

Walking Life

Meditations on the Pilgrimage of Life

by
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Forward

This book is about walking, in particular about walking our life path. It is about walking one step at a time and the quality of our walk. It asks questions and offers suggestions on how to improve our walk. This book flows from reflections made throughout my life and during several long walks in Spain along the Camino de Santiago and its brother the Via de la Plata.**

When you have the time and the inclination, read this book slowly, one page at a time, even one page a day, and consider how each page can fit into your life, how you can apply its spirit to where you are in the world today.

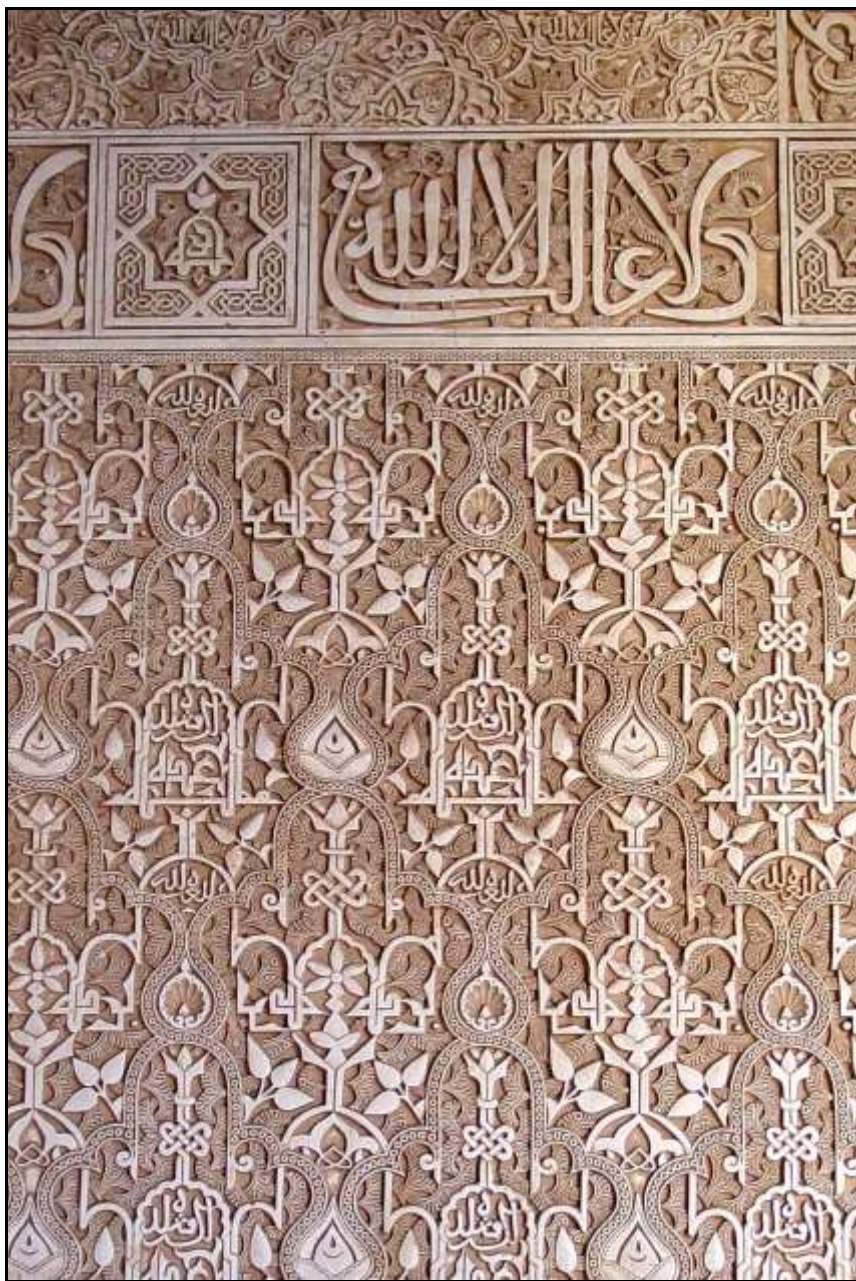
As I pass these words on to you, I thank God, the Universe, and untold numbers of people who have influenced me over the years and have helped me to better understand who I am and who we are. I especially thank Petra Wolf, my wife, who helped me formulate some of these questions and meditations as we walked our pilgrimages and afterwards as I wrote this book.

