

All Roads Lead Home
Life, Love, and Forgiveness on the Camino de Santiago
-or-
Fear and Self-Loathing on the Camino de Santiago

DAY 1- FEAR AND SELF-LOATHING ON THE CAMINO

Whoever thought my pilgrimage would begin with me jerking off into a plastic cup? Those words shot through my head as I was standing at the edge of uncertainty and a 482-mile walk across Spain on a centuries-old path called the Camino de Santiago.

What brought me here? I guess the same things that brought me to my knees back home in Southern California- The dissolution of a 23 year marriage that taught me how to hate, the teetering of my first real relationship after being separated that taught me how to love again, and a gnawing feeling in my gut that after more than half a century on this earth I was still lost, and that I'd probably die with no better of an idea as to why I'm here than I had when I first stumbled into my mom's arms across a green carpeted floor in a suburb of Los Angeles more than five decades ago.

I was hoping that somehow taking a million steps down a path across Northern Spain in the middle of a blistering hot summer to find some Saint buried at a church in a city called Santiago de Compostella would help me lose sight of some of the things I needed to rid myself of. I would leave those things behind with each boot print I made in the dirt and hopefully would see the path that lies in front of me more clearly, and figure out how to walk it with the time I have left before I shuffle off this mortal coil.

So when I hit rock bottom, walking the Camino barged into my psyche like a bull running through the streets of Pamplona looking to gore a drunken tourist, and it wouldn't let go. I'd never even been to Europe, but with everything I knew and loved tumbling down around me, I didn't have to think twice.

"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, and enterprise of great pitch and moment with this regard their currents turn awry and lose the name of action." -Hamlet

By now you probably want to know about the jerking off part. Or maybe not. Well, a little over 14 years ago, I was at the Center for Reproductive Health, cup in hand and a passel of porn spread out in front of me on that thin white paper that covers every exam bench in every doctor's examination room that anyone has ever been in.

The room was nice and tidy and smelled like the overly floral perfume that all grandmothers wear, which to me was at least better than the smell of piss and 409 that permeated every corner of the nursing homes I used to frequent when I had a job delivering drugs to dying people, just out of college.

The nurse politely alluded to the cupboard where they kept the porn, just in case I was in need of assistance. Strangely enough, the sterile white walls and pastel pictures awash with flaccid colors didn't give me a hard on so I dug into the stack of magazines. Fortunately, none of the pages were sticky.

It was funny to see these examples of the pinnacle of serious journalism in America with names like Club, Jiggs, and Swank. I remember taking furtive glances at the same magazines on the racks at the liquor store a few blocks from home in the suburbs of Los Angeles where I grew up when I would accompany my dad to buy a newspaper and bottle of Thunderbird.

Besides the magazines splayed out before me like the legs of a Hustler model, I imagined the rest of these periodicals relegated to landfills or stacked in dusty, dark corners of aging fathers' garages across America. For the current generation, those magazines with layouts of women with names like Michelle Angelo, and Moan A. Lisa have been laid to rest with the advent of internet porn, yet another sad, generational passing that our children will never get to experience.

A little about me- I've never been one of those men who necessarily wanted kids. You know the guys. The ones who were destined to get married, have 2.4 kids and live out their lives with a steady job and weekends full of soccer games, manning the grill and watching football on TV. I know I should have been more in touch with my inner Neanderthal, hard-wired to create as many spitting images of myself as I could, but I was never that guy.

So it caught me off guard when at age 45, Janice (my wife of 10 years at the time) told me she'd like to have a child. We'd never really discussed it. We were both in our first marriage and had gotten together when we were older than most. When we met, we were both focused on work, and as I settled into running a company my job took me out of town a lot.

On reflection, a big part of why Janice' thoughts turned to motherhood may have been due to her career. The industry she had toiled in successfully for twenty years as a freelancer was notoriously ageist, and she wasn't getting any younger. She hadn't been getting much work, and it seemed to me that perhaps her energies needed to be focused elsewhere. And she probably felt some maternal tug, a call to nurture that she had chosen to ignore.

I was ambivalent- I mean we were both 45. After thinking about it (or maybe Janice just wore me down- an easy task for her those days) I decided that despite some misgivings, I would do what I could for the woman I loved. I also reasoned that having a child might teach me a few things I needed to learn about life, maybe help me grow up some. After we made the decision and nothing happened, Janice started taking some Chinese herbs, and after that didn't work, she started in with fertility drugs, and we had the obligatory sex at the appointed time.

Time went by, and we kept trying. It all seemed so, uhh...scientific and sterile, except for the jerking off part. I ignored the fact that I was more of a "let nature follow its course" kind of guy and after several unsuccessful attempts we got an inkling of hope- an early test indicated a positive result. After a month, a subsequent evaluation revealed a healthy baby girl. Seven months later Hannah was born.

She's 14 now, and I think I've been a pretty good father. I taught her a few things, was integral in rearing her, and we had a fun, loving relationship, at least until Janice and I separated, and Hannah came to hate me. And I can't pinpoint the moment when her feelings toward me changed and why they did, but I do know that her growing hatred of me was one of the many emotional components that were weighing me down so much that I was shying away from life, unable to move. It was one thing among many that were tearing my heart apart and resulted in the inexplicable decision to head to Spain and walk the Camino.

