



The Flourishing Culture Podcast Series

“500 Miles on the Camino de Santiago”

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Al Lopus

Male: Welcome to the Flourishing Culture Podcast, where you’ll learn how to build a flourishing workplace culture that drives the ministry impact of your organization, your church, or your company, brought to you by the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. Now here’s your host, BCWI president, Al Lopus.

Al Lopus: Hello, and thanks for joining us today. Today’s podcast is something completely different. Normally, I’m the one asking the questions. In the next few minutes, the questions are actually going to come straight at me. Playing the role of host today is Mark Cutshall. As a professional writer and creative consultant, Mark is a member of the team of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute. He’s a long-time friend, and I have a good idea of what he’s about to pull out of his sleeve as we talk. Welcome, Mark, and lead us on.

Mark Cutshall: Al, what can I say but welcome to The Flourishing Culture Podcast? Back in August, you took a little journey, a journey of a lifetime, really, a journey that lasted 35 days in which you walked 500 miles across the northern tier of Spain. You’ve shared with me privately how this spiritual pilgrimage, as you call it, affected you as a follower of Jesus, and I’m curious in the next few minutes to find out what it has meant to you and your work as president of BCWI.

Al: That’s right, Mark. The experience certainly was a significant one as I did this with my daughter. I’ve realized clearly there’s a story inside that I’d like to share with you and our podcast audience about what I experienced and how leaders and anyone who wants his or her life to count for advancing the kingdom of God here on earth might come away from such an experience.

Mark: Well, we have a literal path to go down, and I’d like to open it up with a story. Give us a quick flyover of this 500-mile journey you and your daughter Lane walked, where it took place, and why you did it.

Al: Well, first of all, I did it this summer from June 24 to August 4, and we walked the Camino de Santiago. What that means is the Way of James. *Santiago* is Spanish for James and *camino* is the way, so it's the Way of James. Now James, of course, is the apostle (Peter, James, and John, one of the three closest disciples of Jesus), and the legend goes that his bones are actually buried in western Spain, not far from the western coast of Spain.

For over a thousand years, Christians have walked the Camino de Santiago for a lot of different reasons, and literally millions of Christians have walked this. They do it to grow closer to God or perhaps discover or redefine their purpose in their lives. We started out in a French town called Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in France. It's right at the bottom of the Pyrenees mountains. It happens to be the trail that Napoleon took his troops over this mountain to attack Spain at one point, and I just am glad that I was not part of that army, because that would have been a tough hike as a part of an army marching in formation.

Mark: Napoleon aside, Al, when you started out, what was your prayer as you set out inside?

Al: I started out praying, "Lord, here I am. What do you have for me?" I really started with open hands and an open heart for God to speak to me as I walked a million steps in that 500-mile journey, and I wasn't disappointed.

Mark: Well, give us a picture of how you started out that first day on the Camino de Santiago. Put us on the road with you and Lane, your daughter, that first day.

Al: I was recovering from jet lag, having flown from Seattle first to Paris and then a small flight down to where we started. It was a bright sunny day. It was 10:00 in the morning, and we had mapped out what the next day would look like, at least the first couple hundred yards of it. When we started off it was all downhill, down about 200 or 300 yards to the bed of a river. From then on it was all uphill, and I mean it was all uphill.

We had our 25-pound packs. We stayed in *albergues*, they call them (another word for hostel). We walked about eight miles that first day up to the first hostel, as they recommended. We broke up that mountain climb up the Pyrenees into two different days. So we climbed about halfway up on the first day to a place called Orisson and bunked in for the night.

Mark: So 8 miles down, 492 to go. True confession. How did your feet feel after that first day?

Al: My feet were fine the first day, but here I am a couple of months after getting back, and the bottoms of my feet are still a little numb.

Mark: Is Dr. Scholl on your speed dial? Is that what I can infer here?

Al: Yeah, I should have consulted him before I went.

Mark: So as you went along, say a little bit about where the camino became your own journey with God.

