The Camino is about Stopping:
A Chaplain’s Sabbatical Journey

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To utter “walk” and “stop” in the same breath seems something of an oxymoron—especially when the “walk” is a thirty-six day trek across France and Spain. The author, a chaplain gifted with a rare sabbatical, completed this journey with “three amigos” in summer 2008. This article, distilled from her journey on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, urges chaplain colleagues to discover their individual ways of stopping.

SUMMER 2008 BROUGHT A RARE GIFT to me as a chaplain: a two-month sabbatical, my first in twenty-nine years of ordained ministry. The time was spent walking the 500-mile pilgrim route known as the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. Camino simply means “way” in Spanish, the Way of St. James. My three companions and I walked from St. Jean Pied de Port in southwestern France, across the Pyrenees, through Pamplona where the bulls ran a few days later, across the wheat fields of the Meseta, through lush vineyards and Galicia’s eucalyptus forests to Santiago in northwest Spain and its beautiful cathedral dedicated to St. James. It took us thirty-six days, and except for blisters and some tired muscles, we arrived safely for the Feast of St. James on July 25.

My mind still is filled with gorgeous scenery, hospitable people and the life of wandering on foot, much as Jesus and his disciples must have walked. In the intervening months, I have tried to distill some of the learnings of this journey, especially as they pertain to our discipline of chaplaincy. The foremost insight is about stopping.

At the end of day five of our trip, one of our foursome had developed severe blisters on her feet that required her to take a bus to our day’s destination, a town called Estella. Apparently blisters are not unusual at this point on the Camino, because the Cruz Roja (Red Cross) had set up a foot clinic just a few doors down from our pilgrim hotel. The clinic had a delightfully jolly Basque doctor, with long, curly hair and brown legs in Bermuda shorts. He giggled readily at the pilgrims’ complaints and gave out bear hugs, while speaking no English, and, it seemed, minimal Spanish!

His assistant and translator, Simone, was a stunning young woman from Brazil. She had attempted to walk the Camino, despite having had four open-heart surgeries. When she experienced difficulty breathing, her doctors told her that her heavy backpack was straining her still-healing sternum, and she should not continue the walk. Greatly disappointed, but having fallen in love with a volunteer at the clinic, Simone decided to stay and help other pilgrims. She was sympathetic to my companion’s blistered feet and swollen ankles, and she wisely confided, “The Camino is about stopping.” Not about the walk itself, but about stopping.

Her words hit home in multiple ways and situations. The sabbatical was about stopping my normal day-to-day ministry at the hospital, filled with rushing from one emergency, trauma or tragedy to another; responding to pages, voice-mail and referrals. In its place was a totally different activity, one that was physical and strenuous but also often isolated and contemplative.

Stopping came in the form of needing to ask directions when we couldn’t find the yellow arrows or scallop shells that point the way. Stopping came as we waited in the heat of the day with our
backpacks lined up next to those of other pilgrims at the door of a hostel not yet open. Stopping came as I retraced my steps to locate my sunglasses, walking stick or some other item I had left behind.

More importantly, it was stopping old habits of impatience, judgment and what the Buddhists call the “monkey mind” of distracting thoughts, plans and scatteredness. These keep me from being in the present moment and staying focused on each step toward a deeper relationship with God, with my companions, with those around me, in an attitude of gratitude and prayer.

Joyce Rupp, a Roman Catholic sister and prolific author, was one of my inspirations for walking the Camino. She undertook it some five years ago at the age of sixty. The title of her book about that journey came from the advice of another pilgrim: “Drink more water and walk in a relaxed manner.”1 Like Rupp and her companion, we sometimes felt the pressure to hurry our walk in order to get a bed in the next pilgrim hostel. In Rupp’s words,

Our unspoken motto became: Push onward. Push forward. Push, push, push. Rush, rush, rush. We soon discovered that the rushing and pushing caused us to lose our enjoyment of the walk itself ... [we] had a good talk and both agreed the stress of hurrying denied us our inner harmony and the spiritual adventure of the Camino. We decided to slow down ... [we] reminded each other of this often by simply saying: Time to stop hoofing it!2

The lesson of stopping comes home to me again and again in my ministry and in the ways I refresh myself when the ministry day is done. I make it a practice to stop at the local YMCA on my way home from the hospital. Here I spend an hour in physical exertion that helps me lay down the emotional exertion of the day. My obsessing about the day’s deaths, traumas, pain, and suffering are put down for the moment. As I sweat on the cross trainer or stationary bicycle, I read novels and short stories. The Maine snow piles up outside, and life comes back into proportion; I let God be God. The Camino continues to teach me about self-care and about my small role in God’s colossal economy.

