
THE WALK OF A
LIFETIME CHAPTER 1

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Whispers of the Camino

When you plan a journey,
It belongs to you.
When you begin a journey,
You belong to it.

African Proverb

I PAUSED as I stepped over the threshold of my back door, keenly aware that with that step a long-awaited pilgrimage was beginning. I was leaving for Spain for six weeks. It was a journey I'd been dreaming of for two decades, but it was also the longest time I had been away from my home and family in 39 years. The trees in the woods behind my house were still bare. The grass on the back slope was brown; small patches of melting snow lay on the edges near the woods.

My flight would take off in about six hours. I had wanted to walk across town to catch the airport bus that morning—I was about to walk 500 miles, so the three miles

didn't seem like much—but freezing rain was falling and my wife Jane insisted on driving me. I hate farewells and was pulled in two directions: eager to get going, but resisting the moment I would have to say goodbye. It was only a little over four weeks until she would join me, but that's a long time when someone has been part of your every day, every decision, in some ways every breath, for nearly 40 years. The drive took ten minutes. Because it was raining hard and because the bus was about to leave, we only had time for a brief hug and a quick kiss. I hopped out of the car, reached into the back and grabbed my pack and poles. I sloshed through a few deep puddles and boarded the bus. The driver glared at me impatiently, since I was the last person to board, but just then my oldest son and grandson ran up and I jumped out to give them a final hug, too.

I had been waiting for this moment for years, had been preparing for it for months, but suddenly the thought of putting an ocean between me and everyone I loved, for so long, seemed momentous. My eyes swelled with tears as I sank into my seat and waved farewell to them all one more time through the bus window.



THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO had been whispering to me for nearly 20 years. I first read of it in a medieval autobiography—the *Book of Margery Kempe*—an early 14th century English mystic, who took several pilgrimages herself, to Rome, the Holy Land and to Santiago de Compostela.¹¹ I was intrigued by its history and its mystical draw on people. At its peak—in the 12th through 14th centuries, perhaps up to a half a million people walked to and from Santiago,

believed to be the burial place of the Apostle James. Many sought a miracle; some were doing penance. Others simply craved adventure and to see something beyond their own town or village, since the average person in the Middle Ages rarely traveled more than a few kilometers away from home.

I learned that medieval Europe was ripe with pilgrimages,² and Santiago, after Rome and Jerusalem, was the most popular destination; in the 13th and 14th centuries it even exceeded those two. In Northern Spain during the Middle Ages, whole towns and villages grew up to support it. The path provided for significant cultural exchange between northern Spain and the rest of Europe; the German poet Goethe is quoted saying, “Europe was made on the Pilgrim Road to Compostela.” The round-trip for those walking from the far reaches of France or Germany would be more than 2,000 miles, or 3,200 kilometers. The entire journey might take them years and many died along the way. Never a single route, the Camino was a network of roads, snaking across France and Spain, at points merging and then separating. But from France and beyond, as they reached the Spanish border, most converged in or near the town St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port in the French Pyrenees, and from there on the most popular route—and the most famous—became known as the *Camino Frances*, or the “French Way.” From there to Santiago it is 500 miles or 800 kilometers.³ Previous routes, especially along the Northern Coast had existed for centuries, but the Camino Frances proved to be the easiest to traverse. Guidebooks were written for would-be pilgrims.⁴ Some went on horseback, but most went on foot, typically carrying a small bag for food, a staff, a jug or gourd for water and a hat to fend off the bright Spanish sun. They had to contend with thieves,

con-men, swollen rivers, heavy snowfall, rain, freezing winds, scorching heat, and the endless, wide-open and occasionally disorienting *Meseta* (or Spanish Plain). Churches and monasteries founded *hospitals*, or places of hospitality, providing free food, lodging and care for the sick. Fountains were built in the town squares for quenching pilgrims' thirst. *Peregrinos*,⁵ as they were known, often walked in groups for safety, stopping to view magnificent churches and Cathedrals, many of which still exist. The Way⁶ followed an old Roman road, which itself may have followed a still more ancient route from Celtic and pre-Celtic times.⁷

The Camino experienced a slow decline in the 16th and 17th centuries after the Protestant Reformation. By the 18th century, the flood of pilgrims slowed to a trickle, though it never ceased entirely, and many of the smaller towns and villages fell into ruin. But the memory of its greatness and its mystical intrigue never completely left the people who lived along it or the imaginations of those who heard about it.

