

## **HARRY POTTER, THE SEQUEL: DOING THE RIGHT THING**

**A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene  
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
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### **Reading**

*Some people and places from Harry Potter's world:*

The Great Hall of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry:

Harry had never even imagined such a strange and splendid place. It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles that were floating in midair over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting.... Dotted here and there among the students, the ghosts shone misty silver. ...Harry looked upward and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard Hermione whisper, "It's bewitched to look like the sky outside." (*Stone*, 116)

A description of the Dark Lord, after being stripped of his powers:

It was hairless and scaly-looking, a dark, raw, reddish black. Its arms and legs were thin and feeble, and its face—no child alive ever had a face like that—flat and snakelike, with gleaming red eyes. (*Goblet*, 640)

Albus Dumbledore, wizard headmaster of Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft:

He was tall, thin, and very old, judging by the silver of his hair and beard, which were both long enough to tuck into his belt. He was wearing long robes, a purple cloak that swept the ground, and high-heeled, buckled boots. His blue eyes were light, bright, and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles and his nose was very long and crooked, as though it had been broken at least twice.

### **Sermon**

Harry Potter, skinny kid with glasses and unruly black hair, raised by emotionally-abusive, gross and disgusting Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon Dursley. Harry Potter, the boy who lived, seemingly miraculously, through an attack by the unimaginably-evil wizard Voldemort, an attack which killed Harry's parents—but mysteriously turned the Dark One's power back upon him, leaving him with no body

from which to practice his dark craft. (And leaving Baby Harry with a lifetime lightning-shaped scar on his forehead.)

Harry, rescued at age eleven by the astounding news that he is a wizard and gets to go to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Introduced to a world of shining—and darkly terrifying—magic and humanity: magical creatures like Buckbeak the hippogriff, huge and noble flying horse with eagle head and wings and talons; joke shops with Dungbombs and Nose-Biting Teacups; Quidditch, a complicated game played on flying broomsticks, with four balls, at which Harry excels; Hogwarts headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, with twinkling blue eyes, a whimsical sense of humor, *and* the power to make Voldemort afraid; Hogwarts Potions teacher, Severus Snape, who hates Harry with a relentless hatred and picks on him and his friends like a nightmare version of the “unfair teacher.”

Harry’s world includes loyal and trustworthy friends Ron and Hermione; the Weasley family, who love him in a way his non-wizard (Muggle) aunt and uncle absolutely did not; vicious school bully Draco Malfoy and his henchmen, the big, stupid Crabbe and Goyle. Harry’s world includes fun, disappointment, mischief, comradeship, bullying, adventures, and the ongoing, world-shaking war between good and evil.

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The other day at lunchtime in a restaurant, I saw someone I like and respect, a man of a good deal of learning, with an analytic mind and a voracious appetite for knowing and understanding. He and his family don’t attend church much, so he is often slightly apologetic when I see him—but always warm, usually commenting that he’ll be there soon.

Thinking of how intellectual he is, I said, “Great! Although you may not want to come this Sunday, since I’m preaching about Harry Potter.”

He looked surprised, then very pleased, and said, “Harry Potter?!? My kids love Harry Potter—I love Harry Potter! Maybe we’ll all come!”

What is it that makes these stories so compelling? What draws so many of us, of all ages and habits of mind, to read these four books (out of seven, when the series is finished) with such interest and satisfaction?

(I read a colleague’s sermon on the books, and he notes that the author, J.K. Rowling, never uses the subjunctive mood of verbs.... (Sawyer) But I doubt that’s the fascination.)

The story is well-written, understandable to all without ever being “only children’s literature.” It is filled with adventure and fun and suspense and humor and excitement. These are good reasons for a book or series to be universally-attractive—but not enough in themselves to explain the great pull of the Harry Potter books.

What Harry Potter’s adventures do for us is to give us a compelling, highly readable vehicle for looking at the religious questions of good and evil. Good and evil as we run into it in our regular lives, as well as when we think about it in terms like “Dumbledore” and “Voldemort,” or “God” and “the Devil,”

All people, of all ages, wonder consciously and unconsciously, Why do bad things happen to good people? What does it mean to be a good person, to be the kind of person each of us wants to be in our hearts? How are we supposed to act when we come up against evil, against people who hurt others for fun, people who love to see unfairness

happen and who enjoy seeing others in pain? What are we supposed to be like when we come up against those who want absolute power, who want to do whatever they want to do, no matter what harm happens to others?

The lives and adventures of Harry and his friends and his acquaintances and his enemies give us hope and inspiration. They show us how good and bad people act, how we may choose to act.

There is a movement among certain religious people to try and ban the Harry Potter books, supposedly because they encourage witchcraft and wizardry, which is forbidden in the Bible. (Deuteronomy 18: 9-14) The disapprovers allow that the good people in the books are good—kind, compassionate, wise, strong, brave—but they disapprove, because the Potter books don't say that these virtues come from God.

This is a strongly-held position, but we Unitarian Universalists need not be concerned about it—except, of course to defend the books' presence in schools and libraries!. We do not believe that every word of the Bible is literally true, because we know it was written over thousands of years, by human beings in different cultures.

And—more significantly—we find it more important to speak of human beings making choices on earth than we do to say exactly who or what leads us to make these choices. All of us are led to good acts by something higher than our “usual” selves, and many of us call that higher moral force “God”—but such a naming is not as important as the choosing itself.

