

The Role of Group Dynamics in the Process to  
Self Transformation  
on the Pilgrimage to Santiago



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I dedicate my Master thesis to Els and Nico Heukels  
who gave me the opportunity and support  
to accomplish my Masters

Figure 1. Camino, just after Puente la Reina



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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that the process of self transformation is less individualistic than acknowledged by Heelas in his book "The New Age Movement". A majority of the pilgrims on the Camino to Santiago shows clear similarities with the New Age discourse as described by Heelas. They use the Camino as a Gnostic experience in a process towards self transformation. After analyzing the social context of the Camino the interdependence between the pilgrims and their surroundings becomes clear. Together they create a imagined 'Camino world' with the aim to optimize their Gnostic therapy. There where pilgrims were confronted with the boundaries of their imagined Non-Place the social interdependence of their gained self transformation showed. Further research is

New Age, Gnosis, Self Transformation, Pilgrimage, Non-Place

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# 1 Introduction

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At the end of the twentieth century the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela experienced a renewed interest. Pilgrims from all over the world came to the “Camino” (the name often given to the pilgrimage to Santiago) to walk or cycle towards Santiago. In earlier times pilgrims went or were sent out of motives based on their Christian belief. These days most pilgrims have different reasons to walk the Camino to Santiago de Compostela. Their motivation is often not related to Christian belief. The Camino is a network of European pilgrim-routes that all end in the Spanish city Santiago. Most of the routes come together at the Spanish-France border. From there it crosses through the north of Spain and is known as the Camino Francés. This is the most used path to Santiago. Many pilgrims decide to start their pilgrimage in Saint Jean Pied de Port, a little village in the very south of France, one day’s hike to the first Spanish *albergue* (hostel) in Roncesvalles. From there it is an almost 800 km journey to the cathedral in Santiago.

Why Santiago became the destination for a pilgrimage is not clearly explained other than by apocryphal texts. Legends tell us that the apostle Jacob went to Spain, to preach the word of God. Upon his return to Jerusalem he was executed. The story that has been passed down the generations is that his bones were brought back to Spain by his followers, only to be rediscovered 800 years later. A man saw star-shaped lightning over a plot of ground which turned out to be the place where the bones were buried. This event was very welcome in a time of political and religious strife with the Moors, who were encroaching from the south and taking over ‘Christian land’. Saint James became the icon on the battlefield as the knight on a white horse, as a symbol for blessed support from above. Rome declared Santiago de Compostela to be the third Christian pilgrimage, after Jerusalem and Rome, and for this purpose Saint James was pictured as a pilgrim himself with long coat, three cornered hat, a St. Jacob’s Scallop and a *calabasin* (calabash) to hold drinking water. During the middle ages the pilgrimage to Santiago reached a historic climax with millions of pilgrims finding their way to the cathedral of Santiago. With the arrival of Protestant Reformation the enthusiasm for making a pilgrimage decreased. The absolute minimum was in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

Before I started my preparation for my research my only contact with the Camino had been a book by Paulo Coelho “The Diary of a Magus: The Road to Santiago” that I read some ten years ago. The main character in Coelho’s book walks the Camino out of a mixture of Christian and mystic beliefs. By coincidence I reconnected with information about the Camino at the time I was looking for an interesting topic to dedicate my master thesis to. Since I was thinking of writing about the ‘self-made-beliefs’ that many contemporary people prefer over the established religions, the modern pilgrimage appeared to offer a very suitable opportunity for field work. When I read about the many non-Christian pilgrims that are attracted to the pilgrimage to Santiago I was of the opinion

that the Camino could be an example of modern reinterpretation of that what belonged in earlier times to the domain of conventional religions. I chose the Camino as my fieldwork location, not so much for the Camino itself, as for the opportunity it presented to study the modern beliefs of modern pilgrims. I wanted to develop more insight into the way people think and construct their modern beliefs.

In the book "Pilgrims Stories, on and off the road to Santiago" Nancy Frey stays very close to the experience of the pilgrim (Frey 1998). In her work she describes the details that all together form the Camino of the late twentieth century. Just back from my two Caminos I had the same desire to explain the friendly Camino world. Frey pays attention to all differences and details she comes across and in her book uses words to paint a picture of the Camino. Although her way of writing is very useful in creating understanding about the Camino, it does not add so much on an analytical level. Frey summarizes her choice as: "*I feel relieved to realize that I wrote this book more from the passion that I have for the Camino and the depth I feel towards those along the way who helped me, shared their lives and stories with me, and became my friends than from fear generated by the 'publish or perish' mentality requisite to advance an academic career*" (Frey 1998: 218). Despite the fact that I think Frey's work is beautiful to read, I strove for a higher level of abstraction in my work, not out of fear for academic pressure but out of my curiosity about human behavior and the role of belief in our existence. As I explained earlier on in this chapter, my goal is to understand the role of the Camino in how pilgrims construct their beliefs. To be able to understand the role the pilgrimage to Santiago plays in the construction of belief it is necessary to analyze how the Camino itself is constructed. In this report I investigated the Gnostic way of thinking (a way of giving meaning and reasoning based on imagination (Aupers, Houtman, Pels 2008)) among pilgrims, how they use this in constructing their Camino-world and the function this Camino-world has for their belief and desire for self-transformation. My analytical perspective is based on my conclusion that the Camino is an imaginary space in which pilgrims search for a Gnostic perspective to reach self-transformation. To place this in an academic frame I use the term Gnosis, Heelas' theory about New Agers and Augé's theory of Non-Places. Gnosis is based on the presupposition that liberation of the true Self can be reached through a "*transformative experience of the transcendental mind*" (Aupers e.a. 2008: 690). New Age is a form of modern Gnosis. In the book 'The New Age Movement' Heelas describes people that search for a non-institutionalized belief based on the 'inner Self' instead of a higher authority. Heelas uses the term New Agers for "*those who maintain that inner spirituality - embedded within the self and the natural order as a whole - serves as the key to moving from all that is wrong with life to all that is right*" (Heelas 1996: 16). To reach this transformation from wrong to right Heelas discovered three steps that he considers to be the core of what New Agers have in common. New Age is not a movement with members but a way of thinking, discourse, which Heelas refers to as "lingua franca". In my research I use the work of Heelas to provide insight into the Camino as a therapeutic phenomenon. Heelas describes the process of self transformation as the central feature of New Agers. The Camino is for most of the pilgrims a Gnostic therapy in which they strive towards a certain level of self transformation. Many pilgrims expect and hope to gain knowledge and insight in themselves by going through the experience of walking the Camino.

This brings me to Augé's theory about Non-Places. The Camino as activity is expected to be a transformative experience. To optimize the condition of a transformative experience the pilgrims create an imaginary space, called Camino. To be able to explain the reader how this imaginary space is created I will use the term Non-Place. Where the limits and borders of the imaginary space (the Non-Place) touches the normal world the temporary nature of the transformative experience becomes visible.

There are many academic fields that occupy themselves with creating understanding and insight in human behavior and society on topics such as religion, gnosis, New Age and pilgrimages. Since the latest flourish of the interest in walking pilgrimages (in particular the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela) social science shows growing interest in understanding the motives of the secular pilgrim and the function of modern pilgrimages. 'The secular' is a broadly discussed term within the Anthropological literature and beyond. In this work it is not my aim to contribute to the discussion around the content of this term but to indicate my research population. I have chosen the term 'secular' to combine the paradoxical way of reasoning of my informants by rejecting conventions and the traditional religions but sacralizing the Self. This Gnostic attitude to life is a mixture of secularization and sacralization processes and "... *disturbs classical theories of secularization, which were largely predicated on the replacement of religion by science in the most important social realms*" (Aupers e.a. 2008: 693). Different disciplines are interested in the secular pilgrim. Some research about pilgrimages is mostly focused on the understanding of the phenomenon as such. Others (and I consider myself one of them), investigate the site of a pilgrimage with the aim to be able to use it as an example of a topic that shows itself among other sides on a pilgrimage. In this case the pilgrimage is used as a sample. It is the research approach Coleman is pleading for by stating: "... *the most valuable work in this area is that which looks outward, making points about human behavior through using 'pilgrimage' as a case-study rather than focusing on the institution itself as a firmly bounded category of action*" (Coleman 2002: 363). The pilgrimage is an interesting setting for observing and investigating social developments/change that are ongoing within society. One of these developments is the construction of modern belief, such as New Age. Aupers and Houtman plead in their work for more research about the role society and groups play in the construction of self-spiritualization. Until recently self-spiritualization was described as a modern belief in which the individual trusts her 'inner voice' as guidance for which 'path to walk'. Aupers and Houtman state that the individual essence in New Age beliefs is a sociological myth and that really the 'authentic Self' is only alive due to a social construction of society. They formulate the need for future research thus: "*A radical sociologisation of New Age research is called for, documenting how this doctrine ideal of self-spirituality is socially constructed, transmitted and reinforced, and critically deconstructing rather than reproducing sociologically naïve New Age rhetoric about the primacy of personal authenticity*" (Aupers, Houtman 2006: 1). I am of the same opinion as Aupers and Houtman and question the individual nature of the process of self transformation. My thesis will give an insight into how group dynamics and group isolation are important ingredients for self-spirituality coming into existence.



My research is of social relevance since it creates insight in the social needs of a certain group in society. This group experiences the normal society as a trap and searches for a different way by connecting to their inner Self. One of the things they do to be able to connect to this spiritual Self is to walk a pilgrimage. This group is finding social and contextual support and inspiration while walking the Camino to Santiago. This research helps to map the needs of this group, to analyze the social context and therefore to link it to trends in society (in future research) as I will explain in my conclusion.

In the first chapter I will give the reader background information about the Camino and the act of walking a pilgrimage, explain which methods I used to collect the data and why I thought these methods would be the most fruitful for the questions I wished to answer. I will reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of my methods and how it opened certain doors but also confronted me with limitations and difficulties I had not considered before I left. After sketching this to the reader I will use the second chapter to describe Gnosis, Heelas' three steps of self sacralization and self-transformation and how these steps are enacted within the context of the Camino. In the second part of this chapter I will explain why the pilgrimage can often be compared with a Gnostic therapy and how it shows on the Camino. In the third chapter I introduce the theory of Marc Augé about non-places and I will explain why the theory of non-places is of relevance in the case of the Camino. To do this I will give an insight in the act of walking the pilgrimage to Santiago and how the Camino is made up of certain rules, objects, processes of imagination and socialization and how over time the Camino became disconnected from its Spanish and Christian context, in other words, how the Camino became a separate world. In the fourth chapter I will combine the knowledge gathered in the previous two chapters and focus on the paradoxes and contradictions that are woven through the whole construction of the Camino and what the consequences are for the pilgrim when he reaches the end of the Camino and faces the journey home. I will summarize the most important findings in my last chapter by formulating a conclusion.

I would like to thank all the pilgrims I have talked with, for their company and friendship and for their trust and confidence in me as a person and as a researcher. It was an honor to listen to their experiences, thoughts, feelings and wishes. A special word of gratitude I would like to give to the pilgrims I interviewed in my first week on the Camino. They made me feel confident with the situation and showed me the mutual benefits my interviews provided. This made it possible for me to approach my informants with confidence and free from feelings of guilt. I feel very privileged having been able to experience walking the Camino twice and talking to so many people from all over the world. I think it is hard to find a place on earth where people are so open and willing to talk about themselves. The conversations were of enormous value, both in terms of understanding the pilgrimage to Santiago as well as becoming a part of my personal development. I shared many new insights and beautiful moments with others and it gave me the possibility to bring my theoretical lessons into practice. Special thanks are due to the Alberque de Pieros "El Serbal y la Luna". They opened their doors for me at a moment I needed rest, after almost three months of walking and talking. They offered me work in their *albergue*, they gave me my own bed and gave me the opportunity to see the Camino from a different point of view. I would like to tender my

thanks to my supervisor Prof. P.J. Pels for his supervision during the whole process of preparation, fieldwork and writing my story. Our discussions and conversations were inspiring and motivating. For the English correction I would like to address a word of gratitude towards Nils Visser and Andrew Joseph Plummer who provided me with advice concerning the English language. And last but not least I would like to show my gratitude towards my partner Benjamin Tritschler who supported me on moments I was close to despair during my fieldwork and process of writing.

## 2 Doing Research on the Camino

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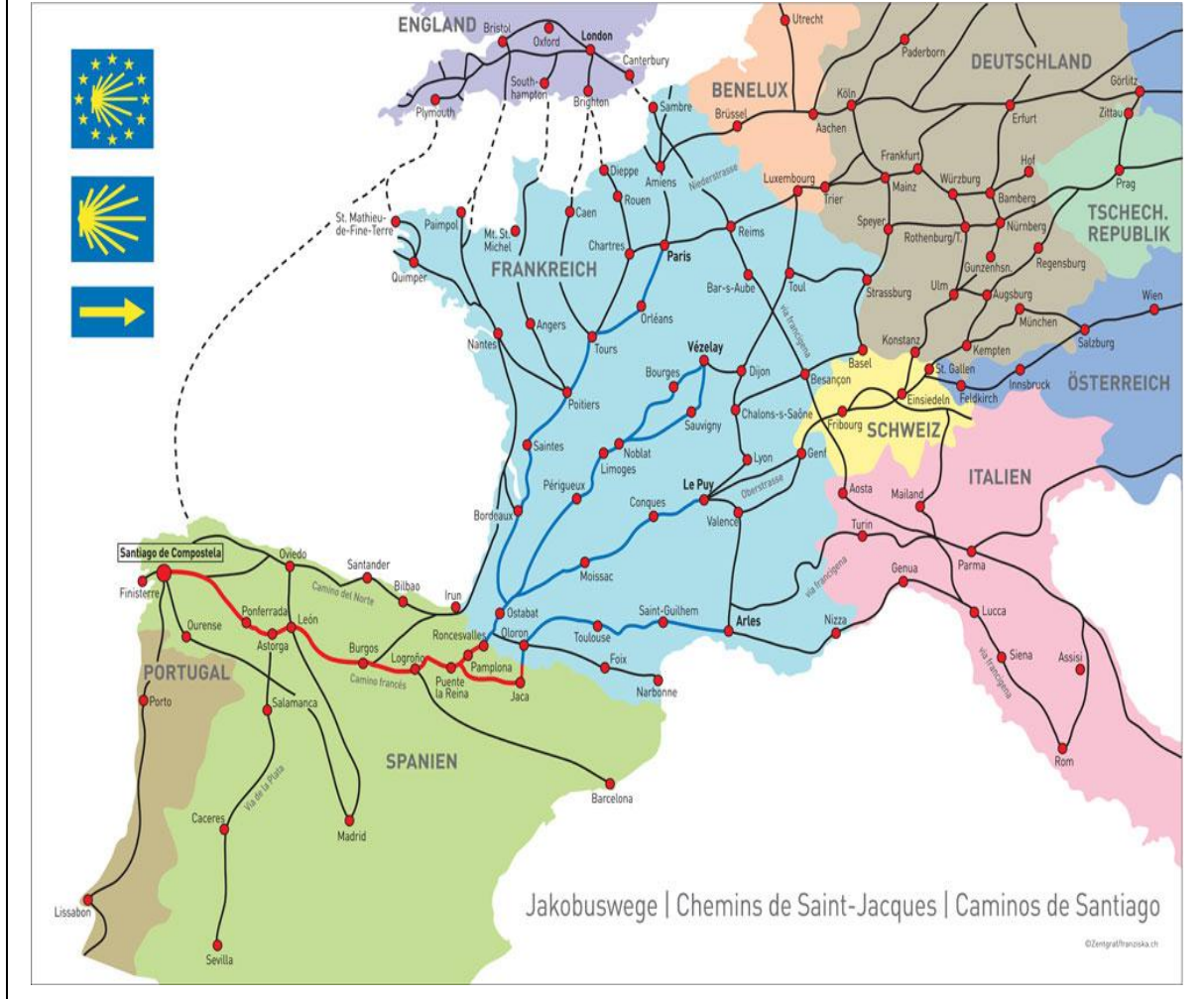
In this chapter I will explain in more detail what the pilgrimage to Santiago is about and what the daily practice and reality of a pilgrim is. This will be visually supported by a number of pictures to enlarge the understanding of the phenomenon. In the second part of this chapter I will elaborate on which method is most suitable, and how I gave form to this method in practice. Finally I will attend to the advantages and disadvantages of the method chosen and which possible biases may follow from them.

### 2.1 The Content of the Camino

#### 2.1.1 The Geography

The structure of the Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is clearly visible in the map below. On the map you see the net of pilgrimages that all come together in Santiago de Compostela. The German map directly points out the importance of the French border, there where many of the European pilgrim routes come together and pass the Pyrenees. The red route, crossing the north of Spain is the Camino Francés. The Camino Francés starts in Jaca (Spain) or St. Jean Pied de Port (south of France). St. Jean Pied de Port is the place where many pilgrims start their pilgrimage. During the first one or two days (depending on the daily distance the pilgrim is covering) the pilgrim crosses the Pyrenees, through a landscape with hardly a house and rough rocky grasslands and free roaming horses and sheep. On the Spanish side there is a steep decline through a deciduous forest to the monastery of Roncesvalles. In Spain the Camino is marked by yellow arrows on trees, houses, streets and road marks. The days after, the path goes through a hilly landscape with rivers, villages, Rioja vineyards and the legendary streets of Pamplona. The first big city on the way is Burgos, with an impressive cathedral and many tourists. The next stretch is from Burgos to León, over the highland of northern Spain known as the Meseta. Here the road is sandy, straight, with few trees and an exhausting heat during the summer months. For some pilgrims it is a reason to skip this part and take the bus from Burgos to León. After León the landscape becomes hilly again. In these mountains stands “Cruz de Ferro”, for many pilgrims highly important symbolic place (see page 36). A few days later there is the (by many pilgrims feared) steep ascent towards O’cebreiro, an old mountain village with Celtic influences and famous for its far reaching view over the mountains of Galicia. Galicia is the region of Santiago. It is a green, often wet hilly landscape with small rural villages and old hollow roads through a land with plenty of trees. Then there is the last climb, named “*Monte del Goso*” from which you have a beautiful first view over the city of Santiago, the place that has determined the direction for many weeks. The entrance into the city is

Figure 2. Map of the main pilgrim routes to Santiago de Compostela  
<http://www.pilgern.ch/pilgern/Jakobsweg-Europa-Karte.jpg>



long. Once the inner city is reached the pilgrim-ambiance is growing and it feels as if the city is all about the pilgrimage to Santiago. It is reflected in the many souvenir shops full of St Jacob's shell-inspired-gadgets, the street musicians, the street plays and the many pilgrims and tourists that all congregate in the center. The centre of this all is the cathedral and the square in front of it that supplies a never ending stream of people visiting the church. For some pilgrims Santiago is not the end of their journey and they continue walking another hundred kilometers to the sea to "Finisterre" (the end of the world) but most of the pilgrims visit the sea by bus or go back home from Santiago. Only a few of the pilgrims walk back home. The Camino Francés from St. Jean Pied de Port till Santiago takes more or less 35 days: five weeks of doing an intense activity (most of the pilgrims are not used to so much walking) in an unfamiliar setting.

