



Spring 2008

The Forum: Spring 2008

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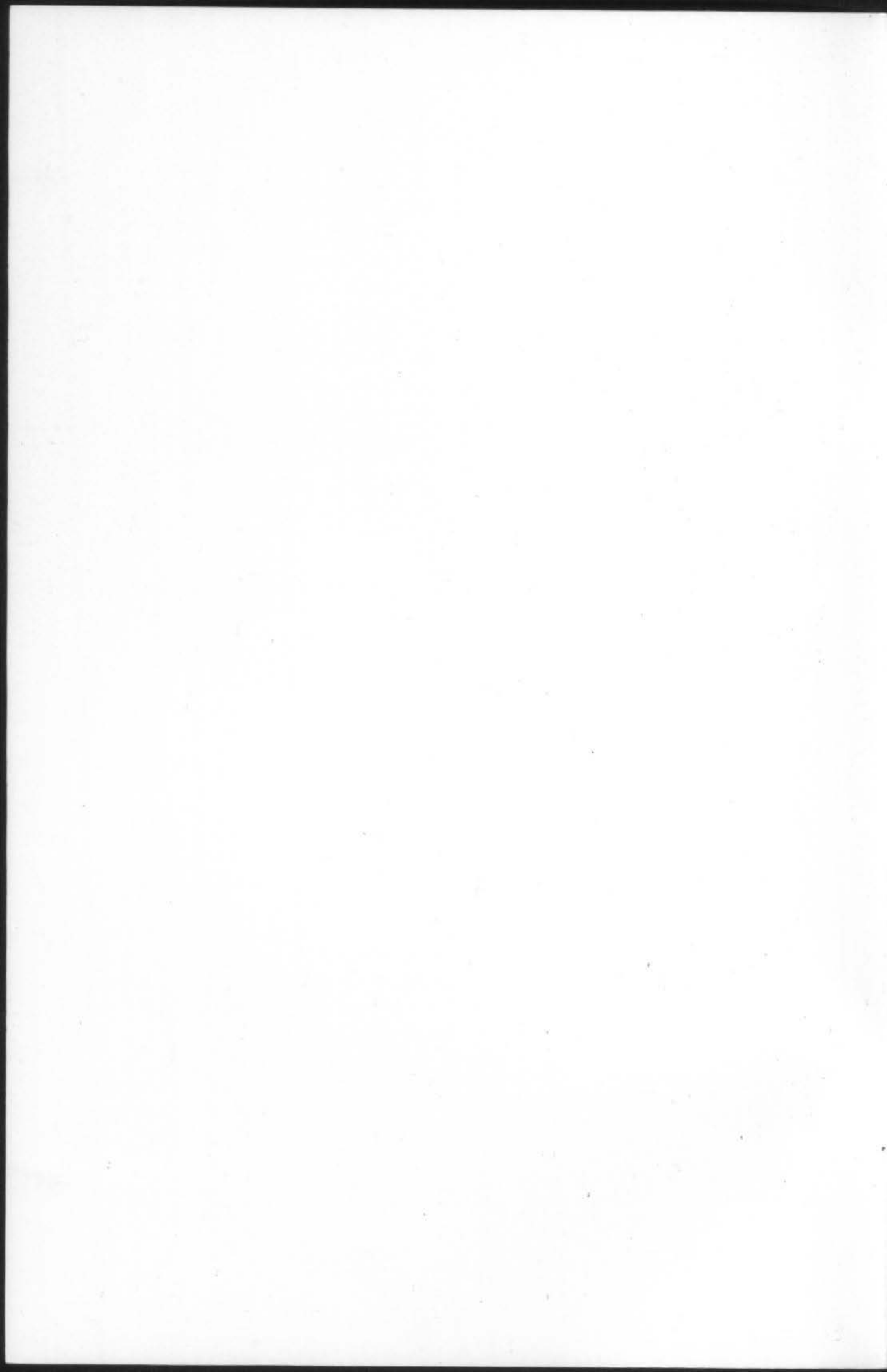
the Forum

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. stories . poems . essays . art. .

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Tangled Journey
Holly Johnson
Digital Photograph

Travis Waswick

Philosophy of Science

Throughout the history of humankind, humanity has struggled to come to terms with its existence in this place and time. By this struggle the studies of philosophy and science have emerged, brought forth to seek fact from fiction, truth from untruth, to find absolute knowledge in a world of ambiguity. The search for knowledge is not distinctly human, but the depth to which humans seek to understand is unprecedented in the animal kingdom. The fact that distinguishes us from apes, monkeys, dolphins, and whales, may be however, our greatest downfall.

It has occurred to me in studying the quest for truth of philosophers and scientists that there is a need, a need to know the absolute truth of the natural world. I must say that this need of truth may have blinded all of humanity from one startling yet undeniable observation: What if there are no absolute truths? Even if there is absolute truth how will anyone know when it has been achieved? It is my position that absolute truth in anything is unachievable, regardless of science and philosophy.

It is ironic that I will use philosophy to prove that it in itself is a feeble attempt of humanity to come to basic truths. It is also ironic that by definition the theory of no truth is philosophical in nature. Philosophers have long discussed the nature of truth. Karl Popper would say that new theories, at least useful theories must be bold, and that any scientific theories must be falsifiable. He mentions that bold scientists propose that their own theories are false, and spend time trying to discredit themselves (Popper, 1974). This will be my task.

I will assume the position for the moment that absolute truths can be achieved. An example of this could be some of the most interesting physics of the 20th century, a unified field theory known as string theory. For the moment I will assume that this is the absolute truth of how subatomic particles interact. Even if this could explain every physical happening known to mankind, scientists would never stop looking beyond this theory, trying to find something more truthful. It can be noted that where one looks hard enough, one is bound to find something. The prob-

lem with absolute truths is that even though humans are genetically programmed to search for it, they are ultimately incapable of recognizing it. This is simply human nature.

