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"Re-Imagining the Grail Quest: The Grail of  
Compassion"

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# Re-Imagining the Grail Quest: The Grail of Compassion\*

KIM SAMUEL

FROM THE GRAIL QUEST TO THE GRAIL OF COMPASSION

The basic plot of the Grail quest story is well known. It has been summarised as follows by Emma Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz:

A mysterious, life-preserving and sustenance-dispensing object or vessel is guarded by a King in a castle that it is difficult to find. The King is either lame or sick and the surrounding country is devastated. The King can only be restored to health if a knight of conspicuous excellence finds the castle and at the first sight of what he sees there asks a certain question. Should he neglect to put this question, then everything will remain as before, the castle will vanish and the knight will have to set out once more upon the search. Should he finally succeed, after much wandering and many adventures, in finding the Grail Castle again, and should he then ask the question, the King will be restored to health, the land will begin to grow green, and the hero will become the guardian of the Grail from that time on.<sup>1</sup>

For several years I have been reflecting upon how it is that every knight in every Grail quest begins his journey in the deepest, darkest part of the forest, where, as Joseph Campbell writes, 'there was no path'.<sup>2</sup> I have been thinking about how this experience relates to the isolated person: the person at the bottom of the well, the person who is alone in the dark, unable to create a path from which to move forward.

\* This is the edited text of a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy on 26 November 2015.

1. Emma Jung and Marie-Louise von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, trans. Andrea Dykes, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 9.

2. *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on his Life and Work* (Novato CA: New World Library, 1990), Foreword.

It may indeed seem at first blush that the isolated person is not on a journey at all, much less on a heroic quest. That person did not choose to be at the bottom of the well, whereas the knight chose to embark upon a quest. Yet in a spiritual sense, I believe the knight in the forest and the person in the well are one and the same. Neither one has received and retained the gift of compassion, the gift that the soul has inside it all along, but which must be awakened in some way.

This is the gift Kathleen Raine gave me when she told me that she saw me as ‘a seeker of truth’, the greatest words I could ever hear in my life. Khalil Gibran said, ‘Truth is a deep kindness that teaches us to be content in our everyday life and share with the people the same happiness.’<sup>3</sup>

Thus, while many people—even the knights themselves—see the Grail quest as a solo endeavour, I see it very differently. I see it as the individual struggle to affirm role and place within the larger community. Think of the Buddhist Bodhisattvas on their multi-generational quest for Enlightenment; or the Islamic traditions of the Sufi mystics. Think of indigenous youth, setting out on their vision quests, to contemplate their role in the universe. I see it as the journey of an individual in reciprocal relationship with community, which shapes and is shaped by the knight in his quest. The values, history and traditions of community are what are being honoured in the journey.

And even if he is not aware of it, the Grail Knight is supported by the wisdom of the unseen world. As Kathleen Raine wrote in ‘The Invisible Kingdom’: ‘We know more than we know’.<sup>4</sup>

It is this knowingness that allows the knight to transcend the search for material things. This makes his quest a spiritual journey that results in a life of meaning, meaning that can only be found and expressed through connection to others. Without knowingness, the knight is merely a quester, an adventurer, not a seeker; and only seekers have the hope of receiving the Grail.

I am re-imagining the quest therefore as the journey of seeking, not the journey of one of the fanciful figures from the age of chivalry, but instead of somebody who, much like all of us, has a path and a choice, in the realm of community. I am reminded of what Pablo Neruda said in his Nobel lecture:

3. *Spirits Rebellious*, trans. H. M. Nahmad (London: W. Heinemann, 1949). I cite the digital edition published by Sterling Publishers in New Delhi in 2007 (reprinted 2009), where these words appear on page 53.

4. *The Presence: Poems 1984/87* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1987), p. 58.

All paths lead to the same goal: to convey to others what we are. And we must pass through solitude and difficulty, isolation and silence in order to reach forth to the enchanted place where we can dance our clumsy dance and sing our sorrowful song—but in this dance or in this song there are fulfilled the most ancient rites of our conscience in the awareness of being human and of believing in a common destiny.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the Grail is both about finding ourselves, and about understanding that we are part of something bigger.

