

Travel Tip

A Poem by Linda Beeman

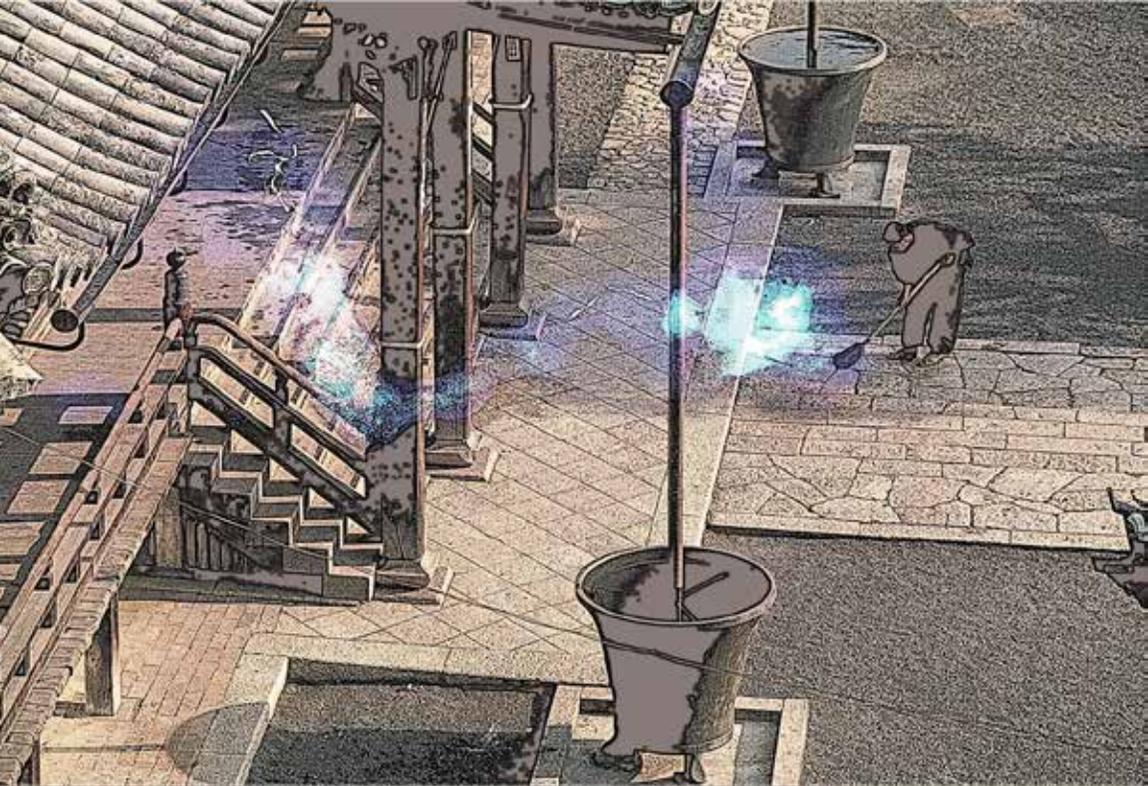
Wherever you go
there you're not

Travel is all about
seeing through other eyes
making yourself unobtrusive
gaping at small wonders
finding courage to ask

Wherever you go
pack humbly

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The Precincts of the Sacred



The Zen of Sweeping Stones — a Buddhist monk at a temple
in N. Kyoto, Japan Photograph by Earl Cooper

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

— T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”

Camino Lessons: Variations on the theme of Pilgrimage



by Marlene Schiwy

EVERY YEAR, THOUSANDS of people walk the ancient Camino de Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain, one of the most important medieval religious pilgrimage routes. A reputable Camino Web site states that the numbers have risen steadily from 700 pilgrims in 1985 to approximately 200,000 in 2012, rising to an all-time high of 273,000 in the recent Holy Year of 2010. The Camino Francés is only one, albeit the most travelled, of a dozen major Camino routes throughout Europe, all of them converging in Santiago de Compostela in the northwest corner of Spain, not far from Finisterre, where land meets water at the legendary ends of the earth.

