

## The Ends of the Earth...Ever Been There?

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## THE ENDS OF THE EARTH...EVER BEEN THERE?

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In 2018 it was as if my pilgrimage as a doctor had come to arrive at the ends of the earth. In Latin, Finisterre. Finisterre, the place where ground turns to ocean. Finisterre, the uniquely chosen sacred final destination of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela; a 780km pilgrimage in southern Europe ending in Spain. Ending in Finisterre, if you choose to press on past Santiago for 3 days of walking to the rock cliffs of Finisterre overlooking the Atlantic. The place where ground turns to ocean and if you wanted to walk onward it would not be possible to continue in the way you had arrived by foot. Finisterre is a place for contemplation, transcendence, and vulnerability. I had arrived at my figurative Finisterre in my career.

Perhaps you have come to a place in your career path that stopped you in your tracks and forced you to consider how it was that you had arrived in this place. Arrived in this state of being a doctor. The years go by so fast. How was it that you got here? Perhaps virtues that once guided you through medical training and the first years of practice are no longer able to buoy you this place in your career. Perhaps you haven't had a moment to catch your breath and consider the virtues that guide your career. Perhaps the conversations of life you are having are ending or are already ended and you are just now realizing this new reality. Lastly, perhaps you have arrived at a place in your career path where it was time to let go of the things that helped you travel thus far. Far enough to arrive in this place where you find yourself. Perhaps it is time for letting go? A time for change. Perhaps change has happened and you are just realizing it now?

I didn't know it then but 2018 was my arrival at my career's Finisterre. A doctor for 18 years, and the end of the earth in my career experience at that moment in time. The place in my career where the ground beneath my feet felt unsettled and the future was unknown and there was no way to travel onward. And similar to walking the Camino de Santiago and arriving in Finisterre, there were three real rituals that I was performing, but I did not realize it so clearly at the time.

The Camino de Santiago is marked with scallop shells as signposts. Scallops are a sign giving direction and so upon arrival at the Ends of the Earth the first ritual is to contemplate what brought you here. While eating tapas of scallops consider the direction of your life and what has contributed and led to your arrival at the Ends of the Earth. The second ritual is to burn something you have brought; perhaps a love letter, a greeting card, a picture, or a tightly held belief that may no longer inform the conversations of your life. The third and last ritual is to leave behind something that brought you here but is no longer needed to carry you forward; perhaps a pair of shoes or socks. How then will you journey onward, the way only your shadow could take to your unknown future? So, three rituals I consider to be contemplative, transcendent, and vulnerable. Being contemplative of what brought you to this place while creating transcendent ashes of once important messages now traveling in the air and experiencing the vulnerability of letting go of the safe and familiar travel accompaniments. In my lived experience at my career's End of the Earth these rituals are not linear. These three rituals serve like a call and answer, and sometimes the answer is the call echoing across the waves. Rather than an answer, you are simply called deeper into the unknown. In 2018, I said goodbye to three mentors who had helped me to this place in my career. The virtues they instilled could carry me no further. I was appreciative to have had the relationships and fearful to let them go. There was certainly no way for them to help me move forward. In fact, in retrospect the conversations we were having, or I thought we had been having had ended some years before. It was only now in 2018 that I felt this deep

### **Finisterre\***

The road in the end taking the path the sun  
had taken, into the western sea, and the moon  
rising behind you, as you stood where ground  
turned to ocean: no way to your future now  
except the way your shadow could take, walking  
before you across water, going where shadows go,  
no way to make sense of a world that wouldn't  
let you pass, except to call an end to the way  
you had come, to take out each frayed letter  
you had brought and light their illumined corners;  
and to read them as they drifted on the late  
western light: to empty your bags; to sort this  
and to leave that; to promise what you needed to  
promise all along, and to abandon the shoes  
that brought you here right at the water's edge,  
not because you had given up but because now  
you would find a different way to tread,  
and because, through it all, part of you would  
still walk on, no matter how, over the waves.

