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El Camino di Santiago: Mindfulness

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Leah Heyman

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Religion 392, Professor Gallagher

"It feels like *Groundhog Day* (Film, 1993). Everyday I wake up and walk the same road and again I experience the pilgrimage. My routine is repetitive as I seem to be reliving the same day over and over again." How could this reflect one's experience along el Camino de Santiago? My notion of this pilgrimage, though highly ingrained in structure through marked paths, shared routes, and pilgrim hostels, was completely contrasting of this young German woman's experience. Though my routine remained the same, I woke up to walk the paths each day anew. I went to bed physically and mentally exhausted after walking anywhere from 6 to 12 hours, yet woke up the next morning to begin my journey afresh. Each day I experienced a different stage along the Camino, along my Camino. Though there exists a formal structure for this pilgrimage route, no two journeys are the same; each pilgrim experiences the roads subjectively. To even express out loud my reasons for walking this path is a personal experience in itself.

Terms:

Albergue: hostel for pilgrims along el Camino

Peregrinos= pilgrims

El Camino de Santiago= St. James Walk

Buen Camino= Good walk (literally)

Camino= path, way.

specifically referring to El Camino de Santiago (if capitalized)

Compestela: certificate received to show completion of el Camino. Must walk the last 100 km or bike the last 200 km to Santiago.

,ofchaosParish briefful As we had been feeling suffocated by our studies, our only escape was through the thought of foreign travel, some distant vacation that would take us away from the never-ending stress of our schoolwork. We began to brainstorm exciting trip ideas for our spring break and ways in which we could seek financial support for our travels.

News of a foreign language grant had been circulating through our school emails for some time now. Once we came up with the notion of a school-funded trip, we immediately began to explore ideas in which we could utilize this grant. We sought an academic reasoned trip that would embrace both of our respective foreign language skills: Chelsea in French and I in Spanish. Immediately I remembered the "Camino de Santiago," a transnational pilgrimage that spans from Southern France to Northern Spain.

Based on a trip that I had planned several years ago, we devised a plan to walk the pilgrimage of St James, El Camino de Santiago. I first heard of this spiritual journey while working at a yoga center in Southern Spain, during my gap year before Connecticut College. Since then, I had come across numerous travelers that shared stories from their own pilgrimage along the Camino. It was that night, that we conceived the idea for our independent study, our grant proposal, and our pilgrimage to Santiago.

Prior to leaving for our trip to Spain, I was consumed by my research preparing for the walk, never once acknowledging the fact that I was about to experience my own pilgrimage. I spent my days reading about the history and origin of El Camino de Santiago and pilgrimages in general, devoting little time to contemplating what I hoped to achieve personally upon reaching Santiago. I had a

very narrow understanding of my would-be role along el Camino. I explained this trip to others as a research initiative, and I a student of the historical path. It was during my flight over to Spain, two days before the walking began, that I first questioned my true inspiration.

Why today, do people walk nearly 500 miles from St. Pied de Port, France to arrive at the cathedral of St. James in Santiago? “Why have millions of medieval people walked hundreds, sometime thousands of miles to the northwest corner of Spain to visit the relics of the apostle James, which had, according to a most unlikely legend, been discovered there?”¹ For what reason have I chosen to become a pilgrim of El Camino?

During these six hours spent thousands of feet in the sky, I realized that I had my own motivation for walking to Santiago. Though it seemed luck that Chelsea and I had come across this academic grant, I was confident that this was a journey of fate. Neither Chelsea nor I had openly discussed our trip in light of personal dimensions, yet each of us possessed our own inspiration for choosing this trip. For me personally, traveling to Spain under the pretext of pilgrimage would act as an empowering way to return to a past life.

As was mentioned before, I took a year off in between schools. I spent seven months traveling and working in various parts of Europe. Though this was the most incredible year of my life, teaching me lessons that could not have been learned elsewhere or under other circumstances, my trip ended very abruptly in Spain. My life abroad ended in an unsettling manner, leaving my yearlong adventures tainted by painful memories of a destructive relationship in Barcelona.

