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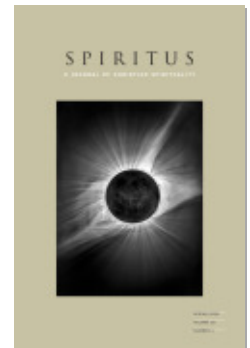
Walking as Resistance to Hypermobility: The Camino de Santiago Pilgrimage

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Walking as Resistance to Hypermobility: The Camino de Santiago Pilgrimage

CARA ANTHONY

The Camino de Santiago (known in English as The Way of Saint James) is enjoying a surge of popularity. In ethnographic interviews, U.S. pilgrims report experiences of sacred time, profound friendship and community, and connections to nature. This contrasts sharply with circumstances in the U.S. captured by the term “hypermobility,” where the need to travel far, frequently, and fast erodes encounters with landscapes and neighbors, and accelerates the mistreatment of both nature and vulnerable members of our communities. Pilgrims who travel the Camino perform an act of resistance to hypermobility and enact a kind of utopia where they re-imagine their connection to the land, to each other, and to the divine.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM OF HYPERMOBILITY

Walking is built into our genes and physiology. It is the most basic way to travel and carries symbolic weight in the Christian imagination, through images of the Exodus, exile, discipleship as following in the footsteps of Jesus, and the pilgrim Church that journeys toward God. Walking connects us to landscape, neighbors, and especially through sacrament and ritual, it brings Christians closer to God. Yet it is the least valued mode of transport in the industrialized world. This is especially true in the United States, where people walk significantly less than their counterparts in other countries.¹ Since walking slows us down, it can re-orient our imaginations and relationships toward hospitality, ecological sustainability, and community. Walking thus becomes a form of resistance to hypermobility.

Hypermobility names the host of ways that travel, both local and long distance, no longer supports human dignity. Having adequate means of moving about and going places enables a full and free life, however, we suffer when mobility requires us to go faster and farther, with more frequent, expensive, and time-consuming trips. The effects of hypermobility are everywhere: businesspeople often spend as much time in airports and hotels as at home; parents endlessly shuttle between errands and after-school activities; we try to see our friends, and find we have to schedule a date weeks in advance; there are neighbors on our street that we have never met; and in all of this, we frequently

wear pedometers to *remind ourselves to walk*. With this love of wide-ranging travel options comes a certain level of weariness and disconnect.

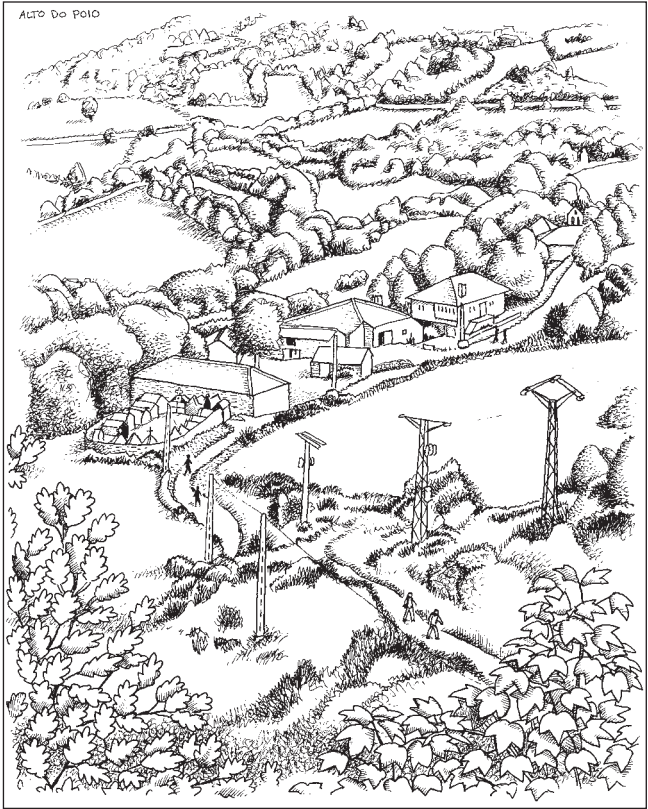
While hypermobility frustrates middle-class Americans, it devastates the natural environment as well as people in marginalized communities. Whether we consider greenhouse gases generated by the transportation sector (which make up 27% of all greenhouse gas emissions),² urban neighborhoods divided and gutted by highways, or the disproportionate exposure to car pollution suffered by communities of color,³ mobility comes at an intolerably high cost. It damages the “integral ecology” promoted by Pope Francis’ environmental encyclical, *Laudato Si’*.⁴ The challenges of hypermobility oblige us to pause and be mindful of how we move about. In the words of Pope Francis,

