

**T**hose of us who teach in a Waldorf high school know well the archetypal questions and observations that resound from the text of Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. Although in recent years I have dispensed with other "Ur" Main Lessons, such as *Faust*, instituting instead a seminar on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century female authors, I have deliberately chosen to keep the *Parzival* block in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum. From its strikingly modern and innovative themes of inclusion—for example, Parzival's brother, Feirefiz, born to an African mother, is essential to Parzival's success in finally re-discovering the Grail castle; the influence and agency of the book's female characters is incontrovertible—to the text's exploration of the young soul's journey through life, this 13<sup>th</sup> century work is an invaluable well-spring for the questions and insights that students experience when studying the text in its entirety. (I am impatient with watered-down presentations and approaches to this work and strongly recommend that high school teachers give their students the privilege of reading von Eschenbach's artful, stem-winding prose in its entirety.)

*So how can one teach Parzival in a pandemic? How does such a significant moment in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum translate in the cyber world of remote learning? The New York City Rudolf Steiner School students and I had the following experiences this past April.*

## Continuity Was Key

The class "met" online, via Zoom, for 90 minutes every day throughout the four-week block. Prior to teaching the course, I toyed with the idea of meeting every other day as other colleagues were doing with younger grades. I decided against it: the impact of the text, I felt, would dissipate if we didn't deepen the discussions of the sixteen "books" that make up *Parzival* through conscious review and day to day elaboration.

## Movement Was Essential

What worked was to begin with movement – sitting for a Zoom meeting for 90 minutes would have been debilitating. We spoke the morning verse, standing, and then our Upper School eurythmy teacher, Alexandra Spadea, began our day – working with Rudolf Steiner's indications for the planetary movements and their

corresponding colors and moods. Students stood behind their "desks" at home as we moved together to the gestures and sounds conveyed by Ms. Spadea:

<b>Sun:</b>	AU, white -	the complete human being
<b>Venus:</b>	A, green -	loving devotion
<b>Mercury:</b>	I (ee) yellow -	egotistical potential
<b>Moon<sup>1</sup>:</b>	Ei (i) purple -	creative potential
<b>Mars:</b>	E (ay) red -	aggressive potential
<b>Jupiter:</b>	O, orange -	wisdom
<b>Saturn:</b>	U, blue -	"Tiefsinn," deep pondering, memory of times past

The views of planets and their influence are mentioned several times in the *Parzival* text. In later Zoom discussions, fruitful connections were made by the students between the gestures they were learning and the astrological import of these movements. As distant as we all were during our COVID spring, moving together to begin the Main Lesson united us.

## Break-Out Rooms

Discussions of specific questions and themes in smaller groups proved invaluable to the success of the Main Lesson. The Zoom option of 'breakout rooms' gave students time to debate and educate one another on the topics set the day or week before. The ability to "visit" each one of these breakout rooms allowed me to answer questions as they arose and share further thoughts before moving on to the next group. I truly enjoyed the function that allows the host to end the breakout sessions at the same time for all. This proved so much more effective and efficient than the experience, surely familiar to other high school teachers, of having to run all over the school to gather back small discussion groups which had become so immersed in

1. Moon is a central place of balance – the only gesture that does not move. Imagine a lemniscate around the place where your wrists cross, and experience the relations of above and below at the crossing where your wrists meet.

their discussions that they “forgot” to return to the main classroom.

### Timely and Immediate Response to Student Work

At the end of the week, students sent me cell phone pictures of their artwork and emailed their journal entries and essays on an almost daily basis. I could correct these on my computer and return them immediately for revision and final entry into the students’ Main Lesson journals. The rhythm of daily and weekly gathering and the immediate return of corrected work kept the momentum going, kept a check on who was not completing assignments, and most importantly, kept the intensity of the Main Lesson experience alive.

### Individuation

With more time at home, it was important to encourage students to be creative and independent in their approach to the study of the text. They were asked to keep journals, into which artwork and personal essays were crafted every few days. Perhaps the isolation at home gave the students more time and space to think more deeply about the questions concerning individual freedom and destiny that the *Parzival* text brings so vividly to life. Clearly, students had more time throughout the day and week to do outstanding artwork as well as truly reflective writing in response to questions such as:

- A. What is the Grail and what does it mean as a symbol, both in *Parzival* and in our lives today? *Parzival* is described as a “Brave man slowly wise.” How does a person find the Grail? What qualities are needed—for *Parzival* and for any individual—to find it?
- B. Who are the main female characters in *Parzival*? What roles do they play in the book? How do they both visibly and invisibly move the plot?
- C. Describe the role of polarities or opposites in *Parzival*—black and white, joy and sorrow, love and hatred, alertness and dreaminess, physical love and spiritual love, innocence and experience, etc.

