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Grit or Grace: Packing for the Camino de Santiago

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As the director of a new collegiate study-abroad program that will invite students to complete a segment of a Christian pilgrimage across northern Spain, the Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James), I am tasked with setting the expectations of students, parents and administrators, and with addressing the needs of student travellers. The present chapter analyses several genres of cultural artefacts that novice pilgrims, such as my students, are likely to encounter prior to departure: travel guidebooks and manuals, publications more generally about sacred journeys, pilgrimage memoirs and films. These texts help to frame the journey ahead as a pilgrimage, as a long-distance hike or both. Of particular interest to travellers as they prepare for departure is the representation of packing lists and outdoor sports gear across the various genres. I wish to consider the ways in which the material goods one brings from home for a journey impact and/or reflect one's intended travel experience. I encourage any would-be pilgrims to interrogate their own purchasing and packing choices, as they encounter these and other textual representations of the Camino de Santiago and as they consider their motivations for undertaking the journey.

Key Words: Camino de Santiago, Way of St. James, hiking, pilgrimage, preparation, packing, packing list, backpack, outdoor sports gear, tourism.

Packing for the Camino

The Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James) was one of the great pilgrimage routes travelled by medieval European Christians. After centuries of waning interest in the practice of pilgrimage, the Camino and other sacred routes have enjoyed a recent resurgence in attention and participation. In 2014, more than 235,000 people registered their arrival at the Pilgrim's Office in Santiago de Compostela (Caminoteca, N.D.). At the Pilgrim's Office, those seeking a certificate of completion are asked the reason(s) for which they undertook the journey. The recognition of myriad motivating factors for travel, including secular inducements such as nature and cultural tourism, corresponds to the increased popularity that the Camino de Santiago has enjoyed in recent decades, particularly among non-religious travellers. Anthropologists have observed overlapping motivations among pilgrims and tourists:

Walle (1997) writes of adventure tourists seeking peak experiences for self-actualisation and fulfilment. In his 'insight model', subjects engage in these activities as a way of seeking spiritual insight as a form of higher learning (Bell & Lyall, 2002:28).

During the 2014-15 academic year I successfully proposed a new collegiate travel-enhanced academic program that will invite students to complete a segment of the Camino de Santiago after completing coursework on campus. Once in Spain, students will encounter the beautifully ecumenical, interfaith space of the Camino. Now, as I recruit participants to the program, the question becomes: how do I characterise the Camino de Santiago for student travellers in a way that is accurate and positions the group to have a meaningful experience?

The growth in popularity of the pilgrimage has been accompanied by a boom of publications that reflect and capitalise on the varied population of potential travellers. Would-be novice pilgrims who enter the key words 'Camino de Santiago' into the search bar of a major retailer's website are likely to encounter several genres of cultural artefacts that depict some aspect of

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the pilgrimage: travel guidebooks and manuals, publications concerned more generally with pilgrimage across world religions, pilgrimage memoirs, film, etc. Across these and other genres, I observe an increasing concern with packing lists and the selection of outdoor sports gear as part of one's preparation for pilgrimage. Not only print publications, which I will discuss, but also online forums dedicate special attention to the issue of what and how to pack. Now, I am tasked with generating such a list for my study abroad program. What gear does one need in order to complete a pilgrimage successfully? (What does 'successfully' mean in this context?) What is the purpose of these items we carry? At what point does protective gear become a burden, an albatross, an obstacle to the sacred?

I wish to consider the ways in which the material goods one brings from home for a journey, impact and/or reflect one's intended travel experience. I will approach this question concretely by looking at the shifting images of backpacks, outdoor gear and the like in various texts written for an audience of would-be pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago. I believe that the different types and shades of travellers that coexist along the Camino in the twenty-first century, can be distinguished from one another, in part, based not so much on what they carry but more so on their relationship to the material goods they carry, that is, the spirit in which they carry them.

