

My Very Long Walk

A reflection by Holly Boone

Many of you know that I recently returned from walking the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain. When you've asked me "How was the Camino?" I've probably given you a blank look and mumbled something like, "Wonderful." It was indeed full of wonders, but I find it impossible to express my wonderment in a few off-the-cuff remarks. The wonder of the Camino is really many, many small wonders that reveal themselves when one is walking quietly in the world with no agenda except to take another step.

Some of you are curious about what spurred me to walk the Camino, my spiritual practice while walking, or insights I might have gained. I have tried here to answer the questions you've posed to me by telling you, as best I can, what the Camino meant for me personally. It seems a paradox that only an individual's particular, unique experience provides any useful meaning or insight for another individual. I hope these remarks about my particular journey are of help to you on your particular journey.

Why did you walk the Camino?

My favorite month of the year is October. I love everything about it—the growing brilliance of the trees, the elegiac tang in the air, the earlier darkness, the volatile weather that is rain or shine beautiful to me. For years I've found that on particularly fine October days, when more than anything I wanted to be outdoors, I have often had some dreary duty that kept me inside, frequently in front of a lifeless computer. On these days I would promise myself, "Someday you are going to spend every single day of October outdoors!"

My deep wish for October was not only about admiring the trees and feeling a keen wind in my face (although those are reasons enough). At 62 I am in the October of my reasonably expected life span (knock on wood). Wanting to spend time in the natural world at a beautiful season of the year became also a way of saying to myself, "It is time to look more closely at your life." I decided I had to give myself permission to do both.

Last year I started thinking how I might accomplish my goal. I couldn't just go outside and sit and watch the clouds go by. I am temperamentally unsuited to "doing nothing." I would have to keep moving. I would have to get up every morning and walk out the door, ignoring every other claim on my time and energy. To give myself a goal, I decided to pretend that I was walking the Camino de Santiago. I had first heard of the Camino long ago, and it was on my list of things to do "someday." I planned to keep track of the miles I walked around Seattle and plot them on a map of the Camino across northern Spain.

Around that time, our rector Doyt started planning his sabbatical, which, tantalizingly for me, included walking the Camino. Hey, forget pretending, I told myself. Just go walk the Camino! So my partner Pat and I began making plans. We read about the Camino, attended presentations by Camino veterans at REI, and talked to members of the local Puget Sound chapter of the American Pilgrims on the Camino. We walked around town and dragged ourselves up Mt. Si and got our gear ready. Later we would wish we had walked a lot more and collected a lot less gear.

We left Seattle on September 9, flying to Paris and traveling by train and bus to the little town of St. Jean Pied de Port at the foot of the Pyrenees near the Spanish border. We began walking on Saturday, September

12. Forty-one days and almost five hundred miles later we arrived in Santiago de Compostela on October 22.

What's so special about the Camino?

There are certainly other places in the world to walk quietly to enrich your spirit. But for most of us walking the Camino is certainly a lot easier—and cheaper—than, say, hiking the Appalachian or Pacific Coast Trails. Footpaths along the way for the most part have been smoothed by the passage of pilgrims for many centuries. There are hills and tough stretches, but none that can't be crossed with patient effort by a reasonably healthy person who can walk comfortably a few miles a day. All along the Camino there are inexpensive lodgings and food. A bunk in some of the *albergues* (pilgrim hostals) cost as little as five euros (currently around \$5). A meal with wine or beer was usually ten euros. As two jolly Scotsmen told us, “The Camino is the best pub crawl in Europe—we can't stay home as cheaply as walking here!”

The most significant attraction of the Camino I think has nothing to do with the practical considerations of ease or cost. For me and many pilgrims, it wasn't even about getting to Santiago to see the Cathedral and its elaborate burial shrine of the apostle James.

You know that “churchy” feeling you get in some old churches—say, in Epiphany's Chapel? Many people sense a similar sacred and peaceful quality along the whole of the Camino. Overwhelmingly the old pilgrims set out for Santiago in a spirit of genuine piety. Why else would they undertake such an arduous, life-threatening journey? They have hallowed this path and not only with their faith. Their very human lives passed this way. Pilgrims fell ill, they died, they quarreled and worshipped, they lost their money and sometimes their lives to bandits, they ate bread at the monasteries and went hungry on the road. They walked in their miserable sandals and heavy cloaks, sweltering or chilled to the bone. But still the faithful made the journey to and for God. Walk a few kilometers on the Camino and there is a cross, a chapel, a church, the ruins of a little hermitage of some saint crazy with God. No matter one's religious or spiritual leanings or lack thereof, the Camino reminds even the most casual walker that there is The Great Something Else.

