

ON THE CAMINO 2015

In the fall of 2015 with a full backpack and a joyful heart, I walked the 500 mile Camino Frances, a 1000-year old pilgrim trail across northern Spain. You may have seen the Hollywood film, "The Way," with Martin Sheen. The trip took me 38 days including a rest day. Beginning August 26 in St. Jean Pied-de-Port France, I traveled solo with the intent to be in the moment as much as possible and explore my Oneness with the other pilgrims on the trail and all of life. Some evenings I wrote home to family and friends via email. Here are some of the stories and photos of my adventure.



Day 2, Sheep in the Pyrenees



Day 3, A typical scene along the Camino trail

8/29 ZABALDIKA, DAY 4

This morning after taking a photo of the bridge leading out of the village of Zubiri where I stayed last night, a couple walked up behind me and the guy asked if I would like a photo of myself in the picture I was taking. Here it is. I am just starting on my day hence, I look somewhat clean and alert. :)



This was the most amazing day yet. I am more and more committed to listening to myself and stopping whenever I feel like it or going to visit a village or interesting site. Today, after visiting a village and sitting by the river for a while, I caught up with Janet, a friend from the first three nights. We chatted with another pilgrim in a shady square for 1/2 an hour then found the outdoor fire baked pizza place that had been advertised along the way. There we got to talk to 2 different groups of native Spaniards using our meager Spanish and the locals' better English. Later we saw kids jumping off a bridge into a swimming hole in a river before turning UPHILL to see a chapel and ring its bell, the oldest bell in Navarre! All things that make my heart sing.

I sat down in the chapel to tune into the energy there and found myself crying on and off for the next 2 hours. Not sure I am done yet.

Janet and I had been on our way to Pamplona to an albergue there, but after my response to being in the chapel, I decided to stay for the night. There are nuns who live here, but I have not met any yet. They were off doing something special.

It is 92 outside this afternoon. That alone would have been reason to stay here. I am still sensitive to the sun from the antibiotic I took before the trip. I truly am relieved to be here. As the saying goes, "The Camino provides."



*Stamping my credential at the outdoor pizza stop.
Albergues, bars and cathedrals stamp the credentials
to prove that the pilgrim stopped there.*

9/1 PUENTA LA REINA, DAY 6

Wonderful Day!

Out the gate at 6:20 AM with only the nearly full moon and street lights for light. Gorgeous. Luckily I had gotten out of bed at 8:00 last night to see which way the trail exited Cizur (pronounced thee-thur). AND luckily there was a pilgrim about 20 meters in front of me. I could just see him in the light of the street lights so I knew where he thought the trail went. At one point he turned left, the way I thought he should, but when I got to that point the arrow went right, away from the lighted wind turbines we were supposed to walk toward all AM. As I was pondering whom to believe, a Camino angel appeared in his car driving slowly. I shrugged my shoulders at him and pointed both ways. He pointed the same way as the arrow. I waved at the guys ahead of me (now 2) and we all headed toward a different set of turbines.

What a magnificent walk through agricultural fields. The sunflowers in one field were just barely visible in the increasing light.

[At that point the lights went out in the restaurant where I was writing, and I heard glass crash outside and the sound of wind in awnings. I grabbed my book and phone, left the restaurant and ran down the high walled streets of the village back toward my albergue with another couple. Since there was no electricity (and still isn't a couple of hours later) the electric keypad on the door did not work so we turned and ran through the maze of streets around to the other side of the city wall where we knew the door would be open. We got drenched along the way.]

I hope all the pilgrims still out on the trail had enough warning to be able to seek shelter before the lightning started. My roommate from Lithuania and I have been hanging out in our exceptionally lovely room using the light from the doors to our balcony to read and talk. Don't think we will be going out for dinner tonight. Still no sign of lights.

**** THE LIGHTS ARE BACK ON! ****

That is all for today. Siesta (Stores and most restaurants close from 1 to 4 PM) is over and I have some things to do before supper and an early to bed. Perhaps the storm is over and we will be able to walk early tomorrow morning after all!



