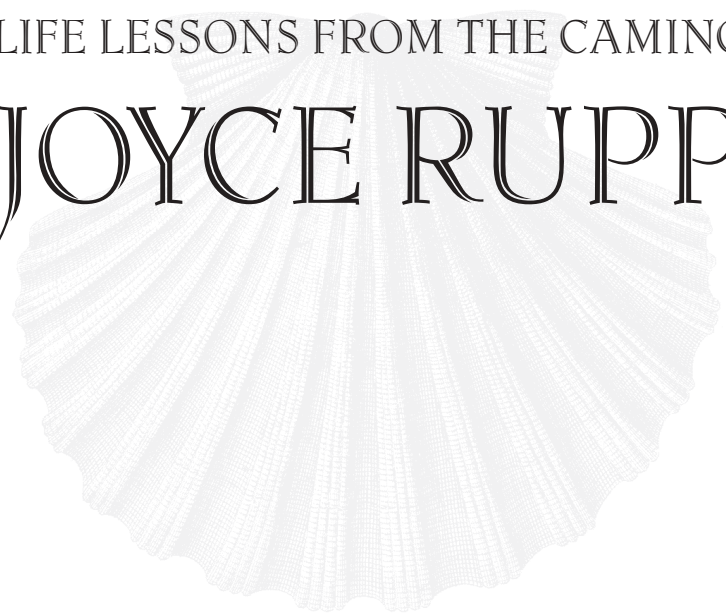


WALK IN A RELAXED MANNER

LIFE LESSONS FROM THE CAMINO

JOYCE RUPP



ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

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Published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 10545-0308.

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

Design: Roberta Savage; Map: Ponie Sheehan

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rupp, Joyce.

Walk in a relaxed manner : life lessons from the Camino / Joyce Rupp.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-13: 978-1-57075-616-0 (pbk.)

1. Christian pilgrims and pilgrimages—Spain—Santiago de Compostela. 2. Rupp, Joyce—Travel—Spain, Northern. 3. Spain, Northern—Description and travel. 4. Christian life—Catholic authors. I. Title.

BX2321.S3R87 2005

263'.0424611—dc22

2005009140

I
ALLOW THE HISTORICAL ROUTE
TO EMPOWER YOU



Walking, I am listening to a deeper way.
Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me.
Be still, they say. Watch and listen.

—*Linda Hogan*



I magine walking on a path where millions of feet from other lands and cultures have previously walked, feet that have trod hundreds of miles to reach a sacred site. Think of what it would be like to have that same path and those same stones beneath your feet as you, too, walk for many weeks to reach the same destination. This is what it is like to be on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela.³ It is a journey filled with spiritual connectedness and communal resonance.

This particular Camino is a revered walk to the cathedral of St. James in the city of Santiago in northern Spain where, according to legend, the bones of St. James the apostle were brought to rest. This pilgrimage is ancient. Some sources say it developed in the ninth century. Historical records definitely confirm the Camino as a popular pilgrim route by the beginning of the tenth century. I was amazed to learn that up to a million people walked the Camino during the Middle Ages. Currently, as many as 1,000 set out each day during the busy summer months. When these pilgrims complete their walk to Santiago they receive certificates at the pilgrim office near the cathedral of St. James. These certificates are signed and serve to authenticate the pilgrimage.

One aspect that attracted me was the spiritual energy I thought the old route held because of the many people who walked it before me. The endpoint of Santiago was not what primarily drew me to go on the Camino, although the cathedral of St. James is one of the most visited sacred Christian sites of the world.

People of varied religions and no religion visit the cathedral in order to experience the sense of something larger, fuller, and more profound than what is usually encountered in day to day living.

EACH SACRED SITE has spiritual energy for those who deliberately visit it. Not only is the spirit of the one who is honored present at that site. The good intentions and prayers of untold pilgrims add to the source of energy found there. What makes the Camino so special is that this source of renewal is present, not just at the destination point of Santiago, but all along the road one travels to reach the sacred site.