There were also plenty of memento mori along the way, if that's what it takes to get your attention. I stopped counting the number of memorials to pilgrims of all ages who had died while on the Camino. Those I suspect got everyone's attention, even that of the jolly Scotsmen on their pub crawl.

Was walking the Camino hard?

One pilgrim we met said this, “Walking the Camino is harder than I thought it would be but also easier than I thought it would be.” We agreed.

The hardest thing was walking 10 or 12 miles and getting up the next day and doing it again day after day. Maybe that hardship was as much psychological as physical. The early days of walking across the Pyrenees and the corrugations of Navarre were indeed difficult, and early on Pat endured some bad blisters. But after a couple of weeks we got used to the daily rhythm of walking punctuated with rest stops. Besides, we were always eager to see what new beauty the next day had to offer.

Many times I thought how easy walking the Camino was compared to “normal life” back home. What could be more pleasant than getting up each day, putting on your backpack and walking through largely

unspoiled countryside? There were few decisions to make each day—where to stop for the night, where to eat, but after a while those were background processes that didn't take much thought. Walking the Camino, I would say, is far easier than the harried daily routines and responsibilities many folks endure every day. There were some days I was quite frankly depressed at the thought of returning home, and I don't even have to get kids to school each morning or make some boss happy.

We met Kathy from St. Louis outside of León, and we frequently walked together. She had recently lost her husband, whom she had nursed for many years following his disabling stroke. She was 73, a grandmother, and walked with her blistered toes wrapped up like little mummies. In the afternoons when Pat and I were sagging she invariably zoomed ahead of us. Once she told us, "Walking the Camino is the hardest thing I've ever done." Pat and I looked at her incredulously, both of us thinking, "No, Kathy, the Camino is a sweet little cupcake compared to what you've been through!"

The pilgrim fare along the way, especially for vegetarians, got a little tedious, and the lack of privacy in the albergues was something to get used to. (Hungarian men running around in their underwear!) But the whole point of walking the Camino or making any pilgrimage is to enlarge the spirit. A spiritual journey that doesn't take you outside your comfort zone isn't worth the air fare.

What was your spiritual practice while on the Camino?

Most of all I tried to pay attention. Attentive, vivid wakefulness, the spiritual masters continually tell us, is the beginning of any direct experience of God. I made it my chief business to observe even the smallest features along the way—the miniature leaves of the shrubby oaks along the fencerows, a woolly caterpillar, a bird's nest. I do not believe I can experience God without seeking instruction from and delight in the natural world. If the trees and animals and grass and wild roses along the way live continually fulfilling the purpose and will of God, then the Camino provides as grand a tour and complete a demonstration of God's Kingdom as one can obtain with a plane ticket and good pair of boots.

I kept silence. Pat and I agreed that at least the first hours of the mornings we would walk in silence. Sometimes a chatty fellow pilgrim would fall in with us, and I would drop back to retie my boots or fiddle with the camera while the chatterbox continued on with Pat. Bless her, she took a lot of hits for the team! Most people in fact were respectful of the quiet spell cast by the Camino. We greeted each other with "Buen Camino," (Camino shorthand for hello there, good morning, shalom, peace, have a good walk) and then returned to our silence.

I prayed. I left my *Hour by Hour* at home, but I scattered brief (inane?) chats with God throughout the day: "God, trees and grass are such beautiful ideas!" "God, my foot is really hurting now. Please help me keep walking." Sometimes my modified Jesus Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, thank you for your mercy. On the long, hot uphill grade outside Castrojeriz, I counted off decades of the rosary on my fingers (the Hail Mary being all I could remember from my Catholic phase). I prayed for people I met on the Camino and people back home and loved ones who had died. I lit candles for them in any church I could. I attended pilgrim masses whenever they were offered.

