

## Camino as Transition

Let me start by being honest; I never planned on being a *peregrino*. I am an out of shape asthmatic who never looked at exertion as a process worth much interest. In addition, my spiritual need for self-discovery was equally comfortable with apathy and the status quo. “Don’t start none, won’t be none” was the mantra I lived by. All of that changed abruptly when my younger brother (and best friend) passed away from cancer, a year after an unexpected divorce left me as a single father. Loss is like being thrown from a sinking ship, into a sea of uncertainty and pain...and it was a big sea. The result of finding oneself in a sudden and crushing discomfort can lead to us to scramble for whatever debris happens to be floating around us, clinging to whatever will keep us above water. For me, there was a lot of detritus to hang on to. I was determined to live the life that my brother no longer had, to show my young son that pushing outside comfort was the key to enjoying life, and to raise money for a scholarship at Florida State that my family had established in my brother’s name. I was going to do more than float around and wait. I was going to swim for a shore beyond the visible horizon that I had faith would be there.

There were various signs and events that occurred to lead me to walk the Camino. The final sign was discovering during a conversation with my mom that the cross my brother Joel had bought for me years ago was that of St. James – I had never made the connection to Santiago but I had been wearing the last push to go for years without knowing – any remaining doubt left that day and I bought my airline tickets that evening. Once the decision to go was set, a newfound determination to push outside my comfort zone propelled me forward. Logistics and being of English and Celtic decent led me to the Camino *inglés*. Not as long as the more familiar *francés*, the *inglés* would allow me to tackle a full Camino, not be away from my son for an extended period of time, and still earn the *Compostela*. As I prepared, I remember spending huge amounts of time and energy learning all about the journey I was about to undertake. Although the Camino *inglés* is the shortest of the complete pilgrim paths to Santiago, there was still a lot for me to absorb. From routes and accommodations to distances and elevations, I immersed myself in the details of the trip. Not knowing Spanish, I worked on learning phrases that I would need along the way. Being out of shape, I spent months working on losing weight, watching my diet, and walking further and further distances to be as prepared as I could be for the trip. I joined American Pilgrims, read Brierley, and joined Ivar’s Camino forum online. However, the Camino (like becoming a parent) is not something that one is ever truly prepared for, no matter how much effort is put in (as every *peregrino* knows)...because the Camino de Santiago is so much more than simply a journey. I would almost argue (from the comfort of home) that the physical part of the Camino is the smallest part of the journey...almost.

Like any pilgrimage the Camino is not simply travel and discomfort for the body and the soul, nor does it end at the Pilgrim’s Office, under the incense of the *botafumeiro*, or with the lights of the *Fuego del Apóstol*. Although I labored and prepared and focused on completing those five days in Galicia, what I discovered is that the beauty of the Camino is that it really doesn’t ever end at all and that being a *peregrino* is not limited to walking on trails marked with shells and yellow arrows. Like so many other pilgrims

before me, I am a different person (and that can be positive and negative). I see life differently now. I have an urge to embrace life as more than a given, and to push my boundaries. I find myself wanting to tell others about the experience of the Camino and to help those who want to know more about the journey. I look for opportunities to speak in front of others about this journey of the body and the soul. I am also less satisfied with things than I was before – what we carry physically on the Camino has an equivalent in the spiritual, and both weigh us down - we only take what we NEED on the Camino. Just as I shed items that were too heavy out of my pack one night in Bruma, upon my return I also shed some physical items that were once important to me. Some of my closer relationships changed a bit too (sadly, one or two important relationships were unable to survive my return, and those were on me). Just like coming back home after moving out, life has gone on while we were away, and it can be impossible to adequately explain to our loved ones what we have experienced as *peregrinos*. I bought some of the blue and yellow tiled waymarkers to give to close friends and family upon my return, as well as to put in my home and office. While they were gifts and an attempt to share my experiences with those who I care about, there was a more selfish purpose. By hanging them up in their houses, I was giving myself a physical reminder of my trip each day, a clue of the direction I need to go to stay on the path, and my eyes find those gifts every time I walk into a room with one hanging up. (Yes, I'm using my friends and family. What can I say? We *peregrinos* are resourceful). As I travel through life as a permanent *peregrino*, I also find myself unconsciously looking for blue and yellow waymarkers everywhere I go...and I haven't yet had a day go by where I haven't seen one, either actual or metaphorical.

So, as many others have said before this (and admittedly with MUCH greater eloquence), if we wish to, how do we make sure that we as *peregrinos* stay on the Way once we leave Santiago? First, write everything down that you experience, draw a picture, pen a song, do ANYTHING that can help put words to the feeling and experience. Second, look for opportunities to share your experiences with others (church groups, libraries, etc). Third, don't stop walking! Whether it is back to Spain, or other pilgrimages, or just walking regularly, do not stop. Not only is this good exercise, but being out with our thoughts allows us to reconnect with the world that we often seem to isolate ourselves from with media, work, hobbies and dreams. Fourth, just like there are countless examples of *Camino* angels who help pilgrims on the Way in times of need (mine were in the form of half a dozen Scots from two different groups!), be an unexpected *Camino* angel for others. Help someone. Be their *Camino* angel or waymarker. Show someone else the Way, and in doing so, continue walking your own *Camino*.



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He devotes his spare time to reading, travel (most often to Europe, where he lived for ten years), and most of all, to his son Brendan Joel. His website is [fromcouchtocamino.blogspot.com](http://fromcouchtocamino.blogspot.com)