The iconic pilgrim sculpture that we passed today

9/2 VILLATERATA, DAY 7

This was a challenging day. The air was cool and clouds often covered the sun, which felt great. The storm last night removed lots of topsoil from the farm fields and dumped it on the Camino, community gardens and village centers. The village I am in tonight was clearing mud off the soccer field and tennis court, streets, stores and garages as we walked past. It looked like a real community effort with the children joining in. I didn't find my rhythm today till I was on the detour on the highway to Villatuerta.

The community pilgrim meal tonight (everyone staying here eats dinner here) was one of the best meals I have ever had. It was Paella for 35 prepared by the two owners of the albergue in one enormous round Pizza-like pan. There was great company too.

Got a massage this afternoon so ready for bed. Have a short day planned for tomorrow so I will have more time to write and fill in some blanks on yesterday's journal.

9/3 AZQUETA, DAY 8

I am sitting out in front of the albergue where I am staying listening to the chatter in Spanish coming from the kitchen where they are preparing a vegetarian meal for tonight - second in a row! Love it!

After hitting the wall yesterday with my original approach to walking the Camino, I wondered what would happen if I just got up when I felt like it and took as much time as I felt like taking in the AM to get ready for the day. And presto! A whole new way of approaching the Camino!



Chicken distracting me from the arrow I was looking for

I got up around 7, talked to my 4 roommates as we doctored our feet and made plans for the day. I knew I was going only about 10 K so I could hang out and write for the afternoon. And, I knew that I needed to stop in Estella at the supermercado to get some food to carry on a sparse cafe day. One of the other women - who grew up in MI - thought she might join me in Azqueta also as she was having muscular issues with her feet. So I took off for Estella on a beautiful crisp AM - the first time I have needed a second layer. I walked slowly enjoying each step, the views, the sounds, the smells. My heart felt full.

In Estella I stopped to ask directions to a grocery store twice and understood enough of the Spanish answers that I actually found it! I bought yogurt, fruit, Muesli and nuts. As I loaded it in my backpack, I realized that it was heavy so I went to grocery store's cafe and ordered a cafe con leche to eat with yogurt, muesli and banana from my pack which reduced the weight significantly!

Once back on the Camino, I ran into my Michigan roommate who had had some insights about what she is learning about herself on the Camino. It is remarkable how often I am confronted by others contemplating issues that are up for me.

Like competition: If I pass someone on the trail, does that say I am faster than he? What does it mean when he passes me when I sit down to rest my feet? Does it indicate anything about who will get to Santiago first? Does it matter?

Or concern about what others think of me: If I walk fast and rest a lot, do I look foolish to the person who walks at a steady rate and passes me every time I stop to rest and change my socks? Do her thoughts change who I am? Do I know her thoughts? Will I ever see her again? Will I walk the same way tomorrow? Does how I walk indicate who I am or my value?

I love how everything gets dramatized on the Camino. In the end it becomes obvious that all that really matters is being in the moment. And when all I am doing all day is walking in nature, I have lots of opportunities to bring myself back to the present.

Fuentes are water fountains. They are very generously provided for the pilgrims usually in villages and sometimes in the middle of nowhere. Today I had a drink from a wine fuente! I stopped and had a cup of wine about 10 this AM! I believe it was the same wine we had at dinner last night.

The first week of my walk I was practicing what I was reading in Thicht Naht Hanh's *How To Walk* book. I was matching my pace to my breath letting my lungs determine my pace: 2 paces on the in-breath & 3 paces on the out-breath, 2&2 on the uphill or 1&1 when it was steep. It worked really well. I could get into a rhythm and move right along feeling the love in the in-the-moment connection.

