

Breakfast with Paulo Coelho

A Man in Search of His Destiny

Paulo Coelho the author of the bestseller, THE ALCHEMIST, who convinced millions of readers that happiness lies within reach, knows about the routes his protagonists take. Hospitalized, in his youth, in a mental institution, burnt all the bridges behind him in his 40's and truly believes that the entire universe support those who seek their destiny. In an interview with Sarit Yishai-Levi, he talks about how a visit to Israel inspired him to write THE ALCHEMIST, about an encounter with the mysterious super-designer which gave birth to THE PILGRIMAGE, about Christina, the women in his life, and why he is convinced that the next millenium will be a women's millenium.

It is not easy being a journalist. It is a competitive and exhausting profession and you are always measured by your most recent article. And still, there are moments in this business that are a privilege that make the insane mice race against the deadline, worth while. I had such a moment when I met Paulo Coelho whom I admire, whose book, THE ALCHEMIST, is the most influenced book of the last decade, on a large group of people and that sold in Israel 130,000 copies and more than 9 million copies around the world.

In his book, Coelho coined terms that are taught in assertiveness seminars and are used to train business people. His opinion as expressed in the book that that the entire universe support those who seek their destiny, became a slogan; people quote Coelho when they decide to change their lives , and those who read THE ALCHEMIST, BY THE RIVER PIEDRA I SAT DOWN AND WEPT or THE PILGRIMAGE and now, his latest, VERONIKA DECIDEDS TO DIE – view him as a teacher and mentor, a philosopher and pioneer.

In THE ALCHEMIST a shepherd travels to a foreign land just to find out that the treasure he is seeking is right under his nose; in THE PILGRIMAGE, the protagonist goes on a 700 km pilgrim to Santiago in order to learn the world's language and connect to its signs; in BY THE RIVER PIEDRA I SAT DOWN AND WEPT the protagonist understands that love is not demanding, doesn't entail concessions and means unity with the loved one and ability to see in them the divine; in VERONIKA DECIDEDS TO DIE the heroine attempts suicide and is hospitalized in a mental institution just so she could discover and fulfill her destiny.

I meet Paulo Coelho for breakfast at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. It is scorching hot outside and the wonderful balcony was converted for the holiday to a Succah as steaming as a Turkish Bath. A gentle and kind man , looks into my eyes, remembers my name and uses it often. When I address him as "Mr. Coelho" he insists I call him Paulo.

He is a guest of Keter Publishing House that published his books in Hebrew here to promote VERONIKA DECIDEDS TO DIE and to meet his readers. He has a cold and I learn, to my regret, that he suffers from an ulcer as well. Why 'to my regret'? Because deep inside me I hoped that a man like him, who achieved such perfection in his books, found peace and calm in his life as well. He apologizes for not feeling well, very courteous, and is quite pleased when I pull out THE ALCHEMIST and ask for his signature.

I see great joy in his eyes when I tell him that how much I enjoy his work and what great influence they have on me. And I'm not the only one. The young waitress says she'd read THE ALCHEMIST and that it is the most beautiful book she has ever read. The rumor that the man at the table with me is the author of THE ALCHEMIST spreads. People come over, excited, asking to shake his hand. He thanks everybody in the same manner: he hold his palms together and says: "Thank you, it's very kind of you."

"Each time, I'm touched," he admits. "It hasn't turned into a habit. Writing is very lonely, the only connection of an author with his readers is in moments like this. When I meet with people and see how my work influenced them, I feel whole. I never cease to be amazed. Yesterday, I called the reception desk and the guy thanked me for my book and discussed THE ALCHEMIST with me. This made the trip to Israel worth while." For breakfast, he orders cheese and vegetables. When offered eggs he shrugs: "No, no, I never eat eggs." He does touch his cheese and vegetables and only drinks a glass of water with Alka Selzer in it, and asks if I'd share a glass of juice with him. When I refuse, because of his cold, he laughs and says: "I like your healthy attitude."

Coelho is married to Christina, his high school sweetheart. They don't have any kids. "It just happened this way and the fact I don't have children allows me to do one of my favorite things: travel around the world. I believe you mustn't stop travelling ever. That's the only way to know the world we live in."

It is his second visit to Israel. "The first time was in 1987 before I wrote THE ALCHEMIST. At that time I traveled the world and searched for life's meaning, I wanted to know other cultures and I loved the Israeli one. I found here a great country filled with energy, I had time to meet people and talk to them. The truth is that as a Catholic, my main goal was to visit the holy places but I was very disappointed when I saw how crowded these places are where a person doesn't have the intimacy needed in order to connect to God. I traveled from the Dead Sea to the north and dedicated my time to talking to people. That is, in my opinion, the only way to know a country: through the people. I was anonymous, no one knew me, not even in Brazil my homeland. At that point, I published only one book - THE MANUAL OF THE WARRIOR OF THE LIGHT, who no one cared about. It was a turning point in my life where I decided to leave everything and follow my destiny."

What did you do before you decided to follow your destiny?

