

Good morning. It's wonderful to be here among you, back in my old hometown. I went to high school right across the street. I spent plenty of weeknights on the other side, hunkered down in the stacks of the public library. And while much of the town's profile has changed since I was a kid, there's enough that hasn't to render me nostalgic.

The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts raised me up. I was ordained here and experienced my formative years serving under Bishops Shaw, Cederholm, and Harris. These days, I oversee the chaplaincy program at Harvard-Westlake, an independent private high school located in Los Angeles. But for twelve years *prior* to my arrival on the left coast, I was the Director of Spiritual and Religious Life at Phillips Andover, a boarding school located not so terribly far from this parish. My transition to the City of Angeles occurred during the height of COVID, timing that made that first year quite challenging. But the change of scenery *also* afforded me some unexpected opportunities, including the time to finish a project that had been on my bucket list ever since I can remember.

As a young girl, I wanted desperately to be a writer. Raised on the adventuresome tales of Nancy Drew and Anne of Green Gables, I knew the key to crafting a riveting book was the storyline. But I never came across a topic that seemed worthy of such arduous attention or the spilling of such large quantities of ink. Until I did.

Today I want to share with you *some* of the details of that discovery. There is nothing new or cutting-edge about it. Indeed, it is an ancient practice people of faith have been doing for thousands of years. This story begins with one of Jesus' disciples – the venerable *St. James*.

During my first year at Andover, having just survived the grueling gauntlet known as faculty orientation, I headed toward the home of the then Head of School to attend one final cocktail party before the academic year began. I was shy, I am shy, which made me even more aware of how animated the conversation was that surrounded me, something that made me feel very much like the outsider I was.

But luckily for me, one of the other attendees quickly scooted over and introduced herself. Within a few minutes, I discovered she was from Cuba, was a member of the world languages department, and was herself a person of faith. And when *she* discovered I was the new campus minister, she immediately launched into a lengthy conversation about the Camino de Santiago, a 500-mile pilgrimage path that extends across the width of northern Spain, ending at the cathedral in Santiago where, as lore would have it, the remains of *St. James* were believed to be interred.

As a lifelong practicing Christian, I was embarrassed to admit to my new friend Carmel that I had never heard of the Camino. Well, that didn't last for long. And a handful of years later, I too would find myself on that same path, walking hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of miles toward the famed cathedral, wondering how exactly this had become my reality as well.

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Looking back on it, perhaps I shouldn't have been so surprised. In seminary, I took the standard rote of classes. I studied scripture, made my way through centuries of church history, and was introduced to the practicalities of liturgy. So it wouldn't be out of the ordinary to assume my strongest spiritual connection would be to our prayer book, or the Bible, or to presiding over weekly Sunday services just like this. But, if I'm being honest, none of these were the most *prominent* tool in my spiritual toolbox. No, it was something much more mundane and universal, a practice I have relied upon my whole life long.

“Solveitour ambulando,” as St. Augustine once said, or “it is solved *by walking*.”

I share this trait with countless others, many whose stories are contained in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The Israelites *wandering* in exile. The transformational moments of the Good Samaritan, the conversion of St. Paul, the return of the prodigal son, all incidents that took place *on the side of a road somewhere*, as the protagonists were making their way from one place to another.

Even Jesus himself, strode into the desert for some 40 days and 40 nights, with nothing but time and an expansive horizon to help him make sense of his life, his vocation, and what was to come.

When I later shared this dream of mine, of making the landscape of Spain the backdrop of the next stage of my life, my friends and family were strangely unconcerned about my capacity to traverse an entire country, noting that my stubbornness alone would likely provide enough fuel for the journey. But they did remain mystified as to *why* I would do such a thing. What sort of provocation could *possibly* lure me into such a punishing crucible?

Confused myself, I asked this same question of every pilgrim I met while on the path. *Why*, I queried, *why* are you here? And much to my surprise, nearly all of them gave me the exact same answer.

My heart is broken.

Some were in the throes of a divorce. Some were grieving the death of a parent. Some longed to revive the relationship they once had with their children. Some had had their world shattered by drugs or alcohol. Some had lost a job. And some, they were just lost. But a common thread remained, this fervent belief that the Camino could *heal* them somehow, that through the act of *walking*, the painful and crippling portions of their lives could somehow be exorcised from their hearts.

And so I too began to consider if this were my truth as well. The day I reached the apex of the trail, some 350 miles into the pilgrimage, these were the words I wrote in my journal in an effort to capture that transitional moment:

“When I was younger, I saw the world in black and white. Right and wrong. For me or against me. Oh, I had all the answers back then. I was vigorous but not flexible. Strong but brittle. What I didn't fully appreciate back in my salad days were the countless ways in which I would grow *stronger* with age. I bend

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now. I play the long game. Like the very iron of the cross at which I knelt, I have been made *more* formidable by the impurities that mark my life.”

Today’s gospel from Matthew features a parable that likens the kingdom of heaven to, well, a whole cadre of things. A comparison is rendered to the mustard seed, to yeast, to hidden treasure, to a merchant in search of pearls, and even to a net full of fish. For me, the common denominator of this assortment is the *joy* imbued in their discovery. And when that treasured nugget is found, the lure of everything else falls away.

During my 37 days of walking across Spain, I was often plagued by bouts of doubt, discomfort, and disorientation. But in the quieter moments, I remembered I had *chosen* this journey. I had come to the rugged and raw landscape of the Camino, in part, as a journey of self-discovery. It did *not* disappoint. In the end, the pilgrimage provided me with the pearl I had come to find - an uncompromisingly honest reflection of the person I was, and perhaps, a glimmer of the person I *could* be.

And so this morning, I offer for *your* consideration these same questions.

Who are *you* trying to become? And how might the path *you’ve* chosen, be helping or hindering your spiritual trajectory?

My blessings to each of you for whatever the journey is that lay ahead. **Amen.**

Visit The Rev. Gardner’s [website](#) to learn more about her book.