

Quest for the Grail

By Mark Bernstein

Part I

Creativity thrives at the cusp, at borders where differences converge. Art, imagination and spirituality thrive at the fringe, at the edge. The ends of the earth, the highest mountains, the deepest forests, far removed from the constraints and conformity of society are creative places. The edge between land and ocean, tidal flats are the most productive areas on earth providing fertile habitat for landish beings and oceanish beings, and beings that are part of both. The most diverse habitat is that hazy area in the distance between field and forest where deer graze. In the hazy cusp between life and death, between the mundane and the spiritual is also where mythology resides.

Joseph Campbell, Unitarian saint, taught that all myths and all religions are true. When read as metaphor all myths reveal the same universal truths. The myths and religions are superficially different because they are created in different times and must speak the language of their place.

Sixth century England was at a political and spiritual cusp. The Romans had deserted Britain leaving a political vacuum, internal disorder and barbarian invasion. The powerful landowning hierarchy professed a Christianity which had been imposed by Roman rule, but Celtic gods and pagan religion resided in the hearts, minds and imagination of the people. The legends of King Arthur and his mentor Merlin flowered at the crossroads of two great religious movements, the end of the Celtic pagan and the beginning of the Christian era.

The stories of King Arthur and his knights became 8th century British folk history, crossed the English Channel to become 12th century French minstrel literature, and were adapted by the Catholic Church which covered its pagan symbols with layers of Catholic theology. The legends then recrossed the channel to become the original English novel with the French name "Le Morte D'Artur", the death of Arthur in which, surprisingly, Arthur doesn't die.

Although a Christian allegorical overlay was added in France, the Celtic themes could not be eliminated. Pagan themes recur in the sword in the stone, the gift of and return of the sword Excalibur, the central role of Merlin the ancient wizard who built Stonehenge, and the enchantments, mystery and magic, which pervade the stories.

Uther Pendragon, King of England dies without any known heir. In London, a huge rock appears. It has a sword handle sticking out of it, and it bears the inscription: "He who removes this sword is true heir and rightful King of England."

No one can remove the sword in the stone until Arthur does, and he is mystically revealed as the chosen King. Pure, non-Christian mysticism.

Nonetheless, not everyone accepts the revelation and some revolt. Arthur needs a sword to unify the land. Merlin takes Arthur to a lake in the land of Avalon and tells him to row to the middle. When he reaches the middle of the lake, the earth mother, goddess since Paleolithic time: "The Lady of the Lake", extends her hand from beneath the water and gives Arthur the sword Excalibur.

The edge of the water of the lake is the cusp between the conscious and unconscious, the worldly and the spiritual, the mundane and the mystical. The pagan universal powers of the unconscious have produced a sword with which Arthur will restore balance to the world. The masculine symbol of power, the thrusting sword unites the country and subdues the barbarian Saxons. But it is the feminine scabbard; the vessel which receives and cradles the sword, which is given to Arthur by the pagan priestess "Morgan la Fey", Morgan the fairy, which reenergizes the sword and protects Arthur from mortal wounds.

Arthur, conceived in enchantment, mentored by the Druid priest Merlin, and mystically anointed to rule, given Excalibur to unify England, end barbarian attacks and depredations and restore productive life to the wasteland, establishes peace among feuding warlords, creates the equality of Fellowship of the Round Table, establishes the knightly virtues of chivalry, invents the rule of law, and creates the utopia which is to this day known as CAMELOT.

Part II

Thank you Miss O'Brien. I never thanked you before, but then I was only 9 when I knew you. Miss. O'Brien was the librarian at P.S. 204 in Brooklyn New York. She taught library skills every Friday afternoon. After ten minutes of instruction, we could wander among the shelves and pick any book for 50 minutes of reading.

About the third week of October, Miss O'Brien called me up to her desk. Oh no, what did I do now?

"Mark, I've been watching you for weeks." She said. "You find a book, sit in you seat and read for about 10 minutes, get up, put that book away and pick another one. Ten minutes later you're up looking again. You never finish anything! I don't care how long you take, you can take as long as you want, but when you pick your next book you have to read it to the end."

Oh dear me! She was right. For the rest of the class I studied my choices. I couldn't decide. The next Friday I looked again. I couldn't decide and for 50 more minutes I searched. I knew Miss O'Brien was watching but she never said a word. The next Friday I again wandered the room, studying the shelves. Finally I made my choice, this book: "King Arthur and his knights."

I had found dragons, and damsels imprisoned in enchanted castles, and jousting knights in shining armor I found wizards, potions, spells, and adventure. I had discovered the medieval video game.

I've been captivated by the King Arthur stories ever since, and especially by the quest for the holy grail, the search for the meaning of life, the quest for salvation, the quest in which most knights fail and die and the quest which destroys the round table and Camelot.

