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## **Pushing through Life's Pilgrimage Together**

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# PUSHING THROUGH LIFE'S PILGRIMAGE TOGETHER

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**Mauro Properzi**

**Abstract:** *Walking for 500 miles in a foreign country through heat, arduous terrain, and many inconveniences is difficult enough. Add to the equation a man in a wheelchair, and the task appears impossible. The solution? Determination, humility, humor, faith, love, and someone, or many, who give you a push. I'll Push You is a true story and parable for life that will give readers hope and encouragement.*

Review of Patrick Gray & Justin Skeesuck, *I'll Push You: A Journey of 500 Miles, Two Best Friends, and One Wheelchair* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2017). 296 pp. \$24.99 (hardback); \$15.99 (paperback).

Reading or watching the news can be a depressing experience. Most stories feed us excessive amounts of conflict, violence, abuse, and tragedy that can be difficult to digest. If we come to believe that what we see is the full picture of “reality,” falling into cynicism becomes a real possibility. To counterbalance this negativity we need true stories of kindness, sacrifice, faith, and hope to remind us that goodness and God are still very much among us. *I'll Push You* is one such story. It's a story that touches, inspires, entertains, engages, and moves readers to life reflections and examinations. Indeed, the book can be a transforming experience because it is a story written in the language of truth from beginning to end. The experience, characters, relationships, hope, and life lessons presented feel true to the very core. This is, I believe, the greatest gift the book offers: it shows us a reality we may be too distracted to see or too hardened to recognize.

A *pilgrimage* is a journey to a holy, special, or unusual place. In many faith traditions people have travelled often long and dangerous distances

to sacred sites in order to rediscover their faith, connect with God, explore the deepest corners of their souls, or a host of other reasons. One of the most important Christian pilgrimages is the *Camino de Santiago*.<sup>1</sup> The pilgrimage begins in the corner of France at St. Jean Pied de Port, then crosses the Pyrenees into Spain with a first stop at Pamplona, where the famous running of the bulls takes place, and culminates 500 miles to the west in Santiago de Compostela in the Spanish autonomous community of Galicia. According to tradition, Santiago's cathedral contains the human remains of the Apostle James; hence, this "sacred site" functions as the destination of the pilgrimage.

Hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world walk or bike these routes every year, some for spiritual reasons, others as adventurous tourists. Most if not all are transformed by the experience. That Justin Skeesuck from Idaho should make the decision to go on the *Camino* is not newsworthy ... except for the fact that Justin is confined to a wheelchair due to a progressive neuromuscular disease. The only way his dream can come true is through the help of his best friend Patrick, whose response to the invitation provides the very title to the book: "I'll push you."

As readers travel with Justin and Patrick to Spain, they really come to know the two friends in their joys, sorrows, and struggles. The authors display a remarkable amount of transparency and vulnerability by describing not only their remarkable journey, but also their backgrounds and life challenges. The story is thus an account of the spiritual and emotional development of the two authors as they travel to a destination both physical and spiritual. It is also the potential story of every human being because the pilgrimage functions as a broad metaphor for life with its challenges, surprises, hopes, and disappointments — but most of all with its love. Indeed, if the book has a primary theme or a thread that unites the various experiences, relationships, and adventures described, it is that love makes the "mission possible." The depth and sincerity of friendship between the two protagonists is central to this message, but the love they share with their spouses and children, the love they feel from God, and the love and support they receive from fellow travelers, friends at home, and even complete strangers, highlights it as the necessary ingredient of a meaningful life.

Humility is another prominent theme, especially in Patrick's journey. He learns from Justin the importance of letting go of control, of trusting loved ones in the midst of tragedy, and of truly having faith in the God he

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1. The *Camino de Santiago* is known in English as "the way of Saint James" or "the road of St. James."

believes in when obstacles appear insurmountable. Reciprocity surfaces repeatedly. Patrick may be pushing Justin's wheelchair physically, but Justin pushes Patrick in other profound ways. Indeed, most of the encounters with occasional helpers, travel companions, and new friends highlight this dimension of reciprocity. Patrick learns that receiving is as important as giving when he concludes, "I have to let go of the safety I find in my own abilities; I have to let go of the reins so I can embrace the provision of others" (231). In this way the *Camino* becomes transformative. Patrick's subtle invitation is for readers to join him and be transformed in the same way.

While the book is filled with what we may call "life lessons," including memorable insights on rest and the Sabbath, the strength of community, and the power of faith and grit, the story is neither heavy nor moralistic. These lessons flow naturally from the real experiences of the authors, who describe their adventures with great humor and enthusiasm. For example, the impromptu songs that Justin sings to Patrick when he dresses him in the morning highlight the fun dimension of even the most ordinary moments of life. Readers' eyes are also opened to the aesthetics of northern Spain as the writers focus their attention on its beauties, both in its nature and people. Overall, optimism and hope overflow from the book's pages, not as a result of denial of darkness but in recognition of it. The difference is in looking through the darkness in the strength of faith and love.

As Latter-day Saints we know much about sacred journeys; indeed, we are a journey-conscious people. We view the biblical exodus as a foundational event of God's interaction with His people, but we also place great focus on other transforming journeys. The exodus of Lehi's family in the Book of Mormon and the pioneers' crossing of the plains in the history of this dispensation are only two of the more significant examples. These and other travels (like the journey to reach a distant temple) clearly involve sacred destinations — promised lands that assure peace, prosperity, posterity, or spiritual illumination. Yet it is the journey itself that sanctifies the travelers and prepares them to enjoy the destination. Trials, joys, and numberless opportunities to develop faith, love, and mutual support on the journey are not secondary to the destination — they become part of it. Ultimately, life itself is our greatest pilgrimage to be endured but also enjoyed in family and community fellowship until we reach that glorious destination, which is God's eternal presence.<sup>2</sup>

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2. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Of Regrets and Resolutions," *Ensign* (November 2012), 21-24.

In reflecting upon the decision that led to the *Camino* adventure, Patrick says his friend Justin “always starts with the *why*. If the *why* is strong enough, the *how* will come together” (29). What many thought was impossible actually came to be. How could that be? Patrick again responds: “Though my *why* has changed, the *how* never has. It has always been *together*” (81). Justin echoes him and adds: “The only people we feel loved by are those who pursue us. They pursue conversation with us, spend time with us, hold us when we are broken, and help us get up when we fall” (178). The right motivation and support will do it: even in the midst of great trials, life may turn out to be a wonderful adventure. *I’ll Push You* opens a window into the friendship between these two Christian Nazarene men from Idaho, and by so doing shows us a real-life example of Christlike love. In a world that often highlights discouragement and isolation, these are the stories we need to read more of!

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