

THE WAY: Trusting the Journey You Didn't Plan For
Final Week of a 3-Week Series, "Lessons Learned from Our Lived Experience"
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So, I would like to share with you a journey I took with myself and my husband, "The Way." It's called, "Trusting the Journey You Didn't Plan For." I will trust in you, right?

So, Shirley MacLaine wrote a book a long time ago. I probably read it 30 years ago. And it's about ... And by the way, did you know she's still alive? She's an actor. She's still alive: 92 years old. She's still alive. Wow! She's kicking it, right? She's too ornery. [Laughs]

So, she wrote a book a long time ago called "The Camino, A Journey of Spirit." And she spoke on her intention to walk this pilgrimage across Spain. And she talked about what she took with her; what she released along the way; and what it felt like to be on the other side of this adventures.

Pilgrims/pilgrimages are nothing new. Like this slide here. Moses led the Israelites out of Israel, right? Wandering 40 years towards the promised land that they couldn't see. No one knew. They just had faith that it was there. Jonah was running as far as he could from his calling as a boat could carry him the other way -- before the sea itself turned him back around toward the very thing he was avoiding. And Joseph and Mary walked the road of Bethlehem, not knowing what they would find or what they would do when they got there ... just that they had to go.

So, pilgrimages are not just Christian, either. They're in every religion. There's some in Islam, Judaism, Hinduism ... and the list goes on. And people have been taking pilgrimages for a long time. And the Camino de Santiago was my dream. And I thought it looked pretty easy, myself. Little did I know!

So, about a decade had passed when this picture comes up right here. You can see the Camino right there. You can go back. You can see the Camino going across the screen. There. That's the line: 586 miles, this particular path. So, I had decided that someday I would take this journey.

And when I was going to SWIHA -- anybody go to SWIHA? Southwest Institute of Healing Arts? Yeah, I went there a long time ago. And in one of my coaching sessions -- we always share coaching. And I said, *"I want to go on this walk."*

And they're like, *"Well, have you told your husband?"*

I went, *"Nooooooo."* We'd only been married a year. So, I was like, *"I don't want to bring that up because it's going to be ..."*

But they said, *"I dare you to go home."* And nobody dares me to do anything! So I did. I went home and I said, *"So there's this pilgrimage across Spain that I'd really like to take."*

And he said, *"What's that?"*

And I said, *"It's called the Camino de Santiago."* And he had never heard of it, which shocked me. Because, I mean, I had known about it for so long. So, he started looking it up, and we started planning. It took us nearly a year, but then we were on our flight to France. We had been training, and we were planning on leaving from St. Jean-Pied-de-Port, which is east of the Pyrenees Mountains.

And as in all journeys/pilgrimages, there's more than one path. This particular path that you see right there was the one that they said was St. James the Great, one of Jesus' 12 disciples. They said after his martyrdom in 44 AD, legend says that his body was miraculously transported across northern Spain on this trail, and that his remains lie enshrined at the Compostela at the end ... which I got to see, which was amazing. You know, legend tells us, right?

So, we were very excited, and we did all the work. We began at that little town on the foot of the Pyrenees, and we knew that there was 586 miles ahead of us. We had read all the books, cover to cover.

We packed as light as we could, because every ounce counts when you're backpacking for six weeks. We took one pair of clothes to wear and one pair of clothes to wash. That's what we had the whole way. Two pairs of boots for hiking in case one got wet. And, of course, we had our rain gear and stuff.

We trained our bodies for months. We loaded these backpacks -- not with the stuff to have, but with like flour bags and stuff. And we walked all over Phoenix at the time, just with these backpacks going up and down the mountain -- Thunderbird Mountain; I mean, everywhere we could just try to get used to the tracking through there. And we even learned a little bit of Spanish; really not enough to do anything, but we knew where the bathroom was, the hotel was, and where the food was. [Congregants laugh] So we figured ... And I already knew how to say taco, but, you know.

