

To the Field of Stars and Beyond

by

Daniel T. Pyne

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2008 was drawing to a close and we were hosting a small New Year's Eve dinner party. Barack Obama had just been elected president, a new year was about to begin, and there was a general sense that everything was possible. Our vintage two-bedroom apartment was especially cozy that evening, between the candlelit decorative fireplace, flanked by frost-laden windows, and the savory aromas of the developing meal emanating from the kitchen.

Once we were all comfortably seated in the living room with cocktails in hand, I kicked off the conversation with: "Well, here we are at the end of another year. In many ways it has been a mixed bag: The economy has gone to pieces but Obama got elected. So, what were the 2008 highlights for you, good or bad? Go with the first two things that come to mind." This resulted in a pregnant silence that fell upon the room like a pall, followed by one of our guests responding, "Gee, that's a heavy question, why don't you go first?" Surprised by the reluctance, I responded with:

"Well, I finally succeeded in lowering the condo assessments, which is unheard of, and our company had its first profitable year despite the tanking economy."

Then everything came to a stop as the "y" in "economy" left my lips. I could hear myself breathe and see the facial acknowledgment of my guests, who nodded slowly in approval with a lift of the eyebrows, as if to indicate nonchalantly, "Oh, that's good." My consciousness then departed, pushed by an external force unknown to me. I felt something akin to physical pain manifest somewhere in the center of my body that said:

“How pathetic is that! Lowering the homeowner assessments and showing some numbers in black at the end of a financial report? Where is the substance, the meaning?” Not only had I invested a tremendous amount of energy and nearly ten years of my life into achieving the success of not going out of business with a small, fledgling, bootstrapping software company, but I had also been in a relationship, which despite my best efforts, had been on the decline for several years and had now reached a level of toxicity leaving me utterly bereft. “*What was I doing with my life and where was I in my spiritual development?*” I thought. It must have dropped off into some deep abyss around the time when I set out to make my fortune and build something of a coexistence with someone I had hoped would be a lifelong partner. I hadn’t expected the business to provide me with spiritual nourishment but I also hadn’t expected the business to become so much a part of my adult life. I had, however, expected to find some spiritual development with my partner, certainly in terms of sharing a life together and learning how each of us views the world. And in fairness to the past, there was some of this, but somewhere along the line we had turned a corner, exited somewhere, and had been driving down the road of mutual resentment.

This was a dark moment of enlightenment, especially as it was happening in the timeless state, deep within my own thoughts, at my own New Year’s Eve soirée—having the epiphany that possibly everything heretofore was a waste, despite looking great on the surface. Then, in a flash of unconsciousness, a voice from within said, “ENOUGH!

This is the last New Year's Eve where I am no further along in my relationships and spiritual development. This is changing no matter what." Contrary to New Year's resolutions that might seem like a good idea, and even be a good idea, but fade and wither with time, I knew in that moment my life was going to change. How it would manifest itself, I knew not, but it was going to happen.

The switch flipped back to real time and I rejoined the dinner party and conversation. By the looks on their faces, no one had noticed that I had left the party and I was successful in hiding the revelation I had just experienced for the remainder of the evening. In fact, I didn't mention it to anyone, not even my girlfriend. Then, not even a week later, that relationship abruptly and unceremoniously ended over dinner at a local Chinese restaurant. It wasn't a huge blowout and our argument never went over a decibel for other diners to notice, but after the bill was paid, she went her way and I went mine.

As I look back on the sequence of events that led me toward the fulfillment of my New Year's Eve resolution, I can't see any other way to have gone in the direction I would later go while still being in a failing relationship, but this may just be the way hindsight works. After our separation was complete, I slipped into a depression resulting from the loss of my companion, confidante, and life partner. I could also not stop thinking about the moment not but a few weeks prior when time stopped on New Year's Eve, and how meaningless and futile everything I had been pouring all my energy into

seemed—a failed relationship, a software business, and a condo association, the last of which truly is the most thankless volunteer job anywhere.

As a result, winter languorously drew out with its gray days and long, cold nights. My only motivation was to find a solution to what had now become a bona fide existential crisis, prompted if you will by Socrates and his “unexamined life” not being worth living. I could not help but conclude that my energies were mostly poorly spent on chasing the proverbial dollar, much as one needs a certain amount of those to pay the bills, as well as the years spent in a relationship that had failed. Much as I had always agreed with the idea that “things were meant to be” and that “there’s no such thing as mistakes, only lessons learned,” I was unable to believe them at that time.

