

LA CONCHA

american pilgrims on the camino magazine

A Recap of

Our St. James's Day Celebration

in Notre Dame, IN

Spain Re-Opens

Notes from the Annual Meeting
of the Federations in Spain

FINAL REFLECTION:

No Pebble

Letting Go
of Your Burdens

AUTUMN 2021

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COVER Photo: Sunrise on the Meseta, June 2013
by Kip Redick

CRUZ DE FERRO (at right)
Photo by Kaye Robinson Callaway.

Artwork unattributed in this issue is original or licensed and provided by Francine Mastini.



The mission of American Pilgrims on the Camino is to foster the enduring tradition of the Camino by supporting its infrastructure, gathering pilgrims together, and providing information and encouragement to past and future pilgrims.

LA CONCHA

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Dear fellow pilgrims,

The burdens we carry . . . or which drag us along with them, if looked in a more honest light, are many. For this autumn issue of La Concha we invited you to explore the ways in which pilgrimage plays a role in our abilities to learn from them and let them go.

The burdens written of in this issue take many forms. Some pilgrims explore burdens that are both deeply literal and symbolic at the same time. They describe rocks, mementos, tools . . . things they thought they would need on our journey but were found to possess both a material and a mental weight. Things that ultimately symbolized an exhaustive need for order and control.

Other pilgrims have written about how pilgrimage gives us the tools to temper the psychological burdens we face when we return home. And then, there are the burdens of regret, grief, sickness, and loss. Many of the stories shared by pilgrims in this issue explore the way that pilgrimage helped them manage the grief and sorrow of terminal illness, extraordinary life changes, and the death of loved ones.

The stories that you have shared are inspiring and instructive, especially as American Pilgrims mourns the loss of one of our most engaged volunteers, Gene McCullough. And they remind us, as does the memorial to Gene that we offer in this issue, that the way of the pilgrim is the way of constant instruction in how to let go of certainty while holding on to the ineffable joy of community that we are called into. May Gene rest in peace; his heart and spirit will continue to vitalize American Pilgrims' volunteer culture for decades to come.

Megan

Megan Muthupandiyam, Editor in Chief



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The Strength Within: Your Superpower

LETTER FROM A
BOARD MEMBER

by Sara Gradwohl
Mooresville, IN

When we hear the call to walk the Camino de Santiago, sometimes the answer is an immediate and enthusiastic “Yes!” For others, it’s a slow burn that smolders until it explodes.

Both groups have doubts and nagging questions once they commit to walking. Can I expect to walk that far and for that long? What about blisters? What if I fail? Can my body withstand it?

Some will get blisters on the first day. Others gradually develop knee problems, tendonitis, or plantar fasciitis. We persist, putting one foot in front of the other moving toward our destination, harboring thoughts of self-doubt, insecurity, lack of confidence, loneliness, despair, and regret. What was I thinking? Why did I think I could do this? I miss my family and my bed. It’s not what I thought it would be. I can’t physically do this. I don’t want to be here anymore. I’m sick of walking. I want to go home.

Somewhere, deep inside, we discover something many of us didn’t realize we possess: inner strength. That “superpower” I envy in others, embodied by quiet confidence, resilience, and determination. Often accompanied by grace. The “I’ve faced the worst and I came out on the other side with a superpower,” and the knowledge that I will not be broken, no matter how broken I felt in that darkest hour.

We prepare for the Camino in different ways, but no one willingly seeks a trying, difficult experience to “break” us and see how we’ll hold up.

That might be why walking the Camino has such a profound impact on pilgrims. We come home changed. For everything we take in our packs and what we leave at Cruz de Ferro, we come home with something that can’t be taken away. We come home with a superpower.

Maybe that’s why pilgrims seek out other pilgrims. We don’t need to advertise or wear a cape. Your superpower is there. You’ll find it when you need it. Others will help you if you ask and let them. You can help others discover their inner strength, their superpower. We’ll walk together into Santiago, supporting and inspiring each other, shedding tears of joy.

When we walk with others we share our superpower. We can’t contain it. We can’t see it. We discover it. We help others in need.

If you’re not walking the Camino this year, you can still have a profound experience. Use your superpower to help your fellow pilgrims, those experienced, and those who had hoped to walk for the first time. Support each other. Reach out to someone in your chapter who is having a hard time. Listen. Take a walk. Journal. Find a creative outlet. Use the time to remember how we felt in our darkest hour along the Camino before we discovered the strength within. You have it. You walked up the mountain in absolute defiance; you did it your way. Remember that moment and use your superpower of inner strength to help your family, friends, neighbors, even strangers.

We’ll get through this by supporting and loving each other.

We are stronger than we know. 🍀

Editor’s note: Sara, exhausted yet unable to sleep, wrote this as a note on her iPhone at 2:58 am, onboard AA640, PHX-CLT, March 16, 2020, on her way home after the 2020 Gathering of Pilgrims in Lake Tahoe, NV. She didn’t look at it again until just after midnight on July 25, 2021, and first shared it with her fellow pilgrims that evening at the American Pilgrims St. James’s Day Celebration in Notre Dame, IN.



“Don’t stop believing,”
says Sara Gradwohl.
Photo by Jo Halverson.

INTERNATIONAL

Report from the Second International Meeting of Friends of the Camino

by Steve Lytch, on behalf of the American Pilgrims' Representatives to the Second International Meeting of Friends of the Camino Lancaster, PA

The International Meeting of Friends of the Camino is a forum where the community of international associations committed to supporting the Camino de Santiago come together to reflect on the tasks and challenges facing the community of pilgrims who seek Compostela.

Ruben Mendoza and I represented American Pilgrims on the Camino at the second international meeting in Fromista, Palencia, August 27 through 29. We heard from representatives of towns, provinces, and regions along the Camino about how they have weathered the pandemic. Each international association reported on its activities. We heard stories, either virtually or in person, from around twenty associations like ours, ranging from Asia to Latin America to Europe. Author Rebecca Scott shared her perspective on the state of the Camino from her home on the Meseta.

Officers from the Policía Nacional, responsible for security in the cities, and the Guardia Civil, responsible for the countryside, assured us that the Camino is safe. They told us about some innovations to help pilgrims. Guardia Civil developed an app that a pilgrim can activate in an emergency, and responders will know where to find him or her. Four vans have been modified to take first aid to injured pilgrims and carry them to medical care. They are currently operating in Navarre and Galicia with plans to procure more vans and expand to other regions next year. They brought one of the vans from Carrión de los Condes to show us. They also buzzed us with the helicopter that patrols remote areas of the Camino.

In the next issue of La Concha, we'll tell you more about how those who live and welcome us along the Camino have adjusted to the constantly shifting situation due to COVID-19. We'll also report on some of the innovative ways our sister organizations have brought pilgrims together while we've been apart. ☞



Members of the meeting with Guardia Civil's emergency mobile unit. Photo by Steve Lytch.



Jeff and Joyce at the 2021
Celebration in Notre Dame, IN.



Jeff and Joyce on their wedding day,
accompanied by American Pilgrims guests David
and Ann Cook, Wanda Miller, and Pastor Mary.

Volunteer Spotlight: Jeff Bray and Joyce Philpot

*by Meg Muthupandiyar, with Jeff Bray and Joyce Philpot, on behalf of the Giving Thanks Team
Elm Grove, WI and Indianapolis, IN*

Many people who attend American Pilgrims' Gatherings feel it is a positive experience, but can it change the course of one's life? Ask Jeff Bray and Joyce Philpot, who met at the 2020 Lake Tahoe Gathering and got married this summer. We were able to hear their inspiring story at the Celebration in Notre Dame, IN this August, and they've allowed us to share their story.

Jeff, who hailed from Arizona, walked his first pilgrimage in 2017, journeying from Lourdes to St. Jean Pied de Port, then from Santiago to Muxia. Joyce, who lived in Indiana, took pilgrimages in 2018 and 2019—the first from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago, and the second from Lourdes to Burgos.

Jeff attended the Gathering in Lake Tahoe to participate in hospitalero training, and Joyce, who had heard about American Pilgrims on the Camino from chapter coordinator David Cook, decided to attend to support other pilgrims. "I had had a powerful experience," she says in explanation.

While at the Gathering, a mutual acquaintance connected them, knowing that they each had profound experiences during their pilgrimages to Lourdes and St. Jean. They found a well-spring of stories they wanted to share with one another. As Jeff says, "Joyce and I continued our stories and experiences over lunch, and dinner, and breakfast, and lunch, and dinner, and between the Gathering sessions, including walks in the snow."

Having exchanged phone numbers at the Gathering, they spent the next 109 days texting and exchanging the occasional phone call. When he asked her to accompany him to his sister's wedding, Joyce said yes. By their accounts, for six weeks after the wedding, they were inseparable—driving from Kansas to Arizona, then back to Indiana, visiting friends and family along the way. Well before summer was over, it was clear that the relationship was deeply rooted and flourishing. "We enjoyed being with each other so much that it was difficult during the times we were apart," Jeff says.