Yet in both the well and the forest, some aspect of belonging is missing. I see this aspect as compassion, the gift the soul has inside it all along: compassion beginning within oneself, and from there extending to all of humanity. And this is the quest I believe has relevance for us all, the very human quest for belonging. I imagine the Grail of Compassion as consisting of three key principles:

- *Accepting and nurturing ourselves as we are, and accepting and nurturing those who are different from us.*
- *Connectedness with everyone in the community, and knowing that everyone in the community has a purpose.*
- *Respecting that as members of a community, we have a sacred responsibility to hold everyone's life in high regard.*

I see the Grail of Compassion as the ultimate journey for the soul, to heal, enlighten, illuminate and expand one's own existence.

In order to re-imagine the Grail Quest in this way, I am first going to take you back in time to the thirteenth century and Wolfram von Eschenbach's story of the Arthurian Grail quest, *Parzival*. Following this, I will share with you some stories about seekers who inspire me today—women and men who have felt isolated and hopeless, yet persevered against all earthly odds, bringing light to their own lives and to those of others.

5. The full text of the lecture can be found at: <[http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1971/neruda-lecture.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1971/neruda-lecture.html)>.

THE LEGEND OF PARZIVAL<sup>6</sup>

In Wolfram's telling Parzival's father, Gahmuret, is a knight who dies in battle. Parzival's mother, Queen Herzeloide, does not want her child to be exposed to the lifestyle of chivalry, so she moves to the forest where her son grows up a free-spirited child of nature.

But when the boy turns sixteen, he meets some knights in the forest and decides he wants to join them. His despairing mother tries to foil his plans by giving him a ridiculous costume to wear, hoping that if he is dressed like a fool, he will not get very far. Still, Parzival leaves.

When he gets to King Arthur's castle, he manages to win his first battle, and is taken under the wing of an experienced knight, Gurnemanz, who tutors him in how to behave. Gurnemanz offers Parzival his daughter's hand in marriage, but Parzival, contrary to the customs of the Middle Ages, does not want an arranged marriage; he wants to marry for love. So he rides on to another kingdom, where he helps to end a siege—winning the love and ultimately the hand of a beautiful queen called Condwiramurs.

After some time, Parzival decides it is time to embark on another adventure. One evening, he comes upon a fisherman in a boat, who directs him to a castle with moat and drawbridge. It turns out that the angler is in fact the Grail King, Anfortas, also known as the Fisher King, who is suffering from a debilitating wound that will not heal. Parzival joins the ailing Anfortas and the rest of his court for a banquet, and is amazed by what he sees. A beautiful princess carries something called the Grail to the banquet table—and somehow, this magical Grail is able to produce a boundless feast.

Parzival has many questions, but remembering the rules of good breeding, he does not ask them. He does not even ask the main question he wants to ask—what is wrong with the King.

The next day, mysteriously, the castle is silent and everyone is gone. So Parzival leaves, and encounters a woman—his aunt Sigune—who explains to him that he has failed; that he has missed the greatest treasure in the world because he did not ask the question that would have healed the king and renewed the wasteland. Parzival is crushed,

6. There are various good English translations of Wolfram's *Parzival*, the best of which is probably that by Cyril Edwards: *Wolfram von Eschenbach: Parzival and Titurel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

and resolves to find the mysterious castle again—even though Sigune tells him it is impossible to find it twice.

He rejoins Arthur and the rest of the knights, and is dining with them one evening when a sorceress called Cundrie curses him in front of the Knights of the Round Table for having failed to ask the question that would have healed the Fisher King. Parzival feels both ashamed and disgraced. And he also thinks that life is really unfair. As he sees it, he has not only become one of the greatest knights of all time, he has also grown in other ways too, such as marrying for love, and by sending all those he conquered in battle to serve a woman called Cunneware, to atone for her having been humiliated because of him. So he sets off yet again—renouncing God and spending almost five years alone in the wilderness. As Jules Cashford explains: 'Parzival's separation from Arthur's Court and his refusal of the courtly God marks, then, the first stage of the hero's solitary journey to fulfilment, that lonely dangerous quest, which is the only way to an individual life'.<sup>7</sup>

Over the course of this time, Parzival starts to undergo a kind of conversion. Slowly, he lets go of his frustration and his pride. His horse leads him to the home of a hermit, Trevrizent, who turns out to be the Fisher King's brother; and Trevrizent helps Parzival understand that his anger will get him nowhere. Through their conversations, Parzival develops a more intuitive understanding of God; and in so doing, he is able to discover 'the other'.