It seems that it is also human nature to give explanation to things that seem to have no reason. I noticed this most recently in a biology class. The instructor was trying to explain two different parts of DNA known as introns and exons. Exons code for proteins and introns code for absolutely nothing. My instructor kept offering suggestions of why DNA would have long stretches of base pairs that code for absolutely nothing. The most probable explanation, and the explanation put forth as most truthful, was that the introns exist to give a cell the ability to turn on and off specific protein synthesis. To me this seemed a viable explanation, but as I thought about this answer it occurred to me that there might not be an absolute truth in this matter. What if the introns are in DNA for no reason in particular? What if they are wasted space, tiny inefficiencies that evolution has not yet weeded out? I think that most would agree that this is a viable possibility. In science there exists a need to find a reason for everything, a purpose for everything. If, as a community, scientists want to be truly honest with themselves, they must admit the possibility that there are things in nature that are beyond reason, that exist purely for no reason at all. Until this happens there can not be absolute truth in any science.

One issue about the theory that there is no truth, or that we will never be able to achieve absolute truth, is that this theory is not easily falsifiable. To be falsifiable is one of Popper's key components of a theory (Popper, 1974). In that it would be very difficult to prove that truth exists, I will consider the day that scientists quit studying a field the day that my theory is falsified. If the truth is known, what is the point of wasting time and money studying the subject further? My theory can also be falsified by proving that there is a reason to everything. The day someone scientifically proves that behind everything in nature there is a solid reason for existence, is the day I will declare this theory false. While both of these methods may seem extreme or impossible, they most certainly are not, and I truly await the day I am proven wrong.

If this theory is to survive in the highly critical area of academia it must meet a set of standards. These standards are not in print, there is no checklist for a successful theory; however, I believe that Roald Hoffman has come up with an acceptable set of guidelines for an acceptable

theory. In his theory on theories he first says "there's no getting away from it; a theory that is simple yet explains a lot is usually accepted in a flash." (Sacks, 2003). The theory I have put forth is extremely simple, and incidentally explains quite a lot. The second point in the Hoffman model is that theories must tell a story. While the story behind my theory is somewhat short, there is a story nonetheless, a story of the search for truth. The third point to Hoffman's theory is that all successful theories must be "a roll-on suitcase," (Sacks, 2003). Theories must be portable; they must be applicable to different circumstances in different locations. I feel that my theory has met this requirement, as no matter what the circumstance or occasion it can be applied. The last of Hoffman's requirements that I will consider is that theories must be productive (Sacks, 2003). Many people may argue that in putting forth a theory on the absence of truth that I am seeking to slow progress, to encourage people to stop seeking the truth. This can not be further from the truth. I do not advocate, nor will I ever advocate, the slowing or stopping of science research or philosophy. I feel that the theory I have put forth is only productive if the search for truth continues. It is productive because it encourages scientists and philosophers to consider what they observe differently.

To search for truth is one of the noblest and most widely spread callings of humanity. To some extent all people search for truth whether it is in their relationships with others, in how their body works, or in the reasons behind our existence on this little oasis in the desert of space. It is my position; however, that it is impossible to come to any absolute truths. This is due to human genetics, and unfortunately there is nothing that anyone can do about it. I have examined my theory through the lens of several other prominent philosophers and scientists and found it to meet their standards for a theory. My only hope (as I am studying to become a scientist) is that someday I will be proven wrong.

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It's In The Bag
Amanda Unruh
Acrylic on Canvas



Gallery Contemporary, New York, NY / February 1997

Summer Flame
Jessica Skroch
Digital Photography

Summer Flame
Jessica Skroch
Digital Photography

Emily Hill

Sinful Games

"The only difference between a French funeral and a French wedding is that at a French funeral there's just one less person at the party." That is what Grandpa Louis would say with a glint of humor in his crystalline blue eyes. It seems like every French person in a 100 mile radius would arrive at a funeral, even if they did not know the deceased. It did not really matter since if you had a drop of French blood in you, you were probably somehow related. It was a social opportunity, a time to catch up with the French community that has spread across the North Dakota land.

Now it is Grandpa Louis' funeral, but despite his old saying it was less of a party without him.

My lips try to resist puckering as I sip the cheap tropical punch that the St. Mike's ladies circle provided. It was the only form of liquid in sight to swallow the overly peppered tater tot hotdish. Then, I see him, the dark, tall figure across the room. His yellow eyes sense my apprehension. Suddenly my twenty-eight year old body feels as if it is a naïve girl of twelve again.

* * *

It was 1992 and the August day was sticky. "August is slicker than snot on a door knob," my grandpa would always say with a wink. My sister just graduated from college, another reason for the French population to flock. Most of the relatives were outside in the garage trying to escape the sun's unforgiving rays. My mother's four older sisters, who were still dark European beauties, were suffering the most in the heat. They were all middle aged and hot flashes were a daily occurrence. They all had taken off their panty hose and were sprawled out on neon colored lawn chairs moaning,

"It is so damn hot."

"Pass me another scotch on the rocks."

"I wish I would just dry up already and revel in being an old woman."

"Damn menopausal madness."

French women are known for not mincing their words when they are trying to express themselves. They are not capable of embarrassment or modesty at

family gatherings. Since I am half French and half Irish, it has made me a bit more reserved than the other women in my family, which causes confusion for my mother and aunts.

My mother, a petite woman with kind mahogany eyes, told me to go inside to fetch my aunts some ice cold water. As I pushed through the bustle of relatives and ventured towards the kitchen, my cousin Marie grabbed me.

"Bernadette!"

"What?" I answered quite startled.

"Come down stairs. Have you heard of a Ouiji board?"

"Where'd you get one of those?"

"I borrowed it from my non-Catholic friend from school," Marie gleamed proudly, as if non-Catholic meant to her "more fun" and "dangerous."

"Marie, my mom said that I wasn't allowed..."

"Oh come on," as she tugged on my arm, "she's too busy entertaining."

As she held on to my hand, we ran down the steps of our ancient home, breathing anxiously in hopes that the adults of the party would not catch on to our secret meeting. Ouiji boards were right up there with reading your horoscope in the newspaper for Catholic parents. My mother always said that Ouiji boards were controlled by the devil himself and so therefore the game was starchy against the Catholic Church doctrine. The concept of the devil seemed very real, frightening and at the same time fascinating to a twelve year old. If you were brave enough to face Satan, you were a quasi-adult in the eyes of your peers.

As Marie and I entered the damp family room, two of my other cousins were already seated at the board. Anna, who was close to my age, looked as if she were pressured into this as well by Marie. She stared at the board with immense Catholic guilt. You could almost see John Paul II on one shoulder and her small, yet domineering mother on the other telling her that she was going to hell in a hand basket if she laid her hands on that game. Her sister, Lizzy, who was the oldest of our group at thirteen, reassured her that it would be okay and it was all make believe anyways.