So, there I was, standing in St. Jean Pied de Port (literally "Saint John at the Foot of the Pass") France looking out at the Camino de Santiago and my future, literally and figuratively. Lao Tzu said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Yeah, well...I'll bet his first steps didn't take him 25 kilometers over the Pyrenees in the rain with a 30-pound pack on his back suffering from a serious hangover due to a miscalculated "cultural experience" the night before in Madrid.

Unfortunately, that momentary lapse of good judgment in Madrid had compromised my level-headedness and, more importantly, my sense of direction when I set out to take a train from my hotel to the central station where I could board my bus to St Jean Pied de Port. Not that my judgment had been stellar as of late. In fact, due to the shit bag of

chaos my life had become during the previous year, my decision making was pretty much on the level of the dude who decided there should be 16 lifeboats on the Titanic.

After agonizing over the signs at the train station, I ended up heading in the wrong direction. Considering the state I was in, I guessed I was probably going to end up at the gates of Hell, or at the very least a Justin Bieber concert. And I figured I deserved it. Well, at least according to the hung-over voice in the back of my head who in his best moods thinks I'm a worthless dung heap. Best I can remember he went on to ridicule me and question how in the hell I was going to be able to hoof it across an entire country when I couldn't even navigate the Madrid train station.

Finally, after I turned myself around with the help of an older gentleman on the train who spoke English, I made it to the central bus terminal only to find that the last bus to Pamplona wouldn't make the connection to St. Jean, my jumping off point. I got out of line and kicked myself for the hangover, not planning, and for the gnawing feeling that this whole misadventure may have been a colossal mistake.

While I was wallowing in self-pity followed by a chaser of self-loathing, I spied a window for another bus company and discovered that they too had tickets to Pamplona, and in fact, their bus would get me there in time to make the connection to St. Jean. There's a saying that the Camino provides. Yeah, well, that kind of magic didn't exist in my fucked-up world at the time, but I took the ticket anyway and ran to catch my bus.

When I got to Pamplona, I found my way to the bus for St. Jean. At least where I thought it was supposed to leave from- my hangover infused insecurity was still questioning every thought and move I was making. Fortunately, two pilgrims were sitting on a bench (their backpacks tipped me off), so I approached them in the spirit of pilgrimic kinship.

Kento was a short Japanese guy, probably mid- 30's, with a perpetual grin on his face. He was traveling, at least for the moment, with Asia, a mid-30's woman he had met in Madrid. Kento didn't speak much English, but he was animated, continually bouncing up off the bench to make a point, although I was never sure what the point was. You couldn't help but like him.

Although I couldn't understand much of what Kento said, Asia was a different story. She was a beautiful brunette from Poland who spoke three languages fluently, English being one of them. We all boarded the bus which was only half full, and away we rolled to St. Jean. Asia and I talked for a while, but for some reason, she seemed a little guarded. Maybe it was because she was talking to a half-crazed emotionally bankrupt American with the scent of two dollar a bottle Rioja oozing out of his pores.

She told me she was staying with an acquaintance in St Jean for two days so that she wouldn't be setting out on her pilgrimage the next morning like the rest of us, so I reasoned I wouldn't be seeing her again. After about an hour and a half on a winding road through the Pyrenees, the bus pulled up to St Jean in a drizzle. Asia and I hugged (she had told me she was a big hugger) and said our goodbyes.

Kento had volunteered to see if there was a room at his Auberge (the name used for many of the inns and hostels along the Camino catering to pilgrims), so I followed him past the center of town and up a picture perfect, winding, cobblestoned street that crossed a river. It was almost too perfect.

We got to Kento's Auberge only to discover it full. He offered to help me further (I think) but I shook my head and offered him my hand, muttering the pilgrims greeting of "Buen Camino." It was time for me to begin my pilgrimage, and to experience one of the primary reasons I had traveled halfway around the world- to be alone with the pathetic creature that had crawled out of the primordial ooze of my soul over the last few years.

The man whose self-esteem had been whittled down to a toothpick by an emotionally abusive wife. The man whose guts had been eviscerated by a beautiful Swedish ex-model and mother of 4 who saved him and made him feel worthwhile, at least until she almost died and then told him she no longer had feelings for him. The man who secretly hoped he might find a cliff somewhere along The Camino that would make a fall seem like an accident.

Two months before setting foot on the Camino, I was sitting with Amanda on a bench by Starbucks. It was the first time I'd seen her since losing her from my sight as she left the Southwest terminal at LAX a few weeks prior and just faded out of my life. I had gotten her a position on a project I had been hired to work on, and we were traveling back from Sacramento, where the job had wrapped up.

It was sort of like a traveling circus, we were working on the same project, but different teams and I saw her for a little while most days. She had told me on my birthday, at the beginning of the trip, that she had been drifting away; that her feelings for me weren't the same.

I was devastated. This beautiful creature had given me life. I had been drowning in a sea of self-loathing and contempt for the world that had dealt me this losing hand. But at the time, she didn't care. She had reached into my heart and touched my soul. She kissed me, she hugged me, she made love to me, and she brought me into her life, for better or for worse.

I say for better or worse not to be ironic, but because, as we soon found out, we both still had shit to deal with. We were both in the throes of our divorces and reeling from abusive spouses and haunted pasts. I had an estranged daughter, and she had four kids who were continually acting out, vying for her attention. Looking back, neither of us made the best decisions at the time, but I think we both simply needed one thing: to have someone else love us, so we could start learning to love ourselves again.