I read. For my birthday I received a most timely gift, *A Joseph Campbell Companion: Reflections on the Art of Living*. The book is full of rich thought, but Campbell's explication of the mythic journey spoke most urgently to me as I walked. The great journey that is a person's life, Campbell says, is to discover one's bliss,

by which he means the true task and purpose of one's life which alone excites our deepest joy. You might have heard Doyt or Kate say much the same thing this way, quoting the writer and theologian Frederick Buechner, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

To discover this treasure, this bliss, the seeker must leave behind family and community, along with the roles and expectations and distractions and duties they entail, and embark alone upon a journey of self-discovery. Only when we shed our false identity can we discover our authentic self. Only then can we slay the dragon of our false life "whose every scale reads 'Thou Shalt.'" It is more than a little embarrassing to admit that I am still struggling at my age to discover the true purpose of my life, the task I must have been born to accomplish.

The only other book I carried besides the guidebook was my little white *New Testament and Psalms* that I had received as a child, probably from my Baptist grandmother. I read the Book of Acts, and the Epistle of James.

I said thank you a lot. I found that the more attention I paid to *all* of the life around me (past and present, animal, vegetable and mineral), the more I found to be grateful for. That we had the strength and health to walk. The bold little robin who gave me a good look at his natty red vest. The old gentleman who must have come every morning to open the village church and stamp pilgrim credentials—an open church was always a gift because so many other churches were locked up. The water flowing from an old Roman fountain, after all these years still refreshing pilgrims. The ancient grove of chestnut trees that looked like a fairy land in the misty rain. The kindness of the pharmacist who told us how to treat Pat's blisters. So much kindness was shown to us and to all the pilgrims along the Camino!

I just walked! All sorts of people have made much of the profound and mysterious connection between walking and thinking. What quality of human thought, and therefore human experience, is lost to us when we no longer walk much in the course of our days? Especially walk on the natural earth among groves of great trees or grassy plains wide open to the sky? Not just our boots are made for walking but our bodies, too. After walking so much every day I realize how *unnatural* life has become for most of us moderns sitting indoors or in car much of the day. For some fascinating history and insights about walking, I recommend Rebecca Solnit's *Wanderlust, the History of Walking*, and Robert MacFarlane's *The Old Ways*.

In her book *Walking Home: From Eden to Emmaus*, Margaret Guenther makes the point that except for his donkey ride into Jerusalem, Jesus walked everywhere he went. What would it have been like to walk with Jesus for three years, crisscrossing the land that even then was holy? Sometimes, when I tried to feel "spiritual," I would imagine Jesus and his disciples walking ahead of me, their robes and sandaled feet very much like those of the early pilgrims of the Camino. That image would last a moment or two until I caught sight of a bird or cute dog or spectacular cloud formation. I must have the monkeyest of monkey minds!

Has the Camino changed your life in any way?

I sure hope so! But we'll see. When we arrived in Santiago I was excited to get the charming certificate pilgrims get after completing the Camino. I had heard that pilgrims' names were printed in some quaint Latin equivalent, and I was interested to see how my name would be rendered. Alas, the Latin for Holly Jo Boone is plain old Holly Jo Boone!

I have returned home, however, with the intention to spend less time and energy *doing* and to spend more *being*. I shall give more thought and nourishment to my authentic, eternal life here and now and less to the wants and whims of the particular mortal identity that will pass away. To this end, I'm continuing my Camino practices and adding more.

I'll keep the Sabbath. Besides that famous commandment, there are fascinating and compelling reasons to keep the Sabbath. I recommend *The Sabbath*, the classic work by Abraham Joshua Heschel; Walter Brueggemann's *Sabbath as Resistance*; and Wendell Berry's Sabbath poems. Keeping Sabbath in the intended spirit is far from observing a nasty list of prohibitions. It is a gift of calm rest and relief from the demands of our culture of noise, consumption and rote activity. What might keeping the Sabbath look like in the early 21st century? For instance, instead of spending a Sunday afternoon at University Village looking for an outdoor rug at the Pottery Barn, I took the dog for a walk at Myrtle Edwards Park along the waterfront and watched cormorants diving in the gray water as the sun set behind the ferry boats.

I'll live more quietly and spend more time alone. I don't want to be "bizzy" (busy+dizzy), which is quite different from being engaged in meaningful work. I will avoid as much as I decently can those activities unsuited to me. I have always enjoyed solitude, but now I realize for me—and probably for you, too—it is a spiritual necessity and not an optional pleasure.

I'll keep walking. Walking the dog or to the grocery store, if done with attention and a spirit of gratitude, refreshes and strengthens the spirit as well as the body. It is the daily moment and habit, not the big trip, that changes us over the long haul. Because it is such a basic and ancient human activity (since we hauled ourselves upright!), walking can act as a conscious break and mini-retreat from all the distractions and junk in our modern lives (junk food, junk entertainment, junk activity, junk thought—hey, I know this can be fun, and I myself *love* Cheetos and *Breaking Bad*) that does not feed our eternal life of the spiritual body and soul.

