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EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA: THE PILGRIMAGE OF A GROWING LEADER

*“Once you have traveled, the voyage never ends, but
is played out over and over again in the quietest chambers . . .
the mind can never break off from the journey.”*

—Pat Conroy

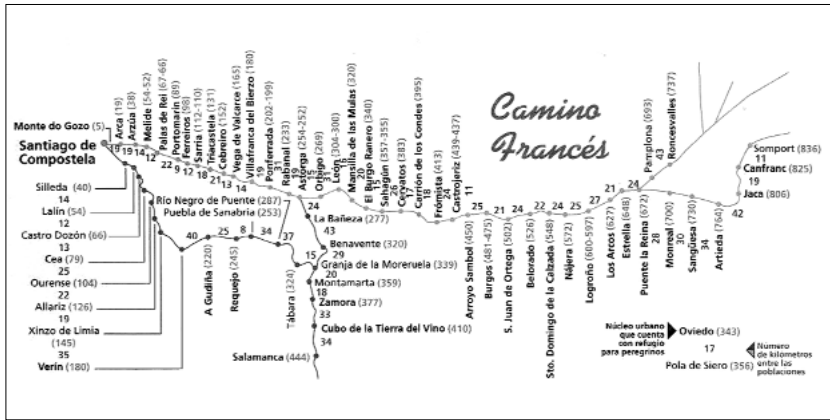
*“A true journey, no matter how long
the travel takes, has no end.”*

—William Least Heat Moon

My experience through the Leadership Program at Andrews University is like a pilgrim’s journey through El Camino de Santiago de Compostela. El Camino de Santiago de Compostela, known in English as The Way of St. James, is a Catholic pilgrimage route from St. Jean Pied de Port, France, through northwestern Spain to Santiago de Compostela, España (Figure 1). For more than 1000 years, pilgrims have walked this 780 km route (484.66 mi) to collect a “Compostela” or document that states that the person named therein had successfully completed the route for religious reasons, most notably, to pay reverence to the remains of St. James, which are claimed to be in the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela.

[Picture: Brad Map]

[Figure 1: El Camino de Santiago de Compostela, from St. Jean Pied de Port, France, to Santiago de Compostela, España.]



The Metaphor

Although El Camino has been known in Catholic circles for centuries, it has not been until the recent release of the film *The Way* (2011), starring Martin Sheen and produced by his son Emilio Estevez, that Americans outside of the Catholic tradition have become more aware of the pilgrim route and of what people do to prepare for and complete the journey. *The Way* is the fictional story about an American doctor who traveled to St. Jean Pied de Port to bring home the remains of his son who had been killed in a terrible storm while walking El Camino. The father, played by Martin Sheen, decides to take the route himself in honor of his son's quest to complete the journey. The father's journey turns out to be quite different from what he had planned, and it has a profound impact on his life, lived formerly in luxury back in California.

Tom, the father and main character played by Sheen, is inexperienced at hiking along roads and trails, through mountains and valleys, and into and out of small villages and towns. He discovers, however, that he was not alone on the journey. Tom meets many other travelers from around the world along the way, each with their own issues and reasons for making the journey and seeking greater meaning in their own lives. Among the pilgrims Tom meets are a Dutchman, a Canadian, and an Irish writer who suffers from writer's block. As the synopsis from *The Way* (2011) website states:

From the unexpected and, oftentimes, amusing experiences along "The Way," this unlikely quartet of misfits creates an everlasting bond and Tom begins to learn what it means to be a citizen of the world again. Through Tom's unresolved relationship with his son, he discovers the difference between "the life we live and the life we choose."

After viewing this film, I became extremely interested in learning more about El Camino and the people who embark upon this trek

through the Pyrenees to the supposed resting place of St. James' remains. It has been reported throughout the years that El Camino has been traveled by thousands of people from of all sorts of life. Among them are Charlemagne, Pope Calixtus II, King Alfonso II, El Cid, and many noblemen, priests, farmers, beggars, healthy, sick, blind, lame, rich and poor, women and men.

What is interesting is that it takes quite a bit of planning to accomplish this trip successfully. Just look at the wealth of expert advice on the Internet on the El Camino Santiago website (2011). Here are some important insights.