The modern revival of the Camino began about 40 years ago, largely through the work of a Spanish priest, Father Elias Valiña Sampredo, who conceived of the route marked with yellow arrows. Today it is a major Cultural Itinerary of Europe and UNESCO has declared it a World Heritage Site. Since parts of the old *Calzada*,⁸ the original route (and Roman road), was then and still is under the asphalt of highways, alternative dirt paths have been created, sometimes going alongside the modern highways, though long stretches of the old dirt road still make up much of the Camino Frances. The ancient Camino towns came back to life; the ruined and depopulated villages were gradually rebuilt. Hostels—called *refugios* or *albergues*⁹—

along with hotels, grocers, cafés and restaurants, were opened. Modern pilgrims can find a place to eat or sleep every few kilometers along its entire length and a bed in an albergue can cost as little as €5 (or \$6.) Those on a tight budget can manage easily for as little as €30 /day and reservations for lodging are not required. From a trickle in the 1980s, the Way has again experienced a surge, with more than 300,000 pilgrims walking all or part of it annually, as in the Middle Ages.¹⁰

For a decade I read about the Way, or met people who had been on it. The whisper grew louder. Ten years ago, the author and friend, Arthur Paul Boers, handed me a copy of his book, *The Way is Made by Walking*, a memoir of his pilgrimage. I quickly devoured it and became determined that I would walk it the first chance I had. The whisper became a calling, a dream. But when would I do it? With the responsibilities of a husband and father, taking six weeks off to walk the Camino Frances was not an option. Friends suggested I do it in parts or stages, maybe two weeks at a time. Some suggested cycling it, which would take less than half the time. But this wasn't just a "bucket list" item, a box to check off labeled "Camino." I wanted a life-changing experience—something restorative—and that was only going to happen step-by-step, over time. I needed to do the *whole* thing in *one* go. I didn't know that I would wait another ten years for the chance.



I HAVE ALWAYS HAD an adventurous spirit. The youngest of four baby-boomers, I grew up on the edges of suburbs in both Pennsylvania and Connecticut. I played in the streets or ran in the woods while traveling deep in my imagination.

Back then, play dates didn't exist, phones were attached to the wall, there were just three TV channels and they only played reruns in the afternoons after school—and that drove me out of the house. When I wasn't outside, I devoured books, collected postage stamps and dreamed of traveling the globe as a writer. I had a large map of the world on my bedroom wall, which I studied in detail. I routinely fell asleep with an encyclopedia on the bed, its pages open to some obscure country of the world.

Meanwhile the upheaval of the 1960s was happening around me and I was aware of it all: the civil rights and environmental movements, the sexual revolution, the war in Vietnam and later, women's liberation and Watergate. My dad may have been in the Army when we were all born, but by the late 60's my older brothers were demonstrating against the war and going to Woodstock. They were ten years older than me and as an adolescent I laid awake during the hot, sticky summer nights, the sounds of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez drifting in from their room next door. Everything in society seemed up for questioning and I questioned it all. We were middle-class, but my social conscience was stirred and I grew up to become a nonconformist, as well as adventurous.

I began college eager to become a writer, a journalist, but by the first year I was aimless and partying. At the end of my second year, I was introduced to Christianity; my social consciousness was reinforced deeply by the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, but I couldn't fit into the conservative groove of contemporary American Evangelicalism. I went to seminary after college, intent on pursuing a career as a traditional pastor, but that didn't fit either. After I met and married my Jane, we decided to follow the most committed spiritual path we could. We moved into an

intentional Christian community where no one owned anything; everything was shared among the community members, and with the poor. The dream lasted nearly two decades, until the time came to move on. We relocated across the country, to help care for my ailing parents. Starting over was not easy: we left the community with six children, few material possessions and no bank account. We struggled financially, but it drew our family closer.

Over the next years we built a new life: I began work full-time at a state university and went to school in the evenings to obtain a Master's degree. Family continued to be the most important thing about my life and I tried to keep that a priority, even with a demanding career. At age 49 I became a grandfather and our already large family began to expand as our children married. I eventually went back into ministry, where I managed to couple my spiritual calling with my love of writing, working for the publishing house of a major Christian denomination, the last seven years as its executive director. In that role we came to the Shenandoah Valley where we sank our roots—growing fruits and vegetables on an acre of land, surrounded again by the woods. We ride our bikes to the farmer's market and eat supper on our front deck on summer evenings, watching the sun set over the mountains.