#### *Choosing.*

Right at the end of the second book, Albus Dumbledore says, “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” (*Chamber*, 333) This is one of the most important lines in all four books—maybe *the* most important, morally speaking. At the end of the fourth book, when a student has been killed in an encounter with Voldemort (the stakes keep getting higher as the books go along), Dumbledore reminds us again that our choices make a huge difference. He tells the Hogwarts student body, “Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory.” (*Goblet*, 724)

Harry makes moral choices, even though he is no angel of perfection. He never acts like some kind of saint, always feeling kind and forgiving toward everybody. He has hateful feelings just like the rest of us. In the first book, the author tells us, “Harry had never believed he would meet a boy he hated more than Dudley [his spoiled, mean-as-dirt, piggy cousin], but that was before he met Draco Malfoy.” (143) He and Hermione and Ron, best friends, have disagreements that lead them to barely speak to each other.

He has a lot of doubts and insecurities about himself, never feeling 100% confident about being able to do what he sees he has to do. (He once says, early on, “If [I'd] once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick [me] around like a football?”)

He breaks school rules, sometimes to fight against Lord Voldemort, but at other times for more human reasons—like the time he uses the Cloak of Invisibility and the Marauders' Map to sneak out of the school and go to the wizard village of Hogsmeade, with its fabulous candy store and joke shop and great pub.

In other words, Harry Potter, the great wizard, is as human as you and I are. Think about yourself for a moment, as honestly as you can. Do you ever have really mean, hateful feelings about other people, when you'd like something really bad to happen to them? I do. Ever feel insecure and scared about whether you can do something, or be what you want to be—ever feel nervous that other people will think you're stupid or incompetent? I do. Ever do things you know are wrong, just because you want to do them...? [I don't think I'll admit to that one, as your minister....!]

But Harry, this scrawny, sometimes-hateful, often-insecure, regular kid (from a terribly deprived background!) makes choices that come from a great heart, and he gives us hope that we can do it, too. We may feel that our great heart comes from being in tune with the Spirit of Life, the Great Holy Mystery, God—as I do. We may feel that it comes from the love and support and honest criticism of our friends—I believe that, too. Or we may feel it comes just from inside ourselves. Harry doesn't talk about the source of his choices, he just acts from the goodness that lives side by side with the other stuff—we can do it, too.

Harry chooses, from his generous and brave heart, to help others, even when it puts him in danger, or makes him lose an advantage.

Ron joins him at one point in the first book, when they hear Hermione scream and know she is going to be killed by the twelve-foot, foul-smelling, club-wielding troll from which they have just escaped. The author says, "It was the last thing they wanted to do [go back], but what choice did they have?" They manage to save her (getting troll boogers on Harry's wand in the process!), but are about to get in major trouble from teachers. Hermione, who is the best student in the whole school, and sort of a goody-two-shoes, *lies* to the teachers, taking the blame for the boys' being where they shouldn't have been. All three kids choose to do things that are hard for them, to save and help each other.

In the fourth book, Harry is involved in the Triwizard Tournament, a competition among Hogwarts and three other wizard-training schools. Harry gets some inside information for the first task, information one other contestant does not have—so he tells him, in the interests of fairness, even though it takes away Harry's advantage. In the second task, he believes others are in danger, and takes the time to see that they are saved—using precious time, thus allowing others to win.

Most of us, when we look at the best that is in our hearts, find there concern and love for others—concern and love that make us go beyond our usual comfortable ways. I know of one child in this congregation, whose sorrow for all the people killed in the New York City bombings, for all the innocent being killed in Afghanistan, gives him terrible nightmares and makes him unable to sleep well. One of our teenagers serves on an important church committee (just as another did before him), taking his responsibility to his religious community very seriously, even though he has the incredibly busy schedule of a UU teenager. There is at least one person in this Fellowship who would just snort if we suggested she was doing anything virtuous, just because she regularly travels across the state to visit a mentally-ill friend who is institutionalized.

Harry's example helps us remember that we, too, can make good choices, generous choices, kind choices—even though we are also sometimes self-centered or mean-spirited, or have had troubles in our lives.

Harry sticks up for the weaker, too, the less fortunate and capable, the picked-on people of his world. Neville Longbottom is a terrible klutz, an incredibly inept wizarding student, a perfect target for the bullies and meanies of the Hogwarts world. At one point, Harry offers the miserable Neville his last Chocolate Frog and says, "You're worth twelve of Malfoy."

Do we follow this fine example? When we hear someone at school or work being picked on—in front of them or behind their back—can we be like Harry and speak right up in defense? Even if the person really *is* inept, or a "dork"? When we hear comments or words that put down a class of people—"That's so gay!" "He Jewed him out of it" "Don't be an Indian giver"—do we speak up? It is hard to do, no question about it, because others may turn on us. But Harry—a guy who shares most of the weaknesses we all have—does it. The world around him is better because of his moral choices. We can make our world better, too.

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I hope everyone keeps on reading and re-reading Harry Potter. There's a lot of fun to be had in the books, from the fabulous magical Hogwarts feasts, through smart-aleck chess sets of living pieces that comment on players' abilities, through Nearly-Headless Nick, the ghost who can't join the Headless Hunt because the axe didn't quite sever his head, through Platform Nine and Three Quarters, the invisible platform at King's Cross Station, that lets Hogwarts students get to their magical train.

I hope everyone keeps on reading and re-reading Harry Potter because the adventures make terrific reading, and sweep us into a time and place that give us excitement and enjoyment.

And I hope we all keep reading these books because the characters give us religious inspiration, strange as that may seem to some. I love reading the Harry Potter books for fun and excitement, and I also love them because the people in it have the same faults and weaknesses I have, and they still manage to do the right thing, most of the time. If Harry and his friends can choose to help others and make the world better—maybe I can, too.

"It is our choices... that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."  
May we make the right choices, whatever our abilities.

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