

Godward on Pilgrimage



On the Camino (the pilgrimage to the shrine of St James in Santiago de Compostela in Spain), it is customary to carry a special “passport.” This identification establishes that you are a pilgrim, authorizes you to stay in hostels and—if stamped daily—qualifies you to receive a much-coveted certificate from the Cathedral of Santiago at the end of the journey. In acquiring a passport, pilgrims designate their motives as either “religious,” “spiritual” or “other.”

Pilgrims on the journey for prayer or penance fall under “religious.” I confidently claimed that category. “Spiritual” is more vague, less than traditional but more than secular. Many in the “spiritual” crowd told me they were “spiritual but not religious.” As for “other,” that catch-all included pilgrims who just wanted to hike, were looking for an economical vacation, or were at loose ends in life....

The “spiritual” and “other” folks intrigued and engaged me the most, partly because they raised unexpected questions, but mostly because I heard God through them. They were the ones who most reliably pointed me Godward on my pilgrimage....

It may seem perplexing that even those who profess no belief in God mystically read spiritual forces into a simple dirt path. Yet these are vital signs of a religious longing that persists in a thoroughly modern culture....

An anonymous pilgrim who walked the Camino before me wrote: “I did not set out on a spiritual or religious journey—but it ended being that way—accident? I don’t know.... Maybe that is just the Camino de Santiago at work.”...

The philosopher Albert Borgmann speaks of “focal realities”—a thing, place or practice that is shaped by three qualities. It has a “commanding presence” that requires effort and discipline, skills and habits. It makes wide-ranging connections with other people and with history, nature and God. Third, it

emanates a “centering” or “orienting power” that helps us recognize our most important priorities.

The Camino is in every sense focal. First, it is engaged only by walking hundreds of miles, taxing muscles and moving at an unaccustomed pace. Second, it connects the pilgrim with other pilgrims past and present; with Spain and its Catholicism; with the people who offer hospitality along the way; and, of course, with the geography of mountains, trees and forests. Finally, the Camino is a place where priorities are often reoriented....

Borgmann contends that when existence seems shallow, focal realities can “center and illuminate our lives.” They move, teach, inspire and reassure. “Focal reality gathers and illuminates our world,” he writes. A life with focal realities at its center poses a telling contrast to the aspects of our lives today that “lead to a disconnected, disembodied and disoriented sort of life.”

We know something is missing. The theologian Eugene Peterson cautions that “the wonder has leaked out” of our lives. We are aware of a sense of hurry in our culture; and we complain of being too busy, not having enough time for the things we value most....

The longing for “something more,” a sense that there must be a better way, propels individuals on spiritual quests.... So the Camino became a context for pondering priorities. It was no surprise to learn of impressive changes that fellow pilgrims made after this journey.

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Arthur Paul Boers - UCANews