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We Make the Way by Walking: Spiritual Pilgrimage and Transformative Learning While Walking the Camino De Santiago

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Abstract: After grounding the discussion in prior research that led impetus to doing a spiritual pilgrimage, this paper primarily provides an auto-ethnographic account of the major insights about spirituality, culture, and transformative learning gleaned from walking the nearly 500 mile pilgrimage route of the Camino de Santiago.

I have been doing research on the connection of spirituality and cultural identity for more than 12 years by conducting a longitudinal study of the spiritual development of some 30 adult educators. In the process, I have had the honor of listening to participants share stories of deeply transformative spiritual experiences. Most relevant to this paper are the stories that participants shared about spiritual pilgrimage, that resulted in my own desire to conduct a major spiritual pilgrimage: that of walking the nearly 500 mile pilgrimage route of the Camino de Santiago in the summer of 2012, and of the transformative learning that resulted from this walk. Given that the landmark adult education text by Myles Horton and Paul Freire (1990), *We Make the Road by Walking*, has deeply influenced my own life, I thought it fitting that I literally make the road by walking into a new way of being.

The Camino de Santiago, is literally “The Way of St. James,” and was originally a Catholic Christian Pilgrimage way across Northern Spain. St. James was one of the apostles of Jesus, who went to the Iberian Peninsula and was martyred there. His remains are buried at Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in the Northwest of Spain. The Camino is also situated under the Milky Way, and those who walk the Camino sometimes refer to “following the Milky Way.” Saints and prophets of old have walked this road; so have many more modern day pilgrims, most for spiritual reasons, but some more for adventure and challenge. There have been many books that document people’s experiences on the journey (Coehlo, 1995; Rupp, 2006, MacLaine, 2000, Schmidt, 2012) that provide further detail about the Camino and their own experiences

In light of having conducted studies that influenced this spiritual pilgrimage, the purpose of this paper is to provide some brief background to these studies, and then to primarily provide an auto-ethnographic account of the major aspects of adult learning from walking the nearly 500 mile spiritual pilgrimage route of the Camino de Santiago

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the longitudinal study that is the backdrop to this auto-ethnography is related to the bodies of literature focusing on spiritual pilgrimage (Cousineau, 1998, Morinis, 1992), spiritual development (Fowler, 1982, Wink & Dillon, 2002) as well as discussions and studies about spirituality and cultural identity development in the field of adult education, summarized recently by English and Tisdell (2010). The literature that connects to the spiritual/cultural perspectives on transformative learning (summarized by Taylor, 2008) is also an important influence. Prior research in the field indicates that many who value a sense of spirituality attempt to cultivate their spiritual development by engaging in various spiritual practices, such as through meditation; some also reclaim

their cultural heritage by understanding the way their ancestors embraced cultural and spiritual ritual, while others cross cultural borders to attempt to facilitate their own spiritual development (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Dillard, 2006). Numerous writers have described spirituality as a journey toward wholeness, or a journey toward wisdom (as summarized by Tisdell, 2003) using the idea of journey in its more metaphorical sense. But Kottler (1998) suggests that many adults also attempt to facilitate their own transformation and spiritual development through travel, while others do so by going on a spiritual pilgrimage. A spiritual pilgrimage can be either a metaphorical spiritual journey or actual travel to sacred sites (Cousineau, 1998), and in anthropology, Morinis (1992) discusses different types of pilgrimage, all of which involve a journey and a goal, where a part of the goal is movement along the journey itself from the familiar to something other, until this new other becomes integrated into a new sense of self. This sense of movement is reminiscent of the phrase “we make the way by walking”. In adult education circles Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990) used this phrase in describing their activist adult education stance. While this is a secular text that informed this work, in the book they describe their sense of spirituality that also is one of the underpinnings of their work; hence this “secular phrase” guided my intention and methodology of walking. The 7th beatitude of Jesus (Matthew 5), “Blessed are the peace-makers,” particularly Neil Douglas-Klotz’s (1990) midrash of “Blessed are they who plant peace in every step” was a part of my “personal theoretical framework” that guided the walk itself.

Background and Methodology

This is primarily an auto-ethnographic account of the spiritual pilgrimage itself. Numerous methodologists have described auto-ethnography as “research, writing, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social” (Ellis, 2004). The 31 North American adult educators that I have interviewed over the past 12 years, initially for a study about how participants’ spiritual development relates to their cultural identity (Tisdell, 2003) influenced my interest in pilgrimage. Their stories deeply affected my understanding of how my own spiritual development intersects my cultural identity as one with Irish-American Roman Catholic roots. In the past couple of years, I have re-interviewed several of these educators again in order to examine how their spiritual development has unfolded over time, and relates to the notion of wisdom; several of them discussed this notion of spiritual pilgrimage, which influenced my own further research and writing about wisdom (Tisdell, 2011), as well as my undertaking of two significant pilgrimage experiences. The first involve climbing the sacred mountain of Croagh Patrick in the West of Ireland in 2009 (discussed in Johnson, Swartz, & Tisdell, 2010). The second is walking the 500 mile spiritual pilgrimage route of the Camino de Santiago in the summer of 2012.