### 2.1.2 The Practice

What does a Camino pilgrim do? For every pilgrim there was a moment that he or she decided to go on a long journey and to do so on foot. For some it takes over ten years to make their wish come true and for others it all happens within one week. Some of the pilgrims start on their own doorstep, may it be in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany or any other country of the European continent (I did not hear of a single pilgrim that started on their own doorstep and did not come from within Europe). But most of the pilgrims travel to a certain spot on the track and start walking from there. A small number of pilgrims start in Santiago and walk “against the stream”. They do not receive the *Compostela* (the official certificate given as a proof of going the pilgrimage for at least 100 kilometers by foot). Pilgrims start with excitement about the unknown, even those that walked the Camino before. Life on the Camino reduces itself to the very basics of life: waking up early, getting ready to leave, finding food to eat (not to carry), washing your clothes and yourself, finding support and friendship among other pilgrims, finding a place to sleep and walking, lots of walking. The number of hours and kilometers walked on average per day differs greatly among the pilgrims. To give an estimate: pilgrims are on their way from seven till two/three in the afternoon. Some arrive at five, others at twelve; some walk 5 kilometers per hour and do not take breaks and others walk 3 kilometers per hour and take plenty of breaks. Some pilgrims prefer to leave early, before sunrise. Others take their time. But all need to be on their way before eight in the morning, since those are the rules of the *albergues*. Some pilgrims eat the breakfast provided by the *albergue*, others chew on something they bought the day before or simply start walking and enjoy their breakfast somewhere along the road. Some pilgrims prefer to walk alone; others search for the company of other pilgrims and form whole (multi-national) groups; or they vary depending on how they feel at that moment. Many pilgrims imagined the pilgrimage to be lonelier, with fewer pilgrims on the road and endless room for reflection. They often come with the wish to walk alone but find themselves walking in company and, different from what most of them expected, the conversations help them in their process of reflection. But no matter in what formation they walk, they all walk hour after hour.

By being resident in *albergues* pilgrims often sleep together in dorms with multiple beds ranging from six to eighty –and sometimes even more- beds. They share the same kitchen (if present), bathroom and other facilities that differ from place to place. Together they are in the same routine, the same rhythm and are confronted by the same obstacles. And although there are plenty of differences among the pilgrims, everybody carries a backpack, walks during the day, is confronted with an evening curfew at ten and needs to leave the *albergues* before eight in the morning. They can share their pain, their fear, their wishes, their prayers and their doubts... because there will be always somebody who is willing to listen or is facing the same situation. The majority came alone and this might be the reason there is the unwritten rule: to take care of others, because one day you will find yourself in need of help.

After arriving in the *albergue* every pilgrim has his or her own system of arranging food, washing and sleeping. A scene that was repeated daily was that of pilgrims washing their clothes and hanging them on lines to dry in the sun. Since it is very important to carry as little weight as possible, most of the pilgrims have little spare clothing with them. But some are so tired that the first thing they do after arriving is rest their body, some even don't go to

Figure 3. Foot massage by Pilgrim



the trouble of taking off their sweat soaked walking gear. The intense and lasting physical exercise is a new experience for many pilgrims. The body starts complaining and problems such as swollen and inflamed muscles, blisters and exhaustion arise. The *albergues* often look like a field-hospital with pilgrims helping each other to nurse the physical complaints (see figure 3, where pilgrims give each other foot massages). Bandages, creams, blister material and knowledge are exchanged. But pilgrims help each other also with psychological problems and more philosophical questions concerning the meaning of life. For most pilgrims the Camino to Santiago is a spiritual journey as well. Apart from the fact that many people enjoy the nature and the culture that is part of the route, it is the spiritual aspect that makes for many pilgrims the difference with any other walk. The social interaction with other pilgrims, together with quiet moments creates a therapeutic setting of reflection on life. Pilgrims help each other by sharing their stories and giving advice, support, compassion and

recognition but also on an energetic level people receive help. The term energy is in the context of the Camino often used to refer to spiritual energy, which I explain in more detail on page 33-34. I encountered several healers that shared their skills with pilgrims who were ill, injured or suffered from a complete physical or psychological breakdown. Some healers gave Reiki (a Japanese alternative health therapy), others did not give it a name. They were well known among other pilgrims, like nurses, doctors and physiotherapists were as well, since stories often traveled faster than the pilgrims they applied to. The *albergues* vary from very comfortable to very basic. For the evening meal pilgrims subscribe to a 'menu de Peregrino' (pilgrim menu) if it is on offer, or get together and cook if a kitchen is available. This creates a very intimate setting and food and drinks are shared. On several occasions I came in and was invited to join others with the meal they had prepared.

Although the accommodation has improved over the last ten years, the journey brings a certain risk and above all a challenge. For many pilgrims the Camino forms a physical challenge and a mental challenge. All pilgrims left

home, facing an uncertain experience, especially those who started for the first time. Not all pilgrims walk for many weeks, some chose to walk for a few days, others for a few weeks and some for some months. The result is an ever changing and dynamic stream of pilgrims, and a mixture of pilgrims that are fresh from home and those who are fully into the routine. But one thing is the same for all pilgrims: there will be a moment that they go back home.

## **2.2 The Methodology**

Before I will continue with explaining the methodological aspect of my research I would like to shortly summarize the most important features of the Camino. To understand the process of self transformation and the role of the Camino I mainly focused on the social construction of the phenomenon "Camino". After three months of field work and thorough analysis I will emphasize two aspects that seemed to be crucial for the understanding of the Camino as a social construction. In the second part of my thesis I will explain in more detail how I came to this understanding. Firstly the Camino is used for Gnostic therapeutic purposes. Many pilgrims come to the Camino under the impression that the experience of walking the Camino will have a healing effect on them and their lives. They are of the opinion that the transformative knowledge based on personal experience will lead to salvation of their true self. As a consequence pilgrims construct an imaginary space that is most beneficial to their expectations. Their fellow pilgrims often play a crucial role in this construction.

This background information is necessary for the reader to understand the context and situation of my field. This knowledge is necessary to now understand why I choose certain techniques and methods for collecting my data. First of all I will explain how my research question came into being and describe the type of information/data that was needed to answer my research question. My research proposal was focused on the framing of authenticity. After reading the existing literature about modern pilgrimages the widely shared search for authenticity among pilgrims became clear. Within the New Age discourse the authentic self is the aim of self transformation. The authors Aupers and Houtman bring the authenticity of New Agers under discussion by stating that the massive search for authenticity by itself is a product of a process of socialization (Aupers, Houtman 2008). By researching the construction and the type of authenticity I hoped to created more insight in the nature of the search to authenticity. My research questions were designed in such a way that at the end of my investigations I would be able to say something about how authenticity is defined and expressed in the context of the Camino de Santiago. The first few days on the Camino I tried not to analyze too much and just to observe and to note everything down I thought, heard, and saw. When I was used to the practice of walking and the other many aspects of the pilgrim life I started to analyze my data. I understood the importance of my presence, of the experience and observations of the phenomenon. I realized that the "Camino world" as a social creation was worth changing the direction of my research for. I decided that it would be more interesting to analyze the social context pilgrims create in their search for authenticity than the construction of authenticity itself. The Gnostic way of thinking is the main force behind the Camino as an imaginary place to find the authentic. Therefore in my final thesis the focus is not as

much on the framing of authenticity but rather on the Gnostic way of thinking of the pilgrim. Another reason not to focus solely on authenticity is the fact that I became more interested in the total process of self transformation and not just the final goal, authenticity. I wanted to know more about how social processes influence the way to self-transformation. To say something about self-transformation and self-spiritualization as products of a social group's process one needs to analyze the social situation, context, and behavior of the informants.

In researching pilgrims there are different ways of collecting data and all of them have pros and cons but some methods have more pros than others. My research strategy was in the form of fieldwork, participant observation. The sort of data that I was looking for is best collected by going to the field and examining the informants in their context. As a researcher you directly observe and collect that data by being present in the field and using the informants as your source of information. The participative part of the investigation is an "actor" based strategy by which the view and experience of the informant (actor) is the central point of view and gets combined with the observations of the researcher. In total I had three and a half months to dedicate to my fieldwork. To be able to say something about the character of the pilgrimage, the role, and how it is created I needed to understand the social interaction between pilgrims, the personal experience of the pilgrims and how the pilgrims place the Camino within their lives. To be able to collect information to understand the phenomenon 'Camino' I had to observe the social interaction and connect this with the information I would gain in interviews. It was the social construction of the "Camino world" and the position of this "Camino world" within the normal world that I wanted to explain. To be able to map this "Camino world" and the friction with the normal world that came with it I had to be part of that "Camino world" and at the same time create moments when I could step out of this world and take a distance. The Camino world was for a very large part a social construction, rooted in a Gnostic way of thinking. To be able to understand this construction I had to 'infiltrate' the social dynamic that was the creator of the phenomenon I observed.

All pilgrims chose this pilgrimage above any other walk or way to spend their free time. Most of the pilgrims are looking for a Gnostic experience, a way to transform a part of themselves or their life into something better, something authentic. The majority of the pilgrims come with the expectation that the experience of walking the Camino will give them the tools to self transformation. The conviction that true wisdom comes to you when you 'connect to your inner self' is according to Heelas one of the central features of New Agers. He distinguishes three steps in the process to self transformation, which indicates a process comparable with a therapy. The discourse that Heelas describes is also the fundament of the way of thinking of many pilgrims. They expect the pilgrimage to be a Gnostic therapy. Many pilgrims told me they come to walk the Camino to make their heads empty to be able to connect to their true self and so finding their way to self transformation. Talking to other pilgrims is a way of sharing their experiences. Confession is the basis for Gnosis since this is the only way of sharing and recording the personal experience. Peter Pels states that: "Inspired by the esotericism that also characterized the Romantic movement, modern occultism and New Age thereby developed a notion of personal experience that increasingly relied on testimony as its sole authorizing instance ... " (Pels 2002: 99). After



confession, the personal experience becomes reality for those who share their stories. And so they build together their own reality, an imaginary space. I will elaborate further on how the social construction of the Camino shows in my results in the second part of my thesis but for now it is enough to state the importance of the social interaction for redirecting my research and choice of methodology. Due to the importance of the social interactions and the very intimate way of reasoning there was the need to come very close to my fellow pilgrims. To be able to understand the pilgrims I had to become part of their imaginary space too. My interviews became part of the Gnostic therapy many pilgrims were looking for. Since my interviews were so personal and unique (every interview was shaped by another life story) straight questions would not have fit. The sub questions that were part of my research proposal functioned as a frame, passively present. By passively present I mean that I did not convert them into direct interview questions, but used them as an interview schedule with questions and topics that I wanted to cover in every interview. To be able to also include the social interaction between the pilgrims and their surroundings (at home and on the Camino itself) I had to include some extra themes into my conversations and observations.

### 2.2.1 Participant Observation

This is an investigation of the pilgrim's their experiences, feelings, meanings, beliefs, and behavior. To be able to collect this kind of data a qualitative method of analysis is most suitable. Quantitative research does not give room to the social complexity of the data. I am not looking for numbers, but to understand a phenomenon constructed by belief. In my qualitative research I try to combine the actor view of my informants with my own observations and existing literature written about this topic. I decided on participant-observation as my main source of information. A participant observation is a research method which allows the investigator to 'be one of them', 'an insider' and at the same time creates moments in which you observe your informants and are at a distance and being an outsider. *"As an insider, the fieldworker learns what behavior means to the people themselves. As an outsider, the fieldworker observes, experiences, and makes comparisons in ways that insiders can or would not"* (Sluka, Robben 2007: 2). The danger of participant observation is in getting too close and too involved with your informants.

In writing my proposal I could choose from a variety of different ways to collect my research data. But since I wanted to fully understand the pilgrimage to Santiago I decided it was the best to experience it at least one time by myself, to live it from the 'beginning' (the beginning is not a fixed point, but any place where you start) until the end. It would give me the opportunity to understand the phenomenon of walking the pilgrimage to Santiago and my understanding would add a deeper level to my interviews. It would provide me insight into the practical part of the Camino and at the same time bring me closer to the pilgrim on social-emotional level by positioning myself as an insider. Apart from the social trust benefits of this choice it would show me how a pilgrims-day looks like from the early morning till the night. And just as important, it would show me the pilgrimage from beginning till the end and give me the opportunity to analyze possible changes along the way. For the second half of my fieldwork time

I would walk it a second time or work in an *albergue*. During my first Camino I discovered that my estimations were correct; walking together with my informants turned out to be a very fruitful way of doing fieldwork. Even more when it turned out that most of the interviews and conversations I held took place during the daily walk. Therefore I chose the first option and so, after 800 kilometers plus 100 kilometers from Santiago to Finisterre, I took the train back to the 'start' and walked all those kilometers for a second time, though with different people, in a different season and with the knowledge of my first Camino in my backpack. Starting in Saint Jean Pied de Port it would take me round about 35 days to arrive in Santiago and so I could walk the road twice. So why was walking 'as a pilgrim' such a productive strategy to collect data and what were the disadvantages?

I started my fieldwork as most other pilgrims do: travel to a certain point on the Camino with a backpack with only the most necessary belongings, good walking shoes, a pilgrim's passport and a St. Jacob's shell. Some chose to bring a stick with them as well. My pilgrimage started on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, early in the morning in the very south of the French Pyrenees in the village Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. I was just like them, an excited pilgrim and on top of that an excited student who was, for the first time in her life, facing fieldwork of this length and complexity.

Living like a pilgrim provided me partial entrance to their social world. I was in the lucky position that in most of the cases the pilgrims were more than willing to talk and to be interviewed by me. Although I expected to do my interviews after the day's-hike in the *albergues*, in reality it turned out to be different. While I was walking I encountered people, introduced myself (including the fact that I was a student and researcher) and most of the times a highly personal, open and comfortable conversation would follow. In those conversations I was able to steer the topics in such a way that the 'interview' covered all my themes of interest but at the same time the pilgrim could fully tell me what they wished to share with me without any restrictions. Many of the pilgrims I spoke to told me they did a lot of self-reflection during their Camino. This might be one of the reasons why they obviously had the need to talk about it, to share their new thoughts and feelings. Several times pilgrims told me that the contact with other pilgrims was like a therapy for them, a therapy in which one was sometimes the therapist and sometimes the patient. Many of my interviews were therapeutic as well since many of my informants shared deep personal emotions and stories with me and often had to cry during the conversations. Several times I got the feedback that the interview had helped them and that they were grateful to me for listening to their stories. This gave me the confidence to keep contacting pilgrims since I was not seen as an intruder in their experience. In the Introduction I briefly describe the writing style of Frey, in her book 'Pilgrim Stories'. She acknowledges the feeling of 'doing something back for the pilgrims that gave her their stories' and therefore she decides for a book that stays close to the daily experiences of the pilgrims. In the beginning of my fieldwork, and even after returning home, I sensed the same kind of 'feeling for compensation'. But the pilgrims made me understand that they were happy to talk to me and to receive time and attention for what they wished to share.

To gain trust I presented myself as neutral as possible but at the same time honest when people asked for more personal details. I behaved like an average pilgrim: I walked every day of my pilgrimage; I carried my own

backpack, slept in *albergues*, walked every kilometer of the pilgrimage, was simply dressed, took time for myself and shared time with others, was open to that which would cross my path and even had my own private problems and questions to think about. This description is on a par with the general image of a pilgrim. There are many varieties, but for the depth of my data it was necessary to be accepted as 'one of them'.

### 2.2.2 My Position as a Researcher

A crucial aspect for participant observation to be fruitful is the trust and confidence of the informants. Gaining the trust of my informants was not always easy. Pilgrims often first needed a certain 'proof of true pilgrimage' and 'proof of added value'. The first 'proof' had much to do with my double identity as a pilgrim who is walking the Camino as part of her field research. My informants often asked for an insight in my pilgrimage as a researcher. They wanted to know if my experience was like theirs or of a more rational kind, since my motivation to walk the Camino was so different from theirs and little to do with inner transformation. I talked openly about my fieldwork and how I combined my research with personal developments that came up while walking and talking. Several times the conversations with my informants moved me. This, together with the long time away from home (three and a half months) and the consequences this had for my personal life were not always easy and caused sad and reflective moods in me. At the beginning of my field work my relationship with my boyfriend did not prove stable which resulted in a breakup half way through my time in the field. In the beginning I tried to hide for my informants my own feelings and thoughts regarding my private life, for the time I would be home again. But after a while I realized that this would not be healthy and would not benefit my investigation in the end and so I came to the solution to reserve 'private time' and walked alone. Not all interviews were 'one way' and several times I found myself talking about my own life. Pilgrims talk with each other to give meaning to their experience and hence confession is a crucial part of their Gnostic therapy. It was only normal to show and share some personal details and it turned out to benefit the trust relationship between me and my informants. I tried to keep my own comments free from judgmental comments and religious remarks. When my informants explicitly asked for my personal opinion about certain topics I did not mind sharing them. I am of the opinion that for my focus of research the benefits of personal 'close' contact was of more importance and value than strict absence of my personal belief. As Nash states about her work among the Bolivian mineworkers: "*We can no longer retreat into the deceptive pose of neutrality. Science advances only by honest declaration of the convictions that influence our data gathering and analysis*" (Nash in Robben, Sluka 2007: 233). This is why I extensively reflect my methods of research and the position I had as researcher. I am interested in the way pilgrims construct their reality on the Camino, how they respond and what value and position they give events during their journey. My personal remarks even became useful as I realized that for some pilgrims I had turned into an 'authority'. This authority was not based on the fact that I was a researcher (most class difference fall away on the Camino) but depended on the projection of the wish of many pilgrims to encounter inspiring persons to help them in their inner transformation. It gave me the opportunity to understand how authorities come into being and what it says about

the behavior and expectations of pilgrims. The 'proof of added value' was not as openly asked for as the 'proof for true pilgrimage'. Pilgrims come to the Camino with the hope and expectation to return with more, with more of themselves. They hope to increase their self understanding, self acceptance, and personal development. And so they are looking for inspiration, for life-changing moments, for heart-opening conversations, and hope-giving encounters. Not long after I started I understood that my interviews did not need to disturb this picture as long as I gave my informants the space to unfold their story my interviews would be of great help in the pilgrims need/wish for confession. In the beginning my interview style was rather direct due to the fact that I asked questions with the focus on my research topic. But after I understood the 'confession-culture' I made sure not to be so direct in my questions, but to let a conversation develop. Once the conversation was flowing my topics of interest were often very easy to include in the conversation, without disturbing my informant in his or her process of self-understanding. Pilgrims talk to each other, which is an important aspect of the whole experience, and I was just another pilgrim to talk to, without limiting them or forcing them to fit into my questionnaire. In every conversation I tried to mirror their words, by summarizing them and asking questions that helped my informant to dig deeper into their own topic. It is the 'confession-culture' on the Camino that made it so easy for me to become an insider. My interviews had an essential function within the Camino practice and explain why my research method was so productive, I gave pilgrims the opportunity for confession.