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\*David Whyte, *Finisterre, The House of Belonging*, from *David Whyte: Essentials*. ©2020 David Whyte. Reprinted with permission from Many Rivers Press, Langley, WA. [www.davidwhyte.com](http://www.davidwhyte.com)

in my core being. The reason they could not help me move forward was because the direction I was moving was not mine anymore. The frantic career development pace was a blur. I had become so caught up in all that I perceived was expected of me that I lost sight of what it was I wanted to do in life in the first place. There was just so much noise. It was a poignant time and I remember feeling failure, joy, relief, guilt, and betrayal all at the same time. They had helped guide me here and yet the virtues of those relationships could no longer carry me forward because those virtues were theirs, and never really trusted traveling companions of mine. Those virtues had become foreign to me. I honored their guidance in getting me here like the clam shells along the Camino, but I had to burn their letters, realize the conversations were stale and over, and say goodbye. Farewell. I had to revisit what was important to me. Why medicine? Why hospice and palliative care? Why at an academic medical center? Why me? Why now? Why ever?

In November 2019, in search of how I was to tread forward, I joined an eclectic small group of people from all backgrounds and from all around the globe at the Whitbey Institute on Whitbey Island off the coast of Washington state for the first of 3 three-day retreats over the next 2 years on Conversational Leadership<sup>†</sup> with poet David Whyte. Three days of gathering, listening, sharing, contemplation, writing, small group activities and sharing with the focus being the 7 core steps to conversational leadership. I awoke each morning around 4am and read and wrote for a couple of hours based on the material for that session over a cup or two of coffee while sitting



in the 40-degree damp northwest pacific air at a picnic table outside the retreat center. We started every morning with piano music and Tai Chi, followed by poetry, story and sharing sprinkled with art inspired large and small group activities to promote deepening awareness and experience of the themes. We spent time in the retreat center and outside in the natural beauty of Whitbey Island.

Conversational leadership is lived artistry that is discovered through seven core elements to guide you in developing your artistry; for me, my artistry in creating safe, welcoming spaces, and crafting language to promote healing and wellness. This stands in stark contrast to the strategic mindset of my career focused on tactics for achievements. Artistry

The seven elements are not linear but dynamically fluid and they are: Stopping the Conversation, Cultivating a Friendship with the Unknown, Coming to Ground, Cultivating Robust Vulnerability, Artistry, Making the Invitation, and the Harvest of Presence.

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<sup>†</sup> Conversational Leadership is transformative (<https://www.invitas.net>).

describes my way of being and my way of showing up in the world as a modality for doing rather than simply a strategic mindset for doing and achieving. Artistry is strategically relational.

Before the first gathering, David extended one of the most enriching invitations; David invited us to study the work of artists who were an inspiration in our work. As an aspiring photographer, writer, and storyteller, I chose documentary filmmaker Ken Burns because Ken Burns focus on the richness of emotion in his stories. Ken Burns exemplified the dichotomy between the subject and the story. His subjects (e.g., Civil War) were always told through story. Emotional stories. Translating what I had discovered from teaching communication in healthcare, the subject was communication, the delivery was story. The emotion of the story is what conveyed the subject matter.

My study of Ken Burns led me to study a whole host of storytellers/artists with some of the most impactful being Malcolm Gladwell, David Sedaris, Annie Leibovitz, Ron Howard, Jodi Foster, Steve Martin, Michael Crouser, Vivian Maier, John Mellencamp, Bruce Springsteen, and Maude Lewis. What inspired me most was their perspectives on what I have come to recognize as *emotional archaeology*. In other words, uncovering, discovering, examining, contemplating, and sharing stories through the emotional experience of story through spoken word, imagery, written word, song, music, videography, and any other medium that best expresses the emotion of the lived human experience. What also inspired me was their courage to be vulnerable and take risk in their career to ensure that they could cultivate their artistry true to their core being.

Why do I care about stories anyway? Perhaps because I am still discovering my own. I took time in the early hours before the retreat started to journal about what matters and crafted the beginnings of a list of virtues that would carry me forward: humility, curiosity, generosity, love, kindness, joy, authenticity, presence, prayer, listening, and sincerity. Unknown to me at the time, I was starting to cultivate my artistry – the gift that I offer those around me that keeps on giving. What is my artistry and how would I (re-)discover my artistry was core to this transformational process and my being. I would need to take risks to refocus my life and career. Artistry is core to how I show up in the world. Once again it is a way of being.

