

El Camino

Peter Gray



Twelve youth and four adults participated in the Youth Pilgrimage to Spain this past July. Following is a reflection by one of the participants.

I wanted to go to Spain, but not like this: a packaged, chachka-laden bus tour. My original summer plans had been to hike the Sierra Nevada, alone: writing, wearing wool sweaters, and trying to look as ruggedly picturesque as possible. But I was too flaky, so my parents pulled the plug. I felt like I was settling, compromising my independence. By the time I left Spain, this view had changed.

My first memory of Spain is eating lunch alongside the highway to Pamplona. Jacobo, the son of our guides, was half-naked and clapping along in his three-year-old stumbling gait - un pi'caro al co'razon. Jet lag hung on everyone's faces, squinting before the piercing Spanish sun. We were surrounded by arid rolling hills, the wheat (trigo) chopped low to the ground.

We got to know the picnic lunch routine: some type of sausage, a local cheese, fresh bread, and then the occasional tin of sardines, mussels, or octopus in escabeche (a sauce of vinegar and paprika).

My memories of the St. James' trip to Spain are divided up fondly between the landscape and the people I met and got to know. I'll never forget those fields of wheat, beautiful but foreboding in their endless, empty tracts. The rustling of the stalks sounded like white noise, making memories of those sections of the Camino have a hazy, dream-like quality. We would pass through towns seemingly deserted, full of Giorgio di Chirico's crooked shadowy streets. I remember when we walked out of Nájera into the hills of pine. It was how I had always imagined the backdrop of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* - steep, open slopes covered in a sprinkling of needles.

Those memories are solitary, though. I was alone for them. I also remember coming out of those hills and finding a lone bicy-

cle wheel and rolling it up the path, much to the delight of Jacobo, now strapped into a pack on his father's back. He clapped and shrieked wildly when I rolled it off a steep embankment and it went flying into the dense green crop of the next field.

I remember walking with people whom I had been going to church with for a long time, and learning so many new things about them. I would make Militza and Jennyfer Machuca, originally from Venezuela, talk for miles in Spanish with me, correcting me frequently. I remember talking to Nancy, one of our guides, about the life choices she had made - staying in Spain and starting her business and her family there after she had been working on the Camino de Santiago for her U.C.- Berkeley Ph.D.

The time I remember most clearly was when we hiked twenty four miles by moonlight. It hurt. My feet felt like they had been beaten with a bat. But as we trudged along through Galicia, under thin, austere eucalyptus trees, we sang.

Rounds of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" alternated with lessons in the lyrics of D.M.X. (an expletive-laden rapper, to those of you in the older generations). It had the effect of an Indian run, where a group jogs single file, the last one running up to the front, and so on, so that everyone is pulled along by the group as a whole. It kept us going.

If I had done that hike solo, I would have stopped - alone, in the woods. I learned that a group is a powerful thing, powerful enough to alter an individual's emotions completely. Mine, which would have otherwise told me to give up, were molded and reaffirmed by my companions. Succeeding as a group had a rewarding quality that I had not expected. I thought of success in terms of myself, the individual, that I would be celebrating my own personal achievement. I realize now that I was not strong enough to personally achieve it. I was dependent on the group around me.

Peter Gray is an usher, a prayer leader and a reader at the 9:15 service. He is a senior at Trinity School.