Finally, I want—this is a hard one!—to stop wanting things. Not just material things, though that would be hard enough. As a wise friend once told me, even wanting that close parking space is a little act of greed. Harder for me will be *to stop wanting my way*. Stop wanting other people to live or do or be as I would have them live or do or be. (I can tell you that I've already blown this one!)

Now I am even wary of wanting the *world* to be different. The world is what it is. It will not be any different from its present state of violence and cruelty and greed and hunger and misery and thoughtless consumption until we ourselves are profoundly different. As the bumper sticker says, we have to be the change we want to see in the world. This quote, often mistakenly attributed to Ghandi, might sound trite but it is no less true. Sign on a tree along the Camino: Be the Change!

I of violent opinions and passions have always resisted the Buddhist notion of detachment, but now I think I finally get it, at least a little. To quote Joseph Campbell in *Myths to Live By*:

All societies are evil, sorrowful, inequitable; and so they will always be. So if you really want to help this world, what you will have to teach is how to live in it. And that no one can do who has not himself learned how to live in it in the joyful sorrow and sorrowful joy of the knowledge of life as it is.

Or as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, “Be happy!”

What lessons did you learn on the Camino?

When I read a biography, I am always moved by the arc of a person’s life from birth to death, a whole life compressed in a few hundred pages and experienced by the reader in a few hours. The Camino was like a life’s journey pared down to its essence and compressed into a few weeks. There was a start, a middle and an end, and along the way, for a few weeks at least, there was a community of people all living more or less the *same life*.

We all had the same goal of walking a few more kilometers down the road. We all had the same need for food, water (and beer!), and a bed for the night. We had our aches and pains and blisters like the aches and pains and blisters of our fellow pilgrims. We carried with us only the things we thought essential, which weren’t much, so no one seemed to have “more” or “less” of what they really needed. There was the sense that we were all on this journey *together*.

Probably this sense of a shared, common life was why plain old *kindness* seemed to be the operating principle along the Camino. The staff and volunteers running the albergues and the townspeople in the streets and bars and markets and pharmacies along the way were invariably kind. I cannot recall a single expression of annoyance or rudeness, even when we clueless pilgrims might have deserved a good bark. Pilgrims were kind to each other, sharing their cheese, apples, wine, their band aids, cough drops, tea, Ibuprofen and shampoo, their encouragement, sympathy, cell phones and professional knowledge, with anyone in need of them. We smiled and wished each other “Buen Camino.”

Why can’t we in our “normal life” be as kind and generous as we collectively seemed to be on the Camino? Obviously life off the Camino encompasses a far wider spectrum of people—as wide as the world. The overwhelming variety of human experience, histories, beliefs, circumstances and personalities does make it harder to recognize what we all have in common. Each human life has never been lived before, so the particulars of each person’s life are unique. But the joys and dreams and pain and suffering of the stranger across town or across an ocean do not have to be exactly like mine for me to acknowledge that the stranger does experience joy and does have dreams and does hurt and does suffer. On the Camino, pilgrims limping with their blisters didn’t have to ask if someone else’s blister was just like their own. Everyone, even those without them, simply knew that blisters hurt.

Would we be kinder and more generous to one another if we accepted as gospel truth that another’s joys or sufferings were fundamentally no different from and no less significant than our own? Were in fact virtually our own? What if the first thing we wondered about people we meet was not their family name, address, occupation or income but instead where they hurt and what burdens they carried invisibly on their shoulders? You can bet everyone hurts and everyone has their burdens, even the too rich, too thin and too beautiful. Would I be more patient with the clerk ringing up my groceries too slowly to suit me if I knew she went home to care for a disabled son? Would I stop snarling at the rearview mirror, “Hey, Jerk, quit tailgating!” if I knew the guy behind me was anxious to get to the hospital to see his wife?

So this is what I think I learned from the Camino. No matter the strange and wonderful and infinite variety of our particular lives, we are in fact all living the same life. We are all living a human life. We are all on the

same Camino, even though the way is as wide as the whole world and as long as human history. We are all pilgrims on our way to the small, simple shrines of our own graves, the portals leading home to God.

Certainly this is nothing new. But aren't most life lessons about learning the same few big old things? And learning them over and over again?