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The Dream's Way:
Resonance in Dream Experiences on the Camino de Santiago

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I recently returned from walking 500 miles in France and Spain, following the Camino de Santiago, an ancient pilgrimage route. The journey included dreaming and dreamwork, of course. I'd hoped that this pilgrimage, and the dreams that came with it, would be spiritually

breathtaking and life-changing. Well, I was often breathless (exhausted!) and was certainly changed—but my dreaming and waking on the way often seemed driven by the relentless ups and downs of discomfort, homesickness, confusion, and coping.

Still, even through rough weather and pockets of dead air, the faint static of scattered dream signals *resonated*. As I reflect back, I feel like a struck bell: trembling, reverberating, ringing out (or wringing out!) meanings that echo deep and far, connect me to others, and call for a response.

What is truly meaningful in our dreams and in our waking lives? How do we find resonance in dreams that seem vague, disturbing, incoherent or unpleasant? We all experience a range of frequencies of dreams and dream-like states every day and night. Some of these experiences are beautiful and breathtaking, but some are difficult to appreciate, and many are not particularly moving or memorable. How do we "tune in" to the ground of our collective being that is perfectly and uniquely expressed in each moment of dream experience?

On the Camino, some of my dreams and dream-like waking experiences were extraordinary—but many just seemed difficult, and a few were miserable. The resonance was subtle, and came through engagement with every aspect of these waking and dreaming experiences, including the painful and tiresome along with the profound.

My pilgrimage journey certainly got off to a painful and tiresome start, with three claustrophobic hours on an airless airplane before takeoff while the crew searched for the source of a crackling noise someone had heard as the engines were warming up. Finally, we got off the ground for the 12-hour flight, which was as long as it sounds. In Paris, the airline lost my luggage—one backpack, containing everything needed for the next two months. Just getting from my home in Oregon (USA) to the small village in the foothills of the French Pyrenees where I would begin to walk took three days. Already, my worst worry-dreams were leading the way.

Once I got onto the Camino at last (backpack recovered), the walking itself went pretty well, but attending to food, shelter and basic hygiene required relentless effort. My body reacted to the

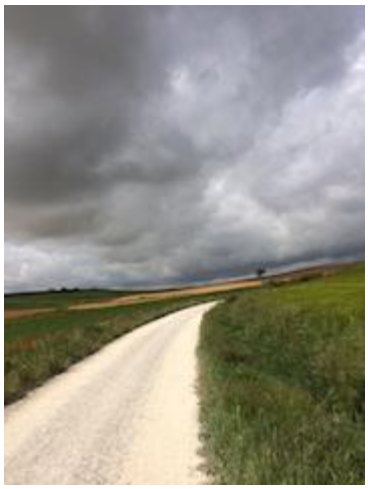
adventure with exhaustion, indigestion and insomnia. The bank card I'd brought for travel failed to work, leaving me without money in a remote part of rural Spain. Thanks to kind strangers, help from home, and some extra miles hiking to the nearest town with a Western Union office, I got resupplied with cash. Then I came down with a respiratory infection and was sick for about three weeks. Everything became more and more challenging. Most nights, staying in crowded hostels, feverish and kept awake by my own coughing, I barely slept and couldn't remember dreams. The dreams I did remember were jagged fragments, strongly emotional but without continuity.

Often, those dreams just seemed to reiterate and exaggerate the challenges I was facing as I walked, giving me more opportunities to try to relate to those experiences:

> ***Crawling All The Way:*** *The path is almost impossible—steep, narrow, and finally closing in to become a tunnel that goes on for miles up the mountainside. I have to crawl on and on, carrying my heavy pack, with barely room to breathe. I fight the panic of claustrophobia and keep crawling, just to get through.*

Dreams like "Crawling All The Way" may have been opportunities, but they felt punishing and exhausting. After a long, hard day, why did I need a long, hard dream? I would have preferred a good night's rest!

Still, my central goal on this pilgrimage was to learn to adapt, wasn't it? Much later, after I got home, I read what I'd written as a statement of intention for the journey: "Unconditional acceptance of all experiences." What was I thinking? *Unconditional? All experiences? Really?* It was as if I'd incubated a dream, and gotten just the kind of dream I'd asked for. The challenges I faced were echoing my own intentions back to me. And I did adapt and accept, because I had to—even if it meant getting down on my hands and knees. It was humbling, but also brought me closer to the ground of my being, closer to the world around me and my own body.



