

# MY CAMINO

*Things I Learned Walking With Our Grandson*

A hiker with a large backpack and trekking poles is walking away on a dirt path through a dry, hilly landscape at sunset. The hiker is wearing a blue jacket and dark pants. The path leads into the distance, flanked by dry grass and hills. The sky is a warm orange color, and the sun is visible on the horizon. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

FRED DAWKINS

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FRED DAWKINS

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*This very personal memoir is dedicated to our six grandchildren, Jacob, Gareth, Elias, Hannah, Zina and Owen.*

*This narrative reflects everything that Nana and I have strived to achieve in building relationships with each and every one of you from memorable days at the cottage, to great family visits to Florida, to Nana days and sleepovers at our home. Reading stories together and making up stories like the Whopper series. All of these things involve the art of making memories resting firmly on the foundation of unconditional love. After this, I promise each of you a personal memoir of my life to share experiences and insight to read at times and to pass on to future family members.*

*A society grows great when old men plant  
trees in whose shade they shall never sit.*

*—Aristotle*

I'm sure Aristotle did not foresee a group of old men driving around in a pickup truck, shovels in hand, placing saplings. Instead, I believe he meant planting the seeds of wisdom and experiences from a life well lived. I can only imagine a great, great grandchild of mine reading some of my thoughts in seventy-five years which help solve a problem. What a legacy.

The message to readers is to build relationships in the here and now. Work at it. But remember: it has never been easier to write a book and self publish it. Write about your life for your family. These things make for a meaningful legacy.

# 1

## DECISION MADE

**H**ow could this have happened? How did I, a seventy-plus-year-old retiree, consider walking eight hundred kilometres in Spain, when a few short months before it had never entered my mind? I hadn't even heard of the Camino. I was no couch potato but was quite content walking on my treadmill three days a week for half an hour, followed by a ten-minute soak in the hot tub at the recreation centre in my retirement complex. That local scenery was all I needed. It reminded me of the Roman baths—exotic enough at my age and stage. Was it an urge to travel, like many retirees? No, I'd had my fill of that during my forty-seven years as an entrepreneur, visiting over thirty countries and more than forty American states. Besides, I was busy writing books and checking off items on my bucket list. Life was good. If anything, there wasn't enough time to do everything I had in mind. The very suggestion of abandoning my fully engaged extended middle age (old age doesn't exist) was preposterous.

Well, for starters, let me warn you. If anyone suggests watching the film *The Way*—starring Martin Sheen and his son Emilio Estevez, who also directed it—don't do it. Almost half of the people I met walking the route had seen the movie, and for many it was their first introduction to the Camino. The movie is pure bait, hooking many new pilgrims. Second, don't watch it with one of your grandchildren, especially one who is in great physical shape and thrives on any challenge he encounters, going out of his way to take on things that few people his age, never mind mine, would even contemplate.

Just kidding, *sort of*; the movie is a compelling story and it gives you just enough of a taste of the Camino to catch your interest. It doesn't tell you everything (more on that later), but it does challenge you. As the credits scroll, your brain starts to race. *Could I do that? Should I do that?* Your inner self warms to the idea while your knees and feet begin to cringe. You can feel a tiny knot in your stomach tightening. Your throat is a little dry. When you look across the room, your wife has an incredulous expression and you can almost hear her thoughts, which are clearly: *You wouldn't, would you?*

The credits continue to scroll. You are definitely in a confused state, where your imagination magnifies both your ability and your thirst for adventure. Then you make the mistake of looking right into the eyes of your grandson Jacob. *Wouldn't it be great to share an adventure like that with him? Nobody gets that opportunity!* Lacking a defence mechanism and abandoning the instinct to protect your aging body, without any hesitation you utter the fateful words: "I'm in if you are?" One second later your fate has been sealed by his "I'm in." Two words, just three different letters, he hadn't even said he was interested. It will forever be "your" idea. Not really. Our minds were totally in sync. I just said it first.

That was in December 2015. We agreed to go the following September, right after Jacob completed his contract for tree planting in northern Ontario. We all know how flighty kids are today. He would almost certainly pull out once he realized the downside of hanging out with someone almost fifty years older for six full weeks, right? No millennial could endure that; I mean, seriously, with the current pace of change, the generation gap between grandparents and grandkids is impossible.

