

GSCNC Book Club
Meeting Guide

The Alchemist

By Paulo Coelho



**Best for
Seniors and Ambassadors**

Introduction

Book Summary

Santiago, an Andalusian shepherd boy, has a dream about finding treasure in the pyramids of Egypt. A gypsy woman and an old man who claims to be a mysterious king advise him to pursue this dream. "To realize one's destiny is a person's only obligation," the old man tells him, "when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it."

Meeting 1

Setting up your Book Club

This meeting guide provides a basic outline for hosting three or four 60-minute Book Club meetings. You are welcome to incorporate as much or as little of this meeting guide into your meetings. This guide can also be used as the basis for a sampler troop. Consider asking a local book club to host the meetings! Please refer to the "Setting up your Book Club Guide" for more information.

Meeting 2

Discussion Questions (p. 1-65, Santiago leaving the Crystal Merchant)

Discover

At the start of his journey Santiago asks a gypsy woman to interpret his dream. What was his dream? What does she ask for in return? What does the old man request when Santiago asks him about his path to the treasure? Both payments represent a different price people have to pay to fulfill a dream. Only one will yield a real result. Which payment represents false hope; why? Can you think of examples from your own life when you had to give up something to meet a goal? Was this a difficult decision?

Connect

One of the first major problems Santiago encounters on his journey was the theft of his money which forced him into taking a job with the crystal merchant. There, Santiago learned many lessons about life. What important lessons did he learn while working there? Of all these, which lessons were the most crucial to the pursuit of his Personal Legend? What is a personal legend? Why are Personal Legends different from person to person? When Santiago talked about the pilgrimage to Mecca, the crystal merchant argued that having a dream is more important than fulfilling it. Do you agree with Santiago or crystal merchant? Can they both be right?

Take Action

Santiago is convinced he is doing the right thing by searching for his treasure. Do you think he is? Why? If you were apart of the story and you knew what he was trying to achieve, would you help him? Why? Think of someone you know (a friend, family member, teacher, coach, etc.) that is trying to fulfill their own personal dream. What is that dream? Is there something you can help them do to achieve their dream? Why is it important to help people achieve their own "Personal Legend?"

Activity: The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine

Supplies

- Copies of Worksheet 1 and Worksheet 2 (one of each for every girl)
- Pens or Pencils

Alchemy Background

Alchemy was a form of early modern chemistry. Alchemists sought to create the so-called philosophers' stone in order to, among other goals, change metals such as lead into gold. For Newton and other practicing alchemists of the 17th century, there was a philosophical and spiritual aspect of their work that involved transforming the chaos of our everyday world into a pure enlightened state. This journey to enlightenment is known as the Great Work.

Alchemists heavily coded their work in symbols and metaphors to prevent back-

Meeting 2

lash from the church and to keep the uninitiated from learning their secrets. Animals, plants, colors, and celestial bodies were used as symbols. While there were no fixed rules in the use of symbolism, there are common themes.

Key Terms

alchemy: A medieval chemical philosophy that aimed to change base metals to gold, discover a universal remedy for illness, and prepare an elixir that would enable one to live forever.

antimony: a metallic element with four allotropic forms; used in a wide variety of alloys.

elements: The seven base metals plus arsenic and sulfur. They were not elements in the modern sense.

philosophers' stone: A mythical substance believed to cure disease, confer immortality, and turn ordinary metals like lead into gold.

symbol: A printed or written sign for the purpose of representing an operation or action, an element, a quantity, a quality, or a relation (as in music).

Activity Answer

Answers should describe the preparation of gold by mixing impure gold with stibnite and then heating the mixture in a hot fire three times to purify. Other interpretations of the passage may include that the stibnite is derived from lead (the offspring of ancient Saturn), that stibnite is added to impure gold (cast to him the body of the king), that after being heated three times there is no stibnite left (when this has been performed thrice the Lion has overcome the wolf and will find nothing more to devour in him), and that at the end of the experiment, the king—or the gold—has been prepared (our Body has been rendered fit for the first stage of our work).

Additional Discussion Questions

1. Compare the different interpretations. Did different groups come up with the same answer? Why or why not? Have the girls discuss their decisions.
2. Have girls name some universal symbols they commonly see (road signs, warning signs, musical notes, etc.). Ask them to name some symbol systems that do not use words (hieroglyphics, Braille, Zip codes, bar codes, or ISBN numbers). Discuss why symbols are important.
3. Sir Isaac Newton is well known for his mathematical and scientific achievements, yet few people know about his work as an alchemist. Some people believe that Newton pursued alchemy with the hopes that it might help him better understand great truths about nature and the universe. Newton used his own symbols and phrases to describe the steps he took when performing alchemical experiments. Explain why he might have done this.

Closing

Ask girls to consider choices for their final activity (see Meeting 4 suggestions). Remind girls to read the second half of the book for the next meeting.