### 2.2.3 Benefits

Due to the fact that pilgrims have hours and hours, days and weeks in which they more or less walk for seven hours a day, there is a lot of potential 'interview-time'. As a consequence the interviews could take as long as the informants needed to share their stories with me. The length of the interviews varied from an hour to a few days. Another reason to choose for participant observation is that it gave me the time to extend my interviews. I noticed that the pressure and formal atmosphere quickly faded away, by walking and talking and giving the time to the conversation to develop. I had no time pressure, nor did my informants. This gave me the unique opportunity to observe and listen in settings where my informant had long forgotten about the interview situation. My choice was confirmed by two female students that I encountered on my way. I was just talking to a pilgrim from the USA when we passed the two female students, sitting at the side of the road, just before the Camino went up a steep hill. It was a beautiful morning and it promised to be a very warm day. One of the girls approached the two pilgrims in front of us, who started that day together with the pilgrim I was in conversation with and asked us to answer some questions for an investigation. It would take approximately fifteen minutes per person, so in our case one hour. We asked if it was possible to do it together, so it would only take fifteen minutes for all of us. Since that was not possible we decided, after a short consultation, that we did not want to participate. The reasons the other three brought up were: the break would be too long, the long trail in front of us crossing dry, flat and shadeless land would become too hot with the rising sun and they did not feel any obligation towards the girls they did not have any connection with. The two girls had chosen for a formal interview setting with a

questionnaire and no involvement with the informants. Their strategy proved to be not flexible enough (they could not adjust to the needs of the informants). This event proved in a very simple way the benefits of the methods I chose; the time benefit and the advantage of being an insider.

Another benefit of my participant observation was the opportunity to encounter the same pilgrim on different points on the Camino. This gave me the opportunity to follow certain pilgrims in their behavior over time. I could not plan this, since the speed and movement of pilgrims is very unpredictable and so was my own speed. Due to my irregular walking pattern I made sure not to be surrounded by the same group during the whole Camino. I had days in which I walked far and fast and days in which I opted for a short distance. It often happened that I was already surrounded by the same group and saw only familiar faces for a few days. After a while I would plan a short distance-day on purpose and say farewell to those who continued. But many times our ways crossed again due to pilgrims with physical problems, pilgrims taking a rest day in a bigger city or because I caught up by walking some longer distances. The encounters with the same pilgrims in different stages of their Camino made me aware of the fact that the attitudes of the pilgrim change along the Camino. The attitude of pilgrims at the start is different from pilgrims at the middle and the end. And these follow-up-interviews functioned as extra proof for this change. The number of interviews (115) combined with the follow-up-interviews (and conversations in between) is enough proof that the change is not due to variety among pilgrims.

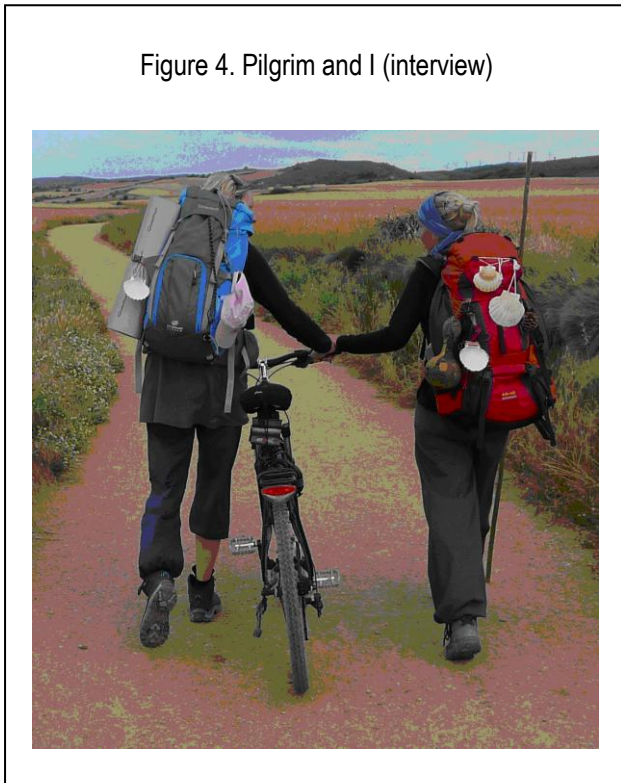
Due to the fact that I did not work with structured interviews and the setting of the days and conversations were always different, my interviews varied in length, depth and context. There were pilgrims that I spent a few days with and others that I talked to for only one hour. It was especially when I talked to different pilgrims that traveled together that I had to opportunity to follow them for a few days and enrich my interviews with observations and group conversations and interactions. At the end of my second Camino I got the opportunity to be a *hospitalera* (host in a pilgrim hostel) for ten days. This experience provided yet different information. It allowed me to take a distance from the 'pilgrim life', simply by interrupting my daily rhythm and by adopting a different role. It was very interesting to experience the Camino from a different point of view and to notice that suddenly I was not 'one of them' any longer. Although I had some very interesting conversations with a few of them, my responsibilities as a *hospitalera* clearly restricted my possibilities for holding interviews but at the same time gave the opportunity to observe the pilgrims from a different point of view. As a *hospitalera* I did not have the privilege to use every possibility that passed by. My responsibilities came first and my help was most needed during the hours that the pilgrims were there. I consider the variety within my methods as a positive influence on the study. It reflects the dynamic character of the pilgrimage. Due to my flexible way of interviewing I could adapt to the different situations in which possibilities came on my path. The short as well as the long interviews were of value for my investigation. The added value of the long interviews was not so much about gaining more facts but about observing them in different situations that occurred in the meantime. It gave me insight in the process of short-term change and development that most of the pilgrims went through, as they told me. It was in these cases that I was able to observe the aimed and claimed transformations. This gave me the possibility to collect more

“backstage” information, as Erving Goffman describes the information that goes beyond the controlled impression informants try to give and to go further than the socially desired answers, since not all pilgrims opened up equally fast (Berreman 2007: 146). Some of the pilgrims came to me with the aim to share their story and others I walked over 50 kilometers with before they trusted me with their story. In some cases the story to tell was of such complexity and length that more than the average time was needed. The disadvantage of the difference in length of my interviews is that it is more difficult to compare them with each other. Due to the large number of interviews and many more observations in this study the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

#### 2.2.4 Distance

A very important part of participant observation is the observative part. By participating the researcher runs the risk to get too close and to lose the objectivity that is necessary for non biased data collection and a clear analysis. In the case of my fieldwork the chance to get too much involved and to “go native” was very high. Anthropological fieldwork is about finding the right balance: as Powdermaker says: *“Participating too much results in one’s going native; participating too little turns one into a superficial, ethnocentric, survey-wielding, number-crunching social scientist with, some say, zero insight into the people studied”* (Powdermaker in Robben, Sluka 2007: 13). Due to the fact that the social group dynamics were very strong it was not always easy to withdraw myself. Expectations of others and the attraction to belong to a group were a constant social pressure. I wanted to be accepted as one of them, but could not leave my professional obligations out of sight. To be able to study the therapeutic social setting of the Camino I had to create moments in which I could observe it from an outsider aspect. I had several strategies to create moments of distance and reflection and by doing so guarantee the quality of data. The first strategy I planned already by writing my research proposal. After walking the Camino the first time I would take some days in Santiago to evaluate, reflect and based on information that would give me make the plan for the second half of my fieldwork. And so I did. I stayed for some days in Finisterre and for little more than a week in Santiago de Compostela. There I took a rest, for my body and mind. In Santiago as well as in Finisterre I had the opportunity to observe the pilgrims without being on the way myself. This helped me to see the setting from a different point of view. To give an example: The first time I arrived in Santiago was a completely different situation and experience from the times I observed others arriving. The first time I arrived in Santiago tears were rolling down my cheeks and I myself was overwhelmed by sudden emotions. My emotions were based on the rapid change that took place in my private life, in the time I was away from home. I experienced Santiago as a pilgrim (hugging my fellow pilgrims) and being recognized as one. The days after I was not longer recognized as being a pilgrim (without my backpack) but an observer like many other tourists and citizens in Santiago. In the first situation I observed others by being in the same situation and surrounded by people I was connected with. The opportunity to experience the same situation from different perspectives adds depth to my data and analysis. However the break in Santiago did not give enough rest and distance to keep control over the extent and the timing of my involvement with the pilgrims. I needed distance on a more regular basis. The context

of my fieldwork was exhausting for my mind, since I had very intense contact with many pilgrims, heard many personal stories, saw many tears and every time I had to say farewell to them (see Figure 4, where I comfort my informant at an emotional moment in the interview). All this belongs to anthropological fieldwork as Powdermaker states: “In addition to a capacity for open involvements and for becoming detached from them, personal qualities such as kindness, patience, tact, endurance, and the ability to ‘take’ both loneliness and ambiguity are helpful” (Powdermaker in Robben, Sluka 2007: 8). In the beginning I was able to apply all these features very well but the



number and the intensity of the interactions made it very tough in the end. That is one of the reasons why I decided to insert morning hours that I walked alone, to take the time for my own thoughts, process the interviews and take a “social rest”. I often took off alone in the early morning, a time that other pilgrims were still asleep. The chilly morning breeze and stunning sun rises created the setting of the hours that I thought for myself instead of listening to others. By walking slowly I made sure that after a while I would be among other pilgrims again at the time I felt ready to listen to their stories and thoughts. On my second Camino there was a point in which I was so packed with information and intense social contact that I had to take a break. This is the moment that I worked for 10 days in an *alberge* as a *hospitalera*.

Ten days at the same place, the same bed, change of activity and receiving pilgrims instead of being one. It offered me a rest from the social swirl which the Camino became to me. I was in need of privacy and an information stop. It turned out that I still had some interviews with pilgrims that stayed in the *alberge* but the frequency was less and the time to process information more abundant.

### 2.2.5 Disadvantages of Participant-Observation

There were also disadvantages of a participant-observation and I couldn't find adequate solutions for them in every case. Due to the fact that the interviews took place while we were walking it was not possible to take notes during the conversation. For pilgrims it is very important to keep a certain rhythm and therefore it was not possible to stop for writing key words down. Another option would be to work with a recorder. Apart from the fact that this would include weeks of work to process this, it was also socially undesirable and would harm my position as ‘one of them’. It was socially undesirable since a recorder would permanently emphasize my role as a researcher, making this a fixed part of my identity. On top of that a lot of pilgrims abandon technical apparatuses during their

Camino and my recorder would be associated with those aspects that they wish to take a distance from on the Camino. The few times that I recorded an interview, the character of the interview was formal and the informants clearly felt less free to tell their story and were waiting for questions to answer. By not recording or taking notes the informant talked freely without being reminded of the composition of an interview. Often informants did not experience it as an interview and interpreted it as a pleasant conversation. This was a positive influence on the content of the conversations. The downside of this interview technique was the fact that I had to remember everything and only in the evening or during a short break had the time to write down my notes of the day. There were days that I had three interviews plus all the 'daily interactions'. It was often too much to write everything down in detail. The writing combined with the evening responsibilities of a pilgrim and social interactions was not easy and often I missed the time to process the data before new data would come in. Since I was not able to record conversations I will present my data not in quotes but mostly by telling in my own words the stories the informants told me. I will base myself on my notes that are as close to the words my informants used as my memory allowed. I took notes in English, since most of the interviews were in English (being the dominant language on the Camino). When I use a text directly from my fieldwork notes I allowed myself to adjust the text on grammar to improve the readability. When I give a story-like example based on my field notes, I will present it as indented text. The story of 'a master student doing research on pilgrims and walking the Camino twice' did the rounds and as a result I had so many pilgrims approaching me to tell their story that it became impossible to keep track with my notes. I did not slow down on the number of interviews because I realized it was not so much the facts as more my informant's way of thinking that was of importance. I was interested in how pilgrims looked at their own story and how they positioned the Camino in their story and therefore I preferred a higher number of interviews/conversations over a precise recording of all the data. If I had the opportunity to do both it would have had my preference, but in this circumstance I had to choose and I chose understanding their way of reasoning above detailed information about their lives.

The plan of my fieldwork did not include a part in which I would follow my informants back home. During my fieldwork it became clear that one of the most interesting phenomena happened at the end of the Camino. I will explain in my thesis how to interpret the fear and the sorrow that pilgrims feel at the end of their journey but due to my data restriction I will not be able to follow them while they bridge the two worlds and go back into their normal life. This will be an excellent way of extending and deepening the work I did for future investigations. The only source of information I have concerning the situation of the pilgrims that returned home is the book by Frey, since she included also this part of the journey. I will use the knowledge and information that is accessible in her book to support my results and conclusions.

## **2.3 The Camino Population**

In the time I wrote my research proposal I wished to include all pilgrims that arrive in Santiago by means of non-motorized transport, in other words those that deserve consideration to receive the "*Compostela*" (the document



that is handed over by the pilgrim office after proof of true pilgrimage which is measured by a minimum amount of kilometers). Once I was on my way I realized that it was not possible to include the pilgrims on a bike on an equal level as the pilgrims that made the Camino by foot. Due to the fact that the pilgrims on bike covered larger distances per day and would often arrive later in the day, there was little chance to really come in contact with them. The bikers tended to stick with other bikers and I often needed the possibility to establish a contact in a longer period of time. This strategy was not possible to apply to the bikers, since I would never see them more than one time. A few times I spoke to a pilgrim on a bike, but too little to be able to include them into my research systematically. Differences between pilgrims concerning the grade of luxury or sleep comfort (hostel versus hotel) had no influence on the number of interviews. Although I had to spend the nights in hostels, since hotels were out of my budget, it did not limit me in talking to the pilgrims that preferred shelter in more luxurious places. The type of shelter was of no influence since most of my interviews were done while walking. The only disadvantage was the fact that I could not observe the pilgrims' life in these places. Although by far the majority of the pilgrims chose for a stay in *albergues*, some pilgrims treated themselves with a night in a more luxurious accommodation (once in a while) and a few almost never stayed in *albergues*. The following example shows that the kind of shelter was not of disturbing influence to my conversations. I spoke with a German man who walked the Camino together with his father and his dog. He joined his father of almost 80 years old, to make one of his father's last wishes in life come true. The hotels were a necessity for his father's highly needed night rest. During the daily walks they walked together with pilgrims they met on the way and who did sleep in *albergues*. I walked with them for a few days. Every morning we would meet at a certain time and place. After the daily walk we often met somewhere in town to have a drink and enjoy the rest. The communication with the father and his son was not hindered in any way by the fact that we did not share the same sort of shelter for the night. The same experience I had with other pilgrims that chose for more private and luxurious conditions to spend the night. This does not apply to the pilgrims that covered many kilometers a day by bus, slept in reserved hotel rooms and only walked for little distances a day. I could not come into contact with them for the same reasons as that it was difficult to establish meaningful (for my research) conversations with a bike pilgrim. Secondly these "bus pilgrims" did not really fit within my target group since their main way of transport was motor driven. Other pilgrims differed by sleeping under the blue sky, in a tent or in the open air. I did not encounter many pilgrims that did so and those who did had different motivations. I spoke to a pilgrim who traveled with his horse and slept on the ground with only a plastic tarp above him in case of rain. Then there was an older couple from France who slept in a tent and a young pilgrim from Germany who slept once in a while in his tent but preferred the comfort and coziness of the *albergues*. For some pilgrims the experience of sleeping outside belonged to their ultimate Camino-experience and so they did it as an exception for one or two nights. These deviations are all included in my research. The bike pilgrims are not.

The international audience of the Camino is one of its interesting phenomena. As a consequence the variety of languages is enormous and for me as a researcher it was impossible to be able to hold interviews in all the

pilgrims' own languages. English was the language most often used by pilgrims to bridge the communication barrier. In some cases pilgrims did not speak a common language although this did not mean that they would not communicate or walk together. A man from Germany told me that he walked a couple of days together with a man from France. Each of them did not speak a second language and so they spoke both in their own language, without bothering if the other understood or not. They gave each other company and were free to express themselves. For me as a researcher the situation was a little different. Due to the importance of exact understanding, languages were of great importance to me and the value of my data. I speak good English, German and Dutch and my Spanish is good enough to hold a conversation but my level of understanding is less detailed in comparison to the other three languages. Although I was able to talk to many pilgrims, there were some cases where the language situation did not allow an interview. Although the ability of speaking a second language could be related to demographic statistics, I am of the opinion that it is not necessary to include these concerns into my research. There were many pilgrims (English, American, Canadian, German, Dutch, Belgian, Spanish, Swiss, Austrian, Australian etc) to whom I spoke in their mother tongue and so they had the chance, regardless of their ability to speak multiple languages, to speak to me in their own language. The biggest bias due to language restrictions are the limited number of interviews with French speaking pilgrims, since I do not speak French. Especially among the older French pilgrims there were many that did not speak any of the languages that I speak. Due to the fact that a large percentage of the pilgrims on the Camino are from France, they are clearly under-represented within my data. I am not able to say if this has caused any bias as a result. Due to the fact that my focus of research is not on differences between countries I am of the opinion that even if there would be a bias it would not be relevant for the outcome of my research.

The variety among the pilgrims was manifold and at the same time they had a lot in common. Many different countries were represented but mostly the more wealthy countries. I encountered (white) pilgrims out of Namibia and South Africa, but the rest of the African continent was not represented. I encountered a very few pilgrims coming from the Middle East and the same for most Asian countries, with the exception of Japan and South Korea. North America was very well represented as was Brazil from the South American continent. European pilgrims were by far the majority with a lot of Spanish, German and French pilgrims. In the first three months of my fieldwork (April, May and June) the composition of the pilgrims was different from the summer months (July and August). During the holidays the percentage of Spanish pilgrims is much higher and it could be possible that this would have an influence on the data. I am not able to exclude this possibility since my fieldwork was mainly during spring time.

The official data published by the pilgrims' office in Santiago is not as neutral and reliable as one would wish for research purposes. As a pilgrim you need to be able to prove that you walked at least the last 100 kilometers or bicycled the last 200 kilometers by handing over a pilgrim's passport with two stamps per day. Afterwards the employees of the pilgrim's office ask the pilgrims some questions about their journey and motives of walking the pilgrimage to Santiago. Only in case the pilgrim makes explicit that her/his motive was religious and/or spiritual an

official document is given, the *Compostela*. For any other motive the pilgrims receive a different document. This is known by most of the pilgrims before they reach the pilgrims office and so they give the desired answer to receive a *Compostela*. Although the pilgrimage to Santiago is, by origin, a product of Christian religion, most of the pilgrims are not Christian or a non-active Christian. I use the term 'non-active Christian' to refer to pilgrims that consider themselves as Christian but do not wish to be involved with the institution of the church and its rules and do not actively practice their religion. In the data that I collected during my fieldwork there is only a small group of pilgrims that walked the Camino solely for religious (Christian) motives. An even smaller part of the pilgrims say they walk the Camino for no religious or spiritual reasons whatsoever and stick to this classification till the end of their journey. A large majority of the pilgrims speaks about a mixture of motives in which religious and spiritual reasons play an important role. My research focus is on this last group, to which I will refer to as secular pilgrims. I refer to my informants as the secular pilgrim not to create a standardized category but to reflect the paradoxal process of negotiation between sacralization and secularization. "*The secular is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)*" (Asad 2003: 25). The secular pilgrim does indeed not break with 'the religious' since many pilgrims are looking and believing in a sacralized self. Although the secular pilgrims have many things in common, to which I will return later on, it also shows great variety. There is variation among my informants in how they combine sacralization and secularization. The outcome is for every pilgrim different and depending on the situation. The variety is mostly related to the usage of certain vocabulary and the way of expressing certain thoughts. A significant part of my focus group fits into the New Age way of thinking and they express themselves that way. Another part of my focus group reasons in a New Age kind of way, but does not relate to it in their usage of language nor do they refer to quotes or authorities that are known for their New Age influences. Despite their different usage of language they show a similar way of thinking in relation to the first part of my focus group and they face the same problems at the end of the Camino. I am talking about two groups within my focus group, to clarify the two extremes in behavior; from presenting themselves very spiritual to not spiritual at all. The reality is not as strict. The pilgrims are gradually spread from one extreme to the other and all gradations in between. They all share the same goal: self transformation and many (but not all) include self sacralization into the process of self transformation.

