

THE SEARCH FOR THE HOLY GRAIL AND STEPHEN KING

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August 8, 1999

There is a story I'm going to tell you about today that is as old as the ages. It is also as fresh and new as today. I'm not absolutely sure why this story is so persistent and so important—but it is. Dozens and dozens of writers and thinkers through the years have tried to figure it out, and they each have their own reasons. I suspect you all know the story, in one form or another, and perhaps you have your own thoughts on its importance to you.

It is the story of the Quest for the Grail. Actually, it's not THE GRAIL, as many Christians insist, but A Grail. It's a story of a spiritual journey. As Bilbo Baggins in the *Hobbit* might say, it's the story of There and Back Again.

At any rate, let me begin by telling you a little background.

As far as anyone can tell, this tale begins at least as early as 500 C.E., although it certainly went back further in time than that. The great shamen and wise men and women of the early Celtic groups told this story, in various forms, and passed it on to succeeding generations. Then, as England and Ireland and Wales became torn apart with wars and her people spread across the lands of Europe, the story went with them. These Celts—many of them,--went to Brittany and became wandering storytellers—troubadours—going from court to court, manor to manor, telling this magnificent story in return for food and lodging.

By now it was the first millenium. Europe was in turmoil. There was no strong central government anywhere. Any rich guy that had a strong castle and could afford a few tough guys to protect him could call himself a lord or a king and rob and rape and pillage and make his villages help him out. By custom, wealthy fathers left all their lands to the eldest son and the younger sons were left to make their way as best they could, often by robbing other people, or attempting to kill the eldest son to get the loot for themselves.

And the women—just forget it! They had no rights—they were lower than the cattle on the chain of command. It was a brutal world with not a lot of hope for most people. The Christian church was very powerful, rivaling kings and princes, but not much help to the little guy. The church had made rules and commands that must be followed upon pain of excommunication, but about the soul there was little concern.

And then these troubadours appeared, bringing a story of a young man—penniless, definitely unsophisticated, but full of hope. Brimming with hope. His name was Perceval. And stories of King Arthur, who valued loyalty and courage and manners above all else. A pure heart could slay any number of evil dragons. The Knights of the Round Table who were sworn above all to protect all damsels and honor them above themselves. This was all new stuff—very heady offerings to this downtrodden group of people.

Suddenly, the Pope got a wonderful idea—he would send all these trouble-making knights and younger sons off to fight a holy war. THAT'D keep 'em occupied and out of everyone's hair. Plus, kill off a few infidels in the process. Not a bad thought. And so the crusades began and all at once the world horizon grew and there came a deluge of new concepts and man's image of himself expanded and deepened. The Church and Christianity was really just beginning at that time to explore the importance of the human soul and dealing with the mystery of just what it is.

Meanwhile, back in the castle, about 1180, Chretien de Troyes decided to write down these stories that the troubadours were telling, and in the process, adding some of the newfound depth and introspection the world was experiencing. And, for good measure, a bit of anti-Christian Church stuff was thrown in for spice. Of course, since each troubadour embellished the tales and adventures of Perceval to suit the lord and ladies he was telling it to, these tales had spread all sorts of intriguing branches and offshoots and Chretien had to weed out all the rubbish and put the story into some kind of coherent whole.

Here is the story he told:

Perceval—The Grail Quest

Young Perceval's mother has taken her infant son and left her castle and made her home in the middle of a vast forest, far far away from other people, with all their problems and dangers. The mother raised Perceval to know nothing of the outside world. He is totally ignorant of knights and kings and religion. One day, when the boy is about fourteen or so, he is out playing in the woods with his little javelins, hunting birds and small game.

Along the forest path comes a group of riders on decorated warhorses, dressed in chain mail and helmets and flying colorful pennants. Well, Perceval, in his ignorance, falls to his knees, thinking these must be angels that his mother has told him about. He has never seen a war horse, or a sword, and certainly never shining armor. These men, after laughing at Perceval's ignorance, finally tell him that they are knight and they are searching for some bad men who have stolen a damsel. Perceval insists on learning more about these magnificent warriors. And so they tell him of King Arthur and his Round Table, or pursuing honor and rescuing damsels in distress and fighting evil.

Well, that does it! Perceval goes home and tells his mother all he has seen and learned. She then reluctantly tells him of his father and brothers who were knights and died because of it and begs him to forget all he has seen.

Of course, he cannot and Perceval is determined to leave that very instant to go find this court of King Arthur and become a knight. His mother pleads to no avail. And so, she sees she must give this ignorant boy some tools to help him survive in the world.

