

## PARZIVAL-- THE JOURNEY OF ADOLESCENCE

*Parzival*, Wolfram von Eschenbach's medieval epic, offers a portrait of the journey of through adolescence. The heart of the eleventh grade curriculum in a Waldorf School, it is often experienced as the heart in fact of the whole Waldorf Curriculum. It's possible to look through the lens of *Parzival*, and better understand the journey of adolescence.

### **Developmental Context**

We know that in the first seven years the young child, mostly head, devotes most of its forces to forming its physical body, the instrument through which she will fulfill her life. The young child primarily lives into the world through reaching, playing, working, running in the world, through action, through willful limb activity.

We know that in the second stage of life, between the change of teeth and puberty, the growing child develops especially the heart and lungs, breathes in from and out into the world, learning, one might say, especially through the rhythmic system. The child is artfully forming the ways, the rhythms, the habits which will enable him to experience life, forming, one might say, one's life-body, (or etheric body) while learning primarily through feeling.

Only in the third stage, adolescence, does the metabolic system fully come into its own; only then does the youth become capable of reproduction. Only then do legs and arms extend into their final fullness. And yet in terms of soul faculties, only after puberty does thinking rightfully, naturally, organically emerge, flower in its own right as a new capacity. Perhaps the essential question of Waldorf High School education is: How can this new "soul-body" (or astral body) be helped to emerge in adolescence as harmoniously as possible in relation to the physical and life bodies on the one hand, and serving as artfully as possible on the other hand the imminent emergence of the individuality, the "I AM"?

How can the Waldorf high school curriculum respond to this question? One way is by striving to teach in the ninth grade in ways which help the newly born thinking faculties to be grounded as well as possible in the laws and realities of the physical world, in ways recapitulating the first seven years of development. Then in tenth grade the teachers try to help the soul-body's thinking develop further, through teaching in ways which guide the student into understanding how things work, how poetry works, short stories, epics, mechanics, Euclidean geometry, physiology, etc., in a way becoming conscious of the world as the life body experiences it. Then in eleventh grade the thinking comes most purely into its own, no longer recapitulating earlier stages of development, but becoming able to think conceptually in its own right. And in twelfth grade the curriculum artfully imagines ahead, to something actually experienced at the end of adolescence, at the beginning of adulthood, the emergence of the I AM.

## Parzival's Family Context

How is the story of Parzival a portrait of this whole span of development? First, some context of Parzival's heritage. Parzival's father Gahmuret first married a beautiful, black, Moorish Queen, Belacane, with whom he fathered a black-and white child, Feirefiz. Then when he won a mighty tournament in Spain, the codes of Christian chivalry declared his Moorish marriage invalid and he was forced to marry the Christian Queen Herzeleide by the law of the tourney. Although they grew to love each other, he left in time to help his former lord, the Baruch of Baghdad, losing his life in battle. In her grief at the news of her husband's death, Herzeleide gave birth to a son, Parzival, vowing however that he would never know of knights, so no woman would suffer such grief as hers.

The childhood of Parzival therefore was utterly protected, in the forest of Soltane. The child did not even know his own name, only his mother's nickname for him, *bon fils*, *cher fils*, *beau fils*. A child of the wilds with a sensitive soul, on the one hand he could shoot birds with his little self-crafted bow and arrows, yet on the other hand, their song touched him to tears. When his mother discovered the source of his sorrow, she had all the birds in the area destroyed. When her son suffered even more because of their absence, she realized, "Who was she to alter the commandments of God?" When the boy asked what "God" was, she answered, "a shining Light." When another day the boy saw three shining lights on horseback, he asked them if they were God. No, they were not God; they were Knights, bestowed so by King Arthur. When the boy told his mother that he was going to become a knight, her heart sank. Knowing his will though, she put him in fool's clothing, on a bad nag of a horse, with some essential motherly advice, including: avoid a dark ford, listen to a grey man, and kiss a woman, to win her ring and greeting. She did tell him that he had lost two kingdoms. The boy courageously departed in search of King Arthur, armed only with his javelot. Unbeknownst to him, his mother, Herzeleide, almost immediately dropped dead in grief at her second loss.

## Ninth Grade

In a certain way, this is the child who enters ninth grade, the great wide world of high school, gawky-limbed, a bit foolish in his or her garb, armed with "motherly" advice and a willful heart. In a certain way for any adolescent, the "mother sphere" naturally dies some, as the adolescent moves more into the "father sphere."

