

# THE CAMINO AND THE COCHLEAR IMPLANT

## *Being Guided into the Way of Peace*

Philip Shano

MANY YEARS AGO, I read a newspaper piece about the *camino de Santiago de Compostela*, the Way of St James. It was a simple account of a woman's journey on the ancient pilgrimage route across northern Spain. She walked about 800 kilometres, to arrive at the city of Santiago de Compostela in the north-west corner of Spain. For the writer, it was a month and a half of walking and living a simple, intimate and communal life. For me, it was the planting of a desire. A dream started to take shape. Once I read that article, I was convinced that I would one day walk as a pilgrim on the *camino*. I didn't know *when*, but I knew that *I must*.

In 2003 a brain tumour came along and disrupted all the plans I had for my life. I feared that the *camino* was a dream that would never be realised. But after a period of intense rehabilitation, I discovered that my dreams did not have to be ignored, but could be adapted. A good friend offered me a piece of advice that stays with me. I lamented that the illness had changed my life forever. He said: 'Yes, *changed*, but not ended'. My life did not come to an end.

A year after the diagnosis, the surgery and the recovery, I was once again ready to be assigned to ministry as a Jesuit priest. I became novice director at the Jesuit Novitiate in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and was there for more than five years. Each spring, we would send out our first year novices for their month-long pilgrimage, an experience that Saint Ignatius of Loyola wanted for every young man seeking incorporation into Jesuit life. He wanted novices to spend a month 'in making a pilgrimage without money, but begging from door to door at

times ... in order to grow accustomed to discomfort in food and lodging'. Thus, the novice abandons his reliance on 'money or other created things' and 'place[s] his reliance entirely in his Creator and Lord' (*Constitutions*, Examen 4.12.[67]).<sup>1</sup>

As my friend had reminded me, my life after the brain tumour was about change, not about ending. The years as novice director included running marathons in Minneapolis–Saint Paul, hikes in the Colorado Rockies, and other adventures that seemed miraculous after the tumour and the ways it had changed my body. One of the novices had walked the *camino* the summer between his graduation from Boston College and his entry into the novitiate. Perhaps it was Chris' frequent references to the *camino*, or perhaps it was the photos. Or was it the way in which his prayer and life as a novice were peppered with references to the pilgrimage? Whatever the underlying reason, a dream that I had put on hold became a growing and intense desire, especially as I sent novices out on pilgrimage each year.

My assignment at the Jesuit Novitiate ended in August 2009. I had been promised a brief sabbatical before returning to my own Jesuit province and taking on a new ministry. The focus of my sabbatical was listening in the context of *pilgrimage*. My pilgrimage on the *camino* was 34 days out of a three-month sabbatical. Let me say a few things about that experience and some of my interior movements.

### ***Preparing for the Camino***

The *camino* is a medieval pilgrimage across northern Spain. It has many routes, but all end in Santiago de Compostela. I chose the traditional route starting from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in France. The *Camino Frances* ('French route') crosses the Pyrenees in southern France and ends 780 kilometres later in the ancient city where legend holds that the Apostle James is buried. My preparation involved talking to people and reading accounts of pilgrims' experiences. My favourite account was Joyce Rupp's *Walk in a Relaxed Manner*: out of all the books I read in preparation, it comes closest to describing the exterior *and* interior pilgrimage. Some other works I read were Paulo

<sup>1</sup> The 'pilgrimage experiment' remains an important element in most Jesuit novitiates around the world. A good description of the contemporary experience is Chris Manahan, 'On the Road—With \$35 and a One-Way Bus Ticket', *America* (25 February 2008).

Coelho's *The Pilgrimage* and *The Alchemist*, Shirley MacLaine's *The Camino: A Journey of the Spirit*, Kevin Codd's *To the Field of Stars*, Hape Kerkeling's *I'm Off Then: Losing and Finding Myself on the Camino de Santiago*, guidebooks and various internet sites and blogs. Most of the books and sites irritated me with their long accounts of blisters and the challenges of the pilgrim hostels. I chanced upon a travelling exhibition that stopped at a university down the road—Sacred Steps on the Camino: Pilgrimage to Santiago.<sup>2</sup> This featured photographs and paintings by several North Americans who had travelled the *camino*.