She tells him to always be polite to women—it's OK to kiss them, but no more. But if a woman offers him her ring, it's OK to take it. And she told him that if her ever came upon a church, which he would recognize by its magnificence and splendor, he must go inside and pray.

And so Perceval left for his adventure. He looked back once at his home and at his mother. She, in despair, had fallen at the gate as she waved goodbye and died of a broken heart. Perceval sees this, but continues riding his mule into the sunset. At this point in the story, he represents the innocent who thinks only of himself and has no concept of his place in the world.

As Perceval rode through the countryside, he came across a wonderful pavilion in a clearing. He thought, "this must be a church that my mother told me about because it is so beautiful." So, following his mother's advice, he walked in. Well, it was no church; it was only a decorated tent. And inside was a maiden sound asleep.

Perceval, again following his mother's advice, went to the maiden and attempted to kiss her. She woke up and fought him off. But, Perceval was very strong, even for a lad, and managed to kiss her several times.

Then he saw a ring on her finger and pulled it off, since his mother had said it was OK if she had a ring. The maiden begged him to return the ring, but Perceval wouldn't listen and mounted his mule and rode away.

Soon afterward, the knight who was off hunting, returned to his tent, saw his damsel in a bit of disarray and with no ring, and immediately assumed she had had a lover in his absence and had been less than discreet. He beat her and from then on gave her no food or clothes or horse to ride because she had been so unfaithful to him. Again we have an innocent who takes the world at its literal word, causing only distress and grief.

Meanwhile, our hero arrives at Camelot and, outside the gates, meets the Red Knight—a magnificent knight dressed all in red and bearing a red shield and lance. This Red Knight has taken a goblet from King Arthur's table, spilling wine all over Guinevere, and insulting King Arthur, and now is riding back and forth in front of the castle, demanding Arthur come out and fight him.

Perceval is totally in awe of the red armor and wants it for himself. So, he rides into Camelot, finds Arthur brooding over this goblet and spilt wine episode, and, in his blundering way, demands Arthur make him a knight.

Sir Kay laughs at the young man and says, "Sure, you go kill that Red Knight and take his armor off him and you can keep it all for yourself." Arthur chastises Kay for his mockery of Perceval, but Perceval himself thinks Sir Kay is serious and rides out, kills the Red Knight through probably sheer luck, and then struggles with how in the world to get the suit of armor off the dead knight. Finally, with the help of a young page, Perceval gets the armor off the knight and the page dresses him in it.

To this point, Perceval is still the epitome, in medieval times, of an ignorant man. He is, to some thinkers, the symbol of the human soul—unshaped, with no depth, thinking only of itself, and yet not truly aware of what itself is.

The story continues telling of Perceval's blundering and bumbling his way through various episodes until he meets a wise old man who teaches him manners and courtly ways and tells him all the rules he must abide by, and also teaches him proficiency in swords and lances and such. But above all, he tells him, as Perceval prepares to go out into the world, quit talking so much. Don't ask so many questions.

This question, as it turns out, is nearly Perceval's downfall.

Perceval continues on his way, having grown up a bit and determined at this late date to go back to see about his mother. He has many adventures, among which is to meet the love of his life, Blancheflor. He pledges his undying love and fidelity, then promptly leaves her to go out and seek adventure. Perceval has begun experiencing the world outside himself and finally beginning to learn compassion. And now, the real important part of the story begins.

Perceval is riding through a forest, looking for a place to spend the night, when he sees a man in a small boat, fishing in the river. He asks him where he can go to find a night's lodging, and the man tells him to go up the hill and there he will see a dwelling where he can spend the night. Perceval thanks him and proceeds up the hill.

After awhile, he sees the dwelling and rides in and finds the fisher who makes him very welcome. He tells Perceval that he cannot rise to greet him as he is grievously wounded and in much pain, but that he should eat all he desires. During the meal, a sword is brought in, dripping blood, and is carried through the hall.

Later a grail is carried in by a lovely damsel, and this grail provides food to everyone, as much and as varied as he likes. Perceval is quite curious about this sword and the grail and why the king is in such pain, but he remembers good society says it isn't proper to ask questions, so he remains silent. His need to follow the rules is stronger yet than his compassion for human suffering.

The next morning, Perceval arises and dresses himself because there are no pages to help him. He yells and bangs on every door he sees, but can find no one in the castle. It is deserted. He finds his horse saddled and ready for him, so he rides out, and behind him, the drawbridge, as if by magic, raises itself so he cannot reenter.