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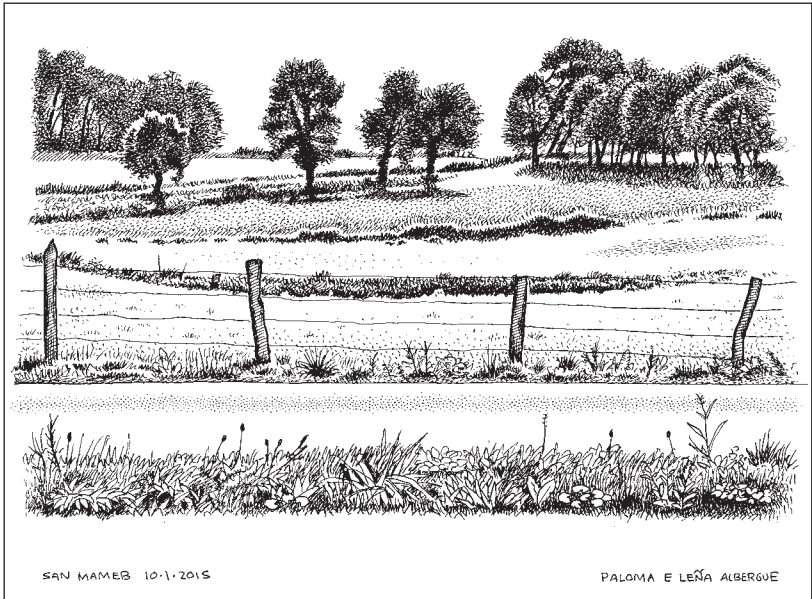
We have to accept that technological products are not neutral, for they create a framework which ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups. Decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build.⁵

Pope Francis’ phrase regarding “decisions about the kind of society we want to build” bears further reflection. The ability to imagine a reality shapes decisions about it. Charles Taylor calls this the “social imaginary.” “Social imaginary” refers to “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings,” and this imaginary is usually “carried in images, stories, legends, etc. . . . It incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other, the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life.”⁶ Our social imaginary enables us to envision certain possibilities together, and also makes it difficult to conceive of other possibilities. Hypermobility manipulates our social imaginary. It distances us physically and mentally from our homes. It allows us to abandon one place for another, zip through or above the landscape, think of any particular place as insignificant, and thus neglect, ignore, and exploit our own home places.

I too am implicated in hypermobility as a lifestyle and a social imaginary. I live and work in the Midwest and frequently fly to conferences and to see family on both the East and West Coasts. I have lived in five U.S. states, as well as overseas, to pursue education and work. It is exactly the *pervasiveness* of hypermobility that made me recognize that we are not just going to step out of it, but need ways to resist it. I propose that a walking pilgrimage is a quasi-liturgical activity that affirms an embodied connection to land, neighbors, and God, and is an effective method to disrupt the mindset of hypermobility. Through participation in a pilgrimage like the Camino de Santiago, new intentions and habits are formed which can lead to different ways of acting in everyday life.



Alto Do Poio © 2018 Andy Singer.



Paloma e Leña Albergue © 2018 Andy Singer.

THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

The Camino de Santiago is an 1,100-year-old pilgrimage route with many branches through Europe which all converge on the city of Santiago de Compostela in Northwest Spain. The most popular branch is called the Camino Frances (French Way); it starts in the French Pyrenees, traverses the high plains of North-Central Spain, and eventually enters the lush green mountains of Galicia in the west. The Camino Frances is nearly eight hundred kilometers, about five hundred miles.

