

Chapter Twelve

An interview with...

Shannon Wallis

David Wright (Wright)

We're talking with Shannon Wallis. Shannon is the Global Director of Leadership Programs and responsible for the development of top-tier talent for Microsoft's Sales Marketing and Services Organization. For 15 years, she has specialized in manifesting big ideas through transformational change. She works with her clients to define what they want, take the steps to get it, and release the limiting beliefs that hamper their progress. Prior to her current role, she consulted to and held management positions in Fortune 100 businesses as diverse as Coca-Cola and Universal Studios. Her degrees include an MBA from Duke University and a BS in Human Development and Social Policy from Northwestern University. She is an active member of the National Speakers Association and a highly sought after keynote speaker.

In 2000, Shannon founded Create Your Life, an association designed to help individuals discover their passions and manifest them in their lives. Create Your Life offered them a network of supporters who sustained and encouraged them to achieve their dreams. She was drawn to Microsoft in 2004 after hearing its mission, to enable people and businesses throughout the world to realize their full potential. This interview tells the inspiring story of how Shannon's personal and professional expertise crystallized in one transformational experience – a 500 mile hike across northern Spain.

Six years ago, you walked across northern Spain. Why did you do that?

Shannon Wallis (Wallis)

I think the better question is, “Why would anyone, especially someone who is not an avid hiker, strap on a twenty-pound pack with one change of clothes and two sets of underwear, walk through mountains and wheat fields, in the pouring rain and scorching sun, and then search for lodging, water, and food every day for thirty days?” I had a vision—a calling—that was so compelling, I could not say no. And, it was one of the most significant learning experiences in my life, both personally and professionally because it taught me what it really takes to achieve our dreams and to get to our destinations. It wasn’t academic theory written in a book about Change Management. The lessons were real and personal.

Prior to having this vision, I had worked for over ten years in Human Resources consulting, specifically Organizational Change. As a consultant at companies like Watson Wyatt, Cooper’s & Lybrand, and Price Waterhouse, I learned the methodology for helping organizations get to their destinations.

There are three phases: First, analyze the current state—what’s happening today, what’s not working well, what best practices exist. Second, envision the desired future state—consider the best practices, adopt or adapt them, or create something new. Third, implement the vision. Although it’s much more involved and takes time, this is the basic approach. I worked with many Fortune 500 companies utilizing it. Projects usually ended with people being “downsized,” which most people know is just a fancy term for fired. Knowing this was difficult for me, I focused on the opportunities that could be created in the future because of the changes that were implemented.

After several years of consulting and traveling every week, I burned out. I accepted an internal Organizational Change consulting role with The Coca-Cola Company where I didn’t have to downsize people. Instead, I focused on getting the best out of the people already there. I had been working at Coke for two years and was participating in a one-year leadership development program when I received “the call.”

During a retreat in June 1999, I had a vision to go to northern Spain to do something spiritual. It wasn’t a very clear vision, and I didn’t understand it. After

the retreat, I flew home to Atlanta, and I said to my husband, “Joe, we’re moving to Spain.”

He replied, “What?”

I said, “I can’t explain it, but I have to go to Spain—northern Spain—to do something spiritual. I think it will be in October.”

Joe is a pretty remarkable person. Instead of questioning it or complaining about how it might affect his career at Accenture, he supported me and responded, “Okay.” My journey to Santiago had begun.

Two days after returning from the retreat, my manager walked into my office and said, “Shannon, someone from the Madrid office called and asked if you’d be interested in a similar position there.”

I jumped out of my chair and started screaming, “I knew it! I knew it! I knew this was going to happen!” I told her about my vision of going to Spain.

“Whoa, hold on a moment!” she responded. “Things at Coke change very quickly so don’t get too excited yet.” Two days after we had that conversation Coke experienced a crisis in Belgium that changed the entire European business plan and would eventually lead to the CEO’s departure. As a result of the change in business, the job in Madrid disappeared.

However, a different position surfaced two months later. I was asked to interview to be the Chief of Staff to the President of Central Europe based in Vienna, Austria. It was a position many people desired, but I thought it was a long shot for me. In fact, when I was first asked to interview, I laughed and said, “Why would I interview for that job? It always goes to a Marketing or Finance person. Why would they take an Org Change consultant?” In the end, there were three final candidates: a person from Corporate Marketing, another from Corporate Finance, and me. Although I told my friends and family that my chances were slim, deep down, I believed the job was mine. I could see myself in the job. I believed that it was a part of my personal purpose in life, and that I was meant to go.

When I walked off the plane in Vienna it was early morning. I hadn’t slept and was looking forward to showering and resting before my afternoon interview. I was greeted by a driver who explained that my interview had been rescheduled for that

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morning because the President had another commitment and needed to travel in the afternoon. “Can you come to the office right away and talk to him?”

I felt brain dead. I hadn’t slept, and I was exhausted. I replied, “Of course!”

During the interview, I remember being less than eloquent. I thought to myself, “What are you saying? Pull it together; you make no sense.” But somehow, in the midst of my foggy confusion, I must have said all of the right things because a couple of days later they called and offered me the job. It was late September.

