

The Holy Grail  
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship  
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Some of you have met my precocious dog, Tillie. She is my nearly constant companion, sweet and devoted, but not particularly obedient. Some would say this is my fault... and I admit that I have not trained her well or consistently...but I also contend that she has an overactive quest gene...a canine knight complex...that is impossible to daunt.

I'm generally very careful about where she can be off leash, exactly because of this flaw of disobedience. She is prone to running off in search of the dog-version of a grail. I've seen this grail miraculously appear in the form of skateboarders, school buses, wheelchairs and bicyclists... anything that moves quickly or loudly on wheels... such things call to her as the objects of her desire and devotion...they hold the promise of ultimate dog-fulfillment.

The other day I had her off leash on Chapels Golf Course, where now in the winter months, she can romp and run and chase balls. I threw a ball, and as she ran to fetch it, I saw the exact moment that she caught sight of the blur of a bicyclist in the distance. The briefest hesitation, an instance of uncertainty...then the course of her original beeline abruptly changed, and off she sped. There was nothing I could do to deter her in this quest. This is her nature. The call of the quest was infinitely stronger than any call of mine. All I can say is, thank goodness the bicyclist had a good head start.

I'm not a dog psychologist, or a people psychologist for that matter, but I tend to think that there is such a nature in all of us, a nearly primal urge, to search... to be called toward something that is just out of reach, but that holds such an abundance of promise, that if ....if... if we could just reach it, all would be well. This object of desire is not the same for all of us, and especially in this age of postmodern relativity, it is difficult to identify. False, or unworthy, grails abound in our culture. Many grails are purported to be within our reach...if we can only earn enough, spend enough, diet enough, hobnob enough...How are we to know what grail is of value? How are we to trust that we will not be duped in the process? What is the one true and holy grail?

The mythologized search for the grail, at least in its Arthurian form, assumes an unquestioned end-product and result. The Knights of the Round Table went on a quest in search of, and in service to, an idealized vision, an eden, a paradise where the successful would become one with god, and in so doing, would somehow save society. Today many resist such notions of ultimate truth, and we would instead craft our own grails, our own desired ‘truths.’ Even so, we remain suspicious of, and ambivalent about, their ultimate worth. We question everything... this is very nearly the UU mantra. The question lies at the heart of our faith.

The penultimate question, in the quest for the Holy Grail is, whom does the grail serve? This is not as simple a question as might appear. I’m not sure I even understand what this question means. Perhaps I am stuck in the hierarchical progression. If those who come to the Grail Castle serve the Grail King, and the Grail King serves the Grail,<sup>1</sup> then the grail would seem to need to serve something beyond it... something higher, something greater. And what exactly is beyond the grail? Besides, how is the grail, an object, to serve someone? And so I walk with a question that is difficult to answer...whom does the grail serve? Why go in search of the grail?

Indeed for one knight, Parsifal, whose name means “innocent fool”, the question, or the lack of the question, was his downfall. He had on good advice that when he encountered the grail, he must speak the question, but he was so dazzled by all of the pomp and circumstance of the castle, that he forgot to ask. He forgot why he was there, and his quest failed. So maybe the actual object, or its trappings, gets in the way of finding the answer. If the grail is simply an object of desire, something tangible of value that would be attained, it blinds us to the purpose beyond the grail, to that which the grail contains.

One such container, the cauldron, plays an important role in Celtic spirituality and mythology, and it is thought by many that the cauldron is the forerunner to the grail...that the Arthurian tales are born of a melding of Celtic and Christian traditions. As a symbol, the sacred vessel lies deep within the human psyche, and so it is fitting that this pre-Christian cauldron is a magical object. On the most basic level, it is a container for cooking, for providing nourishment, yet it is also the quintessential manifestation of the circle, the orb. It is the shape of our earth, of the moon and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.employees.org/~pcorless/pendragon/grail-clan.txt>

the sun. Its bowl can hold all illusive power and wealth...the hope of abundance, restoration, and wholeness. And, as a container for the whole, for all that is us, it is a place for brewing, for percolating together in community...in support of one another and in alchemy with one another, literally stewing in transformation together. It is a circle, but it can also hold something: life itself, in its circular journey from birth to death.<sup>2</sup> I propose that what we are really in search of is the promise that this sacred vessel contains. I ask again, whom does the grail serve?

One potential answer is that the grail serves those who would look into it. And who can look into it? We find in the Arthurian grail stories that the key to finding the grail lay in the character of the person who sought it. Galahad, the one destined grail knight, is portrayed as virginal, a shining example of pre-existing worth, unbroken by sin or sexual desire, a Christ-like character.<sup>3</sup> In his presence, this Holy Grail, this holy quest, would seemed to be removed from the realm of possibility for the ordinary person, and only available for the chosen one, that Knight who could occupy the Siege Perilous. But remember that Galahad exists in myth, and as such is a symbol to be interpreted in service of the grail. Galahad represents that ultimate worth, that dignity, that heroic possibility that is contained in each of us, if we but find the means to unlock it.

Unitarian Universalism has always denied the premise that only a few are chosen. Resistance to the idea of the elect was evident in the radical reformation, the religious movement that birthed Unitarianism in Europe. As early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century, not long after the Arthurian stories appeared, Jan Hus, a Bohemian priest, was supporting religious practices that encouraged the participation of ordinary parishioners. Hus was accused of heresy and burned at the stake, but his followers continued to insist that all should receive communion wine, a sacrament which theretofore had been reserved for the priests alone. The orthodox position was that only the 'chosen' were allowed access to the chalice...a belief that seems to have been perpetuated in the Arthurian stories.