Al: Well, each day, my daughter and I would walk along, and we walked together, at least where we were seeing each other. We had different paces, but we walked together all along. We stayed at the same places. As we walked our own pace, I had a lot of time to reflect on my life. I had just turned 65 on this trip, and 65 is kind of a benchmark for people in their work life in our culture, and I was really seeking, "Okay, God. I have open hands and an open heart. What is it that you want me to take away from this?"

To be six weeks, basically, away from our culture, away from my lifestyle, away from nearly my entire family and team and everybody. We didn't have great access. We had no telephone coverage because of being in a foreign country. We had Internet coverage at various cafés and hostels and so on, but we really felt removed from the world we lived in, and it gave me a chance to really reflect on my life and my walk with God and my relationships with others.

Mark: That's fascinating, because it's truly reflective, as you shared with me. You mentioned a Scripture when you got back of some meaning for what Christ in the world meant to you in a new way. Talk about that.

Al: Well, the Scripture they use and that you see over there on the journey is, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." The way, which is *camino* in Spanish... "I am the way, the truth, and the life." I really felt that Christ is the way, as he described it. He is the truth. He is the life. That really spoke to me while I was there.

Mark: What was something else that caught your attention as you found yourself farther out from your point of destination and somewhere in the middle of the trip? I'm wondering if you ever thought, "Why am I doing this? I'm aching. I have a kinship with Saint James in his bones." Was there ever a place where you got in the trip to say, "I'm calling Uber, and I'm getting to the finish line"?

Al: Well, there was one point... My daughter had done some of this before. There was a place where we were walking into a city called León, and the walk was primarily through an industrial section. After walking in countryside for such a long time and enjoying nature and being outdoors and in the quiet, we decided to take a train for that part of the journey. The problem with the Uber app is unless you have Internet access it doesn't work.

One of the things I really enjoyed was the people we ran into. I ran into people from 25 different countries. I reflect on a couple from Denmark who were in the maritime industry, about my age. They

have grown children, and here they are walking along the Camino. There was another couple from South Africa. He was a banker and had run into some difficulties, and he was using this time of walking (even though he had part of his back fused; he wasn't carrying a pack) to think about a couple of key business meetings he was going to have upon his return.

I ran into and walked with a family of evangelical Catholics from Australia. It's interesting what they're involved in, and we had a chance to talk about that. I walked part of the time with a couple and their daughter who had just graduated from high school from Germany, and that was very interesting. Just to see and experience people from different cultures and different countries. There were some from the US as well.

We walked with a teacher from California. I walked with a priest from the Church of England for a while. It really showed me how even though we're in these very different cultures... There were even a number of South Koreans on this journey. Even though we're all from different cultures, we're all the same in so many ways. I noticed that people are really looking for meaning in their lives, and that came out in the journey as well.

Mark: So really, a journey of miles, a journey of spirit, a journey of Scripture, a journey of differing cultures, a journey of conversations and some commonalities of Christ, of the Spirit, in your own journey. Take us through that last day, Al. What was it like to reach that finish line, the cathedral of Saint James there on the western coast of Spain? Walk us through those last couple thousand yards and what you were noticing, both outside and maybe inside.

Al: Yeah, it was really an interesting day. We had stayed about 10 miles out, so it wasn't going to be a long day. We averaged 12 to 15 or 15 to 18 miles a day walking. The last day we worked it out that it would be about a 10-mile walk, so it wasn't a long walk for us, and it was a pretty easy walk. As we walked into Santiago, we would see where pilgrims had walked for a thousand years, and there are a lot of places for them to stay. You feel pretty fit after almost six weeks of walking.

So you're feeling pretty fit. You're walking into the city. You're feeling like you've made it. I mean, this is a long journey, day after day, mile after mile. "What's the next village? Where are we going to spend the night?" And finally, there we are. We've achieved the goal that was in front of us. There was just this sense of relief. My daughter, bless her heart, kind of broke down and cried. There was such an emotional sense. We have a picture. We took a selfie of us in front of the cathedral when we got there. It was an accomplishment. There's no question about it.

