**Dan Ward**

**My Camino**

I’ve been fascinated by the Camino de Santiago ever since I watched the Martin Sheen film *The Way* several years ago. For those who aren’t aware of it, the Camino is a hike across Spain that began over one thousand years ago as a Christian pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint James, but eventually evolved into a challenge undertaken by those of other faiths and none at all for a variety of reasons – religious, spiritual, personal and social. The film tells the story of a father whose son lost his life walking the Camino, and who decides to walk the route himself in his honour.

Sadly, the idea of walking the Camino myself was the stuff of fantasy at that time. The underlying heart condition I’d lived with for many years had degenerated into full blown heart failure, and I was struggling to walk to the end of my street due to breathlessness. It’s hard to put into words how crushing that was for me, as somebody who’d always used the endorphin release of physical exercise to alleviate any mental stress I was enduring, and it also hugely impacted my self-image for the worse. To put it as bluntly as possible, I stopped thinking of myself as someone with a future.

Less than two years later, I was lying in a hospital bed in intensive care waiting for a heart transplant, attached by wires in my leg to an ECMO life support machine. This was the culmination of 18 months on the transplant list, 3 of them as a hospital in-patient, and more cardiac events, defibrillator shocks and late-night ambulance trips than I care to count. My health had been up and down in the previous year or so, but had deteriorated severely that year, and I knew at this point that my life was at serious risk.

I think most of us have at least briefly indulged the morbidity of pondering what our death bed experience would be like: what would our final words be, who would be with us, how might we be remembered? For me, that experience became a reality so much more quickly than I ever expected, and the overwhelming emotion I felt was sadness. I just felt acutely sad about all the places I’d never see, the people I’d never meet, the dreams that would die with me.

Somebody, somewhere had other plans for me, though. After eleven days on life support, a heart finally arrived that was a match for my body. For those reading this waiting for a transplant, let me be brutal: the first weeks after a transplant feel like your entire body has been hit by a double decker bus, and reversed over for good measure. Making my way from one end of my hospital bed to the other still exhausted me almost a month later, and even after I’d been home a good few months there was still a lot of trepidation about what kind of future awaited me. Because the cannulas in my thigh attaching me to the life support machine seemed to have done a bit of damage to the blood flow in my right leg, I still struggled with walking distances too.

Of course, physical rehabilitation is only part of the adjustment process that comes with a transplant. There’s also the profound psychological impact it has on you, not least because you are now carrying a piece of another person around with you. It’s a huge thing to process that someone had to die in order for you to live, because your miracle has been bought with someone else’s tragedy. This was especially resonant in my case when I found out that my new heart came from a young man who lost his life at the age of 27. I won’t say that I ever felt guilt about it, but I immediately felt a strong sense of duty and obligation towards the person whose heart I now carry. This wasn’t only the duty to look after the heart and not abuse it – that was a given – but also to live as full a life as I possibly could. I wanted to take my donor’s heart to places his body never had the chance to see. As soon as I started recovering my strength, I began to make changes in line with this new attitude. I took up standup comedy, I competed in the British Transplant Games, I bought a house, I visited Rome for the first time. And almost 3 years after my transplant, I decided it was finally time to walk the Camino. I’d never done any kind of hiking or backpacking trip before so I didn’t know quite what to expect, but after doing some initial research I booked my flights and packed my bags to arrive in Sarria in June 2024.

I set off on my first day’s walk in blazing sunshine, across the rolling hills and lush green forests of Sarria. By the end of the six hour journey that day, I’d learned a number of things about what was ahead of me. The most obvious one was that the walking I’d done back home wasn’t really sufficient to prepare me for the prolonged climbs and steep descents of the Spanish plain. By the time I reached the town of Portomarin that evening, I had painful blisters on both feet and a sore knee from the descents. I was also introduced to some of the typical rituals of the camino, including buying a scallop shell to tie to the back of your pack and thus signal your identity as a pilgrim. There was also the tradition of wishing everyone you pass along the way “Buen Camino!”, a small but always welcome gesture of encouragement and solidarity that transgresses language barriers among the many nationalities and backgrounds walking the trail. Sometimes this small greeting would develop into a longer conversation, or even walking together for hours (as was the case with my new friends Clive, Anne, Jack, Alex and Jan).

A day later, I started to have serious reservations about what I’d gotten myself into. The pain in my feet and knee continued to bother me throughout what was a much more solitary day, with much less greenery and much more tarmac, and by the time I limped into my hotel room at around 3PM I had no energy to even climb off my bed. Everything felt stiff, and to make matters worse one of my pill boxes had begun to malfunction, leaving me with serious anxieties about my supply of medication running out and having to cut my trip short. It had also been a much more solitary day, with most of the friends I’d made on the first day staying in different towns and not coming into contact with many English speakers after that. When I woke the next morning, I resolved to just keep putting one foot in front of the other until I couldn’t anymore, and trust that whatever had got me as far as I’d come since 2021 would also get me to Santiago. It was one of several lessons I learned from my experiences with illness that would resonate with me throughout this pilgrimage. I found it interesting photographing the graffiti I passed along the route, which would often consist of words of encouragement like “keep going” or “Ultreia!” (beyond). One day, I passed a wall with a couple of slogans that really resonated with me: “Long live the fighters” and “After winter comes spring.”