Pilgrimage is about following the way wherever it takes us. We may have a destination, but to get there we must go through unfamiliar country among strangers—and deep into unknown territory within ourselves. And the destination never turns out to be what we expected. Doesn't this sound like a dream? Pilgrimage and dreaming are both unsettling. We turn ourselves over to dreams each night, and let the landscape of the dream world take the lead. Dreaming has its own way, and to fully experience any dream, we must follow that way—even through foreign lands, and the confusion and darkness of our own depths.

I picked up a lot of random dream signals when I was coming down with that respiratory infection. I'd been exhausted by the hostels (sometimes 20 or more people sharing a single toilet and shower), not getting enough to eat or drink, and walking in rain and heat on rocky or muddy stretches that ran through industrial wasteland and along highways. Trying to relax at night, I found myself overwhelmed by the demands of my body, and multiple symptoms—headache, sore throat, fever, cough—all clamoring for my attention:

> ***Trying To Listen To Everyone:*** *Other pilgrims from all over the world crowd around me, jostling, pressing in. They need something from me, but I can't hear what they are saying, and I can't catch my breath . . .*

Pilgrimage and dreaming require close listening. We must listen for the subtle resonance in the midst of disorderly experiences: listen to footsteps, steady or faltering; follow the tones of nearby voices in unfamiliar languages; notice a rumble that could be thunder, or a distant jet; feel the background music of birdsong. By listening to our senses (not just sounds but all of our perceptions), making connections (with others, and the world around us), being fully present—we find meaning in our dreams and in our waking lives. Any dream, and any waking moment, can resonate if we tune ourselves to its frequency, and appreciate its subtleties. But how?

It's not necessary to understand a dream intellectually. Sometimes it's most meaningful just to absorb impressions and atmosphere.

> ***Toymaker/Filmmaker Is Missing Something:*** *A man makes strange toys that come alive but just march around. His wife sits in a wading pool watching TV; she will soon leave him. He makes films that never include darkness, so they all have an eerie, silvery light, like a partial eclipse or the half-light before an afternoon thunderstorm.*

When I embarked on this pilgrimage, following my dreams, I knew that the outward path wouldn't always be comfortable and the inward path wouldn't always be clear. I knew that I needed to "include the darkness," and that I might find myself in that eerie, in-between world where the familiar and unfamiliar come together. I knew that I would need to adapt and listen. But on the unsettling path itself, finding resonance was often more difficult than I'd imagined.

What really made a difference for me was the sense of shared experience. I was surrounded by other pilgrims (and local people) who were all facing challenges of their own. Although we spoke many different languages, we communicated with each other naturally—using a few common words, lots of gestures, and especially just feeling the camaraderie of mutual encouragement.

Additionally, my days and my dreams were filled with the companionship of loved ones at home who were following my journey. And even the dead kept me company: my parents—who both died recently—were with me all the way:

> ***Whose Losses Are They?*** *Mom and Dad are grieving because their grandparents have just recently died. I remind them that it's not their grandparents, but their parents—my grandparents—who have died. Then, I realize that it's actually* **my** *parents who are dead. Mom and Dad are no longer here. I can't believe they are really gone*.

Well, in a way—the dream's way, and the pilgrimage way—they are not really gone. In this surreal, eternal landscape where we are wide open to all that we don't know, the past, present and future coincide. Our losses echo through generations, and our care for one another gives us common ground.

Walking, appreciating the beauty around us, and coping with basic survival needs took up most of our energy on the Camino, so we didn't share dreams or talk about our lives beyond this place and time. But I was not the only one carrying grief and love, losses and blessings, memories and dreams, as I walked. All those I encountered had their own networks of connections, their own

stories. And all those throughout history who had walked this Camino, or had lived and died in this land, seemed present with us, too.

The journey was dreamlike in many ways. All of the people, including me, resembled dream figures. We seemed to be part of one psyche—our unique, individual characters dreamed up by some larger dreamer. Together, we belonged to a big story, and each contributed a vibration essential to the resonance of the whole.

Without talking about it, we resonated with one another. My pace was inconsistent, so I rarely saw the same people for more than a few days in a row, but the sense of community was in the air, and friendships came easily. We didn't try to hold onto each other, but were always delighted to encounter one another again further along. It seemed as if we'd always known each other.