So, this picture here, you know, most of us kind of approach big transactions in the same way in our lives, right? A new job, a marriage, a diagnosis, a movie, a season of grief. We read what we can. We prepare what we can. We train ourselves as best we can. And there's a wisdom in that, right? Preparing matters. Then life happens.

And the first lesson of the Camino taught me no amount of preparation tells you what the road will actually be.

So, there were the guidebooks. But guess what? Everybody read the guidebooks. We hadn't counted that everybody was reading these same books, and everybody said show up in September. We were there in September, and it was packed.

Next, the one with the albergues in it, the beds. Everybody was very friendly. Even the villagers were very friendly. But the path was packed. I mean, it wasn't just people walking. There were people on horseback, and there were people riding bikes. And this path -- it's a hiking thing. It's not like it's all land like this. I mean, you go up and down and around and everywhere. It's really crazy in some parts.

The very first day, we were at 17 kilometers up the Great Pyrenees. And then it was 13 down, just to get to the first albergue. And we were just dead tired. I mean, we fell over in our things that day.

So, the albergues were all filled to the brim. We had all these college students. We didn't know that European colleges had just let out in September, too. So, everybody was flooding this. And with all these kids running around, doing what kids do -- no problem there -- it just was very uncomfortable for myself and my husband in this place. Because we had planned on going from albergue to Albergue -- which is a hostel is what they're saying. Going albergue to albergue, like you see on here in the picture, and just staying there. That was the cheapest way to travel, right?

After about three nights of trying to find a bed and fighting all these kids that were getting up at 3 o'clock in the morning. These college students that were getting... [Audio Issues]

So back to this. So, these 20-something-year-olds were getting up at 3 a.m. to get to the next albergue by noon so they could get a bed. And my husband and I were dawdling along at 6 o'clock. You know, taking our time, getting there at 8 o'clock, there's nothing. And if there's nothing there, you have to go to the next town or you have to pay for a hotel.

So, after about three nights of that, we said, "*Nah, nah, nah.*" We started paying for hotels. We had every stop planned along the way, but we adjusted. This was our first course correction, right? We started booking hotels away. "*So how far can we get from here to here? This is our next stop. We'll make it at least 17 miles, and then that's our next hotel.*" So, we would do that. And that worked out. We used booking.com, so we didn't even have to understand Spanish. [Congregants laugh] It works over there, too! So, it was wonderful that way. It did cost more. It cut into our budget quite a bit. But the quiet was worth the euros.

So that was the good part. So, that was course correction number one. It was small. And you look back at it now, it's kind of funny. Although in the time, it didn't feel very funny.

So, we were headed for course correction number two. The first couple of weeks, we stayed right on schedule. Right there. Six weeks we knew start to finish. And that was the plan, and we were holding to it. We met a lot of people along the way -- wonderful people. And everybody was looking for the Americans. We thought maybe there was somebody special there, but it was us. And I didn't know how we were special -- just being the Americans on the road. But it was like, *"Oh yeah, we saw the Americans!"* Okay, that's us!

For some reason, they had everything to ask us about our presidents at the time. So that was interesting, too. This was 2012.

So, we actually greeted hundreds, maybe thousands, of pilgrims. And you say, *"Buen Camino,"* which is "good way." So, it's a "nice travels."

But after about two weeks of pounding the pavement -- not pounding the pavement, but the dirt -- going up, going down on these hills, my feet said, *"That's enough."* I got plantar fasciitis. And if you've never had it, consider yourself lucky, because it is excruciating pain. It feels like you're walking on broken glass. So, my feet hurt so much we couldn't move. I couldn't walk. So, we had to stop. We were not at our next destination. We were about halfway through.

So, there was a town that we got to. Well, it wasn't really a town; it was like a road on the side of the road with a grocery store. It was half grocery store, half bar. And there was another couple there. It was two women: a daughter and her mother. The daughter spoke English and Bulgarian, and the mother spoke Bulgarian and French. And so we -- through these translators -- they went inside and asked how we can get on the trail.

