

Zoe: Would you tell me a little bit about the work you do as a professor?

Lou: I teach at Houston Baptist University, and believe it or not, I just finished my twenty fifth year teaching. So my official title is, I'm a professor of English. I teach literature and my specialty is the Romantic and Victorian poets, Wordsworth and Tennyson and Browning and whatnot. But I also specialized in C.S. Lewis and J.R. Tolkien, the classics, the Greeks and the Romans, and up to Dante-particularly focusing on ethics. In addition to teaching for English students, I lecture for the honors college...we do this sort of Oxford model where the students have four hours of sort of dialogue, Socratic dialogue, a week but then once a week I lecture to everybody so all the students you know, with like six-seventy of them all together, and I take them to Greece, Rome...sort of leading up to Dante.

Z: So what brings you to the Jung Center?

L: Well I'm going to be teaching a two-lecture series-it's an introduction to Dante. And if it goes well, then maybe next year we'll go look at Dante's Inferno. But the two lectures actually stand on their own, you go separately to one or both of them. And the first lecture I'll do is something I love to do for my students. To help you really understand Dante's great journey to hell, purgatory and paradise-you really need to understand what the medieval cosmos looks like. First of all, the medieval people did know the earth was round-they didn't think it was flat-but they did think it was at the center of the universe, with all the other planets revolving around it. This was a pre-Copernican universe.

What's more important than that is not just that they put the earth at the center-it was that their vision of the universe was much more beautiful, much more poetic than our own. They believed that they lived in a sympathetic universe, not just something dead and cold that we study, but something that we were in sympathy with, so that the movement of the planets actually exerted an influence on our world. So what I'm gonna do in the first lecture is take everyone to really step back and sort of map out the universe, so we can see not only what it would look like, but what it felt like to live in that universe. Dante is taking us on a tour of his universe in all the different media-to give you an example, they believe that the moon shed its influence down on the earth, gave us an influence that we still know about today. You know, people know the Spanish word for moon as "luna"-that's pretty much the same with Latin, and it causes lunacy-we still say that today when there's a full moon right, people start acting crazy. But it's the same way that the moon has that influence on people, it also influences the earth itself to produce a certain metal. If you think about it, the moon causes werewolves and what do you use to kill werewolves? A silver bullet. So the idea was that the moon produces silver.

The other thing we'll look at is how they believed that everything in the universe could be lined up both horizontally and vertically. They had four elements that they thought controlled everything-they also thought that we had four bodily humors, the sort of liquid that gave us certain personalities. So this will be a fun lecture to sort people into a new way of looking at the universe and the way it holds together. One of the things that has become more popular in America is holistic medicine, that today we would identify with China or India. Although, in the Middle Ages, Western medicine was holistic as well. It's really not a difference between East and West, it's a difference between post-Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment, and so people are interested in the connections between things. But of course that's a very Jungian view, to look at the world holistically.

And then the second one-the whole lecture is gonna be based on one question-why would Dante choose Virgil for his guide through this wonderful Catholic universe? You would think that if Dante wanted a guide for his universe, he would choose a Christian, like Thomas Aquinas or Augustine or maybe one of the Apostles or even Jesus himself. But why would you choose a pagan writer, Virgil, who died maybe 19 years before Christ was born? It's a very odd choice. And so we're going to do it bit by bit, and ask why Dante chose Virgil. And as we ask that question, it will give us incredible insight into the Middle Ages, and the sort of the intellectual climate, that sort of emotional, mental, spiritual climate that produced Dante. Because in the Middle Ages, Virgil was not only considered the greatest of poets, he was actually considered a sort of proto-Christian, somebody that God used to prepare the Christian world that was coming without him knowing-it's kind of an odd concept. They read-and one of the things I'll share-this sounds kind of crazy but a lot of Christians, if they're looking for an answer from God but they're too lazy to pray, flip open the Bible randomly to a verse, like fortune telling. Well believe it or not, in the Middle Ages, people did that with Virgil's Aeneid. They would open the book up and put their finger there, and try to find wisdom in that-it shows you what high esteem they held Virgil in. We'll be going over that all different reasons that Virgil is a proto-Christian, somebody who would considered the great the great forerunner of epic, the reworker of Homer. So Dante will continue and this will allow me to do what I really love to do and make connections across intellectual and aesthetic history. And again, to speak in Jungian terms, Virgil

becomes this sort of archetype or embodiment of different things.

Z: So what do you think is the greatest value in students immersing themselves in this mindset, that's so different from a postmodern mindset of what health and the mind is?

