

Chartres

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I commenced walking the Camino de Santiago across France in 2010 completed it in Spain in 2011. I needed a time of retreat to reflect on my experience, to tie up the loose ends. I visited Chartres cathedral in 2010. I found walking the labyrinth an uplifting experience and an opportunity for a prayer of movement. I wanted to do the same in 2011.

Surfing the internet I discovered that the Faith Hope and Love Global Ministries would be running a contemplative pilgrimage, a spiritual retreat at Chartres cathedral in the same week that I had scheduled my visit. I was familiar with the Ministry because I had read a book written by one of the retreat leaders, Jill Geoffrion *Praying the Labyrinth*. I had exchanged emails with Jill. She and her husband Tim would be the retreat leaders. Why not join them?

The Camino had stimulated my imagination in powerful ways. I had no blinding flashes of insight, no on the road to Emmaus meetings, but I was inspired at the courage of many people. I was searching and, like so many folk I spoke to, had some difficulty in articulating the reasons for undertaking this arduous endeavour. I suppose I was reaching out for certainties that I know will always elude me. God has always been a slippery character. Just as you feel you are getting somewhere, things slip away. So many of life mysteries are impenetrable. I find myself in doubt. I suppose this doubt gave me the creativity and passion to question, to inquire, to leap into the unknown and the unknowable. One side of my mind knew that I'll never have the answers, but that didn't stop the other side yearning to know.

Somewhere here, faith steps in and we trust in answers that are best guesses. If we knew all the answers there would be no need for trust and faith.

I was open to what the retreat had to offer. I liked the warmth that radiated from Jill's emails and the enigmatic quotation from St John of the Cross at the end of her emails:

If you wish to be sure of the road you are travelling close your eyes and walk in the dark.

I was apprehensive because I wasn't sure what to expect. Both Jill and Tim were American Baptist pastors. I had a stereotype of yanks going overboard. Would I find myself under siege weathering the evangelistic style that I'd seen on early morning religious TV programmes? I was expecting to be challenged. I was stepping out of a comfort zone, but that has seldom deterred me from leaping into the unknown. Faith is about moving out of your comfort zone, trusting in the lead given and letting the unknown in

So I came to Chartres with a very open mind ready to listen and to learn. I was familiar with the beauty of the cathedral and the value of the labyrinth. A labyrinth differs from a maze in that a maze is designed to lose your way whereas the labyrinth leads you on a path to a destination. When I first walked the labyrinth in 2006 I likened the pathway to my life up to the moment, the various turns being the important events in my life. The pathway is clearly defined. I could see where I'd been. The sense of being open to what lay ahead came to me as I left the confines of the labyrinth. I was moving into the future, into the unknown. I had to be ready to go where God led me. When I visited in 2010, a question arose as I walked

around the path. What is the next step for me? It was one of those questions that couldn't be answered immediately. I had to be patient, to live with the question and, one of these days, live into the answer. Would I find an answer on this third visit?

I found the week both stimulating and invigorating. Jill and Tim warmly welcomed their pilgrims. In no way did I feel intimidated but an equal among pilgrims on the journey. Jill was enthusiastic and devotional. She loved the cathedral and the labyrinth. Her enthusiasm was infectious. Tim had an engaging style. He was a good teacher and guided his pilgrims through thought-provoking questions, discussions and personal reflection. The two enjoyed their complementary skills. Besides me, there were five others, all Americans. Cheryl was from New York, Beth, Jane and Maureen from Minnesota, Minneapolis, and MJ. I'm not sure where she lived. I had the opportunity to get to know these people in our class discussions and our shared prayers and meals. We spent as much time in the cathedral, just a few minutes from the retreat centre. We prayed on the labyrinth, attended a Mass in the ancient crypt chapel, and toured the cathedral windows and roof.

Although I have visited many cathedrals in Europe, the Chartres Cathedral is the one that I have had the privilege to study closely. The description in my earlier book of my 2006 visit is still relevant:

The building is breathtaking. If you visit as a tourist you will find an outstanding model of aesthetic achievement but, if you visit as a pilgrim, you will enter a wonderful instrument of religious action, of a faith expressed in stone that generates its own energy. If you give yourself the time to appreciate the beauty, to absorb its harmony, and not rush on to the next tourist thing, it's difficult not to be inspired.

The cathedral is awe inspiring, I found myself so often just wondering around, looking about me, at the soaring roof, at the magnificent stained glass windows, at the carvings and sculptures, all the time giving thanks for the opportunity to linger in such a place. The building is steeped in history. The guide books are full of the detail. I felt an affinity with the millions of visitors over the centuries, of the multitude of pilgrims whose feet had worn smooth the stone of the labyrinth, of the countless everyday folk whose efforts built the cathedral stone by stone and have kept it going since. What extraordinary vision had the original designers! How did they manage to get things just right?

One afternoon, we left Chartres and on a beautifully sunny day visited the original quarry from which the stone came. The people of the village came out to meet us. We were shown the actual places from which the stone had been extracted. Those stones were carted back the 10 kilometres to the cathedral site. The trip became a pilgrimage in itself with everyone even royalty participating. We walked back to Chartres following their route. It would have been difficult to get lost because we walked across a plain with the cathedral on the horizon, its towers soaring up to the cloudless sky. Even in these modern times the cathedral is a dominant landmark in the countryside.

