

Walking with Nathaniel

By Ellen N. Woods



Through the simple act of putting one foot in front of the other, a grieving father finds comfort and a way to help others.

In 2001, Denis Asselin (B.A. 1971) and his son, Nathaniel, traveled to France. It was a bonding, restful trip for the two in a country Asselin knew inside and out. The now retired French teacher had throughout his career coordinated more than 20 exchange trips for French and American students. Nathaniel had in fact spent his first birthday in Paris in 1987.

As father and son walked from the Louvre to the Grande Arche, they stopped at the statue of Sisyphus. According to Greek mythology, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to an eternity of rolling a huge boulder up a steep hill, only to have it roll back down, causing him to begin the futile process anew.

Nathaniel stopped to consider the statue and said, "That's what my life feels like." Asselin recalls, "It was a light bulb moment for me in understanding my son's anguish."

Three years earlier, at age 11, Nathaniel had begun to show signs of a little-known men-

tal illness that Asselin says would prove "unrelenting and unforgiving" for the next 13 years. Nathaniel suffered from Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), a brain disorder that falls under the umbrella of Obsessive Compulsive Disorders (OCD). "He fought the disease with integrity, grace, and courage," says Asselin. "He did everything he could to overcome it. But in the end, he couldn't fight any more." Nathaniel took his life in April 2011 at age 24.

Just weeks after their son's death, Judy and Denis Asselin walked the Camino de Santiago with their daughter Carrie, 22. Walking the path of that ancient pilgrimage to the burial place of St. James in Spain proved healing for the family. When Asselin returned home to Cheyney, Pa., he continued walking, and soon charted his own pilgrimage of 552 miles, in an effort to "turn adversity into advocacy."

His trek across six states in six weeks gained national attention and helped raise awareness about BDD, touching hundreds, perhaps thousands, who are affected by mental illness.

A Son's Journey

Nathaniel was born the day before his father's birthday in August 1986. "He was incredibly awake from the moment he was born," says Asselin. "He was always curious, imaginative, and full of surprises. He was deeply sensitive and empathetic.

"When he was 11 years old, things fell apart suddenly. It caught us by surprise," says Asselin. Nathaniel had become anxious and was exhibiting obsessive behaviors such as running for miles every day to the point that he lost so much weight his parents had to hospitalize him. With medication and therapy, Nathaniel was able to get through middle school with periods of happiness and close friends.

But by the time he entered high school, there was a downward spiral. The handsome teenager could not bear to look at himself in the mirror. He would use the bathroom with lights off and the door cracked just enough to let in the smallest amount of light so he did not have to see himself in the mirror.

Sometimes his family covered all the mirrors in the house with brown paper.

The Asselins now had a name for their son's pain. They learned he had BDD, sometimes called "broken mirror disorder." The disorder was first identified in scientific literature in the mid-1980s. It is studied as an OCD illness. Therapy to alleviate the symptoms is still hit and miss, says Asselin.

"Many people are not familiar with BDD, and if they have heard of it, they think it is a vanity issue. But it is a distortion in perception that brings on incapacitating anxiety and depression," says Asselin.

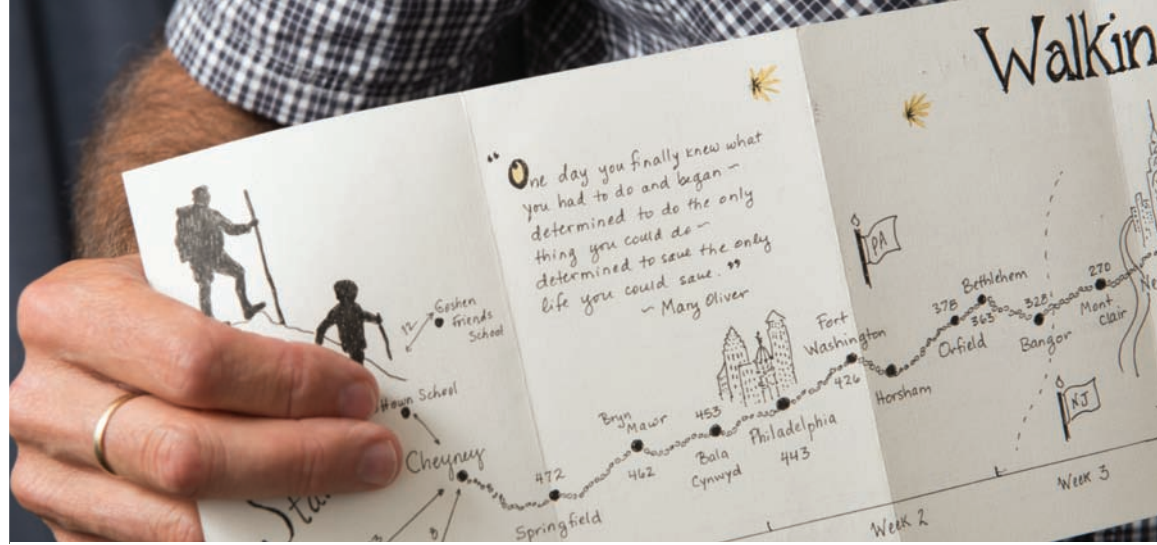
By his sophomore year, Nathaniel had to be homeschooled. As he saw his friends head to college and move on with their lives, his depression worsened.