All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.

— Martin Buber, *Tales of the Baal Shem Tov*

For Christians, this pilgrimage culminates at the Cathedral in Santiago where the body of the apostle Saint James was reportedly brought by ship from Jerusalem and buried. For some people, it is a way to honor crucial passages and milestones: a divorce or loss of someone dear to them, a major life transition such as career change or retirement, or simply an opportunity to contemplate their lives anew with hopes of finding a broader vision. For others, it is an initiation rite that tests their commitment and endurance, their willingness and capacity to relinquish the usual comforts of life and open themselves to a wider reality. There are easier ways of arriving at Santiago than walking 800 kilometers

through often taxing terrain and uncertain weather, but walking the Way of Saint James brings transformation for many. Absolved from their usual responsibilities and disconnected from technology's addictive grip, they may discover a new connection to the earth beneath their feet, to the ever-changing landscape and weather surrounding them, to their fellow pilgrims, and not least, to themselves.

Having lost the old certainties and feeling rootless and adrift, we move out into the world, a community of pilgrims and wanderers on an ancient road, searching for the ground of our own being. The long days and weeks of walking ground the pilgrim's quest for spiritual enlightenment through constant contact with the earth and attention to the body's needs. When feet are blistered, throats parched, bladders bursting, and joints ache, the body is speaking loudly and clearly. It is asking to be heard.

But pilgrimage is both an outer and inner process. As the Greek poet Cavafy reminds us, by the time the weary traveler finally arrives at Ithaca or Santiago, he or she has long since realized that arrival was never the goal. Is there in everyone an archetypal attraction to travelling the world on foot and finding an intimate connection to the earth and her creatures? Are we all on pilgrimage, hoping to make our way back to the body of the Great Mother?

II.

IN THE SPRING OF 2012 I walked the Camino with my 24-year-old niece. I had always planned to go alone, but Chelsea was struggling to find her way and it seemed like a good time to invite her onto a new adventure. I was keenly aware that this would be a very different Camino from the one I'd envisioned, but I hoped the dramatic break from Chelsea's usual routine might bring a fresh sense of possibility and a wider vision for her life.

Contemplating the long days and weeks of walking ahead, I tucked several beloved poems and quotes into the flap of my Moleskine notebook for inspiration on my journey, among them the following three:

It is part of the business of growing up to listen to the fearful discords which real life grinds out and to include them among the images of reality.

— C. G. Jung

A free woman has a strong neck – an open connection between heart and head, a balance between reality and ideals.

— Marion Woodman

The creative is an achievement of love. It is marked by imagination and beauty, and by connection to tradition as a living force and to nature as a living body... nothing can create without love.

— James Hillman

I made a detailed packing list and gradually filled my backpack over several weeks. When you know you'll be carrying that backpack for hundreds of kilometers, you also know that every ounce counts. I weighed everything, and took only the essentials, including miniature shampoo and toothpaste, and just enough blister cream and Tylenol to get us to the nearest pharmacy. Along with my little journal, I wanted to take a paperback book. Not something to read and leave behind, but one I could dip into during the evenings and reflect on as I walked. I decided on James Hillman's *The Force of Character and the Lasting Life*. On the eve of setting out for Spain I wrote in my journal:

What is it I'm really hoping for in the course of this Camino adventure? A deeper understanding of my own aging process? Time to reflect – in solitude and away from my usual routine – on my remaining time on earth, whatever that might be? Some kind of loving transformation? Rejuvenation of my writing process? Perhaps something else that I can't even imagine now? I do know that I want to welcome each day and "take earth for my own large room / and the floor of earth / carpeted with sunlight/ and hung round with silver wind / for my dancing place." (May Swenson)

