

## Lessons Learned on the Camino

Last Sunday I talked about how at this time last summer my daughter Elise and I walked about 500 miles for five weeks across Northern Spain on the Camino de Santiago. We also learned a brief history of the Camino, and I talked about the common elements of a pilgrimage. The Camino is a Catholic pilgrimage, and pilgrims usually walk 13 to 20 miles each day, carrying all that they need on their backs, and they stay in hostels called Albergues. Today I will be talking about how the Camino showed me what is essential about being a human.

The Camino stripped our days down to the bare essentials: walking, eating, playing and sleeping. I use the term "playing" loosely, more like to mean enjoying ourselves with solitary or social activities. I was surprised by what little I needed not just to survive but also to be happy. The survival list is short: food and water, shelter, clothing, and physical health—much like the basic needs on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Here in the U.S. many of us have an excess of food, water, shelter and clothing, but a deficit in physical health, given our rates of diabetes and heart disease, for example. Of course, there are Americans who lack a sufficient quantity in all of these.

Food and water are obvious survival items, but many who live in privilege take it for granted and eat in excess and leave a lot to waste, simply grabbing from the

shelves of the supermarket and their pantries. On the Camino, we had to make sure we had plenty of water and knew how long we had to walk before we'd come to another water source. We could not carry a lot of food because of the weight, so we carefully chose food for calories, nutrients and weight. We became more conscious about what we put in our bodies.

Shelter is another obvious item on the survival list. On the Camino, we slept on bunk beds and shared a room and bathroom with dozens of people. If we were dry and the right temperature, we slept well and were ready to get up at 5:00 am the next day to walk again. Some albergues were more luxurious than others, but I found that my favorite albergues were sometimes the rustic or crowded ones because they were the ones where I connected and enjoyed my time with fellow pilgrims or the local people. For example, I have a fond memory of sitting on a tile floor between our bunk beds to play UNO with a Spanish boy and older gentleman as we listened to the thunderstorm outside. Another favorite albergue was where we had a vegetarian communal meal, and the pilgrims representing the U.S., Switzerland, Germany and Lithuania stayed at the table talking until late at night.

But many homes in the U.S. are beyond shelters, they are movie theaters, play rooms, and offices. With bigger homes comes more work and costs. So we work more to maintain our big homes, and spend more time entertaining ourselves and

less time with friends. But in the albergues, all we needed was a place to sit so we could talk and connect with other people.

Clothing is similar to shelter. On the Camino we only had two changes of clothing with us, and we had to wash our clothes in the sink and dry them in the sun.

Everyone pretty much wore the same type of clothes—things that were cool, dried quickly, had pockets, and were in need of a good cleaning. Elise and I spent way more time prepping our feet in the mornings than on our clothing, face and hair.

For example, in Elise's battle with blisters, every morning she applied anti-inflammatory cream, Vaseline, moleskin, Compeed, and rubber toe sleeves. How we looked had absolutely no impact on how our Camino would go, but if our feet were unhappy our days were much harder.

Here we go beyond the basic necessities of clothing, we use it to convey messages about who we want to be, how much money we have, or to present ourselves in a standard that we aspire to. But after so many weeks of not putting on makeup and wearing the same clothes day in and day out, and finding my looks to not be a factor in how my day went, I find my appearance and that of others to be less important. I was never one to do or spend a lot on my appearance to begin with, but I no longer wear make-up on a daily basis or feel apologetic for that, nor do I feel like someone is better than me because they are able to look so put together

every day. How we dress and style ourselves are simply choices that we make each morning, it does not define us as a person.

Walking so many miles each day, a person becomes very aware of their body. If you're smart, you quickly learn to pay attention to what your body tells you in order to walk the distances you want. Your foot has a hot spot? Stop immediately and cover it. You're thirsty? Drink! You're tired? Rest! We saw many people who could not complete their pilgrimage due to injuries of use and wear. Our physical body was a major player in whether or not we would complete the Camino and whether or not it would be an enjoyable experience.

That is true for all of us in our lives, though in our modern age we focus more on how our body appears than on its health. If we worried less about aspiring to the body of a 20 year old model and focused more on having a healthy body, exercising and eating right might not be such acts of frustration. If we did strive to take care of the only bodies we have, our lives could be easier in different ways—more energy, more stamina, more years, leading to more opportunities to do activities we enjoy with people we love. We would not only survive, we would be happy.

This brings me to the mental health list. I feel like in our culture of stigma around mental illness that it is necessary to remind people that we are all born with

different strengths and weaknesses in our mental health, just like in people's physical health. A family's history of high cholesterol is no less shameful than their history of bipolar disorder. But, there are things we can do to maximize our mental health, just as we can for our physical health. And research is learning more and more about how closely tied the two really are. But the biggest lesson that the Camino revealed to me was: we do not need a lot to maximize our emotional well-being.

