

Post-story dialogue for In the Belly of the Whale

These dialogues take place between Leo and his “Inner Storyteller” - the source of the stories he tells. Just as with the stories, they are created with no preparation and proceed with a life of their own. Leo’s words are written in normal text here. His Inner Storyteller’s words are in italics.

Let’s look at some of the hidden meanings of this story.

Okay.

It’s not really a story about devotion to your husband or your wife. It’s a story about devotion to oneself, but that deepest aspect of oneself, that is witnessing this life but not fully immersed in it: the wiser, stronger aspect of ourselves that we all carry inside, that animates our lives.

Sure.

This deeper self is simply THERE in everyone, or else they wouldn’t be living at all. Their bodies would not stand up, their hearts wouldn’t beat. It is the ANIMATING spirit. And yet, we are often so unaware of it. Why is that?

Well, our culture rarely points to it at all. We’ve lost most of the references from our old mythology that did so, and contemporary religion loses a lot of people. So the mainstream culture we live in doesn’t make much reference to this at all. As a result it sounds a bit esoteric and foreign.

Right. So, what’s important to note here is that this would have been very much more referred to in earlier times, and in earlier cultures. The “great spirit” or “God” would have been constantly woven into people’s lives, as an ongoing awareness that was incredibly relevant, almost inescapable.

Here in the story, we’re tracing the path of a modern individual, who finds themselves in THIS culture, with its very thorough lack of such signposts and references to this thing. So as a result there’s this widespread bewilderment: “I have this calling going on inside, why is no one telling me what to do about it?”

There’s a widespread malaise, like an unmet spiritual yearning that manifests in all kinds of difficult and challenging ways. People feel trapped, like the prisoner in the first story, or constantly at war with themselves and others, like the knight in the second story.

Or they feel this aching longing that is utterly bewildering. “Something is calling me, but I have no idea what to do about it. But doing anything else feels meaningless, so I’m just going to keep travelling life’s road, searching for this, until the answer shows up.” Many people live like that, if they are lucky enough to hear the call strongly enough. The woman in the third story is one of those.

But it's the Queen of the fourth story who is the most interesting. She wants to LIVE like this. She wants to live in such a way that puts the spiritual core back at the centre of her life, to make ALL actions about this.

Why does this sound so foreign? Why does this sound like a weird esoteric concept? It's because our culture has, as already stated, eroded the sense that this matters and is important. A great many other things have subsequently been inserted into the space of "what matters above all", some of which are quite the opposite from this, in terms of their benefit to us: which is to say, living by these things will not be healthy for us.

And their insertion is driven by all kinds of forces, some of which are really NOT healthy for us at all, such as consumerism. We live in a culture that is shaped by commercial forces. So now we get the message that the POINT of living is to have, to buy, to consume.

Just consider how incredibly different that is from the Queen's learning. She is learning to live from something vital and alive that is INSIDE her - the animating spirit, that is the primary moving force of her life. This spirit is the ground of every longing she feels. Every single longing she feels COMES FROM HERE.

This includes the longings that are to do with continuing her body's existence (such as food, water, air) and also the existence of her species (sex). But it also includes the longings for meaning, purpose, to love, to give, all the most meaningful longings we have.

To return these longings to their source is to purify them. To become aware of where these longings come from and to actively do all we can to align to THAT is an act of self purification in the most healthy way. We align to THAT which is already giving rise to our longings. This ends the imprisonment. It ends the war. It is the beginning of true purpose.

Unfortunately, we are living in a culture that seeks to fulfil those longings in some truly weird and twisted ways that are not at all in alignment with the source of those longings, leading to mass confusion, overconsumption and bewilderment. It's dangerous, and unsustainable. So this isn't an exotic and esoteric teaching that is in this story, it's an urgent one. As long as we are seeking to fulfil our needs with no reference to the true source of those needs, our strategies will doom us, individually and collectively.

As the story completes, there's a restoration of order in the Kingdom at war, a restoration of purpose in the woman's life, and a restoration of freedom for the prisoner. Aligning to the source of our longings is what brings all this about.

The spiritual core at the centre of our being is not some exotic fancy that only the most privileged have the leisure to pursue. It's a vital necessity, the avoidance of which is catastrophic for our culture. It's the gaping void at the centre of our society.

Thank you. That's very powerfully put.

Is there anything else you could say about the story?

Yes, there's something in the story that also needs to be emphasised, because it's a corrective to some of the traditional ways that we've looked at these things.

At the centre of the story there is the WHALE. This is a wonderful symbol, because it's literally the biggest creature we can see, so it's a good stand-in for the divine source, which we can't see.

Notice that this whale is soft and nurturing. Not punishing and critical. Like a mother (or indeed, like a mother's womb) this whale is soft and forgiving and all-accepting.

This is the quality of the divine that we need to recover. The experience of our deeper spiritual selves is SWEET. It is succour, a place of infinite rest and healing.

We've experienced this in the womb. If we were lucky enough to have a loving and healthy mother, we experienced it at her breast or in her arms. Ideally WE KNOW THIS somewhere in our bodies. We will have a reference for this in our own experience.

And in addition, we all have moments in our lives when we feel a deep sense of nurturing. This might come from a lover, even if only very briefly. It might come from eating something truly wonderful. Or lying in the sun, or swimming in a warm sea. There are moments when we are OKAY. When we are deeply at rest and okay in the world.

THAT is a reference that's worth nurturing and cultivating. Because to find our way back to the spiritual core of ourselves will take some retraining. We have been taught that the divine is remote, but it can be as close as warm water upon our skin. We have been taught that "God" is severe and demanding, but he/she can be as nurturing as a lover. We have been led to believe that we have to suffer, or at least go to enormous lengths to know anything about this, but what if the draw to this is already inherent in the way our bodies seek out what is pleasurable and nurturing.

Befriending our body's instincts and longings is a step towards befriending our deepest urges. The whale, this big, infinitely nurturing being that surrounds the Queen entirely, stands for this kind of softness, gentleness and loving acceptance.

Thank you.

How to listen to this story, then?

Take it walking and let it percolate in you. Listen to it at night and let it inform your dreams. Listen to it at times of need and let it guide your attention back to the One True Thing that is at the centre of all your heart's desires.

Thank you.

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