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EL CAMINO: MY 800 KM. PILGRIMAGE ACROSS SPAIN

Some time has passed now since I completed my pilgrimage, an 800 km walk across northern Spain. Upon reflection, I now realize that it was not entirely what I expected.

I began my walk from St.Jean-Pied-de-Port in France on April 23, 2009 on a beautiful sky blue day, crossing the mighty Pyrennes that first day in 91/2 hours, and finished, 32 days and 800 km later, on May 24 at my destination: Santiago de Compostella, the resting place of St. James the Apostle.

It was the most unique experience of my life. I can now understand why this has been a pilgrimage route since the 10th century AD. All who walk it—and there have been many—cannot help, I'm sure, but be touched in some deep way by the beauty, the history or the spiritual power of this path.



A year in its preparation—training, reading and deciding on and purchasing what to take and, more importantly, what not to take—my Camino, as it turned out, was not quite what I had planned on. I read somewhere, before I went, "you don't walk the Camino, the Camino walks you." I now know what this cryptic saying means. When you are open to the deep mystery, ancient history and spiritual forces on the Camino you may be in for many surprises. Such was my experience.

I had decided early on, in my planning stage, not to tell people I was a minister, a "religious professional", so to speak, because I wanted my pilgrimage to be mainly an interior journey to deepen my experience of God, to reflect upon my life and seek direction for my future ministry and where it might take me. I didn't want to have to explain, "no, I'm not a priest," and no, I am not what many people unfamiliar with Christianity think of when they hear "Christian minister", namely, what they see on television! I wanted to make my pilgrimage a solo journey into the mystic, into the "Cloud of Unknowing" where I could ponder the BIG questions of life in splendid isolation. Sure, I knew others would be on the same path and I was not averse to meeting folks, but that was secondary to the main purpose of my pilgrimage, or so I thought.

I "came to my senses" on the Camino.

That was a revelation I recently had as I struggled to put into words my Camino experience. It perplexed me why I was having such a difficult time articulating this incredible experience. After all, there were so many experiences; why could I not just share them? The reason, I now realize, is that while walking the Camino I "came to my senses" in a very profound and literal way, unlike any other time in my life. What I mean is my mind was overshadowed by my senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, all of these became heightened during my walk. Another way to say this is I had a shift in consciousness. I underwent a transformation in the way I experienced the world around me. This is a wonderful thing to happen to a person. I believe this shift from our preoccupation with our mind to a focus on our senses is at the core of spiritual life. Such a transformation enables one to "see", and therefore act, in a whole new way.

Most of us live our lives in our heads much of the time. Our minds have control of us. We are constantly thinking about things—events from the past or plans for the future—what we want to do this afternoon, tomorrow, next week, next year. We become, possessed, so to speak, by our minds. We think that we are our minds. But we are not. Our essential self is our spiritual self. In the Bible this essential core of being is referred to as "the Heart" (I use a capital "H" to distinguish it from our physical heart).

The mind is a wonderful and necessary part of our being. But we are not our mind. Many spiritual teachers talk about this.

I led a book discussion group, my Discovery Group at MacKay United Church, on Eckhart Tolle's book, *The Power of Now* not long before I walked the Camino. Tolle talks about the importance of living in the NOW—the present moment, which is all we really have. The past is gone and the future has not yet arrived—and when it does it is no longer the future. So the present moment, the NOW, is the only reality there is. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches "present moment, wonderful moment" meditation and also stresses the importance of

living in the Now.

To stop living through our mind and return to our senses is a spiritual discipline that has to be experienced and practiced. On the Camino what I discovered was that although I knew, discussed, taught and preached about these ideas, I had never really and truly experienced this way of "being" until I walked El Camino. And when I did, it changed my Camino experience dramatically.

The experience of living in the present moment is not something one can explain or describe by words. This, I now realize, was why I was having such a difficult time writing and talking about my Camino experience. For me, it was an experience of spiritual transformation that is not easily articulated, nor ever adequately explained, by words.

Perhaps this is why "Camino alumni" seek each other out and sometimes travel thousands of miles to reunite with one another. This was the case recently at my church when Leslie Harmon organized a one year reunion of her 2008 Camino friends from Australia, Germany, Sweden and Canada. They "understand" and are "connected" to each other because of this shared experience.

When I came back to my senses on the Camino from my mind-dominated self (and this started slowly to happen the first day climbing over the Pyrennes from France into Spain), my Camino experience took on a different shape from what I had imagined

The experience of becoming fully present to the moment, the NOW, initially evoked a deep awareness of the natural world around me, literally with each step I took (I haven't calculated how many steps I may have taken on this pilgrimage but it was a lot !). When you are "on foot", walking, and in the NOW, life slows down; I mean really slows down, especially after the first few hundred kilometres.

Each detail is noticed: every slight rise of elevation in the terrain, every new ounce of weight in your back pack, every shift of wind direction... variation in temperature, sounds and smells (dung one step, roses the next). The distant mountains became my "friends" on the desolate meseta. I talked with a raven when I was very lonely one day (and when I lifted my right arm with my staff in it, the raven raised its right wing as if to say "adios", and flew away).



One morning as I sat in the mountains near the “Cruce de Ferro”, a distant cowbell rang out across the valley. I was transported back to a Buddhist retreat I took many years before with Thich Nhat Hanh in New Hampshire. I recalled his “bell of mindfulness” practice. Every time the meditation bell was sounded during the retreat, no matter what you were doing, you would stop and BREATHE.... and say “present moment, wonderful moment”. I started this practice again, each day.

