

Why Walk?: The Pilgrimage Revival

By: John Louis Darrouzet IV - Film & TV Production Major, Music Minor

Mentor: Herbert Medina - Professor of Mathematics, 12 times on the Camino

Abstract:

The Camino de Santiago, or The Way of St. James, is one of the most important pilgrimage paths for Christians, and the past 20 years have seen a rapid and steady increase in the amount of pilgrims walking the Camino. American pilgrims that completed the pilgrimage doubled in the span in the 2 years after the 2011 release of *The Way*, a film that portrayed main characters that have non-religious reasons for walking the Camino. These resurgences of pilgrims has come at the same time that the Pilgrim Office, who releases official statistics on the pilgrims of the Camino, has reported that an increasing majority of pilgrims walk the Camino for non-religious reasons. These secular and cultural reasons are not expanded upon, and this research project will attempt to explain this pilgrimage revival by examining these reasons with the lenses of Frederic Gros' philosophy on walking and Robert Macfarlane's writings on walking and pilgrimage.

Introduction:

The Camino de Santiago, also known as The Way of Saint James, is a pilgrimage path comprised of a network of routes that all converge on the Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain. Because the remains of St. James, one of the twelve apostles of Christ, are said to be buried there, the journey to Santiago is one of the most important Christian pilgrimages. Because of its reach into most of Western Europe and the path's religious salience, the Camino sees representatives from many different countries outside Spain, namely Italy, Germany, France, and even the United States of America (Pilgrim Office).

In 2016 American pilgrims made up a substantial 10% of all pilgrims on the Camino, up from a negligible 4% in 2010, and the entirety of this growth took place between 2011 and 2012. (Pilgrim Office). During this same time frame, no other country had even half of the increase in pilgrims that the U.S. had. (Pilgrim Office)

This outbreak of American pilgrims could be explained by the 2011 release of *The Way*, which exhibited four characters who all had vastly different and *secular* reasons for walking the Camino. No longer a solely religious endeavor, this film conveyed to an audience of predominantly Americans (*The Way* was not widely distributed, seeing small premieres in Spain and Canada before releasing in the U.S.) that one needn't be motivated by religion to justify walking. However, this phenomena is not solely applicable to the U.S. and American pilgrims.

In the past 20 years, the Camino has seen an astonishing increase in pilgrims, from 23,218 in 1996 to 277,913 in 2016: a 1,197% increase (Ferris). During this same time frame, never has a majority of pilgrims reported a solely religious motivation for walking the Camino, save during Holy Years (Ferris, Pilgrim Office). This implies that this pilgrimage revival is not only religious in nature, because it also extends widely into secular culture (Macfarlane).

However, the term “secular” and “culture” are vague in this context, providing scarcely the amount of information about the actual motivation for a pilgrim to complete such an arduous journey as the term “religious” does. And so, I pose the following question: what are the reasons for this pilgrimage revival?

Background:

Americans avoid walking when possible; in fact, there has been a 50% increase in both the amount of vehicle trips taken and the amount of miles driven on those trips since the 1970's (Vanderbilt). This increasingly sedentary American lifestyle has been combated with research on how walking positively affects one's physical health, including investigations on how walking can help reduce blood pressure and how walking can help lower the risk of Alzheimer's (Vanderbilt, Basset et al). However, there is a significant lack of research done on the mental and emotional impacts of walking on a human's psyche (Legrand and Mille). This gap in knowledge is best filled by French philosopher Frederic Gros and British author Robert Macfarlane.

People walk in search of beauty, in pursuit of grace or in flight from unhappiness, walking as elegy or therapy, walking as reconnection or remembrance, walking to sharpen the self or to forget it entirely (Macfarlane). These different intentions, goals, or motivations for walking are all valid reasons for putting one foot in front of the other, and, at its core, it is a very simple idea with very simple outcomes. This is the essence of the philosophy of walking: looking at the loaded questions of eternity, solitude, time, and space, but on the basis of experience and the basis of very simple, very ordinary, everyday things (Gros).