The flight from Sacramento had been silent. We sat next to each other but didn't have much to say. We had made it to the airport early, and I found myself vacillating between part of my old self- at least the funny, smart, adorable part of me; and a part that was now vacant, that had nothing to say. I didn't know what to do with the part of me that had grown to love Amanda over the past nine months. The part of me that shared my ongoing divorce with her, and hers with me. The part that wanted to feel her head resting on my shoulder, wanted to press my lips to hers and breathe life into her, and feel her breathe life into me. We weren't sharing those things anymore.

When we got off the plane, we walked to baggage claim in silence. I just felt numb. I didn't know what the hell I was going to do to fill those lonely moments, hours, and days. Even though she had been drifting away for awhile, I was still hoping for...what? I don't know. I just knew that I would never again find the love, tenderness, and connection that I had with this beautiful soul who picked me up when I was knocked to the ground by the slings and arrows of a 23-year marriage that in the last few years had become emotionally abusive.

After I left Kento, I walked down the cobble-stoned street under a steady drizzle alone, content to wallow in my over-indulgence-laced bath of self-pity. Not sure where to turn, I decided to walk back down the street and stumbled upon a room that was abuzz with activity. It wasn't an auberge, but it was a place one could obtain their "pilgrims' passport"- sort of like a real passport, with pages to get stamped in towns along the way. I had ordered one online, but it occurred to me that I had never received it.

After being issued my passport, I asked the woman who had helped me about a place to stay, and she directed me to one of the newest auberges in St Jean, just down the street. When I got there, I was glad to see they had beds. Due to the constant drizzle, I had gotten soaked and I pictured myself having to sleep outside and spending the first few days walking while coughing up phlegm and blowing snot onto the Camino. Not the best behavior for a pilgrim on some sort of spiritual quest I surmised.

The proprietor, Maria Estelle, welcomed me out of the rain and into the ante-room of her auberge, an ancient stone structure that was probably older than a Commodore-64, or even my 7th-grade homeroom teacher Mrs. Beyenburg. At the time she seemed older than dirt and could only talk about her Shih Tzus' and how she was allergic to everything including grass, sunlight, and most severely, 7th graders.

She was the one teacher that the 6th-grade rumor mill had demonized, and the possibility of being under her iron fist had gotten me in the habit of praying every summer night, not to be assigned to her class. It wouldn't be the last time in my life that my prayers wouldn't be answered.

Inside, the auberge was inviting, graced with a comfortable sitting area and some soft couches. Maria Estelle gave me and a few others a tour, directing us upstairs and showing us the different sleeping options. I opted to pay an extra euro and sleep in a smaller room with only four beds.

I'm not sure why, maybe I felt I needed a slow immersion into the pilgrim life instead of being woken up to the sound of snoring and farting as a hundred other pilgrims in bunk beds crammed into one room tried to sleep and ignore the fact that...well...they were one of a hundred pilgrims crammed into a room of snoring, farting pilgrims.

As I was settling in two other pilgrims, both Korean, joined me in the room. Hyun and Park hadn't known each other before meeting in Paris and taking the train to St. Jean together. They spoke slightly more English than I speak Korean which is none. Hyun immediately asked if I wanted to get a bite (he did most of the talking, as it were) and I agreed. I thought to myself and hoped they weren't glomming on to me because I was American and would be able to translate from their rudimentary English to some quasi-French/Spanish -at least enough to order dinner anyway.

We walked into town and got a bite to eat, the cafes were abuzz with activity- fellow pilgrims excited about their impending journey. The dinner conversation was rudimentary to say the least. I wolfed down some Spaghetti Bolognese and a glass of wine, and returned to the Auberge. The proprietress offered me a French beer, and we talked a little about St Jean and the Camino as her husband watched some sort of Italian reality show. After she joined him, I wrote in her guest book- "Thanks for opening up your place and your heart to me."

No easy feat for man whose heart had a fissure the size of the San Andreas Fault running through it. But the next day would prove that a few blisters, constant drizzle, and 20 kilometers of road that seemed like it went straight up (it got me thinking that somebody really screwed up on the directions to hell) would at least help me forget the sadness and pain that had sent me there in the first place.

*And we'll walk down the avenue again
And we'll sing all the songs from way back when
And we'll walk down the avenue again when the healing has begun
And we'll walk down the avenue in style
And we'll walk down the avenue and we'll smile
And we'll say baby ain't it all worthwhile when the healing has begun
I want you to put on your pretty summer dress
You can wear your Easter bonnet and all the rest
And I wanna make love to you yes, yes, yes when the healing has begun...
-Van Morrison*

DAY 2- GORILLAS, JOHN VARVATOS, AND THE FABRIC OF LIFE

The alarm on my phone went off around 6, and I groggily stumbled out of bed like a drunken wildebeest and somehow wrested the phone from the charging station that was between Park and Hyun's beds. I returned to lie down and collect my thoughts and the one thing kept creeping into my sleep-deprived brain was the absolute silence of our quaint little room at this old stone inn nestled amongst trees and mountains.

My reverie was interrupted by a memory from the previous night's fitful sleep- my phones cheery whistle ripping through that beautiful and profound silence throughout the night, due to me forgetting to turn the ringer off, and not wanting to get up and further disturb my fellow pilgrims as they tried to sleep. Each time it whistled I figured it would be the last time, so I let it go.

