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# El Camino di Santiago

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The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

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*My Story of El Camino de Santiago*

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The term pilgrimage often refers to the mass movement of a group of people to a sacred location. Historically, the movement of people has the lasting significance, shaping the pilgrimage. But as I have learned from my own personal experience, a pilgrimage has lasting significance within each individual because of the internal transformation that occurs throughout the journey. The internal transformation that I experienced was strongly influenced by the strong community that I experienced while walking el Camino Francés, a route of El Camino de Santiago in Northern Spain. This special, and varied community defies many challenges posed by the eclectic Camino pilgrims. The pilgrims are bound by the shared experience along the Camino, from stories shared over meals, while walking, or attempting to remedy our intense physical pain. To cope with the challenges each individual faced storytelling became an essential part of daily life. Sharing stories with fellow pilgrims along the journey facilitated quick friendships that ultimately formed the community of pilgrims along the Camino. In addition to the direct support from pilgrims there is a support system of Spaniards.

The first community that Leah and I were a part of was the one created on the first night of our pilgrimage. We began El Camino de Santiago in León, Spain. After walking from León to Villar de Mazarife with 10 additional, and accidental, pounds we were exhausted upon arrival at the albergue, part of the chain of hostels set up specifically along the pilgrimage for pilgrims. This was our shortest day in terms of kilometers and highlighted our physical weaknesses. Luckily, these feelings of pain and anticipation were subdued by my excitement and astonishment of my current situation in Spain. We were quickly welcomed by Jesús, the albergue

owner and then by the only other pilgrims who had arrived before us, three men, from Italy, Korea, and Japan. Leah and I were quickly whisked off to the nearest supermercado to purchase our very budget friendly meal. These men all were willing to assist in any way possible. At the time we were naïve about many of the challenges that the more experienced pilgrims had faced. They were leading by example by incorporating us into their meal planning and preparation, showing us that fellow pilgrims are the primary support system. After shopping in the small village we retreated to the sunny patio of the albergue courtyard to get to know one another.

The Italian spoke of his quest for religion along the Camino in coordination with his Christian roots. He started the Camino in Roncesvalles, Spain about 14 days prior to meeting us. He started the pilgrimage with two of his Italian friends, but after two days of walking their group separated and his friends went home. After, that brief introduction the men from Korea and Japan quickly interjected that when they met the Italian he spoke very little English and had improved dramatically by traveling in their group of three.

Then the warm, bubbly man from Korea took the time to explain why he was in Europe for the first time. He came specifically to Spain on a short break from work to go on the Camino. He is Christian but emphasized that he did not regularly attend church. He had a plane ticket home that was quickly approaching so he was not able to think about continuing to Finisterre, “the edge of the world”, which is another two or three days more walking past Santiago.

Lastly, the Japanese man explained that he had been traveling around the world for the past two months, beginning his journey in Southeast Asia. He plans on walking to Finisterre. The Italian also want to do this as long as he had time.

The conversation was mainly in English with some Italian, Spanish, and French mixed in. I came to the quick realization that my background in French in combination with hand gestures

and facial expressions allowed me to understand Italian and Spanish rather easily, although I could not respond in anything but English or French. The stories shared over the course of this evening connected me to these pilgrims. I was amazed by their perseverance highlighted by their strengths, both physical and mental. I was tired after a day of walking, and they were mentally and physically strong enough to have been doing this for many weeks. Their stories about their motivations and aspirations regarding the duration of their trip served as a model that I also hoped to achieve.

My community changed dramatically when I stopped walking because of an injury. After two days of walking I began to experience a new intense pain in my shins and ankles. After walking a very slow 5 kms, leaving from Astorga I faced the decision of whether to continue on. On that third day Leah and I were walking with a pretentious Swiss doctor in his 50's who lives in Germany. As a group we decided that it would be unlikely for me to reach our destination by nightfall and I sadly decided that I needed to return to Astorga.

During my rest days I felt very alone because I was not traveling with Leah. As I iced my legs and wrote in my journal there was a constant influx of new pilgrims arriving and new people to meet. I was placed in a room in the albergue with a German woman that I had previously met along the walk. At first I was dismayed at this fact because she was loud and boisterous but she proved to be a great company and really comforted me. The sense of having someone familiar to spend time with was a newly developed idea, because she was not far from a stranger but because she was a pilgrim.

As a pilgrim the influx of new people provided new stories to hear. Even though I was without my travel partner, Leah for this night, I was far from alone. Fellow pilgrims expressed their concern about my injury and shared stories to keep me busy. When I first made the decision

to turn back alone, I was extremely dismayed and disappointed. But the larger community along the Camino supported me, and was able to show that I made a good decision.

