

Walking the Songlines of the Soul: A Pilgrimage Walk, Le Puy-en-Velay to St. Jean-Pied-de-Port, on the Camino Path of Stars, An Inner Journey in the Outer World

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How does pilgrimage help the Earth?

a pilgrim's relationship with the Earth, with the landscape, can be a love relationship. Just like us, the Earth longs for such love and calls us to love her. The Earth in her love for us helps us towards illumination, and we can help her towards hers. That is the hidden purpose of pilgrimage – the so-called redemption of mankind and Nature, the raising of all to light, wherein Light is the manifestation of Love.

Peter Dawkins, Elder and co-Founder, Gatekeeper Trust, UK

The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.

I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in.

John Muir, Naturalist, Conservationist, and Founder, Sierra Club, USA

When we touch the Earth mindfully every step will bring peace and joy to the world.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Touching the Earth*

On the return trip home, gazing through 240,000 miles of space toward the stars and the planet from which I had come, I suddenly experienced the universe as intelligent, loving, harmonious.

My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity.

We went to the Moon as technicians; we returned as humanitarians.

Edgar Mitchell, Apollo 14 Astronaut and IONS founder.

Part 1: Le-Puy-en-Velay to Conques

Chapter One: Our Environmental Crisis and the Call to Pilgrimage

Dear Reader, *Walking the Songlines of the Soul*, is a companion to my previous book, *Songlines of the Soul: Pathways to a New Vision for a New Century*. In that *Songlines*, I wrote about the breakthrough of the imaginal world – or Other world as I sometimes call it – into this world in experiences of synchronicity, UFO phenomena, Crop Circles, Near-Death experiences, and the Mystical Cities of the Soul. The focus of these direct encounters of a subtle world in this world happens with the opening of the heart, rather than the interpretations of the mind. Despairing about the prospect of yet another war (this time in Syria) and lamenting the continued disregard of environmental concerns in the collective, not to mention a feeling of overwhelm and helplessness about these large issues, I felt I had to undertake something on a smaller and more human scale, something that I could actually do. So living at the foot of Mt. Ste. Victoire near Aix-en-Provence during the summer of 2013, and hiking almost every day on this sacred mountain, I made plans to walk part of the *El Camino de Santiago*, not in Spain, but in France, called there *Le Chemin de Saint Jacques*: I would start from Le-Puy-en-Velay in the Haute Loire to Conques, a mediaeval village in the Auvergne, a journey of some 230 kilometers (or approximately 140 miles). In the autumn of 2015, I walked the second part of the Le Puy route (as it's called), from Conques to St. Jean-Pied-de-Port, some 550 kilometers (or 330 miles).

This book is a story of how, in unexpected and unanticipated ways, imaginal experiences with the spirit and spirits of nature during my walks helped to transform my grief into what I can only describe as a deepening of love both for our Earth, and from the planet toward me. These chance encounters that opened me in subtle ways to other dimensions then led me to the next phase of my life, as if a resonant field of *songlines* or dreaming-tracks was orchestrating the invisible threads of fate. The encounters also reminded me of the first time I had had an experience of the 'light of nature' which was also a felt expression or manifestation of love. I was somewhere between the ages of four and six, and it took place in our vicarage garden in Sussex in my native England one summer evening.

Epiphany of Light

I remember the feeling of a relaxed kind of happiness pervading everything. Tea in the garden is over, and the warm summer July evening is slowly extending itself. It is still quite light and will not be dark for several more hours. Six o'clock, though, is bath and bedtime for my sisters and me. But I resent going to bed when it is still so light, for it does not feel like the moment to try to sleep – as if the day still welcomes us, wanting us to be with it, wishing us to continue our games outside.

I am hoping against hope in this moment that our parents will forget the time so that I can remain in this delicious, happy space. It seems that my father is mowing the lawn, though the sound of the motor seems far away, and I can smell the newly cut grass, its sweet, green aroma filling my small nostrils. My mother is gardening, pulling up weeds, cutting roses, filling vases, at this moment fully devoted to her task, forgetting everything else, preoccupied, restless.

