

Youth Initiative High School

Kaleidoscope

Find Your Question

Questioning the Answer

We live in the society of the pundit. An unanswered question, even if unanswered only for a day, is like a shirt with a missing button or an unmowed lawn—something to be fixed, a sort of epistemological eyesore crying out to be remedied.

Humans are a curious species. One of the things that sets us apart from the rest of the Animal Kingdom is our uncanny ability to discover the answers to the world's great mysteries. But perhaps even more quintessentially human is our recognition of those mysteries in the first place. No other

animal knows how to refine petroleum or grow cassava roots because no other animal is able to ask the right questions, or any questions at all, really.

An answer is something you can hold in your hand, something with neat edges, digestible; something demanded by children.

But a question is not so simple; it is a tension, a longing, a positive absence, a purpose, the soul of the answer. While an answer may impart wealth or peace or comfort, only a question can impart purpose, only a question can awaken within us

the greater parts of our minds and hearts.

This issue of the Kaleidoscope reminds us to feel the warmth of this life-affirming spark, to find the question that opens us to the world.

"One who asks a question is a fool for five minutes; one who does not ask a question remains a fool forever."

-Chinese Proverb

Ready or Not?



By Jacob Hundt, Faculty Chair and Program Administrator

One of the cornerstones of the 11th grade curriculum in a Waldorf high school is an obscure Medieval knightly romance entitled *Parzival*. Composed in Middle High German by a little known, and possibly illiterate, German troubadour named Wolfram von Eschenbach around the year 1200, *Parzival* is not an easy read. The narrative structure is dense, the customs and world described are unfamiliar, the names are bizarre and numerous, and the metaphors are convoluted and extended. It is a book that requires real concentration to make head or tail, but reading it and discussing it has frequently touched something deep in the seven classes I have read it with. And deep is where students in the 11th grade often want to go.

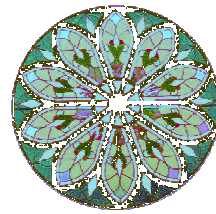
One of the ways I like to open up the themes raised in *Parzival* is to look at other works of art in different media, including music, poetry, film, and classic sculpture and painting. This year, for example, we began the block with a close look at a painting entitled *Ecce Ancilla Domini* by the English Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It depicts the Annunciation, the famous moment in the Gospels when the Archangel Gabriel appears to Mary, bearing the astonishing news that she is to be the mother of the Messiah. In Rossetti's rendering of this archetypal moment, we see a gangly teenage Mary curled awkwardly against the wall of a bedroom. Before her appears the lily-bearing archangel, upright, insistent, somewhat stern, and all the more

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What is Absolute Excellence in a Relative World?