Dhunpath (2009) notes in his discussion of life history methodology as “narradigm” (p. 543), that research participants share a kaleidoscope of memories, dreams, and reflections that affects both researcher and participant, and affects how I have continued to make sense of my own spiritual journey, in my further research and writing and in embarking on spiritual pilgrimage. Hence, while the participants in my former studies were not literally writing with me in my further writing on wisdom or spirituality; nor were they walking with me along the Camino de Santiago. Yet, they were very much with me as I made greater sense of my own spiritual journey along the pilgrimage route, particularly as a mid-late career academic walking my way to a new way of being. From an auto-ethnographic perspective, actual data from the study included my blog of the spiritual pilgrimage, photos, journals, and reflective poetry written along the way.

Findings: Major Learning

To get a real sense of the journey, as an auto-ethnography, I would invite the reader to look at the blog that I wrote about the experience (www.libbycamino.tumblr.com). One can get a far better sense of the journey itself from looking at pictures, and my day to day writings, than from reading a conference paper!. My most significant learnings are summarized here, but probably top among them was how to manage pain. I also discovered from both a spiritual and cultural perspective, the incredible value of my knowledge of the Christian scriptures that I grew up with in my Irish-American Catholic family of origin. The story of the healing of the paralytic as told in John 5: 8 and the injunction to “pick up your mat and walk” guided my meditation that led me in how to transform my pain into something more meaningful, though space doesn’t allow me to do justice to this examination. With that as a contextualization, here I summarize the 10 most important things I learned.

1. The Importance of Moving/walking and Its Connection to Meditation

Human beings were not meant to sit in front of a computer screen; they are meant to move! I’ve had trouble with my back for years, but I carried a 20-pound pack for 472 miles, and never had one problem with my back (aside from being tired at the end of a walking day)! Moving/walking has a miraculous power to help heal the body and the spirit too, particularly when it is approached as a form of meditation on the present moment in every step. While I’ve always been pretty good about getting some exercise, I’ve learned something new about walking, and walking as meditation. I’m going to continue this as a practice.

2. A New Understanding of Hospitality

The hospitality on the Camino is nothing short of incredible. For the most part, those who live on the Camino route do everything possible to be welcoming, to be somewhat nurturing through food and shelter at a limited price (or for donation) and to help you find your way. While language can be a minimal barrier, I learned that there are ways to communicate beyond language or other limitations by embracing this notion of hospitality. I have stories too numerous to share here about how this was manifested. But it reminded me of the biblical concept of hospitality and the injunction to make the stranger welcome, a concept that appears to be embraced by most who live on the Camino route. This sense of hospitality generally carried over to the *peregrinos* (pilgrims) as well. There are of course a few bad apples in the bunch, but for the most part I will be contemplating the meaning of Camino hospitality for a long time!

3. The Camino as Microcosm of Life

The Camino is not an escape from one’s life; it is a microcosm of life itself. I met all of myself on the Camino, including my anxiety as I prepared to go, moments of insecurity about my self-concept along the way, manifestations of the ways that I deal with, avoid, and negotiate conflict. I experienced through a friend issues related to dealing with death, so death was present on the Camino as well, and is part of life itself. I also re-met my laughing self in ways I hadn’t experienced in a long time! I found out how I deal with pain in its newer manifestations. I re-discovered once again how connected I am to my cultural and Catholic religious roots, in how I make meaning of things. While it is a luxury to take five weeks away from one’s work life to walk the Camino, it is not an escape from life itself. Indeed, we take

ourselves with us everywhere we go! So I re-met all the wonders and foibles of Libby Tisdell in new ways.

4. New Meaning of Turning Toward the Light

There were fields of sunflowers on the Camino – just beautiful, and they each had their own unique heads and faces (as you can see in the photo below) always turning toward the light – turning toward the sun. I have never seen so many sunflowers, but being immersed in the natural beauty of Southern France and Northern Spain and just being outside for five weeks, made me contemplate the beauty of nature, and what it means to toward the Light in new ways!

5. The Mystery and Meaning of the Shadows

The shadows, literally and figuratively, also took on new meaning on the Camino. I found myself studying the shadows throughout the day, and my own shadow, and how it changed with the sun's trace across the sky. I also studied some of my inner and more metaphorical shadows, and how they too manifest and change over time. I'll be working on this for a long time!

