Lee Hoinacki

Walking With My Dead

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For further information please contact:
Silja Samerski Albrechtstr.19 D - 28203 Bremen
Tel: +49-(0)421-7947546 e-mail: piano@uni-bremen.de

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One of the principal benefits of going to a foreign country is that it opens you up to encounter strangeness; and the unfamiliar can wake you up, can even reveal something disturbingly new about yourself. When I arrived in Germany for the first time, I found much that struck me as unusual or odd. But one very common occurance surprised me: the sight of people taking a walk. The custom was especially evident on a Sunday afternoon in small towns or at the edges of cities. Further, I was unexpectedly startled by friends who suggested that we take a walk in order to discuss something; hard to imagine, they were serious! But after the rewarding experience, I came to esteem this novel addition to my life a singular gift.

It's difficult today to think back to that time, but using one's own limbs to move across the earth predates the emergence of humans; for me, it's nearly impossible. Like many or most Americans of my generation - before hiking, backpacking and jogging became fashionable - I seldom walked unless forced to do so, for example, to get around campus or town while in college. But a class in college first made me think about walking and its place in one's life. I could not help but reflect on this action as one associated with high civilization when I read Plato's Phaedrus. I was especially struck by the prayer offered by Socrates at the end of the dialogue, and have never been able to forget it:

> Phaedrus: But let us be going, now that it has become less aggressively hot.
> Socrates: Oughtn't we first to offer a prayer to the divinities here?
> Phaedrus: To be sure.
> Socrates: Dear Pan, and all ye other gods that dwell in this place, grant that I may become fair within, and that such outward things as I have may not war against the spirit within me. May I count him rich who is wise, and as for gold, may I possess so much of it as only a temperate man might bear and carry with him.
> Is there anything more we can ask for, Phaedrus? The prayer contents me.
> Phaedrus: Make it a prayer for me too, since friends have all things in common.
> Socrates: Let us be going.

What was the relationship between the thought of Socrates and the activity of walking?

Later, I learned that Aristotle walked while teaching at the Lyceum. From this practice, followers of the Stagirite were called Peripatetics, the Greek word meaning to discourse while walking up and down. But no teacher I ever knew or heard about ever suggested taking a walk while s/he lectured, commented on some text, or carried on a discussion. In the academic world, the closest approximation I've seen is the occasional practice of taking a college class outside to sit on the lawn. In the city, I've seen office workers come out to eat their lunch under a tree or in the sun, if such a place can be found, and the weather is suitable. But such limited movement has little in common with walking. Thinking or learning may be fostered by walking; I don't know; sitting in the sun appears to be most conducive to contemplation on the order and beauty of the universe.

Given this limited personal background, I was altogether astonished to discover myself on the Camino de Santiago, a backpack riding securely on my hips, walking across Spain to Compostela. And at age 65! How did this come about?

In early 1993, a friend offered me the chance to give some lectures in Spain at the University of Oviedo, on thinking about technology. As I prepared to leave the house in Bremen to catch a train, Ivan Illich said to me: "If you're going to Spain, you must visit Compostela." I had heard the word, and vaguely associated it with an ancient place of pilgrimage, but knew nothing more about it.

When I finished the talks and discussions in Oviedo, I realized I had two full days left before I had to return to Germany, and the train trip to Compostela was both possible and affordable.

It was dark when we reached the station in Galicia; I asked a local person for directions to the "old city," and started walking. Locating a cheap rooming house or pension in an attractive side street, I went to bed early, for I wanted to take full advantage of the next day, a Sunday.

While quiet and darkness still enveloped the city, I arose and walked the short distance over narrow stone-paved streets to the cathedral. The doors were just being opened, so I entered and explored the interior, alone in the cavernous emptiness of a temple without people. Since I am rather unlettered in the appreciation of church architecture, almost nothing caught my attention except the large statue of St. James the Greater - Santiago - dominating the high altar.

My governing idea of a place of pilgrimage was taken from photographs I had seen of Lourdes. I was puzzled, then, to see no evidence of the shrine being visited by the sick; there were no crutches or ofrendas - a thanksgiving image for an obtained cure or favor.

Leaving the church, I stepped out into the enormous Plaza del Obradoiro, and looked across at a magnificent facade of twenty-five arches across the front of the Palacio de Rajoy. Turning to my right, I saw another impressive monument, the splendor of the restored Hostal de los Reyes Católicos, originally begun by Ferdinand and Isabella when they finally conquered the last stronghold of Islam on the Peninsula, in 1492.

Wandering through the old city, which clustered around the cathedral, I again experienced what I had first come to know on a visit to Assisi: a beautifully restored "medieval" town. Again, also, I felt a certain uneasiness. Can one recover the dead through artistic reconstruction? What kind of reality was this?

I came back to the cathedral at the hour of the Sunday High Mass. Now the church was full, animated, but it seemed that most of the people were tourists. Perhaps I was seeing a modern incarnation of a pilgrim.

After the Mass, I found a short booklet in the back of the church that spoke of people walking to Compostela. The printed pages claimed that there was some connection to the pilgrims of past centuries; one could relive a dead experience. I wondered ...

