

Ultreia

by

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I first heard the word “Ultreia” in the small commune of Conques, France during the late summer of 2009. Earlier that same year, I had plunged into a deep depression. Everything that previously mattered to me mattered less or not at all. I doubted the purpose of my life and questioned the nature and meaning, if any, behind the relationships into which I had invested so much of myself. One of these relationships, arguably the most important at this time in my life, had suddenly become a part of my past. I started to question what “love” really was. Had I experienced it? Had I given it? What at one time felt like love was not longer in my life, or so it seemed. And also for the first time, I truly confronted my own mortality in a very deep way. I kept saying to myself, “what is the point of building a family, a business, relationships, or anything for that matter if in 50 or 60 years, or possibly much sooner, I will be dead and gone from this world altogether?” Even more disconcerting was my inability to remove the pallor life and my surroundings now possessed. I had arrived at that moment in one’s life where the entire nature of my existence, the sum of my life experiences, seemed to me to be a complete fraud. And when you start to see things in this way, and can only see them in this way, it’s a quick trip down a very dark rabbit hole.

I needed to find a way out and became determined to search out a solution to this depression, to find some truth if there was such a thing, to climb back to the surface, to the light. It was a lonely place to be and the answers were not evident, especially when I did not have a firm grip on the questions. I spent many evenings and weekends diving into philosophy, literature, and art, which somehow eventually lead me to discover and then embark upon the Camino de Santiago, a major Christian pilgrimage that terminates in the city of Santiago de Compostela, Spain. The pilgrimage, known also as the Way of Saint James, came into existence over a thousand years ago. While there are several versions as to the origin, they are all centered around the Apostle Saint James appearing on the shores the Atlantic coast of Galicia followed by his body later being interred in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, which is the capital city of the region and roughly a three day walk from the coast.

Aside from religious scholars, the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela was little known to the American public in 2009, myself included. My inspiration as a non-practicing and non-religious Catholic to embark upon the pilgrimage, having never heard of it until a few days before I purchased airline tickets, can and should be described as divine inspiration and fodder for a future Literary Club Paper. But as this is, or was, “short paper night,” I will save that for another time.

Of the many routes that lead to Santiago de Compostela, four begin in France. Given my strong francophile tendencies, having spent several formative years during and after college as an American in France, I decided to start there, selecting the Via Podiensis Route, which begins in village of Le Puy en Velay, an hour south and west of Lyon by train and approximately one thousand miles away from Santiago de Compostela. My plan was to cash in two weeks of much needed vacation to walk along the route, enjoying the remote French countryside while searching for the answers, or at least some clarity on the crisis I then found myself in.

Now let us return to *Ultreia*. It is, first and foremost, a word of Latin etymological origin. One astute Chicago Literary Club member has already correctly surmised that the word must have something to do with “more” as “ultra” is a root while “eia” gives meaning to “beyond.” There are several spellings of *Ultreia* and scholars believe it was used primarily, if not exclusively in the vernacular of the Catalanian people who inhabited what is now Southwestern France and parts of Northern Spain. The first known written occurrence of *Ultreia* is found in the *Codex Calixtinus*, a 12<sup>th</sup> century book about Saint James and the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. It is a compendium of sermons, prayers, songs, descriptions of miracles; in short, a practical travel guide for the pilgrim, replete with recommendation on where to stop and pray, visit and venerate, as well as places to avoid. There are even descriptions of streams and rivers from which one should not even let his horse drink. The book is considered by scholars to be the first known written travel guide of The Western World.

The Codex Calixtinus shows the word being used as a common greeting among 12<sup>th</sup> century pilgrims and it continues to be used as such today. However its meaning is not simply “hello, good day” but more a call of encouragement among pilgrims, something along the lines of “onward my friend!” or “keep going, you can do it!” It was common to call out “Ultreïa” to a fellow pilgrim you spotted from a distance, especially if you had met the person before. It was equally common, if not more so, to use “Ultreïa” as the farewell expression when parting ways. Whether coming or going, it is almost always issued with vigor and vim.

Ultreïa is also known as a contemporary song sung among pilgrims. The modern version, set in French and sung as a chant is called “Le chant des pèlerins de Compostelle, Tous les matins....Ultreïa.”