*Mike Metras
November 2006*

**The Camino de Santiago is a 1,200-year-old pilgrimage route across northern Spain to the grave of St. James in Santiago de Compostela. The Via de la Plata is another pilgrimage route, this one in western Spain from Seville also to Santiago. Pilgrimage routes come from all over Europe to join the Camino in Spain. In Germany and northern Switzerland these routes are called the Jakobsweg.*

Do you listen to your deepest desires?

The spontaneous tears that come up from deep within when we least expect them point to places our innermost heart wants us to be. We learn a lot about ourselves when we recognize these tears, when we feel them, when we follow them, when we act on them. It's good to listen to them and act on them even when all the logic of our heads says they lead us astray. Tears seldom misguide us.



Alhambra wall, Granada, Spain

Do you walk with purpose?

To begin a journey, we know we have to take the first step. Once we are moving, we follow step with step. But we have to decide to take that first purposeful step. We have to commit to it. In our lives we have to make the same purposeful planning, we have to commit to what we want to do and then take that first step. The next steps follow there too. The question is how actively and purposefully are we guiding our walks, our physical walk, and our walk of life.



Camino de Santiago south of Pamplona, Spain

Do you see and feel everything around you?

We know enough to watch the road in front of us to know where to put our next steps. But we need to look beyond. When we keep at least one eye on the horizon all around us and at everything in between, we come to know our entire world better.



Jakobsweg near Bad Waldsee, Germany

Do you reach high enough?

We need to boldly go after our desires and goals even when we think they are only reachable in our wildest dreams—the Camino of Santiago, the Pacific Crest Trail, our soul mate, the special career we want to follow, or the book we want to write. We can achieve them. We can reach far beyond where we think we can.

The impossible is possible.



Jakobsweg, Constance, Germany

Do you second-guess yourself?

When we come to a fork in our path, it's time to consider our options and choose a direction to go. We have the arrows and signs at the intersection and in our hearts as guidance. But once we have chosen a path, we do best when we walk it boldly, joyfully, and without longing for the path not chosen. If we feel compelled to reconsider our choice, we need to realize that compulsion and treat the reconsideration as a new junction to consider, choose, and walk.



Jakobsweg near Münchwilen, Switzerland

Do you accept your mistakes?

Perfection is not an option. Perfection doesn't exist. We are human beings. We can only go for our best and forget about making anything "perfect." In fact, if we aren't making mistakes, we aren't trying hard enough. When we make mistakes, that signals that we are trying. Letting fear of making mistakes rule us can lead to doing nothing, chronically, one of the biggest mistakes of all. When in doubt about the next step, we can only take a step, any reasonable step, and believe that the best will come of it, even when that "best" includes a mistake or two.



Leaning Tower, Pisa, Italy

Do you take advantage of opportunities?

As I started each morning on the Camino, I tried to stop at the first open bar or grill. Sometimes there was not another bar along the path for a long time. It was never fun when I couldn't drink my morning coffee or eat my morning toast until 2 pm. An opportunity once passed up may never present itself again.



Camino de Santiago, El Ganzo, Spain

Do you take a break often?

It's hard to be aware of anything around us when we are spending most of our effort getting where we are going, speeding down the path. Everything passes a blur. We relax when we slow down to enjoy our surroundings, to smell the flowers, to hear the birds, to take in the details of a tree's bark. They are there for our pleasure. We renew ourselves when we stop on a riverbank or under a tree. Fifteen minutes under a tree can give one an extra two hours walking time.



Camino de Santiago near Villafranca di Bierzo, Spain

Do you look for the "right" path?

We cannot think of following the "right" road, the "correct" path. There is no "right" road, no "correct" path. There is only "my path" and "your path." We decide what that road is. It only matters that we walk. We do not even have to walk the distance. The Universe, God, puts the path in front of us. The real goal is to walk, to experience today's walk with openness.



Camino de Santiago near Castrojeriz, Spain

Do you break rules?

Rules, like arrows along the Camino, are guides to direct us to a specific goal and to maintain order among all who walk. But they are only guides. If we believe our path must contradict their norm, we can only go our way with grace. If the rule says, "Walk," and we need to ride because we are blistered, we can only ride. If the arrow points left and we think the valley to the right looks more interesting, why not go there?



Camino de Santiago near Triacastela, Spain

Do you have too many things?