## Parzival

1) Parzival, as yet unable to read the actual waters, followed her advice literally, going way down a stream to shade, before crossing the waters, always in the language of myth a spatial picture of entering a new stage of experience. Yes, he soon came upon a lovely lady (Jeschute) asleep half-clothed in a tent. Yes, he dutifully leaped upon her, kissed her, took her ring and brooch, and, ravenous not with lust but with hunger, devoured not her but her food, and departed, pleased with performing his first adventure so well. Unbeknownst to him, her lord returned to her find her apparently ravaged, punishing her with public shame, breaking her saddle, allowing her only clothing the dress she was wearing.

2) The young fool [Parzival] next encountered a grieving woman (Sigune) attending the still-warm corpse of her sweetheart (Schionetulander). When the boy identified himself to her as “*Bon fils, cher fils, beau fils,*” she, recognizing her cousin, told him his true name, “Parzival, which signifies, *right through the middle.*” She informed him of two kingdoms, currently stolen from him, which he was destined to rule. And, to protect the fool-garbed boy, she sent him in the opposite direction from Arthur.

3) A fisherman offered him lodging, for Jeschute’s brooch, and pointed him toward Arthur the next day.

4) As Parzival approached Arthur’s encampment, he encountered a red-haired knight in red armor on a red horse, in red trappings, holding a red-gold goblet he had taken from Arthur’s court as sign of his intention to claim his kingdom. Ither, the Red Knight, sent the boy to the Round Table to communicate his challenge. When the fool entered the court, not only did he see Arthurs everywhere, but the knights and ladies recognized, in spite of the naivete and the fool’s garb, a rare individual of high birth. A woman laughed, of whom the prophecy was that she would never laugh until she saw the greatest knight in the land. Keie the Seneschal beat her for laughing because of this fool. A servant, of whom the prophecy was that he would be dumb until he saw the greatest knight in the land, spoke for the first time. Keie beat him too.

Since noone was willing to fight Ither, Arthur gave the boy permission to take Ither’s red armor, which he wanted, if he could, as part of the process of his becoming a knight. When Parzival returned to tell Ither he wanted his armor, the knight laughed, striking the boy’s head with his spear. In immediate, instinctive fury, Parzival hurled his javelot through the eye of Ither’s red helmet, killing him. A page had to come out from Arthur’s court to show the ignorant boy how to undo the armor and put it on over his fool’s garb. The unknown boy, in the Red Knight’s armor, leaped onto the Red Horse, and went forth, further into the world.

## **Ninth Graders**

Like the boy in fool’s clothing on the bony nag, the ninth graders, especially the boys, are even dangerously awkward in their suddenly growing bodies, as ill-fitting in their old clothes as in their newly long limbs. Because of this awkwardness of body and soul, the high schools often let ninth grades be less in the eye of public audiences, such as not having a class play. Like the fool with Jeschute, the ninth grade boy understands little of the mystery of woman, and the ninth grader, boy or girl, so far understands little of the emerging soul-body, although the girl is usually way ahead of the boy in her astral awareness. The ninth grader has lost the two kingdoms of early childhood and youth, which he will regain as he becomes able to transform his physical and life bodies through the growing activity of his own individuality, a life-long process. Like “*bon fils, cher fils, beau fils,*” the ninth grader is shedding subjective familial and childhood nicknames, knowing him or herself increasingly by the objective birth name, in this case, “Parzival.” Like the fool at the round Table, the ninth grader is on the one hand observed accurately by the teachers in his or her still foolish ways, yet on the other hand the teachers strive to recognize the higher self, both reflecting something of the student’s inner origins and gleaning something of his or her future destiny. Recognition of this higher self can give joy to the soul (Cunneware-the woman who laughed) and voice to the awakening mind

(Antenor-the mute servant who spoke) in those around. Like the boy with the Red Knight, the ninth grader both carries high ideals (becoming a knight) and yet so often acts and reacts thoughtlessly (his desire for the armor led to his killing Ither). Even Parzival giving the horse its reins is a picture of unconsciously allowing one's destiny to unfold.

### **(Tenth Grade)-Parzival**

Because he knew not how to check the speed of the red horse, the new Red Knight galloped into the unknown farther in one day than any experienced knight would in two. 1) As the naïve mind beheld pinnacles and towers of a castle apparently growing up out of the ground, he saw a grey-bearded gentleman,(Gurnemanz) and finally, remembering his mother's advice, agreed to get down from his horse. The servants were shocked to find fool's clothing under the Red Knight's armour. Yet, after bathing him, they brought him a white garment and a longcoat of scarlet wool. Gurnemanz also recognized the uncouth youth's fine origins and patiently taught him the knightly skills of horsemanship, swordsmanship, jousting, etc., as well as the chivalric codes of courtesy with ladies, such as his lovely daughter Liaze. Gurnemanz quickly came to love the Red Knight as a son, ready to offer his daughter in marriage. The Red Knight though felt he needed to prove himself in knightly deeds first. Because the Red Knight had initially spoken only of his mother, Gurnemanz had given him new advice, including not to ask too many questions, to have mercy with opponents in battle, and that husband and wife are one.