Joe left his job, and we moved in the middle of November. It wasn’t the right location or timing, but it was closer to Spain, and I knew that I was getting nearer to my vision. Little did I know that I was about to have one of the most significant experiences in my career as an Organizational Change consultant. I was about to learn that change isn’t just about the business—it is very personal. Within a couple of weeks of my arriving in Vienna, the CEO, Doug Ivester, resigned. By mid-January, Coke had a new CEO and my new boss, the President of Central Europe, who was not in his political favor, was out of a job.

So there we were. We had just moved to Vienna. My husband was without a job and my job was eliminated when our President was removed. I couldn’t help thinking, “What have I done?” I panicked. Joe and I talked about our situation and decided that we didn’t want to return to the United States, yet. We decided that we would try to stay in Europe. I only spoke English, so our best option for a job search seemed to be the United Kingdom. In early February, we flew to London to interview with a variety of companies.

Prior to going to London, I talked to my friend Christy, who said, “I think you should interview with our company,” and she arranged an interview for me. A few days before the interview, she called me to tell me more about the woman I would interview with. She mentioned that she thought I would find her very interesting and that she had just returned from a sabbatical. When I met her for the interview, I mentioned that Christy had said she had recently returned from a sabbatical and asked what she had done. She replied, “I walked *El Camino de Santiago*.” Without understanding what it was, where it was located, or what it was about, my soul cried out, “I’m going to do that!”

And then I asked, “What is the *Camino*?” She described an eight hundred kilometer footpath across northern Spain that starts in the Pyrenees along the border of France and ends in Northwest Spain at Santiago de Compostela—the place believed to be the burial site of Saint James. *Santiago* is Spanish for Saint James. *El Camino de Santiago*—the way of Saint James—is the pilgrimage to Santiago that began one thousand years ago and has been traveled by millions of individuals from all walks of life since then. The modern *Camino* is traveled by approximately 60,000 pilgrims annually. At its height in popularity during the 1400s and 1500s more than half a million traveled it each year.

It was February 2000 and I finally understood my vision. I was going to walk *El Camino de Santiago*. This I knew. Yet many other things would happen in my life before I would actually step onto the path of Saint James and begin the journey to Santiago.

Wright

So if you didn’t go right away. What held you back?

Wallis

Life held me back. After our interviews in London, we returned to Vienna and discussed our options. After much consideration, we realized that we didn’t really want to go to London. We wanted to go to Spain. Joe is half Spanish and bilingual. He was born in Spain, which we knew would help speed up the process of getting a work visa. We began the job search in Madrid where we had friends. Joe found a job fairly quickly, and we moved to Madrid in September 2000.

During the interim, I helped in the downsizing of the Central European organization. The “coincidence” of hiring an Org Change consultant into the Chief of Staff role was not lost on me. The Vienna office alone was expected to experience a 90 percent downsizing. It was fortuitous to have an Org Change consultant present during that time instead of someone with the Marketing or Finance background. I was able to help people in a time of need and to see the impact of restructuring from a very personal perspective. It was a humbling experience. I learned the hard way that it wasn’t just business—it was personal.

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Being a part of that type of downsizing was personally challenging and emotionally draining. When we moved to Spain, I decided to take some time off before I jumped into a new organization. I called it my sabbatical time.

It was a good time to embrace the cultural change that I would experience. I grew up in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, a small town in the middle of the wheat and corn fields and in a family “blessed” with gifts that keep on giving—alcoholism, depression, abandonment, and poverty. Understandably, I dreamed of living a different life. Moving to Vienna and Madrid was, in many respects, like winning the lottery.

My life as an expatriate was completely different from the one of my childhood. I wanted to fully embrace it. I didn’t have the opportunity in Vienna because we weren’t there very long and I was busy at work. I did have the chance in Madrid. I had struggled to put myself through college and graduate school and then worked like a fiend to be given incredible opportunities in my career. I wanted a break. I wanted to live a little, learn a new language, see the country, and spend time with friends. Now, I had the opportunity. During our first nine months in Madrid, we had nearly sixty visitors.

Our first visitor was Susan, a friend of mine from my MBA program at Duke. She had studied in Spain when she was in college. One day in September, as we were driving around southern Spain, I told her about my vision of walking the *Camino*. Susan had studied in Santiago and had seen the pilgrims on their way to the cathedral. She replied, “When you go, let me know; I’d like to go too.” I promised to contact her when I was ready.

While I guided our visitors through Spain and took Spanish lessons, Joe began his new role as a director with a large multi-national consulting firm. By January 2001, it was clear that the job wasn’t what he had expected. In fact, my husband, the Marine Reservist, who I jokingly told people was so tough that he could sleep in the dirt and eat dirt, was miserable. In the years I had known him, I had never heard him complain, so I knew it was serious. He left the consulting firm and accepted a position as the European representative with a U.S. based executive search firm with whom he had a prior relationship. The job was 100 percent

commission. I was nervous about that, but we had saved my Coca-Cola severance package and had a small cushion while the business was launched in Europe.