The sinful game was about to start when suddenly we heard a scratchy, but deep voice behind us say, "Can I play with you?"

It was Paul. This was our socially inept cousin of sixteen who excelled at lurking in dark corners and startling others. He made everyone a little uneasy. He looked so bizarre for a full-blooded French boy. He was tall and thin, not short and dark like the rest of the relatives. Paul's skin had a strange

yellow tinge that clashed with his toe-head hair but matched his beady eyes.

"Sure," Marie said with obvious reluctance. "Sit next to Bernadette."

Paul sauntered over and sat next to me on the floor. His skinny, bony legs grazed mine as he was trying to position himself cross-legged. I moved my leg tighter to my body.

"Okay Bernadette, you can go first with Paul," Marie ordered.

I put my hands on half of the Ouiji board's decipher. Paul's scaly fingers followed mine, placing them on his half of the device. His yellowed and freckled fingers were too long to allow for personal space on the device, so the fingers nervously touched my small white hands. I wanted to pull away, but longed for the affirmation from my confident cousin Marie.

"What do you want to ask it?" Anna asked shakily.

At age twelve, I tried to think of the most scandalous question I could muster up that was not too personal (like who was my secret crush at school), but still was mysterious. When it finally dawned on me, I demanded the board to tell me,

"How will Grandpa Louis die?"

The minute I asked the question, I regretted it but the device began to move with urgency. I looked up and saw Paul's mouth transform into a crooked smile, glistening from the metal of his braces. "S" was the first letter and Anna squawked in fright. Paul moved his pointer finger and placed it on top of mine. "T" was the second letter. Marie giggled and said, "It knows! It really knows!" The third was "R" and Paul's breathing became rushed and I felt it upon my forehead. "O" was presented next as Lizzy yelled at Marie to "Take a chill pill!" Lastly, the letters "K" and "E" revealed themselves. We all looked at each other in fright, saying nothing. Our hands never left the device. We could only hear our breathing in the silence of the basement and feel the unrelenting guilt of sinfulness hovering around us.

I felt as if I had just proclaimed a death sentence for grandpa. Stroke.

Two high-pitched voices pierced through the silence of the basement. I turned around to see two of my aunts coming towards the family room, still sweating from being outside.

"Ah yes, it is much cooler down here."

"We should just move the party to the basement."

They saw us as they approached the light. We tensed up because we all knew what was coming next.

"What are all of you doing down here? What's that game you're playing?"

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph! It's an Ouiji board! You all need to go to confession."

"Bernadette and Paul, you clean this up. Marie, Anna, and Lizzy, upstairs. Now!"

Marie, Anna and Lizzy rushed up the stairs without saying a word, with my aunts following after them scolding. It was a far greater punishment to be left alone with Paul downstairs, for he said few words and his eyes isolated you from the outside world.

I folded up the board and placed it in the box. As I grabbed the Ouiji decipher, Paul placed his hand on top of mine. I could hear my mother upstairs yelling, "Everyone outside for cake and punch!" Soon after there was a herd of footsteps parading out the back door. The house was still and there was no one there to witness what happened next.

"Come here," he said with an unidentifiable look on his face. I did not want to go near him. He was the type of cousin I refused to hug when I saw him at Christmas, so why was this any different? "No, I'm going outside for cake. Do you want to come with?"

"No, I said come here!" He grabbed my arm. He pulled me towards his body. I struggled against his long frame, but he would not let go. Paul tossed me on the worn out plaid couch and started caressing my face, whispering softly, "It will be alright, don't you trust me Bernadette?" I started to cry. All I knew was that I wanted to escape directly to my mother's protective arms, the place where nothing could hurt me.

"Don't touch me. What are you doing Paul?" My body became paralyzed against his. I felt as if I could not escape if I wanted to.

"We are going to play a little game," he said blankly through his hazardous eyes.

"We just played a game and got in trouble. I think that's enough playing for today," I tried to calmly tell him. "Let's have cake, okay?"

"We'll have cake after we play the game."

As he grinned with the metal in his mouth, I saw my feared expression in the gleam of his eyes. Paul breathed heavily down my neck and it smelled like the combination of cheetohs and ranch dressing he was eating earlier. I felt his scaly hand find my ankle and travel up my leg, past my dress. "This is what grown-ups do at night. Don't you want to be a grown-up Bernadette?" He moved his face closer to mine. I felt a strange sensation of wanting run away from his grasp and at the same time his grip and touch was something I never experienced before. His dried lips moistened by spit shadow

mine. My body made the decision to arch against his like a puzzle piece.

"Paul! Bernadette! Come here now! You're missing cake!" my mother's voice echoed down the basement stairs. Both of us were perfectly still.

"Paul! Where are you two? Birdie?" she said as she walked down the creaky steps.

Paul's breath exhaled as a drop of his saliva landed on my chin. Quickly he got up, tugged on the bottom of his dress shirt and smoothed out his pants. My mind was racing. Although my mind was relieved that my mother was saving me, my body suggested that it wanted to experiment with its awakened awareness. I still could not move, as much as I wanted to run away. I lay there waiting for the sanctuary of my mother arms. My mother approached the family room with urgency.

"Now what are you two doing down here? All of the relatives are upstairs and wanting to talk to you."

Paul quickly escaped the darkness of the basement. He did not say a word to my mother, nor did he look at me.

She sternly looked at me on the couch, "I heard about the Ouiji game. We will have a discussion about that later." My mother's severe look softened when she realized I had not moved from my position on the couch. She came over and placed her hand on my forehead and softly asked, "Sweet pea, aren't you feeling well?"

I did not respond. She gathered my small frame in her arms and took me upstairs to my bed. I remained restlessly awake as I heard the commotion downstairs. It was not the sounds of the relatives that kept me awake, but the warmth of his nauseating yet stimulating breath still on my neck.

