

Towards Santiago

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In a chapel one night, I sang Shalom Havereem together with Christian, atheist, agnostic, German, Canadian, French and Belgian pilgrims. There were about 10 of us standing in a little circle. Our shared language was the music of that Hebrew song. We couldn't speak together, but we sang together and we walked together, our feet blistered and callused together. And slowly, slowly we made our way to Santiago together, each on her or his own pilgrimage, each suffering under the weight of our own burden: our pack, our health, our lives.

I felt pulled like there was a rope deep in my belly that kept me moving westward, always westward, towards Santiago. I often thought of those arriving in Santiago ahead of me or of those behind me, just starting out, with fresh legs, feet and clothes. I thought of those still comfortable in their beds at home whose time for pilgrimage had not yet come. I thought of those who had completed the pilgrimage and returned home. How does a pilgrim return home again?

In April and May of 2002 my partner Steve and I went on our greatest adventure yet. We walked 500 miles along El Camino de Santiago in northern Spain. We walked from the French border all the way across Spain, almost due west, to the cathedral and city of Santiago.

We walked about 12 to 15 miles a day carrying with us as little as possible: food and water, warm clothes, a sleeping bag, a journal and one pen, each. Our one luxury was a shared camera.

Everything you carry makes a difference. Pilgrims got creative about how to lighten the load. Many fellow pilgrims ripped pages out of their guidebooks every evening, and we heard of people who even cut their toothbrushes in half.

One of the great lessons of the Camino was about simplicity. Each morning we got out of bed, packed our stuff and walked. When we were tired, we stopped to rest. When we were thirsty, we drank. When we were

hungry, we ate. At night we found a bed and slept. It really is that simple. Yet, the days felt so full. Life was so vivid and rich.

The route we followed is a historic pilgrimage route to the cathedral in Santiago, where, according to legend, lay the remains of Saint James the Greater, brother of Zebedee and disciple of Christ. In the 9th century a monk had a night vision of the remains and followed a path of stars to a field where human bones were found. The local bishop declared they belonged to Saint James – “Santiago” in Spanish. Pilgrims have made their way to Santiago ever since. We walked in the footsteps of thousands of pilgrims before us. This pilgrimage is a walk through history, ancient and modern.

One morning, as we ambled along a ridge, we came to a quiet stone memorial. Surrounded by blue sky and clouds, it was deeply peaceful. Below us sat heathered valleys. In the 1930s this area was the site of a Spanish Civil War battle. The memorial mourned the loss of life on both sides of the conflict. I was touched. The history was palpable. How sad to have killed and died over this beautiful, peaceful country.

I was drawn to pilgrimage not because of Saint James, who, besides bringing Christianity to Spain, was also believed to appear on a white horse to help the Spanish defend their country against heathens, namely the Muslim Moors. We saw numerous gruesome representations of Santiago Matamoros, Saint James the Moorlayer.

No, Saint James didn't draw me to pilgrimage, but I was drawn. For me, travel is a spiritual experience, and I wanted to be an intentional spiritual traveler. Travel challenges me in unexpected ways and makes me feel more connected to the world. In traveling, I often experience feelings of awe and wonder – feelings that are basic to my spirituality.

I am a pilgrim.

When I was walking everyday, I noticed the details of my body. I never paid so much attention to my feet before. My blisters came in cycles. I would get three or four in one day. They slowly healed and about a week later I would get a few more. My feet became callused and hardened, like blistered, pink claws. But they carried 800 kilometers and I fell in love with them.

The days were each very full and soon settled into certain rhythms. We slept in pilgrim refuges where each dormitory room was crammed full of bunk beds. In the dark, pre-dawn dorm rooms we awoke to plastic bag noises, “crinkle, crinkle, scrunch, scrunch,” as the early risers began packing. Plastic bags come in handy for numerous reasons, so every pilgrim carries at least one or two.

Eventually, giving up on sleep, we would get up, pack, and eat a simple breakfast. We were often on the road

between 7:30 and 8. In the cool of the morning we walked in silence. We became familiars of early golden light. The landscape and scenery changed, but those rich, quiet mornings were consistent.

At some point we would start on a poem for the day. Stephen and I had each brought along about 15 poems. We memorized them one by one, line by line. As we learned more and more, the poetry began to feel like a secret language. The words danced in familiar rhythms between us.

One day as we made our way across a valley, Steve was a good 10 minutes ahead of me. A solitary cuckoo bird, hidden in the grass, began to serenade us. We later discovered we had each greeted its offering with the previous day's poem by William Wordsworth.

Blithe New-comer! I have heard,
I hear thee and rejoice.
Cuckoo! Shall I call thee Bird,
Or but a wandering Voice?

On the pilgrimage the words we spoke were not as important as was the act of communication. In sharing that poem I felt like we were communicating with each other and with the bird, not through the language, but with our presence and our shared experience of life in that moment.

I had other experiences of communication that were completely lucid though few words were ever exchanged. One night we shared a meal with a dozen pilgrims in a little village. We had mountains of salad and pasta and bread. After stuffing ourselves, we all sat at the one long table. The pasta was gone, but a little bread was left.

I sat next to a French couple and a few Belgians. Together my neighbors only knew a handful of English words, about as many as I knew in French. The French couple had become familiar, we had seen them frequently over the last few days. We sat together pleased and tired. The Frenchman leaned over and grabbed a basket of bread. He took out a piece and broke it in half and gave half to me. "No, thanks. Full." I pointed to my stomach.

He looked at me with the kindest eyes and tried again. He held out the little crust of bread and said, "En France, les amis, friends." I took the bread with tears in my eyes. It takes so little to connect to someone, to make a stranger a friend.

That was one of my favorite days. They were all my favorite days. Each was so full of life. So much was happening. So much happens each and every day. There was a sign in a refuge along the way, claiming that

someone invited each of us to make the journey and that, when we went home, we were charged to invite others. So I extend the invitation, to become a pilgrim. Walk the path, my friends. I have found it to be varied and accessible. Pilgrims are all sorts, all ages, all ethnicities and all levels of ability and disability. The journey is great. The lessons are many.

Village people, living along the Camino, greeted us with “Buen Camino” or good journey. When we said our final good-byes in Santiago, all the pilgrims wished each other “Buen Camino” as the pilgrimage is not over, for we’ve only just learned the lessons.

Now we must figure out how to apply them to life.

Buen Camino, my friends, and blessed be.