



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

allowed into the cathedral after closing time on Thursday evening. We helped moved the chairs to one side and had the labyrinth to ourselves. Then with all the time in the world we walked the labyrinth.

On my last visits the thinking side of me was dominant, thinking about my past and my future, where I was going in my life without Maris, etc. without too much reference to the present moment. This time was different. I put my thinking aside and put on my feeling cap. I just walked and was intent on the experience of being there. I realised on the Camino that the action of walking was a prayer in itself. One doesn't pray just with words. You can pray with body movement and by just being present. The labyrinth acted as a metaphor bridging spirit and body, integrating the whole of my being, my masculine and feminine sides, the rational with the emotional, my physical and spiritual journeys.

I had brought from Australia the small wooden cross made from pieces of driftwood which I found on an Oregon beach. I had carried it in my backpack but now I held it in my hands.

My cross is sacred to me. It's a link with eternity. Who knows? The tree from which came the wood of my cross could have been growing at the time the labyrinth was built. I felt myself floating timelessly. Sometimes I felt a presence, just like on the Camino. Sometimes Maris was walking with me, sometimes Jesus. I used to tell the others that I regarded Jesus, not as the distant king of heaven, but as my mate and he spoke with an Aussie accent. I'd like to think that either Maris or Jesus was telling me not to be too worried about where I was going. Just be content to be. I already knew this because about a month before I left Australia, I came across a series of quotations from Thomas Merton, one of which was:

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You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognise the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.

What has happened to me at Chartres? What did it add to my Camino experience? I think my eyes have been opened wider to the many ways in which God is present in our lives and to the many ways in which we can pray. My time with Tim and Jill was only a start. Much was enlivened in the time but I could see that my first task was not to let the week slip into the mists of memory. I had to continue to nurture all the learning and insights. I had a job to do, as if the week had been a briefing on the work ahead. I could not go home and be complacent, or slip back into the comfortable old ways of thinking. I had to go home with a sense of dissatisfaction. I needed to do something different with my spiritual life.

I needed to do a critical review. Before I began the Camino I raised the question *Who am I?* and *What do I want to become?* I also reflected on my allegiance to the Catholic Church.

A central principle of its social justice teaching is respect for the individual and the common good. Such teaching can be very demanding in what it expects from me. In becoming who I want to be most deeply and truly I should move away from considering myself in individual private terms and reflect on my position in the world around me – as a member of my family, my neighbourhood, my country, my church, my culture and my planet – if I want to grow spiritually. I'll have to pose a series of questions. What is hard about growing spiritually? What'll get in the way and undermine my spiritual enthusiasm and vitality? What'll keep me from pursuing my vision? What help will I need to stay on the path?

I'll need to face reality. God gave me a spirit which can get lofty at times but He gave me a body as well, grounded with its needs and desires. I can be a selfish bugger. I need to face the truth about myself, discard the delusions, stop kidding myself and come to grips with what I don't want to see. I need to seek inner change. This would require a prayer or two to help me to see what I need to see, to give me the guts to face the truth, the wisdom to act and strength to act on what's revealed. I'll need to embrace the journey for what it is. That'll include the pain, hardship and suffering as well as the good parts.

If I'm going to be serious, I'll have to be prepared to cross bridges. The critical transition from one state of being to another should start from the moment I return home. I'll need to anticipate the bridges from an old me to a new me, what resistance I'll face, what resources I might need to face the transition.

I could not leave Chartres without mentioning my fellow pilgrims. Cheryl, Beth, Jane, MJ and Maureen were keen searchers, too. Beth described our lives as 'an ongoing contemplative journey.' With our different backgrounds and experience, we were seeking answers to similar questions. I admired the mutual respect and preparedness to listen and to understand each other, the sense of wonder at the eye-opening experience that Tim and Jill offered us. We shared the gift of our presence with each other. We found the sacred in the ordinary, in our singing together and our conversation over a good bottle of French wine. It was sad to say goodbye. Another Camino parting!

My deeply personal journey continues.

At one stage I thought my travelling was a reaction to Maris' death but it is more than that, more than working my way through my grieving. The same profound longing that sent me

travelling in 2005 and 2006 continues to drive me. It had me walking the Camino in 2010 and 2011. It had me visiting Chartres. I came with many questions, a preparedness to be open and to trust. I hope I have been receptive, and have accepted the challenge to grow with each experience. I leave with a lot more questions than I arrived with. I'm not sure if they will ever be answered or if they are answerable. Perhaps I have to accept that to be human is to live with uncertainty. Perhaps I have to remind myself that a mature spirituality is to bear with the ambiguity of life. Let's hope I have the momentum to nurture this new understanding and not accept certainties just to allay my anxieties. I'll never stop searching and puzzling for answers.

I've heard that your world is supposed to get smaller as you age. It's supposed to close in but, for me, it has the promise of getting vast. My pilgrimage has added meaning to my life and breathed a new vitality into my body and spirit.

I'll just continue to be a pilgrim on a journey and 'walk on, and on, and ever on.'

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