

What is your “Quest-I-On?”

Before beginning to go through the Jesus narrative looking at the questions he asked, I want to look at the matter of questions and how they apply to the spiritual quest.

What is your question?

What is the quest you are on?

Or, what is your “Quest-I-On?”

We need a core narrative that offers us security in an insecure world. One that can lead to healing for our many wounds. The early followers of Jesus had such a narrative. Those who embraced it lived in a new world. They were transformed. They practiced love and joy and non-violence. Though they were seen as a threat by the political establishment of their day, they prevailed.

I am not so naive as to believe that we can embrace that same narrative because of the way it has been corrupted and hijacked. And, we live in such a different world.

Further, though this country likes to describe itself as “a Christian nation,” the fact is that the narrative we have followed up until this moment has allowed many of us to assume the right to a privileged place in this world, to consume the earth’s resources at a self-destructive rate and to presume a security that has led us to the brink of inevitable collapse. The narrative we follow, unconsciously follow and live out, is composed of many parts: that more will make us happy, that youth is more valuable than age, that we “deserve” the best of everything, that technology will make everything better, and so forth.

In the New York Times just this past week (11/30/18) Bret Stephens wrote:

“The reason technology so often disappoints and betrays us is that it promises to make easy things that, by their intrinsic nature, have to be hard. Tweeting and trolling are easy. Mastering the arts of conversation and measured debate is hard. Texting is easy. Writing a proper letter is hard. Looking stuff up on Google is easy.

Knowing what to search for in the first place is hard. Having a thousand friends on Facebook is easy. Maintaining six or seven close adult friendships over the space of many years is hard. Swiping right on Tinder is easy. Finding love - and staying in it - is hard.”

We are in need of a noble truth.

William Sparrow, who was dean of Virginia Theological Seminary in the mid-nineteenth century has a wonderful line that is an inscription outside of the library there: “Seek the truth, come whence it may, lead where it will, cost what it will.”

This journey we are making from the “no-longer” to the “not-yet” is not one we can predict. We may think we know the destination but we don’t. Nor do we know who we will be along the way. Nor whom we will be when we arrive. Like life itself, it will be, is being, a journey full of joy and sorrow.

I’m sure you seen one or more of the television ads for DNA testing. For a fee one of these places will send you a kit. You swab the inside of your mouth with a Q-tip and send it back to them and, a few weeks later, you will get an analysis of your DNA telling you where you are from. One of these companies shows a person at the beginning of the ad who tells us that for years he had believed that his family tree took him back to Switzerland. After the DNA analysis, however, he now realizes that his heritage is Scottish. So he swapped his lederhosen for a bagpipe.

If we could only “get it” that the myth of Adam and Eve is the most helpful one we could embrace, because it says we all came from the same source, then perhaps we could stop with the divisiveness. Whereas it is religion’s job to bind up the wounded, heal the hurt and reunite the separated, religion seems easily to gravitate toward contributing to bad ideas about both God and our neighbor.

I don’t know about you but it seems to me that when something really stupid and ignorant is said by a political or religious “leader,” it so often comes from someone from Texas. And, if it is religious, from a Baptist. Nevertheless, I was stunned to read recently that Ed Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston warned that God will punish America for voting Democrats back into power in the

midterm elections. He said, “The Democratic Party is basically godless.” This is not helpful rhetoric.

We need a different narrative. One that will offer security in an insecure world. One that can lead to healing of our many wounds.

What is your “Quest-I-On”?

In the center of time and space there lived a king in a castle. His name was called the Fisher King. His name is Pelles.. He had been mortally. He never left his bed chamber. He had fallen under an evil spell. He no longer cared a thing about the well-being of his people or his lands. All of his kingdom was slowly wasting away, dying - cattle, crops, everything. Everyone’s soul seemed to be suspended. People went about their daily tasks lethargically, as if they were all in a trance. They had lost all sense of purpose.

There is a cottage in the woods not far from the castle. In it lives a young man and his mother. The young man, whose name is Perceval, has just come of age. While walking through the forest one day he encountered a group of the king’s knights riding along the road. He was awestruck by their shining armor and appearance. So much so that he immediately wished to become one such as they appeared to be. Over the objections of his very strict mother, he set off for the castle to see how to become such a knight.

When he arrived at the castle he was struck dumb. Instead of the glorious Camelot he had expected, he found himself in the middle of a wasteland. Everything was sterile. He discovered that the king had been wounded in the groin. That is, he had lost the power of re-generation. The king’s attendants, moving about in their listless stupor, did nothing about this terrible situation that had befallen them.

Perceval was given a horse and weapons so he could battle with a formidable knight who had beaten all of the king’s knights. Even the best of them.

