

What I've Learned from Harry Potter

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Reading:

from Book 5 (pp. 243-244) – *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, first session of Defense Against the Dark Arts with new professor, Dolores Umbridge, who is employed by the Ministry of Magic. At the end of the previous book / school year, Harry had witnessed the return to life of the evil Lord Voldemort and seen him kill a fellow student.

[Professor Umbridge said,] “Now, it is the view of the Ministry [of Magic] that a theoretical knowledge will be more than sufficient to get you through your examination, which, after all, is what school is all about..”

[A student named Parvati asks,] “...isn't there a practical bit in our [exam]? Aren't we supposed to show that we can actually do the counterurses and things?”

“As long as you have studied the theory hard enough, there is no reason why you should not be able to perform the spells under carefully controlled examination conditions,” said Professor Umbridge dismissively.

“Without ever practicing them before?” said Parvati incredulously. “Are you telling us that the first time we'll get to do the spells will be during our exam?”

“I repeat, as long as you have studied the theory hard enough...”

“And what good's theory going to be in the real world?” said Harry.

“This is school, Mr. Potter, not the real world,” she said softly.

“So we're not supposed to be prepared for what's waiting out there?”

“There is nothing waiting out there, Mr. Potter.”

Sermon:

I have colleagues who frequently preach about the books they're reading – fiction, nonfiction, spiritual memoirs, political commentary, poetry collections, biography, you name it. If they've read it, they can craft a meaningful message from it. I've always been more of the mind that, as Ralph Waldo Emerson told a graduating class of divinity school students in 1838, the task of the preacher is “[to deal] out to the people [her] life—life passed through the fire of thought.”

Now, this is not a comment on the value of one approach over the other, but simply offers a bit of insight into my personality. You see, when it comes to reading, my brain really is a sieve. I do enjoy the *act* of reading, but I simply don't retain the particulars of what I've read. I really do escape into the text, and when I return to the real world I'm gone. It's even worse with

movies—I have been known to ask, on the way from the theatre to the parking lot, “Now remind me, who was it who did that thing in the abandoned building in that last scene?”

But personal experience—the people I meet in the flesh, the things we do with our minds *and* spirits *and* bodies—now, those things stick with me. That’s why the exchange between Professor Umbridge and her students so amuses me... “This is school, not the real world.” (How often can we say, “This is church, not the real world?”)

I tell you all this because it’s a little risky for me personally to preach about a printed work of fiction—not to mention a series that totals over 4,000 pages. And yet, we all know that Harry Potter is a household name. J. K. Rowling’s books about Harry’s seven years as a student of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (if we can actually count the 7th year, eh?) are not an insignificant, irrelevant component of our 21st-century cultural vernacular. And that makes it relevant to *our* context of cultural and religious meaning-making. And, I would argue, practical to the *real world*.

As with any epic work (think “The Bible,” for example) I could choose any number of themes to highlight in what will necessarily be just a surface-scratching commentary on a story with such fun, and often poignant, details. There’s the overarching idea of a hero’s journey (which some would say is debatable) and universal archetypes; there are life and death questions; there is war – and the graphic ways in which Harry learns that war is bloody, personal, sacrificial (all the while *we* in the more-than-half-century since WWII have been “protected” / anesthetized from the real consequences war); there’s a subtext about the influences of nature vs. nurture in the development of character; and, speaking of nature... there’s all sorts of natural imagery throughout the story.

But I’ve chosen three general themes in Harry’s story that I want to commend to you as directly relevant to our Unitarian Universalist worldview: (1) the question of good and evil; (2) the absolute necessity of community / relationships; and (3) the powerful nature of love.

Lest there should be any disappointment later, I should offer a spoiler alert and make it explicitly clear that if you don’t want to hear any details about these books—including the most recent one—then I’ll encourage you to leave and spend some time, perhaps, with our children in their religious education class this morning.

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A reductionist might say that J. K. Rowling’s distinction between good and evil—with Harry and friends on the good side, and Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters on the evil side—is simplistic to the point of lacking any real moral content. (Sawyer) I see it differently, for the potential for evil in Harry is explicitly acknowledged, and I would argue that the potential for original goodness—and even the option of redemption, until the very end—is allowed even in Lord Voldemort. This, for me, was an unspoken message from Dumbledore to Harry in the 6th

year, as they looked back on the life of Tom Riddle—always his choices *could* have been different.