I trust you're enjoying our podcast. We'll be right back after this brief word about a valuable tool that can pinpoint the true measurable health of your culture.

Male: What if you could get an upper hand on unwanted turnover, relationship conflicts, struggling morale, and unproductive staff, and at the same time increase the effectiveness and impact of your organization? You can with the Best Christian Workplaces Employee Engagement Survey. This popular, proven resource pinpoints the true health of your workplace culture and ways to improve it.

You'll get a detailed breakout summary of the eight essential ways your culture and your organization can flourish, all from a principled, practical, faith-based approach that works. Join the more than 800 satisfied organizations, churches, and Christian-owned businesses who have said, "Yes." Sign up online today at bcwinstitute.org. The Best Christian Workplaces Employee Engagement Survey. It's your first important step on the road to a flourishing culture.

Mark: You mentioned earlier to me when you were revealing what the trip had meant to you of some things you brought back with you, some larger-than-life "ahas." Talk about those.

Al: It was interesting. About a week before we finished the trip, we spent two full days at a Benedictine monastery where three monks live and host people. We stayed three nights and two days at this monastery, and it gave me a chance to sit and reflect and meditate and pray and begin to summarize my reflections. Again, being away from my life and my culture was really helpful in that regard.

I came to realize my priorities. Clearly, my family, my wife, my daughters, the most important relationships I have next to Christ himself, and I really reflected on "Okay, there I am at this stage. What's important? What relationships are important to me for the rest of my life?" I've always regarded work as pretty important, but again, the analogy of in your last days on your deathbed nobody ever says they wish they had worked more, and I thought about my relationships.

Another thing that really is clear to me is the world needs Christ now more than ever. You see Spain, and you can imagine it at its glory in 1500. Here we are over 400 years later, and they've declined since that peak. Christianity was such a big part of Spain at that point. You would hear about the Knights Templar and see the cathedrals they built, and you realize that Christianity has declined in Spain, and we're experiencing that in *our* country.

Gosh, but the world needs Christ now more than ever. That particularly rang out to me. When we think about the issues we have, immigration, conflicts with various countries, and so on. What is it all about? That was another one. Another one... The world needs Christ now more than ever, but what about *me*? What's *my* role in that? I walked away feeling like when it comes to my work here at the Best Christian Workplaces, and I thought a lot about that...

Am I finished with this race? Where am I on this path? I realized I'm closer to the beginning of the race than the end, and that came to me on day 29 in kind of an epiphany experience. I am in the race, and I'm in the race to win, and I don't even see the finish line in front of me. This isn't going to be a year or

two or three or five. It might be ten, but I don't see the finish line in front of me. So, regarding my work with Best Christian Workplaces, I'm closer to the beginning of the race than I am at the end, and that came to me in an experience that was emotional, which is unusual for me, and clear.

I really got the sense I'm supposed to run the race God has given me to run and that he'll take care of the rest of it. There are other people and other things he'll arrange to take care of, but I know he's going to take care of it. Also I came to realize that, yes, my work at the Best Christian Workplaces, where we have this vision that Christian workplaces should set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world, is my primary calling. The idea of healthy, loving cultures in the body of Christ is the core of Christ's heart, so that's one place our hearts intersect, I know.

I'm also very involved, and a lot of people don't know this, but I'm the chair of a Christian nonprofit called the Nicolás Fund for Education, and I was part of a team that helped to start this. It serves the poor in Guatemala who were involved in a civil war. These are Mayan descendants, and they were really hurt by the civil war over 30 years up until the 90s. So we started a school there for the children who typically would not have a chance to get an education beyond sixth grade.

