

All Roads Lead Home
Life, Love, and Forgiveness on the Camino de Santiago

DAY 1- FEAR AND SELF-LOATHING ON THE CAMINO

I wish God would've told me it may not be a good idea to begin a pilgrimage with three hours of sleep and a wicked hangover. Those words seeped into my booze and cigarette-smoke addled brain as I stood staring at a dirt path that wound its way up the Pyrenees, and a 482-mile walk across Spain on a centuries-old pilgrimage route called the Camino de Santiago. Then again, I hadn't been listening to god much lately, or anyone else who had an opinion about my reckless behavior and apparent lack of rational thinking. What a few years ago might have been a vast, open vista adorned with wonderment and adventure, was instead a dark, cold mountain devoid of any signs of life, short of the suffocating stench of loneliness.

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

Janice and Hannah

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 needed 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.

Leave it to me to screw up before I even set foot on the Camino. After exiting my hotel in Madrid and 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 pile of shit. 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.

I sat down next to a lithe, twenty something Canadian named Erin and we talked all the way to Pamplona. She had been traveling for a few months and was thinking about opening a hostel in some small town outside of Calgary like the ones on the Camino. Maybe a place where Neil Young and K.D. Lange could hide away and collaborate on a few new songs. The plan seemed a little whimsical to a hard-boiled nose to the grindstone 'Merican like me, but hey, everybody's gotta have a dream.

When we got to Pamplona, Erin and I parted ways. Without much difficulty, 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, there were two pilgrims sitting on a bench (my critical eye spied the humungous backpacks sitting next to them), 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 conversing with a half-crazed emotionally bankrupt American with the scent of two buck 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 his 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.

Amanda

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. We'd met 10 months prior (six months after my separation from Janice) and had been tied at the hip since. I had gotten her a position on a project I had been hired to work on, and we were traveling back from Sacramento together, 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. Great fucking timing.

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 a 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.

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.

*I have a friend, he's mostly made of pain
He wakes up, drives to work and straight back home again
He once cut one of my nightmares out of paper
I thought it was beautiful, I put it on a record cover*

*And I tried to tell him that he had a sense
Of color and composition so magnificent
And he said thank you, please, but your flattery
It is truly not becoming me*

*Your eyes are poor, you're blind, you see
No beauty ever could have come from me
I'm a waste
Of breath, of space, of time -Bright Eyes*

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 been prescribed back in the states. Apparently, a few friends who weren't familiar with the time difference between Spain and the U.S. (not to mention my forgetting to turn off the volume on my phone) 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 become 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 goodbye 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..."

While walking 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 many of us, particularly in America, have been taught to feel 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 than 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.

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.

Being uncomfortable is 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.

As I navigated the constant 30% grade up the Pyrenees, I wondered if the other Pilgrims were as ill-prepared as I was. Probably not- I don't think they were 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.

The first day on the Camino is probably the hardest. Maybe every pilgrimage starts off in hell, and the point is to move towards some sort of redemption. Unfortunately, the constant caterwauling and harangue of every muscle below my waist made it hard to consider the spiritual significance of my quest.

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 left Antonio and the warmth of the cafe in Orisson and trudged on ever upward towards Roncesvalles, the ancient monastery where I was hoping to find a cot to rest my tired and wet bones. The wet just reminded me that not too long ago, I'd been drowning in a sea of self-loathing and contempt for the world that had dealt me a losing hand after I had separated from my wife and was relegated to living in a crappy old studio apartment feeling sorry for myself. It took a long time to realize I had dealt that losing hand to myself.

What I couldn't understand was that how Amanda had come into my life under those conditions. She had reached into my heart and touched my soul. She kissed me, she hugged me, she made love to me, she brought me into her life. She began to heal some of the open wounds from the last few years of my marriage that were deep and festering. But as she and I soon found out, the two of us 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 to learn to love ourselves again.

The drizzle continued, mixed with light fog and low hanging clouds. 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.

Meeting this diverse range of pilgrims I met while slogging up the slippery slopes of the Pyrenees on that first day gave me at least a modicum of hope for mankind. Despite our differences, I suppose there's a commonality to those walking the with me, something that connects us. I'm sure many are true pilgrims- they're on a journey of moral or spiritual significance.

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.

As the herd thinned and I distanced myself from my fellow pilgrims I stared into the clouds and saw Amanda's eyes staring back. At that moment I began to understand that pretty much all of the valuable lessons I had learned about life for better or worse, had come from women. And as the lonely path wound its way up the Pyrenees and into the fog, I trundled on, wondering what other thoughts would wander through my befuddled and tempestuous brain, courtesy of the Camino. In a strange way, I was kinda looking forward to it...

The fog got thicker and eventually I was alone, the fog making it all the more lonely. But then I ran into an old farmer walking his cows up the mountain. He had those wild, unkempt eyebrows and a sparkle in his eyes, and he spoke a little English. We talked for a little while as we walked ever upward.

