

Rev Ron Phares
The Green Knight
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I have a question for you. How... are... you? And how do you want to be?

You know, you are blessed... to live in this beautiful world. This beautiful world of infinite complexity made easy - soaked through with enchantment and terror, with simple pleasures and subsistence tasks. Deep breaths. Sun buttered fields. Tides and the persistent sacrifice of prey. Love. Lamentation.

A world in which profound heartbreak is all but guaranteed and all but guarantees a response only our imagination can muster, a response that reveals we are connected beyond the material, a response which, at this late hour, is what is finally at stake; our felt imagination's ability to comprehend our interdependence.

There's a stunning film currently available to stream called The Green Knight. It's a metaphorical meditation on our present and, perhaps given the age of the source material, perpetual ecological dilemma.

The tale begins when the Green Knight rides into King Arthur's hall and challenges anyone present to single combat. But there's a catch. The champion who accepts the challenge must promise to seek out the Green Knight in the Green Chapel one year from that day to receive in return whatever blow the champion now scores upon the Green Knight.

Gawain, impetuous and glory hungry, accepts the provocation, whereupon the Green Knight lowers his head and extends his neck so that his verdant noggin can be hacked clean off. When Gawain hesitates, the Knight questions his honor, quite a slite to an aspiring knight.

And so Gawain finds himself, one year later, on a quest for the Green Chapel in order that the Green Knight may return a decapitory blow. And, as happens on chivalric quests, Gawain encounters a number of challenges on the way. He is protected though in these ordeals by a magic belt, made by Morgaine, his enchantress mother, that keeps whoever wears it from harm.

Through this belt, we see that it does not so much matter what Gawain does - he will live. Rather, what matters is how Gawain is. And he's... not great, Bob. For while Gawain survives, he also fails each encounter.

His failures are moral & spiritual. He betrays, cowers, dismisses that which he should respect, treats beauty as utility, takes love for granted, ignores wisdom, and centers himself at every turn. His being - how he is - shapes his impact. And he is, in short, a rake.

Because one lusts for what one lacks, Gawain lusts for honor. But he lacks it because he does not understand it. He thinks honor is reputation and glory. And so it evades him because honor is not about glory. It is not self-interested. Honor is other-interested.

Honor is not even primarily about deeds. Rather, as the tale demonstrates, honor is about spiritual integrity, which is about relational integrity, which is about recognizing our interdependence which is expressed by the green.

What the belt illuminates, as a plot device, is that honor is not, primarily, about what you do. Rather, honor is about how you are. Honor is about how we understand ourselves in the world. And this carries us into some territory that is tricky to articulate. So apologies in advance.

How you are gives your deeds, not only consequence, but character. This is the spiritual version of process over product. Honor is about your manner, your essential *point of view*. How you are is about the essential quality of your relationship to the ever changing world.

And here we must navigate a paradox. The nature of your essential-how is entirely relational. It is revealed and is expressed within your relationships with... everything. But it is also not contingent on circumstance.

While it's true that better days make it easier to stay in touch with your essential-how, who you are at heart should not depend on your bad day. That is easier to say from my position of privilege. But that does not make it untrue.

And this is critical. Because if how you are is beyond contingency, that means it operates in a timeless category. How you are is on the wavelength of the eternal. How you are is apart from life and death.

Gawain fails to understand this even as he finds the Green Chapel and offers his neck to the ax of the Green Knight. Protected by his bewitched belt, he is still betraying the game that brought him to this moment. He is a coward in the face of his honor, and thus still beholden to death.

Yet in that moment, Gawain sees his life flash before his eyes. He sees himself surviving the encounter, thanks to the belt. He returns home. He is knighted, marries, grows wealthy, is made king. But, having failed in his ordeal with his own honor, Gawain has not shifted how he is. Persistently self-interested. A rake to the last.

Thus his love is hollow. His wealth is hollow. His reign is hollow. His life is hollow. His society is hollow. His eternity is hollow. Death still has the final say and says it. So it doesn't matter if it is today or decades hence, Gawain's head rolls.

Gawain's vision underscores the same idea that the magic belt illuminated earlier; death is not in question. It is promised. Life too is not a question. It is underway. The story suggests that these are not the questions that matter.

The question that matters is that of relational integrity. It's not about our survival. It's about getting right with the world, with the green, with the face of nature, with our embeddedness in the land. And so, with that wisdom gained, Gawain removes the enchanted belt and submits to his reckoning, his reconciliation, his honor. The ax falls.

Now right before the ax swings, in one last act of self-interest, Gawain asks the Green Knight, "Is this all there is?" The Green Knight replies, "What else ought there be?" This is not an admission of nihilism, or even a reckoning with mortality, but rather an affirmation of and invitation to enter into the intricate and stunning elegance of life itself, the green that will cover our gravestones with life, with us.

Willingly fulfilling his bargain, Gawain has shifted his essential-how. And so can we. Like Gawain, we can not opt out of this fundamental reciprocity. Which brings us to the issue of our likely extinction.

Cheery, I know. But given the calamitous state we have driven our planet to, I do not know if we're going to make it. Actually, that's not true. I do know. We're not.

But we always never were. That's not how the green works. Now, shall we fight with our every fiber, or at least some spare fibers, to reverse our trajectory? Or maybe we ought subscribe to a life of hedonistic indulgence. Despair is always option.

Or I suppose there is a chance that some new technology or policy or plutocrat saves us. But even if those things happen, it won't matter. Without changing the essential patterning within us, it just delays the inevitable.

The deep knowledge of Gawain and the Green Knight tells us that the only chance we have is to stop prioritizing survival and shift our focus to how we are in the world for its own sake. We may find this shift shapes our deeds in such a way that survival occurs as a happy externality. After all, it's not that how we are has no impact. It does. It has.

The face of nature says, what we take, will be taken from us. A cut for a cut. What we do unto the world, we do unto ourselves. And we... we blow the tops off mountains. We spray forests with glyphosate. We turn natural processes into permanent trash.

The exchange of a cut for a cut is an ontological law. As you do unto the world so the world does unto you. We are not separate. When this law is ignored, our essential-how emerges as self-interest. And self-interest is self-terminating.

When this law is recognized, spirituality emerges and our essential-how responds to and partakes in the eternal. Honor refocuses destiny from victory to depth and naturally yields integrity and, broadly speaking, life. What else ought there be?

This is not hospice. Hospice lingers in the wrong question. This is a depth of experience that is its own consequence and therefore of eternal quality. As such, I hope it offers an antidote to despair, an invitation to experience the eternal, and possibly our best hope to continue to do so. I imagine it is a decidedly different mindset from what each of us currently runs.

What does this look like? I'm not sure. I haven't got that far. But I am actively trying to figure this out. I think you're on the right track when you feel the kind of love that blows your habits to shreds. These ideas of other-interestedness, creativity, interbeing, eternity, and love all whirl round each other. So grow your love.

Love your grandkids. Your spouse. Your cat. Your sofa. A tree, a leaf, the vein in the leaf, the chlorophyll in the vein, every molecule all the way down to atoms and combined on up to the sun and constellations. Can you love gravity? The earth? A pool of water? A raindrop on a window pane? The essential-how of you shared in this green bargain?

For we are a sun bathed field, a deep breath, and the persistent sacrifice of prey. We are the brief lives of butterflies and their role in the perpetuation of life. We are of love, lamentation, profound heartbreak, imagination, eternity and unspeakable beauty. We are Gawain and the Green Knight. And when at last we understand this, we are the enchantress Morgaine.

And so I ask again, how are you? How do you want to be?