment," Morales explained. "So it was from this unhappiness that I thought, 'Maybe I'll go now. Maybe I'll take this journey I've always wanted to take.'"

Using the term "pilgrimage" for a trip to Dollywood of all places might at first seem a bit pretentious, but in reality, it's completely fitting. A pilgrimage is a journey that is endowed with particular significance. It needn't be religious in nature — although some are — but it must include a strong emotional component. "It was special to me because I wanted to, in some ways, pay homage to this extraordinary woman whose music has been the soundtrack to memorable moments in my life," she said.

For Morales' partner and daughter, the trip was more vacation than quest. "They were tourists," she continued. "They got different things out of it. So people can make the same journey, but it can be meaningful in different ways, or not at all."

One outcome that Morales hadn't anticipated when she set off on her pilgrimage was that each place she'd chosen to visit presented a version of the rags-to-riches narrative, the American Dream. "Afterward, I was able to celebrate America and be more reflective about the country and why I'd chosen to live here than I was before

the pilgrimage," she said. "And I hadn't expected that. I expected to get a better understanding about the places that are important to Dolly Parton because her songs are all about that — the beautiful Smoky Mountains, country versus city.

"And I did get that," Morales noted. "But what I hadn't expected to get was what I most needed. And in reality, that's what a pilgrimage is all about."

Morales will sign copies of "Pilgrimage to Dollywood" at 7 p.m. Thursday, May 15, at Chaucer's Bookstore, 3321 State St. in Santa Barbara.

About UC Santa Barbara

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