In typical French manner, it is a long way of saying “The Compostela pilgrim’s chant, Every Morning, Ultrëia,” or simply, “Ultrëia.” Both the greeting and song take me immediately back to that period in my life when I progressed along the pilgrimage route to its conclusion at the steps of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, two weeks at a time, as work vacation permitted, over the course of six years, picking up exactly where I left off the year before.

I have journaled extensively on my pilgrimage experience, nearly two hundred thousand words and counting, the single largest endeavor of my recovering English Major lifetime. When I consider that F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby” is forty seven thousand words, I can see that I have some distilling to do if I am ever to publish an oeuvre worthy of inspiring others to embark upon a spiritual journey, be it the Camino or something else.

With distillation in mind, I would like to share an excerpt on my first encounter with Ultrëia, one of the many transformative moments I experienced while on pilgrimage.

Conques, France – September 14, 2009

Tracks of my progress spread out behind me on the dry earth as I traversed a harvested field, one of many such fields, some harvested while others were still developing. It was mid afternoon and the late summer sun shone down upon me, energizing and illuminating my way as I put one foot in front of the other, over and over. Large billowing clouds lined up overhead like soldiers in ranks, marching across the horizon. At times, I felt like they were following me and at other moments it seemed they were leading me ever so persistently in the direction of Santiago. For most of the day, I progressed onward through or in-between these tended fields and alongside country roads.

I had been walking consecutively for about a week and by now had settled into the pedestrian rhythm of the pilgrimage, getting used to my new day job, which was simply to make it from one place to another. Santiago de Compostela was an abstract concept at this point, likely because it was still some 900 miles away and also because I was at the beginning of my spiritual journey. Yet, abstract as it was, I, like every other pilgrim I had met, pushed on, day after day with Santiago as our goal. I felt connected to self in a way I could not recall ever having been, except perhaps as a child. I was acutely aware of the involuntary motion of my footsteps and the subtly different sounds they made on the varied terrain under foot. I noticed the songs of birds more and started paying attention to the cattle, goats, sheep, chickens and dogs I encountered in a way I would never have noticed had I not been walking alone for hours and hours. It is when you have crossed over into this rhythm, when, while walking alongside any country road, you become exceptionally startled by the passing car or truck as they all seem to be going over 100 miles per hour. When you later return to the places where modern society has left its indelible mark on the land, which in this part of France are roads and villages, you feel as though you have been catapulted forward in time. Of course, you know that the fast moving machine is a car, but because you have returned to your primal and more natural state, the car startles you as it is harsh and unnatural. You recognize the advances and comforts of modernity but prefer to be among the fields, the birds, the layered

sounds of crickets, grasshoppers and other insect life, the slow, bucolic gaze of the heifer lifting its head and watching you quizzically as you plod down the gravel road or footpath. You begin to *know* as opposed to feel that Nature is timeless and you connect with something ancient and familiar while walking at length, a transformation which had already begun to have a therapeutic effect on me.

My attention now returned to Conques, and I began to wonder when I would come upon this place whose beauty I had heard so much about these past several days. The vast agricultural landscape still surrounded me, a few farm houses here and there, with their tractors, grain elevators and rusting farm equipment of bygone times. None of this bespoke the splendor I had heard about the revered village with its famed abbey and cathedral. But then, after some time, I came upon a grouping of trees with a wooden sign post that read “Conques” with a painted arrow pointing to what was clearly a trail leading into a forest that seemed to appear out of nowhere. The scenery changed immediately upon entering this magical wood. Not only was I now surrounded by forest, but I started to descend deeper and deeper into a greener and greener world. It was an Alice in Wonderland experience as I had just earlier spent the entire day walking amid amber fields mostly devoid of trees. I now marveled at the dense green vegetation that hid the sky from my sight and further enclosed upon me as I walked.

Further down I went, wondering if there was a bottom to this thick forest. At last, I saw a clearing and the suggestive shapes of dwellings. I then caught a view of Conques and the surrounding valley and nearly fainted. Again, I had the feeling of stepping back in time and was convinced that it looked the very same as it had hundreds of years ago when the first generations of pilgrims traveled along the very same path. The center of the village is at the lowest point where the cathedral and abbey of Sainte-Foy de Conques draw their daily flock of pilgrims. The church and abbey boast proud spires and turrets in the center of the village and the surrounding homes are all of hand hewn stone and thick wood beams from long since felled trees. The forest trail now became a gravel trail that grew wider and quickly connected with a gravel road that serviced the row of homes