The title of this project refers to one way to understand the distinction between sacred and secular travel by considering the individual's reliance on either 'grit' or 'grace' to sustain them through the trials of the journey. By 'grit' I mean one's own personal determination, tenacity and self-reliance; by 'grace' I refer to the Christian belief in the unmerited favour and blessings bestowed by God, implying a certain amount of dependence and vulnerability.^[2] The difference between grit and grace as relating to pilgrimage is rooted in the question of who provides for the needs of the pilgrim: the pilgrim her/himself or God (and his proxies). If a pilgrim is one who voluntarily leaves daily life and habits by engaging in physical and

metaphysical movement in order to experience a personal, spiritual change and also to enjoy *communitas* and hospitality, then packing lists and the pursuit of the best gear, provide a false sense of security to one who is meant to seek a disruption of their daily life, and also have the potential to isolate the traveller from her/his fellows.

The first guidebook of any sort dedicated to the Camino de Santiago is thought to have been composed in the twelfth century by Aymeric Picaud, a French monk and scholar. In the fifth book of the manuscript known as the *Codex Calixtinus*, the towns and facilities along the Camino are listed

in order that the pilgrims who depart for Santiago, having listened to all this, may try to anticipate the expenses necessary for their travel (Melczar, 1993:87).

A good medieval pilgrim, then, should be informed and make some financial preparations. Although the author warns against the presence of unauthorised toll gatherers along the way, charity is the law of the land according to Picaud:

Pilgrims, whether poor or rich, who return from or proceed to Santiago, must be received charitably and respectfully by all. For he who welcomes them and provides them diligently with lodging will have as his guest not merely the Blessed James, but the Lord himself... (Melczar, 1993:132).

The author goes on to tell stories of inhospitable people along the way whose lack of charity toward pilgrims was miraculously punished. Both travellers and locals, then, are charged with making pilgrimage logistically possible. The responsibility for providing for the pilgrim's needs is shared across the two groups.

Nearly 1000 years later, the content of guidebooks for the Camino de Santiago has changed substantially. With access to more complete and recent information about the conditions along the route, the onus is now on the traveller to prepare for the journey in such a way as to have very little, if any, need for the help of strangers. For example, Anna Dintaman and David Landis's *A Village to Village Guide to Hiking the Camino de Santiago*, is a popular guidebook among English-speaking travellers containing over three hundred pages of maps, measurements, advice and information about each segment of the Camino. After reading that 'packing for the Camino can be a soul-searching affair' and being told the virtues of packing light, the reader turns the page to encounter a neatly

2) 'Grace,' *Oxford Dictionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Viewed on 15 May 2015, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/grace.
 'Grit', *Oxford Dictionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Viewed on 15 May 2015, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/grit.

formatted, extensive packing list. (Dintaman & Landis, 2013:32). Set on a distinctly coloured background, the list is divided into visually appealing blocks, each item set next to a small box just begging to be checked, making the task as simple and as soulless as possible for the reader (Dintaman & Landis, 2013:34-5).

Recently, at least two publications have emerged that are entirely devoted to the packing stage of a pilgrimage: Jean-Christie Ashmore's *To Walk Far, Carry Less* (2011) and Sybille Yates's *Pilgrim Tips and Packing List* (2013). Each of these paperbacks fills more than a hundred pages with practical advice about clothing, backpacks and gear that can quickly add up to more than ten percent of a traveller's body weight. As to why twenty-first-century pilgrims have become so concerned with, and distracted by, the question of the right gear to sustain them on their journey, Yates succinctly identifies two principal culprits: 'Fear and insecurity, and the marketing that takes advantage of them, are the main reasons why pilgrims carry far too much on the Camino'. Sadly, most travellers and travel writers fall into the trap that Yates describes, that being the dependence upon and faith in the commercial entities that sell shiny new gear (Yates, 2013:11). I find that these contemporary travel manuals and guidebooks increasingly depict the Camino de Santiago, one of the world's oldest Christian pilgrimages, as a secular journey whose challenges can be mastered with an adequate amount of preparation and the right combination of equipment. In this brave new world of pilgrimage, repackaged as long-distance hiking, the packing list becomes its own literary genre.

