

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 17, 2012 at 4:41am

Along the Way, journey of father and son, a spiritual tale



Actor Martin Sheen and son, actor/director Emilio Estevez, have written joint memoirs focusing on their complex and often turbulent father son relationships. Their stories take readers through some five decades of notable acting careers.

Interweaving alternating chapters, the men write with a strikingly honest and personal pen. They reveal the lives of ambitious men who take acting and directing seriously, using these art forms to tell meaningful stories while always seeking greater self-discovery.

The problem, however, is that the same driving forces that bring the men success as actors also cause disruption and pain to those closest to them, members of their own family.

Written with the assistance of writer Hope Edelman, an accomplished author in her own right, the book is rich in detail. It offers a rare look into one of Hollywood's most successful acting and filmmaking families.

However to view this work simply as an account of the ups and downs of two Hollywood careers is to miss its purpose. This book is much more ? it is a love story of father and son. Readers travel with them as the men struggle to first understand each other, then to assist each other, and, finally, to accept each other for whom they are and have come to be.

The search for awareness, understanding and intimacy are themes central to these memoirs. At one point Sheen writes: "I became an actor because it was a clumsy attempt to become myself."

Along the Way grew out of an experience the men had filming of "The Way," the 2011 film directed by Estevez in which his father played the role of a man who carried his son's ashes along the 500-mile pilgrimage path, the Camino de Santiago in southwestern France and northern Spain.

The memoirs begin when Sheen was 21 and just married to wife, Janet (not the focus of the book, but clearly the glue within the family, a person deserving more attention than she gets between these book covers). She gives birth to their firstborn, Emilio. Three children follow: Ramon, Charlie, and Renée.

As Sheen's struggling career slowly takes off the family is required to follow him from New York City to Malibu, from Mexico to Colorado, and then to the Philippines where he played a major role in the legendary movie, *Apocalypse Now*.

It was in the Philippines that Sheen, then a heavy drinker, clashed violently with Estevez, then in his teens. The son wanted to return to his school and classmates back in the states. The father had promised him his work would be done in time for the new school year. When that did not happen and when the father ignored his earlier promise, the son had had enough.

Writes Sheen: "For better or worse I had an old world belief that the kids were better off with me, wherever I was. We were family. We had to stick together to get through this. I had such a singular focus on my career and myself. I thought the kids would adjust."

At that time Sheen was much more concerned with his role in the movie than with the pledge he might have made to his son. Sheen's drinking was adding to a separation between him and the rest of his family.

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"Alcohol allowed me to feel and do things I didn't have the courage to feel and do when I was sober," writes Sheen.

Counters Estevez: "Watching my father drink was like watching weather patterns blow across the backyard. Alcohol first made him sentimental, then it made him self-pitying, and then he'd get angry. And self-righteous and arrogant."

The men came to blows.

"Our fight that night remains one of the lowest points in our relationship," Estevez writes. "It was the only time we ever came to blows. The explosion was terrible but in retrospect, necessary. It showed me how determined and how strong I was as an individual. It also helped my father understand I was no longer a son who would quietly follow him everywhere he needed to go."

A then exhausted Sheen at age 36 suffered a heart attack. That heart was a wake up and a serious confidence crusher, he recalls. He felt sorry for himself, but with the help of Janet he started a long road back to recovery and eventual sobriety. He notes later: "Self pity pulls us away from our true selves into egocentricity and isolation."

Years later, Sheen and Estevez travel together to India for the movie, *Gandhi*, in which Sheen played

another major role. That trip turned out to have consequences for both father and son as it spawned spiritual awakenings in both men.

The poverty was overwhelming, they recall. Estevez writes that his father had once told him that in India all one's senses are assaulted, especially the sense of justice.

The Indian experience triggered a reconversion within Sheen. Some time later, still trying to sort out his spiritual call, he finds a priest in Paris, confesses his sins, and re-enters the church.

The rest of the family refuse to follow, which initially upsets Sheen, but eventually he comes to recognize each person must follow his or her own spiritual call.

But by then the Second Vatican Council had changed the church of Sheen's youth. It was now more securely anchored in the works of the beatitudes. This was to Sheen's liking. He found himself being influenced by Catholics such as Fr. Daniel Berrigan, whom he met on a film shoot, and Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement.

Eventually, Sheen was drawn into nonviolent protests against nuclear weapons and war, getting arrested 67 times, he recalls. He protests not necessarily believing his actions would change the world, but because those protests allowed him to stay faithful to himself and his faith.

Long after Sheen, the father, allowed his son to separate and become a man in his own right, and long after Estevez, the son, recognized he could be himself and no longer felt required to earn love from his father, the men find peace in their relationships.

Estevez writes a script and asks his father to play the lead role. It calls for them to travel to Spain where Sheen's father had emigrated to the United States many decades before. Sheen had come full circle. He had come home in way that honored his own father. Sheen's real name – not his acting name – is Ramon Estevez.

Once again Sheen, working this time for his son, brings quiet dignity and subtle grace to his acting role, this time as a pilgrim fulfilling a journey his son was unable to complete. The movie gained quite positive reviews.

Sheen, it turns out, acts to teach. Good movies have lessons, he writes.

At one point he notes philosophically that each person is responsible for his or her own happiness. "Only we can choose what will make us happy, but we can't achieve that state without living an honest life."

Along the Way is a unique joint memoir that deserves a wide audience. Its reflective nature offer a refreshing reminder that people can make a difference with their lives and that good art, while celebrating intrinsic beauty, can and should move people to deeper introspection, even to becoming better and more loving fathers and sons – and, of course, mothers and daughters.

Along the Way

By Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez

With Hope Edelman

Simon and Schuster

408 pages

\$27.00

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Source URL (retrieved on 05/21/2018 - 2:25pm): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/spirituality/along-way-journey-father-and-son-spiritual-tale>

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