By Eamon Heberlein, YIHS Senior



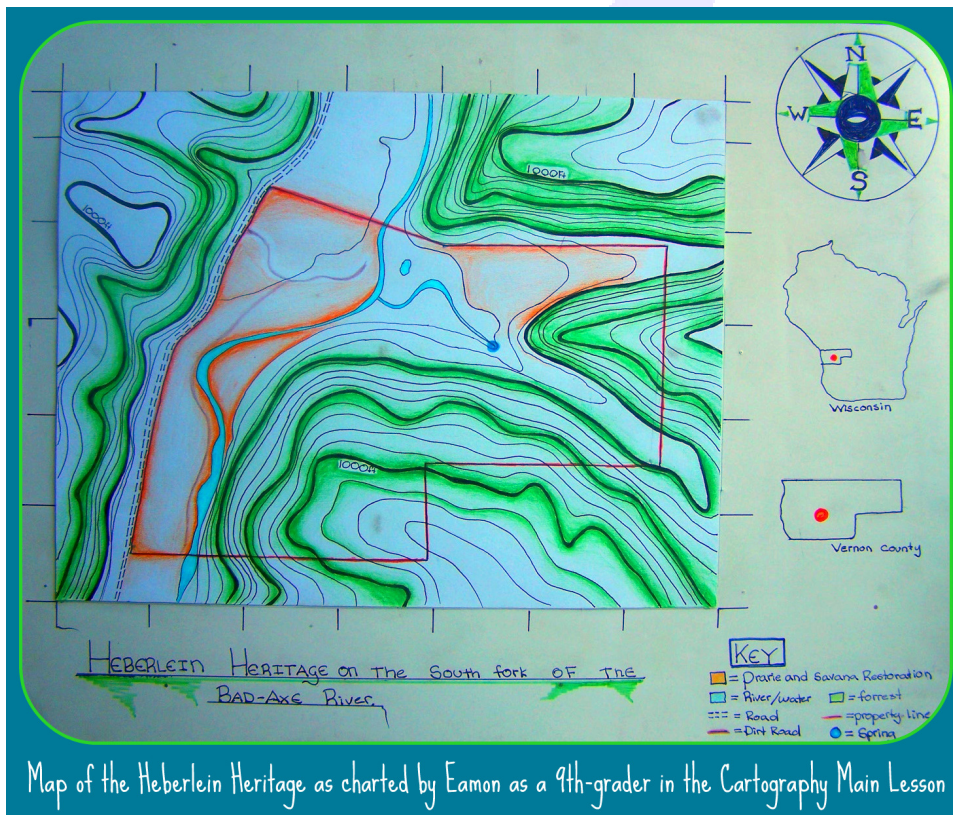
As a student who characteristically strives for academic perfection, I have always felt that having a sound and justifiable answer to the question “*what are your beliefs*” was a sort of prerequisite for being an intellectual. Unfortunately, according to this definition I have miserably failed at achieving an “intellectual” or “educated” status. But in an ever-increasingly diverse society, this is clearly a question that recent generations—more than ever before—have had to struggle with. When I ask myself... “*what do I really believe?*”, the question at times seems paramount, and at others irrelevant; but the truth is, whatever my “beliefs” are, they remain beyond words. Sometimes an experience or notion is just too subjective to communicate in a fashion as arbitrary and intangible as language.

Viktor Frankl wrote “*there is nothing in the world... that would so effectively help someone to survive, even in the worst conditions, as the knowledge that there is meaning in one’s life.*” Reading this statement—knowing that I can live happily while being skeptical of some deistic being or post mortem elysian field—I ask why; what is it that gives meaning to my life and permits me to accept my seemingly materialistic existence? The answer seems to have taken the form of a question: “*what is excellence?*” I have always imagined that like riding a bike, once one has achieved or found excellence, they could better understand how it is done, or what it is. Therefore, I think I can say the obsession and search for excellence inspires my desire for prowess in the world of academia. Learning and the search for knowledge has become one of my greatest passions, for with every new understanding, however small, comes a greater comprehension of the world in which I live, of my reality. Learning, knowledge, and experience help one to more clearly understand their questions of life.

I, like most, have developed nascent answers to my omnipresent questions. One night, trying to write a college essay, I sat down to read the book, *Zen And The Art Of Motorcycle Maintenance* and found for the first time a piece of literature I literally could not put down. Robert Pirsig’s novel followed his own thoughts on quality and excellence, which paralleled mine to an uncanny degree. As I flew through the book and followed this question far beyond the realms I had yet taken it, I felt revelation after revelation. Finishing the book late the following morning I decided to take a nap before sitting down to write the paper in which I would make clear the question which had, for so long, burned inside of me.

However, to my dismay after a short nap I sat behind my desk and realized... I was not closer to understanding excellence, and neither was Pirsig.

Another book which has inspired my venture to understand excellence is the novel *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse. From this narrative I pondered how such a man could find more Buddha in a river than in the Buddha himself. I realized that while there is a form of excellence and quality in education, science, technology, philosophy, and mathematics, the novel suggested that one might only find the truest and highest quality in Nature. I think excellence can be found in almost all things... but life, nature, and the universe have always seemed to me the very epitome of excellence, or even truth. This may be why understanding them has become so important to me. And what better way is there to understand nature than to be submersed in it?