¹ Keller, Rosanne. Pilgrim in Time. P.8

I left Barcelona on a whim, out of necessity. I had been in a state of deep depression, unrecognizable and lost to the world. It seemed only fitting to return anew to Spain, for the purpose of pilgrimage, such a healthy hopeful means for travel. I hoped to restore my affinity for the Spanish culture and prove to myself that I am a stronger person than I was the day I left Barcelona, 3 years ago.

The goal of a pilgrimage is most always to obtain some form of personal transformation². The journey is as important as the destination. Rosanne Keller extends the journey to include one's return home. She claims "pilgrimage does not end when we arrive at the sacred place. For the most important stage is to return home—transformed and enriched."³ This quote is extremely relevant when analyzing my own notion of this trip to Spain. Chelsea and I planned a few extra days at the end, where we would visit Barcelona. The "return home" that Rosanne Keller discusses has a dual meaning for me. Indeed, my journey would include the return to the hectic life as a student at Connecticut College; however, a more immediate significance of my pilgrimage journey would be how I was able to return home to Barcelona as a "transformed and enriched" person. I had the task of re-establishing myself along the walk, and hopefully returning to Barcelona more full of life and understanding than years past.

All those who we encountered along our walk, possessed some type of notion or expectation of how this journey would affect them. Each fellow pilgrim sought a form of transformation unique to their own lives. Some explained their travels along el Camino for fitness purposes, others religious.

² Keller, Rosanne. Pilgrim in Time: Mindful Journeys to Encounter the Sacred.

³ *Ibid.* p.3

Patrick, a young college student from England had walked these paths a year ago with friends for vacation and adventure. He had returned most recently alone to bike the roads to Santiago.

Our friend Tom, a Norwegian divorcee and father, admitted to using this pilgrimage as a form of escape from his debilitating social tendencies and complicated home life. He suffered from severe obsessive-compulsive disorder and was unable to work professionally or comfortably interact with the world. As this was Tom's third time walking these paths, the journey had become a means for healing and strength. At dinner one night, Tom proudly expressed that this may be the last time he returns to el Camino. He told us that he was ready to stop running away from the reality of his world. It was time for Tom to bring his pilgrimage home permanently and confront his life.

Rob, an Australian psychologist who had once served as a paratrooper, came to walk the Camino after quitting his job. He had been working in a hospital in England for the past two years but was unsure where his career would take him next. He hoped to utilize this pilgrimage as a form of exercise, with the goal of restoring his fitness.

Regardless of a person's reasons, as pilgrims along el Camino we were all challenged to embrace this new experience. It took me quite some time to adjust to feeling like a pilgrim, not a tourist or a visitor. I was treated not as a stranger as I passed through these cities, towns, and hamlets but rather a pilgrim, one who had been walking through these villages for centuries.

Towards the beginning of Chelsea and my walking, it was hard to not think about what all of our other friends were doing and how we could have had a typical

spring break, relaxing on some beach somewhere. Yet, instead Chelsea and I subjected ourselves to long hours of endless walking and physical pain. It was not until a few days from our destination that we realized the rewards of this pain. The physical pain acted as a motivating factor to keep going forward. At some point upon returning to school after all the pain had subsided, the lack of pain became uncomfortable. My body had become so accustomed to the experience of pain that without it I felt a bit lost. Throughout my trip the physical pain kept me grounded. Both Chelsea and I experienced periods of extraordinary pain, which dictated our walk's pace. Our aches and pains facilitated a slow travel, which instructed us to experience the world in a new way. We became mindful of our surroundings and were able to absorb the culture, sounds, smells, and rhythm of our environment.

