

Excerpted from:
Along the Templar Trail: Seven Million Steps for Peace
© 2008 Brandon Wilson, all rights reserved
published by Pilgrim's Tales, Inc.
photos available on request

Chapter One

Heeding the Call

“For in their hearts doth Nature stir them so,
Then people long on pilgrimage to go,
And palmers to be seeking foreign strands,
To distant shrines renowned in sundry lands.”
~ Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

The apparition stood by Samir's bedside. In his other life, Samir, a muscular fellow in his forties with short-cropped hair, was a Druze policeman in northern Israel. Active in the international peace movement, he was also a father, husband and an otherwise sensible man not prone to hallucinations. Still, he could hardly ignore the gaunt man with flowing long hair and holes in the palms of his hands who appeared before him crying, “There is a river of blood running through Jerusalem.”

Samir tried to move, but was paralyzed. He tried to speak, but was mute.

Meanwhile, the apparition insisted the policeman draw a picture of him. He wasn't an artist, and eventually was able to move his lips enough to mutter the excuse, “I have nothing with which to draw.” However, the visitor persevered with his demands. An hour later, when Samir was finally able to stir again, he discovered paper and drawing supplies had mysteriously appeared in his room. So he had no choice, but to follow the stranger's instructions.

The next morning, clearly still distressed, Samir presented a striking portrait he had drawn to the priest at the rectory where he was staying during the peace conference in Norway. Then he guardedly told the Father about the strange specter who had appeared with his warning. Hearing this story, the priest became equally fearful and gave Samir a large cross to wear during his stay, as well as holy vestments.

A few years later when I met him, Samir was still shaken by the events of that day. He struggled to understand the stranger's visit and its meaning. Were his words prophetic? Or simply a reminder of the seriousness of the task at hand?

As the world's “Doomsday Clock” approached two minutes to midnight, the specter's appearance and its implications could no longer be ignored.

Flying at thirty thousand feet, head above the clouds, always had a way of putting life into perspective. Still, it was a helluva notion, even from a heavenly height. It was a new adventure, and as usual I had little idea where the road ahead might lead. Yet sitting on the long, cramped flight to Zurich, I had plenty of time to retrace the steps that had brought me to what some might consider the threshold of madness.

My odyssey into the unknown had its genesis in 1999 when I was a simple, hobbling “pilgrim” or traveler on an inward journey along the Camino de Santiago in Spain. Although I’d rigorously trained in advance of my five hundred-mile pilgrimage walk across Spain, it only took one day on the trail to reduce my well-laid plans—and me—to a stumbling, bumbling, festering mass of blisters. My air-supported shoes had “popped” as I slid down a heap of slag from Roncesvalles to Zubiri, and before long I sported four oozing blisters on each foot.

Oddly enough, the simple act of slowing down forced me to quiet my mind and body, as each step had to be carefully placed, so as not to bruise a blister or cause another one. The Zen-like method of “deliberate walking” also unveiled a beautifully complex and tranquil world with every step.

The sunshine on the surrounding vineyards was radiant. At times, the heady aroma of fresh thyme flooded my senses. I wallowed in nature’s abundance. It was a chance to rediscover my place in the natural world. Slowing down also allowed me the luxury of companionship, as I learned that walking a pilgrimage was a journey outside—while traveling within.

Each day, after walking twenty-five to thirty kilometers, I’d arrive at an *albergue* or hostel where fellow pilgrims or peregrinos from around the world spent the night together. We’d suffer through cold showers, aches and blisters, and then savor a bottle of local Rioja wine. As difficult as it was, there were no sweeter times.

We’d all voluntarily left homes, families, jobs and outside life on an incredible journey of simplicity to the supposed burial place of St. James the Apostle. It was a 21st century act reminiscent of days a thousand years earlier. However, we weren’t alone. Many faiths had similar traditional journeys to their centers of devotion or sites of miracles throughout the ages, whether it was Muslims traveling on *hajj* to Mecca, the Hindus wandering to Varanasi on the holy Ganges River, the Buddhists crossing the Tibetan plains from Lhasa to Kathmandu, such as my wife Cheryl and I had done with our horse Sadhu in 1992, the Jews on their way to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, or Christians on their journey of penance, faith or in search of miracles to Rome, Lourdes, Jerusalem, or Santiago de Compostela, among others. A pilgrimage was a physical link to the spiritual plane; to one’s cultural traditions, to kindred spirits, to God.