After a long winter of occasional visits, Jeff moved to Indianapolis in March of 2021. They were married on June 17, 2021, at their home.

They both note that several American Pilgrims on the Camino members played a role in their courtship and supported their journey together. David and Ann Cook, Joyce shares, "are wonderful mentors. [...] They have been very supportive of our relationship growing, and when we spoke to them about our desire to be married, David found a wonderful pastor who agreed to marry us. Not only was she wonderful, in so many ways, but she had also walked the Camino. Pastor Mary has a very open and welcoming heart."

The couple also found support in Wanda Miller, a Camino pilgrim and an American Pilgrims on the Camino member. Wanda encouraged Joyce to accept Jeff's invitation to attend his sister's wedding, and she subsequently participated in their wedding ceremony by reading a scripture passage.

Joyce and Jeff plan to walk the Portuguese Camino from Lisbon through Fatima to Santiago in April 2022. It will be a delayed honeymoon, but also the next stage of an ongoing journey for two pilgrims who, in a desire to give back, found a precious gift given to them as well.

ST. JAMES'S DAY CELEBRATION

What a Celebration!

by Joseph Curro
Annapolis, MD

From July 23-26, 2021, pilgrims gathered at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, IN to celebrate St. James's Day. The weekend included phenomenal Spanish food and wine, talks by pilgrims and special presenters, music and dancing, prayer and fellowship, community service, and—of course—a lot of walking. Here are some highlights of this wonderful gathering to honor St. James, and to celebrate the pilgrim community.



1. Chef Charo's team prepared Tarta de Santiago for the St. James's Celebration at Saint Mary's College, July 24-26, 2021. Photo by Sara Gradwohl.

2. Sustainable farm at Saint Mary's College service project participants got their hands dirty, July 25, 2021. Photo by Sara Gradwohl.

3. A quiet moment at St. Mary's College during the Celebration. Photo by Dave Donselar.

4. John Stackowicz Leads Pilgrims Over the East Race of the St. Joseph River at St. James' Day Celebration. Photo by Dan O'Sullivan.

5. Walking to Notre Dame University, July 26, 2021. Photo by Sara Gradwohl.

6. Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, University of Notre Dame, July 2021. Photo by Sara Gradwohl.

ST. JAMES'S DAY CELEBRATION



7. Pilgrims at the Celebration of St. James. Photo by Sara Steig Gradwohl.

8. American Pilgrims on the Camino hike the LaSalle Trail during St. James's Day Celebration at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. Photo by Dan O'Sullivan.

9. Pilgrims' Mass for St. James's Day. Basilica of the Sacred Heart, University of Notre Dame, July 25, 2021. Photo by Megan Muthupandiyen



10. American Pilgrims on the Camino President Dave Donselar and lifetime member John Venuto prepare for wine-tasting class, under the watchful eye of sommelier Tim Ruys. St. Mary's College, July 23, 2021. Photo by Megan Muthupandiyen

11. Pilgrims repair bikes for St. Mary's College students. Notre Dame, IN, July 25, 2021.

12. Celebrating St. James's Day with flamenco dancing and music. St. Mary's College, July 25, 2021.



USEFUL NEWS FOR PILGRIMS

Join Us for Upcoming National Events!

*by Allison Venuto, for the Membership Team
Dallas, TX*

Please join us through the upcoming Jubilee year as American Pilgrims launches a series of national events for members. Except for a few exceptions, the speakers will be scheduled on the third Thursday of each month 8 pm Eastern time via Zoom.

You'll find information about each event and the link to register below. Each event requires a separate registration.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Thursday, October 21 at 8 pm EDT

Update from the Asociaciones in Frómista Conference in Spain

American Pilgrims Board members Steve Lytch and Ruben Mendoza attended the Asociaciones in Frómista Conference in Spain at the beginning of September. This is a group of associations of municipalities that support the Camino. Join them for an update and a time to ask questions.

[CLICK TO REGISTER FOR OCTOBER 21 EVENT](#)

Thursday, November 20 around 11 am EDT

The Impact We Make Together: A Conversation with an American Pilgrims Grant Recipients Panel

Join members of our Grants committee and a panel of American Pilgrims grant recipients who will talk about the initiatives supported by our organization and share updates from their organizations. Please note the time of this event is pending.

[CLICK TO REGISTER FOR NOVEMBER 20 EVENT](#)

To see events that you have missed, subscribe to American Pilgrims' YouTube channel by following the link below.

[AMERICAN PILGRIMS ON YOUTUBE](#)

We thank you for your continued membership in American Pilgrims on the Camino and your support of the pilgrimage experience. We hope you'll mark your calendar and join us for these events!

¡Buen Camino!




Hablas español?
Parlez-vous français?
Você fala português?

Interested in occasionally translating video and audio documents for American Pilgrims?
 CONTACT COMMUNICATONS@AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG



book reviewers wanted.

Interested in writing an occasional book review for American Pilgrims?
 CONTACT COMMUNICATONS@AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG



Do you know a volunteer who exemplifies American Pilgrims' values community, service, gratitude, and simplicity? Nominate them to be featured in our new quarterly volunteer spotlight. Nominations can be emailed to communications@americanpilgrims.org. Be sure to include their name and tell us why you've nominated them!

AMERICAN PILGRIMS



VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

of

A photograph of a two-story white building with a vine-covered porch and a stone bench in the foreground. The building has several windows, some with white frames. A red plastic chair is leaning against the stone bench. The scene is outdoors, with a paved area in the foreground and a blue sky in the background.

**"Any concern too small to be turned into a prayer
is too small to be made into a burden."**

– Corrie ten Boom (Dutch Resistance fighter)

chapter news

Serendipity on the Road to Santiago (Iowa)

*Dawn Bratsch-Prince, Central Iowa Chapter Co-Coordinator
Ames, IA*

On Saturday, July 17, a group of Central Iowa pilgrims hiked seven miles round-trip along the Chichaqua Trail to the Santiago United Methodist Church, near Mitchellville, IA. The weather was warm, but the canopy of the trees along the trail provided wonderful shade. This was our chapter's second annual hike to Santiago to celebrate the Feast of St. James.

As we turned right off the trail and toward the tiny church, our group passed by a home that had a large and lovely garden, complete with statues, flowers, and benches for visitors to rest. The homeowner was out tending to the garden and called out to us, asking where we were heading. When we explained that our destination was the local Santiago Church, she mentioned that she had keys to the building. "Would you want to go inside for a visit?" she asked.

We were overwhelmed by the serendipity of our chance encounter with this "Camino angel." We learned that the church is only open for Sunday services and special events, and we quickly agreed to her kind offer. We continued our walk until we reached the church grounds where we enjoyed a break in the shade for snacks and drinks.

Our Camino angel, Becky Young, met us on the church steps and welcomed us into the tiny sanctuary. She explained that she has deep roots in this Iowa community and that her ancestors had a role in building this church in the 1890s. Sunday services still draw a small congregation of about 20 community members.

On our return hike, Becky invited us to stop at her prayer garden. Her husband, Mark, joined us, and they shared the story of their garden. It began with one favorite statue. Flowers and trees were later added, and over time the garden grew to include

statues of Jesus, Mary, and many angels. As the garden grew, it attracted many visitors. Becky and Mark added benches and chairs for visitors who wanted to stop and rest or reflect.

Colorful lights illuminate the garden at night. The Youngs' prayer garden is known by the surrounding community as a tranquil resting spot for contemplation and fellowship, but its fame has also spread across the state.

Serendipity, in the guise of Becky Young, met our pilgrim group on our journey to the little Santiago Church in Iowa. The magic of the Camino knows no geographical bounds! ☞



Left: Church of Santiago, near Mitchellville, Iowa.



Below: Central Iowa Chapter members visiting the prayer garden of Camino Angels Mark and Becky Young, near Mitchellville IA.



Left: Members of the Central Iowa Chapter gathered in the Church of Santiago during their July hike near Mitchellville, IA. All Photos by: Dawn Bratsch-Prince.

