

Sunday December 5th
The Grail Quest
Rev. Phares

Kids Moment

Today, I'm going to tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was and is a lush and beautiful land that had become a wasteland. The springs have gone dry and, as if the earth can no longer hold water, rain only brings further devastation.

When there is not flooding, there is drought. When there is not storm, there is fire. The crops are drowned, burnt, or withered. Disease is rampant. The peaceful realm is everyday less kind. The leaders are at a loss.

When the land before was lush and bountiful, the beating heart of the land was the Fisher King, from whose seat a multitude of fish and fowl and fruits and beasts emanated. He was abundance. But some earthly lords had abused the graceful abundance of the land. The Fisher King withdrew. The wasteland spread. And even the righteous then suffered.

But, to some brave knights there came a vision. A cup, a grail, that when sipped from, restores the land and the drinker and brings the dead back to life. But in the vision, the grail was veiled.

And so these brave knights went forth as knights do to *reveal the grail*, finding all sorts of knightly adventures on the heroic scale. Of course not a one of them came anywhere close to finding the object of their quest.

It was Perceval, who, after failing again and again to discover the grail despite his heroic adventuring, found himself at a loss, despondent, defeated, and wayward, grieving by a river.

It is then that, by the happenstance only surrender can unleash, he encounters a humble fisherman in a little boat who invites him to his castle. It is odd that a fisherman would have a castle. But as Perceval witnesses the wonders filling the castle, he comes to understand that this is indeed the Fisher King. But the king is sick, nearly immobile due to a wound high up on his leg that keeps him weak and sick.

The Fisher King feeds Percival and shows him all kinds of interesting objects of power. And right in their midst, Perceval sees it: the grail. But yearn as he would, he can not imagine how to win it. For truly, it is not to be won.

So close! And so the defeat is all the more tragic. Perceval returns home. On the way he encounters his cousin, a little girl, who chastizes him for failing to perceive the question that would have rendered the grail.

Do you know what the question was? The question that would have rendered the grail? It's actually so simple. The little girl tells us the question is, "What's the matter?"

It's a question that has some willingness to it, you know? When you ask, "What's the matter," you are also asking how you can help.

And do you know what? That's where the telling of Perceval's story ends. We don't see the land healed in the story. But it's not the end of the tale. For the story now, is no longer his, but ours.

"What's the matter? How can I help?"

Reflection

Ron Phares

The quest for the grail is one of the most enduring and psychologically loaded tales in the western canon. Recently, it was brought to my attention by more than a couple encounters in close occurrences, that this tale may have something to say about our current situation and I'm not one to ignore synchronicities. I consider this a message with some insistence. It really wanted my, and thus - I think - your, attention.

In doing some cursory investigation, I learned that written the tale of the grail, dates to the 12 century. But it seems that story is more like a collection of sympathetic tributaries that are damned up and redeployed. Embryos of the grail quest exist in cultures as far flung from one another as Persia and the Celts, where the tale finally seems to have rooted.

And there's a bit of a prequel that I think will help us digest a more nuanced understanding of our role in the tale. We already understand that the Fisher King was the heart of the land. But if he was the heart, the spring fed water ways were the circulatory system.

These springs were tended to by maidens, spiritual beings, called The Voices of the Springs. Should a weary traveler - and who is not a weary traveler - approach with the appropriate respect, the maidens would offer to them a goblet filled with their spring water.

Of course that liquid is both symbolic and literal; water as a medium of the ecological soul. Ancient and earth centered cultures the world over know that springs are sights of spiritual emergence, thresholds into the deeper order of the world. So drink, weary traveler.

But, to the Voices of the Wells there came a king who did not abide by the custodial traditions of respect and reverence and who saw, in their grace and graceful giving, only the opportunity for power. And so he and his men took the maidens and made them theirs in all the worst ways. Untended the springs dried up. And the land became barren.

Also prior to the quest, we learn that Percival's mother was the King's sister (not that nasty king, another one). In her wisdom, she raised her son away from civilization. So Perceval was a bit of a wildling until he saw some knights, and seduced by their trappings, ran away to join the circus... which in this case was the knighthood.

