

Camino: Walking the Way to Santiago  
Unitarian Church of Calgary, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2009  
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This sermon was first presented November 25<sup>th</sup> 2007 at the First Unitarian Church of Victoria, as part of a pulpit exchange with the Rev. Jane Bramadat, while the speaker was still settled as minister serving the Anchorage Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. The sermon was subsequently presented in Anchorage Alaska and elsewhere. There may be some minor differences between the following text and the presentation made at Calgary in 2009.

In the fall of 2007 I walked the old pilgrim trail through the north of Spain, El Camino de Santiago de Compostella: the way of Saint James of the field of stars. A friend and I began the walk in September, in France, at Saint Jean Pied-de-Port in the Atlantic Pyrenees. We completed our camino at Santiago in the far west of Spain in mid-October. I'd like to share with you some observations from that journey, some sense of the people we met there, and some reflection.

We walked six hundred kilometres in thirty-nine days. I invite you to walk with us through one of those days. It is late September. We slept last night in a small town called Villafranca Montes de Oca, in an old converted school house. It's a great albergue: clean, well ventilated, with lots of very hot water. This town has been sheltering travellers on the old Frankish war trail and trade route and pilgrim path for more than eleven hundred years. Their means are modest; they share what they have.

There were about forty of us in each room last night, our sleeping bags spread out on an upper or lower bunk bed. Yesterday was an average day; we walked 17.5 kilometres. Today we'll walk 18, with a lot of hill work. Our back packs are stripped down to eight kilos; A light pack makes a happy camper!

We cooked our own supper last night, and went to bed early. Lights out was around 10 pm. We wake early, while it is still dark. Folks seem quieter than usual. The guide books alarm us. They warn us not to enter the oak forests of the Montes de Oca if it is at all late in the day. While it is not difficult to find our way to the next habitation in good weather, still it takes at least three hours to reach the hamlet at San Juan de Ortega. The elevation rises to 1150 metres along the mountain paths. The dense woods are completely unpopulated. Some even speak of wolves in the forest, and wild boars.

Breakfast is a quick cup of tea, some dried fruit, hazelnuts, and yoghurt, then we're away. It is still dark. But we know a cafe-bar that opens early, so second breakfast is only two hundred metres up the road – *caffe con leche* and a *croissant*! It will be twelve kilometres to the next. Well fuelled, we hit the trail as the sky grows light.

The opening lines of Dante's "Inferno" echo in my mind: "Halfway along the road we have to go,/ I found myself obscured in a great forest,/ Bewildered...." [Dante, tx Sisson ll 1-3]

I grew up in rainforest country. My daddy was a logger. I feel at home among trees. The day is fair enough, the weather changeable, the air cold and damp with some wind. The path up into the Alto -- the high country -- is clearly marked. But the forest is so quiet. Sometimes no other person is in sight. Still, one does not walk alone. Mile after mile, old tunes come back to haunt you, snatches of old songs and lines of poetry, and half-remembered conversations.

We walk with the ghosts of a millennium in these mountains: ghosts of kings and soldiers, traders and settlers, pilgrims and penitents. And bandits. A thousand years ago these Montes de Oca were notorious for their dangers, with bandits and runaways and masterless men.

In living memory, Spain endured Civil War. Mid-way through the forest, we see a memorial to their dead. It is a plain stone pillar, marked with Picasso's dove of peace. The words are in Spanish and I struggle with the translation, something like: "Your deaths were not in vain, but your killings were".

After three hours walking through the forest, we begin to climb a little higher. At 1,250 metres elevation we step out of the trees and onto a paved road into the old, old settlement where San Juan de Ortega built a church in the Middle Ages to shelter pilgrims from the wolves and bandits.

The old stone church stands strong against the years. We step inside. A choir of French pilgrims, raise their voices. Their song lifts up into the stone vaults above us as we sit among the columns. It is as if a thousand years were but a moment. As the voices separate into two parts, then meld in harmony, I am almost weeping for the beauty of it.