> ***Looking For The Lost Twin:*** *My partner, Holly, tells me she once had a twin sister (by a different father), who was taken away at birth. She isn't curious about what happened to her twin, but I am. With the help of some friends, I begin a search for the lost twin. When I find her, I will bring the sisters back together.*

These fragmentary, half-forgotten dreams kept pace with the journey. Neither dreaming nor waking experiences called for interpretation. Whatever meanings were to be found seemed self-evident and mysterious at the same time—evoking sensation rather than sense.

The intense effort I expended keeping up with myself in my waking hours kept me from explaining, analyzing, or even reflecting on my experiences. I could only respond, like an echo, to the tone of each moment. When I remembered dreams, they were just further experiences inviting responses, and I responded by simply tuning into them, and recalling them, re-sensing them, as I walked.

The night before I reached Santiago, the culmination of the Camino, I dreamed a single image that stayed with me:

> ***Splitting the Pine:*** *A massive, old pine tree is going to be cut down. They've already removed most of the branches, and I see the tree in silhouette, knowing that tomorrow they will split the trunk down the center, with a jagged cut like a bolt of lightning. I can see it now, as it will be: a vivid wound. This sacrifice is necessary (maybe the tree is dying anyway), but makes me sad.*

I was very sad when I arrived in Santiago, not celebrating like most of the other pilgrims completing this long journey. I knew there were two more weeks before I could go home, and I was exhausted, ill, and felt that I didn't know why or how I had managed to come all this way. There were a few familiar faces in the crowds of giddy pvilgrims, and we shared some warm hugs, congratulations, and photos—but then they were gone and I felt truly alone in a foreign land.

I'd planned to continue walking another fifty miles to Finisterre ("land's end") on the coast, but it had been raining steadily for days, my stomach hurt, and I just needed desperately to rest. So, I took a bus to the lovely, coastal town of Muxia to stay in a quiet hostel (with my own room!) where I could recover and reflect for almost a week before going on to the IASD conference in the Netherlands—and then finally home.

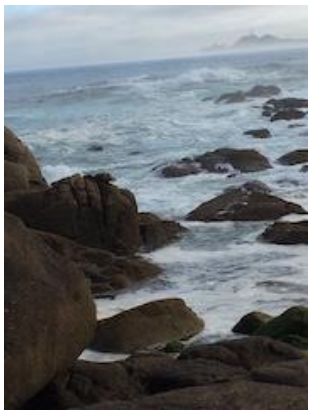
In Muxia, "Splitting the Pine" resonated powerfully with my inner and outer experience. The pilgrim in me felt like that massive pine tree, ancient and wounded, waiting for daybreak and the

lightning stroke that would split me down the center. I was ready to let go of my own goals, and turn myself over to something larger.

Each morning and each afternoon, I walked to the magnificent headland of the *Costa da Morte* ("coast of death"), to stand on a rocky hilltop and look out at the Atlantic. There, a sculptor had created a monument called "The Wound," in memory of the damage done to the ocean ecosystem by a 2002 shipwreck and oil spill just offshore. The tall, tombstone-like monument was a smooth slab split down the middle by a zigzag crack, exactly like the split trunk of the tree in my dream.

All along the way, my dreams had seemed to tap into the struggle and suffering of the land and sea and all the people who'd lived and died here through the geologic wear and tear of centuries, through wars, shipwrecks, plagues, and long journeys. But those dreams, like the place itself and the people I encountered, all resonated not only with turmoil and loss but with life.

The ocean had recovered from the oil spill—its water shivered in the cool gray morning light, and broke in translucent aquamarine waves on the rocky coast. The world around me rang with a new resonance, and it seemed as if all my struggles had exhausted themselves at last and left me. There was a lightning split down my center through which the vastness of the ocean could be seen.



Just being alive is astonishing. “Unconditional acceptance of all experiences” doesn’t depend on good experiences, or good feelings about those experiences—it simply calls for full participation. It is the same with dreams. They don’t have to dazzle me with their beauty, or impress me with their wisdom, or leave me feeling like I understand everything. If I participate fully, take a long walk in the dream world, share with strangers and let the landscape open the way—then every dream, and every moment, resonates.