In my journal I'd written the names of the people I love and their most pressing concerns. Every morning I would choose one to hold close in my heart, and dedicate the day's pilgrimage to them. *Keep it simple*, I concluded the journal entry. *Give thanks for each new day, and be present in everything I do. Be patient with Chelsea and myself. Open my heart to those I meet along the way. Write down my thoughts and insights. Carry those I love in my heart. And drink plenty of water!*

It was drinking enough water that proved to be the biggest challenge. Toilets were few and far between and I couldn't bring myself to squat in

the often exposed fields along the way, which made the strategic intake of liquids a priority. With time we worked out a system of drinking very little until we knew there were toilets ahead, then downing as much as we could (I would not recommend this system to aspiring pilgrims).

Chelsea turned out to be a hardy and hilarious travel companion, and our conversation roamed in many directions as we walked together day after day. One of her favorite songs at the time was Alanis Morissette's "I am a Wunder Kind." We listened to it over and over on her headphones, singing along, *I am a magnet for deeper kinds of wonderment, Destined to serve, destined to roam / Destined to seek, destined to know.* The lyrics seemed to mirror our quest as we

continued, mile after mile. We spoke often of Gavin, her baby boy who'd been stillborn in the summer of 2008 and whose perfect little face was engraved in my memory as it was in hers. Day after day I could not help but notice the constant attention her nubile blonde beauty attracted from men of all ages and how invisible I had become, in contrast.



Marlene (right) with her niece Chelsea

We fell into a rhythm of walking for six or seven hours with only a few brief stops along the way, finding a room and showering, then going out for the Pilgrim's dinner. During the evenings we lay side by side on our beds, relaxing and sharing our impressions of the day's experiences, or listening to music (Chelsea) and writing in the journal (me). One evening Chelsea asked me to read out loud to her. *She really wants to hear James Hillman's thoughts on aging?* I thought. I read, and we had lively discussions about "Gravity's Sag," "Erotics," and "The Force of the Face."

We laughed and called ourselves "the whiny pilgrims" for complaining when things went wrong. One night halfway through the Camino we wept with exhaustion, stretching arms out across our beds to hold hands as we fell asleep. While drinking our morning café con leche we talked about our dreams and what they might be telling us, noting the similarities in their themes at times.

Then I was laid low with severe tendonitis and Chelsea caught a stomach bug. We were forced to stop walking for five days and rethink our Camino itinerary. Due to Chelsea's time constraints we decided to take a train to Sarria so that she could walk the final 100 kilometers required for the official Compostela certificate. As we trekked into Santiago she protested, "But I'm not ready to go home, Aunt Marlene. I haven't learned all of my Camino lessons yet." Spoken half in jest, but it was the other half that interested me. We both knew the Camino had reached deep into her heart and soul in some way she didn't have words for.



After we'd said our farewells and Chelsea boarded the train to Madrid, I considered my options. Our change in plans had brought me into Santiago a week earlier than expected, and I felt restless and dissatisfied with my

truncated walk. My tendonitis had calmed down and my body wanted to keep moving, so I decided to carry on walking to Finisterre. I was anxious, knowing there would be far fewer pilgrims or signs along the way, but I seized my courage and hoped for the best.

Sure enough, within half an hour of setting out the next morning, I was lost. As I stopped in the middle of a shady park on the outskirts of town to speak with a young Korean pilgrim who was equally disoriented, three German pilgrims walked toward us with confident strides, and the five of us eventually found our way out of Santiago.

And so it was that I walked the Camino Finisterre in the company of Klaus, a gentle woodsman from Hamburg who had worked as an agricultural expert in many countries but felt most at home walking in nature. Klaus told me he was walking the Camino in hopes of coming to terms with the sudden death of his little granddaughter the previous year. Occasionally he pointed out something in the surrounding landscape — an unusual species of tree or wildflower — or we stopped for something to drink, but most of the time we walked in companionable silence and I

found his quiet, unruffled presence and unfailing sense of direction soothing and restful following the boisterous weeks with Chelsea. The Camino Francés had been our Camino, but the Camino Finesterre was mine. I even found myself being noticed by men, and realized I wasn't quite as invisible as I'd felt beside my lovely, statuesque niece.