We often mischaracterize the first principle of Unitarian Universalism—that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person—by simplifying it to mean that everyone is inherently good. I think we must be more sophisticated in our understanding of human nature, and recognize that inherent worth and dignity speaks of potential, though not always of reality. That we are born in blessing, not in sin, does not discount the *freedom* we have to choose oppression over justice; greed over generosity; love over hate; or acceptance of one another over judgment and exclusion.

Michael Goldenberg, who wrote the screenplay for the film version of book five—*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*—neatly expresses this theme this way. Harry and his godfather, Sirius Black, are having a conversation midway through the story, as Harry is more and more aware of the direct connection between his and Voldemort’s thoughts.

Harry Potter: This connection between me and Voldemort, what if the reason for it is that I’m becoming more like him. I just feel so angry, all the time. And what if after everything I’ve been through, something’s gone wrong inside me. What if I’m becoming bad.

Sirius Black: I want you to listen to me very carefully Harry. You’re not a bad person.

You’re a very good person, who bad things have happened to. You understand?

[Harry nods his head]

Sirius Black: Besides, the world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters. We have all got both light and dark inside us. What matters is the power we choose to act on. That’s who we really are.

One might argue that Harry’s ultimate task and destiny are too “clear” to him and to us to be meaningful. In real life, sometimes the way *is* clear. Often it is not clear, but sometimes it is. Some critics have argued that the hero’s tale – if Harry is the hero – is hollow because Harry’s destiny is so clear from the beginning. That he must defeat Voldemort, yes. But look at all that isn’t clear, all his mis-assumptions – about Dumbledore, about Snape, about whether the defeat of Voldemort was his only destiny. But as Sirius reminds him (and this part is in the book) – “Yes, but the world isn’t split into good people and Death Eaters...” (*Order of the Phoenix* 302) And no more real is the either/or duality that we so often set for ourselves.

Plus, one of the keys to Harry’s ultimate defeat of Voldemort is that he stops fighting his uniquely terrifying insight into Voldemort’s mind and emotion. He had, in a way, to embrace the evil (or, at least the awareness of that evil) in order to defeat it. We like to pretend that if we just ignore things, they’ll go away or not be true. Not so for Harry. Nor for us in the “real world”.

Now, it is almost trite to say that Harry couldn't have prevailed alone – certainly not without the friendship of Hermione and Ron, and all his Gryffindor housemates, and Hagrid (oh, dear Hagrid!), and the Weasley family, and the Order of the Phoenix, and his mentor Dumbledore... and of course we learn, finally, not without Severus Snape!

Harry is an orphan, raised by his non-wizarding Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, secluded (at least for his first decade or so) to the closet under the stairs. One could argue that Harry could so easily have taken a different path – not knowing the support of real family and friends in those early years, isolated, secluded, hopeless. And yet in the surrogate family of the Weasleys, and of course in the extended community of the wizarding world—especially at Hogwarts—Harry finds a real home, a community of persons with whom he feels free and empowered and *real*.

Is it not all that different from finding a community of faith that feels like one's own spiritual home, like so many of us have found *here*?

The metaphor doesn't stop there, though.

In the final book, as the opposing wizarding forces are truly at war, we read the following exchange between two of the members of the Order of the Phoenix (“Harry’s people”). These two people are wizards, of whom most Muggles (non-wizard humans, the majority of the world population) are unaware...

[Kingsley says,] “Muggles remain ignorant of the source of their suffering as they continue to sustain heavy casualties... However, we continue to hear truly inspirational stories of wizards and witches risking their own safety to protect Muggle friends and neighbors, often without the Muggles’ knowledge. I’d like to appeal to all our listeners to emulate their example, perhaps by casting a protective charm over any Muggle dwellings in your street. Many lives could be saved if such simple measures are taken.”

“And what would you say... to those [~~listeners~~] who reply that in these dangerous times, it should be ‘Wizards first?’” asked Lee.

“I’d say that it’s one short step from ‘Wizards first’ to ‘Purebloods first,’ and then to ‘Death Eaters,’” replied Kingsley. “We’re all human, aren’t we? Every human life is worth the same, and worth saving.” (*Deathly Hallows* 440)

The message is clear—without relationships, without recognizing our interconnectedness, without a community of support, none of us will thrive. Indeed, all of us will suffer.

Which actually leads us to the third, and arguably most powerful theme in this epic... the power of love—real, divine love.

Harry would have been justified in not choosing “the good” – and yet he did, and sustained it, through his relationships, his friends... love made manifest in the world. Dumbledore reminds

Harry throughout his years at Hogwarts that the greatest tool he has against Voldemort is his capacity to love. Neither Harry nor Voldemort actually things much of this particular distinction, and they both dismiss it as meaningless. We are wise enough to see it, however.

