

# The Grail Castle Experience

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 13 January 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Jolyon Bromley

Epiphany 1C

Wisdom 6: 12-19; Mark 9: 2-8;

Contemporary Reading: *The Peace of Wild Things* by Wendell Berry

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

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In my early twenties I left the church community I been brought up in, rejected all Christian teachings and made the intellectual decision to be an atheist. I thought this was necessary in order to explore my sexuality without the strictures and constraints of church teachings. I had had a number of infatuations, but I was very inexperienced and nothing had ever happened.

In this state of mind I came across a book that really spoke to me – it was Robert A. Johnson's *The Psychology of Romantic Love*, a best seller. As a Jungian therapist, he analysed the famous Medieval legend of *Tristan and Iseult* in some depth and drew out some insights for the present day.

In essence, he wrote that, in the grand passion of romantic attraction, one projects one's own wants, needs and desires onto the other person, creating a kind of idealised fantasy, rather than encountering the real unique individuality of the other person. And so it all starts to fall apart when you realise they are not who you thought they were.

Many years later I had another encounter with Robert A Johnson when he was a guest on the outstanding radio program *The Search for Meaning* presented by Caroline Jones. (You might remember it.) He gave an engrossing account of what he called *the Grail Castle experience*. I heard this a long time ago so I'm a little bit vague on exactly what he said – but something like this.

He described how, as a young student, he had a part time job and there was a particularly busy period of time when he was required to work through the night, finishing in the dark hours of the early morning.

Although he was at the point of exhaustion he decided, rather than going home, to drive up to a nearby lookout to see the dawn. There he had an extraordinary experience of elation, transcendence, of merging with the light, and feeling a sense of connection with all that he saw.

An experience that was not repeated, no matter how hard he tried - until many years later - when he arrived in India after an exhausting flight and again, nearly at the end of his endurance, he wandered onto the balcony of his hotel to see the sunrise and felt that same overwhelming, uplifting feeling of deep connection with all around him. This time, he said it stayed with him and he could access it within, whenever he needed to.

His story had immediate resonances for me! I'd had an experience while I was working part time as a bush regenerator, looking down, being very focused on identifying weeds and removing them. Then, at a point, looking up through a clearing in the dark circle of the trees to the brilliantly blue, light-filled sky and feeling a surge of exhilaration that lifted me up and connected me with earth and sky.

In the midst of these overwhelming feelings an image came to me from the Psalmist – *my cup runneth over!*

This feeling was not unfamiliar. I knew I had experienced it before but I couldn't tell when - and like Robert A. Johnson, I know I can access those feelings whenever I need to now.

Johnson set these experiences in the context of the Medieval Romance of *Parzival*. Jungians love to connect human experience with archetypal images found in myths and legends. So he referenced the young knight's encounter in the Grail Castle, which lifted him out of his ordinary reality into a space filled with awe and wonder. Parzival has two visits to the Grail castle, firstly as a wide-eyed innocent and secondly with a highly developed consciousness through life experience.

There have been various tellings of this Celtic Grail story, in French, in German, in English and even in Welsh. It is a fundamental story in Western culture. In the popular imagination, the grail has become the object of any serious striving.

Perhaps the most widely known reference is Wagner's opera *Parsifal*, based on Wolfram Von Eschenbach's *Parzival*.

Wagner had what he called his Good Friday experience, a powerful encounter with the Christ, late in his life and immediately sketched out a scenario for the opera. He wanted to bring his Grail Castle experience to a wide ranging public through his music. Although there is a powerful focus on the Grail in the opera (the Grail, by the way, is supposedly the cup Jesus used at the last supper, and was brought to the west by Joseph of Arimathea). So, in Wagner's Opera, there's a strong Buddhist theme. The line - *Enlightened through compassion, the pure fool*, is repeated often.

The original Eschenbach text of *Parzival* I have worked with for over 20 years. It is a central text in Year 11 in the Steiner curriculum and I could always find something new to explore through its 16 chapters. Even though it was written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century it can still speak to modern readers about a young person finding his path in life. His name, Percival in English, has been interpreted as meaning "piercing the veil".