Astonishingly, Perceval won and he took the armor of the fearsome foe. Some said it was mere luck that he had won. Others said that the young man’s innocence had conferred a divine blessing and strength upon him.

Perceval desperately wanted to help his king. But he, like all the others, had no answers as to how to heal the wound. His mind was filled with questions. These too, like his new found strength, flowed from the gift of his innocence. He damed them up inside of himself however because he remembered his mother's constant teaching of not embarrassing people by asking questions.

Instead, Perceval left the court and castle on a quest for the Holy Grail. He believe that if he could find this chalice that was allegedly used at the last supper Jesus had with his disciples and bring it back to the castle, the king would be healed and the kingdom would be restored to its former grandeur.

Perceval ventured down many a blind path and false trail in his search. Finally he glimpsed the Grail and, as a result, felt the king's pain in his own heart.

He rode his magnificent white charger back to the king's castle. He rushed to his king who by this time was at death's door. With compassion in his heart he overcame his previous hesitance and knelt beside his monarch. A question rose to his lips, "What ails thee?" O, "Where do you hurt?"

There was a blinding flash of light. In an instant the spell was broken. The king's health was restored. The land and all its inhabitants, the animals and the crops, the dried up streams and wells, were all renewed.

The king and all the other members of the court turned to Perceval and in honoring him the king gave this toast: "If you falter, never forget, that every day holds the promise of a new redemption."

Healing came to the king, who is an archetypical symbol of being centered and whole, because the right question was put to him. Questions can be dangerous. They can take us to and over the edge of the safe world in which we live.

The story of Perceval and the Grail comes to us as an unfinished poem from a French author. It was composed during the 1180s or 1190s. It was first written as a poem that recounts the adventures and growing pains of the young knight Perceval.

Other writers picked up the poem and added lines to it. Scholars say that there are four other different additions to the original piece.

Perceval is the earliest recorded account we have of what was to become the Quest for the Holy Grail. Actually, in the original the grail is not called “holy.” It is just a vessel.

You can go on the internet and look up this story and its history. It had a tremendous impact on the literary world of the Middle Ages. It introduced people to the story of the grail and its power.

My purpose in this talk is not to go into the history or influence of this very powerful story. You can do that on your own. I would encourage you to do so. Just enter the terms “Holy Grail” and, then, “Perceval, the Story of the Gail” and you will have some fascinating reading. There are great Grail stories and traditions that span time and space. Richard Wagner wrote a magnificent piece of music called “Parsifal.”

I bring it up because of the role this story has played in both my psychological training and my on-going personal growth. As you know, the path of psychology, that is the understanding of the person and the psyche, that I follow is that of Carl Jung. Jung made a very unusual promise to his wife. He promised never to talk or write about the Grail Legend. She had spent thirty years of her life researching the Grail story and she wanted to write and publish her own work. She died in 1955 before fulfilling her wish. Jung asked Marie-Louise von Franz to complete his wife’s lifelong endeavor.

This is an extremely rich book full of both psychological and theological insights. It has a section on the Trinity and the transformation of it into a quaternity - Father, Son, Holy Spirit and Mary. Merlin the Magician is introduced as the image of the whole person, as the one who points to the unconscious and past it to the wholeness beyond opposites.

It is well beyond the scope of this talk to do justice to the entire content of this book. I wanted to introduce the Perceval story to you because Robert Johnson introduced it to me. He even based his book on masculine psychology, He, on this

book. I was privileged to hear him give the contents of this book in a series of lectures he gave.

What Emma Jung does, and so does Robert Johnson to some degree, is show how this popular fairy tale of a simpleton was transformed into a mystical religious quest that inevitably addresses the religious problem of we humans.

The symbolism in the tale is profound and complex. The Grail is a life-preserving, life-giving vessel that is guarded in a place that is difficult to find. The king is dying and his kingdom is devastated. The king can only be restored to health if a knight of a certain character can find the castle, see what is going on there and ask the proper question.

In the story Perceval thinks himself up for the task. He finds the castle and the king but fails to ask the right question. As in all fairy tales, he is given a second chance.

The castle is a symbol for the unconscious. It is difficult to find. The grail for Jung was the whole person, the true Self, that inner guide that is God's voice that slumbers in the depths of the unconscious of every person.

According to Jung the king is sick because of a failure to integrate the shadow. In a world where all are shining knights in glorious armor there is no integration of the sacred feminine. Until the king grappled with the dark - like Jacob and Job before him - he could not come into a realization of the totality of the God-image.

There is also in this profound and wonderful story the stage of development of the human spirit where we are no longer satisfied with the materialistic side of things but where there is the ability to go beyond this to the capacity to endow the concrete with symbolic meaning. That is, we develop the ability to reflect, to discern, to place value, to develop the ability to discriminate between good and evil that reaches beyond what our tribe says about these things.