Thankfully, Netflix had come into existence and I started to pour through the Criterion Collection of art films from the 1950s onward. I immersed myself in works by the likes of Bergman, Godard, Kurosawa, Truffaut, Tarkovsky, and Luis Bunuel, all of whom examined various representations on the human condition. Strangely, it was the French film Bunuel produced in 1969 called *La Voie Lactée*, or “The Milky Way,” that first introduced me to the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Stranger still, the film is a satire of the Catholic Church and historically documents various renegade sects and their sometimes hedonistic pagan practices. It depicts the Church and religion in general as a controlling enterprise. It’s a hard film to describe, as it is also a comedy following

two vagabond French pilgrims bumming their way to Santiago de Compostela, starting in Paris and meeting characters from the time of Christ to the present.

The film opens with a simple, ancient map of Europe focused on France with several drawn lines representing the major routes connecting the various cities in France with others in the direction south and west, arriving at the border of Spain and then traveling west toward the Atlantic coast. A narrator's voice recounts the following as the camera slowly pans across the map.

“Starting in the eleventh century and throughout the Middle Ages, the city of Santiago de Compostela in Spain was the destination of a very important pilgrimage that still exists today. Each year, more than five hundred thousand pilgrims coming from every country in Europe set out on foot to worship at the tomb of the apostle St. James. . . . In the seventh century AD, according to the legend, a star led certain shepherds to the place where the body of St. James was found. From there the name Compostela came into existence, *Campus Stellae* (in Latin), meaning the field of stars. Throughout the region, the Milky Way is also known as the Way of St. James.”

Immediately I paused the film. Having lived in the southwestern French city of Montpellier for the better part of three years, I could not understand how it was that I had never heard of this pilgrimage before. I immediately consulted Wikipedia to verify if this was fact or fiction and confirmed that it was indeed fact. And as a matter of fact, Montpellier was situated along one of the ancient routes. Having been raised Catholic, I

was also surprised to have never heard mention of it, which according to Wikipedia lists it as: “one of the most important Christian pilgrimages during the later Middle Ages, and a pilgrimage route on which a plenary indulgence could be earned.”

As I pondered this for a moment, something truly mysterious happened. A voice inside of me, not that of my own, said: “Go and do this pilgrimage and don’t wait long to start it.” It was a very simple one-sentence statement coming from what I interpreted to be a male voice and spoken in a strong, matter-of-fact manner. It was not stern, nor was it soft. It was direct and then it was gone. You will have to take my word that I was not using any drugs and had only had a glass of red wine with dinner.

Needless to say, I was taken aback. It didn’t seem like this voice came from me, but I was very much home alone. I resumed the film and decided to give the voice and its instruction some thought over the coming days, and I did just that. While researching the principal pilgrimage routes, I recalled two other strange events that had occurred back when I was living in France during my early twenties. The first relates to Le Puy-en-Velay, an out-of-the-way city I had visited while living in France which is also the starting point of the Via Podiensis pilgrimage route. I was in Lyon with a free day before I was scheduled to depart and was interested in taking a day trip to a smaller town in the area. The woman tending the ticket counter at the train station recommended Le Puy-en-Velay and I purchased a ticket.

As the train arrived on the outskirts of town, I was suddenly overcome with a strong premonition that I would come back in the future when I had more time than an afternoon to explore the city and its environs. I even went so far as to say this aloud, not realizing it at first, but thankfully not saying it loud enough to give other passengers the idea that I was crazy. As I recalled this, I could not help but conclude how this strong premonition would later serve as a trigger for me to select Le Puy-en-Velay as my pilgrimage starting point.

The second event also occurred while living in France. My friend Matthieu and I were returning by car (his car) from a weekend visiting friends in Bilbao, Spain. Somewhere in the Pyrenees Mountains straddling the border of France and Spain, I was so struck by the feeling that I had been there before that I asked Matthieu to pull over. Keep in mind that this is well over ten years before I had heard of the pilgrimage. I told Matthieu that I was imagining myself meeting with local villagers, listening to their stories; sampling their food, wine, and customs, and that I needed to come back here to wander around and do some hiking. He laughed and told me I was crazy.

“Can we go now?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, “but remember this conversation.”

Years later, when I was returning home by way of Paris after one of my pilgrimage excursions, I had dinner with Matthieu and his wife at their home. He was

curious as to why I was doing the pilgrimage. I replied by asking him to recall that conversation by the side of the road in the Pyrenees.

“Do you remember?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied, “and I still think you are crazy.”

There were just too many coincidences for it to be coincidental and a few days after watching Bunuel’s *Milky Way*, I called United Airlines, with whom I had an accumulated abundance of airline miles, to inquire on obtaining a flight from Chicago to Lyon, France, on specific dates leaving in late August and returning in early September that worked optimally with my work schedule. Knowing that I have never nor nearly never been able to get a flight to and from a destination using the “super saver” option on specific days, I reasoned that if my request was fulfilled, that it would be yet one more sign from the universe urging me to go walking on the pilgrimage route for a few weeks. And when this happened, I had no other choice but to purchase the tickets and pack my bags.