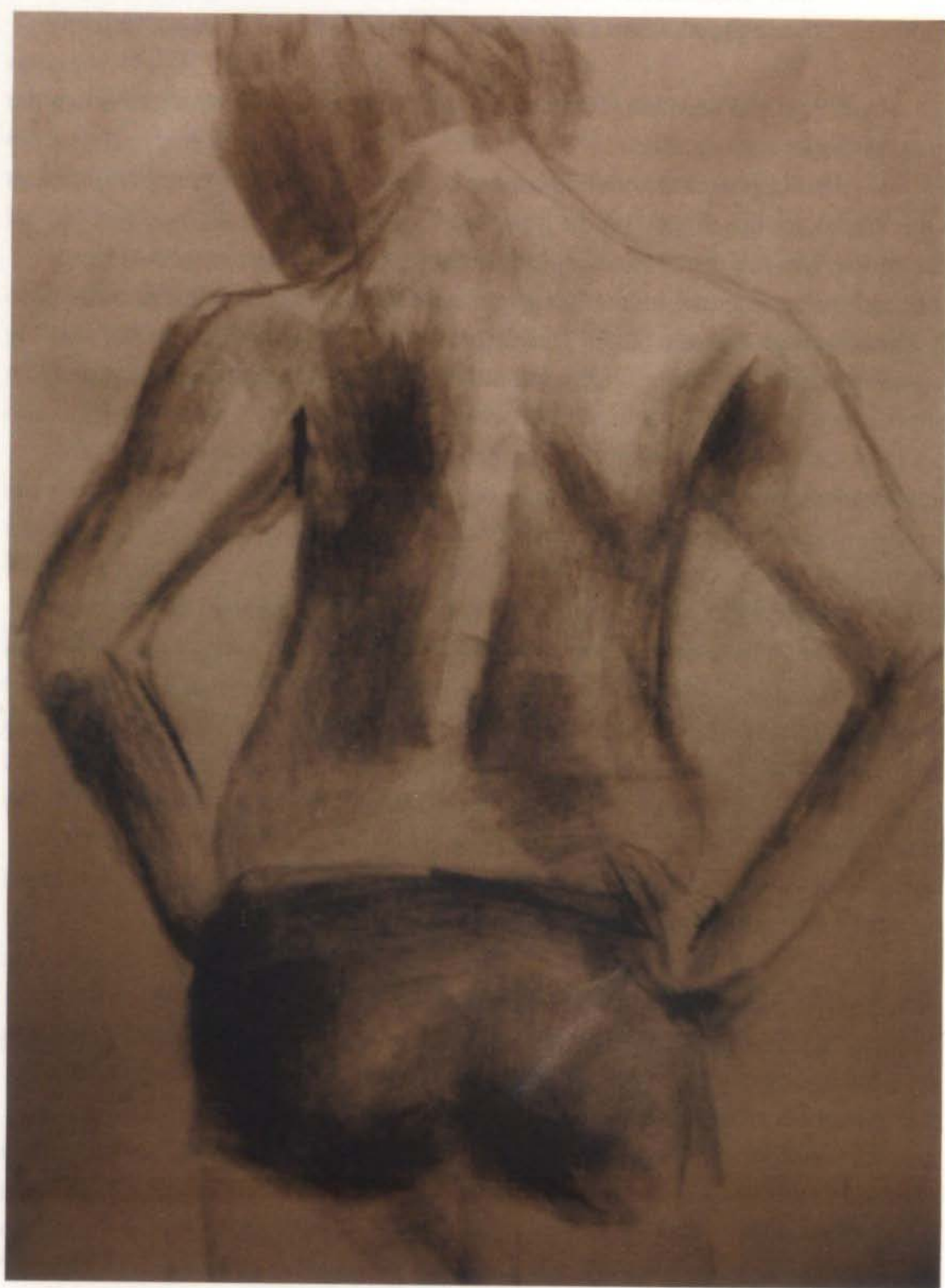
* * *

I try to take another bite of my hotdish, but the action fails. The combination of the peppery hotdish, sour punch, and the memory of rancid ranch dressing and cheetoh breath hovering over my young frame still haunts me. Now we are both adults and I am awake.

Paul walks over to me. His crooked grin remains devilish sans braces. I nervously try to find someone to protect me from him and myself, but realize I am twenty-eight.

"Hello Paul," as I try to appear calm.

His eyes blaze as he says, "Hi, Birdie."



Life Studies
Amanda Unruh
Charcoal On Paper

Amanda Unruh

Least Resistance

Sophie brushed the fringe of too-long bangs out of her eyes to better see the call numbers of the mountain of books laying on the counter in front of her. Most of them were non-fiction, the worst to put away. The numbers were so long and they took forever to put in order. The non-fiction were located at the farthest corner of the large public library, and the shelves seemed to reach up forever. Sometimes Sophie imagined she were in a large labyrinth when it was her turn to shelve them. With so many rows, it wasn't difficult to believe. *It would be easy to get lost as a small child, she thought. I would never bring my kid in here.*

"Sophie, are you almost done with those? There are patrons who need your help." Margaret's voice brought Sophie back to reality. The head of Circulation and second in command at Lincoln Public Library, Margaret had a way of intimidating most people—especially Sophie. She nodded to Margaret and made her way over to the line of people needing a guide to the mysteries of the Dewey Decimal System. As usual for a Saturday morning, the library was understaffed and Sophie had to work hard not to get behind.

"Excuse me, miss? I want dog books."

"Could you direct me to the biographies?"

"Where would I find Earnest Hemmingway's work?"

"I need a Hitchcock movie."

These kinds of questions haunted Sophie's dreams sometimes. It was frustrating that people did not use the resources given them and just look up their own books. Sophie had to remind herself that she was being paid to help these people. It would be so much nicer though, if she could just avoid them altogether and simply put books away.

It could be worse. She might not even have an after-school job. Then she would be stuck hanging out with Sam and Rachel every day, or worse, her parents. They would inevitably make her go to church school on Wednesday

and bible study on Thursday and "Alive" group on Saturday. She liked church, but there can be too much of a good thing. As it was, she worked during most of these events, and therefore had an excuse to simply attend Sunday morning service, which was just the right amount of church for one week.

"Sophie, please. Pay attention when I'm talking to you." Margaret frowned condescendingly at Sophie and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Make a note of putting away those non-fictions when you come tomorrow afternoon." She turned go. "You shouldn't always leave them for last." Sophie cracked her knuckles nervously. She imagined herself grabbing Margaret's wrinkled arm and staring directly into her eyes. *Maybe if you helped out a little here when it's busy instead sitting on your big old butt and checking your email all day, there wouldn't BE anything left over to put away tomorrow!* If only she had guts.

