

The background of the cover is a surreal landscape with a blue sky and a horizon line. A woman in a long, flowing blue dress stands on a path that recedes into the distance, marked by two bright white lines. She is holding a large, thin, circular hoop above her head with both hands. Another similar hoop is on the ground around her feet. The overall color palette is dominated by shades of blue and white.

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

ALEPH

Paulo Coelho

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THE ALCHEMIST*

Paulo Coelho

Aleph

Aleph:
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Аннотация

Another stunning novel by the author of *The Alchemist*.

Aleph marks a return to Paulo Coelho's beginnings. In a frank and surprising personal story, one of the world's most beloved authors embarks on a remarkable and transformative journey of self-discovery.

Facing a grave crisis of faith, and seeking a path of spiritual renewal and growth, Paulo decides to start over: to travel, to experiment, to reconnect with people and the world. On this journey through Europe, Africa, and Asia, he will again meet Hilalthe woman he loved 500 years beforean encounter that will initiate a mystical voyage through time and space, through past and present, in search of himself.

Aleph is an encounter with our fears and our sins; a search for love and forgiveness, and the courage to confront the inevitable challenges of life.

Paulo Coelho

Aleph

Translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa



HarperCollins *Publishers*

Dedication

For J. who keeps me walking,

S. J. who continues to protect me,

Hilal, for her words of forgiveness in the church in
Novosibirsk.

O Mary, conceived without sin,

pray for those who turn to you.

Amen.

A certain nobleman went into a far country to
receive for himself a kingdom, and to return.

Luke 19:12

Epigraph

The Aleph was about two to three centimetres in diameter,
but all of cosmic space was there, with no diminution in size.
Each thing was infinite, because I could clearly see it from every
point on the universe.

Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Aleph'

Thou knowest all – I cannot see.
I trust I shall not live in vain,
I know that we shall meet again
In some divine eternity.
Oscar Wilde, ‘The True Knowledge’

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Moscow, 1 June 2006

Author's note

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King of My Kingdom

Oh no, not another ritual! Not another invocation intended to make the invisible forces manifest in the visible world! What has that got to do with the world we live in today? Graduates leave university and can't find a job. Old people reach retirement and have almost nothing to live on. Grown-ups have no time to dream, struggling from nine to five to support their family and pay for their children's education, always bumping up against the thing we all know as 'harsh reality'.

The world has never been as divided as it is now, what with religious wars, genocides, a lack of respect for the planet, economic crises, depression, poverty, with everyone wanting instant solutions to at least some of the world's problems or their

own. And things only look bleaker as we head into the future.

What am I doing here, trying to make my way in a spiritual tradition whose roots are in the remote past, far from all the challenges of the present moment?

Along with J., whom I call my Master, although I'm beginning to have doubts about that, I am walking towards the sacred oak tree, which, for more than five hundred years, has stood there impassively contemplating humanity's woes, its one concern being to surrender its leaves in winter and recover them in spring.

I can't stand to write any more about my relationship with J., my guide in the Tradition. I have dozens of diaries full of notes of our conversations, which I never bother to re-read. Since our first meeting in Amsterdam, in 1982, I have learned and unlearned how to live hundreds of times. Whenever J. teaches me something new, I think that perhaps this will be the last step required to reach the top of the mountain, the note that justifies a whole symphony, the word that sums up an entire book. I go through a period of euphoria, which gradually dissipates. Some things stay for ever, but most of the exercises, practices and teachings end up disappearing down a black hole. Or so it seems.

The ground is wet. It occurs to me that my trainers, meticulously washed two days before, will soon be covered in mud again, however carefully I tread. My search for wisdom, peace of mind and an awareness of realities visible and invisible has become routine and pointless. I began my apprenticeship in magic when I was twenty-two. I followed various paths, walked

along the very edge of the abyss for many years, slipped and fell, gave up and started all over again. I imagined that, by the time I reached the age of fifty-nine, I would be close to paradise and to the absolute peace I thought I could see in the smiles of Buddhist monks.