Johann Hari, a reporter who researched depression and anxiety for his book called "Lost Connections," said that to meet our basic psychological needs we need to feel like we belong to a community or group of people, we need to feel valued as a person, be good at something, and we need to feel secure in our future. I had read an excerpt from his book, and I felt like his list of needs pretty much matched up with what I found on the Camino.

Let's work backwards, starting with feeling secure in our future. There is a saying on the Camino, "You pack what you fear." If you fear blisters, for example, you pack Moleskin and Compeed. But some people had more fears than others. One woman we met started off with two backpacks—one in front and one in back—because she just could not imagine living without all her "essentials." When you carry everything on your back and then walk up a mountain, you quickly come to realize what really is NOT essential. The albergues at the beginning of the Camino

have tables where people can leave things that they no longer want to carry—and others can take what they do want to carry. People left things behind like hair dryers, make-up, heavy books, large knives, portable coffee makers, and thick sweaters. Once Pilgrims experienced the Camino and better understood the risks and realities as well as actually felt the burden of their fears, they were able to let their “essentials,” or their fears, go. Bill Bennett, in his book “The Way, My Way,” talked about how using a cheap, light, disposable razor on the Camino made him confront his fears of a shaving cut after using six dollar razor blades for 20 years. The small inconvenience of a shaving cut had grown into a fear that needed to be avoided at almost any cost.

Many of our days are shaped by the fears that we carry—fear of the caffeine withdrawal without our morning coffee, fear of wearing the wrong thing, fear of getting our boss or spouse angry, fear of being too late or too early, fear of looking less than another person, or fear of losing the respect of others. There is a lot of anxiety in our country, even among those who live in safe communities, because we carry so many little fears around with us.

Many pilgrims walk the Camino at a moment of transition in their lives. Some were in transitions after losing a job or marriage, or they needed some time to think about a big decision such as leaving a relationship or an addiction. The routine of walking, eating, washing, relaxing and sleeping every day, was an antidote to the

stress and anxiety of uncertain or unhappy futures. There was comfort in knowing how the day would go, but with the excitement of new locations, food and people.

Hari also said that people needed to feel good at doing something. What I saw on the Camino was that people needed to have something that they enjoyed and were good enough at it that it was fun to do, not frustrating. I met an American pilgrim who carried his mandolin and played it whenever he stopped for the day. There were pilgrims who drew images to remember their days. I met a Danish man who loved learning languages and we had a wonderful conversation about linguistics while sitting on our bunk beds. An Italian pilgrim shared with me his passion about teaching math. Some people are able to work in their areas of passion while others participate during their leisure time. And some can afford to do more with their passions, but a man who can only listen to jazz on the radio can feel the same stirring as someone who is able to fly to other states for jazz concerts. We all have something that fills our hearts, is a bubble bath to the brain, or brings peace to our souls. What is it for you? We need to allow ourselves the opportunity and time to participate in these activities that fill us up with positive energy.

Another psychological need is to feel like we belong. On the Camino, spending time with others was just as much a part of the experience as walking outside every day. All of the pilgrims were part of a roving community, and although we never stayed in the same place twice there was a sense of communal living. We would

often see the same people at different cafes, albergues, and towns. We knew each other by sight, backpack, knee brace, or limp. When someone needed something, another pilgrim would offer what they had. And we experienced the fullness of our hearts when we helped someone else and accepted help from others.

But something interesting happened in the last 100 kilometers of the Camino. In order to receive a Compostela, which is a certificate stating that you completed the Camino, you must walk the last 100 kilometers to Santiago. The closest town at the 100 kilometer mark is Sarria, and it is at Sarria where the personality of the Camino changes drastically. There are large groups of people—church groups, family reunions, and youth groups—that start the Camino there. Despite the large number of people on the Camino after Sarria, Elise and I never felt more alone. The “new” pilgrims tended to ignore other pilgrims, and just focused within their own groups. There was no more sense of community. Before Sarria, Elise and I knew that if we had a problem we could wait a few minutes for another pilgrim to walk by and we would get the help we needed. After Sarria, when she sprained her foot, dozens of pilgrims walked by without a single offer of assistance.

This reminded me of home, where small communities have been replaced by suburbia, where we live in silos. Each family has their own places to shop, worship, and go to school. It is easy to not see your next-door neighbor for months. Building connections is much harder.

And I found that my favorite days on the Camino were usually those when we got to spend time with someone, like when Sarah—who I am thrilled is here today from Chicago—and I shared a bottle of wine with our feet in a river, or when a group of young Koreans shared watermelon and whiskey with me one evening, or when Elise and I sat in a cobble-stoned square in Leon with Woterio from Italy and another man from Ireland. The conversations we had were often profound because we would talk about why we were doing the Camino and what the Camino was teaching us. We developed connections quickly.

