

The Biggest Idea Ever

How you can
trade anxiety,
fear, & burnout



for lasting
peace, purpose,
& significance

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Camino: Living unhurried.

“Wherever you go, go with all your heart.”

Confucius

“The real voyage of discovery consists not of seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

Marcel Proust

After almost two decades as a pastor, God was stirring me to step into my next season. Jamie had been co-leading the church with me for 18 months and had developed a very exciting vision for the future. I loved Jamie’s dependence on Jesus, his passionate preaching and teaching, his family life, and his joyful approach to ministry. The congregation had welcomed him warmly, and he was developing strong relationships in the community. They planned a big farewell barbecue for us on the first Saturday in June so we could tell stories and celebrate.

In late May, my son Denis, and his wife Robynne were in town for a visit. Denis planned for us to get dressed up and celebrate Robynne’s birthday with a fancy dinner at the Hilton and tickets to a stage performance of *Pride and Prejudice* downtown. We walked into the hotel after parking the car, and Denis went to a different floor than I normally took to get to the Orchids restaurant, housed in a spectacular art deco room called Palm Court. I hadn’t been there in a few years, so I didn’t say anything. Suddenly he turned left and began walking into the Hall of Mirrors. I heard Marianne say, “Don’t disturb that meeting!” When the doors swung open, there was a giant picture of Marianne and I on the screen over the stage. It was so confusing!

We walked into the room filled with our kids and grandkids, our extended family from Canada, and so many people from the city and the church that we loved. Our mentors Jerry and Patti Kirk had come from Richmond, Indiana. Friends had come from Georgia, California, and North Carolina. There were hugs, speeches, stories, videos, live Motown music, and an outrageously generous financial gift. It was totally overwhelming. Tears of joy filled my eyes. My chest pounded. It was such a powerful wave of emotions. It felt like arriving in heaven and being welcomed into a huge celebration by your loved ones.

It was like a love bomb exploded among us.

When it was time to get up and say a few words, I was grateful that we had an hour to soak it all in and get our thoughts together. Marianne spoke of the joy and kindness and the bonds of friendship and love. I noted that this was a full circle for me. My first big P&G event in Cincinnati was in that room, at first year-end management dinner in November 1984, when I heard speeches from Chairman Brad Butler and CEO John Smale. Jesus was blessing our obedience to his call in a very personal way.

God had orchestrated this party, thrown by friends full of love, in the same place that symbolized my corporate success. I don't remember everything I said, but I did share the Kingdom Gospel that saved my life, and I gave thanks to Jesus for Marianne's forgiveness, without which our family and ministry would not have ever been the same. On top of all that, the congregation gave us a six-month paid sabbatical, well beyond the three-month sabbatical we were supposed to take in 2020 before COVID canceled our plans.

Marianne had been doing lots of dreaming and planning about the sabbatical while I finished my last month at the church. One idea was front and center in her heart: to walk the Camino de Santiago (The Way of Saint James). It's an ancient pilgrimage route from St. Jean Pied de Port in southwest France to Santiago de Compostela in northwest Spain. It started in the tenth century, and approximately 200,000 pilgrims make the trek every year. The Camino was beautifully captured in the 2010 film *The Way* featuring Emilio Estevez and Martin Sheen.

My wife can dive into something new and research it like nobody's business. She read books and blogs, watched videos, scouted equipment stores, Camino websites, sent inquiry emails, and put us on a training regimen. I had serious doubts about my knees; we walked a lot but never in the league of 90-100 miles a week. We expected this could take 40-45 days at 13-14 miles a day. Marianne reported that we would be gaining a total of 50,000 feet of altitude through the hike. Climbing Mount Everest almost twice doubled my doubt!

Our approach to the trip evolved as we learned more. We did not want to be on a pre-set schedule that would feel like we were on a treadmill. We wanted to be able to stop for rest, new relationships, and any special events that might be happening. We both had been working a full-on schedule for 50 years—it was time to slow down and enjoy the journey.