After 17 whistles spaced out over a few hours, I had finally fallen into a fitful sleep with the help of a few anti-anxiety pills I had gotten from my doctor. Apparently, a few friends who weren't familiar with the time difference between Spain and the U.S. (not to mention my momentary lapse of cell phone etiquette) had chosen these opportune few hours to text me suggestions for places to stay and eat in Spain. I lay there for a few minutes and collected myself as everyone stirred, groggy from their interrupted slumber, ready to wring the neck of anyone who dared purse their lips and let out a whistle.

Getting ready seemed to take forever, but as I subsequently found out, preparing the night before to hit the road quickly and quietly is something you learn after a few nights of getting pissed off at yourself for not being organized and thoughtful of the other pilgrims who might still be sleeping and aren't ready to leave as early as you are. But at this point in my journey, it made perfect sense. The shit bag of chaos that had been my life reared its ugly head and proceeded with the reckless whim and abandon I had gotten used to over the previous year or two.



I finally finished packing and headed downstairs to the front door, saying my goodbyes to Maria Estelle who hugged and kissed me on both cheeks. Park and Hyun were in the lobby by this time, so we headed off together down the perfect dewy streets of St. Jean in a steady sprinkle, almost rain. We walked the cobblestone streets through the town one last time and in just a few minutes were on a steep, paved road heading into the Pyrenees. We were in Basque country, which straddles the border between northeastern Spain and Southwestern France.

The Basque have always been a curious breed since until recently no one was sure where the hell they came from. The natural assumption would be that they were a blend of northwestern Spanish and southwestern French folks, sort of like a Rhone blend with some Garnacha and Tempranillo thrown in. But the thing is, they have unique customs and a language that's unrelated to any other culture, so I naturally assumed they were aliens, or possibly sired by Sasquatch. Recent studies though suggest they're descendants of early farmers who mixed with local hunters before becoming isolated for millennia.

Speaking of isolation, it's one of the reasons I traveled to Spain. Since I had blown off all my friends to be with Amanda as much as possible (she was as needy as I) and my wife and daughter wanted nothing to do with me, I was pretty much alone after Amanda's sudden decampment. As I mentioned earlier, I didn't know what to do with the empty minutes, hours, and days that were now parading before me like an old blind dog named "Lucky" trying to find his way home. If it wasn't enough to try and heal from my wife's emotional abuse and get my daughter not to hate me, I now had to try and mend my broken heart.

“At the start of therapy, Mr. West presented with acute distress and anxiety due to marital discord. His wife had labeled him the problem and “sent” him to therapy. The treatment is supportive psychotherapy with a focus on issues of self-esteem building, trauma recovery, codependency, and adjustment to ongoing, major life changes. In the couple relationship, the wife has been berating, controlling, and humiliating Mr. West for years. Though Mr. West has never used the word “abusive,” I maintain that his wife was emotionally abusive...”

February 15, 2015. Psychological assessment

After returning from the Camino I wrote in my journal “Some people seem to think walking across Spain is a big deal. I don’t. It was just something I had to do. I guess when you don’t think too much of yourself, you reason that if you can do it, anyone can.”

I didn’t realize it at the time, but I was writing about worthiness. And I don’t know what it is, but it seems modern man, specifically in America, has been taught to feel he/she is unworthy, never good enough. Maybe it’s due to our hyper-competitive society, or our increasing isolation and lack of connectedness as individuals. Everything seems to be more fractured, fragmented, and fucked up then ever.

So what if I started a company and ran it for 15 years. So what if I contributed to a successful marriage and to raising a beautiful daughter until the marriage became abusive and my daughter became estranged? Looking back at my life, for the most part I’ve always I tended to think that no matter what I did, it amounted to pretty much nothing.

In my case, a combination of things from my past contributed to my feelings of unworthiness. Therapy, reflection, and meditation have given me a few insights into my unworthiness. The best I can figure is that my self-loathing was a result of zits, shyness and a propensity to live in my head during my formative teenage years, wonderful parents who provided everything I needed but not much emotional support or positive reinforcement, and a marriage that, in the end, became emotionally derisive.

According to Deepak Chopra, after a child is born, it continually seeks to understand the world. Once conditioning starts, the mind begins to build “a separate self”. And that separate self is naturally disconnected. And that disconnected self begins to live in fear, due to fear based conditioning.

This is what begins to generate feelings of shame and unworthiness. This conditioning is provided first by our parents, then our siblings, our friends, and acquaintances, and finally by society.

It seems to me, as we get older our society/culture refine those fears and feelings of unworthiness by all the bad news that gets crammed down our throats and they’ve become very adept at providing it to us 24/7. Maybe it’s just another form of control by a somewhat cynical society.

The church used to be provide that control, at least when god was still a bullying dictator full of fire and brimstone. But Jesus kind of fucked that up. Jesus preached love. And there is no fear in love. If a society doesn’t have a higher power providing fear and unworthiness (which begets control) then it needs something else. This all sounds a little conspiratorial- maybe those who run the show are simply giving us what we want, like iPhones and reality shows.

When the Dalai Lama was asked about the concept of self-hatred, he expressed confusion and asked his translators to explain. After listening he said that while he thought he had a very good understanding of the nature of the mind, he felt ignorant on the topic of self-hatred.

One can conclude, based on Deepak Chopra’s statement, that feelings of unworthiness are not a part of the Dalai Lama’s cultural conditioning. The Dalai Lama went on to say the self-loathing we experience here in the west is a **conditioned response**. Sound familiar?

