

The Grail Quest

Young Sir Perceval, tired, excited, a little uncomfortable, sits at table beside the wounded Grail King. A procession of young women passes through the hall. They carry strange implements, including a spear dripping blood of its own accord, candelabra, a platter, and a cup emitting its own brilliant light. Not a word is uttered as they move along, their faces solemn, eyes unblinking. The procession leaves the room as mysteriously as it came. Perceval restrains himself from asking what this was. Surely the king will explain it if he wants him to know. Nevertheless, Perceval is taken back as every eye in the room stares at him with anticipation. Little does he realize that they wait for him to ask:

"What is the secret of the Grail? Whom does it serve?"

These simple questions provide the central theme of the Grail quest. Until the hero gives them voice, the conditions of the test will not be satisfied. The Grail King will not be healed of his terrible wound, and the kingdom will remain a wasteland.

Unlike other stories, where the hero is challenged to *answer* some question or riddle, the drama waits for Perceval to do the asking. It is not a test of prowess or intellect that evaluates his worth. The wounded king waits for Perceval to freely express his interest, and is dismayed when he does not.

Perceval would have loved to know what was going on, how the king was wounded, why the land all around was lifeless. Concerned more about his manners as a guest, however, he withheld asking. The anticipation in everyone's eyes offered no clue as to what was expected. He had no idea that this was a test!

Another version of the story waits for a different question altogether:

"What ails thee, Uncle?"

This has nothing to do with the Grail itself, but with the health of the king, who was wounded in the testes or "thigh." The wound would not heal, and his suffering was reflected throughout the realm. It is significant that the Grail King was wounded in his testes, representing manhood, and that such a wound produces a world of waste and

sorrow. We see that today. Male ethics are not what they should be. Male energy is too often wasted by the drives of ego. Our so-called *sovereignty* over the earth has not produced a paradise or Camelot. It has produced enough pollution to result in sharp increases in cancer, rampant cases of asthma, and global warming. It has produced war and poverty and a value system solidly based on greed. This is what happens when men lose their way.

The story of the Grail suggests an enigmatic solution. On a later occasion, Perceval finally asks the right question. The king is healed and the land along with him.

But why a question? How does that heal anything?

The answer is simple: only by melding a compassionate (“what ails thee, Uncle?”) and inquiring (“What is the secret of the Grail?”) mind to the force of male energy can the tracks of suffering and failure be reversed. In this respect, the Grail King represents a spiritual center that has failed its charge. His wound was caused by pride, by adherence to illusion. When Perceval, in complete innocence, expresses his natural concern, the wounded king is restored to health and the land with him. In this respect, the Grail King and Perceval represent two halves of a single male psyche. When masculine energy and compassion are divided from one another, tragedy is inevitable.

The test was not meant to determine Perceval’s cleverness or skill at arms. It did not measure his looks or foresight or monetary wealth. It allowed him to express his simple humanity—that part of us that really does make the world a better place.

The essence of the warrior spirit is not brute combativeness or aggression as often portrayed by film. It is the willingness to sacrifice one’s life for someone else, for the good of the tribe or nation. The true spirit of the warrior is motivated by compassion and love.

We hear soldiers killed in Iraq described as caring, gentle people who deeply loved their parents, wives, children and country. Politicians referred to them as heroes. The righteous warrior knows that war is hell and is only justified when no alternative is

available. He wants peace and prosperity throughout the land. He fights for a cause he believes in. He understands duty, and will risk his life to save a comrade. As Jesus clearly pointed out, only love produces such devotion. The true warrior is a man of love and peace.

The Quest for the Holy Grail is not easily defined. Its philosophical roots are more complex than the romances let on, and more profound than their authors realized. Even today we struggle with its secrets, which means that our striving to understand allows us to directly participate in that original quest. Like those original Knights of the Round Table, we know we may fail—yet the search itself brings wonders and revelations that are worth all our efforts.

The Grail we find in literature is actually a fusion of ideas compiled from many different traditions. One finds echoes of the Grail extending back to early Greek mythology, where the divine *Krater* (or cup) contained the elements of life from which new souls imbibed. Plato spoke of a fiery cup which contained the light of the sun, and another which held the *Over-Soul of Universal Nature* (ref. *Psychogony*, Plato). Orphic mysteries connect this cup to that of Dionysus, a divine source of inspiration. Orpheus claimed that many such cups comprise the *Solar Table* (a precursor to the Round Table?), which he considered the center of the universe. The heavenly spheres were sometimes depicted as cups containing the essence of Creation.