For six months with occasional reassurance from my wife that nobody but her could tolerate me for six weeks, I waited for him to cancel. Then panic set in and I started to train in earnest. In my heart I knew that Jacob was not a quitter, and for that reason alone I couldn't quit either. After writing three books on entrepreneurship, my mindset dictated what would happen. Jacob finishes what he starts and so do I. That is what entrepreneurs do in business and in life. So that's how I found myself on a bus going from Pamplona to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port on September 21, 2016, gasping at every hairpin turn in anticipation of walking back.

# 3

## YOUNG MAN WITH A HORN

**M**y Camino was different than most, driven by the desire to build an adult relationship with my grandson. Jacob is our eldest grandchild, the oldest of five, having two brothers and two sisters with just one cousin on our side of his family but seven on the other. Birth order has a major impact on every family dynamic, arguably cutting carefree youth prematurely for the oldest and causing challenges for which none of us are prepared at a young age. Being the youngest or in the middle brings a completely different set of issues. I worry about all my grandchildren but, as the first, Jacob introduced me to many new possibilities in a rapidly changing world.

Like most of us are in our early twenties, Jacob was in the midst of figuring out life, a little confused and occasionally misdirected. Like any self-respecting grandfather, albeit with limited experience in that role, I wanted to help him get onto a solid life path. As we set out on this unique adventure, my hope was to build an unbreakable bond between generations separated by five decades. I suppose this was literally the initial step in seeking that type of connection with all six of my grandchildren, magnified by the reality that this was an opportunity I'd been denied due to the premature death of my grandfathers.

Jacob was born when I was forty-eight. Arguably my first fifty years brought about more change than any comparable period in history. World population moved from two billion to eight billion. The Soviet Union peaked and collapsed. Life expectancy improved. In the west, religion

declined. So much more had happened. Jacob's first twenty years were far different than mine, exposed to virtually everything and insulated from very little. What better way to know each other, warts and all, than spending almost every minute of six weeks together in the midst of a demanding physical challenge, at least for me. But how would this intergenerational relationship evolve? What if our needs and likes just didn't mesh? Well, it turns out that the Camino is a great equalizer, highlighted by the isolation from so many distractions that preoccupy us day by day. What I learned went far beyond the countless interactions between us.

Each person's Camino really is unique to them. Part of that difference stems from the people who you meet along the Way. Generally, you fade in and out with a dynamic group of *peregrinos* (Spanish for "pilgrim") who start as much as two days ahead of you or two days behind. Some pull ahead only to drop back. Others you never see again. Some just pass you by or you pass by them, but many move at a similar pace. It's a fluid group within which you see people along the trail or at cafés or albergues (the dormitories, pronounced *al-bear-gays*) off and on, sometimes within hours, days, or even weeks. Within that moving subset of pilgrims, a few people will stand out. Maybe it's because of their appearance or personality or intellect or often for their kindness, but you *will* notice them and you'll definitely remember them.

Within our travelling entourage, my grandson was one of the "memorables." That distinction should have been obvious from the beginning when Jacob arrived at our door the afternoon we were leaving for Spain. I had been struggling for weeks to reduce the weight of my backpack, eventually shrinking it down to about twenty-six pounds. As I found out later, that was still far too much. That is too much for almost everyone but Jacob, who arrived with a fifty-pound pack plus a newly purchased, slightly used saxophone in a separate case. I'd completely forgotten that he'd played the sax for one year in high school several years before. Whatever the reason, he felt this was a much-needed diversion along the trail. I will never understand why he needed it, but the sax definitely played a distinctive role in our tale.

My wife Karin's reaction was instant and quite logical. "Don't you think a harmonica is more appropriate?" Maybe so, but we all know that the concept of what's appropriate or not is fairly subjective. If you do decide to walk the Camino, there are no limits beyond your ability to carry whatever

you decide is suitable. You will undoubtedly overshoot the mark, but it will be your decision. For Jake, that meant a ten-pound saxophone and a lot more *and* he could handle it. My selfish reaction at the time, which I managed to keep to myself, was *Oh no, how will he be able to carry some of my things if I need help?* Of course that had always been my fallback plan: dear old Gramps might just need some help from his much younger, stronger, and faster grandson. I shouldn't have worried. No matter how much he was carrying, Jacob was ready to help me if I struggled in any way.