As much as it immersed us in culture and cuisine, it also forced us to confront our lives head-on: our hopes, our fears, our relationships, our life’s work and choices. It was a month to “unplug” and remove ourselves from the din and distraction of the outside world. For once, there was no noise reverberating in our heads—no music, no commercials, no late-breaking news, and no cell phones or pressing emails. We were alone with our thoughts, a surprisingly rare occurrence these days. How often in our lives do we have the time to slow down and examine our life’s path? How often do we have the time to commune with a force greater than ourselves?

Along the way, there was a gentle unraveling of life as we peeled away the onion-like layers of our “walls” and insecurities. We learned to trust our intuition again, to trust others and celebrate the small victories: the simple act of making it another thirty kilometers along the trail, finding water when it was so blistering hot you swore you couldn’t walk another step, or having an “angel” on the trail surprise you with a welcome cup of coffee, a “Buen Camino,” or “thumbs-up” sign of encouragement. It was those small “miracles” that made us appreciate the larger ones along the path—and in life.

It was along the same trail that I first met Émile, an amiable French-man in his sixties. It was early morning atop a rise ringed by a field of herbs. At first, he looked eccentric with his leather cowboy hat and full bushy white beard. We briefly exchanged greetings, him in his gentle, self-effacing tone that instantly transformed my opinion of him from a salty seadog to Père Noël; me in my rusty, Inspector Clouseau-accented high school French. (“Do you ’ave a lissansse pour zis minkee?”) Our first meeting was brief. We talked in simple sentences, because his English was even worse than my French. Despite his age, having already walked from his home in Dijon, France, his feet were in far better shape at that moment than mine. He sped ahead and we soon parted ways on that hillside.

It’s odd. Life has its own plan that may or may not coincide with our own. That night, I met the French wanderer again at the albergue, along with four others who just happened to be on the same path, at the same time, and at the same pace. We six found our lives thrown together—as well as our future fates. Eventually, after the others left the trail to return to their “normal” lives, Émile and I continued alone. Although communication should have been difficult, our friendship grew because our words were few and spoken more from the heart. Perhaps we were long lost “brothers,” if not in a familial way, then one far stronger.

Oftentimes, Émile spoke of walking from his home to Jerusalem with his wife Sophie after she retired. I marveled at the idea and was intrigued by the prospect, but at 2,700 to 3,500 miles (4,000 to 5,000 kilometers) it seemed too formidable. Nevertheless, I’d chased a few outrageous dreams myself and it held great appeal. If we don’t have our dreams, what do we have? Besides, if the “mere” five hundred mile Camino de Santiago (or Chemin de St. Jacques, as Émile called it) was so rewarding, just imagine the challenge, adventure and possible enlightenment of walking to Jerusalem? Yet even then, he made it clear it was something he and Sophie would walk together as a couple. So I’d just have to look on in envy.

Our parting that chilly morning in October 1999 was unexpectedly sad, as sharing a month-long pilgrimage forges an unforgettable bond among *peregrinos*. Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that our paths were destined to cross again.

In the ensuing years, I continued following simple pilgrim’s paths on a continuing inward journey of “walking meditations.” These historical treks became my passion, my reason for living. When I wasn’t walking, my mind was on the trail, immersed in introspection. As I trod these paths, mostly alone, they confirmed the simplistic beauty of walking in quiet contemplation, peace, and inner tranquility. Over the following six years, I followed my sweet obsession. Over two autumns, I walked the historic 1,150- mile Via Francigena from Canterbury, England to Rome. Another summer, I trekked the path of Norwegian pilgrims from Oslo to Trondheim on St. Olav’s Way. Then finally, since I’d regaled Cheryl with my own tales of El Camino, we walked it together in 2005. Although the trail had changed little, I’d grown and now felt like I was there to lend support to others.

After reaching Finisterre, once the edge of the early European’s known world, I returned home to the edge of my Hawaiian volcano expecting to return to an all too normal existence. Life, once again, had other plans. One day, out of the blue, a simple email, a short correspondence from long-lost Émile set my mind reeling.

“Sophie is unable to make our long-planned walk to Jerusalem. Would you be interested in joining me?”

The possibility was both exhilarating and incredible, but what about logistics? Could I simply close-up my quiet upcountry life, cancel engagements and find the gear? Could I afford to go? Could I leave home without feeling like the husband who ducked out for a quart of milk never to return? Then again, was I willing to brave a spiritual marathon across two continents and a distance greater than the width of the continental U.S.?