I must emphasize that the pilgrimage, commonly referred to as the Camino de Santiago and sometimes just the Camino, was mostly unknown to the American public in 2009. It was not until the film *The Way*, produced by Emilio Estevez and starring Martin Sheen, was released in 2011 that it became better known to the US public. Even still, the meteoric resurgent growth it has experienced in Europe and by visitors from all over the world is nothing short of a phenomenon. Officially speaking, a matriculated

pilgrim—that is, a person who is awarded with the “Compostela” certificate of completion—must have walked or traveled by horse or mule the last 100 kilometers of the pilgrimage. If you decide to ride a bicycle, you must have cycled at least the last 200 kilometers. Pilgrims are required to carry a “credential,” a pilgrim passport, which is stamped by proprietors and volunteers at the places you stay as well as other historically significant sites such as churches. When you arrive in Santiago de Compostela, you present your credential to the official pilgrim office as proof of the distance you traveled in order to receive your certificate. In 1985, a total of 690 pilgrims arrived in Santiago de Compostela. In 2009, the year I started, 145,877 completed their pilgrimage and in 2019, there were 347,587, more than double the number of people than when I started and many, many orders of magnitude more than in 1985.

In addition to the tally, the official Pilgrim’s Reception Office collects other demographic information on matriculating pilgrims. In 2019, nearly half of the 347,587 newly minted pilgrims claimed spiritual reasons for embarking on their pilgrimage, with 40 percent indicating religious reasons and the remaining 10 percent reporting cultural or other non-spiritual or religious reasons. A near equal number of men and women coming from 190 different countries received their Compostela that year, with 95 percent undertaking their journey on foot.

Looking at these statistics, it does not take a giant leap of faith to conclude that something special is happening on the various routes that lead to Santiago de

Compostela. While the individual reasons to travel to and upon these routes may vary, we all share the common destination of Santiago de Compostela and the hope that we will have discovered something about ourselves along the way.

At a certain point during my journey, I had the fortuitous occasion to meet a person who had dedicated her entire adult life to the Camino, completing over twenty pilgrimages along the various known, lesser-known, and unknown routes. She and her husband ran a pilgrim hostel out of their home where I stayed one night while making my way across northern Spain. As I was the only guest that evening, we enjoyed a long dinner conversation during which she shared an old tradition, perhaps as old as the pilgrimage itself, on how the pilgrim should view his or her journey as a metaphor for life.

According to the tradition, the pilgrimage is broken into three distinct phases, with this first being birth and childhood. The pilgrim is born when he or she embarks on the pilgrimage and must immediately adapt to the rigors associated with walking every day from one place to the next over various terrains and in various weather conditions. Just as an infant progressively develops sight and physical mobility over the first days, months, and years of life, so too does the pilgrim acclimate to the backpack, blisters, shin splints, sun, heat, dehydration, rain, mud, cold, windy weather, and so on until they are mastered or at least under control.

Once acclimated and adapted to the physicality of the journey, you move into the long haul of adulthood. This middle period is where the pilgrim must work on ridding him or herself of the ego constraints hindering spiritual progress. This is quite possibly the most important period and represents the spiritual work of our lifetimes. The goal is to have shed that which burdens the soul so that we may approach death, the final phase—metaphorically represented by the end of our pilgrimage, at the steps of the Cathedral de Santiago de Compostela—with as light a heart as possible.

“Better to arrive at your last breath feeling at peace with the world, don’t you agree?” she asked.

Not only was there no arguing with her on that, but I have found this to be a true and succinct way to describe the pilgrimage in general terms. Using this as a framework, I invite you to join me as I retrace some of my own steps on the pilgrimage. The following excerpts, extracted from journal entries taken from my sixth and final year, contains elements of all three phases of the pilgrim’s journey, even though they occurred during my final year on the Camino.

Also, to provide some context, I switched pilgrimage routes my final year from the popular Camino Frances to the Camino Primitivo, “the primitive route.” It is also known as the “original route” that the shepherds, described at the beginning of Bunuel’s *Milky Way*, followed to discover the body of St. James. I did this to escape the increasing

number of pilgrims on the Camino Frances as it gets closer to Santiago de Compostela, in favor of the road less traveled.