We all go through similar experiences in life, but we're all affected differently by those experiences due to the infinite and nuanced nature of our individual souls. I got tired of using my experiences as an excuse. Maybe the whole point of life is to break free from our conditional lives and learn from the things that provide us with negative emotional responses to events in our lives.

If I didn't think about and learn from the events in my life, I'd still be held hostage by them, a victim of my past, not able to move forward and take responsibility for my actions. We learn to walk by falling down. I guess the key is to teach our souls to get up and dust themselves off, and not be crippled by our broken hearts.

As I continued to lumber uphill through the steep foothills of the Pyrenees surrounded by green fields that rolled down to the valley floor, I realized I was getting wet. Well, my clothes were just damp enough to bother me. You know the feeling- you just don't want the dank fabric to touch your skin, because, well, you just don't like it, it's uncomfortable.

It seemed my life, in a sense, had become uncomfortable over the previous few years like the shirt I was wearing. Once warm snug and relaxed, the fabric of my life had become wet and clammy and stuck to my skin, reminding me of what I had become, at least in the eyes of my wife and daughter.

I reasoned that being uncomfortable is probably psychological- It's a reaction, an emotional response we learn. It seems most of our emotions are just that- habitual responses to things that hold us in their grip and keep us from being happy. But changing habits is as tricky as trying to teach my mother how to navigate the internet.

It actually wasn't all that cold, but it sure as hell was steep. In fact, the first day of the Camino is one of the toughest. Most of the other pilgrims out here are probably like me- stupid enough to throw a 25-pound backpack over their shoulder and traipse 25 kilometers over a mountain range without any prior training. I had heard though that it was all about the journey, but the saying "the road to hell is paved with good intentions" came to mind.

After about 2 and a half hours of uphill, I came upon Refuge Orisson, a lonely Inn and cafe overlooking the beautiful viridescent valley I'd just clomped out of, and the last chance to have a real meal until Roncesvalles. There were pigs the size of Mini-Coopers milling about out front, so I got a chorizo baguette for ironies sake along with an espresso chaser. I sat down with a young, good-looking Italian dude from Milan.

It was Antonio's second Camino, and we discussed our countries, our lives, and what had brought us to walk the Camino. I told him that part of the reason I came to Spain was due to a woman- I'm sure the first time those words have been uttered on the Camino. In actuality I was there because of several women. Not sure what the universe was trying to tell me, but it felt like she was poking me in the eye with a stick. That was burning. While shoving another one up my ass.

I finished up and moved on, wanting to get some miles behind me. As I walked, I had short conversations with some other folks from Norway, Poland, Italy, and other countries. Never having even been to Europe, it amazed me to experience such a diverse mix of people on my first day walking the Camino. In addition to the diversity, every last person I talked to was so friendly and giving, in contrast to how I felt about myself- an inconsequential, selfish American prick feeling sorry for himself on some sort of "Eat, Pray, Love" journey into his self-absorbed core.

I suppose there's a commonality to those walking the Camino. I'm sure many are true pilgrims- they're on a journey of moral or spiritual significance. Not me. Being agnostic (I'm too much of a chicken-shit to be an atheist) I'm here for other reasons. But in the end, I guess my rationale isn't much different than that of the true pilgrim.

I'm here to give myself time to think, to dig inside and get closer to my heart and soul so I can heal the wounds I've been ignoring for the last few years, unfettered by the Sturm und Drang of everyday life. And like the silent wind that pushed me, unwittingly, to the Camino, I have no idea how I ever allowed myself to look past the worthless pile of shit I had convinced myself I was, to be deserving enough to take a month and flit off to Spain on what seemed like a whim.

After another few cold, water-logged kilometers I came upon a guy in a van selling snacks- cheese, fruit, and beverages. I nursed a hot chocolate as I talked to Joan, a woman about my age who was from London and just finishing up her first year of schooling to be a family therapist- yet another conversation to leave me with some feelings of unworthiness and general malaise towards myself. But at least the hot chocolate was therapy to a cold, battered soul.

I now hold hot chocolate (at least hot chocolate offered to a lost, soaked soul in the middle of the Pyrenees wondering what the hell he was doing there) among the most regal of beverages, right up there with an intense Syrah from Eastern Washington or a cup of Terrafazione espresso from Portland.

By the way, this whole family therapy thing that Joan was studying is also one of my many areas of expertise, having gone to a family therapist for a few years (my ex-wife's idea) in addition to some internet research I've done. Doesn't it seem like the internet has helped make us all experts, in five minutes or less via a quick Google search? Maybe it also contributes to us being more independent, albeit isolated. We no longer learn from each other by gathering together to share ideas and knowledge.

A study published in Psychological Science (I found it on the internet...) shows that we, as a people, are becoming more independent and self-reliant, as well as self-centered. The suggestion is that people are becoming more isolated and focused on themselves, rather than others.

Additional research shows us becoming more narcissistic. These studies also show these characteristics relate to economic success, so who cares? It seems in our country the consensus is that money is the bottom line (pun intended) as to the general worth of an individual. So, if becoming narcissistic is a natural byproduct of becoming the wealthiest nation in the world, so it goes.

One symptom of a society shifting in this direction is a lack of empathy –lack of caring much about others, which leads to more significant economic disparity (think shrinking middle class), and a lack of concern for taking care of the less fortunate (like the contempt for the "socialistic" agenda of Democrats, i.e.- Obamacare).