The mystery religion of *Eleusis* utilized a sacred vessel called the *Kernos*, a bowl with smaller cups attached to it, which was used in rites of initiation.

Celtic tradition spoke of mysterious *Cauldrons*, known to provide rebirth, inspiration or abundance. There was one such Cauldron in hell that was capable of bringing the dead back to life. (One story depicts Arthur trying to appropriate this Cauldron, but he ultimately failed.) The Celts also described a Cauldron that would only cook food for men of heroic stature. Another grail-like image was a basket which multiplied the food put

into it—a sort of cornucopia. Similar Grail archetypes are found in India, Russia, and Japan.

The following attributes point back to these ancient Grail traditions:

- Life essence.
- Healing.
- Initiation.
- Nourishment.
- Abundance.
- Light.
- Inspiration.
- Heaven.

These same attributes appear in the Christianized version:

- Sustained the early Grail Kings well beyond their years.
- Eventually healed the wounded Grail King.
- Marked certain people as favored in the eyes of God.
- Fed the Round Table Knights.
- Multiplied fish to feed the many.
- Shed its own light.
- Inspired the Grail Quest through its brief, veiled appearance at the Round Table.
- Was delivered from heaven by neutral angels during the time of Satan's rebellion.

Conclusions about the Grail are difficult to maintain. Its most recognized form is that of a cup or chalice, but it was also described as a platter, basin, rock or jewel from heaven. Its uncertain shape reminds us that we are dealing with a symbol rather than an actual object. Archeological digs will never find that relic, because the quest is a spiritual adventure, with spiritual rewards.

The relic-conscious, medieval mind naturally connected the idea of the Grail with chalices used by priests during mass. Its pedigree eventually pointed to the cup that Christ used at the Last Supper, which they then described as the *Holy Grail*. Joseph of Arimathea was said to have collected some of Jesus' blood in this cup, making it the most sacred relic of them all. Its miraculous powers included nourishing the body, healing the sick and extending life.

Tradition has it that Joseph took the Grail to either France or England. It may have played a central role in the *Cathar* faith, which was eradicated as heresy during the Albigensian Crusade. This is the Grail that most medieval writers wrote about, although the earliest source, that of *Chretien de Troyes*, never explained its origins. To him, it was a mysterious cup, glowing with its own light, paraded through the Grail King's hall along with other *Hallows*, including a sword, a spear, and a platter. Chretien never finished his story, so we will never know exactly what he had in mind.

A recent theory suggests that the Grail is a symbolic reference to Mary Magdalene who, it contends, was the wife of Jesus. In French, the word *Sangreal* is translated as *Holy Grail*. However, it can also be pronounced as *Sang Real*, or Royal Blood. In this theory, the pregnant Mary Magdalene carried Jesus' bloodline to Europe, representing the *vessel* (i.e., cup?) of his future lineage. This idea of the feminine as a sacred vessel (such as Mary the Mother of God) helped fashion the cult of woman that resulted in courtly or romantic love.

As well it should. What might be described as *female qualities* seemed to emanate from the mystery that the Grail represents. These qualities include love, nurturing others, bringing life into the world, sustaining life as a familial unit, along with civilizing the strength and resolution of the male. While we sometimes call these principles *feminine*, they are really human qualities that belong to men as well. When lacking, we are less than what we should be as men.

Rooted in shadowy layers from the past, the implications of the Grail remain murky from the start. It was considered the most sacred of all relics, a source of healing and power that would only show itself to those who were worthy. An artifact from heaven, it was considered the gateway to the world beyond. At its height, the quest to find it represented the eternal quest for spiritual perfection, illustrated by the many trials of the Grail knights.

The ambiguous quality of the Grail, with its roots in myth and paganism, produced an enigma that eludes us even today. It is this ambiguity, however, that makes the Grail so appealing and relevant. As a complete enigma, it is capable of representing the fullness of mystery itself, hinting at existential answers that cannot otherwise be approached. This explains the profound significance of the Grail *questions* (which for spiritual purposes best remain unanswered). We approach the Grail of Mystery only when we soulfully inquire about its nature. This inquiry, along with the compassionate, questioning mind that it implies, positions us in a correct relationship with the elusive qualities of Truth.

