

SEARCH FOR THE HOLY GRAIL AND THE STRUGGLE FOR WHOLENESS

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July 28, 2002

Each one of us, at an early age, catches a vision. Generally it is to heal a wound. Parsifal's father was a knight killed in combat. Parsifal in turn is dazzled by knighthood, in compensation for his loss. My particular wound, as I grew up, was WWII, my realization of the brokenness of the world.

To heal that wound, as a young adult, I labored for a European federation, seeking to bring unity among previous enemies. Subsequently, I entered the ministry to create or be part of a beloved community. I struggled for civil rights and peace in Viet Nam, harmony among the world's religions, finally, inner peace. Are you in touch with your wound? What is your healing vision?

Today's reading is from HE, a book by Robert A. Johnson, an Episcopal clergyman and Jungian analyst. The theme of the book is the Parsifal legend, portrayed as the quintessential male archetype, the struggle of men to achieve wholeness. Parsifal, as a knight in shining armor, is very successful in his struggle in the outer world.

Here begins my reading, somewhat abridged:

"Parsifal is lionized at King Arthur's court. Then, on a decrepit old mule, that limps on all four feet, in comes a hideous damsel. Iron dark are her hands and nails. Her loins and shoulders are twisted like roots of a tree. The hideous damsel rides into the castle on her mule, and points the accusing finger at Parsifal, exclaiming, "It's all your fault." The hideous damsel usually happens at the very apex of a man's career.

Recently, he has been named CEO of the corporation, or whatever the summit of life is for him. There is some correlation between the amount of fame one gets in the outer world and the condition of the soul. They often have an inverse relationship. When a man outwardly succeeds, he is often in for trouble with his soul. Often, at about middle age, the savor has gone out of life.

The hideous damsel whispers in his ear, "What is the use of it all?" This is not a time to take tranquilizers or get a mistress. The hideous damsel means to send you off on your quest for wholeness.

The search for the Holy Grail is multicultural and multifaceted.

From a historical perspective, it took shape in France in the twelfth century, from the pen of Chretien de Troyes, had a German version by Wolfram von Eschenbach, in the 13th century, and an English one, in the fourteenth with King Arthur's Round Table. Various forms appear almost simultaneously in Wales and many European countries. Actually,

prior to the Christian adaptation, the story of the Holy Grail has pagan, Celtic origins. Richard Wagner's *Parzifal* in the 19th century is influenced by a Buddhist perspective, that makes compassion into a central motif. Be that as it may, a vast underground wellspring has broken into the open.

The Grail myth is a combination of secular and religious themes. The setting is that of a wounded king, the Fisher King, in a country in deep crisis and the country will not be healed, unless the king is restored to health, which once more is an old pagan theme, that goes back thousands of years to the pharaohs. When pharaohs were aging, they were tested annually as to their physical strength, and if it was waning, the pharaoh would be replaced by a young heir to the throne. By the way, the title of Fisher King originates in the fact that in Christianity, the fish is a symbol for Jesus, and Jesus wanted his followers to be fishers of men.

In the Christian tradition, the real-life actors are contending knights, of which Parsifal becomes one, but underneath it all, there is a spiritual quest, to be whole. "Be ye whole", by the way, is a better translation than the conventional "Be ye perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect." The search for perfection is actually motivated by its opposite, imperfection, falling short, sin. The English word sin comes from the Latin root, sine, meaning without, without perfection, a deep wound, like that of the languishing Fisher King. He had been wounded by a spear striking his groin, with the symbolic meaning that the king's and the country's generativity had been destroyed.

Orthodox theology sees sin as part of the human condition, starting with Adam and Eve, ejected from Paradise. The Jungian approach, by contrast, and similarly, the Unitarian Universalist one, does not dwell on original sin, but emphasizes the original blessing of life on this planet, a creation that in the Book of Genesis is called "good".

Our journey toward wholeness involves trusting the unconscious, a voyage from the selfish ego to the larger Self, and coming to terms with evil in oneself, rather than project it onto others. It is an understanding that both the masculine and the feminine reside within each person, that in our psyche, we are androgynous. Good and evil, light and shadow, male and female, the inner and outer, far from being mutually exclusive opposites, are inextricably interwoven polarities that together make for wholeness.

Evidence for this is all around us. When male and female are united, a new human being is created. Sunlight yields both light and shadows. Good and evil are a mixed brew.

