

The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho
Discussion Questions

1. In the prologue, the alchemist reads a version of the story of the death of Narcissus that has a somewhat different ending from the traditional telling, one that emphasizes the grief of the lake into which Narcissus will no longer be looking at his reflection. In beginning the book with this story, what themes and relationships is Coelho telling us to watch for throughout Santiago's story? Do you think there may be an element of "narcissism" in the pursuit of one's personal legend?
2. Just as, in the prologue story, the lake grieves for the dead Narcissus, the wind and the sun talk with Santiago about love, and their relationship to the Soul of the World, and about how he can turn himself into the wind. Do you have a personal relationship with the natural world? Have you ever had an experience that you would describe as a "conversation" with some part of nature, such as a river or a sunset or a field of flowers?
3. At the start of his journey, when Santiago asks a gypsy woman to interpret his dream about the treasure in the Egyptian pyramids, she asks for one-tenth of the treasure in return. When Santiago asks the old man to show him the path to the treasure, the old man requests one-tenth of his flock as "payment." Both payments represent a different price we have to pay to fulfill a dream; however, only one will yield a true result. Which payment represents false hope? Can you think of examples from your own life when you had to give up something to meet a goal and found the price too high?
4. The old man who reveals himself to be "the king of Salem" tells Santiago that the new book he's just acquired is about the same thing almost all other books are about: "people's inability to choose their own Personal Legends." This story is so common, he suggests, because people come to believe "the world's greatest lie" – that we all lose control of our own lives and must let them be controlled by fate. When is Santiago tempted to let his life be controlled by fate? The elder chieftain of the oasis tells Santiago the story of Joseph of Egypt, who became an important counselor to the pharaoh. In what ways would this Personal Legend have suited Santiago's own life? Why does he not choose it?
5. Paulo Coelho once said that alchemy is all about pursuing our spiritual quest in the physical world as it was given to us. It is the art of transmuting the reality into something sacred, of mixing the sacred and the profane. With this in mind, can you define your Personal Legend? At what time in your life were you able to act on it? What was your "beginner's luck?" Did anything prevent you from following it to conclusion? Having read *The Alchemist*, do you know what inner resources you need to continue the journey?
6. One of the first major diversions from Santiago's journey was the theft of his money in Tangier, which forced him into taking a menial job with the crystal merchant. There, Santiago learned many lessons on everything from the art of business to the art of patience. Of all these, which lessons were the most crucial to the pursuit of his Personal Legend?

7. When he talked about the pilgrimage to Mecca, the crystal merchant argued that having a dream is more important than fulfilling it, which is what Santiago is trying to do. Do you agree with Santiago's rationale or the crystal merchant's?

8. The Englishman, whom Santiago meets when he joins the caravan to the Egyptian pyramids, is searching for "a universal language, understood by everybody." What is that language? According to the Englishman, what are the parallels between reading and alchemy? How does the Englishman's search for the alchemist compare to Santiago's search for a treasure? How did the Englishman and Santiago feel about each other?

9. Santiago and the Englishman are curt and distant with each other when they first meet, but warm up when they discover that they are both carrying two divination stones called Urim and Thummim. Indeed, when the Englishman reveals a knowledge of the provenance of Santiago's stones, the boy feels "suddenly happy to be there at the warehouse" and is excited by the Englishman's recognition of their encounter as an omen. The Englishman comments that he's like to "write a huge encyclopedia just about the words *luck* and *coincidence*. It's with those words that a universal language is written." Do all of the characters in *The Alchemist* experience omens as coincidence? What other kinds of omens occur in the book? If the universal language, in the Englishman's words, is "understood by everybody but already forgotten," in what sense do omens remind us of what we've forgotten? How is the Englishman himself both a link to Santiago's past and an omen about his future?

10. The boy and his traveling companions are overjoyed when they reach the tents in the oasis in the desert, with its fifty thousand date palm trees and innumerable colored tents, a place larger than the average Spanish town, filled with men, women, and children all eagerly greeting the travelers, who just as eagerly have abandoned the silence of the desert and are "talking incessantly, laughing and shouting, as if they had emerged from the spiritual world and found themselves once again in the world of people." According to *Marriem-Webster's Dictionary*, an oasis is "something that provides refuge, relief, or pleasant contrast." Here Coelho seems to be suggesting a reversal in our perceptions of the spiritual and material worlds – that the spiritual experience is the arduous journey of discovery and the "world of people" is where we go to rest and be rejuvenated. What oases have you experienced in your life? Did your oasis seem "of this world," or was it a spiritual experience?

11. Santiago conveys one of the lessons of the alchemist when he tells the desert that love is "what makes the game become the falcon, the falcon become man, and man, in his turn, the desert. It's what turns lead into gold, and makes gold return to the earth." The desert replies: "I don't understand what you are talking about." Is the desert simply being obtuse, or is this a lesson about intimacy between the spiritual and material worlds that only humans need to understand? What is the connection that the alchemist makes between alchemy and evolution? Between evolution and love?

12. The alchemist tells Santiago "you don't have to understand the desert: all you have to do is contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation." With this in mind, why do you think the alchemist chose to befriend Santiago, though he knew that the Englishman was the one looking for him? What is the meaning of the two dead hawks and the

falcon in the oasis? At one point the alchemist explains to Santiago the secret of successfully turning metal into gold. How does this process compare to finding a Personal Legend?

13. When the boy asks the alchemist why so few alchemists have succeeded in turning lead into gold, the alchemist explains that “they were looking only for gold... They were seeking the treasure of their Personal Legend, without wanting to actually live out the Personal Legend.” Can you think of events in your own life that made you wonder, as Santiago does when he meets Fatima, whether you had finally attained your treasure? Do you think it’s possible to attain more than one treasure in your Personal Legend? Have there been times in your life when you felt resistant to living out your Personal Legend?

14. Why did Santiago have to go through the dangers of tribal wars on the outskirts of the oasis in order to reach the pyramids? At the very end of the journey, why did the alchemist leave Santiago alone to complete it?

15. Toward the end of their journey together, the alchemist tells Santiago a story about a Roman citizen who was visited in a dream by an angel telling him his son’s words would be remembered for generations to come. After the Roman dies and goes to heaven, he speaks again with the angel and is astonished to learn that those words would not come from his son who is a well-known poet but from his other son who is in the military. That son, a Roman centurion, encountered a rabbi whom he saw to be the Son of God and uttered the words immortalized in the Gospel of Luke (chapter 7): “My Lord I am not worthy that you should come under my roof...” What lesson did the alchemist wish to convey by telling the boy this story about a dream? Does the New Testament version of this story (Luke 7) seem to be related to this lesson?

16. Earlier in the story, the alchemist told Santiago “when you possess great treasures within you, and try to tell others of them, seldom you are believed.” At the end of the story, how did this simple lesson save Santiago’s life? How did it lead him back to the treasure he was looking for?

A map of Santiago's journey

