

Facing Platform 9 ³/₄
and other Obstacles on Life's Path



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The founder of Forbes Magazine, B. C. Forbes, made this observation: “History has demonstrated that the most notable (people) usually encountered heartbreaking obstacles before they triumphed. They won because they refused to become discouraged by their defeats.”

What we know about obstacles, and their place in us and among us here in the West can be informed by the Hindu tradition. A major deity in Hinduism is Ganesh, Lord of Obstacles. You see a statue of Ganesh, of elephant form, on the altar this morning. Now, Ganesh is both placer and the remover of obstacles – this is his role in the ongoing creation of life. And anytime the Hindu people begin something new or endure difficulties in life, they turn to Ganesh for hope and for direction. I am not Hindu, but I am drawn to this tradition that inter-relates obstacles with the human condition, both the existence of the difficulties as well as the emergence from them. I know, as you all know, that there is no life without obstacles – without troubles great and small – without *stuff* in our path, things to trip over or run smack into, or the other way obstacles show themselves: as a lack of *stuff* when we need it – an absence of courage or money or health or skill or love or hope.

Ever since I was fortunate enough to find Unitarian Universalism, and to be drawn to its pluralistic nature, which encourages us to find inspiration from all the world’s wisdom stories – I have held faith in one of the first things I learned from Hinduism – an ancient tradition which dates

back some 1500 years before the common era, is the world's oldest living religion, and the third most practiced upon the face of the earth. Hinduism teaches that a man or woman is wise to meditate upon these things: birth, death, decay, sickness and error. For none of us will escape facing those. They are part of the stories of the human experience; present in myth and narrative across time and space. Think of Moses, or Joseph. Odysseus; Little Red Riding Hood, King Arthur, Pinocchio, and so on. These stories, and the one we will explore today support the wisdom of Father Alfred D. Souza, who wrote:

For a long time it had seemed to me that life was about to begin - real life. But there was always some obstacle in the way, something to be gotten through first, some unfinished business, time still to be served, a debt to be paid. Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that these obstacles were my life.

The story we turn to now is a contemporary myth, the tale of Harry Potter, a tale of finding true self, and of triumph over obstacles great and small. Like so many of us when we are young, Harry Potter did not know who he was, or have a sense of who he was born to become. Orphaned at a young age, his childhood had been sad and lonely. But there comes a time when all the obstacles, the difficulties, the pain of his first 11 years, must give way to the force of his own unfolding. He is being called to take his place in the world, at Hogwarts, the great school for wizards (which it

turns out that Harry is). Harry's Uncle Vernon, who has custody of Harry, refuses to let Harry go. And to this, Hagrid, the great half-giant, and a true friend of Harry from the beginning, declares: "If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him", growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself..."

In all of us are lives waiting to be lived, true selves waiting to unfold. For as long as we live. From Harry Potter we learn that there are times when, no matter what forces seem to conspire to stop us, we must face who we were born to be, face our own unfolding future.

And isn't that how it is with finding our way through and past, over and around, the obstacles of our lives? Be they to do with health, or money, or work, or life or love, gain or loss, or complete sea change, it is in the process of moving through them that we do our most important learning and becoming, if we are paying attention. Harry Potter, who at age 11 after a tragic childhood, learns that he is really a wizard – is paying attention. Still, he can't quite bring himself to believe that he could be more than his past, or move beyond all he has ever known. When he wakes up the morning after Hagrid comes for him– he denies what he has learned:

“It was a dream,” he told himself firmly. “I dreamed a giant called Hagrid came to tell me I was going to a school for wizards. When I open my eyes I’ll be at home in my cupboard.” There was suddenly a loud tapping noise. *And there’s Aunt Petunia knocking on the door,* Harry thought, his heart sinking. But he still didn’t open his eyes. It had been such a good dream.”

Sometimes, in getting beyond the obstacles of our lives, we have to believe that there *is* a beyond – that another story, not the one we know so well, lies waiting. In a sense, like Harry, we have to believe in magic – to trust in that which we cannot fully see, to trust that our story will unfold as it should. I believe that the deities of all the world’s religions, including Ganesh, exist to embody and help us make manifest this truth.