lining the steep upper bank of the village. Signs directed pilgrims toward a set of steps leading downward still, where, at the very bottom I saw the French couple whom I had met earlier in the day, calling out to me with large gestures of excitement. “Daniel! Daniel! We've been waiting for you! Come quick, I think there's a room for you!” Without so much as responding, I found myself running a few hundred yards down the cobblestone street to the entrance of the Abbey. “He's here, he's here! l'americain, he's here!,” my dinner companions from the night before exclaimed. Several middle aged ladies tending the reception of the Abbey told me I was in luck. They were completely sold out, however one person had gotten sick enough to have been evacuated by ambulance and I could therefore have his bed.

I had just enough time to meet my room mates before dinner; two older men, friends of the man whose bunk I had been given. Right away they informed me that they were snorers, “serious snorers,” they said. Mildly concerned for the coming night's repose, I laid out my sleeping bag and went down to the courtyard to await the start of dinner along with the rest of the pilgrims, a large group, several of whom I had met over the course of the previous days. As we were exchanging stories from the road, a brother from the abbey walked toward me with such a determined look that I could feel his approach from 20 to 30 feet away. He arrived and asked “Do you speak English?,” to which, dumbfounded, I responded simply with “yes.” He then asked if I would agree to read the English translation of a prayer during a service in the cathedral after dinner, to which I agreed.

Fast forward to the service and let me just say that it was a moment both in and out of time. I climbed the stairs to the elevated pulpit next to the altar in the dimly lit and high vaulted cathedral of Conques to deliver a pilgrim's prayer to the congregation of one hundred or so gathered. Every word I spoke resonated off the steep stone walls, the statues, the busts and other ornamentations surrounding us. The audience appeared as a single solemn and motionless mass of faceless souls. It could have been 500 years ago as the lighting prevented me from discerning their facial features or the clothes on their backs, but they were there and they were listening to the words and the rhythm of the prayer. Their thoughts may have been drifting out and along the waves of the

spoken words, spreading out into their own prayers, their own stories, their own suffering and their own joy of having made it to this point in their personal journey. We were separate sentient beings yet together as one in this special place and time, with each other and all those who had been here before us, sharing in this moment of our lives.

The same brother who asked me to give the English version of the prayer then began to play the melody of the pilgrim chant *Ultreia* on a beautiful grand piano located in the transept of the cathedral. Softly the congregation muttered the words of the chant, and with each verse I felt a release of the emotional cargo we all carried with us, individually accumulated over the course of our lives, distinctly our own burdens yet part of the common weight slowing our progress. While I did not know all the words, I was able to join in the refrain:

*Ultreia, Ultreia, Et sus eia, Deus, adjuva nos!*

Onward, Onward and Beyond, God Help Us!

Suddenly I was overcome with a flood of emotion that I recognized to be love. In that moment, I had forgotten who I was and became one with the others and everything. It was a moment of perfection, life without the worry of what you need to do or have or have not done. Nothing mattered and yet everything mattered. There was no future and no past, just this moment.

Before returning back my bed in the Abbey, I walked behind the cathedral where there was an open cloister whose outer edge ended abruptly on what I discovered was a cliff wall overlooking the valley beyond. Past the dark void, I discerned the silhouette of the distant wooded hills I would traverse in the morning, ascending onward, *Ultreia*.



Postscript.....

I later learned all the words to Ultreïa and fully participated in the chant whenever the occasion presented itself. I often played the role of master of ceremonies, gathering everyone around the table at breakfast or dinner, or on the trail, or at a village cafe, to sing together. After my third year on the pilgrimage, I decided to undertake a recording of Ultreïa for YouTube as, much to my surprise, very few versions existed at the time. Little did I know then that an American singing a Capella in French would become the current de facto online version, an accomplishment for which I am deeply humbled.

Loosely translated, the lyrics are:

Waking up every morning we take to the trail,  
every morning we go farther.  
Day after day, St. James calls us to Compostela.  
Ultreïa, Ultreïa...

Trail of Earth, trail of faith  
The Milky Way of Charlemagne  
The trail of all the Jacobean

Ultreïa Ultreïa....

And over there at the end of the continent.  
Saint James awaits us  
Always with a fixed smile  
The sun setting in Finisterre

Ultreïa Ultreïa, E sus eia Deus adjuva nos.