The basic story of the Holy Grail goes something like this: the Grail King, being young and somewhat careless, challenged a Saracen warrior to joust. He killed the Saracen, but was wounded when his opponent's lance shattered against his shield, sending a splinter through his testes (sometimes referred to as his “thigh”). The splinter could not be removed, and he went on to live in terrible agony. As he deteriorated, the land did too. Soon his entire realm was transformed into a wasteland.

Sir Perceval, recently dubbed a knight, comes across the Grail King, who is fishing in a stream (the only diversion he enjoys). The King graciously invites him to stay in his castle overnight, and Perceval accepts.

That evening, the King, Perceval and various attendants dine in the Great Hall. As the feast begins, everything suddenly stops. A parade of beautiful young people slowly walk through the room, carrying what appear to be sacred relics, including candelabras, a dish,

a spear (which appears to be bleeding), a sword, and a mysterious cup or chalice that glows with an almost blinding light. Perceval is transfixed by what he sees, watching carefully as the parade files into another room.

All eyes turn toward Perceval, as if anticipating some response. While he is overwhelmed by curiosity, he remembers how his mentor cautioned him not to ask a lot of questions. Afraid to look foolish, he remains silent.

The feast continues, less enthused than before. When it ends, Perceval finds a place to sleep. He awakes the next morning to find himself alone. The castle is empty and disappears once he leaves.

A woman later explained his error. If he had asked about the Grail, the King's wound would have been healed, and the land with him.

Perceval feels terrible. He commits himself to finding this castle and asking the right questions, but the castle is nowhere to be found. So begins his personal quest, built upon compassion for the wounded Grail King.

Perceval encounters several adventures, and then Chretien de Troyes' story abruptly ends. Later continuations have him find the castle and ask the right question. This heals the King and redeems the Wasteland. He later becomes the new Grail King.

Another popular version places Perceval in a less significant role.

It started on Pentecost, during the latter years of King Arthur's reign. A saintly young knight named *Galahad* had just joined the Order of the Round Table, and sat in a chair (the Siege Perilous) that had been reserved for him since Arthur's companionship first began. He later amazed everyone by pulling a sword from a block of marble that identified him as the greatest knight who ever lived.

The arrival of Galahad signified the height of Arthur's reign, followed by a swift and fatal decline.

That evening, as the knights gathered at the Round Table, the was suddenly filled by a wondrous scent, and then a beam of heavenly light. Within this unearthly radiance was the glowing shape of the Holy Grail, veiled by white cloth so only its outline was perceived.

Each knight suddenly found his favorite food arrayed before him, appearing from nowhere. The light then disappeared, and the Grail along with it.

The knights were astonished by this miracle. They considered it an invitation to see the Grail unveiled. They knew that finding this elusive, incredibly powerful relic would lead to spiritual perfection. How could they resist?

To King Arthur's dismay, Gawain committed himself to the quest and others quickly followed. Arthur suddenly faced the prospect of all his knights abandoning him for a quest that, to his mind, served nothing but the endangerment of all he had created. Without his knights, what would happen to his kingdom? He also feared that most of them would never achieve this quest, and might be harmed or killed while trying. He stated his displeasure, but it was too late. The commitments were already made, and could not be rescinded without dishonor.

The next morning they attended mass and received Holy Penance. They knew the quest would be a lengthy task, and intended to bring their loved ones with them. A holy man appeared who told them they could not, furthering a sense of dread. The women bade them a sad farewell as the knights took leave from Camelot.

They separated, each entering the forest at a different point in order to initiate his own unique adventure. They had no idea where they were going, or what trials they would face. Such is the nature of a quest. Having prepared themselves all their lives for the unexpected, they would meet their destinies head-on.

Both Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and his French sources then describe some of their adventures. During the year that followed, the knights were challenged according to their worth. Some turned back, including Gawain. Many died. Others faced demons in the

guise of women, and in one case as a horse that threatened to drown Perceval in the sea. Brothers fought brothers. They were haunted by dreams. For those who searched faithfully, holy guides would direct them.

It was during this time that Lancelot and Galahad became acquainted as father and son. Galahad proved himself to be the perfect knight, and Lancelot was proud of him. They remained together for six months, and then it was time for Galahad to move on.