Oviedo, Spain 2014

After a long series of flights, I found myself at the baggage claim of the Oviedo Airport. One by one, the bags started to appear with eager travelers lying in wait. The crowd thinned as I took in the scene while contemplating the journey that lay before me. After the last bag was lifted, the carousel stopped and I now stood alone in the sudden and silent realization that my backpack had not appeared. How could this be? Of all the people on the flight and of all the flights that I might take, that this one very important piece of luggage, critical to the completion of my journey, with every ounce therein having been carefully considered, would be *the one* that did not arrive at its final destination. Yes, the luggage office at Iberian Airlines confirmed that which I did not want to believe—my backpack did not make it to Spain.

At first this struck me as a serious blow for which I did not have an immediate solution. Everything I had in the pack, a total of fourteen pounds of things, was paramount to my making the journey, or so I believed. While yes, I was wearing one of the two pairs of clothes I had brought as well as my trusty boots, I felt as if the universe was putting the brakes on my pilgrimage. Was I wrong to have switched pilgrimage routes my last year?

In any case, it was too late to change plans. I was in Oviedo and had no other choice but to wait for a day or two in the likelihood or hope that my backpack would arrive on one of the subsequent flights. This is what the airlines told me in so many words, even though they couldn't find any information on my pack since it left Chicago. It was 10:30 p.m. and I was nearly delirious from the twenty-four hours of sleepless travel, with multiple layovers and a thirty-minute shuttle to the city, and whatever time it would take to locate my hotel remaining. I clearly had lost the luck of the simple itinerary I had secured my first year traveling to and from the pilgrimage.

I awoke late the following morning near checkout time after a restless night of sleep largely due to circular thoughts on the whereabouts of my backpack. I went to the reception area where the Wi-Fi was best to call the airline again, navigating my way through a dense series of automated menus to discover that my missing baggage had not yet been found.

"We regret any inconvenience this may have caused you and encourage you to check back later," the recorded message said. I was not convinced of their sincerity. Knowing that I didn't have an endless amount of free time at my disposal with the clock ticking on my return flight, I asked the person tending the reception if there was an outdoor recreation store nearby. Coincidentally, there was and it happened to be literally next door to the hotel and the only one of its kind in town. *What a turn of luck*, I thought; the universe is now helping me.

After all the careful considerations and time spent planning what would go into my pack and how much each item would contribute to the total weight, I ended up spending no more than a half hour selecting a new backpack, sleeping bag, rain parka, socks, and underwear. As it concerns the art and science of packing the pilgrim backpack, I would be remiss not to dedicate at least a few words on the subject. As I completed my one-thousand-mile pilgrimage over the course of six years, two weeks at a time, I had several opportunities to improve upon the previous years' load such that by my final year, I had succeeded in reducing the weight on my back to less than half what it was my first year. This newly procured backpack was even lighter than the one I had carefully prepared in Chicago. I came to understand that what we think we need to have in our pack, just like what we think we need to have in our lives, is actually less than we think.

With the new backpack strapped to my torso, I was finally able to set off walking. Just being in nature and away from all the noise of my modern metropolitan life had become a big part of what I considered to be the gift of the pilgrimage. To make up for lost time, I took a bus to a small town called Tineo where I spent the evening, walking the next day to Pola de Allande. My story picks up there the following morning.

Little did I know it, but this was going to be a big day. After a continental breakfast at the hotel bar, which consisted of packaged brioche, cold cuts, and two café con leches, I stepped onto the sidewalk and walked toward the main roundabout to

reconnoiter with the yellow arrow and scallop shell Camino waymarks that guide pilgrims in the right direction. I could see that my stopping options for the day were either Berduedo or La Mesa, although between the two, Berduedo appeared to have more options for food and accommodations given the limited information I had, which amounted to a few printed pages from websites containing maps and village names.

Upon reaching the end of town, the route descended from the side of a paved road and then left onto a dirt road that after a few hundred yards dissolved into the base of a lush valley of green grass glistening in the morning dew. The ground was spongy at least fifty feet on either side of a stream cutting through the valley back toward Pola de Allande. The trail, a footpath at this point, flanked and followed the stream toward its source, slowly ascending and making for an agreeable upward amble on tender ground with shining dewdrops everywhere and the smell of life—full, healthy, and invigorating green life—all around me.

After a while, the stream ever so slowly narrowed to the width of a few feet and then dissipated into more spongy grass and puddles. I continued alongside the narrow turf plain until the valley ended in front of a large vertical wall of rock, the base of which abounded with trees and shrubs. Off to the right, I spotted a notch in the rock from which the stream, now considerably reduced from its former self, flowed. While unmarked, this had to be the trail, as there was no other way to go forward.

Passing through this notch was like crossing through a magical portal, leaving the sun and glistening grass of the valley to arrive suddenly in a diffusely lit rainforest, with hidden trickling streams, ferns, and moss everywhere. There was so much of this glorious green vegetation that I was careful not to stray from what seemed like a footpath for fear of damaging the moss. The temperature was perfect, whatever degree that is, and the cool humidity was a sponge bath to the skin. I lingered for a good hour with not another soul passing through, thankful to simply be alive and able to return to nature and my spiritual journey.

