

Pilgrims' progress

Sojourners find comfort, connection and companionship on the road less travelled

BY ANNE BOKMA

They say miracles happen regularly on the Camino de Santiago, the 1,000-year-old Spanish pilgrimage to the cathedral that's thought to house the remains of St. James the Apostle. Tom Brown, an 80-year-old great-grandfather from Kitchener, Ont., who has walked the trail twice, says even though he's an atheist, he doesn't dispute that the Camino is capable of transforming lives — maybe even enough to make a doubter like him believe in miracles.

Brown first walked the Camino at 77, a year after the death of his wife, Mona. They'd been married 53 years, and her death cast him adrift. "I was stuck in my grief," he says. Brown thought the Camino might help. He completed the 750-kilometre walk in 24 days, connecting with many people along the way — including a newly divorced young woman from Paris and an Australian mother and daughter who were trying to repair a fractious relationship. Other times, he walked alone, putting one foot in front of another for as many as nine hours a day. He felt connected to the earth — eating almonds plucked from the ground and tomatoes off the vine — and also to the sky: one memorable night, he looked up and beheld the beauty of the vast Milky Way. In that single moment, "things started to fall away, and I just felt a sense of joy for no reason," says Brown.

"I felt overcome, and I knew I was part of something incredible."

The tradition of pilgrimage is part of every major religion: Jews and Christians travel to the Holy Land, Catholics to Lourdes and Muslims to Mecca. Last year, a United Nations study found that one of every three tourists is a pilgrim — a total of 330 million people a year, including 30 million who go to Tirupati, India, 20 million to Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico and 15 million to Karbala, Iraq. Those who consider themselves spiritual but not religious are also keen to embark on these protracted passages. While their destinations — from Stonehenge to Sedona, the Ganges to Ground Zero, Woodstock to Graceland — are diverse, what propels them to take the journey

is universal: the struggle with a transition such as divorce, death or downsizing; a search for meaning; the opportunity to encounter a sense of the divine in nature and a sense of history in ancient paths and landmarks; and the companionable solace of travelling alongside fellow pilgrims.

Rev. Lynne McNaughton, an Anglican priest at St. Clement's in North Vancouver who wrote her doctorate on the topic of pilgrimage, has been leading annual international pilgrimages for almost 20 years, along with United Church minister Rev. Gerald Hobbs, who is also a professor emeritus at the Vancouver School of Theology. She says pilgrimages offer an opportunity to "experience the communion of saints" — a connection to ancient peoples who have gone before. They are also great levellers since travellers leave behind their usual identity and status trappings and outfit themselves in a simple getup of hiking boots and backpacks. And because pilgrimages can be arduous, McNaughton says they are often a "lived metaphor for physically enacting what is happening spiritually — there is something in walking that allows us to process and heal."

Brown says his first hike along the Camino, marked by suffering and loss, helped him heal from the death of his wife. Last year, he decided to hike the trail again. This time, he met a woman, 74-year-old Mary, who was dealing with depression after the loss of her husband two years before. The two hit it off and within 10 days they were walking hand in hand. By the end of the trail, they were engaged. They married last December. Brown credits the Camino with profoundly changing the course of his life. "When you say you are an atheist, people think you don't have the kind of spiritual experiences religious people have — but nothing could be further from the truth."

Anne Bokma is a journalist in Hamilton.