Asselin says with different therapies there were happy times. Nathaniel helped coach a middle school cross-country team, volunteered with a local EMT unit, and held a job. But inevitably medications lost their effectiveness and Nathaniel would experience periods of darkness. One time in 2009, he told his parents, "I can't wake up in my bed tomorrow morning." They promised him he wouldn't. They drove to Massachusetts and checked him into a clinic that specialized in OCD. At one point they even took him to Florida, hoping the sunlight would help. "We tried everything and we always told him we had hope," says Asselin.

But Nathaniel was "already talking about the moments in his life he had lost. He felt isolated. He told us 'If I was in a wheelchair people might understand.' He was tired of being medicated."

Jeff Szymanski, executive director of the International OCD Foundation, wrote an essay about Asselin's pilgrimage in the June 2012 issue of *Psychology Today*. "Did Nathaniel commit suicide because he thought he was unattractive? No. He took his life because his brain was unrelenting, never allowing him an escape from thoughts and feelings of being less than ... For a family who loved him dearly, this was devastating. How could all of their love and support not sink in? Unfortunately, Nathaniel's inner voice was just too loud and distracting."

A good family friend, Brennan Barnard,



accompanied Asselin on a leg of his U.S. pilgrimage in spring 2012 and wrote an essay about the experience in the *New Hampshire Monitor*. “Nathaniel was wise beyond his years, one of those old souls whom others turn to for guidance and friendship. He was bright, gentle, and motivated, and genuinely cared about the people in his life. What no one could know was the power of the internal conflicts that ruled his thoughts and behaviors.”

“After he died, there was such an outpouring from people who Nathaniel had touched,” says Asselin. “We’re not sure if he really knew what he meant to so many people.”

A Family’s Journey

In October of her senior year at Earlham College, Carrie Asselin signed up to walk the Camino de Santiago — the Way of St. James — with a student group following graduation. The school-organized “May term” trip is meant to coincide with the time of transition in the new graduates’ lives. When Carrie signed up, “little did she know the next chapter in her life would be to deal with tremendous loss,” says Asselin.

Reeling with grief, Carrie told her parents the only way she could make the weeks-long walk so soon after her brother’s death was if they came with her. And so they did, allowing her to begin the journey as she had planned with her classmates. They joined her during the second week of her walk in León, Spain. “When we saw her, she was in bad shape. She had terrible blisters and tendonitis. She was exhausted. She was channeling her grief into relentless pounding of her feet along the Way,” says Asselin. “Since my wife and I move at a slower pace, she and her feet began to heal.”

As a family, they spent the next two weeks

walking to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain, where it is believed the remains of St. James the Greater are buried. “Sometimes the three of us walked together, other times alone, or with the Earlham group, or with a new acquaintance. We met people along the Camino who had lost a loved one and were searching for solace. It is a collective experience, yet individual. And it is a powerful metaphor for life. We got up every day and put one foot in front of the other and realized the act of doing that was as much about the journey as it was about the destination. There was no agenda to the day other than to pay attention.”

Asselin says one of the most poignant moments for him and his family along the Camino was the stop at the Iron Cross (*Cruz de Ferro*). People climb the hill to the large cross and leave a small stone they brought with them on the pilgrimage, often symbolizing a burden they carry. The Asselins brought a stone from outside of Nathaniel’s bedroom window and one from the track where he coached the cross-country team. They left one on the pile and carried the other stone 60 miles past the cathedral to Cape Finisterre (“the end of the world”), a peninsula on the west coast of Galicia, which is the final destination for many pilgrims along the Camino.

“On a beautiful day, with a bright blue sky, we left the other stone and some of Nathaniel’s ashes on a rocky ledge looking out to the ocean,” says Asselin.

A Father’s Journey

When he returned home, he missed the pace and the peace of the Camino. So he kept walking. And it was on a walk that he got the

idea for his own pilgrimage, and plans began for Walking with Nathaniel.

