

Essential Energy

When It Is Time to Reset: Take a Pilgrimage

There are times when we hunger for a start-over. These usually coincide with a deep weariness of the soul — the fall-out from intense or relentless struggles. Clearing typical stressors can be as simple as cleaning the house, as we all feel better when the kitchen is spic and span. Or, maybe we take a spa day in the middle of the work week. When our everyday solutions fail to touch the ache in our heart and body, we must undertake a more significant solution — a pilgrimage.

I recently embarked on a lifelong dream — a pilgrimage of the grandest sort. With four friends, I walked the Way of St. James, otherwise known as El Camino.

The Camino is an ancient pilgrimage route initiated in the ninth century. Its myriad of trails spans several countries. These walkways mirror the journeys of St. James the Apostle and lead to his shrine in Santiago, Spain. Though the Way is considered a Christian journey, the trails were earlier tread by our pagan ancestors, who followed the stars of the Milky Way to undergo their own soul-searching. Across time, the Camino has come to represent a turning point, attracting people who long to release the old and glean a fresh start.

When arranging the trip, I had no idea how much I would need it.

During the year before my odyssey, my mother died. My oldest son and partner needed assistance buying a house and my youngest son, a baseball player, hit bottom. In the midst of all that, I had three books due to publishers.

I know you have had tough times. So have your clients. Some burdens feel like too much; some *are* too much. It does not matter if our worries are for ourselves or for those we love. Our heart carries what — or whom — it chooses to carry. When we look in the rearview mirror, we often perceive these situations convey our deepest teachings. But how do we survive them? Recover from them? Whether we are in the middle of a challenge or recently finished with it, we need the space necessary to forge perspective and gain the wisdom seeking us.

It seems counterintuitive to undertake a pilgrimage to recover from a hardship. By definition, a pilgrimage is an expedition to a sacred site, but not one conducted in a plush motor home. A true pilgrimage involves leaving behind the comforts of everyday life to lay bare the soul.

Most typically, pilgrims bring nothing but the necessities on their backs, their quest requiring self-denial. I believe the goal is not to despise the body. Rather, it is to allow the body to become a vehicle for awareness.

When we started out in Portugal, I did not hold many hopes for the trek. How would a grueling meandering help me resolve my mother's death — or her life? How would misery gift me the insights needed to bolster my youngest son's spirit? Traveling without a car would certainly not resuscitate my bank account, nor get my writing done.

Let me tell you, trudging the Camino was not an escape from reality. There is nothing more real than aching shins or too many mountainous ascents. As I complained to one of my more resolute companions, I was certain that God had made a mistake in scattering so many hills in that part of the world.

After a few days, I found myself wondering about the worth of my pilgrimage, or any pilgrimage, for that matter. God was not gifting me with any sage-like wisdoms. I was, quite simply, sore. After meeting a few of the other pilgrims, I started to wonder if treks like these only worsened our misery.



For example, I met a woman who was walking with her dead son's stuffed Mickey Mouse. It seemed that her wounded heart was splitting wider, not closing. A married couple shared that they were walking to strengthen their thirty-five-year relationship. Based on their quibbling, I suspected that the chasm had only broadened.

I did not have a sense of achievement until we limped into Santiago. The angels did not burst into song. God did not shout from one of the too-many mountaintops. I simply felt relieved.

I had made it!

As I said to a friend, I am the same person who began the walk, but now I know I am stronger than I thought.

That strength made all the difference in my life upon returning home. It imparted a silent message to my youngest. *You can do it!* Since then, he has been playing the best ball he has ever played. It gave me joy toward my oldest son's achievements and led to dreams in which my mother, smiling, visited me. It also pushed my projects through to completion.

I learned that a pilgrimage is not actually about suffering or sacrifice. It is about *feeling*. On the walk, I felt my body. I felt my feelings. I felt my pain. And because of this, I felt the strength innate to me and knew, without a doubt, the source of that power came from something bigger than me. Quite simply, I could not have put one foot in front of the other without greater help, by whatever name you call it.

You do not have to walk someone else's walk to undertake a pilgrimage. You merely have to select an activity outside of the norm that will help you *feel*. It is through the body that we become the soul that we really are. It is through the body that we sense the spirit lighting us from within. Take space. Be the pilgrim you already are. Push. (And all the better, if a spa day does push you to the max!) €



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