For the first three months, he traveled and built relationships with organizations, but he did not earn any money. This was expected because it normally takes three months in the United States to see a return on investment. We thought that it might take a few more months in Europe. Then we learned that I was pregnant. We were thrilled about the pregnancy, yet nervous about the lack of income to support ourselves and the baby. Instead of giving up, we decided to give the organizational relationships a little more time to bear fruit. At that point, Joe could manage the relationships remotely, so he decided to take a three-month Marine Reserve assignment at Camp LeJeune in the United States. It would provide regular income and give us a little more time to figure out our next step—stay in Europe with the new job or return to the United States and find employment there.

Joe left for Camp LeJeune in mid-June 2001 right after I had completed my first trimester. He would be gone during my second trimester but we weren't concerned because I had already passed the first. The day he left, I had a doctor's appointment scheduled. While Joe was en route to the United States, the doctor said in Spanish, "Shannon, I'm very sorry; I can't find the heartbeat." Because my Spanish was not perfect, I hoped that I had misunderstood. I hadn't. In fact, I learned that I had probably miscarried three weeks earlier. I was devastated and felt terribly alone as the doctor described the procedure and hospital stay that were required. I had no way of immediately contacting Joe, which added to my feeling of isolation. By the time I could talk to him, I could barely speak.

The remainder of the summer was very difficult for me, but as mid-September approached, I looked forward to Joe's return. Then 9/11 happened. Joe was still on active duty at the time. As a communications officer, he was mobilized to Stuttgart, Germany, where the satellite systems are monitored. Our decision to stay or go was on hold.

Prior to arriving at Stuttgart, we were able to spend a couple of weeks together at home in Madrid, and I was blessed to get pregnant again. I was thrilled. Even though Joe wasn't there, I had something to look forward to and my doctor

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seemed quite certain that I would be fine. A couple of months passed, my pregnancy progressed normally, and my doctor said it was okay for me to travel to Houston for the birth of my sister's first child. Because of my history, he asked me to see a doctor while I was in the United States but assured me that he didn't expect any complications. When I arrived, my sister delivered her baby and the next day I went to the doctor to discover that I had miscarried again. During this difficult time, I was grateful to have the support of my sister, but it was bittersweet with a new nephew at home.

I returned to Madrid and saw my husband over the holidays. On New Year's Eve, as we toasted the New Year, my husband said solemnly, "Shannon, it was a tough year, but it's over and it can't get any worse." As soon as he said that, my stomach turned over and I thought, "Oh no, something really bad is coming." A few days later, my mother called and told me she had cancer. My first thought was, "No way, this can't be happening. I've lost my job, my husband is gone, I've had two miscarriages, and now my mother has cancer." My mother is my rock. Through all of the tough times in my family, she hung in there. I started to cry and she said, "Don't worry, the doctor says it isn't that bad; it's only Stage 1."

I flew to the United States to help my mother recover from her surgery. We didn't expect that she would need chemotherapy or radiation, but we knew that she would be off her feet for a few weeks. So, I flew from Madrid to Seattle and they performed the surgery. We then discovered it wasn't Stage 1—it was Stage 4 and the cancer had metastasized to her lymph nodes and rib cage. A short surgical recovery turned into months of chemotherapy and radiation. When the majority of the treatments were completed in May, I returned home emotionally and physically exhausted. Joe was still in Stuttgart but expected to end his assignment in a few weeks.

Around this time I started to read the many books I had collected about the *Camino*. When Joe arrived home, he noticed the pile on my side of the bed. He looked at the books and he looked at me and asked, "Are you going to do the *Camino* now?" I stared at him, paralyzed, as the following thoughts went through my head in a millisecond, "Why am I reading these books? Am I going to walk the *Camino*? How can I go at this time? We've been separated for nearly a year? It's

been a terrible year. We should be together now. We should be starting our family.” Without waiting for my response, he said, “You should do the *Camino*. I want you to go.” In that moment my first two lessons from the *Camino* arrived.

Wright

What were they?

Wallis

Know Where You are Going (number one) and *Know What You are Leaving Behind (number two)*.

Until that point, the *Camino* had been nothing more than a romantic vision—a calling that I couldn’t explain. At that moment, it became a symbol for a new beginning. After the loss, pain, and fear of the prior year and a half, I was exhausted emotionally and expecting the worst to happen. I wanted to put it behind me. I didn’t understand how the *Camino* was going to help that, but I was absolutely certain that whatever it offered was going to be better than what I was sitting in emotionally at that point in time. I was conscious that I needed to let go of some things to move forward in my life.

Wright

Shannon, how do these lessons help us get to the destination?

Wallis

First, you need to know what you really want. Most of us wander aimlessly in life bumping into things that sometimes work for us. But when we know what we want in life, our actions can be much more prescriptive. Imagine the difference in planning a vacation when you say, I want to see the volcanoes of Costa Rica versus, I’d like to go somewhere warm. Clarity makes taking action easier.