L: That's a good question, and what's interesting about this is, in some ways, I think it would interest both the modern and the postmodern. And what I mean by that is, in one sense it's gonna interest the modern mindset because Dante gives us a system, something huge. What makes it also postmodern is that even though we're in the system, it's not a sort of cold, logical rational system that we just study dispassionately, that happens so often in modernism. To me, if there's one thing the postmodern person is looking for, one word, I would say that word is connection. That's what we see both in Dante's universe and in his relationship with Virgil, is a desire for connection, sympathy, and a kind of authenticity, an idea that the stars are not just cold and distant and have nothing to do with us, but also not that they control us-this is not fatalism, it's a give-and-take between us. And I think the medieval would have understood in their own way this quantum mechanics, this whole idea that our perception of the world somehow influences the world. They did have a give-and-take understanding of things, and I think that's going to be the takeaway more than anything else-not only what they believed but trying to see in the eyes of the medieval. Something I learned from C.S. Lewis is, rather than just study the medieval mind, why not put on his armor and looking at the world through his visor? That's the idea, how we can see and feel the world they saw. It should be a lot of fun.

Z: How do you think this sort of audience in 2016 will look at the Middle Ages differently, especially since we have the rise of non-institutional spirituality, and the spiritual but not religious movement-how do you think like this sort of crowd is going to interpret Dante and Virgil differently?

L: Helen Luke-this was a while ago-she wrote a book on Dante that was all done with Jungian archetypes. What's amazing about Dante is that it lends itself to a very full reading. I think when we come to Dante, you can understand different aspects of him even though he's coming out of a very specific medieval Catholic mindset, because he touches all things that are universal. I think that all people can find themselves in Dante, find themselves challenged. What does it mean to be human, what does it mean to live in a world-like the word, ecosystem. Dante's ecosystem is just a whole lot bigger.

One of the things I do is use acupuncture, and it's the understanding of how energy is moving through things, and that kind of stuff does actually have relevance for Dante. Because today, the heavens have just become empty and dead. I really do think that we've taken the awe out of the universe. And this is really shocking even if I'm speaking to a specifically Christian audience, like at my university. Again, a lot of Christians have sort of bought into this sort of Enlightenment view of things, this sort of dead world. But that wasn't really even the Christian view if you go back several hundred years ago, so I think this is the kind of thing that challenges people of all different religious or actually no religious background, that these things can go together-a sort of scientific observation of the universe but also an engagement with it. The way I put it is, for the medievals the universe was their home. For us, it's just our house. When they looked at the universe, it was not just something to be studied-it was a poem to be enjoyed, and I think it speaks to almost all people from all different cultural backgrounds that we can cut our way into that.

Z: Do you think that putting it in Jungian terms kind of gives it this more universal character?

L: I think it does, when we step back-that's why I find archetypes so helpful-when we step back, we can see how these ideas persist and pop up. The most obvious example would be someone like Obi Wan Kenobi from Star Wars-he's no different than a sensei, a master of martial arts-we immediately recognize this type. One of the things we're going to have a lot of fun doing, especially in the first lecture, is look at how many words we use today come from that universe. Barring down how many words we still use today-even a word like influenza that comes from influence...these words actually go back to the influence that the different planetary spheres have on us-how these all go back to the planets. It's really exciting, it's what I call the synthetic vision, drawing together rather than cutting up. Our meddling intellect misshapes the beautiful forms of things we murder to dissect-and there's something very dissecting about the Western mind. I think people would be shocked how Eastern the Middle Ages seems, how holistic-so I think there's a meeting of the two in Dante.

Z: This is such an interesting topic to teach, especially since our society now is obsessed with STEM and the natural sciences, the quantitative sciences, and it's so interesting to see that maybe these things aren't necessarily at odds with the religious and the spiritual and the awe of the universe.

L: Well, they don't answer all questions. In some way they tell us everything and tell us nothing at the same time. They tell everything about our world and nothing about ourselves. And Dante tells us more about ourselves-again, what does it mean to be human. Not just what it's like to have the body parts of a human being, but what does it mean to be human. And the West confuses knowing what something is made of with knowing what something is. I can tell you what I'm made of, so much flesh and sinew and bones, and I hope that that's not who I am.

Z: Do you see this in your classes as well-among a crowd of twenty year old students-that they are also seeking this meaning, even while they're constantly being told they should proceed profitable professions?

L: That is a good point. I think a lot of people that major in business or medicine or nursing and things like that, I think the regular work they dive into at first but then they realize there's stuff to do with life, we have to answer these questions. What's interesting is that in the degree courses, I find that a lot of their biggest clients, like in the Jung Center, are doctors, lawyers, businessmen, engineers in their sixties, seventy's or eighty's-and what happened is they're people that when they were younger did something very technological and very job-oriented. And I personally find that to be the audience I enjoy the most, because these people are often hungrier for this than maybe the English major that's twenty years old, who doesn't quite realize how important this will be since they don't have those years of experience.

I think there are people who actually have done the practical thing and done well at it, but they're realizing that there's other dimensions. The way I like to put it is that business, medicine-these things have survival value-but things like the humanities, the kind of lectures you have at the Jung Center, give value to survival. Because they give value to survival and people realize that they're just as important as to who they are here. We are complex creatures and we can get by with creature comforts, but we're not going to be satisfied ultimately-there's something deeper, there's something eternal that needs that "who am I," "what is my purpose here in the world." We are haunted by these things, to go beyond just a simple Euclidean world.

I think I'm up for a couple of Tuesdays in September. If this does well and there's interest, next year I'll follow up with Dante's Inferno, taking us level by level.