Now, we had already booked our place up here, thinking, *"Okay, we're set."* There was no way we were getting there. We took the closest spot we could. So, we canceled that one and found another one. And when they went in there, they came out a while later and they said, *"Okay, there's a bus that comes by, and you can get on that bus and it will take you to the next town you're looking for."*

We're like, *"Oh, yay!"* We probably waited three hours for the bus, and we got on it. They didn't even charge us to get on it. We just got on the bus, sat there with our backpacks. And there's this elderly man driving, and there's another elderly man. And he's sitting in a seat that's this way, and they're talking back and forth, and they gave me dirty looks like, you know *"Grr grr grr."* We didn't know what they're saying.

So, we were trying to translate through the mother and the daughter. *"What are they saying about us?"* You know; *"What's going on?"* Until there was a young man over here that spoke English, and he said, *"They're putting you out at the next stop. You're on the wrong bus."*

We had no idea where we were -- in the middle of nowhere. And it was just like, *"Oh, now what?"* Even the town that was closest, we were still probably 15 kilometers from it. And there was no way I could walk. Now, the other mother and daughter, they could walk ahead, but I wasn't going to be walking, and my husband certainly wasn't going to be carrying two backpacks and me.

So, we were in a panic and the kid over here with his girlfriend says, *"Hold on, I've got it."* And he picks up his cell phone and he calls somebody. And they're saying whatever they're saying. And he goes, *"Okay, when you get there, there'll be a car waiting for you. And this car for 20 bucks a piece will take you to the town you want to go to."*

Yes! All right! We were going to be okay. So, we get there and there's this little tiny red car. I kid you not. It was about that big. Now, you can imagine four backpackers with everything they own on their back. With the -- I mean, the pads, the sleeping bags, everything -- trying to get into that; trying to get into that car.

And what happened was the three backpacks went in the back. And my husband sat in the back between the two women, and he had his backpack on him. And we're driving down the road. [Audio problems]

This guy is going crazy. So, he's driving crazy through the roads. And you know, what dawned on me at this time is, *"We don't know these people."* This is like a horror movie starting, right? We just get in a car with somebody we had no idea. We have all of our money and everything with us, and they're taking us to God knows where. But it worked out okay. They took us where we needed to go. Of course, because I wouldn't be here if they didn't, right?

So, there was a campground that we needed to sleep at instead of the hotel that we had hoped to sleep at. And that was okay. We spent a couple of days there. But from then on in the trip, it was walk one day; rest two days. We had six weeks to go 586 miles. We didn't have time to rest two days. It was supposed to be walk every single day the whole way. We were going to have two days at the end to rest. That was it.

So, we had to fall back and punt. Course correction, right?

As we're going along the trail, we still keep going. One day out, then we rest for two days. One day out, then we rest for two days. We ran into a young lady that was walking with us when I had first hurt my feet. She was covered in bites. Do you remember that albergue we were supposed to go to that we had booked the time at? It was full of bed bugs. And we had missed that.

So sometimes course corrections can actually work in your favor! At least for us it did! And once you get bed bugs on the Camino, you can't sleep in any more of the beds or the hotels. They won't let you. Even if you get the cure from it, they assume that you're contaminated at that point. Really, I don't know where they let you sleep because you can't camp there, either. So, you have to keep going. So, it was awful.

So, we get to this picture here. And the next course creation, this is where I might stumble just a little bit. In our way there, you don't have a lot of reception for cellular service. So, when you get to the town, your phone goes "ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding." All the things you missed, right? Going off, going off.

So, we get to this one town and my husband's phone's just blasting. All these little messages, messages: *"Call home, call home, call home."* We're like, *"What the heck?"*

You know, my daughter, her husband and the kids – the ones I'm raising right now -- were living in our house, taking care of our horses, taking care of our dogs. Everything seemed to be okay. We thought, *"Okay, it should be okay."*

It was his brother, and there was a tragic accident and we lost Baxter, the horse. Now Baxter was his baby. He got him when he was six months old, and at this point he was 13 years old. [Chokes up] It was just over the top at that point. We knew that it was something we had to do.