Second, you need to know why you are making the change. Most people resist change. Understanding why we want to make a change provides momentum for moving forward. It doesn’t have to be as extreme as the pain I felt. It could be as simple as, “This job is no longer satisfying to me and I’m not learning anymore.”

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As I made the decision to go, Susan's voice echoed in my head, "When you go, let me know; I'd like to go, too." Yet, I hesitated. Susan had started a new job three months earlier and I doubted that she could come. But it ate at me. I sent her an e-mail with two sentences: "I am leaving for the *Camino* in two weeks. Do you want to come?" She sent an e-mail to me the next day. "Funny you should ask, I just lost my job. I'm coming."

So, my third lesson was, *Invite Others to Participate, They Might Surprise You (number three)*. Tell people about your plans to do something different, to go to a new destination. Say, "I want a different job or career," "I want to lose fifty pounds," "I want to run a marathon." Whatever it is, we are less likely to back out when someone not only encourages us, but also agrees to accompany us in our journey. Furthermore, our supporters may have hidden talents or connections that will help us arrive at our destination, thus our probability of success increases.

Two weeks later Susan arrived in Madrid. Given the circumstances in our lives, we had decided that we would only walk for about two weeks. A lot of people walk the length of the *Camino* a week at a time. They start in one place, walk for a week, and return the following year to pick up where they left off. That was our plan. We had our packs and walking sticks—everything that we needed for our journey.

The next morning we were on a train that would take us to Pamplona, the closest city to Roncesvalles we could get to by train. Roncesvalles is the town on the border of France and Spain where the *Camino* originates. We arrived in Pamplona around ten in the morning to discover that the bus to Roncesvalles did not leave until much later in the afternoon.

We were much too excited to wait for the bus. Realizing that it was only forty-four kilometers (twenty-seven miles) east to Roncesvalles and being from the city, we hailed a taxi. Ironically, we traveled east to Roncesvalles so that we could walk west and return to Pamplona a few days later.

Winding through the mountains, a shocking revelation hit me and I blurted out to Susan, "It's a long way to Pamplona."

She replied, "You're just getting that?"

What I meant was, “What was I thinking? The cab ride is taking forever and the first thing we have to do is walk back to Pamplona. Am I kidding myself? I’m going to walk to Pamplona with twenty pounds on my back? This is crazy.” I thought of quitting right then and there. Many journeys end before the first step is taken, so people never get to their destinations.

The next lesson of the *Camino* hit me like a ton of bricks. *It’s a Long Way to Pamplona—Every Journey Begins with the First Step (number four)*. Many times when we look at the destination, we feel overwhelmed. The journey seems too long. It is a guarantee that we will never arrive at the destination if we don’t take the first step. Getting to Pamplona is critical because it is a milestone that moves us in the right direction. If we can get to Pamplona—the first milestone—we are that much closer to our destination.

When we arrived in Roncesvalles, the Pilgrim Center at the church was closed. At the Center, we intended to collect our Pilgrim’s Passports—documents pilgrims carry that serve as proof of the journey when they arrive in Santiago and request the certificate for completing the *Camino*. In addition, passports are required to obtain lodging at *refugios*—refuge places with beds, showers, and kitchens for pilgrims. A *refugio* is the rustic equivalent of a dormitory. It provides the basics. Hot water is a bonus. As pilgrims walk the *Camino* each day, they search for shelter at night in a *refugio*. Each *refugio* has a unique seal that is stamped on the passport and the passport becomes a record of the journey.

As we waited for the Center to open, we talked to other *peregrinos* (pilgrims). We met two Canadians, Christine and Judy. For some reason, I believe that all Canadians are outdoorsy and avid hikers. Their packs were twice the size of ours and contained the latest and greatest hiking gear. As they displayed their gear and talked about the best way to wear your pack, I became concerned. They seemed so knowledgeable. I wondered if we were ready for the *Camino*. I had my answer the next day when I saw Christine and Judy struggling with their packs along the road. Within a few days, they had packed up half their gear and mailed it to Santiago to pick up when they completed their journey.

The next lesson of the *Camino* had arrived, *Pack Light (number five)*. Many of us have had the experience of thinking we have finally figured out all of the rules

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to win the game only to learn that the rules, or some of them, have changed. We can't assume that what has gotten us to where we are today—our skills, beliefs, and assumptions—will move us to where we want to be in the future. To get to our destinations, we must discard some of the things that made us successful in the past to create room to build new capability that gives us a higher chance of success.

The Center also had a *refugio*. After it opened, we began the ritual that would be ours for the remainder of our journey. We found a bed, unpacked, showered, and then searched for dinner. On that first day, we did not need to wash our clothes. In most *refugios*, pilgrims cook their meals with others. In Roncesvalles—the starting place—pilgrims dine together in a small café.