This connection seemed to have inspired Lancelot. He now regretted his affair with the queen. He believed that his otherwise exemplary life amounted to nothing due to his sin. Sign after sign convinced him of this. He dreamt of knights who ridiculed him while surpassing his performance. A hermit did his best to guide him. Lancelot traded his fine tunic for the rough hair shirt of the penitent. He fasted from meat and alcohol, while genuine regret tore at his heart.

Galahad was the only knight to flawlessly master this quest. Everywhere he went he destroyed evil, conquering his enemies even against tremendous odds without killing them. God was obviously with him.

Most of the other knights, in contrast, faced demons and enemies that brought them to defeat.

Perceval and Bors (Lancelot's cousin) joined Galahad in succeeding where the others failed. In order to do so, they faced challenges that proved their value. A few of these incidents are worth examining, for they reflect some of our own challenges.

One day, while searching for the Grail, Sir Bors discovered his brother, *Sir Lionel*, tied naked to a horse while being tortured by his enemies. Just as Bors was about to rescue him, a damsel called for help. She was being kidnapped and would soon be raped.

What should he do? Save his own brother? Or rescue a damsel who was about to be dishonored?

Lionel and Bors were very close. As cousins to Sir Lancelot, they too were raised by the Lady of the Lake and were famous for their accomplishments. Lionel was a hero, about to be killed. The damsel, in contrast, was a stranger of unknown worth. Bors had to decide in an instant whether his duty to *serve all women* superceded the obligation of close family ties. He chose the damsel. Not sure that his choice was correct, he prayed for God's forgiveness.

After the rescue, Bors searched for his forsaken brother, but was too late. He found the bloody corpse, and was stricken by grief.

Sometime later, he rode through a town and rejoiced to see his brother still alive! Lionel, however, did not rejoice to see the kinsman who had failed him. He was so angry that he attacked Bors viciously. Bors, not wanting to harm his only brother, only defended himself as best he could.

A priest who tried to stop them was killed. Another Round Table knight tried to intercede, but was likewise dispatched. It was only when Bors prayed to God to forgive him for having to defend himself that a miracle happened. The two men were separated by fire from heaven.

Lionel, freed from his demonic possession, sorely regretted everything he had done.

Bors, on the other hand, had consistently made the right choices. Lionel was a knight who understood the consequences of his vocation. He should have been ready to suffer and die at the hands of his enemies, without faulting his brother for rescuing an innocent woman.

Bors regretted having to make this choice, but fulfilled his obligations. He faced the adult truth that life does not always present us with clear-cut, black and white decisions. Sometimes we must not choose between the lesser of two evils, but the greater of two goods. Whichever choice he made, someone would have been harmed.

Was his brother, who was a worthy knight of the Round Table, more important than a damsel he did not know? Was the damsel more of a priority because of the chivalric

obligation to rise to her defense? There was no satisfactory choice in this decision. Bors was being tested by the unfair realities of life – not some romanticized version.

Bors rightfully mourned the death of his sibling, and rejoiced when seeing him alive. When Lionel angrily attacked, he limited his response to defense alone, regretting even that.

The moral? Chivalry can serve us as an excellent guide, but no code of ethics, religious or philosophical, provides ideal solutions to every challenge life puts in our way. We can only do our best, and live with the results.

The demon-possessed Lionel represented male qualities that were out-of-balance and disconnected from their purpose. We have all met men who fit this category. Anger lies just below the surface—ready to explode. They cannot be reasoned with, and care little for the harm they cause, even to the innocent. All they care about is their own rage. Our prisons are filled with such people. When warriors set humanity aside and embrace rage instead, the results are cataclysmic. How many people have to be maimed or killed to satisfy a nation's anger, or bolster its pride? Lionel almost killed his brother, the person he loved more than anyone in the world. It is true he was described as “demon-possessed,” but anger is like a demon in that regard. It makes people do things that are against their better judgment.

Another test, reflecting on the obsession with *power*, focused on Perceval. He was given a demonic horse to ride, having no idea of its true nature. As he started to ride, the horse ran faster and faster, until it surpassed what was possible for any earthly creature. Perceval could neither stop the animal, nor gain control over its direction. He could not jump off without serious injury.

