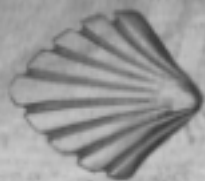


The Day Was Made for Walking

Searching for Meaning on the Camino de Santiago



Noel Braun

To Jill and Tim
In appreciation of your
help to a pilgrim on the
THE DAY journey.

WAS MADE FOR WALKING

**An Aussie's Search for Meaning
on the Camino de Santiago**

Noel Braun



NOEL BRAUN



22. If you wish to be sure
of the road you're travelling,
close your eyes and
walk in the dark



Arriving at Santiago was not the end of my pilgrimage. Pilgrimages are circular. You come but you don't stay. You travel along a route, arrive at your goal but the journey continues in the days and months and years that follow your return to where you come from. I was on my way home but my pilgrimage continued in that I had a further destination. My French book *Guide Spirituel du Pèlerin* recommended that, following the Camino, the pilgrim should undertake a monastic retreat and included a list of French monasteries. I visited Chartres cathedral in 2010. I found walking the labyrinth an uplifting experience and an

opportunity for a prayer of movement. I wanted to do the same in 2011, a fitting finale to walking the Camino.

In addition to reading *The Red Badge of Courage*, the day and a half of travel from Santiago to Chartres gave me time to nourish my inner spiritual life. The Camino had stimulated my imagination. I had a glimpse the possibilities of eternal truths in my encounter with the sunflowers and the 'Breath of God' one morning at dawn.

I was inspired at the courage of many people who had left the comfort of their homes to undertake such an arduous journey and despite their suffering continued to persist. They were searching and, like me, had some difficulty in articulating the reasons for undertaking this arduous endeavour.

Surfing the internet I discovered that the Faith Hope and Love Global Ministries would be running a contemplative pilgrimage, a spiritual retreat at Chartres cathedral in the same week that I had scheduled my visit. I was familiar with the Ministry because I had read a book – *Praying the Labyrinth* – written by one of the retreat leaders, Jill Geoffrion, which I bought at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco when I walked the labyrinth there in 2006.

I had exchanged emails with Jill. She and her husband Tim would be the retreat leaders. Why not join them? I was open to what the retreat had to offer. I liked the warmth that radiated from Jill's emails and her promotional blurb – I also liked the enigmatic quotation from St John of the Cross at the end of her emails: *If you wish to be sure of the road you are travelling close your eyes and walk in the dark.*

My last experience of retreats was at school, which were appropriate at that stage of my life, but now, many years later, I had a completely different perspective and a different set of questions. Spirituality changes over time. The development of

spirituality is a lifelong journey. I was apprehensive because I wasn't sure what to expect. Both Jill and Tim were American pastors. Fixed in my mind was a stereotype of yanks going overboard.

Would I find myself under siege weathering the evangelistic storm that I'd seen on early morning religious TV programmes? I was expecting to be challenged. I was stepping out of a comfort zone, but that has seldom deterred me from leaping into the unknown. Faith and spirituality are about moving out of your comfort zone, trusting in the lead given and knocking down the barricades to let the unknown in. Furthermore, both Jill and Tim had read my book *No Way to Behave at a Funeral* and I was encouraged by the insight of their comments.

What about *The Red Badge of Courage*? I chose this book because I'd read it years before and knew it to an exciting account of the American Civil War to pass the time travelling. It's a classic of American literature and regarded as one of the best accounts of war from an ordinary soldier's perspective.

I did not expect it to have much relevance to my week at Chartres. I chose it as a secular contrast but I found a profoundly moving account of one young man's battle with himself to overcome uncertainty and doubt. He was facing enormous challenges on a spiritual journey of self-discovery. I identified with this young soldier.

So I came to Chartres with a very open mind, ready to listen and to learn. I was familiar with the beauty of the cathedral and the value of the labyrinth. The labyrinth was installed on the floor of the nave between 1194 and 1220. Its single path design represents the journey of the spirit. It's a path of prayer and reflection, walked for spiritual insight and healing. A labyrinth differs from a maze in that a maze is designed to lose your way whereas the labyrinth leads you on a path to a

destination. It's a metaphor for our own spiritual journey in much the same way as the Camino is a metaphor.

When I first walked the labyrinth in 2006 I likened the pathway to my life up to the moment, the various turns being the important events in my life, the most significant being the presence of Maris – our life together and her death. The pathway is clearly defined. I could see where I'd been. The sense of being open to what lay ahead came as I left the confines of the labyrinth. I was moving into the future, into the unknown. When I visited in 2010, a question arose as I walked around the path. What is the next step for me? It was a question that couldn't be answered immediately. It was as if I had to be patient, to live with the question and, one of these days, live into the answer. Would I find an answer on this third visit?

Jill and Tim warmly welcomed their pilgrims. In no way did I feel intimidated but an equal among pilgrims on the journey. Jill was enthusiastic and devotional. She loved the cathedral and the labyrinth. Her enthusiasm was infectious. Tim had an engaging style. He was a good teacher and guided his pilgrims through thought-provoking questions, discussions and personal reflection. The two enjoyed their complementary skills.

I was surprised at the small number of pilgrims. Besides me, there were five others, all Americans. Cheryl was from New York, Beth, Jane and Maureen from Minneapolis, and MJ. I'm not sure where she lived.

I got to know these people in our discussions and our shared prayers and meals. We spent time in the cathedral, just a few minutes from the retreat centre. Although I have visited many cathedrals in Europe, the Chartres Cathedral is the one that I have had the privilege to study closely. The building is breathtaking. If you visit as a tourist you will find an outstanding

model of aesthetic achievement but, if you visit as a pilgrim, you will enter a wonderful instrument of religious action, of a faith expressed in stone that generates its own energy. If you give yourself the time to appreciate the beauty, to absorb its harmony, and not rush on to the next tourist thing, it's difficult not to be inspired.

I found myself so often just wandering around, looking about me, at the soaring roof, at the magnificent stained glass windows, at the carvings and sculptures, all the time giving thanks for the opportunity to linger in such a place. I felt an affinity with the millions of visitors over the centuries, of the multitude of pilgrims whose feet had worn smooth the stone of the labyrinth, of the countless everyday folk whose efforts built the cathedral stone by stone and have kept it going since. What extraordinary vision had the original designers! How did they manage to get things just right?

One afternoon, we left Chartres and on a beautifully sunny day visited the original quarry from which the stone came. The quarry had been a working enterprise until only recently. The people of the village came out to meet us. We were shown the actual places from which the stone had been extracted. Those stones were carted back the ten kilometres to the cathedral site. The trip became a pilgrimage in itself with everyone – even royalty – participating.

We walked back to Chartres following their route. We didn't have to carry large stones, just tiny pieces of rocks as souvenirs. It would have been difficult to get lost because we walked across a plain with the cathedral on the horizon, its towers soaring up to the cloudless sky. Even in these modern times the cathedral is a dominant landmark in the countryside.

Like everyone else, we were able to walk the labyrinth on Friday when the chairs were cleared away. However, we were