Like everyone else, we were able to walk the labyrinth on Friday when the chairs were cleared away. However, we were allowed into the cathedral after closing time on Thursday evening. We helped moved the chairs to one side and had the labyrinth to ourselves. We had

a ritual of burning a piece of paper on which we had written things we wanted to change in ourselves, things which we felt were getting in the way of getting closer to God. Then with all the time in the world we walked the labyrinth. On my last visits the thinking side of me was dominant, thinking about my past and my future, where I was going in my life without Maris, etc. without too much reference to the present moment. This time was different. I put my thinking aside and put on my feeling cap. I just walked and was intent on the experience of being there. I realised on the Camino that the action of walking was a prayer in itself. One doesn't pray just with words. You can pray with body movement and by just being present. I had bought from Australia the small wooden cross made from pieces of driftwood I found on an Oregon beach, which up to now I carried in my backpack but now I carried it in my hands. My cross is sacred to me. It's a link with eternity. Who knows? The tree from which came the wood of my cross could have been growing at the time the labyrinth was built. I felt myself floating timelessly. Sometimes I felt a presence, just like on the Camino. Sometimes Maris, my wife who died seven years previously of suicide, was walking with me, sometimes Jesus. I used to tell the others that I regarded Jesus, not as the distant king of heaven, but as my mate and he spoke with an Aussie accent. I'd like to think that either Maris or Jesus was telling me not to be too worried about where I was going. Just be content to be. I already knew this because about a month before I left Australia, I came across a series of quotations from Thomas Merton, one of which was: *You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognise the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.*

Tim ran a session each morning which he entitled Guideposts for Spiritual Growth. Tim's input was challenging. He was inviting us to do a critical review of our spiritual life. His guideposts indicated you had to be proactive. His first guidepost was about being intentional in seeking God. Reading the scriptures was a start but you also had to reflect on what you saw as God's activity in your life through the eyes of faith. (The phrase the eyes of faith I found very useful). You had to ask what God wants for you, to seek God with the eyes of faith and to ask what God is communicating. His second guidepost was to embrace the journey for what it is. That included the pain, hardship and suffering as well as the good parts. He posed a series of questions. What is hard about trying to grow spiritually? What gets in the way or threatens to undermine your spiritual vitality? What strategies might be helpful and what help do you need in order for you to stay on the path and keep pursuing your vision. His third guidepost was to face reality. That is, face the truth about yourself, discard the delusions and come to grips with what we don't want to see. This led to the fourth guidepost: Seek inner change. This required prayer-help me to see what I need to see and give me the courage to face the truth and the wisdom to act and strength to act on what is revealed. The fifth guidepost was about being prepared to cross bridges. The critical transition from one state of being to another would start from the moment we returned home. He invited us to anticipate the bridges from an old you to a new you, what resistance you would face, what resources might be available to face the transition.

I was aware on the Camino that arriving at the destination of Santiago was not the end. Pilgrimages are circular. You come but you don't stay. You return to where you started. You

travel along a route through the pilgrimage, arrive at your goal but the journey continues in the days and months and years that follow your return to where you come from. My time at Chartres with Tim and Jill was only a start. Much was enlivened in the time but I could see that my first task was not to let the week slip into the mists of memory. I had to continue to nurture all the learning and insights. I had a job to do, as if the week had been a briefing on the job ahead. I could not go home and be complaisant. I had to go home with a sense of dissatisfaction. I needed to do something different with my spiritual life.

Tim was very open to discussion and with such a small group there was ample opportunity for everyone to participate. I found the phrase the eyes of faith useful. It helped to put into words what I was already doing. When trying to explain an event or phenomenon one can look at it with the eyes of science or with the eyes of faith. With the eyes of science you look for a logical or rational explanation of why things are so. You may look at the same event with the eyes of faith and this opens the possibility of God's hand at work. Both outlooks are complimentary. They don't have to contradict each other. My training in scientific method had influenced my thinking in arriving at solutions to life's problems. It causes me to think in terms of working hypotheses. You evaluate what you already know of a situation and develop a working hypothesis which enables you to work with a particular explanation of an event and to take action. The hypothesis explains why things are so, and will do until another better explanation comes along as more information or knowledge comes to light.

One of my working hypotheses is that God exists. This underlies my endeavours towards spiritual growth. It's my guide for living. It gives meaning and enables me to integrate spirituality into daily life and I would probably act and live out my life in the same way as if my belief in God was rock solid, as if I was absolutely certain that God existed. Like any hypothesis, it's open to questioning and it is possible that another explanation may come along. For example, some people who may be averse to the word "God" replace the term with "higher self". That is their working hypothesis and assists them in their search for a meaningful life. In my case, I suppose that my interest in spiritual matters helps to affirm that I'm probably on the right track when I say that God exists. That is, I haven't come across any evidence that will make me alter my working hypothesis.

What has happened to me at Chartres? I think my eyes of faith have been opened wider to the many ways in which God is present in our lives and to the many ways in which we can pray.

I could not leave Chartres without mentioning my fellow pilgrims. Cheryl, Beth, Jane and Maureen were keen searchers, too. Beth described our lives as "an ongoing contemplative journey." With our different backgrounds and experience, we were seeking answers to similar questions. I admired the mutual respect and preparedness to listen and to understand each other, the sense of wonder at the eye opening experience that Tim and Jill offered us. We shared the gift of our presence with each other. We found the sacred in the ordinary, in our singing together and our conversation over a good bottle of French wine. It was sad to say goodbye.