2) Giving his horse rein, the poised, courteous Red Knight, having shed his fool's clothing, came to a kingdom, Pelrapeire, so long under siege that the inhabitants had been suffering from starvation. When the Red Knight entered, they mustered a feast, in hopes of help, as he listened to the plight of the beautiful Queen, Condwiramurs, besieged by the army of an unwanted suitor, King Clamide and his seneschal Kingrun. That night the beautiful Condwiramurs entered his room in white robe, told her story further, asked if she might lie with him, " and the proper limits of womanhood were not broken."

In battle the next day the Red Knight successfully defeated the King's seneschal, remembered Gurnemanz's counsel of mercy, and sent Kingrun to serve the Lady Cunneware, who had been beaten for laughing because of Parzival. The second night again "he whom they called the Red Knight left her a maiden." Yet she gave him her heart. After he defeated King Clamide, sending him also to serve Cunneware, Queen Condwiramours and the Red Knight united the third night as husband and wife, with him becoming the ruler of Pelrapeire. The whole kingdom feasted on newly brought foods, prospering anew. And yet, in time the new King of Pelrapeire, as much as he and the Queen loved each other, felt the need to go find his mother.

### **Tenth Graders**

The tenth graders quickly overcome the ninth graders' struggles with not knowing how to pace themselves, in schoolwork, in social life. The tenth grader wears, one might say, the white robe, reflecting the pure life-forces of one's childhood, yet without the foolishness, and the scarlet longcoat as a picture of the emerging soul-life. The sophomore learns the ways of the world, the codes, the procedures, successfully attaining a poise, a proportion, echoing that poise of Ancient Greece which so permeates the tenth grade year. The

harmonious poise includes growing self-awareness; hence one makes amends, as the Red Knight begins to do by sending the two great warriors to serve Cunneware. The tenth graders prove themselves in battle, on sports teams, in model United Nations, in community service experiences. "The Red Knight" is the name by which Parzival is becoming known in the world through his deeds. While the picture of marriage is of course premature, nevertheless, tenth graders become capable of a certain courtesy in relation to the other gender. Many embark to live in other cultures on foreign exchange. There is a kind of fulfillment. 'I can manage what high school asks of me.' And in fact, when they return from their exchanges, they often feel they are the king or queen of the world, and it can be hard for them to imagine what more high school may have to offer.

### **(Eleventh Grade)-Parzival**

- 1) Again allowing his horse to find its way, the Red Knight found no lodging at the end of his first day, until he came upon a lake, on which fished a man with a hat of peacock feathers. At the fisherman's counsel, the knight made his way to the only lodging within thirty miles, up the way, to a castle "as though turned on a lathe," where he was welcomed, bathed and given a robe belonging to the queen, Repanse de Schoie. In the great hall sat four hundred knights, and in front of the fire lay the King, the fisherman himself. When a spear dripping blood was borne around the hall, all wept. Twenty-four maidens attended the Queen, who bore the "perfection of Paradise." Whatever any lord or lady wished to eat or drink, this "perfection of Paradise" presented. The ailing king presented the silent guest of honor with a sword. All retired.
- 2) When the Red Knight awoke from a nightmarish sleep, he found himself alone in an abandoned castle. Having dressed and armored himself, he rode forth; a squire at the drawbridge called at him, "You goose! If only you had asked the question!"
- 3) In time he came upon a woman wailing for her embalmed lover. His cousin Sigune told him that he had spent the night in Munsalvaesche, where the ailing King Anfortas was kept alive by the Holy Grail, until one should alleviate his suffering. She told Parzival that the sword Anfortas gave him would shatter once; then when he put its pieces in the spring of Karnant, the sword would become whole, never to break again. When she learned though that Parzival had remained silent, had asked Anfortas no question, she angrily called him a wolf, saying he had lost his honor at Munsalvaesche, and sent him off.
- 4) Next Parzival came upon a shabby, neglected nag, ridden by a woman whose rags were essentially knots trying to cover the holes exposing her fair flesh. In spite of his red armor, Jeschute recognized his extraordinary beauty, identifying him as the "source of all her suffering." As Parzival remembered, and came to understand, he vowed to right his wrong to her. When her knight Orilus arrived, Parzival defeated him in battle, made him swear to serve Cunneware, and took him to a hermit's cell, where Parzival swore Jeschute's innocence, so that Orilus was able to "forgive" her and reunite with her in love. "I was a fool then, not a man, and not yet grown to wisdom," said the king of Pelrapeire of his state of soul when he had first left his mother in fool's garb.
- 5) Although it was May, the time of Pentecost, snow had fallen, and a hawk had wounded a goose, leaving three drops of blood in the snow. Unaware that Arthur's