A few more hours, a few more miles, then rest and a shower and hot food. Tonight at Atapuerca we are 18 kilometres closer to Santiago. The weather is colder now. It rains after we settle in to the albergue. Tomorrow we walk to Burgos. But tonight there is hot water enough, another early night, and more stories. Every person has a story.

Who are these people? We are young and old and middle-aged. We are fit and not so fit. Each of us walks our own camino. None of us walks alone. The images of our cities and our homes and all with whom we share our days and lives are very close. Each of us brings our own ghosts, our own questions, our own hopes and fears.

We are slow to ask names of one another. We give first names only, never last names. We rarely ask or speak of what we do for a living. We ask first, where did you begin your walk? One man tells that he began his camino by stepping out his front door.

We ask, where did you come from? What city or town? Homeless as we walk, we are mindful of the communities that cradle us.

Sometimes we may ask, why are you here? Many of us were drawn to the camino because someone we admired and respected had walked it, and their stories compelled us.

Many of us came at a time of change in our lives. Some young people are about to choose their life's work. Some in their 30's are contemplating marriage or children or a career change. There were mothers in their late 40's coming to terms with an empty nest, and folks in their 50's coming to terms with the death of parents, the closing of doors, the opening of other avenues. There were some in their 60's, reinventing their lives as retirement approached. Disconnections. Reconnections. There was a man in his 70's who declared he was walking the camino to annoy his family and prove he was still good for something.

There are young soldiers, just back from the middle east, flying down mule-killer hills on racing bikes, rejoicing in their liberty. There are old soldiers looking for a new path and purpose. Folks travel on foot, on bicycles, or on horseback. Young and old, male and female, fit and faltering, with friends or family or all alone, from all over Europe and all over the world, of every race and many tongues, we come to the Camino to test ourselves against its challenges and opportunities, more than ten thousand persons streaming along the trail into Santiago every year.

Where did you start from? Why are you here?

I would like you to meet some special people. I would like you to meet Anna, from Ottawa. She walks slowly, with a knee brace. Anna is religious, and cherishes her faith quietly, within. Anna walks to say thank you for blessings received.

I want you to meet Victoire, from Toulouse. Victoire tells us he is not religious, that he walks for sport. He wants to walk across the whole world. He likes to walk because it brings him closer to people. Recently he walked across Senegal, Mali, and Burkina-Faso. His memories are vivid still, of the people there and the challenges they meet each day: women carrying water from the well each day; children learning to read in villages where no newspaper is to be found.

Victoire tells us he is an agricole, a farmer, so he knows how to fix things. Victoire's idea of a good time is to walk across Africa with a hammer and vice-grips in his pack, and stop in at every hospital along the way to do basic repairs, like cleaning mineral deposits out of shower heads so they will flow freely once again.

Victoire seems increasingly isolated by deafness. Walking seems to reconnect him. Each evening he waits until the sky is dark and the stars are bright, and in the deep quiet of the night he telephones his beloved spouse in Toulouse to share their day. Victoire tells me that he is not religious, that he walks for sport.

I want you to meet people whole and broken, people at peace or in torment, people drawn and people driven. Meet the folk from crowded Holland, who delight in what they see as wide open spaces. Meet the Brazilian peleton – about twenty cyclists having a wonderful time together,

zipping along the open road. Meet the choir from Majorca, who cook and drink wine and sing the night away.

Meet the hospitaladeros, often volunteers, who keep the refugios and alberges running and make our journey possible. Remember what it says on your pilgrim passport: the tourist demands, the pilgrim gives thanks. You are a pilgrim and you are on a quest and your journey is profoundly purposeful. And purpose is hope.