"Of course," she replied meekly, looking down at her tennis shoes. Why bother trying to stand up for herself? She never did. It seemed easier that way.

* * *

Church seemed longer than usual. The preacher was on a rant about the end times...at least he was ten minutes ago, about the time when Sophie had tuned him out. Sam sat beside her, his larger frame protectively hovering over hers. She caught him looking at her through the corner of her eye. He smiled, blushed, turned his head quickly. Sophie knew he wished she would hold his hand while they sat together, but her excuse had been that it was church and her parents would not approve. This seemed to be enough for him usually, but then there were all the times they hung out outside of church.

"I just don't understand the point of dating when you won't even let me show you I like you," he'd complained, looking at her with those imploring eyes. She'd looked away, finding it hard to put in words her feelings.

"You can show me you like me without touching me, you know. I just want to take it slow. Don't you?" She hoped her bangs covered her eyes enough to hide the fear that lay behind them. "God would want us to." Playing the God card usually worked with Sam. He had sighed, signaling an end to the argument, for now.

Sophie wondered if God really didn't want them to hold hands, or if it was just another way for her to avoid a potential hurt. When she had talked to

Rachel about it, Rachel had laughed outright.

"Not hold hands? Are you kidding me? You're kidding me, right?" Rachel looked at her incredulously from across the bed one night she slept over. "So, I'm going to assume you haven't even kissed then? This is unreal. Are you a mutant?"

Sophie tried to clear her mind and bring her attention back to the sermon. The pastor was saying the benediction. It was time to leave.

* * *

"Place is pretty quiet this afternoon, huh?"

Sophie glanced up from the books she was shelving on the bottom row. A boy was smiling down at her, one arm leaning nonchalantly on the bookshelf, the other hand stuffed into his faded jean pocket. He looked older than her, but not much. Probably not out of high school yet. He didn't look like the other boys who frequented the library.

"Yes, church's just out..." she mumbled the reply, eager for this stranger to leave.

"You're supposed to say, 'of course it's quiet, it's a library'." His words dripped honey. Was he flirting with her? She felt her cheeks burn under his gaze. Guys at the library didn't usually flirt with her. They weren't really the type. Actually, no guys really flirted with her. Even Sam wasn't really a flirter, and he certainly never looked at her in that way. She stood up slowly, still holding a few books in one hand.

"Can I help you find something?"

"Yeah. Some poetry as pretty as your raven hair." He smiled at her flushed cheeks. "You know, you really shouldn't wear your bangs in your face like that, it's hard to see your pretty eyes." Flustered, Sophie cracked her knuckles and looked away from the boy. She smoothed her skirt.

"I can show you to the poetry section..."

"Please." He walked beside her, his shoulder brushing hers. As it did, a shiver went up her spine. What was that feeling? *Poetry*, she thought. The poetry section was located in one of the farthest corners of the labyrinth, in the 800's. She gestured to the correct shelf and turned to leave. Grabbing her shoulder, he turned her back.

"You can't go yet," he whispered.

"I have to finish my work."

"You're not done helping me."

"What else do you need?"

He leaned his head close to hers, trapping her between the bookshelf and himself. "Can you keep a secret?" He whispered in her ear, and kissed it. Sophie swallowed hard, unsure of what to do. As she turned her head away, she felt his lips on her neck. Now they were on her own. As his hands grabbed hold of her and moved where they pleased, she thought of Sam. He'd never done this. He would be so angry. As his hands moved underneath and up her shirt, she thought of Rachel. She always bragged at being the experienced one, well what now? As his hand traveled downward, she quit thinking and kissed him back.

* * *

Sophie grabbed her jacket from underneath the counter.

"Where do you think you're going?" Margaret hissed. "You still have two hours before your shift is over."

"I don't care, I'm leaving now. I'll work two extra tomorrow."

Sophie had never been so forthright with Margaret, and it felt amazing. Margaret stood, dumbfounded, as she watched Sophie leave. Sophie walked, practically skipping, home. The "incident," as she had started to think of it, had happened only a week ago, and already her mind had been on an emotional roller coaster. The boy from the library had left as quickly as he had come, with only a "See ya, Raven," as a goodbye or explanation. She knew she'd probably never see him again, but it didn't matter. At first she couldn't believe what had just happened. Not only had she let him do what he did, she had let herself enjoy it. She loved the feeling of danger and excitement she never knew existed. Then, all of a sudden, she thought of Sam with a pang of guilt. She had let a boy "violate" her, as her parents would probably put it, and it wasn't even her boyfriend. Was that what she had been missing with Sam? Why had she been so scared? Now that this had happened, she felt as if a gate had been unlocked. Up until now, her life had been a plain one, but safe. Now she had tasted risk, and it had tasted good. She felt freed from a prison she didn't know existed. She wanted to try other things, to see what it felt like to be that kind of girl. She had already gone to parties with Rachel and her older friends. At first, it had terrified her, but was kind of fun at the same time. Sam had been angry that she started partying, but when she kissed him on the lips,

he'd forgotten the quarrel in his surprise. Though it had only been a week since "the incident," Sam and Sophie had gone farther than she'd ever dreamed they'd go. Farther than either of them were comfortable with, but with Sophie being the leader, Sam felt it must be okay. Rachel high-fived her when Sophie told her.

"All-right! That's more like it. Not so much a mutant after all, Sophie." Sophie smiled at her friend's approval.

* * *

As she adjusted her miniskirt until her reflection satisfied her, she shoved a headband into her short black hair. Ravaging her desk for her eyeliner, Sophie noticed a note from her mother.

Dear Sophie—

I just want you to know that your father and I love you, no matter what you do. No matter where you go, no matter whom your friends are. We are worried about you, but I don't want you to feel like we are mad at you. If you need anything from us, we're here. I know we don't talk anymore, but just say the word and I'll do whatever is in my power to help you, to bring you back. Again, we love you, but we miss the old Sophie. I miss my baby girl. We're praying for you, dear. God loves you.

--Mom and Dad

Sophie read the note one more time. She closed her eyes as a tear escaped, leaving a trail that followed the contour of her cheek. Eyeliner in one hand and note in the other, she stretched her arms out wide as if she were a scale. The hand with the note closed, crumpling it into a ball. Letting it fall into the garbage can, Sophie grabbed her purse and walked out the door.

