A Pilgrim and her Spiritual Quest on the Camino de Santiago

Now, I'm modern Pilgrim Susie and I want to share with you my Camino and why it was - and still is - so important to me.

As we have learned during Time for All Ages...

A pilgrim is a person who goes on a long journey, especially to a foreign land, for a spiritual purpose and so it was for me.

On October 2, 2018, I left my home in Vermont to walk the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrim track from St. Jean-Pied-de-Port, France, 500 miles across northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela, the Cathedral city of Galicia, Spain.

I was hiking the Camino Frances, the most often walked route of many starting all over Europe, all ending in Santiago.

The very first day, I started hiking up to two passes in the Pyrenees and over into Spain. I was plenty worried about even being able to accomplish that feat, more less keep going through ancient villages, vineyards, high mesas, the wheat belt of Spain, two other mountain ranges, all the way to very near the Atlantic Ocean, and what was considered The End of the World in the Middle Ages.

I came to my Camino from a very emotionally dark place. After caring for my husband (and Midd classmate) Tom for over 12 years, while he progressively worsened with severe frontal temporal lobe dementia, I finally had to place him in residential care. This proved to be agonizing and grievous for me, in both my body and spirit. Tom and I had enjoyed many long distance walks during our marriage, and I vowed to myself, that when he did not know me any more, I would walk to heal myself and reach some acceptance of what had happened to me and to us. In retrospect, I realized that making such a vow already made me a pilgrim.

My reasons for this pilgrimage reflected my personal crossroads at that time: My goals were to: *Move my body, mind, and spirit toward strength and wellness; learn life lessons - physical, emotional, and spiritual.* The means to accomplish my vow and goals started with my planning - *to write a journal to document and clarify my thoughts and feelings and learnings.* I wrote 16 chapters of my Camino story before, as I walked, and afterward. My vow, as well as my need to find answers to my list of reasons, gave me the strength and courage to keep going to Santiago.

It felt important to me to be a true pilgrim, carrying everything I needed in my backpack, spending each night in an albergue (hostel) after walking as far as I could, often where others I fell into walking with were also staying.

All along The Way, I gained appreciation for my classical liberal arts education at Middlebury College. Walking the Camino nurtured and expanded my curiosity in Middle Ages European history, the geography of northern Spain and its impact on humans, philosophy and religion, great arts & architecture, humanities and literature, even politics and its interplay with human nature. Being a pilgrim on the Camino brought all my learning together into one experience - a powerful education and transformative adventure. The great cathedrals along the Camino presented me with curriculums in all the subjects involved, teaching me, just as they did for pilgrims in the Middle Ages, history, religion, politics, morality, art, and culture. Since common folk in the Middle Ages mostly could not read or write, the Cathedrals were an early use of multi-media to teach the masses, about Christianity of course, and about society and morality and duty according to the mores and expectations of that time. Every stain glass window, every statue, every altar piece, every small side chapel had lessons and inspiration for every worshiper (and in my case, a modern pilgrim).

It is traditional while walking to leave stones or personal items at altars to symbolize giving up one’s heavy burdens along the way. After a week on the Camino, I realized I was still emotionally carrying Tom. One morning I went into a small, ancient chapel and made an altar for Tom with his baseball cap I had brought to shield me from the sun, a scallop shell (the symbol of the Camino), a rose I picked outside, some American coins I found in my backpack, and a lighted devotional candle I found in the chapel. Then I sat in front of my altar and talked to Tom through tears, explaining that this hike was really hard and carrying him was too much for me - that I had cared for him after his diagnosis because I wanted to, and I did the best job I could. I told him that I loved him and would continue to ensure he got the best care possible and that I wanted to be with him to the end. After an hour, I left, and with a lighter heart continued walking.

I had other talks with Tom along the way, telling my geography major husband about the topography, climate, human history, and culture of the land I was walking through. I tried to interpret for him all I was learning from my nightly Camino guidebook reading, sensing from nature, and feeling spiritually. My experience became a walking and writing and feeling meditation.

As pilgrims since the Middle Ages have done, I made other stops at sacred sites, leaving a personal item or a rock to represent something I was willing to give up to make my life journey a little easier. (Cruz de Ferro slide) At another altar on a mountain top, I gave up buying things just to make me feel better; I’m still working on that one but it helps that I set that burden down along the Camino. I also made an altar for a dear friend who died suddenly from a brain aneurysm while I was on the trail, sending her off on her last Camino with my tears and love and a few symbolic relics of our deep friendship.

I was continually struck with how powerful and sacred it felt to be walking the same route and perhaps having the same doubts and questions and hopes as millions of pilgrims before me. Walking on an actual Roman road of cobblestones or on a path several feet below the level of land, worn down by so many pilgrim feet, or sitting in a well worn church pew and opening myself to the sacred atmosphere, I felt goose bumps as well as solace to identity with so many seeking human hearts.