The spirit that pilgrims of olden years have left on the Camino is a spiritual vigor available for each pilgrim who walks it. The road to Santiago holds many kinds of ancestral power, including that of adventure, generosity, faith, purpose, companionship, trust, and courage. This energy can be missed, of course, if one is not open or aware but I think it is difficult to miss. Even those who set out on the Camino without any spiritual intention experience moments of awakening on this path. With each step toward Santiago, the spirit of past pilgrims who walked, sang, and prayed their way to the tomb of St. James fills the modern pilgrim with an unspoken grace, gifting each one with what he or she most needs.

As with numerous other pilgrims on the Camino, Tom and I experienced the spiritual potency of the Camino in the walking of it, rather than in reaching its destination. Initially, we thought *getting to Santiago* was the purpose of our walk. We soon discovered it was in making our way to the cathedral that we were to receive spiritual empowerment and renewed enthusiasm. Our life lessons unfolded among the numerous ups and downs the Camino provides. In the movement of each day, on the very same roads, paths, and streets other pilgrims had walked for centuries, we rediscovered a sense of the sacred. It was there we deepened our knowledge of how to walk through life in a relaxed manner. It was there we developed a pilgrim spirit.

The Camino's energy also comes through historical architecture. One is easily awed by the early Roman bridges that still span the rivers of towns and cities, the original Roman roads taking one forward toward Santiago, and the towering cathedrals and strongly built churches that continue to grace the Camino's path. It is over, through, within, and beyond many such historical markers that every pilgrim passes. In doing so, each traveler touches the vibrant energy of the journey, knowing those who made the pilgrimage in times past also experienced these same historical sights.

I sensed the Camino's energy immediately. With my initial steps, I felt an immense oneness with the countless number of pilgrims who previously traveled it. A flood of gratitude and joy moved through me. I knew it was holy ground. The spiritual ancestors of the way to Santiago had wanted to do this as much as I did. What had they experienced? What had they felt and seen? I couldn't wait to find out for myself. I wanted to walk the Camino with as much heart, as much grace, as much richness of spiritual experience as others did before me. My heart was high with hope as I set out, ready to receive the power each part of the path bestowed.

I noted in my journal the first day when we paused in a grassy area filled with tiny purple crocus-like flowers:

We have stopped at Viscarret, a small village, to rest. The walk here was very hilly and quite strenuous but also magnificent in views. Wonderful wildflowers: rose, lavender, and many I do not know. Such a surprise to find these blooming in September . . . We walked this first day from Roncesvalles into a magnificent forest with fresh, fragrant pine. A grace-filled walk. Already I have felt the energy and power of all those who have walked the Camino before me.

Because of this keen awareness of the route's energy, a few days after Tom and I began walking on the sacred way to Santiago, we

added two lines to a song by Jan Novotka that we sang daily. Every time we sang this song I was drawn anew to the ancestry of the historical route, feeling a joyful union with all who had been there before me:

In the name of all that is we come together,
In the name of the pilgrims on the way,
In the name of the people who have walked this path,
In the name of all that is, we come.⁴

We came in the name of countless people who had started out as we did. They gave vitality to the path by their presence. Each pilgrim today adds to that energy of pilgrimage. It makes no difference where one starts. Some begin their walk from the revered centers of Rome or Lourdes. Others originate from within their home countries, such as Italy, Belgium, France, Germany, or Holland, but almost all eventually meet up somewhere on the well-worn path that goes across northern Spain to the sacred site in Santiago. The most common starting point on the Camino is either the tiny village of St. Jean-Pied-de-Port on the French side of the Pyrenees or Roncesvalles on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees.

When Tom and I began walking the Camino at Roncesvalles, we followed the traditional pilgrim custom of wearing a scallop shell, another sign of union with the ancient pilgrim energy. The shell tells everyone that the traveler wearing it is on pilgrimage. There are numerous explanations offered for wearing the shell. One popular legend has it that when St. James's followers carried his coffin to land from the boat they were traveling in, they interrupted and surprised a wedding party on the shore. A horse spooked and bolted into the sea. Both the groom and the horse he was riding were presumed to have drowned. A miracle is attributed to St. James because the groom and the horse both survived the consuming waters. They came up out of the sea and strode triumphantly to the shore, with many scallop shells attached to the

tangles of seaweed clinging to horse and rider. Thus the shell became a key symbol for those who journey to the cathedral of St. James.