I did some training, such as walking with a backpack weighed down with books. Pride had a role in that I figured that I was already in adequate physical shape, since I could run marathons and hike in the Rockies. Perhaps that attitude was connected to the irritation I felt in reading the accounts of pilgrims who moaned about their blisters. I know that I am too stubborn and proud a person to complain about petty discomfort. That stubbornness helped me deal with a brain tumour and helped me prepare for the *camino*.

As novice director, I had asked novices departing on their pilgrimage experiment to compose a prayer. My aim was twofold: to help each novice focus on the graces he desired during his pilgrimage; and to help others to pray along with him as he journeyed. Thus, I composed a prayer that I used every day of my pilgrimage. I sent it to family and friends, in case they wanted to pray with me as I journeyed.

### *Camino de Santiago de Compostela Pilgrimage 2009*

O Lord, the path ahead on this day and in this life is uncertain. Be with me on each step of my journey. Be with my fellow pilgrims and all who strengthen my faith. May they remind me of those who walked with you on the road to Emmaus.

Grant me the grace of being a pilgrim on your path. Let me see that you are the Way, the Truth and the Life. May I wander with mindfulness and keep my eyes on you.

Grant me the grace of listening: to listen to the earth, to listen to fellow pilgrims, to listen to my heart, to listen in the present moment and to listen to that still, small voice that stirs in me. Help me to

<sup>2</sup> The book I recommend is Joyce Rupp, *Walk in a Relaxed Manner: Life Lessons from the Camino* (Maryknoll: Orbis 2005). Information on the travelling exhibition is available at [www.SacredStepsInSpain.com](http://www.SacredStepsInSpain.com).

have open ears and an open heart. Help me to be receptive to all that is offered. Grant me the grace of being disposed to receive your grace. May I be open to the experiences of the journey.

Grant me the grace of freedom, the grace of a lightness of being. May I be free in the face of the elements, food, accommodations, companions and personal health. May I allow myself to be a spiritual adventurer in search of my heart's treasure.

Grant me the grace of striving forward in hope and trust. May I have the wisdom to discern the uncertain moments and all anxieties. With Paul, I pray: 'Forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus'.

St Ignatius of Loyola, pray for us.

St Francis Xavier, pray for us.

Blessed Pierre Favre, pray for us.

Santiago de Compostela, pray for us.

Our Lady of the Way, pray for us.

My friends did, indeed, join me in prayer. I have been surprised at how often friends mentioned putting the prayer on their fridge, in their breviary or Bible, or in some other place where they could think of me each day. I continue to pray it now and then, realising that the graces I mentioned have a value in everyday life, not just on a sacred pilgrimage.

### ***A Secret Weapon on the Camino***

The desire for *listening* is a major element in my prayer. There is a story here. My brain tumour left me with a deafness that grew more profound over the few years after the surgery. When I originally planned the pilgrimage, I thought that solitude would be a natural focus of the days. Not only did I plan to walk alone through the daytime, I also expected that my evenings would be marked by solitude. Such a way of orientating my days was not something I would choose, but it was something forced upon me by my circumstances. But, then, a few months before the pilgrimage, I had great success with cochlear implant surgery.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> A cochlear implant is a surgically implanted electronic device that provides a sense of sound to a person who is profoundly deaf or severely hard of hearing. The cochlear implant is often referred to as a bionic ear. It consists of an array of electrodes wound through the cochlea, which send the impulses to the

The implant removed me from the enforced solitude of the world of deafness and allowed me to hear once again. So, the grace of *listening* became an evident desire as I contemplated a sabbatical. Listening on the *camino* was physical and exterior, but it also involved attention to the interior movements going on in me.