The pale violet wisteria – its soft, plump blossoms like bunches of grapes embedded in feathery, delicate, light green leaves – is gorgeous against the sand colored walls of the house. At this hour of the slowly setting sun, the light is golden on the vicarage stone, and the shadows begin to play their contrasting themes across the lawn. All the voices – my parents, sisters – seem muffled. A train in the distance is making its way across one side of the playing field, down beyond the Church, over by the cricket pavilion. Usually, when we hear it coming we run and run to race it to the bridge, and climb the steps up to the middle where the steam from the engine covers us up, devouring us, while we shriek with terror and delight!

In this moment, I begin to dissolve. I do not run. I keep still. Everything is so quiet, peaceful, dissolving. The light reminds me of another time, another place, a memory of something so far away; so familiar. The light is golden, its palpable softness is breaking through from another world into mine. Everything feels touched by its beauty, everything feels kissed by the soft whisper of its breath, everything – flowers, grass, trees, birds, house – welcomes this guest in silent praise. I feel at one with this light, I feel that it sees me. I feel totally at home in this moment, neither child nor adult, but an eternal being in complete harmony with a story much larger than my own. I come from this light, and to this light I shall return.

Oh! I do hope they will not notice the time, break the miracle, bring me back. I am completely happy here....

For several years I had been wanting to walk on part of the Camino, and had always assumed that it would be the stretch across northern Spain made popular in the film *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen, and directed by

his son Emilio Estevez. (This path that actually begins in St. Jean-Pied-de-Port is called the French Way, or *Camino Frances*, and is considered the most popular route.) However, as I began to research this pilgrimage path on the internet, I saw that there are in fact many paths that link to that particular (mainly) Spanish one, both within Spain itself, as well as others that wind their way through various parts of France, and have different names such as the Vézelay Way which begins in Burgundy, or the Paris and Tours Way. As I was living in Aix, one of the closest paths to me was a half-day train ride away beginning in the beautiful town of Le Puy-en-Velay in the Haute Loire. The Camino itself actually has routes further afield that pass through Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and beyond (the Rome and Jerusalem pilgrimage paths are particularly important). These various routes all veer towards Spain, linking up with El Camino de Santiago in northern Spain, the road that leads to the city of Santiago de Compostela, where legend has it that the remains of St. James are buried. The path actually extends beyond Santiago to Finisterre on the Atlantic coast, which, according to some, is the real end of the Camino. But the walk I was drawn to, called the Le Puy route or in Latin, *Via Podiensis*, was considered to be one of the most ancient, not to mention beautiful pilgrimage paths of them all, reaching back before Christian times to an earlier Celtic sacred route and no doubt had origins before that now lost in time.

I have always loved walking and hiking, a love that began early with the many walks on the wild north Devon coast in the UK where we spent winter, Easter, and summer holidays as children. This enjoyment of walking had lasted well into adulthood and I had spread my enthusiasm to my own children, both keen walkers and hikers. In fact, my son had walked part of the Camino in southwest France beginning in Bayonne and St. Jean-Pied-de-Port and continuing over the Pyrenees and on to part of the Spanish route (the *Camino Frances*) two winters previously. But now, it seemed that the timing was right for my own effort. Moreover, in addition to the sadness I was feeling burdened by that related to more global environmental concerns mentioned above, I had recently turned sixty-two and was wondering about my own life and whether it was time to take a risk and reinvent myself once again. So, not only globally, but also personally, the timing seemed ripe for the pilgrimage walk.