When I was tired or my heels were bothering me, I would go to BUD-DHA for the 2 in breaths and IS WALK-ING for the 3 out-breaths. I would switch to IS BREATH-ING, LOVE-ING, GIVING, GUIDING, LAUGHING, SINGING, etc. This worked to keep me in the present and moving. I shifted from IS (VERB) to IS IN (VERB), then to **IS THE** (VERB.) The meaning for me kept growing. I realized that today I was doing it on a mental level without feeling the love. And, I don't think that I can feel the love while I am driving myself to go farther faster. So my new commitment is to sit down if I am not feeling the love that goes with it.

Just finished supper - amazing food and dessert - and singing by an Irish tenor! There were 12 of us. 4 Germans including two 20-year-old friends doing the Camino before going to University, 3 French, 3 US, and 2 Irish. The other American broke his ankle on the Camino last year pushing himself too fast. The propriater here took him in and helped him get care and get home.

Amazing day!

9/4 VIANA, DAY 10

Had the best day yet today. Cool temperatures (20 C), some cloud cover, healing blisters, doable distance (18K) and satisfying stops and conversations made it a pleasure. Great night's sleep helps a lot too. The views were beautiful, the natural trails were easy on the feet and it was very quiet all day away from traffic.

When my walking partner, Michelle, and I stopped for lunch at the "café" (really a grocery store with an Espresso maker and lots of tables outside) we chose a stick of French bread, Gouda queso and a can of anchovies for a picnic. As we were enjoying our lunch, our 2 friends from S. Africa stopped and talked to us followed by the wonderful German couple that had shared the paella meal with me in Villatuerta. That night Allesandra and I had talked about how to make the Camino our own. The timing of seeing her today, when I felt like I had taken big strides in doing just that, was a gift. Our picnic probably lasted an hour or so. I usually do not check the time till I stop walking and then I often forget until a bell chimes.



*Community meal at the albergue
Tenor top right*



*Totems built by pilgrims
often in memory of a loved one*

Right now I am waiting for Michelle hoping that she will walk by this cafe. I got some tapas here to hold me over till 8:45 tonight when the parochial albergue of Santa Maria has their dinner for the peregrinos/pilgrims.

I am usually in bed by then. But I do feel pretty good tonight so I think I will be ok. This is an adventure. We sleep on mats on the floor.

Tomorrow is about 22K so I'd like to get an early start. That was probably the voice of my slave driver. We will just wait and see how early I get off.

9/6 NAVARRETE, DAY 11

All is well here. I had beautiful days Friday and Saturday. Feet are healing and I am feeling stronger. And, I need a break from walking.

I am staying in the village of Navarrete where the whole front of the inside of the cathedral is gold - ceiling to floor! I wonder where the communities got gold in the 1500 to 1600s when these amazing buildings were being built.

I had an adventure yesterday when I found all the hotels in town full and my instructions to the next one included a round about that was not visible from the street I was on. As I stood under a tree in the courtyard in front of an old well maintained Hermitage [cemetery in a building] feeling tired and contemplating my next move, a woman called to me in Spanish to ask if I needed help. I told her in English and Spanish that I was on my way to a hotel. She told me I had passed it, and it was likely full. Then our communication broke down until another woman came out into the courtyard. After they talked, the second woman opened her car door and motioned for me to put my backpack in. She then drove me to a hotel with a vacancy!

By then I had realized that 24K was enough for me for the day, and I was ready to crash. I was overwhelmed with gratitude to the first woman as I was about to leave with the second and told her so. She said, "No, no! Muchos gracias to you." Evidentially it was a fun shared experience for her too. Over and over I am moved to receive help from the Camino Angels. Twice as I walked through the city of Logrono yesterday, I paused to look for yellow arrows and before I could ask for help, some one pointed me in the right direction. I feel carried on a current of love and good will.



Golden chancel of cathedral

And! Perhaps the best news! As I was taking a photo of a life-sized sculpture of a potter in town this AM, I heard my name. There was my German friend, Alexandra, who had been warming herself in the sun in front of the cathedral wondering where I might be when she saw me! She and Helmut are also staying in Sombre del Laurel tonight and taking today off too. Later, as we 3 were celebrating in the garden, Michele walked past and we pulled her in too.

