

Lessons from Other Pilgrims
by Suzanne Ball, Manhattan IL

A journey is many things: an adventure, a new experience, a lesson, a passage. Certainly it is always unique to the traveler, even if you're part of a couple or a group. If you go alone, maybe more so.

What makes it even more rich? Finding the people who are on the same path, walking the same direction, sharing the moment. People who point things out, make you think, or make you laugh. These are the folks who you remember years later and are so very thankful for.

Let me introduce you to two people I met during my 500-mile pilgrimage. When you walk the Camino, people appear--and disappear--during the experience. Sometimes someone will pop into your day and tell you where the best albergue is; you'll have a glass of wine or dinner with fascinating people who share a story that is exactly what you needed to hear; you may walk together until the next bar, and never see him again. Or you will meet several times over, weeks apart, in complete surprise.

Lesson One: You never know when it will be the last time you see someone

First came Kathy. I came to call her "Kathy the Hippie" in my head...because she was a total granola-organic-natural woman from Eugene, Oregon. She even dressed like a hippie! I saw her on the first day, the day of the climb over the Pyrenees. In fact, she stepped into a photo as I was trying to capture the sheep that were everywhere. I thought I was taking a picture of a pilgrim from behind, surrounded by the sheep. As I clicked, the pilgrim turned, and I got her face...pure excitement.

We both continued on, and I didn't see her again. Until the next morning. I couldn't sleep and decided to start out early. I carried my belongings into the bathroom to get ready. She was already there, doing the same thing. We didn't say anything to each other until we stepped out of the albergue at the same time. "Do you know which way to go?" she asked me. I pointed to the famous sign: Santiago de Compostela, 790 km. and off we went. I took her photo by the sign. We walked the day together and got acquainted, stopping frequently so she could get fresh fruit. She was a bottomless pit when it came to fruit. Me, I wanted

coffee, but Kathy didn't drink caffeine.



Suzy (left) and Kathy, in Los Arcos, Spain in the Camino Francés, in 2014

Truthfully, mid-morning of the third day, I needed to part ways. For one thing, I walked a little bit faster than Kathy, and that wouldn't do over the next five weeks. Second, I felt like I just wanted to be on my own. Off I went, after my morning café con leche, thinking we wouldn't see each other again. Not so. Over and over, I would turn a corner, enter the random café, take a new street--and there she'd be. After three or four times, I began to believe there was a reason we kept catching up. And...I began to be glad to see her.

I walked more with Kathy than anyone else. On the last day--the day that takes you into Santiago de Compostela--we planned to get up early and start. But she lagged and I went ahead. Of course, we met at a bar, but she couldn't go on. Emotions and tears had overcome her and she wanted to stay back, alone. By this time, I was disappointed. She hadn't brought a camera, and I was worried about who would take her picture when she got to the Cathedral square. But clearly she

needed privacy, so I left. I would see her once again in Santiago. I had a book to give her, but didn't have it with me. Since we had always managed to meet, I was sure I'd see her again. I carried that book for three more days...but she was gone. I would get an email from her in a couple of weeks, but our time together had ended.

Lesson Two: Gratitude for health and every day on earth

Leif and I met in a crowded tapas bar. We didn't really "meet" ...it was more like he helped me out by calling to the bartender to notice me. It was busy, and like most bars in Spain, with one person doing everything: pouring wine and beer; heating the tapas; making espresso; serving as cashier. I wanted a glass of wine and was standing patiently, as others were getting served. Finally, a tall man waved to the bartender and pointed to me. The bartender nodded and I got my wine. I thanked the man and went to the patio.

Later, it was time for the Menu del Dia. The man came over and asked if he could join me, since it was crowded and we were both alone. We introduced ourselves and decided on our dinner choices, and started to talk. Turns out that Leif--who was from Copenhagen, now living in Bayonne--had been a war journalist. He witnessed terrible things in Bosnia, brutal atrocities that he still dreamt about. Leif had just been diagnosed with Stage IV liver cancer. He was certain that the toxins of war, combined with the smoking and drinking to cope, had caused the cancer.

He was walking the Camino during the three weeks between chemo treatments. No real destination. "I just want to be in a positive place, and there is none better than this," he told me. We talked about books, then got on the topic of Rumi. He had just finished a book about Rumi. Another pilgrim had left it behind a couple of days ago, and Leif picked it up. Did I want it? Truthfully, the last thing I was looking for was an extra pound to carry. But it seemed important that I accept the offer.

He dashed to his albergue and returned with the book. (The Forty Rules of Love: A Novel of Rumi, if you're interested.) We had a great dinner and said good night. I would see him again the next day, when it started to rain and he ducked into the bar where I was trying to deal with a sudden hamburger craving. He sat again and we chatted. He's a man in his early 60's who looks robust, but was having a hard

time with the fatigue of chemotherapy. He wasn't sure how much further he could walk, but he was grateful that he had come. "I've had a good life," he told me. "I've wasted days, but now I know how precious they are."



Navarette, Spain on the Camino Francés in 2014

We finished our ho-hum burgers, and parted at the door. A quick good-bye as we pulled up our hoods and went into the rain. I don't have a photo of him, but I do have one of the bar in Navarette where we met. I think of Leif often, hoping he received a Camino miracle.

The book I carried for Kathy? It was the one from Leif.

Lesson Three? We are all connected.