This happens when Parzival and another knight of equal ability are charging at one another on horseback, each determined to win. Parzival's sword breaks on the helmet of his opponent, who refuses to continue the battle since it would no longer be a fair fight. When both men take off their helmets and begin talking, they realize that they are not enemies at all. Instead, they are family. The other knight is actually Parzival's half-brother Feirefiz. This is a critical point in Parzival's journey for here he realizes there is no 'other', no enemy in the dark. The 'other' is ourselves. And in this truth, compassion lives.

Parzival finds the Grail Castle once more, and he goes there, with his brother. This time, casting rules and convention aside, he asks the Question that is burning in his heart. Driven by compassion instead of custom, he asks, 'Sire, what ails thee?' Almost immediately, Anfortas

7. 'Joseph Campbell and the Grail Myth', in *The Household of the Grail*, ed. John Matthews (Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: The Aquarian Press, 1990), p. 204. The text is also available on line: <<http://www.julescashford.com/campbell.html>>.

is healed, the wasteland is healed, and all those in the kingdom are healed.

And Parzival, having successfully completed his Grail quest, becomes the new Grail King.

### THREE THEMES FROM THE FOREST

Now I would like to draw out three key themes that resonate with me as I think about what Parzival's experience tells us about the Holy Grail of Compassion and the journey from isolation to belonging.

The first theme is *the inter-relationship between individual and community*, which corresponds to the first of the principles of the Grail of Compassion listed above: *Accepting and nurturing ourselves as we are, and accepting and nurturing those who are different from us*. Parzival's story shows us that social isolation can happen to any individual—from a Fool to a Fisher King.

And yet, as my friend Ovide Mercredi has told me, isolation is not an individual experience. When the individual suffers, the community suffers. As goes one, so goes the other.

Ovide, who comes from the Cree community of Misipawistik, Manitoba, Canada, is a former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, which represents Canada's aboriginal people—people for whom the land was home, long before European settlers arrived.

As Ovide says, for indigenous peoples, isolation 'is a collective experience'. And the only way to heal that pain is through a collective quest—one that first renews the community's respect for itself. For while we all have our own wounds, we also have the potential to heal. And sometimes the best way to restore belonging is to build it from within.

When I think of how to restore belonging in this way, I first envision the presence of respect, which begins by respecting oneself. Self-respect, which can also be expressed as self-esteem, is an essential ingredient for the individual or group in finding a way forward while honouring the timeless traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. At the core of the symbiotic relationship of the individual within community, lies a sense of belonging both to the present realities and to the timeless traditions that weave generations together.

I was privileged to support a beautiful example of this in a place called Ahousaht, a First Nation community off Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada, where I had the honour of joining with The Prince's School of Traditional Arts in running a series of workshops last year.

Like Misipawistik and many other First Nation communities, Ahousaht has faced more than its share of struggles. A decade ago, it was hit by a suicide epidemic, as dozens of young people who felt hopeless about the future attempted to take their own lives. Residents described the loss of their language and culture as contributing to their sense of isolation—a legacy of forced assimilation, and Canada's notorious residential schools. These schools took children away from their families: ostensibly for education, but in actuality, both literally and culturally, to 'beat the Indian out of the child'.<sup>8</sup>

Today, Ahousaht is reclaiming its pride, in part by reclaiming its heritage, which in turn opens potential new pathways to education, employment and other aspects of building community, honouring the wisdom of the First Nations.