In the last thirty years, the Camino has enjoyed a huge resurgence in popularity, and draws pilgrims from all over the world. According to statistics recorded by the Cathedral of Santiago on the number of pilgrims who receive the *compostela*, a church-issued certificate of completion, more than 250,000 pilgrims arrived in Santiago in 2016.⁷ Even more remarkable is the tremendous rise in the popularity of the Camino among U.S. residents. The number of pilgrims quadrupled between 2011 and 2016, making the United States the fastest-growing national group on the Camino.⁸ In a culture of people who are generally averse to walking, what compels Americans to fly halfway around the world to take a long walk?

In the fall of 2015, I walked three hundred kilometers of the Camino and conducted ethnographic interviews with U.S. pilgrims along the way. I interviewed twelve pilgrims, ranging in age from mid-20s to late 60s. They were white men and women, middle to upper-middle class.

Adam, Chloe, David and Deborah identified as churchgoing Catholics, Jonah as an active Methodist. (All names are pseudonyms.) The remaining seven were religiously unaffiliated, with varying degrees of interest in religion and spirituality. Ethan and Miriam expressed firm rejection of faith in any divine or transcendent reality and are noted as nontheist, although neither used this term explicitly. Clearly, religion or piety was not a unifying factor, and the same is true for the international assortment of pilgrims who walk along Saint James' Way. Despite this diversity, pilgrims find connection on the journey and in its accompanying activities. These practices, executed day after day for a month or more, resemble communal rituals.

One basic practice is that pilgrims travel light. There is no need for cooking and camping gear, since the Camino is not a wilderness trek. Pilgrims often walk twenty to thirty kilometers daily for a month or more, so it is crucial to carry minimal weight to avoid injury. Pilgrims find this to be one of the more challenging and freeing aspects of the experience; respondents loved being able to limit their personal possessions to a small pack for a month or more. Phoebe said:

PARTICIPANT (PSEUDONYM)	AGE	RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION	RESIDENCE (BY U.S. STATE)	NOTES
Adam	69	Catholic	California	
Rebekah	66	Unaffiliated; Baptist background	Washington	
Beulah	Mid-50s	Unaffiliated Christian; Catholic background	Washington	Sister of Chloe
Chloe	Mid-50s	Catholic	Illinois	Sister of Beulah
David	66	Catholic	Indiana	Spouse of Deborah
Deborah	50s	Catholic	Indiana	Spouse of David
Phoebe	59	Unaffiliated, earth-based spirituality	Missouri	
Ethan	Mid-20s	Unaffiliated, Nontheist	New York	Partner of Esther
Esther	Mid-20s	Unaffiliated	Maine	Partner of Ethan
Jonah	Early 60s	Methodist	Michigan	
Miriam	68	Unaffiliated, Catholic background, Nontheist	Colorado	
Tamar	30	Unaffiliated, Protestant background	Oklahoma	

I'm headed toward a more minimalist lifestyle. Even before I left [on this trip], I started getting rid of things. And when I get home I'm going to be able to get rid of even more because I have lived for a month on the Camino with everything that's just in my backpack. So that's one reason that I thought this would be really good training for letting go of things.

Most pilgrims stay together in inexpensive hostels, called *albergues*. Conditions and amenities vary widely, but these communal spaces are highly social. Each pilgrim carries a “passport” that is stamped daily at the *albergue*. This serves as a credential showing that the individual is indeed walking (or bicycling) each day, and entitles them to stay in the pilgrim-only lodgings.

Pilgrims also follow a similar daily schedule. Most arise before dawn to avoid walking in the heat of the day. If one is traveling solo, one can go for hours without interaction with other people, losing oneself in the meditative rhythm of the walk. Even pilgrims traveling with a companion or two find that their different paces can put some space between them along the path. Others walk together, or fall in step with someone who walks at the same pace. It is common to meet the same people day after day on the trail, and to form fast friendships across age groups, nationalities, and other social differences. Some pilgrims end up walking together for weeks, forming a “Camino family.”

Nearly all pilgrims, no matter what their beliefs, stop in the many churches along the way. The Americans I interviewed said they stopped for rest, for quiet, to pray, to participate in services, to appreciate the beauty and history of the churches, or to feel a connection to the centuries of pilgrims who came before them.