As he rides down the road, he encounters a lovely damsel—there are a lot of these in the story—who is holding her dead lover in her arms. She tells him what a fool he has been because he has just spent the night in the home of the Fisher King and has seen the grail, but never asked the king what caused his pain. If he only had asked the question, the king would have been cured and all the land around, which has been a wasteland for

years because of the wounded king, would have been restored. She asks Perceval who he is, and for the very first time, Perceval is aware he has a name and what it is.

The story winds on and on and Perceval eventually rejoins King Arthur and is made a member of the Round Table and there is confronted by an ugly old crone who chides him for his negligence at the home of the Fisher King and coerces and shames him into going in search of the grail castle and of restoring the wounded king and the wasted land by asking the question. Perceval now disappears from the story for a long while as he apparently goes in search of himself and learns what life is all about. He retreats into the forest alone.

At about this point into the story, the author died. Story unfinished. For the next fifty years or so, there were dozens of writers who attempted to complete this tale. Wolfram von Eschenbach is probably the most famous and the most successful. Eschenbach has Perceval return at long last to the Fisher King, after he has grown and his soul has developed. He has learned empathy and courage and what his part is in this world. Finally, he has learned to ask the proper question and has earned the right to reenter the grail castle. All is returned to health and Perceval himself becomes the next Fisher King, protecting the grail. The End.

This story—as silly as it appears—became tremendously important. It made an enormous impact. Perceval and his grail quest and also the concept of King Arthur and his marvelous standards of noble knighthood.

On the most obvious level, it appealed then and still does to the adventurer in all of us. You wear neat shiny clothes and throw lances and fight with swords and rescue lovely damsels from dragons and bad men.

If you read Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur, you find that every other page some knight or other is riding off just to find a spot of adventure. They ride up to castles and shout, "Any adventures around here?" And, of course, there always was. And the rule then was, if the knight rescued the damsel or accomplished her mission, she must submit to him and, of course, throw in all her lands and castles as well. The good guys nearly always won and they were always well built Adonis's. How bad can life be?

But I think there are many deeper levels at which these stories are appreciated and needed in our lives.

Perceval is a story about a hero. Not a hero type like a western movie hero who wins the day and the girl and rides off into the sunset. Or a hero like Arnold Swarzenager who beats up ALL the bad guys in the world, turning the movie screen into a bloody gory mess. Or even a Dirty Harry kind of hero. Nope. Perceval is a hero in the classic sense. The kind of hero that speaks to each of us deep inside.

To be this kind of hero—this archetypal kind of hero, according to Joseph Campbell—he must first turn away from society, then he must be reborn into his own true nature, and

most important of all, the hero must return to society and share his growth and knowledge. The importance of this kind of hero is that he inspires the realization of the possibility of YOUR perfection, and fullness of YOUR strength, and the bringing of light into the world.

Not all our present-day pseudo-heroes fall short of Perceval. Many modern storytellers have retold the Perceval myth and given it impact to reach the enlightened minds of the 21st century citizen.

The Hobbitt. What a hero he is. Bilbo Baggins and his nephew Frodo go forth, reluctantly, like most heroes, into a world laid waste by evil in search of THEIR grail—the rings of power. Well, actually, Frodo's quest was to destroy his ring of power to prevent it from being used for evil. The long hard journey into the wasteland gives Bilbo and Frodo the time and the experiences to grow and become reborn into new hobbitts that are vastly larger in soul than when the story began. And they emerge back into their society, as is demanded of the true hero, to tell the tale of their journey and their growth.

Steven Donaldson has written a six-part trilogy called the Thomas Covenant story—Tales of an Unbeliever. In it the wasted land is the entire earth—tortured by the force of evil that has its grips on the world. The part of Perceval is played by a quiet man who, in the normal world, has leprosy, but when he enters the wasteland, again, against his will, his leprosy disappears, only to reappear when he returns. He takes on the part of the Fisher King as well. Thomas Covenant has the aid of a young girl, but it is ultimately Thomas alone who conquers the evil.

The most famous of our modern grail stories is Star Wars. The part of Perceval is played by Luke Skywalker. His grail is not a golden vessel, but rather the Father he never knew. He retreats in the movie for some time to learn the way of the Force, which is truly learning about himself and who and what he is. Then he faces the evil and returns to his society with his new self and knowledge.