What do we learn, walking six hundred kilometres? I learned, deep in my bones, that I am no longer a young woman, but I am still a capable person and yes, I am a minister down to my toes. I learned acceptance, and letting go; a light pack makes a happy pilgrim. Some spoke of how sometimes it's not an answer that's important. Sometimes the questions we bring to our pilgrimage change or even dissolve along the way, and a new question emerges.

Many spoke of seeking a spiritual experience, and finding it. Many spoke of relationship, and becoming part of something greater than oneself. Some yearned for communion with the cherished dead. Some reached towards a re-union of body, mind, and spirit.

I became more aware of how much mind and body interact with one another, how a cheerful word could make a hill less gruelling, how an illness darkened the day and blocked out the sun.

Many spoke of learning to honour the body. For one man the lesson of the camino was learning not to walk. Like many another, he had walked too far too fast. He was in agony. The Spanish doctor, who sees many such inflammations among pilgrims, told him to rest for seven days. And so my friend took a bus to Finisterre, to the end of the earth. He sat by the ocean for seven days, and remembered his boyhood, growing up by the sea.

Sometimes the lesson of the camino is to honour the bodies that carry us through this beautiful world. We learn to embrace the here and now. We set aside our books and read the landscape. We share in an oral literature of stories and reflections. We learn to listen once again. In the quiet we can hear the wind in the trees and the bells on the herd animals. In the stillness we can hear our own hearts and feel our true feelings, and true harmony.

I found a great sense of groundedness and serenity in long distance walking. It is no small thing to walk six hundred kilometres under an eight kilo pack. One feels a certain sense of accomplishment.

On occasion there was a dark side to this that must be recognized. I watched some pilgrims walk on through pain, with inflammations or tender joints or terrible blisters. I find it frightening to watch someone choose to inflict that much pain upon themselves. And yet, I must respect their free choice, bear steady witness to their struggle, and rejoice in their joy when the task is done for which the suffering was endured.

I do not believe in suffering for the sake of suffering. We can find pain enough without going looking for it. I'd like to think it is as ennobling to accept joy and beauty as to accept with dignity some inevitable loss or pain. I do recognize the engagement of challenge for the sake of growth or some noble purpose or because it is unavoidable. When I bear witness to suffering I hope to see the thing as it is, without romanticizing it, without dressing up pain as more than it is.

There was some pain for all of us in such a pilgrimage as this. But that was part of the challenge. The fact that we were to walk for six weeks meant we had to come to some sense of balance so we could hang in there for the long haul. Flexibility. Compromise. Timeliness. Taking good care of one another and ourselves. These were lessons of the camino, also.

What shall I take from this for daily life? I have learned and relearned that change comes slowly, that small steps can lead to great accomplishments, that it is good to walk with one another. We walk our own path, but we do not walk alone. And each of us has a story.

Where is hope?

On the way to Santiago I met people whose grandparents and great grand parents had tried very hard to kill one other. I saw them walk in peace with one another across the open borders of the European community. I saw a Spanish body politic exercise a thirty year democracy. I saw Spain engage in meaningful discourse about historical memory and bear steady witness to the horrors of their civil war.

I saw hundreds of people show respect and reverence for the earth and one another, day by day, as best they could. The tourist demands, the pilgrim gives thanks. The pilgrim is reverent. The pilgrim sees, each day, a thousand fragments knit into wholeness. I watched pilgrims reclaim their own lives.

In conclusion, sabbatical gave me the opportunity to do something I would have had great difficulty accomplishing without that extended block of time. I am very thankful that the congregation in Anchorage, Alaska, where I have served for the past five years, made this possible.

I walked six hundred kilometres, living very simply, one day at a time. I found a deeper awareness of who I am. I saw a broader perspective on life, death, and change. I touched some deep sense of stillness, acceptance, and serenity. I hope I have learned to let go of that which ought to be let go, and hold fast to that which is good, for a light pack makes a happy pilgrim.

Each of us walks our own camino; none of us walks alone.

May your pack be light, and your path lie clear before you.

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