

# Santiago's Spiritual Awakening is Lived Experience: An Analysis in Light of the Novel the Alchemist

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**Abstract:** *This research paper intends to analyze the spiritual journey of the protagonist Santiago in the enchanting novel The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho. The research paper explores how various experiences of Santiago during the course of his physical journey from the mountains of Andalusia in Spain to the pyramids of Egypt and then back to Spain were divine and ultimately led to his spiritual awakening. During the course of his journey, Santiago learns to read and trust omens which are the signals sent by the divine to those who are fulfilling their personal legends. Santiago also learns that the love is the central part of the encounter with the divine. If one wants to grow into the fullness of one's spiritual potential, one must achieve his personal legend. Only then can one enjoy relationships with others to the fullest.*

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Divine, Omens, Love, Personal Legend

Paulo Coelho, a rebellion by nature since childhood was born on 24th August 1947 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. At the age of 17, his parents committed him to asylum thrice. But each time he escaped. He wanted to become a writer and wished to take it up as his profession. But his parents thought lowly about this profession and urged him to become an advocate. Upon being pressurized by his parents, he joined a law school but soon quit it and became a hippie. He took to drugs, sex and rock and wasted several years of his life into this culture. When at the age of 38 years, Coelho got a spiritual awakening to pursue his career as a writer. In 1982 he got his first novel Hell Archives published which was not a success. Five years later he wrote The Pilgrimage, which was an autobiographical account of his experiences during his trek in Spain. It explored man's need to find his own path in life, holding similar topic to his next novel a year later, The Alchemist. The Alchemist did not become an instant hit. It was eight months after the book was released that an American came to Brazil and read the book. He got so impressed with the book that he offered Coelho to translate it in English and helped him to find a publisher in United States. Then there was no looking back. The Alchemist became a sensation not only in US but in the whole world and got translated in about 67 languages.

Paulo Coelho's charming fable The Alchemist is an enchanting story which explores age - old search of human beings for the divine. In his journey, the protagonist, Santiago who is a shepherd experiences a series of revelations of the divine, which ultimately alter his awareness of himself, others, and the world. Santiago's struggles to 'heed the omens' in order to achieve his "Personal Legend" represent a process of spiritual growth which enables him to see a purposive divine plan in everything.

The first and foremost key to understanding Coelho's depiction of Santiago's spiritual journey is the metaphor of the physical journey. Coelho uses the desire to travel and see new places, as a symbol for the desire to encounter the divine. Santiago belongs to a simple farm family who wants

him to be a priest. But despite this he is a wandering shepherd. Santiago's reasons for rejecting the priesthood are:

"...ever since he had been a child, he had wanted to know the world, and this was much more important to him than knowing God and learning about man's sins".

For Santiago the institution of religion represents spiritual stasis. His rejection of priesthood is not rejection of God but the rejection of this spiritual stasis. For Santiago, the divine is to be encountered in nature, and in the people he meets.

Santiago dreams of a child transporting him to the pyramids and telling him that he will find treasure there. Santiago seeks the help of a Gypsy seeress to get his dream interpreted. She tells him:

"You came so that you could learn about your dreams... And dreams are the language of God".

The fact that dreams are the language of God establishes the fact that God himself wants Santiago to undertake this physical journey for a spiritual experience.

She also explains that God might speak in one of the two languages:

"When he speaks in our language, I can interpret what he has said. But if he speaks in the language of the soul, it is only you who can understand".

Melchizedek is the righteous king of Salem in the Bible. Coelho presents him as a spiritual guide in the novel. Santiago's meeting with him in the novel is transformative with regard to Santiago's spiritual growth. Melchizedek describes the human condition according to the book Santiago is reading: he says that Santiago's book:

"describes people's inability to choose their own Personal Legends. And it ends up saying that everyone believes the world's greatest lie".

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And the world's greatest lie, apparently, is that

“at a certain point in our lives, we lose control of what's happening to us, and our lives become controlled by fate”.

In Coelho's deeply spiritual philosophy, fate stands in opposition to an experiential encounter with the divine. According to him, fate is an impersonal and inexorable force. If one believes that the fate is in control of one's life, then there is no room for genuine encounters with the divine. Coelho seems to be saying that the soul cannot grow towards the divine if it cannot choose i. e if it is bound to the unalterable decrees of fate.

Melchizedek, during his conversation with Santiago also reveals a concept that will serve as Santiago's guiding star throughout the rest of the story:

“Whoever you are, or whatever it is that you do, when you really want something, it's because that desire originated in the soul of the universe”.

This goes to the very heart of Coelho's own engagement with the divine, in *The Alchemist*. All things are one, deeply interconnected and intertwined with each other and with the divine.

Coelho gives us a concept of Personal Legend. According to his philosophy, the Personal Legend represents the achievement of spiritual gnosis. Personal Legends are epiphanies, personal encounters with the Divine Plan. And Melchizedek spells out his purpose as spiritual messenger and guide quite explicitly. He intervenes to stop people from giving up on their Personal Legends. In his own words:

“Sometimes I appear in the form of a solution, or a good idea. At other times, at a crucial moment, I make it easier for things to happen”.

