

Walking the Camino Divino

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OCTOBER 19, 2019, I WRITE ON MY FACEBOOK PAGE: “I ARRIVED IN pelting rain this morning to Santiago de Compostela in time for the noon Mass, blessing pilgrims. I’ve walked a beautiful hundred miles with friends and in silence, through mountains, deserts, towns, welcoming strangers saying *Buen Camino* to cows, pregnant mares, sheep, goats, and tasty tortillas. I’m sore but eager for the Camino of life.”

I don’t say I slipped on the last day in soggy mud near the fence where pilgrims thread holy crosses, that I arrived in Compostela in terrible pain, a fractured tibia. Isn’t falling a part of the sacred way as well?



My desire to walk as Pilgrim, covering one hundred miles on the Way of St. James, walked by millions of people over thousands of years, leads me to a four-day spiritual retreat at Santa Sabina, Dominican College, with Father Fish, a Camaldolese monk and hermit—a veteran pilgrim, *Peregrine*—who has walked several Caminos.

“When we walk the Camino, we walk a spiritual journey on an earthly road. Life is simplified. With silence the Camino begins to speak to us,” he says.

“Hmm!” I say with doubt.

“She chooses us,” he says, calling the Camino “She.”

Do I believe that she chose me?

“Walking is a spiritual and sacramental discipline,” he tells retreatants. “Body is sacrament.”

I nod, remembering the body and blood of Christ, words drummed into me as a child, a mantra in a Catholic family.

“Isn’t walking losing balance, finding balance?” he asks.

“Like walking meditation?” I say, thinking of the moment of lifting one foot, standing midair, before placing it down.

“The Camino invites us out of the known into the unknown,” Father Fish says.

“A great risk,” I say, like the one I took leaving home at twenty-four.

“She only works when we surrender,” he says. “What will you leave behind?”

“Clothes, jewelry, dress shoes, dresses. I’ll take boots, socks, raingear,” I say, thinking of Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*, her adventure on the Pacific Coast Trail and how she left her boots. OOOEEEE!

In my private interview with Father Fish, he asks me what burdens I want to leave with Her. What brokenness, woundedness, stupidity do I want to release?

“Fears of aging and death,” I say. “I’m afraid of moving to the next phase of life.” I don’t say that I hadn’t loved the little girl inside of me all this time; that I want to love her. I don’t tell him that guilt and sadness plague me; that I want to forgive myself.

“With aging we become frightened of unknown territory. It’s like the desert you’re going to walk through. It is scary,” Father says.

“I’m not sure I want to leave.”

“The Camino constantly says leave,” Father says. “She can be a blessing and a bitch too.” Laughing, he reveals some of his own mishaps on the trail, like mistakenly getting off the path, finding himself lost, or adding the dreaded mileage to an already long walk.

“One foot, then the next,” I say. “My tai chi teacher used to say: ‘slowly, slowly.’”

“You’ll have time,” he says.

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On the Camino, discipline begins and is not unlike sitting in the meditation hall, playing the piano, waiting nine months for a child to be born, or waiting in the radiation cathedral at UC with other women every day for six weeks for breast cancer. Like the others, this ritual will be one step at a time.

Certainly, before October 6, 2019, flying to Lisbon-Bilbao, I'd barely heard of St. James, a disciple of Christ who spread Jesus's word in Spain then returned to Jerusalem in 44 CE where he was beheaded by King Herod. With the help of angels, followers carried James's body to Spain to entomb him. Shepherd Pelayo, eight hundred years later, followed a star to his tomb. This

legend brings followers from all over the world to walk The Camino Divino—The Sacred Way.

"Pilgrim" comes from the Latin *perager*: to step beyond one's field. Hadn't I already left my kinfolk at twenty-four when I moved from Boston to San Francisco, pulling a U-Haul with husband and babies, one and three.

At seventy-five I'm itching to step beyond my field again, to wander as a pilgrim through the land. Why? Solitude? Order? Practice? I first heard the word "practice" as a five-year-old when my childhood friend Ray-Ray said, "We practice in this house." He was referring to how he and his sister had a daily practice of piano and song.

So different from my childhood home with my father returning from World War II to meet me, his two-year-old baby, for the first time. My mother distracted, then pregnant with a second unplanned child. I don't recall a practice.

After being diagnosed with invasive breast cancer in 2005 at sixty, I became a seeker. I felt so alone with God. Worse, God had forsaken me. On a cold gray December day after surgery and before radiation, I stood near Kinko's in cold Sausalito, waiting for the Tibetan doctor, a man from an ancient culture, to save me with his herbs. Dr. Lopsang Dhondup took pulses to find the road map that would keep his patients

in good health, that is, to boost my immune system.