This yearning for change had led my husband and I to take some time out from our professional lives and spend six months away from the U.S.: some time in the UK at the beginning and end of our journey; four months in

France, one of my favorite countries, indeed the country of my heart; and a shorter visit to the ancient goddess temples in Malta. After exploring the mystical landscape of Avalon in the Glastonbury area of England, and some of the prehistoric caves and their extraordinary art in the Dordogne region for a month, we decided to settle near Aix-en-Provence, originally a Roman and still a spa town because of the nearby hot springs. Moreover, the Provençal region with its hilltop stone villages, vibrant markets, deliciously fresh produce and large varieties of cheese (notably goat), olives, and bread, fine and reasonably priced wines, summer cultural activities, art exhibits, lavender fields, and beautiful landscapes – such as the marshes of the Camargue with their famous wild white horses and bulls to the south, or the mountains and villages of the Luberon to the north – has always drawn me back time and again. Provence, too is one of the landscapes associated with the grail legend, and is rich with many sites sacred to the Black Madonna and Mary Magdalene, many of which I had visited previously and planned to again this time, and so this imaginal and historical backdrop is another reason I felt called back to Provence's soulful vibration and 'blue' spiritual resonance.

Too, there is the famous quality of the light of southern France that drew those Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters away from Paris and regions north to Aix, Cassis, Marseille, and Arles. Our actual house rental was not in Aix itself, but seven kilometers to the east of the town, right at the foot of Mt. Ste. Victoire, on the north side of the mountain near the village of Vauvenargues where Picasso bought a chateau in 1958 and is buried on its land. So, right outside our front windows, the mountain made famous by Cezanne's many paintings of it, stood solidly and silently in front of us, a magnificent landmark of over 1,000 meters high and considered one of the 'Grand Sites de France,' one that could be seen from miles around. Sainte Victoire was originally called Mont "Vintour," in recognition of the god of winds, natural forces that continue to dominate the peaks of the mountain. With Christian influences gradually gaining the upper hand, a chapel was built at the summit in the C13th century, and the mountain was renamed Sainte "Venture," or Mont Venture. In the C17th century, once again, the mountain was renamed, this time to "Victoire" to align with a Roman virgin martyr. Today, the ancient name is preserved in the "Venturiers," pilgrims from nearby Pertuis who, for over 400 years, still honor the mountain each year by climbing to its summit on the saint's feast day, April 24th.

This mountain and its many *sentiers de randonnées* or hiking trails was irresistible to an avid walker such as myself so, during the summer months, I walked almost daily on its slopes.

Imaginal Travel

But part of my love of travel in general no less than of walking in particular has to do not so much with what we might call (rather crudely) “sight-seeing” than with a more mysterious factor, that invisible Other who awakens in us something less tangible when we allow ourselves to stray into foreign lands. Here fantasies, thoughts, feelings, dreams, and visions of various kinds arise in our bodies, linking us perhaps to the past or even to the future. We might even feel a call to a particular place, or places, nothing we can defend rationally, but nevertheless experience as a summons from deep within that we feel we cannot refuse. This is the sort of journeying that can open us to the unknown and can transform our lives, even in small and subtle ways, and this is the sort of travel that I call *imaginal or alchemical travel*. It involves a way of tuning in to the invisible landscape of place and its many voices as well as enjoying the sensuous displays of place on the surface; indeed the surfaces draw us down and in, and up and out, if we have the patience to be so educated by the unfamiliar. This is the kind of journeying that reanimates the old idea of a world soul, where everything from stones to stars is linked together.

For example, the Renaissance philosopher, Ficino, embraced a cosmology based on the idea of a world soul or *anima mundi*, that linked the divine, angelic orders, planets, and the elements to animals, plants, and minerals. The human soul as a spark of the divine could reach out and embrace all things in the cosmos through reflective thought, meditation, and especially love, forming the link between world soul and human soul, above and below. Ficino’s contemplative perspective awakens the soul to direct knowledge and a vision of the mysteries. It is part of the Western esoteric tradition which continues in our time with Jung’s initiatory psychology that begins with an inner focus and extends, through his synchronicity principle and UFO studies, to a new vision of humankind’s place in nature and the cosmos. Here, it is not only reflection and feeling but also reverie and the creative imagination that are valued as the links between inner and outer worlds, between psyche and nature. So, beyond interesting historical and even mythical and legendary facts about places, it is with this imaginative capacity that I like to travel, and walk-about. Such an attitude can open us

not only to personal but also to cultural and cosmic dreaming, and we discover how our own lives are interwoven with collective themes that seek transformation and healing.