Research is starting to show that our relationships with other people are very important factors in our physical health. A Harvard study that followed men for 80 years found that the best predictor of their health when they were 80 years old was their happiness in their relationships when they were 50 years old. That was a better predictor than their cholesterol levels, IQ levels, social class or genes. Meta-analysis research at Brigham Young University looking at studies involving more than 3 million people found that loneliness and social isolation was just as big a risk factor as smoking and alcoholism for dying at a younger age, and was a bigger risk factor than obesity. To improve our physical and mental health, we need to have a network of family or friends with whom we feel close. We do not need to live in a better neighborhood if the one we already live in is safe. We do not need

the busiest social life or the most likes on social media. We need deep personal connections.

Finally, we need to feel that we are a valued member of this human community.

Here is where I think our society really sells us a raw deal. We are given a message that to be valued we must be rich, white, physically attractive, and able-bodied.

On the Camino we valued other Pilgrims for their ability to connect with us and for the gifts of themselves. Sarah gives us the gift of fun. Whenever we are with her we are laughing and smiling. When Elise and I ran into Father Keith, a priest from Philadelphia, he gave us the gift of feeling loved. He seemed glad to see us and grateful to share the path with us for a few hours, so that we felt special when we were with him. Safa, an 18 year old from Germany who walked the Camino alone, demonstrated to us determination by walking long distances even with the many problems her feet presented her. If you got to know Daniel, from Mexico, and Simone, from Germany, you would be rewarded with intelligent and genuine conversations. Spending time just walking with others helped me see what people really had to offer—themselves. Yes, we can glean other things from people, like networking contacts or favors, but the human connection is much more valuable. On the Camino I also learned that if I judged someone too quickly I might miss out on a lovely gift.

There were two men who were each walking solo who clearly had an addiction to alcohol, and one we labeled as “the drunken sock stealer guy” because...well, it’s a long story but we eventually concluded that he did not steal any socks. The other was known for snoring loudly during a one-man play. We would sometimes laugh at their antics, and then dismiss them from our thoughts. But then we walked with one of them for a bit and learned that this was his fifth Camino, and he only felt close to his deceased father when he arrived in Santiago. The other man we kept running into at cafes and albergues, and we discovered that he was very intelligent and sweet. Their problem with alcohol was only one facet of their being; they were as complex a human as I was and were more than just a dismissive label. And once I learned those lessons we never saw those men again. What gifts have I missed out on because I dismissed a person as not having much to give?

I recognize that walking the Camino is a privilege that many people could not even consider, especially from outside Europe. With more generous vacation time and the Camino being on the same continent, Europeans from different socioeconomic groups had more opportunities to make the pilgrimage or parts of it. But, it was really hard to tell a person's socioeconomic status on the Camino. A musician and a welder and a CEO were all in the exact same weather on the same road. No one was better than another, more deserving of a privilege, or had more authority than others. A person's status at home did not matter on the Camino. On the Camino

we asked how a person's journey was going, why did they choose to do the Camino, and most importantly, how were their feet? We rarely asked about one's occupation, it was irrelevant to what we were doing.

What was relevant was if the person was open to connecting with and being considerate of others, or were they rude or selfish? Or, like one man did various times, did they talk about themselves but as soon as the conversation turned to somebody else, walk on ahead? And in the grand scheme of life, aren't our occupations and our status irrelevant to what we're doing here on earth? A person's race, finances, education and family resources have a significant impact on the external trappings of our lives, and I do not want to minimize how privilege and resources ease the burdens of living. But, take that all away and we are all humans relating to our families and friends, and to the rest of the world. We do not need wealth or power or a certain skin color to genuinely connect or disconnect from people. Our essential selves are humans with a capacity to love, hate, connect and push away.

So, what did the Camino teach me? It taught me what were the important things about being human. The very basics to survive are food and water, shelter, and physical health. Some of these things we focus too much on while others too little. But to be a complete, healthy and happy human, we do not need much of what our

culture tells us we do—a big house, nice clothes, good looks, etcetera. And we should not judge if a person is worthy of getting to know based on those things either. The important things are connecting with people you love and who love you, being open to the unseen gifts of others and ready to offer your gifts, and spending time doing things that bring you joy or contentment. Yes, in this world we need to work and earn money in order to survive, and feel that our future is secure, but to live a rich life, all we need is to deeply connect with other humans.

Give yourself the gift of love by connecting regularly and intentionally with those you love. Make it a habit, like exercise. And, by the way, doctors are starting to find that exercising and spending time outside can also be an effective way to boost a person's mood. So, go take a walk, or a nice long hike, with someone you love. I walked 500 miles with my daughter, and these were some of the lessons I learned.