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COMPANIONS ON THE CAMINO

From Brokenness to Brotherhood

by John Shaughnessy

Mark Peredo knew he had to do something drastic.

He had just returned from a journey that many people consider the trip of a lifetime – a journey that often restores a sense of peace, healing and spirituality to a person’s heart and soul.

Yet after his 27-day, 600-mile walking pilgrimage across the Camino in France and Spain in late 2016, all that Peredo felt was a lingering combination of anger and brokenness.

He was still trying to come to terms with the recent death of his father, who had always been his best friend.

And he was still trying to completely recover emotionally and physically from the horrific accident in 2015 that nearly killed him when another driver struck his car head-on at a high speed – a crash that led Peredo to have eight surgeries and devastated the dreams that had just come true in his life.

That’s when Peredo decided to do something drastic.

He started a search for the driver of the other car, Luke Hutchins.

“After my return from the Camino, I had a need to seek him out, to understand, to see if he was OK,” recalls Peredo, a member of St. Mary Parish in Lanesville in southern Indiana. “There was still this whole forgiveness I was withholding from Luke. I was still angry. I knew I needed another way to go. I was trying to make a forgiveness breakthrough.”

Opposite: Luke Hutchins and Mark Peredo raise the walking sticks they used on the Camino de Santiago.

During his search for Hutchins, Peredo came across a news report that stated that the accident wasn't the result of drugs or alcohol, but an epileptic seizure.¹ For the first time, Peredo realized that Hutchins had suffered, too, and was likely still suffering.

So when he finally came face to face with Hutchins in the early part of 2017, Peredo did something that still stuns Hutchins.

"My initial thought was fear," Hutchins recalls about that first meeting, which included his father and a brother by his side. "I didn't know whether he was going to start yelling at me."

Instead, Peredo told him he just wanted to meet him, to talk with him. And through conversations with Hutchins and his father, Peredo learned that, since the accident, Hutchins was unable to work, had become divorced and was still struggling with the effects of epilepsy.

A short time later, Peredo stunned Hutchins again. He shared his plan to help them both heal their brokenness.

Trying to Find a Purpose

Peredo asked Hutchins if he wanted to walk the Camino with him.

"The thought in my mind is that I'm in limbo about the next steps in life," Peredo recalls. "I'm trying to find my purpose, where I fit in. I knew I was still broken. I wasn't whole. I was hoping I could create a way to make something great out of something bad – and he would be a partner with me in this.

"Through nobody's fault, both of us had almost been killed in the accident. I wanted to do this for myself and him – to walk as brothers, to create something positive for our futures."

When Peredo mentioned his plan, Hutchins had never heard of the Camino, where it was, or what it entailed. But the more that Peredo talked, the more Hutchins became swept up in the thought of traveling to a foreign country, of being on an airplane for the first time in his life. Concerns of how the epilepsy might impact him while walking the Camino faded amid the plans of the adventure.

1 Ed. Note: This seizure, the first of Hutchins' life, had led to a neurological diagnosis of unnatural knots of veins that had lain dormant in his brain from birth. At the time of the accident, they had begun to restrict blood flow, causing the first of many seizures.

“I had no idea what I was walking into,” Hutchins says. “I figured it was the first time I would ever be out of the country, and there was no way I’m going to turn him down.”

In the months that followed, Peredo did fundraising for the trip. During that time, he also read “a couple of articles about a couple of people who walked the Camino who had epilepsy,” trying to learn more about how the journey might affect Hutchins. Wanting to help protect Hutchins if he fell on the trail, Peredo bought knee pads, elbow pads and a helmet for Hutchins, insisting he wear them when they began walking.

Finally, in late October of 2017, they set out from a small town in France on the ancient pilgrimage path that leads to the shrine of St. James at Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain. And on the first day, as the 49-year-old Peredo and the 33-year-old Hutchins walked up a mountain, their journey almost ended in disaster.

Carrying the Pain

“I vomited four times going up the mountain and two times going down the mountain,” recalls Hutchins, who was carrying a backpack that weighed about 40 pounds, similar to Peredo’s. “I felt Mark took care of me. He took my pack. If he wasn’t there, I might have had to stop right there.”

Peredo notes, “He’s throwing up, and he’s throwing up some more. I’m thinking he’s going to die. I take his pack. I’m walking up with his backpack and my backpack.”

Peredo was also carrying some emotional baggage from the journey he had made on the Camino a year earlier.

In many ways, that 2016 pilgrimage was his attempt to “reset my life” after the accident on April 10, 2015.

That day, the married father of three had been driving home to Lanesville on I-65 South after a meeting in Indianapolis that had secured a deal with a national company for his growing marketing-design business. Shielded by the traffic ahead, he never saw the car, heading northbound, cross the median out of control until it was too late.

“A car was coming at me at 50 to 70 miles an hour,” Peredo recalls.

Firefighters used a “jaws of life” device to extract the bloodied Peredo from his smoking, crumpled car. He recalls being put on a stretcher, lifted into

an ambulance and rushed to a hospital where the ordeal of six surgeries on a shattered right foot and two surgeries on the shattered right bridge of his face began.

At the same time, Hutchins was rushed by helicopter to a hospital. The accident left his body broken, with fractures of an ankle, a leg, fingers, ribs, a kneecap and a collarbone. His face had to be reconstructed, with a permanent metal plate holding his chin together.