Preparation for the Camino Walk

I hadn't quite realized until we arrived that the house we rented near Aix was situated – literally – at the foot of the central north side of Montagne Sainte-Victoire, a limestone ridge extending 18kms, and reaching at its highest point about 1,000 meters (or just over 3,000 feet). It was almost as if fate had put me there and almost as if I could feel the mountain calling to me, luring me out onto her slopes. So, day after day, I would find different hiking trails of which there were many, or sometimes repeat paths I'd already walked, and set off to their starting places. The hiking trails are evaluated according to difficulty level and some slopes are steep and rocky and challenging in places. The paths take you through fields and pine forests – one trail goes over a reservoir – and onto open spaces from which you can see miles across the open countryside, to the north and Vaucluse area of Provence with its Luberon range, or to the south and the Massif des Maures or Mountains of the Moors (a reminder of the time when the Moors and Arabs from North Africa inhabited coastal Provence in the 9th and 10th centuries) that runs along the Mediterranean coast. In-between are farms, olive groves, vineyards, small villages, the occasional chateau, and an ugly power plant to the south west – landscapes often obscured in a blue haze during the hot summer months, or turning a threatening grey when the summer thunderstorm clouds would begin gathering on the horizon.

Amongst the butterflies flitting past me on the path and the various birds flying above, each with their distinct calls, and the annoying flies and sometimes gnats and mosquitoes (insect repellent is advisable!), one of the things I loved the most was hearing the wind whining its way through the pines, a sorrowful sound I always associate with this region of France even when I hear a similar cry in the pine forests of Oregon. There is something about the wind in the pines, as if it is making its plea to us humans to change our lives and to change our relationship to the earth from one of disregard to one of caring respect. It reminds me of a story from our Arctic voyage in December 2012 in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the fabled Northern Lights, a story I shall tell later on.

Several paths from both the western and southern trailheads of Mt Ste. Victoire lead to Cézanne's *Refuge*, the remnants of his art studio where he himself walked from the village of Le Tholonet on the south west flank of the mountain to his painting sanctuary. Here the striking rock faces turn shades of pink and blue depending on the time of day. It is best to see his many paintings of the mountain to have a sense of this changing landscape according to the quality of light.

One of the most rewarding results for me of climbing some of the steep rocky paths to the summit of Mt Ste. Victoire – the *Pic des Mouches* as it is called (and believe me, there were days when I didn't make it!) – to a small chapel sanctuary by a kind of natural stone outcropping with pines, and where water runs out of a fountain pipe to enable you to refill your water bottle, was the feeling of utter and outrageous freedom and liberation I experienced at the top where the wind would often blow forcefully and cool off your sweaty and tired body, and where looking at the sheer natural beauty in front of me on both the north and south sides of the mountain, I became flooded with nonsensical ecstatic joy and a sense of achievement at my perseverance!

And so I walked, almost every day, for two months. When the time came to leave Aix to take the train to Le Puy and begin my walk on the Camino, I made one last hike in order to say a conscious farewell to this strong and powerful mountain that had, after two months, become my companion and friend. It was as if taking the time to walk on her body, mostly in silence and mostly lost in reverie and the physical arduousness of some of the trails, I had, without realizing it until the moment of separation, become rather attached, not to the mountain as a rock so much, but to the mountain as a sentient being that had consciousness and awareness. I had connected to the spirit of the mountain; and the mountain had become alive for me.

