

Camino Conversations: Exploring Pilgrimage as a Spiritual Practice

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In 2016, when I met Vivianne Flintoff, author of *Kiwi on the Camino: A Walk that Changed My Life*, I had no interest at all in walking the Camino de Santiago Compostela – the ancient Spanish pilgrimage route that is currently experiencing a resurgence in popularity. In fact, for reasons I never paused to properly examine, I was quite resistant to even reading about it.

Nevertheless, Vivianne and I formed a friendly connection at a Christian Booksellers Association tradeshow, where we were both exhibiting, and engaged in the professional courtesy of exchanging our wares. I gave her a copy of my album and she gave me a copy of her book, which I resigned myself to reading out of politeness. I had no intimation of the live, green seed that was about to be planted in my heart.

From the opening pages, Vivianne's rich narrative of both the outer and inner experience of her pilgrim journey began to work deeply within me. I felt as though I was walking the path with her and enjoyed the vicarious experience of slowing a busy life down to walking speed. Vivianne walked the Camino Frances – the most popular of the five official Camino pilgrimage routes through Spain, which begins in St. Jean Pied de Port, in the foothills of the Pyrenees in southern France.¹ It passes through four regions of Spain along the 800km road to the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral where, legend has it, the remains of Saint James the apostle are in repose².

By the time I reached the end of the road and the book, an inner knowing had formed within me that I needed to walk this particular route for myself. It felt like a challenge I was not yet sure I could meet, and yet I felt a rising sense of adventure, excitement and desire. Retreats have been a formative part of my spiritual journey, and I began to conceive of the Camino Frances as a long, walking retreat – something that I would do when I completed my spiritual

¹ <https://caminoways.com/popular-camino-de-santiago-routes>

² Mullen, Robert. *Call of the Camino. Myths, Legends and Pilgrim Stories on the Way to Santiago de Compostela* p14,23

direction formation programme to mark the end of this chapter of my life and to imagine with God what the next one might look like.

When I set out, I will be treading a well-worn path. Pilgrims have been walking to Santiago de Compostela for more than ten centuries. Numbers reached a high point in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when as many as 250,000 pilgrims per year would make the often dangerous journey.³ After centuries of declining numbers, a renaissance is underway. The total number of pilgrims arriving in Santiago each year has more than doubled since 2004.⁴ Over 300,000 people completed a Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in 2017 alone.⁵

Post-modern pilgrims reflect the kaleidoscope of beliefs, doubts, agnosticism and spirituality of the twenty-first century. Some embark on the journey as a travel experience, seeking adventure and cultural enrichment. For others, the physical challenge and achievement of walking 800km across Spain is paramount.⁶ Many are drawn to the pilgrim road in times of transition or loss, seeking transformation, meaning and connection along the way⁷, while some people of faith consciously embark on the journey as a pilgrimage of spiritual formation – a journey taken with and for God.

Over the last year, I have talked with pilgrims, read books on the subject of pilgrimage and participated in Facebook groups. I have also conducted formal in-depth interviews with four New Zealand Christian women – Linda, Felicity, Phoebe and Tina * – who have walked the Camino Frances and were significantly shaped by their journeys.

³ <https://caminoways.com/the-history-of-the-camino-de-santiago>

⁴ Briery, John. *A Pilgrim's Guide to Camino Frances (15th edition)*. p12

⁵ Pilgrim Statistics for 2017 www.caminoguides.com/pages/updates

⁶ Frey, Nancy. *Pilgrim Stories. On and Off the Road to Santiago ch1, p30*

⁷ *Ibid*, p27

* Names have been changed.

Felicity, who is not given to hyperbole, said, *"I think that walking the Camino has been such a significant thing in my life that it's almost divided my life into before the Camino and after the Camino."*

Hearing and reading these stories has deepened my awareness of the unique ways pilgrimage can form us spiritually. The late author and minister, Phyllis Tickle, shone a light on the seven spiritual practices, at the heart of the Christian tradition.⁸ She points out that three of these practices – tithing, Eucharist and fasting– deal with the physical dimension of our lives, whilst three – fixed-hour prayer, Sabbath, and the liturgical year – are centred around time. Pilgrimage, the seventh ancient practice, incorporates both the dimensions of physicality and time – an incarnational alchemy full of transformative potential.