It is not easy to walk 780 kilometres in Spain with a cochlear implant. First of all, there was the obvious discomfort of walking without it in rainy weather. I was afraid of getting the external processor wet. It was so new to me that I had no idea about the effect of the humidity, altitudes and high temperatures. Finding an electrical outlet to charge the batteries was a challenge in the simple living accommodation. My charger competed for space with cell phones and cameras that were being recharged. Removing the external component to sleep at night is always a bit risky, because I am completely deaf without it. A fire alarm could be ringing and I would not hear it (though I would probably wake up because of the lights and movement around me). Sleeping without it in the *albergues*<sup>4</sup> on the *camino* was even riskier, though I came to see the advantages of being deaf in a noisy and chaotic environment, especially as pilgrims settled in, ended their day and arose the next morning. After a while, I saw my cochlear implant as a gift. Early in the pilgrimage, I realised how much like a cloak of invisibility it was. What I said in my journal was:

I have discovered that I have a secret weapon in the *albergues*. Besides the calm and serenity that I strive for *in the midst of*, my real weapon is the fact that once I remove my implant processor, I am stone deaf and immune to the noises, loud conversations in foreign



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nerves and then directly to the brain through the auditory nerve system. It bypasses the usual mechanisms of hearing. As of April 2009, approximately 188,000 people worldwide had received cochlear implants.

<sup>4</sup> *Albergue* or *refugio* is the Spanish word for the refuge or shelter that is provided in most towns along the pilgrimage route. These accommodations are simple housing offered to pilgrims for a few Euros. Some are simple and Spartan; others are almost palatial, like an oasis in a very dry place.

languages, snores, creaking beds, rustling plastic and so on. It is akin to Harry Potter's cloak of invisibility. Of course, I am not immune to the smells, or visual stimulation, or to movements. Harry's cloak makes him invisible. The absence of my processor shuts out the noise of the world.

I flew to Paris at the start of September and spent some time seeing friends and enjoying the beauty of the city. But I found myself itching for the road as I travelled to Bayonne a few days later. There was a gift in the scripture for the eucharist on 6 September, the day I was in Bayonne. The 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time includes Isaiah 35:4–7, with its reminder to 'be strong' and 'do not fear'. We also hear that 'the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped'. The Gospel was Mark 7:31–37 with its story of the deaf mute being healed by Jesus. Jesus says, 'be opened'. I had experienced that new opening with my cochlear implant. As those who are hearing-impaired know so well, there is a strong connection between what we hear and how we speak. With the implant, I not only found that my hearing was 'unstopped' as my ears were 'opened'. I also found that my 'tongue was released and [I] spoke plainly' as we hear from Mark. The scripture readings on the eve of my *camino* pilgrimage were a promise from God: *I am with you*. Given all that I had been through, it was a welcome message.

### **Consolation and Desolation on the Camino**

The train from Bayonne to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port was old and slow, rocked back and forth, and made a lot of noise. An experience I had on that ride offered a central theme of my *camino*. In my journal I wrote:

The train ride was about ninety minutes on a slow-moving train. I found that I was in harmony with the rhythm of the train ... in the flow or in tune. It told me the same thing that St Ignatius heard at La Storta, *I will be favourable to you*.<sup>5</sup>

My first reference to it is simple, but that sense of being in rhythm or flow would be repeated quite regularly. I heard it in the train, in the

<sup>5</sup> St Ignatius of Loyola had several significant spiritual experiences in his life. One of the best known and most central to his mission of founding and leading the Society of Jesus was his experience in a church in the town of La Storta, a short distance from Rome. Ignatius had a powerful vision of God promising favour to him in Rome.

sound of walking sticks hitting the ground with each step, in the sound of birds or traffic.

More significantly, I felt the rhythm in my interior movements. I came to associate that rhythm with the experience Ignatius refers to as 'consolation'. Likewise, there were days or moments when I felt what he refers to as 'desolation'.<sup>6</sup> When I felt that steady rhythm and its music, I knew that I was in tune with the action of God in my life and in the world, and, in a specific way, on this pilgrimage. On the other hand, there were times when I felt the complete absence of rhythm. My journal sums it up:

Rhythm versus routine ... there is a big difference. Routine is associated with 'rut'. Rhythm implies 'beat' or 'flow' and 'harmony'. Amazing how I keep returning to that initial experience on the slow-moving train from Bayonne.

That train ride was definitely an experience of rhythm, accompanied by a giddy sense of being cared for so much by God and other people. Rhythm carried me into the pilgrimage. The absence of rhythm told me that there was something within me needing attention.