In fact, I seem to be further from achieving that than ever. I'm not at peace; now and then I go through periods of inner conflict that can persist for months; and the times when I immerse myself in some magical reality last only seconds, just long enough to know that another world exists and long enough to leave me frustrated because I can't absorb everything I learn.

We arrive.

When the ritual is over, I'll have a serious talk with him. We both place our hands on the trunk of the sacred oak.

J. says a Sufi prayer:

'O God, when I listen to the voices of animals, the sounds of trees, the murmurings of water, the singing of birds, the whistling of the wind or the boom of thunder, I see in them evidence of Your unity; I feel that You are supreme power, omniscience, supreme knowledge and supreme justice.

'I recognise You, O God, in the trials I am going through. May Your pleasure be my pleasure too. May I be Your joy, the joy that a Father feels for a son. And may I think of You calmly and with determination, even when I find it hard to say I love You.'

Usually, at this point, I would feel – for only a fraction of a second, but that's always enough – the One Presence that moves

the Sun and the Earth and ensures that the stars remain in their places. But I don't feel like talking to the Universe today, I just want the man at my side to give me the answers I need.

He removes his hands from the tree trunk, and I do the same. He smiles at me, and I return his smile. We make our way, in silence, unhurriedly, back to my house, where we sit on the verandah and drink coffee, still without talking.

I look at the huge tree in the middle of my garden, with a ribbon tied round its trunk, placed there after a dream I had. I am in the hamlet of Saint Martin, in the French Pyrenees, in a house I now regret having bought, because it has ended up owning me, demanding my presence whenever possible, because it needs someone to look after it, to keep its energy alive.

'I can't evolve any further,' I say, falling, as always, into the trap of being the first to speak. 'I think I've reached my limit.'

'That's funny. I've been trying all my life to find out what my limits are and have never reached them yet. But then my universe doesn't really help, it keeps expanding and won't allow me to know it entirely,' says J. provocatively.

He's being ironic, but I keep talking.

'Why did you come here today? To try and convince me that I'm wrong, as usual? You can say what you like, but words won't change anything. I'm not happy.'

'That's exactly why I came. I've been aware of what's been going on for some time now, but there is always a right moment to act,' says J., picking up a pear from the table and turning it over

in his hands. 'If we had spoken before, you would not have been ripe. If we were to talk later, you would have rotted.' He bites into the pear, savouring the taste. 'Perfect. The right moment.'

'I'm filled with doubt, especially about my faith,' I say.

'Good. It's doubt that drives a man onward.'

The usual apt responses and images, but they're not working today.

'I'm going to tell you what you feel,' J. says. 'You feel that nothing you have learned has put down roots, that while you're capable of entering the magical universe, you cannot remain submerged in it, you feel that all of this may be nothing but a fantasy dreamed up by people to fend off their fear of death.'

My questions go deeper than that; they are doubts about my faith. I have only one certainty: there exists a parallel spiritual universe that impinges on the world in which we live. Apart from that, everything else seems absurd to me – sacred books, revelations, guides, manuals, ceremonies ... And, what is worse, they appear to have no lasting effects.

'I'm going to tell you what I once felt,' J. adds. 'When I was young, I was dazzled by all the things life could offer me. I thought I was capable of achieving all of them. When I got married, I had to choose just one path, because I needed to support the woman I love and my children. When I was forty-five and a highly successful executive, I saw my children grow up and leave home, and I thought that, from then on, everything would be a mere repetition of what I had already experienced. That was

when my spiritual search began. I'm a disciplined man and I put all my energies into that. I went through periods of enthusiasm and unbelief, until I reached the stage you are at now.'

'Look, J., despite all my efforts, I still can't honestly say that I feel closer to God and to myself,' I tell him, with barely concealed exasperation.

'That's because, like everyone else on the planet, you believed that time would teach you to grow closer to God. But time doesn't teach; it merely brings us a sense of weariness and of growing older.'

The oak tree in my garden appears to be looking at me now. It must be more than four hundred years old, and the only thing it has learned is to stay in one place.

'Why did we go and perform that ritual around that other oak tree? How does that help us become better human beings?'