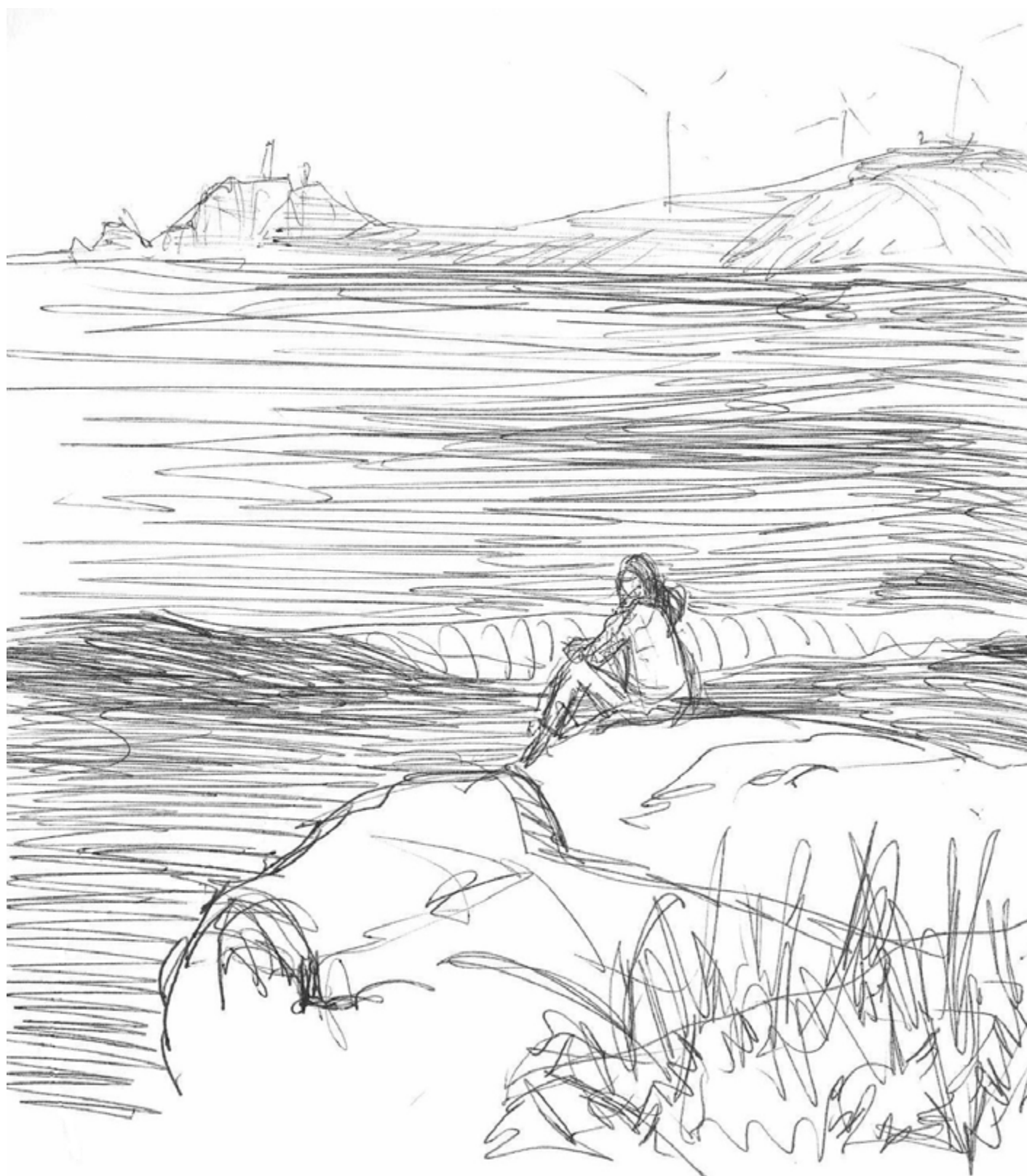
Facing page: Somewhere around Arzua.
Photo by Thom Ryng.

Jacksonville, FL Chapter Creates New Logo

After an interactive hike around the University of North Florida Peace and Botanical Gardens on August 14, Jacksonville Chapter members gathered around the newly unveiled chapter banner showcasing the chapter's new logo. Photo by Jacksonville chapter.



Jacksonville logo contest winner, Beatriz "Bea" Nobles (center), is presented with a certificate of congratulation by Miriam Gallet (left), Jacksonville Chapter co-coordinator and Paula McPhaul, a Chapter Logo Competition judge at the logo unveiling on August 14, 2021. Photo by Jacksonville Chapter.



"Reflection." Pen drawing by Lisa Graves. Drawn in Muxia after the artist's walk on the Camino Portugués.

The Wisconsin Way: The Way is Made by Walking

by Stacey Wittig
Munds Park, AZ

So many of us resonate with the words of Spanish poet Antonio Machado, who said, “Wanderer, the way is made by walking.” He was, of course, making an analogy of the inner pilgrimage. However, when I spoke to a group at the American Pilgrims St. James’s Day Celebration in South Bend this July, I used Machado’s words to sum up the making of the physical Wisconsin Way.

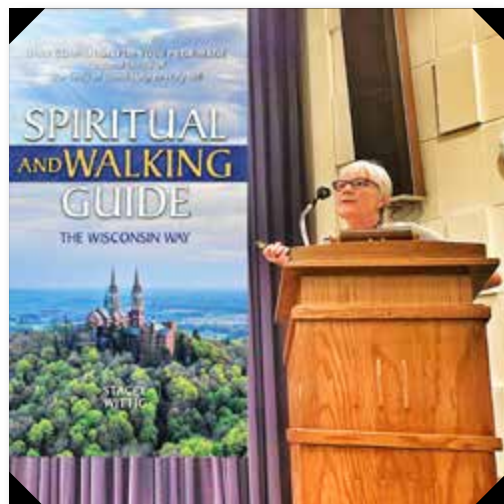
The Wisconsin Way, a pilgrimage loosely based on Camino de Santiago, is in its infancy and is organically growing. “As we walk the route, the Wisconsin Way becomes more developed. As locals see pilgrims, they will get interested in hosting. As more people host walkers, more walkers will come. As more walkers come, locals will see the value in opening albergues and Airbnbs. With increasing tax revenues, municipalities and townships may be open to mark the route. The Way is made by walking. Please come and be the early waymakers,” I invited.

The American pilgrimage is off to a good start with one albergue, purpose-built and operated by Wisconsin Way founder Father Andrew Kurz. Pilgrims can make advance reservations with him and also with a monastery, campgrounds, Airbnbs, and hotels along the Way. Kurz hopes that others will open similar pilgrim houses near the 440-mile pilgrimage route. Currently, the first 154 miles between Our Lady of Good Help outside of Green Bay, WI, and Holy Hill near Milwaukee is mapped and routed in my new guidebook launched at the St. James’s Day Celebration, *Spiritual and Walking Guide: The Wisconsin Way*.

During the presentation at South Bend, I compared and contrasted the Wisconsin Way to the Camino de Santiago. “The American Camino, which highlights shrines, monasteries and European-style churches situated in dramatic glacial landscapes of farmland, forests and lakes, is an unforgettable alternative to walking European pilgrimage routes,” I shared. “And just like the Camino in Spain, there are plenty of holy hotspots along the way.” They include the start point—the only U.S. Marian apparition site approved by the Vatican—roadside shrines, woodland chapels, and Holy Hill Basilica, a climactic ending to your first 154 miles.

However, unlike the Camino, accommodations are scarce. In addition, no yellow arrows mark the path that treads country roads, rails-to-trails gravel paths and wooded Ice Age Trail overlays.

Father Andrew Kurz and Camino author Stacey Wittig on the Wisconsin Way in October 2020. Photo by Stacey Wittig.



Veteran pilgrim Stacey Wittig discusses the Wisconsin Way at a breakout session at the St. James’s Day Celebration in July. Photo by Jorge Cortes.



"Travels with a Stick: A Pilgrim's Journey to Santiago de Compostela"

by Richard Frazer
Birlinn Limited
2019
220 pages

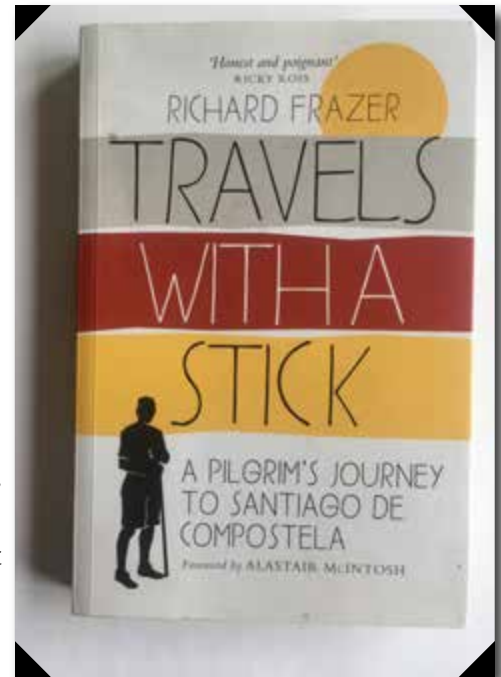
Reviewed by Jerald Stroebele
Anchorage, AK

Yet another Camino memoir, but unlike most others I have read. A Presbyterian minister from Edinburgh, Scotland, begins his pilgrimage to the Catholic city of Santiago de Compostela, Spain. A senior office-bearer in the Church of Scotland, in 2017 he encouraged the church's General Assembly to reverse 500 years of hostility toward pilgrimage—a hostility initiated by Martin Luther in 1520 when he "described pilgrimages as giving occasion for 'countless causes of sin'."

