

Technology: An unknown pilgrimage

This month marks a significant anniversary in the history of technology: It is the 10-year anniversary of the iPhone. Apple celebrated by unveiling yet another iPhone, this one called the iPhone X.

And what was the new iPhone's crowning technological achievement? Facial recognition software that takes your facial movements and animates them on the poop emoji. How far we've come.

Apple's captivating products are a ready reminder of the significant place that personal technology occupies in our culture. Global media outlets flock to northern California anytime Apple is ready to put something new on offer.

Millions around the planet watch live online as the CEO performs the quasi-liturgical act of unveiling the newest gadget. It is a pilgrimage of sorts for many who desire to connect with something that seems to connect us all.

It used to be that a pilgrimage would put us in contact with something spiritual — the birthplace of a saint or a place that seems to allow a deeper connection to the divine. It's a "going away" to discover something about our tradition and something about ourselves that feels like home.

In 1994, Microsoft launched an ad campaign for its PC that asked, "Where do you want to go today?" There was a sense in the early days of the internet that we were headed somewhere new, down Al Gore's "information superhighway." It was a place of speed and utter convenience — no more trips to the bank, the store or even the front porch to grab the newspaper. It was all at our fingertips.

This technological sense of travel or pilgrimage ushered in by the internet has sapped travel of its travail. How do we recover or renew our desire to move through the world in a way that is not frictionless but actually invites uncertainty and asceticism?

Shortly after St. James the Greater was beheaded by Herod in the first century, his body was miraculously transferred to Spain. In the centuries that followed, visiting the saint's relics in Spain became one of the most famous pilgrimages in the world. Tens of thousands continue to make the journey by foot every year over hundreds of miles on the famous Camino de Santiago, the Way of St. James.

The Santiago de Compostela Cathedral that houses the relics is breathtaking. Apple's new headquarters pales in comparison to the architectural achievements of that earlier time.

Before pilgrims reach the majestic cathedral, there is a stretch of road that lies between Burgos and Leon in Spain on the pilgrimage route known as the meseta. It is a 100-mile stretch of windswept plains and dry dirt roads that is extremely hot in the summer months and excruciatingly boring to travel through.

Pilgrims have described the meseta as mind-numbing, dreary and tedious. One even compared it to a root canal. Many pilgrims opt to take an air-conditioned bus or train to avoid the dreaded meseta.

Strangely, others refer to the journey from Burgos to Leon as a "walking meditation" and "soul-reviving." One pilgrim said it was "quiet, serene, warm, sometime bare and, surprisingly, full of surprises." Another put it this way:

"The emptiness of the meseta offers little entertainment for our overstimulated senses. This part of the Camino can be a wonderful option to empty yourself and create a new mindset. The wonderful meseta has a lot of beauty to offer. This beauty does not like to be so obvious but will reveal itself after a few days walking. The beauty of the meseta may not be seen with the eyes in the first place."

So there's a paradox here. Same stretch of road, totally different reactions. So which is it, mind-numbing root canal or soul-reviving surprise?

The answer seems to lie in the imagination.

There are some that take the trip because it's a trendy, unique, off the beaten path type of vacation. They are tourists who enjoy collecting experiences. They go places to say they've been and take lots of pictures to post on Facebook. They ride the air-

conditioned buses past the meseta and count themselves among the proud denizens of our digital culture of speed and convenience.

And there are others who take the Camino pilgrimage because of a deep spiritual hunger. They are there with others, but their focus is on their relationship with God.

They seem to know something that the tourists don't know — that the ascent of the mind to God requires a certain level of detachment from the world and its trappings like air-conditioned buses and iPhones.

Without passing through the arid and dusty windswept plains, there is less appreciation for the glorious mountain at the end.

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