

The Search for the Hero's Soul in *The Alchemist*

Michael J. KREMENIK

*Department of Medical Social Work
Faculty of Medical Welfare
Kawasaki University of Medical Welfare
Kurashiki, 701-01, Japan
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Abstract

The Alchemist touches upon two major themes in mythology: The hero journey and a person's spiritual quest to find out his or her true nature.

Coelho is asking his reader to take the same journey his character Santiago does. Coelho believes that if we do we will be better people and in turn the world will be a better place.

Introduction

The Alchemist, by the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho, is a wonderful fable about finding one's destiny. Most of us think about seeking out our destiny, what we want to accomplish during our lifetime, at an early, or perhaps at a later nostalgic point in our lives. But for some reason or other we never make the attempt. The Alchemist's hero, Santiago, finds the courage to go after his destiny.

A poor boy from Andalusia in Spain, Santiago finds his destiny, or what Coelho calls his treasure, by undertaking a heroic journey. This journey, the people he meets along its path and the trials he must pass in order to succeed, will act as Santiago's spiritual awakening. He will discover his own nature and also the nature of the world. Basic aspects of the hero journey are used to tell

this very spiritual story about finding out who you are, what your destiny is. When the journey begins Santiago is a naive boy without a clear vision of who he is. By the end he is no longer a boy but a universal hero we can admire.

People have been telling mythological stories for thousands of years. They help us to deal with the powers of nature we cannot explain rationally and also give us inspiration to face difficult situations. Joseph Campbell, regarded as one of the world's foremost authorities on myth, defines myth by separating it into two categories. In one, myth is sociological. It links you to a specific society or group. In the other, myth acts as a metaphor for spiritual potentiality in the human being, irrespective of societal constraints put on the individual, and the same powers that animate our life animate the life of the

world¹⁾.

Coelho's story is a myth of spiritual potentiality using philosophical tenets of alchemy. He is not interested in the better known aspect of alchemy which was caught up in turning base metals into gold. Alchemy was a much deeper discipline than a pseudo-scientist searching for some magic gold formula. Coelho's belief in alchemy's spiritual power to lead us to our destiny, to what he calls an understanding of the Soul of the World, is the driving force of this book.

In order for Santiago to find his treasure, he must undertake a hero adventure. The mythic hero adventure comes from an ancient tradition but I believe it still has a spiritual relevance in today's modern world. For all of our technological and scientific advances we are still very far away from understanding the complete power of earth's nature, our universe and by implication the abundant mysteries of the spiritual power within and around us that we call God.

Santiago spends his early teenage years attending a seminary. Poor families from Andalusia take great pride in having a priest in the family and Santiago's is no different. But Santiago doesn't want to be a priest. He wants to travel the world. He tells his father of his dream and asks for his blessing. Santiago's father understands his son's feelings. He too, in his younger days, had his son's passion for the independence and freedom that seeking out one's destiny can bring. He gives Santiago his blessing and the money to buy a flock of sheep. Santiago thinks that being a shepherd will allow him to fulfill his dream, to find his treasure. He soon familiarizes himself with all of Andalusia as he grazes his sheep and goes into different towns to sell their wool.

Santiago's hero journey has begun. Campbell says that one of the typical ways a hero journey begins is when someone feels there is something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society²⁾. Santiago is chafing under the expectations set out for him by his family. He wants to break out of these family and societal bonds and experience something no one from Andalusia has experienced before. But at this early point in his journey he doesn't know what that is or where he must go to find it.

The sheep, however, are giving signs to Santiago that Andalusia is not his destiny. For the last two years Santiago has been leading his sheep in search of food and water, but now he sees it the other way around. The sheep, not he, are the leaders. He has acclimatized his life to their schedule. He is still in his home country, his work as a shepherd boy is not special and the sheep are lulling him into their routine. This is not his treasure. Santiago sees the resemblance to his father's responsibility to his family. The sheep trust him. They don't rely on their own instincts. They wait for Santiago to feed and water them, find shelter for them and keep them safe from danger. He is just like his father, no closer to his dream than when he left the seminary.

