

# “O CEBREIRO”

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*How the Boston Marathon Bombing and the Camino de Santiago Changed My Life*

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by John M. Schmitt

Three weeks into walking the Camino de Santiago you're a hardened veteran. You have seen and been so many places, braved every element (most notably the temperamental Spanish weather), been lost, alone, weeping, laughing, screaming, running, crawling - living. Your feet, once a constant source of fatigue, pain, and therefore, attention, now glide underneath you. It was at this point where "the Camino walks YOU" as Aussie Joe told me. I was beginning to see what he meant.

I had just left Villafranca around 8am after little sleep. Last night around 7 pm I learned that someone had bombed the Boston Marathon, and details were hazy. Friends of mine had checked in on social media to say they were safe, others I still hadn't heard from. No one knew who had done it or why, but I feared the worst. It was making me physically ill. I wasn't sure how Obama would respond in this situation - after all, we never thought Bush was going to be the War Hawk he turned out to be. I was restless and anxious as I stayed up until 1am. In non-Camino terms, it's like staying up until 6am in the "real" world. Most pilgrims are asleep around 10.

The bombing to me, for many reasons, was crushing. Besides the senseless loss of life, and the uncertainty of America's response, the hardest thing for me to deal with was the population that was attacked: runners.

You see, I started running about 8 months prior, and had just completed my first half marathon: 13.1 miles of glory running through Washington, DC. I finished in 2 hours, 28 minutes, all despite some nagging physical injuries that persisted through the race.

Leading up to this race, I spent three months running in blizzard conditions in Buffalo, NY, running with friends in New York City, and did five other races of varying distances. I joined the New York Road Runners, and began to run a race every other week or so. I found a community of people of all shapes, sizes, and abilities, who cared not about how fast you were, what shoes you wore, or what your religion or politics were. They were always encouraging and open. The running community embraced my friends and me with open arms, and we now had found a subculture we could dive into, with medals, T-shirts, and most importantly, health all as trophies.

It was never lost on me how welcomed we all felt in the running community, and any chance I got to spread the similar love to other folks, I would. The last mile of every race, when I typically gun it, I cheer on those around me, telling them they "got this!" Or to "keep it up!" Yes, I am that guy.

So when I stood in line to get my medal engraved at the finish line at RFK Stadium in DC, and a man who had just finished the full marathon was standing next to me, I couldn't help myself.

"Hey man, congrats on the marathon! What was your time?" He said something like 3 hours, 30 minutes. "Man, I can't imagine. I mean, I'm hobbled and I only did half of what you did. That's incredible."

And I meant it. I couldn't imagine having to run that same distance again after just finishing it. The crowning athletic achievement of my life to that point, was only half of what this man had just run, and much faster than I. However, it was his response to me that typifies the runners' culture.

"Thanks very much," he said. "You know, 13.1 is no joke either. You should be really proud of yourself," as he put his hand on my shoulder. I muttered out a thank you, as most compliments I ever receive make me squirm.

And that was the extent of our conversation, and he was off somewhere, and I to meet my friends for our free post-race beer.

It was this man's world, and my world, one of health, tolerance, acceptance, respect, and joy-in-movement that had been so mercilessly attacked. That is why it affected me so deeply.

Everything this morning was about Boston for me. It was also O Cebreiro day. On the Camino, while we typically had been finding days to walk alone, or speed ahead, there was a clear understanding that this climb, one of the steepest, was going to test our mettle and our mental toughness. Arrival in O Cebreiro at the top of the mountain would be the gateway to the final 180 km to Santiago.