On April 24, Asselin stepped outside his front door and began his walk through parts of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. He ended his journey on June 7 in Boston, meeting with clinicians and researchers at the headquarters of the International OCD Foundation and later spoke about BDD at a rally at Christopher Columbus Waterfront Park.

Along the way, he stopped at places of joy in his son’s life: the birth center where Nathaniel was born; the schools Nathaniel attended, including Westtown School, where Denis taught and Judy is a theater teacher and where Nathaniel was a student and volunteer coach; and Good Fellowship Ambulance, where he volunteered. Asselin also stopped at hospitals and clinics where Nathaniel received treatment, in total meeting with 145 clinicians who work with patients who have OCD-related diagnoses. Family members and friends provided meals and places to stay.

He set out with the modest goals of raising awareness and money — more than \$25,000 has come in for BDD research — and “letting families know that they don’t need to suffer alone.” When he started Walking with Nathaniel, Asselin said he wanted to talk to at least five people every day about BDD. But sometimes crowds came out to greet him and, as word spread, the media came, too, including Fox News, CNN, ABC News, *The Boston Globe*, and *The Los Angeles Times*.

On their Spain pilgrimage, the Asselins carried the official “*credencial*” of the Camino, a passport that documented their progress with stamps from each of their stops. On his U.S. pilgrimage, he carried a passport drawn by Judy that beautifully illustrated the landmarks along his route. Instead of stamps, he collected

signatures on this passport.

Asselin said it was important to him that the walk be called Walking *with* Nathaniel and not Walking *for* Nathaniel. “He was with me every step of the way, encouraging me to keep going. He was calling me to give meaning to his suffering. And I knew the way to do that was to help alleviate the pain of others.”

Asselin walked into Boston with Judy and Carrie and a young woman with BDD whom Nathaniel had befriended while they were in inpatient treatment together. As he crossed the finish line, he remembers thinking, “This is just the beginning.”

The Way of St. James

Denis Asselin has watched the movie *The Way* several times since it came out in 2011. In the movie, Martin Sheen plays a father who travels to Spain to claim the ashes of his estranged son who died while walking the Camino de Santiago. He decides to continue the pilgrimage in his son’s honor.

The stories of those he meets along “The Way” make for a compelling film that has brought renewed interest in the Camino.

“People spend weeks walking the Camino de Santiago for a variety of reasons. Some are travelers and explorers. And many are at a point of transition in their lives and are looking for a spiritual experience,” says Rev. James Garneau (Ph.D. 2000).

Father Garneau made the pilgrimage in 2004 before starting a new ministry. “It was an outstanding gift in my life to have that time for spiritual reflection.” When he heard about the Asselins’ story and the healing power they found on the Camino, he said, “I wasn’t surprised. There is not much you can control on

Days after returning home, he looked at the website his family set up to chronicle his walk. “I was shocked to see hundreds of emails had come in. People who have BDD and caretakers and others with OCD or other types of mental illness. Some just wanted to talk. Others offered words of encouragement.”

Asselin says, “I don’t want to become a grumpy old man who lost his son. That’s not me.” So he continues to smile and laugh, to honor his son whom he calls a “gift from God,” to find joy in his family — a marriage made even stronger by tragedy and a daugh-

ter who has started a career in brain research.

After 36 years as an educator, Asselin says he has a new vocation. “I feel called to keep the movement going.” In October, Asselin and his family went to Boston for OCD Awareness Week events, including the International OCD Foundation’s “Night to Believe” gala, where Asselin received the Hero Award for his efforts. “I accepted it for Nathaniel and for all the others who suffer from BDD, who have the courage, fortitude, and grace to live each day when their internal wiring is an obstacle to their own happiness. They are the real heroes.” **CUA**

the Camino except making one step after another. When we can put all the distractions of life aside, it is easier to feel God’s presence and his healing grace. We are reminded that God is always walking with us.”

Father Garneau celebrated Mass at nearly every stop along the way of his month-long journey to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain. “Often, the local people would find the person with the keys to the church and they would ring a bell and everyone would come, grateful to have a priest.”

The hospitality of the Camino is not much different from what it would have been more than a thousand years ago, says Father Garneau, a Church historian. In the ninth century, pilgrims came from all over Europe when they heard of the discovery of the tomb of St. James in Galicia. The pilgrimage has continued over the centuries. “People still walk from town to town and from church to church. They depend on the help of strangers and the hospitality of local townspeople,” says Garneau.



Web Extra: For an in-depth story on Father Garneau’s pilgrimage, visit cuamagazine.cua.edu.