

Excerpt from *Walking the Path: A Chicana on the Camino de Santiago*

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INTRODUCTION

I began walking the Camino Francés, one of the many routes of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, at St. Jean Pied de Port in France on December 17, 2010 and arrived in Santiago de Compostela on February 1, 2011. A year later, I blogged at www.elcaminoayearlater.wordpress.com about the experiences and the lessons learned during the pilgrimage. During the stint at the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares the summer of 2012 under the Beca Nebrija de Creación Literaria, I shaped the blog into a manuscript for publication, revising heavily and adding a substantive introduction and structure so that each entry includes historical facts and a meditation. The following excerpt presents two days along the Camino, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Not physically, but emotionally perhaps the most difficult part of the walk was the period between Christmas Eve and Día de Reyes, for I was away from family and friends during the holidays and my birthday, and I was homesick even as I rejoiced in the experience of walking the ancient pilgrimage route to Santiago.

The book, a mixed-genre manuscript, includes poetry as well as prose—and even a play—and is divided into three main parts: Preparing to Walk, Walking the Path, and Reflections. Each entry is dated but it is not a journal as the entries were written a year after I made the pilgrimage and heavily revised later. I trust that this sampling, this tidbit, will provide an inkling as to the project's purpose. There are literally thousands

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of books chronicling pilgrim's experiences along the Camino de Santiago; I humbly add to this body of work.

1. December 24, Christmas Eve

One of the sayings that kept coming to me as we walked was “por algo pasan las cosas,” for things kept happening to thwart our plans. It is a dicho that my grandparents would repeat often. My maternal grandmother, Celia Becerra de Ramón, whom we her grandkids called Bueli, and my paternal grandfather, papagrande Vicente, were both prone to lapsing into an appropriate dicho for almost anything that happened. Indeed, aphorisms like “No hay mal que por bien no venga,” and “Cuando una puerta se cierra otra se abre,” offered consolation when things didn't go as expected. Dichos such as these remind us that no matter how bad things get, there is a reason. Fatalistic? Perhaps, but also wisdom from the past, garnered from the old folks who always seemed to find a way to survive the many vicissitudes of life along the US-Mexico border. The latter dicho, or refrán, “Cuando una puerta se cierra, otra se abre,” especially haunts me, and I remember the near shock of finding this phrase below the sill of a window in the walled city of Avila back in 1980—researching the phrase, I found that it was Don Pedro Dávila who had pierced the wall to create an opening in defiance of then Queen of Spain Juana I, who had had various windows bricked over in 1507; it was he who had the phrase “Cuando una puerta se cierra otra se abre,” inscribed below it. I first visited Avila in search of the mystic nun, Teresa de Avila's childhood home, as have so many Chicanas who come looking for the place where we expect to find traces of that strong woman who defied the Church, who built convents all over Spain—some would say safe-houses for women—the woman to whom we prayed as children as members of Las Teresitas in our various childhoods all over Aztlán.

Suddenly coming upon the wall and the window, that spring day in 1980, I stood transfixed in front of the stone where my grandmother's words were etched: Cuando una puerta se cierra otra se abre.

A few years later, reading *Don Quixote*, I was struck by his declaration, “que no hay refrán que no sea verdadero, porque todos son sentencias sacadas de la misma experiencia, madre de las ciencias todas, especialmente aquel que dice: cuando una puerta se cierra, otra se abre.” I remain awestruck by the rich knowledge my grandmother had of all things Spanish embedded in her dichos and in her very life.

Bueli, raised by her grandmother in Monterrey, Nuevo León, had not had the privilege of a formal education, yet, she was the one who taught me to read and write before I ever got to school. It was her influence that instilled in me a love of reading and

of learning. She was the one who told me fantastic stories I later learned were from classic world literature. Bueli lived with us until her death when I was in fifth grade—she was there when I was born and every day of my life until she died; how could her dichos not touch my life?

That day on the Camino de Santiago, Christmas Eve 2010, Becky, my co-peregrina, and I had walked out of the albergue in Obanos and after a light breakfast headed out of town on the path to Puente la Reina a few kilometers away. We strolled the streets of Puente La Reina and took photos. I was fascinated by a curious looking figure we kept seeing in shops and restaurants alongside the traditional Belen, or Christmas crèche.





