

500 Miles- A Spiritual Journey in Northern Spain

My brother, Jay, died three years ago, after a painful 8 months of dementia and leukemia. He had a difficult time in his decline... as did I, his chief caretaker, and only family member. When he died, I felt a great relief ... and great sorrow and guilt. I had no place to take all these feelings and had to return to work as a preschool teacher at a day-care center in Dorchester, MA. During this time, I saw a movie done by Emilio Estevez and his father Martin Sheen, "The Way". It was a quiet, little movie, which was sort an underground hit. There I found out about a pilgrim walk from a small village in Southern France and the Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela, a total of 500 miles. It is a Catholic pilgrimage dating back to the Fourth Century.

Pilgrims have walked the Way ending in Santiago at the tomb of the Disciple, Saint James, the patron saint of Spain for centuries. Most people walking the Camino these days are not even religious. They come to the Way for a variety of reasons; some spiritual, some to lose weight, some to see the Spanish countryside, view history, study architecture. I must admit I am a Catholic. Not the best. I grew up in churches next to my mother who prayed the rosary daily and attended the Blue Army to end Communism. It was just part of my life. My brother was a much better Catholic. He went to Catholic School until he was bullied so much he had to leave. And he went to Fairfield, a Jesuit University. He went on retreats and to church every Sunday. I hung around Quakers, Buddhists, Unitarians, and Jews, and I liked them! I rarely went to mass.

But Jay's death shook me. And when I learned about the Camino Santiago I knew I had to go. Other things called too. I was exhausted from working 43 years as a teacher, the last 10 with infants and toddlers. I had just turned 70. I was overweight from eating too much birthday cake and cookies.

I had to go, not just for Jay, but for me.

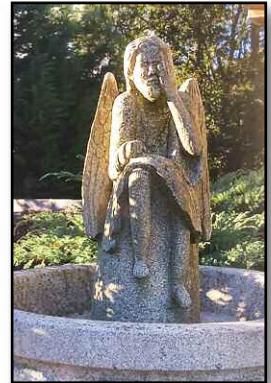
I found that a longtime friend, Irene, wanted to go as well. She could only stay a month. I would have to do a major part by myself. Irene was in much better shape than me and much more organized. But in mid-August we met in London and took a train to Paris and another to St. Jean Pied-Port in the South of France to start our journey. Early on August 17 we picked up our packs and poles and headed up the Pyrenees.

The journey had a great impact on my life. There are lots of stories; walking above the clouds, the small villages, the ancient churches. Peregrinos (the Spanish word for "pilgrims") come from all over the world; from all over Europe, from South Africa, Korea, Japan, Hungary, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil. A group of 10 people came from Israel. Lots of Canadians. And of course, Spanish,



Italians and Portuguese. Not that many Americans. We stayed in alberques (hostels just for peregrinos), some private, some public, convents, monasteries. We all shared the same bathrooms. We suffered blisters, knee problems, exhaustion.

It is an ancient custom on the Camino Santiago to carry a stone during your journey. You are supposed to place it at a cross, the Cruz del Ferro, about two thirds of



the way to Santiago. I picked up a stone in the foothills of the Pyrenees in France when I first started out and placed the stone deep in my pack. After carrying it over 300 miles I knew it was for my brother and the burdens I carried with him. The guilt, the shame, the grief, the loss of Jay. Arriving at the place I left early before dawn and there in the morning on top of the mountain was the cross. It was not beautiful, a tall metal and wood cross with stones piled around it. I had taken out the stone from the pack and walked with it in my hand all morning. When I arrived several dozen people were laying their stones at the foot of the cross. I climbed my way to the top and laid down Jay's stone. The flood gates opened and I wept for about 20 minutes. Afterwards, I gathered up my pack, smiled at the other pilgrims, each having their own moment, and set off on my journey. My pack somehow seemed so much lighter, my gait so much more confident. I believe I left the grief behind. I felt so much more alert and happy.

Returning to my new retired life I go to Mass once a week. Jay would have liked that.

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