My family owns a piece of land on the south fork of the Bad Axe River where I have spent many hours in solitude. Existing and participating in nature—in mind and body—makes the participant (or at least it is true in my case) feel and become more aware of the heritage, the connection, and the relationship, which he shares with nature. It is in this awareness, this connection that Siddhartha found Buddha in the river. By finding serenity in nature—in the woods, by the stream—he developed and fostered equanimity and integrity in his life, and reached enlightenment. It is solitude in nature more than anything that has helped me—like Siddhartha—begin to foster equanimity in my everyday life and see what is good in a different light.

But as Pirsig wrote: *“What is good Phaedrus, and what is not good, need we ask anyone to tell us these things?”* In the search for a meaning in life, a purpose and a why, I am inclined only to say that understanding is respective, that quality is relative. When we look at someone else’s life, someone else’s work, theirs is always better than ours. All the while they are looking at ours and thinking the same. Can one really learn what is universally good? I would like to think so, and I will continue looking for such an understanding. But the rate at which my heart beat while reading Pirsig’s endeavor, that complete and veritable understanding I felt, was real. The fact that I woke up hours later to find that understanding lost means nothing. The understanding I held for that brief time was so piercing and exalting that in those moments it really was the truth.

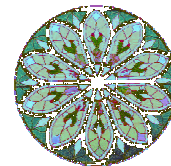
When one experiences moments like these, when one looks at the stars and feels an insatiable urge to conceive the vastness of the universe and time; when we recognize the inimitability of life, of our own lives, we truly feel alive. From time to time I look at my toe, or my hand, and think “WOW!” It is staggering sometimes to witness the creations of life; the awe-inspiring flabbergasting improbability of our existence, and the awesome power of the human mind. When I feel all these things, fulfillment, beauty, serenity, understanding, and the staggering nature of my place in the universe, however significant or insignificant, I feel I am living in the moment, and feel a sense of wellbeing. And even if my life stands for nothing beyond the playing out of sub-atomic particles according to fundamental physical laws, even if my existence and my individuality is merely the result of biological, psychological and sociological conditions; my existence, and that state of being I sometimes find myself in is worthy in-and-of-itself to live for. The irony and paradox of my life then—and of many—is that while living, I am striving for those moments when I actually feel alive. And when one feels alive in that truest sense of the word, they need not ask questions of gods, or the purpose of their existence.

I feel I will someday have to accept that my search for excellence may never render an answer or reveal the nature and truth of quality. But through learning and experiencing it, and feeling more ignorant of its quintessence, I am in some roundabout way understanding excellence. Sometimes maybe the questions we ask—not the answers we receive—have the power to give meaning to our lives. For in an abstract sense the unanswered question subsumes its answer.



Eamon Heberlein, YIHS Senior

What are the Unifying and Directing Principles of the Universe and the Human Being? Seriously.



By Shawn Lavoie, Teacher, Development Director

In February, YIHS was graced with a visit by a remarkable teacher and impishly delightful human, Frank Chester. A life-long practical arts teacher and sculptor, Frank lived all over the country, and currently lives and works in San Francisco. After retiring and for the last 10 years, Frank has taken on an exciting project: researching Platonic forms and discovering new geometric forms and frontiers, in the heart and at the core of the Earth.

What shines about Frank's work, aside from his fascinating discoveries, is his method of inquiry. To find his unique 7-sided form, the Chestahedron that has equal surface areas of all sides, Frank used hybrid artistic and mathematical approach to sculpt, mold, measure, and deduce the form. Next, he wanted to know, "where does this form come from?"

This question led him to more questions. Focusing on the intervals between the known Platonic forms, Frank found his 7-sided form within the Platonic forms. The series of questions below help move Frank forward in discovering where his form came from and how it manifested in the world.

In his multiple engagements during his 5-day stay, Frank presented a dizzying array of visuals and outlined numerous geometric principles, all while posing big questions and making people laugh.

He led a sample Main Lesson for a group of YIHS and Viroqua High School students, in which students learned the basics of projective geometry while watching how those basic principles come alive in 3-dimensions.