We all found each other.

Life is good.

9/8 SANTA DOMINGO, Day 13

I am beginning to feel my way into walking MY Camino. Yesterday I spent with Helmut and Alexandra on their last day on the Camino for this year. I surrendered to their rhythm, which is slow and curious, and I felt relaxed and content when we got into town. We had hiked all AM, spent an hour and a half in a little village eating lunch and exploring the cathedral, walked an hour and hung out for an hour a couple of times before we got to our destination. We were ready for showers and dinner. However, there were no accommodations available for us even after thinking creatively. So, I took a taxi to the next village where there was space for me and H&A took a bus to Burgos a day early. It worked out fine but not ideal.



Today I was up and out by 7:45 (instead of 10:45 yesterday) and had a slow conscious walk to a village that promised a cafe that was off the Camino. When I had not reached it, I asked a woman passing if the Jacobea Café was ahead. She said yes. However, when I got there it was locked. Great disappointment when one is low on food and counting on a tortilla to power the next 8K.

The same woman came by as a young woman and I were wondering what to do. I commented to the Spanish woman that the cafe was closed. After checking with some locals about the cafe, she invited us to her house for cafe con leche (milk.) We were delighted to see her beautiful yard and dog and chickens. The cafe was especially good and Francisca sent us off with cookies and fruit. She spoke no English and Jenny (from Germany) and I speak almost no Spanish. By the end of our hour with her, our communication skills had improved immensely.



*Our Camino angel, Francisca
and Jenny from Germany*

Jenny and I have double hotel room tonight. And tomorrow night we have reservations at an albergue only 15k from here. Jenny is nursing a sore foot. We plan to go slowly and explore the 3 villages on the way.

9/13 HONTANAS, DAY17

A very unusual day on the Camino. Cloudy as I headed out. Missed seeing Orion and the planet.

As the sky began to grow light I could see gray clouds in the west. We are warned that the sun is scorching on this stretch called the Meseta. No shade or water. Today the landscape ahead is shades of brown and beige with gray clouds. This is the breadbasket of Spain. Most of the grains have been harvested leaving stubble for miles in all directions.



The Meseta

I stopped for a tortilla before daylight in a quaint old bar. The proprietor showed me his big bulletin board of money from many countries and photos and post cards from pilgrims past. As I left he gave me a small medal to wear around my neck.

I hiked part of the AM with one of the guys we ate with last night. We stopped at a little market for a second breakfast.

I walked solo all afternoon. The wind picked up and the clouds got darker eventually it rained for about 10 minutes. Just long enough to get out the rain gear. It actually felt good to reduce the wind.

9/14 ITERO DE LA VEGA, DAY 18

Today was my favorite day yet on the Camino. I awoke with the statement that "everything is always in the process of working out for me" going through my head. It calmed the packing of my backpack. There is no rush if everything always works out for me regardless of what time I leave the albergue.

I left with my heart full and no stars in sight. I turned on my headlamp as I left the village streets behind and continued along the trail with several pilgrims.

I love how the vista slowly makes itself visible as the sun rises. Much to my great surprise after the brown of yesterday, there was a line of big green trees indicating a river below me on the left. I saw almost nothing green yesterday. The trail continued gently downhill for 8k and the sun began to shine on the hills to the NW. The dirt trail joined a narrow concrete road with bright green irrigated crops on the south next to the river. Overhead was bright blue sky with puffy white clouds and all around me brown hills that looked like parked flying saucers from my childhood. I was filled with awe and appreciation for the gift of such beauty.

I stopped for breakfast #2 in Castrojeriz in the first bar I saw eager for tortilla and cafe con leche. I was delighted to find a seat indoors as the day was very cool and windy again. Just as I was about to leave, my friend, Jenny walked through the door! She did not take a rest day in Burgos after all and caught up to me quickly. We walked together briefly then began stopping at alternate times till our paths crossed at the top of the hill before heading down into Itero del Castillo.

