

A Modern Day Pilgrimage: The Camino de Santiago

Last summer my daughter Elise and I walked the Camino de Santiago. There are many Caminos to Santiago, and specifically we walked the Camino Frances, 500 miles from Southern France across Northern Spain to Santiago. I have never been Catholic, so the crypt of Saint James did not hold meaning for me; the cathedral with his crypt was simply the end of the walk. I wanted to walk the pilgrimage to be in Spain and away from the stress of my everyday life. There is a saying, though, that the Camino begins when the journey ends, meaning that we learn our lessons and gain insight after we have returned home, and I found that as I reflected on our walk back home I started to understand its significance as a pilgrimage after I had already finished it.

So, what is a pilgrimage? A pilgrimage is the intentional removal of yourself from your daily life in order to travel to a site that has some sort of cultural or spiritual significance to you. The goal of a pilgrimage is not just the destination but also to feel closer to God or to grow in a spiritual or personal way. Almost all religions except Sikhism encourage the practice of pilgrimage. For example, Jerusalem is a place of pilgrimage for Christians, Jews and Muslims. Hindus & Buddhists have many pilgrimage sites in countries where they are a major religion. There are some common elements to a pilgrimage, and today I will talk about those and share examples from my own pilgrimage on the Camino.

While some pilgrimages are required in certain religions, such as Islam's pilgrimage to Mecca, others are taken on by a desire to influence the future, such as curing an illness, or a need to thank a god for good fortune. Some pilgrims are called by God, others by a shock such as the death of a loved one, and for others there is just a drive or yearning to go walk to that place. Elise and I met many pilgrims at points of transition in their lives, such as having a job or relationship end. People called to do a pilgrimage are usually longing to find meaning within themselves by getting outside of their own lives. It is difficult to explain to people why one would want to walk for so many days and miles, but the desire to do so is there.

It is no accident that I was called to do a pilgrimage in Spain. I had studied for a semester there as a college student, and had learned about the Camino later in life. It was something I thought might be neat to do one day. There is also a Camino that goes from Sevilla to Santiago, called the Via de Plata, the Silver Route, and when we visited the cathedral in Sevilla in 2015 I happened to spot the scallop shell on the outside of the cathedral, signifying the start of that Camino. At that moment I felt like someone flipped a switch inside me, and suddenly I *had* to walk the Camino.

There was left a drive in me to do the Camino as soon as possible; it was not something that I could put off. I was afraid something would happen—a family

member or I would get sick or life would get in the way. I didn't want—I needed to walk in Spain, a country I love, and I felt that there was a lesson waiting for me there.

Preparing for the journey is part of the pilgrimage. Many people wait years to accrue the resources and the right circumstances they need to make their pilgrimage. And for many, a pilgrimage will be impossible. The summer of 2016 I got an extra job to fund my trip—I was a UU working at a Jewish community center so I could walk a Catholic pilgrimage. The moment I answered the first summer job ad I felt like I had taken my first step on my Camino.

It is important to learn about the pilgrimage before starting it. A guidebook for the Camino called the Codex Calixtinus was written in Latin in the early 12th century. A guide to Jerusalem was written in the 4th century. Knowing what to bring, wear and do can enhance the spiritual journey. For example, some pilgrimages require certain clothing. Buddhist pilgrims on the island of Shikoku in Japan wear a white jacket that symbolizes renunciation.

And there are often sacred shrines along the journey that require an object or action to appreciate their significance or make an offering when they appear. In studying for the Camino, I learned that there is a large iron cross, Cruz de Ferro, at the top of a mountain. Pilgrims leave rocks there from home in memory of someone they

lost or to represent a burden they no longer want to carry in their hearts. Knowing this, I asked Julie Brewer, Leon Huhn's mom, for 2 stones that she and Leon had collected from their favorite beach. The family are members of First U and Leon had died of cancer one year before. We wanted to remember him and in a symbolic way take him with us on the adventure. As the sun rose at Cruz de Ferro, we left one of his rocks at the base of the cross, on top of a giant mound of rocks that had been left for centuries. Leaving Leon's rock with thousands of others made us feel like Leon, Elise and I were connected to generations of pilgrims and a community of love.

An important component of a pilgrimage is separation. According to the PBS series called "Sacred Journeys," a pilgrimage "rejects the safe and familiar. It asserts that one is freer when one frees oneself from daily obligations of family, work and community, but also the obligations of science, reason and technology." I think of it like removing as many confounding variables as possible from the experiment of life so we can better see who we really are. For example, after shedding all work demands and household demands, I realized that I did not know how to spend my time without having a to do list. On the Camino, once you walked, showered, and washed your clothes, there was nothing else you had to do that day, and I struggled with feeling restless and guilty that I should be doing something. After a few weeks of walking I was finally able to enjoy the albergue

(a hostel for pilgrims) in the woods whose only entertainment was watching the birds dip in the pond to eat bugs. The separation from my daily activities forced me to figure out how I really wanted to spend my time, and it taught me how to be still.