The stopping also underlines new priorities I place on patient/chaplain encounters. Like other health care providers, I find myself too often focused on numbers, quotas and recordkeeping. “The clock is ticking, there are ten more new admissions to see before the day’s end,” my internal supervisor admonishes. Then I meet Mr. S. The social worker has asked for a pastoral care consult on this man with a PhD in theology, now suffering from dementia. Confined to a wheelchair and a bit scruffy in hospital pajamas, he has a vacant look. “How much time do you have?” he asks as I pull

Judith Blanchard (at left) and her Camino companions, better known during the trek as the “four amigos.”
up a chair. My Camino clock reminds me that I have all the time it takes to listen, to affirm, to be present. We don’t talk theology; we talk about his Airedale terriers and how he misses walking them; how he’s terrified that he won’t ever get to see them again.

Rupp’s final lesson of the Camino is a reminder to pause and reflect, which she describes as “my inner stop sign. In my hurried life, it is essential to ‘stop, look, and listen’ before crossing to the next piece of life’s journey.” Like Rupp, I often paused at the top of a rise, to catch my breath, sure, but more importantly, to look back on the gorgeous countryside and to congratulate myself on the distance I had traveled. Stopping is important for looking back, for staying in the moment, and for re-orienting oneself for what lies ahead. It is in stopping that gratitude can grow.

Rupp writes of her beloved companion, Father Tom Pfeffer, who died suddenly just six months after their return to the United States.

Tom said, “I thought about the many little things that really helped our pilgrimage.” … bunk beds by a wall to provide a tiny bit of privacy, ladders between the top and bottom bunks making the climb up and down easier, those little bits of shade on the mesa, soft grass cushioning our weary feet, village fountains to fill our water bottles, stones, logs, and benches on which we sat when we needed a rest. His naming of these things restored my gratitude for them.

Since the Camino, reflection has become a much more integral part of my ministry in the hospital in two concrete ways. I now keep a book of deaths that occur in the hospital with contact information for the next of kin. At the end of the year, I write personal notes to these families with remembrances of their loved ones and how they have touched my life.

I also close each day with a discipline of gratitude. Before retiring, I spend time remembering the human vistas that have passed before me, the companions on my daily walk, and I thank God for them and for the privilege to accompany them as their chaplain. Like Tom, it’s the little things that I remember:

- “Hey, Church Lady!” and a warm smile from a unit clerk.
- A “chance” encounter with a patient’s wife even though he was not on my list of new admissions to see.
- An e-mail from a daughter sitting vigil with her father in our hospice house, giving thanks for all the prayers coming their way.
- The two-year-old with forearm immobilized under an IV needle, gamely “driving” a red wagon being pushed by his chaplain with chemo pole in tow.
- A maintenance man holding out my glove as I retrace my footsteps back to the office at the end of a long day, certain that I had lost another one for good.

Looking back on today with gratitude deepens my prayer life, restores proportion to that which may feel like failure, and gives me a sense of eager anticipation for tomorrow.

As I reflect on my sabbatical journey, I am filled with gratitude to my chaplaincy board which approved the time away and to the Louisville Institute for a grant that not only paid for my time in Spain but also for my replacement at Maine Medical Center. I find myself zealous to spread the word to chaplain colleagues: find a way to put a sabbatical into your contract! It’s not clear to me why our parish clergy and academic colleagues have this gift almost automatically. We must find a way as a profession to claim this time for rest and renewal, and there are resources available to underwrite the costs.
We all need to find ways for significant stopping in our lives. Yours may not be a 500-mile walk. There may be a book in you that needs writing; a research project that always gets back-burnered in the press of daily tasks; a language you have wanted to learn or a spiritual practice that seems to evaporate with the first page of the day; a call to create space for deepening your prayer life, the well of your compassion. Whatever it may be, dream big! Make it happen!

2 Ibid., page 54, 57.
3 Ibid., page 252.
4 Ibid., page 251.