Coming out into the sun-filled Plaza, I walked down the adjoining streets again, taking in and savoring the festive atmosphere created by the people, out for a Sunday stroll, the wandering musicians, the aromatic coffee shops whose small tables and chairs covered the sidewalks, and the picturesque restaurants, inviting me to sample the cuisine of Galicia. Still, a vague disquiet: I could not shake off the feeling that I was in other tourist destinations I have known.

Unable to form any coherent thought at all about this spot as the crowning consummation of pilgrim dreams for hundreds of years, I walked back to the cathedral. On one side, I found a Blessed Sacrament chapel with glass doors to shut out the noise of the nave; occasionally, people came in and out. As in other such chapels I had visited over many years, I was stirred by the evident piety of the worshipers. They entered and silently knelt or sat, all their attention focused on the Host in the monstrance, which was surrounded by many burning candles and colorful flowers. Each person was "lost" in his or her world of mysterious communion with the Lord present in the Eucharist on the altar. Each time I enter such a sanctuary, my thought and desire immediately fix on these people: How can I enter the region of their faith?

I had come into the room with a question: Why do people, for hundreds of years, continue to visit this place, this shrine? I quietly sat there, perhaps for an hour or two, first thinking about my question, then attempting to empty my mind completely. I knew this was necessary, for I could not learn about the inexpressable if I remained a prisoner of my own thoughts.

I was not disappointed. At one moment, a clear notion came to me: If you want to know why people come here, you must come.

I understood perfectly: I had to retrace the path, go through the experience, of thousands, maybe millions, of pilgrims over hundreds of years.

I picked up my bag at the pension, walked to the station, boarded the train, and dreamed about pilgrims in the Middle Ages while returning to Germany. But I had no idea where one started, whether there was a fixed route, how one ate and slept while getting there, or the time it would take, but I knew I was going to walk to Compostela.

Back in Germany, the details were rapidly revealed. Illich gave me a pair of his old walking shoes which, amazingly, seemed to fit. A student loaned me a backpack and showed me how to adjust and shoulder it. I learned that a traditional place to start was on the French side of the Pyrenees in a town called St. Jean Pied de Port and, following the camino francés, one could hope to get to Compostela in about a month.

I put some books in the backpack to give it weight, and set out early each morning to practice walking for a couple of hours. After five or six days I decided I was ready, got on a train, and traveled to St. Jean Pied de Port.

I recalled that I was already familiar with two other places of pilgrimage, la Villa in Mexico City, the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Czestochowa, the town in Poland with the chapel of the Black Virgin. In each of those places, an image is all-important; people come to kneel before it in silence; one can hope to enter the world an icon opens and reveals.

I had read nothing about Compostela, except for the booklet I found in the back of the cathedral. I had no idea of what I was looking for, or of what I hoped to achieve, by walking about a thousand kilometers across Spain. But, as with the initial idea of walking, two others had somehow formed in me: I would read nothing in the time it took to reach Compostela, and I would walk with no one, only alone. Both practices, I learned later, are unusual, hardly heard of. After I returned to Germany from Spain, I read that there is a huge literature on this specific pilgrimage, and that almost all people walk in a group or with a friend.

Crossing the Pyrenees on the very first day of my adventure, I came to see and accept three necessary truths: Solitude and silence are required; reflection, not reading, should be observed; and, I needed to reach the dead of my tradition, to experience them, and to embrace them tightly.

How did I come to acknowledge these practices as necessry, and as true? I don't know; I felt it with an absolute certitude. I suppose the action itself of putting one foot in front of the other somehow revealed these truths to me. Perhaps I discovered a new route to knowledge; walking in this way, in this spirit, is richly revelatory; there is a connection between a certain kind of walking and a corresponding thought.

Reflecting on my thirty-two days of walking in silent solitude, I have come to understand something: I cannot live without this knowledge, that the crucial question today ... for philosophy, religion, for thought itself, is: Who are my dead, and how do I touch them?

If I am to be something other than a straw blown about by the wind, I must find a tradition and insert myself in it. This is the primary task of each person who wants to live a human life, who wants to be human. Instinct is not enough; the passions can mislead. Because I think and desire, I need to learn how to live and, ultimately, there is only one way: to enter my tradition, to follow in the footsteps of my ancestors.

But the truth of a tradition is known most certainly through its dead, through those who have most fully tested and lived it. They are alive; the history of thought or ideas is not. They can be known intimately; they will reveal themselves to you - this I learned out there in the solitude of a sacred space, the spaces where I set my feet, the space established and sanctified by my dead.

Every person must ask this question about his or her dead. For each, the answer will be different, for many traditions have contributed to where people stand today. Traditions are not abstract, they are flesh and blood, they are made up of those who have "kept the faith," those who have lived honorably, those who have sought to supersede self, who reached out in love to the

other. Every tradition on earth is peopled by such saints or witnesses. One need only look for them and, finding them, hold them tightly.

Not everyone will be able or inclined to walk a thousand kilometers across Spain. But each person must find his or her place in the world, in the cosmos, and in the Beyond. It is my own firm belief that one's place is primarily in Creation; everyone is incarnate, and each must explore the nature of her or his particular incarnation, find the essence of creaturely existence: Am I my own raison d'être, or part of some larger reality? The dead know.

Hoinacki
State College
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