And yet, the only thing that consoled me then was sitting quietly or walking slowly, lifting each foot, feeling a moment of suspension before landing. I remember crying inside the downstairs closet in the spare bedroom of our house nights on end, not wanting my husband who had helped me logistically to maneuver through the medical system to hear my crying and despair. When he left for work, I took my tears to the meditation cushion behind the couch in the living room, telling myself, *stay, sit*, as I prepared for a ten-day silent retreat at Spirit Rock. I wanted to handle this in silence. We sat, and walked, and ate.

My motivation to walk the Camino feels like taking up the Zen cushion.

"We practice in this house," Ray had said. "Piano and song, one note then another." Did he know something then?

I tell the meditation teacher at Spirit Rock about my fear of leavings. He says, "If you don't leave, you can't arrive."

Now I've convinced Peter to join me, along with friends Karen, David, and Ned, to leave our comfy homes to walk a hundred twenty miles in rain and mud on difficult terrain. Flying to Lisbon-Bilbao, I ask myself, *What are you seeking?* I don't know the answer. I'm only following a deep knowing that walking will inform me.

From Lisbon we fly to Bilbao to meet a bus to Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees. At Iglesia Santa Maria at 8 p.m., we receive a special blessing for pilgrims of any faith. I receive the Eucharist and the Pilgrim's Passport. The Big Dipper smiles as we begin the morning walk through woodland and pastures. Immediately, raspberry vines entangle me. Thorns wind around my ankles, leaving welts as I admire pregnant mares. Later the first day I slip on slimy rocks while crossing a stream, leaving a wrist sprain. How do I keep going if on this first day I'm already wounded? I think of the poets I love who say the wound is a blessing. I pick myself up, inhale my tears, and pray, telling myself to take the Camino a step at a time. Hadn't Father Fish said She was a bitch too?

While Don Quixote battled windmills, we as pilgrims battle wind. She snaps my hat. The visor stands up or flies off. I spear it with my walking pole like Sir Thighbone (Don Quixote), the knight-errant speared windmills. The walk is hard, dry. Blisters bubble. Battered by wind, I begin singing "You Are My Sunshine" like I used to sing to Isabella and Milla, our granddaughters, when they were babies. They are at home in California about to graduate from high school. Seeing their faces brings tears of love down mine.

*The Camino is working on me,
talking to me of love and tears.*

On a thirteen-kilometer day we leave the monastery near O'Cebreiro. A dark sweetness punctuates secret passageways to Triascastela, one of the last days before reaching Santiago. Walking quietly with other *peregrino*, we listen to the rain. We are ghosts in ponchos. The pelting rain drowns us, soaks us to the bone. I am one with others. We are a parade of souls on the way that thousands of others have walked.

Drinking tea in a teahouse with other pilgrims nursing our blisters, I rest after walking in foggy mist along the beauty of profound green farmland below us. Farms in beautiful rectangular sections of green. A painting I can still see in my tea leaves.

At O'Cebreiro, the view is spectacular with its mystical cloud cover that hovers and floats over and below the hilltops. A beautiful walk through pine forests reminds me of Point Reyes, my home away from home. Fresh enlivening smells of pine needles and red leaves cling to my shoes, slowing things down, providing a spongy carpet for my weary feet. Red and yellow next to green rolling hills call peace to my eyes. I wander through a town, talking to pregnant cows with horns. Do females have horns? I think so.



One very round cow scratches her head in the vines. Animals and soft clouds give me an ageless feeling. The weather is mild and wet, no longer summer. Every now and then the clouds part to give a glimpse of the sun; curtains part for a moment and then flow, closing the window.

Next day from Sarria we walk through woodlands and farms. Smells, mainly of cows in enclosed spaces getting ready to feed people, stench the air. Pastoral scenes tempered with hectors of green grass shaped in rectangular forms are enclosed by

stone walls. More pilgrims walk here in Galicia, the garden route to Santiago. Today I walk the entire time alone, eighteen kilometers, reflecting on the Camino. Peter is behind me. I realize he's always been behind me, has my back. Tears flow around this awareness. Tears filled with love for him and the gratitude I've never shared.

*The Camino is working on me,
showing me I am loved.*

Walking alone gives me the opportunity to see myself more clearly.

The man in Barbedelo responds to my request for a stamp on my passport by taking my poles from my hands to put rubber caps on the points. I don't want rubber caps on them.

"No," I say as he moves further back into the shop. I follow, realizing he wants to sell me baskets for them.

"No, I don't want to buy anything. Please leave me alone."

I leave. He smiles. I feel as though I've escaped a fox, the dog in Paulo Coelho's book *The Pilgrimage*. I stood up to the fox. I feel proud of myself.

The Camino is working on me, showing me self-protection.