Frazer openly describes his self-consciousness about being a Protestant on the Camino. He begins his pilgrimage in Le Puy-en-Velay, France, but does not disclose his profession until specifically asked during a communal meal at an albergue in Pamplona. And he wants to avoid becoming a "father confessor" to fellow pilgrims. In this he fails.

Frazer begins his Camino a fit walker with a competitive edge: "It was a steep climb up to the region known as Le Domaine du Sauvage. I passed a good number of people on the way." And: "It is, I am afraid to say, probably a bit of an ego thing, that I paced uphill, refused to rest and passed weary pilgrims along the way with a smug inner gleefulness." But he is soon humbled, when three days into his journey, he is severely hurting from blisters and sore tendons. He is forced to take a minibus ride on to the convent of the Angels of Mercy at Saint-Côme-d'Olt for a two-day rest.

Frazer emerges the better man (and walker) for his rest and reflections. Throughout the book, he shows his good, ministerial heart toward his fellow pilgrims: "We have to learn how to live with more humility and respect, and there's a bucketload of that in the Camino community." For those of us who ask ourselves why we walk the Camino—whether for religious, spiritual, cultural or, daresay, recreational purposes—Frazer provides a bucketload of pilgrimage history. His is a spiritual journey, and this delightfully rubs off on the reader.



Egeria, Spain's First Peregrina

by George Greenia
Williamsburg VA

In the early 380s, centuries before the discovery of St. James's tomb in a repurposed Roman mausoleum in northwest Spain, a Galician noblewoman became Spain's first known peregrina. Egeria visited sacred sites in the Holy Land and Sinai Peninsula on her own and wrote for her beloved sisters back home.

She is almost the earliest and certainly the most forthcoming Christian pilgrim to describe a freshly baptized world of abbots, bishops, and liturgies in all their "sensorial surround." The churches she visited in Palestine were smoky with incense, bright with bejeweled vessels, lit by banks of candles, and loud with voices raised in full-throated worship. Worshippers' excited cries could be heard beyond church walls and "as far away as the city." There were no pre-packaged histories of the places she revered except for what was already recorded in Holy Writ. Egeria simply got site briefings and guided tours from resident monks or cadged oral lore from locals. Many biblical sites had no sanctuary built over them, others lay in ruins. When there was a church community, she joined in its liturgies.

Egeria is remarkable for journeying to the opposite end of the Roman Empire before Christian pilgrimage became a 'thing'. All she sought were the dusty villages and hillsides where Jesus and other figures from the Bible spoke and performed their memorable deeds.

She met with local monks and common believers who stood around to recite the Scripture passages that spoke of their patch of sacred history. Egeria took part in "legacy re-enactments" of biblical history. No one gave a tour, no one sold souvenirs. Her local hosts were not custodians of shrines, just living successors—even kinsmen—to the characters in the bible stories Egeria splices into her account. She finds nothing to report about inter-religious tensions between Christian and Jews, or among Christian sects. (The birth of Islam comes hundreds of years later.)

The Christian West was still inventing its choreography of religious routines. The emperor Constantine had made Christianity the official religion of a sprawling Empire and for travelers like Egeria the Mediterranean was a fairly secure Roman lake. Constantine's own mother, Helena, the "amateur archeologist" who

discovered all sort of artifacts like Jesus's original cross, became a model for other women visitors to Palestine. Cranky St. Jerome griped about the lady visitors wandering around 'his' home turf in Jerusalem. Setting out in the fourth century, Egeria enjoyed a historic interlude of expanded feminine mobility hardly seen until the 19th century's upper class Grand Tour.

Women pilgrims to Santiago started to outnumber men some years ago, especially when you don't count the bikers who are almost all men. Egeria is a great role model for independent women forging fresh spirituality on ancient foundations.



2nd century Fayyum mummy portrait of a Roman noblewoman. Photo by University of Manchester.



11th cent. copy of Egeria's travels, Arezzo, Italy. Photo by Wikimedia Commons.



St. James in the Cathedral of Oviedo. Photo by Jim Larocco.

Letting Go of Burdens



Sello art. Photo by Miren Forero.

To Let Someone Else Carry Your Burden, or To Not Let Someone Else Carry Your Burden...That Is the Question

by Kay Shue
Dalton, OH

The newness has worn off. The quaint towns near the French border are gone. Our legs are strong but our feet are bruised and sometimes our spirits as well. Numerous people have started shipping their bags to the next destination to lighten their load. I am not judging those people because we all must walk our own Camino. However, for me, the Camino continues to become a metaphor for life. There are many people in the world who carry great pain in their lives every day and they cannot “ship that pain ahead” to lighten their load. So, I have chosen to carry my own pack as I think and pray for those who carry heavy burdens.

Yesterday, as our group of five chose to walk an additional seven kilometers through the afternoon sun to the next town on already bruised feet, my friend Francoise asked to carry my pack for me (she had shipped her pack ahead and was light on her feet and knew I was very tired). I told her that I would carry my own pack, but then I remembered the song I sang one hour earlier for the group of pilgrims I was journeying with.

*Will you let me be your servant? Let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.
We are pilgrims on a journey. We are travelers on the road.
We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.¹*

I handed my pack to Francoise. I continue to be grateful for friends on this journey of learning. ☞

The Spiritual Armor of the Camino

by Joseph A. Curro, Jr., Assistant Editor at La Concha
Arlington, VA

Pilgrims imbue the Cruz de Ferro with a deep mystique. In approaching the towering pole and iron cross to lay down our stones, we can be forgiven if we feel a bit like Jack planting his magic beans and start waiting for a miracle.

In reality, there is no magic about it. The Cruz de Ferro is about hopes and dreams, worries and concerns, and facing fears. Yes, it is a place to release our burdens, but also to don spiritual armor to protect us in the face of future challenges.

When my daughter Savannah and I made our pilgrimage in 2019, I was serving as a local



Joseph A. Curro, Jr. and Savannah Curro at the Cruz de Ferro, June, 2019. Photo by a generous pilgrim.

¹ Gillard, Richard. (1977). The Servant Song. On Scripture in Song. Brentwood, TN: Brentwood Benson Publishing

|| LETTING GO OF BURDENS ||

elected official, and she was a newly-minted public school graduate. We left for Spain in the midst of a ballot campaign to rebuild our town's crumbling high school and sidewalks.

Rather than carrying random stones from home, we opted for deeper meaning. I picked up the shrapnel of a broken paving brick near Town Hall. Savannah, in full cap and gown, palmed some debris from the front steps of the building where she had studied for four years.

Our "stones" turned out to be good luck talismans. After receiving the news that the ballot questions had been successful, they became thanksgiving offerings which we dutifully carried over the coming weeks to their final resting places. At the foot of the cross I prayed that future generations of students would have the same educational opportunities as my daughter, and—as I let go of my bit of sidewalk—I said a special prayer for my father and for others who suffer from mobility issues that prevent them from enjoying the gift of the Camino.

That should have been the end of the story. Right?

Wrong!!!

Over the next year-and-a-half, I accumulated new burdens, all against the shared backdrop of the global pandemic and a country that seemed to be tearing itself apart. I suffered through the deaths of countless relatives, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. I experienced job challenges and family tensions. I was caught in the crossfire of extreme local civic unrest.

Just when I was beginning to wonder if my pilgrimage was even "worth it," a friend pointed out that the Camino had strengthened me for the year ahead.



He was right. I had indeed donned my spiritual armor, but I needed to be reminded that my Camino had only just begun. ☼

Santiago in My Backpack

by Jim Larocco
Alexandria, VA

"When you walk the camino, you lose your burdens and find your soul."

When I heard that from a veteran peregrina, my immediate question was, "Why is the word 'and' in the sentence and not 'but'?" She replied, "Because one follows the other." I must confess that after walking from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago, I felt I had lost my burdens but I didn't feel I had found my soul. Perhaps that is one reason I felt the need to walk again...and again...and again.

Something changed during my fourth camino from Lyon to Oviedo on the Camino del Salvador. Perhaps it was due to the mountains, the quiet, or the Asturians, a people of deep faith and love of life (like the famous chef José Andrés). Whatever it was, I began to feel something happening inside me. This was magnified by the reception of the villagers at Bendueños who opened their hearts to us. We had heard this was the most welcoming albergue on any camino. The hospitality and good cheer remains unrivaled in our experience.