Our Walk Begins

Our destination was Santiago; our path was along el Camino Frances; and our only task was to continue walking. Through the rays of sun and drops of rain, up mountains, down valleys, across highways, and through vineyards, from sunrise to sunset, our only contract was with ourselves. We designed this journey three months ago with the established goals of reaching Santiago and experiencing life along the medieval pilgrimage route. The implications of our personal journeys only became clear through our individual experiences along the way and upon our return home.

El Camino de Santiago is one of the most travelled Christian pilgrimage routes throughout Europe. his pilgrimage originated the claims that St. James' remains were carried by boat from Jerusalem to Northern Spain. Despite the evident truth

of St. James burial in Jerusalem, el Camino is celebrated as the path to the shrine of St. James⁴. Before grasping the significance of this pilgrimage in our modern day, it is interesting to understand the myth from which this tradition originated. In medieval days, pilgrimage was a form of penance, and atonement. El Camino de Santiago has become a pilgrimage of historic tradition rather than simply religious devotion. The historical tradition of this pilgrimage has endured time, maintaining purpose as a walk of faith and transformation.

Though traditionally a Catholic pilgrimage, El Camino de Santiago has transformed into a path for all people, regardless of motivation, or religious affiliation. People now come each year from countries all over the world, each with different motivations and sources of inspiration, yet all with the common goal to arrive at the cathedral St. James in Santiago de Compestela. All those who embark on the path of St. James possess some amount of faith in them selves (to complete the walk) and the sacredness of the journey that awaits them.

Throughout our eleven days walking the path, we encountered people from Germany, Italy, various parts of Spain, France, England, the United States, Norway, Australia, South Africa, Korea, Japan, Mexico, Switzerland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Canada, Ireland, and perhaps other parts of the world that I have since forgotten. We even met one man, who introduced himself as “Bin Laden”, and claimed to be from the Camino. We met this man while eating breakfast one morning towards the end of our trip. Though we only interacted with “Bin Laden” for half an hour or so, we learned quite a bit about his character along the Camino. Upon first noticing his large hiking pack and unwashed look, I immediately assumed

⁴ Bradley, Ian. Pilgrimage: A spiritual and Cultural Journey.

that he was a pilgrim. Though his words rejected my initial assumption, his explanation of endless life along el Camino suggested otherwise. He walks back and forth along the Camino, creating beaded trinkets to leave in the bars. He has practiced this tradition for over a decade, with the intent of leaving his mark along the path. It is unclear to me why he feels this need to be recognized amongst the pilgrims, but he has become a known character of the Camino.

Our interaction with “Bin Laden”, though brief, allowed us to reflect on several parts of our journey. First, “Bin Laden’s” story represented an interesting genre of pilgrims. Some people walk the Camino once or twice, but others return time and time again. Those who return numerous times either come to complete various sections along the path, or simply come to walk because they are unable to leave the road behind. Such pilgrims acquire a habit of pilgrimage, seeking purpose or escape from their external lives. Rather than embracing the impermanent sanctity of the pilgrimage journey and carrying the sacredness of this time with them beyond Santiago, these people seem to treat the walk as a way of life.

Our conversation with “Bin Laden” also helped to highlight other significant characters along our journey. He asked us to tell him about non-pilgrims along the way that played significant roles in shaping our pilgrimage. Our response to this question provoked a series of reflections inspiring a new understanding of our journey along el Camino.

The most influential non-pilgrim within our sacred world along el Camino was Jesus, a kind hospitalero⁵ who welcomed us to the Casa de Jesus on our first

⁵ Volunteer host along the Camino. Jesus owned the pilgrim hostel that we stayed at.

night after walking. This first night's stay was crucial after just having been introduced to the roads of the Camino that morning. The Casa de Jesus provided for a memorable first rest, as it was also the place in which we first truly met our "Camino family," of which I will explain later.