One night Santiago, with his flock, uses an abandoned church as a place for himself and his sheep to spend the night. The church has no roof and where the sacristy once was there now stands a sycamore tree. Within the walls of this once sacred place Santiago has a strange dream for the second time. He doesn't understand it but he feels it has some kind of guiding importance for him, so he goes to an old gypsy woman he has heard can interpret dreams. Santiago's dream begins with him in a field with his sheep. A little girl then

appears and begins to play with the animals. The child then takes Santiago by the hands and transports him to the Egyptian Pyramids. The child then says "if you come here, you will find a hidden treasure". Then, as the girl was about to show him the exact location, he wakes up³.

"Dreams are the language of God", the gypsy woman tells Santiago. She will only be able to interpret his dream if it is spoken in our language, but if God speaks in the language of the soul, it is only Santiago who can understand. She calls Santiago's dream, "a dream in the language of the world". And interprets the dream to mean that Santiago must go to the Egyptian Pyramids. If a child showed them to him they must exist. There he will find a treasure that will make him a rich man⁴.

The gypsy woman is telling Santiago to embark on the hero journey. In urging him to find his treasure she is expressing a basic motif of the hero journey. The hero must leave one condition and find the source of life to bring him forth into a richer or more mature condition⁵.

The source of life in *The Alchemist* is the language of the soul. Santiago is the only one who can understand it and therefore the sole interpreter of his dream. The gypsy woman only tells Santiago to go to the Egyptian Pyramids. She doesn't know the dream's meaning. The journey will force Santiago to undergo a transformation of consciousness in order to reach this source of life, an understanding of his soul. This transformation of consciousness in the hero comes about through trials or by illuminating revelations⁶.

Santiago's journey to the Egyptian Pyramids therefore is a spiritual quest, his spiritual quest being to find the thing he basically is. The fact that the dream is in the language

of the soul will force Santiago to discover his inward being first before he is able to complete his journey.

After his meeting with the gypsy woman, however, Santiago is not yet ready for his journey. He does not understand what the gypsy woman has told him. The Pyramids are far away. How will he get there? What if he never makes it? He is dissatisfied with her advice and resolves to never believe in dreams again.

Santiago needs some encouragement and Coelho provides it with a standard hero journey figure: the old man as counselor. He reacquaints Santiago with his destiny, gives him the strength and courage to take it on and finally sends him on his way.

The old man's name is Melchizedek, king of Salem. He tells Santiago that he helps those who are holding onto their dream of finding their treasure but need a push to get started. Melchizedek's job is to free Santiago from his own fear of going after his destiny. But what he says is as difficult to understand for Santiago as what the gypsy woman had said earlier.

Melchizedek talks about the soul too. He says the great truth of this planet is that when you really want something, it is because that desire originated in something he calls the Soul of the World. That desire is also your destiny and is a person's only real obligation. He also talks about something called the big lie: "that at a certain point in our lives, we lose control of what's happening to us, and our lives become controlled by fate. So we fight between controlling our own destiny versus being controlled by fate"⁷.

Melchizedek is not sure if what he is saying is penetrating Santiago's mind so he tries to make a deal with Santiago. If he will sell the king 1/10 of his sheep he will tell him how to find his treasure. Santiago faces his destiny

again. He must choose between something he is accustomed to, his life with his sheep; and something he wants to have. Santiago knows that his family and his town are used to his absence so he figures his sheep will eventually get along without him too. He brings 1/10 of his sheep to the king the next day and the rest he sells to his friend⁸⁾.

Melchizedek tells Santiago that to find his treasure he must follow the omens God has left for him. Melchizedek gives Santiago two stones from his breastplate to help him interpret the omens. The white one, Urim, means no and the black one, Thummim, means yes. But Melchizedek counsels Santiago to try and make his own decisions and only use Urim and Thummim when he doesn't understand an omen.

II

With the money he has from selling his sheep Santiago crosses the Strait of Gibraltar to Tangier. His desire to find his treasure is going to be tested many times. Along the way Melchizedek will appear under different guises to support him. But Santiago's will to understand his soul must ultimately come from within himself before he is allowed to find his treasure.

Santiago doesn't yet know his soul, however, and in Tangier he has an immediate setback. He is in new surroundings unable to understand the Arabic language and still unsure of how he is going to reach the Egyptian Pyramids. He makes a mistake by latching on to a young Arab boy who can speak Spanish. The boy has no qualifications to act as a guide but since he can speak Spanish Santiago trusts him. He gives him all his money so he can buy camels and provisions for the trip. But when they go out into the crowded market of Tangier the Arab boy ditches Santiago, leaving him with no money,

unable to go to the Pyramids or home to Andalusia, and nobody to trust or communicate with.