When we arrived in Oviedo and entered the cathedral, kneeling in front of the large statue of Santiago stirred some strong emotions. A few moments later in the Cámara Santa, as I looked up at the 12th-century pillar-statue of brothers James (Santiago) and John, I felt a timeless bond with those who had walked before. When we received our certificate (the Salvadorana), I noticed that the cathedral sold a foot-tall replica of the statue of James and John. When I bought it, my wife asked if I really intended to carry it to Santiago since the very next day we would begin walking the Camino Primitivo. I said yes...my burdens had vanished and this would re-

James and John pillar in the Holy Chamber of the Oviedo Cathedral before the Cámara Santa.
Photo by Jim Larocco.

place them. It would lift me up, not weigh me down. And so it did.

Back home, we have placed that statue in our main room as a constant reminder of what the camino means. Some call it a spiritual awakening; I prefer to call it a human awakening that takes us back to our oldest roots, showing the way to what really matters in life. ☞



Self-portrait. Photo by Dianne Homan.

Of Many Steps

by Dr. James R. Brooks
Salem, OR

Standing in the post office at Pamplona, I rejoiced. I was mailing home a couple of pounds of unnecessary items. The Correos agent was my confessor: I had packed my fears.

Before leaving home, I prided myself in packing light. With a laugh, I set aside items such as the medical kit with the fancy case and the paramedic-quality scissors. I felt so smart to opt for the simple ziplock bag sans scissors.

Three days after leaving St. Jean Pied de Port, I was letting go of my pride. Having shipped a coat, socks, and more, I was relieved. Walking out of Pamplona, I was confident I had accomplished the big letting-go.

The Camino was not done with me, however. The reusable liquid container I had carefully filled with soap was forgotten in an albergue bathroom. A tripod clamp dropped out of my bag along the way into Burgos.

The most comical experience was in Foncebadón. After dinner, the topic of packing fears came up. Long story short, I began spreading my medical kit on a table for review by my peers. After many laughs at the fears I continued to carry (250 cotton swabs for a 30+ day journey!!!), I left half of my medical kit on the table for others to enjoy.

Upon quick reflection, what I carried was pride, fear and comfort. I could weigh this in kilograms per step for an entire Camino. Then I learned to let go, to rest in a more lasting experience that is freedom. Having fewer items to carry opened up more time to enjoy life, to focus on my pilgrim companions and fully engage with the Way. I most cherish the opportunity the Camino gave me to learn how to trust—trust the Camino will provide, that I am enough as I am, that God will see me through. Letting go gave way to trust.

Last week, I confessed to my barber that I only use one soap in the shower and we laughed. I still enjoy the many steps of letting go. ☞

|| LETTING GO OF BURDENS ||

My Name is Daniel

by Daniel De Kay
Sebastapol, CA

When I left home in September of 2002, headed for the Camino Frances, I was called Dan.

That name isn't used in Spanish, though; it's either Dani or Daniel.

I walked over 1,000 miles on my first pilgrimage, from St. Jean Pied de Port to Finisterre, then back to St. Jean. Walking that far gave me time away from all that was familiar and I began to see, and more importantly to feel, parts of myself that I hadn't touched in a long time. There were days when I walked along crying. There were days when I had continuing conversations with myself—out loud, mind you—about many aspects of who Dan was. There were parts of him and his history that I was not at all proud of.

At nearly 1,500 meters above sea level, the Cruz de Ferro is the highest point of the Camino. It's a pilgrim tradition to leave a stone there, imbued with whatever prayers or hopes or cares the pil-

grim chooses to leave behind. After those weeks of conversations, tears, revelations, and sore feet, there were a number of things that I decided I would leave there atop that pile of stones. Along with thanks to my parents and friends for who they were in my life, I wanted to leave behind the anger, fear, mistrust, and insecurity that I for so long had held inside myself. These were parts of me that I no longer wanted to be. I wanted to be the person I was coming to know as I walked the Camino.

When a pot of water boils, bubbles form at the bottom of the pan, then float to the surface and pop! they are gone. I'd had two months in which to let many bubbles hidden inside me float to the surface and dissipate into the ether. I felt like those bubbles were the pieces of me I no longer wanted to be. When I arrived back in St. Jean Pied de Port after two months of walking I felt much, much lighter inside.

I left Dan at the Cruz de Ferro and walked on as Daniel, with the intention of being a person I could always be proud of. Now every time I hear my name it is a powerful reminder of what I learned on the Camino, and of who I am. ☪



Camino days merge into a continuous movement of sun and shadow, hunger and thirst, fatigue and sleep.
Photo by Mark Patrzalek.



CAMINO

Ancient stones patiently lying
In wait, beyond awareness
Of a lone woman
Carrying her fears on her back.
Thoughts mixed with sweat,
And muscles that surrendered
Long ago to the inevitability
Of ten thousand steps per day.
Each morning a new frontier,
A Nalgene bottle of water
Hours ago warmed by
The Spanish sun,
Dances to the rhythm
Of her steps.
The trees, fallen leaves, and dirt,
Once considered pedestrian
Are seen with new eyes.
Life has become a symphony
Of shades of green, earthy scents,
Distant church bells, singing brooks,
Stone markers and eucalyptus trees.
To her right, silently swaying,
A man davens under a wooden
Shelter, his tallit witness to
His complete love of the book
He holds gently in his hands.
She continues her journey.
Her only companion now is
The Camino, new to her
Yet as old as the wisdom
It offers to those it beckons
To its path...

*Tarryn Jamison
November 2019*

Leboreiro, Galicia. Photo
by Thom Rynge



Misericordia

by Ron "Willie" Williams
Winfield, IL

A five-hundred-mile walking pilgrimage won't escape pain, blisters, and tendinitis. My feet were crabby companions with their sharp, stabbing ache as I limped into Melide. Well-developed bulbous blisters were stinging and throbbing, and I was shocked to see two new blisters had grown atop unhealed blisters. Yes, there were blisters on top of blisters! I was in misery.

Thankfully, the clinic in Melide had answers—a gel cushion and strong anti-inflammatory meds got me back up on tender feet and I was soft-stepping my way the next day. Joined by three Irish gals, their stories and brogue tickled me from head to toe. What foot pain?

I stopped at a roadside cafe for lunch and to rest my tender feet. Ten feet from the trail, I watched pilgrim after pilgrim trudge through the gooey mud, dodging large stones and the eroded gully in the center of the trail.

To my shock, a bright, tangerine-colored, three-wheeled cart rolled past on the Camino, carrying a young adult male weighing about 150 pounds. He was paralyzed and struggling with other severe special needs. A man strained forward with a grasp on the front-wheel handles. Two other men plowed in sync, one on each rear-wheel handle. All three grunted ahead step after step, escorted by two women saddled under heavy backpacks with supplies.

Sadly, I was too injured to help. How could these five manage this? They were all well over sixty years old! They chose to strap human deadweight in a cart to walk a trail that holds risk for even the sure-foot-

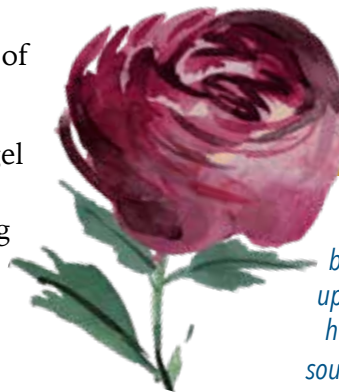
ed pilgrim. I marveled as they struggled, wove, and slid their way through the muck.

Was it difficult? Fraught with potential injury? Laborious? Miserably painful? Undeniably so. The "why" was clear: to demonstrate love and mercy for the paralyzed young man.

The Spanish word for mercy is misericordia. Miseri translates to "misery," cor means "with," and dia means "God." Misery with God. That is, God is with us in our misery, our suffering.

The old adage, "Misery loves company" holds a new twist when we are mindful that God is with us in our misery: He brings others to carry us through it.

Editor's Note: This article is an excerpt from Willie Williams' memoir, Lost and Found along The Way. 🌿



Heavy, or Light?

by Dorothea Biernesser
Alexandria, VA

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

(Matthew 11:28-30, New International Version)

How far had you gone on your Camino before you realized you were carrying too much?

On our Camino from Sarria to Santiago, my husband and I were weighed down by a physical burden. We had too much, both on my back and in our (daily transferred) bags.

We weren't just carrying what we "needed." We were also carrying a lot of what I "wanted" in case of trouble. A double sleep sack. Five rain ponchos (we reused two). Twice as many clothes than we actually wore. One long-sleeved shirt and set of pants. Bathing suits. Hiking boots, gym shoes, sandals, dressier shoes. More medicines and bandages than I ever had use for (not including the ones I *did* need.) Truly, a triumph of want over need.

LETTING GO OF BURDENS

The second, for me, was a heavy mental burden. I'd spent time making elaborate backup plans for imagined obstacles. I carried worries that I could have just laid down, including whether I was going too fast for my husband, and whether he was resenting it. Even when I was walking, I kept worrying. For a while. At least, until I slipped and fell, tearing a little skin off my knee.