He also arrived wearing his favourite tree-planting shirt: flamboyant, flowery, noteworthy, not outrageous but definitely noticeable. Had you met us along the Way, you would have come to know this handsome young man in his colourful shirt, wearing a large, heavy backpack and carrying a saxophone, playing it from time to time, and travelling with his grandfather, which was unusual in itself. Did I mention that he also had a very healthy prominent dappled beard? So, would you have remembered him?

I'm pretty sure the answer is yes.



The key words here are *come to know* because that's the most important thing I was hoping for on my Camino. There is much more to tell, but what I found early on was a young man eager to try his Spanish, which pleased the local merchants to no end, often leading to praise for his efforts and a bigger piece of chorizo. A polite, thoughtful, and unique personality who related to others of any age, always willing to offer a helping hand, being neither saint nor sinner. All that in the first few days. But I was on the verge of the opportunity to know my grandson in a way that I suspect very few grandparents get to do. That was my mission. Anything else that might come out of my Camino would be pure gravy—and as it turned out, there was plenty of it, both figuratively and literally.

**Want more? Grab a copy of the full book at your favorite ebook retailer!**

## SELECT ENDORSEMENTS FOR FRED DAWKINS

The Entrepreneurial Edge non-fiction series (Dundurn Press)

### **Book One: *Everyday Entrepreneur: Making It Happen***

“Fred Dawkins has written a wonderful book about entrepreneurship unlike any other in the market. He brilliantly uses his storytelling skills to illuminate his subject in a way that makes the book a joy to read. You’re so wrapped up in the story that you may not realize how much you’re learning until you’ve turned that last page.”

—Terry Fallis, award-winning author of *The Best Laid Plans, Up and Down*, and others

“Fred Dawkins’s easy-to-read writing style belies the critical importance of his subject matter, including a complex set of essential entrepreneurial skills and the important role of entrepreneurship in the global economy.”

—Dr. Ajay Agrawal, Peter Munk Professor of Entrepreneurship at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, founder of the Creative Destruction Lab, and presented with the Order of Canada 2022

“Fred Dawkins has pulled together a wealth of knowledge and advice crucial to the successful entrepreneur in a highly readable fashion. It is a must-read for aspiring and seasoned entrepreneurs who are facing today’s complex, volatile, and uncertain world.”

—Dr. Sherry Cooper, former executive VP and chief economist at BMO Financial Group

## **Book Two: *Family Entrepreneur: Easier Said Than Done***

“In the age of Twitter, it warms the heart that ‘smallbizpreneurs’ still rule the roost and family business remains the proven formula.”

—Peter C. Newman, legendary Canadian journalist and broadcaster

“This second book in the series ought to become the bible for every entrepreneur and budding entrepreneur as it is full of very valuable, helpful, and vital advice. Very cleverly written.”

—Frank Weisinger, past national president of the Life Insurance Association (UK)

“Dawkins provides sage advice for anyone in a family business, emphasising how important it is to face the issues head-on as rationally as you can and not allow emotion to dominate. The valuable insights will guide you no matter where you are on the entrepreneurial time table.”

—Dr. Elizabeth Stone, dean of The Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph

## **Book Three: *Ageless Entrepreneur: Never Too Early, Never Too Late***

“Entrepreneurship is not just for the young. It is a mindset and it’s never too late to take charge of your life and become an entrepreneur. That is Fred Dawkins’s message in a nutshell and nobody tells the story better of how to make the leap successfully. Fred’s common-sense wisdom and experience shines through this journey of transformation—an excellent read for young and old and everyone in between.”

—Tiff Macklem, Governor of the Bank of Canada

“The lessons you remember are the ones from good storytellers and Fred Dawkins is one of the best. I found myself nodding my head and smiling as I read *Ageless Entrepreneur*.

—David Tsubouchi, former Ontario Minister of Consumer and Commercial Relations



**FRED DAWKINS** is a published author of a three-book non-fiction series, *The Entrepreneurial Edge* (Dundurn Press). Those books use the story form to teach relevant concepts. Dawkins holds both B Com and MA (Econ) degrees from the University of Toronto, where he was a gold-medal-winning student. An economic major and a political junkie, his career is best described as that of a serial entrepreneur with successes in manufacturing, retail and land development. In addition to completing *My Camino*, Dawkins has recently published his geopolitical novel *The Noah Project* exploring, in a dramatic way, what the near future could bring.