Melchizedek leaves Santiago with the important lesson that he should always pay attention to the omens left by God. In Coelho's weltanschauung, by reading the omens is how one learns to discover the Divine Plan in one's life. But one faces a key obstacle in reading and trusting these omens and which is doubt. After a naïve Santiago allows himself to be robbed by a thief in Morocco, he is tempted to blame God and give up his dream:

“He wept because God was unfair, and because this was the way God repaid those who believed in their dreams”.

However, Santiago then tries Urim and Thummim given to him by Melchizedek asking “if the old man's blessing was still with him” and finds the answer to be the affirmative.

Sure enough, before long Santiago happens to meet a humble crystal merchant in Tangier, who offers him a job. And the Divine again send a signal to Santiago and intervenes in his quest to achieve his Personal Legend, for the merchant says:

“I'd like you to work in my shop. Two customers came in today while you were working, and that's a good omen”.

The merchant is a devout Muslim and dearly wants to fulfill his obligation to make the hajj to Mecca but he has never done so for a very telling reason:

“Because it's the thought of Mecca that keeps me alive... I'm afraid that if my dream is realized, I'll have no reason to go on living”.

He fears that actually fulfilling his spiritual quest by making the hajj will leave his life empty. Santiago also struggles with this temptation as well. While preparing to leave, he tells the merchant that

“I have the money I need to buy my sheep. And you have the money you need to go to Mecca”.

Santiago is tempted to do as the merchant is doing. He simply wants to return to a place of spiritual stasis, rather than pursuing his Personal Legend and the encounter with the divine that it represents. Abandoning his spiritual journey will mean going back to Spain and

“doing just what I did before... even though the sheep didn't teach me to speak Arabic”.

This is another crossroads moment, one that touches both Santiago and the merchant. The merchant expresses his pride in Santiago, but then says:

“You know that I'm not going to go to Mecca. Just as you know that you're not going to buy your sheep”.

The merchant is teaching Santiago the same fundamental lesson that Melchizedek taught him, only from a different angle. Coelho strongly hints that the merchant is in fact Melchizedek in disguise, as Santiago notes

“...for the first time that the old merchant's hair was very much like the hair of the old king”.

Santiago remembers, too, that Melchizedek

“said that he always appeared to help those who are trying to realize their Personal Legend”.

This sign is another guide - post to help Santiago on his journey toward the divine.

The story climaxes at the oasis, where Santiago falls in love with Fatima, and she with him:

“At that moment, it seemed to him that time stood still, and the Soul of the World surged within him”.

Here, Santiago learns that love is “the most important part of the language that all the world spoke—the language that everyone on earth was capable of understanding in their heart”.

Love, is a central part of the encounter with the divine. In fact, Santiago's encounter with Fatima, and his temptation to stay with her in the oasis, is in many ways the culmination of the central theme in Coelho's narrative: if one wants to

grow into the fullness of one's spiritual potential, one must achieve his Personal legend. Only then can one enjoy relationships with others to the fullest, for these too are a part of the divine plan. Fatima readily understands all of this:

"If I am really a part of your dream, you'll come back one day".

Nonetheless, Santiago has to learn this lesson again. After his reading of the omens saves the oasis - dwellers from an attack and wins him gold and respect, he is tempted to abandon his Personal Legend and remain in a place of spiritual stasis. The old alchemist explains that if he stays, he will try to ignore the omens—and finally they will abandon him. Coelho reiterates his cardinal theme: Santiago must finish his quest, because he still has much to learn, a divine plan for his life to fulfill.

Indeed, if Santiago had stayed at the oasis, he would not have had to transform himself into the wind, a magical feat that he is forced to perform lest he be killed by the tribal militants who have taken him captive. When Santiago protests that he can't do this, the alchemist replies that:

"If a person is living out his Personal Legend, he knows everything he needs to know", explaining that the fear of failure is the only thing that "makes a dream impossible to achieve".

Sure enough, on the third day, Santiago is able to become the wind by speaking with the desert, the wind itself, the sun, the Soul of the World, and the Soul of God, discovering a divine plan in all things:

"And he saw that the Soul of God was his own soul. And that he, a boy, could perform miracles".

There is no doubt that this is another moment of epiphany for Santiago: it is not a mere feat of magic, it is an encounter with the divine.

Santiago's journey seems to end where it begins. He reaches the Pyramids and is robbed and beaten, only for one of the men to recount his own recurrent dream—of a great treasure at the very church where Santiago once herded his sheep! Santiago's physical journey has taken him right back to where he began, but the cardinal point is that spiritually, he could not have reached his destination without the journey.

The destination, then, is unachievable without the journey: Santiago's experiences have enabled him to achieve incredible epiphanies of the divine. By learning to read the omens, he can now see a divine plan at work in his own life, and all around him—spiritual riches he never could have gained without his lived experiences.

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