I left in the morning praying the rosary quietly to myself, something I hadn't done since I was forced to do so in Catholic high school. I was thankful for buying my Mother the rosary at the Burgos Cathedral so I could use it today. "Hail Mary" after "Hail Mary" I prayed for those hurt and affected by the bombing, as I walked down the valley, along the motorway, inching closer and closer to the final province on the Camino, Galicia. I prayed for restraint by my government, for not rushing to judgment, for all those runners who had their glory day ruined. My pack felt heavier than ever, as I longingly slouched my way on the pathway, feeling very sad. While I did not walk alone per se, I made it clear in broken Spanish to Pedro and Manuel that I wished to walk "solo," and then showed them the *rosaria* I was using to pray. They understood immediately, and motioned about a bomb and "Boss-tone." "Si, si, Boston. Soy un ..." And then I made a runners motion, and they understood. These were my people, my new friends, who had been hit. They spoke to each other in Spanish, clearly upset, and I was able to make out Manuel saying in disgust "people are fucking crazy." They left me alone and walked on slightly ahead. I resolved that today's climb, the toughest one to date, would be for my runners, my new friends. For Boston.

After an hour, my rosary was finished, and I began to socialize more. Peter, my new friend from Holland, walked about 3 hours with me and we got to know each other more. We shared about our lives, our reasons for pilgrimage, and our aspirations for when we were done. Peter was battling terrible blisters, and was unsure if his body was allow him to climb all the way up O Cebreiro today, but I encouraged him to do so.

We stopped for lunch and ran into Aussie Joe and the Canadian women, and it was also the first time I met Cristina, a beautiful Spanish woman who would walk with us the rest of the way to Santiago. Joe, a towering man with a sharp jaw, salt and pepper hair, who looks much younger than he is, jaunts along the Camino at a fierce pace. So much, in fact, that I started to call him "Kanga Joe," after his native kangaroo. I kept up with him one day on the *Meseta*, the plains that occupy the middle third of the Camino, and just about broke myself. Out of necessity, I urged him to push on the next day, and I would meet him at the next town.

Joe and I talked over lunch about the bombing, and his views were surprisingly pro-American with respect to foreign policy. He believed, like his parents, that America is a source for liberty, a necessary counterbalance to the forces of religious extremism, albeit very imperfect. There's no one that can deny our shortcomings and gross misgivings as a nation, but I too believe this.

Joe also knew that after my climb up to the Iron Cross, outside of Foncebadon, that a Spanish man named Raphael had seen me and described me as climbing like a *perro*, or dog. I use my walking poles as third and fourth legs, and with all my might fly up ascents. I get a great thrill from the climb - the heart pulsing in my chest was such a beautiful and tangible sign of my own humanity, a graspable feeling of being alive. It's one of the myriad reasons I love to run. So with that in mind, we talked about the climb that now had come upon us: O Cebreiro was five kilometers away, all straight up. I was chomping at the bit for it.

*"This one's for my running friends, Joe. I'm not playing around. I'm putting on music, and getting the hell up there, if I have to crawl."*

*"I have no doubt in my mind you will get there, John. What a fitting tribute."*

I joked about playing AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" as my unofficial O Cebreiro climbing music, and the Canadians mentioned they had seen me use my walking poles as drum sticks on the *Meseta*, using the pathway as my own drum set. I put my earphones in and felt the same pre-race rush of adrenaline as I put my rucksack on.

Joe, the Canadians, and I all left together, and as soon as the gradient began to rise I hit play on my iPod, and Angus Young's guitar riff blared in my ears.

*"Thunder. Thunder. Thunder."*

I bid them farewell with a wave and thumbs up, and began to visualize the top. About half a kilometer up the ascent, I passed Pedro and Manuel on the road. I waved but did not say a word and we passed with smiles.

The climb to O Cebreiro is broken into three sections, with two towns providing temporary relief as you ascend. Each town had a bar and at least one place to sleep should you decide you were not cut out for the whole climb. The first two kilometers were by far the worst. I would climb about ten meters and have to pause to catch my breath. It was about 85 degrees F, humid, and I was sweating profusely. The path was all loose stone, so every placement of my walking poles was shifty and imperfect, rendering my walking poles only used for balance. This meant the work was predominantly done by my legs, with little aid of my upper body. I was gassed as I entered the first town, about 40 minutes later. I took a shirt out of my rucksack, wet it with water, and draped it over my head, then held it in place with my ball cap. A bottle of water later, I set out again for the second leg.