That has been great work. We love seeing that they are breaking the cycle of poverty, especially for this next generation, through education. While that's not my primary calling, I clearly have a heart for it, but I really got a sense I should do that out of obedience as I serve the poor, the naked, the hungry, as Christ calls us to. So that became clear to me, that yep, the Best Christian Workplaces is my primary calling and the Nicolás Fund for Education is something that I'll continue in that role out of obedience.

The final thing, my core purpose. I had a chance to do a life plan just before I went, and my core purpose coming out of that, and it really reinforced itself on the camino, was to reflect Christ by being a catalyst for positive change, inspiring others to excellence. I really want to feel that's exactly what I should be doing. To be in relationship with Christ, to reflect his love by being a catalyst for positive change...that's what we're doing here at the Best Christian Workplaces. So a long answer to your question. A lot came out as I was walking along, and just to let it happen. It wasn't something I structured. It just happened.

Mark: Well, extremely personal and thoughtful, for sure. It's fascinating that for such a long journey you were taken to a new beginning, a new beginning of a new commitment, or a recommitment, really, to Christ and his body, to your work, holding the fullness of the other commitments God has given you with the Nicolás Fund. That all is so meaningful and something I know you're going to ruminate on with new passion and new vision.

We've talked before about how one question can open the door to a whole conversation, so maybe a bit of irony that we'll end our conversation on a question I'd love to ask you. After the trip and after the time you've had to think about it and share a little bit about it right now... For everyone listening,

especially for leaders, what's the one thing you want to hand to them with those... I loved your image of the open hands. What would you like to hand our listeners today that you'd like them to take with them after our podcast?

Al: Well, I reflect on a number of leaders we've interviewed on this podcast, and I go back to Ruth Haley Barton, who talks about having a structure in our lives to really reflect on who we are in Christ, because we can only bring to others in leadership who we are ourselves, and how having a daily devotions... On a weekly basis you have a sabbath. On a quarterly basis you might take a personal day to reflect, a quiet day in prayer. On an annual basis you might want to have a couple of days where you go away and sit and reflect and journal.

I believe that every 7, maybe 15 years (it has been 15 years since I've been here at the Best Christian Workplaces), to actually take a sabbatical, to do something. Take six weeks, take a couple of months, and just get out of your life and into a different culture, where you can really know the presence of God and confirm the call he has on your life and to know that he loves you unconditionally, and then from that you're able to serve purposefully in the way you know God wants you to serve.

That's the thing I came away with. I got clear direction. I got clear purpose and a clear vision of where I am in this journey, and I'd encourage leaders to do something like it. There are different caminos or journeys or walks, but to get away, get in nature, wherever it is you feel close to God, and that way you are going to know your purpose, you're going to know that God loves you, and you see the world through different eyes. That's the encouragement I would have.

It gives you a new not only energy but courage to face the battles, the mountains, the challenges you have in front of you. I've come back with new plans to reshape my daily habits and to continue to be, as they say in Australia, "match fit," as I learned from my Australian rugby-playing people. To be match fit. I plan to continue to be fit, and I've continued in the last couple of months to keep up on the health side, but really to reinvigorate my daily devotions, my prayer life, and of course, the focus on my work life. Maybe that's more than one thing, Mark, but that's what I come away with.

Mark: Thank you, Al. A reflection of a journey ended and perhaps a journey begun for those who have listened to your story, your 500-mile walk, your once-in-a-lifetime, or at least once every 15 years, walk of the Camino de Santiago. Al Lopus, president and cofounder of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, thank you for being our special guest today on The Flourishing Culture Podcast.

Al: Well, thank you, Mark. And to our listeners, thank you for investing your time in your workplace culture journey today. This is Al Lopus, reminding you that a healthy culture drives greater impact and growth for your organization, and I'll see you again soon on The Flourishing Culture Podcast.

Male: For a free transcript of today's podcast, visit blog.bcwinstitute.org. Join us next week for another one-to-one interview with a respected Christian leader. The Flourishing Culture Podcast with Al Lopus is a presentation of the Best Christian Workplaces Institute, helping Christian organizations set the standard as the best, most effective places to work in the world.