We made the decision to carry our packs and remain totally flexible, so that whatever adventure opened, we would be free to jump into it. That meant we would need to be judicious about what to carry. We settled on 12-14 pounds. What does that mean? Two sets of clothes, a sweater, zero makeup or hair dryer, no food, and 1 Liter of water. Bare bones.

Our training walks were eye opening. After 10 miles with packs, Marianne was great, but my knees were toast. Compression sleeves and walking poles helped, but my knees and plantar fasciitis objected. We ordered a device to stretch my foot ligaments, and my wonderful orthopedic surgeon gave me cortisone shots in each knee. I still wasn't sure I could make it, but I knew that I had done everything I could to prepare.

Our overnight flight to Paris was half full, so we had plenty of room to stretch out and sleep. We landed feeling fresh, and with a couple of comfortable train rides, had a beautiful sunset dinner in Biarritz. The next morning, we took the early train from Bayonne through the stunning foothills of the Pyrenees and arrived at the sleepy commune of St. Jean Pied de Port. This name translates St. John [at the] Foot of [the] Pass. This was the ancient capital of the Basque province of Lower Navarre, and famous starting point for the Camino Frances route, the most popular of several hiking routes to Santiago through different parts of Spain and Portugal.

The sun crept over the mountains, and the morning air was still crisp as about a dozen pilgrims left the train, each of us silently taking it in, contemplating what we had gotten ourselves into. A few hundred meters up the hill from the train station, we found the quaint little post office and shipped our big suitcase ahead to Santiago de Compostela. With that taken care of, we shouldered our packs and walked up the hill to the old city. The combination of ancient stone walls, tile-roofed buildings, beautiful large trees, flowers splashing colors everywhere, and the deep blue sky took you back 1,000 years. Richard the Lionheart had conquered this area in 1177, but the Basque culture was still intact.

As we strolled down Citadel Street, we passed little cafes, restaurants, and auberges. We stepped into the Camino registration office and received a helpful pilgrim orientation from volunteers who had walked the route. We got our fold-out cardstock passports that would carry the stamps of all the places where we would stop. This was the proof required to receive the official Compostela certificate at the end of the Camino. We also purchased the ubiquitous symbol of the Camino, a scallop shell, to attach to our packs and identify us as pilgrims. We checked into our auberge and explored a bit before a wonderful dinner overlooking the river.

After a great night's rest and breakfast, we walked down the street, crossed the medieval bridge, and headed out of town. The road angled upward, and we were quickly past homes and climbing through occasional farmhouses, yards, and fields. It was steeper than I imagined,

and I was immediately grateful that Marianne had decided to break the first stage into two parts.

After three hours climbing 3,000 feet, we arrived at Auberge Orisson, drained by the heat and the exertion. We were rewarded with a glorious view of the mountains, a delicious lunch, and a nap. At the Auberge's traditional communal dinner, each pilgrim shared their name, country, and one word describing their hopes for the Camino. Ours were "adventure" and "inspiration"—others listed "answers," "love," "healing," and "friendship."

That night we had our first dorm experience and plenty of distraction with snoring, phone calls, and an alarm going off mistakenly at 5:30 am. Many from this group would end up being our Camino family as the journey unfolded.

The Camino's 24-kilometer first stage is the hardest of all. From St. Jean Pied de Port, the elevation gain is almost 5000 feet as you climb to the top of the Pyrenees, cross into Spain, and then descend 2500 feet into Roncesvalles. As we left Orisson on day two, a dense fog engulfed the Auberge. We walked upward for two hours and then suddenly broke through the fog into brilliant sunshine, finding dozens of peaks all around us jutting out of the fog.

It reminded me of the day my eyes opened to the Kingdom—the view changing from a murky prison into brilliant light. We were greeted by soaring hawks and flocks of lambs filling the grassy hillsides. As we crested the Pyrenees, we saw the challenging descent into Roncesvalles. The downhill was brutal on my feet, knees, and back, and I barely hobbled to our hotel. Some of our group confided to Marianne that they didn't think I was going to make it. Neither did I. That night, Marianne found some videos on the use of walking poles, so I could learn the correct descent technique. From then onward, I was 1000% better.