I arrived in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port on 6 September. It was that night I had my first experience of an *albergue* on the *camino*. I was assigned an upper bunk in a room with four other men and one woman. It was a clean and welcoming place, with a private shower and a clean patio with a gentle breeze for hanging out my laundry. Little was I to know how spoiled I was! It was also where I received the first stamp in my pilgrim passport (*credential del peregrino*).<sup>7</sup> After waking from a fitful night of sleep filled with many uncertainties about what lay ahead, I packed my backpack and set out.

It is a long and challenging walk from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Roncesvalles, on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees. On that day of walking mostly uphill through the mountains and in the heat of an

<sup>6</sup> St Ignatius saw movements as a given in the spiritual life. His classic tool, the *Spiritual Exercises*, names the movement as either consolation or desolation. Specific definitions from Ignatius are found in Exx 316–317. There are many commentaries on the terms and on discernment in general.

<sup>7</sup> To qualify for a *compostela* at the end of the pilgrimage in Santiago, a pilgrim has to have accumulated a specified number of stamps (*sellos*) in a pilgrim passport. The stamps are available at *albergues*, bars, restaurants and other locations along the route. The passport is the official identification of a legitimate pilgrim on the *camino*.



early September day with few trees in sight to offer shade, I pondered a few questions. Though they were hardly existential, they seemed crucial on that hot and long day: why am I doing this pilgrimage? Why didn't I choose to start in Roncesvalles? Why am I carrying so many unnecessary things in my backpack? Why had these things flown across the Atlantic? One of the first items to be jettisoned was a heavy copy of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. It was hardly the only item to be left behind somewhere or given away in those first days. I did a lot of pondering about the two ways in which I needed to do some purging—of the possessions I was carrying in my backpack, but also of the many interior burdens and anxieties I carry after more than five decades of life and its challenges. That first day also involved expending a lot of psychic energy about the physical trip to Roncesvalles. It called to mind the mental gymnastics I performed running marathons. The mantra toward the end became quite simple: 'I can make it'. With perseverance, water and food, and the occasional companionship of other pilgrims, I limped into Roncesvalles at 3.30 in the afternoon.

Roncesvalles was just the end of one day, but it was only after 34 days as a pilgrim that I walked into Santiago de Compostela. At the beginning there was a lot of beautiful scenery as the route passed through picturesque Spanish villages. There was also the start of friendships that took me to the end. Physically I was getting used to the wear and tear on my feet, legs, shoulders and back. I was slowly coming to terms with the backpack and streamlining its contents,



knowing that whatever I carried was going to be with me for a long journey. It was in the *albergue* in Zubiri that I first encountered a couple from the Boston area who would become occasional travelling companions on the *camino*. Rita used her Blackberry to update her blog<sup>8</sup> each day, making sure that family, friends and strangers around the world were keeping up with their adventures and their growing number of *camino* friends.

After the first few days I started to find my rhythm, but I was still struggling to maintain it even at the end. I gradually became accustomed to the way of proceeding on the *camino* and learnt how to get enough nutrition and rest and to pace myself. I had to lower my expectations of what I would find in an *albergue*. I am grateful for my own resourcefulness about food, accommodation and general life. There developed a daily routine, but I came to prefer the word *rhythm* to describe the movements of the day that made sense for me.

The day consisted of the basics of rising, walking, eating and sleeping. My routine at each destination was to locate and settle into an *albergue*. Even greater than my desire for a bed at the *albergue* was my strong desire for a stamp in my passport: I felt I had earned it after a full day of walking. Once housing was found and the passport was stamped, I went through the usual rituals that every pilgrim does in some order: unpacking the essentials, showering and cleaning up, laundering dirty clothing. Eventually, given the opening hours of shops in Spain, I would go in search of a market, a bar serving food, or any place where I could find something suitable to eat. There were times when that was a challenge. Some of the things I ate on the *camino* are not things that I would usually eat. It's amazing how good even a piece of bread and a can of sardines can taste after a full day of hiking.

The evening might involve sharing a meal with others, at the *albergue* or a restaurant. Sometimes the meal consisted of items bought at a market, and I tried to find things that were suitable for the demands of the physical and spiritual exercise. My most memorable meals involved a share in the cooking. Pasta and omelettes seemed the most common dishes.