With easily two-thirds of the day's walk still before me, I reluctantly pushed on. After crisscrossing back and forth over the stream with the help of some large stepping-stones, the narrow canyon widened as did the footpath, which now increased in grade as I lumbered out of the rainforest and into an equally dense temperate forest still only minimally illuminated by the dappled light breaching the forest canopy. The trail seemed to continue on and on, upward and onward, with no end in sight.

Eventually though, the forest released me and I beheld yet another entirely new world of several steep canyons that dissolved into mammoth formations of stone and shrub in the direction of my travel with the escarpment behind me, a vast unfolding landscape where Pola de Allande was, although I could no longer discern it. While I did not realize it at the time, I was in the formidable Cantabrian Mountains. The trail continued to ascend at what seemed an even increased grade if that was possible, and

while my legs were starting to protest, I was comforted by the quiet beauty of this new alpine landscape, only interrupted by the language of the wind, which I felt was speaking to me. In those moments, those hours alone in the woods and mountains, I not only felt, but knew that I was accompanied by something greater, wiser, and more ancient than me.

After a short rest for lunch, during which I aired my now aching feet, I continued to climb. The trail was again closing in on one of the giant masses of rock wall above me, forming a semicircular bowl that fanned out and whose opposing wall I suspected and hoped to be the summit. My suspicion was confirmed when I soon heard the sound of a semitruck's engine brakes confronting the steep grade and switchbacks of a road I imagined above me and out of sight. At last I was nearing the end of this grueling and spectacular ascent, scrambling over large rocks and boulders to reach the horizon. The last several hundred feet were painfully slow and I was extremely aware of every ounce of weight in my new and even lighter pack, feeling thankful to have the reduced load. At last I reached the summit, a vast windswept place that at first did not offer any spectacular view other than flatland and sky.

Then, as if in a dream, two silhouettes appeared in the distance approaching from my right along the ridgeline of the mountain formation. I had read that there was an ancient (and barely maintained) route that bypasses Pola de Allande and stays very remote. This couple must have taken it. It looked as though they were waving to me

although I could not be sure, so I continued walking along the plateau to the opposing side of the summit, whereupon I was leveled by an amazing view over what appeared to be the entire western half of Spain. I had climbed higher than I had even thought and I was looking down upon a whole range of smaller mountains.

All the pain in my legs and feet disappeared thanks to the endorphin rush that the view provided. I spent a good several minutes enjoying the panorama, allowing the constant whoosh of wind to cool the sweat on my skin and shirt. I was so excited to continue that I started to skip down the trail into the mass of mountain terrain, leaving the still distant waving couple to encounter sometime later if it was meant to be. After a while, the grade leveled off although I was still in the high country, following a trail that was now covered in heavy ground vegetation, shrubs still, but less windswept and greener. Then a very small collection of ancient-looking stone homes appeared, too small to be described as a village although it may have served as one in bygone times. There was still at least one family living in one of the old stone homes, and there was also a chicken coop (with chickens) and a water hose—which I asked, and was given, permission to use to replenish my supply.

As I was doing so, the couple from the summit now approached, calling, “Daniel, Daniel!” I could not believe my ears! Who were these people and how did they know me? I had just arrived in Spain a few days ago and had never before been in these parts. But as they came closer, I could see that it was the Italian couple, Fabrizio and Paola, I

had met at the hotel in Oviedo when I was frantically calling the airlines from the reception area using the hotel Wi-Fi. What a coincidence! We exchanged greetings and laughed at the unusual and frequent coincidences that occur on the Camino. A friendship had just hatched, the seeds for which were planted in Oviedo, and they would become part of my band of pilgrims this final year. As we both had different walking cadences, we agreed that no matter what, we would find each other again, no doubt by chance, and wished each other a “buen Camino.”

The route continued to descend, sometimes slowly and at other times more sharply, but all the while I was transfixed by the natural beauty in every direction. In some ways, especially in the lower altitudes, it was the simple and familiar beauty of green trees, blue sky, and billowed clouds, a gentle breeze here and there, an opening in the wood giving view to some formerly hidden field, distant farm, or village . . . a beauty which feeds the soul and made me quite content to be living in the here and now. It’s a beauty that exists off the Camino too, and one that I could find back home without much trouble. There are times, not just during this day’s spectacular walk, but during other days across this six-year journey, where the march of time comes to a halt and where I feel like I could be doing or could have been doing this long journey forever. And when these feelings come through me like the breeze summoned up from the valley below, I again know that I am where I am supposed to be.