Next, Frank met with YIHS faculty and posed the questions, "Who are you? What are you passionate about?", challenging teachers to do something they love everyday. "That passion is what will transmit to the students," Frank asserted.

On Saturday, a large crowd gathered for a public lecture on the sacred geometry of the heart—an application of his research into the 7-sided form. And on Sunday a hands-on workshop for the public.

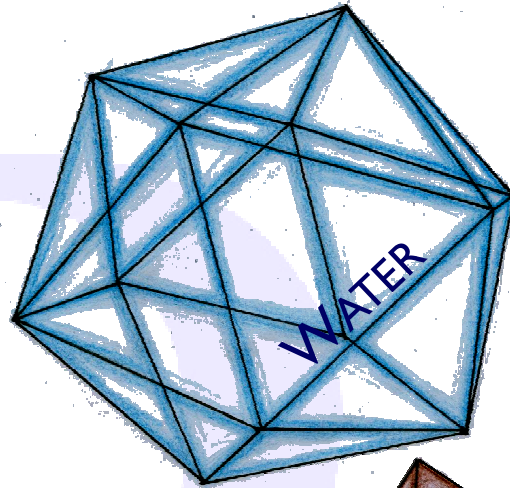
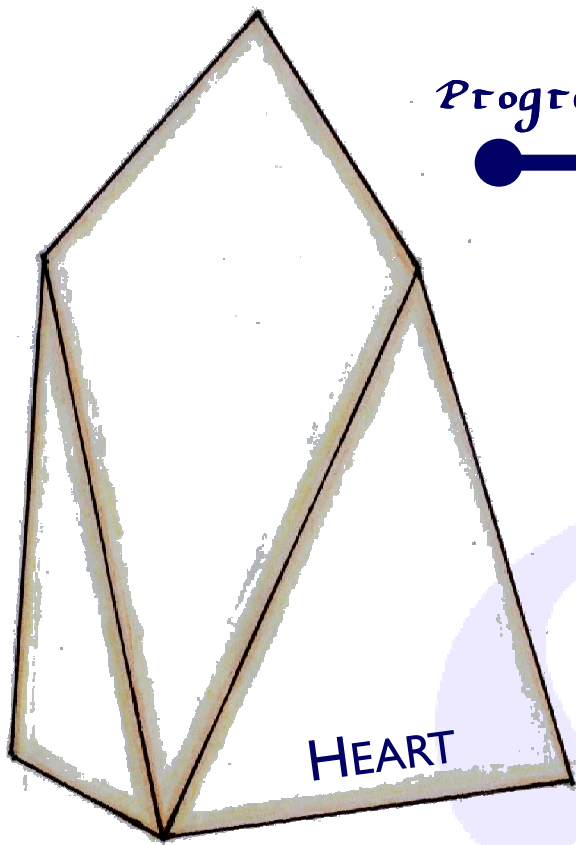
Finally on Monday, the whole school spent the morning listening to a far-reaching presentation on the forces and geometric forms within the Earth—yet another application of his research.

Frank's visit inspired students, faculty, parents, and the whole community. In his work he blurs the rigid distinctions between artist and mathematician, creator and analyst, question and answer. His approach to Anthroposophy was also a breath of fresh air; he saw Steiner's ideas as a launching pad for personal investigation and observation. Frank left everyone who participated in his talks, workshops and classes intrigued, a bit perplexed, and also invigorated to follow their own burning questions wherever they may lead.