Then I became much more aware and open to the something else around me. This "something else" had a major impact on my initial Camino game plan of walking in solitude. I had imagined that solitude would be my "way" into a deeper connection with God, the Sacred, the Spirit and myself. It seemed like a "pilgrim" thing to do. Solitude has for a long time been a conducive place for me to experience the sacred, and it still is, and was on the Camino as well (even though at times it invoked in me a real sense of loneliness). But coming to my senses and into the present moment also took me out of my solitude to a place I was not expecting.... to the place of people.

I'm a “people person”. I like people. It's one of the reasons I went into the ministry. Connecting with people is a major part of my work, but on the Camino I planned to, well, do something different: to experience this journey without people. I had decided to walk solo. But as it turned out, the people I met along the way greatly enriched my Camino experience and even became central to it.

The shift came when I decided to tell people that I was a minister, something I was intent on concealing, as I have mentioned. The Camino has a way of “opening you up”. I now realize: how could I possibly be open to all the Camino had to offer if I was not open myself.

My shift came shortly after receiving a gift from an unknown person at an albergue I stayed at in Puente La Reina on the fifth day of my journey. It was a crude wooden “Tau” on a simple white string so you could wear it around your neck. I was not familiar at the time with the stylized “T” shaped symbol called Tau, but I took it anyway with thanks and, surprisingly, wore it that day. I never took it off for the rest of my journey.

This was a strange thing for me to do as I never wear anything around my neck, but here I was wearing this “thing” for all to see and I didn’t even know what it was! I had to learn quickly lest people asked me what it signified, but when I asked locals I got vague and differing answers...”I think it has something to do with Francis of Assisi”....”I believe it is connected to the Knights Templars”...”Isn’t it a cross of some kind?”.

On the 15th day of my pilgrimage, when I was walking through the flat desert-like “meseta”, I came upon the tiny hamlet of San Anton. About the only thing there were the ruins of a convent dedicated to “St. Anthony the Great”, and lo and behold, the Tau symbol was everywhere, built into the windows and doors of this crumbling edifice.

I have since discovered that St. Anthony (251-356 AD) was an Egyptian Christian anchorite (not to be confused with St. Anthony of Padua, 12th century). He was one of the more famous “desert fathers” who devoted himself to a life of prayer, poverty and solitude in the harsh desert 95 miles from Alexandria. There he fought off many temptations of body and mind (Salvador Dali did a famous painting entitled, “Temptation of St. Antony”). I have also discovered that the Tau is a symbol on the crest of St. Antony’s College at Oxford University.

According to Wikipedia, there are many more associations with this symbol. It is actually the 19th letter of the Greek alphabet but became a symbol for many things. (All those early answers I received from the locals were right!). Strangely, Wikipedia makes no mention of the Tau being connected to St. Anthony or his Order. Yet, having seen it with my own eyes, I know it is.

It is an eclectic symbol to be sure which made it fitting for me, an “unfinished” Christian as I call myself, to wear. But that I should wear it “religiously” without knowing this at the time - without really knowing anything about this symbol’s meaning was, for me, yet another one of the mysteries of the Camino. For as it turned out, this crude symbol given to me by a stranger became the conduit for my “disclosure” and my shift to a new kind of Camino experience with people, people and more people of all types and persuasions.

There were people from literally all over the world walking, biking and riding the Camino. When people started to approach me asking about the Tau I soon mentioned quite naturally, after all my fuss about keeping “mum” about my occupation, that I was a Christian minister. After several minutes, often many, many minutes, explaining what the United Church of Canada stood for and what it did not, conversations soon morphed into all sorts of

questions and discussions about spirituality and religion. Many personal things were shared with me and I was very interested and enlightened by these conversations as I walked. I was able to share my faith and ideas with many interesting people.

I found that people, especially in the 30-50 age bracket, were quite interested in matters spiritual. Many were going through significant changes and passages in their lives and had uncertainty about their futures. Some seemed to be seeking something “more” in their lives. Talking and listening to peoples’ stories, beliefs, dreams and loves turned my Camino experience into a community experience.

El Camino was a unique community, a transient community constantly in flux. A community where you would fall in and out of relationships quickly and easily.... and then often resume a relationship with someone you hadn’t seen for several weeks just as quickly and easily - greeting them like a long lost friend even though you may have only talked with them for a few hours.

This sense of community extended to all areas of need and life. People would literally give “strangers” the shirt off their back if needed. Shared meals were often prepared and shared together in the very basic surroundings of the albergues where pilgrims slept and bathed together in dormitory style settings. It was like what I imagined the very early Jesus communities to be like as described in the book of Acts where “all things were held in common”.

This experience made me reflect a lot on the importance and nature of community in the contemporary church.

The *peregrinos* (pilgrims) on the Camino were literally “one” in their goal of walking the same path - all heading in the same direction even though each had their own motivation for making this journey. The church also needs a common vision to bind individuals together. It is only when members of a congregation share a common vision, have a common goal, can true community flourish – be a place where we “share each others burdens” and “walk in the other’s shoes”.

Genuine community may be the one thing that can save a crippled, ailing church, a category that many churches of all denominations fall into today.

When I look back on my Camino experience the old cliché comes to mind: “God works in mysterious ways”. The Camino also works in mysterious ways. If you ever get the opportunity to discover just how El Camino can work on you, you will be truly blessed, as I was, with a unique experience that may very well change your life.