With some halting help from my overly fatigued husband, I washed my wounded knee, and gratefully accepted a Band-Aid from a fellow peregrina. By that time, I finally got to a place where I was too weary that I simply gave up those mental burdens to God, and started praying over them instead. It would probably not surprise you if I said that those burdens felt lighter. And after our return from Santiago, every time the burdens get heavier, I remember Who has offered to carry them, and what He offers in return.

So, when on your Camino did you realize you were carrying too much? Are you still carrying too much? Why? ☪

Drop the Baggage!

*by Paul J Sniadecki, South Bend Chapter Coordinator
South Bend, IN*

This essay is not about the type of baggage one carries on planes, trains, or automobiles while traveling. Rather, it is about the “baggage” we carry, whether we recognize it, or not. Pilgrims might be more aware of this type of baggage than others. So what is this baggage, and can it be dropped?

Decades ago my work life provided an opportunity to help implement a top-to-bottom Quality Process initiative within a major organization. It was all about headquarter's desire to achieve “break-through” performance. Our implementation training was extensive and full of technical tools and techniques. Interestingly, there was a small segment about the need to “Drop the Baggage.” The facilitators claimed the need existed in each individual work location.

We spent about 15 minutes in that training module.

The details on how to drop the baggage were limited. We completed the training without ever really learning how one does it, yet alone how to achieve it in a workplace that had accrued years of grievances, unfriendly colleague relationships, and scores of supervisors limited in emotional intelligence. The concept, however, was not forgotten.

Fast-forward decades to fall 2019. I was retired and embarking on my first Camino experience. We left the United States on the spur-of-the-moment, accompanying a relative who needed an immediate redemptive experience. The only planning we did was to purchase airline tickets to Madrid.

That was a big change from how I traveled before, so I dropped something there.

During the first day on the Camino, my companions dropped belongings from their backpacks to travel lighter. I did not...so I missed an opportunity there.

Along the Camino I began to realize there was a lot of “stuff” in my life that I needed to drop. When I entered the Cathedral Plaza I took off my backpack and realized I should have dropped it sooner.

Maybe a second Camino will help. Learning how to drop the baggage is not easy, but necessary—I think I might finally understand how to. ☪

Up to O'Cebreiro in a Blizzard on the Camino de Santiago

*by John Harrison, Santa Barbara Chapter Coordinator
Santa Barbara, CA*

By the 43rd day of the Camino that I had put off for 50 years, I was hardened. I had gotten through the ‘What am I doing here?’ moment, lost 43 pounds (yes!!), and felt there was nothing new the Camino could throw at me. I scoffed politely at the hostel host who handed out tiny Band-Aids to each peregrina or peregrino as we exited to begin our journey to O'Cebreiro. I thought, *What a strange sense of humor!* But then I remembered how the Camino can bring out the joyful comic in all of us.

“Why the Band-Aid?” I asked, then laughed at the response. It was for the tip of my nose.

‘Why?’ I asked. I was not even shocked when I heard that the bandage was meant to protect my nose from being scraped as I climbed up the steep slope to my destination, that charming hamlet of warm and cozy dorms with the church right at the end of the climb. I swept out of the hostel with just a t-shirt and over-jacket on, wearing G-Factor breathable boots and medium weight wool trek socks, not yet regretting my earlier decision to discard my fleece and sweater for future pilgrims to use.

Anyway, all was as expected as I marched up the first quarter-mile of the gradually increasing slope, but soon the smaller became larger stones, and the larger stones turned to rocks. A light mist settled on the path. The tiny droplets felt pleasantly refreshing, even as the droplets changed to a light rain and made walking uphill a bit slippery. The mist then changed to a gentle fogginess, and then suddenly, like a wild-haired wraith, a *really* cold wind blasted down-slope right into the face.

All niceness was gone as the wind began to sting, and I realized I was in a hard-wind ice storm, climbing nearly vertically. For every step up it seemed I slid back a half step. *And it was cold.* But the Camino wasn’t done. A full-on blizzard then announced itself with a screaming wind and eye-blinding snow.

Going up that slope seemed like it would never end but I had acquired the mental trick of thinking *Even this will end sometime, so what’s the problem?* It was a wonderful walk up even though I lost sight of the path on occasion and had to just stand and wait for a blizzard gust to give me visibility. When it did, I tried not to look over the side of the path to the valley below. Eventually, bone-tired and mentally drained from the need to be constantly alert, I reached the top. The snow was quietly drifting down, letting enough light through for me to see Santa María la Real church.

I entered and just sat in that quietness pondering how much the climb to O’Cebreiro had just taught me about life’s hardships, the wonder of nature, and the joy of being alive.

I wouldn’t have missed it. ☞

A Lighter Way of Life

by Marian Gonsior
Westland, MI

Back from Spain, I wanted nothing more than to immerse myself in the beauty of *Hispania* once again. Instead, I prowled around the house, disgusted by all the material things I had accumulated. So much stuff! On the Camino de Santiago, we survived with so much less. Better than any prescription, the Camino lightened our burdens.

It’s similar to how every time we leave our homes, we exist outside that mundane world of utility bills, dirty dishes, and to-do lists. What seems essential before the path—the make-up, the new hiking shirt, the multiple guidebooks—is left forgotten at the bottom of the pack, some 20 kilometers outside of Tui.

In the rhythm of walking, the layers of protection we’ve built up to defend ourselves from the outside world recede. We emerge as pilgrims, stripped of external signs, known only by the heartiness of our laughter and the candor of our tales. We met a daughter who joined her father on the path so he would not have to travel alone. We washed our clothes on an outdoor washboard together with a pair of sisters, the older always leaving before the other was ready. As pilgrims we learned that not only does the Camino provide companions, but also a freedom from the burdens that weigh us down. Fears of not being good enough, of being last, are replaced with the joy of being, the joy of the path! If I, at 62, can walk 30 kilometers in one day, is there any other challenge in daily life that I’m not up to? Simplicity becomes the pilgrims’ strength, wherever they might be, whether cleaning out the closet or hobbling into Santiago de Compostela’s Praza do Obradoiro. ☞



|| ARTS & CULTURE ||

Lifting Some Burdens Along The Way

by Raymond Ortiz
Santa Fe, NM

You came to me again, as if in a dream. Pilgrim from Japan, young mother on her new journey of grief for her unborn child, miscarriage of hope, each step tracing out new hope for another life. Pilgrim from America carrying not only his pack but the grief from the loss of his beloved father, all on top of the pack of the nurse, now his companion, who cared for his father during his dying days. Not yet a couple, they slowly moved through stages of the Camino, through stages of grief. French Canadian pilgrim balancing the load of difficult relationships heaped onto her professional life, deeply committed to healing patients in pain. Light on her feet from years of walking many different paths with a mindful presence. Pilgrims from Ireland, treading heavily under large packs worn by new walkers, yet under heavier burdens, trying to reconcile their faith with the truths of newly revealed abuses by their clergy, priests and nuns alike, against boys and unwed mothers.

Pilgrim couples, the first from Paris, walking from Paris in their seventies, with their 50-year marriage and memories of losses of some of their children in tow. All of this heaped onto their other belongings on the wheeled sled behind them that they hauled by their double harness. Trying to find a new life, a way of releasing. A younger Spanish couple at the beginning of their relationship, each having already traveled through their own tortuous pasts but having crossed an important threshold that lay beneath my own feet: we all choose to carry, or have heaped upon us, a certain load. It is not just the weight that matters, it is how we choose to carry it.

My heart fell into the rhythms of these stories, into deeper memories of my life. Profound losses of my grandparents who raised me, who taught me to love, to try and pass this gift to others. The loss of my second child in miscarriage, finding hope through my grandchildren, gifts from my son. Balancing numerous family and court obligations on scales of justice not blind to my absence. Reaching for scant time left on my life's pilgrimage, understanding that it is in the listening to pilgrim stories, in their telling, that a soul path emerges from the mists at dawn, leading out to the next horizon.

Letter From the Camino: Farewell, Greenland!

by Leah Wilkinson-Brockway
Spokane, WA

Dear Pilgrims, greetings from Milepost 2,949 on my virtual pilgrimage from Spokane to St. Jean Pied de Port.

Since my last letter, we have crossed from the Capital Nuuk to Cape Farewell, Inatsisartut (Greenland), an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. The wide Atlantic Ocean beckons. Our virtual compass is set for County Cork, Ireland. For the walk over the water, travel light and have a huge amount of faith. Shed any unnecessary weight. Jesus says His burden is light. That is just what we need.

Yesterday, I made my list of burdens, physical and spiritual. So far, they are increasing:

1. Left heel pain for two years.
2. The pandemic.
3. My backpack.
4. Fear of the future, the Great Unknown.
5. Grief, loss, and sorrow.
6. My family, hopes, and obligations.
7. Stuff at home, a lifetime of collecting.
8. The joys of my life, my four remaining cats.
9. My state in life, i.e. married-divorced.
10. Memories, details, traumas, wonders, and joys.