He told me that he'd lived in these hills for 70 years, since he had been born. I imagined he probably hadn't traveled far from this place, and I thought about Americans and our incessant wanderlust, our urge to get out and move, to see other parts of the world even if it's an lown traveling to the Grand Canyon.

Something about this old guy touched me as we walked. I felt a little more akin to him than to the fellow pilgrims I had been walking with, who seemed so imbued with dignity and worth. Not that this old farmer didn't have those attributes. I felt like I was a man without a home, caught between some old, traditional world mired in the anachronistic lessons I'd been taught by the past, and a new world order that was imbued in the younger, idealistic kids I had been crossing paths with. Only time would tell if I would continue to lean on my old ways or let go of the past and open my eyes to the crazy, rapturous dance that life can be.

As I shambled uphill in the rain and fog I came upon a welcome site- a jolly guy wearing a beret in a white van parked off the side of the road selling fruit, hot chocolate, candy bars, etc. I took off my pack and 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.

Like others I had spoken to, at least I was buoyed by Joan's passion to help those in need of caring. It seems the whole world was on board with this program, but for one country- my own. And I'm not trying to batter America, it's given me a wonderful life. But it seems we're suffering from symptoms caused by our own success, leading to us as individuals becoming more isolated and self-absorbed, the result being a lack of empathy.

This also leads to more significant economic disparity (shrinking middle class), a lack of concern for taking care of the less fortunate (the contempt for the "socialistic" agenda of Democrats, i.e.- Obamacare), and the inability to cooperate with others (the U.S. Senate), 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. Sound familiar?

Joan left as I finished my hot chocolate and I had trouble mounting my pack. By the time I was ready to go I couldn't see anyone in the fog, so I walked away from the van in the direction I thought everyone had gone. A few hours later as the fog thickened and darkness ensued, I would throw myself to the ground and tearfully scream at the heavens when I realized I had taken the wrong road and was hopelessly lost.

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 in a horror movie when the teen sees handwriting scrawled on a wall as she's 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.

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 to.

I 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. The funny thing was, at that time in my life I wasn't looking to hook up, resolved to be by myself and figure my shit out. Still, the more we spoke, the more I felt 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.

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.

All I could do was keep walking or turn around and retrace my steps back to the van. After not seeing anyone for a good hour or two, and with enough uncertainty to make even a hardcore 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 becoming exhausted from beating myself up, I calmed down and breathed deeply (one of the few things I had remembered from therapy). I 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 middle child screaming for attention.

I walked a while longer and reached the crossroads where the van had been, but it was no longer there. I took the one other path that wasn't heading back the way I had come this morning and crossed my fingers. I still wasn't convinced that it was the correct route (the voice in the back of my head made sure to keep me doubting), but after walking for a kilometer or two, I reached a fence on the top of a hill, and a sign directed me along the fence line, through a field towards Roncesvalles, my destination for the evening.

It wasn't one of the familiar Camino signs, but it pointed to where I needed to go. I stopped for a moment to tighten the waist belt of my pack as the light rain turned into a squall at the top of the exposed hill and daylight began to fade. I was hoping my luck may have turned, but I wasn't counting on it. Except for stumbling upon the sign to Roncesvalles, lately my luck had been akin to a bald guy winning a comb.

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 trudged on. 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.

It struck me that if anyone had a reason to be worried to be out here it should be me. I'd never even been to Europe, didn't speak much Spanish, and my emotional state was like that last scene of "The Perfect Storm" when George Clooney is at the hatch of the Andrea Gail underwater as it slowly sinks, deciding whether or not to follow Markey Mark to the surface.

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 hide away from everyone. 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 autopilot and forget about everything, and the rest of my body followed suit. It seemed anxiety was stoking my battered soul, like a neurotic Forrest Gump.

Speaking of anxiety, I guess doing something as drastic as booking a ticket to a continent I'd never been in an attempt to walk across a country I knew nothing about (short of Christopher Columbus and a year or two of junior high Spanish) meant I was at the end of my rope, and this was my call to action. I'd begun to deal with my depression and anxiety before I left- 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 never occurred to me to take insights gleaned from my emotions instead of my intellect and consider them as signposts. In looking back over the notes from my first therapy sessions there were a few hints that perhaps I should have.

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 not applying for a security guard job in South Central L.A.

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 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.

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 in the last few years, and the life that was waiting for me back home.

On reflection, the fact that I'd never even been to Europe made flying half way around the world to walk across Spain with a clatter and din filled knapsack full of rampageous emotions and suicidal dreams seem a little crazy, or, in the words of the voice in the back of my head, inconceivably stupid.

But for fucks sake, 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 for many things we do in life. Sometimes they slap us in the face, but most often they lurk underneath, quietly cajoling us, trying to remind us what our soul is trying to whisper in our ear.

Unfortunately, they're just supposed to be delivering a message, but we don't seem to be able to let go of them. We obsess about them; they take up residence and become habitual ways of thinking. If we don't try and recognize them for what they are, they become threads woven into the fabric of our being, difficult to unravel.

