

COELHO, from page 1

which may come as a shock given the solace his novels have provided for so many.

At the time, Coelho should have been on top of the world – a happily married bestselling author. Instead, he was suffocating in his “comfort zone.”

“It looked like I had no more challenges in life,” he explains. “This is not good because life is a constant challenge. People tend to stay in the comfort zone because it is safe [but] if you don’t accept challenges you are dead!”

This diagnosis does not bode well for Western society, where lives are dictated by TV schedules and people are trapped by routine. By Coelho’s definition, we are not really living.

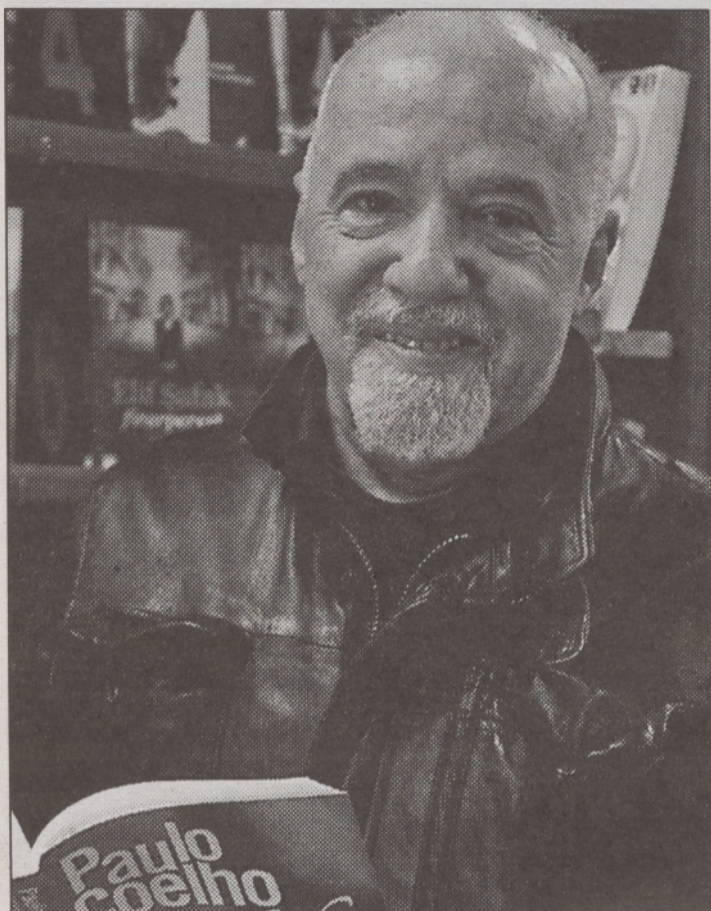


PHOTO COURTESY OF PAULO COELHO

Revolutionizing how authors interact with their readers online, Coelho spends hours each day posting regular blog entries and replying to user comments. Last year he was declared the second most influential Twitter user in a survey carried out by Forbes Magazine. “More influential than Lady Gaga and Barack Obama,” he says, laughing.

“Let’s not generalize, Steven,” he scolds, playfully. “Many people, but not everyone, otherwise I would not have any readers! It’s a tendency we have, and we have to fight against it.”

As “Aleph” topped bestselling charts in countries as diverse as Brazil, Serbia and the United States, it seems one question he must be asked constantly is unavoidable: What is the secret of his success?

“There is no reason!” he retorts. “Reasons you give for deceptions. You can give a thousand reasons to justify deceit but you never can explain success.”

“Don’t ask me also, ‘What do I do with my money?’” he chides. “Everyone asks a lot of ‘how,’ they don’t ask ‘why.’ How did you become rich? How did you become a

bestseller? How did you become a journalist? Just changing how to why makes a lot of difference to life.

“All my books, and this I guarantee, I put the same enthusiasm and love,” he continues. “Having said that, you can imagine if I thought about half a billion people (reading my books) I would be paralyzed. It’s natural that we try to please everybody, so we cannot think about this.”

Born in 1947 in Rio de Janeiro to a middle class family, Coelho was committed to a mental institution three times by his parents from the age of 17. Rejecting their wishes for him to become a lawyer, Coelho lived as a hippie until 1974 when his subversive politics attracted the attention of the Brazil’s military dictatorship, who imprisoned and tortured him, leading to a

fracture in his otherwise unwavering Catholic beliefs.

“I totally lost my faith,” he admits. “I thought, this cannot happen to me. This is not fair, this is not just, God does not love me. It took me seven years to get rid of this experience.

“When you are in jail and you are tortured, you don’t exist anymore,” he continues. “After you are released the prison remains in your soul.” But since a person is the sum of his experiences, can Coelho consider

his suffering an important part of his spiritual journey toward the man he would become?

“I doubt, Steven,” he sighs. “Probably my period in the mental institution was very useful for me, but I don’t think you need to be arrested and tortured to arrive where you need to arrive. This is the only thing that I would gladly erase from my past.

“I see friends who never ever recovered from this. For every three people who succeeded in overcoming their ordeal, seven are broken for life. Nothing justifies being arrested (simply because) you have a different idea.”

Coelho’s ideas are still being suppressed by some regimes. For example, his work is

outlawed in Iran.

But what is it about his books that warrants them being banned? “Why they are dangerous? Ask them, ask them!” he exclaims. “Any idea may be dangerous. It depends on the culture that absorbs it. Writing implies the revolution of the writer itself. So I don’t know why some books are banned here or there. I don’t ask questions - I have Internet, don’t worry.”

A proud Internet pirate, Coelho is notorious among his publishers for distributing much his work online for free. And anticipating that “Aleph” would be banned in Iran, he posted a prominent link on his website for the Farsi translation of the book. “You won’t believe me,” he teases, “but we have had 317,000 downloads of this Farsi edition.”

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“I’m really crossing my fingers for Justin Bieber to use his celebrity to do something,” Coelho adds. “He is very young but I hope he can use his influence to do something good.”

The statement almost sounds facetious, but the sentiment is sincere. Believing that art has the potential to unite humanity, Coelho primarily uses his blog to share stories from around the world and encourage others to do the same with whatever creative outlets available to them.

“At this present moment, all bridges are collapsing: economic, political, social. There is only one bridge still standing – the cultural bridge,” Coelho says. “I may not understand your political system, I may not understand your religion but I understand your story. I understand your painting. I understand your music, your dancing. There you have this bridge.

“It is my responsibility as a writer to do my best not to allow this bridge to collapse.”

“Aleph” is out now. You can follow Paulo Coelho on twitter @paulocoelho.

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