This sort of philosophy cannot be done full justice by quantifiable inquiry, because it has to be lived, experienced. Walking explores the mystery of presence to world, to others, and to

one's self, and so one discovers that walking emancipates one from space and time, and *vitesse* or speediness, because it is the sedimentation of the presence of landscape in one's body (Gros). Everyone walks for different reasons, and landscape and the human heart are best illuminated by story, by pattern, and by example rather than by analysis (Macfarlane). This is also true of pilgrimages and the pilgrims that walk these paths.

With shifting motivations, from solely religious to a combination of religion and culture, the Camino has seen a huge influx of American pilgrims. There is a definite causal relationship between the release of *The Way* and the 250% increase in American pilgrims on the Camino during that time frame, because one would think that the U.S., a country that more than doubles the amount of weekly churchgoers and adherents of religion compared to Great Britain, France, and Germany, would have a large number of pilgrims (Arbor).

However, that is just not the case, because in the United States, there are very few well-known pilgrimages, which in turn causes there to be very few pilgrims within the country. Roughly 40 to 50 Christian shrines exist in the United States, none of which are heavily traversed, except for the national shrine to the Virgin Mary at Emmitsburg, Maryland (Jenkins). Because of this, many Americans do not go on pilgrimages, and might choose rather to go on a hike or do a similar sort of physical and spiritual exercise (Vanderbilt).

This resurgence of pilgrims is going against the traditional and religious definition of a pilgrimage, and it is shifting into a more culturally grounded concept. Again, I pose the question: what are the reasons for this pilgrimage revival.

Methods:

I plan on walking the Camino de Santiago myself from Pau, France, through the Pyrenees to Pamplona, Spain, documenting through video and pictures the landscape, the people I encounter, and my overall experience walking the Camino. I also intend to analyze the effects of walking on the mind and soul per Robert Macfarlane's writings and Frederic Gros' philosophy on walking. With these lenses, I will derive a list of interview questions that I can ask myself and the people that I encounter on the Camino, with the aim of understanding people's personal reasons for walking the Camino, if not for religious purposes.

I intend to interview around five pilgrims who claim their reason for walking the Camino is non-religious, five pilgrims who claim their reason for walking the Camino is religious, and five people who live along and work at the Camino, in order to encompass the full scope of reasons for walking the Camino before narrowing down to just the secular reasons.

Some sample questions would look like this: Where are you from? What is calling you to walk, and how have you answered that call during your journey along the Camino? How does walking in the landscape of the Camino play a part in the spiritual and mindful experience of the pilgrimage? Have you faced any adversity during this pilgrimage, physically or mentally? What is keeping you determined to finish, and how do you expect to feel once it is over? Have you felt changed or altered by this walk, the landscape, or the people?

Additionally, I would interview my mentor Herbert Medina, Mary Beth Ingham, who has written reflections on the Camino, and if at all possible Robert Macfarlane. Ultimately I intend to gather a number of case studies that delve into questions about life, faith, purpose, and understanding in order to accentuate the thoughtfulness that comes with walking. Walking is not

merely an exercise to be done or an inconvenience, but rather a medium through which one can grapple with life, sharpen oneself, or lose oneself.

Expected Results:

I expect that the answers to my questions will be vastly different from person to person, but despite their differences in values and experiences, they will still most likely be connected by a common theme: the importance of walking every step of a path with the backdrop of this landscape, in the context of pilgrimage. Since the act of going on pilgrimage is becoming an increasingly secular endeavor, I expect people will have a vast array of reasons to be out on the Camino, so hopefully I will encounter people who have a wide breadth of experiences to share.

Personally, I expect to find that walking in the natural surroundings, especially in the stretch of the Camino through the Pyrenees, to resonate with myself, facilitating a deeper and more profound experience.