Phyllis picks up this theme in her foreword to Joan Chittiser's book, *The Liturgical Year*: *"Pilgrimage, engages both the physical space of the body and the dimension of time, requiring that we go at least once in a lifetime with holy intention to a place made sacred by the faith and encounters of other believers."*⁹

Tina, a woman in her fifties who walked the Camino Frances route alone, reveals the potential for pilgrimage to be a grounded, incarnational embodiment of contemplative spirituality when she says, *"Everything is heightened – time, your body, hunger, your spiritual awareness, your physical awareness."*

Through my Camino conversations and readings, I have noticed some recurring themes. With the popularity of the Camino de Santiago continuing to rise, it is quite possible that spiritual directors in Aotearoa New Zealand will at some stage work with directees who feel drawn to

⁸ Tickle, Phyllis. *Recovering the Ancient Practices* <http://qideas.org/videos/recovering-the-ancient-practices-1/> Retrieved October 2018.

⁹ Chittister Joan. *The Liturgical year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life*. Foreword, p14

this, or other, pilgrim roads. In what follows, I share a selection of these themes and insights in the hope that they may enhance our collective ability as spiritual directors to be helpful companions to those undertaking a pilgrimage. I believe we can have a valuable role to play in companioning these pilgrims as they prepare for, or reflect on, their journey.

PREPARATION

In her widely read book about her Camino experience, *Walk in a Relaxed Manner*, Joyce Rupp says that the time she spent in physical training for her pilgrimage was a challenging but important part of her experience. Prior to leaving for Spain, Joyce spoke to her spiritual director, describing the resistance she felt to training because it was pulling her away from her writing work. Her spiritual director said, “Remember, the preparation is part of the journey itself.”¹⁰

It is helpful for spiritual directors to remember these wise words and to hold an awareness that the pilgrimage experience often begins at home in the preparation phase. Preparing to walk the Camino de Santiago is multi-faceted, often involving travel logistics, research, packing, physical training and more. All of these practical and physical acts of readiness provide raw material for spiritual exploration.

The conversations that occur during this time of preparation also provide an opportunity to explore the deeper layers of a directee's hopes, fears and desires for their upcoming journey, and any sense of how God might be leading them. Joyce Rupp undertook a personal retreat with her pilgrimage companion prior to going to Spain, a spiritual preparation process, which she says “deepened our purpose and clarified our intentions.”¹¹

¹⁰ Rupp, Joyce. *Walk in A Relaxed Manner* p46

¹¹ Ibid, p44

For two of the women I interviewed, hints of the spiritual growth themes that lay ahead of them on the pilgrim path emerged in their preparation phase.

Linda sensed an invitation from God to “lighten up”. This call had spiritual resonance, but it also carried an energy that was expressed in very practical terms. In preparing to rent out her house while she was overseas, Linda sold or gave away nearly all her furniture. She set out feeling ‘lighter’ before she even set foot on the trail. She said, *“There was just a letting go of possessions. I felt so free to be a pilgrim.”*

Felicity sensed a call from God to walk the Camino in the months following her husband's death. She says, *“I was really convinced that God was saying to me ‘you go, and my grace will be with you’.”* In the six weeks prior to leaving for France, she climbed four mountains in her local area. Although happy in her own company, she said she would never have done something like that on her own prior to this pilgrimage. *“It was actually a wonderful experience. In this whole process, even in the training, I actually learnt a lot about myself.”*

Linda and Felicity both spoke of having a clear sense of God's call to walk “the Camino”. Phoebe, on the other hand, first walked part of the Camino Frances as an adventure seeker in her early twenties, without any conscious personal or spiritual growth aspirations. Nevertheless, this did not prevent her from being significantly formed by one of the most universally described themes of the Camino di Santiago experience – simplicity.