The road from Castrojeriz took me through the 1.5k long traditional pilgrim village. As I left it behind, it became obvious that the road off in the distance lead rather steeply up the next mesa. As I was appreciating the beauty in all directions, a local woman came down the hill towards me. I struggled to find the words to tell her how beautiful I thought her country was. We stood together in the middle of the trail communicating with our hearts more than our words and parted with a double hug.

One of the things I think she said to me was that the hill ahead looks very hard but in 15 or 20 minutes you will be to the top. So with a full heart I started up the mesa appreciating the young pine trees planted in the terraced hills and the textures of the landscape below.

Eventually I met Jenny in a lovely picnic area somewhat out of the wind with a discretely placed row of bushes just far enough away to provide a screen to allow voiding the bladder. These places are hard to find on the Meseta. And with villages often 10k apart, that can be a challenge.



Trail up the Mesa in the distance

Jenny had a reservation in Itero for the night. I was considering going on another 8k (to make a total of 28 for the day). Long story short: after meeting a young woman on the trail who had cycled there to hand out fliers for Jenny's choice of albergue for the night, seeing a PRAYING MANTIS in the middle of the road that avoided the wheels of a truck that drove over it, then stepping in and loving the energy of the place, we decided to stay here at La Mochila tonight. It has a garden and lots of charm and is owned by a group of 9 friends who take turns running it.

Jenny and I are sharing a room for 3 with a young pilgrim and her dog – only the third one I have seen so far. The dog is quite docile and an easy roommate. We just must take care not to let him out of the room.

Life is good. Looking forward to new adventures tomorrow.

9/16 CARRION DE LOS CONDES, DAY 20

It has been an emotional 24 hours. It took me a while to process the loss of our beloved and sacred Harbin Hot Springs to the Middletown CA forest fire. Then, after talking to Lew about needing to decide how I am going to complete the Camino, I awoke in the middle of the night knowing at a new level that everything ends: Harbin, the Camino and life. With my new understanding I was able to decide today not to bus ahead to avoid the storms dumping quantities of rain on Spain. Given all the options, what I want most to do is walk the whole Camino this year now. That means a late arrival at the INEH conference in the UK.

With that decision made, the clouds parted this AM and I was able to walk the 6k to Carrion de Los Condos under bright blue skies ringed by angry gray clouds. There was even a small piece of a rainbow that shown briefly just above the horizon. It was a challenging walk as I used my walking poles to keep myself from being blown off the trail by the south wind that blew wildly at 90 degrees to my path.

I arrived in Carrion about 10 AM. Knowing it was too early to get a bed at the Santa Maria albergue where I wanted to stay, I got a croissant at a lovely bakery across the plaza from Santa Maria Cathedral and ate it immediately sitting right there.

I was definitely feeling the need for a day off! The rest of the AM was spent sitting in Santa Maria Cathedral soaking in the beauty and music as I wrote in my journal.

Around noon I queued up with many other pilgrims who were stopping early in this day of quickly changing weather. After being shown to my room by a lovely Augustinian nun who I heard speak at least five languages as she was processing those in front of me, I crawled into my sleeping bag and had a lovely nap. Later I

bought my contribution for the community meal (At this albergue the nuns cook a couple of hot dishes and the 52 pilgrims staying here each contribute something to the meal too.) I got some cookies at the local bakery. Communal meals are always very special. I appreciate connecting names, stories and personalities to some of those faces that I see on the way.

The reason I wanted to stay at this A is that there is a service of singing with the nuns at 6:00 this evening. Time to get ready for supper.



Augustinian nuns at Santa Maria

9/17 MORATINOS, DAY 21

Today was the beginning of the second half of the Camino! The music that was providing the rhythm for my walk was probably symbolic of what was going on in my head.