Perhaps you have enjoyed time in retreat or a contemplative pilgrimage like the Camino. Times in retreat and contemplation are often brief and separated by what seems like too much time. Even though I have yet to journey on the Camino, I now journey every day in my career as though I am on a contemplative path trusting in the signs leading beyond the horizon, resting in the moment, and letting go what becomes too heavy to carry forward as I sort through my vulnerabilities to be present in the world. Here is how I translate Conversational leadership to my daily cultivation of my artistry and my way of being in life.

## **STOPPING THE CONVERSATION**

What conversation are you having now that you need to stop? I had several conversations that I just needed to stop having. In fact, the noise of all the conversations was at one point too much noise to even be heard. Those tended to be conversations of delayed gratification. When I achieve this, I will do that. How do I achieve this or that? How can I make it go faster or slower? Today as I journey the Camino of my career, I am keen to recognize who is speaking, who is listening and how the conversations are experienced. I speak less and I stop all together when nobody is really listening. I listen more. I move on when I want and stay longer when a real conversation is being held. I am more intentional about who I bring to the table and who I do not.

What promises are the pillars of your existence? One promise I needed to break was a promise of obligation. In stopping my conversations with my mentors, it was a radical letting go of promises made and now broken. I misinterpreted the stale conversations and took missteps and I felt vulnerable. I felt crumpled up and thrown away. As I mentioned, I remember feeling failure, joy, relief, guilt, and betrayal all at the same time. I learned that being on a threshold of where your life is and what you want now is about the conversation between who you are and who you are becoming. What promises do you need to break? Avoid the temptation to make new promises too quickly.

## **CULTIVATING A FRIENDSHIP WITH THE UNKNOWN: ASKING A BEAUTIFUL QUESTION**

How many packs of obligations do you carry on your journey? How heavy are they to carry? How many have you set down by stopping the conversation? Let them go. Set them all down along the path and rest. Just, let them go. Have you ever been exiled? I felt exiled when I said goodbye to my mentors, and it was in that moment that I realized I have just 3 choices. I could carry on and deny it and act like nothing had happened. Which I did for a long while. I could become cynical like the strategic mind will direct you and lead conversations of frustration. Which I also did for a long while. Or I could look deep inside myself and find a place where my voice could once again carry volume and meaning. Which I do now. And once I was able to speak of my exile, the path home became clearer. These days I travel my career Camino with a light pack and a fresh voice always considering my artistry and what questions are calling to me that I need to speak into the world with my ever-regenerating voice. I have something to say, and you do too.

## **COMING TO GROUND: MAKING CONTACT WITH THE COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION**

In the silence created by stopping the conversation, what new ground will you discover? What step will you take? I would recommend not stepping too soon. There is plenty of life and career ground to cover by

standing in place and surveying all that is around you. Be aware. Slow down. Be intentional about your next step and pause not once but many times before you set your next step firmly on new grounds. Rest in the quiet and do not hesitate to leave the load and travel on with only the essentials of a day pack. That is enough for today. Keep it simple.

## **CULTIVATING ROBUST VULNERABILITY: ASKING FOR VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE HELP**

What are your vulnerabilities? If you fail, who would you be? Ask those around you about your vulnerabilities and if they are honest, they will tell you. Acknowledging your vulnerability has a quality of surrender and may be a behavior that runs counter to the prevailing culture and norms. Be brave. Have courage. Humility and curiosity help to cultivate a softening and gentleness that allows for the acknowledgement of your vulnerability. Like exile, find your voice and speak your acknowledgement of vulnerability into the world. Daring to bring your vulnerability into relationship is the invitational nature to request help both visible and invisible.

## **ARTISTRY: FOLLOWING THE PATH OF VULNERABILITY AND REVELATION**

How will you find your own physical practice of this artistry that you offer as you journey on your career Camino? What gift will your presence and engagement offer to others that will keep on giving long after the conversation has ended. For me it is solely based on the virtue of generosity. I am perpetually reflecting on the invitation I am making to others to create space and language to foster healing and well-being. Core to this is the awareness of emotional archaeology informing the experiences and memories that we all may live and relate to. This is the focus of my artistry by being just brave enough to speak my vulnerability into the world if only for a moment.

## **MAKING THE INVITATION: THE CRUCIAL MARKER OF A REAL CONVERSATION**

What invitations are you making? Are you too busy to be bothered? Are you too strategic to be interrupted to consider a new thought or way of approaching an issue? For me, the question is, "Cory are you being generous with your time, presence, and expertise with a listening ear and a humble and curious mind?" For me, I want my invitation in life to be foundationally rooted in virtue of generosity. That was not a virtue guiding my being in previous season of my life or career. The seasons of our life come with invitations. Consider the invitations that you are making to those around you. Invitations are a way of risking ourselves;

being vulnerable. Consider the conversations that flow from these invitations. My conversations are richer and informed with attention to emotional archaeology.