We carry so much that we don't need. Our houses have so much excess. What about those extra pairs of shoes we don't need? Extra baggage means extra wear on everything: our shoes, our feet, our legs, our breath, our heart, and our selves. We move more easily when we regularly get rid of excess. Less is more, both on the walk and at home.



Camino de Santiago, pilgrims gear, Samos, Spain

Do you cool off often?

On hot days, it's great to pour water over our heads. Like lightening our load or resting under a tree, sticking our head under a fountain's cold flow or into a stream's cool waters can give us miles of additional walking distance on a hot afternoon. The same is true in your everyday life. Take water breaks often.



Switzerland

Do you resist going back once you have passed something?

When we have the urge to do so, we serve ourselves when we go back. It's OK to go back. So many times in the past I have refused to go back, often when I would have been better off to do so. It doesn't hurt to go back. We may never be this way again. Going back may lead to little or nothing.

But it also may lead to some wonderful experience or exciting discovery, something that can only happen when we go back.



Via de la Plata near Morille, Spain

Do you worry about things before you have to?

We can only climb a hill when we get to it. We can only walk where we are now. When we see a hill down the road in front of us, there's no reason to climb it in our heads five times before we get there. We will have plenty of time to take on that hill or any other problem when it's in our face. And who knows? The problem may take care of itself; the road may turn before we get there, as it did in this picture.



Camino de Santiago near Castrojeriz, Spain

Do you take one step at a time?

We can go anywhere one step at a time. When we are tired and hurting and think we cannot make the day's destination, we need only to remember that we can take the next step. That, along the next and the next, soon adds up to the rest of the way, one step at a time. At the end of my first walk across Spain to Santiago and the Atlantic, I had walked over 950 kilometers (580 miles) one step at a time—an astounding total of somewhere around 1,900,000 steps. We can always take one more step.



Camino de Santiago near Astorga, Spain

Do you hear everything that is spoken around you?

As we walk, we learn a lot when we listen to whatever the Universe is telling us, no matter where she speaks from. We learn much when we are open to all and listen to and hear everyone and everything. The Universe serves us with some wild ideas from wild sources at times. But most of the time we receive simple, easy-to-do suggestions from our everyday surroundings.



Mysore, India

Do you share your joys and sorrows?

We lighten our load when we share the joys and pains of our days and celebrate with those who walk with us. We grow when we include others as part of our walk and let them include us in their walks. That way we help and support each other in our quest for enlightenment.



Camino de Santiago, Azofra, Spain

Do you try to make others do things your way?

When someone wants to be out of step with us or walk down a different path, we best let her walk her own path. We'll rejoin somewhere later if it's meant to be. If we try to change another's pace or path against their will, we are only going to cause both of ourselves grief.



Via de la Plata near El Real de la Jara, Spain

Do you do things someone else's way sometimes?

We grow when take time once in a while to walk with others who are not walking at our pace or not walking down our path. When we do, we usually return to our pace or our path refreshed, better for the experiencing.



Via de la Plata south of Zafra, Spain

Do you say "No" when you need to?

We often are afraid to say "No" to someone because we may hurt him or her or we are afraid of a confrontation.