In the last book, Harry muses that Dumbledore would have told him he had the power to love, but Harry had instead decided that he had the power to grieve, which Voldemort lacked. Ah, yes, but we—older and wiser as we are—know that grief is not possible without love, that grief is itself borne of love. “Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears,” as the Lebanese prophet Kahlil Gibran wrote.

Of course the story contains lessons about many different aspects and kinds of love.

In the *Half-Blood Prince* we are barraged with incidents of gratuitous snogging. And the highly irrational responses of those who witness such activity. (For those of you not in the know, snogging is kissing... making out... tonsil hockey...)

...[Ron and Harry] found themselves looking at Dean and Ginny, who were locked in a close embrace and kissing fiercely as though glued together.

It was as though something large and scaly erupted into life in Harry’s stomach, clawing at his insides: Hot blood seemed to flood his brain, so that all thought was extinguished, replaced by a savage urge to jinx Dean into a jelly. (*Half-Blood Prince* 286)

If you are older than, say, 20 years, can you not remember the totally overwhelming flood of emotions and hormones and confusion incited by physical attraction? So often we insist on talking about love and sex and relationships such that they seem totally abstract to our kids. It’s no wonder they feel they have friends in Harry and Ron and Hermione. To *them* they can relate, if not to us.

And then there is Severus Snape. Oh, dear Snape. I think perhaps I should write an entire essay just about him. So easy to dislike, and yet so beautifully redeemed, despite his unpleasantness to his death. From Snape I was reminded that we don’t have to *like* or even *respect* in order to *love*. Love, indeed, was his motivation, too.

And I was reminded vividly that even the most unpleasant people – does anyone really *like* Filch? – are loved by someone. (“Mrs. Norris had arrived, unseen, and was twisting herself sinuously around Filch’s skinny ankles.” *Deathly Hallows* 406)

Love has power. From the first book to the last, we are reminded that Harry’s mother’s love for him is what saved his life, and what has kept him protected from death. But it’s not just Lily’s love for her child. It’s the love manifest in every relationship that sustains and strengthens Harry on the journey – with his friends, especially Ron & Hermione, of course; with the

Weasleys, his surrogate family; with the community and family that is Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; and even, in the end, the somewhat distorted sense of love that his cousin Dudley finally manages to express to Harry in the final book: “I don’t think you’re a waste of space.” (*Deathly Hallows* 40)

But you know, really, the bottom line for me, as a minister who wants to encourage especially her young people to be devout, free-thinking Unitarian Universalists—accepting truth not because someone else tells them it is so, but because they know in the fabric of their being that it is so—is that the Harry Potter story is a lovable, engaging universal story... yes, like many others before it.

Far from being merely theoretical (thank you, Dolores Umbridge), the story animates—in a fun, engaging, fantastical way—truths that we affirm in our real lives. That every human being is born inherently worthy, and with the responsibility to choose right over wrong; that we are all part of the human family, and the even-larger family of life, interconnected in ways that transcend our human understanding; that justice for all—and not just for those we identify as “us”—is the goal toward which we must cooperatively aim; that we must encourage and support one another in our spiritual journeys; that the search for truth and meaning must at once be free, unbounded, and also undertaken responsibly.

But perhaps most importantly, the Harry Potter story is important because of how we have reacted to it. Because it has engaged us, captivated us, set our imaginations and our emotions on fire. We can have lofty debates about its quality as literature, but the debate is not necessarily relevant—not in the real world, in the lives of real kids (no matter their chronological age) for whom it has been an escape, a map, a friend, a story of hope and ultimate triumph.

A couple weeks ago, columnist Diane Cameron wrote a piece offering some end-of-summer reading advice. Ignore the stack of books you promised yourself you would read to grow, to better understand yourself, to improve your relationships or your parenting skills. “Hands-down,” she said, “the single best summer book is *Anna Karenina*. With Leo Tolstoy’s tale you get everything in one: romance, history, a relationship how-to book, and the best management advice you’ll ever read.”

“But, you may insist, fiction can’t improve your real life. With all due respect, you’re wrong. When we read, ‘to escape,’ it’s not *from* life but *to* life. Fiction gives us the assurance that the story that we love most—our own—is worthy.” (Cameron)

And while I am inclined just to say “Amen” there, we must close with Harry, and Dumbledore. Final words of wisdom...

“Tell me one last thing,” said Harry. “Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?”

Dumbledore beamed at him, and his voice sounded loud and strong in Harry's ears even though the bright mist was descending again, obscuring his figure.

“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?” (*Deathly Hallows* 723)

And now... Amen.

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