These two rest days gave me welcome relief from most of my pain and dramatically increased my commitment to finishing the walk. I wanted to successfully complete the walk more than ever. As Leah told me on the phone when we planned how we would meet back up, this pilgrimage is about grinning and bearing it. I internalized these words and had a new found commitment to not allow myself to be defeated by the pain I was experiencing.

Upon my arrival to Ponferrada, I was greeted by a story that demonstrated the extreme pain and suffering that pilgrims experience. The man I met waiting outside the closed albergue, looked defeated as he sat in wait. We quickly began talking and I learned that he was in his 20's and lived in Belgium; he broke his ankle in a fall. He began to relay the sad story of how his pilgrimage had come to an end. The story began with a clumsy, absent minded fall on top of a mountain pass with all his gear on. He walked for 5 km to the closest village on his broken ankle and then was taken to the hospital by the people in the village. Upon learning the fate of his broken ankle, he demanded his last stamp for his pilgrim credentials, to demonstrate that he was ending his pilgrimage without another choice. When I met him two days later he was in immense physical pain in his cast and was still down-trodden because of his situation. He vowed that he would return and complete the journey one day. This story proved to me that relative to this man's story my pain was insignificant. I was physically able to keep walking compared to my friend, which continued to push me forward.

Other stories about emotional pain, explained pilgrims motivations for participating in the Camino. Pilgrims including my German roommate were confronting painful things in their life while on the Camino. My roommate, in Astorga was in her 30's and recently divorced. My

impression was that she was traveling alone to challenge herself and to regain confidence in her ability to be strong for herself. A Swiss doctor was also post-divorce and attempting to gain perspective on his serious romantic relationship with his former student who is half his age. Another man was traveling on the Camino for the second time because he had recently lost his job and was in the process of transitioning to work independently. The person whose story about emotional pain and stress that had the most influence on me was my friend from Norway.

The man, from Norway was tall and quiet. He began to really open up one afternoon as we walked together. Never having spent time with him alone before he revealed a side of himself that I had not been privy to. He explained that he was unemployed, and had a job for many years because of his intense battle with obsessive compulsive disorder. He explained that since the end of his one-year marriage and the birth of his only child, a daughter he had been alone. I was inspired by his comfort to leave Norway to participate in the Camino for a third time. From my perspective, he hoped to gain insight and confidence with his disorder with the hope that he could function more within society. He said it might be his last Camino because he did not want to use it as a method to escape from his life at home. This story about loneliness and perseverance verified that individuals are complex and storytelling serves as a window to life beyond the Camino.

Two stories, about individuals along the Camino who were not pilgrims had a powerful impact on my journey. The trip to meet Leah, after we separated for a night was more challenging than I had expected. Wandering through Ponferrada I was lost. I had a map, focused on the area around the albergue. I was slowly making my way from the bus station through the bustling downtown on Ponferrada. I had asked for directions from two women but in my lack of Spanish I only could comprehend that I was supposed to continue straight for a long time and

then turn left. I must have looked lost and sad, because after walking for 40 minutes I heard someone calling “Chica, peregrina, peregrina!” Distinctly, marked by the pilgrim shell I carried on my backpack an elderly man was calling out to me. He pointed further down the street to a very old man slowly waving his hand to get my attention. With nothing to lose, I hoped this old man could point me in the right direction. I explained my situation in a little Spanish and English. The man seemed overjoyed with my presence in Ponferrada as a pilgrim; he knew where I needed to go. He said a small prayer for me before sending me on my way. This stranger supported me when I was ready to give up. He is an exemplary example of non-pilgrims going out of their way to support pilgrimages on their quest for Santiago.

Another strong character whose kindness saved us was Jesús, the albergue owner in Villar de Mazarife. Upon, our arrival at the store Leah and I realized we had a grand total of five Euros to our name. That nearly turned into a disaster because there was not an ATM in the small village. We returned to the albergue, nervous that we would need more money for the food and drinks, but everyone assured us that it would all work out. The next challenge we faced was that we wanted to ship our excess clothes. When we asked Jesús where the post office was he nearly laughed off our question, unfortunately this village also did not have a post office. He suggested we pack up some boxes and he would drive them to the closest post office and send them for us. This act of generosity was made complicated because we didn't have money to ship the packages. But Jesús came to our rescue later that night and brought us to the closet ATM 15 kms away. He was patient as we packed up the boxes and addressed them. I was so nervous to trust this man we had just met with our money and our packages, but we needed to keep walking the next morning. His generosity was evident when we arrived in Barcelona to our clean clothes. When I think of Jesús, I think of my Camino angel. He saved us from a tight situation multiple

times over the course of a few hours. Without his support, my pilgrimage would have been very different.