* * *

Andrew Rilometo

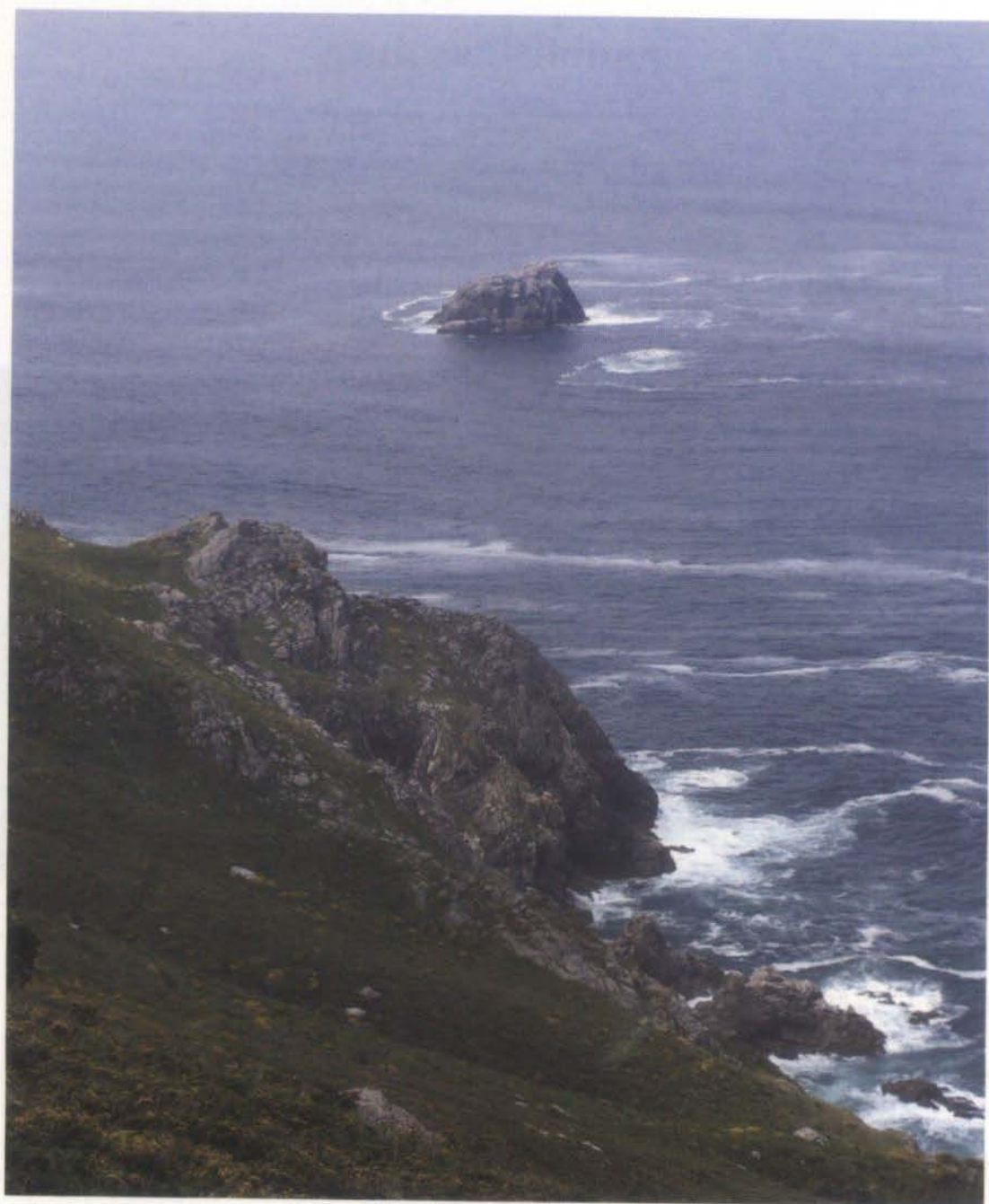
Smiles Before Magenta

Smiles before magenta,
children together in an image.
A picture.
Three children together.
They are smiling.
The focus is behind the camera,
but they are not
laughing at the photographer.
They are happy to be together.
The nervous tension
of the camera displayed
in their smiles.
Sitting between
my sister and I,
is my brother.
A snapshot before tragedy.
A thumb over the lens
shows the amateur,
but the blanket behind
shows the reach for
professional as if taking
a portrait for remembering.

Each wears red
clashing
with the magenta like
siblings.
The children are captured
before the innocence of youth
is lost,
before the darkness of reality
is obtained.
The smudges on the picture,
-like the fading of vision-
the wrinkles at the ends,
-like folds on our faces-
and the crease over the printed image,
-like the wear on the family-
this image still beholds.
The faces are familiar
one too much so,
another more mature and confident.
The last only familiar because it's
the way it stayed.



Homeless-Oslo
Rick Abbott
Digital Photograph



The End—Finisterre
Holly Johnson
Digital Photography

Holly Johnson

Experiences Worth Reliving

Who knew that my freshman year of college would entail what it did? Not only did I have a whirlwind adventure in experiencing my first year of college, with moving away from my parents to figuring out classes myself and to living on my own, but I also had quite an adventure chasing little yellow arrows and seashells throughout northern Spain. I became an official Pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago and there were an abundance of experiences I had that are worth retelling, worth reliving.

Each one of us as unique individuals had our own unique reason for wanting to go on a pilgrimage . . . and mine definitely changed. Firstly I looked at this opportunity as my last, as a final thing that I could have encountered just this once, and never again. I had thought that someday when I get married and start my family, I could never go on such an excursion, and that basically I wouldn't have the funds, or I'd be too busy with daily life to take a moment for myself. I learned (while abroad) that I can take time for myself, no matter how busy life may get, and no matter what I bring upon myself to make it that way. I've also realized that money isn't an object, although my whole life has been spent drilling the opposite idea into my head. There is always more money to be made, and that a treat to you isn't as bad a thing as my parents and others in my family might think it to be. In the area I grew up, something like this trip doesn't happen or come around very often if at all to anyone, and I based my expectations on that at first. My initial intentions and reasons for this trip weren't correct, at least not in my newly realized view, and that even though everyone was telling me that, it took actually being there to fully realize it. Realizing myself on this trip was indeed the single largest endeavor that happened.