Walking alone for twenty-two kilometers, I see myself on the Camino near animals, villagers, pilgrims from Asia, Italy, Australia, London, people in wheelchairs and using crutches. We are on the garden route of Galicia to beloved Compostela.



October 19, 2019. It's dark leaving Lavacolla, setting out this morning

for the last walk, twelve kilometers on the Camino toward Compostela and St. James's tomb. The rain and the weather match the tears filling my eyes this morning at 7 a.m. on the final stretch. A journey personal and physical, spiritual and emotional awaits me today. I know not what it may bring. I pray to dear James whose memory is kept alive by pilgrims over the centuries.

"Bless me today and all the pilgrims, *Gracias*," I pray.

I walk the last twelve kilometers with pilgrims who like me are walking in pelting rain, drowning in water and mud in soaking wet raingear. Cold to the bone, we enter a chapel near the monument to Pope John Paul and Saint Francis. A little *ermita* (hermitage) four-and-a-half kilometers from the cathedral in Santiago. A woman welcomes us as *peregrino*, stamps our passports Ermita San Marcos de Gozo. She lights a white candle in a red glass. Twinkling with red, like the blood of Christ, I place it at the altar, praying for Frank, my meditation teacher who has had a stroke; Gay, my colleague who is wheelchair-bound and homeless; Mary, a Dominican nun who is dying; and all of us on this road to the field of stars.

I sing, "I walk not into the night. I walk but toward the stars," a song I sang in the Threshold Choir to people dying. I joined the choir after surviving invasive breast cancer. I wonder if

this is the song of my passing. Yes, Compostela, the field of a star, is less than eight kilometers away now.

Outside the rain pours down. I slip in the soggy mud near the fence where pilgrims have threaded holy crosses. My left knee gives way and a new pain deepens the one already there. The pain is exquisite. As the fog deepens, I am less clear. I search the drenched faces of *peregrino* who pass by saying, "*Buen camino*, can I help? Need an arm? A tall branch to use as a crutch?" They melt my heart, and for the moment I find the courage to keep moving toward Santiago de Compostela and St. James.

The Camino tells me of the love of strangers.

My knee aches, my mind jumbles. How will I walk the remaining five kilometers with pain searing through my knee? Peter is ahead now. Have I a sprain, a break, a tear, or a fracture? How can I manage to walk into Santiago, my goal now for two weeks?

"Walk, walk, a step at a time," comes a voice inside.

Why does my wise self not tell me to stop to ask for help or to find a place to get a taxi to ride into the plaza at the Cathedral. Instead, I hear again, "Take one step at a time. Lightly, hold the pain."

The wind and the rain pelt and my poncho is soaked, beaded with little diamonds of water reminding me of the jewel on my finger, a diamond my



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maternal grandmother wore on her finger. The ring is old, born of another time when Grandmother received it as a young girl from her lover, my grandfather. The ring passed down to me at her death in 1963, even before I was married. I wear it next to my wedding ring, a plain silver band that cost eleven dollars in 1965. I run my finger along its side, twirling the band as if to awaken it. It does not turn easily around a swollen finger. I hardly notice the pain in my knee as I twirl the band, thinking how Grandmother Josephina made a Camino too. Didn't she cross the Atlantic from Italy to come to America, bringing her new husband, her sister to the new world? Hadn't she suffered in the winds and rains of the sea, traveling day upon day, sunrise upon sunset, always with the raw elements thrashing the boat as she carried the first child in her womb.

Thank you, Grandma, for getting me through this hard patch. The Camino gives me a moment of remembrance.

I need to stop to sit, to give my knee a rest. The rain has lessened, and the stream beside the path twinkles over rocks. Galicia, the Garden of Eden. I don't want to think, only to listen, to feel the moisture from the sky dripping from the trees and down my face. I stretch my head and neck up and open my mouth to sip the tears from the trees. Raindrops commiserate with me, crying cool tears down my face and onto my awaiting tongue. The taste of

the pine-filled drops meld with my tears, refreshing me. Another one soothes the acrid taste that has accumulated. Why? I ask the Camino.

How will I make it? What? When? The questions begin to fall away so that only the cool, vivifying drops of rainwater console me. My mouth, my tongue become the container for the teardrops from the sky. With tongue hanging like a puppy, I sit for time unmeasurable.

Yes, this is like sitting on the cushion fourteen years ago when I held all that seemed so bleak; when I didn't know my prognosis; when I traipsed around in the cold outside of Kinko waiting for the Tibetan healer to read my pulses; when I sat in the radiation cathedral five days a week for six weeks to heal my invasive breast cancer, not knowing that fifteen years later I would be walking the Camino de Santiago. It was like that then. I'd sat and sat and walked in meditation, freeing my mind so that I could take it a step at a time. Was life repeating itself? A new round?