I would end each day by writing in my journal, studying the guidebook, and deciding on my travel destination for the next day. My

<sup>8</sup> See Rita's blog about her experience at [www.rita-underthemilkyway.blogspot.com](http://www.rita-underthemilkyway.blogspot.com).

journal fitted somewhere between a record of interior movements and an exterior travelogue. As for the desired destination each day, I had a habit of going beyond the goal. This might mean just a few kilometres to the next village or town that had an *albergue*. But there were times where I walked an extra ten or so kilometres to find a place that seemed right. The decision to move on was motivated by my energy levels, the weather, the terrain, or the fact that it was too early to end the hiking day. The element of rhythm had some role to play, in that some stops just felt wrong. The day ended with Night Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours. With that, I crawled into my sleeping bag, in the dormitory of the *albergue*. The next morning there would be a quick clean up, a bite to eat, repacking my backpack, praying Morning Prayer and heading out of the door.

As the days moved on, I realised that the walking was becoming a retreat. There were many spiritual movements of consolation and desolation, and a deepening awareness of those movements. I was growing in intimacy with Christ. As I look at my journal for the middle days of the pilgrimage, I realise how much was going on within me and around me. I was becoming more accustomed to the road and the *albergues*. With that familiarity was growing a sense of getting used to the routines and rhythms of the road. The walking became the prayer. Thus, I found that I was usually ready to leave the *albergue* in the morning so I could hit the road: there was solace out there. I wrote in my journal: 'It's in my time alone on the road that I find the most peace, and not in the *albergues* or when I am being taken (or moving) into someone else's rhythm'.

The twelfth day was central for me. I set out from Ages, aiming for Burgos. I departed in light rain, almost consoled by the memory of Psalm 51, 'O wash me more and more from my guilt'. Judging by the increasing rain and the wind, I must have had plenty of guilt to be washed off. I arrived in Burgos wet, cold, tired and hungry. The rain poured and the wind blew as far as the edge of the city. I was journeying in complete deafness, since I had removed my implant processor to protect it from the wet. At times I wandered aimlessly, in desperate hope. The situation was worsened because so much of the terrain was rugged and uneven. There were moments during the day when I lost track of the others and had no idea where I was and whether I was, indeed, on the *camino* any more. I rarely stopped to rest

or snack, since there was so little shelter and to stand still in the rain would not have been restful or relaxing.

Later on, as I reviewed the day, I pondered who or what gave me the strength to go forward. Several things stood out. First of all, I found myself relying on my own interior strength, fortitude, tenacity and stubbornness. Those gifts had been with me from earlier stages in my life; they were not about to fail me now. A phrase from Luke 1:68–79, the Gospel Canticle in Morning Prayer, became a mantra, ‘Guide me into the way of peace’. I also followed others and trusted that they had a better sense of direction than I now had. There were memories, prayers of petition and mind games that kept me occupied. The *camino*’s yellow *flèches* (arrows) helped when I could see them.

One of the more mysterious gifts offered to me that day was the small crocus-like purplish flowers that seemed to be strewn on the pathway. I followed them with the absolute conviction that someone ahead of me was spreading them, almost like a scene from Hansel and Gretel. I continued to see them in the days afterwards and remained convinced that an angel just ahead was scattering them. Then, one day, I realised that they were growing out of the ground and were appearing because of the generosity of the rain. Those flowers gave me the strength to forge on toward Burgos. And, in later days, as soon as I saw them in the path, I just knew that I was going in the right direction. They were one more sign of that inner rhythm and sense of consolation that was guiding me. The walk that day from Ages to Burgos was significant. Despite its toughness, I was given the grace to keep going forward. It reminded me of the determination I had felt to forge onwards, even after a brain tumour threatened to obstruct the course of my life. That day was one more piece of evidence to tell me that you don’t have to feel good to be moving forward in consolation.

