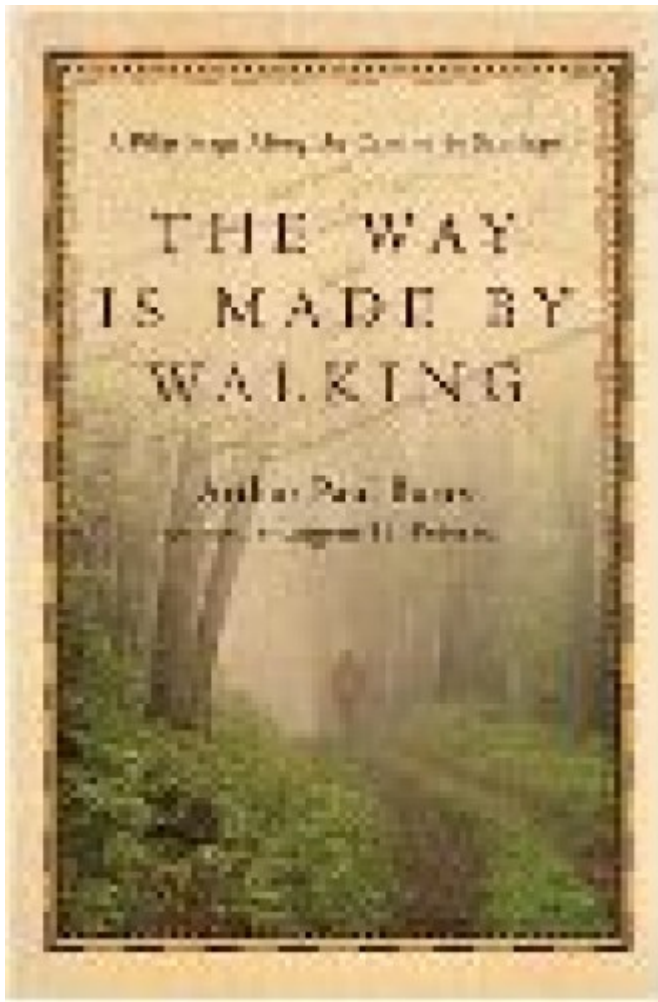


The Way Is Made by Walking: A Pilgrimage Along the Camino de Santiago

reviewed by [David J. Wood](#) in the [January 27, 2009](#) issue

In Review



The Way Is Made by Walking: A Pilgrimage Along the Camino de Santiago

Arthur P. Boers

Erasmus, writing in the early 16th century, provided a scathing critique of the waning, often abusive practice of Christian pilgrimage in his day. Nevertheless, he wrote: “If any shall do it of their own free choice from a great affection to piety, I think they deserve to be left to their own freedom.” The pilgrimage of Arthur Boers to Santiago de Compostela provides an account of Christian pilgrimage that Erasmus would surely have affirmed. *The Way Is Made by Walking* is an extended reflection on this embodiment of pilgrimage—a 30-day, 500-mile walk in northern Spain along the Camino de Santiago. For centuries, the Camino (Spanish for “journey” or “road”) has been a well-traveled path for pilgrims.

Embarking on this particular pilgrimage was by no means out of the ordinary for Boers. A Mennonite pastor teaching at a Mennonite seminary, Boers is also a Benedictine oblate—well schooled in the habits of the daily office and the importance of spiritual retreats. Furthermore, he loves to walk. Throughout his account, he makes numerous references to his extended encounters with hiking trails and his weekly walk to and from his place of worship, and he tells how these experiences shape his spiritual life in important ways.

Even so, the encounter with the Camino was of a different order than he anticipated. This dusty, difficult road and the intense demands it made upon his body took him to unexplored places—in himself, in his relationships with others, in his relationship to God, in his perception of what it means to follow in the way of Jesus. Boers’s account is a testimony to the importance of physicality to the spiritual life.

He does not ascribe penitential significance to the oozing blisters, the painful tendonitis or the sheer exhaustion that he experienced in the course of his journey. On the other hand, he does reflect on how these experiences in the context of pilgrimage had a profound impact on him that was revelatory of God’s presence in all that was around him. He encountered the presence of God in new ways at meal times, in small talk, in dreams (even nightmares), in rest, in hospitality, in loneliness, in longstanding tradition, and in the uncommon solidarity he discovered with fellow pilgrims along the way—many of whom did not share his Christian motivations. “In a small way this pilgrimage was a crucible for living out and examining my Christian life and faith to this point,” Boers writes. “It was a time of prayer and reorientation, the most profound spiritual retreat of my life.”

In North American Protestantism, with our aversion to asceticism, pilgrimage has become mostly a metaphor. It is a way of perceiving our lives, not a particular, physically demanding practice. Spiritual retreats often demand little of us in terms of bodily engagement. More often than not, the greatest sacrifice we make is to fast socially when we make silent retreats, or to cope with surroundings that are starker than we are used to. Our practice of retreat tends to equate spiritual renewal with physical rest.

Boers makes the case for an intrinsic connection between spiritual renewal and physical demands. In the midst of his pilgrimage, something broke open, and it wasn't just the blisters. He began to discover how his practice of prayer and retreat and solitude (so crucial to his spiritual growth) had had the unintended consequence of making him less attentive to the knowledge of God that comes through encounters of everyday life. It was the experience of physical stress, limitation, vulnerability and dependence that drew him into new depths of reflection and self-awareness. He began to encounter God more and more in faces and places and events beyond himself. *The Way Is Made by Walking* is an invitation to embody pilgrimage.