From the moment we began to unpack, the questions began. “Where are you from?” “Are you going to Santiago?” As I mentioned earlier, Susan and I didn't plan to go to Santiago. We were going as far as we could in the next two weeks. But as the other pilgrims asked me, “Are you going to Santiago?” my soul responded as it had done when I first heard of the *Camino*. “Yes, I am going to Santiago!” But my head said, “No, that wasn't the agreement. I told Joe that I am only going for two weeks.” He had just returned; I couldn't be gone for a month. Besides, Susan had to get back to start her job search and we were now in this together.

However, the next morning Susan said to me, “I just want you to know that I've decided to go to Santiago.” I responded, “Me, too!” At that moment, we committed to a more specific destination. It was no longer just about the *Camino*—it was about Getting to Santiago!

The next lesson was clear: *Commit to Going and Go! (number six)*. Too many times when we look at our destination, we get stuck. The distance seems too far, the work required to get there too great. We wonder whether we should stay or go. We give this stuck place a lot of terms like, sitting on the fence, limbo, or the neutral zone. Whatever we call it, staying stuck is as much of a decision as deciding to move forward. Mentally commit and get off the fence. Say, “I'm going to Santiago.” Without commitment to the destination, our chances of success are limited.

Shannon Wallis

Susan and I started walking to Pamplona that morning on our way to Santiago. The first couple of days were really fun. Susan and I hadn't seen each other in over a year and we caught up on each other's lives. But, after the second day, I noticed that matching Susan's stride was difficult for me. Susan is eight inches taller than I—all in her legs. At five feet, my legs were too short to match her stride. Likewise, it was just as difficult for Susan to slow down and take shorter strides. During a normal hike, it would not have been an issue. But we realized that continuing to walk together eight hours per day with twenty pounds on our backs for another thirty days would be painful. We were initially saddened by this discovery because we had looked forward to walking together. But even though we realized that we would have to walk separately, each at her own pace, we still agreed to get to Santiago together.

It was an important lesson—*Everyone Walks at a Different Pace, Work With It (number seven)*. As we move toward our destinations, some of the people who agree to join us may take a different approach to getting there. We all have our own pace and it is important to respect the differences and figure out ways to work with them.

Wright

I know that you arrived in Santiago together, how did you manage to do that if you were walking separately?

Wallis

Susan and I agreed quickly to some guiding principles that helped us to “walk together” while walking separately. If we hadn't agreed to them, it would have been very easy to get separated because we could have easily stopped at different towns or *refugios* along the way and ended up days apart.

Three things helped us: First, every night before bed, we looked at our map and planned the next day. We agreed on the town and *refugio* to meet in. We agreed that no matter how tired we were, even if we thought we couldn't continue on, we would get to that location. We trusted each other to follow through on that agreement. We knew that if we didn't, we would get separated. Second, we

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communicated a lot. When we woke up in the morning, we checked in with each other and reminded each other of the agreed destination for the day.

Then we had a ritual of a morning coffee. At the first town with an open café, Susan would stop to have a coffee and wait for me to arrive. Even though I would leave before she did in the morning, she would have her coffee first. By the time I would arrive, she was ready to move on. We'd check in with how each other was doing, offer each other "*iBuen Camino!*" (the greeting of pilgrims on the *Camino*, which means "Good Journey!") and she would be on her way as I sat down for my coffee. That was how we stayed connected.

Third, we followed the *flechas amarillas*—yellow arrows. The yellow arrows are the markers along the *Camino* that point you in the direction toward Santiago and let you know that you are still on the right path. Some of the arrows are obvious while others are not. I got lost once and had to backtrack one hour to find the right marker. I learned that if I didn't see an arrow every couple of hours, I had better head back to the last marker I had seen.

The *Camino* taught me that to get to the destination, you have to *Agree on Your Milestones (number eight), Communicate, Communicate, and Communicate Again (number nine), and Find the Yellow Arrows and Move Forward (number ten)*. When moving toward our destinations, it's important to set small goals for ourselves that are achievable. I tell my clients, baby steps become journeys. Ask yourself, "What am I going to do today to move myself in the right direction?" Tell everyone you know about the milestones. It helps to maintain focus and motivation when they are achieved. Finally, look for the signs or markers that you are moving in the right direction. If we are honest with ourselves, we see them but choose to ignore them. Down deep, most of us know when it is time to move to our next destination. We choose not to. We can just as easily choose to pay attention and follow the markers.

Before I share the last five lessons, I want to explain my daily *Camino* experience. I woke up every morning at five and the first thing I did was take an ibuprofen. I did this to prepare my feet, which was painful work. You would not want to have seen my feet. On the second day when my first blister arrived, the *hospitalera* (the person who runs the *refugio*) said, "Don't worry. You'll only have

that for a couple of days.” I was actually kind of proud of that first blister. I thought, “Yea! Now I’m a pilgrim. I have the blister to prove it.” On the fourth day, I had three or four blisters. The *hospitalera* said, “One week, maximum! I’ve never seen anyone who has had blisters beyond one week.” I quickly learned that I was going to be the exception to the rule. By the time I reached Santiago I had sixteen blisters on my feet! All were in various stages of disintegration or healing. I was famous on the *Camino*. I would arrive in *refugios* and *hospitaleros* would say, “I’ve heard of you! You’re the American with the blisters.”