SIMPLICITY

There seems to be something about the back-to-basics rhythm of pilgrim life that invites a different way of being. All four of the interview subjects spoke about simplicity – some with a quality of longing in their voices. Each woman also described her pilgrimage experience as

addictive and this seemed to be connected to a desire to return to the simplicity of pilgrim life.

I identify two key dynamics at the heart of this simplicity theme: a sense of letting go and a sense of entering a soul-supporting rhythm of life.

Letting Go

Letting go is a multi-faceted act. Walking the pilgrim road involves an untethering from normal routines and responsibilities, and a stripping down of possessions to the barest essentials. Pilgrimage is a liminal space. It can offer an invitation to let go of many of the ego props that reinforce your usual narrative identity and to be more truly yourself – unencumbered and open while on the road.

For Linda, part of the simplicity of her journey was the sense of being free from the responsibilities of normal life. *“You get addicted to the simplicity. It’s a holiday from being encumbered and it gives you lots of time with God. The Camino was the beginning of a different way of being for me.”*

Phoebe and her friend realised the necessity of letting go after an exhausting first day walking with overpacked backpacks. She said, *“We had ridiculous things like full bottles of shampoo and a nice dress to wear in the evenings. I remember just throwing it all in the bin. I learnt that I didn’t need all that stuff. I think it helped me simplify my life a lot.”*

A Soul-Supporting Rhythm

So what occupies the space left by this practical or psychological act of letting go? Pilgrims enter into a circadian rhythm of life: waking, walking, talking, washing, eating, sharing,

sleeping and repeating that cycle again the next day. It is an embodied rhythm, lived in daily contact with nature and connection with others.

The patterns of pilgrim life seem to create a unique contextual container for spiritual and personal growth. It is as if daily movement shakes the psyche loose and there is time to work with what emerges.

Phoebe, an extrovert, intentionally took the chance to walk alone during periods of her second pilgrimage, reflecting on the end of a relationship and on her recent recovery from major surgery. She says, *"You've got that time to think and pray as you walk along. You're out in nature and you do feel a little bit closer to God because you're in an amazing place and have time to process."*

Linda found the rhythm of pilgrim life to have a monastic quality. *"It's a very rhythmic life. But, over the time, you can feel a building resilience – spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically."*

The combination of letting go and embracing soul-supporting rhythms creates an embodied praxis for the ego loosening and kenotic spirituality (described by Cynthia Bourgeault as *"self-emptying that leads to fullness"*¹²) that is at the heart of contemplative consciousness. The organic rhythm of pilgrim life may pattern a new kind of consciousness into the pilgrim.

Felicity commented, *"...the emptying of yourself that you get by living simply and going at a medieval pace – it's sort of like stepping completely out of one life into other. To slow down to walking space for that amount of time actually does things to you."*

¹² Bourgeault, Cynthia. *The Wisdom Jesus* p60

Once a pilgrim has returned home, spiritual direction conversations may usefully explore this oft commented on theme of simplicity and how it might inform their post-pilgrimage lives. What are they being invited to let go of, to loosen their attachment to? What soul-nourishing rhythms might support them as they continue their pilgrimage through life?

SELF AND OTHER ON THE WAY

The hours of walking, resting and eating during a pilgrimage also create opportunities for rich connection with others. Each woman I interviewed spoke of the Camino community as being something unique and special. Phoebe said, *"People seem to be quite open. I love meeting strangers and hearing their stories. And feeling like I can share my story as well with them without any judgement. It's okay to just be you."*

Felicity, who self-identifies as an introvert, speaks of having a tendency towards being a recluse. She says one of the gifts of walking the Camino alone was the opportunity that gave her to interact with her fellow pilgrims. She felt an invitation to engage more with others and was intentional about leaning into this growth curve along the way. She says, *"I had been working on it a bit, you know, looking for opportunities to talk to people rather than hiding from people."*

One night during her journey, Felicity was dining alone when she suddenly had a strong sense that she was supposed to be talking with someone. She says, *"I felt as though I'd been dug in the ribs and I heard a voice in my head saying, 'you didn't come on the Camino for this'."* Compelled, she stood up to see who was around and ended up having a profound conversation with a stranger whom she continues to have a connection with to this day. Integrating this emerging confidence into her life back home has been part of Felicity's post-pilgrimage journey.