What is the meaning of these myths conceived in medieval superstition, born at the cusp of the pagan and Christian world, nurtured by ancient religion, and mediated by emergent Christianity of incipient England and France, which became the midwife of literature?

Arthur has restored England. Dragons have been slain. Enchantment defeated. The Knights live in the glory of the equality of the round table, jealousy and strife are banished. AND THE HEROS ARE BORED! THERE MUST BE MORE TO LIFE THAN THIS.

King Arthur's Court is gathered for the Pentecostal feast. But before dinner can be served everyone hears a tremendous thunderclap, every door and window slams shut, every torch and candle goes out.. It is pitch black except for a glow which is seen around a beautiful maiden dressed in white who has appeared by the round table. She wears a veil and is carrying a covered object. Both are shrouded in myst. The covered chalice lifts from her hands and floats from place to place around the table. And as it passes each knight, his plate overflows with his favorite food and his soul becomes refreshed, his life renewed. When the chalice has entirely circled the table, the doors and windows reopen, the woman and chalice disappear and the quest for the Holy Grail begins.

All earthly difficulties have been conquered and the Knights of the Round Table realize the need for spiritual sustenance. And they must quest afar because there was no Unitarian Church nearby.

The story of Percival the knight who eventually succeeds in the quest and traverses the veil of conscious reality to the spiritual reality, which supports this world.

Percival's mother is of noble lineage, and of course married a valiant knight. While she is pregnant with Percival her husband is killed in battle and she vows to raise Perceval away from the modern world, without knowing anything about knights or war.

One day while minding his own teenage business, four knights in armor chance to ride by. Enthralled by their appearance he decides they must be angels and asks how he can become a knight. They tell him King Arthur at Camelot must grant it. His mother seeks to discourage him but Perceval is not to be distracted. And off he goes to become a knight, knowing nothing of what knighthood means. He has heard the hero's call he has been summoned to adventure; he has heard life singing to his true self, to his inherent character and he must respond, he must follow his bliss. He leaves his childish ways and hits the road.

Seeking to discourage Arthur from knighting him, his mother gives him an old nag to ride and farm clothing to wear. So looking like a country beggar he arrives in King Arthur's hall immediately after the grail

queen's visitation. But before he can even approach King Arthur, a Knight in Red Armor rides into the hall jumps onto the round table grabs Arthur's cup and pours wine all over the Queen! Taking the cup with him, he challenges Arthur to fight outside. What an insult! This has been already been Quite an evening Quite an evening!

Well, before King Arthur can catch his breath, up rides Perceval and demands to be made a knight. Arthur's foster brother Kay, needing to get on with the important business of dealing with the grail mystery and this outrageous insult tells Perceval that if he wants to become a knight he should go fight the Red Knight outside. Out goes Perceval and everyone thinks this is the end of that arrogant lout.

Naively, Perceval calls the Red Knight to battle. Perceval wears no armor, he has no lance, he has no sword, he has only a farmer's javelin. The Red Knight is so insulted that King Arthur has sent this farm boy to fight him, that he takes the butt end of his lance, smacks Perceval up side the head and waits for a serious challenger to emerge. Perceval takes his javelin and throws it. And he's a natural! Like Ryan Howard at bat, Iverson in the paint, Brian Westbrook at the two, the javelin goes right through the Red Knight's eye, exits the back of his head and down he goes. So Perceval now has his amour and his horse but still knows nothing about being a knight. He rides back into the hall to return Arthur's cup and is knighted.

One after another the Knights of the Round Table take a sacred vow to quest to see the uncovered grail in its full glory and ask Arthur for permission to leave.

As each Knight leaves the court, he enters the forest at its darkest point, where there is no path, where no knight has ever entered before. Each must create his own path to salvation alone because each must find his own grail. The common path does not work for this adventure .

Most of the knights will die in the quest without even locating the grail castle, which houses the mystery. Just as many will stumble through life without appreciating or even experiencing the mystery of this wonderful continuous revelation. And Perceval heads out also.

Perceval wins many jousts with other knights, dispels many enchantments and sends each defeated knight back to King Arthur to tell him of the exploits of the Red Knight. Perceval has achieved

professional renown. He has left his childish psychological state, entered and succeeded in society, but has not yet grown to maturity.

Perceval comes upon a desolate land. Nothing grows, the people are dirt poor, the horses are all skin and bones. The land is barren. He comes to a lake and sees a fisherman in rowboat. The fisherman tells him he should climb that mountain to spend the night at the Fisher King's Castle. Perceval climbs the mountain, but finds no castle. As Perceval is cursing the old man's lies a castle appears with its drawbridge open and Perceval is ushered into a great hall and welcomed by the Fisher King, the very man in the boat. Percival finds that he is the expected guest of honor at a grand feast. We have entered another world, a land of enchantment. The fisher king explains that his land has become a wasteland because he is in constant pain. He cannot even walk and must be carried everywhere. He can no longer rule properly. Fishing is his only comfort. Suddenly the grail procession appears again, but this time the maiden wears no veil and she is carrying the grail uncovered. The Fisher King explains that the only food he can keep down is brought by the grail.