There were times when I would stand up and want to pass out from the shooting pains that went through my body because of the blisters. Every morning started with ibuprofen. Then I would prepare my feet. I had to wash them, drain the blisters with needle and thread, put antiseptic on them and then gauze and tape them. Then I would have a light breakfast, check my map, and remember where I planned to meet Susan. When I stopped for coffee, I would check my feet to let them air a little bit.

I was careful about my feet because a simple infection can lead to blood infection and if a *hospitalera* find out and a doctor learns of it, the *Camino* is over for you. Pilgrims with seemingly minor health issues are often sent home because people have died on the *Camino* from infection and other things. Therefore, I knew to be diligent about my feet. In fact, I learned so much about healing feet that I became the healer of others. (Sadly, my foot healing skills aren’t valued in my current profession.)

After my coffee, I walked and walked and walked until I arrived at the agreed *refugio*. I would find the bed that Susan had saved for me when she arrived. If I hadn’t invited Susan, I would have slept on the floor most nights! Inviting others pays off in unexpected ways. Each evening I would shower, wash my clothes, prepare my feet, get lunch, shop for that night’s dinner and the next day’s breakfast, rest, and make dinner with friends. Around 8:00 PM, I would pop in my ear plugs to eliminate others’ snoring and go to sleep.

By the tenth day of the *Camino* I had easily mastered the routine as I was entering Burgos, the place I was going to meet Joe. Shortly after I made the decision to go to Santiago, I called Joe to let him know. He was very supportive

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and agreed to meet me in Burgos. He drove to Burgos from Madrid in about two hours. Seeking sympathy, I showed my damaged feet to Joe. I told him about the trials of the *Camino* and how I walked in spite of the pain, the rain, and the lightning storms that we had experienced that morning. I explained what it meant to be a pilgrim and that I had done this every day. *Every day!* I wanted him to agree that I was indeed brave for carrying on in spite of it all.

My Marine looked at me and said, “What were you thinking? It wouldn’t be a pilgrimage if it weren’t challenging.”

What did he just say? This was not the response I was looking for. I was so *mad!* I couldn’t believe he said that to me. I thought, “He doesn’t understand what this is all about!” I was so angry! The next day after he left, I told Susan and my new friend, Lori, about his insensitivity. I said in a sing songy voice, “It wouldn’t be a pilgrimage if it weren’t challenging.” They were as outraged as I was. Clearly he did not understand! We talked about his comment for not only several kilometers, but several days! But, it was interesting because the more we talked about it the more it become a mantra when something wasn’t going quite as easily as we hoped—“Well, you know, it wouldn’t be a pilgrimage if it weren’t challenging.” When we met pilgrims along the *Camino* who had their own stories of woe, we would nod and say “Well it wouldn’t be a pilgrimage if it weren’t challenging!”

In truth, my husband, the Marine, understood better than any of us. *It Wouldn’t Be a Pilgrimage If It Weren’t Challenging (number eleven)*. If you think getting to the destination is going to be easy, think again. Change is seldom easy. We can pick the destination and follow the markers but it won’t be a piece of cake. That’s why all of the other lessons are so important. We need them to help keep us on the path so we don’t give up.

Leaving Burgos we entered what would become the most challenging stretch of the *Camino* for me. The distance between Burgos and Leon was flat, hot, and covered as far as the eye could see with wheat fields. It would take ten days to walk the distance before we reached the foothills of Galicia. Being from South Dakota, I knew wheat fields. By this time, I had at least twelve of the sixteen blisters. I was in a lot of pain and I was alone. Being of fairly average height, Susan usually walked with others. I, on the other hand, walked alone because my stride was shorter and

my pace was slower than average. The wheat fields drew me right into my childhood, which, as you can probably guess, was less than ideal. I spent most of my childhood ashamed of my family situation and trying to hide it from my friends. For the better part of my childhood, my father was an active alcoholic or absent from the home. My mother suffered from clinical depression but she managed to work and keep food on the table. We had very little besides each other. I was the oldest child who filled in the parental gaps. As I walked between Burgos and Leon, I was stuck in the mire of it all. I could not escape it.

Then, the *Day of Devils* arrived. It is a distance of over twenty kilometers during which pilgrims walk with little access to shade and no access to well water. This was a particularly bad day for me.

On the *Day of Devils*, I was contemplating the three things all pilgrims hear when traveling the *Camino*. First, the *Camino* calls you. I absolutely believe that. Second, everyone's *Camino* is different. I was living that. From my perspective that day, Susan was having a jolly time with her walking companions. Third, the *Camino* is a metaphor for life. If that was true—my life was about pain and being alone. I didn't like the implications. I was at my lowest point emotionally. I was in terrible pain that day—it was very hot and I felt horribly alone. I looked in front of me and saw nothing and nobody. I looked behind me and saw nothing and nobody, except the wheat fields, for what seemed like miles. I felt so hurt and angry. I was particularly mad at God for allowing this pain in my life. I felt sorry for myself. I shook my walking stick wildly at the heavens and screamed. I pounded it on the ground multiple times with all of my force and cried, "If the *Camino* is a metaphor for life, why is my life so filled with pain?" I cried, screamed, and doubled over in pain thinking that if I gave up now, no one would even find me until the next day because I was usually the last one to arrive. I truly considered giving up, and in some ways I did because I finally surrendered and said, "I just can't do this, God, because if this is the way it's going to be, if I am going to be alone through all of this pain, well, I just don't want to think about it anymore. I can't do it." But, I was resolved to my fate.