I learned that there is three parts encompassed in a pilgrimage: internal/interior, moral, and physical/place. Fortunately, my entire experience involved all three parts, although one more than others: internal pilgrimage. Spiritually I grew in such a few short weeks than I think I have in my entire life. During my senior year of high school, I was starting to look for myself as

an independent individual, while studying abroad was me finding those results I was searching for. I never knew that one could experience themselves so wholly, soulfully, and deeply as I did over the weeks I was abroad.

What sticks out in my mind the most is the problems and setbacks I encountered along the way with something that I thought I'd have no problem with: my knee. Although it was two years ago that I had ACL reconstructive surgery on my left knee, I never imagined what trials I'd endure while hiking. I know it was the fact that we started in the Pyrenees, and walked 100km during those first four days, in continuous straight up - straight down weaving out of the mountains is what did it. My knee can handle pivoting and cutting required for basketball, but it couldn't handle climbing a 200m high hill in 300m, or going back down the other side. It's okay though, because I learned very quickly something incredible about myself. *Cogito ergo sum* - I think therefore I am. To be able to control mind over matter takes great control and skill, and I learned I can do just that! I didn't have a coach there to tell me what to do, to keep going, and not to give up - it was my own mind telling me to do those things.

There was another instance where I had my mind over matter . . . on day 14 of the trip homesickness hit me like a ton of bricks. It was the combination of being puking sick (from some rotten tuna and mayonnaise) and the fact I was having trouble dealing with people along the route. I broke down completely, 100%, and desperately needed the comfort of familiar other because at that moment I was completely alone on the Camino. I called a trusted friend who is always full of advice and cried outrightly for a half an hour. Through his advice, wisdom, and guidance I overcame all those odds and pushed on, continuing when others (and myself a few months before this experience) would have quit. I have never been happier with myself than I was that day . . . I matured in great leaps on that day, a new confidence was found.

Self-realization was a huge aspect of my experience on the Camino de Santiago. As I mentioned, this is something I started looking for in high school and found on the Camino. The person I had spent the most time with along the way was almost a mirror image of myself on some occasions, and I realized through that person that some of the things I do/have done are those I don't want to do ever again. At one point one night, it was a little chilly in the room, but a few men were passing bad gas (while sleeping) and I knew it would be warm in the room in the morning; therefore, the windows were open. Without thinking of others who would be affected, the one I was traveling with sealed every last window. That next morning, every last pilgrim was wonder-

ing why it had gotten so warm in the room that night. Looking at that situation, I would have been the one who shut all the windows before, because I would have been selfishly thinking of only myself. However, by seeing that firsthandly and realizing the situation, I learned to put others before myself (something of which I was getting better at, but fully realized on the Camino).

I also realized that sometimes one has to do the thing they most DON'T want to do, in order to pacify others, or keep promises and plans. A few certain times I wanted to quit and give up, and change my plans of travel afterwards. I didn't though, and it didn't kill me, but I learned I can deal with it and handle it. Respect was also something I heavily contemplated a few times . . . respect between older and younger generations. The conclusion I came to is if older generations want respect from younger generations, why don't they act "older and wiser" by giving youth respect first and in return they just might find respect from those youth. The older people I enjoyed much of my time with along the route were the ones who gave me respect and I respected them back, almost to the point of a seemingly no age barrier. We all knew and respected the fact we were there for the same reason, the same encounters, and experiencing the same things (just on different personal levels). In my eyes, I hardly saw any age difference, like they were peers.

Spiritually the Camino de Santiago made me see a much more simplistic, humble, and grateful side of myself (one I didn't know existed). A goal of mine now is to harness the power to relax myself; much like the relaxing feeling I had walking day after day. In contrast however, at the same time I realized I like the busy and complex lifestyle I bring upon myself and the American culture places on it's people . . . it's just that I need to be able to relax every once in a while too.

The firsts for many experiences happened on my maiden journey to Spain. These too helped me in shaping myself and realizing my potentials. It was the first time I left home, my family, and my comfort zone for a long, extended period of time and stayed out of touch with everyone I keep regular tabs on. It was my first international experience as well, and the first trip I paid for (or will be paying for) entirely on my own. I learned on my first true hiking experience that I can live out of a backpack with two changes of clothes (I usually win the award for overpacking) and I learned how to hand wash my clothes (minimal washing machines and no dryers in Spain). The physical tests of hiking like that (and the problems with my knee) were the first of that magnitude and endurance. To be thrown into all of those new "first" events (by myself no less) was in itself an inspiring feeling . . . knowing I can handle

all of those things with poise and control.

The place/physical part of pilgrimage was the next biggest of the three, but just as important as the others. The surroundings were gorgeous and when trying to explain it to others back home, I find it difficult, because words don't do it justice. My first view of the ocean was incredible: high atop a point on the face of a huge rock I looked out over the ocean surrounding me on three sides and felt lost in the air, like I was flying. The weather was overcast that day and the horizon was difficult to distinguish sky from water, so from top of the rock it felt like I was suspended in midair. That day at Finisterre was incredible; we were at the end of the world as the medieval pilgrims thought of it when they were in Finisterre.

I found myself thinking of the historical significance of every rock, every tree, every building, every church/cathedral, and every footprint along the Camino de Santiago. At one point (as if in slow motion like a movie) I was walking along, and looked back at the little puddle I had stepped in only to see my own footprint in the mud alongside of numerous other distinctive footprints. I slowed and mentally visualized thousands upon thousands of pilgrims just like me thousands of years before me making their mark in the same spot as I did. *How many footprints were underneath mine?* I thought to myself. Then as minds sometimes do, mine started to play a trick on me . . . I imagined the ghosts of pilgrims from all the ages over the history of the Camino alongside of me cheering me on and telling me all the physical pains were worth it.

And they were, the churches I saw along the way were so beautiful and unique; yet, so completely full of history and historical significance that I could write pages upon pages describing it. My favorite, though, was of course the cathedral in Santiago, because of its importance and meaning to me as a pilgrim - it was my destination. When I was in the Pilgrim's Office in line to get my compostela I was overwhelmed by the smell emanating from everyone, and then realized I was contributing body odor myself! When it was my turn in line to get my compostela, an excited fear came over me. *Would I get it? Did I have enough stamps?* Of course I did, and the ladies were very nice, and my official pilgrim's name became Holly Helena Johnson in Latin.