Chelsea and I had met at the Madrid airport the day before, and stayed the night in Leon. We had found each other outside . examsas if in a , for our new realityAs we were both caught up with our recent arrival, our fluster led to several errors of judgment. The first occurred when we were unable to send our additional bags to Barcelona, as planned, due to our inattention to the post office hours. With the post office closed, we were forced to walk carrying the additional weight until Monday (two days away). Luckily, Jose offered to help us mail the bags in order to alleviate our burden. We made it through the first day walking 20 kilometers with two bags each, one in front and one on back; however, both of us questioned whether we would have been able to continue the following morning were we not able to send the bags.

Through jumbled Spanish, I explained the situation to Jesus. He provided us each with a box and offered to mail the packages himself. There was no post office in the village, so he would have to drive a few towns over later on in the week. We were so grateful for his help, but still foolishly unprepared for a part of our walk, the finances. Just as there was no post office, there was also no bank machine in the village. With only 5 euros in our pockets, we could not send our packages nor pay for our entire stay that night. Again, Jesus came to the rescue and offered to drive us to an ATM a few towns over.

Such hospitality was commonplace along the Camino. Upon realizing that we were pilgrims, many would wish us well reiterating “Buen Camino,” some blessed us, others opened their homes and fed us, and the rest merely guided us on our way. All that surrounds this route to Santiago developed to support the growing needs of the pilgrims along the route, and has remained to help nurture those who partake in this pilgrimage.

As pilgrims, we are meant to carry everything needed during the trip on our backs. This has a literal significance, referring to our clothes and other necessities on our back, and also an interpreted value. Pilgrims must carry the burden of their journey, whatever it may be, upon their own shoulders. Yet, along el Camino, this is never an independent burden. Pilgrims rely on the kindness and generosity of others for help and guidance. We were received with extraordinary hospitality and instances of altruism throughout our walk. We were supported by hosts, fellow pilgrims, way markers and locals, and despite any physical or mental challenges were encouraged to continue our journey.

There was an incredible sense of community along El Camino. The structure of this historical tradition has created a sacred world in which pilgrims explore themselves through the external experiences they have with nature, fellow pilgrims, others, and all that surrounds them. Every interaction with this sacred space influences the experience of pilgrimage and our beings along the road. Though I expected to spend time reading and reflecting at our hostels, there seemed little time for such activities. We were constantly meeting people along our path or in the hostels, each with their own story to tell and reasons for walking. We formed connections with people within hours, and soon considered them family.

Though there was a certain impermanence that accompanied our lives along the Camino, there were very few moments where I ever imagined our lives along this path ending. We had a purpose beyond reaching Santiago, we were experiencing a world, which we had never seen nor understood. Our time was sacred and precious, not in the way that all time is, but unique only to the roads of el Camino.

There was an aspect of vulnerability that most everyone walking was subject to, allowing for such deep relationships to form overnight. There was very little small talk on the Camino, and instead people shared intimate details of their lives within hours of their first encounters. We traveled along the road with family, friends, and familiar faces everywhere. Though we were all on the same path for different reasons, our destination remained the same.

It was at the Casa de Jesus that we first came to understand this sacred world of trust, vulnerability, and intimacy. There we shared our first meal together with Japan, Korea, and Giacomo, "our Camino family." We all traveled together for the first few days of our trip. Though we did not walk together during the day, we met up each night to share food, laughter, and company. Though none of us confidently spoke the other's language, we easily communicated and connected.

After what felt like years together, but only reflected a few days' time, we began travelling with new faces. All pilgrims were immersed in each other's lives in a way that made it difficult to ever truly be alone. Yet, regardless of whether people traveled as a part of a group or not, the pilgrimage remained a solitary endeavor.

It took some time for me to understand that I myself was a pilgrim of the Camino. Though I defined my intentions at first through research, I completed this

journey as a pilgrim. Regardless of the context and pretext in which people begin this walk, everyone arrives in Santiago at the Cathedral as a pilgrim. Though not all may acknowledge this truth, it seems evident that regardless of one's will and one's way, their experience along el Camino reflects their own personal journey.

