

Instead of an Introduction

It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

Chinese proverb

I'd wanted to make the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in Spain ever since I'd first heard about El Camino de Santiago. I had run marathons and climbed high mountains. I was running ten or more kilometers several times a week. I didn't give a second thought to the way thousands of ordinary people make pilgrimages. Instead, I planned to run the trail in the quickest time possible, or to do it by bike. A few weeks after returning from a trip to Antarctica, where I had climbed its highest peak Mount Vinson, however, I decided to walk Camino alone with a backpack, like nearly everyone else on the way to Saint James' tomb.

The faithful started walking to the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela in the ninth century. In the Middle Ages, a spider's web of pilgrimage roads enmeshed Europe. Camino Francés, or the French road, became the most heavily travelled route of western civilization. It is 780 kilometers long and is considered the most important pilgrimage route to Saint James' tomb. It begins in Basque country, in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, then runs along the Atlantic coast through the Pyrenees, then through the valleys of the Erro and Arga rivers to Pampeluna, the Rioja wine region, Meseta Central to Spain's old capital Burgos. It then winds its way by mountain trail to the Celtic hamlet of O'Cebreiro, descends to the Galician plateau, and finally reaches Santiago de Compostela.

Although many years passed during which it was nearly forgotten, now over 100,000 people a year make the pilgrimage on the Way of St. James, with 2010 being a record year of 271,000 registered pilgrims. Camino de Santiago was the first pilgrimage first in Europe route to be declared a European Cultural Route by the Council of Europe, and was named a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1993.

Heading out from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port on March 13th, 2011, I was an optimist. I thought I'd finish the trail with ease, clocking in 40km to 60km a day. I would have lots of time to meditate and talk to the people I would meet. However, the first day already contained a warning things would turn out not as I had imagined. Although I reached Roncesvalle in eight hours, a 26km mountainous trail deemed as one of the most difficult sections of the route, my feet were rubbed raw. The sharp pain took away any desire I had to hike.

Things got worse in the next few days. The abrasions on my feet multiplied, and I labored over the next few sections of the trail. People were passing me. Not just students, but housewives, female as well as male pensioners, and office workers who had just stepped away from their desks. Finally, a 130kg man passed me like an express train, greeting me cheerfully, only slightly out of breath.

“Buen Camino,” he said. I didn’t pay attention to the landscape or people. I walked like a robot, trying to focus on rejecting the idea of quitting the pilgrimage and giving it another try some other time. And yet I knew that successfully finishing a marathon or climbing a mountain, especially the final sections, is determined by one’s mind - not one’s legs. My physical torment lasted ten days, until the wounds on my feet healed. If it hadn’t been for the kindness of the people I met along the way, evening talks, their support and ever-present smiles, I would have surely given up.

That’s when it occurred to me; maybe this was the way it was meant to be. I got a lesson in humility and in something even more precious: I realized that the people who saved me were those that, under normal circumstances, I should be helping, taking into account my experience and physical fitness. I saw my fellow travelers, ordinary people, in a whole new light. They weren’t ordinary at all, but exceptional. Three housewives, a fat percussionist in a flamenco band, a student sleeping in his baseball

cap, a doctor from Korea worn down by life, a young girl from Singapore wondering whether to study medicine or veterinary medicine, a Dutch woman three-months pregnant.

Each one of them hiked with a smile on their lips and serenity in their hearts. Meanwhile I was walking with a grimace, while the sharp pain of my cut-up feet penetrated my brain, not allowing me to focus on anything other than my own suffering. Again and again I asked myself: what gives these people so much spiritual and physical strength that they can match a marathon runner? Where do they get their absolute calm and optimism, enough almost to move mountains? Why do I feel so dumbstruck by their readiness to help, and their openness to the world and to others that makes every conversation interesting and instructive?

The answer was simple and the same every time: goodness, friendship, kindness, love, empathy, readiness to help in exchange for nothing, solidarity, respect, joy -- these values were the invisible fabric of their attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. It made me feel good with these people, safe and happy, as if I had known them for ages. In the world I left behind, uncertainty and chaos set the rhythm of the day as the unforgiving competition and the permanent rat race kept people always on their guard. In the world I left behind, fear turns into constant stress paralyzing the mind and the body. Everything is for sale and anything can be bought. The end justifies the means.

The world I found here wasn't driven by lust for power and money, nor by ruthlessness, selfishness, or envy. The heroes of this world are people whose uniqueness does not arise from their beauty, youth, strength, or wealth. Quite the opposite. They aren't characterized by any of these attributes of pop culture heroism. They are unique because they know how selflessly to offer help, kindness, or a smile. They are ready to listen to others and pay attention to them. Such simple values, demonstrated in everyday actions, make ordinary people unique beings. "Ordinary people can become extraordinary, capable of miracles, if they're guided by a few basic values," became my motto as I walked, and it was confirmed in practice a thousand times. It's a cliché, a banal truth. Everyone can agree with it on a theoretical level. Abstract declarations are one thing, real life is another. But that's what I encountered on the Camino, this motto put into practice in its most beautiful incarnation.

Eventually my wounds healed and I could savor the solitude of the Way of Saint James as well as evening talks in the hostels. And the whole way, until I reached the Cathedral, I thought about those ordinary people guided by basic values, which led me to think about values in my personal and work lives. I came home with a conviction, which turned into a categorical imperative: I had to share my insights with others.

The relation between positive values in life and in business had a real, practical dimension for me in the past. I realized that my personal experiences of putting values on the forefront of managing a business and seeing them as fundamental to worker relations were unique and rare, and I had a duty to bear witness. In today's changing world, society is just becoming aware of the idea that profit isn't the only or even the most important goal of a business. Society's painful experiences of companies and managers driven by greed, ruthlessly pursuing profit maximization have midwifed this awareness.

Acting according to values is as important for businesses as it is for people. It allows a person to live with dignity and die with a sense of fulfillment, and gives a business a chance at immortality. Thanks to my value system, I can take things one day at a time to build happiness in my personal life, and achieve success and satisfaction at work. The values by which I aspire to live define what kind of person I am, what choices I make, and how I am perceived by others. The values by which managers aspire to run a business are the bridge transmitting talent. Values enable businesses to grow and be profitable in accord with the environment, with worker preferences, as well as with the expectations of stakeholders and owners. It's the ordinary-extraordinary who, using values as a roadmap, create incredible businesses. Mahatma Gandhi said: "Be the change that you wish to see in the world." That's why I've written this book. It wasn't part of the plan.