

The Path Taken

**A Father and Son Journey to
Santiago de Compostella
along the Camino Frances**

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Carole, Simon, and Mateo, thank you for being my lifeline. You are the anchor to my world. Our journeys continue!

CHAPTER 1

CAPE FINISTERRE

Finisterre translated from the Spanish means “end of the earth” (*fin* means “end,” *la Tierra* means “the Earth”). Cape Finisterre on the northwest coast of Spain was thought to be the end of the earth for thousands of years before we figured out how to build sailing ships and learned that the earth was round. It is the farthest point west a person can travel on the European continent. I thought it would be the end of my *Camino*. My second son Simon and I had just completed the 940-kilometer walk from St. Jean Pied-de-Port in southwest France to Santiago de Compostela, then to Cape Finisterre.

The end of the earth is well-known and significant to Christians for many reasons. James, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, preached the gospels in this area 2,000 years ago. During his last visitation, Jesus commanded his apostles to go to the ends of the earth to tell everyone about the miracles they witnessed and the truths they heard. James followed this command. He traveled to this area to carry out the will of Jesus. The apostles were not overly successful with their attempts to convert Romans, Basques, and pagans to Christianity 2,000 years ago. But it turns out that James was one of the most successful given that, over the past 1,100 years, so many people from all corners of the world have made the pilgrimage to view his relics.

Close your eyes and imagine no electricity, no smartphones, no lights, no plastic, and no cars. Imagine a time when the only source of heat was fire; imagine a place with only handwoven fabrics for clothing and animal skins for warmth. It was the beginning of the Common Era. People in this traditional setting walked on uneven, unpaved trails, mostly barefoot but sometimes wearing rough, hand-hewn sandals made of leather and wood. Some used donkeys to lighten their loads. Only the wealthy rode horses.

Europe has been inhabited for tens of thousands of years. Archeological discoveries provide evidence of people occupying this region of Spain over 350,000 years ago. One village I encountered along the way was Atapuerca in the province of Burgos. It is set in rolling hills with narrow draws going off to the west. In the draws are caves that contain artifacts of past inhabitants.

I found recorded evidence of someone walking the path as early as 866 AD. Some speculate that the Camino de Santiago was used at least 5,000 years earlier as a trade route. Something attracts people from all over the world to walk the trail. Kings, queens, princesses, princes, warriors, maidens, paupers, peasants, and politicians have made the pilgrimage. Walking the Camino de Santiago changes you. It gives you a gift of awareness that is hard to describe. It helps one find truth and spirit in life. One interesting story tells of how our journey out of Africa millions of years ago followed this path. We have been here before. It gave me a sense of déjà vu.

I met many colorful people along the journey, from all corners of the world. Typically, the travelers or pilgrims are easy acquaintances. You see someone and start a conversation. Your paths may cross again several times. Moving along the Camino, you travel to other places and meet other people. Most travelers are easy to talk with. Most discussions are open and frank. People talk about food, love, politics, religion, blisters, children, and the weather.

This story isn't about any one particular traveler. It's bigger than that. It's about putting one foot down in front of the other and walking through a mysterious and spiritual journey. It's about the people I met and the stories I heard. It's about the experiences on the Camino de Santiago. It's about how a collage of humanity injected hope into my world and helped me understand my spirit. It's about a 56-year-old Boomer embarking on an adventure of exploration, hoping to find more truth in himself and those around him.

In 2014, I was at a holiday party talking with a group of friends. Somehow the subject of the Camino de Santiago came up. Just about every person had heard about it. At some point

during our conversations, a spark lit up inside of me. I spoke up: “I should do it. I should walk the Camino. Why not?” This was the decision point that ignited my passion for pursuing the pilgrimage, a journey that would ultimately change my view of the world and everyone around me. Two years later, I walked the Camino de Santiago with Simon, my 15-year-old son.

Another event that roused my interest in trekking the Camino was a movie I saw in 2010 called “The Way.” It starred Martin Sheen and his son Emilio Estevez, who wrote and directed it. The movie was loosely based on a few vignettes from the book *Off the Road* by Jack Hitt and featured the adventures, mishaps, starts, stops, paths, roads, trails, hostels or shelters (known as *albergues*), strange people, and comic relief he experienced along his Camino. That is how one references the Camino: your Camino, my Camino, his Camino, her Camino, their Camino.

“The Way” is the story of a father’s Camino. The narrator, Tom, is an ophthalmologist living in Ventura, California. His estranged 37-year-old son Daniel died on the first day of his own Camino, in the high reaches of the Pyrenees Mountains, when he was caught in a sudden change of weather. Tom decides to walk the Camino himself after retrieving Daniel’s ashes, hoping to better understand himself and his son.

Tom has a philosophical breakthrough when he remembers driving his son to the airport and lecturing him about life’s responsibilities. Tom told Daniel that he made choices. He chose his life and decided on his duties. Daniel disputed Tom’s statement, saying that one cannot choose a life; one can only live a life. Daniel represents a free spirit and the passion to explore. The father, Tom, represents the grind of life in which we often trap ourselves. At the end of his Camino, while holding the ashes of his son, Tom finally realizes the truth of Daniel’s words.

I studied the Camino extensively for two years before walking it. I read everything I could: books, essays, blogs, and websites. I was amazed at the wealth of historical accounts available. The end of the Camino for most pilgrims is Santiago de Compostela, a labyrinth of ancient terracotta-roofed stone buildings. The road systems in the old parts of the city were designed and built by Romans. Cobblestone lasts a long time when it’s done right, and the

Romans built infrastructure that survived. Some of the churches date back 900 years; their relics document the spread of Christianity throughout Europe and beyond. The cities, towns, and villages grew and evolved with pilgrims providing a consistent economic flow to the area.

The ancient buildings and churches house vast caverns of artifacts, art, and written accounts of miracles along the Camino. The real teachings of St. James are buried in rich antique archives and stories of people long past. My hope is that this story will find its way into those archives. Perhaps a thousand years from now someone will pick this dusty story off a shelf and try to decipher its contents.

The Camino de Santiago is a personal journey. It is physically challenging, mentally melting, and spiritually refreshing. Simon and I started from our home in Oregon on June 13, 2016, and entered Santiago de Compostela on July 21. We reached many significant milestones together: monuments, markers, and villages. But we did not always walk together. As a matter of fact, we separated after the second day high in the Pyrenees Mountains. We had agreed to meet in Zubiri, a small village in Spain. But I was in too much of a hurry and missed the right-hand turn into the village. I was five kilometers past the turn before I realized I had hiked too far. When I finally contacted Simon, I learned he had met with several older pilgrims on the trail: Jens from Germany, Maggie from Canada, Huy from Houston, and Clinton from southern California. It was a good group of young people whom I grew to respect and trust once I got to know them. They took Simon under their wing that evening, and they all became fast friends. They called themselves the “Shade Brigade” because shade, on some parts of the Camino in July, can be difficult to find.

Simon, my older son, is a good -natured young man. That year he was on the cusp of manhood. Although I invited my wife, Carole, and both of my sons to come with me, he was the only one who showed any interest. I am not sure if it was because he was genuinely interested in coming on the adventure or if he felt that someone needed to watch over Dad. Whatever the reason, I was grateful he came. He took care of me in ways that will resonate for the rest of my

life. He gave me memories for this book. I thought it was really cool that he met people from all over the world, and I'm sure the experience will resonate with him as he grows older. He gives me hope that our family's adventurous spirit will survive. I hope the memory will nurture his spiritual heart.