At about 5:00 p.m. I arrived in Berducedo where I could either stop for the night or continue walking to La Mesa. Fabrizio had mentioned that they had already reserved a room in Berducedo. According to his guidebook, La Mesa had only one abandoned dump of a hostel with no option for food. Still, I just wasn't feeling like this was the place I should stay for the night. Then again, the idea of walking another three miles after an already strenuous day, only to find an abandoned dump of a hostel, did not sound inviting either. Sometimes, in these situations, it's best to just flip a coin, heads or tails, and go with the result. So I asked the universe to help me out with an answer and I let a euro fly flipping in the air, which landed on heads, meaning "Start walking to La Mesa."

La Mesa is a commune situated in the saddle of a high mountain valley with peaks on either side. At the center of the valley are a half dozen dwellings and the outbuildings that belong to them, all constructed of nearby stone centuries ago. At the center of the commune is an equally ancient weathered stone church, longer than it is tall. The sun that was with me a short while ago was being replaced by a fast-moving blanket of gray clouds whose ceiling was not much higher than the steeple of the church. There were no services, which prompted me to think about what I was going to do for dinner while I looked for the one hostel Fabrizio had told me was here. It turned out to be easy to spot as it was the one building, located completely by itself several hundred yards apart from the rest of the commune, surrounded by a few shrubs and no signage, that neither looked

old nor like the type of home that would belong here. It was constructed in the typical European postwar, uninteresting square concrete block style, with paint already peeling around the windows and trim and a front door that was wide open.

Inside there were two rooms on the first floor with bunk beds, some twenty to thirty in total. A handwritten note taped to the wall near the entrance indicated in both Spanish and English that it was five euros to stay the night and to put the money in a locked box nearby. It also gave instructions on how to get the hot water going and where to wash and dry your clothes. There was a hot plate in the kitchen and someone had left behind some pasta. After carefully examining the identical-looking bunks for bedbugs or their signature bloodstains, I claimed a bed and started to unpack. There's a routine to pilgrim life and it's vitally important to get your sleeping accommodations confirmed so that you can unpack, then wash clothes and yourself before dinner, which is usually prepared for you at a reasonable fee. This evening, however, I was on my own to produce a meal.

Keeping with the routine, I washed my clothes and took a shower. When I returned to the dormitory I discovered that I now had a roommate, a younger man in his late twenties or early thirties who had just arrived and was starting to unpack from the day's walk. We both greeted each other in Spanish and tried to carry on a simple conversation, which ended quickly with him asking in English if I spoke it. This made the breaking of ice infinitely easier and we quickly exchanged our pilgrim profiles

where I learned that he was from Warsaw. I asked him what his plan was for dinner as there was no food in town and he responded by pulling a couple bananas and some chocolate from his pack.

What to do? I thought. It immediately occurred to me that we could use some wine. It had been a long day and we were in Spain, after all. I asked him if he drank wine, to which he said “yes” and I told him I would go and fetch some “in town.”

“How?” he asked.

“I’m not exactly sure yet.”

Somehow I felt I would prevail and so I walked the couple hundred yards back to the church and the nearby farmhouses, where I saw an old woman tending to something outside her front door. I greeted her with a “buenos dias” and asked in my very limited Spanish for some “vino rojo” and that I had “dinero” to pay for it. She understood and motioned me to follow her to the church. I came to understand that she wanted me to help her to return a large, old, and tattered bible to the altar. I’m not sure why she had it at her place, but she was clearly the custodian for the church, having procured from her pocket a very large skeleton key to open the door, which looked as old as time itself. Of course, she understood that I was a pilgrim, as we must be the only travelers passing through these parts on foot. She motioned for me to sit down and say a prayer, which she suspected I would want to do. I was pleased to help her and see the inside of the church, contemplating the many generations of townspeople it has held and comforted.

Afterward, we returned to her home across the street where she motioned for me to wait in front while she went inside. She returned shortly thereafter with an unlabeled bottle of wine, filled almost certainly from a larger cask inside. She accepted 1 euro for it (I offered more and she refused) and I managed to make her understand that I also needed two glasses as there were none at the hostel, which she went back and brought to me.

Adam was shocked by my success in procuring a bottle of wine and so was I.

“How did you do this?” he asked.

“Are you familiar with the expression, ‘Ask and you shall receive?’” I replied with a smile.

Incidentally, several days prior I had impulsively bought a 16-ounce can of “fabada,” the popular pork-and-bean stew of Asturias, not entirely dissimilar to cassoulet. I had never done this sort of meal provisioning during the previous five years on the Camino, other than simple fixings of bread, sausage, and cheese for lunch, but was glad to have carried the can with me since Oviedo, as it was obviously exactly what I now needed. Using the hot plate to prepare the pasta and combine it with the can of stew produced a hearty meal for two, accompanied by a delicious local vino rojo with chocolate and banana for dessert.

