



An Allegory for Midlife: *Percival and the Grail myth*

The Story

Percivalⁱ was the youngest knight of the Round Table and the most human, but he couldn't hold a candle to the grand knights like Lancelot and Galahad, known for their gallantry and strength. In contrast, Percival was known as the innocent fool. King Arthur chose him for his wholeheartedness.

The resting place of the Grail was Camelot before it disappeared. King Arthur charged the knights to go in search of the Grail, believed to be in the Grail Castle. They all set off on their horses and as a matter of honour, each knight found their own separate way into the forest to find the castle.

After many suns and moons of making a lonely path deep into the forest, now near exhaustion at the end of the day, at last Percival came out into a clearing.

There ahead was the Grail Castle, bathed in golden sunlight. It was the most beautiful sight and it filled him with love, bliss, and wonder.

He galloped his horse ahead to cross the drawbridge before it closed at dusk and inside, was welcomed by the courtiers, then taken to the Fisher King.

The King had a wound that would not heal, and the only respite from it was when he went fishing. It could only be healed if he gave over guardianship of the Grail to someone true with noble intent.

Percival was wined and dined in company of the Fisher King, then given a bed for the night. When he woke in the morning, the place was deserted.

He rode out of the castle confused and upset. He had failed. He did not know what he could have done differently. Like the other knights, he returned to Camelot empty-handed.

Decades passed, and between battles and other knightly duties, Percival searched in vain for the Grail Castle. He never forgot the golden moment of seeing it, but now questioned if it was just some hallucination from exhaustion.

His hair now grey with age, Percival set off once more for the Grail Castle on his fine black mare. In the forest, he came across a hermit and asked if he knew the way to the Grail Castle.

"Yes. Just go north, down along the valley. Then turn left."

The valley was thought to be impassable, and he wondered about the hermit's truthfulness. He followed the way, encountering steep and treacherous valleys, his mare nearly slipping down a ravine. Then he faced vines so thick no sun could get in, and he had to hack a way through.

Bruised, weakened, and cut from thorns, he arrived at flat land where he could ride his mount through forest. He turned left, toward the west.

Percival was near exhaustion. Desperation rose as he feared failure again, knowing this was his last attempt.

Suddenly, he emerged into a clearing, and there it was again. The Grail Castle, in all its splendour, golden in the setting sun.

Percival spurred his horse on and passed over the drawbridge just in time. As it closed it struck his horse on the back hocks.

Once again, he met the aged Fisher King in the great hall. This time Percival knew he must demonstrate worthiness to become guardian of the Grail and return it to Camelot.

But how?

The feast was nearly finished when on impulse, he stood and asked a question of all those present:

“Who does the Grail serve?”

And all in the great hall shouted the answer, “The Grail serves the Grail King.”

He looked to the Fisher King who said, “The grail does not serve me, nor you, nor your king. The Grail serves only the Grail King.”

With a rush, a warm breeze blew into the Great Hall as though a spirit had come amongst them bringing peace and wellbeing.

With great ceremony, the Fisher King, now healed, holds up the Grail for all to see before placing it into Percival hands.

Commentary

How is the myth of Percival and the Grail an allegory for midlife?

Here are my seven interpretations, I’m sure there are more.

1. Who does the Grail serve? It’s a strange question for our modern ears, and a stranger answer is given. But in the early centuries when the myth was first told, it was probably pretty clear.

Here’s the way I understand it: the Grail does not serve the one who possess it, in this case the Fisher King; it serves the Grail King. It does not serve ego.

The Grail serves its own force, the greater good—it **serves what is greater than the self**, what is transpersonal.

2. Percival's first search for the Grail is an initiation. I often think we all have this first intense 'Grail Moment' at some time during childhood or young adulthood, that later on may be attributed to mere youthful fantasy.

So, what is the Grail or Golden Moment? Being filled with unfettered enchantment and peace, it is quite distinct from peak performance. After the first experience, Percival looks for it in love, in success, popularity, and many other ways, to no avail.

The danger is that he may tell himself it was just an illusion.

3. Percival's name in his early life means "innocent fool". I totally relate. As a young adult I thought I knew my way, until the ground gave way beneath me. Then I had to confront that really, I knew very little.

4. The drawbridge struck Percival's horse struck on the back legs. This is a reference to our **vehicle (e.g. career, livelihood) in life being weakened**, either no longer fulfilling, or not right for the task ahead.

5. The first Grail experience shows us what is possible. **Next comes a long preparation**. It takes Percival many years of living life to be ready.

Just like we can't push the river, we cannot simple will the manifestation of second golden moment. In Jung's words, until "an extension of consciousness is achieved in old age."

6. The literal translation of the name Percival is "pierces". In Jungian terms, Percival was able to **pierce into the dark valley of the unconscious**.

In midlife there's a tendency to do the same by facing unconscious fears and desires found in our shadow side.

7. Piercing a way between two mountains is not merely finding a third, alternative route.

Rather, it's like the Buddhist concept of the **middle way**; that is, a way that lies beyond either of the two known ways. The middle way forms a new paradigm for the way ahead, for life.

In conclusion, for me the myth of Percival and the Grail speaks to the value and capacity of the second half of life.

It illustrates that fulfilment and truth come through long-lived experience.

I believe there is also the idea that our authentic gift and task, when enacted, is the spirit of giving back in our own way, serving what is transpersonal.



ⁱ Although the myth of Percival is set in the masculine, it relies strongly on the feminine qualities to fulfil the quest, and I hope indicates like yin and yang, we need both in the one.