One element of separation that I really enjoyed was being cut off from news, especially political news. Friends and family were told to not send me any news unless it was something I needed to know. One friend forgot my rule and sent me a text about stupid political people in power. I ended up ruminating on it while walking that day and found that I lost my feeling of being centered and calm.

Although feeling indignant towards others can make me feel superior, it took away my peace.

But we are also called to separate from science and reason so that we can accept what the pilgrimage teaches us through moments of beauty or surprise. For example, someone with medical training might be able to tell me why, during my week of severe knee pain, my knee did not hurt for two hours as we briskly walked with a bright red backpack far ahead, always at our horizon. Once we caught up to the red backpack we discovered it was our friend Safa, at that point sitting dazed on a bench from dehydration. We sat with her for a while and I gave her the water from one of my bottles. As soon as I got up to continue walking, my knee began to have stabbing pains again, and I'm sure there is a scientific reason for that. But on

pilgrimage, it felt like I had just participated in a Camino miracle. To my pilgrim mind, my knee stopped hurting so I could provide Safa with the water she so desperately needed.

According to the “Sacred Journeys” series, “The backbone of a sacred journey is the pain of the journey itself...In almost every place, the travelers develop blisters, hunger and diarrhea. This personal sacrifice enhances the experience; it also elevates the sense of community one develops along the way.” For most of the Camino Elise battled with her feet, trying to keep the blisters at bay. The community of pilgrims would rally around her, with one pilgrim providing her rubber toe sleeves, another providing gauze pads, and others giving advice and sympathy. Many would argue that the point of a pilgrimage is to improve oneself through overcoming problems and obstacles. To quote Jennifer Westwood from her book “On Pilgrimage,” some religions, such as Christianity, equate suffering with redemption.

On the Camino specifically, it is said that the first third of the Way is physical, the second third is mental and the last third is spiritual. The first two weeks I suffered knee pain; at its worst I would get flashes of stabbing pain in one of my knees and it would collapse out from under me. Fortunately, I had walking sticks so I never fell. Our pain taught us to pay attention to our bodies, they were our only mode of transportation, and when we had no pain, we learned to savor that moment,

knowing it was not permanent. The pain emphasized the challenges, and sometimes clouded the successes. But in the end the success was so much sweeter because we suffered to achieve it. The pain added poignancy.

Suffering in pilgrimage can also be mental or emotional as a person confronts a lesson or memory or as they experience a negative situation like getting lost. The second third of the Camino, the Meseta, is considered the mental part because it consists of flat fields, with no shade and very few villages to stop and rest with a cool drink and distraction. It is monotonous and boring and creates a different kind of pain, a mental pain. Elise and I alternated between hours of silent walking, just putting one foot in front of the other, and then we'd fill the lonely road with song and silliness. Elise had created the chant that she sang for the prayer response on the Meseta.

Many pilgrimages have a turning point, whether it's the moment that the pilgrim commits to continuing on or giving up, or when the pilgrim stops suffering and begins to feel more ease and enjoyment in their walking. In both cases, the pilgrim is at a crossing point between home and the self to the divine. To go on ahead, the pilgrim goes towards the more spiritual experience. On the Camino Elise and I never waived from our commitment, though we did worry if my knees would force us to stop. When a friend later asked me about my turning point, I immediately knew what day that was, and in fact it was exactly one year ago today.

A year ago today we walked into a farmacia and bought a better knee brace and an extra strength anti-inflammatory cream that I would rub on my knee every few hours for the rest of the Camino. At our albergue that afternoon I had my legs massaged, which was excruciatingly painful, but afterwards my legs felt much better. After that day I no longer suffered stabbing pains in my knee, and day by day my knee got stronger and stronger. The fear of having to quit the Camino subsided, and I was allowed to spend less energy on my pain and fear and more on the experience of walking the Camino.

And then the journey grows in its spiritual significance. We become more keenly aware that we are a part of a historical process, that thousands of people have walked the same paths for thousands of years. Phil Cousineau in his book “The Art of the Pilgrimage” says that pilgrims learn to walk with the “intention of attention,” they see the beauty around them with their heart and feel that everything that happens in pilgrimage has meaning.

It is said that the third part of the Camino is the spiritual part; probably because the region of Galicia is beautiful with green mountains and hills, with views that are inspiring, making us feel awe and part of something much larger than ourselves. For me, though, the community of pilgrims was also spiritual in the last third of the Camino, to feel this connection to people I saw every day or only once. There was no competition or race; we were all just trying to get to the same destination, and

we cared for each other as we did so. I remember sitting at a café and watching the pilgrims walk by, and I felt love for each of them.