At the bridge that gives the town its name, we stopped to take pictures, and I realized that the slight pain I had as we walked the short distance from Obanos to Puente la Reina was getting worse. The right leg felt numb, and I had spasms up and down the thigh and calf. I self-diagnosed: sciatica. I had never suffered from such pain and was perplexed as to what was causing it. The only thing I imagined could cause it was some pressure from the backpack on the nerve.





My options were to remain in Puente la Reina and catch up later as I felt that if I took a break from walking the pain would ease up, or I could take a bus to the next town. I didn't want to stay behind, so we decided that I could take a bus to Estella and Becky would meet me there at the church-sponsored albergue. Thus, I would rest my leg and we would decide what to do once we met there.

It was Christmas Eve and Xavier, the French pilgrim who had given us a list of the albergues that were open, had told us only one albergue was open in Estella, the Albergue Parroquial San Miguel.

And so it was. But before writing about the amazing experience at the albergue, I must write about my amazing experiences and the extraordinary people I met in Estella before even getting to the albergue.

I must tell how it was that having the sciatica pain on the right leg proved providential and why the dichos came to be so relevant.

After I left Becky at the bridge, I went looking for a place to take the bus to Estella.



Serendipitously, I timed it right and only waited about ten minutes at a café where I almost forgot my trusty walking stick; no doubt my forgetfulness was due to my being quite upset with myself. I kept blaming myself and my usual self-nagging ensued: I could've trained better, I should've taken precautions, I need to remain focused, and so on and so on. Luckily, I remembered that I had left my bastón as I was waiting

at the marquesina, the bus stop, and I ran back to retrieve it. By now it was raining hard and I was glad not to be on the Camino even as I kept regretting that I was not walking. Be present, I kept telling myself. My backpack seemed to weigh even more and since I didn't have a poncho, I was soon drenched despite my water repellent pants and parka.

I was glad to see the bus arrive, right on time; the trip was brief—no more than 20 minutes, what would take hours walking. In my head I did the math: if by bus we were traveling 60 miles an hour and walking we did 20 minute miles....

I wept silently, the tears running down my cheeks as I looked at the terrain where the Camino could be seen in the distance. The conversation in the bus was lively, as I was surrounded by folks who knew each other and who obviously made this trip regularly. I was struck by an octogenarian who joked with the driver and whose gnarled hands gripped a handkerchief where she kept her change. She reminded me of my paternal grandmother, Mamagrande Lupita, who also kept her “centavitos” tied in the corner of a handkerchief.

I wept. The tears were of regret and worry. What if I couldn't go on with the Camino? If the pain persisted, I would be forced to stop walking, delay, or even just stop entirely. I tried to find comfort in my usual, *ni-modo* philosophy, but it was not working.

When I finally got off the bus in Estella, I assessed my situation and the strategy seemed to work, finally: Do the best you can, I told myself; spend the time catching up on e-mail and rest the leg. It will surely be better tomorrow. It's Christmas Eve. Maybe I should ask Olentzero to grant me the wish of healing me so that I could continue the walk, after all he appears to be somehow aligned with Jesus and Christmas.



Arriving in Estella, or Lizarra, as the town is known in Basque, I followed the signs to the Tourist office, hoping to find information about the albergue and where to find the public library so I could use the internet. We had used the library in Pamplona and in most towns, for we found out that most public libraries had free internet access, but I never got there in Estella. Instead I discovered that my bad luck was really good luck; it was all meant to be as it was. No hay mal que por bien no venga. Por algo pasan las cosas. Cuando una puerta se cierra, otra se abre. The street signs we had been seeing in País Vasco and in Navarra were bilingual and it was no different here.



I met Marian and María who staffed the Oficina de Turismo. They invited me to join them as they were about to have some hot tea. As we chatted over chamomile, I told them of my leg pain. Right then and there, Marian gave me a Reiki treatment that eased the pain considerably. Although she didn't call it that, I had heard of Reiki and had watched Becky treat the mare back in Valcarlos; this was Reiki. Becky had even given me a short treatment that morning hoping that the pain would go away and I could walk. Marian also taught me a few stretching exercises to keep the leg flexible, including slapping the leg up and down to increase circulation. Santo remedio, as my Mom would say. The pain eased up considerably and I knew I was led to Marian and to Estella. I was soon sipping manzanilla and chatting away with Marian who upon hearing about what I did in the States, called a friend of hers who also had similar interests.