# 3 Camino as a Gnostic therapy

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This chapter will explore the relevance of Heelas' writing to my research. First I will explain the Gnostic way of thinking and how this forms the basis of New Age. Understanding these terms forms the basis for the second part of this chapter in which I discuss the three steps Heelas describes as foundation of the process of self-transformation, in his book "The New Age Movement". In the final part of this chapter I will show the similarities between the behavior of the pilgrims and the New Agers that Heelas describes and how the Camino turns into a Gnostic therapy.

## 3.1 Gnostic way of thinking

A crucial part of the Camino is the Gnostic way of thinking. First I will explain what "Gnosis" is and after I explain how Gnosis plays an important role in constructing the Camino to Santiago as a Gnostic therapy.

Gnosis is a way of giving meaning to something by using "the way of the imagination". As Aupers et al formulate it: "*We think of modern gnosis as comprising a personal experience of revelation that can be conveyed neither through discourse (which would be "reason") nor through higher authority (which would make it "faith")*" (Aupers e.a. 2008: 688). Gnosis is based on a transformational belief of the creative mind. The source of Gnostic knowledge is based on the inner richness of the human being such as personal experience and imagination. It is the personal experience that Gnostics believe will bring the transformation towards a better world and therefore they exclude all that is related to institutions, dogmas and authorities. Aupers et al explain the central character of Gnostic epistemology as a epistemology that: "*... presupposes a dualistic ontology by juxtaposing two radically different worlds, one evil and alienating and the other offering salvation from suffering, defining the movement from the former to the latter by means of a transformative experience of a transcendental mind. This is crucial for understanding the holism characteristic of modern occultism and New Age: the primacy of a dualistic ontology for Gnostics indicates that their holism is not (yet) realized: it is an ideal, a cure for the disease diagnosed as dualism*" (Aupers e.a. 2008: 690). This dualistic ontology is clearly shown in the reasoning of the pilgrims and the driving force behind the Gnostic therapy that arose on the Camino.

### 3.1.1 New Age

Heelas wrote the book "The New Age Movement" in which he explains what New Agers have in common. According to him it is Self-transformation based on Self-sacralization that forms the core of the discourse he refers to as New Age. Heelas summarized the discourse of Self-transformation in three steps i.e. "Your lives do

not work, You are gods/goddesses in exile, Let go/drop it" (Heelas 1996: 18, 19, 20). These three steps are according to Heelas the essence of the behavioral thinking of New Agers. In this chapter the work of Heelas will be used to explain the transformative attitude that the majority of the pilgrims have, although not always consciously. According to Heelas New Age is a way of believing outside the network of conventional religions and institutions. The movement grew big during the twentieth century. Heelas describes in his book the "lingua franca" (Heelas 1996: 18) of the new age movement, which is in other words 'the basic approach towards life' that new-agers share, which includes the three steps towards authenticity. I will explain every step according to the ideas of Heelas after which I will link the steps to the data I collected during my fieldwork. The stories of the pilgrims were all unique, but from an analytic point of view they are very similar because they share the same way of creating hope for a better future. This hope is based on a Gnostic dualistic world view in which the transformational experience will bring salvation. This thought underlies the Gnostic therapy that emerges on the Camino to Santiago. As stated in the chapter "Methods", my group of informants was not homogeneous in many respects however there were features that a large majority of them shared. These features correspond with the features of the discourse as described by Heelas. Not all pilgrims show these characteristics in the same intensity but overall they express the same pattern. This pattern will be clearly explored when I explain the process of self-transformation.

### **3.1.1.1 Self Transformation**

Self Transformation is one of the fundamental features that New Agers share according to Heelas' theory. The need for Self Transformation arises as a result of the rejection of "the old Self" and the wish for "a new Self".

Pilgrims on the Camino showed a diverse set of motivations for walking their pilgrimage. Most of the pilgrims I interviewed made a clear distinction between tourists and pilgrims. Although not all pilgrims considered their fellow pilgrims as being pilgrims, I did not encounter a pilgrim that did not see him or herself as a pilgrim. The question who is a 'true pilgrim' and who is not a 'true pilgrim' is an often discussed topic among pilgrims on the Camino.

The literature on tourism describes many reasons for people to go on holidays. There are different categories and religious tourism is one of them. It is only during the last twenty years that scientists consider a dedifferentiation. Collins-Kreiner describes in his article the recent development of dedifferentiation and narrowing differences between tourism, pilgrimage and secular pilgrimage. He states that: "... a change is observed from viewing pilgrimage as a general and comprehensive phenomenon to its analysis as an individual, hence more pluralistic, entity" (Collins-Kreiner 2009: 444). Although according to the scientific literature the borders between tourism and pilgrimage are blurring, most of the pilgrims themselves are of a different opinion.

Before going on holidays people often say they need to recharge their batteries. This implies a circular process, gaining back that what got lost in daily stress life. By far the majority of the people that walk the pilgrimage to

Santiago do not have a circular process in mind but a linear one. Most of the pilgrims I spoke to expect and believe in change, something that improves their lives in a structural way. This is why transformation is such a central element in the Camino-experience. Although most of the pilgrims combine their search for transformation with joy, cultural interest, religion, spirituality, sport and adventure, their hunger for change or growth is what is at the basis of a unique experience. According to many pilgrims the transformative aspect of the Camino is what distinguishes a pilgrim from a tourist. The pilgrim's belief in transformation is not only a goal but much more the core of their belief. Personal development and inner transformation is seen as the solution for improving the world, as often stated: "improve the world, start with yourself".

### **3.1.1.2 Self Sacralization**

Self sacralization is based on several convictions such as perennialism (belief based on the conviction that all religions share the same essence and the rejection of institutions), individualism and self-ethic (based on the belief that *"the 'individual' serves as his or her own source of guidance"* (Heelas 1996: 23)). Sacralization of the self is the belief that the divine is seated within, in each individual. In the established religions the divine is centered in an authority in the form of one or several Gods. Holy books and messengers of the divine, define what is good and what is wrong and, even more importantly, how to become a better person. Within the New Age discourse the central authority is rejected as the source of truth. It is typical for New Agers to be convinced that the truth comes from within. The belief in inner transformation is based on this decentralized divine energy. The divine is within all people and this allows every human being to connect to their own inner truth. Since traditional religions and authorities are no longer accepted as leading examples, the guidance towards the inner truth needs to come from somewhere else. It is 'intuition' or the 'inner voice' that will lead every individual towards improvement. Heelas explains in his book that New Agers are not like-minded when it comes down to the interpretation of self-responsibility. He describes them as ranging from strict individualistic thinkers to community thinkers. Some New Agers are of the opinion that everything that happens in life is your own responsibility and based on this conviction *"one should not interfere by attempting to exercise responsibility over the lives of others"*. Others *"feel a profound sense of responsibility for others and the earth"* (Heelas 1996: 25). This self-ethic is based on a perennialistic approach in which individuals combine the very best of every religion and philosophy. New Agers are of the opinion that the essence of every world view (religion, philosophy) contains in essence the same message as Heelas states: *"The perennialized viewpoint involves going beyond traditions as normally conceived, going beyond differences to find - by way of experience - the inner, esoteric core"* (Heelas 1996: 28). Due to the international character of the Camino the differences become even more profound. It opens the possibilities for many of the pilgrims to cross boundaries of faith, language and traditions. The diversity among the pilgrims gives the chance to find the common grounds (esoteric core) and ignoring or celebrating differences. In other words: the diverse and international setting of the Camino stimulates the "New Age" perennialistic attitude and enlarged the sense of brotherhood (Cutsinger, El-Ansary 2007).

### 3.1.2 The three steps of Heelas

The three steps that Heelas defines as the 'lingua franca' are expressed in different ways. I will elaborate more on the differences when I apply the three steps of Heelas to my own research data. What New Agers (and many pilgrims) share is the way of thinking, of giving reason and making sense out of "Life". They differ in how they give shape to their way of thinking. The three steps of Heelas can explain the similarities in thinking and how this influences the act of walking a pilgrimage. In chapter 5 I will say more about the friction that arises from sharing the same thinking pattern but expressing it in different ways.

Heelas explains the New Age discourse by dividing the process of self transformation into three steps. He summarizes the content of these steps as: *"It explains why life - as conventionally experienced - is not what it should be; it provides an account of what it is to find perfection; and it provide the means for obtaining salvation"* (Heelas 1996: 18). The three steps of Heelas are at analytic level strictly separated from each other but on empirical level they are not. The three steps of this discourse belong together, and form together a "transformation" of the relevant person. The conviction that something is wrong might just as well come after the realization that there is a better alternative and a person might need to repeat the three moreover, to be able to reach the new Self in all its aspects or to strengthen their belief. The discourse of New Agers comes to show on the Camino as a Gnostic therapy. Ian Reader already acknowledged the therapeutic aspect of walking a pilgrimage in his article "Pilgrimage growth in the modern world: Meanings and implications". He states that: *"Caught between personal loss of meaning and a lack of interest in organized religious structures, they had become interested in the pilgrimage as a form of alternative therapy"* (Reader 2007: 222). I will explain how this takes the shape of a Gnostic therapy on the Camino.

#### **Step 1: 'Your lives do not work'**

The common pattern of thinking starts with the realization that "something is wrong" in one's life. Heelas explains this first stage as: *"The great refrain, running throughout the New Age, is that we malfunction because we have been indoctrinated – or, in the New Age sense of the term, been 'brainwashed' – by mainstream society and culture"* (Heelas 1996: 18). Heelas states that especially authoritative institutions and structures within society, such as the church, school, and parents, are the cause of feelings of disruption from one's true self. *"The burden of the past"* (Heelas 1995: 19) is the accumulation of forced, not voluntary and compulsory choices and acts in one's life, in other words: *"the socialized self"* (Heelas 1995: 19). This accumulation is the source of unnatural and alien responses that intensify the discomfort in one's life. New Age is a form of modern gnosis and rejects all forms of social conventions and the socialized self as a product of the accepted rules the mass is shaped by.

Figure 5. Memorial Scallop (in Danish)



Without a warning, happily walking your Camino  
in the sunshine, you suddenly collapsed.  
Forever gone  
(cross) + 16 may 2011  
May your memory, forever be honoured.

The discourse that Heelas describes is followed by most of the pilgrims and applied to their lives also before they come to the Camino. At home they found out that they are trapped, that they live a life they no longer agree with or that they wish to give their lives a twist, change direction and take a different perspective towards life. In the conversations with my informants they told me about their lives and how they came to the decision to walk the pilgrimage to Santiago. An often returning aspect of their stories was the “turning point”. Some pilgrims went through a drastic change of leaving a marriage, a sudden spiritual call or the loss of a beloved one (see Figure 5). For others it was the search for meaning in life, reflection and contemplation of less dramatic happenings or about life in general. Although the character of this moment of change was for every person different, the effect of it was at least in one aspect the same as most of the other pilgrims: they started a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. The turning point was often a painful experience in which the relevant person decided to take over control and to make a change. So did I talk to an artist who used to be a successful career woman with a comfortable income and a promising business future lying in front of her. Some three years ago she decided to change her life and to start living her dream. She quit her job and started a study at the art academy. At the moment I spoke with her she was about to complete her studies and to start her life as self-employed

artist. She explained me that there were still moments that she doubted if her decision was wise. The insecure future as a self-employed artist scared her on moments. Her Camino was partially dedicated to strengthen the connection to her inner wish to live her dreams. The Camino is known as being a suitable place for (self) reflection and finding yourself (back). A personal journey towards the inner Self is precisely what many pilgrims are looking for, as being the solution for Self Transformation. They are looking for a Self that is not vulnerable for the negative influences from outside that they often experience as limiting.

Although they told me there was something wrong, several of the pilgrims did not want to summarize their situation/past as “problematic”, that something is wrong. If I asked for an explanation why they did not associate



with the word “problem” they would give me two different reasons. One group preferred to emphasize the aspect of growth. They described their past as lessons they had to learn and by doing so they stressed the positive angle of their situation and the belief that everything happens for a reason. The other group clearly did not want to be compared to the stereotype pilgrim that is facing personal problems and is looking for answers. After talking extensively to them I concluded that most of the times they did fit the stereotype description.

In many conversations the pressure of the current society was seen as a factor that had a negative influence on their lives. The term “Stress” was often used, related to their lives back home. They would talk of running from the one responsibility to another without the time to evaluate, reflect, consciously choose or pause when wished for. As a woman from South Africa told me that she felt as if she was sitting in a train that went so fast she was not able to see the landscape, to change direction or to enjoy the cities she passed by. Her words are a very illustrative way of expressing the feeling of being trapped in the life you are living, a sensation many pilgrims shared with her. To be able to get off this “train” you have to jump and take a risk, some quit their jobs, others left their partner, and some even sold their house and belongings before going on pilgrimage. Not all pilgrims went through such a drastic change of direction and not all had a “problem” so much as a feeling of dissatisfaction, a belief in betterment. They felt disconnected, as if they lost control over the direction of their own life (like the South African woman said) and so they took time to reconnect. For others there was a clear moment in time that separated the “old me” from the “new me”. A very drastic example is a German man I spoke to. He was in his early thirties and had recently suffered two heart attacks. After this experience he wanted to live his life in a different way. He wanted to take the chances life offers him and not to wait until it might be too late. For others the turning point was not as life-threatening but never the less had a similar result for their interpretation of life. In cases pilgrims went through an experience that changed their direction/course of life, they would often connect “good, new habits” to themselves (the inner/new self) after that special experience and “bad, tempting habits” to their old self (formed by society), before they changed their focus in life.

Often pilgrims would speak of the empty and demanding society. Empty because it does not fulfill you with lasting, inner happiness and it stimulates the materialistic, temporary and mundane desires of the ego. Demanding because they feel lived by the rhythm of society and cached by the expectations of their surroundings. “Going back to the basics” is one of the aspects of the Camino that leaves a strong impression behind and that stimulates the pilgrims to realize what is truly important to them. The Camino environment and practice is in many aspects the opposite of this empty and demanding society. Most of the pilgrims come to deepen their belief and think about the meaning of life. The daily physical exercise and the simple lifestyle (food, shower, and bed) give the pilgrims lots of time for the reflection he/she wishes for. The result of this change of direction is often the rejection of the “socialized” Self and the focus on something that is felt to be unique and authentic, the “true self”, as more in detail described in step 2.

## **Step 2: 'You are Gods and Goddesses in exile'**

The socialized self, as explained in the first stage, is the obstacle that needs to be conquered to become your true self. This obstacle is often named: "ego, lower self, mind or intellect" (Heelas 1996: 19) and is seen as a product of an unnatural process that brought the person away from his/her true central inner Self. This "inner Self" is pictured as a natural state of being, before it got polluted by society, which is present in every single soul and only needs to be recognized as such and given room for expression. This 'authentic Self' is seen as the "God" inside, the pure and wise inner source of wisdom that will lead you to the true path of life. This attitude towards religions and the individual is also reflected in Perennialism. "*The perennialized viewpoint involves going beyond traditions as normally conceived, going beyond differences to find - by way of experience - the inner, esoteric core*" (Heelas 1996: 28).

Heelas talks about the rejection of authorities such as the church which is seen as being part of the imposed order that people no longer wish to be dictated by. It was especially the institution of the "church" that people did not relate to. Non-active Christians often stressed the fact that they do not need to go to church to be able to talk to God. The act of walking the Camino was by this group of pilgrims seen as a way to connect to the essence of their spirituality. The names most frequently given to this essence varied from God, Energy, Higher Power, and Love. The experience of nature on the Camino is very important for the spiritual feeling, and being connected. Nature and silence were sources of inspiration and contrast to what normal life brings. A part of the pilgrims that is not longer satisfied with their lives is skeptical about spiritual experiences but at the same time hopes to find in that direction solutions. Many of them are middle age men and many of them do have spiritual experiences on the way. This strengthens the conviction that the Camino is a special place that brings pilgrims in contact with their spiritual self, even those who were not convinced from the beginning. Several times these men would cry during the interview and tell me that it has been many years ago that they cried the last time. When I asked them why they thought that "the Camino made them cry" they often related it to being connected to their feelings again by walking the Camino. Feelings, intuition and the heart were often related to the new self and progress. And for many pilgrims it was the same. They came to the Camino with their heads full and the wish to empty it, to create room to be able to connect to themselves again. The life they live in the normal world, before they came to the Camino, was disconnected from the "true self". Many of them told me that they felt more connected, for some it resulted in tears and for others in a tinkling smile in their eyes.

Despite the Christian origin of the pilgrimage to Santiago, a lot of non-Christians are also attracted to walk the Camino. An example of this mixture of beliefs, sources of inspiration, and religions are the Eastern influences on the Camino. So it is not only the audience of the Camino but also their sources of inspiration that are very international and cross cultural. This is among others reflected in the role is given to energy. Within the Indian and Chinese life-philosophies energy place a vital role and is seen as the transporter of new life, health and spiritual development. Pilgrims often refer to energy as a source of divine Love. Not only do the pilgrims show a great

deal of interest in and affection towards Eastern approaches towards life, it also is reflected in some of the *albergues* along the road. Practices such as yoga, meditation, and Reiki are strongly represented. I encountered it on my Camino at the moment I needed help most. One day I felt very weak because my body had suffered an allergic attack the night before. I could not walk far and had to stop in a tiny village in which a little house in the middle of the playground served as *albergue*. There were only twelve beds and a bathroom but never before had I been so happy with a bunk bed and a backbreaking mattress. I was not able to eat anything other than fruit and in the afternoon I was lying in bed, too weak and exhausted to write my notes down or have a look around.

A lady came to my bed. She was a pilgrim too and I had seen her before. She offered me to give me energy from the universe, to get stronger. I was happily surprised to get help offered and agreed with the session. We went outside and she asked me to take place on the chair in front of her. I closed my eyes and felt her hands moving a little distance from my body. After a few minutes she asked me to give her my left hand. She laid two fingers on my wrist and I felt a tingling in my lower arm. She told me that what she did was a blood cleansing. After she was finished I sat a while longer with my eyes closed. When I opened them I saw the woman standing next to me, making certain movements. She explained me that she had to bring herself back in to balance after the session she gave to me. Then she invited me to join her daily routine which consisted out of a series of eight positions, each of which had to be held for five minutes. The lady told me that she did this practice every morning before she started to walk and every afternoon after she found herself a place to sleep.

