

# Not Quite the Alchemist

**EXCLUSIVE:** Face to face with Santiago—far from being hooked on the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Life, this alchemist is nothing but a shepherd who has found life's greatest treasure

By AMY AU

In a dusty musty room with cobwebs clinging on the corner of the ceiling, crammed inside the wooden shelves backing precariously onto the clammy walls were books with enigmatic signs (and a number of holes eaten into by grubs). The only candle standing on the wax-stained candlestick had already been snuffed out for ages—but the room was not entirely engulfed in darkness. Flickering, sizzling fire was burning in the grate. In front of it was a wrinkled man with his shadow extended into the dark. He was squinting at the fire, or rather the pan over it, waiting for gold to ooze out from the dull mixture of liquid metal.

Yes, this is the popular image of alchemists who practiced medieval chemistry. These people were usually the most erudite ones in their own society, carrying out clandestine experiment. Can a shepherd boy master such

esoteric science? Probably not.

“Everyone, from the rich to the obscure, has the potential to become an alchemist. All you need is the will to realize your dream,” emphasized Santiago, a shepherd whose discovery of a chest of Spanish gold coins hit the headlines last year.

What made him an alchemist was not his unearthing of the invaluable treasure, but his journey to search for his dream, which he referred to as ‘Personal Legend’, and fulfill the destiny blessed by God. Every experience in turn inspired Santiago to grow and divulge the secret to happiness.

Santiago could have remained an ordinary shepherd in Andalusia if not for a dream. Most people would laugh off a dream of hidden trove near the Egyptian Pyramids—it is just a dream after all. Santiago,

preoccupied by his sheep, books and the merchant's daughter, was oblivious to the implication of the dream. Not until the alchemist who disguised himself as King Melchizedek preached him about people's obligation on earth, that is, to realize their ‘Personal Legend’, did Santiago set off to Africa.

Santiago said his adventurous nature further fueled his desire to nose the treasure out. “You know, I always follow my heart rather than my head like any youngsters. I had already forgone living in clover to become a shepherd; I had nothing to lose anyway.”

But he did. He was robbed thrice, not to mention dangling on the brink of death when caught by a tribe in the desert. In fact, these misfortunes were stepping stones leading a step forward to his treasure, so were the acquaintances with several intriguing people: the crystal

merchant whose fear of realizing dreams emboldened Santiago to continue with his journey; the Englishman who bolstered up Santiago's knowledge of alchemy; the alchemist whom Santiago met when left stranded in the oasis, was the key to Santiago's success, instilling the true wisdom of alchemy in Santiago and escorting him in the final stages of his odyssey.

When asked about his discoveries, Santiago burst out, "Imagine you arrived at the Pyramids: there was nix but rock when you delved till the bottom. Worse still, you were robbed and bludgeoned. How outrageous!"

"Anyhow, thanks to the robber's mention of his dream about a treasure in Spain, I knew where my target lay. If the robber had believed in his dream, I wouldn't have stood a chance of uncovering the Spanish gold coins!" the young shepherd chortled.

It turned out that the hidden treasure buried under a sycamore in a ruined church where Santiago had once spent nights with his flock. "Life is always full of ironies," concluded Santiago.

In a way, the ironic

search illustrates that sometimes our dreams are not elusive, not faraway, and not glittery; they may camouflage themselves with ordinary trifles in our daily life. To unmask them requires our courage, faith and persistence to relinquish our grip on comfort.

Yet the real treasure lay not in the physical wealth, but in the journey itself—a journey of self-discovery and dream actualization through which Santiago acquired wisdom and fulfillment. As novelist Ursula K. Le Guin puts it, "It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end." In Santiago's case, not only did he gain profound insights during his search, but he also found Fatima, the love of his life.

Whether we bump into our potential other halves like Santiago did remains beyond anticipation. But we will indubitably encounter obstacles which whittle away our determination to pursue our dreams. According to Santiago, two obstacles include the deprivation of dreams by others and the fear of failure.