I'm just scratching the surface of both this story of Perceval and the Holy Grail and the ways Emma Jung and Robert Johnson have treated it. If you want to use this story as a guide for part of your own spiritual practice, I highly recommend Robert's little book, "He." I know I make a lot of book recommendations. You'll

thank me for this one. It isn't, by the way, a book for group discussion. This one you read by yourself with notebook and marker in hand.

I'm bringing it up because I could think of no better way to introduce the importance of questions into our ongoing conversation of how we navigate the territory between the "no-longer" and the "not-yet."

When the knights had seen an apparition of the Grail, they determined to go on a quest to find it. At first they thought, "We should go out together to find the Grail." Then they realized this would be disgrace. Each must go alone into the forest and enter at the place of his own choosing. Individuation is not a group activity. Though bringing full personhood to the collective is essential and though the group can provide resources and support, growing up is something you have to do for yourself and by yourself. As one of my teachers put it to me years ago, "No one can take a bath for you."

This is what Joseph Campbell called "the hero's journey." The word "hero" is related to the words "heresy" and "heretic." All three are derived from a Greek word meaning "able to choose." A hero is a chooser. A hero chooses the questions of her or his life and therefore the quest that person chooses to live.

For all of us, the question is the quest-i-on. The questions we ask, or fail to ask, shape the journeys of our lives. What distinguishes the person who experiences real life from the position of the true Self has to do with the questions that person asks or hears and the earnestness with which that person seeks to live their answers.

In the realm of spirit, or of True Self-development, or to use Bill Plotkin's phrase, Soul-crafting, there are really no answers. Rather, there are answering persons. This is very hard for the ego. The ego which thrives on being right and in control will almost always settle for satisfying answers - even if they are false! - rather than remain on the quest for truth. But, until that truth is found and experienced, the King and the Kingdom remain ill and barren.

I've shared with you several times that Jesus not only asked more questions than he was asked but also he almost never directly, verbally answered any question. Rather, he would tell a story or perform some action.

Jesus didn't answer questions. If Fundamentalist Christians were to take this in, I think it would shake their world because a basic assumption of Fundamentalism is that it has answers and that it is religion's job to answer questions. Jesus didn't answer questions. I think of both the immense humility and groundedness it must have taken Jesus to be able to deal with people the way that he did. Time after time the only answer he gave was silence and genuine love. Of course, he was judged harshly for that.

The questions Jesus asked are designed to reposition people. To lift them up from where they think they stand and put them down some place else. The questions he asked, the stories he told, the deeds he did were designed to make people aware of their unconscious biases, to break them out of their dualistic mindset, to challenge their image of God or of the world and to present them, us, with new and creative possibilities.

Remember what I said when we first started talking about miracles: religion has historically served two functions. One was to stabilize and make the ego secure. The other, and this we are all most resistant to, is to destabilize the false assumptions on which the ego stands. That's what the questions of Jesus do. They reveal the false assumptions on which the ego's world has been built.

Jesus does not seek to take us to some moral high ground. He wants to be that guide into that dark place in the wood into which each of us must go alone but which journey, if we undertake and ask the right questions, can take us into transformative space.

This is not easy or quick work. This, for me, is symbolized in Jesus asking Peter not once, not twice but three times in a row, "Peter, do you love me?" Henri Nowen said that this may be the most significant question of our time. God is crying out to us through the suffering of the earth and its inhabitants: "Do you love me?" We have, I deeply believe for our own health and wholeness, to ask the world

and its inhabitants, “What ails thee? Where you you hurt?” Then we have to listen deeply to the answers and act accordingly.

For me, one of the most probing questions Jesus asks is, “What do you want me to do for you?” The story of our life doesn’t really get interesting until we know what we want. Life is short, no matter how long you live. What are we really looking for in the remaining years we have left?

In the Grail myth the hero is one who is adequate to the Grail Quest. This adequacy is not a matter of big muscles or intellectual refinement. It is a matter of a simple, childlike heart. Jesus was clear, as are all spiritual teachers, unless we become as children, we won’t make it.

Perceval often seems, when you read the story in its entirety, something of a fool. I’m thinking the line between the hero and the fool is fairly thin. Jesus likely seemed like a fool to those in places of power and leadership.

Perceval was raised by his mother. His father was a knight who had come to his end as knights often do. Mother would see to it that the same thing does not happen to her precious boy. So she secludes him from knightly things and knightly stories. Of course, this fails.

One day three knights show up in bright and shining armor and the boy is enchanted. Mother then hopes to have him ridiculed out of his quest. She wants him to give up this foolish business of heroic intentions.