I got jolted from my self-absorbed ponderings (I'd say self-reflective but at the time the voice in the back of my head was still using every opportunity to keep me feeling like shit about myself) when I tripped over a small log on a downhill slog through a forest. I was behind Wim and Elsa at this point, so no one saw me as I lurched and pitched back and forth, careening downhill trying to maintain my balance, like a drunken Sisyphus chasing his huge stone down a hill yet again.

After I recovered, I couldn't help thinking about Wim and Elsa. The feelings and emotions I was harboring seemed miniscule compared to the grief they must be dealing with. But it seems some of us are more resilient than others. 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 seemed like it 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 my daughter 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' 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.

And if you believe in things like souls, angels, unicorns and shit like that, 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 run 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.

I caught up with Wim and Elsa as the rain subsided. The Camino flattened out and led us into a serene forest which should have made me...well...serene. Instead, I began to stress out about trying to get my first post up (this book began as a blog)- as I mentioned, due to some outside forces I could not comprehend, I was determined to write about my walk and post to a blog every night.

And for some strange reason, that determination was still with me. It would have been much easier for me to fall into old habits and, once I got to Roncesvalles, seek out a bottle of \$2 Rioja from the monastery gift shop and see if there were any monks I could bum a cigarette or two off. I mean, I had already convinced myself I would fail even before I began- I was pretty sure monks didn't even use the web- I assumed that internet porn wasn't an interest of theirs.

Elsa was quiet as we walked, so Wim and I did most of the talking. Wim told me about his dad, and told me that not too long before he died, his father had him bring him a book and read this quote from Hunter Thompson: "Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming "Wow! What a Ride!

I choked back a tear and resolved to give it my best shot. I had only been on the Camino a short time and already flashbacks and memories of my life were parading by, reminding me of things I needed to deal with, a kind of "walking therapy". And indeed, it seems one of the reasons the Camino is therapeutic is that it distills life into a few simple things. Your mind quiets due to the fact you realize there are only a few things to concern yourself with- where to get something to eat, where to stay, and simply putting one foot in front of the other.

On the down side, you're pretty much always heading West, so the long shadows of the morning are always out in front of you, reminding you that even though some crazy whirlwind of sadness, ecstasy, and downright stupidity may have thrown you half way around the world to stumble across a country you've never been to, you will at some point have to return home and look at yourself in the mirror.

I finally arrived in Roncesvalles- lifeless, drenched and cold. It didn't help my current mood when I had to go 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 glared at me with derision, looking like gnarled veterans on a mission from god, and maybe they were. Well, it probably wasn't derision, it was more like my insecurity knowing I didn't have my shit together like I assumed they 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 it was relatively waterproof without it. Just another bad decision among many of late.

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, we can do without many of them. And in America it seems we are fortunate to have more creature comforts than most. Unfortunately, in a sense it seems they tend to insulate us from life, and the lessons we're supposed to learn. One learns to walk by falling down, and, well...forgetting to bring a towel to the shower.

Returning to my cot I got dressed in the only clothes I had that were dry and climbed up to my top bunk to write. And then something came over me- I started laughing and couldn't stop. I guess it was the sheer absurdity of that moment. Everything I'd been through over the last few years came rushing over me, not to mention the trials of the last few days- getting lost in the Madrid train station, almost not making my bus to Pamplona, being lost in the fog.

And there I was, 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, wearing a black \$150 John Varvatos button down (the only long sleeved shirt I had that was dry) 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, but something else was making itself known, a feeling I had dismissed long ago. It was to be the first gift I received from the Camino.

And it can only be described as some sort of grace. To Christians grace is understood as a spontaneous gift from God- "generous, free and totally unexpected and undeserved". I wasn't so sure about any connection to the god I grew up with, but considering my current state of self-loathing, I did indeed feel that these feelings of peace and acceptance of myself were undeserved.

I struggled to hold back the tears as I began to give thanks to whatever forces had landed me there. I suddenly understood the bad things that had happened the past few years were actually catalysts for growth, as long as I could get over the hurt and pain long enough to see them for what they were, emotional habits I was clinging to that I thought would protect me, but that actually no longer made any sense.

It seems the people we come into contact with (friends, lovers, enemies) are just trying to get what they think they think they need or deserve. They do so using the tools and weapons they've been taught by others who are just trying to

muddle through and certainly don't know how to deal with the absurdity of life today, much less how to be good teachers. And in the end, it seems like most of us are simply coming to grips with understanding there is only one way to learn to love life, or at the very least someone else- by learning to love yourself.

I didn't have any clear-cut answers as to how I would proceed to untangle these negative emotions and bad habits I had learned to rely on, but I figured that recognizing them was the first step in trying to fix them. And even though my shit-colored glasses way of looking at the world had become embedded in me and I had turned into a man I didn't recognize, a man that was lost and that I hated, I thought about others who were much worse off than me. And I thanked the universe for my life.

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