What is most important about this evening is not the successful procurement of dinner, although it does deserve its place in the annals of making lemonade out of lemons, but rather the connection I made with Adam, who also, along with Fabrizio, Paola, and others I would soon meet, became part of a growing group of friends with whom I would later share in arriving at the end of our pilgrimage. Admittedly, when I first saw him in the room after returning from my shower, I was disappointed at the prospect of sharing the large room of twenty-plus beds with one other person. It just felt strange. But, after getting the wine and food going, we were both happy to be having a warm meal at the picnic table outside, which opened the door to a powerful exchange and one I will never forget. While we conversed at length on our quests for answers, meaning, and spiritual wisdom, he never revealed the exact source of motivation that had lead him to the pilgrimage, nor did I press him on the matter. He shared that there had been a longstanding depression and sadness in his life from which he could not escape. An older friend and mentor suggested he walk the Camino, which brought him to where we now were; an American from Chicago and a Pole from Warsaw, two complete strangers coming together while sharing a meal at a picnic table in the middle-of-nowhere La Mesa, Spain. The sun had set by the time we finished dinner and we remarked on the fragments of the Milky Way we could see revealed in breaks of the clouds, a reminder of the journey still underway.

The next morning I awoke to find it raining outside and was thankful to have had a roof over my head for the night. As I looked out the window from my bunk, I suddenly knew why my backpack had gone missing. Prior to leaving Chicago, I had quietly stowed a lightweight tent into my pack for the first time during my six-year journey. This decision starkly contradicted all my previous experience and wisdom in favor of being able to avoid the increasingly crowded hostels for the solitude of camping under the stars. Losing my pack prevented me from pitching a tent in La Mesa, which I almost certainly would have done given the outside appearance of the hostel. And, had I done this, I would have completely missed my connection with Adam, which like all of the others I had made over the years, is a core component that distinguishes the pilgrimage from a hiking trip.

A few days later I received word from Iberian Airlines that they had found my backpack. It was in London's Heathrow Airport, never having made it beyond the first leg of my trip across the pond. The customer service agent, this time a real person, apologized again for the inconvenience and asked if I would like to have it shipped to my location in Spain or have it sent back to the United States. "Send it back home," I said. "I've been able to manage without."

Midway through the twenty-mile walk on the day before my arrival in Santiago, I decided to put the following request out to the universe and to whomever might be listening:

“Seeing as how I am going to finish this long journey tomorrow, I was thinking . . . I would be grateful for any spiritual insight you might be willing to share with me. . . .”

Then, almost instantly, something I can only describe as a “beam” or a “download” came into my head. It was issued by the same voice that instructed me to embark on the pilgrimage. This time, in a more loving, yet still impersonal manner, it said:

“Number 1: Forgive yourself. If you want forgiveness for something you did, all you need to do is ask yourself for it and then grant it. You don’t need to belong to any religion and you certainly don’t need to walk to Santiago de Compostela. Just ask sincerely, and then grant it.

“Number 2: Forgive others. This is harder for you. But you know that holding onto anger serves no useful purpose, nor does seeking retribution or revenge. The satisfaction from the latter is short lived and you will almost certainly create karma that will set you back. Just let it go.

“Number 3: Trust that there is a divine purpose to your life and the lives of all others. Part of the divine purpose is for you not to know its exact nature, for if you knew, it would diminish the experience. Just trust that there is a divine purpose to all life.

“Number 4: Once you have made progress in numbers 1 through 3, you are able to use your unique gifts to help yourself and . . .

“Number 5: To help those who surround you in life.”

And with that, the voice was gone.

To state that the Pilgrimage de Santiago helped me to fulfill my New Year’s resolution is an understatement, but not just because of this moment of spiritual revelation. Powerful as it was, there was something greater still, something that I had experienced time and time again and something I knew I could count on and look forward to. That something is the realization that we are all connected to each other and to all life around us. I learned that I was not alone in my struggles just as the self is not a suspended particle in a vacuum. Whereas I might spend the better part of each day walking in solitude, I knew I would be welcomed wherever I ended the day by other pilgrims and the dedicated volunteers and proprietors who provide food and shelter for the night as we continue this ancient tradition.

It was during these moments: sharing a pilgrim meal together prepared with love, singing the pilgrim chant “Ultreia” while walking together toward Santiago, congregating at a village café to rest and examine our lives and ideas, receiving treatment for debilitating blisters and treating the blisters of other pilgrims, receiving blessings of goodwill and praying together in the little chapels and cathedrals along the way, that I tasted the knowledge that we all were a part of a larger One. The bonds of brotherhood and belonging so quickly established on the Camino with complete strangers was something I had never before felt or believed possible. What I had in fact

experienced during each year and each encounter, during each of these shared moments, was love.