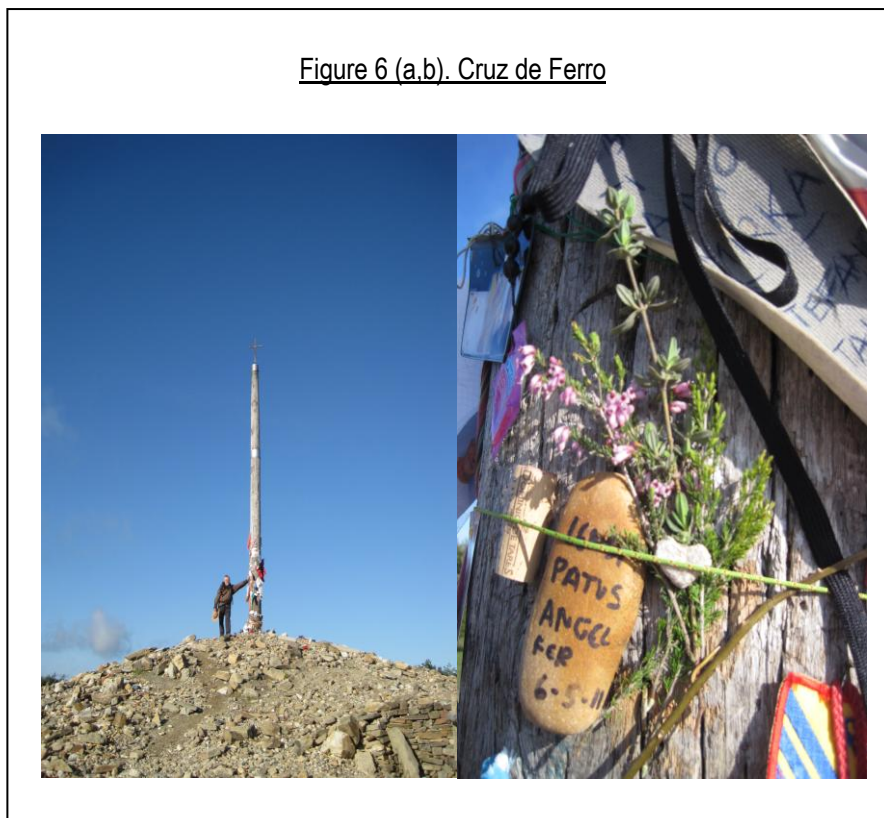
Irrespective of the fact if one believes in transmissions of universal energy, the above situation is an example of the many other encounters I had with 'alternative healthcare' and yoga-related practices. The existence of a Higher Energy that connects the whole universe is a firm belief among many pilgrims. The way pilgrims express this belief is different from each other but many of them refer to something inside themselves, something pure to which with they had lost (partial) contact before and they hope/expect to be able to (partially at least) restore contact with by walking the Camino. The belief in a Higher Energy that connects the Universe is why many pilgrims believe that with connecting to their inner Self they also improve/restore their connection to the Universe. The universal energy that the lady gave me was of healing nature and so is the effect, many state, of (re)connecting to your inner Self. The inner Self is a spark of universal energy and the universe is wise, in balance and pure. Heelas is of the opinion that New Agers believe that their inner Self is something divine. The pilgrims of my target group were divided when it comes down to this topic. Some clearly connected their inner Self with a divine sort of essence, but most of my informants did not use words such as 'divine' when it came to describing their inner Self, but they all described their conviction of an inner source of truth (like a divine conscious) in other words. Their belief in the existence of an inner Self is a conviction that forms the basis on which many pilgrims world view is founded. Most of my informants did not explicitly connect their world view with something holy. Although for many of them it was something intensely beautiful and often the word 'Magic' was used to express their feeling of fascination. I spoke to a Japanese young man who decided to walk the Camino after he had finished high school. I overtook him on a long stretch through the hills on a very warm afternoon in May. He was limping and therefore I asked him if he needed any help. He told me he bruised his ankle but that he would make it till the next village. I thought it was better to accompany him in his current condition and that way

we got talking. He explained me that he believed in an ancient indigenous Japanese belief (Shinto), which holds that God is in all living beings and that everything stays in connection to each other. The young man told me that that is why he believes it is very important to act with respect towards all living beings. Although he was probably one of the very few pilgrims with the Shinto belief, the teachings he explained to me I heard very often in other pilgrims world views. Though most of the times pilgrims would indicate Buddhism as their source of inspiration. Of course nature is everywhere, but pilgrims told me that they experience nature differently on the Camino, of more spiritual value than nature back home. An Irish man told me what a fellow pilgrim had told him:” It is not the nature that is different on the Camino, but the way the pilgrims learn to look at it.” This sentence clearly reflects the Gnostic way of thinking of which I will say more in the second part of this chapter. These few words reflect the transformative value and the magic “sauce” that covers the north of Spain, there where the yellow arrows show you where to walk.

### **Step 3: ‘Let go/drop it’**

This third of Heelas’ stages concerns the liberation of the true Self. The third ingredient towards Self-spirituality is leaving the ego behind. As Heelas formulates: “*There are many different ways, rituals, and practices that are designed to help people ‘drop their ego-attachments’*” (Heelas 1995: 20). Only in this way one is able to free oneself from the imposed harness of modern society and connect to the authentic that lies within.

Many pilgrims go home with the good intention to prioritize taking better care of their inner Self and to stay



connected like they felt it during their time on the Camino. The cause of their personal disharmony was often found in the world around them and the negative influences it had on them. Pilgrims often talked to me as if they consisted of two different parts, one part that was polluted by society and one part that wished for purification.

There is one spot on the Camino that symbolizes

the 'let go/drop it' in a very direct way: Cruz de Ferro. After Astorga, the mountain range 'Montes de Leon' starts, at first this is hilly but on the second day after Astorga the track becomes steeper and harder. High in these mountains is Cruz de Ferro. It is a simple iron cross, fixed on top of a five meter high trunk of a tree. At the foot of the post rises an enormous heap of stones, of all sizes from small to very large. In older times Cruz de Ferro served as a frontier mark. For some non-Christian-based-reason passers-by brought stones with them, to leave at the foot of the post. In the twelfth century Hermit Glaucelmo placed a cross on top of the pole and by doing so turned the heathen tradition into a Christian one (Anguita 2008). These days the stones are still there and the majority of the pilgrims bring a stone from home to leave it at Cruz de Ferro. The thought behind this ritual is that the stone symbolizes the problems and sorrows that are in the heart of the pilgrims. On the evening before the day's hike to Cruz de Ferro I had dinner in a lovely *albergue* in Focebadon. I sat there at a table with seven other pilgrims and at one point in the conversation we got to talk about Cruz de Ferro. Most of us were carrying a stone with us to leave on the next day. The German lady at the table told us that she had a stone of one kilo with her. She had carried it from the first day of her Camino. I responded in shock (which I still regret as I realized that my reaction was incorrect and insensitive, since no one would carry a stone of one kilo without a good or important reason). I corrected myself saying that one kilo is really heavy and she replied with the words: "yes, but my pain is also really big", as she said those words tears filled her eyes.

Another point on the Camino that reflects this 'let go/drop it' is the Cabo Finisterre (a peninsula at the north west coast of Spain), the end of the world according to the Romans. Cabo Finisterre is a peninsula with a lighthouse, 94 km from Santiago. For some pilgrims Finisterre is the final destination of their pilgrimage and Santiago just another city on their way. For others the kilometers from Santiago to the sea were seen as 'free time', as the fun part. The pilgrimage to Santiago was more of an obligation they made themselves, dedicated to reflection and growing. A German man said it like this: "Walking towards Santiago was a serious act, but the track to Finisterre is to enjoy and feel free." There are different rituals that pilgrims perform when they arrive at Finisterre. The whole Camino Francés, pilgrims walk towards the West. In Finisterre they arrive at the end of the world, to see the sunset as a symbol for the end of their journey. The sun sinks into the sea, changes the sky into a colorful setting that accompanies the pilgrims that sit in little groups on the peninsula, the end of their journey. Often pilgrims make little bonfires and burn parts of their pilgrim-outfit as a symbolic act of reflecting the transformation that happened from the inside by walking the Camino, you shed your old skin. The Pilgrim stick is another object that pilgrims have a special bond with. Especially the ones found in nature, decorated and carved, little pieces of art. At the end of the world the pilgrim stick is no longer needed, it helped to walk the road that was not always easy, but the journey has come to an end. As a last act of liberation some pilgrims chose to throw their stick into the sea, from high up the rock of the peninsula into the foaming white waves of the end of the world, the end of the pilgrimage.

In Santiago many pilgrims miss such a symbolic end as the cape with its rituals in Finisterre. Most of the pilgrims attend the pilgrims Mass, visit the grave of Saint James and go to the pilgrims' office to collect their Compostela.

Still it is not the end many hoped for. An often returning feeling was the feeling of being lost in Santiago. The rhythm of walking is gone, the city is full of tourists and so is the church. During the Mass a constant stream of tourists is going in and out and walking around. The for many weeks so isolated group of pilgrims is suddenly spread and absorbed into the crowd. It is an end that does not feel like an end and for this reason many pilgrims continue to Finisterre (by foot or by bus).

## 3.2 Gnostic Therapy

### 3.2.1 The Role of 'Imaginatio'

Figure 7. Message on an old door



The Gnostic therapy is about how pilgrims gave meaning to their experiences using their imagination. The Gnostic way of thinking is clearly visible on the Camino in how “the normal” is turned into “something special”. The normal reality is seen as a distraction from the truth that is covered by a veil and only to be discovered through imagination. Gnostic knowledge based on personal experience is the way towards self transformation. As Aupers et al formulate it: “... being concerned with the secrets of salvation, knowledge is not just theoretical information about things but is itself, as a modification of the human condition, charged with performing a function in the bringing about of salvation. Hence the role of imaginatio as ‘the main instrument of attaining gnosis,’ for the imaginatio is creative and therefore changes one’s self and the world around one” (Aupers e.a. 2008: 690). Figure 6a. represents this in the words: Our life is the work of our thoughts (Nuestra vida es la obra de nuestros pensamientos, in Spanish). Due to the fact that Gnostic knowledge obtained by personal experience is of such importance, pilgrims are looking for these experiences that are meant to change their lives.

Not all pilgrims experience this in the same way. One group would refer to it as “magic”, others preferred to use the term “spiritual” and some named it “miracles”. Although most of the pilgrims add value to the Camino by thinking in a Gnostic way, there is still a big variety within the Gnostic way of thinking. I will give a few examples to show the diversity in how pilgrims combine the sacral and the secular. [Typ hier uw vergelijking.](#)

In the figure below (Figure 8) you see three different examples of how pilgrims take the time to give the(ir) way a spiritual meaning. The pebbles form a central role in this. Many pilgrims connect or give meaning to them by laying forms, carrying them with them (to Cruz de Ferro or the sea), giving them as little presents to other pilgrims or as a form of meditation (by performing certain activities such as building). On figure 8a. you see a Road Sign



with on top some pebbles and two flowers. The yellow sign (representing the Jacobs Scallop) shows the direction to walk. Many of these road signs are decorated with pebbles, flowers, pictures and other little objects from

Figure 8 (a, b, c). Pebbles on the Camino



pilgrims for pilgrims. These little objects and acts mark the way and connect the pilgrims. I spoke to a lady from the United States who carried little pieces of wood with prints of angels with her. She used to lay them on the road signs and other places where they could inspire other pilgrims. On figure 8b. you see a construction of pebbles, like on picture 8c. There are many different reasons why pilgrims pick up a pebble. Some construct a little tower; others lay a form or write a message on them. Pilgrims told me they did it for meditation, as a memorial to somebody, as a way to thank 'the Camino' for what it gave them, to mark a special place or to continue a tradition (there are places on the Camino with many little pebble towers). Most of the times, the reason behind the act was of reflective nature and had the purpose to bring the pilgrims closer to the inner Self, connect to themselves, find silence, make contact with their heart/feelings. In other words: it was part of their Gnostic therapy.

### 3.2.2 Gnostic experiences

#### **Meditation to the heart**

Figure 9b. shows a spiral with in the center of the spiral a heart. I saw this shape several times returning on my first Camino and was wondering about its meaning. At the end of my Camino I was in the middle of a conversation with a pilgrim when he jumped on his feet and drew the same shape into the sand. He explained me that another pilgrim showed it to him, as a meditation to the heart. He showed me how to do it, three steps

forward and two steps backward and when we arrived in the center we turned around and walked in the same way back. Via him I came in contact with the pilgrim who showed him this meditation. I wrote him (after I returned home) and asked if he could be so kind to explain me the shape. He wrote me that on his first Camino (in 2009) he got inspired by pilgrims leaving messages for other pilgrims at the side of the road. He explained me in the following words how the idea of the spiral came to him:

“Just after crossing Ventosa, we passed by the place we called the Garden of Pebbles with many pebble structure erected by pilgrims. Daniel and I spent a couple of hours there and I erected a small stelae (small monument for the dead) of pebbles in the honour of my father who had passed away some years back. After finishing it and meditating on it for some time, I felt very tired and fell asleep on the grass right next to it. When I woke up, my eyes opened facing the sky. I remained speechless when I saw a spiral of clouds just above the stone structure I had erected.”

Some days later he exactly found such a spiral laid in stones (Figure 9a.). He continued:

Figure 9 (a, b). Meditation to the Heart



“I left my backpack drop off my shoulders, and started walking the spiral towards the center of it. As I was walking the layers of the spiral, my steps started slowing down more and more... the external world started fading out more and more... then tears, uncontrollable tears washing my soul from within... and as I got closer to the center, the tears started to calm down, and peace settled in my heart as stopped walking in the center of the spiral and set, my eyes facing west, my soul drawn within”.

Two years later (2011) he walked again the Camino. He had added the shape of a heart in the center of the spiral and was laying them all along the way to Finisterre. Walking the spiral of the heart, constructing shapes with the pebbles, became a healing meditation for him. Due to this powerful (spiritual) experience he wished to share it with others, to help them on their way to self transformation. This story shows how a Gnostic way of thinking changes the reality. Due to the fact that the pilgrim connects the spiral of clouds with the tower of pebbles (stelae) the spiral form gains a spiritual value. This pilgrim ‘reads’ the meaning behind the spiral of clouds.



## The Way of the Hearts

“The Way of the Hearts” is a story about a pilgrim in his early thirties believing in the power to change his own life, to turn deception into strength and pain into wisdom. The way he did this was by believing in his own imagination. He is one of the persons I met on the Camino who was a very clear example of how to form the Camino into a therapeutic experience.

Figure 10. Heart Shape



When he told me his life history, sitting at a river bank warmed by the last rays of sunlight, I fell silent. It was a story about a life full of “bumps in the road”. I could feel the lived pain and sorrow, but most of all he convinced me of his will and belief to transform every detail of his life into something fruitful and meaningful. He told me about his “way of the hearts”. The heart-shape became a form of hope, warmth and strength for him. He told me about his wish to encounter warm-hearted people, people that live with compassion and empathy. After our first interview I accompanied him for two days and later I joined a group of pilgrims of which he was one. This gave me the opportunity to observe him in depth and to see how his belief and attitude influenced other pilgrims. He used to see the heart-shape everywhere. While we walked through north Spanish land he would make me aware of all the heart-shapes that were surrounding us in stones, flowers, clouds and much more. It happened a few times that he came to a point in the conversation when he had said something very important to himself and right at that moment he found a heart-shaped stone. For him these stones were signs of the universe to encourage him on the “path he was walking”. This belief was very deep rooted. This became visible when he burst into tears at the moment of finding that heart. He explained me later that

the tears were there out of gratitude for the beautiful way, life shows us our way. He shared his belief with other pilgrims and suddenly the heart-shape became also for others a symbol of belief, hope and trust in the wisdom of life.

Other pilgrims came to him, to show him their pictures of heart-shapes. They also came with questions to him, how to find spirituality/magic on the Camino. Another pilgrim told me the story of how he asked this man for advice. To be able to tell the story clearly I will call the first pilgrim Philipp and his fellow pilgrim who asked for advice Tobias (these are not their real names). This is the story:

When Tobias came to the Camino he expected to experience a certain spirituality. Before he asked Philipp for advice he had walked for one week on the Camino. He told Philipp that he had not experienced anything spiritual and that he was slightly disappointed by it. Philipp gave him advice based on his belief to open up to everything around him and that spirituality is everywhere. Tobias walked the day after with his eyes closed and paying attention to the wind. Then the following happened: He walked on a sunny day, with the wind coming from one side, through the wine fields. Suddenly the wind came from the opposite direction and it felt for him as if the winds pushed him to one side of the road. He decided to let the wind lead him. When he opened his eyes he was standing in front of an olive tree with

a shadow just big enough for him to be covered in. He sat down and felt connected and inspired, with good thoughts and an enlightened feeling in his heart.

Tobias saw the wind as a guide with the task to lead him to the olive tree, the place where he received the message of the Camino. The belief that the Camino gives to them what they need is a very strong conviction among many of the pilgrims. Forms in which the Camino steers the lives of the pilgrims on the Camino are: the encounters with other pilgrims, thoughts, insights, inspiration, help and happenings. In the next example the help and wisdom from the Camino (as a special and spiritual place) is passed through in the form of Runes.

### **The Stone-Master**

On my second Camino I met a man from the UK who had worked earlier on in his life at a university after finishing his academic study. He was walking the Camino in three times and this year he would reach Finisterre and complete his journey. On his second time on the Camino he started to collect (little) stones that for some reason were special to him. He gave the stones meaning such as: Ice Rune, Seed Cleft, Bear Paw, Heart Stone and Fire Stone (on the picture below from left to right). The names evolved into larger descriptions that became every time



more complete. At some point he started to use the stones as “runes”, to inspire, predict and guide himself. Eventually it evolved into a “rune reading” for friends and persons who were interested and so it slowly turned into a job/profession. He had the stones with him on his third time on the Camino and if pilgrims were interested he would be willing to do “a reading” for them. He showed all the stones to me and gave of all the description and explained how the meaning of a stone could have different interpretations depending on the positions to the other

stones of the reading. He gave me his business card and on his website I found the following description of the stones:

“The Walking Runes are a set of 32 stones collected whilst walking the route of an ancient ley line across Northern Spain. They reflect the contemplative nature of the journey and, although they have a strong connection to the more traditional rune stones in some aspects of meaning, they have an energy and vitality all of their own” (Walking Runes).

Another quote from his website shows the clear Gnostic way of looking at the world around us. Here stones are turned into blessings.

“All these runes are in their original state, as they were found , It is surprising what things of beauty lay at our feet ,when we start to slow down and look more closely, we begin to see that which in our rushing we often miss... Blessings...” (Walking Runes)

I just gave three examples of how pilgrims interpreted stones in a Gnostic way, all attribute special signs, values and meanings to the stones. The first pilgrims uses the stones for meditative purposes. The second pilgrim believes in an “added value” concerning the heart-shaped-stones and the second pilgrim believes in the special meaning of the collection of stones that he selected on his second time on the Camino, “normal stones” were given a meaning, role and function in the story of these (and other) pilgrims.