The Prince's School was there to reinforce this revival: its workshops celebrated local culture and crafts, such as the cedar bark weaving tradition, emphasizing geometry and fourfold symmetry, all rooted in Nature's patterns and harmony. The focus was on what the Prince's School describes as 'the beauty of the permanent that shines through into the world of the transient'. As Wendell Berry has written: 'Nothing exists for its own sake, but for a harmony greater than itself which includes it.'<sup>9</sup>

Community Elders worked side by side with First Nations youth to share this ancient wisdom. And, as I watched the students, I sensed that they were expressing the Creator through their work. This was not simply because the art they created held such value and meaning for their culture—but because the experience of creating the art helped them recognize the value in themselves. Rabindranath Tagore described art as 'the response of man's creative soul to the call of the Real'.<sup>10</sup>

8. <<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2005/06/29/ahousaht-asks-help-96534>>, accessed 7 March 2016.

9. *Standing by Words* (San Francisco: North Point, 1983), p. 85.

10. *The Religion of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), p. 137.



The second theme is *the duality of existence*, which corresponds to the second principle of the Holy Grail of Compassion: *Connectedness with everyone in the community, and knowing that everyone in the community has a purpose.*

As we learn from Wolfram's Parzival, we must first recognize duality in order to understand oneness. Parzival is at once a fool and a knight; a boy raised in the forest and a man who will be king. But amidst these contrasts and contradictions, he charts a middle path. Wolfram invented a French translation for the name *Parzival*, understanding it as '*perce le val*', which as Joseph Campbell explains means 'through the middle, between the pair of opposites, between black and white'.<sup>11</sup> As Campbell puts it:

Wolfram has opened his story with the statement: life is both black and white; it cannot be all one or the other. Living your life irresolutely tends to increase the black. Living with resolution and determination moves you toward the white. But no matter what you do, it's going to be both black and white, and the world is going to criticize—but be resolute!<sup>12</sup>

In Parzival's case, he began his journey as nothing more than a material quest for fame and fortune, yet then gained knowledge and wisdom. And finally his path transformed into a spiritual journey. He could not have found the light if he had not first passed through the dark. 'In a dark time,' as Theodore Roethke wrote, 'the eye begins to see.'<sup>13</sup>

In this connection, I think of studies that psychologists have done around what they call 'post-traumatic growth'—the surprising fact that many trauma survivors can point to ways in which their lives have changed for the better as a result of their experiences, whether this be the finding of strength they never knew they had, or the deepening of their relationships with friends and loved ones.

We can choose how we act. We can choose how we treat others. And we always have the power to change: to change our minds; to change our course; to change ourselves for the better.

11. *Romance of the Grail: The Magic and Mystery of Arthurian Myth*, ed. Evans Lansing Smith (Novato CA: New World Library, 2015), p. 42.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

13. *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* (London: Faber, 1968), p. 239.

I sometimes say that when I was a little girl, William Blake saved my childhood. He taught me that light and darkness exist forever and always, and that we must learn to navigate between the two, always seeking the light.

Good and Evil; Black and White; Innocence and Experience; Heaven and Hell: they are all part of the human condition.

I remember reading 'The Chimney Sweeper' in *Songs of Innocence* and being moved by the child workers it described— orphaned, abandoned, and covered in soot, yet dreaming of angels who spirit them away to leap and laugh and bathe and relax and 'rise upon clouds and sport in the wind'. For me there was comfort in knowing and accepting that everyone feels this duality: that it is possible to feel sorrow and pain, and yet still to experience joy as well, joy that can be shared with others in a virtuous circle of gratulation.

If we can accept both the light and the dark, in our world and in ourselves, we can ultimately find our pathway to balance and belonging for ourselves and for others. In so doing we can reawaken what His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales has called 'our intuitive feelings about things'.<sup>14</sup>

One of my favourite examples of this reawakening is a community called L'Arche, where people with and without intellectual and psychological disabilities live together.

L'Arche was created in 1964, when the Canadian philosopher and humanitarian Jean Vanier visited an institution for people with intellectual disabilities and was appalled by what he saw. So he bought a small home in the north of France, and invited two men from the asylum to live with him. He thought that he was the one helping them—but he soon realized that he too had been transformed. As Vanier says, their life together helped him become more human. In his own words:

[T]hrough L'Arche, I began to see the value of the communion of hearts and of a love that empowers, that helps others to stand up; a love that shows itself in humility and in trust.

