

The
Pilgrim Spirit

The Longer You Walk, the Deeper You Go

*Walking 3,500 km Toward a
New Life on the Camino de Santiago*

Gideon Enok

The Pilgrim Spirit: The Longer You Walk, the Deeper You Go

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*For my great-grandmother, Grethe Thomsen,
whose embrace was unconditional kindness*

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I Part 1

*“It may be that when we no longer know what to do,
we have come to our real work
and that when we no longer know which way to go,
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.”*
—WENDELL BERRY, *Standing by Words*

Why don't you walk from Denmark to Santiago, Gideon? a voice from an invisible source whispered.

I was alone, facing the waves drifting softly onto the shore. There was no one around me or anything that could have uttered the words in that mysterious message. But something talked to me, and I heard it.

It was strange, of course, but the strangeness was submerged in the surprising joy I felt in hearing it. I didn't consider what it was that spoke, or where it came from, because my curiosity took up that space in the loaded question. Fear, worry, and concern weren't present either. A fire lit up inside of me instead, and I smiled with delight at the compelling proposal and, even more so, the magnitude of the challenge.

The 800-kilometer journey on foot from the little town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in Southwest France, to Galicia's capitol, Santiago

de Compostela, in Northwest Spain, is known as El Camino de Santiago, or The Way of St. James, one of the world's most well-known pilgrimages. Walking from Denmark, however, and adding four more countries and more than 2,700 kilometers would make the trek much more exacting.

Despite the hard reality of the enormous task, the flame of inspiration continued to burn as I proceeded on the concrete path toward the harbor, where I was meeting my parents for lunch. We found a little eatery and settled ourselves, and when I shared what had just happened, I felt as if my entire body was radiating the same smile as before. My mom noticed and remarked that it lit up my face. I hadn't smiled like that in many weeks. It settled over me like a soft cloud of joyful energy.

I was fully aware of the vast endeavor, and the grueling kilometers added to the spiritual adventure, but it didn't even occur to me that I might not be able to do it. Something in me had already changed, and my parents saw what I felt.

I know now that it was the vivid reassurance of an epiphany. I was going. I was actually going to do it. I didn't know how. I didn't even know why. I just knew that a part of me was already standing there, in front of the cathedral in the historic square of Santiago de Compostela, and later, sitting at the Zero-Kilometer rock, next to the lighthouse in Finisterre, at The End of The World.

If you ever feel the call to go on a long pilgrimage, and even if you can't and never will be able to for whatever reason, I'm taking you on that journey with me, retracing my steps through pain, tears, and desperation, between wild agony and the sublime highs. The hardest experiences and the loneliest times gave me invaluable lessons, which sustained me through the entire trek, and in my daily life since then. I'm sharing them in the hope that they can offer some inspiration and support on your path in life.

THE PILGRIM SPIRIT

Perhaps first among those lessons is that it's not so much about journey or destination, but the courage to walk into the unknown with an open heart. No matter where the road leads, pilgrims find solace, and the motivation they need to go on, complete their mission, and live life well. Between the beginning and the end is the journey, sparkling points in space and time, and we can all walk it with the Pilgrim Spirit of loving intention, tested faith, and the truth found in trust.

Text message sent to Jack, June 7, 2020, 1:35 p.m.

*I don't feel like continuing anything.
Life is blank. I don't trust what I feel or see any value.
I'm done. I want to just stick a knife in my arm and go – been
depressed and suffered all of my adult life.
I can't anymore, I just can't – nothing works,
none of the things I pursue leads to any good.
The people I love and have been close with leave,
and I have way less now than when I started my adult journey.
I've tried so much and have so little.
I am at the end now.
I have nothing left to give or do,
it's not enough or good enough, ever...*

I guess it's clear that I wasn't starting from a good place. Another relationship, similar to many others, had broken up. I was depressed. I thought about harming myself. I was angry a lot of the time. I couldn't see any point or meaning in anything that I was doing, or might do. And I hadn't yet reached the point of acceptance of my own responsibility for the mess I was in.

Each day I woke with a mixture of sadness and frustration. I was living in the middle of nowhere, on the first floor of a red farmhouse without running water. There was a little blue kid's couch in the corner. It was like a constant hint that my life wasn't moving on, and that I definitely didn't belong there with the kind, elderly couple whom I could hear downstairs every morning, for thirty mornings, when they made their coffee.