## **Chapel of Eunate**

Stories of unexpected help are many and even pilgrims that left home without any spiritual belief change their opinion after living some “special experiences”. It proves the conviction that things happen for a reason. It also feeds the feeling/thought/wish that there is a special energy on the Camino. Some pilgrims believe in the connection with the route of the Camino and the stars, others talk about energy meridians that would add an extra spiritual sensitivity to this particular place on earth. Apart from this Camino-energy there are some places on the Camino that are famous for their strong spiritual powers. One of these places is the little chapel of Eunate, a very small church build in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century and finalized in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. There is no clear explanation for the unusual construction and its function in earlier days. The esoteric oriented people believe that it used to be connected to the Templar knights and others that are more academically orientated believe that its function was of a funerary chapel. For this thesis it is not important what the most reliable variant is but to analyze the behavior of pilgrims related to this chapel. To reach the chapel pilgrims had to walk an extra five kilometers. Since the chapel provides only eight beds, most of the pilgrims visit the chapel for other reasons than a place for the night. It is known that you have to walk bare foot three times around the chapel to come in contact with the special spiritual energy of this place. For those interested or looking for spirituality the chapel of Eunate contains an extra power of attraction. Not all pilgrims find it worth the extra kilometers but there are many for whom this place is one of the main sites of the Camino. Petra (pseudonym), a German woman in her early thirties, was one of those pilgrims attracted, due to spiritual motives, to the chapel in Eunate.

Her mother used to be spiritually active and interested in esoteric practices. Petra strongly resisted the esoteric practices of her mum when she was younger. More recently she started to explore her own connection to a more spiritual life and the chapel of Eunate was for this reason a place of interest to her. The reason she took the detour to Eunate was to walk three times around the chapel. When she arrives there, ready to walk the rounds, an older woman came to her and asked if she wished to feel the energy of Eunate. After Petra confirmed her question the woman grasped her by the shoulders and places her on a special spot with the words "If you want to feel the energy, this is the place where you feel it most strongly". Standing there, a warm wave of energy flowed through the body of Petra and she felt light in her head and was overwhelmed by this special sensation. From this moment on Petra was opened to what became a spiritual journey.

Many pilgrims are like Petra, searching for a moment of "being connected", finding the Gnostic experience of self transformation. It is this search for Gnostic experiences that drives pilgrims. Many pilgrims come to the Camino with high expectations such as: solutions, spirituality and inspiration. In many cases pilgrims are grateful for 'what crosses their path' but there are also pilgrims that go home disillusioned. The same phenomenon is observed by Frey. She states: "*Some come to the Camino believing that the "therapy route" will give them the quick fix or the spiritual insight they crave yet feel frustrated when it seems that only others end up with solutions*" (Frey 1998: 221). This was the case for a Brazilian pilgrim that I spoke to in Santiago. He had expected more mystic encounters and told me he was still thirsty for more magic. He went home with the plan to come back soon, to continue his search for mystic moments.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

The shared wish for self transformation among pilgrims shapes the search for Gnostic experiences. The three steps of Heelas show the way of thinking and acting of the pilgrims. The three steps come to show on certain moments and places on the Camino and in the conversations I had with the pilgrims. They believe in inner transformation and share the hope that the Camino will help them in their process of self transformation. The act of walking, the conversations with other pilgrims, certain rituals and the time away from home helps them to transform. In the last part of the chapter I showed by giving some examples how the Gnostic experience takes shape and how they are shared and distributed among other pilgrims. It is Gnosis that makes the difference between a long distance walk and the Camino as we know it today. It is the Gnostic way of thinking that creates the ambiance pilgrims need to attain their wish (goal) of self transformation.

# 4 Camino as a Non-Place

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In this chapter I will introduce the theory of “Non-Place” as defined by the French Anthropologist Augé to be able to place an important aspect of my data and observations, the socially constructed Camino, within an anthropological frame. I use Augé’s Non-Place theory to describe and explain the ‘different world’ created on the Camino and the consequences of passing through a different world for the social construction of self-spirituality as a Gnostic therapy.

## 4.1 Augé on Non-Places

Marc Augé wrote “Non-Places, An Introduction to Supermodernity” in which he explains the relation between supermodernity and non-places. It is a book about the modern division and design of space that changes the behavior of the people passing through these spaces. Augé defines a non-place thus: *“If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place”* (Augé 2008: 63). He gives as example modern supermarkets, airports, petrol stations and shopping malls. Augé explains to the reader that they all look the same, all over the world, although it is not necessarily the looks of the non-places but the way of organizing the space that gives them similitude. One of the most striking characteristics of Non-Places is that they are like separate worlds. Augé gives as an example: driving on the highway from Paris down to the south of France you do not experience that what makes the region you are crossing unique. For the driver it is just another highway. Augé elaborates the six characteristics of Non-Places: similitude, proof of innocence, temporality, language, and loosened from history and culture. I will explain these features one by one and apply them to my own data.

The Camino is not like the Non-Places Marc Augé describes but I recognize many of their characteristics and functions in the Camino. The examples of Augé are all high tech constructions and products of modernism. The locations focused on by Augé are all related to a futuristic world, there where growth and development is claimed. Those places are concerned with making profit and are key elements in a global economic network. In this respect Augé’s work does not apply to my research, since many of my informants clearly wish to set themselves at a distance from this part of society. They wish to go through an experience of a simple life with no material distraction and temptation. They are looking for a world in which actions and reactions are not profit driven but based on generosity towards your fellow men. But Augé is useful for his theory of non-places as little worlds separated from the world surrounding them. By comparing the Camino with the Non-Places of Augé I am able to analyze the different building blocks (aspects) that together create a world separate from normal society.

## 4.2 The Camino-World

Here I will explore the similarities between the Non-Places described by Augé and the practice I encountered on the Camino. What makes the Camino a Non-Place and how does this show in the daily practice and experience of the pilgrims? The group of pilgrims and the *hospitaleros* (hosts in the hostels) together create a 'different world'. A world with different social rules, that is loosened from its cultural and historic roots and made for people to pass through as pilgrims. How is this imaginary space created and how does it serve the need for Gnostic therapy? One can only pass through, it is not a world to live in and the identity from before the journey will wait for the pilgrim when he comes back from the journey.

### 4.2.1 Similitude

One of the characteristics of a Non-Place is the similitude, the uniformity that connects. Augé uses the term "similitude" to refer to the uniformity and equality among the passers by of a Non-Place. The term "similitude" is directly linked to the absence of hierarchy and individual images due to the adaptation of a public/group image such as: traveler or customer. This is part of the "different world" aspect of a Non-Place. Within the Non-Place your home-image is no longer of importance, different rules count and all you can do is pass through. Borders and differences created by hierarchical structures of normal society disappear and create new social possibilities, at the individual level, but also in social interaction. Similitude is a dominant issue among pilgrims and is



Figure 12. Walking Boots at the entrance of an *Albergue*

stimulated by the way the Camino is organized. On the Camino pilgrims are, for as long as the journey lasts, free from their home-image. By leaving differences at home pilgrims are more alike than they would be in normal life. They feel connected to each other, not being disturbed by barriers of class and style. In the beginning of their pilgrimage pilgrims are astonished by the fraternization that comes so rapidly into existence with other pilgrims that are

strangers and yet not. They share such a big part of their adventure with each other, by all following the same simple design. This reduces the differences and space between them. It shows the similitude among this group of travelers and the contradiction with their goal: to come closer to themselves, to find themselves.

As a pilgrim it really does not matter if you are a doctor or a teacher in your normal life, apart from the fact that pilgrims will use your medical knowledge when they are in physical problems, but even in that case a pilgrim-doctor is placed in a different context and way of reasoning. At home you go to a doctor, you are insured to a certain extent and there are many procedures that need to be followed. On the Camino a pilgrim-doctor is rather seen as a help that happened by on the way, as a gift, as something that happened for a reason. A pilgrim would never ask for money. But as a pilgrim, being a doctor as a profession in normal life, you do not get a bigger bed, as a student the prices are not cheaper and being rich or poor does not show much in the material appearance. Most pilgrims walk in outdoor clothes, carry a backpack with a St Jacobs shell. All other material proof of social class and image are left home, for the simple reason that you cannot carry it with you. It relieves, gives pilgrims the feeling of freedom. It is the simpleness of the life of a pilgrim that creates the room for reflection, feeling, and calming down. Regularly pilgrims told me how amazed they are of the fact that the simplicity of the Camino is having such a positive effect on their being. The dictators of daily life are left home. That what chases people in normal life, what gives their lives shape, but what at the same time is their biggest enemy. For many their problems are best summarized in the words 'societal stresses'. Phrases such as 'In normal life I do not have the time to feel', 'there is not the time to step back for reflection', 'in normal life I am lived by the responsibilities life places on me'.

One of the ways the uniformity shows itself on the Camino is the way the pilgrims are dressed (Figure 9). Although there are no fixed rules about how to dress, there are so many similarities that they take on a collective appearance. The most eye-catching detail is the St. Jacob's shell. Most of the pilgrims attach it to their *mochila* (backpack) so that they are recognized as a pilgrim. I often saw that people wrote a little message on the inside of their shell, or had the red cross of the "*Templarios*" (the powerful Spanish knights that protected pilgrims on their way) painted on the back. But apart from the St. Jacob's shell the cloth, boots, backpack and non-fashionable clothing make pilgrims easy to identify. Because of this uniformity exceptions are clearly visible and sometimes "picked on". If you do not fit into the uniformity other pilgrims can see you as a threat to their profoundly constructed "different world". Many of the pilgrims are not aware of their exclusive behavior and they do not mean any harm. The biggest resistance is against behavior that represents "the normal world". I will discuss this topic in more detail later on in this same chapter.

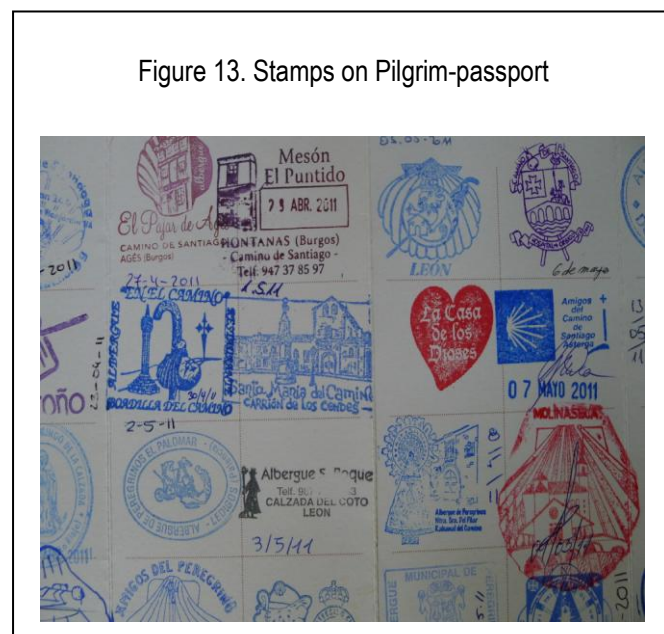
It is difficult to walk the Camino and be 'unknown', because if you try to stay out of contact, that would be enough reason for others to talk about you, to discuss this way of walking the Camino. There was a man that had a sign hanging on his backpack and in front of his chest with the words: "Thank you for respecting my wish for silence". It was written in three different languages. This man was a topic of discussion, especially when the conversation



was about the question:” What and who are real pilgrims?” Some would say he is ‘more pilgrim’ because he really does it alone and does not distract himself with conversations from the process of self-reflection. Others were of the opinion that he missed a crucial element of the Camino, which they considered to be the social interaction with other pilgrims. This example shows the need to compare and judge, for finding a shared understanding of what to expect from their own co-creation: the Camino. I experienced this myself, since my ‘walking the Camino twice’ attracted a lot of attention and questions. This was very useful in my case, since a lot of pilgrims came to me to give me their story. But it also showed how a story changes by passing from mouth to mouth. It showed how people talk about me, what terms they used and how they experienced my ‘role’. Within one interview the attitude of the pilgrim towards me and my ‘role’ as a researcher could change from not being a real pilgrim because I did not reflect on myself, but on others to being a wise and blessed person because the conversation we had helped them to see their lives differently. All I did was ask my questions, summarize their words and give room for their emotions and frustrations.

#### 4.2.2 Proof of Innocence

To be able to enter a Non-Place you have to be able to prove your innocence. In the context of the examples of Augé “the criteria of innocence” would be the passport control at the customs. Before entering and leaving the “identity free place” you are screened. But as Augé explains, *“the innocence itself is something else again: a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver”* (Augé 2008: 83). On the Camino this is just like that. Every pilgrim needs to prove his/her innocence. Before you are allowed to be a pilgrim you need to fulfill



certain rules and regulations. One of them is the pilgrim-passport (see figure 13). The pilgrim-passport is a piece of long thick paper that you can fold together like a map. On the front of the passport is often a Camino related drawing and on the first page the personal data with your name, country of residence, age, id-number and where you started your Camino and by what means. The rest of the passport is divided in a grid, so that with every stop in an *albergue* or in a special spot on the way you can have your passport stamped. Every *albergue* or special spot on the Camino has its own stamp. In this

way it is possible to reconstruct the part of the Camino that is walked till that moment. The stamps in the pilgrim passport are proof that you are a pilgrim and provide the pilgrim access to *albergues* and services that are only



accessible for pilgrims. This example shows how the structure forms and demands a certain behavior of the pilgrim. At the end of the pilgrimage, in Santiago and also in Finisterre, the pilgrim receives a Compostela but only after presenting a pilgrim passport that contains two stamps per day over the last 100 kilometers for walkers, over the last 200 kilometers for bikers and 300 kilometers by horseback. In the pilgrims office of Santiago pilgrims are asked for their motivation of making a pilgrimage. Depending on your type of answer you receive different Compostelas. The pilgrim receives a traditional Compostela only for religious or spiritual reasons, for any other motive the pilgrim will receive proof of arrival. Another example is the rule that the light is switched off and the door of the *albergues* closes at ten o'clock at night. In the morning the ultimate time to leave is at eight o'clock and the *albergues* open their doors for new pilgrims to arrive the earliest at twelve o'clock but most of the times later in the afternoon. the time tables of the *albergues* (partially) define the time a pilgrim needs to be on the road (or in bed). It creates a group behavior and stimulates feelings of similitude.

### 4.2.3 The role of Language

Language plays an important role in the construction and functioning of a Non-Place. Augé states that Non-Places: *"have the peculiarity that they are defined partly by the words and texts they offer us: their 'instructions for use', which may be prescriptive, prohibitive or informative"* (Augé 2008: 77). In the case of the Camino the language plays a very special role. It is a form of communication between the pilgrims from the past and the pilgrims from the future. This way a certain tradition and attitude is passed on. To give an example: On the Camino all the pilgrims greet each other with the words *"Buen Camino"*. In their normal life, as they told me, they did not greet the strangers passing by. No matter with whom I walked together, in what time of the year or the identity of the pilgrims, they all greeted each other with those two words when they passed each other or by leaving the *alberge*. This simple act of greeting, these two Spanish words is at the same time reflecting the group culture of the Camino world. It confirms and strengthens the difference between the "Camino world" and normal life. The same form of communication between the past and the future is reflected in the guest books of the *albergues*. Every *albergue* had a guest book in which all pilgrims are free to leave a story, picture, painting or simply a word of gratitude. These books form a source of inspiration, confession and a kind of public diary but only for "members of the Non-Place, Camino". The same kind of transfer of the Gnostic range of ideas is seen in novels, online communities, blogs and guide books. My research was not specifically focused on texts about the Camino but simply formed a part of the practice on the Camino. To give an example of the influence of written text on the Camino is the English guidebook by John Brierly. His motivation to write a guide book for the Camino was the lack of guidance of the inner path in other guides. He tried to combine the outer journey with the inner. Brierly explains his choice with the words: *"That we might find a place to lay our weary head at the end of the day but also, and crucially, that we might feel supported and encouraged to dive into the mysteries of our individual soul awakenings, without which all journeying is essentially purposeless"* (Brierly 2010: 8). This quote is taken out of the introduction of the guide book. This quote clearly states the essential purpose of the journey as being self

transformation. The guidance and attention paid to the inner journey is located in parts of the text dedicated to spiritual reflection. This is the most used guide book among English speaking pilgrims (UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand and others who prefer the English language) and all of them “consume” this Gnostic based interpretation of the Camino de Santiago. One of the repetitively made comparisons by pilgrims is the one between the physical journey and the journey of the soul, the path of personal development to the liberated self. It is not possible to say where the source is of this thought nor is it of importance for my research. What matters is the fact that such Gnostic thoughts circulate and come back in almost every conversation. Many authors have written about the Camino de Santiago in the last twenty/thirty years. The numerous novels (of which Paulo Coelho and Shirley Maclaine are the most famous) show how this phenomenon is reflected in words. In earlier times the pilgrimage to Santiago was mostly connected to Christian belief. These days the pilgrimage to Santiago is ‘borrowed’ by other groups that place it in a different context and connect different words to the same phenomenon. The difference in context shows itself among others in the type of words it is transmitted in to their audience. And this language is also heard among the pilgrims themselves. It is a language that has a strong link to new age terminology. As an example I give a poem (Bernd Lohse, pilgrim vicar) found in a little chapel on the Camino in the mountains of Switzerland, where pilgrims find shelter. Two pilgrims, both from Germany, wrote this poem on the first page of their pilgrim diary, as a guiding poem for their journey. For them it was a source of inspiration and a poetic way of translating their expectations and motivations to walk the Camino de Santiago.

German:

Breche auf, lasse los,  
Beginne dich zu verändern.  
Sei unterwegs mit Leib und Seele,  
Mit ganzem Herzen, entdecke dich neu.  
Sammle auf dem Weg zur Mitte dich selbst ein  
Und du wirst ankommen.

English:

Break up, let go,  
Start to change yourself.  
Be on the way with Body and Soul,  
With whole your heart, discover yourself anew.  
Get yourself together on the way to the middle  
And you will arrive.

I will analyze this poem by showing how the New Age way of thinking is clearly reflected. The New Age discourse is visible in the words of this poem. The first sentence of the poem indicates a ballast you need to leave behind, to be able to make the journey. Letting go will be the start of a change within you. The second sentence tells you to be connected (body, soul and heart) and to discover your new self. It is in the center where you will find the liberated self, the destination of the journey. It is the ballast that keeps you from arriving. The message that underlies this poem is: to reach your inner self (new self) you have to leave ballast behind and walk the way to

your inner authentic center. This is also the basic frame of the Gnostic therapy that many pilgrims pursue on their Camino. The same Gnostic way of looking for a new self I heard in the interviews I had with other pilgrims, in the wise advice of experienced *hospitaleros/as*, on the prints of the t-shirts being sold in souvenir shops, written on pilgrims-post-cards, in the guidebooks and in the novels dedicated to this pilgrimage. This way of thinking reflect the expectations of those who walk the pilgrimage to Santiago and at the same time the unwritten rules how to walk the pilgrimage to Santiago. As an example of how the Camino is presented as a way to self transformation I would like to quote another part of the introduction of the English pilgrims' guide to Santiago by the author J. Brierly.

“This guidebook is dedicated to the awakening of human consciousness. It was born out of a mid-life crisis and the perceived need for a time to reflect on the purpose and direction of life. We have a sacred contract, a divine function and reason why we came here. Pilgrimage provides an opportunity to delve deeper into that purpose and the time to re-orientate our life towards its fulfillment. We have been asleep a long time, but alarm bells are ringing for young and old and there are signs that we are collectively waking up. There is a new yearning to break free from our self-imposed imprisonment” (Brierly 2010: 9).

Brierly advocates the Camino as practice, that gives the solutions for personal problems, like a therapy. In this piece of text all the three steps of Heelas are included. There is something wrong, being described as the 'self-imposed imprisonment' with a mid-life crisis as a result. To find a solution for this problem we need to redirect our life and accept and respect the divine reason why we are on earth. By walking a pilgrimage you could find this deeper purpose of life due to self reflection, with the aim to leave the old behind and start a new day, the sun rise.