After Percival learns the question that renders the grail, that little girl who is his cousin, she also tells him that his mother died of grief not long after he abandoned her for the galavanting life.

So there are some powerful archetypes at play here. There are Maidens, a Mother, and a female child - all of whom have agency in the natural spaces outside of institutional power. There are kings. There is the grail. There is the land itself - and its waters.

The land, like the water I think, is both literal and metaphorical. It really is the land. But it is also the soul. With great wisdom, the metaphor erases the distinction between the two. What's the matter with the land is what's the matter with the soul. That's the whole thing, right there. What's the matter with the land, the world, the country, the cosmos, the ecosphere, the congregation, your relationships... is what's the matter with the soul.

Meanwhile, all three instances of women seem to resonate along the lines of emotional relationship, from love, to reverence, to heartbreak. So for me, the feminine in this story stands for benevolent relationship and the open heartedness and reverence required of it. The archetype of the king is plain and well known. It is about benevolent agency through responsibility and duty.

Thus to cultivate a healthy ecological soul, that is, a soul in healthy resonance with our contexts and ecosphere, we need these qualities; open heartedness, reverence, responsibility. These qualities scaffold the grail. Of course, as the central symbol, the grail is the source from which invigoration - both personal and ecological - flow. It is the abundance and grace of the world in all its procreative flourishing.

Our own chalice, the central symbol of our spiritual tradition, shares a strong resonance to the grail. They are feminine symbols in their contours and functions; water bearers, vessels of life. They carry our spirit and spiritual sustenance.

But the grail morphs beyond the symbolic at the conclusion of Perceval's seemingly failed quest. Hearing both the question and the news of his mother's death, he goes home. That is where the tale ends. Later iterations have different endings and sometimes different characters. But for the bones of this tale, it ends in the hero's supposed failure.

There is no magical restoration of the land. In this way it reminds me of the gospel of Mark, which, before later additions, ends not with a resurrection, but simply with an empty tomb. A hollow. An empty cup. But nature (and stories) abhors a vacuum. And so an empty tomb, an empty cup, an empty quest... is a call.

For in fact, the grail has been revealed. It is, at last, not an object, but a question. The grail is the question: "What's the matter?" Which is also "How can I help?" That question is the grail.

How do we restore the land, how do we heal the king from which all abundance flows, how do we redeem ourselves, how do we respect the Voices of the Springs, how do we mend our soul and our world? Unveil the grail, which is the question, "What's the matter? How can I help?"

Look around in our world, our city, our congregation, your home, your heart. There is beauty, yes, but also pain. Where you see pain, where you see the need for healing, where you see struggle, ask, "What's the matter? How can I help?"

Now, like everything, that question has a shadow side. It can be abused. It can possibly yield a sense of inadequacy if you feel you can not respond as well as you'd like. But this is where the lessons of the Women and Kings come to bear.

These two sets of archetypes turn into questions for me: How open is my heart? Am I reverent? And, am I behaving in a responsible fashion such that my actions have benevolent impact?

These three questions can not be asked separately from one another and will continually refine each other. How open is my heart? Am I reverent? Am I behaving in a responsibly? Are my relationships and actions benevolent?

If your heart is open. If you are reverent. If you are prepared to act responsibly. If you are oriented toward benevolence, then you are ready to unveil the grail. You are ready to ask "What's the matter," in a way that knows the difference between worry and care, between self-interested concern and compassion.

I hasten to add that this is not a question that requires an ever ready or immediate answer or diagnosis. Perceval was appropriately befuddled before the Fisher King showed him the grail... and befuddled even before the grail itself. "What's the matter?" is more of an orientation. It's more of an opportunity to listen than fix. As a question is more a declaration of intent, a posture, a perspective of receptivity.

The "how can I help" part too. Sometimes it is enough to ask, to allow your generosity of presence to call out the bounty of the land... which is also your soul... your context... your congregation... your quest. What's the matter? How can I help?

Here lies our restoration. Here lies life itself.