For centuries, long-distance walks have provided important avenues for personal and communal transformation and reconciliation, and for the enactment of ritual and the expression of desperation. When walking becomes a spiritual quest - whether overt or subtle, clear or murky in the mind of the walker - it takes on a role of a pilgrimage.

In their two-volume encyclopedic work, Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland, Linda Kay Davidson and David M. Gitlitz define pilgrimage as, "A journey to a special place, in which both the journey and the destination have spiritual significance for the journeyer." Seeking renewal, transformation, ritual, or self-knowledge, modern-day pilgrims flock to ancient walking paths imbued with the historical significance of the footsteps of centuries of previous seekers.

One of the most popular such paths is "The Camino de Santiago" (The Way of St. James) - a network of pilgrim routes extending throughout Europe, all of which lead eventually to the city of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in northwest Spain. The most popular route, the Camino francés (or the French route) is roughly 450 miles in length - for several centuries during the Middle Ages, it was typical for a quarter of a million pilgrims to be in the process of travelling this path at any given time. Today, about a quarter of a million modern-day pilgrims arrive at the cathedral at the end of the Camino every year.

American Pilgrims on the Camino is a resource and membership organization for people who want to walk the Camino or have already done so. The group has 31 local chapters throughout the United States with hundreds of members and they anticipate processing close to 7,000 credentials ("pilgrim passports") in 2015 alone. Of course, not all people from the U.S. who walk the Camino use the resources of American Pilgrims on the Camino, but it provides a welcome home for many who are curious about the Camino, who are walking it now, and who have returned home from their journey. In addition to local chapter events, American Pilgrims on the Camino hosts an annual national Gathering for anyone enthusiastic about the Camino.

“El Camino is rousing itself from centuries of slumber and its potential to exert a positive influence on the changes confronting us at every turn along the way is enormous. The spirit of St. James and The Camino is alive and well and ready to assist each one of us in formulating a new and positive future quite unlike anything we have manifested in the past.” – John Brierley
Those interested and experienced in walking the Camino represent a growing population within the United States – a group that trains for this and other long-distance walks and is looking for ways to do so close to home. They are walking longer distances as they prepare for pilgrimage, or are seeking wisdom and further transformation by walking where they live once they return.

The Camino de Santiago is a rare example of pilgrimage accessible to people from all over the world, but the potential exists to build new paths, journeys, and walking routes that inspire the same commitment and enthusiasm right here in the United States. New efforts to connect our parks, greenways, trail corridors, and walkways to one another to allow people to find community and healing honor the tradition of the Camino and other pilgrim paths throughout history.

**Action Item:** Visit the American Pilgrims website and locate a chapter near you to get connected to upcoming gatherings, presentations, and local outings.