entourage was nearby [in fact seeking the Red Knight], Parzival was entranced by Lady Love, the red blood on the white snow reminding him of his Condwiramours. Hardly aware, he absent-mindedly unseated two of Arthur's knights, breaking the arm and leg of the second, none other than Keie the Seneschal, who had beaten Cunneware and Antenor because of Parzival. When Gawain had the sensitivity to cover the three drops of blood, Parzival came back to his senses, was escorted to Arthur's court, which had been seeking the Red Knight to award him the epitome of worldly honor, membership in the Round Table.

- 6) At the moment of the Red Knight's greatest acclaim, Kundrie La Sorciere appeared, as ugly as many beasts mixed, with uglier news, the public proclamation that the Red Knight's fame was just falseness, that rather than bliss he had brought curse upon all, that since he had failed to heal the Lord of the Grail, he was no better than an "adder's fang.." Humiliated, shamed, Parzival vowed to pursue the Grail singlemindedly. He renounced God for imposing such disgrace upon him

### **Eleventh Graders**

The journey of the eleventh grader is usually, and unavoidably, the loneliest of all. There is often the agonizing question, "When will I ever be whole?" and yet there is usually some glimpse of that still-future experience, "Here I am, essentially." The Grail Castle offers an image of, on the one hand, the pain of suffering, and yet as well the mysterious, ever-nourishing potential implied by the Grail itself, of experiencing "who I am," my eternal identity. However, as long as the growing individual behaves according to someone else's (Gurnemanz's) guidelines, he or she will not be present enough to identify with the sufferings of another. Although Parzival dons the robe of the guardian of the Grail, he remains silent because of Gurnemanz's general code; he is not able to act individually from within himself. Less than individual, he is called "goose," "wolf," "serpent," implying perhaps that in each of his soul-faculties, thinking, feeling, and willing, he is more animal than human, not yet wholly human. Sigune reveals to Parzival the mystery of the Grail sword which, once shattered, can be properly healed, to be whole forever more, a picture of the fragility of the emerging sense of ego, which can be restored as that higher self, one's eternal I AM.

The eleventh grader can bear growing consciousness for setting things right, as Parzival restored Jeschute to her proper place in Orilus' heart. In a certain way, as the soul first comes into its own in the eleventh grader, love can first really work its spell, as portrayed in the drops of blood on the snow. The strengthening thinking in the maturing adult body can lead to worldly success and recognition, as in the Red Knight's invitation to join the Round Table. And yet every eleventh grader's sense of self will suffer potent attack in one way or another, outwardly or inwardly, and hence there can be a feeling of losing one's way, of one's destiny slipping away, as portrayed in Parzival turning his back on God. Nevertheless, Parzival's commitment to seeking the Grail alone portrays the almost instinctual lifeline to persist, as fallen apart and inhuman as one may feel, in the quest to make oneself and therefore the world whole.

### **(Twelfth Grade)-Parzival**

For four and a half years Parzival wandered alone through the wasteland in quest of the Grail. At times, Parzival sent the knights he defeated also in quest of the Grail.

1) Eventually, long after Parzival's Grail sword broke and was made whole again, the errant knight came upon a hermitess' cell, where a wan lady guarded a coffin. Sigune, fed from the Grail by Kundrie La Sorciere, withdrew her censure of her cousin when she heard of his long, lonely quest, pointing him in the direction of the Grail castle. However Parzival was still not inwardly ready. When a penitent family informed Parzival of the day being Good Friday, and urged to him to shrive his soul, Parzival was reminded that he had long severed his relationship with his Creator. When the Templar horse he was riding led him to a hermit's cave, Parzival was able to say to old Treverizent, "Sir, Give me counsel...I am a man who has sinned."

2) The holy man told Parzival the stories of Lucifer's fall from the heavens, of Cain's robbing the earth of her virginity by shedding his brother Abel's blood, and of the Grail community, including the fact that one can only come upon the Grail castle unawares. When Parzival confessed to killing Ither, the Red Knight, Treverizent informed him that in doing so he had killed his cousin, and that his mother (Treverizent's sister) had died when Parzival had left her. Then Parzival confessed to being the one who had not asked the ailing Lord of the Grail (Treverizent's brother) why he suffered, leaving him and the kingdom to continue suffering. After Parzival did penance for fifteen days, the holy Hermit Treverizent took Parzival's sins upon him. [The goose is on the way toward becoming the dove, the emblem of the Holy Spirit, the emblem of the Knights Templar, the guardians of the Holy Grail.]

