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TRAVEL: A pilgrim's progress toward healing

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Dr. Marina Skulsky honours her late husband by hiking the road to Santiago de Compostela in Spain

Everyone takes the pilgrims' road to Santiago de Compostela for different reasons—religious struggles, self discovery, beautiful scenery and physical challenge. Mine was to walk away grief.

There are granite markers along the trail engraved with scallop shells that tell you the number of kilometres to Santiago. I encounter my first at kilometre 155. I put a small piece of white quartz on top of it to commemorate my journey, just as many before me had done. My mantra as I set a stone on each marker became: "Blythe, my darling, I love you, rest in peace."

Travelling together has always been an important part of our family. So when my husband, Blythe Brown, a frequent Medical Post writer and Calgary family physician died on March 21, I wanted to honour him in the best way I knew how.

We had travelled and written about many places, but one special place was left undone. We had always planned to walk the French Camino into Santiago de Compostela (St. James of the Field of Stars) in north-west Spain. We had planned to go a year after rehabilitating from his bone marrow transplant. Tragically, our trip together wasn't meant to be.

While preparing his eulogy, I came across two letters he'd written encouraging me to organize this trip; either together or alone, if need be. After 33 years of marriage, who was I to argue? With less than a week of planning and two weeks after his funeral, I travelled with trepidation to northern Spain to do my 165-kilometre memorial walk.

There are many ancient pilgrim roads (caminos) throughout Europe that lead to Santiago, but the most frequented today, and in the past, is the French Camino, which crosses into Spain through a pass in the Pyrenees. I started my journey from the city of Leon, about halfway along the French Camino.

Santiago was St. James the Great, one of the 12 apostles. Legend has it that he was taken back to northern Galicia to be buried with the people he converted to Christianity. Beheaded by the Roman emperor Agrippa I, he became the first Christian martyr, which enhanced his importance.



Dr. Skulsky's trek included beautiful sceneries, such as that on the climb to O Cebreiro.

Early travel guides

The first complete pilgrim's travel guide was done in the year 1135, the Codex Calixtinus by the French cleric, Aymeric Picaud. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, there were 300,000 pilgrims (pelgrinos) a year trudging to Santiago.

This required the complex development of hospitals, hostels and safe passage for all medieval travellers. Each pilgrim wore a wide brimmed hat, carried a walking staff, toted a gourd for water and wore a long cape with a scallop shell—their insignia as a pilgrim. The scallop allowed safe passage and penalties were harsh should a pilgrim meet with foul play.

Fast forward to 2009. I arrived in Bilbao, northern Spain and took a five-hour train trip to Leon, and I was ready to begin.

Travelling alone, I thought it was best to access some services to support my trek. Normally a detail-oriented person, I was doing this strictly on faith that things would fall into place. Nonetheless, I happened upon an excellent local Spanish tour company online called Fresco Tours (www.frescotours.com). Alex and staff travel the French Camino every two weeks from April until October. He couldn't have been kinder or more supportive of my quest. They arranged hotels, luggage, transfers and meals. I was charged with carrying my daypack, map, my pilgrim passport and finding my pace on the Camino. Many others backpacked and stayed in hostels or homes on the way.



The late Dr. Blythe Brown..

Almost immediately, I could feel the Camino spirit. Anyone passing you on foot or bicycle would call out, "Ola! Buon camino!" (Hello and good journey!) That became your first greeting with each fellow traveller encountered no matter their language or country. There

is something very special about following a 1,200-year-old path that millions of people have travelled before you. In solidarity, all footsteps in the dust point in the same direction. The stone and paths are worn in gracious anticipation of providing something greater than oneself.

It is a solitary endeavour as everyone walks at his own pace. The first five kilometres are up a mountain to O Cebreiro. It snowed the day before I climbed in early April. The weather is extremely changeable—just like the Rockies! But I was grateful for cool, clear, beautiful skies and light winds. The lime green forests and fields were punctuated by small areas of snow as I climbed. There was a misty rain and thick fog at the top that added to the mystery of my journey into the unknown.