It's regarded as a profound esoteric text - and the story is packed with archetypal images. Let me share just a hint of the richness.

Parzival's mother is the Queen of Wales and she develops an obsessive attraction to a handsome French knight who's participating in a tournament in her capital. After considerable negotiation he reluctantly agrees to marry her on the condition that he has the freedom to come and go pursuing his own interests.

Unfortunately, he dies in battle before his son Parzival is born. In a state of despairing grief she takes the baby away from the court to bring him up in a remote forest to protect him from the aggressive male culture of knighthood.

He has an idyllic childhood, wandering freely in the forest immersed in the natural world, but with no clue about civilization, until in his teenage years he encounters a group of Arthurian knights passing through the forest. It's his mother's worst nightmare! He comes home excited, determined to seek out King Arthur and become a knight.

His mother has to let him go, but she dresses him in fool's clothing and gives him a broken down old horse, hoping that he won't get far before he's mocked and laughed at and people jeer at him - and he'll come running back to her.

As a totally ignorant young man he makes some catastrophic mistakes that severely impact on the lives of other people. And yet there is something noble, some special inner quality that people recognise in him.

After several chapters into the narrative he has made his mark in the world and is riding along a lonely, remote track as evening falls. He calls out a greeting to a richly dressed man in a boat on a lake and he's given directions to a castle a little further on where he can stay the night. But he's warned many people ride right past it without seeing it.

This is the first indication that somehow the experience in the Grail castle is not a physical thing, there is a dreamlike quality to the events, the mysterious revelation of the Grail that feeds all those present. He watches passively as the fisher king, who directed him to the castle, officiates in the ritual, apparently in great pain. Everyone is gracious to him but he goes to sleep with an indefinable sense of unease.

Next morning when he wakes, he's alone; everyone has gone. He leaves and down the track he runs into his cousin Sigune, who tends to pop up unexpectedly when he needs some advice. He tells her about his encounter with the Grail and she says, *"And of course you asked the question."*

*"No. What question?"*

*"Are you that stupid? Didn't you see the suffering of the king? Didn't it arouse compassion in your heart? If you had just asked, 'What ails thee? He would have been healed and you would have become the king.'"*

*"Yes! I did see his suffering. I did care but I'd been told in my training not to ask too many questions."*

So, the Quest becomes the Question!

He has to face lots more challenges and let go of many ambitions before he's ready to be called back to the Grail castle, to ask the healing question and assume the role he was destined for.

Parzival's spiritual journey is important, because it represents the next step in the development of human consciousness. The expansion of awareness, compassion for all living things and the planet itself. We still have a long way to go!

Let me try to draw all this together! Today is Epiphany 2. We're not focusing on the revelation of the Christ at the baptism. We're with the 3 disciples on the mountainside experiencing the revelation of Christ's spiritual nature which, indeed, was a profoundly mystical experience for the disciples.

And we're also with Wendell Berry, leaving the grief and worry of the world behind, to find the peace and connectedness beside the still waters. (When Vivien Langford showed me this poem, *The Peace of Wild Things* she highlighted "*the day-blind stars.*" The stars are there even though we can't see them in the daylight.

In this moment we can't see the Christ but his spirit is here, in our midst, in us, linking us together in community. There are many ways to experience that spirit of connectedness in the outer world of nature, in music, drama, great art, when we are moved, elated, feel deeply.

We can feel that spirit of connectedness in our inner life in prayer and meditation.

Let me finish with the image, the imagination of the Grail.

Whether it existed as a physical object in Western culture or not, it can be seen as a symbol for the human heart, which itself, is a metaphor for our inner life.

The thing is, the cup is there, like the human heart, to receive whatever is poured into it. But it is also there to give out, to be drunk from.

May our hearts be filled with the spirit of love and may it flow out from us into the wider world.

As the Psalmist says - "*my cup runneth over.*"