

Chapter 15

Next Steps

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”

Lao Tzu

For more than the last twenty years I have been mostly sitting! The mainly sedentary nature of my work came with a toll. I am convinced that all this sitting has contributed to my feeling of being stuck. The exceptions have been brief market visits which had me vigorously walking around many of the world’s cities from Seoul to New York, trying to capture in a short space of time as much information as possible of the market and culture around me. I often found I would shed a few pounds out of sheer curiosity; fuelled by fascination at the world around me, I would walk until my feet and legs ached. Only these concentrated bursts of “free exercise” have punctuated an otherwise ball-and-chain work-life stuck at a desk, or in meetings, or taking long flights and drives.

At this juncture in my life I find myself yearning to get my body moving. Although yoga has become my preferred form of exercise, it is not the type of movement in which my body carries me from A to B. The time has come when I am hungry not only for some real me-time, but for time in motion, well away from it all, mindfully walking over a long distance, a very long distance in fact. I am going on a pilgrimage!

Not long after Erik left, I was watching a documentary on the Japanese TV channel *NHK World* about pilgrims who walk 1200 kilometres around the island of Shikoku to visit eighty-eight Buddhist temples, across hilly and beautiful terrain. I have visited the island before, but only briefly. Aside from the mostly Japanese pilgrims who complete the Shikoku circuit on foot, due to time constraints many others do this pilgrimage using motorised transport, or in sections. Of all the pilgrims, there is a small number of foreign tourists who travel to Japan for the spiritual walking trail. It takes about eight to ten weeks to complete it on foot, depending on one’s level of fitness. So it’s not for the faint-hearted. Watching that documentary then, I remember distinctly a powerful emotion like, Gee, I wish I could just go there right now, escape from here for a while and walk this *funk* off, find myself and get fit. What has my life become? Only moments ago, my future looked pretty secure and set, thank you!

Boom, my dad died. Enter grief and feelings of powerlessness at not being able to perform CPR to save him.

Boom, Erik and I struggled to reconnect intimately for years before he left, then he left. Enter loss plus financial worry regarding the roof over my head.

Boom, my job was on the rocks. Enter disillusionment and more financial worry.

Oh, how I wish I had had the money and time to cast away, to escape back to my beloved Japan for a while, to do that long walk and somehow come to my senses. Yet, at the time, I simply did not have the means to do it. But now I do! Being recently *freed* from my employer, I am able to take a year off and breathe, find myself and set things in motion for a new life, a sabbatical of sorts. To boot, I have just received the final financial allocation from my late father's estate to help with the cost of the trip. The pilgrimage has all of a sudden become possible by two events occurring in the same month.

It was a Sunday morning in August, just days after receiving the severance offer at work on 8/8, that I woke up and the penny of possibility dropped. The year of so-called garden leave is a gift from the Universe. It will give me time and muse to write my book, an endeavour my job was increasingly standing in the way of anyway. But that particular Sunday the clarity dawned on me lovely and slowly - *I can now do my pilgrimage in Japan* - Whoo Hoo!! It just has to be part of my spiritual journey.

The decision was easy - no questions, no doubt, just absolute joy. The meaning of 8/8 was crystal clear: 88 temples!

Three days later I was in Dublin on what was to be my very last business trip of my eleven years with the company. In the airport bookshop I thought I'd take a peek at the Irish author section and one book jumped out at me from its position on the shelf: *Mindful Walking* by Hugh O'Donovan. Of course! How could I think otherwise? When the student is ready the teacher always appears. I started reading on the flight back to Germany, high above the Irish Sea, wondering if I could, by lucky chance, catch sight of the Isle of Man below, before the flight veered southeast to continental Europe. Surprisingly the flight path actually went up northeast, towards Liverpool, before flying down across the UK, so I got the most amazing view of the island from the air as an unexpected bonus. That is what I call abundance!