In recent years I traveled across the U.S., some of it personal, but much of it for work. It wasn't until we were in our early 50's that my wife and I were able to fulfill the dream fueled so long ago by that map of the world in my childhood bedroom. In the course of a decade we went twice to South America and several times to Europe, visiting the UK, Ireland, France, Germany and Switzerland. We hiked the Cliffs of Moher, the Scottish Borders, Hadrian's Wall, the Rhine Valley, the vineyards of Alsace,

the Swiss Alps. In Vézelay, France, a common collection point in France for medieval pilgrims, I bought a map of Europe showing all the Camino routes to Santiago and put it on my wall, a source of inspiration. Yet all this hiking was only a rehearsal for *the* Camino, which remained my dream. As time went by, the idea that I would walk the entire Camino Frances took mythical proportions in my mind, rehearsing in my imagination the arrival and start of the pilgrimage in the medieval city of St.-Jean. Like the characters in the movie “Close Encounters,” I felt as if I had been imprinted, was being called, chosen, and I could not explain it.

I have been fortunate enough to work in jobs where I could serve a higher purpose and I mostly loved my work. Yet, there was no escaping the boxed-in world of contemporary American society. My time became parsed into the days of the weeks, the hours of the day, the appointments on my calendar and the items on my to-do list. I shouldered priorities that weren't my own; I had to play roles to do my job. There were budgets that continually shrank, constituencies that disagreed; the publishing industry went through tremendous and disheartening disruption. I became an expert at down-sizing a business, but over time this wears a person down. I was at the pinnacle of my career, but it was time for a change. I had been convinced for decades that the pace of my life—along with most Americans—was too fast, too busy, and that I needed more time and space to appreciate what was going on around me, to listen more deeply to God through the “everyday.”

My opportunity came this past year, not long after I decided to leave my job and take my own year-long, unpaid sabbatical. I had reached 60 and knew it was the time. My last child had graduated from high school and the nest was

officially empty. I was too young to retire, but old enough to know that I needed to slow down and reorient my life. My dream had grown: besides going on a pilgrimage, I wanted to take an entire year to re-set my life—to pause, to “down-shift,” to start living in a slower gear. I left my job the first week in January, allowing myself three months to prepare.

As a road cyclist, I routinely biked over 3,000 kilometers (2,000 miles) per year, but I wanted to be in better shape, so I took regular fitness classes and began to build new strength and lose weight. A few weeks before I left I walked longer and longer distances, gradually building up to 25 kilometers (15 miles) per day with a full pack. I bought guidebooks and digested them, selecting one to take along with me. I watched YouTube videos and read online forums. I collected my equipment, carefully selecting and weighing my pack’s contents down to the gram.

In addition to physically conditioning my body, I prepared my spirit for the journey, thinking through my rationale and creating guiding principles. When asked about what I intended to do while I walked, I replied, “think, pray, talk to strangers, make new friends and see what opens up for me each day.” I developed these simple rules for my walk:

1. I will try to go about 25 kilometers a day.
2. I will make no reservations for lodging. I will simply accept whatever accommodations are available when I reach a destination.
3. I will not be in a hurry (and will remind myself of this continually).
4. I will carry my pack the whole way. I will be forced to keep the contents light.
5. I will walk the entire way—no taxiing or bussing between towns.

6. I will make it a priority, since I am not in a hurry, to slow down and listen for the voice of God speaking around me or through those I meet. These are the “signs.”

7. I will accept, within reason, whatever is offered me, as a gift from God.

Some of these became principles that I would carry with me long after I came home and would develop into what I call a “Camino for Life” attitude.



I MADE plane reservations for late March, with the intention of flying from Washington D.C. to Paris, then catching a train to St.-Jean-Port-de-Pied. I anxiously watched the weather in Spain—they were having one of the coldest and rainiest winters in memory—and developed doubts about my timing. I would not even be able to walk the fabled “Napoleon Route”¹¹ the first day, the highest and most scenic route over the Pyrenees, because it was still under a meter of snow. Leaving in early Spring meant that I would need more warm clothes than I had originally imagined, meaning extra weight to carry. I agonized over the contents of my pack, the choice of each piece of clothing. Would I be carrying enough? Would I be carrying too much? Would I be warm enough? Would I be too hot? As if to compound my anxiety, the French railway workers were threatening to strike...