Thank you, Lord, for my giant 69-year-old pack of burdens. There are heavier pack days and lighter pack days, as my energy ebbs and flows, as my spirit resists and yields to the will of the Divine Spirit. More gentleness is always necessary. What is the hurry? When we reach the destination, there is always another. Arrive ready for more. Rest for a spell. Put that pack down. There is nothing better than a

rest—an hour, an afternoon, a day or more of pure rest. Then the Camino beckons again, and we shoulder our packs. Can we avoid post-Camino empty feelings, like astronauts who went to the moon? Maybe. Just trust the Lord, who already has His plan waiting. Ask Him while we walk the ocean.

Walk each day like it is all there is. Our burdens, all that they comprise, are a share of the Cross. A gift of the Camino is knowing we are all on the Great Pilgrimage, destination Heaven. We are pilgrims for life. Lay your burden down, sort, readjust. After a rest, hoist again and trudge on, limp or roll. Prayer or a song lightens the load. A good companion always makes the distance shorter. Gratitude is the antidote for most trouble, even pain. Praise to God our Father. Peace to you. Love, Leah ☪

Editor's note: This is the tenth reflection from Leah G. Wilkinson-Brockway about being a pilgrim in her own town as she walks daily to travel the collective distance, as the crow flies, from her home in Spokane, WA, to St. Jean Pied de Port (approximately 5,055 miles). This is her Camino for now. Ultimately, her goal is to walk 500 miles of the Camino Francés from St. Jean Pied de Port, arriving in Santiago to celebrate her 70th birthday in 2022. You will find Leah's previous reflections in the June 2019, September 2019, December 2019, March 2020, June 2020, September 2020, December 2020, March 2021, and Summer 2021 issues of La Concha.



The author and Diesel the dog take in a sunset atop a bluff. Photo by Halle Kuhar-Pitters.



Pilgrims at the Cruz de Ferro.
Photo by Cathay Reta.

Picking up Stones, Leaving Burdens

by Cathay O. Reta
Spokane Valley, WA

Today the trail ascends to an altitude of 2,600 feet, leveling off at Alto del Perdón. As I start up the path, my heart grows heavy. It whispers what I have to do today. I'm angry about it. I don't want to do it. I'm fuming. Slowly I ascend both the hill and the anger.

At the top is the sculptural depiction of pilgrims making their way west on the Camino. Wind turbines from the next hill over are towering above them. The wind is cold, loud, and relentless. Alone, I sit. Tears fall from my eyes. I forgive David. I forgive him for dying and leaving me, releasing an anger I didn't even realize I carried.

The descent is a long, hard walk over loose stones, but I feel lighter. I do a roll-call of body parts—they all check in and report that they are fine. I pick up two small stones. I add one to an altar to the side of the rocky path, thankful that I no longer carry this burden.

Two weeks later I reach the Cruz de Ferro. I pull the second stone from my pocket and set it down, nestled among a collection of similar stones. Small ones, large ones, round, flat. Some have phrases written on them. Others have names and dates. Some, like mine, are plain. Their mere presence is sufficient. David would approve. As I run my fingers across its smooth surface, I whisper my final good-bye.



Looking back, I appreciate that the Camino was gentle with me, drawing out the burden I didn't even know I carried. When I set out for Spain I imagined it was to plan what I would do with my next 30 years, now that my husband had died. I thought it would be a mental activity. I didn't know that I had unfinished business. I think that perhaps it is these unknown, unnamed, unspoken burdens that weigh us down the most. We're unaware when they distort our perceptions. We feel a bit off, but are not quite sure why. Ah, but when such burdens surface to our conscious mind and we let them go, true bliss follows. We're transformed.

I wonder how many burdens the Camino has helped unsuspecting pilgrims to name and to discard along the Way. ☪



Cathay Reta saying a final good-bye at the Cruz de Ferro. Photo by Amy Kim.

Burden of Thanksgiving

by Kevin Hargaden
Greenville, GA

“Gracias,” I said to the priest as I selected a rock from the basket he had extended to me. As part of the pilgrim blessing ceremony at the end of Pilgrim Mass in Santa Maria in O’Cebreiro, he presented each of us pilgrims with a stone as a remembrance. The ceremony clearly moved and thrilled the other pilgrims. They all clapped when it was complete. I was a bit put off; why give us a rock? These pilgrims are heading west to Santiago. They have already passed Cruz de Ferro. I thought pilgrimage was about laying our burdens down, leaving the literal rock as a symbol of all the metaphorical, physical, emotional, and spiritual burdens we carry so that we can walk through life lighter and hopefully better. Why give us a stone as a keepsake? Yet I realized this happy Franciscan priest wanted to bless us pilgrims on our Way. So I took it with me, dropped it into my mochila at the albergue, and went to dinner.

That year I had walked the Camino Primitivo from Oviedo to Santiago, but had scheduled time to walk home-ward as well, retracing my steps from previous Caminos on the Camino Francés, but this time heading east.

A week later, walking up Monte Irago from El Acebo, I paused and read the historical markers that tell the story of Cruz de Ferro. Because of my blistered feet in the past, I had not considered them before. The still, overcast day invited reflection. The markers mentioned a tradition for pilgrims to bring a stone back from Santiago to lay under the Cross as a sign of having completed their pilgrimage and as a promise to live life as a gift. What a lovely tradition I only heard about a hundred yards from Cruz de Ferro! Yet once again, the Camino had provided what I needed. I dug into my mochila for the little stone the priest had given me. It was a small piece of grey slate with a bright yellow arrow painted on it. I waited my turn as other pilgrims went to the base of the Cross. Then I made my gift, grateful for being a pilgrim, and left rejoicing with the burden of thanksgiving. ☪



Scallop shells donativo along the Camino Inglés, just outside Ferrol, Spain, May 2019.
Photo by Sara Gradwohl.

|| LETTING GO OF BURDENS ||



Before It's Too Late

by Francine Mastini, La Concha Team Member
Tacoma, WA

"And you think the wrong you've done, is just too much to be forgiven. / But you know that isn't true / just lay your burden down, He has forgiven you." ("Lay Your Burden Down" by Chuck Girard)

I met Lisa when our common postal worker mashed my peonies. On an internet community board, she posted about her issue with the same postal worker. I emailed her. She said, "come by and have tea and scones." She was funny, constantly learning, and fearless. From that moment, we united and were inseparable. Until we weren't. For five years, the end of that friendship was like a rock, holding me in place and keeping me from moving forward. I was stuck reliving the anger, pain, and frustration. It got to the point where I wouldn't drive past her house two blocks away ... our friendship was over in a moment of careless words.

It took the adversity of the 100-year floods of Spain in 2016 to truly make me come to that place in my heart where I could begin to pull that rock off my back and cast it away. I needed a Camino where I could lay that burden down on the muddy ground of the Meseta.

It wasn't enough to simply leave it on that muddy plain, though. While much of the hard mental work was hammered out in the cold, dirt, rain, mud, hail, and the endless endurance of stinky wet shoes, the true healing came much later after I came home. Through a series of small but significant overtures, the end of icy silence came. Maybe it had come before, but only now, after my Camino, was I ready to receive it.

I said, "I lay that down on a Spanish road." She said, "Come by and have a scone when this pandemic is over." We chatted by text and email. We forgave each other. We healed.

Then, she died suddenly from colon cancer. It took her quickly and mercifully, and that bright light was gone in an instant. She was the person who got me hooked on hiking and inspired me to "have an adventure!" I am grateful to God, to her, and to the Camino that I had the space to lay my burden down before it was too late. 🍪

FINAL REFLECTION

No Pebble

*by Shoshana D. Kerewsky
Eugene, OR*

It's about 2:00 AM. This is when a rebound medication effect wakes me, sweaty and alert, no matter what time I go to sleep. I'm not sure which medication or combination causes this, but it's been consistent in the 6 years since I finished what's called "active" cancer treatment. I already know there's nothing that will put me back to sleep for at least an hour, maybe two, maybe not at all. What I can do, though, is calm my thoughts, relax my body, and be present in the moment.

I recall my Camino memories, those long, sweltering nights on sticky plastic-encased mattresses, my rumpled silk bag liner below me and my thin cotton shawl across my torso. Focusing on my breath, I attune to the sensations around me: Pilgrims breathing, sometimes snoring. Odors of soap, mint toothpaste, a little mildew from the shower drains, a little manure despite the prohibition on boots in the dorm room, damp wool socks, apples. Bed frames creak, a small truck rumbles past, a fly buzzes at the closed window. I concentrate on a faint cool draft against my feet, remembering walking that morning in a light breeze, reaching the foot of the Cruz de Ferro.

