“If only normal life would be like life on the Camino“

If someone would have predicted before my pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela that I would ever write about spirituality, I would have looked pityingly in response. Why? Because for me spirituality was connected, above all, to: "head in the clouds" and hardly to "feet on the ground". Of course that says a lot about me. I'm a doer. For me the pilgrimage as an outward bound journey appeared to be just the right experience.

The pilgrimage as an inner journey is a lot more difficult. It is about travelling consciously along the path of your own life. For me, the journey to Santiago was the beginning of that, or at least, a new beginning. For me it is still the most amazing journey of my life. Why? That is hard to say. As a tourist you only have to say: "I visited Paris" and one immediately thinks of the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, croissants and boulevards. What it means to find your own way as a pilgrim is much more difficult to describe and to explain. But I will give it a try.

What does "spirituality" actually mean? To live a "spiritual" life means, to me: to deliberately and consistently go my own way, to be attentive and open to others, and to be aware of the Other. These three elements are also the basis for this story: me, others and the Other. Of course in relation to pilgrimage.

ME

When we talk about pilgrimage, we often come across two metaphors which are strongly connected: the labyrinth and the hero's journey.

The labyrinth is an ancient symbol for the way of life. You leave the old and set off for the new, into a labyrinth, in search of new meaning. At some moments you seem to have found it, at others you feel further away from it than ever. Upon discovering the new meaning you touch the core of the labyrinth. Then, you have to find your way out, searching for ways to shape your daily life in accordance with the newly discovered meanings, for yourself and for others. Again and again.

Once upon a time, within a labyrinth on Crete, there lived the Minotaur. This was a monstrous bull who fed on humans who had been sacrificed to him. The hero Theseus ventured into the labyrinth and succeeded in killing the monster. Then he managed to find his way out by following a red thread, which his beloved Ariadne had spun for him.

That is the essence of all great stories of heroes: the hero is challenged to step out of everyday life and fulfill an important mission: like Theseus to defeat a monster, or to search for a treasure, like the quest for the Holy Grail by the knights of King Arthur.

These great stories often have a happy ending. Probably that's why they are so popular. In normal life, a happy ending is not as certain. Therefore many people choose the safe way; they stay at home in their own comfort zone. Or they take to the road, but at the same time try to take "home" with them. You can also see
this on the **Camino** (and we see this in ourselves):
- heavy backpacks and biking bags, stuffed with certainties,
- luggage transport and taxis to get around difficult obstacles,
- many calls, SMS and emails, so as to not let go of the familiar,
- planning everything, so as to not give in to the unknown,
- endless surfing on the internet beforehand: searching for solutions to problems which in reality usually will not occur or which will solve themselves.

Of course there can be very good reasons to use such tools. What is a great challenge for one person is a piece of cake for another. One pilgrim has just recovered from a serious illness; another is in the prime of life. But the challenge to each of us is clear: to face the adventure head-on, to expand your boundaries, to become the “hero” of your own story.

That is the first step: into the labyrinth and meeting the challenge. But there is yet another first step: to get out of the labyrinth. In the heroic tales this is the moment when the hero finds the Grail: a beautiful symbol of new insight, or of an important decision. Then he / she returns home, to share the insight with others. That is what really gives meaning to the journey.

And on the Camino? In Santiago, the pilgrim’s office is waiting for us with a real certificate: the Compostela. That seems to be the end of our journey. But ... nothing is less true. In Santiago we actually are only halfway. A new challenge awaits us then: to bring the Camino home. To leave the yellow arrows behind us and to give our pilgrimage a personal meaning that enriches our daily life and our relationship with others.

The **OTHER**

In the West the image of “the Other” has been defined for centuries by Christianity. That image has been centered on God. The universe revolves around his creation: the world. Historically that was so evident, that the old pagan symbol of the labyrinth could be depicted in churches without any problem. Thus it became a new symbol of faith which, like a red thread, would lead Christians through the labyrinth of life.

From the 16th century on, however, a counter movement started. A milestone was the discovery that the earth revolves around the sun, and not vice versa. Since that time, rational science has pushed faith into an ever smaller corner. Church and state are increasingly separated. God is relegated to the private sphere, if welcome at all ...

However, gradually the understanding arises that the story is not finished with that. That the mystery of existence is something far greater than ourselves.

We see this also on the **Camino**. In the Middle Ages it was an important way to express the Christian faith. Then the Camino slowly sank into oblivion, to make a great comeback precisely in our "infidel" times, albeit in a very different form.

... There is so much beauty ...
I am convinced that there is not one answer to the great questions of our lives: where do I come from?, who am I, where am I going?. We have to give meaning to our lives ourselves, by going our own way. In doing so, each of us will be inspired in some way by the great mystery: by God, by a beautiful sunrise, by the rhythm of our breathing, by whatever. There is so much beauty. Thus we go, as pilgrims, with our head in the clouds and with our feet on the ground. With confidence in the voice in ourselves. We are following the red thread of our dreams, aren’t we?