Even though the pilgrimage and all its many gifts are now a part of my past, I do not lament that I no longer have the easier access I had on the Camino to drink from the stream of this knowledge. Not believing, but rather Knowing It exists is the greatest gift I received on the pilgrimage. Its existence is not limited to the various lines we see on the map tracing their way across Western Europe toward Santiago de Compostela. It exists everywhere where we are: in our frenetic twenty-first-century world, in the places and times where we cannot think of anything more than getting through the day, the week, and managing everything, including the pain and suffering dealt by the hand of life. It exists also in all the troubled and conflicted areas of our existence where being One seems the least possible.

Arriving in Santiago de Compostela is no more the end of the pilgrimage than it is the beginning of something new. To illustrate this, allow me to conclude with an allegory to describe what I believe to be “beyond” our journey to the Field of Stars.

The pilgrim, guided by the Milky Way, diligently and dutifully followed the steps of the original shepherds and scores of others who preceded him over the centuries toward Santiago de Compostela. After surviving several arduous mountain passes and the vast stretch of high plateau known as the Meseta, famous for its sublime treeless beauty and the hallucinatory effects it bestows on those who endeavor to cross it, unable

to escape the relentless sun and heat, he finally arrived at the threshold of Galatia. The greatest challenges of his journey were now behind him, and with a lightness of foot and spirit he traversed the green hills and riparian forests that separated him from his destination.

At long last, he arrived at the steps of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. After laying his hands on the sacred pillar and beholding the tomb of the Apostle, he participated in the pilgrim mass, where he was purified by the famous Botafumeiro, the enormous censer suspended from the central dome of the cathedral, which when filled with incense, is hoisted by a team of eight tirabolerios, who in a beautifully choreographed effort, pull on the giant ropes to send the smoldering censer swinging across the entire transept of the cathedral, nearly reaching the vaulted ceiling on either side. Immersed in the sweet-smelling smoke, he was overcome with joy and a deep sense of accomplishment for having made it to the long-anticipated end of his journey. As he exited the cathedral, his elation suddenly turned to sadness, a deep sadness similar to what he felt after the loss of his wife. He had been so focused on getting to the end, that he never considered what he would do after, and he now was confronted with an enormous hole in his heart which had previously been filled with his pilgrimage.

It turned out the other pilgrims he had met along the way and who arrived with him in Santiago on the same day were also suffering from a sadness that the pilgrimage was now over. One of his traveling companions suggested that they all continue walking

to Finisterre, the rocky peninsula on the edge of the Atlantic coast which, according to tradition, was known to be the literal end of the pilgrimage as its translated name means “end of the earth.”

This struck them as a good idea and they all set out the following morning with renewed jubilant spirits. During the three-day walk, everyone was acutely aware of the sands escaping from the hourglass of their pilgrimage, which made everyone savor each step and remaining moment together. On the afternoon of the third day, they arrived at the end of the earth and beheld the mighty Atlantic Ocean from the edge of the peninsula’s highest cliff where they lingered, mostly in silence, until the sun set over the horizon.

That night the pilgrim dreamt he had exhaled his final breath while watching the very same sunset he had just seen. He felt himself gently and peacefully separate from his body, which he could now see reposed, looking out over the ocean. Slowly his consciousness continued to rise such that he could see more of the beautiful coastline, the ocean surf breaking against the rocky cliffs, and the patchwork quilt of fields stretching inland back toward Santiago and farther east still.

His spirit continued to rise and he could now see the entire earth below him, the perfectly round green-and-blue sphere that had been his home for as long as he could remember. Feeling that he could not go back, he was gripped by a fear, such that he had never experienced before. At the same moment, he felt an urge to turn away from the

earth and into the black void of space, illuminated only by the countless stars of the Milky Way which now appeared brighter and more beautiful than he could ever remember.

Then, two beings, human-shaped silhouettes of light who were somehow familiar to him, appeared. He went toward them and asked why he was suspended in the middle of space. One of the beings replied by saying: “Do you see all those points of light that you call stars? Each one represents another sentient being like you whose life you have helped over the course of your time on Earth.” As he gazed upon the innumerable points of light, he could hardly believe that he had had a positive impact on so many people.

“Oh, but you have,” the being said. “Sometimes it can be just a smile or a helping hand to a stranger and other times it can be someone you have helped throughout your life. What matters is that you brought light into the world. You need not worry about the end of your journey, for it will only be complete when, instead of seeing stars, the darkness is gone and you only see light.”