They headed for the sea! Perceval would have drowned if he had not turned to God for help. Making the sign of the cross on his forehead, the demon horse was immediately burdened by Perceval's weight to the point where he could safely jump off. It then rushed into the sea to its own destruction amid sheaves of fire!

It is our nature to be attracted to power, which can then be used for good purposes or for bad. We want control over power, or to be close to someone who has. We want our nation to be the most powerful on earth, not just for our own defense, but to propagate our values elsewhere in the world. We think power gives us the authority to change things to our liking.

Perceval was sitting on all the power he could ever want. A splendid warhorse symbolized the strength of knighthood, distinguishing the knight from commoners and giving him combat advantages over his opponents.

Unfortunately, he lost control as soon as he hopped on. The horse, like the wielding of power itself, had a mind of its own—attempting to carry Perceval to his doom. To save himself, Perceval surrendered his ego to a force outside himself before it was too late.

The license that power gives can be intoxicating. It seems to differentiate us from other people as being somehow superior. It seduces us to force our will, and can lead to deadly consequences. It tempts one to circumvent the law. Even the desire for power impacts our ideals, encouraging cleverness to dominate our thoughts.

History shows that power habitually corrupts people, leading to the downfall of the great and the slaughter of the innocent. Hitler was drunk with power. Attila consumed by it. The threat of nuclear proliferation during the cold war demonstrated how senseless and out-of-control power can be. Today we see developing nations lusting for such power. The giants who have it and recognize its curse work feverishly to deny them. Such attempts lack credibility, however, as these same giants hoard power that can destroy life on earth a dozen times over. This illustrates the difficulty in balancing power with *moral* authority. It easily borders on hypocrisy.

Power can be a good thing, but it should never be used as a tool for our own gratification. It needs to be justified by the best of causes that are well thought out. The War in Iraq provides a current example.

When terrorists destroyed the World Trade Towers, the U.S. had every right to bring those who perpetrated this crime to justice. The free world agreed, and helped in this cause. Afghanistan became the theater for war between dangerous fundamentalist ideas and a powerful nation bent on destroying them. Although the purpose was not to enact revenge, a desire for vengeance had certainly and most naturally awakened in people's hearts.

Unfortunately, before finishing the job in Afghanistan, we turned our attentions to Iraq, another Middle East problem. We knew that Saddam Hussein was a contained threat to the region and to Middle East oil. He was the quintessential "bad guy," guilty of atrocities directed even at his own people.

We had the power and opportunity to free oppressed Iraqi citizens from his hateful regime and decided it was time to do so, violently, even though tens of thousands of innocent people would be killed. With that decision, the conscience of many of our allies turned against us.

Iraq's military was quickly overwhelmed. We expected to be greeted as liberators who would easily create a democracy in a culture extremely different from our own.

Blinded by power, we quickly raced to Baghdad, waiting for an enraptured populace to welcome us with open arms. We were totally unprepared when they quickly rejected our beneficence and labeled us as "occupiers." We had no clue that our best intentions fulfilled their worst nightmare: the secular West imposing its will upon a captive and "holy" people.

Insurgency mixed with international terrorists, resulting in a war between Western values and a people sworn to the extreme dictates of their own culture and religion.

We were so confident in our own power that we failed to recognize the historic distrust of Western influence in the Middle East. We assumed that our power would intimidate the entire region. We were not prepared for the problems we would face.

The hubris of our leaders seemed out of control. Politicians told us that that Saddam Hussein was linked to 9/11, even though most of us knew that he was not. They thought they could rally support by saying that he had weapons of mass destruction, even as inspectors and other intelligence refused to support these conclusions.

The results were disastrous, with hundreds of thousands of lives lost. The future of Iraq's democracy remains tenuous at best. Success has been claimed in that terrorists have not attacked the United States directly, even as Americans continue to die in the battlefield.

The administration tells us to stay the course. Others demand that we abandon the Iraqi people to the terrible fate we thrust upon them. Both alternatives are unacceptable. We are like Perceval heading for sure disaster, afraid to jump off to certain death. And why? Because power blinded us to the warnings of our allies and the cultural beliefs of the Iraqi people. We thought we could bully a fundamentalist ideology that recognizes no battle-lines, honors no law or respect for human decency, and deceives itself into thinking that God is pleased by the madness they perpetrate.