Frank Chester in his workshop

Progression of the Platonic Forms

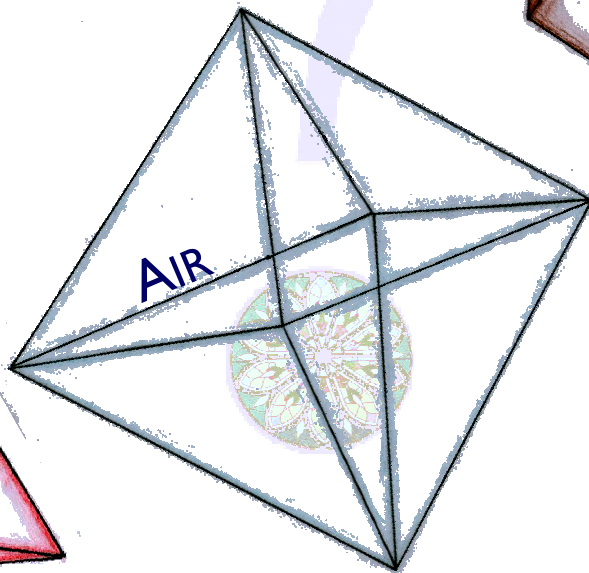
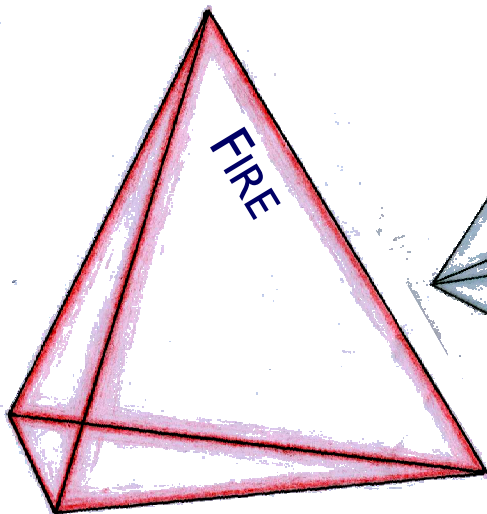
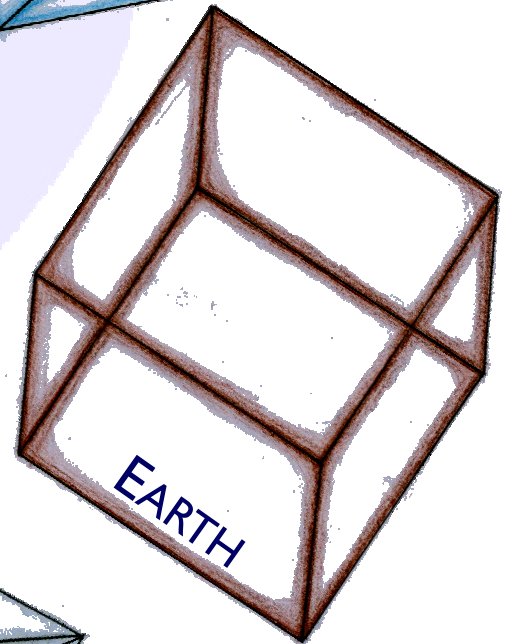


Water: How does it change?

Earth: How is it different?

Air: How does it reverse?

Fire: How does it invert?



Hand-drawn Images by William Pollard, YIHS Junior

(Continued from page 1)

imposing due to the fact that Gabriel is floating several inches off the floor on a nimbus of flame. But Mary isn't even looking at this otherworldly apparition. She sits on the bed, shoulders slightly hunched, gazing at an unseen point in space, or perhaps more accurately, gazing within, absorbing the shocking news she has just received.

We know how this story ends. The painting's title is a quotation from the Vulgate Bible: "Behold the handmaiden of the Lord... be it done unto me according to thy word." But the fascinating thing about this image is that it captures Mary in the moment just *before* her affirmative response, *before* she becomes The Virgin Mary, Full of Grace, in a moment of fear, self-doubt, and maybe even resentment in the face of the enormity of the task she has been handed and the road she will have to travel.

Mary's physical gesture in this painting and her troubled gaze are strongly evocative of some of the most challenging aspects of adolescence. Students in their 11th grade year stand on the threshold of adulthood, looking out the door of their homes and school and into the wider world. Their still-fresh ideals and their burgeoning interests and passions are beginning to give them inklings of their real selves and of their unique tasks in life. All of this is exciting and engrossing, but it can also be terrifying. Wouldn't it be easier, more comfortable, more modest even, to simply curl up and hide?