I started out with an old Sunday school song, I've got that Joy Joy Joy Joy, (down in my heart.) The next verse has "peace that passeth understanding" in place of Joy x 4. I don't know if you sang that as a kid or not, but I have to believe that that song came from my afternoon and evening with the Augustinian nuns. If any group of women exudes joy and peace it is them!! It was delightful to sing and eat with them. During my morning walk I was walking at a measured pace battling the strong winds in my face.



Leaning into the wind on the Meseta

The next song was Staying Alive. This one popped into my head after I had a second breakfast of bread, cheese, olives, cucumber and chocolate espresso beans while hiding from the wind in a wooded ditch. Newly nourished and caffeinated I was really moving along slicing through the wind.

The rest of the day included well-spaced cafes and snacks and no memorable songs. I have learned the importance of eating every hour or two. It keeps my energy up.

When I got to the planned end of day, there was no room in the albergue. Luckily, the next one was only 3k away and the staff person in Terradillos de Los Templarios Albergue called ahead to reserve me a bed in the next A in Moratinos.

I walked a total of 30k and felt normal after because I stopped and had a cheese sandwich instead of pushing myself to gut out the last 3k. (And possibly because I am getting in shape.)

The sun has come out for the first time all day as I sit in the garden of the albergue. My newly washed clothes are drying and life is good.

9/18 BERCIANOS DEL REAL CAMINO, DAY 22

Walked 24k today in the sun with no wind and lovely cool temperatures. The last half was entirely on dirt trail with perfectly placed sycamore trees to protect us from the sun the whole way. Delightful. I stopped several times and still made it to Bercianos del Real Camino in 6 1/2 hours. Then I was ready to stop! I am at a 200+-year old, volunteer-run, church related Albergue. We pay for our bed and communal meal donativo. The accommodations are pleasant and the volunteers very kind and helpful. Those interested will have a meditation at sunset.

The common attitude on the Camino right now is of "not enough" accommodations. After getting to their anticipated destinations, finding them full and having to walk another 3-10k, many pilgrims have started using their smart phones to make reservations. Often the private albergues and hotels fill the night before. So the race is on to get the municipal albergues now.

I would prefer not to make reservations, AND it challenges my competitive spirit to relax and appreciate the moment and stop as often as I like and not rush. My solution is to be out by 6AM and stop early too. I had to put my mochila/backpack in line at the door to reserve my spot because the A wasn't open yet here. That gives me a nice long afternoon to write and wander through the village.



*Perfectly placed sycamores
along the Way offer shade*

My thoughts today took me to letting in that I am not doing this alone. I have lots of outer help, support and guidance coming from all of you and inner support and guidance also. So how could I be walking the Camino alone? Thank you for our connection.

9/20 VIRGEN DEL CAMINO, DAY 24

I am in Leon today - a big city with a beautiful Gaudi building. (I am not familiar with that architect but many people here are.)

My choice for a lunch has turned out to be heaven for a pilgrim on the trail who does not want to stay overnight in the city. It is a place for the locals - mine is the only backpack in the place. The best part is there is an upstairs bar with couches that is unused right now. I feel like I am resting in my own private living room! And, the restroom is up here too.

The last 2 days have been flat and straight as only the Camino can be. It has been sunny, clear, wind free and cool. Perfecto.

The pre-sunrise westward-only path has helped me get oriented to the AM stars. The Big Dipper is on its handle in the north and Orion is east and overhead this time of year.

Today is the big bicycle ride through Leon. There are more than a 1000 adults and kids on bikes with and without training wheels wending their way through the city with a police escort.

I have decided to continue through the city and out the other side to pick up a few extra K today. Having a goal has increased my tolerance for walking in industrial suburbs.

9/21 HOSPITAL DE ORBIGO, DAY 25

It is another beautiful, calm, sunny, cool, dry day on the Camino.

Given the option of a green path or a highway path, I have been choosing the former. Why deal with the noise and hectic pace of the cars? So I was mildly surprised to be drawn to the road route. It definitely challenged me to keep my focus on what I love about being on the Camino and not slip into resistance of any sort.