Meeting 2: Activity Worksheet 1

The *Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine*

The *Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* is a famous alchemical text that appears to have first been published in Germany around 1599. The text was later translated into Latin, Greek, and English. The author, "Basilius Valentinus," claimed to be a Benedictine monk. The author's true identity is unknown. The text itself contains 12 coded passages, or keys, that describe the process of creating the Philosopher's Stone, a mythical substance believed to cure disease, confer immortality, and turn ordinary metals into gold.

- Read the passage. Use a pencil or highlighting pen to mark any words or phrases you think might be clues to the text's meaning.
- Pair up with a partner. Use the "Keys to the Stone" to decipher the text. Note: some words may have more than one meaning.
- Together write your interpretation of the text on a separate piece of paper. Share your work with your troop.

The *Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* Excerpt:

1 *If you would operate by means of our bodies, take*
2 *a fierce grey wolf, which, though on account of its*
3 *name it be subject to the sway of warlike Mars, is*
4 *by birth the offspring of ancient Saturn, and is found*
5 *in the valleys and mountains of the world, where he*
6 *roams about savage with hunger. Cast to him the*
7 *body of the King, and when he has devoured it, burn*
8 *him entirely to ashes in a great fire. By this process*
9 *the King will be liberated; and when it has been*
10 *performed thrice the Lion has overcome the wolf,*
11 *and will find nothing more to devour in him. Thus*
12 *our Body has been rendered fit for the first stage*
13 *of our work.*

Meeting 2: Activity Worksheet 2

Keys to the Stone

To be used to decipher the *Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine* excerpt.

Common Symbols in Alchemical Texts and Images

baths: cleansing; dissolving a solid in a liquid

black cow: black or purifying matter

black raven/blackbird: a black mixture

bone of whale: a white mixture

child: offspring of the king and queen, the result of their marriage or union; a naked child symbolizes the innocent soul; a child crowned or clothed in purple robes signifies salt or the Philosopher's Stone

crown: completion; perfection of a metal

dragon/serpent: fire; the dragon in flames is a symbol of fire and calcination (breaking down a substance by heating or burning it); dragons with wings represent the volatile principle (mercury); dragons without wings represent the fixed principle (sulfur); a dragon biting its own tail is the ouroboros and signifies the fundamental unity of all things

eagle: volatilization and air

egg: the sealed vessel of creation

hermaphrodite (half man/half woman): conjunction; the union of two opposites

king: man, solar consciousness, and gold; the red king is sophic sulfur (considered the seed of gold); the king united with the queen symbolizes conjunction (the joining of two opposite natures)

lion: raw matter and acid; red lion is the red acetate of lead in crystalline form; green lion is the green acetate of lead in liquid or crystal form; black lion represents carbon; the winged lion is mercury or sophic salt

ouroboros (a serpent biting its tail): completion

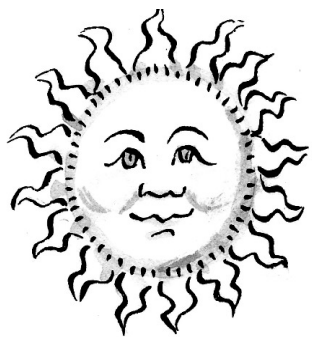
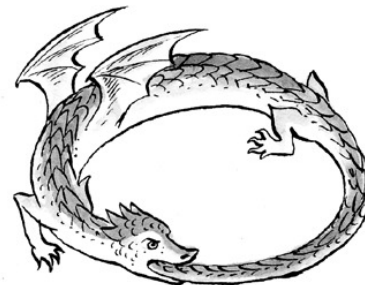
queen: woman, lunar consciousness, and silver; the white queen is sophic mercury (considered the quintessence of metals); the queen united with the king is the operation of conjunction (the joining of two opposite natures)

stag: the soul

trees: the process of transformation

whale: water

wolf, grey wolf: stibnite, an ore of antimony



Metals Used by Alchemists

antimony: wolf, grey wolf

gold: sun, king, perfect sphere, Leo the Lion, Sunday

silver: moon, queen, white rose, crescent, rain cup, Cancer the Crab, Monday

iron: Mars, shield and spear, Scorpio the Scorpion and Aries the Ram, Tuesday

mercury: Mercury or Hermes, caduceus (twined serpents on a staff), Virgo the Virgin and Gemini the Twins, Wednesday

tin: Jupiter, lightning, Pisces the Fish and Sagittarius the Archer, Thursday

copper: Venus, hand mirror, Taurus the Bull and Libra the Scales, Friday

lead: Saturn, old man carrying a scythe or hourglass, Capricorn the Goat and Aquarius the Water Carrier, Saturday