3) One morning at dawn two armed knights, encountering each other, engaged in mighty battle until eventually a page called out, "Gawain." The other knight, on the verge of victory, stopped, doffed his helmet, declaring "I have vanquished myself."

4) Though chagrined at the close call with his beloved and respected Gawain, Parzival found himself in time in similar battle with the most splendidly attired knight he had ever seen, who turned out to be the most able knight he had ever fought. When Parzival was on the verge of defeat for the first time in his life, the other knight identified himself as Feirefiz, son of Gahmuret, and Parzival realized he had been fighting his own brother, the most powerful knight in the Moorish East.

5) Soon after, Kundrie reappeared, no longer odious, with quite different news, that Parzival had been blessed, had been summoned to become Lord of the Grail.

6) Parzival, allowed to be accompanied by black and white Feirefiz, entered the Grail Castle, beheld the agonizing Lord of the Grail, Anfortas, and asked, in the most intimate, informal way, "Ohm, was fällt dir?" (Uncle, what troubles you?) Anfortas was immediately restored to health, joy was restored to all in Munsalvaesche, and the whole kingdom of the earth, Terre de Salvaesche, was restored from barren wasteland to fertility. Parzival became Lord of the Grail.

- 1) Parzival, Lord of the Grail, having fulfilled his mission, was able to reunite with his faithful love Condwiramurs and their twins, Kardiez and Loheringrin.
- 2) Parzival found, for the fourth and final time, his guiding cousin Sigune, who had now been able to die, joining her beloved Schionetlander in the afterlife.
- 3) Feirefiz, wishing to be able to behold the Grail, became baptized, married Repanse de Schoie, the Queen of the Grail, and they returned to the East, begetting Prester John, legendary founder of Christian kingdom in the East.

## Twelfth Graders

Reminding ourselves that the twelfth grade Waldorf curriculum works as an artful anticipation, even a homeopathic concentration, of a maturing that actually doesn't come fully into its own until about age twenty-one, we might recognize Parzival's wanderings alone in the Wasteland for four and a half years as a picture of that arc of time, from eleventh grade (age seventeen.) to twenty-one. As Parzival is finally able to say, "I am a man who has sinned," so the senior is usually able to be fully responsible for his or her actions. As Trevrizent reminded Parzival of the Fall of Lucifer, of Cain and Abel, of the history of the Grail, so the twelfth grade curriculum both returns to the contemporary world, and yet recapitulates, looking back at whole scopes of history, of evolution, even of child development, in ways not possible before. As Sigune withdraws her censure of Parzival for his failures, and Trevrizent takes Parzival's sins upon him, so the teachers and other adult guides recognize in the senior a clean slate, new possibilities, whatever his or her failings or limitations may have been during the troubled journey of high school.

One can see Parzival's battles with dear Gawain and brother Feirefiz as pictures of Parzival making his own both Gawain's wisdom of the ways of the heart, and Feirefiz's powerful will, his ability to lead many of the great armies of different parts of the world harmoniously. The twelfth grader, through transforming his or her own understanding, own heart, and own will, becomes better able to be open to the I AM, the individuality, of another. Called to the Grail Castle, Parzival is able simply to speak to, recognize, empathize with Anfortas' suffering, what another human being is experiencing. When Parzival does so, it heals the individual, and the whole kingdom of the earth. When the twelfth grader "returns" from the alienating trials of eleventh grade, and is able in the simplest ways to "recognize" the individuals in the community of the school, there is a healing effect. The seniors set the tone of the school. That ability to make whole the atmosphere, to regenerate the "health" of the whole school, will spread out gradually, eventually into the whole world. In the reunion of Parzival and his brother Feirefiz, the reunion of Parzival and his wife Condwiramurs, as well as the marriage of Feirefiz and Repanse de Schoie, are portrayed the reconciliation of East and West, of Moor and Christian, of black and white, of male and female, ultimately the reconciliation of all opposites. Then the whole world becomes refertilized; the goal, the work of Waldorf Education is nothing less.

While it is possible to look at *Parzival* as a picture of the journey of a whole lifetime, even as a sketch of large stages of evolution, it serves concentratedly, microcosmically, to reveal much of the journey of adolescence.

John Wulsin