If our society has difficulty in functioning, if we are continually confronted by a world in crisis, full of violence, of fear, of abuse,

14. HRH The Prince of Wales, with Tony Juniper and Ian Skelly, *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World* (London: Blue Door, 2010), p. 9.

I suggest it is because we are not clear about what it means to be human.

We tend to reduce being human to acquiring knowledge, power, and social status. We have disregarded the heart, seeing it only as a symbol of weakness, the centre of sentimentality and emotion, instead of as a powerhouse of love that can reorient us from our self-centredness, revealing to us and to others the basic beauty of humanity, empowering us to grow.<sup>15</sup>

Today, L'Arche communities exist in 35 countries on six continents. And if you visit one, you will see it is a model of what community should look like in the world, inclusive, caring, human: a place where joy and sadness, good and bad, life and death are all around, and where some measure of suffering is necessary for transformation, yet nobody need suffer alone.

Accepting and nurturing others who are different from us is how we manifest the Grail of Compassion; for, as Jean Vanier explains, 'When we reveal to people our belief in them, their hidden beauty rises to the surface'.<sup>16</sup> Holding the mirror to others, and helping them to see their hidden beauty, is a pathway to belonging—because it not only helps others see the light, but reflects their light onto us all.

When I think of L'Arche, I think of recognition, which to me means: 'I see you for who you are and you see me for who I am and we need to see each other in order to honour humanity. It means I will look to you to tell me what you need and I will support you wherever you are.'

And when I think of strength and courage embracing the middle way, where truth and wisdom lie, I think of my friend Loretta Claiborne. Loretta grew up in a poor inner-city neighbourhood in York, Pennsylvania. She had many siblings and one parent, her mother, who was on public assistance. Loretta was born with an intellectual disability. She was also partially blind, and did not learn how to walk until she was four. She was bullied and made to feel 'less than'.

Loretta told me:

I was very isolated in the school system. I was very violent. I was in my late teens and taking a lot of drugs for my behaviour, much of it caused by being isolated by people in my community. School kids

15. *Becoming Human* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), pp. 77–8.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

would punch and hit me. I've got scars to this day from where I got cut. They knew I wasn't going to make it into an ordinary school. I was sure I was going to be institutionalized.

Loretta was not institutionalized. Her mother would not hear of it. So she went on to secondary school. However, the bullying continued and the teachers were so frustrated with her that they pushed her toward shelter workshops which are, as Loretta said, 'where people like me went after school'.

But a man at the shelter workshop, who saw how fast Loretta ran back and forth to work, suggested she join a sports club, which she did. Loretta said that this was the first time in her life that she did not get teased. She told me, 'Man, nobody called me names. Nobody. Nobody was calling people names. I had the best time of my life.'

This club was Loretta's introduction to Special Olympics, a global organization that provides year-round sports training and athletic competition for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. Special Olympics offers continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and typical athletes whom they meet through Unified sports, and their communities.

Loretta has been a member of the Special Olympics movement since the 1980s. In her time as a competitor, she completed more than 25 marathons, twice ranking among the top 100 women finishers in the Boston Marathon, and winning a total of 6 gold medals at 6 Special Olympics World Games. She has spoken to the United Nations General Assembly, the United States Congress, Harvard University and all around the world as a forceful advocate on behalf of the rights of people with disabilities.

Loretta sees sports as her pathway to belonging. I see a hero who found her pathway to the Grail of Compassion and followed it, resolutely. She creates unity through the example of her life and the courage to be herself, building bridges through compassion and lifting up entire communities in the process. To quote Jean Vanier again:

Communion is mutual vulnerability and openness one to the other. It is liberation for both, indeed, where both are allowed to be

themselves, where both are called to grow in greater freedom and openness to others and to the universe.<sup>17</sup>

The third theme is *the power of transformation*, corresponding to the third principle of the Holy Grail of Compassion: *Respecting that as members of a community, we have a sacred responsibility to hold everyone's life in high regard*. Transformation occurs through the experience of seeing ourselves in the other, and vice versa, as in the Sanskrit aphorism *Tat tvam asi* 'thou art that'.