In all my preparations, I overlooked my footwear. At one time I had hoped to walk the entire way in sandals, but realized this would be difficult in the early spring, with the reality of mud and the distinct possibility of snow. I thought that the well-worn-in hikers I had been using for several years would perhaps go the distance; this would turn out to

be my only real mistake in all of my planning and over-planning.

I received one important piece of advice a few weeks before leaving, and it would turn out to be my first lesson of the Camino, though I didn't quite know it at the time. My friend David Landis, author of one of the Camino guide-books,¹² told me, "Russ, take less than what you might need. You can always get something along the way. The biggest problem is not that people don't have enough, it's that they have too much and they can't figure out what to get rid of." With that advice, I opted for less. And I would later come to be grateful for it. (And I later listened to stories from frustrated pilgrims who had to figure out what to purge from their packs.)

The greatly anticipated day of my departure arrived: Tuesday, March 27, 2018. I invited a few members of my small group from church and one of my pastors for a send-off.¹³ We ate muffins, had coffee, prayed. With years of dreaming and months of preparation behind me, I received a blessing and we hugged and said our good-byes.

THE MELANCHOLY AT my departure diminished during the two-hour bus ride to the airport. Arriving at Dulles, I felt conspicuous walking through security dressed as a pilgrim, hiking pants and shoes, hat and backpack, watching the businessmen in their three-piece suits hurry through, impatiently checking their watches. I had a few hours before my flight, which I spent in a lounge eating food and reading magazines. My gate was next to the lounge and I checked the departure board nervously several times before queuing up for my flight, boarding pass ready. Showing my passport as I went through the checkpoint, I

excitedly headed down the jet-way, conscious with every step that I was *on my pilgrimage*. Finding my seat, I stowed my pack in an overhead bin, sat down and began to relax. The rush of my departure, the sadness of saying good-bye, the anxiety about getting to the airport and taking off on time... it all slowly faded. I was on my way to live a great personal dream: walking the Camino. Everything I needed was inside a 16-pound pack in the overhead bin. My return ticket was six weeks away.

I was finally in no hurry.

The flight headed eastward, into the night. I ate supper, drank a glass of wine and watched movies, unable to sleep until the last hour.

Shortly before dawn, the flight landed in Paris.

I deplaned in a mental fog that matched the cold and rainy conditions on the ground. I went through passport control quickly and after retrieving a small bag—my hiking poles couldn't be carried on—I now had several hours to wait in the De Gaul airport for my train. The airport was not well-suited for napping and more than anything else I longed for a place to stretch out for some sleep. I was tempted to stretch out in the middle of the floor, but in my dress and with my pack, was afraid I might be mistaken for a homeless person. Mid-morning, I gave up on the idea and stopped in a shop for a baguette, coffee and a bottle of water. By now I was too alert to sleep, but too fatigued to concentrate on anything. I tried to read the French newspapers, but it would have been difficult even if I weren't so tired. I was relieved to gather this much: the planned strike of railway workers was still on, but not until the next week.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was time to board my train. Feeling very much the modern pilgrim, I shouldered my pack and took several escalators down to the *TGV*

station that is inside the airport. I found my platform and boarded the train for Bordeaux, wearily settling into a seat facing forward, next to a window streaked with long rivulets of rain.

The train ride to Bordeaux and then Bayonne took five hours and the rain continued as I again attempted to nap, body pressed against the side of the car. I dozed lightly as the train whizzed at speeds of 160 kilometers an hour through the French countryside. Occasionally rousing, I could see flooded fields out the window; France was also having one of its wettest winters. Giving up on sleep, I pulled out my guidebook and looked at the maps of the first several stages of my pilgrimage, beginning with the challenging climb the first day over the Pyrenees. My fatigued brain began to doubt: would I be able to tackle it in just one day?

In Bordeaux I had to change trains and I couldn't nap on that one either. By then it was mid-afternoon in France, but mid-morning back home and my circadian rhythm was hopelessly confused. Surprisingly, I became more alert, noting that the landscape flattened out as we approached the coastal plains around Bayonne, my next-to-last stop where I would catch the local train to St.-Jean.