Tina discovered a newfound confidence in her body, her brain and her capabilities along the pilgrim trail, as well as the courage to use her voice assertively when she needed to. After a defining moment on the Camino, she says, *"I grew taller by the minute. I grew ten feet tall."* The next day she was speaking by phone to her sister in New Zealand who had had a dream the previous night that Tina, who is the shortest of her sisters, was taller than all of them.

When Tina returned home, she wanted to remember her pilgrimage lessons. She wrote in her journal, *"Help me to learn to recognise the courage I now possess and to use it wisely."* She was also aware of potential changes in the dynamics of her personal relationships as a result of her growth. *"My husband and son don't know this 'Tina', this 'ten foot Tina'. They only know 'small Tina' and the friendly Tina and the obliging Tina – they don't know the Tina that I've now met."*

Spiritual directors can be alert to these growth frontiers and provide the listening and questioning space to help homecoming pilgrims explore how God may be inviting them to live out these emergent aspects of their personalities in their vocations and relationships.

NEW UNDERSTANDINGS OF GOD

A pilgrimage journey may also lead to new understandings of God – sometimes paradigm shifting ones.

Felicity's pilgrimage journey was characterised by a deepening understanding of God's grace. She says, *"I think that it confirmed my faith in God's goodness and His presence and His personal love and care for me in a way that I hadn't experienced before, because I think – I'd never really ever been asked to put my life on the line in such a big way before."*

On Tina's pilgrimage she discovered an affirmation of her Maori spirituality as it relates to her understanding of the way God is present in nature. *"In Spain and in France I realised that*

there is a God of sea, there is a God of mountains – I met him, I met her. Trying to be a Maori on the Camino – I can!”

Linda described how in the decade prior to her Camino journey, a deepening contemplative spirituality had been slowly dismantling what she described as a Pentecostal black and white certainty in her faith construction. As she prepared for her journey, she was aware of a question in her heart: *“If I go to the very edge of all that I know, will God catch me?”* She says she walked into a profound knowing along the pilgrim path that *“if I go to the very edge of all that I hold secure and let go of it, He will catch me.”*

This new knowing also led to a letting go of old certainties. *“I know way less. It smashed all my God paradigms, of who he/she might be ... apart from this feeling that I’m going to get caught up. I’m going to be held – even in death.”*

Spiritual directors may have the opportunity to companion homecoming pilgrims through this sacred work of exploring their knowing and unknowing in relationship to Mystery. Directors can listen and look with pilgrims as they seek to live out of their expanding understanding of God in their ongoing spiritual journey and in relationship with others.

Linda’s relationship with Christian community was impacted by her pilgrimage experience. Her story offers an invitation for us to be aware that pilgrimage may be a catalyst for spiritual growth that takes people beyond traditional forms of institutional faith. She says, *“My spirituality changed significantly. I haven’t been able to commit to a church community. I would say that through doing the Camino I am now part of the world community. Before there was the Christian them and us – now, where I see love, I see Christ.”*

FURTHER PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS

Consider Doing the Camino Yourself

Several of the women I interviewed said they tend not to share their Camino experiences at a deep level with people who haven't done the pilgrimage themselves, because people don't really "get it". As spiritual directors, embarking on our own pilgrimage journey can be a gift, not only for ourselves, but also for people who we may companion in the future.