“The police officers were surprised that both of us were even alive,” Peredo says.

“I Swelled Up in Tears”

Yet as horrific as the accident was – an accident that also eventually led him to lose his business – what devastated Peredo even more was the death of his father from cancer on July 28, 2015.

“My dad was my best friend,” he says. “When I was a boy, we lived in Bolivia, out in the country. My dad and I would walk in the mountains. As I got older, we came back to the United States. We’d still walk and talk together. Whenever we had issues in our lives, it was always a walk and a talk.”

During that first pilgrimage, Peredo often thought of his father as he walked, leading to an emotional moment.

“About the third week in, I finally broke down and cried,” he says. “That was after a day when I pushed myself hard. The following morning, I woke up early. I heard my father’s voice. It hit me like a brick. I swelled up in tears, and I cried. I felt he was telling me I was doing all right, that he approved.”

Peredo also remembered the advice that his father sometimes gave him – to “keep going forward” in life. He followed that advice again as he carried his backpack and Hutchins’ backpack on the first day of their Camino journey.

Moving Forward

That approach of moving forward also began to work well for Hutchins after that first day.

He stopped smoking within the first few days of the journey, and he began eating lighter meals, relying on more soups and energy drinks that helped

with staying hydrated. He and Peredo also stopped by a medical clinic on the Camino where they sought the advice of a doctor about the medicines he was taking for his epilepsy.

“She said if I continued to take all the medicines, I wouldn’t be able to continue the walk,” Hutchins says. “I was taking eight medicines, and I reduced it down to two.”

With all the changes, he felt better, more confident, and on one of the mountains they climbed, he found himself passing other pilgrims. He even stopped to help one of his fellow pilgrims make it up the mountain.

“She gave me a cross from Israel,” he recalls.

There was also the night when he danced with some of his fellow pilgrims, the day when a herd of sheep made him smile as they seemed to come out of nowhere, and the stops in the churches, the cathedrals and the small towns along the way – all part of an adventure that he describes as “a brand new experience into a whole new world.”

But there were tough moments, too. He never adjusted to the dormitory-like hostels where they slept with other pilgrims. He struggled when others spoke a language different than English. He missed his two children. And there were times when he feared what would happen if he had a seizure, fell in a ditch and no one found him.

A Bond of Brotherhood

The mostly “ups” and occasional “downs” of the journey for Hutchins seemed to mirror the relationship that he and Peredo had during the pilgrimage. Many times, they opened their souls to each other.

“We talked about each other’s families, our life experiences,” Hutchins says.

At other times, they became frustrated and irritated with each other. On those days, they walked with other pilgrims, keeping their distance from each other.

“There were moments when you wanted to knock each other’s blocks off,” Peredo says. “We’re human beings. We have our trials and our issues that we deal with. We’re not perfect. But what I found on this trip was the peace of walking with him. We became good friends on the trip. My father was my best friend. I consider Luke as closer to a best friend than I’ve had in years.”

Hutchins notes, “I pretty much treat him like my brother.”

The depth of their bond overflowed when they sometimes talked about faith. Peredo considers his Catholic faith as an important part of his life, with “a special place in my heart for Mary.” Hutchins found his faith growing during the pilgrimage.

“We were talking about faith and his future one day,” Peredo recalls. “I was asking him about maybe being a youth pastor. Right then, a rainbow comes out, and church bells are ringing.”

Hutchins viewed his frequent sightings of rainbows on the pilgrimage as a sign for him: “It was kind of like a rebirth. I’m a lot stronger in my faith now than I ever was before.”

A Journey of Healing

After 40 days and 460 miles of walking, Peredo and Hutchins reached the shrine of St. James at Santiago de Compostela.

By the end of the journey, Hutchins had long ago discarded his helmet, and he suffered only one seizure along the way.

“It was incredible I was able to walk it,” he says. “Mark kept encouraging me. When we got to Santiago de Compostela, I was so happy. It was finally mission complete. I can finally go home now. I was missing my kids so bad. It was a really great experience. If I had the chance to do it again, I would.”

For Peredo, the second pilgrimage gave him the peace and healing that had eluded him during his first journey along the Camino. He embraced part of that peace and healing with Hutchins in a way he never expected.

“The best parts of walking together for me were being able to joke about stuff,” Peredo says. “By the end of the trip, we were talking about the accident and joking about the accident.”

He pauses, collecting his thoughts about how far he and Hutchins have come from that moment when their worlds collided.

“For me, going through this process of healing and letting go and not hating is something I needed to do – to prove to myself, to prove to my children that you have to stay the course, and that something good will come from it.

“I wanted to go back because I was broken. Luke wanted to do it because he was broken. We helped each other through this.” ✦

Ed. Note: Mark Joseph Peredo is now co-directing a film – Road to Muxia – about his first pilgrimage from the Basque Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela and the Spanish coast in an attempt to come to terms with his own near-fatal accident and his father’s death. Pilgrims often say, “On the Camino, you get what you need,” and when our RtE editor asked Mark if he had felt the presence of St. James, he replied, “No, but my father was with me the entire way.”

To learn more about the film and to support his efforts go to:

<http://www.muxiafilm.com/>

or <https://www.facebook.com/roadtomuxia/>

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