



*God's Hotel:
A Doctor, a Hospital, and a
Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine*
By Dr. Victoria Sweet
- Study Guide -

The Summer Orientation common reading is intended to bring students and faculty together in an intellectual exercise. While you will not be tested on *God's Hotel*, we hope you will be able to join your classmates and discussion leader in a candid discussion about the text, its themes, and parallels to your own experience. We know that most freshmen come to Orientation having read the book. Students who have already read *God's Hotel* say it's engaging and enjoyable... a great read!

- ❖ The author, Dr. Victoria Sweet, often talks about what she learns from her patients. Pay attention to their stories... how do they inform the author's vision of her profession?
- ❖ Do you see your own experiences as a student as parallel to the experience of the patients in the book, or do you identify more with nurses and doctors? Why?
- ❖ In many ways the workings of Laguna Honda go against modern medical culture and standards. Can you find parallels in your own life, in which you have had experiences that ran counter to the norm or to your own expectations? Do you anticipate such experiences in college?
- ❖ In what ways does Dr. Sweet criticize modern medical practice? Are there ways in which her critique is applicable to society in general?
- ❖ A major theme that runs through the book is that of community. How is community created? Who creates it? How is it sustained? What parallels can you envision between a hospital and a college or a college residence hall in the context of community?
- ❖ A major theme that runs through the book is hospitality. What does hospitality mean in the context of the book? How might this translate from a hospital setting to a college setting?
- ❖ Dr. Sweet makes a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. How does this pilgrimage play out in her life? What role does discernment play in her life? What role do you anticipate discernment playing in your life?
- ❖ Dr. Sweet goes back to the University to get an advanced degree. She clearly doesn't need the degree to get a better job or to make more money...

why did she do it? Can you see a role for education in your own life beyond the pursuit of jobs and money?

❖ Why do you think we selected this book for incoming students to read?

About Dr. Victoria Sweet*

Dr. Sweet is an Associate Clinical Professor of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, and a prize-winning historian with a Ph.D. in history. She practiced medicine for twenty years at Laguna Honda Hospital in San Francisco, where she began writing. In her recent book, *God's Hotel: A Doctor, a Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine* (Riverhead, 2012), she lays out her evidence—in stories of her patients and her hospital—for some radically new ideas about medicine and healthcare in this country. In our attempts to get control of healthcare costs by privileging “efficiency,” she suggests, we’ve been headed down the wrong path. Medicine works best—that is, arrives at the right diagnosis and the right treatment for the least amount of money—when it is personal and face-to-face; when the doctor has enough time to do a good job, and pays attention not only to the patient but to what’s around the patient. Dr. Sweet calls this approach Slow Medicine, and she believes that, put into wider practice, it would be not only more satisfying and beneficial for patient and doctor, but also less expensive for everyone. Her Ecomedicine Project is designed to prove this. The New York Times calls her ideas “hard-core subversion”; Vanity Fair judges the book to be a “radical and compassionate alternative to modern healthcare,” and Health Affairs describes Dr. Sweet as a “visionary” and “subversive in all the best ways.”

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WHAT'S A PILGRIMAGE, and WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO GO ON A PILGRIMAGE? *

Dr. Victoria Sweet

A pilgrimage is a journey for spiritual reasons but with a material goal—a shrine, a church, a mountain. It comes from the Latin word for pilgrim, *peregrinus*, from “*per-ager*,” meaning “through the territory.” A pilgrim, therefore, is someone who leaves home to travel “through a territory” that is, by definition, “not-home,” and so has the wider meaning of alien, foreigner, stranger.

But *peregrinus* (stranger) is different from *hostis* (stranger), the root for the *hospes* of hospitality. *Hostis* is the stranger from the host’s point of view—the stranger who knocks at your door. *Peregrinus* is the stranger from the pilgrim’s point of view—the one who does the knocking. The pilgrim leaves home in order to experience being a stranger—speak a different language, eat different foods, encounter different expectations—to experience otherness as the other.

The walk into the medieval village of Conques is stupendous; see here for a French program on it: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q5wTBKI8lrk>.

In the Middle Ages, being a pilgrim was a big deal. It was what we all are, the medievals thought—pilgrims on the pilgrimage of life, leaving our home at birth and traveling through time until we reach the spiritual goal of death; along the way, feeling “other” to what we see around us. To make a physical pilgrimage was to make that metaphor real.

The thing about a pilgrimage is that there is no way to experience it except to do it. In that way it is very like life. No armchair reading, no movies, slideshows or virtual photo albums can substitute.

Pilgriming isn't like backpacking. Most pilgrims, even today, don't carry backpacks; instead, they stay in hostels, no-star hotels, and even in monasteries where monks and nuns still practice the virtue of pilgrim hospitality. At the end of each day's fifteen or so miles, you do not have to put up a tent and cook Ramen; you can have hot showers, good wine, and French meals. But it isn't like day hiking either, because one walks not just through nature but through history. So nothing goes by too quickly; the pilgrim is not a tourist but an actor in a landscape made to the measure of his or her footsteps. The scenery changes at the pace of walking, and just when you are ready for a village, there a village is, or a river, or a tree with plums.

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Watch and listen to Dr. Victoria Sweet on the Web

You can find many links to both text-based and video-based interviews with Dr. Victoria Sweet, and to videos of Dr. Sweet at a variety of speaking engagements. Here are just a few that we like:

Author@Google talk (video): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1SY3c3KdM>

Tedx Talk (video): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4w17dEDYrhE>

Booklist interview (text): <http://booklistonline.com/ProductInfo.aspx?pid=5192517>

Search for others!

You can also learn more about God's Hotel and Dr. Victoria Sweet on her website: <http://www.victoriasweet.com>.