Over the next few days, we found our rhythm. Up early in the morning, stretch, and get on the road, using headlamps when needed. Take in the sunrise and the varied natural beauty: rocky hills, rivers, acres of vineyards, sweeping wheat fields, and tree-lined paths. We would be quiet as we meditated and prayed. After five miles or so, we would stop in a beautiful medieval village for breakfast. Here we connected with one or more of our new friends to share a meal and take care of blisters. The standard fare consisted of a cafe con leche and a tortilla, which is a crustless quiche with eggs, potatoes, and onions. Alternatives included croissants, hard-boiled eggs, and bananas. Once refueled, we headed out for another 5 miles, usually with energetic conversation and lots of laughter.

The villages were spectacular: arched stone bridges, historic churches, friendly people echoing “Buen Camino!”, and rustic cafes. The second stop of the day was all about hydration, sunscreen, getting feet up for a while, and ibuprofen. Oh yes, and for some, time for a cold beer. Then off for the last five miles, with a steady stream of pilgrims rolling into the hostels, inns, and hotels. Before the heat of the day caught us, we checked in, showered, got the laundry done, on the clothesline, and settled in for a tasty lunch.

Afternoons were free to check out the villages’ treasures: museums, ancient fortresses, and the ubiquitous 1000-plus year-old chapels and churches. Then a few quiet hours reading, napping, booking the next day’s accommodation, and chatting with family back home. The evenings usually included group dinners, with pilgrim menus offering three courses and wine for \$15. Conversations flowed joyfully into the starry evenings, a great distraction from sore legs and feet. The early risers headed to bed and the late risers partied on. Rinse and repeat.

The stories were inspiring. Hallie was an American in her late twenties, walking to honor her Dad who had passed away. Greta was a Romanian in her early 40s looking for her life’s purpose. Pete and Julie were from Canada and Singapore and had met in college. Pete wanted to honor his father who had passed recently. The Camino was way outside Julie’s comfort zone, but she attacked it with gusto. Arthur from France was in his late 30s and had quit his job to walk his second Camino and make some career decisions. Gregory and Justin were from Germany. Justin was 15 and struggling with some bad choices. His parents engaged a unique counseling service for new options in therapy. Gregory was that special counselor who agreed to walk 500 miles and help Justin find some new perspectives and skills.

Olga was from Sweden, a mom of five who was a hospital administrator burned out by COVID. Her husband and kids sent her away for a six-week reset. Trudy and Gail were sisters living on opposite coasts of Canada who hadn’t seen each other in years. Anita and Juan were widowers from Spain who walked the Camino in stages one week at a time when they could get away from work and their family commitments. This was their rare time alone together, as they hoped to one day to live in the same city. Tina owned a holistic medicine practice in Austria and had closed her practice for a much-needed renewal. Carla was from Croatia and faced an important medical procedure on her return. Every day, we saw a few of these new friends, and often 8-10 of gathered for dinner. Over the course of six weeks, conversations deepened, and so did relationships. This is the great blessing of the Camino: unhurried days, sharing the challenges, listening, encouraging each other, and laughing together.

Pilgrims over the centuries have described the Camino as having three distinct phases. The first phase is physical. The Camino starts with a bang and presents a significant physical challenge, especially the older pilgrims. But the Camino also invites people who are in a hurry to slow down, either through blisters, new relationships, or unexpected treats. When we came into Los Arcos, the whole town was dressed in white and red, and tables for dining were set up all along the main street. There would be the running of the bulls at 4 p.m. followed by a community feast. Anyone in a hurry or coming through town between noon and 4 p.m. would be drawn into the festival and face the barriers erected to protect people from the bulls. It was an instant party. The only thing to do is change your plans!