First, a pilgrim must plan his time. There is no set time to complete the journey. Some pilgrims travel quickly, some do it in spurts or stages, and some go at the journey very slowly. Most people average between 20 and 25 km per day. The important point to note about time is that the journey requires effort. Travelers must make progress continually if they are going to reach the destination. There are physical challenges that one must overcome and that can consume time, but that is the beauty of the journey—the satisfaction of completing a difficult task.

All pilgrims face difficulties along the path and have to overcome bad times. But no El Camino traveler is ever alone. The people on the same journey will help and encourage any pilgrim along the way. People may enter the journey on El Camino alone or in a group; some make the journey alone, but many travel together. They meet many interesting people along the way and make many new friends. There are times when pilgrims want to walk alone and there are times when they want to join up with others such as at a local hostel or eating establishment at day's end.

Pilgrims also plan their resources for the journey. Most plan a budget of 25 to 40 Euros per day. They take the opportunity to eat with locals in small villages and enjoy the company and gastronomy that comes along with it. These interpersonal interactions with so many people help pilgrims to carry on till the end.

Expert travelers of El Camino offer sound advice on how to pack for the journey. The caution is to not to overpack and be weighed down with a lot of unnecessary equipment or supplies. They strongly caution pilgrims not to take on more than they can handle. The essentials are all that is needed to complete the journey, no matter its length. The essentials for a successful trip along El Camino include a sleeping bag and mat, 2-3 cotton t-shirts, a couple of pairs of comfortable lightweight pants, 3 pairs of thick socks, underwear, a good pair of boots, small containers of toiletries, sun screen, medication and first aid, and an El

Camino guide book so the traveler will never get lost. And above all, the one lesson pilgrims should take with them is: If in doubt, ask!

At the El Camino de Santiago (2011) website, a traveler documented one day in his journey along El Camino this way:

El Camino de Santiago is a new life, a life inside your life where you have the chance of truly being yourself, a return to the basics of the human being, where you have the chance of paying attention to the small things that we always forget in our “busy-lives” . . .

You meet people in your Camino and you really listen to them, you feel a connection with them, they are not strangers. You learn from them and care about them. You feel hungry and think about how and where you will eat: under a tree, beside a stream of water or in the next village you will find. You feel tired but very healthy. The Sun is giving you strength. You continue enjoying the day and nature and observing everything that happens around you . . .

The Sun is dying now. It is time to rest and wait for the following day. You can choose where you will sleep: in the next village? In the small albergue enjoying a dinner of local food and nice company?

Or maybe under the stars in the warm night . . . And the following day the cycle starts again. You will choose how far you want to walk, you will choose your route, you will choose where you will stop to stare at something. . . .

Once you have been seduced by its charm you can't even tell if you have been there just for a few days or for years.

This journal entry captures the essence of the pilgrim experience along El Camino. It is not just the “Compostela” at the end of the journey, but the journey itself that makes the person, and that is all the difference in the world. After viewing *The Way* and learning more about El Camino, I knew I had found the perfect metaphor to represent my leadership competencies. My personal journey through the Leadership Program is likened to that of a pilgrim’s journey along El Camino de Santiago de Compostela.

An Academic El Camino Pilgrimage

Now that I have identified this metaphor with my quest in the Leadership Program, I want to share with you its parts and meanings as they relate to my journey. (I have summarized them in a table at the end of this article.)

The Plan

First, just like a pilgrim preparing to make the journey along El Camino, I began my journey in the Leadership Program with a plan in mind. I had already completed a Master’s degree in Educational Administration so I felt I had a pretty good foundation for where I needed to go with the doctoral program. Little did I know how much more I would grow, and now

that I am at the finish line, I am solidified in the realization that I will continue to grow as a leader for as long as I continue to draw breath!

One critical element in the Leadership Program was the requirement for students to complete an Individual Development Plan (IDP) which would serve as a “road map” through the doctoral program. My IDP included a vision statement for my leadership and it documented how I would reach an acceptable level of proficiency in 20 different competency areas through professional experiences, projects, reflection, coursework, and a dissertation. I created my IDP, which not only documented what I had already accomplished as a leader, but it also projected areas I needed to become more skilled in along the journey. So I added those elements to my IDP and coursework plan.