Heroic adventures have this dangerous path that must be taken before they succeed. The hero, when following the path of his desire, must keep his mind in control and not let it pull him into disaster⁹⁾. Santiago fails miserably. He mistook familiarity for safety and trust. He had thought going to the Pyramids would be very simple. He became careless and lost everything. This initial test is a difficult one for Santiago to overcome. He doesn't yet possess the inner strength and understanding of his soul to conquer this setback by himself.

Santiago gives up. He resolves to work in Tangier, save his money until he can go back to Andalusia and buy back his sheep. He soon finds a job with a crystal merchant, is a good worker, and within a year has enough money to go home. While working for the merchant Santiago tells him about his journey. The merchant, like Santiago's father, has given up on his own dreams but still believes in their importance. He pushes Santiago to seek out his treasure.

In fact, Melchizedek is the merchant. Santiago of course doesn't know this, but it is through him that Santiago resumes his journey. Santiago, while packing for home, comes across the Urim and Thummim. They remind him of the king and of his need to follow his dream. Here again, with the help of his counselor, Santiago gathers the strength to go forward once again. Santiago still needs Melchizedek's help but a psychological evolution is slowly taking place within himself now. He is moving from a position of immaturity to the courage of self-responsibility. Its full evolution still requires another test or what Campbell calls an initiation ritual¹⁰⁾. Santiago's experiences in Tangier are only

preparing him for the more difficult trials ahead. Only when he can pass a test without the help of his counselor, will he achieve full spiritual maturity and the courage of self-responsibility that comes with it.

The trip across the desert will provide just such a test, and the teachings of alchemy will act as Santiago's guide to his soul so he can pass his test. Santiago joins a caravan. He is no longer relying on strangers who have no means of transportation to take him where he wants to go. This caravan makes repeated journeys across the desert. In this caravan he comes into contact with alchemy through another traveler, an Englishman. He teaches Santiago some basic lessons about the ancient science.

The main idea of alchemy is that all things are the manifestation of one thing only. The Englishman uses metal as a metaphor for this idea. If a metal were heated for many years it would free itself of all its individual properties, and what was left would be the Soul of the World. We may compare this idea to what happens when a person dies. Everything but the person's soul decays leaving that one part of us, our soul, remaining. It alone represents all the parts that made us human when we were alive. Therefore we must listen to and nurture our soul if we want our spiritual life to be fulfilling.

In alchemy the Soul of the World allows the alchemist to understand anything, because it is the language with which all things communicate. This soul is what Joseph Campbell calls "the powers of nature". He says that if you can transcend your humanity you can re-associate yourself with this nature force. People who have stopped listening to their unconscious nature, what alchemists call the Soul of the World, are off-center. Their mind is not in tune with their body or heart. They listen to their neighbors to learn

what they ought to do, how to behave etc¹¹).

Santiago is trying to understand his own nature force by going on this journey. By the time he joins the caravan and meets the Englishman he is beginning to understand his own nature and its relationship to the nature force around him. He tells the Englishman: "The closer one gets to realizing his destiny, the more that destiny becomes his true reason for being"¹²). And what he calls intuition, luck or coincidence is really a sudden immersion of the soul into the universal current of life, where the histories of all people are connected, and we are able to know everything, because it is all written there¹³).

In order to read this universal current of life one must be able to understand the omens put before us that will assist us in the journey. Their understanding will require personal courage as well as an understanding of the universal language. Melchizedek warned Santiago that he would have to read the omens. His ability to understand their magic power will be tested before he reaches his treasure.

The caravan reaches an oasis, and while there they hear about the tribal wars going on in the area. One evening at the oasis Santiago goes out for a walk in the desert and notices desert hawks flying above. Suddenly one hawk dives through the sky attacking the other. An image then comes to Santiago. He sees an army, swords unsheathed, riding into the oasis. Santiago remembers Melchizedek's warning to always heed the omens. So he goes back to the oasis to reveal his vision to the tribal elders.

The tribal elders, upon hearing about his vision, explain their Tradition to Santiago. It states that an oasis is both a neutral territory, but that at the same time it should believe the messages of the desert. The leaders decide that for tomorrow only they will break the

agreement that nobody within the oasis can carry arms. For every ten enemy dead Santiago is to receive a piece of gold. But if at least one of the weapons is not used tomorrow it will be used on Santiago.