Another genre available to those seeking to know more about the Camino de Santiago is the sort of academic or philosophical text more generally about pilgrimage, past and present. Titles from Jennifer Westwood, Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, Phil Cousineau and others, speak to the spiritual underpinnings of pilgrimage rituals across religious traditions. These authors are uniformly unconcerned with the precise list of contents of a pilgrim's bag and proffer no concrete advice for packing. Furthermore, they consistently impress upon the reader the fact that the journey described therein is designed to be neither comfortable nor relaxing: 'What is consistent across cultures and religions is that the path of a pilgrim is a challenging one. The adversities of displacement along with the inner struggles of the traveller combine to make the pilgrims' way a meaningful yet difficult journey' (Kujawa-Holbrook, 2013:9). Instead of listing the items that might provide physical comfort or

reassurance to the pilgrim, scholars and practitioners of pilgrimage describe the internal preparations required to reap the spiritual rewards of a sacred journey.

Pilgrims' memoirs are a popular and abundant genre of non-fiction, advertised to those curious about pilgrimage. Most Camino memoirs contain some discussion of packing and gear – what they were glad to have brought, and what they decided was not necessary. In their coursework prior to traveling to Spain, my students will read one of the best-known Camino memoirs in the American market: *To the Field of Stars* (2008), the autobiographical tale of a North American Catholic priest who, while living in Belgium for a time, decides to walk the Camino de Santiago. Given the vocation of the author, the reader is not surprised to encounter beautiful spiritual discourse that permeates the linear account of Kevin A. Codd's pilgrimage. One may, however, be surprised by the number of references to outdoor sporting gear woven into the story of this novice hiker and religious practitioner.

A sporting goods retailer in Belgium helps Codd equip himself for the journey. He recounts falling in love with certain items for their bright colours, unique features and bargain prices. He leaves the retailer in high spirits, believing himself 'ready' (Codd, 2008:13). It is as if the trip to the sporting goods store has become a twenty-first century pilgrimage ritual. As he begins walking, however, he comes to loathe the shiny new things that had previously given him a sense of preparedness:

The pretty blue backpack with orange trim that had so enchanted me at the GoSport now seems like a vile enemy, silently and insidiously increasing the pressure upon me to give in, to break down, to collapse in a heap (Codd, 2008:15).

The purchased goods that were meant to keep him safe and comfortable are, ironically, causing him great physical discomfort. The reader wonders if a different sort of preparation was required in order for the traveller to be truly 'ready' for the journey.

Along the final 100 kilometres of the Camino, Codd and his companions encounter a new sort of pilgrim: the *sinmochilas*, or the pilgrims who send their gear ahead in a car in order to walk unburdened. Such travellers are known to some as *turiperegrinos* or *turigrinos*. The narrator describes their presence as a nuisance: 'These gangs of pseudo-pilgrims are frisky

and loud and they hog the road as they wander along . . . I have no desire to meet any of them' (Codd, 2008:227). To travel lightly is considered a virtue, a sign of expertise in hiking and/or a true divorce from the modern world's creature comforts, perhaps even an acceptance of one's dependence on God to provide. Nonetheless, there appears to be such a thing as to travel too lightly, to the point when one ceases to be a pilgrim and becomes something else: a pretender, an obstacle on the (literally) narrow path of the true pilgrim. Yet, Codd writes in his introduction that he and most contemporary travellers to Santiago de Compostela can only hope to be 'approximate pilgrims' because, unlike medieval pilgrims, they do not walk directly from their front doorsteps to an unknown place hundreds or thousands of miles away without the aid of a guidebook, only to turn around upon arrival and walk all the way home. (Codd, 2008:xv). In the twenty-first century, then, we all must exist on some sort of continuum of pilgrimage gravitas, the medieval pilgrims at one extreme and the *sinmochilas* near the other. Codd's judgment of the *sinmochilas* is troubling given that the concept of

inauthenticity rests on an essentialist foundation, denigrating one type of culture or expectation as less authentic than another. . . . all cultures are in a process of evolving, inventing or reinventing themselves, experimenting with new possibilities; tourism adds to this dynamic . . . (Skinner & Theodossopoulos, 2011:405).

I, like Codd, approached the Camino with a constructed notion of authenticity, of a right (past) and wrong (present-day) way to complete a pilgrimage. It was also with an eye for (what I believed to be) verisimilitude that I watched several films and documentaries on the Camino before my departure.