If our experience in Tibet had taught me one thing, it was that I was the type of person who was unwilling to give up once I focused on a goal—even when saner minds cried “Enough.” I could be tenacious, which was both a blessing and a curse. I knew I could handle one month—but seven? Could my body survive what could amount to a 3,500-mile trek at my age?

Then, there was the routing and security. After planning for six years, Émile suggested we follow the Danube Valley through Germany’s Black Forest, then to Vienna, Austria and Bratislava, Slovakia to Budapest, Hungary, then south through Serbia, Bulgaria, and across the vast plains of Turkey’s Anatolia.

It was a path steeped in history. The route roughly coincided with the one followed by Godfrey de Bouillon, the Lord of Bouillon and Duke of Lower Lorraine, and his forty thousand troops during the First Crusades in 1096, as well as some early pilgrims. After fierce battles, Godfrey and his men reclaimed the Holy City in 1099 and he was named King of Jerusalem. Nine of those knights who served with him became the first Poor Knights of Christ of the Temple of Solomon, or Knights Templar, created in 1118. An order founded on poverty, chastity and obedience, they pledged to protect pilgrims on passage through the Holy Land and to protect Jerusalem from all aggressors. Other sections of our proposed route existed as far back as Roman times when the Danube River marked the northern border of their empire and remote outposts protected its frontier. Beyond there lay “barbarians.” Then the route’s southern portion, built in the 1st century A.D., was once known as the Roman *Via Militaris* or *Via Diagonalis*, stretching 1,054 kilometers from Belgrade all the way to Constantinople (now called Istanbul).

Assuming we’d make it that far, then came the tricky part. Eventually, the route would lead us through Turkey to Syria into Jordan. Thanks to recent disastrous policies in Iraq and the Middle East, I could imagine our presence would be about as welcome as a pork barbecue at a mosque.

Still, I jumped at the chance. There was no use waiting for all those problems to be fully resolved—or doubts to be set in stone.

It was our destiny and an opportunity that fate had placed on my doorstep, a chance that would never present itself again. Besides, I saw it as more than just a personal pilgrimage in the traditional sense. I viewed my journey as having a greater purpose: a trek for peace, which was especially ironic since our path was to follow a route used over a thousand years for war.

I’ve always been a firm believer that events in our lives happen for a reason, some inexplicable at first. Each person can effect change by their actions, however small. I had long admired the dedication of an older, simple American woman called Peace Pilgrim, who’d walked across the country with only the clothes on her back for twenty-eight years and over 25,000 miles with a simple message of peace. How many lives had she touched? How many still remembered her message today?

If, to paraphrase Mark Twain, “Everybody talks about peace, but no one does anything about it,” possibly now was my chance for action, if only to remind people of our similarities as citizens of this fragile planet and the necessity of considering other paths for resolving our

differences. With courage, faith and resolve, maybe we could accomplish something greater than ourselves. How could I not heed the call?

Once I'd committed to the adventure, the nagging details surfaced and were surprisingly quickly resolved. Traveling light was especially important since the distance was so great and the terrain especially challenging in Asia. Luckily, I found sponsors for high-tech marathon shoes to replace my heavier boots, and Nordic walking sticks to decrease the stress on my knees, one of which had undergone arthroscopic surgery to remove cartilage years before.

Then I took care to prepare my family to the idea of my long absence. Although Cheryl wouldn't be able to join us for the entire trip, she looked forward to meeting us in Budapest for ten days on the trail. The rest, well, I'd work out along the way.

After two full days in the air, the seatbelt sign finally illuminated and we prepared to land in Zurich, the polar opposite of my pineapple isle. It was too late for last-minute doubts. Bracing for impact once again with the earth, I prayed that with a pure heart and courage God would provide the rest.

Note: **Along the Templar Trail** was published in January 2008 and is available in hardcover or paperback at your favorite bookstore or Internet bookseller.

BRANDON WILSON is an award-winning author/photographer and explorer. He is author of **Yak Butter Blues: A Tibetan Trek of Faith** and **Dead Men Don't Leave Tips: Adventures X Africa**. His photographs have won awards from *National Geographic Traveler* and *Islands* magazines. He is also a member of the prestigious Explorers Club.

For photos, reviews or to order, please visit <http://www.pilgrimstales.com>