Most stretches of the Camino feature villages every few kilometers. By mid-afternoon, pilgrims usually find a place to stay for the night. The late afternoon and early evening is time to relax, take care of personal needs, contact loved ones, and most importantly, to have long conversations with other pilgrims. Outside of a few large cities, there are no tourist attractions. Dinner is at 8 p.m., and most *albergues* call for silence and lights out by 10 p.m. Pilgrims enjoy lots of free time, but very little privacy.

Pilgrims frequently experience problems like illness, injury, or unwelcome changes to their itineraries. Often, other pilgrims help; in fact, people want and expect to help each other as part of the pilgrimage. Mutual assistance is so ingrained in the Camino culture that there is even a name for it: “Camino angels,” and many participants told stories of helping or being helped. Chloe recounted a story of missing a train and winding up in the wrong town, far from her sister and their hotel room. A group of pilgrims came to her aid. They had recently suffered the death of a friend, but they transmuted their grief into an opportunity for hospitality. Chloe shared:

In the very beginning [of the Camino] I had three angels that took me and let me sleep in their place in the evening, and then they made sure I connected with my sister before we departed. It was perfect. There were supposed to be four of them, and one passed away. And they said, “You’re our Annie.” So it kind of made them feel good that they were helping me out. They took care of me. It was wonderful.

The rhythms of the pilgrim’s day create a sense of sacred time - time dedicated and “set apart” from all other times. Even religiously unaffiliated pilgrims spoke of the quality of their time on the Camino as special and distinct from other times, as expressed by Esther:

We finished our year on the boat, we're doing this [walk], and when we get home, we have to figure out what's next, whether that's another boat, or grad school, or some other job. And so for us, it really is this almost time on another plane, where we're in this little bubble of we don't have to think about what comes next until we get home.

Participants spoke of their time on the Camino as an opportunity to think about major life transitions, to step away from time pressures that make it difficult to reflect. The walk itself invited them to remove distractions and pay attention to the present. Tamar explained how within this time, she formed connections with the people immediately around her:

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There's been several people that I have encountered over the course of the last forty days that have become my Camino family. And it is - you bond very quickly through this experience, and you bond very deeply through this experience, I think in part because you don't have a lot of time together, so you cut to the chase. There's not a lot of small talk. It goes immediately to big talk because you have an entry point, like, "Why are you here?" And that usually is a deep question.

All participants expressed appreciation for the breathtaking beauty of the Camino, and the way that walking allowed them to experience it. Walking slowed them down, enabled greater appreciation for nature and feelings of unity with nature, and led some pilgrims to prayer, like Adam, who said:

I spent three days [instead of one] . . . just to be in those mountains. Just to be able to look out and see those rolling hills and so forth. And I was saying to myself that I can't wait to get to this part of my journey because for me, these are the cathedrals which no human hand has made. This is all God's work, you see. And this is where I feel closer to the Lord, in this cathedral, than sometimes I feel going into an *iglesia* [church].

Reaching the final destination of Santiago de Compostela has its own set of rituals. Many pilgrims pause outside town at *Monte de Gozo*, the Mount of Joy, for their first glimpse of Santiago and to take some refreshment. Entering the old city and arriving at the Cathedral square is a joyful and moving experience for many people. A surprising and wonderful occurrence within the first day of arrival is re-encountering people seen earlier along the way, and there are many happy reunions. Pilgrims wait in line together at the Cathedral office to get their *compostelas*, and virtually everyone, regardless of beliefs or religious background, attends the pilgrim Mass in the Cathedral.

Especially popular is the Friday Mass at the Cathedral that employs a massive incense burner called the *botafumeiro*. The *botafumeiro* weighs more than 100 pounds and stands almost five feet high, requiring six men to hoist it over-

head using a pulley system. It swings at high speed over the thronged church, its arc reaching almost to the vaulted ceiling. Thousands of cameras come out, despite announcements prohibiting photos, and the whole crowd is transported by the glorious flying censer above. This is possibly the most catholic experience I have ever had: people from all over the world, packed in together, filled with delight at this exuberant expression of prayer. Pilgrims who have no interest in organized religion are often moved and inspired by the experience.