I am still working on that book bought in Dublin in preparation for what will be another life-changing event. I feel an excited thrill just thinking about it, getting ready for it, and the day will soon arrive when I am actually there walking, walking, walking, with very little in terms of comfort, carrying everything on my back, up and down the hills, up and down the many steps to the temples,

totally alone except for the pilgrims, sleeping who knows where, but so connected, connected to everything! On many days I will be walking with sea views too. It will be heaven.

As if in agreement with my plan, the Universe provided a little more encouragement recently, and it is much needed too, as it is now turning colder as I write and the prospect of being outdoors in the elements for two months is a bit less appetising. Through the German-Japanese Association, I was able to attend a talk by world traveller Thomas Bauer, so I would actually get to meet someone who had done the pilgrimage. Immersed in his pictures and prose, I felt myself already there. An accomplished walker of multiple world pilgrim routes, Thomas was kind enough to share advice about the practicalities. Compared to the legendary Camino de Santiago in Europe, he explained, the Shikoku Henro is a radically serious endeavour for most of the pilgrims, who do not join in much banter with their fellow walkers; language constraints notwithstanding, they tend to do it in silence. He also talked about it being his first visit to Japan and the challenge of feeling so utterly foreign himself. For him, the journey turned around some of his prejudices about the culture.

Already familiar with those “gaijin” experiences, the main thing I look forward to is it being *the slowest journey of my life*, step by step, over a thousand kilometres on foot, relying on my own body, being cut off from everyday life, getting back to human basics, losing and finding myself. The more I prepare for this trip, though, the more I’m scared. I can imagine myself before taking that first step out onto the road saying *What are you doing girl? Are you crazy?* But I will breathe in deeply and mindfully put that first foot down, connecting with the earth. I will try to just keep on walking, rhythmically with my breath, as slowly as needed. There will be times on the mountains that it will be better to look back and see how far I’ve come, than to see how far I’ve still got to climb. I accept that it will be as much of a challenge mentally as physically because I really do want to consciously “feel the fear and do it anyway”, as they say, to build my courage and resilience so that I can take on new adventures in life. That is my goal. Whether I finish the pilgrimage or not, just by trying, my confidence must surely come back. Naturally, I’ll be encountering fellow human beings on their journeys too. Giving and receiving support on the route will keep me going.

I’ve booked the tickets! Should I shave my hair off to avoid lugging around hair care products? How will I get on without make-up? Without my Earl Grey? Can I afford the occasional night in accommodation? Should I plan it all out meticulously, how many kilometres per day, which shelters on which nights, or should I just go with the flow and let it all unfold? Will my Japanese adventure become material for a second book? These and more questions will occupy me as soon as I finish this manuscript. Okay, dear reader, that is a fat lie; these questions are already keeping me up at night in anticipation!

So I have at least two major adventures ahead in 2018: an epic pilgrimage and publishing this book, both of which, I know, will take me out of my comfort zone. And that is kind of the point. I want them to be catalysts for change and growth.

The old “disconnected” way of life up till now was meant to be what it was. It is not the way forward for me, and that is good, I am glad it’s over. Change is called for in the second half of my life. It’s time for me now to take off the heavy cloak of my old life, drop it to the ground, and walk forward less encumbered. A crisis really is a decision point, a turning point, an opportunity to decide—consciously—to live differently, with more courage and creativity in one’s steps, pivoting to a path that is allowed to be a mystery. It will unfold how it’s meant to.

As I prepare for this epic adventure and the date looms closer, it becomes clear that I will be breaking through a kind of barrier. I will be accomplishing something that will stretch me, reconditioning myself to deal with my experiences differently, in a way that serves me better than before. I will be listening out for the answers to my prayer.

I think I have the fortitude to complete this crazy endeavour. Imagine the satisfaction if I do! I hope my back holds up. I hope I can meditate about angels supporting me when my feet feel like lead. Perhaps it will feel like floating at times. Whatever awaits, I am glad to be taking real steps in my life, moving forward. I wonder what the next fascinating lesson in life will be.

Surprises lay in store for sure.