The Support of Peers

I also participated in workshops and regional group meetings, another required component of the program. These experiences focused primarily on what I needed to do to be successful through the journey. Some of the meetings were trailblazing for the entire Leadership Program. For example, I remember during one regional group meeting, Dr. Freed, a founding member of the Leadership Program, introduced our group to the concept of regional group member “sign-offs” for the 20 competencies. Prior to this, a small team of faculty members, including the student’s advisor, were the ones who evaluated the level of student proficiency in each competency area. But the program faculty felt that this process needed to be expanded and now asked each of the members of a student’s learning group to evaluate and eventually “sign off” on each competency. This new concept made competency assessment and evaluation a shared responsibility between peers and faculty. This new practice gave a new purpose for the existence of regional learning groups. Peers were now able to help each other to navigate their way through the program, much like peer travelers help each other along El Camino. That was truly a groundbreaking moment in that it brought clarity to the purpose of regional groups and helped define how members assist one another through the journey.

The El Camino Community

Pilgrims who travel El Camino meet interesting people during their journey. The same has been true in my experience through the Leadership Program. I have met many people along the way who have guided me, who have influenced me, and who have made me a better person. First,

there are my fellow travelers, that is, the other students in the program. We have traveled many kilometers together, working our way through difficult passages, celebrating in each others' successes, and providing a continuous support mechanism. Then there are the locals, that is, the professors and support staff in the Leadership Program. These people are the experts who know how to navigate the different stages of the journey and who offer never-ending advice and encouragement. They even feed you! Finally, there are the guidebooks themselves, that is, the experts in the competency areas that led me along the way and helped me to form my belief system. Some of the great leaders I encountered at different stages along the journey include Fred Jones (2000) and his *Positive Classroom Management*; Marzano (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001) with his *Classroom Instruction That Works*; Joyce (Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2004) and his *Models of Teaching*; DuFour and Eaker (1998) with their *Professional Learning Communities*; and Reeves (see Besser, Anderson-Davis, & Peery, 2008) with the Data Team process. And of course there are many others who led the way for me to be successful in this journey.

Milestones

An important component in planning a journey is the creation of a travel plan or road map that takes the pilgrim through the different stages of El Camino. I see the different stages of El Camino in the development of the competencies. One stage of my journey represents a star competency area of an effective teacher/instructor. A star competency is one area in which a student has to show a level of competency significantly beyond the mere proficiency level. Being an effective instructor of students, an instructor of instructors, and mentor/coach to instructors and other educational leaders has been the essence of my professional career. A second stage in the journey was the effective change agent with skills in planning and implementing change, developing human resources, and public relations. My work includes planning and implementing change, helping people transition through the change process, helping people develop their fullest potential, utilizing those people skills for the good of the individual as well as the organization, and promoting public relations. Like pilgrims who help each other along El Camino, I constantly work to bring people along, whether that be through professional development, encouragement, nudging, mentoring, reaffirming, motivating, or empowering. A third stage of the journey represented the competency of an effective organizer. In my work I function often in an organizing

role in which I clarify how people understand the curricular and instructional expectations so they know the “route” of the journey, how their skills and talents contribute to the make-up of the whole, and how they can operate within the milieu of district, state, and federal laws, regulations and policies.

Another stage of the journey was the collaborative consultant competency cluster, in which I strive to keep communication channels open at all levels and where I use evaluation and assessment measures as the basis for the decision-making process, a necessary component in solving organizational and personal issues and problems. A fifth stage of El Camino represented a reflective researcher. I have learned that this competency group is extremely critical for making decisions, planning, executing, and for being a capable learner. This stage involved the dissertation research, and I cherish the thought of the continual enhancement of this skill. The final stage of the journey embodied a competent scholar who has a broad-based understanding of information that helps him connect all of the stages together for a successful journey along El Camino.

Each stage of El Camino that is completed by a pilgrim marks a milestone in accomplishment. At some locations the pilgrim is granted some type of recognition about reaching that stage of the journey. Just like the pilgrims of El Camino, I accomplished milestones at different stages of the journey. As the pilgrims of El Camino traverse on the path, many of them record their experiences and the milestones they have reached along the way. Just like these pilgrims, I have documented the different achievements in my leadership journey throughout the program—these are represented as artifacts in my portfolio.

As the quotations at the beginning of this reflection suggest, even once all of the stages have been joined together and the goal has been reached, the journey will never end. No, the reward is not only in the “Compostela” or diploma at the end, nor is it only in the journey itself. Rather, it is in the lessons learned from the journey, through its completion, that the leader comes to the realization that the journey continues as a commitment to life-long learning.

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