CHARLES TAYLOR AND “CROSS-PRESSURED,” “FRAGILIZED” IDENTITY

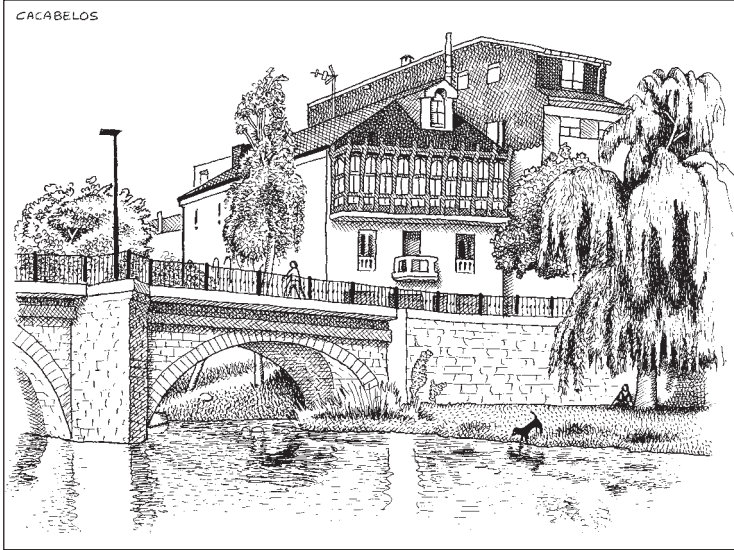
I want to briefly focus on the great variety of religious and philosophical worldviews held by modern Camino pilgrims. Charles Taylor calls this the “nova effect.” In his description, two basic options, traditional religious faith and atheism, have exploded into a million choices. “It’s as though the original duality, the positing of a viable humanist alternative, set in train a dynamic, something like a nova effect, spawning an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond.”⁹

The nova effect is a two-edged sword: it can be liberating or disorienting. The realization that one could adopt any of a dizzying array of worldviews challenges one’s existing identity, creating a kind of stress or pressure. These alternative beliefs are not exotic and strange, but are the views of family and friends.

When . . . the other becomes more and more like me, in everything else but faith: same activities, professions, opinions, tastes, etc. then the issue posed by difference becomes more insistent: why my way, and not hers? There is no other difference left to make the shift preposterous or unimaginable.¹⁰

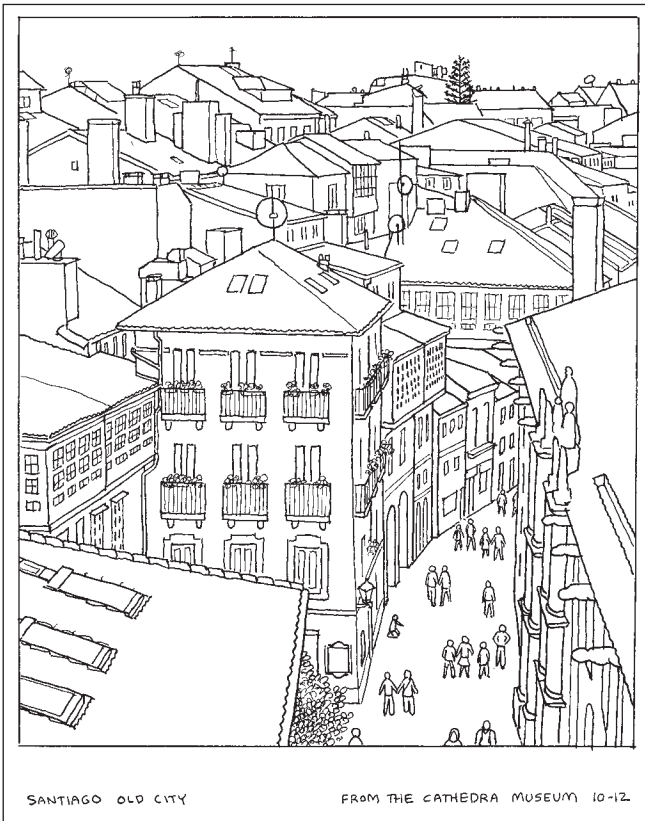
The question, “why my way?” arises for all kinds of people, not just religious believers or atheists. Taylor calls this the “fragilization” of our worldviews. We may respond to it in various ways, but the pressure is there. It is evident on the Camino, as different people rub shoulders and share dinner tables. And, since the Camino is a sacred or set-apart time for many pilgrims when they delve into the meaning and direction of their lives, conversations can quickly get into the territory of deeply held beliefs about reality. Jonah describes how rather than experiencing a heated debate or polite, awkward silence, the unique circumstances allow for mutual sharing and listening among participants:

Earlier I was traveling with people who are very spiritually focused, and now I’m traveling with some young people who are very . . . how do I put it? Very full of joy, and experiencing, and . . . religion doesn’t do it for them, you know? And so I think that I’ve lost, not lost, but there’s a sense that you’re



CACABELOS

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part of a church or you're not, and I don't think its role is in this place . . . I'm enjoying the company of these young people so much, and they have so much life, and there is so much wisdom in people that are so young. And so this is for me spiritual, but it's not spiritual in the traditional sense . . . I don't know if they would recognize how spiritual they are. But I find it so valuable!

Catholic Mass for pilgrims, both en route to Santiago and in Santiago itself, are liturgical opportunities to sustain this fragility and mutual sharing. Catholic rituals of pilgrimage and the Mass risk losing their original meanings by sharing them with non-Catholics. But religiously unaffiliated pilgrims are taking a risk, too: they risk the possibility of opening themselves to more transcendence than they anticipated. There are ways to invite pilgrims more fully into transcendence especially through the physical, tactile sacramental forms. Although not a representative sample, four pilgrims I interviewed (Beulah, Phoebe, Miriam, and Tamar) treasured some physical token given to them in church, or were inspired to light a candle for a loved one. None of them had a formal affiliation with a church. Through these shared practices and physical signs, it is possible to form a fragile but real community with the power to resist patterns of life that threaten us.

A MOVING UTOPIA

How can the motley crowd of pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago, living together in a set-apart or sacred time, be understood to perform an act of resistance against hypermobility? After all, the carbon footprint of a pilgrim traveling from North America is huge. And is not the walk itself an example of detachment from place rather than devotion to it?

To address the second point first, I propose that the meaning of a walking pilgrimage *changes* in the context of hypermobility. Although a pilgrim was an exceptionally mobile and maybe even rootless individual in the context of Medieval Europe, today the act of crossing Spain on foot is almost unthinkably slow. When we normally move at great speed over the landscape, pilgrimage becomes increasingly a form of reverence for the ground under our feet, rather than a sign of rootlessness.

Walking the pilgrimage is an act of resistance. Philip Sheldrake discusses the creation of religious utopias, places that stand outside the ordinary “map” of society. While his analysis focuses on monasteries, it also applies to modern pilgrimage.

Significantly, the pilgrim's daily schedule bears some similarity to a monk's: both include communal meals and lodging, devotion to a fairly set schedule of work (walking), rest, and contemplative time, and living with few possessions in a specific landscape. The monastic utopia was a set-apart place dedicated

for “disentangling oneself from conventional and social obligations in favor of a reshaping of human relations.”¹¹ Similarly, pilgrims express a desire to re-envision or change their lives at home, and the Camino functions as a “time away” to do this work.

Sheldrake writes, “Utopia is where we store our hopes of happiness . . . Utopias are important because they allow us to explore the ‘places of what has no place, or no longer has a place – the absolute, the divine, or the possible.’”¹² Pilgrims are attracted to the Camino by a desire for something that they have not found elsewhere, including a close relationship with nature, abundant time to enjoy it, and time to connect with other people in the way that humans have historically always made friends: by bumping into them. Shared Camino activities foster a shared mindset and open the way to friendship. Some pilgrims, like Jonah, Adam, and Chloe, understand encounters with beloved others and with nature as encounters with God.

Pilgrims find these experiences deeply rewarding, reflecting another aspect of utopias: they are “an act of resistance against a diminishment of imagination regarding our human future.”¹³ I began by noticing the ways in which hypermobility diminishes our lives even as we enjoy its benefits. The fact that thousands of U.S. citizens journey so far to go for a nice walk, spend time talking with other people and in prayer and reflection, suggests that they are missing something essential in their ordinary lives, and that they want it back.