'Precisely because most people don't perform rituals around oak trees any more, and because by performing apparently absurd rituals, you get in touch with something deep in your soul, in the oldest part of yourself, the part closest to the origin of everything.'

That's true. I had asked a question to which I already knew the answer and received the answer I was expecting. I should make better use of his company.

'It's time to leave,' says J. abruptly.

I look at the clock. I tell him that the airport is nearby and that we can continue talking for a while longer.

‘That isn’t what I mean. When I went through what you’re experiencing now, I found the answer in something that had happened before I was born. That’s what I’m suggesting you do now.’

Reincarnation? But he had always discouraged me from visiting past lives.

‘I’ve been back into the past already. I learned how to do that before I met you. We’ve talked before about how I saw two incarnations, one as a French writer in the nineteenth century and one—’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘I made mistakes then that I can’t put right now. And you told me never to go back again, because it would only increase my sense of guilt. Travelling to past lives is like making a hole in the floor and letting the flames of the fire in the apartment below scorch and burn the present.’

J. throws what remains of his pear to the birds in the garden and looks at me with some irritation.

‘If you don’t stop spouting such nonsense, I might start believing that you’re right and that you really haven’t learned anything during the twenty-four years we’ve been together.’

I know what he means. In magic – and in life – there is only the present moment, the NOW. You can’t measure time the way you measure the distance between two points. ‘Time’ doesn’t pass. We human beings have enormous difficulty in focusing on the present; we’re always thinking about what we did, about how

we could have done it better, about the consequences of our actions, and why we didn't act as we should have. Or else we think about the future, about what we're going to do tomorrow, what precautions we should take, what dangers await us around the next corner, how to avoid what we don't want and how to get what we have always dreamed of.

J. takes up the conversation again.

'Right here and now, you are beginning to wonder: is there really something wrong? Yes, there is. But at this precise moment, you also realise that you can change your future by bringing the past into the present. Past and future only exist in our mind. The present moment, though, is outside of time, it's Eternity. In India they use the word "karma" for lack of any better term. But it's a concept that's rarely given a proper explanation. It isn't what you did in the past that will affect the present. It's what you do in the present that will redeem the past and thereby change the future.'

'So ...'

He pauses, becoming increasingly irritated at my inability to grasp what he's trying to explain to me.

'There's no point sitting here, using words that mean nothing. Go and experiment. It's time you got out of here. Go and reconquer your kingdom, which has grown corrupted by routine. Stop repeating the same lesson, because you won't learn anything new that way.'

'It's not routine that's the problem. I'm simply not happy.'

‘That’s what I mean by routine. You think that you exist because you’re unhappy. Other people exist merely as a function of their problems and spend all their time talking compulsively about their children, their husband, school, work, friends. They never stop to think: I’m here. I am the result of everything that happened and will happen, but I’m here. If I did something wrong, I can put it right or at least ask forgiveness. If I did something right, that leaves me happier and more connected with the now.’

J. takes a deep breath, then concludes:

‘You’re not here any more. You’ve got to leave in order to return to the present.’

It was as I had feared. For a while now, he has been dropping hints that it was time I set off on the third sacred road. My life has changed a lot since the far-off year of 1986, when my pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela brought me face to face with my destiny, or ‘God’s plan’. Three years later, I followed the so-called Road to Rome, in the area where we were now; it was a painful, tedious process lasting seventy days, and which involved me enacting, each morning, all the absurd things I had dreamed about the night before (I remember standing at a bus stop for four whole hours, during which nothing of any importance happened).

Since then, I have done everything that my work demanded of me. After all, it was my choice and my blessing. I started travelling like a mad thing. The great lessons I learned had been

precisely those that my journeys had taught me.

Well, the truth is, I've always travelled like a mad thing, ever since I was young. Recently, though, I seem to be spending my life in airports and hotels, and any sense of adventure has rapidly given way to profound tedium. When I complained that I never stayed in one place for very long, people were horrified: 'But it's great to travel. I wish I had the money to do what you're doing!'

