

# Pilgrimage: Making space, supporting practice

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To honour the ending of my professional identity I have decided to walk the 800 kilometre Camino del Norte across northern Spain. After four decades of salaried working life I am retired and on a pilgrimage. In my practice as a spiritual companion for others I frequently ask: 'If you are no longer your work identity and role, who are you then?' This is now the pressing question for me.

As my journey unfolds, I become aware of four spaces emerging in this liminal experience:

- *consciousness*—a waking up, a seeing more
- *perspective*—an enlarging of my perceptions of the world and my place in it
- *disruption*—a radical alteration in my inner being
- *transformation*—an ongoing evolution towards true self.

I offer these reflections as one among a community of those engaged in accompanying others in the spiritual life. My hope is that through these reflections you may be invited into your own experiences of pilgrimage in its many forms and be encouraged to tend to the spaces opening in your life and in the lives of those you with whom you walk.

## Stepping out

I have walked nearly 250 kilometres. It's the start of week three of my six-week journey. All the initial challenges are sorted. I'm hitting pack-fit, track-fit stride. It's a magnificent crisp morning. To the right, a flat and clear Bay of Biscay. To the left, the breath-taking Picos de Europa mountain range pierces blue sky. All around, lush greens of oak and chestnut and grazing fields and corn. I'm feeling very satisfied with my carefully planned pilgrimage and my skillful management of the early obstacles.

Just when everything seems perfect, it hits me. Suddenly, in this breath-taking moment, I am plunged into a profound feeling of unknowing: a yawning inner silence, a darkness, an arresting liminality. I know a tourist expects to see marvellous things and then return to life as usual and does not anticipate being changed by those experiences. I know that a pilgrim should fully expect to be transformed by the encounter. But in spite of what I know, I am drawn up short.

*In what ways is life challenging you to step out into the unknown?*

## **Liminal**

The way begins

straightforwardly

enough

Then takes me down inside

to where I can no longer stand

where my ending is my beginning

In this disorienting abyss

my Me is coming to meet me

from the way I could not plan

## Consciousness

I am a human creature, that part of creation becoming conscious of itself, called to evolution of consciousness. Consciousness is the voice calling out in the wilderness, in the face of all the terrible and beautiful realities: Wake up! Look! See!

In my practice of offering spiritual accompaniment, every person who has shared their spiritual life with me has been on a discovery into deeper consciousness. It's a tremendous undertaking.

No matter the detail of the practical situation, pilgrimage is an adventure into consciousness, into my most fundamental realities, my inner primary material. It requires that I see myself as I really am, stripped of the many layers of outer identity and role.

The blessings of the Camino are silence, solitude, rhythm, landscape, beauty, and encounter with fellow pilgrims. In the large spaces and graced moments, I am prompted to observe and question. I hear myself speaking words I have not previously uttered; thoughts emerge as though for the first time. This spacious gift is making room for unknown, concealed aspects of my self.

I am not who I thought I was, who I claimed to be, what I thought I was doing. My various roles and identities now look like disguises. I didn't know then who I was apart from what others gave and took and validated.

The ground beneath my feet is dissolving. The Way invites me to keep walking, although I am no longer sure what is beneath my feet. It's dark. I am not alone, but I feel alone on this way.

Consciousness brings me to ground, beneath the ground I thought was my ground.

*What is the ground you seem to be standing on?*

## **How ground is made**

It begins with something solid

that inexplicably

must dissolve

And then a dark aloneness

the Nothing

which is the All

A wild and terrifying beauty

cosmic grandeur

overwhelming fecundity

There is only breath, stillness

silence, unknowing

presence, dissolution

This

is my

grounding

## Perspective

There are moments when I need to stop what I'm doing so I can hear and see and feel the life that Life is urging me to see. Pilgrimage is an invitation to such a moment.

There is never enough time to stop. I feel the urgency of time to fix the messes and fractures in my relationships with others. I experience time as relentless waves of responsibility and task and test, of meeting the timely demands required by my various roles: partner, parent, sibling, child, employee, manager, community member.

The press of time. My day-to-day life is dominated by *chronos*: time as a sequence of moments, a series of events, actions and achievements. Chronos time is good for the economy, for professional career development, consumer acquisition, and relationship management. Chronos time gets things done. But chronos-dominated time is also a great destroyer of planet and relationships.

I recall that other Greek word for time, *kairos*. This is time not measured by clocks but rather by 'out-of-time' moments without chronological constraint. It is neither causal nor sequential—it is the moment of something being right. One of the gifts of pilgrimage is a resetting of the relationship with time—the gift of living in kairos time, a feeling of right time, opportune time, deep time.

I set out on this pilgrimage with a sense of responsibility defined by professional and personal roles, and emotionally churned by situations in my personal life. With each passing day on this path I discover there is only one responsibility right now, in this moment. Be here, now. Keep walking. One step after another. This simple practice.

Being present in this way opens me to this different relationship with time. All the roles that defined me seem neither relevant nor useful here. All the relational dramas that so distress me and that I feel the need to urgently fix seem so petty now.

Pilgrimage time is changing how I see and what I see—about myself, about others, about the world.

