***The Way***

(2010, rereleased 2023)

Written, directed, and produced by Emilio Estevez, starring his father, Martin Sheen. The movie is loosely based on the book, Off the Road: A Modern-Day walk Down the Pilgrim’s Route into Spain, by Jack Hitt.

*The Way* tells the story of Thomas Avery, an ophthalmologist from Ventura, California. Avery’s estranged son, Daniel, is killed in a storm while hiking the Camino de Santiago (the Way of St. James). The Way is a traditional pilgrimage of roughly 500 miles through France, Portugal, and Spain, ending at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

When Avery travels to France to retrieve his son’s body, he is surprised to hear his son was walking the pilgrimage path. Avery learns more about the Camino and is given his son’s Pilgrim Passport or credential that is stamped at registered Albergues along the route. The police captain has said the pilgrimage cannot be for someone else, “The Way is a very personal journey.” To ensure his son will finish the pilgrimage, Avery has his son cremated, uses his son’s equipment and begins the journey.

Along the way, Avery encounters three other pilgrims, and they begin to travel together. Each pilgrim shares their reason for making the pilgrimage. One wants to lose weight; another wants to stop smoking and the third has writer’s block. Avery is evasive and not interested in the company yet also tolerates the individuals. Avery’s determination to reach Santiago is seen in his gait; head down, leaning forward on his walking stick with each step planted firmly and with purpose.

The group is relaxing at the Albergue when Avery’s backpack that holds his son’s ashes is stolen. A chase ensues with the thief and backpack disappearing into a “Gypsy” 1 neighborhood. The group returns to the Albergue devastated. Then a man appears with a boy holding the backpack demanding he apologize and return the belongings. The man, Ishmael, says his son has brought shame to his family and culture. He then tells Avery he must continue his journey beyond Compostela to the coastal town of Muxia to spread Daniel’s remaining ashes and discover the purpose of his pilgrimage. Here we see a mixture of age-old beliefs, spirituality and religion.

Avery accomplished his superficial goal of walking The Way so his son could complete the pilgrimage. He even registered Daniel’s name on the pilgrim’s certificate. However, as we see with his traveling companions, their superficial reasons for making the trek also fell away revealing a deeper understanding of themselves.

This is a story of a pilgrimage experienced through physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and visual senses. Here we see an ophthalmologist, who is rigid with a narrow view of life. Like his patient, Avery has memorized his life’s choices leaving no room for spontaneity when Daniel invites him to come on the trip. Avery cannot see life’s colors and isn’t open to adventure because he chose his life path. Initially Avery walks The Way with intense determination. He walks head down, fast paced, in a hurry to get to the end. In spite of Avery’s rage toward his fellow travelers, they show him grace and solidarity and travel with him to Muxia. To be a pilgrim on The Way, one must walk at least 100 miles and suffer the elements. It would be difficult to end the journey the same as one began. A pilgrimage changes the pilgrim. It may not be necessary to embark on a pilgrimage, however, if one heeds Daniel’s message “you don’t choose a life, you live one.”

1 The film uses the word “Gypsy” instead of “Roma or Romani”.

Review by:

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