Other legends are also connected with this ancient pilgrimage. I was elated when I learned this historical route is also called *La Via Láctea* (The Milky Way) because the direction of the path moves under this galaxy. A similar name given to it is Compostela, from two Latin words meaning “field of stars.” Legend describes a shepherd, or a hermit, hearing some ethereal music and following the stars to a field where he discovered the remains of St. James’s body. (On the sixth day of our walk, I was startled when we met an older Japanese pilgrim who told us his last name actually meant “field of stars.” This unusual name was what drew him to walk the Camino.)

The dynamism of the stars, as well as the energy of past pilgrims, the historical sites, and the path itself, called to me as I walked on the Camino. I have long loved a star-filled sky. Standing out under the stars has always been a time of feeling connected to mystery and wonder. The prospect of walking for six weeks under this luminous sky-path intrigued and fascinated me.

However, I never saw the stars in the first weeks of the Camino. Each night I fell into bed exhausted, falling asleep before it was dark enough to view the stars clearly. It was not until we arose and walked in the predawn that I actually experienced this *La Via Láctea* energy. During a week when the sun was scorching hot we found that walking for a few hours in the cool shade of the night made it worth getting up before dawn. We used our small flashlights to guide our footsteps so we would not step into holes or trip on stones in the darkness.

There were several mornings when the waning moon sent out enough light to walk without using flashlights. Those were also the days when the road was smooth and easy to walk. Then I was able to look up often to where the stars were gleaming as far as the eye could see. They filled my heart with a reverent stillness. In

those hushed moments I never doubted the historical energy cradled on the Camino. It surged in my soul on those mornings and sang melodies of pure delight.

It was not only the stars that left their energy in my soul. It was the land, the stones, the trees. Many places my feet touched gave me a sense of connectedness with something old and deep. One rainy day in Galicia we passed by two enormous oak trees. As I paused to appreciate their size and beauty, a mix of love and joy stirred inside of me. I felt the greatest peace. That night I happened to mention those trees to a pilgrim from Holland. The local people had told her the two oaks were over a thousand years old.

The next morning as Tom and I were leaving Triacastela, a hosteler asked us if we knew about an old oak tree on the edge of town. He said it was right on our way and encouraged us to stop to visit the tree because it, too, was over a thousand years old. We went and found the ancient oak. It had a huge, hollow space near the bottom of the trunk large enough for me to fit inside. So I went and sat “inside” the old tree. It was very powerful to be within the body of that ancient oak. I tried to open my heart as fully as I could to receive the arboreal energy the tree held for all those years, a gift readily present for anyone who passed by on the pilgrim route.

THROUGHOUT MY TIME of walking the Camino, the ancestral vigor of the path never left me. It culminated thirty-seven days later when I stood in the entry of St. James Cathedral. Before me was a tall marble pillar filled with carvings depicting the Tree of Jesse, that symbolic scriptural history of the Jewish and Christian lineage of Jesus. It is a strong symbol of faith passed down through the years.

I stood in line with tourists and other pilgrims completing their journey. As I came forward to place my hand in the handprint near the bottom of the pillar, a ripple of strong emotion caught me. I was astonished at what I saw: the indentations in the

marbled handprint were worn deep from the millions of pilgrims whose hands were placed there before mine.

That moment at the Camino's end verified the powerful energy of the holy route. As my hand rested in the handprint on the pillar, I knew I was forever united with the presence of every pilgrim along the ancient path I traveled. As I walked the Camino, the faith-filled energy of the ancestors' courageous endeavors was imprinted on my heart. This surge of love and faith had carried and empowered me with every footstep along the way.

EACH OF US HAS a camino, a road of life. This road allows us access to the spiritual richness of those who traveled before us and those who travel with us now. All loving persons we encounter leave a touch of their positive, growth-filled goodness. We can slip into this energy as easily as my hand slipped into the deeply indented print in the marble pillar of St. James Cathedral.

Whether our sources of spiritual energy traveled life's path long ago or are still on it today, these people of faith are our teachers and catalysts of inspiration. Like pilgrims on the road to Santiago, their goodness empowers us as we set out each day to face the unknown, the beautiful, the challenging, and the rewarding facets of our historical journey. This potent energy stirs in our dreams, permeates our tough decisions with wisdom, and infuses hope into every new beginning.