

The Route of Stone and Water: Look Up

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by the Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Kaeton

As you read this, we will be in the midst of walking the pilgrim's way we call Lent. For many of us, the world has never felt darker and more confusing and chaotic. This year, this Lent, we seem to be in the midst of an especially foreboding and disquieting pilgrimage.

How is it that pilgrims can walk through the darkness, feeling confused and lost, and then find their way to the light and back on the path?

I have walked The Camino de Santiago (The Way of St. James) as a pilgrim twice. In 2018, I walked from San Sebastian in the Basque Region of Spain, on the border of France. My second pilgrimage was on the Camino Portuguese, from Lisbon to Santiago, Spain, in 2022.

I was on the "Ruta da Pedra e da Agua" (Route of Stone and Water), a few kilometers from Armenteira, in the province of Pontevedra, Spain, in the region of Galicia where we had spent the night. Without a doubt, this is one of the most beautiful parts of the entire Camino. The path from Armenterira to Vilanova de Arousa is referred to as *The Spiritual Variant*, a path that leads mostly downhill to the sea; a gift for sore feet and aching knees.

I confess that I could never be considered a hiker. I am more of a walker with a definite penchant for strolling. I always smile when I hear about those who have walked 18–20 kilometers of the Camino in one day. I'm that person who literally has to stop and smell the flowers. In that area of God's realm, it's more like the small blue, pink, or white buds of rosemary that cover the border walls of farmland and the periwinkle hydrangea that seem to burst into huge, glorious pom-poms just about everywhere. Oh, and the eucalyptus trees in the Souto da Retorta forest and along the coast!

To paraphrase Ms. Shug in *The Color Purple*, I think it really pisses God off if a pilgrim does not notice (and smell) the rosemary and hydrangea and eucalyptus.

So, typically, I start the day with other pilgrims after breakfast, but then an hour or so later, they have all moved on and I am on my own, which suits me just fine. Indeed, I was often designated *The Sweep*, i.e. the person at the end who makes sure the folks we started with are in the designated place at the end of the day. This nickname is better than *Pokey Little Puppy*, the other term of endearment bestowed upon me by my fellow pilgrims.

Never mind. There are lots of pilgrims on the Camino from all over the world. Language? Not a problem when you can point and embellish with a few newly learned words. Also, the ubiquitous yellow Camino arrows or stylized shells are always pointing you to the right path; sometimes they are painted on a stone with the number of kilometers to Santiago.

It is very hard to get lost on The Camino — except on The Route of Stone and Water. This area was more like an enchanted forest, with charming little bridges over babbling brooks under which I fully expected a troll and three Billy Goats Gruff to appear. That morning a light, persistent rain bowed the limbs of some of the saplings that provided playful little splashes as I walked past them. It was early October, so the cold rain landed on the still-warm earth, giving rise to small puffs of misty clouds, the stuff on which fairies love to perch and flutter their gossamer wings.

It was easy to get lost in all that beauty and magic and imagination. And so, I did. No worries. Someone will be by soon. I stood at the intersection of the path, where one way went down and seemed to follow the river, while the other went up a hill and through the ruins of an ancient water house. I looked all around for a yellow arrow or shell. Perhaps, it was on that fence? No. Ah, here, on this rock, covered with moss? No. On the ground, I wondered, as I moved dirt and dry leaves around with my walking boots. No such luck.

Ah, this must be a message from The Camino, telling me to stop and enjoy. So I did. For about 10 minutes. And then, I began to worry. Just a little. No one was coming by. This was my second Camino. This was unusual. Someone always comes by.

Fifteen. Twenty. Thirty minutes. No one. Trying not to panic, I struggled to swallow my pride and called our guide, Marco, from my cell phone. He would laugh. Silly American. But, he would hug me when he saw me and have something profound to teach me.

I didn't have to wait that long.

"Marco? It's Elizabeth. I think I'm lost."

(Soft laughter) "You are not lost. You are on the Camino. Tell me what you see."

(Belying my anxiety with some humor) "Stones and water."

(Not amused) "Very funny. Tell me what you see. Maybe I can tell where you are."

"One path goes down and follows the river. The other goes up by the ruins of a water house."

"Yeah, I don't know where that is. You're right. You are lost."

(Full panic now. It didn't take much). "But, Marco, I have looked everywhere for a yellow arrow. I have looked back where I came. I've looked all around me. I have looked ahead on both paths. There's nothing here. Oh my God. I AM lost. Whatever am I to do?"

"Stop. Elizabeth, stop. Now, take a deep breath and listen to me. Are you listening? Now, when you are lost, do not look back. That will only tell you where you've been. Do not look around. That will only tell you where you are. And, don't look ahead. That is the unknown, yet

to be discovered. Elizabeth, when you are lost, look up. When you are lost, always look up. When you look up, you will always find your strength. You will always find your way. For our strength and our help always come from above.”

I had started to cry but I looked up and, through my tears I saw it. There! On the tree! Just above my head. Someone had carved a bit of the bark off the tree, and painted there a yellow arrow. Up. Go up. Walk up by the ruins of the water house. That was The Way. The Camino.

This Lent, when things feel darkest and you feel lost and alone, know that this is just an illusion. We are not alone. Not really. You just have to swallow your pride and call someone and ask for help. There will not be a bright yellow arrow, pointing you to the way out, but there is yet to come, after the darkest Good Friday, a bright light which we call Easter.

And, don't forget, as you travel through this Lent, past the stones of our faith and the waters of our baptism, when things seem their worst, to look up. There you will find your strength and your help. At the end of this Lenten Season, we will arrive on Easter Day, having learned anew the deep spiritual lesson that Jesus is The Way and The Truth and The Life.

After two Caminos, following the stars on The Milky Way of the Compostella de Santiago, I have learned this: Sometimes, you have to reach way down in order to touch the stars.