Remember that Parzival's moment of transformation does not come from finding the castle, but from finding the question that was in him all along, the uttering of which had the power to change the world.

Parzival is not perfect. He struggles and stumbles. His journey is marked by folly and error and pride. But he perseveres. He does not give up. He grows through a process of increasing levels of awareness and corresponding actions: first, by being open to receiving knowledge, which began when he decided that he wanted to learn; second, by being open to receiving wisdom, which began when he learned to listen deeply; and third, by being open to the spiritual journey, which began when he awakened to the power of transformation. His story teaches us that loyalty and truth and most of all compassion are expressed not through sword and armour, not through skill and ambition, but instead through heart and hand.

The first time Parzival finds the Grail Castle, he obeys the laws of knighthood—and he fails. We then see wisdom grow in him, as he becomes aware of what people are for, and the interdependent web of community which binds us together. Then we see Parzival's spiritual journey come to life through his years in the wasteland, where he had to suffer in order to move forward. And finally, when he follows the laws of his own heart and allows his compassion to rule—when he reaches out to soothe another's pain—Parzival succeeds: not only healing Anfortas, but becoming the Grail King himself.

Parzival experienced compassion because he was in relationship with others; and through compassion, he received the gift of transformation. Compassion dissolves the boundaries that separate our being from another's. When Parzival shares in the Grail King's suffering, he and

17. *Becoming Human*, p. 28.

the king become one and the same. That fusion of the healer and the healed is the essence of reciprocity—the reality that we cannot touch another’s life without being touched in return.

To me, this means that I live in relationship with you and you live in relationship with me. Everything is mutual; everything is relative; and we only belong if we belong together. The community restores the individual. The individual restores the community. And the wasteland is restored to life, because we have each other.

This reminds me of a beautiful line I once heard: ‘We are here to be there for someone else.’

I believe the Grail of Compassion exists not only when you are able to reach your outstretched hand to those who are isolated, but also when you include them in your community and create a culture of welcome so it becomes their community too. This doctrine of unity and community has the power to reach even further—extending beyond humanity to embrace all that there is.

For example, many aboriginal cultures believe we are all part of an intricate whole, where compassion finds expression in belonging. In his book *Harmony: A New Way of Looking at Our World*, Prince Charles writes about how in general, indigenous people still live very close to Nature; conscious that, as he puts it, ‘life is a web of interconnectedness; that it depends for its health and survival on a complex interchange of mutual relationships, all of which are controlled by cycles of repeated patterns’.<sup>18</sup>

Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo explains that the central law of his people, the Nuu-chah-nulth, is *tsawalk*, which means simply, ‘We are one’. This ancient wisdom expresses a world view based on the interrelationships between all life forms. Chief Atleo recalls listening as a child to the grandmothers of his village sing special songs to the earth, emphasizing the connection between all human activities and natural phenomena. He has told me how the old timers would say that ‘Even the rocks are alive’.

We are one with all existence. This is a universal sacred truth.

This indigenous worldview makes me think of the principle of *tawhīd* or oneness in the Muslim faith, a oneness that has been described as that which dominates the mind, while the heart is intrinsically linked to the concept of compassion which leads to transformation.

18. *Harmony*, p. 304.

And when I think of an individual who most epitomizes transformation, I think of my friend Kennedy Odede.

Kennedy comes from Kenya. He grew up in Kibera, one of the largest urban slums in Africa, living every day the devastating realities of multidimensional poverty, including a lack of social connectedness. He told me:

Being poor meant that we were automatically labeled as lazy or as criminals, and we essentially became invisible to the rest of society. Even though our next-door neighbours were struggling with the same empty stomachs and daily struggles we were, we kept it to ourselves and it only deepened the divide between us.

If you find yourself in the slum, society makes you believe that this is where you belong. This form of social isolation is created for you in your mind. You know that you are poor. You tell yourself, This is who I am. You feel as if there is a wall between you and the rest of the world and any chance of getting out and getting on with a better life.