So, actually on the Camino -- on this particular walk -- the last 100 kilometers is all you really need to get the certificate that you walked the whole thing, minus everything else. So, we took a train to that spot, and we walked. 100 kilometers in three days. In pouring rain. Mud, slush. I told my husband that the world was crying with us because it was just so overwhelming at that point.

But we got there and we got our little certificate. We managed to get to the train station. We had to take a train to Madrid to get on the airline. We had to change over all of our tickets because, you know, we wanted to go home earlier than we actually had it scheduled. And that cost us a fortune as well because, oh, you want to go home tomorrow? Yeah, we'll pay for it. We can pay for it tomorrow.

But we did it anyway because we knew we needed to get home. There was just too much loss. And I don't think we even spoke the whole flight home from Madrid, Spain. I mean, from Madrid. It was just; it was just too much.

So, if you'd asked me the night before we left -- if you'd handed me a piece of paper, a blank piece of paper -- and said, *"What do you not want on your road on the Camino?"* I would have told you, *"I don't want those crowded trails, those college kids, the backpack, the hostels being full, the plantar fasciitis,*

the bed bugs, the flying home early, all the extra added costs that we had for the extra hotels and the flight home early And losing Baxter. Losing Baxter, which was the hardest hit." So, it's funny that this happened 15 years ago and I'm still so affected by him. Because he was like a puppy dog. He was such a sweetheart. He was a big draft horse and he was just lovely.

So, looking back now, I know there was another plan unfolding beneath the one that we had created. It was God's plan, quietly guiding every step, whether we recognized it or not.

Isaiah 30: 21 reminds us that whether you turn to the right or you turn to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, *"This is the way; walk in it."* God was always leading us, gently leading us home.

Along the Camino, I learned to lean on another person in ways that probably decades worth of soft marriage would have never helped me do, helped me understand. I discovered that the journey is not the destination. It's the journey that changes us. It makes us who we are.

And the Compostela certificate is beautiful, and it's wonderful to have. You have it all hanging up and everything with all the little stamps along the way, and it's wonderful. But I learned that no guidebook -- no matter how well-researched or highly recommended -- can spare us life on life's terms. Life arrives anyway, bedbugs and all.

I learned that God often prepares the way, even when it looks like nothing is happening on the map that you thought was going to happen. Some of my greatest gifts were the completely unexpected: the breathtaking mountain vistas. The peak of the Great Pyrenees. I got to stand on it. It was amazing. It was beautiful. The ancient churches steeped in centuries of prayer. And the sacred moments only found after I stopped trying to control what was going on.

That, I believe, is the true gift of my Camino. Not the certificate at the end, not the cathedral. The real gift is the transformation that happens between the space of what life you planned and the life God has planned for you.

Near the end of her book, Shirley MacLaine shares a thought that has stayed with me all these years. And she writes once again: *"The pilgrim returns home. That is when the real journey begins."*

And I think she's right.

As I begin to close this for tonight, I want to say: Where in your life do you feel off course right now? Where has the plan you so carefully packed fallen apart? Maybe it's your health, relationship, work, finances, grief, or even your faith.

If it's where you find yourself today, I want to offer you the same gift that Camino offered me. You're not lost. You may simply be realigning with the life Spirit has led you toward all along.

Truth teaching in Unity says that in every moment you live in the presence of One Power and One Presence: the Divine Spirit. Spirit knows the way, sees the bigger picture, and is always guiding you towards your highest good. Listen for that still, quiet voice within. It isn't criticizing you for the detours you've taken. It's gently whispering, *"This is the way; walk in it."*

See how hard to say it is? *"This is the way; walk in it."*

May you learn to trust your journey, embrace the unexpected, and discover the gifts waiting where your plans end and God's unfolds. Buen Camino, my friends.