*Museo de los Caminos
(originally Episcopal Palace by Gaudi)*

While it was about 2k longer than I would have chosen, it was a day of soaring appreciation and love. The extra 2k was definitely worth ending in Hospital de Orbigo. The approach to the village is by a bridge with 19 arches over a river and a broad sandy expanse. It still has its original cobbled streets and houses in good repair. Beauty abounds. The San Miguel Albergue is especially beautiful and welcoming as well. Quiet, relaxing music greeted me as I entered the door, and I about melted. It is the only A on the Camino that provides free art materials for anyone who would like to express themselves through the visual arts.



The room and restroom at San Miguel Albergue

As I sit here in the shade of the outdoor entry, a young artist I had viewed at work came out. We had talked earlier about her soaring bird painting that seemed to express my feelings about the Camino. This time I introduced myself and found out that Finland is her home! My mother's family is from Finland. This young woman is the first Finn I have met on the Camino. She could pass for a 12 year old. Brings back memories of my first year teaching when much to my chagrin, the lunch lady at Broadmoor Jr. High wanted to charge me

9/25 VILLAGRANCA del BIERZO, DAY 29

I am sitting in the courtyard of a very old convent that is fully alive with about fifty 6 to 10 year olds. Great joy echoing around this ancient building!

I just listened to an employee here at the albergue where I am staying tonight tell me a bit of the history of the place - AND I understood about 60% of it! I have also been using SPANISH first when I go into a café or shop. The people I am talking to usually understand what I want. I use mostly "hay" and "me gustaria" sentence starters and try to remember por favor too.



Convent courtyard

Yesterday, after walking 26k I was aware that my body had a definite tilt to the left. I asked the clerk at the albergue if the A had a massage therapist. She said they had a fisiotherapist and she would make an appointment for me. Turns out the therapist uses cranial-sacral and orthosteopathic work. We could not communicate verbally, but she understood what I needed and got me aligned in an hour. She suggested that I not carry my Mochila today, so I had it sent on with the service that does that for 7 €. I was amazed at the emotions not carrying my pack brought up. I felt sad and ashamed for not "doing it right." Eventually, I realized that carrying that "burden" had taken me out of my center. I don't feel we are asked to carry burdens, particularly ones that create problems for us without benefitting anyone else.

So, I moved into relief and ultimately into bliss! It was the most beautiful scenery on a most beautiful day. There were 5 villages spaced evenly along the way and most of them had their church doors open and actually called out to invite the pilgrims inside and to stamp our credentials. The energy varied from church to church. The second one I visited had Mary at the center of the front of the church.

The children and adults just sang the Happy Birthday song in Spanish to one of the children.

9/28 BARBADELO, DAY 32

I wish I could share all the images I have in my head with you. Every day I think that the scenes today couldn't possibly be as beautiful as the day before. And they always surpass the previous day.

Here are a few that I caught on my camera.



Have seen this valley the last 2 Ams from above the fog.



My 3 Dutch early morning travel friends partaking in an amazing spread of food and beverages in an open former barn on the Camino. This beautiful array of food was set out for any and all pilgrims to partake of on a donativo basis.



They also made a soft lovely setting to eat it in. Cafe was included too!

In Galicia (western state of Spain) they tell us how far we are from Santiago every 1/2 k!



We are getting closer to the cloud valley.

I am off for another day of beauty.

9/29 PORTOMARINO, DAY 33

Hi all,

Here I am with only a few days left on the Camino. As one who grieves before things end, I have been quite weepy in the AMs. Then I carry on the conversation with myself about feeling the sadness vs. being in the present where there is no sadness. As long as I am doing the Thich Nhat Hanh walking meditation or mantra I am fine. As soon as I lose the present moment, the tears return. By noon I have exercised the process of bringing myself back to the present often enough that I am mostly in joy.

I think the issue is that I like being in the present, and I am not sure I can do it when I return. Maybe I should just stay here. How does one live in everyday life with to do lists and remain aware of the beauty of the moment? Here that is my only job.