Both because of his experience as an individual suffering alone, and because of seeing the behaviour of an entire slum in the way it treated its own residents, he decided to change things. His own journey to compassion led him to share what he had learned and to lift the mirror for all in the process. In 2009, along with his partner, Jessica Posner, Kennedy founded an organization in Kibera called Shining Hope for Communities, or Shofco. Shofco combats extreme poverty and gender inequity in Kenya by linking tuition-free schools for girls to a set of high-value, holistic community services.

Today, Kennedy Odede is one of Africa's best-known community organizers and social entrepreneurs. He is a hero and role model within his region and around the world. He says: 'You start in a community, neighbour by neighbour, a group of people by a group of people . . .'

Kennedy's pathway to belonging was his education, which taught him what he calls 'the power of connecting, inspiring people in Kibera and elsewhere to be positive about themselves and believe that they can make it'. Kennedy says that starting Shofco made him no longer feel like a passive victim, but instead taught him that he had agency and power to change what was happening in his community. He also told me Shofco has given him a sense of the power of 'Ubuntu': feeling

connected to a universal humanity and an empathy that comes from listening deeply—first, to understand what is happening to people who have been isolated; and then, to do something about it.

#### THE JOURNEY HOME

This brings me full-circle to the Grail of Compassion as a pathway to belonging. As Jules Cashford has so beautifully argued,

it is the place in us where life comes into being inside us—‘the still point of the turning world’, as T. S. Eliot calls it in *The Four Quartets*—which is a place before or beyond desiring and fearing, just pure becoming. This is an image which emerges in very different cultures separated by time and space, and so must be a reflection of certain powers or spiritual potentialities in the psyche of every one of us.<sup>19</sup>

The Grail is a quest for meaning, and if we are aware of what it is we are seeking in life, I believe we have a much better chance of finding it than if we do not.

That said, the real journey, at least for me, is essentially a journey home.

Temenos reveres the circle—the sacred shape Prince Charles has called ‘the age-old symbol of unity’.<sup>20</sup> And Temenos knows that the circle has infinite capacity to grow, and that every point on the circumference of the circle is equal to all the others. The Medicine Wheel, the Knights of the Round Table and all of Nature’s perfect forms, bring us home to a place where compassion lives, compassion which Thomas Merton describes as ‘a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings’.<sup>21</sup>

Compassion is not simply an emotion, a feeling we get sometimes. It is a sacred trust, what in Hinduism and Buddhism is called *karuna*—meaning compassionate action, not passive emotion. I find myself thinking of William Blake’s poem, ‘On Another’s Sorrow’:

19. ‘Joseph Campbell and the Grail Myth’, p. 207.

20. ‘Cities for the Future’, *TAR* 18 (2015) 11–16: p. 12.

21. Quoted by Matthew Fox in ‘A Spirituality Called Compassion’, *Religious Education* 73:3 (1978) 284–300: p. 292.



Can I see another's woe,  
 And not be in sorrow too?  
 Can I see another's grief,  
 And not seek for kind relief?

If we do not create and nourish community, then we are very likely to end up with social isolation. We always have a choice. For, as Ovide Mercredi explains, 'Isolation is not just a sociological term. It's about relationships and it has to do with political and economic power and how that power is not evenly or equally distributed in society'. A divided community will become fractured, weakened, broken and dysfunctional, a house divided against itself, a house that cannot stand.

History is scarred with examples of this, from the ordinary to the unfathomable; everything from schoolyard bullying to genocidal warfare. And not only history. If we do not learn, we cannot change.

While reading the newspaper last week at my home in Toronto, I saw a photo of a beautiful baby boy being cradled by his mother, who happened to go to a rock concert one recent Friday night, where she was assassinated, along with hundreds of others there, and elsewhere in the City of Light.

God is weeping. Mother Nature is weeping. And I know that all of us in this room are weeping too.

Imagine her husband, who has lost the woman he calls 'the love of his life', and whose baby son will never again feel his mother's touch rocking him to sleep as she sings sweet lullabies to him. I saw his father interviewed on television last week, where he expressed hope, and the affirmation that life will go on, that love will go on. His heart is broken, and yet he shows compassion.