Further, I plan on creating a documentary that would merge my personal experiences with the other pilgrims that I encounter on the path, so that I could attempt to find a reason for the pilgrimage revival. Interviews with the pilgrims, my mentor and other experts, and personal video diaries would be the highlight of the film, with images and videos of the landscapes and my path supplementing the rest of it. I expect the film to be gorgeous and for my content to be replete with rich experiences and deep thought.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, I want this project and research to be the manifestation of the answer to the question, “why walk?” This resurgence of pilgrims in the past 20 years is not entirely explained

by the Pilgrim Office's classification of these pilgrims' reasons being Cultural or Religious and Cultural, because the term cultural or secular is too broad a term to encapsulate all the possible reasons beyond religion that one would walk the Camino de Santiago.

I believe that the lessons learned from this project could have wider impacts in the lives of non-pilgrims and especially Americans, because it will highlight the importance of getting out into nature and walking in order to rejuvenate the soul: to live life outside of the screen. I hope this documentary and this research will convey that message.

Works Cited

- Arbor, Ann. "Study Identifies Worldwide Rates of Religiosity, Church Attendance." *University of Michigan*. Last Modified January 22, 2007. Accessed on November 10, 2017.
<http://ns.umich.edu/new/releases/1835-study-identifies-worldwide-rates-of-religiosity-church-attendance>
- Basset, David and Wyatt, Holly and Thompson, Helen and Peters, John and Hill, James. "Pedometer-Measured Physical Activity and Health Behaviors in U.S. Adults." *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* 42, no. 10. (2010): 1819-1825.
- Ferris, Laurie. "30 Years of Pilgrim Statistics." *The Camino Provides*. Last Modified January 31, 2017. Accessed on November 10, 2017.
<https://thecaminoprovides.com/2017/01/31/30-years-of-pilgrim-statistics/>
- Gros, Frederic. *A Philosophy of Walking*. London: Verso, April 2014.
- Jenkins, Phillip. "Why Are There No Great American Pilgrimages Like Compostela?" *Newsmax*. Last Modified April 7, 2015. Accessed on October 23, 2017.
<http://www.newsmax.com/US/American-pilgrimages-religious-compared/2015/04/07/id/637008/>
- Legrand, Fabien and Mille, Christian. "The effects of 60 minutes of supervised weekly walking on depressive symptoms among older women." *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, 2, no. 2. (2009): 71-75.
- Macfarlane, Robert. "Rites of way: behind the pilgrimage revival." *The Guardian*. Last Modified June 15, 2012. Accessed on October 2, 2017.
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/15/rites-of-way-pilgrimage-walks>
- "Statistics." *Pilgrim's Office*. Accessed on October 23, 2017.
<https://oficinadelperegrino.com/en/statistics/>
- Vanderbilt, Tom. "The Crisis in American Walking." *Slate*. Last Modified April 10, 2012. Accessed on October 23, 2017.
http://www.slate.com/articles/life/walking/2012/04/why_don_t_americans_walk_more_t he_crisis_of_pedestrianism_.html

Budget

Travel

Plane Ticket to Paris - **\$700**

- From Los Angeles International Airport in Los Angeles, CA on Monday, May 7th at 8:00pm to Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, France on Tuesday, May 8th at 3:40pm.

Train Ticket from Paris to Pau - **\$120**

- From Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris, France on Tuesday May 8th at 6:00pm to Gare de Pau Train Station in Pau, France on Wednesday May 9th at 12:00am.

One Night Stay near Gare de Pau - **\$60**

- Hotel ibis Pau Centre, 3km north of the Gare train station

Staying in Hostels along the Camino for 14 days - **\$840**

- \$40-\$60 a day for food and housing in hostels on the Camino

Food and water throughout the journey - **\$100**

- In case I camp instead of staying in a hostel

Plane Ticket to LA - **\$800**

- From Pamplona on Friday, May 25th at 6:30am to LAX in Los Angeles, CA at 8:20pm.

Equipment

Hiking Backpack - **\$180**

- Osprey Farpoint 55 Travel Pack

Hiking Boots - **\$235**

- Lowa Zephyr GTX Hi TF Hiking Boots

Hiking Poles - **\$120**

- Black Diamond Trail Ergo Cork Trekking Poles

Total Budget = \$3,155

This Experience = Priceless