Slowly but surely, my body started to adapt. There is a saying on the walk that “the Camino provides”, and I was rewarded for my perseverance with a much more comfortable walking climate, some lovely scenery as I passed through quaint Spanish villages and unspoiled rural landscapes, and some wonderful Galician food. I recall sitting with a glass of *Radler* and a Spanish tortilla outside an old Romanic chapel, and just appreciating the serenity of feeling that I was exactly where I was supposed to be at that moment in time, and that there was no need to rush anywhere. As my body and energy levels adapted, I went from going straight to bed as soon as my day’s walking ended to walking an extra hour or more to enjoy the Spanish nights eating out in places like Arzua and Pedrouzo with new friends from the *albergues* I was staying in, and attending the evening pilgrim masses in the town churches.

My last few days of walking were beset with rain, which I was assured is very common to Galicia but still took some getting used to for an Englishman whose previous experiences of Spain were limited to Barcelona and Tenerife! My last day’s route from Pedrouzo to Santiago was marked by biblical downpours, with driving rain carried on the gusts of strong winds soaking into my poncho. Thankfully the company of Brooke, an Australian paramedic I’d met after leaving my *albergue* that morning, made the next four or five hours pass pleasantly despite the drenching. It was fascinating talking to someone on the other side of the emergency medical care fence – someone who’d dealt with heart patients in her own working life – and was one of many moments on the walk that felt serendipitous, especially considering how many emergency trips I’d had in ambulances with paramedics on those dark nights when I felt my heart approaching the end of its road.

In my dreams of doing the Camino, I’d imagined arriving in the Santiago sunlight into the cathedral square and being overcome by catharsis. As it turned out, I passed through the square thinking only of evading the downpours long enough to put my bags down at my accommodation for the night and dry off. I felt nothing really when I saw the cathedral for the first time, and I could not even stand still and admire it for more than a few seconds without having to protect my eyes from the sleet-like rain. I was not too worried about this being somewhat anti-climactic though, as I’d learned from the trip so far that nothing was as I expected it to be, and that had not been for the worse. That night, I went out to a sports bar to watch the first England match of the Euro 2024 football tournament, during which I met a young man called Kerry, a history graduate who I discussed everything from football to ancient Rome with. Kerry was 26 years old, and it was only afterwards that I thought of the similarities in age with the young man whose heart I carry, and who lost his life during the previous European Championships.

As mentioned earlier, the Camino has evolved from a religious pilgrimage to something of a secular tourist experience over recent decades. But many still do undertake the walk as a pilgrimage, and I am one of them. I don’t always talk about my faith and I fully respect those who don’t share it, but I’ve always maintained a belief in God even in those days when I felt he no longer wanted me to live, and so it was my intention from the outset of this to reach Santiago cathedral and offer a prayer for my donor. On the morning after my arrival, I attended an English language mass at the pilgrim’s office chapel, during which a Filippino priest named Father Manny Domingo offered pilgrims the chance to come up on the altar and light a candle for their own intentions. I was beginning to break thinking of what I might say, but I kept my wavering voice steady enough to hold my candle up to the congregation and tell them that 3 years ago, my life had been saved by a young man I would never meet, and that I wanted to ask God to grant him and his family peace and give me the strength to live a life that would do justice to his sacrifice. As I returned to my seat, the next lady to light a candle spoke about her own Camino in honour of her 15 year-old daughter who had passed away, and I was overwhelmed by emotion. We introduced ourselves to each other after the mass and hugged as we cried, and it struck me how beautiful it was for strangers to share such deeply personal things. I have never felt that kind of vulnerability since I was lying on my bed supported by wires and machines, relying on others to keep me alive.

I was reminded of the earlier assurance that the Camino provides, and of my own observation that just because you do not get what you expected, doesn’t mean you don’t get what you need. I arrived at my big climactic moment in the cathedral square in the pouring rain and didn’t feel a thing, and then the next morning I was brought to tears at mass by the honesty of strangers, and again that night at the Cathedral listening to nuns sing in a language I do not understand. I never asked to suffer heart failure, and in my worst nightmares I never thought I would need a transplant while still a young man. But I can say with all honesty that it was the best thing that ever happened to me, and has compelled me to live the kind of life I could only have dreamed of in the days before I knew anything of intensive care wards or life support machines. I’ve never met or heard from my donor’s family and I know nothing about him or his life, but I hope that in some way I am making him proud.

On my final night in Santiago, the sky finally cleared and the sun came out to wish me Buen Camino on my trip home. After winter comes spring.