But it is not so simple, especially for the intellectuals among us, we who live so much of the time in our minds. For all their gifts, our minds can create their own obstacles – laying out before us in an all too neat list, every single reason we might not succeed, or what we’ll regret if we do, noting all the possible pitfalls of our dreams or hopes or best future. In these times, as I spoke about in my last sermon, it is useful to remember that our intellect, our reason, does not have all the information, that sometimes, we must let go of what we are so sure we know if we are to find our own way to *Platform 9 ¾*.

Let me tell you about that platform, which Harry has to face – if he is to enter his new future. Harry first learns about it on the ticket to *Hogwarts*, where it announces that the train which will take him to his new school leaves *King's Cross* from *Platform 9 ¾* at 11 in the morning. Harry's uncle, the portly and unkind Uncle Vernon snorts when he hears this, and jeers at Harry when they get to the station:

“Well, there you are, boy. Platform nine – platform 10. Your platform should be somewhere in the middle, but they don't seem to have built it yet, do they? Harry looks, his heart sinking, as he takes in that “there was a big plastic number nine over one platform and a big plastic number ten over the one next to it, and in the middle, nothing at all.” “Have a good term,” said Uncle Vernon with an even nastier smile. He left without another word.”

The Dursleys laughed at Harry as they drove away. And Harry is left alone. But Harry knows, because he has already faced so much, something about how, when you're deep in trouble, to face difficulty. That is a teaching obstacles bring us, again and again – if we are paying attention. It is why so many traditions, including the Hindu, remind us to ponder the ways of hardship, to reflect often on the obstacles before us.

The Native American tradition, in the teaching of the Oglala Sioux, gives us this saying: “there is a road of good, and a road of difficulty. And

where those roads meet, that place is a holy place.” When Harry is standing in that train station, facing a wall of stone, Harry is at a holy place. And there he has a choice – as we all do when we stand at the crossroads. He can live into that not-knowing, he can follow his own desire and hope for a different future, and trust that there is more in front of him than what he can see. It is hard, but for Harry the pull of his own unfolding self is too great. Though not used to speaking to strangers; because of his lonely, reclusive life Harry finally, after watching three red haired boys somehow disappear into that wall, admits he has to ask for help, consoling himself that, “there was nothing else for it”.

Excuse me”, he says to Molly Weasley, mother of those boys. And in Mrs. Weasley Harry finds his second true friend and the closest thing to a mother he will ever know. She instructs him, not only in how to get onto the platform, but in how to receive kindness and care: “Not to worry,” she says. “All you have to do is walk straight at the barrier between platforms nine and ten. Don’t stop and don’t be scared that you’ll crash into it, that’s very important. Best to do it in a bit of a run if you’re nervous.”

Of course, thoughts of fear come anyway, as they do always when we take great chances, but Harry is determined to reach beyond the life he has had, to reach for the dream that was *so good*. He closes his mind to the fear, his eyes to the brick, and he sets off at a run. For us too, there are times when if we are to discover the future that we were meant to live, we must

close our eyes and run forward, trusting that what we need, what we seek, and who we are meant to be will be there when we emerge.

When Harry opens his eyes he can hardly believe what he sees. “A scarlet steam engine was sitting next to a platform packed with people. A sign overhead said “Hogwarts Express, Eleven o’clock.” Harry looked behind him to where the barrier had been, with the words *Platform Nine and Three-Quarters* on it. He had done it. Thus begins Harry’s new story and his true unfolding.

Some obstacles we face as a result of our birth or circumstances in early life – they are our inheritance, for better or worse. Others, the ones that matter most as we grow older, we take on ourselves. These can come in the form of closing our minds, becoming sure we have all the facts, all the information we need and shutting down, closing off the future in front of us. And yet, one of the greatest gifts of being human is our ability to grow our minds, to call upon our best thinking and our wildest imagination. This may mean creating a way through whatever brick walls we face, refusing to be turned back from our own good dreams, or life’s dreams for us - until we have emerged from our old selves into the new, and discovered the “magic” that lives in us and around us. Without being a “spoiler” for those of you who have not finished this marvelous series, this is Harry Potter’s path as he faces evil incarnate in this modern day myth. It is a story of triumph – of the power of human beings to persevere, to find

ever new ways to defeat the forces which would destroy life in its full unfolding. It is a tale of learning to use everything we are given, and all our friends, even those who seem to thwart us at every turn, in service to life, in service to the greater good.