Another concern is the inability to cooperate with others (the U.S. Senate comes to mind), where people and parties with opposing views are unable to work together to solve problems. This "me first" attitude makes it difficult for us to see the plights of others who are less fortunate and makes it more difficult for us to self-sacrifice for the collective good.

And finally, to quote Kurt Vonnegut, commenting on the character of America: "What is it about blowjobs and golf anyway..?".

I met Amanda at a party. I almost didn't go. I had been with some friends earlier and begrudgingly took my leave. The gathering was a "celebration of life" honoring the birthday of one of the hosts' friends, and the passing of another. The host was a business associate (a doctor I had designed a website for), and as the fucked-up hand of fate seemed to be touching my life those days, I had a legal entanglement with the dead woman (a lawyer) who had been murdered by her ex-boyfriend.

Looking back in life, it seems that, perhaps, from time to time we should stand back and look at the signposts that are vying for our attention, like when the teen sees handwriting scrawled on a wall in a horror movie when they are going downstairs into the basement. For some fucking reason, they keep going. Maybe there are, at times, certain things that

help lead us off in the wrong direction, away from our authentic self- the person we were put on this earth to learn to be. That is, assuming there's any meaning to our existence here on this patch of dirt and pain.

If the signs hint at you (or in my case scream) that you're somewhere you shouldn't be, maybe it's time to head in a different direction. My legal dealings with the dead lawyer whose life the party was celebrating should have been one of those signposts that screamed at me to run. But on the other hand, if I had, I would never have met Amanda.

So, I dutifully walked into the kitchen not expecting to stay long, and a few women descended on me like vultures (later I found out they were more like mother hens) - I figured it was just because I had a bottle of red wine. After pouring some for all of us and making small talk, I walked outside past the two-piece band playing old Motown and 70's rock to the tables that had been set up on the lawn.

I finished my wine and ambled over to the bar to get a beer, trying to figure out how to make a Cuban exit. I ended up at one of the round tables on the lawn after being beckoned by one of the women I had graciously donated some of my wine too.

I then proceeded to be chatted up by the women who had now been joined by their husbands and boyfriends. They asked me who I was, what I did, and how I knew the host. I felt like I was being interviewed, like a deer in the headlights having questions fired at him from a .45 by five or six hunters at the same time. I'm not even sure if Amanda was at the table.

The rest is a blur. I don't know if it was intentional or if it just happened but all I remember is, (it could have been ten minutes or an hour later) I was alone at the same table with Amanda, the one woman of the group who wasn't paired up with someone. And I don't remember anything of what was going on around us as we spoke. Except for calm. And it seemed like we talked about everything under the sun and stars, things you don't talk about after knowing someone for 10 minutes. And it seemed like time stopped as the swirling mass of the party revolved around us.

Maybe it was her friends' intent to leave her alone with me. But you know what they say about the road that's paved with good intentions. Still, the more we spoke, the more I felt like I had known her forever. It wasn't the words she said (affected by a crazy Swedish/Slovenian accent), but what she spoke of. It wasn't what I heard, but what I felt. It was something deep down in me that flickered dimly like a candle on the verge of extinguishing, yearning to be relit.

As I finished my hot chocolate, Joan and the others who had stopped at the van put on their packs and left. I had trouble getting mine on, and by the time I was ready, everyone had disappeared into the fog. I tried to catch up but couldn't find them- just what I fucking needed. My head and heart were already lost amongst the confusing thoughts and emotions that had brought me here, and now my body was following suit.

I trudged on, and my anxiety heightened as the fog got thicker. I felt like I was in the middle of some Grimm's fairy tale- a cross between "Hansel and Gretel" and "The Story of the Youth Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was." I was sure the big bad wolf was creeping up on me, just beyond the fog line.

So I walked alone for a few kilometers, not sure if I was on the right path. After not seeing anyone for a good hour or two, and with enough uncertainty seeping in to make a gambler tremble, I turned around and retraced my steps quickly through the fog at a slow trot. As I walked, I pummeled and belittled myself, a habit I had gotten into at the end of my marriage when things were going bad. What the fuck was I doing here? How did I get lost in the first few hours of this crazy, mixed up Chautauqua I had thrown myself at with little preparation and thought?

After a few minutes, I calmed down and breathed deeply (one of the few things I had remembered from therapy). I thought about getting lost and realized I wasn't giving enough consideration to the present, which allowed the space for my thoughts and emotions (detritus from the past) to barge in, pretty easy for them since they were loud and unruly, demanding my ear like a boisterous 2nd child looking for attention.



I walked a while longer and reached the crossroads where the truck had been, but it was no longer there. I took the other path and crossed my fingers. I still wasn't convinced this was the correct route, but after walking for a kilometer or two, I reached a farm on the top of a hill. A sign directed me along a fence line, through a field and over a few hilltops to Roncesvalles (my destination for the evening).

For better or worse, the first pilgrims I had seen since the food truck crossroads were stopped and staring at the sign, lost in their rain-drenched torpor. Even though it wasn't a Camino sign (usually decorated with an iconic yellow arrow) at least I knew I was headed in the right direction, although I kept a lookout for errant bulls, horses (I had seen a few the size of trucks earlier) and fresh road apples.

I nodded my head to the three pilgrims and continued, and they followed me, perhaps assuming I knew what the fuck I was doing. Just what I needed- to be the leader of a ragtag group of pilgrims who knew even less of what the hell they were doing than I did, although having someone else walking the same path did make me feel a bit more at ease. Maybe the Camino was trying to teach me a little something about responsibility. Or perhaps I was just a broken down douche-nozzle of a man grasping at a few straws to try and make some sense of his universe.