The second phase is emotional. Relationships grow, burdens are shared, and the time alone on the road has a cumulative effect on the soul. Relationships are considered. Who needs to be forgiven? Who needs to be thanked and appreciated? Where is repentance and repair needed? Will your body hold up? Marianne developed a painful ankle. She did not know when she had hurt it, but she was struggling. We had no idea if she would be able to continue. A clinic visit allayed our fears that she had fractured a bone in her foot, and a prescription for Voltaren enabled her to continue. Other friends were not so fortunate. Julie suffered a fracture in her knee joint and taxied the last 150 km while Pete finished.

We shared Julie's disappointment and included her in evening dinners even though she did not feel like it. Marianne and I got behind the main group when we took rest days to welcome our son and his family of 5, including grandkids aged 4 and 6, walking with us for three days. It was their heroic effort to keep their streak of seeing Marianne every month of their lives, and a huge emotional boost for my struggling bride. Our friends sent pictures daily on WhatsApp, and we exchanged messages of love and encouragement. Several waited in Santiago for a few days to help us celebrate our finish.

The third phase is spiritual. The Camino invites honest self-examination. As the miles wear on and the finish approaches, questions arise. Have I made the most of my journey? The history, beauty, and authenticity of conversations invite the presence of God. Everywhere. Pilgrims take stock of life and process the questions that brought them here in the first place. The churches and the crosses along the route are ever-present sentinels. The highpoint of the Camino comes at the three-quarters mark at the Cruz de Ferro (Iron Cross). Here, pilgrims leave a rock at the foot of the cross as markers of lost loved ones, prayers for the sick, and hopes for the future.

As we closed in on Santiago, we did not want the journey to end. When we reached the main square in front of the Cathedral of Santiago, we experienced waves of empathy, joy, and hope, knowing that God had brought us there by grace. The celebratory mass, with the massive incense burner swinging through the Cathedral, cast a symbolic fragrant blessing over tired and smelly pilgrims, a great metaphor for the Kingdom's invitation to grace and cleansing.

What did we learn on our 500-mile hike with Jesus and friends?

- God's presence, love, joy, friendship, and the space to take it all in were rich and stretching. I want to be more aware of the supernatural Kingdom around me.
- Marianne and I will never hurry again. Instead, we have been inspired to be present in new and deeper ways with God, each other, and those around us. Jesus was never in a hurry, he was powerfully present with every person he encountered.
- We will pursue a simpler lifestyle. Living out of a small pack for 42 days was an object lesson in living freely and lightly.
- We will pray, meditate, and enjoy solitude more consistently.
- Investing in the lives of our kids and grandkids is of higher value than ever.
- The Father wants to multiply our family-building efforts, international experience in mission trips, and mentoring Kingdom leaders.
- This book on the King and his Kingdom was birthed on the Camino.

Life in the Kingdom is a lot like the Camino. Raw and real. A journey of awakening and expectation for more in life. Sweet community. An unhurried journey.

We each have a story that the creator is writing, and he is weaving us into his epic story. The Camino helps us see that it is not about us. The world is big and complex and beautiful, and so much more interesting than our limited perspective. The Camino calls you into God's big story. It is a metaphor of his amazing Kingdom. It is an invitation into a deeper and more meaningful life. Together we overcame the physical, emotional, and spiritual limitations we started with.

The Camino is a journey into a way of life that transcends our complex world and opens to a beautiful, simple, and focused life. After 500 miles and 42 days, we could honestly say that we had kept company with the King.

The cool thing is that we can bring Camino life into the daily realities of our families, work, relationships, and responsibilities. We can learn to live as pilgrims whose true home is eternity. We can learn to simply enjoy the King and his Kingdom and see the beauty in the people we are journeying with. Jesus had once again fulfilled his promise: “Keep company with me and I will show you how to live freely and lightly.”

Reflection question:

Think of your life as a pilgrim journey. What one word would you use to describe it?

Practical application:

How could solitude, silence, simplicity and slowing down bless you?

Try one of these practices this week.