Just as in real life, some of my days were pretty miserable, especially during a week stretch of drenching rain and gale force winds while hiking over the Leon Mountains. I kept going every day, trying to dry out my clothes and shoes by appropriating the furnace closet each night in my albergue and draping my rain soaked clothes around it like a drying room. Several nights I was the only person in the hostel. It never occurred to me to take a bus or, heaven forbid, call an UBER. Don’t pilgrims face all sufferings and challenges of God and Nature with fortitude? Meeting up with fellow walkers afterwards, they were amazed I hadn’t just hunkered down in a heated accommodation as they had done.

Other days were full of sunshine and ripe wine grapes on vines within reach of walking pilgrims. Joining others and chatting while walking, becoming part for a few days of what is known as a Camino Family, and writing about my experiences and thoughts and feelings in my journal, my life spirit got stronger just as my walking legs did, and I found new strength within me to get up each morning and carry on.

When pilgrims arrive in Santiago’s Pilgrim Square many of us celebrate the completion of our pilgrimages by attending a Pilgrim Mass which includes the swinging of the Botafumeiro. This is an 80 kilogram incense burner with burning coals which hangs from the top of the cathedral over the altar. It takes eight men to pull the rope and swing it from one side of the height of the nave to the height of the other side. This was done in the Middle Ages to *fumigate* the pilgrims, who probably had been wearing the same clothes for months, at the end of their long walk.

One of my favorite Camino stories is that Catherine of Aragon stopped in Santiago and attended a Pilgrim Mass on her way to England where she subsequently became the first cast-off wife of Henry VIII. Supposedly, during her mass, the Botafumeiro rope broke and the censor went flying through a stain glass window, clearly a sign of what was to come for her. I wasn’t so much looking for a prognostic sign as I was reveling in celebration of completing my walk, giving thanks that I didn’t have to turn around and walk all the way back home, and feeling moved by this extraordinary experience and my personal growth over 500 miles.

As I had walked and thought and written about my goals, I came to realize that Henry David Thoreau had well articulated what I was searching to understand. He gave a famous lecture in 1851 called “Walking” and published it as an essay. Thoreau wrote about walking as a self-reflective, spiritual act and as the best way to learn about who you are and find “lost” aspects of yourself. This echos my reasons for walking the Camino.

Thoreau’s preface to his famous book, Walden, speaks perfectly to being a Pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago. Thoreau said that he went to the woods because he wished to “live deliberately” and “learn what it had to teach” him which is why I went on pilgrimage. Like Thoreau, I also “wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close” ... to find out if life is “mean” or “sublime” and “to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it.” I can tell you that, after walking 500 miles - and experiencing the Camino as a microcosm of life - I truly know that life is both mean and sublime. It was hard on a 75 year old body to walk up to 15+ miles a day, but also energizing and restorative, in body, mind, and spirit.

By the end of my walk, I dedicated myself to living intentionally: that is, to live an examined life; to make deliberate choices, not just allow things to happen, and to apply positive thoughts and good efforts to make my choices successful - particularly in my relationships with others, my environment, my activities, and my continual learning and curiosity - as I continue to create the “story of my life.”

Back home, I decided to consider myself still a pilgrim and purposely use my “Pilgrim Soul” to handle my life’s continuing challenges and opportunities. I was thrilled that I was physically able to complete the journey, but of much more importance to me was my emotional healing and spiritual journey. Through my walking and writing, I did become clearer about my own spirituality. It is characterized by my experiences of wonder and reverence, by my manifold feelings of joy and grief and awe. I envision the hub of my deep feelings as my Spirit of Life, a powerful urge to dig deep into learning and loving and feeling in all my life experiences with the important people in my life, with the world of nature where I choose to dwell much of the time, and within my body and my mind.

Now, please join with me in singing a favorite and meaningful hymn for UU pilgrims, which we all are: Spirit of Life

(Buen Camino sign - leave up for postlude)

The pervasive positivity of hikers on the Camino is expressed every day by meeting and leaving each other with a hearty “Buen Camino - may you find what you are searching for.” As we end this time together, I invite you now to stand if you choose, join hands with your fellow pilgrims in our community here and together, on cue, we will wish each other “Buen Camino - may you find what you are searching for.”

(During Prelude - Susie & stone pilgrim)

(Slide - Camino de Santiago way signs)

Call to Worship

We are seekers who wish to discover and face what is true about our own lives and about the world in which we live. We like to hide from truth when it tells us what we prefer not to hear, but we must continue as pilgrims seeking to know what is real, in its meanness and its glory, and to live as whole persons in the midst of our joys and our sorrows.

Robert Senghas, UU Minister

(Slide - first altar)

Chalice Lighting:

Be our companion on the walk;

Our tour guide at the crossroads;

Our breath in our weariness;

Our protection in danger;

Our albergue on the Camino;

Our shade in the heat;

Our light in the darkness;

Our consolation in our discouragements;

And our strength in our intentions.