What is rare and precious about the Camino is the ability for people to see each other again without making plans. Days vary in length and distance with different overall goals for the arrival in Santiago. However, everyone does have that common route, the common goal of making it to Santiago. People, religious or not put their faith in their bodies to make the journey to Santiago. The journey, as Leah and I discovered is both mentally and physically exhausting. Our 11-day journey from Leon to Santiago seems like a blink of the eye compared to the 6-week journeys some of our fellow pilgrims were embarked on, from St. Jean Pied de Port in France to Santiago.

The duration of time to spend with other pilgrims was unknown because of the nature of the Camino. Sometimes, I would make swift calculations of people, because I did not have time to speak with them. Not only did I make quick assessments of people I met based on my biases and perspective but I also faced a similar judgment. It is important to recognize that as a young woman traveling a pilgrimage my presence was notable. For March Leah and I were not the average travelers or companions. We had to unconsciously fight and break many stereotypes as we built up different relationships. I was rather naïf to the stereotypes we faced, until we were told that we had broken them. Personally, this reinforced the idea that I have a personal perspective of my identity that may differ greatly from other people's perspective of my identity. Before leaving for Spain, I realized that along the Camino my identity was not solely a student, but the immersion that I was heading towards created my identity as a pilgrim. These superficial and sweeping judgments were often laid to rest through the stories that I heard from the pilgrims.



The people I experienced along the Camino in a matter of hours and days became my friends and family. The time I shared with some pilgrims was very short, but strong bonds for those hours still exist in my mind. I consider these fellow pilgrims friends and labeled some as family because of their strong influence on my life- through their stories and support. Unfortunately, I will not be in contact with a majority of people that I met; this is a reflection of the condensed time that exists along the Camino. My Camino friends, as members of the external world strongly influenced my internal journey as a pilgrim.

Through these stories grew relationships, which exist in the liminal period along the Camino. Some conversations are slowly disappearing, except for the details that I recall from my journal. It is unlikely that I will see or even speak to the majority of these people again, and yet I hold each of them so close to my heart. The foundation of each relationship was our shared journey. During this experience, I was able to look at each person I met as an open book. As both a human curious about other people and as a student studying along the Camino I was eager to learn about people in the short moments I spent with them.

Many transitions occur along the Camino for pilgrims. I oscillated between traveling alone, with Leah, and with new friends. I walked through towns, cities, mountains, and valleys. The one aspect that remained the same was my strong connection to fellow pilgrims. The fluid yet influential community that exists along the way to Santiago de Compostela remains central in my mind.

Victor Turner and Edith Turner in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christianity* discuss the idea of pilgrimage as a rite of passage. According to the two authors the rite of passage is surrounded by the acts of separation, margin, aggregation; ideas first coined by Arnold van Gennep. Pilgrimage is seen as a transformative process. The definitions are not that of strict

religious confines but of an evolution of the social dimension within. The rite of passage is seen as a liminal period because of the internal evolution. The pilgrimage is meant for a larger group but the movement and transformation of the heart—what is inward is important. The inward transformation strengthens the pilgrim's attachment to religion through their commitment to the arrival at the sacred location. Turner and Turner allude to the idea that the internal transformation is a common factor among pilgrims. This common factor along with the shared destination is a crucial element in the creation of friendships along the way.

This idea is also echoed by Elisabeth Lidell, a Scandinavian pastor in *Pilgrimage: A Spiritual and Cultural Journey* by Ian Bradley "Christianity came from my head to my heart—it was an inner journey as much as an outer one" (pg. 103). Both practices emphasize a strong connection between spiritual growth and physical being in the world. The journey of pilgrimage brings new attention to the movement and awareness of self with regard to other pilgrims.

I would like to end with this with the idea that my pilgrimage along El Camino de Santiago did not end upon arrival in Santiago de Compostela. The aspect of physical movement to a sacred space ended when I reached Santiago, but a pilgrimage is not that movement in isolation. The Camino continues to have a lasting impression on me because of the memories I have—based on people I met and the stories I heard. I feel connected to this pilgrimage because I, as a pilgrim shaped El Camino de Santiago and it likewise the Camino has shaped me.