Furthermore, I began to sense that the light that the historians of Impressionism speak of as the peculiar quality of Mediterranean sunlight that changes the way we experience nature and landscape as it crosses the sky, was not that light at all. The light of the Impressionist painters I was beginning to sense was what the alchemists called the *lumen naturae*, light of nature. It is a kind of subtle energy that was slowly entering my awareness with all the walking, and that was activated in turn by the spirit of the mountain itself. With a certain way of walking, a certain attunement to

nature, this visionary light can make itself felt. It closes the gap as it were between us and the world (when we experience it as other, as separate from us), or, more accurately, opens a space where we feel our reciprocal connection with nature in a space between, a third space, that links us both as two separate beings coming out of one ground. This kind of imaginal sight (to give it a name) is connected with imaginal travel. So, on that last day, as I walked I started to talk to the mountain. I thanked Mt Ste. Victoire for her beauty and endurance over millennia, for what she must have seen in her long life! I thanked her for companionship all these days. And then I became aware of a deep sorrow overcoming me, and I realized that this was an emotional separation that brought a feeling of great loss, much as I would experience saying goodbye to someone really close to me. Nevertheless, I expressed my gratitude, my love, and my sadness. And then, out of a great stillness that was in the air on that hot day, suddenly a rush of wind out of nowhere arose and embraced me, and I knew that the mountain was responding to me, that I had been heard, and witnessed, and yes, even loved in return. My eyes filled with tears, and for a moment I was suspended in an aura of great blessing, and I was filled with joy. Now, I knew I was ready for the next path, and that this period of time on Mt Ste. Victoire had been my preparation.

Serpent Dream and my decision to walk the Camino

On our drive to Aix-en-Provence from the Dordogne in mid-July, we stopped at Montpellier overnight during which I had the following dream. The dream was a long one, so I'll include just the relevant part.

‘One (of several) snakes approaches me and wraps itself tightly around my (right?) hand and arm. I’m terrified and try to pry it off. I see its eyes (not open, more like slits, does this mean it’s benign or poisonous I say to myself? I hope it means it’s benign). As I attempt to pry it off, it tightens its grip even more. It is useless to pry it off. The snake is speaking to me telepathically. It is saying, “I am much more powerful than you. You need to submit to this fact. Your self/ego must submit to the power of the snake because the snake is the energy of Life itself, and that is more powerful than you. Submitting means accepting that Life Itself is larger than you. It is useless to fight this reality, or fight, fend, pry it off. Trying to fend off the snake is an expression of your fear. Your fear makes you hold onto the ego reality, but this is an illusion. Life is larger than your

little ego. Put your lesser self in service to what is more powerful, that is, in service to Life Itself – This is the true Reality.”

I don't fully understand but try to follow the wisdom of the snake. Inwardly I try to relax and accept its knowledge that Life is what I must submit to, my life in service to Life. As I try to do this, the space between the snake on my arm and its eye looking at me, begins to open up a mysterious portal as if another dimensional reality is coming into view to my visionary eye. I get a glimpse of the mysterious energy that we ordinarily see as just space, apparent 'nothingness.' Now I glimpse into the energy of space itself, in other words, an underlying reality not accessible to an ordinary state of consciousness. Is this perhaps what physicists call the quantum plenum or zero-point field? I marvel at what the snake is showing me, the essence of the mystery of life itself. I am humbled and in awe of the vision.'

The snake dream that I just described opens with a board game that I'm involved with, and I am trying to “complete the 4th quadrant” which unlocks the board and completes the game, “opening to a higher level of consciousness.” The snake part that I've recorded above follows on this opening.

The “problem of the 4th” in Jungian psychology is connected with the inferior function, and for intuitive types such as myself, this involves the body! Snakes signal spiritual wisdom whose source is in the body. Snake wisdom is deeply spiritual and deeply physical at the same time; snake wisdom speaks to the spiritual power of the instincts. My journey at this early 60s time of life involves the body, the aging body that not only signals a relationship to the teachings and call of later life and death, but the body that can open to deep portals of spiritual wisdom. This is a time to let go – well, after all, I had felt a call to risk reinventing myself, and now psyche was responding. Be careful what you wonder about!

But I had recently been diagnosed with a gastric hernia – did I have the guts to change? I feel the terror of this initiatory moment, hopefully a terror that could open the door to the imagination and the earthy side of my being and the primal energy of the earth, and to being led onto an unknown path. I visualize that fierce looking snake goddess from Crete, with the serpents in her hands and the cat, or is it some mythological creature or bird,

on her head? She also has a serpent rising toward her exposed breasts and heart, just where my hernia is located above the tummy button at the third chakra, that place where desire blends with impulses coming from above, a melting pot of earthly and spiritual aspects, where feeling and being are integrated or alternatively blocked because there is a lack of trust in the natural flow of life – issues I’ve certainly struggled with all my life – perhaps the Minoan goddess can accompany me and give me strength?

