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On 'The Way' with Martin Sheen

John Dear S.J. | Oct. 25, 2011 On the Road to Peace

The new movie "The Way" has no explosions, no shootings, no car chases, no vampires and no robots ripping apart tall buildings. Because of that, it probably won't attract many viewers. Instead, it offers a rare pilgrimage of human transformation from anger and grief to healing peace. Along the way, we too are transformed. I loved it, and highly recommend it.

Writer, director and producer Emilio Estevez deliberately avoided making a preachy, overtly religious film. Instead, "The Way" is subtle, uplifting and spiritual.

"It's a film you can take your parents to," Emilio says. As a friend of the filmmakers, I'm not unbiased, but I was deeply moved and inspired by this beautiful film.

The story follows Tom, a grouchy, conservative ophthalmologist, played brilliantly by Emilio's father, Martin Sheen. Tom learns that his son has died just as he was about to begin the ancient 550-mile pilgrimage "El Camino de Santiago de Compostela." He flies off to Spain to collect his son's ashes. There on the French/Spanish border, Tom makes a spur-of-the-moment decision to finish the walk for his son.

As he treks through the Spanish countryside, Tom deposits small piles of ashes at various shrines along the path. In the course of his journey, he meets three other characters -- a large Dutchman, an angry Canadian woman and an Irish writer. The four stick together and slowly come to terms with their broken lives. By the time they reach the tomb of St. James in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain, they have found a new healing peace.

At the center of the film is Martin Sheen's powerful performance. We see him grieving, walking, angry, drunk, weeping, laughing and at one point, jumping into the raging rapids of a wild river to collect his backpack. It's a quiet, believable performance, the best of his storied career. He certainly deserves the Oscar for this role.

"The Way" takes the audience on a long, peaceful walk with these four characters and gives us time with them to reflect on our own lives, our relationships, our brokenness and our place in the grand scheme of things. At one point Jack, the Irishman with writer's block, attacks the "Camino" itself as the ultimate cliché, as a metaphor for everything. Even so, it moves the heart and sets us thinking in new ways.

I liked the French policeman's question to Tom at the start of the journey: "Do you know why you are walking the way?" The same question is asked at the end of the journey to all four characters -- and to the viewers. "Why did you walk the *Camino*?" That could be translated: What have you learned along the way?

It's a question that lingers after the film. For years, I've reflected on the image of life as a long pilgrimage, where we not only walk the way of the nonviolent Jesus, but he becomes for us the Way. Ignatian spirituality taught me to look on my life as a journey with God and humanity, to notice how God has been present and active in my life, to see how God keeps moving close to me and all. In that light, life becomes a spiritual journey of self-discovery, ongoing healing, community-building and inner deepening.

Most of us want to make that journey alone, like Tom at the start of the film. The challenge is to make our journey with others, to reach out even toward everyone everywhere with a universal, compassionate love, to see that we are all on the same journey together, that we need one another, that we can all discover a global healing peace.

Unfortunately, we get so caught up in our day-to-day struggles that not only do we not stop and smell the roses, we forget we're even on a journey!

It's helpful to remember that the early church was called "The Way." It saw itself as a nonviolent community of pilgrims, followers of the Way. That Way was a specific, narrow path, a journey of love, compassion, nonviolence, empathy, service, justice and peace. These days, the church seems stuck in a rut, overcome by power and privilege, unable to move forward.

I wish we could reclaim that early image of church as pilgrim community, to help it get moving again along the Way. I wish we could grieve together the pain and death of sisters and brothers around the world, reach out with compassionate love toward everyone, dismantle our weapons, end our wars, create social and economic justice for the poor, adhere to global guidelines of nonviolence and start a new collective journey toward a future of justice and peace, at one with the Creator, all creatures and creation itself. When we do, we will know ourselves as true pilgrims headed toward the God of peace.

Emilio Estevez's and Martin Sheen's stunning film "The Way" reminds us that we don't have to remain stuck in our outmoded ways. We can all walk the road to healing peace and reclaim our humanity. I know there are many wayfarers out there, like my friends Martin and Emilio, and the one lesson I have learned is that they -- and the Way itself -- make life not just bearable but joyful.

Most of us will probably never walk the great "Camino de Santiago de Compostela." But that's okay. We have this beautiful film to show us the way.

Go see it. And bring your parents.

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John Dear's new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, is available from Amazon.com [1]. Next year, John will undertake a national book tour to discuss this Gospel confrontation of the God of life and peace against the culture of death and war. To host John for an evening talk, send an email through his website [2]. His other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings [3]*; *Put Down Your Sword [4]* and *A Persistent Peace [5]*, are also available from Amazon.com. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn [6]. For more information, go to John Dear's website [2].

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