

Faith In Practice

Life Changing Medical Mission

A Raw and Open Heart



Shortly after my father's death, I boarded a plane for Spain to walk the last segment of the ancient pilgrimage trail, El Camino de Santiago de Compostela. I thought that if I could share my pain by walking in the footsteps of those who, across the centuries, had borne their pain along the sacred

road before me, I might not feel so alone. That I might find some salve for the ache, the empty weight within me, that no words could contain or touch.

Very quickly, however, it became clear. I was not following in their footsteps. Rather they were walking beside me. It was as if the Camino carried their spirit within it. Their whispers wafted about the winding path, darting and floating above the hard-packed earth. The earth that solidly absorbed the shock of each pilgrim's step.

Every few kilometers, signposts that bore Santiago's shell led the way onward. And, yet it was as if these weather-beaten stones, some pocked, others listing, all eroded by time and tears, were telling me that the only way forward was to look back. Back to the shadows of those who had come before me. They, who encouraged each step. They who understood.

Upon these signposts were also offerings of more recent pilgrims. The offering might be a flower, or a stone. Or a note or a photo of a loved one. Or a prayer. Even though I did not know the story behind each offering, why the pilgrim had chosen that particular time to gently lay their offering down, knowing all the while that those who followed would gaze upon it, I could feel the intimate tenderness in it. I could feel the sacred gift offered to God and somehow offered to me, too. I understood.

Step by step, mile by mile, I could hear them more clearly, these pilgrims who had traveled the Camino. They who had journeyed 1,000 years before me, those who had only been there the day before. All who had brought their raw and open hearts to the journey and who gently invited me to do the same, to lay my open heart before them as they had offered theirs to me.

And so, step by step, mile by mile, I began to let go and allow my struggle, my sorrow, melt into theirs. Step by step, I found that we were being bound as one by the outward sign of Santiago's shell, and the inward sign of what healing looks like when we sit in the silence together. What healing looks like when we allow ourselves, as one, to offer our compassion to each other and therein be miraculously enfolded into God's all-encompassing compassionate embrace.

July 25 is El Día de Santiago, the Day of St. James. Each year on July 25 I remember my time on the Camino. I have been sitting with this memory a bit longer than usual this year, knowing how we are all on a journey that carries within struggle and deep sorrow. Unable to embrace or be with those we love. Unable to physically touch those in pain to comfort, or to be comforted. Knowing how we all are, in some way, stunned by a sense of loss, an ache that words cannot contain or touch. Remembering how I too was in that place when I embarked upon my pilgrimage journey in Spain on the Camino.

So, my hope for you is that this time might be transformed into a time of 'pilgrimage' for you, just as the Camino was for me. That step by step, mile by mile, you might look back to see your way forward in listening for those who have gone before you. Those who have left you the signposts of their lives to follow, who whisper to you still. Who have trodden the hard-packed earth of life's challenges before you and endured. Who invite you now to offer to them your raw and open heart.

Transformed into 'pilgrimage' as you listen for others who are suffering along this journey with you. They who, too, are cradling their own raw and open hearts. Pilgrimage so that you might be open to listen for their struggles and their offerings, struggles and offerings that often will go unspoken and yet are still there for you to hear.

And my prayer is that in this time of 'pilgrimage', that step by step, mile by mile, you might begin to let go and allow your struggle, your sorrow, melt into theirs. Step by step, that you might find healing as God binds your heart to theirs. And that, as you sit in the silence with them, that you find

yourself being miraculously enfolded into God's all-encompassing compassionate embrace.

Buen Camino.

Rev. Linda L. McCarty
President & CEO

Photos above taken by Linda on the Camino.

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