The many Black Madonna and Mary Magdalene sites that I have visited in France over the years also personify serpent wisdom. For example, the beautiful Notre Dame de Bonne-Délivrance with her red flowing dress, in Neuilly, Paris, and the deeply moving and sacred Notre Dame-de-Sous-Terre near an ancient holy and healing well in the crypt at Chartres cathedral. There is also a painful-looking Black Madonna figure in the crypt at St. Victor, Marseilles. More famously perhaps is the Basilica of Mary Magdalene in St. Maximin la Ste. Baume, Provence, where MM’s relics are supposedly housed, and the extraordinary cave high up on a rocky mountain side where (so some legends say) she lived for many years a half-hour’s drive away, and a walk up through a lovely forest. In the ancient Romanesque church in Saintes-Maries-de-la-mer, Camargue, the daughter of Mary Magdalene, Sainte Sarah is honored, particularly by the Gypsies for whom she is their ‘Black Egyptian Queen.’ There is a gentle Black Madonna in the C12th Romanesque church in the beautiful village of St. Léon-sur-Vézère, in the Dordogne (on the Vézelay pilgrimage route) and who is linked with the deep and sacred Lady of Rocamadour in a chapel perched high on a rocky plateau (a shrine once the home of an early Christian hermit, Zacheus of Jericho, a “lover of rock,” *roc-amator*, and reputed husband to St. Veronica!). There are two Black Marys in the Basilica at Le Puy-en-Velay (where I began my pilgrimage), one of them called Mary-Isis – more on these two Marys below. There are many other sites, of course, in France and other parts of Europe, and in contrast to the ‘white’ Madonnas that point to the spiritual aspect of conventional Christianity, these Black Madonnas point to the dark mysteries of life, to the wisdom traditions where Sophia is ‘not to be despised because she is black’, and to the earthy aspect of the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis. The Black Madonnas are also represented, for example, by the Black Taras of Buddhism, and the generative black Artemis at Ephesus. These holy earthy wisdom figures can serve as powerful guides to us women in later life.

Furthermore, these Black Madonna sites are shrines built on sacred landscapes going back thousands of years, portals between our earth and an invisible or subtle domain peopled by guides, ancestors, animal spirits, or the divine forces of nature. They were often, and still are, centers of healing because of this permeability to and connection with an Other world. They remind us of the ancient Luna cultures that considered life to be a whole, an ensouled cosmos, as once, for example, Isis ruled over the highest divine spirituality, but whose power also extended to the underworld, to darkness, death, the night and evil, and to an earthy embodied instinctuality. (1.) We need – I needed – to descend to this spirit of the goddess in this period of change and renewal to redeem lost feminine passion, energy, and instinctual vision, to redeem the body, the serpent wisdom, the deeply feminine soul, knowing from the depths. Or to try at least!

Could this dream, then, be an Asclepeian dream, the healing god in the form of a snake? “He” is the healing one who speaks to me about this last third of life. The statement of the snake, “to submit to Life,” must be heard; “not my will but Thy Will,” I hear a voice say. The serpent is speaking with intelligence. Perhaps I don’t have to carry the intellect developed in my professional teaching life anymore. It’s accomplished enough already! I can speak out of the wisdom of something else, of the body, of the subtle imaginal feminine soul, of an elemental energy, of the kundalini energy that is imaged as the Shakti serpent, and who is also considered female. I can focus on movement, active imagination with the body, and walking, walking as pilgrimage and connecting with the heartbeat of mother earth....

And so I took the train to Le Puy-en-Velay to begin my walk.

Note 1. See my *Eros and Chaos*, pp. 111-114, and Anne Baring, *Dream of the Cosmos*.