But not everybody joins this spiritual wave. There are exceptions, not many but there are some. I spoke to some pilgrims who did not join this group wave and openly showed their own interpretation of what a pilgrimage means to them. One of them is a pilgrim from Ireland. His rule was to drink a beer at every pub he came across on his path. He was pleasant company, friendly, helpful to other pilgrims and cheerful. When I asked him for his motivation to walk a pilgrimage he gave me the simple answer: having a good time and physical exercise. He said literally: “I am sorry, but that is all”. He apologized for not having spiritual expectations and experiences. Other pilgrims talked about him, often in a pitiful way. This example shows the social pressure that goes out from the dominating interpretation of Camino as a road to inner transformation and spiritual growth.

The word 'Camino' is known among all pilgrims, no matter what language they speak. In the beginning of the pilgrimage it is used to greet each other and to refer to the pilgrimage. Later on the Camino the word “Camino” turns into an expression, a way to explain that something or somebody has a certain quality that reflects the qualities pilgrims find on the Camino. Pilgrims often used it to qualify a certain situation or action by using the word “Caminoish”, typisch Camino (German for: typical Camino like) típico el Camino (Spanish). This is a clear example of how the pilgrims try to express in words the difference between the two worlds, the one on the Camino and the other one as the normal society. Other expressions with “Camino” are: Das gibt Dir der Weg (German for: that is given by the Camino). This sentence shows that the Camino is way more than just a walking

trail. It is even able to give what is needed, to arrange special encounters and to teach lessons to learn. It shows that pilgrims believe in the not visible aspect of the Camino, the spiritual and magic aspect. A related expression is a 'Camino-moment', in which socially or spiritually things happen that are considered as being created by the Camino circumstances. This expression was often used to typify happenings that could not be explained by normal/rational reasoning. The Camino was also used to build a parallel social world, by giving names such as: Camino-mama-sister-brother-dad to friendships on the Camino. It happened to me three times, independent from each other and I saw it occur around me several times. On my second Camino I met a lady from Australia who was walking with a German boy. She was mid forty and he just finished high school. I joined them for a few days and enjoyed their joyful walks. From the moment they got to know each other they walked together, sharing time and experiences. Friendships on the Camino are given family names to emphasize the deep contact one feels for each other. To have a Camino family stresses the fact that the Camino is like a parallel social world.

In all these expressions the word Camino is used to give meaning to something where no other word for is in the existing language. It is something that is unique for the pilgrimage, for the social construction and the setting. It means that there are moments, things, relationships and acts that are typical for the Camino. One of the moments when the word Camino is used to express something is when there is something "magical" about the situation. A lot of the pilgrims believe that things happen for a reason and that the "Camino gives you what you need". I spoke to a man who did not bring a hat to the Camino. However, since the month April turned out to have extremely high temperatures he suffered from the sun. Not much later he passed a fence with a hat hanging on one of the wooden poles. Since it was in the middle of nowhere he decided nobody, better than he, could use it. Many stories like this one were told. The "magic" that "came to the pilgrims" were not only of material nature but could also be the "right word" or just at the perfect moment, help from a stranger.

#### 4.2.4 Loosened from history and culture

The non-places Augé describes are loosened from their environment, like little bubbles that are disembedded from the history of the land or culture they are positioned in. Augé give the example of the motorist who is driving on the high way from Paris to the south of France does not come in contact with local elements, apart from the illusive pieces of text along the high way (where to find the next castle and which nature area is being crossed by the high way you are driving on) that are there to make the traveler believe it adds depth to the journey without losing speed. It is an illusion because it is created by words that bring up the typical image but not the diversity of reality; it is like leafing through a travel magazine. I am not able to say something about the similarities between pilgrimages all over the world, like Augé does for supermarkets and airports. My investigation was not a comparative one, and so I cannot say anything about the pilgrimages in general and if all pilgrimages are to be compared with the concept of Non-Places of Augé. This could be interesting for a following investigation. For now I restrict myself to the question to what extent the Camino is disembedded.

Although the Camino circa 2011 is a result of (and rooted in) a history that goes back in time for two thousand years, it does not necessarily mean that the current practice of walking the Camino is embedded in this history. Although guidebooks and brochures include a lot of historic information, the function of this material is not necessarily of historic value but to decorate and give (mysterious) meaning and context to the journey towards self-transformation. For example: In several conversations pilgrims told me that they could feel the history that was present on the Camino. The fact that so many people walked the same track before them gave the pilgrimage an extra meaning. It was the thought that they were part of that history that made it feel special to them, being part of a tradition. Many pilgrims associated the past with a simple lifestyle and daily harshness in the struggle to survive. This simple lifestyle is what pilgrims wanted to experience (back to basic) and the physical and mental discomfort/struggle as a proof of that experience. The chaos and complexity of modern society is often given as barrier for people to be able to connect to their inner self. Many pilgrims see the simplicity of the pilgrimage as the explanation for their increased spiritual contact. The churches and castles on the road are decorating this flight into another set of surroundings. For others the historic tradition is of value because they believed that the spiritual energy on the Camino was extra strong due to the many people that walked this journey. They believe that all the pilgrims of the past and the present form a collective energy field by the accumulation of their physical effort and spiritual transformation. This shows how the historic aspect is used to heighten their present Gnostic experience rather than factual knowledge.

Augé explains in his example of the highway that the motorist does not come in contact with French culture as it did when the national roads were used. The intimacy of the small roads, little villages and country side is now replaced by speed efficient highways and time efficient road restaurants. This same happened to the Camino. In the two weeks that I worked in an *albergue* the owners (locals) took me into the mountains near Ponferrada. There, 1200 meters high, was a very old little village "Montes". It used to be part of the Camino, but the route got moved to an alternative one with more commercial benefit (urban area) and more easily accessible for a wider group (with less altitude). Some pilgrims that I talked to who walked the Camino before they moved it are referring to the new route as "the Camino highway". This example shows how the Camino becomes more and more a world on itself, adjusted and reorganized according the wishes of the current audience. An other example are the 'local pubs'. The majority of the pilgrims drink a fair amount of Spanish wine. Even some pilgrims who in normal life do not drink so often, enjoy the good quality wine for relatively little money. But does this mean that the Camino is embedded in the culture of the north of Spain? When they go to the bar they will not encounter the Spanish culture, since many bars on the Camino are made for pilgrims. The Camino crosses quite some areas in which the pilgrims form an important part of the local income. Instead of the north Spanish culture you are surrounded by the Camino culture. The Camino is rather a place where many cultures come together, due to many different nationalities that are present among the pilgrims. The most common language is English, the most offered food is pasta and pilgrims are walking when the locals are sleeping (*siesta*) and sleeping when the locals are on the streets. A typical Spanish habit is the '*siesta*' (a nap during the afternoon when the heat is the

strongest). Most pilgrims do not follow this rhythm, apart from the fact that they are not able to replenish their food stock since shops are closed during the *siesta*. At this time of the day the majority of the pilgrims is still walking, others are washing and preparing for the next day and some of the pilgrims will be lying on their beds, sleeping regardless of the fact whether it is *siesta* time or not. Pilgrims are part of a group, although it is a dynamic group and ever changing in composition and size. The appearance of the pilgrims makes them recognizable as such, for other pilgrims but also for locals. Locals are used to the never ending (and since the eighties ever increasing) number of pilgrims that pass by their homes every day of the week, although in the winter month the number is reduced to only a few. It is almost impossible (and most of the time also unwanted by the pilgrims themselves since they enjoy the image of being a pilgrim) to step out of this pilgrim-world. This brings me to the topic of time experience on the Camino. Augé mentions the time experience as: “*Everything proceeds as if space had been trapped by time, as if there were no history other than the last forty-eight hours of news ...*” (Augé 2008: 84). On the Camino the time experience is taking a different form, but it shares the denial of “daily time” that schedules our life. Pilgrims told me that they forget to care about time, the day the week and even breaking news did not really reach the Camino. I remember that Bin Laden was killed during my first Camino. Most of the pilgrims around me only heard the news days later and even then they could not really care. They explained me that they felt disconnected with the normal world and that daily life seemed so unimportant to them.

#### 4.2.5 Temporality of a Non-Place

Non-places are places you pass through. In the examples of Augé people turn into customers, passengers and travelers. Those are identities people adopt by passing through a non-place. Non-places are not built or created for long lasting encounters. It is not a home or a place to settle. With the Camino it is just the same. It is a place to move through, and only in that way can you be part of the non-place.

Figure 14. Road Sign K 100



This dynamic aspect is materialized in the pilgrim passport. In every *albergue* where you stay you receive a stamp, as a proof that you were there. Unless a pilgrim is seriously unwell they are not allowed to stay in an *albergue* more than one night, they are ‘forced’ to move on. The only option to experience the Camino for longer is to come back and that is what many pilgrims do. Some do so a second time, others year after year, but regardless of how many times they repeat the Camino, there is always the start and the end, the moment the pilgrims return back to ‘normal life’. Being on the Camino is temporary. With every step the end is coming closer (Figure 10).

Augé states that: “*The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude*” (Augé 2008: 83).

This aspect is also alive on the Camino, but not in the limited way described by Augé. Within the context of the Camino it is the situational context that creates feelings of solitude. Augé's solitude is individual, while the feelings of solitude among pilgrims are with regard to the 'normal world', at the moment they have to leave the social comfort zone of the Non-Place. The confession-culture of the Camino creates an intimacy between the pilgrims. Due to the anonymous setting of the Camino (you live with people you never saw before and most of them you will never see again after returning home) and the shared desire for self transformation, pilgrims open up easily and share intimate information. Strangers (other pilgrims) become witness of their process of self transformation. The result is that many pilgrims feel home among strangers (other pilgrims) and are afraid to feel lost when they return home. It is this fear of solitude as a consequence of the temporary process of group forming that forms the desire to extend the "Camino world". Pilgrims extend their experience by coming back to the Camino, building a (online) community, starting up an *albergue* and some even "move to the Camino" by becoming a pilgrim for life. The brotherhood among the pilgrims, together with exceptional events and encounters nourished the hunger for deepening and refreshing their lives. One of the paradoxes on the Camino is: finding one self in a context where differences are taken away and similitude is dominant.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has compared the Camino with Augé's theory of Non-Places and described how the Non-Place is created with the aim to optimize the Gnostic experience of self transformation. The aspects of time, culture, identity, language and companionship are used to create fruitful ground for spiritual development. And it works: the majority of the pilgrims are pleased with the results of walking the pilgrimage. For many pilgrims the reality of the Camino was even better than they expected before coming. Many of them expected the Camino to be a lonely journey towards self transformation. The presence of the other pilgrims creates an unexpected social and therapeutic dimension which many of them perceived as helpful and joyful. They welcomed this social group dimension with open arms and found in the company of other pilgrims what they were missing in normal society. The Camino world gave them the chance to be different, to grow and to critically evaluate their normal life.

But the Camino does not last forever; with every step the end comes closer and the return to normal society is inevitable. The pilgrims come from all over the world and after their Camino they spread again. What are the consequences of this Camino world for their perceived self transformation? What happened to the individual nature of the process of self transformation in which so many others got involved?

# 5 Borders of the Camino world

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This chapter will cover the socially constructed aspect of the transformation that many pilgrims hope to go through by making the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. I will explain why Heelas's three elements discussed in the previous chapter are not sufficient to explain fully the patterns that emerged from the data I collected during my fieldwork. I will identify the short-comings of the work of Heelas and using my data and recent anthropological research on the social factors behind self-spiritualism. It is my view that the end result of exploring the Camino as a Non-Place is the discovery of a separate world based on a wish for self-transformation confronted with contradictions, where the Camino world collides with the normal world.

## 5.1 Negotiating the borders of the Non-Place

The Camino world as being the ideal context for Gnostic therapy is not a fact but a dynamic social construction created by those who are involved. The design of the Camino world is a result of a constant process of negotiation. The pilgrimage to Santiago attracts people from all over the world with different motivations and ideas of how to walk the Camino. They arrive with the image of how they expect the journey to be. The different interpretations of the Camino result in an interesting mixture of pilgrims and pilgrimages that have one thing in common: the direction. (Although there are some pilgrims that walk the direction 'back home'). Although all pilgrims agree with the statement that you walk the Camino for yourself (for your relation to God, to nature, to problems, to spirituality) I only talked to a few that did not judge other pilgrims' way of walking their pilgrimage. This shows the contradiction between the individual and the group, their ideologies and their social dependence and stresses the function of the Camino as a Non-Place. If one is of the opinion that the only correct way is "your own way" why would you judge somebody who is doing it differently, somebody that has a different "own way"? I will first explain the discussion about "the real pilgrim" as an example of the contradictions that arise as a consequence of the Camino as a social construction and then try to answer the question.

The majority of the pilgrims I spoke to had a specific picture of what a 'real pilgrim' looks like and acts like. The picture of the 'real pilgrim' was different for every pilgrim but most of the time similar or equal to their own way of walking the Camino. After talking to many pilgrims about this topic I realized that the picture of the real pilgrim was based on their own needs and possibilities. A pilgrim who carried little weight in his or her backpack and was in good condition emphasized the importance of 'going light' to live the simple experience and to walk long distances to catch the flow and meditative aspect of walking. The pilgrim with a heavy backpack and having more difficulty with the physical exercise, judges the 'fast pilgrim' to be in a hurry and not 'in the moment'. Some older pilgrims judge the younger pilgrims for walking the Camino just because it is fashionable and some of the young



pilgrims are of the opinion that the older pilgrims miss the message since they do not socialize as much and by doing so they miss the inspiring social dynamic.

On my second pilgrimage I spoke to a man from Australia, who was over fifty years old and had bought his flight back home in such a way that it left him with plenty of days for walking the Camino. Just a few hours before I spoke with him another pilgrim had asked him how many kilometers he walks on average and at what date he would reach Santiago. My informant told the pilgrim that he took it easy since he had a lot of days to spend on the Camino before he would fly back home. Whereupon the other pilgrim said: "Oh, I understand it, you are a holiday pilgrim!" These words upset my informant. He did not understand why somebody else had to insult him, judge him, and categorize him. This fragment shows us how pilgrims categorize each other and that 'a holiday pilgrim' is interpreted as something negative. My informant did not see himself as a holiday pilgrim but despite that he experienced the comment of the other as an insult. He told me that he did not understand that pilgrims had to judge each other, according to him a real pilgrim does not judge and gives the other the freedom to do it his or her way. But when we look a little closer to the comment of this Australian man he is not acting differently from the pilgrim that judged him for his way of walking the Camino. By being of the opinion that judging each other is not something pilgrims do, one judges those who are of the opinion that they have the right to judge, also as a pilgrim. This example shows the limitations of convictions that plead for freedom in every way.

### 5.1.1 A social construction

The discussion around the question what a real pilgrims is like is an example of the social nature of the Non-Place, the Camino world. This social nature of the Camino is already acknowledged in earlier literature, like in Belhassen et al who state: "*However, it is not only the tourists' unique, personal actions that create authenticity in this context. The toured objects and social constructions surrounding the experience cannot be separated from the experience itself when analyzing it*" (Belhassen e.a. 2008: 673). The Camino world is a compromise of a negotiated process between individual needs/expectations and the social/material surroundings. The social construction of the Camino as a Non-Place is not a coincidence but the result of a shared need, the need for the most beneficial surroundings for their Gnostic therapy. Pilgrims negotiate with each other, collide and even fight to mark the rules and boundaries of this imaginary space. The academic literature about pilgrimages agrees that the social interaction between the pilgrims is of vital importance for understanding the phenomenon. Victor and Edith Turner (Turner 1978), some of the first anthropologists to write about pilgrimages, describe a process of transformation in which physical exercise and community spirit (*communitas*) are of key importance. Later powerful critiques were formulated by Eade and Sallnow (Eade & Sallnow 1991), who describe pilgrimages as areas of contesting movements. Their focus is on clashes between ideologies, interests and beliefs (Eade 1992, Coleman 2002). I am of the opinion that both theories are right. I encountered both social constructions on the Camino and am of the opinion that both are a result of the Non-Place. The community spirit arises there where the expectations of the Non-Place overlap, when pilgrims share the same ideas about how to give form to their

Gnostic therapy. In the process of group forming the similarities are emphasized and those who threaten the 'communitas construction' generate contesting movements.

This communal spirit is often described by pilgrims as a group dynamic, referring to the friendly, open, helpful, and fraternal attitude among the pilgrims. Often pilgrims told me that they were surprised by the amount of friendly people on the Camino, that in their normal lives they did not meet such gentle, friendly and trustful people. On one of my mornings in Santiago I was sitting on the plaza (square) in front of the cathedral, observing the arriving pilgrims. A pilgrim from Germany that I got to know the evening before by drinking wine with another pilgrim came to me and sat next to me on the ground. In the conversation that followed we talked about the group dynamics and how astonished he was to meet so many friendly people. He explained to me how frustrated he used to be about how closed people are in normal life, as if they are afraid to make contact, to look each other in the eyes or to greet on the street. Many pilgrims told me that 'greeting strangers' is something they wanted to continue in their normal life, to bring from the Camino into the normal world. A pilgrim from Brazil told me that he is of the opinion that only very special people walk the Camino. That this is the reason why there is such an open and friendly atmosphere. Walking to Finisterre I spoke with a German man who told me:

that in normal life he does not behave the same as he does on the Camino. He explained me that he is friendlier on the Camino. The responsibility at his work and demanding daily life gives him stress. The stress makes him unfriendly and makes it difficult to be in touch with his feelings. Here on the Camino he feels free from those influences. He could imagine that counts for more people.

The friendly, helpful and open behavior of people is the aspect of the Camino that many pilgrims told me they would miss once back home again. The atmosphere of community spirit makes that pilgrims open up to each other and feel the space and the acceptance for sharing their personal thoughts and feelings.

The contesting element comes to show on the moment that something is threatening the expected Gnostic experience. And since the process of self transformation, the Gnostic therapy, (partially) depends on the social context, the Camino world, it is of crucial importance that the other pilgrims involved play their "role" well. The other pilgrims form the social context, but not always with the content that is wished for. As a result pilgrims form groups, judge others, become angry and are disappointed. I spoke to a fair number of pilgrims who are of the opinion that having too many pilgrims on the road disturbs and damages the Camino. They reason that the Camino should be a place for reflection and with the growing numbers of pilgrims the peacefulness is being threatened. The idea that the high-days of the Camino are behind us is shared by many, especially older, pilgrims. Those who walked the Camino before are able to compare their earlier experiences with the Camino in 2011. Most of them are of the opinion that the quality of the Camino is decreasing due to its growing popularity. I spoke to a man from Italy, in his early fifties. As soon as he got to know that I was writing my master thesis about the Camino he introduced himself to me and started to talk (there was no need for me to ask questions):

According to him the problem the Camino is facing are the young people, who come without reason or motivation. He was of the opinion that they only want to have a cheap holiday and drink a lot of cheap wine. They do not give depth to their journey and are disturbing the real pilgrims. For the Italian man a real pilgrim prays or performs another form of contemplation.

