

Although Paulo Coelho is the author of one of the most popular novels of the last few decades, he is no conformist. His most celebrated book, *The Alchemist*, inspired by Coelho's pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella in northern Spain, explores the spiritualism of dreams and symbols. Although *The Guardian* accuses the author of "pandering to the lowest common denominator of new age gullibility" and Brazilian critic Mario Maestri dismisses Coelho's writing as "yuppie esoteric narrative," 100 million readers all over the world would disagree.

While his career as a songwriter was established much earlier, the author's commercial success came when he was 38 years old. With over 25 titles, Paulo often draws on his spiritual experiences traveling the world in his youth when writing his novels. Looking at the number of books he has sold and the life-changing effect he has had on millions of readers, this author is indeed an extraordinary phenomenon and unique voice.

From the romance of his earlier years in Brazil to taking on the responsibilities of a UN Messenger of Peace, Paulo Coelho talks to us about his journey, his work and how he sees his role in today's world.

As a writer, most of your novels revolve around the idea of pilgrimage, travel, or departure. The works engage readers in a discourse about letting go of one's defined self-image in new experiences and using those experiences to reach one's own true self. What did you find in Egypt that helped you transmit this concept?

It's true that all of my main characters travel, either by choice (like Santiago or Maria) or by necessity, as is the case of Elias' exile or even Athena's adoption. Their wanderings are the road that most often guides my stories.

I'm a pilgrim writer and that inevitably appears in the way my characters deal with space. I'm in constant movement and very often I find that my characters need to move constantly as I do. I believe that we are constantly experiencing transformation and that's why we need to let life guide us. That's what the main character in *The Alchemist*, for instance, does: he has to get to Egypt in order to discover himself. I decided to choose Egypt because I was so impressed by my first visit to the country.

The physical journey of the protagonist in *The Alchemist* mimics the psychological one in the sense that it's only through this experience that he is able to grasp the deeper meaning of his life, the reason for his wanderings.

In *The Alchemist*, you mentioned several places in Egypt, such as the Pyramids, Cairo, the oasis and desert, Coptic monasteries and the River Nile. What do you find most special in these places, as a person rather than a world-famous writer?

I think that anyone that comes face to face with the history of the Pyramids, the silence of the desert and the tranquil shadows of an oasis, is transfigured. The desert talks deeply to my soul.

In your novels, you communicate a wonderful magical world, full of

spirituality and goodness, and you insist that goodness is not limited by place, religion or group. How did you reach this conclusion, especially with all that you went through earlier in your life?

The cost is always high, but it is worth it. If I look back at my life — which in this moment I am ‘obliged’ to examine, since a biography about my lyricist days just came out in Brazil and another will come out by the end of the year — I see many occasions where society tried to make me conform to “normality.” This resulted in three hospitalizations in an asylum when I was a teenager (which I describe in my book *Veronika Decides to Die*), torture when I was a young adult at the hands of paramilitaries and many defeats. You could look at these experiences and say “Paulo’s life is tragic,” but I don’t see it that way. What I do see is someone trying to remain true to oneself. Yes, there is a price but I believe that life tends to be very generous to those who are brave enough to take these risks. In other words, I’ve always had faith in life.

I’ve also always been fascinated by the spiritual realm. It’s true that coming from a country where different religions have mingled, forming such a unique and rich environment, made things easier for me. In Brazil (and also in the rest of South America) we accept more easily the magical elements of everyday life. However, as a young man I wanted to have answers for everything. I also believed that the path to God was only for a few. Now I know that I can’t have those answers. I only know that I am alive and there is something that manifests itself in my life, and that it is God.

Although I do believe that everything we see, everything that is in front of us is just the visible part of reality, there is also an invisible reality that is ruled by emotions and feelings. This is our perception of the world, but God is, as William Blake said, in a grain of sand and in a flower. This energy is everywhere.

You were given an award by the World Economic Forum (WEF) as a ‘social entrepreneur,’ and then you joined the WEF board as a board member of the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship. [...] How do you see the WEF efforts in this field, and how do you evaluate their achievement?

Certain things when shared are not divided but multiplied. You can say that of love, of compassion, of hope. This is a very simple way of explaining the feelings or actions that create a virtuous circle.

Social entrepreneurship follows the same principle, namely that society as a whole wins much more when business is coupled with social concern. It’s about common sense: How can I have a good quality of life if those surrounding me are constantly striving for food, shelter, water? I may have a haven in my house, but the moment I walk in the streets, I will be in an environment of poverty and violence.