I continued my morning ritual of holding someone I love in my heart as I walked each day. It was easy to do in the fresh, green stillness, and my thoughts went often to my aging parents, especially my mother, who I knew was counting the days until my return. My sister, Chelsea's mother, was planning to join me for a long visit at our parents' home in June, and I wondered what we would cook and bake together this time.



On arriving in Finesterre, Klaus and I joined three other pilgrims in a trek up to the Cape where I made my symbolic sacrifice, burning what no longer served me in the small ritual fire. Then we all drank a joyous toast to the Camino before heading back down for a celebratory dinner in town. After a day's rest, Klaus and I continued up the coast to Muxía where we discovered a beautiful *Casa Rurale* run by a young couple with loving care and delectable regional cooking. On May 23rd I wrote in my journal:

What a glorious final day of my Camino journey. We walked up to the Virgin of the Rocks and lay on enormous warm stones that look like the bodies of whales. The scenery was beyond beautiful and it felt like a wonderful culmination of everything I have experienced. Then we wandered back to the Casa de Trillo and I washed the Camino dust off my feet for the last time before heading down for another delicious dinner. My Camino is over. I walked 22 of the 30 days I'd hoped for, and completed 550 kilometers. It's not what I expected, but this was MY Camino, and I am grateful. Now it's time to relax, celebrate, and go home. A seven-year dream has been fulfilled and now I move on to other dreams.

I had no idea what would come crashing down on us all just two weeks later.

III.

C. G. JUNG DESCRIBED ARCHETYPAL WANDERING as “a symbol of longing, of the restless urge which never finds its object, of nostalgia for the lost mother.” During my Jungian studies in Zurich I dreamed of the earth as a woman’s body. Before me lay a lush and beautiful landscape. As I gazed at it in wonder, I saw that the rounded hills were her breasts and belly, the soft green foliage her pubic hair. “All wandering is from the Mother, to the Mother, in the Mother,” writes Nor Hall, in *The Moon and the Virgin*.

All of this took on new dimensions of meaning when, one week after my return from the Camino, unexpectedly and shockingly my mother died following what was to have been a routine medical procedure. Although I had forced myself to imagine what it might be like to lose her — she’d had several close calls in the past — the shock and timing of her accidental death shifted the ground under my feet in a way I could not have prepared for.

“How long will you be gone?” she’d asked, shortly before my departure.

“Six weeks,” I told her. She looked sad and said, “That’s such a long time.” Did she have any inkling that it was most of her remaining lifetime?

“I’ll be back before you know it, Mum,” I tried to comfort her. “And I’ll come out and spend a lot of time with you in June.”

My mother didn’t understand my need to travel and couldn’t comprehend why I would fly overseas at considerable cost just to walk for many hours every day for an entire month. Both she and my father were penniless immigrants to Canada after the war and, by the time they could afford to travel, her health was unstable and any significant journey was out of the question. Once in all those years she said with a rueful shake of her head, “All those years and where have I been? Nowhere.” Her voice was edged with regret.

“Where would you have wanted to travel, Mum?” I asked her, surprised. She had never mentioned wanting to travel, although perhaps I should have known.

“Hawaii,” she said. “Or California. Somewhere warm.”

I had wanted to walk the Camino for many years and felt early in 2012 that this would be the year. It seemed a cruel twist of fate that as I

was walking toward Santiago at long last, my mother was living her final weeks on earth. Without a cell phone I hadn't even called home often. There were few public telephones along the way, and I wanted to sink into the shared experience with my niece and immerse myself in our surroundings. I called home once at the beginning of the trip and tried again toward the end, but Mum had gone next door with some baking for her sick neighbor. A few days before she died she told me, "I'm always at home and in those few minutes I was out, you called. I was so sad when I heard your voice on the answering machine and knew I missed your call."