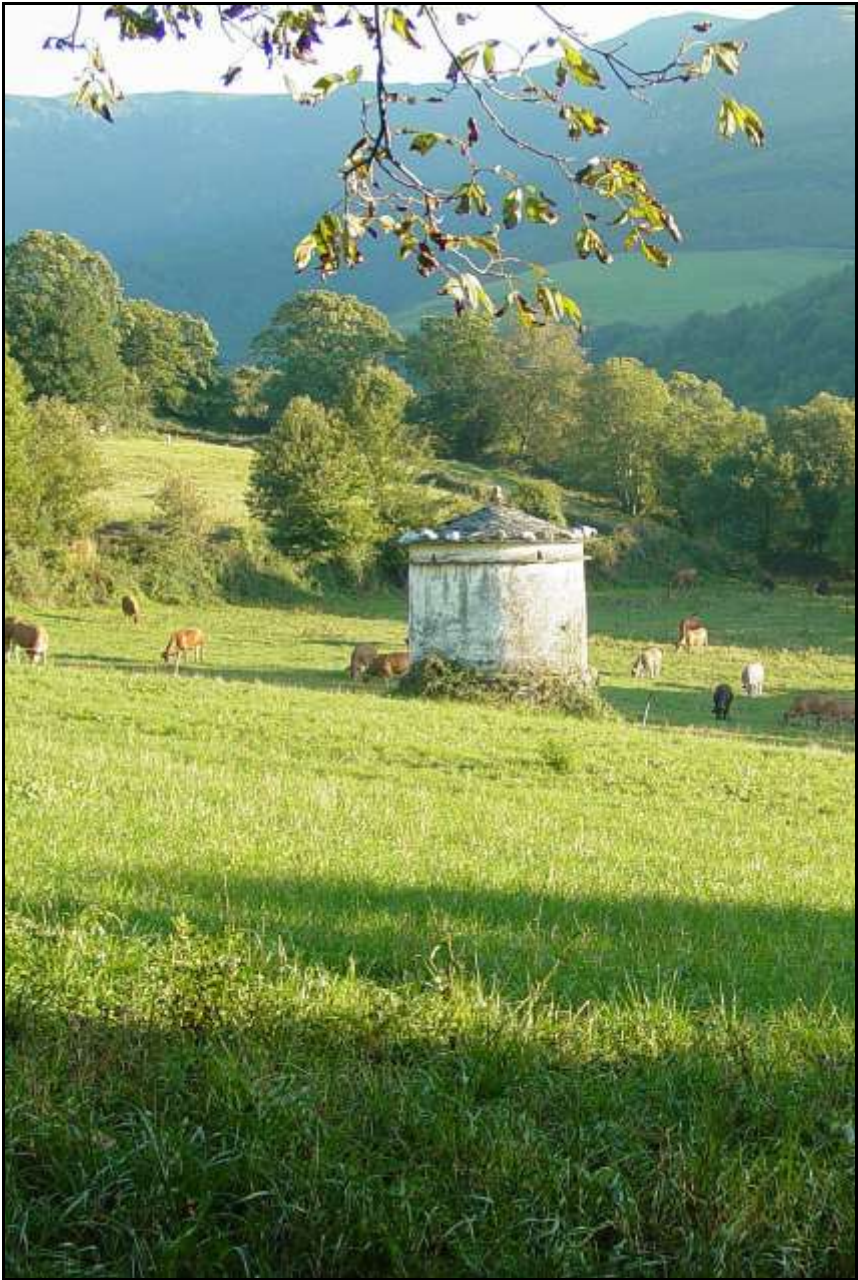
When we must say "No" in order to be true to our own direction, to our own path, we can only say it, no matter how hard. At the same time we have to be careful to say it with as much class and heart as we can muster, and then trust that the other and the Universe will resolve any problem our "No" may cause them.



Wandering bull, Kathmandu, Nepal

Do you taste the vinegar along with the wine of life?

Without cow dung, the Galician countryside would not be so beautiful. Stones in our path make us walk with more attention. Everything the walk has to offer, the joys and the tears, are part of our path. We can learn from them.



Camino de Santiago near Triacastela, Spain

Do you give thanks as you walk life's path?

We often think the paths we walk could be better. But they are all we have. They are our paths. We grow when we thank the Universe, thank God, for giving them to us, for giving us to them as we walk them, suffer them, enjoy them, learn from them, and live them.



Camino de Santiago near Ponferrada, Spain

Do you live for today or for some future goal?

The end brings a beginning. As a walk begins, so it ends, often on some obscure shore. But we do not walk to reach the end. Rather we walk today to feel the sting of the highway, the cold of the morning, the heat of the sun, and the disquiet and ecstasies of the wind on our bodies, our minds, and our souls. And so is life. We are here now to feel all that and more—and then the door closes. This is all we know. We do not know what is beyond this nearby shore. We can only joyfully shout, "Yes" to today and believe that one journey's end brings the beginning of the next.



Camino de Santiago, Estorpe, Spain

About the author

For many years I wrote books to tell people how to repair farm tractors and use computer software. In my vacation time I traveled by car throughout the United States. I dreamed of traveling on more distant paths at the slower pace of a walker. The mountains of Spain, Italy, and Greece and the Nile River called my name for many years. My earlier education in philosophy and theology called me to look more deeply into the soul of the path I was walking. Then in 2000 I left industrial writing to walk and write of more essential and spiritual subjects. This book is one of the results of this change.

*Mike Metras
November 2006*

*Other books by Mike Metras
available at www.WorksAndWords.com*

Ethiopia: Travels of a Youth
Money Meanderings: An Introduction to Numismatics
Axum: Coins and Places



Mike Metras on the Camino de Santiago