

Reflections on My Camino

For Aurora United Church

Sunday, June 30, 2024

Good morning,

Thank you, Martha.

How many of you have seen the 2010 film “The Way” with Martin Sheen?
A few?

I think that first sparked my interest in, and certainly curiosity, about this walk.

Years passed and Martha and I both spoke about what an interesting journey it would be. Little did I realize that once we retired and had the opportunity to walk regularly together, that I was unknowingly preparing myself.

The six months prior to our leaving was spent in organizing ourselves to be as successful as we could, especially considering our age. After all, as I often said, we were not spring chickens! And Martha always commented, “and we don’t know what the Camino will throw at us”.

On May 5th, Martha and I stood here to receive the inspiring and moving blessing from Reverends Lorraine and Andy, and to feel the best wishes from you. We flew to Spain that evening. And here we are today, having completed our 15 days walk, on May 22nd.

It has taken me some time to process that unique experience since I returned home.

In offering my personal reflections today, I have divided them into 3 components: the physical, the mental, and the spiritual.

Physical

From a physical perspective: It is a long and winding road!

I read numerous books over the years, about people's personal accounts and how the Camino offered them great insights, and often, some peace of mind.

I also collected various sayings and quotes that I thought might provide some inspiration should times get tough. Especially, as a good friend who had completed the Camino noted, it is not a question of whether you can walk 20-30km in 1 day Louise, but can you walk it day after day after day?

Another experienced pilgrim reminded me that "all you have to do today, is walk".

So yes, it was a long and winding road, over 345km. It seemed relentlessly undulating and hilly, and in some places, downright gruelling.

But, I marvelled at our surroundings.

I saw glorious landscapes, varying terrains and flourishing gardens.

The first 5 days were bright and sunny, and increasingly hot with little shade. I struggled one day, with a too heavy backpack and sore feet. I had to remind myself, "one step at a time" and how do I lighten my load?

The next 10 days were rainy and cool. I was so grateful that my daily walks at home with Martha had prepared me. Over the years, when I'd text her, looking out my window, are we walking today?, she would text back, "it's only weather". And off we'd go.

So, with the rains of Galicia, I would remind myself, "it's only weather".

And we experienced it all, rain, sleet and hail.

Perhaps one of my most physically challenging days was the climb and descent from Rabanal to Molinaseca. As written in *A Pilgrim's Guide*, "Today we head up through the highest point of our journey. While ascent is steep in places, and will require determination, remember that far most injuries are experienced going downhill". (Brierly, John. *A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago*, p.208)

I appreciated the Rabanal pilgrims' mass we attended the night before the climb, after reading those words. I thought I needed all the blessings possible.

Mental

From a mental perspective: Stay present: Speed doesn't matter, forward is forward.

In addition to the physical challenge of simply walking day after day, I expected this to be a reflective journey and somewhat inner focused. I also wanted to embrace the present because I knew it would be an experience like no other. I wanted to stay present, but the mental challenge often interrupted:

Did I have the resolve to walk day after day for many kilometers?

Could I muster more energy, when the day's walk of 26km turned into 31?

Would I overcome my primal fear of getting lost? Would I lose the path?

But, I discovered that I could do it, and I did do it! You find your strength and resolve and resiliency.

But I also recognized that I didn't do it alone, but "with a little help from my friends". Martha was stalwart, I don't think she ever doubted we would make it, she was the epitome of the perfect walking partner. And our individual strengths made us stronger together.

And there is a Camino community that is there to support you. Many Spaniards have great reverence for the Camino and graciously assist those who come to walk it.

And there are your fellow pilgrims, that you meet once and perhaps further along the way, and you share their experiences, stories, advice and longings.

And there is the Camino itself, it has been said, "it gives you what you need, not what you want".

Spiritual

From a spiritual perspective: Bendicion de Peregrinos or Blessings of the Pilgrims

I felt drawn to walk the Camino. There was just something about walking an ancient path trod by people for centuries.

I found the blessing and laying on of hands from this congregation quite powerful. It was unexpectedly moving, and I carried that energy of good will and blessings from Aurora United Church with me.

I've already spoken of my friend Frank, who at 80 rode an electric bike along the Camino Frances. He was vitally interested in my walking journey and reminded me to carry a stone from home, to place at the Cruz de Ferro, or Iron Cross.

The Cruz de Ferro is considered the most ancient monument of the Camino. As noted: the iron cross, at this altitude, is the nearest point to heaven that the Camino reaches, a potent link between heaven and earth. (Bahrami, Beebe. Camino de Santiago p.326)

The Celts and Romans left a rock on this point centuries ago and the tradition has continued with the pilgrims.

I felt quite emotional in this spot as I placed my rock. In quiet reflection, I very much felt Frank's presence here too. There was a sense of the sacred in this place.

But I think the most moving spiritual experience for me was when we reached the ancient mountaintop village of O Cebreiro. (O Cebrairo)

Martha and I attended a pilgrims' mass that evening. Dating from the 9th century it was held in the oldest surviving church associated directly with the pilgrim way. (Brierly, John. A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino Santiago p. 232).

After the mass, the priest welcomed all pilgrims to come forward around the altar. A representative of each language group was invited to read a prayer. I read on behalf of the English speakers.

In this ancient church, surrounded by people from around the world, focused on a common quest, I was so moved that I could hardly read. It was a very intensely, emotional spiritual moment for me.

Conclusion

And finally, you know the end of our story. We did reach Santiago de Compostela on May 22nd at about 4:30pm, long after most pilgrims arrive. It was an exhilarating moment, we had reached our destination and stood in the large Plaza de Obradoiro facing the immense Cathedral.

In my mind, this imposing structure was a testament to the divine in the human spirit. I could not but help feel the spirituality of this moment.

I had shared a unique experience with Martha, who herself, was an inspiration to me each day. It had been a moment out of time for me, out of my everyday life, where my single task, was, to simply walk.

And yes, the Camino did give me what I needed.

An incredible journey, made possible by the companionship and resourcefulness of a dear friend, a journey that called upon my physical and mental reserves, and a journey that had unexpected but profound spiritual moments.

Thank you, Martha, thank you to this congregation, and thank you to my family.

And, I would like to end with the prayer I read in O Cebriero:

May love be the light of hope in your path.

May peace abound in your heart.

May goodness be your mark in life.

May your faith strengthen you in the mystery of life.

And when the moment comes for you to reach your goal, may LOVE embrace you eternally.

Be happy and make others happy.

Thank you.

Louise Procter Maio