Sheldrake also engages Michel Foucault’s concept of “heterotopias,” “an imaginative space whose purpose is to expose the illusory quality of the places we take to be normal, or they create a space that is ordered in a way that exposes our normal places as disordered.”¹⁴ This hearkens back to Taylor’s social imaginary. Sometimes we need to create spaces where we practice new ways of relating to ourselves, to other people, to nature, and to God. In this spirit, some pilgrims anticipated a change in their daily lives once they returned home. Rebekah reflected:

I think I’ll be a better person, because I think I will be more in the moment . . .
I think maybe I’ll be more generous with my time . . . [Before the Camino]
it was all about my job . . . like 7/24, long days . . . I’m just really looking
forward to having more spontaneous interactions on a daily basis . . . on the
Camino you have time to talk . . . So I think I’m going to try to be better,
more magnanimous with my time and probably caring concern, just because
now I’m not going to be so self-absorbed.

Comments like Rebekah’s reflect changes in intention and internal disposition that are essential to the transformation of the relationships and spaces around us. Pilgrims are re-imagining parts of their lives in order to be more present to themselves, others, and their home places. The Camino de Santiago

is not a panacea for hypermobility and its attendant destruction. However, the pilgrimage offers opportunities for healing relationships damaged by hypermobility at the same time that it grounds pilgrims in a shared humanity, in nature, and in the presence of God found there.

Personal conversion is one dimension of the Camino, although there is a danger that internal growth will not fully connect to community or to the natural world once the pilgrim returns home. The demands and structures of hypermobile life re-assert themselves and it is easy to return to established routines. I propose one liturgical possibility for helping pilgrims to link their personal path to a larger one: pilgrim masses. Masses in Santiago are already well-attended; they offer an opportunity for pilgrims to mindfully integrate new social, spiritual, and ecological patterns in their post-Camino lives. The pilgrim blessing at Mass could include a word of gratitude for the friendship and kindness of the Camino and for the pilgrims who bless the land with their footsteps. It could commission pilgrims, sending them safely home to care for their home places and for the people they meet on their way. The celebration of the Eucharist empowers and equips the community for mission. Why not make the call of *Laudato Si'* for a truly “human ecology” not only part of what pilgrims experience on the Camino, but something that they can carry back into everyday life?

U.S. pilgrims have at least two communities to welcome them home and help them integrate their Camino experience into ordinary life: local Christian churches, and the national organization for the Camino de Santiago, American Pilgrims on the Camino (APOC). Unlike traditional confraternities associated with Saint James, APOC has no religious affiliation and welcomes members of all religious traditions or none. Both APOC and churches afford ritual and social opportunities to resist hypermobility by slowing down, taking time to welcome neighbors, and reconnecting with the landscape in one’s home place.

Churches often host homecoming receptions for returning pilgrims, and invite pilgrims to share their experience in a presentation for other congregation members. Even more, churches with robust liturgical traditions can learn from the Camino de Santiago how appealing a popular ritual can be. For example, a resurgence of Catholic *Corpus Christi* processions in some parts of the United States provides an opportunity to walk one’s own neighborhood. It would be easy for at least some part of this solemn feast day to include a street party. Prayerful, communal walking around our home landscapes could foster new moments of healing for our social and ecological wounds.

Camino groups such as APOC also integrate rituals into a setting that is not explicitly religious. Local chapters hold training walks and host send-off dinners where departing pilgrims are given seashells, a symbol associated with Saint James, as a parting gift. Welcome-back potlucks greet pilgrims when they return, events where they can connect with other pilgrims and share stories of

their journey. United by their love of a good hike, people in APOC groups get together to walk in local parks and natural areas. They also raise funds and volunteer their time to restore parts of the Camino de Santiago that have been spoiled and damaged by too much foot traffic. As is clear from interviews, religiously unaffiliated pilgrims still feel the attraction of nature's peace, the joy of meeting strangers as fellow pilgrims, and the healing of the slow, meditative rhythm of walking. Christians can recognize and honor these holy moments, whether they lead to church affiliation or not.

As a Christian, I believe that God meets us where we are. The Camino enables pilgrims of many beliefs to encounter Christian sacramental life and to integrate it with a powerful experience of human community in a beautiful natural setting. Especially in its immanent, material valence, sacramentality speaks to people who would usually not be interested in religion. If people can sustain this common material thread, share practices, and recognize a common pilgrim identity, there is greater hope for resisting hypermobility. Together we can imagine spaces where we meet our near neighbors, take time to care for each other's needs, and slow down to cherish the earth under our feet.

NOTES

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