Santiago must have the courage to believe in his own power to read omens. He faces death if he is incorrect. Campbell calls this conquest of fear the courage of life. He believes the cardinal initiation of every heroic adventure is found in both fearlessness and achievement¹⁴). Santiago is challenging fear head on. If he is right his journey will continue and his knowledge of the Soul of the World will be greater. His destiny will be that much closer.

Before Santiago finds out if he is to live or die he meets the Alchemist. The oasis is his home. He tells Santiago to come find him tomorrow if he is still alive. The next day the omen plays itself out just as Santiago foresaw and he receives fifty gold pieces.

The Alchemist, satisfied with Santiago's progress, feels he doesn't need to learn anything new from him, but he gives Santiago some advice: "Remember that wherever your heart is, there you'll find your treasure. You have got to find the treasure, so that everything you have learned will make sense"¹⁵). Your heart is what will lead you to your destiny. Coelho makes the heart the vehicle for Santiago to find his soul. If he will listen to his heart, not somebody else's idea of a destiny they have mapped out for him, it will lead him to an understanding of his soul and thus his treasure.

It is what Campbell calls "the force". That force is inside of you. There is no higher cause, no heaven or what he calls "up there". "It is in you. Go and find it"¹⁶).

The passage to fulfillment, and to understanding of our nature within the greater Soul of the World, lies between the perils of desire

and fear. Campbell says the heroic adventure is its own reward if you follow your destiny, but it is necessarily dangerous because we are following our own way, not what our family or our societal structure has laid out as being suitable for us to do¹⁷).

Santiago still faces the ultimate test of his own understanding of his destiny. He must pass it in order to claim his treasure and the Alchemist has agreed to be his guide. The final test begins when they are apprehended by members of one of the warring tribes and accused of being spies. The Alchemist tells their captors that Santiago is an alchemist, a man who understands the nature of the world. If he wants he can destroy the camp with the force of the wind. The Alchemist brags to the tribal chief that Santiago will demolish his camp within three days and that if he fails he is free to kill them both.

Santiago doesn't believe his powers are strong enough to do what the Alchemist has boasted about. The Alchemist tells him not to give into his fears because then he will be unable to listen to his heart and understand his soul.

Santiago first asks the desert for help and it agrees to offer its sand. The wind, however, protests that Santiago cannot become the wind. But he tells the wind that we are all made by the same hand, so it is possible. Santiago calls this idea love. When you are loved you can do anything in creation. The wind had to admit it didn't understand what Santiago meant so it agreed to start a sandstorm that would blot out the sun so Santiago could look up to heaven and ask for its help.

The sun tells Santiago that its own relationship with the Soul of the World is love. If the sun came a little closer everything would die and the Soul of the World would no longer exist. Santiago challenges the sun's definition of love. Love is not based on the power to

destroy all living things. Love is a force that continually tries to transform and improve the Soul of the World. If there were no human beings nothing would transform itself into something better, or acquire a new destiny. "This is why alchemy exists. So that everyone will search for his treasure, find it, and then want to be better than he was in a former life"¹⁸). When everyone achieves their destiny the Soul of the World will become one.

The Soul of the World is not perfect, however. We nourish it for better or worse depending on if we want to become better or worse. The power of love is when we strive to better it¹⁹).

The sun could not turn the boy into the wind. It told him to ask "the hand that wrote all".

All of these nature forces are like man. They too are trying to read the omens of the hand that wrote all. They want to understand their own nature so they can be one with the Soul of the World. But only the hand that wrote all understands the reasons for creation. Santiago saw that the Soul of the World and the Soul of God was his own soul, and that he could perform miracles.

The tribal chief, after seeing the power of the windstorm caused by Santiago lets him and the Alchemist go. Santiago has passed the trials laid out before him. He can now find his treasure because he now understands how his soul fits into the souls of everyone else. He no longer needs the Alchemist, who leaves him alone to find his treasure.

At a sand dune close to the Pyramids Santiago's heart tells him to dig for his treasure. While digging two refugees from the tribal war come across him, and thinking he is searching for gold, beat and almost kill him. Santiago tells them of his recurring dream and upon hearing this they leave him.

before going the leader tells Santiago of his own dream. It is about going to an abandoned church in Spain with a Sycamore tree.