## **THE HARVEST OF PRESENCE**

Are you living a life of conditional waiting or delayed gratification, awaiting dying as a sign for the harvest of your life or are you harvesting during living? I harvest the beauty of my Camino of life every day. I do not need to await a retreat or a trip to Spain. Although, I hope to walk the Camino someday. I harvest generosity and joy with the conversation with a nurse to care for a patient, the listening to a patient or family member, conversations at the dinner table, or the cheers from the sideline of the soccer field. Are you putting valued plans on hold, waiting to have enough money, enough time, fewer children at home, more children at home, or are there other barriers that are holding back your abilities to harvest in the present? Are you being too strategic? The time is now.

## **CROSSING THE UNKNOWN OCEAN**

I dismantled the strategic mindset that had occupied my first 18 years as a doctor and now am living more fully in the poetic mindset with attention to my artistry now 23 years in and it has been transformational. For me, the strategic mindset is outcome focused like a horse at a racetrack with blinders striving to achieve without notice of those around you. The artistic mindset is a different strategy that rests in an abiding trust that the outcome will be achieved in one form or another and essential to that outcome is the experience of those working together towards that outcome. Artistry as a way of being is for life, not just my career. There is no difference in my way of being in my career and in my personal life. Life is grounded in a poetic mindset with attention to my own artistry. The most important influence on my medicine came from the humanities and not medicine. I was able to stop the conversations of my life that were no longer contributing to who I was becoming 18 years into being a doctor. I spent a great deal of time wrestling with the unknown. Should I leave medicine? Should I leave for a different institution? What should I do about cultivating my artistry and how will my environment respond? I came to terms with the courageous conversations of my life and cultivated my abilities to acknowledge my vulnerabilities and speak them into the world as invitations for visible and invisible help. Through new conversations people helped.

I burned virtuous notions of fame and promotion and rested my soul in the humanities of caring and being. Less is more. I defined my artistry as creating healing spaces to listen to the rich textures of stories and to craft language of healing and well-being. I made many promises, and one is simply to be generous and hopefully inform the invitational nature of my being with generosity. I journal daily and I harvest the new direction of my life aligned with artistry and through close attention to emotional archaeology through my personal life, clinical practice, leadership, research, and teaching.



Like the call and answer, some calls are still echoing, and I am listening. I have new conversations and mentors that are truer to my virtues. I encourage you to consider discovering what it is you may need to live more fully in the world because there will always be more questions patiently awaiting you. What virtues inform your life? What invitations are you making? Are you humble and curious? What is your artistry? What would be on your beggar's board if you lost everything? What conversations do you need to stop? What conversations are you having that are already over? Are you in exile? How will you return home? From where will your voice speak? Will you speak your vulnerabilities aloud in search of help? What promises do you need to break? What packs of obligation do you need to set down? What are the essentials for your day pack? What will you harvest today? In my experience, these questions and others will serve as constant companions on your Camino and are the tools that emotional archaeologists use to cultivate their artistry and bravely examine their way of being. ■

## Biographical note

Cory Ingram, M.D., M.S., FAAHPM, is a Hospice and Palliative Care Consultant at Mayo Clinic. Dr. Ingram is the Director of Quality for Mayo Clinic Hospice and the Quality and Safety Curriculum of the Hospice and Palliative Medicine Fellowship. Dr. Ingram also shares his expertise through teaching as an assistant professor of both Palliative Medicine and Family Medicine with the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine and Science and a Co-Director of Communication in Healthcare in the Program for Professionalism and Values. Dr. Ingram is a fellow of the American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine and has served in multiple capacities in the humanities and is the Editor in Chief of the AAHPM Quarterly and in his tenure, they are launching an *Artist in Residency* section to the publication. He has been featured at the Canadian Virtual Hospice and holds Storytelling workshops with Canadian health care institutions. Dr. Ingram is currently working with the palliative care units in Ottawa using the 55-Word story as a modality to improve meaning, purpose and quality of life. He is also a published photographer and poet.