

News, 40/2004

Paulo Coelho, most influential reference author of international renown, came to Melk for the reading of the year for NEWS. His strategies for a joyful life.

The Guide

His thoughts on science, miracles and Bush

One thousand four hundred would not have been overestimated. Just as four years ago, when Paulo Coelho spoke for us in the Votiv Cathedral, the neo-gothic cathedral near Vienna's city center. This time the ambiance was dimmer but just as authentic as the speaker: NEWS and the Waldzell Institute had invited the Brazilian author to Melk Abbey. There he opened on Wednesday (22.9) the King's Stage of the reconstructed Austrian part of the Road to Santiago from Göttweig to Melk.

In the evening he spoke before 500 people, while in front of the abbey's gates the 100 people who had to be turned away were demonstrating. The event was loaded with emotion: Karlheinz Hackl, who went from being diagnosed with a tumor to a miraculous happy end, read the passage on the pilgrim entrapped in a coffin. Peter Schmidl, designated musical chief of the Salzburg Festival, accompanied by the pianist Madoka Inui played works by Robert Schumann. Coelho reminded his audience: "Enjoy your life. After all, Jesus turned water into wine and not vice versa, as would have been the politically correct thing to do." The corresponding godsend was spoken by Lisl Wagner-Bacher until two in the morning in nearby Mauthern.

Read what Paulo Coelho had to say about the meaning of life.

Signposts: Paulo Coelho on...

...the search for meaning.

There was a time when I had many questions and sought the answer to each. Until I realized that I had more answers than questions and that my life was beginning to lose meaning the more I lost the questions. So I tried to respect the secret. "What am I doing here?" is probably the most important question of all. But if we spend our entire lives trying to answer it, then we are wasting our lives. So we had better appreciate the miracle of being alive –we will find out the true answer only at the end anyway. When we are close to the source of all being, we will sense it from the enthusiasm in our hearts.

...the existence as author.

There are two prototypes of authors: the ones who lead an intensive inner life like Marcel Proust. And the others who travel and live like Baudelaire and Hemingway. I belong to the latter type. My themes originate from all fields, and the reactions often surprise me completely. "Eleven minutes" for example: there were many reactions, 99 percent of them positive. To my surprise many men wrote who believed they had recognized themselves in my book. One of them wrote that he usually underlines what interests him in each book with a red marker. In this case he had marked one page after the other, but with the invisible color that comes from the depths of the soul.

...the limits of science and chance.

In my book "The Alchemist" I mention science only in one paragraph and I do not attempt to explain it. It has now been translated into 59 languages and has reached many different cultures, but it apparently applies everywhere. I mean: we developed an alphabet with God, with the spiritual world or however one would like to call it. Today in the Göttweig Abbey library something strange happened to me: I was there in the magnificent library that deeply moved me. I felt the strong energy of the people who left the best of themselves behind. Perhaps they will be forgotten, but their best will remain there. A young priest had opened an old bible and I pointed to a random passage: "What does it say there?" He read: "And Peter spoke..." I had heard enough: Peter is my guide to Santiago in "The Pilgrimage". That was the sign that I was hoping for and in which I believe.

...on pilgrimaging

I do not believe that one becomes better or worse when one travels the Road to Santiago. Karlheinz Hackl told me today how he goes for walks every day and is regaining his strength. We all go on our pilgrimages every day, to work, and to other people. When I can speak to people my world is richer and the weight that I carry lighter. And it keeps the possibility open that miracles happen. If one closes up, nothing will happen.

...filming his books.

My readers have already made the films to my books in their minds and would be disappointed with whatever another would produce. I do not like literary film versions. "The Godfather" and "The French Lieutenant's Woman" are the only exceptions. I myself made a mistake for which I will be paying for the rest of my life: When the "Alchemist" began to do well, forward-looking people invited me to Hollywood and gave me the impression that I was someone very important. In reality they only wanted the cinema rights and I gave them to them. Three years later I wanted to buy them back for triple the amount – no chance. Seven years later I offered the tenfold amount – to no avail. Now I at least sabotage all attempts. When they come to me with a script, I say: "Horrible!" Not that they need my approval, but they do not want me to distance myself from the press either. One day they will win the battle. But it is not over yet.

...his private him.

It is important to be home. I bought myself a small mill near water somewhere in Europe, where I go for daily walks and am close to the beauty of nature. I eat and drink everything – it is not important what comes into your mouth, but what comes out of it. Jesus' first miracle, after all, was to turn water into wine and not vice versa, as would have been the politically correct thing to do. He wanted to demonstrate: "enjoy life and respect zest for life. The path to spirituality is not self-abandonment. I know people who have to go to a party every day or they would not feel alive. And I know some who have been living in a cave for thirty years. But they have not yet understood the miracle of life.

...politics and hope of better times.

I wrote a letter to Bush at the beginning of the Iraq war. One billion people read it. Then the tragedy of Beslan took place. I do not think that we could sink any lower than with this deed. This murder of children was the apocalypse. In this moment I was in despair: everyone knows me, I have sold god knows how many books; all doors are open to me. But then this is all nothing. A senseless invasion in Iraq, dead children. Then I hear how

Karlheinz Hackl speaks of his convalescence, and the beautiful music of Schumann. And that is it: we often feel alone, but we are not. We can do something, but we have to be informed about the wars as well as of our neighbor's battle for survival. And we can pray.

...his dream.

My dream is what I am doing now: to be an author, and this does not mean selling books and being famous, but writing. Every two years I have to face my dream and then I sit there and sweat and tell myself that I do not have to prove anything to anyone anymore. I find all sorts of excuses and then I sit back down and write again. Four days ago in the Ukraine I had an autograph signing session. My hotel was five kilometers away, the police pressed to get moving for security reasons. In two minutes, including two street lights, we were at the hotel and there a twelve-year-old boy was waiting, bright red, bathed in sweat. His name was Oleg and he had raced the five kilometers to get his autograph. Finally he said: "I want to be like you." And I answered: "No, I want to be like you. I want to also carry such a light in my heart that I can run five kilometers in ten minutes because I have a dream."