

Rediscovering Wildness: A Personal Story

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Troy D. Allan, Ed.D., MFA

Professional Practice Extension Assistant Professor



When I told my son about my dream to hike the Camino de Santiago—a historic pilgrimage trail winding through Portugal and northern Spain—and asked him to join me, his response came rather quickly, with very little thought: “No way! But I’ll meet you at the end of the trail.” I laughed at the time, but his words have lingered. I often reflect on his answer and wonder if that isn’t that what many of us do in life? We rush to the destination, eager to reach the end, while forgetting that the journey—the trail itself—is where life happens.

The Camino de Santiago draws thousands of pilgrims from across the world each year all seeking the final resting place of St. James. The trail weaves through the rugged landscapes of rolling hills, forests, and ancient villages. While its origins are rooted in the Christian tradition, it has since become a path for all seekers, regardless of faith or tradition.

For many, walking the five hundred miles of the Camino is less about reaching the cathedral and more about what happens along the way. Each step becomes an act of reflection. It seems that you carry your pack and your burdens, and with each mile, you lighten the load—not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. The Camino, as one pilgrim writes, “teaches that the trail itself is the gift.”

For Maria, a pilgrim who I read about, the journey was transformational. She began the Camino after a life-changing loss, searching for answers. “I felt so broken,” she explained. “I thought the answers were waiting for me at the end. But somewhere along the trail, I realized the answers weren’t at the cathedral, the answers were all around me. In the faces of strangers who became friends. In the quiet of the landscapes. In the rhythm of my own footsteps.”

The rhythmic patterns and sounds of footsteps seem to stir within a kind of awareness and understanding for those that take the journey. I love how Roland Monsegu describes the trail: the journey was “filled with twists and turns, hills and valleys, sunshine and rain, and one particularly persistent squirrel. We walked through forests where trees whispered secrets, crossed rivers that danced to their own tune, and encountered mysterious rocks that looked suspiciously like lost tourists. We met innkeepers with wisdom, farmers with tales, and a donkey with a rather judgmental stare. We learned the joy of simple pleasures, like a warm meal or a hot shower, and the equally simple displeasure of walking too long in wet socks.” For Roland, the trail also became the gift.

Both Maria and Roland discovered that the Camino stripped their lives to its essentials: food, shelter, companionship, and the path ahead. “Walking taught me to notice,” Maria said. And Roland reminds us that the “journey was not just about walking a trail; it was about embracing life with all its quirks and crinkles. We had discovered beauty in the ordinary, joy in the unexpected, and humor in everything.”

Their experiences I read about on the Camino remind me of something Thoreau wrote: “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” The wild, much like the Camino, strips away our masks. It confronts us with something larger than ourselves. The Camino is living awe. It’s not about getting from point A to point B—it’s about feeling the wind on your face, the vastness of the landscape, and your small but sacred place within it all.

When I moved back to central Utah after twenty years in the Army, I purchased a small ranch at the base of the Fishlake National Forest. The vastness of the mountain range overwhelmed me and filled me with awe. I would drive across the valley and marvel at its beauty—the raw, windswept wild that seemed both infinite and intimate. It seemed, at the time, larger than life itself. But now, five years later, I catch myself rushing through the same valley, focused only on getting home from a long day’s work. The wildness that once awed me has faded into what I now see as ordinary. It has become the opposite of the Camino.

This isn't, I believe, unique to me. In rural areas, where nature is everywhere, it becomes easy to take the wild for granted. Mountains and forests, oceans and vast vistas become part of the backdrop of daily life, their wonder lost to routine. We don't mean to lose the wild—it just slips away, replaced by tasks, schedules, and the pull of digital distractions, or what some call the digital landscape.

Robert Moor, in his book *On Trails*, writes, "A trail is a beautiful thing. It is a way of making sense of the chaos." Yet today, we are more likely to traverse digital landscapes and trails than physical ones. Moor argues that digital trails, while efficient, lack the grounding of the natural world. They are curated and endless, designed to keep us scrolling rather than wandering. The result? A restlessness, a disconnection, a yearning for something real. A yearning for the wild.

So how do we reclaim our wild? How do we step off the digital trail and onto the natural one? How do we say, "Yes, of course I will walk five hundred miles with you. What an adventure!"

I believe we start small. First, unplug and go outside. Leave your phone behind. Walk without distractions. Notice the landscape and take note. Next, create a nature habit—nearly the opposite of a social media habit. Spend just 20 minutes a day outside. Sit on your porch, wander through a local park, or watch the stars. Let nature's rhythm replace the noise of daily life. And perhaps my favorite—reconnect with awe. Pause to feel the wild. Stand under a starlit sky. Watch a hawk circling high above. Find beauty in the ordinary. And once you do, invite others to join you! Deepen your connection to the wild by cultivating relationships.

As I continue to plan my journey along the Camino, I think of Maria's words: "The answers weren't at the cathedral—they were all around me." I think of the wild that still waits for me in Fishlake's rugged range. The trail isn't about the end—it's about the journey.

The wild is there for all of us, waiting to be felt. It strips away our masks, reminding us of who we are and who we were created to be: small, sacred, and connected. Let's not lose our wild. Let's reclaim it, one step at a time.

Suggested Additional Resources for Learning More

Books

- *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative* by Florence Williams.
- *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* by Robin Wall Kimmerer.
- *The Well-Gardened Mind: The Restorative Power of Nature* by Sue Stuart-Smith

Websites and Articles

- *American Trails: The Benefits of Nature Trails* (<https://www.americantrails.org/resources/health-benefits-of-trailsww.americantrails.org>).
- *The Nature Conservancy: Mental Health Benefits of Nature* (<https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-priorities/we-are-nature>).

Documentaries

- *The Camino Voyage* – A reflective journey along the Camino de Santiago.
- *The Meaning of Wild | Wilderness Adventure Documentary* - Tongass National Forest Alaska

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