We all have access to the chalice, to union with all possibility. As a symbol, our chalice represents something greater than each of us, or even greater than this gathered community. You

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<sup>2</sup> Matthews, John, *The Grail: Quest for the Eternal* (Thames and Hudson: London, 1981), 8

<sup>3</sup> *Ancient Mysteries*, with Leonard Nimoy, *The Holy Grail*, A&E

heard me tell the children a little bit about the history of this chalice...that its design was meant to represent helpfulness and sacrifice, and to identify the mission of the Unitarian Service Committee. But also central to our faith is the accessibility of the quest to all. And so, Jan Hus, a would-be knight in quest of equality, is also connected with Unitarian Universalism today through the symbol of the chalice. This chalice, our grail, contains the promise of freedom, of sacrifice to a greater good, of possibility, and of holy community. All of this, and more, is held within the symbol of the chalice, an ancient and sacred container.

Thursday night, here at LUF, I attended the first in the Lifespan Education class which is viewing Joseph Campbell's Power of Myth series. This first session focused on the hero's adventure, one of the centerpieces of Campbell's life's work. The video began with a beautiful visual exposé of heroes in our times...Mother Theresa, Ghandi, Terry Fox, Martin Luther King Jr...heroes indeed. But Campbell talks not only about these extraordinary people, but about the most ordinary among us. We are all, he says, heroes in our births. We undergo a tremendous psychological as well as physical transformation, from the condition of a little water creature living in amniotic fluid into an air-breathing mammal.<sup>4</sup> This, he says, is the basic motif of the universal hero's journey – leaving one's current condition, and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or more mature condition.

In this way, the grail calls forth the heroic in us. The grail provides the impetus, the catalyst, for the journey. The grail gives Tillie the reason to take off running in a burst of motivated energy, with the hope of coming into her fullest being as a great hunter and herder. And yet, such individual fulfillment does not yet make the hero. The hero not only reaches the grail, but remembers to speak the question. What does the grail serve? As Susan said earlier, the journey does not become the quest, until that which is individual, or perhaps linear, is conquered by the cyclical... by being in service to something that is greater than the grail, greater than the self. The journey is but individual; the quest is in service to the whole of humanity and existence, for out of the life that is given in service comes a new life, a new way of being or becoming.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Campbell, Joseph, *The Power of Myth* (Doubleday: New York, 1988), 124.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, 135

As many of you know, there is some preliminary conversation at the Board level to define LUF's grail quest, to create an articulated vision for this Fellowship. I have regularly heard this quest described as finding a way to make a choice between buying a building or hiring a minister, but I would caution you that both of these things are but the tangible grail. We may go in search of them, we may even be willing to slay dragons to attain them, but we mustn't let ourselves be dazzled by the Grail Castle. The question must be spoken. We must enter the fullness of the cyclical, and ask, whom does the grail serve?

I daresay that neither of these grails, a building or a minister, will be the end of the journey for LUF. The call of the grail is to enter into and to live the search, because it is the quest itself that brings forth life. You know, the word grail comes from the French *gradule*...which was a platter used to bring food to the table, in an abundance of courses, during a feast. And this probably comes from the Latin, *gradalis*, which means gradually.<sup>6</sup> Step by step, degree by degree, gradually, going deeper and more thoughtfully into contemplation and understanding. The *gradale* is representative of a slow course toward filling one's body with nourishment, and the grail is a symbol for the gradual but progressive journey toward enlightenment and spiritual fulfillment. The grail quest is never over.

Sallust said of myths: "These things never happened, but are always."<sup>7</sup> One great function of mythology is to show us universal truth, to give us guidance, to be a roadmap that provides clues for our journey. Susan beautifully and lovingly contributed to this service and my message by sharing with me some of her passion for the Arthurian literature. She showed me a painting of a young knight, caught in contemplation... standing at a spiritual crossroads, as it were, in that momentary liminal space before moving into maturity...about to leave his youth and to begin the sacrificial hero's journey. I saw Tillie pass through this liminality when she had to choose whether to chase the bicycle or to continue her prosaic ball-chasing. LUF stands today in just such a liminal space...leaving our current condition and about to embark on a journey toward a richer existence. We stand at this intersection...holding the story of the grail in our hands. In what direction shall we turn? How might the grail serve us?

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<sup>6</sup> [www.shroud.com/scavone2.htm](http://www.shroud.com/scavone2.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Sallust, *Of Gods and of the World*

Campbell says that we need heroes, or heroic quests, as constellating images that pull together our tendencies to separation, to pull us together into some intention, so that we can operate singly. This is the purpose of having a vision statement, something that illuminates the grail, shows us the container...something that calls us into our common quest in service of one another. The grail serves us by providing the goal. We serve the grail by embarking on the journey to find it, but together, we and the grail, unite in a common quest of service to all of the possibility it contains... the larger goal, the greater good, the eternal.

The cauldron serves a ritual purpose in the life of the Celts, and the communion chalice serves a ritual purpose in the Christian church. The lighting of our chalice serves a similar ritual purpose. If we but dare to ask the question, it is a deep reminder of all of this history, this present, this future, this mystery. It prompts us to embrace the quest, to take the next step toward fulfillment and true community. It also provides a comfort, a reminder that it is not done all at once or alone...it challenges us to embrace the hope and the possibility that lie in us all.

May it be so.

Blessed be.