The course of my pilgrimage was marked by an active dream-life at night, complementing the interior movements of the day. I found myself becoming accustomed to life on the road and searching for an ever-more civilised way to travel. I was getting used to, and frustrated with, the inconveniences of life in the *albergues*. Starting to find the early morning rush too much of an irritant, I moved further into my own rhythm, waiting until the bunks of the *albergue* were almost empty before going through my own morning routines. It was really quite pleasurable to stay in my sleeping bag while others around me were

rushing and being frantic. As I lay there, I found myself contrasting life in the *albergue* with the solitude and the sense of community found on the road. I was also grateful for my 'cloak of invisibility'.

A few days after the walk to Burgos, in Rabanal del *camino*, I had a miserable 24 hours of nausea and general weakness. I eventually blamed it on rancid oil spread on a salad. I see something of God's humour in the fact that this illness came the night before I was to reach the Cruz de Ferro, located on the 1,504-metre-high pass on Monte Irago. This is a simple iron cross atop a cairn marking the pilgrim route. Pilgrims traditionally place stones at the foot of the cross, carrying their own crosses to add to this cross of iron. I had brought a couple of stones across the ocean, to share in the solidarity of this tradition with the crosses of many others.<sup>9</sup>

After a few days of feeling out of sorts, in Palais do Rei I once again met up with familiar people and was able to escape the rainy weather. My journal entry sums it up:

I feel human for the first time in days. It feels good to be back in synch with familiar faces .... There's something about the flow and rhythm. I get out of it and I feel inhuman. I need to remember the sound of the train from Bayonne. I need to remember the flow, harmony, rhythm and consolation.

The next day, I was able to see a strong link between the unsettled skies and my unsettled spiritual disposition. I realised that both had been troubled for several days. That realisation freed me. The weather did not change very much in my final week, but I found a new attitude within myself. I found a new degree of deliberation and intentionality in my walking and in the evening life in the *albergues*.

The 34th and final day found me leaving Monte del Gozo, just a few kilometres from my destination, after a night of sleep in the mammoth compound built to accommodate the many pilgrims who

<sup>9</sup> In my experience of directing men and women through the Spiritual Exercises, I have often been struck by the strong connection between people's own 'cross' and their prayer in the Third Week, the section on the passion of Christ. People experience the grace of the Third Week by getting more in touch with their own sufferings. In an odd way, this is often experienced in a surprising period of illness during the retreat. The person who says 'I never get a cold!' may be suddenly laid low and is unable to pray in the same way as in earlier parts of the Exercises. Thus, it struck me as oddly appropriate that I could only approach the Cruz de Ferro with an acute awareness of my illness and suffering.



celebrated with Pope John Paul II in 1989. That final morning, I walked in mist and fog from the outskirts of Santiago de Compostela to the Cathedral and the tomb of St James. I had assumed that arriving at my destination would be emotional. Not so! Too many factors conspired against it—the dreary weather, the usual mess at the edge of a city, the rushing about of a Saturday morning. But I did arrive and went through all the usual, ritualistic moments of the *camino*’s conclusion—visiting the cathedral, hugging the statue of St James, receiving my *compostela* (the official Latin document confirming my successful completion of the *camino*) at the pilgrims’ office, going to the daily Pilgrims’ Mass and witnessing the famous *botafumeiro* (a giant-sized censer) swinging back and forth. Then followed a few days of pilgrim activities, running into old friends from the journey, eating good meals, sightseeing and enjoying the activity and life of a major pilgrim city.

### **Leaving Santiago**

The real emotion came when I departed from Santiago a few days later. It was heightened by the farewells to people and situations that had become familiar on the road, by the difficulty of making the transition from being a pilgrim and by some loneliness. There was much that is common to the ending of an intense experience. But, as I left, there was another issue. It had to do with realising how a pilgrimage city swallows up pilgrims. My journal entry offers a few words:

Pilgrims just flow in and out of a place like Santiago. Already, just a few days after arriving, almost no one looks familiar to me. But they know each other. And, once again, I see that transitional form of community .... I'm just one more pilgrim who has been sucked in and swallowed by a place of pilgrimage.

The spiritual lessons were almost endless on the pilgrimage, but they were not earth-shattering. My life had already exposed me to many of the lessons that would have been much more radical in my twenties. I don't say that with pride. I think it is related to the accidents of my life—the ups and downs of community living, ministry, leadership, but, most especially, the fallout from the brain tumour and the way that it irrevocably altered my life. My journal describes what was happening for me as a 'consolidation of the past few years of my life'.