I owned a small publishing house that focused on poetry that, of course, was a mistake because poetry doesn't sell. I wanted to be an author so I decided to sell the publishing house and do nothing until I start to write.

It takes a lot of courage to give up your past in order to try and actualize a dream that may be implausible.

Mahatma Gandhi said that there's no other option in life but to be brave. I was 39 years old, I had enough savings that would support me for 2-3 years without working and I thought that that was the time and the opportunity to fulfill my destiny. I didn't have a choice

Was it the midlife crisis that made you rethink your life?

Perhaps but it was more than that. More than a crisis it was a decision. I decided to give myself a chance to live my life like I believed and wanted a decision to fill the rest of my life with meaning. And do you know what was most amazing? That I came to this conclusion during my visit to Israel. I don't know, maybe it's the energy of this place.

You were already married to Cristina then. How did she receive the news?

She encouraged me and was very supportive. Cristina knows what love is. She knows love is not enforced, it is not a concession, not an obligation to be united and unified all the time. To love is to allow the loved one to follow their dreams. She supported me when I was still dreaming and she supports me today when I'm a successful author. She knows I need my space to follow my destiny and her support is not taken for granted. She could have been envious, since strange things happen between two people who have dream and one of them realizes them. She told me then, in the beginning, "go your own way," though it meant that we spend less than a hundreds days a year together because I travel.

Once you made you decision to follow your destiny and close the publishing house, what did you do?

I burnt all the bridges and the boats so I won't have a way back. It was clear to me that I had to win or be beaten, to succeed or fail. No middle way. I knew I wanted to write and I came a long way since then till this breakfast we're having together. A very long and complicated way.

What inspired you?

It is a story for a thousand nights. I tried to understand myself: who I am, what I am, and decided to write about it symbolically.

Is it a physical route? You were in Spain, Marroco, Slovenia, and Cairo? Did you take the road to Santiago to Lord? Or is it a symbolic journey you embarked on spiritually?

I visited all those places, I wrote the stories knowing the places, but it is not exactly my personal story. After all, I'm not a shepherd but like that shepherd in THE ALCHEMIST I looked for the dream, I experienced what he did at the crystal store, I felt those feelings, I understood, I sensed and I wrote. I didn't think the book will be so successful. I thought I'd written a beautiful book that helped me see and understand myself. I didn't think that so many people around the world would relate to it.

Can you pinpoint what made THE ALCHEMIST what it is today?

I think it's the motto – you have to go far away to realize that the treasure is under your nose. The insight that there're no shortcuts.

What inspired you to claim that the entire universe will help you in your search for your destiny?

I don't know, don't know. I felt it was right, I felt that when I really wanted something the universe assisted me even though it is not always the help you are expecting. When the shepherd in THE ALCHEMIST leaves everything and searches for his treasure, the first thing that happens to him is that he gets robbed. At that moment he could have thought that the world was against him but the universe thought that was the best way. Several times in my life I asked myself why this is happening to me, especially when I was young. But, today, I understand that the universe helped me fight for things I believe in. These were the most important battles of my life. When I was hospitalized, I could have easily become a victim and be beaten, but, I fought and fought and never saw my self as the victim but as an adventurer.

In you youth your parents had you hospitalized a number of times. Why?

I was born in Rio de Janeiro to a middle-class family. They wanted me to be a good boy with a career, that I follow my father the engineer and inherit his engineering company. I wanted other things, wanted to be an artist, a writer. They suppressed my artistic inclinations.

Just like Edward the schizophrenic from VERONIKA DECIDES TO DIE.

Yes, I am Edward. They've told me you're crazy. No one can make a living of art, of writing. This is what they told Edward who wanted to paint heavenly visions. They thought that I was strange with weird ideas. I was a shy boy with classical adolescence problems. I didn't have any friends and I spent most of my time reading in my room. My parents were worried, they said: 'the boy has mental problems, he is aggressive toward us, he is a bad student, what can we do?' They saw a doctor who recommended hospitalization and this is what they did. For a long time after I've left the hospital I suffered anxiety attacks just like Zedka from VERONIKA. I was re-hospitalized and received electric therapy.

Where you depressed?

No, because I didn't see myself as a victim. I used my experiences from the mental institution in VERONIKA.

And there you arrived at the conclusion that all insane people are actually normal, and that the world is not willing to accept people who follow their heart?

Certainly. The world can't deal with people who follow their heart and that societal norms do not apply to them. The world is a world of hierarchy of order. The world doesn't want to be confused, doesn't want to be disturbed. Instead it removes those people out of the way and puts them in mental institutions.

Did you forgive your parents for hospitalizing you?

I never blamed them for that. They meant well. They loved me and wanted to protect me. It was an act of desperate love, to help their child. They weren't motivated by hate or malice.

Why did you choose a woman narrator for VERONIKA, why didn't you expose yourself completely? After all, the story is your story.

I am not Veronika. In fact, Veronika is the only character in the book that isn't me. I'm Zedka, I'm Edward but not Veronika. But because I wrote through Veronika's eyes I could detach myself. I needed this detachment because my experience was so strong that I had to keep some distance from the actual situation.