Travel is never a matter of money, but of courage. I spent a large part of my youth travelling the world as a hippie, and what money did I have then? None. I barely had enough to pay for my fare, but I still consider those to have been the best years of my youth: eating badly, sleeping in train stations, unable to communicate because I didn't know the language, being forced to depend on others just for somewhere to spend the night.

After weeks on the road, listening to a language you don't understand, using a currency whose value you don't comprehend, walking down streets you've never walked down before, you discover that your old 'I', along with everything you ever learned, is absolutely no use at all in the face of those new challenges, and you begin to realise that, buried deep in your unconscious mind, there is someone much more interesting and adventurous and more open to the world and to new experiences.

Then there comes a day when you say: 'Enough!'

'Enough! Travelling, for me, has become just a monotonous routine.'

'No, it's not enough, it never will be,' says J. 'Our life is a

constant journey, from birth to death. The landscape changes, the people change, our needs change, but the train keeps moving. Life is the train, not the station. And what you're doing now isn't travelling, it's just changing countries, which is completely different.'

I shake my head.

'It won't help. If I need to put right a mistake in another life and I'm deeply aware of that mistake, I can do that here. In that prison cell, I was just obeying the orders of someone who seemed to know God's will: you. Besides, I've already asked forgiveness of at least four people.'

'But you've never found the nature of the curse placed on you.'

'You were cursed too at the time. Did you find out what it was?'

'Yes, I did. And I can guarantee that it was far harsher than yours. You committed just one cowardly deed, while I acted unfairly many times. But that discovery freed me.'

'If I need to travel in time, why do I have to travel in space as well?'

J. laughs. 'Because we all have the possibility of redemption, but for that to happen, we have to seek out the people we harmed and ask their forgiveness.'

'So where should I go? To Jerusalem?'

'I don't know. Wherever you are committed to going. Find out what you have left unfinished and complete the task. God will guide you, because everything you ever experienced or will

experience is in the here and now. The world is being created and destroyed in this very moment. Whoever you met will reappear, whoever you lost will return. Don't betray the grace that was bestowed on you. Understand what is going on inside you and you will understand what is going on inside everyone else. Don't imagine that I came to bring peace. I came with a sword.'

I'm standing in the rain shivering, and my first thought is, I'm going to catch the flu. I console myself by thinking that every doctor I've ever met has assured me that flu is caused by a virus, not by drops of water.

I can't stay in the here and now, my head is whirling. Where should I aim for? Where should I go? And what if I don't recognise the people on my path? That must have happened before and is bound to happen again; if it hadn't, my soul would be at peace.

After fifty-nine years of living with myself, I can predict at least some of my reactions. When I first met J., his words seemed filled with a light much brighter than he himself. I accepted everything without question; I walked fearlessly ahead and never once regretted it. But time passed, we got to know each other and with familiarity came habit. He had never let me down in any way, but I couldn't see him now with quite the same eyes. Even though, out of duty, I had to obey his words – which I would have done gladly in September of 1992, ten years after I met him – I no longer did so with the same conviction.

I am wrong. It was my choice to follow this magical Tradition,

so why question it now. I'm free to abandon it whenever I wish, but something drives me on. He's probably right, but I've got used to the life I lead and I don't need any more challenges. I need peace.

I should be a happy man: I'm successful in my chosen, highly competitive profession; I've been married for twenty-seven years to the woman I love; I enjoy good health; I live surrounded by people I can trust; I'm always greeted with affection by my readers when I meet them in the street. There was a time when that was enough, but these last two years, nothing seems to satisfy me.

Is it just a passing anxiety? Won't it be enough just to say the usual prayers, respect nature as if it were the voice of God and contemplate the beauty around me? Why go forward, if I'm convinced that I've reached my limit?

WHY CAN'T I BE LIKE MY FRIENDS?

The rain is falling ever harder and all I can hear is the sound of the water. I'm drenched, but I can't move. I don't want to leave because I don't know where to go. J. is right. I'm lost. If I really had reached my limit, this feeling of guilt and frustration would have passed, but it's still there. Fear and trembling. When a sense of dissatisfaction persists, that means it was placed there by God for one reason only: you need to change everything and move forward.