A sense of community is common and an important aspect of many pilgrimages. Malcom X said after his pilgrimage to Mecca, “Everything about the pilgrimage atmosphere accented the Oneness of Man under One God. Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the overwhelming spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races, here in this Ancient Holy Land.” But not all pilgrimages promote total unity, particularly with other religions.

As pilgrims get close to their destination they begin to reflect on what they have experienced and look forward to coming to the place of spiritual significance. The penultimate day of walking, in our stage of anticipation, Elise and I played a guessing game, giving clues and the other would have to guess a person, place or thing that we had encountered on the Camino. We were gathering up all our memories, taking stock of what we had seen and done and who we met, reflecting on our journey. The morning of our last day it rained, which was typical for the region of Galicia, but it felt fitting because it matched my emotions. I had loved the simplicity of our lives and I was sad to return back to the stress and expectations of our “real” lives.

After five weeks of walking Elise and I arrived at our goal—we got to Santiago de Compostela. The walk through the outskirts of the city was long and frustrating as we struggled to find the markers in the sidewalks. But, when we saw the cathedral my sadness and frustration disappeared and I felt relief and happiness. I was relieved that we had been able to walk the entire 500 miles without having to take a bus or quit, and I was happy and proud that my daughter and I achieved our goal. I felt joy when we saw our familiar pilgrim friends, and we would sit at cafés and talk about our journeys, reconnecting once again.

According to Phil Cousineau, what is important about a shrine, the pending point of a pilgrimage, is not what historians documented, but what transpires in the heart of pilgrims. And, in fact, this is how the cathedral looked the day we arrived.

How do the pilgrims honor the source of the power that lured them there? For official religious pilgrimages, there is usually a climax, when there is a religious ceremony or ritual that culminates the pilgrimage. It is thought that the climax brings awe, profound insight, healing or intense joy. The climax of Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca, for example, is climbing Mount Arafat and praying there during the afternoon. Some of the pilgrimages in the Hindu religion have pilgrims bathe in the part of a river that is considered holy. In Santiago, there is a pilgrim's mass at noon every day. The day after we arrived in Santiago, Elise and I went to the mass, which was all in Spanish. The Catholic mass itself, though, did not hold

meaning for me. But being with hundreds of people, many of them fellow pilgrims who just completed the same journey, felt like the gathering of our community and a place of joy. As we saw the many priests process in, we recognized one of them as Father Keith, the very first pilgrim we met on the Camino. And, even better, he was the one to present the only reading in English. I began to cry the moment I heard his voice. Our Camino had come full circle.

After the climax, pilgrims require time for reflection to absorb the environment of their destination and the recognition of completing the pilgrimage. Phil Cousineau said it gave time for “your soul to catch up.” This could mean walking around the site of the destination, or just shopping in the local shops. During this time Elise and I took a taxi with our friend Simone to the fishing village of Finesterre, which means the end of the world and is on the west coast of Spain. There is a tradition for pilgrims to pick up a scallop shell from the beach and to go to the lighthouse at sunset. The weather was cold, wet and windy that day, but we enjoyed walking the beach, running into friends and talking about our Caminos.

Pilgrims will often give an offering of some kind in gratitude for the completion of their pilgrimage or a sacrifice in the hopes of securing a blessing or miracle. On the Buddhist pilgrimage in Japan, pilgrims will light a candle as an offering to the Buddha and the dead, and then three sticks of incense to honor the deities and the

dead. At two temples in India, Hindus shave their heads, sacrificing their hair to the gods.

The evening at the lighthouse in Finesterre, Elise and I threw the second of Leon's rocks that we had carried with us all 500 miles, off the ledge we were on, towards The Atlantic Ocean and home. Elise spontaneously sat down on a boulder and sang "Seasons of Love," which was sung at Leon's memorial. It was at that moment that my Camino ended; letting go of Leon's rock signified that we were done. I felt a shift inside, and I was no longer a pilgrim. I was a visitor.

Going home is the final stage of the pilgrimage. Many pilgrims return home feeling changed, but friends and family cannot see the change or don't understand it. It is when the pilgrim returns home to their familiar world and feels its contrast with the world of pilgrimage that they discover the meaning of their journey. I had gone on the Camino feeling like there was a lesson waiting for me, but there were many lessons. I learned that some people, even those who loved me, did not recognize how strong I really was, and I was awed by the strength of my 14 year old daughter. I learned what little I needed to survive and be happy, and how I need to ignore so many distracters like status and physical appearance in order to see the truth of a person. Next week I will talk more about what I learned on the Camino.

You do not need to travel to another country or religious site to do a pilgrimage. A place that has meaning for you can be the goal, and the action of getting there would be the pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is really about intention. As Jennifer Westwood wrote, “Pilgrimage is not about thinking but about doing and feeling.” In some ways, pilgrimage is like a really long walking meditation. How long you walk may impact the profundity of the experience, but you receive from your pilgrimage what you need.

I wish you a buen camino.