What did I think about as I walked? Many of the thoughts took the form of meanderings of the mind. A scene, person or experience would evoke memories. At other times, I tried to be intentional and focused about my thoughts, for instance pondering something that had occurred to me in my reflections the previous day.<sup>10</sup> And at other times again, I found my reflections shaped by interaction with other pilgrims. There was reflection on the actual walking and the many things that I was being shown about finding my rhythm. That played itself out for me especially in the continuing question of the advantages and disadvantages of walking the *camino* alone or with others. Do I find and be comfortable with my own rhythm, or do I try to walk with the conflicting rhythms that could be found in a group?

Spiritual lessons were even offered by something as mundane as the contents of my backpack. Many were the result of encounters with

<sup>10</sup> A significant principle of ongoing discernment in any intense spiritual experience is what Ignatius of Loyola referred to as repetition. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, he says that, in repetition, 'we should pay attention to and dwell upon those points in which we have experienced greater consolation or desolation or greater spiritual appreciation' (Exx 62). Repetition does not mean making an exercise over again. Rather, there is a gradual assimilation of the material for prayer, such that the prayer develops toward a simple and clear insight about one's life in relation to Christ. Repetition is an important way to notice the interior spiritual movements in one's heart. It's really a deepening, a gradual honing of what is most essential. Likewise there was a cumulative dimension to my reflection during the *camino*. What I prayed with on one day led me to my reflections the next day, always moving toward a more cumulative experience. The points that took on significance in my nightly journal became fodder for my prayer and reflection the following day.

the community of familiar faces that I was coming to know. My interior life was alive and active on the *camino*. I seemed constantly to resort to the pen and scrap paper in my pocket, jotting down ideas to put in my journal later that day. The entire day became a spiritual experience, in that every little moment offered some spiritual truth. I was blessing myself so often: in gratitude for sighting a *flèche* when I thought I was lost, in gratitude for getting to a village, in gratitude for finding food that I liked, and in gratitude as I left an *albergue* after a safe and welcoming night.

Every now and then, someone asks me what I learnt from the *camino*. I have discovered that I can make a list one day, and then revise it the next. Some of the things that stay with me and are consistent in all of my lists of *what I learnt* have to do with the tension between rhythm and routine; the tension between solitude and companionship on the road; the need to travel light both in my backpack and in myself (to relish the ‘unbearable lightness of being’);<sup>11</sup> the need to be grateful for the little things; awareness of the crosses we are all carrying, as I discovered in listening to fellow pilgrims; the value of friendships;<sup>12</sup> the need to stay on the path (following my personal rhythm, but also the *flèches*, wherever they were found) and to be careful when wandering off the well-marked path; and the fact that the *camino* really begins after the pilgrim finishes it.

I write this nearly a year after my *camino*. Whenever I reread my journal or look at the photographs or read something about the *camino*, I’m taken back to the pilgrimage. I want to be out there



<sup>11</sup> The phrase ‘unbearable lightness of being’ comes from Milan Kundera’s 1984 novel.

<sup>12</sup> Joyce Rupp uses the phrase ‘existential friendships’ to speak about the temporary friendships that happen on the *camino*. See Chapter 21 of *Walk in a Relaxed Manner*. Rupp says, ‘How quickly pilgrims on the *camino* establish friendships .... Even though our time together was relatively brief, the experiences and commonalities we exchanged nourished the gift of friendship. Much on our journey drew us to one another.’

again. Yes, I remember the irritations and frustrations, but I also remember the utter simplicity and ease of life (despite the intensity of the experience). It's not an experience for everyone enjoying a sabbatical. It's work! But, one of its greatest gifts is immersion in and engagement with a project that connects so intimately to one's spiritual life and connects one's interior life to that of other pilgrims. I continue to strive to live by the simple words that Joyce Rupp offers in the title of her book: *Walk in a Relaxed Manner*. To walk through life in such a manner is not that different from what we hear every morning in Morning Prayer and the Gospel Canticle: 'In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace'.

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