The story takes place in Lubliana in Slovenia. Why there?

I believe I could have written a story-taking place in Israel. The story of a country is the story of its people and Slovenia is currently going through crises and treading the pass of a young country, very symbolic to the book's plot. I visited Slovenia three times before writing Veronika. I really connected and felt what that young country is going through.

How come that none of your books take place in Brazil, your homeland?

I am used to Brazil, it doesn't fascinate me and, anyway, I write with my Brazilian eyes. My last book FIFTY MOUNTAINS is about the prophet Eliyahu who ascended in a storm to heaven takes place in Israel and Lebanon, mostly Lebanon. I visited Israel and Lebanon and it excites me tremendously. I learn we're all brothers and sisters. For most

of my youth I traveled the world as a hippie and I feel comfortable everywhere, I am a citizen of the world. My natural habitat is the world and I can write about every place as a native.

You told me at the beginning of the conversation that BY THE RIVER PIEDRA I SAT DOWN AND WEPT is your feminine side. What did you mean?

I believe that the next millenium will be a completely feminine one. Men and women will understand that men are allowed to feel and use their feminine elements. Love, intuition and compassion will have more importance than discipline, laws and rigidity. I've connected to my feminine side in 1989: I was on a pilgrimage to a Christian sacred place - Lord, on the border between Spain and France. I spent there 70 days and 70 nights connecting to my feminine energy. Five years had to pass before I was ready to write BY THE RIVER PIEDRA and accept the woman inside of me, and she's the heroine.

She's a wonderful woman.

Not from the start. In the beginning she resists her intuition, she is insecure, she is masculine, she is busy, she needs to go back home. She does not see what is about to happen the miracle that'll change her life. She doesn't see the signs. She decides to go for two days and slowly discovers her destiny. The hero is also wrong. He thinks that you have to compromise for love. He thinks he should yield his destiny in order to love the woman. But love never asks you to yield, it asks that you freely choose. It doesn't force itself, it is self-evident and the woman understands this first. She releases him to follow his calling and doesn't allow him to give it up for her. The woman is the one who is transformed. And I, through the writing, grasped my own femininity.

How can a simple person see, like your protagonists, the signs and miracles? How can one understand the language of the universe?

That is a question of attention. You need to look around and be mindful. It's all there, a little concentration and you'll find it. This is why I think that men and women must use their feminine sides, listen to intuition not just the brain. Almost always the intuition is correct and all the logical reasons are wrong.

Do you often rely on intuition?

All the time. I nurture my feminine side. I have magical experiences, it's amazing where my intuition will lead me. It binds me to people and this binding is very important to me. You know, even before the waitress came over to thank me for my book, I knew that she'll do it. Intuition...

The rumor is that you had a vision where you saw a man and later met that man in real life, and that this person had changed your destiny. What is true about this story?

I was with my wife on the way from Vienna to Bonn and since I learned and read a lot about World War II, decided to visit Dachau. That was a horrible experience. For a moment, it seemed that world stopped and my body was experiencing an emotional-sensual experience. I felt that I was living in a dreadful world where the lessons of the Jewish Holocaust were not assimilated, where there are still places where horrors take place. I felt like nothing then, like the human race is doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Then I experienced a *deja vu*, that I was walking into an Amsterdam pub and meet a man whose face I saw clearly. That was very strange and it lasted around two minutes.

Two months later I walked into a pub in Amsterdam, with my wife, and just like I knew that the waitress will approach me before she did, I felt I knew him. He looked exactly like the man I saw in the vision in Dachau. I started talking to him, he looked at me and said: "You're crazy." I told him , I'm not crazy. I was afraid. He tried to avoid me but I

insisted and finally he invited my wife and I to have coffee with him. He said that he was learning the universe's sign language, tried to explain it to me, but wouldn't elaborate. He simply said; we live in a world of drugs, everything is a metaphor. If you decide, I'll teach you the universe's language. I asked for twenty-four hours to think about it and then I said yes.

And he taught you the universe's sign language?

He instructed me to go on a pilgrimage to Santiago, 700 km away. I figured out the rest by myself. I tell all about this journey in THE PILGRIMAGE.

He introduced you to the guide you call Peter? You say he is a well-known European designer. Who is he?

Don't expect me to tell you. I'll just say that he is one of the most famous designers in the world. At that time, I wasn't familiar with his name. Now, I hear his name everywhere and saw a couple of documentaries on his work. He is very famous but he asked that I keep his name secret.

How long does it take you to write a book?

That's another feminine quality in me. I am pregnant for about two years and labor is pretty quick. From the moment I sit down it takes me two months to write a book.

Where do you write?

In my apartment in Rio de Janeiro in the messiest room in the world with the TV on the stereo playing, the fax working and the phones ringing. People probably think that I retreat to a secluded place to write. I've tried it but it doesn't work for me. I need the mess, I have to be in the center of activity and then, at the end of the day, when I'm exhausted I also feel open and when I sit in front of the computer everything just flows out.