María Josebe came right over and we hit it off right away; she got her PhD in San Diego and in fact knows border literature—knows my work! She gave me the key to her apartment for us to use on Christmas Day advised that we not walk since everything would be closed because of the holiday. She and her husband, also a professor would be visiting family and wouldn't be back until later in the week. But, I was still not sure. I wanted to consult with Becky so I waited for her at the Albergue Parroquial as we'd planned and then we would decide whether we would take the offer or not.

At 2 p.m. when the Tourist Office closed for lunch, we went for a Christmas Eve gathering at the nearby vinoteca Urederra on Plaza San Martín where we had wine and cheese—I had not had wine in over 6 years because for I discovered that it triggered migraine headaches, but David, the son of the owner assured me I would not get the migraine, and I didn't! It was not a Rioja wine, it was from El Bierzo where we would be walking later on, and they claimed that it was totally organic. I drank the wine with trepidation, but thoroughly enjoyed the fruity dry taste of what is perhaps the best wine I have ever had.

I felt right at home with Marian's friends and the Nochebuena good cheer made it all even more pleasant. A discussion ensued when I asked about the figure I'd seen all over Navarra in stores and climbing up balconies alongside Santa Clause figures. "Sí, es El Papá Noel Basco, Olentzero," Marian answered. The figure of the bearded old carbonero, coal worker, was everywhere we went in the Basque country. I heard at least three variants of the legend right then and there. The variants spoke of either a dissolute drunk or a sage who came down from making carbón vegetal and gifted good children with whatever they wished on Christmas Eve. It thus confirmed for me that the folk story has currency and the variants intrigued me. I vowed to myself that I would research the figure and perhaps write a paper for the American Folklore Society (AFS) meeting, on these figures of winter largesse—los Reyes Magos, Santa Clause, and Olentzero, all somehow connected to the Winter Solstice celebrations from the past, but Olentzero going back to pre-Christian tradition in the Basque country. The Vinnoteca owner gave me a jigsaw puzzle they hand out to children at this time. Why did I not remember Olentzero from my readings of Julio Caro Baroja on the folklore of northern Spain? I took a course from him on the Pre-Iberian peoples of Spain and I do not recall him mentioning this figure, nor do I recall reading about him in the texts I read for the course.

Marian turned out to be a treasure trove of information, a veritable depository of the history and lore of Estella, its Cathedral, and environs; her area of specialization is this region of Navarra and the Camino, and she has written several tracts, and a book on the art at the Cathedral. She has been working at the Oficina de Turismo for many

years and has many stories to tell. She was the one to go to Shilrey McLaine's hotel room, for example, to stamp her credencial de peregrina. Pobre mujer, Marian almost whispers in a sad tone, she tried but her Camino was not what it should be. How could she with all the press following her?

Marian walked me to the albergue parroquial, across the street from a church. I arrived early so, I chatted with first, Alba and then with the priest, a young man whom the woman who comes to check on us tells us is well-liked by the youth but who is not liked by the older parishioners. The woman is the one in charge when there is no hospitalera/o as was the case until Alba was recruited to serve for two weeks. Her term ends on New Year's Eve when she plans to go back to Valencia. David arrived; he was making the pilgrimage by bicycle, and I asked if he had seen Becky. Yes, she is no more than two hours away, he said. He was trying to get to Santiago by the 30th because he had to get back to Madrid by the New Year's. Since he said Becky was still a while away, I went to the church basement across the street to use the internet. The place was full of kids playing computer games. Still, I was able to log on and wish everyone at home a Merry Christmas. The internet was free and the albergue was the first one we encountered that was de donativo, which means the pilgrim contributes whatever she or he can afford. We put in 10 € given that we got a great Christmas Eve dinner as well as a wonderfully clean and welcoming place to sleep.

Shortly after I went back to the albergue, Becky arrived totally soaked and exhausted! We quickly got ready for mass, and I put on my pink turtleneck knowing that my sisters were all wearing pink for Christmas this year. (My sisters and I take turns choosing a color to wear on Christmas Eve, and Marisela had chosen pink! In 2011, Leticia chose Christmas green; in 2012, Elsa chose turquoise.). At the church, I was struck by an image of La Virgen del Ariche—an Ecuadorian Virgin—dressed in pink, “She’s the patroness of all who are in Spain without papers,” a man informed me as I stopped by the side altar. The issue of immigration in Spain is as critical as it is in Texas although, here the migrants don’t cross a river, they cross the Mediterranean or the Pyrenees. The flowers at her altar and the number of candles lit attest to the need for her intercession, even on such a stop along the Camino so far from the ports of entry. After an uneventful mass, with the local parishioners singing off key and a capella as there was no one with a guitar or playing the organ, we pilgrims gathered back at the Albergue for dinner. Alba had received a care package from some pilgrims who had come by earlier: sushi, jamón serrano, and other delicacies.