Imagine the mother whose son left school one day, not to join an after-school study group, but instead to join a terrorist group. Instead of becoming educated in history, art and literature, he chose to become educated in the use of lethal weapons, how to wreak havoc on innocent victims and how to detonate a suicide bomb. I saw this mother on television two nights ago. She buried her head in her lap, hiding her face in her hands. She blames herself. She is afraid he is going to kill people and destroy families, if he hasn't already done so. Sobbing, she wonders what she has done wrong. 'Was this my fault?' she asks. Imagine her pain. And yet, she shows compassion.

Picture refugees half a world away, who have suffered unimaginable hardship and cruelty, and are now being told by some individuals and entire countries that they are dangerous to humanity, because there may be darkness in their midst. Imagine how this must feel to the mother or father seeking only to give their children a life of safety and hope for the future. And yet when communities do open their arms to refugees, they heal the wounds of war, because they show compassion.

Coming through Heathrow Airport on Monday I met a man called Nash, who helped me with my luggage. Nash and his family came to the UK from Syria as refugees five years ago. They have made a good life here. He says they are the lucky ones. He also expressed the pain of knowing that he may never be able to go home again. His family and others in the community where they live have been threatened lately. A few of their friends have been beaten. He said he understands. 'People are just afraid', he told me. And then he added, 'So are we'. Imagine how that must feel. And yet, he shows compassion.

Compassion. If we heal the individual, we heal the community. If we heal the community, we heal the individual. We know this to be true. But to make it real, we must trust our intuition and open our hearts.

Again, I believe that ancient knowledge has a role to play in meeting contemporary challenges, and in helping us re-imagine how we might relate to one another.

Among First Nations, for example, one of the most important structures was the big house, or longhouse as it is sometimes called, in which multiple families lived together, with several generations beneath one roof. Made from cedar logs, these long, narrow dwellings were grouped together to form villages. The structure reflected and reinforced the cultural norms of helping and learning from one another. For First Nations peoples, being and belonging were two sides of the same coin. As Georges E. Sioui, a scholar from the Huron-Wendat First Nation, explains, 'Every expression of life, material or immaterial, demands of the Amerindian respect and the spontaneous recognition of an order that, while incomprehensible to the human mind, is infinitely perfect.'<sup>22</sup>

My point is not that we should be constructing longhouses in the hearts of our modern cities, but rather that we should embrace the

22. *For an Amerindian Autohistory: An Essay on the Foundations of a Social Ethic*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), p. 9.

idea of the longhouse in our hearts: the idea that where we truly feel at home is in a community, where individuals and families can thrive, and where people feel connected to each other and to the natural environment.

We need to find our way back home, which I see as a journey of compassion beginning in the human heart, from a place of love and a deep recognition of the perennial wisdom, the light of the imagination which connects each one of us as a candle in the darkness, to remind us of the universal light and goodness within us all. As Joseph Campbell says, 'Where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the centre of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.'<sup>23</sup> This is about our identity, our dignity, our integrity, and the purpose of this gift of life.

'If light is in your heart, you will find your way home,' said the Sufi poet Rumi; who also asks us this:

Do you know what you are?  
 You are a manuscript of a divine letter.  
 You are a mirror reflecting a noble face.  
 This universe is not outside of you.  
 Look inside yourself;  
 everything that you want,  
 you are already that.<sup>24</sup>

With compassion, with humanity and with spiritual commitment, we can take meaning back into our lives. All of us can seek, and even if we do not succeed by the standard we originally set, it is in the journey and in being on the journey that we can attain what we need to attain – as individuals, as a human family, and as creatures of the Earth. For that transcendent fusion between ourselves and the world around us takes place in the human heart. The journey to belonging is a journey of the heart. And as long as our hearts are open, we can have faith that we are on the right path, and that we will find our Grail.

23. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 25.

24. Shahram Shiva, *Hush, Don't Say Anything to God: Passionate Poems of Rumi* (Fremont CA: Jain Publishing Company, 1999), p. 29.