

El Camino de Santiago . . . “When it comes, give thanks”
Written for *Thin Places* 2008. Year 10, Issue 1, Number 53, 1-3.

by The Rev. Dr. Jill Geoffrion

For thirty-eight hot days during the summer of 2006, the four members of our family walked five hundred miles across northern Spain on the ancient pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela. We had looked forward to sharing the time before our youngest son left for college. We had not anticipated how honest we would be willing to be with one another or how—in journeying on an external trail—we would also commit to journeying towards more authentic relationships with one another.

Before I left for the Camino, I celebrated my forty-eighth birthday with joy. Physical age had little to do with how I understood myself. In my mind I didn't imagine myself to be forty-eight years old; I was twenty-four years young. That twenty-four year old was agile, energetic, strong, and nearly invincible. She was sure that on pilgrimage she would have no trouble walking the same distances at the same pace as her eighteen- and twenty-year-old sons. She imagined that her body would heal almost instantly when injured.

The physical challenges we faced were difficult, especially for me, but not nearly as daunting as the emotional and spiritual ones. Now, two years later, we continue to experience the changes that began on the Camino . . . orienting our lives by what is most important to us . . . being more willing to admit our weaknesses to ourselves, to God, and to one another . . . and traveling more lightly, both physically and metaphorically.

I kept a journal as we walked. Here are some mostly unrevised traces of what I felt and thought along the way—expressions of the raw nature of the experience, recorded when I was in the midst of it.

Following the path. The call to journey towards God is unrelenting. . . . we leave the Known Presence in search of the Unknown Reality . . . as we go seeking God, God walks with us . . . along the way we discover God-close-by and God-far-away. We travel far to move into the sure knowledge that

God was at home,
God is on the road,
God waits for us where we will arrive.

Physical spirituality. Pilgrims can do the stupidest things! When I asked a man hiking up a mountain why he was wearing sandals, he told me, “I didn't hear that we needed good walking shoes until it was too late to buy and break them in, so I just bought a pair of sandals. I figure they will probably last for the eight hundred kilometers between here and Santiago.” A woman answered my inquiries about the bloodstained gauze wrappings on her feet and legs. “A podiatrist treated me in the last town. He told me that I needed to stay off my feet for three days before continuing, but I don't have any time to spare! I'm just going to see what happens.” And now I have to face up to it—what I saw as “others” is me.

What have we been thinking? We haven't. We had a goal, and we wanted to reach it. We believed

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we could make our bodies follow the lead of our wills. . . . How can our bodies serve as our spiritual teachers, especially as we encounter our physical limitations? . . . In what way is God present in us, inside our fleshly inhabitation, especially when our bodies are sick, suffering, weak, or dying?

As I was in the cathedral praying before a piéta of Mary holding a dead Jesus, I realized in a new way that there is enough suffering that comes naturally in life without my needing to add to my own suffering, whether it be mental or physical. I understood that right now I must rest my injured legs and bus the Camino until I can walk without hurting myself. This is not what I had planned, but it is what is needed. I feel quiet and at peace within with this reality.

Questions, mostly for me. How would your life change if you were willing to accept that expressing your worst self is a vital part of what you do every day? . . . If you acknowledged to yourself, “I am most prone to disappoint God when...” what could shift? . . . What if you discovered that you were ready to let go of those beliefs and behaviors that no longer serve you (and hurt both you and others)? . . . Might you be readying yourself to give up something you value? . . . Honesty precedes release. What are you willing to know about who you have been? who you hope through the grace and help of God to become? . . . Are you willing to pay the costs of confession: sincerity, truthfulness, and integrity? . . . Acceptance can be very painful. . . . It can also be liberating.

Nearing Santiago. We feel as if we are just getting started on the internal work that we came to do. TC would like to be walking faster. Dan loves it when we land in a hostel that has internet access. Tim Sr. is aware of the lack of intellectual stimulation, and is really enjoying walking alone for a part of each day so that he can go deeper within. I love this experience and the space of it.

At the end of the day my legs hurt, but I haven’t injured them more. They are my teachers. We are not where we started in the morning. We are not where we were going to be tomorrow. We are where we have been able to arrive. What is true of my legs is also true of my relationships, of my spiritual journey with God, and of my internal psychological relationship with myself.

And now we are here. Here is not only the physical place, but here is where we have come inside ourselves, as members of a family, as part of a group that spans centuries, as those who belong to the human family and part of this amazing world that we walk upon.

I give thanks that we have had this time as a family. We are not the same family that left. We have worked so many difficult communication patterns that were well ingrained. We have learned to tell the truth to one another without needing to separate ourselves from each other. We have learned to share our weaknesses without feeling that we will be hurt by each other. We have learned to be with each others’ pain without feeling a need to experience it ourselves. We have learned to honor that we are in process and that each day at least one of us will do something that will be hard for another of us. We have learned that we are more different than we had known, and we have learned that we are more committed to helping each other than we had experienced before. And that is for starters

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Looking back.

As I walked intentionally toward Santiago;
unknowingly, I moved away from life as I had lived it.

As I climbed mountains,

I descended towards my vulnerabilities.

As my suffering body limped painfully along the path,
my curious imagination grew more flexible.

As I drank litres of water to hydrate my body each day,
my spirit sought thirstily for a seemingly elusive oasis.

As I faithfully recorded my thoughts and experiences,
invisible understandings of Reality were being erased.

Orientation towards Compostela was unwavering.

Whenever there was a choice of which way to go,
lovingly placed yellow arrows

pointed towards my pilgrimage goal.

Even now, I remember with relief and gratitude
the joy of arriving.

“I made it! Where am I?”

I asked as I prayed in the sanctuary.

I still cannot find the place
on the map entitled, My Former Life!

Mini-pilgrimage.

Remember in God’s presence
a time when you thought you knew “where you were going,”

but you ended up somewhere else.

Ask to be given more understanding.

When it comes,
give thanks.