I have two stones: One, a smooth black river stone that I've had on my desk or in my pocket at work for years. It's to lay down the burden of unrealistic wishes about my job, to symbolize letting go of attachments. The other I picked up on the Camino. It's a jagged bit of something unremarkable. It's uncomfortable to hold, not a pleasure. It's been the repository for my negative feelings while walking: it's too hot, it's too hard, my feet hurt, everything is closed, this was a stupid decision. To set it down is to make myself knock it off already with my interior kvetching. I'm with a friend who joined me for part of this pilgrimage. We're old friends; we've walked together before. She has a stone in her hand, too. We set them down. We continue walking. We don't talk about what we released among all those others, the polished rocks, millstones, contributions to the cairn. We know each other well. We don't need to share our challenges and hopes, sorrows and intentions.

I breathe on the Camino, and I breathe at home. I am not comfortable, and I am at rest. Ultreia, no pebble in my shoe.

A pilgrim prepares for the night. Albergue de Santa Irena, A Coruña, Galicia.
October 13, 2018. Photo by Thom Ryn.



|| NEXT ISSUE ||

Submissions to our Winter 2021 issue close on Nov 21st, and we would love to receive your reflections!

The September theme is **THE END IS THE BEGINNING: PILGRIMAGE AS A CIRCULAR JOURNEY**

Above the southern door of the Cathedral of Santiago, named La Puerta de las Platerías, an Alpha and Omega are carved, the familiar monogram of Christ. Notably, however, the letters are backwards: The Alpha has changed places with the Omega.

The end is at the beginning for those pilgrims who pass through the door. Having reached the cathedral, one starts another Camino. In departing, you have started a new life.

For the Winter issue, think about pilgrimage as a circular journey. What does that mean to you, and how does it change your sense of yourself, of history, of time?

Please explore this theme for the Winter 2021 issue by sharing images and essays that communicate:

- Where one ending has led you into new beginnings as a pilgrim and a person.
- How pilgrimage has changed your sense of history—personal or public.
- How your pilgrim experience changed your sense of time.

Please limit essays to 400 words maximum.

The form for submissions can be found by following this link: [La Concha Article Online Submission Form](#)

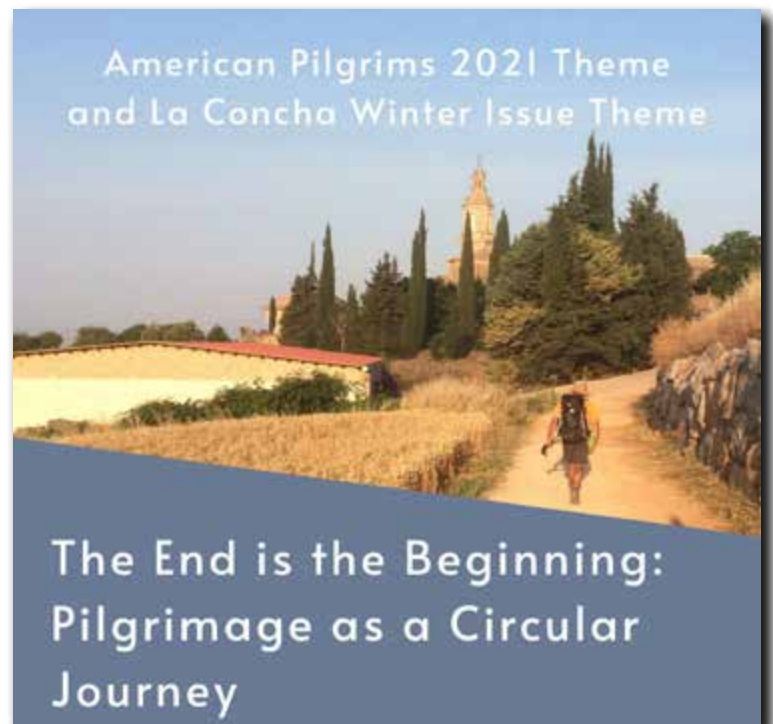
We include as many submissions as possible in each issue. We may defer some items to future issues.

Thanks! We look forward to hearing from you.

Team La Concha

American Pilgrims on the Camino

www.americanpilgrims.org





IN MEMORIAM GENE MCCULLOUGH



Father, brother, husband, friend, colleague, mentor, brilliant, funny, meticulous, organized, adventurer, musician, teacher, pilot...and yes...an accordion player in his youth...just a few of the descriptors that stood out to me during the testimonials by approximately 200 of Gene's friends and family during a Celebration of Life held on September 11, 2021. It was a wonderful celebration that brought together people from a wide range of activities and organizations that benefited from Gene's attention and engagement. His work with American Pilgrims on the Camino was just the tip of the iceberg ... he was engaged in so many activities and interests and the enormous impact he had was obvious in the heartwarming stories.

In my experience, there are a few people who are so good at what they do that they make their work look easy. As a result, it's not always readily apparent how hard they're working to keep things on track. But those people are the true masters of their craft. And that's what Gene was to American Pilgrims...a dedicated volunteer and a master of his craft. He embodied the Spirit of the Camino and the values of the organization. He lived in the moment. He certainly welcomed both the pleasures and the challenges of each day. He had a strong sense of history and a vision for what things should be in the future. And he appreciated all of those around him everyday. A good example for us all, he will be sorely missed and fondly remembered.

Dave Donselar
Alexandria, VA

All I can say is what a great loss to all that knew Gene. He was so kind and filled with more knowledge than most people I know.

Catherine DesJardins
Littleton, CO

Before I ever met Gene, he was an amazing help as we were setting up the first local chapter (Puget Sound) of American Pilgrims. He walked me through everything needed for email and web, refining as we went. When I later met him at the Gatherings and when he hosted the board for a dinner at his home in Colorado, I learned just how many people he helped in this way! But Gene wasn't just a web guru, he and Rosann served as hospitaleros for many years in Rabanal. When I volunteered there, I even found the cake pan they used to bake Tartas for the pilgrims every day. He gave so much in ways we will probably never know.

Martha Crites
Seattle, WA

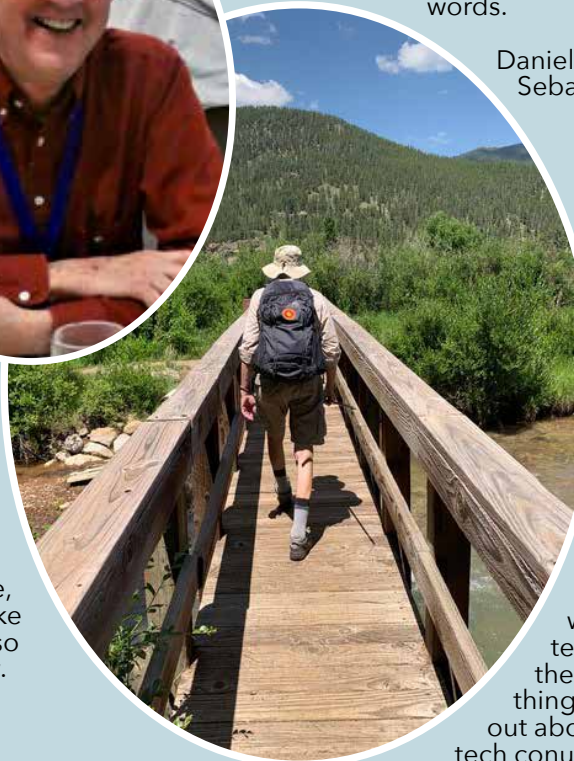
Gene McCullough—a friend and mentor to so many people! I will always remember Gene's smile, his enthusiasm for learning, his open sharing of his Camino resources and knowledge, his love for Rosann, and his acceptance of us all. May we all be more like Gene McCullough and enjoy each and every moment, each and every person and live life to the fullest! *Buen Camino* my Pilgrim friend.

Chris Petty
Denver, CO



Gene was a wonderful man, and using the past tense just doesn't seem right. His untimely death brings home to us all the power of the everyday. There are no wasted days, no wasted encounters, no wasted words.

Daniel De Kay
Sebastopol, CA



I met Gene and his wife Rosann at my first Gathering in 2012 where, in true hospitalero fashion, they immediately made me feel welcomed and included. As I got more involved with American Pilgrims and our friendship grew, I started working with Gene on various technology projects for the organization, something we would both geek out about. Whenever we had a tech conundrum and managed to solve it, he would say something

along the lines of "I'll be darned!" or "Well look at that, Yosmar!" and his eyes would shimmer as if he were a child conquering a new skill. Even with all his existing knowledge, he was always eager to learn something new and then share his new findings with others. And he did it humbly and with an incredibly captivating smile on his face. American Pilgrims and the greater Camino community are beyond fortunate to have benefitted from his immeasurable contributions over the past 15 years as Gene truly redefined volunteerism to a level that most volunteer-driven organizations can only dream of!

¡Ultreia et Suseia, peregrino!

Yosmar Martinez,
Miami Beach, FL