**"Everyone, when they are young, knows what their destiny is. They are not afraid to dream... But, as time passes, a mysterious force begins to convince them that it will be impossible for them to realize their destiny."**

—Santiago

Human beings are born to be bold dreamers. Recall what your childhood dream was? To become an artist, inventor, or astronaut? For all our aspirations, we were plied with the so-called cruel reality, disheartening us that we were neither outstanding, nor our effort was worth the risk. Unnerved, we jilted our dreams and entangled ourselves in dreary work deemed appropriate by worldly standards. Fortunately, Santiago was not strait-jacketed by such tenet, as he was allowed to give up being a priest. "Realization of our destiny is anything but stumbling stone; it's our destiny," he asserted.

Once we decide to pursue our goals, one thing is certain: we will be confronted with setbacks. But success is just about falling a hundred times and getting up a

hundred and one times; fallings are necessary as getting ups steel ourselves for future hardships. After we have surmount the defeats, we feel euphoric, convinced that we have proven ourselves to be worthy of the destiny blessed by God.

**"No heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second's encounter with God and eternity."**

---Santiago

Identifying possible impediments to attainment our dreams alone will not get what we want under our belts. We have to be much clued up on the tips to success in order to get off the ground—and continue on with flying colors. Instead of a litany of darn rules, three precepts will do the trick:

**1. Stick to our dreams** the path towards our own 'Personal Legend' is thorny, intimidating us to test if we will back away from pain. Always keep in mind that prickly stems lead up to blooming blossoms; we will gain our rewards eventually.

**2. Listen to the voice of heart** equating intuition with inaccuracy is specious; as a matter of fact, some scientific discoveries, such as the structure of benzene ring, were initiated by subjective feeling. Though we may not hit every nail on its head, we should follow our heart and be confident in our choices.

**3. Learn form the universe** the implication of omens has been overlooked time and again, due to the fact that these unfathomable signs are often disregarded as oversensitivity at best and psychological delusion at worst. But bear in mind we are never alone in the quest for dreams—signs in the surroundings and advice from others are signposts of our quest. We have to allow ourselves to be open enough to recognize them.

**"When you want something, the whole universe conspires in helping you to achieve it."**

---Santiago

Santiago's tips, interestingly, ring a bell of the New Age belief. Exemplifications include the stress on following the omens,

which is parallel to the New Age idea that there are no coincidences and everything around us has a spiritual meaning, a spiritual lesson to teach us, and the 'follow your heart' notion, which suggests intuition, or "divine guidance", is a more appropriate guide than rationalism.

#### Allusion to Forty Days and Nights?

Some Christians have claimed Jesus' happenings in the desert parallel that of Santiago in many instances. The desert symbolized predicaments. While Santiago was tempted to go astray from his goal, Jesus was tempted by Satan. Santiago's rumination on inconspicuous omens and the voice of his heart led him closer to the destiny God found best for him; Jesus' prayer and contemplation kept him in the right track with God. Their traverse through the desert prepared them to face the ensuing challenges. Such claim had sparked off a heated debate as the conservatives considered the parallelism blasphemous whereas others saw Santiago's experience as a test put to him by God. "Well, it's no surprise that there are varied interpretations as Santiago's wondrous adventure is not meant to be taken literally. How his story inspires people differs personally," said the dean of Cordoba Cathedral.

Nonetheless, people of different sectarian background are appealed to the 'Any dream will do' belief—the key to happiness, fulfillment and the ultimate purpose of creation is in everyone's hand. Whether we embody such belief depends

on our willingness to take risks. Again, Santiago assured, “Everyone on earth has a treasure that awaits him. I’ve found mine. You’ll ultimately find yours.”

True ‘alchemy’ is not a chemical but a spiritual one: the alchemist is now curling up on the cozy couch in a softly-lit room, sipping a cup of latte, savoring the ‘sweet-bitter’ taste of the drink, or to be exact, the taste of success and contentment intermingles with despair and inability. Stretching the arms and taking a deep breath of the aroma prevailing in the room, the alchemist is fortunate to be in the enclave where dream and imagination override pragmatism, materialism and timidity to strive for a meaningful life.