6. A New Understanding of Pain

I don't think it's possible to do the Camino without experiencing the reality of pain. I only met two people who had no blisters on the Camino. There were many others who had more serious problems than blisters, such as issues with joints, or tendonitis; some had to even quit. I was blister free for 11 days, so I thought I was blessed, and then it was my turn for blisters. Sometimes at the beginning of the day, the pain was nearly excruciating for the first 15 minutes. At these times I would meditate on the Gospel miracle story of Jesus healing the paralytic, and the injunction to "pick up your mat and walk". I found this really quite powerful because after 15 minutes of walking, the pain would get less and less. While it didn't go away completely, I found I could walk through it, and I walked 18 miles for a couple of days when my blisters were at their worst. Part of the miracle for me was believing I could walk through the pain, that I could pick up my mat and walk, and walk I DID! This has other implications for both physical and emotional pain.

7) The Importance of Blessing One's Feet!

Feet are a major topic of discussion on the Camino! I've never given my feet much thought prior to this experience, so I have a great new appreciation of my feet, and have been thanking them for carrying me the 472 miles that I walked. This new sense of feet, has given me new reflection on the Isaiah passage, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace..." I am now taking time every day to thank my 56-year-old feet for the good work they do!

8) The Power of Group Singing

I have always found singing some of the world's sacred chants to be incredibly grounding and moving. For the second half of the Camino I hooked up with a group of folks that also sang some of these same chants. We didn't sing all the time, but we'd begin the day singing for about 15 minutes, and then folks would more or less walk alone; then we might reconnect and stop and sing a chant or two in little churches along the way. We'd revert to marching songs when the terrain was tough or we were

really tired. We entered Santiago singing a Taize chant, *Jubilate Deo*, as a round in four parts. Several in the square even joined us. It was fun and inspirational, and ironically this same chant was sung at the Pilgrims' Mass in the Cathedral two hours later! Who knew???

9) *The Ongoing Connection to One's Cultural and Religious Roots*

One of the things I rediscovered is how connected I still am to my cultural and Catholic religious roots. The religious aspect may be because the Camino de Santiago was traditionally a Catholic pilgrimage, and I knew the meaning of the various symbols that I encountered along the way. Whether or not I formally identify as "Catholic" at this point in my life isn't really important, but I find that I can often easily access what I experience as the spiritual domain through many (not all) traditionally Catholic symbols and rituals when they are conducted with meaning and reverence. This sense of spirituality has little to do with, and is very different from, the institutional politics of the Catholic Church and its hierarchy. In any case, I have come to view this sense of access to the spiritual through Catholic ritual, symbol, and music as a blessing of my Catholic background.

On a related note and from a cultural perspective, I felt that the Irish folks that I connected with "got me" in ways that I don't often experience; they too had a similar religious background, and it's difficult in this case to tease out the religious from the cultural. I tend to think that my connection to these particular folks is a cultural connection; however, it may just be the particular personalities involved, as I did experience this connection with a few others as well. In any event, I appreciate in a new way my cultural and religious roots that will always be a part of who I am. In spite of saying that I have an eclectic spirituality that draws on many religious and cultural traditions, I am perhaps more Irish-Catholic than I realized.

10) *We Do Indeed Make the Way by Walking*

I began this journey with a reflection on "we make the road by walking" that I borrowed from a book by two of my adult education heroes, Paulo Freire and Myles Horton. I found out later that they borrowed the phrase from the Spanish poem, *Caminante*, by Antonio Machado. The English translation of the poem is:

*Walker, your footprint is your path and nothing else;
Walker, there is no path, the path is made by walking.
By walking you make the path, and when you look back,
You see the track where you should never walk again.
Walker, there is no path, only the wake in the sea.*

The words are so fitting to my Camino experience that I can't help but wonder if this Spanish poet ever actually walked it himself.

In many ways, this was a guiding meditation throughout this journey. I do believe we make the way by walking, and I am making my way. I have learned in a new way—an embodied way—the meaning of that phrase. While the only path is the path that I make, I am honored and inspired by those who forged a path to discover the wake in the sea. That's why I walked and why I am walking still. Indeed, it was, and still is (as they say in Spain) a "Buen Camino!" And it goes on and on, step by step...

Afterward: Conclusions and Implications

So now it has been six months since I walked the Camino. It was indeed a journey that made me not only “critically reflect on my assumptions” as proponents of transformative learning advocate, but it was a journey where I revisited and embodied some elements of my Irish-American Roman Catholic background that have taken on an embodied and transformative importance, the injunction to “Pick up my mat and walk.” I learned not only that we do indeed “make the road by walking” (literally and metaphorically), as adult educators Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990) suggest. I also learned something about a sense of a spirituality related to the land and to nature, that is so often lost in our computerized lives, and which relates to my more recent academic examination of wisdom (Tisdell, 2011). I learned that while we can learn a lot from the literature about *the nature of wisdom*, we often ignore *the wisdom of nature*. We can do an academic study of wisdom, but real wisdom comes only from walking the journey of life and attending mindfully to the rhythms of nature, oneself, and others. I am still trying to learn what this means. So I continue to make my way by walking.

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