After following a rutted dirt road over a few hills, a break in the fence led me back to the Camino. I quietly rejoiced and trundled on through the rain and fog. Eventually, I caught up with Wim and Elsa, a mother and son from Holland walking together. Wim had been on the Camino a few times, but it was Elsa's first time. He said that he would be with her for a week but then had to go back to work and that she was a little worried about continuing without him.

And then it hit me- If anyone had a reason to be worried it should be me. I mean, my life at home had unraveled to the point that I was putting towels over my windows to keep the light out and not let anyone know I was there. When I did venture outside, it was to go to the market or run 10 or so miles along the beach. Not that I'm a long-distance runner, but when I ran my brain would switch to auto-pilot, and the rest of my body followed suit. It seemed anxiety was stoking my battered soul, kind of like a neurotic Forrest Gump.

When I wasn't hiding or running, I would occupy myself with other things that would help decrease my anxiety, at least for the moment:

- Coffee
- Wine and cigarettes
- Masturbation
- Watching Ryan Reynolds romantic comedies

I'm not recommending these distractions to everyone to reduce anxiety; they were only a band-aid covering up deep wounds. But for the time being they worked for me. I'm providing them merely as a public service, in case they can be of some help to someone in a time of need.

Janice suggested I go to therapy. It came up a little over a year before we separated. I've always been interested in psychology, considering it as a major for about three minutes in college. Along with that, I've always felt that we know so little about ourselves and could probably learn a hell of a lot from some analysis, but I just never had the opportunity (or as far as I was concerned, the need) to go.

At the time, our marriage was already facing some serious obstacles (brought on by the recession and me closing my company), so when Janice suggested I go because insurance would cover it, I agreed. Maybe she thought I would see the errors of my ways and admit I was the one causing discord in our marriage and would begin to acquiesce to her demands.

It didn't quite work out that way. Up until that point, I hadn't really thought of my circumstance, my past, my childhood and how they might be affecting me and my actions in the marriage. I always thought I was insightful (probably something learned from my dad, or maybe I'm just self-absorbed), in fact, it's one of the reasons I fantasized about being a writer. But it just never occurred to me to take insights gleaned from my emotions instead of my intellect and consider them. But there were a few hints in notes gleaned from my first therapy sessions:

2/12

My wife still sleeps with our daughter, who is 9. I've been successfully removed from the equation. Things have been bad since the recession. My wife has outbursts.

2/20

I'm hurt. I'm constantly walking on eggshells. I'm different than I used to be. I feel like I care less about everything than I used to. Janice was furious at me for me for not applying for a security guard job in S. Central LA.

3/6

I started working again, a desk job, part time. I told Janice that the job sucked, the boss was berating, but it would allow me to write. I was trembling when I told about having to write, it was like I was speaking a profound truth about myself. I realized I was trembling because I was scared of her reaction to this very thing I had found, that I thought could save me, and maybe our relationship, and our family.

She said nothing and just kept making dinner. I sat in silence, feeling like I had just sat my bleeding heart on the table and she paid no attention to it, glancing at it with indifference.

3-20

Questioned whether or not I loved Janice anymore, if I ever could again, if I could ever love anyone again. Maybe we are just meant to live lives of quiet desperation.

As I walked along with Wim and Elsa, I learned that they were walking the Camino to help lay Elsa's husband (and Wim's dad) to rest. He had recently succumbed to a long bout of cancer back in Holland. They both needed time to grieve so they figured walking across Spain would help. It made me think of what had brought me here, and I still didn't have a good explanation. And I think it's because I was in the middle of it all, the roiling emotions, the hurt, the utter confusion as to who I was, and what place (if any) I had in the life I had come to know.

I had never even been to Europe, but there I was with a just a few material possessions on my back walking across Spain in the rain (I guess sometimes it doesn't fall mainly on the plain), as wet and miserable as Rutger Hauer at the end of Blade Runner rambling on about Tannhauser Gate.

And like Hauer's character, I couldn't help but feel that I too had somehow fallen from grace and that my fate was beyond my control. I was indeed one step away from crying teardrops in the rain. I would never have even known about the Camino if it wasn't for talking to a guy at a bar that had walked it several years prior.

Even then, I quickly forgot about it that night after a few more glasses of wine. It assuredly wasn't on my radar for the next few years until, unexplained, it roared back and planted itself firmly in my heart and mind when Amanda told me she didn't love me anymore. Which is why I think emotions are the catalyst for extraordinary, and sometimes desperate acts, and probably for most things we do in life.

Feelings point the way to what needs attending to, and the bigger the emotion, the bigger the action to compensate for it, sort of like Newton's third law of action-reaction. And the shit that had happened to me over the last few years, emotionally anyway, necessitated a reaction of elephantine proportions.

And in fact, just like my decision to walk the Camino was not by choice, not to write about it was never an option either. I just cannot find a good enough way to describe how this happened; it just suddenly became a fact. I only wavered once in my decision, when I quickly realized I would not be meeting my commitment to seeing Hannah once a week, even though I was sure she would be okay with it since her time with me seemed to be only a nuisance to her anyway.

But then I realized that she and Janice would be making their yearly summer pilgrimage to stay with Janice's parents for several weeks. I emailed Janice and lo and behold, this time they were going to spend five weeks, long enough for me to go to Spain and try to find my sorry ass. I took it as a sign.