At this moment of surrender, I heard, "*iBuen Camino!*" I froze. I thought I was hallucinating because I had just looked behind me and had not seen anyone for

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miles. I was jolted out of my frenzy and started to walk again. A few steps later, again I heard, “*iBuen Camino!*” I still had tears running down my face and I was shaking and I thought, “No, I am hallucinating because of the heat.” But as I thought this, I slowly turned around and several meters behind me I saw an older woman approaching me. I had seen her a few times in the past few days. She was in her sixties and she kept to herself. She was moving quickly.

My mind was racing, “Where did she come from? Did she see my wild display? She had to have seen me. This is so humiliating.” As she approached me, she again offered, “*iBuen Camino!*” I was so embarrassed I could barely make eye contact. I motioned for her to pass me, because everybody passed me on the *Camino*. Nobody walked at my pace. But she slowed down to walk with me. I thought, “Of all days, someone wants to walk with me.”

Again she said, “*iBuen Camino!*” softly this time. I thought, disgustedly, “Yeah! *iBuen Camino!* all right.” Instead I said to her, “You know, I am ready to die.”

She looked at me and said, “It’s not your day to die.”

I looked at her quizzically and said, “What?”

She pointed to a marker on the road. Markers are placed on the *Camino* where pilgrims have died. They are not common, but they are occasional reminders that not everybody makes it. She pointed to the marker and said, “It was his day to die. It is not your day to die for I am here to walk with you.”

I started to cry. I knew in that moment that God had been with me—I had never been alone.

We walked together—this beautiful older woman, whom I had avoided at the *refugios* because she seemed strange—and me. She had an incredible dark sense of humor. She told me stories and made me laugh for the next two hours.

I asked her, “Why are you walking with me? No one walks with me.”

“Every day I get up and I look for the person who needs me,” she replied, “and I knew today was your day—that you would need me.”

I was stunned. I thought she was an amazing woman and wondered how she knew because she was right. She was from Germany. I don’t know what happened to her. But I do believe that God worked through her. And I believe that I was never alone.

Wright

Shannon, it seems like there are so many things you could have learned from that. What was the lesson for you?

Wallis

Support Comes When You Least Expect It and From the Most Unlikely Places (number twelve). All journeys to the destination will have moments of despair. I suspect that the level of despair varies by how difficult the journey is. In those moments when we think we cannot go one step further and we are truly ready to give up, we must have faith that the support we need will materialize. Since then, I have seen that assistance show up for many people and organizations.

From that moment forward my *Camino* experience changed. I accepted it as it was meant to be. I decided that although my *Camino* was different from others', it was no longer going to be the one focused on pain.

The next morning when I got up I still had physical pain, and as was the custom, other pilgrims asked how my feet were doing because, again, I was a bit of a novelty. Instead of sharing the details of how many blisters I had and how I cared for them, I simply answered that they were fine and I'd like to talk about something else. I decided that I didn't have to share my pain with everyone. I decided to enjoy what was going on around me, and I walked on to the next town.

In the next *refugio*, the *hospitalera*, Laura, looked at my feet while I was cleaning them in the courtyard and asked, "What's wrong with your feet?"

"Nothing's wrong with my feet," I replied. I was on my new path.

She looked at me strangely and said, "No, something is wrong with your feet."

I thanked her and explained that I was fine.

She looked at me firmly and said, "No. Something's wrong with your feet. I've walked the *Camino* three times. Something's wrong with your feet. Come with me."

I felt conflicted and hesitated. I had found courage and peace in accepting my fate. It was strange to have come to terms with it only to think a respite might be near. Laura did not budge. She told me to pick up my boots and follow her.

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She escorted me to the cobbler who looked at my boots and informed me that the insoles were the wrong size. He showed me how the heel of my foot was coming down on the insole incorrectly. He immediately created new ones for me. I had to admit that they felt better.

Next, Laura took me to the pharmacist who looked at my feet and explained that I was allergic to the tape that held the gauze patches in place. It turned out that the red, bumpy, scaly, itchy patches around the blisters were a rash generated by the allergy. She gave me some cream and a special, hypoallergenic tape. Finally, Laura escorted me back to her office at the *refugio* where she handed me two of the largest sanitary napkins I had ever seen. I politely declined explaining that I did not need them.

She said, “No, they’re for your sandals. Part of your problem is that your feet aren’t getting enough air. Remove the adhesive on the bottom of the pad, put them on the base of the sandal, and step into the sandal with the cotton facing up. Try it.”