Pilgrim's Mass at the cathedral in Santiago was such an incredible experience in itself, but it held such a more profound impact on me religiously than I had ever expected and could have dreamed. Although it was held in Spanish, I followed along and recited the lines (in English) where appropriate, and I even received communion. How many people can say they received communion in Santiago at Spain's shrine to St. James? The shrine in the ca-

thedral was so immense that I spent a good half an hour just realizing every detail in it. I cried that day at mass, from sheer joy to be there, accomplishing what I had, and to place myself in such an important event in history . . . it was all worth it no matter what hurdles had lay in my path.

I encountered many obstacles along my route and learned from them for next time. My fiasco with loan money made me appreciate being able to go on such a greater level that next time I know I can do the same (never give up) or make sure to save up little by little. The language barrier wasn't as big of a deal as I thought it would be, but I was lucky and had a friend who knew Spanish well, although I picked up a lot myself. Endurance was a hurdle and having the patience to just keep walking day after day was difficult but manageable. Therefore next time I would probably physically train/prep myself differently - go on mini-hikes with the backpack to get a feel for it.

The most prevalent hurdle I encountered was with the person I traveled with the whole way. At first I was bitter towards all of the unforeseen problems we had together and told myself that the next time I do this pilgrimage I want to be with someone I care deeply about, like a fiancée, husband, or best friend. I realize now that being with that person that I actually learned more about myself than I probably would have if I'd have been with one of those other types of people. I think that when you face the desire to quit and give up because it gets difficult between two unfamiliar people you learn how to cope and overcome, whereas if I'd have been with a best friend or significant other, it wouldn't have gotten to that point and/or I'd have been able to confront them, instead of rely on myself. With different people, the experiences and situations brought on by the one I was with this trip would have been different, and the entire experience would have been altered. My tune now is I'm glad I had to deal with the people I did, because of the unique experience it brought with it.

I had my self-doubts about encountering such a journey, but being abroad I realized I'm older than my years might show - something I'm proud of. As many times I wanted to quit, there were twice as many rewarding times I experienced, and I'm glad I didn't give up on myself. I've grown within myself a great deal through this experience and I hope to do it again someday, but for now I'll keep reliving it daily, keeping all of the abundant memories alive.

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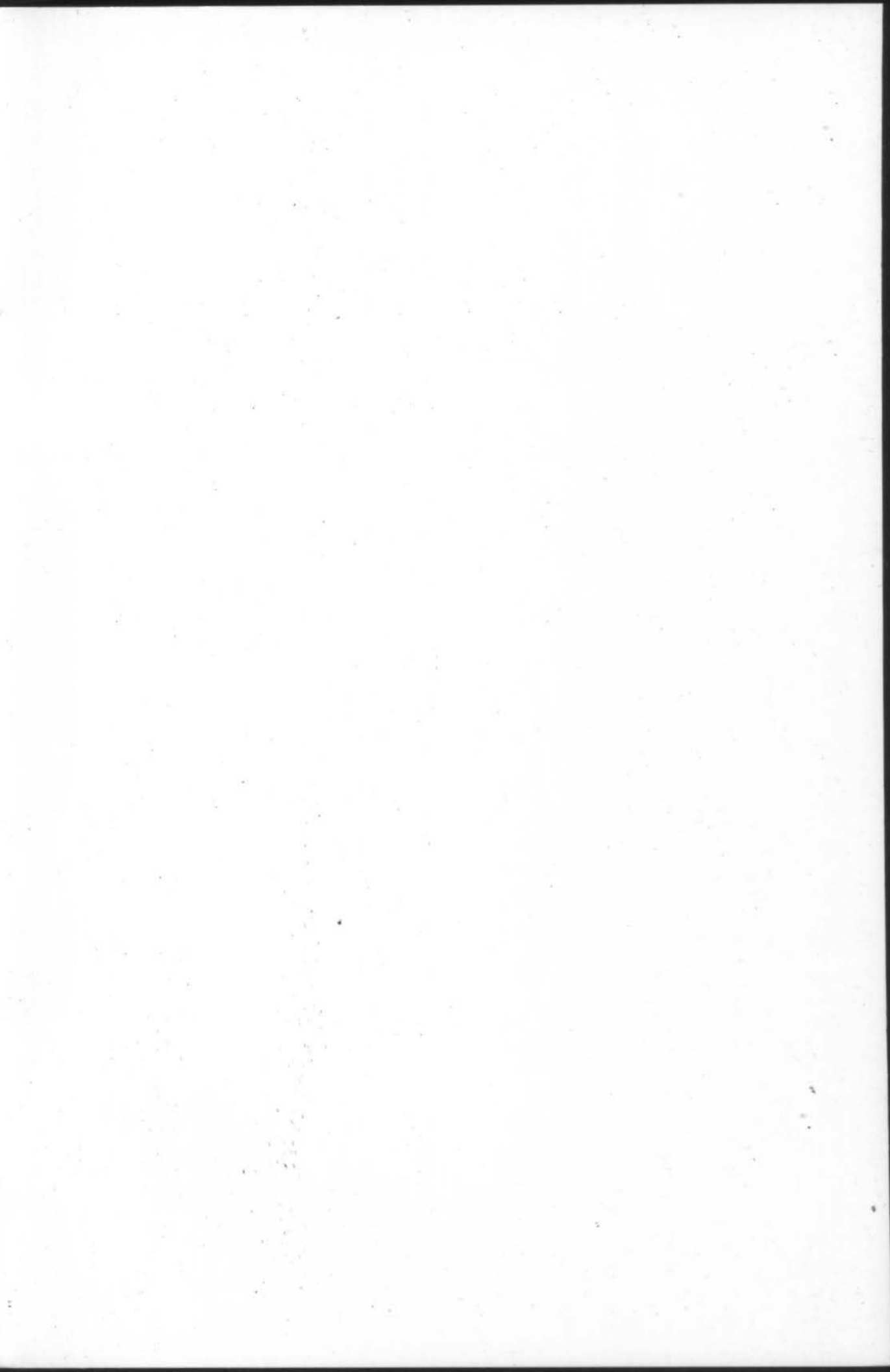
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