*The Camino is working on me,
telling me to surrender, to allow.*

Here She is again, guiding me to sit and gather the strength I need. I'm alone and not alone. I'm sitting with the women in the radiation cathedral, remembering that we could handle what lay ahead. Yes, then too, we were

immersed in a kind of surrender. A space where answers and questions and rationality simmered on a low horizon. I close my eyes, sure I'm among the others, though I see no one in this forest of Galicia.

I breathe, inhaling the scent of woodland and water, hearing a temple bell like in the monastic retreat where I visited Father Fish. He'd called the Camino "She," said "She" would speak to me. But he didn't tell me I would be surrounded in the garden of Galicia by woodland spirits.

Sitting on the pillow of earth among all those who had walked the Camino for centuries, all those who had sacrificed and prevailed, I knew in my bones that they, too, had surrendered. Some had walked over five hundred miles over many months.

"*Senora, Senora.*" I hear a gentle male voice. Am I in a trance? Then, "*Buen Camino, Senora.*" I look up and standing beside me is a man, a shepherd, with his calf in his arms. "*Buen Camino,*" he says, looking into my eyes, a walking stick in his hand, a ragged shirt on his back. He carries a baby lamb with its front legs draped over his forearm like bracelets.

I wonder if he's one of the herders, returning home with a lamb. I'd seen many such shepherds along the way in the fields. But then perhaps I'm dreaming, trancing again. He reaches out his hand. "The path," he says, looking over his right shoulder. "You

have veered off." He bends down and offers his hand. I take it, roughened by his toil like Pa Tony's. The lamb stretches forward, licking my dried tears. The man says, "Follow me."

I stand up and follow him over a small stream to the path, where some other pilgrims like me walk slowly—some alone, some in pairs, some in groups— all going to Santiago. The shepherd retreats across the stream toward his destination.

Soon I see Pete, who has been behind and/or beside me all the way; he, too, walks slowly with a limp. We smile and walk the last kilometer hand in hand into Santiago, two souls on a path. The Camino has blessed us.

A pilgrim walks beside us, saying, "*Buen Camino.*" I look at him. His eyes are wide and fluid. He looks bedraggled too.

He says, "Less than one kilometer. *Buen camino.*" He pulls ahead.

"Wait!" I call. "Why are you walking?" I ask before he's out of sight.

"To cross over the habitual patterns of life, to shake it up a bit," he says. "And you?"

"The Camino can be a blessing and a bitch," I say.

"Blessings. *Buen Camino,*" the pilgrim says, pulling ahead. "Huh?"

"To accept my fragility," I say. "Only works when we surrender and trust." He nods.

I no longer feel the pain of fracture on my left tibia as I enter Compostela.

I am a pilgrim on the road, praying for my safety and that of others.



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I walk the last distance into Santiago in joy.

“Did I meet my intention?” I ask Her.

“You did,” She says. “Vulnerability allows providence.”

“Is that like grace?”

“Hum,” She says. “Remember, you walk not alone.”

“Yes,” I nod. “I walk but toward the star.”

The Camino is working on me, talking to me of fields of love and tears.

The Camino is working on me, telling me we are not separate.

The Camino is working on me, telling me of the sacredness of nature.

“Oh, to be human, needing to be held—and to hold things,” I remember my friend River’s golden line.

“Oh, to be wild and let the river go free,” I say as the doctor places hands on my fractured tibia.

“Oh, to be wild, yet needing to be tamed too,” the doctor replies.

“You’ll feel a slight rush before the calm,” he says.

“I know, it’s always like that,” I say.

In the airplane home, I squeeze my fingers into themselves, feeling the little nubs of aged bones. I close my eyes and inhale deeply, holding

my own fingers within the palm of my hand—a little womb inside me bursting forth. I can hold on a bit longer.

The doctor’s eyes blue and twinkly, like the stars. The bluest stars asking me to take care of myself.

I can hold my hand now, the womb of myself, a small opening into my being. I’m still walking the Camino toward the windmills where Don Quixote smiles. He’s calling me his *Dulcinea*, saying, “Walk toward the spinning wheels in the sky, open your hands and welcome the wind upon your face. Come. You are here with the enchantment of being. One step then another.”

I open my eyes, take a deep breath, feel my feet walking the Camino de Santiago, where pilgrims walked for centuries. A woman walks slowly ahead of me, placing one foot at a time. I catch up with her and walk beside her, smelling the freshness of her robe, the talc she uses. I nestle against the woman’s breast and look into deep brown eyes like mine. We smile at each other. She says, “It’s you, my dear granddaughter. I’m with you.”

I kneel down on the Camino and hug my knees—still knobby caps on fully formed muscular legs—the ones I used to hang on to as a child.

Oh, to be human and need to hold things. ✧