Sometimes, when we are responsible for the obstacles before us, when we had a part in placing them there, it is not our minds which are closed – it is our hearts. It is our ability to love and to feel, to be affected at our core and to give of ourselves out of this deep place, that is stifled. The great hope of Harry Potter’s story, and all the stories like it that live in legend and myth– is of rising above one’s early circumstances, of learning, even if we are older, even if we are old, how to open our hearts – how to feel the pain, not only our own, but of others, of all the others. It is the greatest story of all – of becoming who we were born to be, despite what happens to us along the way. Isn’t this what we all want? Some of us will endure losses so deep, so profoundly grievous, that for a long, long time, sometimes even for the rest of our lives, our task is to emerge from them, to live into a good future, to become our true and best selves even when this means facing a wall of sorrow, and learning at last to trust in the magic on the other side.

Some of you have asked me, why do I love the story of Harry Potter so much? Why do any of us love stories? I think it is because something in them calls out to us, tells us something we have forgotten, or never learned

well. Something in the stories speaks our truth, and shows us what is possible. That's the magic of stories. It's embodied in Ganesh - the belief that we don't have to do it all alone. But, truth be told, I love the story of Harry Potter because in no small way, it is my story. I was not born a wizard or a witch, just an ordinary girl, in southern California. But my early years were difficult, like Harry's. The reasons were different, but the loneliness and the deprivation were not. And then one summer, when I was 11 (like Harry was 11) everything changed. I went away to the island of Catalina, to summer camp. And all that I knew about my world, and my life, was never to be the same. I did not become magical, but in the beauty and the steadfastness of that island, to which I returned to every summer, and finally returned, for some years, to live, I found my true home, and discovered my true self.

The island became to me a castle of hope, as Hogwarts was for Harry, an enchanted place where I found friends, caring adults, and the compelling, life-giving presence of the Catalina hills and canyons, and the great wild sea. No flying ghosts caught my attention, but the bouganvilla at dawn did, and the Catalina Ironwood in the wind, and the young adults teaching with a passion I had never seen before did, and how they listened, really listened, to me. It was a magic beyond any I had known. I may have said this before, that the island is, and always will be for me, a part of what

Wallace Stegner has termed “the geography of Hope”. I believe we all need places like that.

Until I found Unitarian Universalism, with its own magical and true stories, many still unfolding, and its own hopeful home, I was not sure I would ever again find another community like the island, one which could make magic out of sheer air, and make obstacles diminish right in front of my eyes. I still face obstacles, of course, some far graver now in many ways than when I was young. But I do face them. Like Harry, like the 11 year old I was then, I turn to see what I must go through. I ask for help when I need it. And I keep believing in the incredible magic of the future unfolding.

What obstacles lie in front of you? Which has the world given you? What has Ganesh pulled out of his bag of tricks to block your way, your full becoming? What can you face in yourself that may be holding you back? What name would you give to the crossroads of good and difficulty where you stand – to that holy place? And will you remember, whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey, that no matter what you are facing – that always a part of you stands here – in this community, built so long ago, and sustained throughout all its years to be a home for the spirit, a home for the real and human magic of hope, a home where new stories are born every day, a home to ground you through birth, death, decay, sickness and error, a home and a holy place.

I will close with the words of a wise woman who knows more about stories, be they of the magical boy who lived, Harry Potter, or of our own lives, than most: Clarissa Pinkola Estes, in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. She says, and I say with her, to all of you:

I hope that you will go out and let stories happen to you, and that you will work them, water them with your blood and tears and your laughter, until they bloom, until you yourself burst into bloom.

And let us be a part of your story. For we are. We always have been. Our magic is as real as we make it.

Let us close by singing that wonderful song, in the smaller book, *Singing the Journey*. It is # 1021, *Lean on Me*.