I do know that a few years prior after a dogged fight with Janice, I was so shaken that I jumped in my car and just kept driving, ending up in the mountains near the Zen monastery where Leonard Cohen spent a few years after his manager screwed him out of most of his money.

I parked the car and sat quietly crying. After a few minutes, my mind came into focus, and I closed my eyes and tilted my head to the sky, asking whatever might be up there (when you're desperate for someone to listen, you'll take anything you can get) for some clarity.

And while they were at it, I asked whatever might be up there to give me at least a hint as to what it all means before I shuffle off this mortal coil, so I wouldn't be so scared when my soul was ready to get away from my sorry ass. Take it for what it is, but I can only think that my marching orders to walk the Camino was the universe heeding my call.

The Camino flattened out as Elsa, Wim and I walked through a serene forest, and the rain subsided a bit. Meanwhile, I was stressing about trying to get my first post up (this book began as a blog, and I intended to post every night during my walk) and then emailing and posting to Facebook, etc.

I was going to try and recruit some followers via social media and get the ball rolling, hopefully moving towards becoming a writer by trade, and I had decided (or the universe had) that posting every night while on the Camino would make the blog more engaging, exciting, and relevant.

If that stress wasn't enough, it seemed that the one place to stay in Roncesvalles was the one monastery where all the pilgrims lodged, and it was tucked away in the mountains. I was pretty sure monks didn't even use the web- I assumed that internet porn wasn't an interest of theirs. In fact, I figured with my luck of late internet access would be non-existent. Hell, they probably wouldn't even have electricity, running water, or indoor plumbing. God, what if I couldn't check in on Facebook!?

I sat down to take a break and realized that one thing we do in life is to create unreasonable expectations for ourselves, and then get frustrated when we can't reach them. I wanted to move forward with my writing career, make my blog engaging, get a fan base, become an author.

But really, what would happen if I posted a day or two late? Would anyone even notice? Oh, by the way Mark, make sure you ignore the awesome adventure you could be having.

I finally arrived in Roncesvalles- lifeless, drenched and cold. I then waited in line and went through a tedious check-in procedure (a one-monk operation) that required filling out a form as to my reasons for walking the Camino. There wasn't a box to check for "trying to lessen my self-loathing" so I checked off "spiritual reasons" instead.

I walked up to the second floor and found bunk #234, my home for the night. My bunkmates looked at me with derision or at least suspicion it seemed, or perhaps it was just my insecurity knowing I didn't have my shit together like I they obviously did.

They were a bit older and seemed a lot more bound and determined than I and didn't offer up a greeting, so I threw my pack on my upper bunk and rifled through it to find my one other pair of long pants which were...drenched. It seems I had ignored putting the rain cover over my backpack, reasoning that it was relatively waterproof without it.

Shivering due to my wet clothes and having switched from my hiking boots to my wet flip flops (I had smartly hung them on the outside of my pack) I hurried over to the showers and after waiting a few minutes commandeered one of the small stalls. I peeled off my wet clothes, turned on the shower and felt the warm water run through my hair and roll down my back.

After luxuriating in the comfort that can only be experienced in a hot shower or maybe the womb, I begrudgingly turned off the water and went to grab my towel to dry off. Unfortunately, I had forgotten the lesson I had been taught (apparently not very well) the night before in St Jean: auberges don't have towels.

So I used my wet shirt, and it worked just fine. In life, we get a little too used to our creature comforts, but when pressed we're reminded what we can do without most of them. After I dried off, I got dressed in what I had that was dry and sat down to write on my top bunk.

And I had to laugh, picturing myself on the top bunk tapping away at my little MacBook Air looking out the window of a thousand-year-old monastery where my other long pants and wet underwear were hopefully drying in the moist air. To complete the picture, I was wearing the only long sleeved shirt I had that was dry- a black \$150 John Varvatos button down that I brought to wear in Madrid; over a lime green t-shirt with a picture of a gorilla riding a bike, and a pair of O'Neil board pants from Costco.

For the first time in awhile, I felt at least somewhat at peace with myself. The voice in the back of my head was whispering to me that I had no right to feel this way, probably because I'd been made, at least for the last few years, to think I wasn't worthy of much of anything.

The mixed emotions caused a tear to run down my cheek as I began to understand that in life, we learn by falling down, and even if it hurts, it's our job to get back up and learn to walk, and then if we're lucky, to run. I thought about how even more so, those lessons we learn are the threads in the fabric of our lives. And every thread is a different color, each giving life its beautiful patina; even the threads that seem rough-hewn, and not so attractive.

When I finished writing, I closed my laptop and reality stomped back in on the shoulders of the voice in the back of my head who notified me that for all of my lyrical ponderings, I was still looking at 500 miles of who knows what. So I fished out some anti-anxiety pills from my backpack, swallowing them with only my saliva to carry them down my throat and fell into a fitful sleep to the sound of a few hundred snoring and farting fellow pilgrims.

*I sit at my table and wage war on myself
It seems like it's all, it's all for nothing
I know the barricades
And I know the mortar in the wall breaks
I recognize the weapons, I've used them well*

*Reach out for me
Hold me tight
Hold that memory
Let my machine talk to me*

*This is my world, and I am the World Leader Pretend
This is my life, and this is my time
I have been given the freedom to do as I see fit
It's high time I razed the walls that I've constructed...*

-REM