Bayonne is an old French city in the Basque region, on the river Adour, a few kilometers from the Bay of Biscay. I caught my first sight there of dozens of other pilgrims. They were obvious: packs on their backs, walking sticks tucked in, hiking shoes on their feet. I no longer felt conspicuous. I introduced myself to a few of them, some of whom I would see again and again in the coming weeks: George (Jürg) from Switzerland, Charlie (Carl) from Germany, Pauline from France, Alan and Terry from Australia. The final train from Bayonne to St.-Jean was

cancelled and a bus would come for us instead, meaning our arrival would be later than anticipated. I strolled the town for an hour, snapped pictures and bought a postcard and stamps. When the bus pulled up, I grabbed a front seat so that I could get a clear view of the countryside. Within minutes of pulling out, the flatland gave way to rolling hills, to small villages with their distinctive Basque architecture and their tightly manicured Sycamore trees, their limbs stretching out like the arms of broken umbrellas; it was early spring and they had yet to leaf out.

I was so mesmerized by the landscape that my fatigue was momentarily forgotten. The road wound around through small towns, passing farms with cattle and grazing sheep and barns with piles of manure. The higher we got in elevation, the more the houses reminded me of the Swiss Alps: long, low rooflines, with broad overhangs to shed the heavy winter snows of the Pyrenees. The daylight faded.

I got a lump in my throat again when shortly after dusk the bus arrived at our destination and the driver said, “C’est St.-Jean.”

END NOTES

1 “James” is Iago in Spanish, so *Santiago* literally means “Saint James.” *Compostela* can mean either “field of stars” (compost + stella) but could also mean “cemetery.” It is the place where St. James’ bones were buried and shepherds located them because they saw stars dancing over the field, so the word could really have either meaning.

2 *The Canterbury Tales*, written in the 14th century, is a classic of Middle-English writing that many of us had to slog through in high school English. Canterbury was the most popular pilgrimage in England, but local pilgrimages

were common and there were literally hundreds of such sites in England and the rest of Europe.

3 I abandoned thinking in miles when I walked the Camino, since everything—the signposts and my guidebooks—was in kilometers. A kilometer is .6 miles. Twenty-five kilometers is 15 miles.

4 The earliest guidebook for pilgrims was among the five books in the *Codex Calixtinus*, written and circulated in the 12th century.

5 *Peregrino* is Spanish for pilgrim. In French they are called *Pèlerins*.

6 The word “way” can be the same as “camino” in Spanish and I often refer to the Camino as the “Way.” In English this is a word with rich meaning: it can be a route, a road, a path, an artery, a trail; it also has broader meanings that can be spiritual, connoting a pattern of life. The early Christians in the first centuries were originally called followers of The Way.

7 The same Celts who dominated all of northern Europe, including the U.K. and Ireland, came to Northern Spain over 2,500 years ago. The rainy northwestern region of Spain, where Santiago de Compostela is located, is called Galicia and its culture still carries Celtic influence in foods, music, language and architecture.

8 *Calzada* is best translated something like “highway,” which is what the old Roman roads were. Many towns along the Camino Frances are named with *Calzada*.

9 An *albergue*, also called a *refugio*, is a hostel for pilgrims. Located every few kilometers, they offer an affordable place to stay, typically with a warm shower, bunk bed and kitchen or restaurant. Some operate by donation. A pilgrim must present a credencial in order to stay in one. In the middle ages they were called *hospitals* or places of hospitality.

10 In 2018, the year I walked it, 327,378 pilgrims were issued *Compostelas* in Santiago, the largest number in modern history. A pilgrim needs to complete at least the last 100 kilometers to receive a Compestela. About ten percent of those who receive Compostelas walk the entire 800 kilometers from St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port.

11 There are two routes over the Pyrenees, more or less equal in distance, from St.-Jean to Roncesvalles. The more remote or “Napoleon Route” climbs to 1,500 meters before descending to Roncesvalles. It was developed during the Middle Ages since the lower and easier “Valcarlos Route” (which I took) was prone to bandits. The week before I went, two Scots had to be rescued off the top of the Napoleon route after getting stuck in three feet of snow.

12 David co-authored the *Camino de Santiago* guidebook (Village to Village Press), with his wife, Anna Dintaman. I used it the entire way.

13 In the Middle Ages, it was customary for pilgrims to go before their church and announce their intention to make a pilgrimage and received a blessing and prayer for their journey.