

Lessons for Life's Journey from El Camino de Santiago: Grace Notes
Psalm 104:1, 10-24
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Long, long ago, in what seems like a galaxy far, far away, we used to listen to music on something called vinyl records. These are long gone, of course, to be replaced by CD's as CD's are being replaced by MP3's. And while these newer forms of technology have many things to recommend them, they are inferior to vinyl records in one important way.

You can only play them at one speed. In the olden days, before computers or 500-channel cable television or video on demand, if you were hard up for entertainment, you and your friends could spend an entire afternoon enjoying the hilarious results of playing records at the wrong speed. Play a 45 rpm recording of Elvis at 78, and he would sound like a chipmunk on crack.

Or play a 45 of the Beatles at 33, and the music would sloooooow down so much they sounded like the Frankensteins.

When I was walking the 500 miles of El Camino de Santiago, I felt like life was being played in super-slow speed. We live in a rush, rush, hurry, hurry, I need it yesterday world. Walking to get where you are going each day slows everything down to, well, a walking pace.

Time and distance take on different dimensions when you walk everywhere. Two miles is a long way. Fifteen miles, which in a car is almost nothing, is a whole day's walk. Fifty miles seems unimaginably far. No wonder one of the symbols for the pilgrim is a snail. A snail is slow and steady, and carries everything on its back.

Life on El Camino is life in the slow lane. I found living at this super-slow snail speed to be an incredible gift, giving me time to experience and appreciate what I came to think of as “grace-notes”—moments of rejoicing in the small beauties and joys of life, things that at home I often take for granted or never take the time to notice at all.

As I understand it, in music the grace note can be dispensed with. It does not carry the main melody and isn't, technically speaking, necessary to complete the structure of a musical piece. But a grace note has an important function—it underlines the emotion of a melody, giving it freshness and vivacity. (*Joseph Sittler, Grace Notes, p. 9*) On my 500 mile trek down El Camino de Santiago, the grace notes I experienced underlined the beauty of life, and gave me a new perspective and appreciation to things I normally take for granted.

Life on El Camino is simple. You get up. You walk. You eat. You find a place to stay. You shower. You do laundry. You sleep. And the next day you do it all over again. When life is boiled down to its basics, you come to appreciate every small pleasure.

Ice water. Clean safe drinking water is plentiful on El Camino. Ice is not. After a hot morning's walk, finding a bar that served ice water was like finding an oasis in the desert. I can't imagine the finest champagne tasting any better than that glass of ice cold water.

Hot showers. A hot shower when you are hot and dirty is one of life's most delicious pleasures.

Washing machines. When you only have two or three changes of clothes, you do laundry every single day, laboriously washing your clothes out by hand and hanging

them out to dry, just as our foremothers used to do. I came to hate doing laundry. One of the small luxuries I permitted myself was once a week to go in with 2 or 3 other pilgrims and wash our clothes in a washing machine. And, if we were feeling decadently self-indulgent, we would even dry them in a dryer instead of hanging them up.

Walking El Camino taught me to appreciate the grace notes of things like cold water and hot showers, things that I usually take for granted, but which are unimaginable luxuries for much of the world. Since I have come home, I have tried to make a spiritual practice of pausing to give thanks for such small blessings.

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago the joy of community I experienced on El Camino. Some of my most cherished grace notes came in brief but memorable encounters with the Spanish folks I met along the way.

The volunteer hospitaleros who welcomed us so warmly at the albergue in Bercianos del Real Camino. This albergue is located at the end of a tumbledown village that looked like a set for a Sergio Leone movie. You expected Clint Eastwood to come riding into town with guns blazing, not two Spanish brothers who greeted us with big smiles and a cup of water, and that evening lovingly prepared a dinner of authentic Spanish paella.

The cheerful barrista in Sahagun, who grabbed my empty water bottle off the counter and filled it without even being asked, returning it to me with a delightful warm smile.

The old man who ran a café out of his garage in a tiny village down a dirt road. He prepared my friend Lola and me the best ham sandwiches we ever had, thick with

cured Spanish ham and a delicious local cheese. As we were eating he came out and visited with us. Somehow we made ourselves understood through my limited Spanish and his even more limited English. At the end of our meal, as I pulled some chocolate out of my pack for dessert, he hurried back in and came back with two slices of cake, which he insisted on giving to us.

The Spanish man I passed one day. He stopped and asked me if I was a pilgrim. When I said "sí", he pulled some cherries from his pocket and poured them into my hands, then chucked me under my chin and tenderly blessed me with the universal greeting of El Camino, "Buen camino."

When you are walking, especially in a foreign country, you often feel vulnerable, quite literally "dependent on the kindness of strangers." These small gestures of kindness were grace notes that reminded me why hospitality to the stranger is one of the most revered of the biblical virtues, and made me think long and hard about how I need to be more hospitable and caring to those who cross my path.

The most consistent grace notes of my journey came simply from walking for hours out in nature every day, of going so slowly that I had time to breathe in all the small beauties around me..

The never ending beauty of the sunrise, usually accompanied by the crowing of a rooster.

The tolling of church bells, marking the hour or calling the faithful to worship.

The wildflowers that abounded along the trail, and the flowers that adorned even the most humble Spanish homes.

The sounds of birds singing, including the unmistakable call of the cuckoo bird, which sounds remarkably like the one from the clock that we are all more familiar with.

Pausing to enjoy the wonder of a snail creeping across the path, or the fat black slugs that dotted the trail after a rain, to breathe in the fragrance of a rose or a spray of wild lavender.

The stork's nests that dotted the trail, always high up and sometimes in the most ridiculous places.

The psalmist saw all of nature as exuberant testimony to God's bountiful graces. Walking El Camino taught me that all of life echoes with grace notes that give testimony to God's presence, to God's invitation to delight in the world around us. It taught me that life is full of God's grace notes.

In the last sermon I preached before I left to walk El Camino I said this, "I go with an open heart, and an openness to the lessons God has planned for me. I go aware that these lessons may not come in the great cathedral in Santiago or on some lovely mountaintop, but in the everyday experiences of eating and sleeping and walking in community with other pilgrims, in the joy of spending most of each day in the beauty of God's creation, in that inward journey to grow closer to God. I go hoping I have some tiny fraction of the wisdom and spiritual awareness of St. Francis of Assisi who wrote this poem after having been on a pilgrimage to Rome:

A
 bird took flight.
 and a flower in a field whistled at me
 as I passed.
 I drank
 from a stream of clear water.
 And at night the sky untied her hair and I fell asleep
 clutching a tress
 of God's [hair].
 When I returned from Rome, all said
 "Tell us the great news,"
 and with great excitement I did: "A flower in a field whistled,
 and at night the sky untied her hair and
 I fell asleep clutching a sacred tress..."ⁱ

I go hoping that I have the ears and heart and imagination to hear when a flower in the Spanish countryside whistles at me."

That is what I said before I left. By the grace of God, that is pretty much what happened. Now the challenge for me, the challenge for all of us, is to continue to live with openness, the exuberant awareness that St. Francis and the psalmist possessed their abounding delight in the grace notes all around us.

ⁱ Daniel Ladinsky, *Love Poems from God*, Penguin Compass, 2002, p. 32