I've been through this before. Whenever I refused to follow my fate, something very hard to bear would happen in my life.

And that is my great fear at the moment, that some tragedy will occur. Tragedy always brings about radical change in our lives, a change that is associated with the same principle: loss. When faced by any loss, there's no point in trying to recover what has been, it's best to take advantage of the large space that opens up before us and fill it with something new. In theory, every loss is for our good; in practice, though, that is when we question the existence of God and ask ourselves, 'What did I do to deserve this?'

Lord, preserve me from tragedy and I will follow Your desires.

The moment I think this, there is a great crack of thunder and the sky is lit up by a flash of lightning.

Again, fear and trembling. A sign. Here I am trying to persuade myself that I always give the best of myself and nature is telling me exactly the opposite: anyone truly committed to life never stops walking. Heaven and earth are meeting in a storm which, when it's over, will leave the air purer and the fields fertile, but before that happens, houses will be destroyed, centuries-old trees will topple, paradises will be flooded.

A yellow shape approaches.

I surrender myself to the rain. There's more lightning, but my feeling of helplessness is being replaced by something positive, as if my soul were gradually being washed clean by the water of forgiveness.

Bless and you will be blessed.

The words emerge naturally from me – a wisdom I didn't know

I had, which I know does not belong to me, but which appears sometimes and stops me doubting everything I have learned over the years.

My great problem is this: despite such moments, I continue to doubt.

The yellow shape is there before me. It's my wife, wearing one of the garish capes we use when we go walking in remote parts of the mountains. If we get lost, we'll be easy to find.

'Have you forgotten that we're going out to supper tonight?'

No, I haven't forgotten. I abandon universal metaphysics, in which thunder claps are the voices of the gods, and return to the reality of a provincial town and a supper of good wine, roast lamb and the cheerful conversation of friends, who will tell us about their recent adventures on their Harley-Davidson. I go back home to change my clothes and give my wife a brief summary of my conversation with J. that afternoon.

'Did he tell you where you should go?' she asks.

'He told me to make a commitment.'

'And is that so very hard? Stop being so difficult. You're acting like an old man.'

Hervé and Véronique have invited two other guests, a middle-aged French couple. One of them is introduced as a 'clairvoyant', whom they met in Morocco.

The man seems neither pleasant nor unpleasant, merely absent. Then, in the middle of supper, as if he had entered a kind of trance, he says to Véronique:

‘Be careful when driving. You’re going to have an accident.’

I find this remark in the worst possible taste, because if Véronique takes it seriously, her fear will end up attracting negative energy and then things really might turn out as predicted.

‘How interesting,’ I say, before anyone else can react. ‘You are presumably capable of travelling in time, back into the past and forward into the future. I was speaking about just that with a friend this afternoon.’

‘When God allows me to, I can see. I know who each of the people around this table was, is and will be. I don’t understand my gift, but I long ago learned to accept it.’

The conversation should be about the trip to Sicily with friends who share a passion for classic Harley-Davidsons, but suddenly it seems to have taken a dangerous turn into areas I don’t want to enter right now. A case of synchronicity.

It’s my turn to speak:

‘You also know, then, that God only allows us to see such things when he wants something to change.’

I turn to Véronique and say, ‘Just take care. When something on the astral plane is placed on the earthly plane, it loses a lot of its force. In other words, I’m almost sure there will be no accident.’

Véronique offers everyone more wine. She thinks that the Moroccan clairvoyant and I are on a collision course. This isn’t the case; the man really can ‘see’ and that frightens me. I’ll talk

to Hervé about it afterwards.

The man barely looks at me; he still has the absent air of someone who has unwittingly entered another dimension and now has a duty to communicate what he is experiencing. He wants to tell me something, but chooses, instead, to turn to my wife.

‘The soul of Turkey will give your husband all the love she possesses, but she will spill his blood before she reveals what it is she is seeking.’

Another sign confirming that I should not travel now, I think, knowing full well that we always try to interpret things in accordance with what we want and not as they are.

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