I asked the man if he had spoken with some young pilgrims, since his information was so different from what I had collected for (at that moment) ten weeks. He explained that he had not spoken with young pilgrims but he was able to observe their behavior. Although he had not spoken with them he could tell me why so many young people went on the pilgrimage in these days.

He blamed the attention given to the Camino in "those popular books" and in documentaries on television. He thought it to be wrong to advertise so much for the Camino. He forecasted the downfall and destruction of the Camino by attracting people that are no real pilgrims.

The Camino has changed into an attraction for a wider audience and this has taken the charm away. The young people more often receive the blame for the 'over-population' of the Camino as well as the bus- and short distance-pilgrims, since they are all too often seen as not being real pilgrims.

The result of the Camino-Non-Place is a process of group formation. The Camino is like a soap bubble (communitas) in "normal" society that offers room and space for aspects that are missed in the "normal world". But to be able to create such a Non-Place a certain exclusion is needed, to be able to draw boundaries and build a Place with distinct features. This bubble is not the same for everybody and therefore friction and deception are part of using this Camino-Non-Place. The friction is there where people bump into the limits of others which can result in feelings of deception. The interesting element from the Non-Place is that it shows the social aspect of the phenomenon "Camino". Although many pilgrims come with the expectation to walk their own way, in reality they want their own way to be reflected around them. They need this reflection for support, confirmation and inspiration, when it is not reflected feelings of disappointment are generated. This protected behavior is also described by Frey in her book "Pilgrims Stories, on and off the road to Santiago": *"In analyzing authenticity claims it is important to see how the development of this community, whose membership is gained through shared experience, can lead to exclusivity: those who truly buy into the project make it most "authentically". Pilgrims who find something authentic in interpreting their actions and the past in these ways often feel protective of it; they do not want it to be desecrated by others outside of the culture of the Camino. .... some pilgrims fear that what they have found will be diminished"* (Frey 1998: 222). This quote summarizes the exclusive behaviour of pilgrims with the aim to preserve the Non-Place they long for (out of need, belief, sensation or feelings of tradition). A common example of friction between expectations and reality is "generosidad" (generosity) on the Camino. Before the Camino became so popular at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the infrastructure of the Camino was not as well organized and massive as it is in 2011. I spoke to several pilgrims that had walked the Camino before and most of them were disappointed about the 'commercialization' of the Camino. They told me that the character of the Camino had changed over the years due to the enormous increase in the number of pilgrims. As a consequence the infrastructure had changed from a system based on 'generosidad' into a profit driven structure. In the past

*albergues* were based on volunteers, organized by the municipality or the church. And it also happened that citizens opened their doors for pilgrims and invited them to their meals. You still find this on the Camino (see Figure 11, an initiative based on donations), but it is a fact that the set up of the Camino has changed. There are also pilgrims who walk the Camino for the first time that are disappointed. They told me that they had a different picture of the Camino, before they started. A clear example of the 'commercialization' is that people distribute flyers, to attract pilgrims and advertise their business. I saw flyers for cafes, ice cream cafes, *albergues* and services such as massages or physiotherapy. To place this in context: Pilgrim after pilgrim tells me about their need to get away from normal life. They search for silence, time to think, time to reflect and nature. Therefore

Figure 15. La Casa de los Dioses (Food and Drinks for Donations)



they wish to create a distance from their normal life and do not appreciate it when aspects of the normal world are forced on to them. So was I walking with a man from Brazil, talking about his life and enjoying the beauty of nature around us. It was relatively early in the morning, around half past eight and we walked over a dusty, sandy road on the *Meseta* (flat lands in the north of Spain) somewhere between Burgos and Leon. Then there came a

car driving towards us, stopped for some pilgrims in front of us and then continued towards us. He turned down his window and offered us a flyer of an *albergue* with restaurant in the next village. The man I was walking with did not accept the flyer (I did for research purposes) and explained to me in slightly angry words that this kind of behavior will be the reason of the breakdown of the Camino. "It takes the charm and magic away from the Camino" he said.

"The Way is the Goal" is an often returning statement in New Age related literature and guidebooks about the Camino (also used in not Camino related books). It reflects the New Age way of thinking that things do not occur without a reason and that every situation in your life is part of the process to inner-transformation. Earlier in this work I spoke about the role of language in creating a Non-Place. This statement is a clear example of how words form the reality and the mind-set of a whole group. The idea of walking "in the moment and not for reaching the end" came back many times a day in conversations. For many pilgrims the sentence "the way is the goal" forms a daily source of inspiration. However, for some of the pilgrims it turns into a daily source of frustration when they still suffer from some kind of stress. From early afternoon till the evening, pilgrims try to find a place to sleep. Depending on the time of the year and the point on the Camino, it is easy or difficult to find a place for the night. For some pilgrims this generates a lot of stress and worries and they change their day-rhythm to reduce the chance of not having a bed. They leave early in the morning when the moon and the stars are the only light in the sky and the birds are still asleep. A feeling of disappointment and frustration fills them, due to the fact that even here on the Camino stress dictates their lives. The same feeling was shared by pilgrims that had a time restriction caused by their plane ticket or the end of their holidays. Most of the pilgrims that faced a time limit chose to rush, to increase the quantity of kilometers covered a day, or to skip a certain part (often the Meseta) by taking the bus, to make sure that they would reach Santiago at the end of their journey. And some adjusted their plans by assuming they would not make it to Santiago and made peace with that perspective, slowed down and left the stress behind.

## **5.2 The "missing link" in Heelas' theory**

By comparing the Camino with Augé's Non-Place theory the social context and conditions of the Camino became clear. The pilgrimage to Santiago is turned into a Camino world in which the group aspect plays an important role. Therefore I concluded the last chapter with questioning the individual nature of the process of self transformation among pilgrims. I will now explain why the results of my fieldwork convince me that the process of self transformation is not as individualistic as claimed by Heelas.

New Agers state that the only true path towards self transformation is by following the inner voice. But how authentic is the search for the inner voice and the inner voice itself when there are such explicit descriptions and convictions about where this voice should lead to? Is the wisdom of the inner voice truly individual, or rather a result of a doctrine? In case of the Camino I conclude the last.

Although the pilgrims corresponded so well with the New-Agers-description of Heelas, there is an important aspect of the phenomenon “Camino” not fully explained by his theory. This is the aspect of the social dynamic and the role it plays in the process of self-transformation. This “missing link” became very prominent at the end of the Camino, in the moment when the journey back home came into sight. The end of the Camino is experienced by many as a difficult moment. I saw many confused faces and pilgrims told me about their fear of going back home. On my first night in Santiago I spoke to two young befriended couples (two Canadians, a woman from the US and a man from South Korea) that had met each other on the Camino. They were sitting on their beds, staring in space in front of them and looking rather sad. After a while a conversation started in which they shared their worries about going back home. I joined the conversation and asked them why they were looking so sad.

The Canadian man compared the Camino with a theater-show. You work really hard to master the show, during the show you feel like flying above the clouds, you feel like a hero, powerful and alive. Then there is the applause, one last shot of energy and the curtains close. It already belongs to the past, a memory. He explained his feelings by comparing himself with an actor, being the hero on stage that people were applauding for and after the show just a normal man.

The South Korean man continued talking about the actor comparison. He told me that during the Camino he was his own public, he applauded the adventurer and discoverer inside him. At the moment I talked to him, on his last evening on the Camino he felt as if he had to say goodbye to this role and leave it behind. His life waiting for him in South Korea would be very different from the time on the Camino, a city-life full of responsibilities and an ever continuing schedule of activities that need to be done. He was not happy going back to surroundings where everybody is closed (no room for the deep human interaction like on the Camino), where it is hard to make contact, and a world in which people do not greet each other on the streets. He was of the opinion that he would not be able to take something from the Camino back home. He explained to me that for him it felt like two different and separated worlds. That is why it made him so sad that he had to leave; he did not want to leave the Camino world. He told me that it was only possible to be “like this” because of the special context - the Camino world.

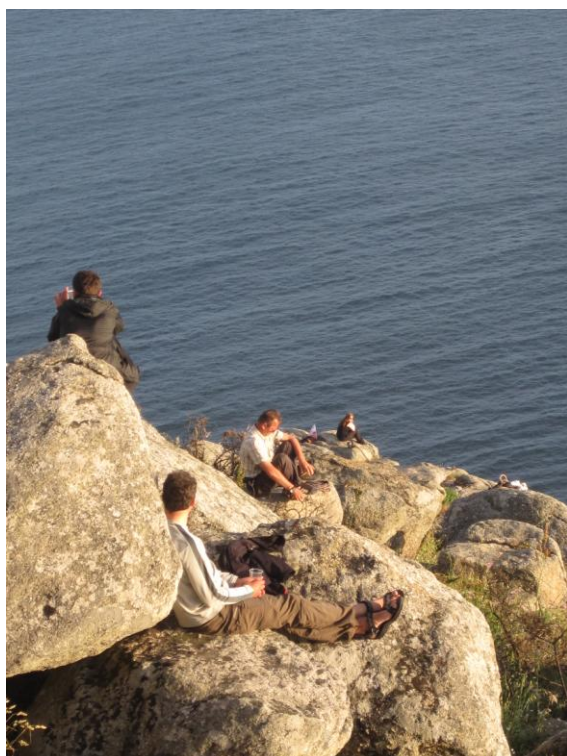
The Canadian man agreed with the point of view of his South Korean friend. He states: “At home nobody will understand us”. The thought of not being able to share this special moment in his life with others made him sad. It is, he explains to me, the reason why he will miss the other pilgrims so much, because of their understanding of the effect this pilgrimage has.

This conversation is an example of how dependent pilgrims are; on each other and on the context they construct together. In the interviews I had, pilgrims often pointed out the group dynamic as a very influential and supportive aspect of the Camino. The group dynamic made it feel like being in a different world. Coming to the end of my first Camino I realized the effect of the social dynamic that was praised by so many pilgrims. Pilgrims had become dependent on each other. A few day’s hike away from Santiago the realization of the approaching end spread slowly among the pilgrims. It was as if they had woken up out of a dream facing the unpleasant reality of the end coming closer with every step. For some the dream lasted longer than for others, but the end came for all. There were only a few pilgrims I spoke to that were unambiguously happy to be able to return home. Most of the pilgrims desperately wanted to stretch their stay and some really did by walking back home or staying on the Camino as *hospitalero/ra* or in other more exceptional ways (like the man from the USA who decided to live for a



few months in a tent at the side of a river or the man from Madrid who made himself home in one of the caves at the seaside of Finisterre). It is not surprising that pilgrims had a hard time saying fare well to a special experience in their lives and people that they became good friends with, with whom they shared their inner secrets and most intimate thoughts and feelings. Many pilgrims were afraid they would not be understood by the people at home, by those who did not share the same experience. It is the fear and reasoning behind the sadness that makes it crucial for understanding the pilgrims, the Camino and its function. Until the moment of returning home the pilgrim

Figure 16. Cape Finisterre



is able to ignore his/her dependency upon the social context. Although during my first Camino it became clear that the other pilgrims formed a vital aspect of the Camino and its functioning, it was only at the end of the Camino that it became clear to me that the self-transformation was a co-production of the individual pilgrim and her surroundings on the Camino. The social dependence is explained by the crucial function of the audience. Pels states: "The persons who constitute themselves by modern confession can only be accepted as authentic by their audience's belief in the truthfulness of their testimony, because, at the moment of display and revelation, the confession cannot carry the context that allows others to test its authenticity with it" (Pels 2002: 98). A recurring statement was: "I am afraid to lose my new self". The content of 'the new Self' was not for all pilgrims the same. Some pilgrims described it in spiritual terms and others not but most

of them share the fear and insecurity about the lasting nature of their new discovered inner terrain. Some call it their sensitive or emotional side, life lessons, contact with the spiritual or simply their new self.

As I explained in the chapter 'Camino as a non-place' pilgrims create a Camino-world and for many it is hard to leave this world. Some pilgrims chose to stay in constant contact with the energy, the vibes and the spirit of the pilgrims by creating a home on the track of the Camino. There are pilgrims who set up an *albergue*, a shop or become a perpetual pilgrim. An example of a pilgrim that made the Camino his home or part of his home is the musician I got to know in front of the cathedral of Leon.

On my first Camino I sat on a bench on the square in front of the cathedral of Leon, enjoying the sun stroking my skin, looking at how the pilgrims mix with the citizens of Leon and listening to a man playing the harmonica. He sat next to the entrance and stopped his play when I walked over to him to give some money. He asked me if I was a pilgrim and so a conversation started. Twelve years ago he walked the

Camino together with his son of twelve years old. Last January he decided to walk it a second time but now alone. When he arrived in Leon he was weak, ill and without any money. The sisters took care of him, gave him food and shelter. After he recovered he decided to stay in Leon. The sisters gave him a tent and he found himself a shelter an hour's walk downstream of the river that crossed Leon. Every day he walks to the cathedral, plays on his harmonica until he has earned enough to buy himself food for the day. Originally he was a flower farmer in the USA, on an island that for a few years was used by rich people as a resort to build big houses. He explained me that he is of the opinion that the USA is full of devils, which is why he gave up that part of the world. He fully disagrees with the capitalistic attitude that took over the USA. So he decided to live in simplicity, close to nature and in touch with the never ending stream of pilgrims. In their eyes he sees the spark of hope he has in the future of the world. Although not all pilgrims live up to his expectations of what is according to him a 'real pilgrim' he got hope from seeing the pilgrims.

According to this musician the pilgrims were special people, carrying the change in themselves that he hoped the world would go through. He gave up on the "normal world" and even "moved to the Camino world" by living in the tent and disconnecting himself from the administrative, monetary and material rules of how to make a living. He is an extreme example of holding on to the Camino as a need for connecting to a better world, a belief in transformation. This situation reflects how the wish for inner transformation can become intertwined with its surroundings and in the Camino becoming a necessity for living in the process to inner-transformation. Frey describes the moment of arrival in Santiago as: "*The paradox of the arrival is the perpetual beginning at its doorstep. In Santiago the physical arrival is paired with the expectation of a metaphorical new beginning that one "should" embark on at the same time as one arrives*" (Frey 1998: 223). Frey refers here to the point on the Camino where (in theory) reintegration into normal society takes place.

The most important sentence Heelas uses to conclude the section about the three stages of self transformation is: "*The past, for the ego is constructed from the time of birth (if not from previous lives), loses its hold – thereby enabling a new future*" (Heelas 1995: 20). The last part of this sentence is crucial to the point made in this chapter. Heelas is saying you first have to let go of your "old self" before something new can grow. To be able to go through this transformation you have to find your inner source of wisdom and abandon the imposed rules of society prescribed by authorities. In other words: turn your back to the authorities and their education of life and find your own path. But leaving the old behind is not as linear as it seems when Heelas writes about it. Pilgrims leave the old world, their old self, to explore and find (partially) their new self. The crucial missing link is: the vast majority of the pilgrims return at the end of their journey to the old world. The aspects of different social contexts (non-places) and the relationship between them are not included by Heelas. This research stresses the importance of the moment where people have to cross the border from Non-Place to the normal world because that is the moment that the social dependence is most visible.



### **5.3 Conclusion**

From this chapter we can conclude that the experience of pilgrims on the Camino is a social construction coming into being in a historical place with a long standing tradition. It is the co-production of a historical setting that provides the opportunity for the modern need of self transformation. This particular Non-Place I called the “Camino world” in the previous chapter. In this chapter I highlighted the difference between the plan/expectations of the pilgrims and the reality of the process of self-transformation.

This research shows that the social interaction between people is an important aspect of the way to self-transformation on the Camino. The social friction, the fear at the end and the pilgrims that keep coming back are all ways in which the social aspect of self transformation comes to show. It is at the boundaries of the Non-Place where the social dependence becomes visible. This work shows the interdependence of the pilgrims and the Non-Place of the Camino for their process of self transformation.

# 6 Conclusion

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This investigation has analyzed the contradiction between the claimed individual character of New Age thinking and the social group force and interdependency observed in the setting of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Before I went to the field I expected to map the framing of the term authenticity and how pilgrims gave form to it, but once out there I understood that the observed group dynamic and its consequences were of much greater interest.

By talking to the pilgrims and observing them I found a clear correlation between pilgrims and New Agers as they are described by Heelas in his book "The New Age Movement". Heelas talks about three crucial steps which New Agers believe will bring them to the desired self-transformation. These three steps were also reflected in the behavior and thoughts of the pilgrims who clearly showed a strong belief in the possibilities of inner-transformation. It was only at the end of the Camino that inner transformations were suddenly questioned and the surrounding and the context of the Camino seen as something the pilgrims had become dependent on. By observing this experience of fear and insecurity, the central role of the Camino and its social structures became clear to me. There was something missing in the steps described by Heelas, the role of the social surrounding and its consequences for the internalization of the transformation process.

During the process of analyzing my data the group dynamic turned out to be a crucial social process for understanding the modern secular pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Marc Augé's theory of "Non-Places" was useful for describing and analyzing the data I collected. Establishing the Camino as a "Non-Place" I was able to discuss and explore the Camino as a different world, a world that became a prerequisite for the pilgrim's inner-transformation. At the moment the pilgrims are about to return home their dependency becomes clear and shows the gap between the two worlds and the fear for the difficulties they might have bridging them. They came to find the right context for self transformation, most of them found themselves transformed and many doubted the internalization and independency of their new discovered self at the end, at the moment the social construction of the Camino would fall away. It shows the inspiring, supporting and forming role of the Non-Place in the process to self transformation.

My work shows the crucial role of social and contextual influences on the process of self transformation. Heelas' theory is incomplete for not including the influence of social aspects for the forming of self transformation. This is one of the first steps into the direction of more detailed research towards the role of a Non-Place setting for reaching self transformation.

### 6.1.1 Future Research

After analyzing my data I realized that it would have been very interesting to include the return home. Due to the limitations of my fieldwork plan I was not able to extend my field of research. At the moment the pilgrims have to return home the gap between the “two worlds” becomes most clear and so the problems that arise with it. There is no scientific literature on the process of reintegration in normal society after having walked the pilgrimage to Santiago. Although Frey does include some words about the pilgrims back home in her book “Pilgrims Stories, on and off the road to Santiago”, it is not the result of thorough investigation since it was not her focus of research. Her words seem to confirm the idea that the process of reintegrating in normal society is not without problems, problems as it seems to be compared with a culture shock and identity related issues. The few pilgrims that I am still in contact with show the same results. After walking the Camino they have problems continuing normal life: they feel lonely, question or quite their job and are sad or frustrated not to be able to bring what they learned/discovered on the Camino in practice in normal society. But it clearly needs profound research to create insight into this part of the process. This would create the possibility to say more about the success or failure of the integration of self-transformation and the role of the social construction of the Camino.

In my analysis of the Camino I conclude that the by many pilgrims intended individualistic process of self transformation is highly dependent on the socially constructed context of the Camino as a Non-Place. As a consequence pilgrims questioned the level of internalization of their new Self. It would be very interesting to investigate if this social dependence (Non-Place related social circumstances) is more often present in settings where people come to with the aim to transform their self. This would make it possible to place the results of my research in a more general theory about the relation between Non-Place settings and the process to self transformation.

With my data I was able to say something about the social construction of the Camino. With the extended data it is possible to say more about the process of inner-transformation and about the reintegration without the support of the Camino-world (or Non-Place settings in general).

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