The warmth and light of summer grew closer, but I felt stuck. My head was banging with questions that I couldn't or wouldn't answer. Only one thing was clear: Once again, like so many times before, I hadn't stood up for myself.

I tried to get unstuck. I meditated every morning and evening, and I walked three times a day. I was practicing mindfulness by paying attention to my breathing while strolling around the surrounding farmlands and nature paths, with my monkey mind and broken heart. And on the thirtieth morning, my wandering led me to a three-hour meditation, a hike to the ocean, and the mysterious question that became a call to the much longer walk toward a new life.

Text messages on June 7, 2020, 2:27 p.m.

Morning Gideon, how are you doing?

Jack, I feel the need to do something that takes me away from where I am, on a path toward something I love, and that inspiration is that I will start to walk from Denmark to Santiago in Spain, my pilgrim home.

Wow, sounds like a great walk!

I moved out of the red farmhouse a few days later, put boxes with books and memorabilia in storage, and relocated to my parents to prepare. The journey had already started its own life inside of me, and I loved it. I was all in. The image developing in my mind was so strong that determination and preparation were mere prerequisites. It was exactly the kind of mission I'd been looking for.

I shared with my family and friend Jack that I needed to do it, although I couldn't really explain to them why. I couldn't even explain it to myself. I didn't think or worry about the world situation, restrictions and lockdowns. I felt the answer to the call so clearly, and it filled me with a firm trust in the unknown.

The route was set. I would start in the old medieval and cultural city of Viborg in the north of Denmark, continue south on the historic Oxe Trail, known as Hærvejen in Danish, to the German border and southwest through the towns and villages of Belgium. The north of

France and the vineyards of Champagne would take me to the halfway marker, the romantic capital of the world, Paris. Bordeaux and the lush wine country in the south of France would lead me to the small, idyllic pilgrim hub of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, at the feet of the Pyrenees.

The Camino finishes in Santiago, and pilgrims celebrate in the Praza de Obradoiro, facing the cathedral in the center of the city. But I knew that my Camino would go on from there to Finisterre and the lighthouse at the furthest point of the coast, known as The End of The World.

I bought my favorite brand of shoes, a red one-man tent, smart wool socks, lightweight zip-off pants, toiletries, and my favorite remedy for blisters, tea tree oil. I also brought my computer and practiced setting up my tent as well as packing everything into my black and orange 48L backpack, until I could do it in my sleep. I was prepared and mentally ready for the potential 3,500 kilometers and many months of walking. (I say *potential* because my head was way behind my heart, not sure what was going to happen or how it would end.)

I felt confident and experienced after a decade of traveling and two shorter Camino walks, but something was still missing. I had the gear and knew I was capable; it would just take longer and the unknowns were greater. But I could feel a lack of something. There was an emptiness inside, born in low self-esteem, and I often felt absent from the world around me. I suppressed all of it down into a gut of sustained tension, which I'd done for years.

As fate would have it, as fatalists say, on the night of my departure, my brother Jon gave me a gift of words. He is a well-traveled, kindred spiritual seeker who has hiked the 88 Temple Trail on Shikoku Island in Japan and practices yoga, tai chi, and free diving. We have always had a loving brotherly bond.

After dinner with our parents, a conversation continued as so many times before, and with his bicycle helmet in hand he said—as if he knew I needed it—*Be strong enough to stand by yourself and be able to lean up against yourself, alone, without anyone else.* It was a vulnerable,

resonating moment, and exactly what I needed to hear. For years, I'd felt like I was on sandy foundations. Jon's advice gave me something to stand on, but, at the time, I was so caught up in the inspiration that I wasn't aware of its deep significance, and had no idea what I needed to walk through to find out.

Diary entry on Day 0, June 21, 2020

...I feel healed and open to life in a way that I've not experienced perhaps since my exchange year in Ohio, 2003. Reason being, that I was heading toward something new and not running away from something old, which I did and continued to do since after I started traveling in February, 2010.

These are my goals:

- 1. Find the place I love to live*
- 2. Do work I love everyday/lifestyle I love*
- 3. Create a family with my love (kids/husky)*

I walk toward this with my heart open to what will happen and come to pass.

Tomorrow, I take the first steps, toward a new life.