Upon beginning my journey along el Camino, I immediately realized how little I had prepared for this adventure. My mind was not cognizant of my own heart's desire, nor prepared to maneuver this internal journey. My body was not physically prepared for the pain in which I would endure along the external path of pilgrimage. How would I interpret my own experience walking along the path to Santiago, without first understanding why I chose to make such a journey? Why was I there? What was my goal while walking? What was my purpose? These questions burdened my mind during my moments of rest and silent walking. Regardless of our motivation, it was clear from the start that both Chelsea and I had every intention to reach Santiago before our trip ended.

Immediately upon checking into our first albergue⁶, Santa Maria Monastery in Leon, the volunteer managing the front desk asked us how we had come to walk El Camino de Santiago. Along with "Buen Camino" this was the phrase I heard most often during our pilgrimage: Why are you walking the Camino?

We discussed our desired research explorations and studious purpose with the volunteer. Though this was merely our reflexive answer, at that time it was also our only clear response and understanding of this journey. Our notion of venturing forth to Spain and walking the roads to Santiago was at first an excuse to travel. We recognized an opportunity to explore abroad and immediately took

⁶ Hostel for pilgrims

advantage of this project as a source for adventure during spring break. Our studies acted as reinforcement for purpose and financial support from the college. Though we both acknowledged the sanctity of pilgrimage, we originally sought to walk these roads as means to travel and see the world. It was on my first day of walking alone, after Chelsea was resting due to pain, that I realized just how unique this travel was. Walking through the endless hills, surrounded by nature and silence, I came to understand the true essence of pilgrimage: sacred time. CThe Camino nearly freezes all other time, allowing those walking its paths to live together in momentary sacred time. Chelsea and I had traveled through time to a sacred place.

Earth time was no longer relevant to our experience. Though Chelsea wore a watch routinely while walking, I consciously left mine at home in order to further distance myself from the holding of time. I did not require a timepiece fastened to my wrist to reassure me of the passing moments. Instead, my body adapted to the alternative spiritual dimensions within this realm of sacred time. Though our schedules were guided by sunrise and sunset, as well as the curfews of where we stayed, our time was not measured by the passing of days, or the distance that we traveled. Our true time was measured by our experiences, the relationships, and the status of our pain.

Originally, I reflected on these days as a "really long walk in Spain." Often Chelsea and I discussed how the majority of our friends were off enjoying typical relaxing vacations while we were walking for hours on end, eleven days in a row, a choice we had made for our own break. It was evident within a day of walking along these roads that "a long walk" could not adequately describe our experience throughout the days. Chelsea and I completed different lengths of El Camino, due to

the two days she rested from her pain. I walked nearly 200 miles from Leon to Santiago. That is our trip in simplest form.

My feet walked through history along this ancient pathway with blisters, aches, and pains. It seemed that our pain began to record the history of our days. We can recall moments along our journey through the people we met, the stories we heard, and the pain that we experienced. Regardless of the severity of our muscle, joint, or tendon pain, we were safely contained within the path, by the historical sacredness of the road and the people.

Upon arriving in the square in front of the church, we both collapsed in exhaustion and awe. We remained lying in the middle of the square for hours reflecting on the massive cathedral that shown before us. elevenmy perception of the world transformedThough neither of us understood truly why we had chosen to walk the Camino, we could not ignore the forces at work that shaped our experience, and influenced our personal transformations.

This quote that I found in a pilgrim's reflection online accurately describes my ambivalence of writing this paper and in essence my journey along el Camino.

"Returning home washed in remembrance of a pilgrimage beyond time and place, as unspeakable and private and special as a night of passion between lovers who would if they could, but unable to find words or means to convey the painful ecstasy of their tryst, simply smile knowingly at each other and tell them we'd had a good time."⁷

⁷ <http://webhome.idirect.com/~thepilgrim/camino.htm>