

# MY PILGRIM SHADOW

## IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT THE LIGHT

### Ellen B. Ryan



As a retired professor of gerontology, I promote resilient aging through my writings and presentations to community groups. My personal path towards resilient aging features regular walking, community involvement and contemplative creativity.

Contemplative creativity started for me twenty years ago when I started journalizing to cope with health problems following a whiplash injury. This journal writing led to my inclination to write poetry. I had read little poetry since high school and certainly never contemplated writing poems. But I was experiencing difficulty reading lines of text for more than a few minutes, and the white space in poetry beckoned. I took a course, listened to poetry, joined a writing group and practised. By the time my vision improved, I was captivated by the process of following inner whispers to create something beyond myself and my expectations.

About fifteen years ago, I began to use a digital camera. First, I snapped family activities and travel destinations. Gradually, however, I became interested in close-ups of flowers and trees; and then my shadow entered the pictures. Soon, I fell under the spell of a new calling: follow the light to photograph my shadow, anywhere.

And now, of course, I am writing to understand the nature of this calling.



### My Reckless Shadow

takes stairs head first  
no way feet can catch up

steals through locked gate  
teasing me over bars

scales lone pine on ridge  
clutching curvy cones

leaps giant hay bales  
hundred metre hurdles tackled

dances along split rail fence  
mourning doves undisturbed

walks on water  
rippling in boat's wake

Sun slips behind cloud  
my daring double slides away

### Origin of My Shadow Photographs

Why do you keep taking photographs of your shadow?" my writing friends ask.

"Is it about the darkness, the shadow side of life?"

"No," I reply. "It's not about darkness."

It was only through journaling that I eventually found my answer:

"It's always about the light."

I am a walker. In recent years, I walk with a camera. Originally, I would photograph my husband along the trails and within landscapes, as I know that images that include a human are more appealing. But what about those many solo walks when I really have time to meander – to use the camera whenever I like and to wander off the path for a good photo? I began to capture my solo walking companion – my shadow or my reflection.

I record my shadow walks in local neighbourhoods and across national borders, on city sidewalks, on country lanes, at the seaside and along nature



**Top:** *My Spanish Padre*

**Above:** *Tree Spirit*

trails. Even on cloudy days or evening walks, I imagine how my shadow would lie across cherry blossoms or ocean surf. Sometimes, the goal is the setting; sometimes, it's the shape, texture or colour of my shadow.

As I follow the light, my shadow focuses attention on the here and now. My head often percolates with ideas while I walk, leaving me oblivious to my surroundings. But the camera grounds me. Watching the variation in light, especially on partly cloudy days, and the way the light highlights or subdues colours connects me to my body on the trail or in the garden.

Each shadow photograph serves as both 'selfie' and 'un-selfie.' I am nervous when a camera is pointed towards me; somehow, I prefer to think I am invisible in the world. Yet, I have no qualms about sharing my *shadow self* over and over again. The shadow photo shows that I have substance, but without the facial features. No concern about my crooked smile or blinking into the blinding sun. Key signs of aging are invisible – grey hair, wrinkles, sagging neck, eye pouches.

### Pilgrim Shadow Images

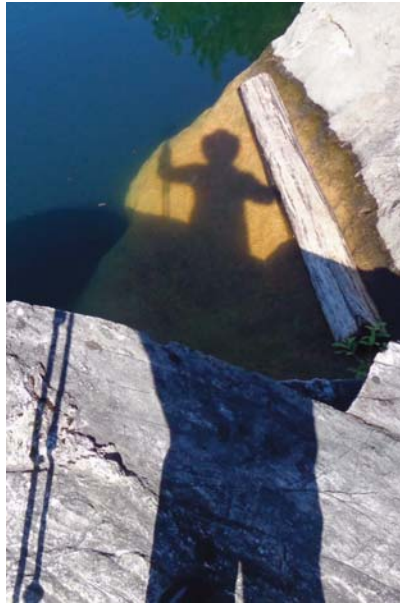
As I mentioned, I started out using shadow images to insert a human figure or two within a special scene.

Over the years, I have photographed my shadow with my husband's in many settings as we travel. The best surprise is *My Spanish padre*. We climb the steps of the Cathedral de Santiago de Compostela after completing a portion of El Camino, a pilgrimage across northern Spain.

There I am with my Tilley hat (a Canadian trademark) holding the camera. Transformed by a trick of the light, Patrick is an ancient padre with skinny neck, wide-brimmed clerical hat, a clerical cape and crooked walking sticks as if made [or sculpted...] from tree branches gathered along the way. In fact, Pat holds my straight hiking poles while I take the shot. The angle gives Pat a cartoonist's thin neck, while his Tilley hat becomes squat with a rolled rim. The impression of his backpack creates the cape. In that midafternoon light, our shadow presence stamps those venerable steps with mystery.

I experiment with my shadow. My shadow can engage in different activities, in different contexts: my long sunset shadow walking on stairs, in autumn fields or at the beach. Increasingly, I search for intriguing textures and colours – on grass, flowers, leaves, branches, ocean waves, sand dunes, patio stones and in cobblestone lanes. Surprises abound. A rock behind me





**Top left:** *Sandcastle Stance*  
**Top middle:** *Explorer to the Self*  
**Top right:** *So Many Selves*  
**Above:** *High Fashion in Stone*

can look like a parasol, and cracks between patio stones can dress me up in a jacket and skirt.

Occasionally, the shadow surprises with sunset glow, separation across water/rocks or multiple selves. The photograph *So many selves* intrigues because it shows my shadow, my reflection and the reflection of my shadow.

## Epilogue

Reviewing my shadow images leads me to reflect on resilient aging. A walker, I exercise my body, mind and spirit. A photographer, I follow the light to deepen my walk through mindfulness and to discover images lying in wait. Seeking my shadow is a response to a mysterious pull—stretching my creative spirit. A writer, I use creative nonfiction to explore the meanings of walking with my shadow. This genre includes personal essays, poetic captions and poetry on how my shadow dares jump over locked gates and stretch my head to the bottom of steep steps.

I aim to live with grace, using my pen and camera to dance between light and shadow.

**Ellen B. Ryan** is professor emerita at McMaster University, member of Tower Poetry Society and The Ontario Poetry Society, co-editor of *Celebrating Poets over 70*, and host of the Writing, Aging and Spirit website. Her interests in the psychology of aging focus on resilient aging in community and writing memoir. Currently, she leads a local Aging in Community initiative to create mutual support networks and to promote housing innovations. Along with talented colleagues, she fosters writing of life stories and poetry among older adults. Ellen also practises mindfulness in nature with her camera. Her specialty is selfie/unselfie shadow images. Email: ryaneb@mcmaster.ca.