The refugee didn't go to Spain, didn't follow his destiny and is now miserable. Santiago has followed his and upon hearing this looks toward the Pyramids. "They seemed to laugh at him, and he laughed back, his heart bursting with joy. Because now he knew where his treasure was"²⁰).

Conclusion

Joseph Campbell teaches that the force one is looking for in the hero's journey is within oneself²¹). Paulo Coelho uses biblical references and tenets of alchemy to help Santiago find this force. Both Melchizedek and the Urim and Thummim are taken from the Old Testament of the Bible. Coelho has taken Melchizedek, a high priest of ancient Salem who in Genesis blesses Abraham after a victory over enemy kings from Mesopotamia, and appropriated his role to be an Obi Wan Kenobi type counselor to Santiago²²). He is Santiago's father, the gypsy woman, the king of Salem, the crystal merchant, the Englishman and the Alchemist. He is always keeping Santiago focused on his journey and especially on his need to trust in himself—what Coelho calls listening to your heart.

When Santiago is alone Melchizedek has provided for a guiding presence through the omen reading stones Urim and Thummim. Urim and Thummim were sacred objects carried inside the breastplate of the high priest. They were used as an oracle to divine the will of God. Santiago uses them to divine the will of the omens along his journey.

But it is the principles of alchemy that matter most to Coelho. He thinks they still have relevance in today's technological machine dominated world. The most important lesson in the book comes in response to

But before going the leader tells Santiago of his own dream. It is about going to an abandoned church in Spain with a Sycamore tree. this question to teach Santiago the best way to learn. "There is only one way to learn. It is through action. Many alchemists were looking only for gold. They were seeking the treasure of their destiny, without wanting to live that destiny out"²³). Coelho is saying that you find your treasure, your reason for being, only after living out your journey. This is a very powerful message in today's volatile, fast changing world.

People, however, are afraid to take the journey. The first obstacle is the persons themselves. They don't believe they have a destiny to fulfill. Societal expectations also hinder people from taking their journey. Our

families, spouses, children, friends and the workplace all can put pressure on us to conform to so called societal norms. Those who take the journey are often seen as selfish. But we don't have to take the journey alone. We all have that treasure waiting for us if we will only listen to our heart.

Coelho is telling us that to find our soul and oneness with the earth we must take the journey. Coelho's dream is that all will search for their treasure, find it, and then want to be better than they were. If everyone is able to have a successful self-transcending experience like Santiago, it will lead to a closer oneness with all things and our journey for spiritual gold will be that much closer to reality.

Notes

- 1) Campbell J (1988) *The Power Of Myth*. Doubleday, New York, p.22.
- 2) Ibid., p.123.
- 3) Coelho P (1993) *The Alchemist*. Harper Collins, New York, pp.13 & 14.
- 4) Ibid., pp.14 & 15.
- 5) Campbell, *The Power Of Myth*, p.124.
- 6) Ibid., p.126.
- 7) Coelho, *The Alchemist*, p.18.
- 8) Mitchell S (1996) *Genesis*. Harper Collins, New York, pp.25 & 26. The meaning of the fraction 1/10 comes from the story of Abraham in the Book of Genesis from the Old Testament of the Bible. Abraham goes to war against Chedorlaomer king of Elam. He is victorious and upon his return is met by Melchizedek king of Salem. Melchizedek offers Abraham (still called Abram at this point in Genesis) bread and wine and blesses him. Abraham in return gives Melchizedek 1/10 of his war booty.
- 9) Campbell, *The Power Of Myth*, p.132.
- 10) Ibid., p.124.
- 11) Ibid., pp.146 & 147.
- 12) Coelho, *The Alchemist*, p.75.
- 13) Ibid., p.77.
- 14) Campbell, *The Power Of Myth*, p.152.
- 15) Coelho, *The Alchemist*, p.122.
- 16) Campbell, *The Power Of Myth*, p.148.
- 17) Ibid., p.158.
- 18) Coelho, *The Alchemist*, p.158.

- 19) Ibid., p.159.
- 20) Ibid., p.172.
- 21) Campbell, *The Power Of Myth*, p.161.
- 22) Obi Wan Kenobi acts as the hero Luke Skywalker's counselor in the movie *Star Wars*. At certain dangerous or important points in the movie Obi Wan Kenobi counsels Luke Skywalker and in this separate way helps him on his quest to fulfill his own hero's journey.
- 23) Coelho, *The Alchemist*, p.132.