Time for All Ages

(Slide - Life is a Camino)

Putting on garb of a pilgrim of the Middle Ages

What is a Camino? It's a pilgrimage rooted in medieval origins. That's why I'm channeling my inner medieval pilgrim self to tell you about the Camino de Santiago which translate in English to The Way of St. James

There were 3 primary Caminos in Europe in the Middle Ages: One was to walk all the way to Jerusalem (after the Crusades failed, it was not safe) and besides it was a really long way from northern Europe; #2 was to Rome the seat of Christianity and seat of the Pope (Alps hard to cross & Italy had lots of city-states & principalities that made it not so safe); and that leads us to Santiago (most successful Camino because the mountains are passable and northern Spain was evolving from Pagan to Christian & the Muslim Moors were being pushed back to Northern Africa)

(#1 Map)

Blue line on the map. This is the Camino de Santiago of the Middle Ages. Pilgrims walked out their front doors from all over Europe to a medieval village in southwestern France - St. Jean Pied de Port. From there they headed west, up and over the Pyrenees and into Spain and 500 miles on to Santiago. Because the trail began in France it is named the Camino Frances and this is the trail, still today, considered the true Camino de Santiago.

(#2 St James statue)

Why Santiago which means St James?

Starting about the 9th Century, Santiago became a religious destination because it was believed that the bones of Jesus’ disciple, Saint James, were interred in the cathedral there. It was thought that James the Greater, one of Christianity's first apostles, had come to Galicia to convert the people to Christianity. He may have had limited success because he returned to Jerusalem and in 42 AD he was beheaded by Herod. Yet, somehow James' body was brought back to Galicia and buried and mostly forgotten Then in the early 800s, led by very bright stars a shepherd discovered the tomb and a smart bishop declared the bones to be those of St James and started building a magnificent cathedral, first in Romanesque style and then in Gothic splendor and had St James' bones interred there, all which changed the name of this cathedral town to Santiago (Saint James).

(#3 Cathedral of Santiago with Pilgrim Susie)

People then believed that religious relics had magical properties, such as healing or expiating a really bad sin. A big incentive was when the Catholic Church started granting individuals who completed this pilgrimage dispensations or exemptions from having to work off their sins in Purgatory before they could rise up to Heaven. The Camino became a short-cut to Heaven.

What was it like to be a pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago in the Middle Ages?

It was hard: getting to Santiago was only half of it; once there and having received your symbolic award, a scallop shell which let everyone know you were going straight to heaven, you had to turn around and walk all the way back home again. Along the way, you faced three mountain ranges, storms and treacherous footpaths, your body getting injured or just giving out and bandits out to steal everything you had of any value.

(#4 Pyrenees col; #5 Pilgrim Susie in storm gear, #5 Pilgrim Susie with legs up)

So how did pilgrims keep up their strength and determination and inspiration to make it to Santiago?

By the 12th to 14th centuries 10,000 pilgrims a year were walking their way to Santiago and back home. Several monastic orders were founded to help house and feed and nurse and protect pilgrims. The places they built for pilgrims to stay and eat and have their injuries and sicknesses tended to were called hospitals.

(#6 Hospital sign)

 Possibly the most famous monastic order was the Knights Templars. They were founded in France to fight in the Crusades and the top dogs of the order really did ride in complete knightly armor on battle trained horses in the crusades. Once the Crusades failed, they switched their attention to the Camino de Santiago and built castles (at least one of which is still in good shape, right on the trail and is worth a half day's pause to tour.

(# 7 Pilgrim Susie at door to Knight's Templar monastery)

The Knight's Templars came up with a way for the pilgrims to be able to pay for their services; that is, a way for pilgrims "to bank" their money before they left home and then draw on it while on the Camino. It was so brilliant and successful that they got very rich which angered the Pope because they had more money than he had and it gave the King of France who owed the Knight's a huge amount of money borrowed to fight the Crusades an idea. The Pope and King joined together to get rid of the Knight's monastic order by excommunicating them and arresting them and burning them at the stake. The Pope and King were eventually successful but the idea of international banks carried on, and the secret rituals and codes of the Knights are still popular among freemasons and many fraternal orders today.

(#8 Pilgrim symbols on road bricks)

Which brings us to the participatory part of Time for All Ages.

A very influential book about being a pilgrim, A Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan, was written in English. And, a famous hymn using text from A Pilgrim's Progress was very popular by the 1600s. Do not panic; we are not going to attempt to sing it. I am inviting all of us to share in a Choral Reading of three verses, to feel in our bodies what pilgrims of the last 1000 years felt as they girded up their loins and encouraged each other and inspired themselves to accomplish their spiritual quests on their Caminos. The verses are in your program and on the screen.

Please stand and Let's use some body English to really feel as pilgrims over centuries have felt as Abi leads us through our inspiring lyrics.

“To Be a Pilgrim”

He who would valiant be

‘Gainst all disaster,

One here will constant be,

Come wind, come weather

There’s no discouragement

Shall make him once relent

His first avowed intent

To be a pilgrim

Whoso beset him round

With dismal stories

Do but themselves confound;

His strength the more is.

No foes shall stay his might,

Though he with giants fight:

He will make good his right

To be a pilgrim

Hobgoblin nor foul fiend,

Can daunt his spirit;

He knows he at the end

Shall life inherit.

Then fancies fly away,

He’ll fear not what men say,

He’ll labor night and day

To be a pilgrim.