The next 1.5 kilometers were steep and unrelenting, and I began to wonder if I would ever get to the top. As a runner, I have learned to not lock sight on the finish line, since my body almost hyperventilates and my heart races in excitement at the possibility of being done. It makes the end much harder, and it's almost painful. For me, I had to stop looking at the end of each switchback and seeing that it just led to another painful switchback. That's how my spirit breaks, how I wouldn't make it up the mountain. I instead put my head down, thought of the friends who ran yesterday in Boston, of those who will run in Boston next year, of those who will never run in Boston but will run elsewhere. I thought of how they all cheered you on, made me feel welcome, made me realize 13.1 miles was a great accomplishment, even in the wake of his own 26.2 miles. And after 20 more minutes of pain, I see the next town, this one more equipped for the road weary pilgrim.

I stop for about thirty minutes, enjoy an ice cold coke, and two bottles of water. I take my shoes off, let the sweat dry off of them, and pose for a photo so I can remember how ridiculous my shirt draped over my head looks. I then prepped for the last bit, put my shoes on, and bounded out the door of the bar into the Galician afternoon. I turned to my left, and there Aussie Joe came up the last hill into town, completely soaked in sweat, his teeth grinding as he pushed himself. We smiled and checked in with each other. "See you at the top, Joe!" I said as I turned and set off.

To my delight, the last two kilometers into O Cebreiro were nothing like the first 3.5 km. In fact, by Camino standards, they were quite pleasant. The paths were dirt, not loose stone; they were wide, full of wild herbs and beautiful native flowers of purple, orange, and white. The views were glorious, and only growing more magnificent as I rounded every corner. I was feeling strong, motivated, and had an indelible smile on my face. Like the last mile of my half marathon, this last climb was celebratory, the culmination of all the preparation put in the 3 weeks prior walking.

I could see stone walls coming up on my right, and I was unsure if I had really reached the final village. I saw a motorway, and a coach parked to the left where folks had gotten out to take photos. This was common on the Camino, as retirees would hop buses to the "big spots" that we all were walking to. I didn't see anyone around though, and no markers telling me where I was. I just knew that the view was unlike anything I've ever seen: so

much free beauty, so much life laid out in every direction. I walked to my left, and saw a cross-positioned next to the motorway, and next to it was a middle-aged man with scruffy hair writing in a journal as he sat. I interrupted him as only an American could, and said:

"Pardon... [pointing to the ground]... O Cebreiro?"

"Sì."

"WOOOOO!!!!" I screamed. I was here, friends. This was for you; for all of you. I took off my rucksack, my hat, my shirt off my head, and knelt at the Cross.

*Thank you, Great Architect, for everything. For all this beauty, for my life, for everything I can touch, feel, and smell. For everything I know, and for all the love in my heart and in the hearts of everyone on this earth. Thank you for the promise of health, the knowledge that by stressing our bodies and pushing ourselves, we can actualize our best selves.*

I vowed at that moment to be an instrument of change in this world, to work to educate children, to get to work on it as soon as I get back. I also decided that next year I would run a marathon.

After checking into the hostel and showering, I went into town to find Aussie Joe finally arriving into O Cebreiro. He outstretched his arms from a distance, and shouted:

*"JOHN! MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!!!"*

When we met we embraced and laughed.

*"That was insane, Joe!"*

*"Yes it was! Well done, John! Good on ya!"*

Like the running culture, we pilgrims were accepting, welcoming, and enthusiastic. And the rallying cry of "O Cebreiro" will now and forever be a source of immense personal motivation. I use it when I feel like I can't go on, when I don't think there's anything left in me to finish something, when I think people are incapable of doing good or helping others. I use it as motivation when I run races.

Four weeks later, with the help of my new rallying cry, I beat my first half marathon time in Buffalo by over 16 minutes, 2 hours, 12 minutes. I repeated "O Cebreiro, O Cebreiro, O Cebreiro" over and over as I approached the finish. I am currently into my last semester now at Columbia University, getting my Masters in Education.

And last May I finished my first marathon.