I did as I was told, and it was—*heaven! Heaven!* It felt as though I was walking on marshmallows. Prior to that moment, I would prepare my feet and then put on my sandals when I arrived at the *refugio*. My friends would laugh because I would walk hunched over like an old lady because my feet were in so much pain that I could barely stand up. With this innovation, I was prancing down the street, so happy in my sandals cushioned with sanitary napkins.

I learned a great lesson that day about getting to the destination, *Innovate (number thirteen)*. Look for ideas that are outside of your comfort zone. I felt pretty silly the first time I put those sanitary napkins in my sandals. Afterward, I felt so good that I didn’t care what anybody else thought. “Oh, there’s that strange American with the blisters and the sanitary napkin sandals.” Well, as noted earlier, we can’t always count on the things that got us to our current destination to get us to the next. We have to talk with people we don’t normally talk with and try things that seem out of the ordinary. We need to read something new and different; we never know where the next idea or connection will come from that will move us one step closer to our destinations.

After meeting Laura, I felt better. I wasn't in as much pain. Interestingly, this is when my *Camino* experience really started to change. To receive a certificate for completing the *Camino*, a pilgrim must walk one hundred kilometers (about sixty miles) of the path.

Susan and I had walked a little over four hundred miles when kids started showing up along the path. In the summer, high schools drop off busloads of teenagers along the *Camino* so they can walk the last one hundred kilometers, pick up their certificate, and have something noteworthy to put on their resumes. The *Camino* becomes one big *fiesta*.

We went from a tranquil, reflective *Camino* to "party time." But, more annoyingly, they stole our trick. Having boundless energy, the *niños* (children, as we called them) would send a sprinter ahead to grab the beds. The "real" pilgrims, Susan, Lori, and those who had started in Roncesvalles, would arrive and the beds would be gone. We would either sleep on the floor or walk on to the next city hoping that other *niños* had not captured those beds too. It was frustrating but we kept our humor by adding lines to Susan's new poem, *¿Niños, niños, porqué hay niños?* Children, children, why are they here? We wished that they would go away.

But they didn't go away, and we adapted. We learned to ask the *niños* where they thought they might end up that day and walk to a different location. We spoke to the *hospitaleros* who, having walked the *Camino*, understood our plight and would try to find us the quietest space in the *refugio*, occasionally offering us their private rooms. I learned, *Niños, niños, porqué hay niños? . . . Why not?* (number fourteen). All journeys involve nuisances along the road. By accepting them, whatever they may be, we can all get to the destination, regardless of our differing intentions. The road needs to be wide enough for all people to reach the destination and wider still so that we can give way to those who might upset us along the way. After all, the *Camino* is different for everybody.

We arrived in Santiago and went immediately to the cathedral. For most pilgrims, this is where their *Camino* ends. My *Camino* was not yet finished. I started to cry. I fell down in the cathedral. I was so grateful to be there, but I knew it was not yet complete for me. I told my friends along the *Camino* that it was my

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3G *Camino*. Three Generations. I walked the *Camino* for my mother, myself, and my future generations.

I did not tell them that along the path, I carried the ultrasounds of the two children that I had miscarried. I did not know how to throw them away. For months they had sat on my desk at home because I didn't know what to do with them. At the cathedral, I wrote a letter to St. James. I put their pictures with the letter and I turned their souls over to the care of St. James. I explained that I couldn't carry them with me anymore. If I wanted to truly arrive at the destination, I had to let go of them. I then placed the letter and their pictures in a box at the cathedral. As soon as I did that, I had the most incredible feeling of Hope. I didn't even know that I had lost it. I knew I had been very, very sad, but I didn't know that hope had vanished. In the moment that I let them go, hope returned for me. I knew that I would return to Madrid and that I would have a family. I had arrived in "Santiago." I had arrived at *my* destination.

Although our "Santiagos" are different, getting to the destination is possible for all of us if we heed the *Camino's* lessons. I did get to Santiago. Today, I have a mother who has been free of cancer for five years. I have a wonderful husband who has supported me in every journey I have taken since then. And, I have two beautiful daughters, Savannah and Fiona. Ultimately, I learned to *Count Your Blessings—Not Your Blisters (number fifteen)*.

¡Buen Camino!

Shannon Wallis

About Shannon Wallis. . .



SHANNON WALLIS is the Director of Worldwide Leadership Programs for Microsoft's Sales Marketing and Services Group. She is an executive coach, consultant, and teacher with twenty years of international work experience in leadership development and organizational change. Prior to her current role, she consulted to and held management positions in Fortune 100 businesses as diverse as Coca-Cola, Universal Studios, and Microsoft. Her degrees include an MBA from Duke University and a BS in Human Development and Social Policy from Northwestern University. She is an active member of the National Speakers Association.

In 2002, she completed El Camino de Santiago, a 500-mile walking pilgrimage across northern Spain. Her keynote address, "Getting to the Destination: 15 Lessons from The Camino," is popular with individuals and organizations embarking on major change.

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