Here are some examples of work, in word and image, from student journals:

### Student Journal Entry 5

*The sorceress, Cundrie, who reveals Parzival’s disgrace in front of Arthur’s court, can be seen as representing an alter ego, or shadow side of Parzival’s persona. Do you have a “shadow side?”*

I have never been a patient person. Even from a young age, if something wasn’t coming easily to me, a mild tantrum was about to ensue. My parents always tell me that I was an easy and docile child, but the smallest things could frustrate me. My first enemy was learning how to put on my socks. After my mother would calmly explain that there was no “left” sock and “right” sock like the shoes that I was already fairly adept at putting on myself, I expected to be able to just pull them on my feet and be done with it. Sadly, this was not the case, as half of the time I would put them on upside down so that the heel was bulging on the top of my foot. This would make me suspicious, thinking that maybe my mother was wrong; I would switch the socks from one foot to the other. Of course, the socks would be upside down again, causing me to rip the socks off my feet and throw them across the room.

Although I eventually did figure out how to put socks on correctly, I had quite a few other learning curves that caused me great frustration. I was the very last child in my grade to learn to read, and after hours of programs and games and exercises I would ball up my fists and swear that I would never be able to do it. Similar to my sock dilemma, however, I overcame my aversion eventually and became an avid and passionate reader a few years later.

I have developed more patience with myself at this point in my life, and have even developed a perseverance for accomplishing things, once I put my mind to it. I have found a way to harness my impatience with myself as a power source which feeds my determination. Out of stubbornness (that is also a definite shadow side of mine), I refuse to allow my frustration to get the better of me. I try to recognize my impatience as an expectation that I have for myself, and it acts as a driver to push me towards my goals.

Julia Byrne, Class of ’21

### Student Journal Entry 6

*Love and its many manifestations is a dominant theme in Parzival. What are your thoughts on Love?*

Love is the bond between two beings. It is often a sense of safety that one feels in the presence of another. Love does not have to be mutual; in fact, some people find it easier to love someone who does not love them back, someone who does not reciprocate their feelings.

Not all love is romantic. Two close friends may have love for each other that is created by their reliance on one another. But when one person loves another, and it is not mutual, it can hurt. In Gawain's case, the love that he feels for Orgeluse is initially only based on her outstanding beauty. His attraction to her is amplified when she teases him and denies him. This is because of Gawain's curiosity and pride. Gawain is not used to being rejected by

women, which is why Orgeluse stands out to him. The evolution of their relationship is one of my favorite parts of Parzival. It is revealed that Orgeluse used to have a husband whom she loved dearly, but he was killed. This is the reason she pushes Gawain away and tests him so severely. This fact reveals that there is always more to someone than meets the eye. And only when, Gawain learned to feel someone else's pain could he truly love in a truly selfless way. Love is about feeling: if you cannot feel someone else's emotions you can never understand them. And if you cannot learn to have patience for someone else's love, then you will wait for it forever. When you truly love someone and feel like you are completely bound to them, it will feel like you are on fire.

James Hixenbaugh, Class of '21



Illustration by Leah New, Class of '21

### Final Thoughts

Remote learning cannot take the place of what Waldorf education prizes so highly – the spontaneity and inspiration inherent in a live, classroom setting. Waldorf teachers know that there is an invisible but palpable spiritual substance built up through the person to person engagement of human beings: nothing can substitute for the community experience that teachers work so hard to achieve in the “trenches” of the daily classroom. Ongoing study, meditation, and collaborative research allow Waldorf teachers to strive to be ever flexible and creative. Still, through the challenging and exhausting work of our COVID spring, I found that the remote learning platforms that I learned to use for teaching high school literature classes could be shaped and directed to achieve a semblance of the participation and immediacy that make teaching a course like *Parzival* such a rich gift for students and teacher alike.

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