OTHERS

We live in a time in which the great, certain answers to social questions are also no longer valid. When the Berlin Wall fell, our western formula of freedom seemed to be the big winner. The vanguard of humanity had reached the heart of the labyrinth; the rest would follow. Meanwhile, the market would bring its blessings, driven by "the invisible hand" of supply and demand. But that too appeared to be a fable. The invisible hands were those of speculators, who made one big pyramid game out of the stock markets: with huge profits at the small apex, while the bill of greed was passed downwards. Freedom also appeared to be just another ideology. A nice package for the rights of the strongest or the smartest.

Now on the ruins of the old financial pyramids new ones are eagerly being built. "Growth" is and remains the magic word. Growth, although we know that our planet cannot bear that. More and more living systems on Earth are irreparably damaged. And we also pass this debt on to the next generations.

With political freedom, our democracy, it is not much better. Confidence in politics and in the government is low. One after another public service has been outsourced, under the motto of a better functioning free market. This is well understood by the new directors: the rewards at the tops of the new pyramids skyrocketed. And at the bottom, budgets are cut, using the magic word: "efficiency". Thus the public sector has crumbled, and with it confidence in the public interest.

Is it a coincidence that many people find common ground in a new theme: concern about all those strangers in our country? Or is it really very logical? These strangers are often at the bottom of our social pyramid and therefore are easy scapegoats. Are we therefore more concerned about girls wearing black kerchiefs, than about men with white collars who are emptying the cash registers?

How can this be? Holland is a rich country and yet there is much discomfort about society as a whole. Although, remarkably enough, most Dutch people say they are satisfied with their own lives. But perhaps this only logical too. From faith in big, firm answers, in which we had a secure role, we have changed in no time to: I will find that out myself. If something goes wrong then, it’s obvious that someone else is to blame... .

Things cannot go on like this, can they? Surely our freedom also contains a mission, no? Namely: to become accomplished as human beings. Not in the way IKEA says: "Design you own life". Life is more than decorating your own tiny palace with clever, ready-made kits. The point is that we dare to set off to find our own
Grail and in doing so develop our talents. Only then can we grow, to true freedom, in solidarity. Even with the weaker in our society. In short: "Improve the world; start with yourself."

It's possible, I'm sure, because I've seen a glimpse of it. Where? On the Camino! The Camino is accessible to everyone. Each person goes his or her own way, and yet there is a strong feeling of connection. The Camino is a colorful procession of believers and atheists, of spiritual people and sportsmen, of young and old, from all walks of life and from all corners of the world. Without formal organization, without hierarchy. So on the Camino you can often hear: "What if normal life could be like this...". Well, if that is what we really want, then let's get to work, OK?

ME, the OTHER, and OTHERS

Can I give a little pass? I'll do that by combining: me, the Other and others, very practical, in relation to that what unites us: the pilgrimage.

The pilgrim on the road. To take to the road means: to learn to live with uncertainties and to understand that it is even of great value to be able to let go of your old certainties. Only then can you develop yourself and only then can you remain open to others and the Other. To take to the road also means: to learn to trust that things will turn out well, though it is often in a very different way than you would have ever imagined. These are important lessons in these turbulent times, characterized by the loss of traditional relationships, by economic and ecological crises, and by clashes of culture.

The pilgrim with the backpack (or cycle bag). Many pilgrims are amazed by how happy they are, while only carrying a few belongings, without newspaper, without TV, in short: while leading a simple life. Indeed, less stuff and less hassle brings more quality of life. All that consumption and all those incentives only distract from our essential mission: to develop ourselves as human beings, in relation to the Other and to others. Consuming as lifestyle is a drug, with as devastating an effect as drug wars. It destroys our earth. Going on a pilgrimage means traveling light, with only a small footprint. Then there's enough for everyone.

The pilgrim as a stranger. The word "pilgrim" is derived from the Latin word "peregrinus" = "stranger". Most pilgrims travel as strangers in other countries or regions. They really experience what it means to be a stranger, especially while they travel light and are therefore more dependent on and open to people along their way. Thus you can feel much more strongly how important hospitality is, and what it means to be really welcome. I think that afterwards you will never look at strangers in your own country with the same eyes again.

The pilgrim on the star road. Many pilgrims are already aware of the magic of the Camino before they even take the first step. They feel the ancient history of it, which even goes back to the time of the Celts. They feel that millions have gone that way before them, in more than 1000 years. They read stories about miracles by James or about special
experiences of today's pilgrims. All of this means that many start their journey with a special mindset. And if we all give a special importance to something, then this becomes a reality.

In short: pilgrimage is a wonderful experience in itself and as a bonus you get a rich metaphor, which helps describing and explaining it. This experience and this metaphor can inspire you again and again, and keep you on track. Especially now that the great answers are history and that we are allowed and... forced to go our own way.

Coming back once more to the sigh above: "If only normal life could be as it is on the Camino". Well, isn’t that exactly our mission? To bring home the experiences of our journey and to give them shape in our everyday life?

To me that is practical spirituality. But actually that is saying the same thing twice. Spirituality is part of the practice of everyday life. Because otherwise spirituality remains stuck in the core of the labyrinth.

Do you want to join?

Arno Cuppen, March 2010