At O Cebreiro, members of the Fresco Tours regrouped for dinner (seven of us) and shared a meal cooked by Pilar, whose family has cooked for generations of pilgrims. It was cozy in the restaurant, but there was little heat in my stone room and I longed for a familiar body to warm up to. Socks and my fleece vest would have to suffice.

This tiny five-house, one-church, hamlet is steeped in history and miracles. There are pallozas (pre-Roman stone dwellings) here that were first documented as a traveller's hostel in the year 836. In the 1200s, a faithless monk celebrating mass secretly berated a peasant who bravely climbed the mountain in a snowstorm to attend the service. At the moment the monk elevated the Host, it turned into blood and flesh and stained the white linens. Today the Chalice and clothes are venerated as part of the archeological relics in this tiny church. In fact, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella made the pilgrimage here in 1486—six years before the discovery of America!

My pilgrimage started in earnest the next morning. For 10 days I journeyed between 25 and 30 kilometres per day, nursing blisters with moleskin and finding solace in the challenge of each new spring day. I passed through lovely little towns and ruins with romantic names such as Tricastela (three castles), Portomarin (door to the sea) and Palas de Reis (Palace of the Kings). I stopped at Samos, the oldest monastery in Spain, to hear the monks sing vespers in the evening.

The singing warmed my spirit and the local spinach bean soup warmed my body. No meal is complete unless you are offered the Tarte de Santiago. This almond torte is topped with the distinctive medieval sword of St. James formed in an icing sugar imprint. All pilgrims are charged with finding the best torte on the camino.

Thus the camino takes on its own rhythm—sore joints, camaraderie, commiseration, humour and peace. I walked in silence on the worn stone and country lanes, crossing sheep herds and dodging cow patties. I listened to the birds and felt the misty rain, braced against cold mountain winds, crossed the streams.

Only one day did I feel particularly alone in a dark part of the forest. The very next marker answered me. "You never walk alone" was etched on it. It affirmed my belief that Blythe was encouraging me along on this camino. I felt the pouch in my pack that carried a bit of clay from his grave and a polished piece of British Columbia jade, a keepsake from his family, and walked on, comforted.

As one goes on, you can feel and see the dogged persistence of previous pilgrims. There are the dilapidated hiking boots held together by duct tape as heels and soles are worn through. Eventually they are discarded atop a camino marker.

As you go through each town you get a stamp in your pilgrim passport. This is your cherished document. It is proof that you walked at least the last 100 kilometres to Compostela and you receive a certificate from the church. A palpable anticipation increases in all pilgrims as one gets closer to Santiago. On a clear day, jubilant pilgrims would race to the summit of Monte de Gozo to become "King of the Pilgrimage." The first to see the spires of the cathedral a few kilometres away obtained this honour.



Modern-day pilgrim Dr. Marina Skulsky stands proudly at kilometre zero in Obradoiros Square at the end of her 165-kilometre walk in memory of her husband.

Kilometre zero

Entering Santiago, I followed the bronze scallops imbedded in the walkways. All bring you down the narrow roadways that suddenly open to Obradoiros Square where a bronze plaque marks kilometre zero.

Accompanying this was the outpouring of laughter, hugs and tears as everyone threw up their arms in relief as they stood on the marker in front of the 1,000-year-old church. At noon the following day, a pilgrims' mass was celebrated. The special Pilgrims Blessing was given and the pilgrims' countries' names were read out. It was a tired, motley group of individuals who joyfully embraced. They came from a multitude of countries, the scallop shell their common flag. At that moment, there is faith and hope for peace in the world that transcends all religions and boundaries.

The end of the service almost marked the end of my personal pilgrimage. There was relief and joy, peace and sorrow, loneliness and solace. I know Blythe would have loved this walk with his usual unbridled enthusiasm. His humour and joie de vivre would have brought a whole new dimension to this trip.

So I counted my blessings and enjoyed the memories. . . . But before I left the cathedral, I had a task to perform. Out from the bottom of my pack came the little bit of clay from Blythe's grave and the polished jade rock. I found a tiny crevice in a stone at the far back of the 1,000-year-old altar and deposited my treasures. Blythe, my darling, we've arrived!

Marina Skulsky is a family physician in Calgary and wife of the late Dr. Blythe Brown.



Stone markers bearing the scallop symbol keep travellers on track.

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