In Search of Self

Teaching *Parzival* to high school juniors

Most US students probably don’t encounter *Parzival*, the thirteenth-century Arthurian romance by German writer Wolfram von Eschenbach, in high school or even college. More than 400 dense pages long, the poem—translated from the original Middle High German—is formal in tone, and at first blush, obscure in subject for today’s teenagers. But the work is a pillar of the Waldorf high school curriculum because of its profound lessons about the stages of growth and learning for students on the path to becoming young adults.

*Parzival* “offers a portrait of the journey through adolescence,” writes John Wulsin, a teacher, author, and leader in the field of Waldorf education. “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.”

At Academe of the Oaks, the book is taught to all eleventh graders by Bowman Garrett, who brings it to life through his own deep appreciation for the story’s liveliness and layers of meaning. A teacher who loves the theme of the quest, he also teaches epics like *The Odyssey* and *The Inferno*; he majored in religion and philosophy at Duke before going on to earn a teaching certificate in English and also studying fine arts. So the major themes of *Parzival*—the journey of self-discovery, the quest for self-mastery, the development of compassion and chivalrous love, and the exploration of the spiritual life—have a special place in his teaching.

“I’ve always been interested in the Arthurian grail legend,” Garrett says. “When I first engaged with the book, I was mainly struck by what a good story it is. You think it’s this crazy Middle Ages poem, but there’s excitement, love, adventure . . . it’s a good read. And I was surprised by how well it relates to the kids’ experience.”

In keeping with the Waldorf curriculum, Academe high school juniors are pondering the question “why?” as they advance toward senior year and the ultimate puzzle, “who am I?” From around the world and centuries ago, the character of Parzival offers a mirror image of the sixteen-year-old’s struggle and the unavoidable sting of making mistakes and learning from them. Parzival suffers a “major existential crisis,” Garrett explains, when he has the opportunity to enter the grail castle but fails to ask his wounded host, the Fisher King, what ails him—the only way to gain access to the grail.

“This is his ultimate flaw, yet at the same time, sets his true journey in motion,” wrote one of Garrett’s students in a paper for the class. Parzival’s blunder starts him on a four-year quest to find the grail once again.

To encourage students to dive into *Parzival*, Garrett assigns each of them at least one of the 16 books to teach the rest of the class. They also must keep a daily journal summarizing every book, write a culminating essay that includes an element of self-examination, and produce a creative work that reflects their understanding of the poem.

One student last fall wrote a song entitled *Knight In Arms*, with a lyrical refrain:

*Oh sad knight*

*You’re standing in the wrong light*

*You’re seeking too much trouble*

*So to journey you will double*

*You can’t go home ‘til you’ve found out where that is*

*You’ve asked your simple question*

*Now you know your own mistakes*

*So tell me: what ails thee?*

“The projects spanned an incredible range,” Garrett says. “There were ballads, paintings, poetry. I think the book really hit home, partly because Waldorf schools place it at the right time to teach it.”

Parzival, Garrett says, is a pilgrim figure in a book that really bridges old-world and more modern consciousness—the evolution from medieval faith and wisdom to modern individuality and compassion. Indeed, one of the most important lessons of the text is learning compassion for others, a theme that is emphasized throughout the course.

A class highlight is a visit to a Trappist monastery, where the students spend two nights for an “immersion into the spiritual life of prayer, devotion, and reflection.” The trip is meant to evoke Parzival’s challenging transformation from youthful folly to self-awareness and spiritual awakening. The point of the trip is not to immerse students in a particular faith tradition, but rather to encourage an inner quest.

“We wanted to try to provide a real experience to help them understand what it is to pursue a spiritual path, whatever that might be,” Garrett says. “The students handled it well. I think they took it very seriously.”

If the previously mentioned student’s essay is any example, it would seem they took it very seriously indeed.

“Though Parzival, and the student, will sway from his true nature in his journey, he will hopefully find himself in the end,” the student wrote in his conclusion. “This is not guaranteed, however, which is why Waldorf encourages it, and the learning environment there nurtures it. The teachers know that someone who has mastered himself is going to prosper in the world.”

“Yeah, no pressure there,” says Garrett, with a smile.