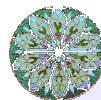
Like Mary in the painting, and like Parzival in Wolfram's epic, young people in their teenage years are presented by life with an urgent, demanding, uncomfortable question: "Are you ready? Do you have the courage, the character, and the inner strength to confront your destiny, the essential tasks that only *you* can accomplish?" My deepest hope as a teacher is that our students will, at the appropriate time, be able to look within themselves and, setting aside fear and the temptation of passive withdrawal, discover the strength there to respond with a firm and joyful "Yes. I am ready."



Ecce Ancilla Domini by the English Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

How Do We Share What We Have?

By Shawn Lavoie, Teacher, Development Director



At YIHS our mission is to teach our students, and over the last 14 years students have graduated knowing how to eat and cook well. Thanks to the 4-year Nutrition course that Jane Siemon has developed and taught, our students can taste the difference between real food and junk food, understand the difference between organic and conventional, and can make a nice dinner from scratch for their family. What our school has learned about whole foods, cooking techniques, healthy agricultural practices has served us well, but how do we share what we've learned about food and nutrition with others?

That question motivated us to transform this wonderful 4-year main lesson into a 4-book curriculum package that other schools and organizations could use. What has come of this year long process is *The Whole Plate: A Return to Real Food*, a nutrition curriculum that YIHS has begun to sell to others far and wide.

With financial support from Farmers Advocating for Organics, The Small Planet Foundation and Vernon Memorial Hospital, a central team of Jane Siemon, Dawn Hundt and Shawn Lavoie went to work, digitizing hand-written lectures, updating sources, seeking permissions, and laying out the curriculum. The logo for the project came from a 12th grader, Eamon Heberlein, and many of the design elements in the curriculum come from past Nutrition Main Lesson Books.

In this transformation from YIHS Main Lesson to salable curriculum for others, Grades 9-12 turned into Units 1-

4, and some of the special lessons, such as “Wild Foods” and “Nutrition for the Childbearing Year” have become Mini-Units. Here’s what you find within *The Whole Plate*:

Unit 1: What is Food?

Unit 2: Nourishment for People and Planet

Unit 3: Learning to Love Organic

Unit 4: The Spice of Life

Mini-Units: Wild Foods with Recipes; and Nutrition for the Childbearing Year



Each of these Units has lectures, readings, study questions, recipes and more. You can read all about them and buy the curriculum online on our new website—designed by guest teacher and techie, Rasha Abdulhadi: www.thewholeplate.org.

May what we’ve learned be shared like good food at a generous table!

How Does One Create and Sustain an Independent School?



The short answer is easy. One does not create and sustain an independent school, it takes an entire community. Youth Initiative High School is proof. Since its very inception Youth Initiative has been a *dependent* school - dependent on the generosity, the talent, the time, the money, and the vision of the community from which it arose.

This tradition of community education continues through today and probably well into the future. The fact is that there is simply not enough money to go around in mostly rural, economically underdeveloped Southwestern Wisconsin for us to charge the high, flat-rate tuition needed to furnish our school with a fleet of new computers and an army of slick full-time teachers (we can’t even afford a janitor). We need to do it another way.



Most of our teachers are part-time, with “real” jobs in a huge variety of fields with a passion for the subject that they teach at YIHS and a desire to give back to the community and play a meaningful part in students’ lives. Many of them even donate their time.

Parents, too, are vital to the school. Being a YIHS parent requires more than just signing up for parent-teacher conferences. A sliding scale tuition is offset by hundreds of parent volunteer hours and parent fundraisers. In the engine of education our parents are the connecting rods that join the students’ pistons to the faculty’s crankshaft.

And, of course, there are our students, the whole reason for this endeavor. They are the gift we hope to give back to the community that gives so much to us.

Though the school may sometimes seem to function like a self-sustaining organism, in reality it is a composition of parts, sometimes working effortlessly, at other times needing a bit more care.

We need the support of the members of our community to continue our mission of shaping young people into productive, responsible, and caring adults that are capable of imparting meaning to their lives. Please consider making a financial contribution to our school.

The school relies on its students to keep the school functioning and they rely on their school. We all rely on our community.



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