Some attribute the recent upsurge in the number of American pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago to the feature-length film set on the Camino, *The Way* (2010). In my guidebook-fuelled haze, I observed that Emilio Estevez's beautiful homage to the pilgrimage route manages to dodge the subject of hiking gear almost entirely. When Martin Sheen's character decides rather abruptly to walk the Camino, he does so using the gear purchased and briefly worn by his adult son, yet he suffers no blisters despite walking 800 kilometres in borrowed shoes. Characters enjoy perfect weather while wearing impractical clothing items like denim jeans. Perhaps the appeal of the film is due, in part, to these glossy lacunas. Indeed, *The Way* has enjoyed more commercial success than documentaries such as

Walking the Camino: Six Ways to Santiago (2013) that dedicate more screen time to the physical and emotional toll of the pilgrimage.

That said, two of the film's scenes highlight the significance of the traveller's backpack: the sequence in which Martin Sheen's pack falls off a bridge into a river, and the sequence in which a young man absconds with his backpack when the main characters stop to rest at a cafe. It becomes quite clear after the robbery that the protagonist is unconcerned with the loss of personal documents and belongings, as he shouts pleadingly 'You can have everything else!' He is willing to part with all but the metal box containing his son's cremated remains (Estevez, 2010). I know from unfortunate personal experience that cremated remains are remarkably heavy when carried in a backpack on the Camino. Sheen's character nevertheless does not at any point refer to the metal box as an unwelcome burden.

Despite (or perhaps due to) its Hollywood polish, I find that the film *The Way* does capture the contemporary spirit of the Camino de Santiago. Though none of the main characters in the film claims to be very religiously observant, each character achieves some sort of spiritual healing by the end of the journey, producing just the sort of pilgrimage described by Phil Cousineau as moving 'from mindless to mindful, soulless to soulful travel' (Cousineau, 1998:xxv).

I believe that the process of selecting which items to bring, and the meaning with which we invest the items we carry, sets the tone for the journey. The goods we bring with us have the potential to close us off to some of the beauty and the pain that may characterise contact with the sacred. Abundance and complete preparedness pave the way to independence, to a journey with no need for help, guidance or comfort from other human beings or from on high. With a saturation of information comes a decreased appreciation for the unknown, for the miraculous. The title of Codd's memoir, *To the Field of Stars*, suggests that the modern-day impetus to complete a pilgrimage comes down to 'the longing to see real stars again,' (Codd, 2008:115), which is to say a desire to observe and feel closer to God's majestic creation. If, however, we become dependent on detailed maps and GPS to guide us, if our eyes are constantly cast down, how are we to see the 'real stars' that guided the steps of the first pilgrims and of which Codd so poetically writes?

In closing, I wonder about the sort of material goods my students will take with them to Spain in 2017. Will my students approach the Camino as a long-distance hike, a place for self-reliance and improvement, a celebration of all that the individual spirit and body can achieve with determination and the right equipment? Or, will they approach the Camino as a pilgrimage and thus an exercise in religious faith, a sacrificial and humbling exercise rooted in an ethos of dependence, both on God and on the charity and hospitality of believers? I will certainly discuss packing and gear with them, in the interest of their enjoyment, their educational goals and their personal safety. A lack of preparedness can lead to discomfort, injury and even the premature termination of a pilgrimage. Nonetheless, if the purpose of the journey is to undergo a change, to be removed from daily routines and comforts, to encounter the divine and/or to come into community with others, an emphasis on materiality may in fact be counterproductive. Most of all, I wish for them to understand that no amount or combination of sporting gear can keep one from experiencing discomfort or encountering the unknown.

I will also discuss with them my favourite ritual along the Camino de Santiago: each pilgrim is invited, even encouraged, to carry a stone or similarly symbolic object until they reach the Cruz de Ferro, an iron cross at the highest point of altitude along the Camino Francés. The Cruz de Ferro provides an opportunity to divest oneself of the burdens and apprehensions that thwart spiritual actualisation. I will travel soon to the Camino de Santiago to scout locations and services, as I prepare to travel with a group of students in 2017. On this pilgrimage, I plan to lay at the foot of the Cruz de Ferro my membership card for the rewards program of a certain outdoor sporting goods retailer.

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