My favorite Grail quest is still being written. So far it is four volumes with at least three more promised before it is complete. Steven King—Mr. Terror and Thrills himself—is writing it. I am not a Steven King fan, but this is special. Even Mr. King has become obsessed with this story. He began it sixteen years ago, and it continues to grow.

It is the story of the Gunslinger of the future who must travel through the Wasteland that our world has become, and conquer the evil force that is torturing it. Along the way he picks up three fellow travelers who are most reluctant to come.

The Gunslinger plays the part of the classic Perceval and, like in the Donaldson trilogy, he is also the wounded Fisher King. His three fellow travelers are also wounded, although each in a different way. All four of these characters goes into the Wasteland and there they each change—they become more than they were before.

What is interesting in the more modern versions is that instead of the single Perceval type hero, the other fellow travelers become more important to us than the hero. In Star Wars, nobody really loves Luke Skywalker. He's too goody goody for most of us. All he can think about is the Force, for heaven's sake. You can't identify with him. But, Han Solo—now there's our kind of hero. He's pulled kicking and screaming into this quest. He's selfish, self-centered, boastful, sneaky—in short, a lot more human. He enters the Wasteland and, like Luke, he changes. At the end of the movie he has become courageous, loyal, principled, a man of value. He also returns to society and thus completes the journey of the true hero.

In Steven King's books, the Gunslinger is cold, sure, incredibly goal oriented. Just like Luke Skywalker. You want him to win, but you just can't identify with him. But his three fellow travelers, on the other hand, are us. They all go into the Quest together, but as the story unfolds, it is each of them who must face particular evils alone, just as Perceval did, just as Luke did.

In Lord of the Rings, Frodo has just set out on his quest, although he really doesn't know that yet, he just knows he's running from and running toward some great danger. He is accompanied by his gardener, Sam. Sam, a non-too-bright hobbit, is asked by Frodo if he wants to continue or return to Bag End, now that he has finally seen elves, Sam's great burning desire. Sam says, "I don't know how to say it, but after last night I feel different. I seem to see ahead, in a kind of way. I know we are going to take a very long road, into darkness; but I know I can't turn back. It isn't to see Elves now, nor dragons, nor mountains, that I want—I don't rightly know what I want; but I have something to do before the end, and it lies ahead, not in the Shire. I must see it though, Sir, if you understand me."

There is this sense in all Quests for the Grail of not being able to turn back even though it's offered; one MUST see it through.

So, it now boils down to, what do all these Grail stories say to me? Why are they so memorable? I suppose there are several things:

1. Quests must ultimately be accomplished alone. Even though you enter the forest with others, it ends up that YOU face the challenge alone. There is no beneficent god hovering above you, there is no Ultimate Good that ensures you will succeed. There is only you. A heavy burden, yes, but also a power and strength to know that perhaps you alone can do this.
2. To find our own individual Grails, we must go into the Woods. All our fairy tales of childhood have Sleeping Beauty or Snow White or Hansel and Gretel or Rapunzel or whoever going into the woods. In the woods, they encounter all manner of evil and danger and maybe even themselves. And in the end, when they return from the woods, they return a new person.

There is a terrific Broadway play called *Into the Woods* by Stephen Sondheim. If you haven't seen it, go, or borrow my tape. It combines several well-known fairy tales into one story and each story necessitates the characters go into the woods to solve their problems. The woods are full of dangers and giants and witches and spells, but, in spite of this, or maybe because of this, the characters find the woods have changed them—life is better after the woods. They grow, they become braver, they become kinder as they go through the woods.

We've all been in the woods. It wasn't the best of times going through the woods, but the going through the woods and coming out the other side we find we've changed, we've grown, we've become better because of the woods.

3. A Grail can be a lot of things. Maybe it's a golden vessel full of never-ending food. maybe it's a magic ring. Maybe it's your hidden past. Maybe it's a forbidding Tower. Maybe it's your Soul.
4. Lastly, perhaps, unlike all these Grail heroes, we're not going on our journey to save the wasted world, but instead to save ourselves. Of course, in doing that, we ARE saving the world.

Let me close by quoting Caitlin Matthews. She says, "Each generation has its own storytellers, its band of eager auditors who seek the empowerment of the Grail for their time. Its appearances may differ, but its effect is always the same—spiritual regeneration. It is that most precious of all spiritual treasures, whatever our tradition, our sense of inner belonging. Whatever story causes our blood to quicken, our senses to be revitalized, our hearts to be gladdened IS our path to the Grail. By aligning with this story we are enabled to embark on our own quest for the waters of life."