That night, we shared a meal at the albergue with some Spanish peregrinos, Moisés and Belén, David, the cyclist, and of course, Alba, the hostelera who is from Valencia and is not really trained as an hospitalera yet—she just happened to be walking back from Santiago like Xavier and the priest asked if she could stay for the two-week period until they sent someone. She agreed and here she was making us feel at home and sharing her bounty. David names us la “Hermandad de Estella” and tells us of his travails: newly divorced, he worries about his little girl. He seeks advice from Belén and Moisés who are teachers and reassure him that she will be fine with the divorce happening when she’s so young. They are in their seventh year of marriage but have been together for 18 years. They are in their 30s. They are walking the Camino during their winter vacation; they come from a small town in Alicante. Starting the Camino in Pamplona, made sense, due to the short time they have to make the pilgrimage. She’s getting a degree in Physical Education; he is a Physical Education teacher. They bemoan the fact that their field of physical education is so discredited in Spain. Everyone talks of the crisis. Alba does not have a job, and Belén is afraid she won’t have one when she graduates. All this we find out because Becky and I decided not to go to Maria Josebe’s apartment until the next day and we decided stay to share Christmas Eve with our fellow pilgrims. We enjoy a great dinner and conversation with “la Hermandad de Estella.”



Fact: Puente la Reina, also known as Gares, its official Basque name, is the point where other European routes of the Pilgrimage join el Camino Frances, thus it becomes a critical town on the Camino from the very beginning. Whether it was because of the Queen of Navarra who had it built or from “Pons Rune” since the River Arga was the Rune at one time, the town has come to be known as Puente la Reina and more generally, Puente.

Meditation: Cuando una puerta se cierra, otra se abre. I know that there is always a solution and that the grand scheme of things may remain hidden, but it is there. I am learning to trust that all is as it should be for the good of all concerned.

2. December 25, 2010

I give Becky her Christmas gift, a tiny doll that I got at the Tourism Office; it is a fundraiser for a women’s project in Africa. I got one for myself as well, but I lost it somewhere in the next week or so. Like other things it just disappeared, and thus I was reminded of the dictum that the Camino takes what it needs and gives you what you need. Obviously I did not need the tiny doll with me along the Camino. Fondly, I remember the tiny hand sewn doll and how special it felt to wear it on the inside of my parka, bringing all those women with me on my walk. I carry other small items with me, things I was drawn to and felt I wanted with me: a heart shaped milagrillo, the card we gave out at my father’s funeral with the song that Elsa and I composed through divine inspiration, Al Cielo Vas. This last item is tucked in my passport even now. I felt compelled to bring something along that would “walk” the Camino with me and that

would carry the energy of the Ley lines. And so it is, when I see these things now, I am transported to the Camino and I feel the energy.

On Christmas Day indeed everything was closed, so we were very grateful to be able to stay in Maria Josebe's apartment, we did laundry, cooked, read and just rested. I imagined what life would be like living like this in a tiny apartment, going to sleep every night to the sound of the river. The view from the apartment was picture perfect. The river Ega courses through town meandering its way past the convents and churches. We made phone calls from a locutorio. I talked to Sandra, my sister, and to Mami. Elsa says all is well at home; GatoTito, the cat, and Sophia, the dog, are fine. I miss talking to Elvia who is not in Laredo and is not answering her cell phone. I feel pulled as I so often do when I am in Spain. I so miss my south Texas home, the food, the people, the feeling of being home.

I kept exercising every evening and the slapping my leg up and down as Marian instructed; I felt fine, pain free. I remained confident I could resume walking the next day. And so it was that the apparent set back suffered in Puente la Reina turned out to be for the best. I made new friends, learned quite a bit about Estella (also called Lizarra, its Basque name), the Camino, Reiki, I had wonderful wine and found a research project for the future, el Ollentzero!

Fact: An important historical site for Roman and other conquerors, Estella, or Lizarra as it is known in Basque, is also an important psychic site drawing those seeking spiritual experiences; a number of spiritual gatherings happen here.

Meditation: Por algo pasan las cosas. I dwell in the knowledge that life has a purpose and that the path that is life takes us to unexpected places. El Camino likewise leads us to where we must go, through what we must experience. Trust.