How many innocent Iraqis have to die for our decisions? How do we measure the cost of our casualties? Power is a dangerous thing. To serve what is good, power demands maturity, integrity, wisdom, caution and the strength to wield it correctly. What good is *resolve* if it continually results in the wrong direction? Humility is significant part of the answer, but people in power have little regard for it.

We ride another demon horse as well, that of rapidly developing technology.

I am not against technology. I stand in awe of its impressive achievements . I have no doubt that many of the problems the world suffers from today will find their solutions through the advancement of science.

My concern is that the latest rush of new technological distractions, catering to every indulgence, draws us away from pursuits that are more humane, contemplative and

character-building. Just keeping pace with the latest developments is a time-consuming challenge. It can be enthralling, entertaining, and even social. But there is more to life than being enthralled, entertained or on the phone every free minute of the day. One needs time to think and reflect.

The grace of civilized living, which technology could and should enhance, seems more at risk than ever. The pace is too quick, too wrought with provocative advertisements that demand out constant attention.

I don't advocate slowing down progress, but I do point out that our response to that pace remains squarely in our hands. We do not have to embrace every fad or buy into every outrage vying for attention. We do not have to listen to music that demeans women (along with the men who demean them). We can reject computer games that offer thrills of virtual violence. We can turn away from newscasters and pundits who try to shape our thoughts to a particular agenda.

We do not have to ruin our environment in the name of progress, when true and responsible progress would find ways of protecting it.

I once heard a man exclaim complete disregard for pollution. "Why should we care? We won't even be around when things really get bad."

Such an attitude is symptomatic of humanity gone wrong. It is not chivalry, and is a debasement of man.

It is thought that many of the Grail stories were written by monks who were propagating their own strict version of Christian behavior. Hence the character of Galahad, who almost seemed represented the return of Jesus himself.

Another notable addition centered on the religious value of virginity and chastity.

There was a growing opinion in the Church that sex was an impediment to spiritual perfection. It was "of the flesh," as the bible put it—a derogatory comment in direct contrast with that which was "of the spirit." While sex itself could not be equated with sin

(since God commanded Adam and Eve to “increase and multiply”) it was thought to easily serve as an instigation to sin. The only sexual relations that the Church sanctioned were between husband and wife, and only for purposes of procreation. Even then, they admonished that it was better to remain celibate.

Their stories depicted Galahad and Perceval as virgins. Bors had *fallen* once, but remained chaste afterwards. Lancelot's immorality with the queen, *as much as he repented of it*, barred him from achieving the Grail. Gawain (who was sometimes depicted as a womanizer) recognized his own failings and withdrew from the quest prematurely.

The message was clear. The monks were propagating their religious restrictions onto the general population.

I certainly have nothing against virginity and chastity. In a world stricken by AIDS and other venereal diseases, such guarded lifestyles offer protection that conventional “safe sex” does not. I am personally convinced, however, that normal sexual relations within a committed love relationship contribute to a healthy, well-balanced and satisfying life. While traditional marriage might not be required for such a relationship, it *can* provide the most idealized expression of true love.

I do not think that virginity and chastity necessarily contribute to anything that might be called *spiritual purity*. In fact, studies show that the repression of one's sexual nature often leads to psychological problems.

On the other hand, obsessive lust, like obsessive greed, will definitely interfere with spiritual progression. There is a difference between desire and lust.

Virginity and chastity are difficult alternatives for most people to embrace. Human nature is sexual to the core, and most of us tend to like it that way.

Our culture reflects this—often to the extreme. Both marketing and popular entertainment thrive on outrageous sexuality—and here the concern of our prudish monks warrants consideration.

Our present environment is quick to recognize and utilize the power of sex—but it does not respect it. To the entertainment world, sex is a lure, a joke, an element of plot guaranteed to draw attention. Advertisers use sexual images in a similar fashion. Professionals in marketing know that if they can stimulate hormones, they get their product noticed.

Our children are being taught about human sexuality by television shows, movies and magazines that have no concern about the morality they propagate. All they care about is the bottom line. The only protest we hear are from parents who don't want sex education in schools, where it is discussed in a sociological and scientific fashion.