Review the Interview Questions in the Appendix

The research interview questions were well received and the interview conversations seemed to be mutually beneficial. Linda commented, *"I think it's important that you slow people down and say, 'So now that you're returning home, how does the Camino live on?'"* When I thanked Felicity for sharing the gift of her experiences with me, she replied, *"Actually, it's a gift to be able to talk about it as well. When I sit down and talk like this, I get so choked up about it because I suddenly realise again what an amazing thing it was for me."*

Read Books on Pilgrimage

It doesn't matter how many Camino de Santiago pilgrimage stories I read, I never tire of them. Thematic similarities aside, each person's experience is uniquely their own. Something of the spirit of the Camino de Santiago can be intuited and absorbed through books. The bibliography of this paper provides a helpful starting point for reading, but is by no means exhaustive.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS AS PILGRIM COMPANIONS

While we cannot physically walk the pilgrim road with our directees, we can be valuable companions for them in the bookend spaces of this significant experience. I believe spiritual directors can facilitate a deepening of the formational power of the ancient practice of

pilgrimage by providing a relational space for deep listening and wise questions that invite directees to prepare for, reflect on and integrate their pilgrimage experience into their everyday lives. The sacred space of the spiritual direction relationship is one of the places in which the pilgrimage experience can live on in the lives of pilgrims.

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Appendix One

Interview Schedule

Spiritual directors may find these questions helpful in companioning an intending or returning pilgrim in spiritual direction. While the scope of this paper focused specifically on pilgrims walking the Camino di Santiago, the questions can be adapted for other pilgrimage routes and experiences.

Please note, because Camino literally means 'way' in Spanish, it is gramatically incorrect to refer to the Camino as a proper noun. However in common speech pilgrims refer to "the Camino" frequently. Perhaps this refelcts a tendency some pilgrims have to endow the pilgirim path itself with a sense of personality and agency. The questions that follow adopt the vernacular usage of 'the Camino' for ease of conversation.

THE CALL

- How did you first hear about the Camino?
- What drew you to walk the Camino yourself?
- What was going on in your life at the time?
- Did you think of the walk as a holiday or a pilgrimage? What did that mean to you?
- What were your hopes for your Camino?
- Did you plan to go alone or with others? How did you decide that?
- Which Camino route did you decide to do and why?
- Did you have any sense of an invitation from God in your desire to walk the Camino?

PREPARATION

How did you prepare for your Camino experience?

physically – practically – spiritually

- Did you spend any time reflecting on what your hopes or fears were?
- Did you discuss your upcoming Camino experience with a pastor, spiritual director or trusted friend?
- If so, what was that like for you?
- What did you talk about? What was helpful for you?
- Was there anything you didn't want to tell them and, if so, what was that?
- How did this person respond to your pilgrimage conversation?
- In hindsight, is there anything they could have done or not done that would have been helpful for you in your inner journey?

WALKING THE WAY

- If you were to choose three different words to describe your Camino experience, what would they be?
- Could you tell me a bit more about each of those words and what they mean to you?
- How would you describe your experience:
Physically:
Being daily in nature:
Connections with others:
Connection with God:
- During your pilgrimage, what fears or challenges did you face?
- How did you respond to those?
- How would you describe the inner journey of your Camino?
- What happened within you along the way?
- How did you change as you walked?

RE-ENTRY

- What was your experience of your Camino ending like for you?
- What was re-entry to 'normal life' like?

REFLECT

- Did you spend any time reflecting on your Camino experience and what it meant to you? Can you describe that process?
- What was it like to talk about your experiences with friends and family?
- Did you discuss your experiences with a spiritual director, pastor or trusted friend?
- What was that like for you?
- In conversations with your spiritual director what was most helpful to you?
- In hindsight, was there anything more that your director could have done to help your inner journey?

When you reflect back on your Camino experience now:

- What stands out to you?
- Were there any learnings from your Camino experience that have stayed with you?
- How would you describe the inner journey of your Camino experience?
- How did this experience form you spiritually?
- Did you come to any new understandings or ways of being with God?
- With yourself? With others?
- How does your Camino experience 'live on' in you?