Properties of the Alchemical Principles

sophic sulfur: symbolized by the red king or red rose

sophic mercury: symbolized by the white queen or white rose

sophic salt: symbolized by the ouroboros, the stone, and the astral body

Alchemical Elements

air: spirit into the manifested world; hot and wet; sanguine

earth: manifestation, birth, and material creation; cold and dry; melancholy

fire: activity and transformation; hot and dry; choleric

water: cleansing and purification; cold and wet; phlegmatic



Meeting 3

Discussion Questions (p. 65-end)

Discover

The Englishman, who Santiago meets on the caravan to the pyramids, is searching for "a universal language, understood by everybody." What does this mean? According to the Englishman, what are the parallels between reading and alchemy? How is the Englishman's search for the alchemist similar to Santiago's search for a treasure? How is it different? How do the Englishman and Santiago feel about each other? Why did Santiago have to go through the dangers of tribal wars in the oasis in order to reach the pyramids? At the very end of the journey why did the alchemist leave Santiago alone?

Connect

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, even though he knew the Englishman was the one looking for him? What is the meaning of 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. What is the secret? How does this process compare to finding a Personal Legend? Earlier in the story, the alchemist told Santiago "when you possess great treasures within you, and try to tell others of them, seldom are you 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?

Take Action

Does everyone have a Personal Legend? Do you think you are on course to finding your personal legend? What might be your Personal Legend? Think back to the discussion of "beginner's luck." Have you experienced "beginner's luck" with something that felt important? Think about the steps you might need to take to complete your Personal Legend. What can get in your way and what might prevent you from following it to conclusion? Having read *The Alchemist*, do you know what inner resources you need to continue your journey? For Santiago what was more important- the journey itself or actually finding the treasure? Why? What happens when one achieves their personal legend?

Activity: Create a Personal Legend Journal

Supplies

- Fabric pieces 14" x 11" (scrap fabric, old curtains, etc.)
- Cardboard 12" x 9" (old manila folders, cardstock paper, etc.)
- Spray Fabric Glue
- Ribbon, yarn, glitter, buttons, etc.
- White copier paper 8.5" x 11"
- Hole Punch

Meeting 3

Each girl will get one piece of cardboard and one piece of fabric. Spread the fabric flat so that the front of the fabric is facing down. Spray the fabric glue over the entire fabric piece. Lay the cardboard in the very center of the fabric. There should be about 1" of extra fabric on each end.

Fold the extra fabric over so that it covers the inside edges of the cardboard. Spray with extra fabric glue if necessary to keep the edges in place. Fold the fabric covered cardboard in half so that the fabric side is on the outside. Use the hole punch to make two holes in the crease of the cardboard book cover. The holes should be 2 ½" from the top and 2 ½" from the bottom (and 4 inches apart from one another).

Give each girl get 10 pieces of white copier paper. Fold the 10 sheets together in half. Punch 2 holes in the crease of the white paper. The holes should measure 2 ¼" from each end (and 4 inches apart from one another). The holes in the paper should match up with the holes in the cardboard when you place them inside of the folded piece of cardboard.

Thread a piece of ribbon from inside of the book's middle and tie a tight bow on the outside. Carefully use spray glue to glue very first sheet of paper to the cardboard cover. This will cover the edges of the fabric and the cardboard to make the book look complete. Do the same with the very last sheet of paper and the back cover.

Allow girls to finish decorating the Personal Legend Journal as they wish. On the first page have the girls create a title for their Personal Legend Journey.

Closing

Have girls brainstorm their next steps to discovering their Personal Legend.

Meeting 4

Extension Activities

Extension activities can be real or virtual. These are just suggestions; please feel free to brainstorm with your troop to come up with other ideas.

- Textile Museum, Washington, DC (<http://www.textilemuseum.org/>): What textiles exist from Ancient Spain, Africa, and Egypt? What were their uses? What can textiles tell us about a group of people?
- National Gallery of Art (<http://www.nga.gov/>): While Santiago was with the crystal merchant he learned everything from the art of business to the art of patience. Explore exhibits that focus on ancient art forms.
- Visit a local Egyptian or Spanish Eatery. What are the local foods? How are they prepared? How is their diet similar or different to an American diet?

Additional Resources

Activities

- Research the life of the author Paulo Coelho. <http://www.paulocoelho.com.br/eng/index.html>
- Make an origami pyramid. <http://www.wonderhowto.com/how-to/video/how-to-origami-a-diamond-pyramid-165961/>
- Write a Personal Legend adventure story.
- Learn about the history of Alchemy.
- Find an page from one of Newton's 300-year-old alchemical notebooks, with parts decoded, at www.pbs.org/nova/newton/alchemy.html.

Outside Resources

- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andalusia>
- <http://homepage.powerup.com.au/~ancient/pyra1.htm>
- <http://egyptianpyramids.tumblr.com/>
- <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/>
- <http://www.sacred-texts.com/alc/index.htm>