As I feel a strong desire to not cry my way through my last 4 days on the Way, I am staying open to ideas that come. More and more I am able to say what I need (food, a place to rest or pee) and have it appear without my doing anything to make it happen other than identifying it and being open to it. The trick may be in the identification of what I want or how I want to feel when I have what I want.

Believe me, I strongly want to bring the Camino home with me and not leave it here when I go to the NEH conference next Tuesday!!

The incredible beauty continues. Galicia is called the Ireland of Spain. I suspect that that is because there is lots of moisture here so everything is green. It also reminds me of Vermont for the same reason. There are dandelions, ferns and family farms, cows, and hay fields. The hillsides are checkerboards of animal pasture and crops. I love the foggy valleys too.

May your pack be light and your heart full.



In the fog in Galicia



9/30 PALAS DE REI, DAY 34

Sharing my feelings of grief yesterday seemed to ground me. I felt much better today.

*These upended stone fences fascinate me.
I suspect that they are very old.*



A mysterious forest near Santiago



This is an example of the fuentes or water sources for the pilgrims that are found in many villages.

10/1 RIBADISO, DAY 35

Yikes!

Time is flying! I have my reservation made for tomorrow night at a hotel because I want a bit of a head start for the last leg of the trip to Santiago. It is a 20k trip according to the book. I am going to do 3k of that today. We are warned that there will be crowds the last couple of k going into the city. If we want to be at the 12:00 mass, we probably need to plan to be there by 11. Exciting day!

I have been doing between 24 and 26k/day for the past week. All is going well. Got to see a pilgrim on a horse today and another in a wheel chair propelling himself down and up hills.

There are lots more people on the trail now that we are within 100k of Santiago. In order to receive the certificate of completion, one must have walked at least 100k. The energy of the new pilgrims was shocking at first, but we all have adjusted to each other now.

This has been a fun evening. This village, Ribadiso, comprised only of 2 Albergues and a restaurant, is right on a small, beautifully clear river. When I arrived, people were soaking their feet in the icy water. Looked like a good idea to me. I dropped my belongings, took off my shoes and joined in. It was heavenly. Since I had no towel to dry my feet, I went barefoot to the A. That felt wonderful too.

A Finnish group is staying here. It was lovely to hear the language being spoken.



The foot-soaking river

10/4 SANTIAGO COMPLETION

I have been sleeping a lot today. Sought out a vegetarian restaurant and have had lunch there the past two days. Great to have hummus and tabbouleh and falafel and rice - flavors I have not had in almost 6 weeks. Sixteen of us celebrated our successful completion of the Camino with a tradition three-course meal at a restaurant last night. Some of them will be walking to Finisterre tomorrow.

Had a good walk into Santiago yesterday. I arrived easily by 11 and got a seat for the mass. The service closed with the swinging of the big incense burner. It takes 6 men pulling the cords in harmony to make the Botafumeira swing. It was originally used to remove odors and diseases from the pilgrims.



The Santiago Cathedral with fellow pilgrims



The chancel of the Cathedral

Following the service I put a euro in the slot to light a candle for a Spanish native who asked me to light a candle for him when I reached Santiago. Two candles lit so I expanded the first candle to include all the Spanish people who started conversations with me, or waved and pointed out the correct direction when I had missed an arrow or gave me food or cafe or just wished me a Buen Camino. I started at the beginning of the trip in my memory and felt like I could see all their faces flip by.

With the next candle I thought of two groups. First, all the pilgrims who had shared food or band aids with me, ate a meal, soaked their feet or walked a section of the trail with me. And secondly, all of you at home who have kept me in your thoughts, offered me some extra energy for those last couple of k or seen me safe and well. I am humbly appreciative of all your love and generosity. Know that I am feeling great love and sending joy and love to you.

Tomorrow I need to repack and decide how to get home what I do not want to take with me to the INEH conference on Tuesday. I will be home the beginning of next week.

Happy fall color season to you all!