Social entrepreneurs are the people who strive to pass on the idea that a person’s well-being is dependent on the well-being of others.

I’ve seen how WEF, with its constant concern to “improve the state of the world” is managing to change perceptions and help social entrepreneurs to not only share information but also to implement their programs in other regions and help them to raise funds. The example of micro-credit — which is changing the face of India but also is being applied in other regions of the world — was nurtured and actively supported by the Schwab Foundation.

This is but one example of the many projects that are supported by WEF and the Foundation and are truly making a difference.

‘Inter-cultural dialogue,’ ‘inter-religious dialogue,’ and ‘global dialogue’ are widely used expressions nowadays. But you ask your readers to build a “dialogue with the world.” How do you see these expressions versus yours?

There is no conflict whatsoever between these expressions and mine. In a way, my expression encompasses the others. Indeed, if you are open to the world, this means you are open to other cultures, other religions, other places. It allows different cultures to share with each other the best they have, and at the same time respect their own background.

From the moment that we understand that the world has a soul and that we are all part of it, we start to pay attention to very subtle things. We start treasuring the small things, the people next to us, the beauty of difference.

Going on a pilgrimage reawakens that awareness, but you don't need to walk the road to Santiago to realize the benefits. Life itself is a pilgrimage. Every day is different, every day can have a magical moment, but often we don't see the opportunity, because we think, "Oh this is boring I'm just commuting to work." But we are all on a pilgrimage whether we like it or not and the target, or goal, is death. You must get as much as you can from the journey, because in the end the journey is all you have. It doesn't matter what you accumulate in terms of material wealth, because you are going to die anyway, so why not live? When you realize that, you can be brave, and that is the first tenant of any spiritual quest — the ability to take risks. And what risk is more interesting than to dive into the soul of others?

As a Messenger of Peace for the UN, and UNESCO special counselor for “Intercultural Dialogues and Spiritual Convergences,” how do you envision your role in today's world?

I think that it is everyone's responsibility to be involved in their community. I've always been very skeptical about people that say: "I want to save the world, help others" This is because "to save the world" is a Sisyphean task — too abstract to actually be put into practice. What is possible, and the most difficult task, is to first look at oneself and try to identify what's wrong. Before searching for the other, one has to find oneself.

I took 40 years to find myself, to accept my dream to become a writer. Only when I started to walk down the path of my personal legend was I able to honestly turn myself towards others: Before that, there were too many walls inside my soul. I looked around me and said, "I can't change the world, I can't change my country, I can't change my city, I can't even change my neighborhood what I can change is my street." That's when I went to a favela (shanty town) — in Rio, favelas are in the center of the city — and met a group of people that were taking care of children. Since then I've been cooperating with them and now we take care of 430 children.

The marvelous thing is that now I'm being given the opportunity to speak out about injustices and use my influence in the political arena.

I still believe that most of the real changes are made in a small scale. Nevertheless the tribune of the UN contributes to the changes that are necessary in the world. Being a messenger of peace is like being a reminder of something that defies power, something that runs deep inside all men's souls. Peace, as well as justice, has a natural authority that, given enough time and enough space, imposes itself. The challenge lies in the fact that too often, we let our better judgment get crushed by too much fear, by too many scars.

Who is Paulo Coelho, the Warrior of Light? To those who want to follow your steps, what advice would you give them?

During my wanderings I came to believe that a person has a personal legend to fulfil. What is a personal legend? It is the reason why we are alive. In my case this legend was to share my ideas with others through writing.

We have dreams that are not necessarily the dreams that our parents or society had for us. So, we must get rid of the idea of fulfilling what people expect us to do, and start to do what we expect from our lives. Dare to be different. You are unique, and you have to accept you as you are, instead of trying to repeat other people's destinies or patterns. Insanity is to behave like someone that you are not. Normality is the capacity to express your feelings. From the moment that you don't fear to share your heart, you are a free person.

As a Latin American author who became an icon in today's world, what are your dreams for the future, on a personal level as well as for humanity?

My dream for the future is to live the present. It is only through one's presence in this world that things can truly manifest themselves. I believe that unfortunately too often men and women are absent from their actions and caught up in their fears, illusions and desires. One just needs to focus in the present moment and understand that the simplest things are the most extraordinary ones. With this knowledge, everyone can first change themselves and the world will simply follow.
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