In the weeks following her death, I was inconsolable. In my sorrow it seemed to me that just when she'd needed me most, I was absent from her life. I wanted those six weeks back. If I'd had any inkling of what was to come, the Camino could have waited another ten years. Or forever. In the face of losing my mother, it seemed like nothing. For many months I could not talk about my pilgrimage at all. When pressed, I could only say, "I walked the Camino and a week after I got back, my mother died." The Camino felt like a miserable prequel to the biggest loss of my life. It didn't matter one ounce that we'd had her for longer than we ever expected to, or that my parents had celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary the previous September, or that there wasn't much left unspoken between us. I was flesh of her flesh, and she was dead. My mother-ground. The earth of my being.



More than a year later I am still trying to see the lay of this new land, this motherless landscape. In the 14 months since my mother's death, my body has begun to release hers. The ache is still there but it's not as intense, at least most of the time. Whenever Mum and I hugged each other, I buried my nose in her neck and inhaled her scent with deep gladness and gratitude. *Remember this*, I told myself. *One day she will be gone.*

Several weeks after she died, my mother came to me in a dream. "I can still smell you," I told her with quiet satisfaction. "I still remember your scent." "I can still remember your scent too," she said. I was

comforted by the dream, but I never had it again. When she comes to me now in dreams, she is always both alive and dead. I am always so thankful to see her.

As my 60th birthday draws near — the day after what would have been her 83rd — I know that another new landscape lies before me — the country of old age. Another kind of pilgrimage and, according to James Hillman, another kind of adventure. In that new country, my own mortality is no longer inconceivable either. I think it's time to fulfill another dream.

IV.

NOT EVERYONE CAN WALK THE CAMINO or even has the desire to. But in some sense we are all on pilgrimage throughout our lives. The Jungian writer Nor Hall says, "If people do not gather anymore on a sacred road to search for their lost souls, the gathering together and the search will be translated into the movement and language of our interiors. Rites of passage have turned inward where they can be lived out as stages of psychic transformation." Jung referred to this process as the individuation journey.

To keep a *journal* is also to embark on a *journey*. Both words have their roots in the French *jour* (day). *Journey* originally referred to the distance that could be traveled in one day and, symbolically, that is the journal's territory as well.

I have journeyed through the inner world for almost half a century. My journal — approaching 200 volumes at this point — has been the longest pilgrimage of my life, bearing witness to its peaks and valleys and everything between. In its pages I have wandered and stumbled, questioned and raged, reflected and rejoiced, poured out my hopes and dreams, and done my best to come to terms with myself and the world around me. Like the Camino *peregrino* or pilgrim, who sets out in hopes of finding a deeper truth and self-knowledge, I have looked to my journal as an unflinching mirror of my soul's journey. I have been a persistent *peregrina* of the inner realm.

But I am only now beginning to separate my Camino experience from its shocking sequel. See it for itself, rather than as the prelude to my mother's death. As I reread my Camino journal, I recall the freshness of each day's experience, the exhilaration of the adventure, the joy of meeting other pilgrims and sharing stories, the unexpected twists and detours

along the way. The satisfaction at finally fulfilling a dream. What the somber shadow of grief has dulled in my memory, my journal restores to its original vivid hues. The sorrow is real, and so is the joy. My journal and I can hold them both.

V.

A FRIEND HOPING TO HELP ME COME TO TERMS with my anguish over Mum's wrongful death asked me, "Do you ever think that walking the Camino strengthened you and in some way prepared you to cope with losing your mother?" I appreciated her loving intention but that didn't ring true at the time, and it doesn't now. As far as I can tell, my Camino experience didn't leave me with any deeper insight into the nature of life and death.

