

STORYLINES

STRIVING

Sandra Derghazarian

Montreal Neurologic Clinic, Quebec, Canada

sandra.derghazarian@gmail.com

KEYWORDS: Pilgrimage; Camino de Santiago; Spirituality; Community; Connection

Seventeen years ago, in the span of a moment and without any rational explanation, I decided: that spring, I would travel to the Camino. I would walk 20-25 km daily for 3 weeks, going from town to town in the North of Spain along an ancient pilgrimage route. I would sleep alongside a group of strangers in dedicated pilgrim hostels. My backpack would need to contain only essential belongings. And, like the majority of pilgrims, I would leave my phone behind. This was a great departure from the way I lived my life: future-oriented and comfortable enough. But by the time spring came around, I was ready and excited.

And with reason. Those 3 weeks of pilgrimage are etched into my mind and my being. Walking for long distances every day alongside other pilgrims allowed me to deepen my relationship with life in a way that I had not previously experienced. The Camino opened up a path for spirituality, connection and growth.

Awe

The spirituality inherent to the Camino rubbed a sacred reality into me: that of the infinite smallness of human beings and that of their immeasurable worth and wholeness. Up to that point, I had not thought those two truths could co-exist or even less, be integrated. But, through different encounters, the Camino taught me to hold those two truths simultaneously.

One such encounter occurred on a grey morning when I was walking alone. As was expected from the weather, in the mid-morning it started to rain. As I pulled my poncho over myself, it ripped at the shoulder seam. Rain fell unhindered onto my backpack. I felt indignation rise in me at the anticipation of my future

discomfort: my undergarments, my only change of clothes and my sleeping bag would be soaked. I simmered in anger and self-pity for several dozen steps as the rain continued to pelt against me. Then, as though a switch was turned on, I suddenly noticed the landscape to which I had been blind thus far. I saw that I was in a field and mist was hovering over the grass. I saw how deep the green was, as it only gets from the moisture of rain. I saw a tree at a distance, standing tall, stoic and graceful against the clouds. Unlike me, it accepted its fate without a ripple of complaint. Everything was beautiful and much vaster than me. In that moment, the extent of my smallness dawned on me: I am at the mercy of a great power that is unseen and untouched but felt very deeply inside. In an instant, the indignation was replaced by awe. Awe at the greatness.

The awe also flowed into the awareness of my own being: not only that I was here—walking, thinking, witnessing such a beautiful sight—but that I was also part of it. Not the / who works, performs, judges, and tries to control. Rather, the / who is untouched by desires and ideas of individual attainment. The / who is worthy and valuable, as a birthright. The / who is whole, loving and loved. The / who is infinitely small and yet infinitely worthy at the same time. In that moment, peace descended upon me and I felt that everything was as it should be.

And, as it is with life, I could not stand there in the rain forever. I started walking again. Eventually, I stopped in a tiny café and worked on sewing the poncho together. A pilgrim found me there and explained he didn't think my repair attempt would work. But I knew that whether it worked or not did not matter—because everything was as it should be.

True Connection

There is another piece to the story. The poncho that ripped wasn't really mine.

On my first day of the walk, after settling into the bare hostel and finishing up handwashing my clothes, I was faced with the unnerving emptiness of time. I had nothing to take care of, no other chores to do and nowhere to go. I grabbed a book I had packed, relieved to have something to do, and sat in the yard. Before I had even opened the memoir, though, a pilgrim who was draping her clothes on the line struck up a conversation with me. "Don't worry," she said in a jolly tone, "you'll get used to doing nothing. We all do." And she smiled. She had been walking for a week already when I joined. I returned her smile nervously, thinking that I would not survive the void. After all, wasn't *being busy* the precise meaning of *being alive*? We continued to talk and she introduced me to some of the friends she had made on the Way. I saw that, just as she had said, the other pilgrims were comfortable doing nothing. I joined in—stiffly.

The conflict between my habit of constantly doing and the reality that there was nothing much to do was very unsettling. However, my discomfort began to dissipate as I witnessed the pilgrims, learned from their

pace and respected their rhythm. That first evening, I was invited to help prepare dinner with the hostel's small community of pilgrims. A typically rushed and mechanical chore became a collective affair that spread over a few hours. A combination of curiosity and respect prevailed as we got to know one another—not through the armor of what we did for a living, but in the unavoidability of who each of us truly was. Paradoxically, it is precisely what I feared—“*doing nothing*”—that allowed us to carve depth into time by settling into each other's presence. In this way, day in and day out, the emptiness of time became a profound source of replenishment. We connected through sharing not only our tasks but also our personhood. It is not that the friendships we developed or the community we weaved were idyllic and perfect; far from it. It is that the connections were raw and true because we could not escape into *doing* and because our daily experiences of awe opened our hearts.

It is through such true connection that I came to possess the poncho. When one of the pilgrims found out that I didn't have one, he clearly felt compassion for the future-me who would get wet, and gave me an extra poncho he had. It was that gesture of kindness, and the ripping of his poncho, that led to my deep experience of awe in the rain.

Back Home

During the three weeks we were together, the pilgrims and I had numerous encounters with kindness, connection and spirituality. We called them the “gifts” of the Camino. Because of the gifts—which gave me a sense of completeness and wonder—I once expressed to a pilgrim that I wanted to stay on the Camino forever. The wise pilgrim answered: “The *real* Camino starts when you return home and bring the lessons you learned back into your real life.”

I think about those words often. I have not managed to bring the Camino home as much as I would have hoped after all these years. I remain future-oriented, I find myself nearly always *doing* and not enough in connection. But as Parker Palmer says, it is part of the human condition for there to be a gap between where we are and where we want to be. I have grown more patient and more forgiving with myself over the years as I inhabit that gap. While there is no fully arriving at where we want to be, there is a striving. Moments of connection—to true self, to others or to greatness—awaken our striving. It is precisely to revive that striving, which runs deep in all of us, that I chose to share this story with you. ■

Biographical Note

Sandra Derghazarian is a community neurologist and a physician coach who has loved stories for as far back as she can remember. *Storylines* is a column in which she shares stories about work and life. As much as possible, she tries to stay loyal to the messy and sometimes contradictory experiences of everyday life.