

Starting with myself


When I told people I was walking to Santiago, they asked me where I was starting from: Vézelay, or Le Puy, or Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, all of these popular places to begin walking. I told them I would start at the traditional starting point for a pilgrimage: my own front door. For though we may imagine other starting points, actually there aren't any. We may commence walking in one place, but the journey always starts where we are.

So one happy morning I set out from my home in Margaretting, just outside Chelmsford. I said Mass in my little chapel. I said goodbye to Rebecca, my wife. I walked to Ingatestone Station – about two miles – got the train to London Liverpool Street, across town to Paddington, and then to Plymouth. I walked from the station to the harbour and boarded the overnight ferry to Santander.

On the way to the ferry I passed a young man, probably only about 16 or 17 years old. He was sitting by the side of the road weeping. I stopped and asked if I could help, but he waved me away.


In many ways, I carried his sadness with me as I walked. I found myself thinking about him and praying for him, wondering what had caused such grief. He reminded me of myself years ago, when I had just left home. I was sitting in Regents Park, feeling homesick and lovesick. Someone came by and told me not to worry; it wasn't the end of the world. But it felt like it was.

Sitting on the deck of the ferry that evening and watching the land retreat from view and thinking about what lay ahead, I wrote this poem.




The value of a person's life is not
measured in Facebook likes, nor column inches,
nor Twitter followers, still less by what
school they attended.

The new shoe pinches.
Of course it does! To fit will only ever
be an investment of time, the instruction
of the road, and it can never
rise as an entirely self-contained construction.



I place my feet where other pilgrims trod,
I test the weight of all that is put down,
I chew the fat of earth and light and God,
I put on what I need as cross and crown.
I make a stranger's welcome fire and hearth,
I find out what a life is really worth.






2

These are the steps I am taking today

In my little cabin in the bowels of the ferry, I had an uneasy first night's sleep. I was nervous about what lay ahead, mindful that I hadn't really done any preparation for such a long trek, and not at all sure that I was fit enough to make it all the way. I was only confident of one thing: I was bound to get lost. Some people are born with an inner sat nav. Not me.



It was a beautiful hot day as the ferry came into Santander. Everyone stood on the deck watching the land come into view. Beyond Santander were mountains. Foolishly, I realized that I had not really thought about this. I knew how far I had to walk each day. But I hadn't reckoned on the terrain.

Disembarking, and more mindful than ever that I didn't quite know where I was going, I was massively relieved to see a waymarker in the pavement saying 'Camino del Norte'. I was on the right road.

I made my way to the cathedral, but it was closed. So I sat and ate a very delicious lunch at the quayside, the first of many fabulous meals I was to have as I walked across the northern coast of Spain. I then went back to have my pilgrim passport stamped for the first time. This is a kind of pilgrim's credential issued by the Confraternity of St James in London. You need to present it at each hostel. It shows you are an 'official pilgrim', whatever that is! I then started walking.

This poem, about the steps I was taking and the trips along the trip, was written in the restaurant waiting for the cathedral to open.

These are the steps I am taking today.
One: to learn the Spanish for 'Help I'm lost!'
Two: find out how much living lightly costs.
Three: see if there's a way within a way.
These are the steps I am taking today.

These are the trips I am making today.
One: to think contemplating self is prayer.
Two: crave a helping larger than my share.
Three: in this bright moment, mourn yesterday.
These are the trips I am making today.

So place each foot without regret or fear,
If this is faith, then there must be doubt;
Some things are only learned by striking out,
So make each breath a joyful gift of prayer.



3

Yellow arrows

My first night in Spain was spent in a small hotel 5km outside Santander. The following morning, I awoke to torrential rain. I discovered the Spanish for breakfast – *desayuno* – and had something to eat. I postponed walking for an hour. But with the rain showing no sign of abating, I put on my wet weather gear and set off.

Panic set in after a few metres. I didn't have a detailed map. I was only very vaguely aware which was the right direction. I had an app on my phone that showed the way, but I was worried about the phone's battery life and didn't want to use it too frequently.

So which way to go?



After a couple of hundred metres I saw a yellow arrow painted on a lamppost. It was a wonderfully reassuring sight. This was the way. And right across Spain, and for the next month, I followed these arrows.

This in turn reminded me of the game I had played as a child: tracking. Someone laid a trail with arrows made of sticks and everyone else followed.

What was beautiful here was that someone had gone before me. These ideas of laying a trail and of someone going ahead found their way into several poems.

I stayed in Requejada that night. It was my first in an Albergue – the pilgrim hostels along the Camino. This one, like most, was very basic: bunk beds in mixed dormitories, a couple of toilets and a shower. I was touched and blessed by Sebastian, a carpenter from Bavaria who had walked from Irun. He showed me the ropes, and later we drank rum and brandy together in the bar over the road.





Dragged heel through the dirt; or with carefully
constructed sticks; or in autumn, wet leaves,
and – if you know where to find them – conkers,
when I was a boy my favourite game was
tracking. I think that is what we called it.
One goes ahead to lay a trail, and the
rest of us count to 500 or watch
a clock move slowly. Then we would follow.
Sometimes the trail splits, arrows pointing this
way and that, so we too would separate.
An ‘X’ told you which had been the wrong turn.
Double back. Seek out boyhood’s holy grail.
Here an undivided route is marked by
arrows. Painted yellow. Plain. Polite. Without fail.