Back to the story of Parsifal. He is raised by his mother. Father had been killed in battle. For Parsifal, there was no male role model. Even if dad had not been killed in battle, fathers are often so wrapped up in work and career, so that boys are raised by mothers. Ruth Barnhouse, an assistant in psychiatry at Harvard, comments, "A girl learns to be like mother, while a boy must learn to be different from her, without the difference turning into antagonism or fear, the antagonism of defining oneself by opposition to mother, the fear of being alienated from the source of life.

In our story, mother implores Parsifal to stay home, by her side, in a protected environment, fearing that, like her husband, her son might get killed. However, Parsifal has to go out into the world and do his own thing. He becomes a dazzling knight, fierce and victorious in combat.

Eventually, in his search for the Holy Grail, he meets pilgrims, symbolically representing his conscience. The pilgrims ask Parsifal, “Why are you armed on Good Friday?” Indeed, why do we arm ourselves? I am not referring here just to what immediately comes to mind, like swords and guns at the personal level, missiles between nations. Psychologically, men arm themselves with status, prestige and titles, ostentatious homes and beautiful spouses, outer symbols of achievement. In our individualistic Western society, men compete with one another, men are into one-upsmanship, rather than into relationships and the interconnected web. With Frank Sinatra we sing, “I do it my way,” even if it hurts my neighbor, though Sinatra does not address that aspect.

It has sneaked into our governmental consciousness as unilateralism, like opting out of an International Criminal Court, the Kyoto Treaty, an international convention against torture. As the world’s pre-eminent superpower, we put ourselves above the law, separate ourselves from the rest of humanity. For macho men, might becomes right, knights in shining armor in a crusade against an axis of evil. Similarly, in our private lives, in the battles of existence, we arm ourselves for success and maximum profit. Yet, there is a small voice that reminds us of the saying, “What does it profit a man to win the whole world, if he loses his soul?”, his most precious possession.

By analogy, what does it profit to be the world’s greatest superpower, if in the process we lose our soul? Dare we engage in such ultimately fatal Faustian bargains? It is good to reflect upon the experience of two ex-Presidents who have dealt with the hideous damsel. After Watergate, Richard Nixon retires in disgrace. By contrast, Jimmy Carter, after stagnation and the Iran hostage crisis moves on to become a highly respected elder statesman, a mediator, and human rights advocate. His cup runneth over. Carter achieves what Socrates prays for, “May the inner and the outer man be one.”

In developmental terms, we start with the unconscious innocence of childhood. In adulthood we face the trials and tribulations of human existence. We struggle mightily to make it in the world, with its abundant share of challenges and disappointments. We may end up crucified by life’s circumstances or listening to the hideous damsel. We may follow in the footsteps of a Parsifal, walking the walk of personality integration, maturity in our final years, serving a higher purpose, serving the creative, life-sustaining forces in human civilization, in short, achieving wholeness.

What happens after Parsifal is confronted by the hideous damsel? He leaves the castle in distress, realizes that his life, despite its apparent brilliance, had been inauthentic. He wanders the countryside for years, not particularly seeking to find the Grail Castle. He wants to find himself which anyway is the preeminent task. He finds himself when for a second time he comes upon a group of pilgrims.

This time, instead of hurrying by them, he joins them, dedicated as they are to human compassion. Parsifal realizes that when he hurts someone else, he hurts himself.

This awareness, this growth in spirit, has the unanticipated impact that suddenly, out of nowhere, the Grail Castle appears before him. One of the parting admonitions of Parsifal's mother had been that he should not ask questions. In his first encounter with the Fisher King, Parsifal follows the advice. This time he asks the question, "Whom do we serve?" This releases positive energy. It was the right question. The Fisher King is healed, the country recovers. Parsifal finds the Holy Grail that had dwelt all along in the Grail Castle. All's well that ends well.

The Grail myth is a story for our times, actually, for all times. Though we do not talk about grails and castles, courageous knights and enchanted maidens, we are asked to answer the question, "Whom do we serve?" "What is the purpose and meaning of our lives?"

When Parsifal, you and I, allow ourselves to be confronted by these questions, deep in our hearts, the answer becomes clear—beyond self-righteousness, be aware and integrate your shadow. Beyond selfishness, open up to the larger community. Beyond consumerism, connect with the realm of spirit. Be at peace with yourself and the universe.