Many people do give up their dreams to please mother. Or, “mother” as projected onto some external person or entity - a spouse, a job, a title. Who has not heard or had it said to them, “You can’t do that! What would people think?”

Everyone on the quest must be prepared to face not only failure but, perhaps worse, ridicule. If you want to be sure of yourself, do what the culture tells you to do, do what your tribe requires. If you want to break out of the conventional mold, you must figure out for yourself what you are about.

The heart of the story of Perceval and his quest for the Grail is suggested in his first encounter with the Grail castle. After various adventures, Perceval has sort of stumbled into the Grail castle. This is the wisdom of innocence. The purity of the simple fellow gets him into the castle.

In the castle lives a king who is sorely wounded. The king's illness has brought devastation to the kingdom.

Everyone of us, some more than others, gets wounded growing up. In the process of making sense of our experiences, using the capacities we have at the time, we come to develop beliefs about life, about ourselves, about others. Moving away from the "no-longer" means developing new and different beliefs about life, about ourselves, about others.

Perceval can redeem the king and the kingdom by asking a simple question. He comes to the wounded king and wants to ask, "What ails thee?" But he has been told from dozens of sources that good knights don't ask a lot of questions. He has reached this decisive moment: shall he act from his heart or from the role he has been taught. He fails. He has been socially indoctrinated. This indoctrination caused him to doubt the promptings of his heart.

He chooses to act the way he thought he was supposed to act. He missed his opportunity because he was trying so hard to be "a good boy."

He goes to bed that night, and when he gets up in the morning, the castle is empty. As he leaves the castle, he hears a voice shouting, "You silly goose! Why didn't you open your mouth and ask the king the question?"

Though he is a little dense in the head, he soon enough comes to realize that he has missed his chance. He is really depressed. He could see now that his being so slow to ask the question as he sat beside the dying king has cost him.

For the next five years he tries desperately to find his way back to the castle. He is booed and jeered. Everyone knows he has failed and everywhere is the desolation of the kingdom.

But, he is gaining the wisdom of experience, of commitment, of loyalty and dedication. His journey weaves through a maze-like set of experiences through which he comes to redeem and understand his past. Holding to his quest, his question, provides him with the ball of string that he can unwind and find his way out of his lostness and back to the castle.

Of course, he eventually triumphs and, in fact, becomes himself the Grail King. Through his tenacity of purpose, or loyalty to the quest, he makes it.

When you hear me say “he makes it,” I hope you are not hearing a “and they all lived happily ever after ending.” I’m not selling optimism. I hope I’m wrong, but I think we have few reasons to be optimistic. I do think that we have every reason to hope.

My faith and belief is that for every person who takes up the great quest-i-ons of life and holds tenaciously to them, there is a marvelous life - no matter what.

For Perceval and for you and me the basic issue is compassion.

“What ails thee?”

Or, put in our language, “Where do you hurt?”

If you look around you and the world looks like a wasteland, like the kingdom is dying - in spite of how the stock market is doing, the way toward the “not-yet” is through the heart. If we are following Jesus, the simplest rendering of this I know is, “As you have done it to one of the least of these, you have done it unto me.”

The way forward is through the heart.

Whatever is at the center of your life will be the source of your security, your guidance, your wisdom and your power.

Security has to do with knowing who you are.

Guidance has to do with the values by which you live.

Wisdom has to do with asking and being open to wise and useful questions.

Power has to do with our willingness to live our values.

The loving heart, the heart of compassion, is the reality of the human life. The desire to be who you truly are is what begins to wake you up.

We are in a trance so much of the time. I easily fall into the trance of the culture. I assume you do too.

I don't, of course, know what the unique shape of your quest is like. What I know I hope for is that the over-arching quest for all of us might be the heart of compassion. Compassion first for ourselves and, then compassion for others and for the earth and all its inhabitants.

The Grail, says Jung, is the principle of individuation available within each person. "As threads of a fabric are woven into a pattern, so the Self as a living garment of divinity is woven out of the many decisions and crises, in themselves possibly insignificant, by which we are affected in the course of our lives."

I want to try to be as unclear as I can:

We're not searching. We've already found. We have the Grail in our hands. It is made up of such beautiful materials: precious metals and jewels. Peace, love, joy, patience and humility.

But, we are on a quest. Our quest is to go out to an ailing world and people asking: "What ails thee? Where do you hurt?"

So here are two questions I leave with you:

The first is from Meister Eckhart: "What good is it to me if Mary gave birth to the son of God fourteen hundred years ago if I do not give birth to the child of God in my time and in my culture? We are all meant to be mothers of God. For God is always needing to be born."

The next comes from Mother Teresa: “What do we live for if not to make life less difficult for each other?”

The answers will have to come from you.

What is your “Quest-I-On”?

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.