On my last day of walking I wrote in my journal, *I've been thinking a lot about my "Camino lessons," as Chelsea and I called them. Let it be, seems to be one of them. Let myself be, perhaps. I don't have to force or push anything. I don't have to be invulnerable or strong all the time. I can let someone else take care of me too.*

While many people walk the Camino as a temporary refuge from frantic and fragmented lives, my life at home includes the luxury and spaciousness of time for soul-searching and contemplation. Along with a colorful kaleidoscope of ever-shifting shards and pieces of memory, and the concrete, embodied experience of being on pilgrimage, walking the Camino offered a few simple and lasting truths. They say every pilgrim gets what he or she needs.

- Walk your own Camino, not someone else's. I might have avoided the tendonitis and foot injury, had we stopped more often for short breaks instead of following the lead of Giulia, a gregarious Italian woman determined to push ahead. Her facility in speaking Spanish and my own insecurity made it tempting to follow close behind her.
- Take it one day at a time, and be prepared to change course if necessary. I had hoped to walk for 30 continuous days with perhaps a day off in the middle to rest but had to surrender to the reality of my injury. In the end, mine was not the perfect 33-day Camino outlined in John Brierly's excellent guidebook. I walked my own idiosyncratic Camino.

- Carry only what is essential. It's probably much less than you think. I'd packed as selectively as I could but within days I left behind a small hot water bottle and several other items. It was the coldest, wettest spring in a hundred years and I was grateful for the old cashmere scarf and gloves I'd tucked into my backpack at the last minute, but once the weather warmed up I left them behind. My book, on the other hand, was essential, along with the poems and quotes and a single tube of lipstick. Many pilgrims divested themselves of half of what they'd brought, along the way.
- Share what you have, whether it's fruit or chocolate, a rain poncho or extra pair of socks, a band-aid or an inspiring quote. We're all in this together.
- Welcome the kindness of strangers. After a long train journey we arrived in Pamplona in the middle of a heavy downpour on a Friday night and couldn't find a room. Out of nowhere an older Spanish gentleman appeared and asked us in German if we needed help, then took us to a new hotel not mentioned in our guidebook and spoke to the manager on our behalf. He had walked two Caminos himself, he told us, and this was his way of expressing gratitude. "He's our first Camino angel," Chelsea said as he drove off in the rain. There were others. Maria, the pharmacist in Leon provided better advice for my crippling tendonitis and Chelsea's stomach bug than any of the doctors, and explained in detail what parts of the Camino to avoid if I wanted to keep walking. Dorothea, an older Dutch pilgrim, took under her wing the Japanese and Korean girls who couldn't speak Spanish or English and often felt very alone as they walked. Ben, from Washington, D.C., stopped to adjust my backpack with such painstaking care that I never again had an aching back or shoulders. Caesar from Bangalore walked at a leisurely pace and paused for anyone who needed help; his humor and goodwill lightened the hearts of everyone who met him. It seemed that whenever we most needed help, it was provided. Chelsea and I did our best to pass on the kindness we received.
- Remember that every pilgrim is carrying a secret burden of longing, heartache, and hope, even if you can't see it and don't know what it is. In the end, what calls each of us to the Camino remains a mystery. Be gentle with everyone you meet, and especially with yourself.



- Finally, on the Camino and on the larger journey of life itself, find the poems and quotes that ignite your spirit and nourish your soul. Carry them in your journal and in your heart of hearts, wherever you go. When the road seems endless and the way uncertain, they will be your guiding light. I leave you with these words from Jung's collected *Letters*:

If you want to go your individual way it is the way you make for yourself, which is never prescribed, which you do not know in advance, and which simply comes into being of itself when you put one foot in front of the other. If you always do the next thing that needs to be done, you will go most safely and surefootedly along the path prescribed by your unconscious.

Now and always, Buen Camino!



I dedicate this essay to the memory of my mother,
Lilli Schiwy — 1930–2012.

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