Although Perceval has been blessed with the vision of the uncovered grail he says nothing. He never asks the question, which would break the enchantment, cure the fisher king and save the land. The greatest knight in all of history never says: "Why are you and your country sick?" "Can I do anything to help you?"

When the grail procession leaves, the fisher king ends the evening and Perceval is shown to his room. Before falling asleep, Perceval realizes he has felt no compassion, expressed no sympathy, and has not even asked why the Fisher King and his country are devastated. It never occurred to him to ask if he could help. In fact, if he had asked, the enchantment would have been lifted and the country would have been saved. He decides to ask how he can help first thing the next morning.

But it is too late. The next morning the castle is empty. His horse is already saddled in the courtyard. As he rides out of the castle across the drawbridge, it suddenly rises up and his horse must jump to avoid falling into the moat. When he lands on the other side, the castle disappears and a voice says: "You silly Goose!" Perceval's first encounter with the grail has ended badly. It will be years of wandering in the wilderness before he is given another opportunity.

Why has Perceval failed in this Celtic world of enchantment and magic? First of all we must take note that despite the Christianization of the

myth, there is no formal religion in the grail mystery. The grail is carried by a maiden not a monk or a priest. It is housed in a castle, not in a church. Spiritual sustenance is found in the heart not in the institutional religion of the church.

The founders of modern Unitarianism, Emerson and Theodore Parker taught that divine revelation did not end in the Middle East two thousand years ago. Revelation is not the monopoly of any religious hierarchy or creedal system. The revelation which surrounds us, and manifests itself in the human spirit has been experienced and explained by prophets of every age. As Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas: "The Kingdom of heaven will not come by expectation, the kingdom of heaven is here spread out upon the earth and men do not see it." We are all created in God's image.

Percival has grown up. He has left his mother and the dependent psychological state of childhood. He has achieved independence, professional competence, worldwide renown and outstanding success. But he lacks an appreciation, which only the grace of the grail can provide. His failure in the Fisher King's castle represents his spiritual immaturity. He does not appreciate our first Unitarian principle: We are all part of the family of man in an interdependent web of life. He does not appreciate our first Universalist principle: Love is the nature of God and creation.

He is unable to interact with compassion. He has not learned to love life.

In the face of a wasteland country, directly facing a sick government the greatest knight the world has ever seen cannot become involved in the life of the world. He remains self-absorbed.

Our own country has been described as a materialistic self-absorbed wasteland. Our government has been described as imperial, dysfunctional, and even sick.

The quest for the Holy Grail is the universal hero tale describing the physical and spiritual odyssey each of us takes between the mysts before birth and the mysts after death. Joseph Campbell says: "The adventure of the Grail ---the quest within for those creative values by which the Waste Land is redeemed ---has become today for each the unavoidable task."

Can we do better than Perceval?

Can we in realization of our Unitarian faith ask?

Your majesty why are you suffering? Your majesty, why is the country be a wasteland? Your majesty, what can I do to help?

Can we be a generous and welcoming people? Asking friends and acquaintances and strangers: "how are you doing?" and meaning it. Not the perfunctory "How are you? Fine thank you, how are you?"

But rather: No, Really, I mean it, I want to know, how are you really doing? And I will truly tell you how I am, and in that honest open relationship we will both be healed and with us the country.

Unitarians may not believe whatever they want to . Our faith is centered in reverently encouraging the free and responsible search for truth and meaning in spiritual growth.

This Unitarian grail is found in uplifting Sunday service and glorious music. It is demonstrated in service to the homeless, and tutoring at the Lingelbach School. It is experienced in sharing our joys and sorrows as life gives us both, and in the loving community of our small group ministry, sharing our life journey in fellowship as part of this spiritual community which sets no bounds but experience, and imposes no creed but sincerity.

Our Unitarian-Universalist grail is the mystic glow, of recognizing that each of us, in God's image, must find her own path through the forest at it's deepest point and that wherever that may lead, if traveled in love and sincerity is the proper path to salvation. Our Unitarian-Universalist grail is the mystic glow of appreciating that however diverse our paths, however varied our life's experiences or ethnic origins or loves or lovers or beliefs; it is holy to travel together in community and fellowship.

Spirit of life come unto us. Sing in our hearts all the stirrings of compassion. Give life the shape of justice. Roots hold us close, wings set us free.

As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, in a

World without end. Amen.