*How is your current relationship with time a barrier to deepening consciousness?*

## **I want to say something about time**

I'm not talking about the clock  
my billable hours  
how long it takes to cross the hemispheres  
or my experience of these arduous steps

I'm thinking, rather, about time as lover  
as countless forested footfalls  
unhurried love-making with this wild world  
flower or painting or single pure note  
timelessness when science and art kiss  
Love itself

I am fumbling  
to say  
something

about time as otherness  
as emptiness, abundant everything  
utter darkness and brilliant light  
time before there was time

expansive  
disrupting  
reordering

## **Disruption**

In this simple pilgrim rhythm—as kairos time is opening me to awareness—my self-view and my world-view are being turned upside down.

Even though I know a lot about the natural necessity of endings, my intellectual knowledge is no match for my instinctual and embodied reaction to what the simplicity of the path is doing to me.

The best energy of decades has been spent cultivating a persona, carefully curated through the various roles I have been given and adopted. I have unconsciously allowed my self-worth to be determined by external relationships, impressions, ideas, and my own constructed self-representation. I know who I am and I can love myself because I have done these things, held these ideas, portrayed myself thus and was viewed by others so.

Step by step, up and down mountains, on hard asphalt and soft autumn leaf-litter, in the expansive and damp-day silences and in this out-of-time-ness, everything is dissolving, collapsing, breaking down. The orchestrated pattern of my life is being disrupted.

I realise I can no longer easily answer questions like ‘What do you do?’ ‘Who are you?’ ‘Why are you here?’ I set out with ready answers that sounded (at least to me) plausible, credible, even applaudable. Some things have already ended and I didn’t know it.

I am confronted once again that I know things, I know *about* things. But here I am invited into an experience, into a feeling, into an undergoing, towards an ending which feels at this point like nothing other than an end.

*What endings is life inviting you to experience, to feel, to undergo?*

## **How things end**

How there are messy unplanned endings

neat ends I plan so carefully

which turn against me.

How I know about

the fundamental necessity of ends

yet rarely welcome what I know.

How I mightily resist

fists clenched, jaw tight

imagining the worst.

Breathing the forests of life's extravagance

my excuses and refusals reveal

how I am so slow to love what is natural

Oh, how beautiful is the end of things

## **Transformation**

I am walking where millions of others have walked. Everything I know and have is the fruit of the labour of those before me. And yet, like every other person who has lived, who lives, who will live, there is a particular humanity that can only be manifested and lived by me, in me, through me. This is both a relief and a burden.

I am on a pilgrimage to discover, and to recover, this ordinary miracle.

The latter days of walking are more silent. I seem to have lost both my way and my words. I feel something I cannot readily articulate, something very real, yet hidden. Something is happening that I cannot measure or prove and that cannot be bought or sold. Something is arising from a source other than my conscious self, my persona, my beliefs, my roles.

There is a future that remains invisible, although it is already present in the disruption of an ending.

Transformation is my willingness to wake up, to accept the confrontation with an enlarged perspective, to suffer hopefully, step by step, through what is coming to an end. The process is not chronos-determined—it is pure gift, emergent—and it is reshaping what I have to offer others.

I do not make transformation happen, yet my willingness to enter into its mystery is required. It does require my undergoing it—and my longing for it.

*What are you longing for?*

## **I don't know what faith is**

I do know how to place one foot after another, on this rock-hard, on this soft mat  
decomposing

I know how to receive from these life-breathing wonders, how to follow the contours of this  
land, to feel its grandeur and grace

I know how to trust life's twists and turns, how to accept what I do not deserve, how to look  
and see, how to breathe and wait

I know that there is no pain or loss which has not been felt by those before me, no suffering  
that was not endured by Moses, Jesus, Buddha and Mohammed

I know that I stand on the shoulders of countless others, and I know that there is a particular  
Way that only I can walk

I know that my freedom is hidden in unknowing darkness, the self that is given to me, in the  
forgotten, lost, opaque, neglected and despised

I know that the bread of life will sustain, that love and awe will open a path where none  
exists

I know that

in longing for what is emerging

I will become a more fully human one

## Home

I am home. Everything is exactly where it was before I left. The walk is long behind me. I have to remind myself, yes, it all happened. Life has returned in all its ordinary and comforting rhythms, joys, complexities, and demands—accompanied by a new depth of both freedom and disturbance. First I walk the Camino; then the Camino walks me. My pilgrimage is over; now the real pilgrimage begins.

I return with an even deeper hunger. I know that I am not the I who was defined and constrained by all those roles, by my self-projections. I know that as I step into the reassuring comforts of chronos-time, there is another time that even now is birthing who I am becoming.

My Me is coming to greet me, in a way I could not plan.

One of the well-known end-of-Camino rituals is to eat the Coquilles Saint-Jacques, the Saint James scallop. This particular Atlantic scallop has come to symbolize the pilgrim. To eat it at the end of the walk is a great shared rite of celebration.

For the individual soul, this meal is a symbolic consuming of my own way, my own experience of pilgrimage, my self—and all the aspects of my self which the ongoing pilgrimage continues to bring to consciousness, to change perspective, to disrupt, to transform.

Communion is a lifelong invitation and a way of integration into the authentic self. I need to consume this me.

I am home. Let the feast begin.

*What is the communion you are invited to make with your self?*

## **Communion**

There is only one thing to do  
when my soul is hungry

To sit down at the table of my self—  
*eucharisteo*

To taste and chew and swallow  
the decades of encounters

To digest and integrate  
all the complexity and the mystery into my fibres

To become what I eat

To become my self

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