It is unfortunate that our sex drive begins before we are mature enough to handle it. This can lead to confusion, violence, teenage pregnancies, and easily-seduced victims of sexual predators. Parents have the immediate responsibility to guide their children through this phase of immaturity, but it is a social issue as well.

Although I am a strong proponent of freedom, what I really advocate for is a strongly advocate the combination of freedom and conscience. It disturbs me to see television imposing frivolous sexual content into family homes, where children will be unduly influenced. To varying degrees, this shapes their attitudes about sex and gender relationships for their entire lives.

It is wrong to think that this applies only to the victimization of girls. Yes, they suffer from being objectified. Yes, they are pushed into shaping themselves according to unrealistic expectations. These topics are well-known and much publicized. But what about the boys and men who are seduced into victimizing them? What made them that way? What shaped their ideas about sex to be something negative and anti-social?

Studies conflict about how the media influences abnormal behavior in children. This isn't surprising. One can find studies showing that tobacco smoking is harmless as well.

It is true that most violent or sexually aggressive boys have a history of being traumatized by some aggressive adult, either directly or by witnessing this behavior in his family. I don't contend with that.

What I do contend with is a media that, reinforces unhealthy ideas and attitudes by always pushing the limit of what is acceptable. By thriving and competing among themselves to be the most outrageous, the media is guilty of desensitizing both young and old alike. Cop shows continually try to intrigue us with sexual crimes and killers—but so does *Court TV!* Comedians and rap singers work hard at convincing young people that it's cool to be contemptuous, rude and pushy. Sitcoms work their hardest to project sexual innuendos into every scene. All of this is so common that it's become the norm, and that's where the assault on our culture really takes place. The more we hear these unending sexual inferences, and hoodlum-style boys rudely droning their endless complaints, and yes, political extremism, the less outrage we feel.

One need not be physically raped to be irrevocably harmed by society's prevalent sexual profiteering.

While overt pornography is at least somewhat regulated, television images reflect conventional sources. They are not Playboy magazine hidden by curious teenagers under the bed. They are mainstream media sanctioned by the powers that be. They are "acceptable," which implies that the behavior they represent is acceptable as well. The direction this is taking has an impact on us all.

Because we live in a free society, we loathe to regulate anything that might infringe on freedom of speech. A certain amount of undefined sexual expression has be included in this. I'm not calling for regulation (although I wouldn't oppose a reasonable form of it either). What I do call for is an awareness and concern throughout the culture so that better choices might be willingly taken by all.

We don't need the business world tinkering with the sexuality of our children—yet our silence condones it. It's time to examine how much of our values have been adversely

influenced already. Only when *we* decide to change can we expect our pandering media to change as well.

We need to rejuvenate our national conscience. The religious right has been trying to do this to some extent, but only according to their own limited agenda. We don't need divisive and controlling agendas in order to recognize right from wrong.

Freedom only works when people make it work. Sitting back and ignoring the decay of our civilization might be construed as "freedom," but that is surely not the freedom our nation is all about.

And what of our children's freedom to grow unmolested by media imposed sexuality?

I am not, by any means, a sexual prude, but I do think it's important to protect the sexual nature of our species from being shaped, manipulated and exploited by those who profit from our loss. They tell us they are respectable business people giving the public what they want. They defend themselves by saying that if they don't inundates our lives with outrage, someone else will. What excuse could possibly carry less substance?

These are not words of respectable people. They reflect the logic of the rapist who blames his victim for his own misdeeds. Unfortunately, we are so indoctrinated by corporate interests that we accept their twisted excuses as if they actually made sense.

The final conclusion is this: people have to change before the media changes—and people changing their own lives is what chivalry is all about.

There is nothing inherent in capitalism that *forces* businesspeople to make immoral decisions, or *forces* people to invest in them. It is not the system that makes these choices. It's people. There is a difference between making an honest living and run amok greed—although more and more we fail to see it.

Medieval chivalry tells us that greed is one of the *Seven Deadly Sins*. No doubt this conclusion was influenced by the gospels, where Jesus used strong words condemning wealth and greed (and religious power as well). It appears that many Christians have

somehow resolved this issue over the years (along with it the prohibition of usury).

Nevertheless, it remains at the root of our economic problems today.

It is impossible to unite greed with morality. When government says we have a strong economy because stocks are rising, while people can't find jobs that pay a decent wage, something is wrong.

Someone's greed is distorting the truth.