



The Wisdom of Harry Potter

A Sermon by the **Rev. Carolyn L. Price**
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The narrow path had opened suddenly on to the edge of a great black lake. Perched atop a high mountain on the other side, its windows sparkling in the starry sky, was a vast castle with many turrets and towers." (Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, Chapter 6.)

And so we are introduced to the magical world of Hogwarts, the mythical school of witchcraft and wizardry that is the setting for the Harry Potter books, which have become a sensation among children and adults all over the world. I remember when the second Harry Potter book came out, in July of 1998. I was serving as minister at our UU camp in the mountains, Camp de Benneville Pines. So I was up at camp a day early to meet with the staff. And at our staff meeting we talked about how we all – adults each and every one of us – were disappointed that we had to be up on the mountain the day the new Harry Potter book came out. So we concocted a plan.

Each session when they arrive, children check in at a registration table. The next day, the first day of camp, the dean, a fellow UU from our San Luis Obispo church, and I sat at the registration table. And every time we saw an 8 or 9 or 10 year old (we did this only with kids who we knew from prior camps) happily clutching the Harry Potter book as they checked in, one of us would pipe up “ You know, we’re confiscating all the Harry Potter books. It’s a camp rule that the staff needs to read them first. Camp

rule.” Well, these kids registered shock on their faces for a moment, but being good UU kids, kids we teach well how to think for themselves, looked us straight back in the eye, and at 8 or 9 or 10 years old, said clearly and with confidence, “No way!” But we did get several kids to agree to loan us their books as soon as they were finished.

Harry Potter is a young boy when we meet him. He’s had a wretched upbringing, losing his parents as a baby, and being raised by uncaring, even abusive, relatives. His room is a closet under the stairs. He’s fed stale leftovers and yelled at probably every day of his life. In this “home” Harry is fully the outcast, the unwelcome, the pariah. He has no power. He has no real hope. But everything changes on the day that he turns eleven.

Harry is no ordinary boy, we learn, but a wizard, and not just any wizard, but the only person who has ever survived the death curse laid down the incarnation of evil itself, the dreaded Lord Voldemort, who most wizards and witches are so fearful of that they cannot even say his name, but call him “you know who.” He tried to kill Harry but Harry survived, and this marks him forever. He carries a literal scar of the evil that touched him on his forehead, shaped like a bolt of lightning. Looking at Harry, one cannot miss the scar. It is harder, though, to see the scars that have marked him as a result of living for over a decade with these cruel, unloving people.

This is where the book becomes universal, more than a simple story for children, if there is truly such a thing as a simple story for children. As Unitarian Universalists we have long recognized the power of story as a bearer of truth and a beacon of hope, and as a way of learning and growing. Our movement was instrumental in changing what children did in Sunday school in America. Our great religious educator Sophia Fahs risked her reputation when she stepped outside the accepted bounds of using only bible stories, and brought in folk tales from all around the world, which she compiled into several books used in our Sunday Schools to teach universal truths, to study the great questions, and to learn about the priests and prophets across religious traditions. Her books “From Long Ago and Many Lands” and “Old Tales for a New Day” are still staples in our church school curriculums.

Harry Potter is, like the characters in many stories, a product of the imagination. The author, a woman who is arguably the world’s most popular children’s writer, began her journey as an impoverished single mother on welfare. This story took root in her imagination years before she ever set pen to paper. Before she begun writing in earnest she had created detailed drawings of all the characters and knew most of the plot of the entire 7 novels.

In the Jewish mystical tradition, imagination is understood as a “fierce power ... from God that leads to the divine.” According to Daniel Matt, author of *The Essential Kabbalah*, (Harper, San Francisco, 1996.) when imagination unites “with the grandeur of the mind, the potency of inference, ethical depth, and the natural sense of the Divine, (it) becomes an instrument for the holy spirit.¹”

This morning I’d like to take a look at the ethical and philosophical dimensions of the Harry Potter stories. On face value, these books are a classic tale of the timeless conflict between good and evil. Good is personified most clearly in the patriarchal figure of Albus Dumbledore. Dumbledore is the headmaster of the great school of wizardry, Hogwarts, and is a true champion of the power of good.

In the books, as in life, we learn that is not always easy to be good. Though we are all born with that capacity, even – we find out in the story – the evil Lord Voldemort had that potential – we must each one of us, for ourselves, and often for much of our lives, make the choice to draw from deep within the well of goodness that we are born with, and by our acts and our choices refill that well from the good of the world in which we live.

Harry Potter is a story about trust, for without trust there can be no goodness. Harry knows very little about trust when he first comes to Hogwarts, when he begins his coming of age process. He has had no experience with people who are good, save for the first year of his life with his parents. This time with them, however, we learn in the novels, is worth more than the briefness of the experience might suggest. For by the time Harry is 15 months old, he has been marked both by evil, in the form of the scar that Lord Voldemort gave him, but also marked by the utter goodness and the love of his parents.

Both parents fought for his life, but his mother died when she could have chosen to live. The evil Voldemort was not going to kill her, just Harry and his father. But she could not bear this, and so gave her own life to protect Harry, acting out of profound maternal love. And the sheer power of that love turned out to be a force of magic all its own, which, though it left no physical mark, changed Harry’s fate forever.

Here is a pivotal scene, near the end of the first book, when after a narrow brush with death, in a dark encounter with evil in human form – Voldemort – Harry wonders why he has again survived, why the evil could – literally this time - not touch him. Confused and afraid, he comes to the wise and caring Albus Dumbledore. Here is what Dumbledore tells Harry:

¹ Matthew Fox, *One River, Many Wells* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam Inc., 2000) p. 219.

“Your mother died to save you (Harry). If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn’t realize that love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign . . . to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin. That evil person, full of hatred, greed, and ambition, could not touch you for this reason. (For him) It was agony to touch a person marked by something so good”

The Sorcerer’s Stone, Chapter 17

There is no magic in this, some would say. Love does leave a mark on us, whether we are loved all too briefly, as Harry was, or whether we are blessed with the abiding love of family and friends for our entire lives. Love leaves a mark – and for Harry, though he was too young even to recall the origin of that mark– it enabled him to survive in a heartless world, living in a dark, dirty closet under the stairs – for an entire decade. Though he couldn’t remember it, love’s mark for Harry was like the memory of a soft song sung to him as a babe, a lullaby from when his world was whole and love was everywhere around him.

But not even in the world of imagination and dim memory can anyone survive forever without love that is in made manifest in the everyday world. And so it is that when this unusual boy turns 11 that he enters the wonderful world of Hogwarts – the school and home that will return him to the embrace of love that every person, but particularly young people, needs to find to grow strong, and to realize the fullness of their own and life’s worth.

Bit by bit Harry is given back the presence of kindness in his life, of caring and gentle adults willing to teach him, and to stand by him. For the first time, he discovers faithful and enduring friends, and he steps closer and closer to knowing human love in all its forms.

At first, this is not easy for him. After years of not having his birthday remembered, let alone celebrated, when he turns 11 Harry meets a character named Hagrid, who comes to take him to Hogwarts. Hagrid barges into Harry’s life, literally breaking down a door where Harry’s aunt and uncle have locked him in, looking more like monster than man, furry and huge and frightening. Here is the scene when Hagrid enters:

“A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.”

But despite his appearance, this massive man, who is at once enormous and enchantingly sentimental – turns out to be full of love for Harry, bringing him the first birthday cake he has ever had. When this happens, as the author describes it:

“Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, ‘who are you?’”

Having no conscious memory of receiving love, Harry cannot recognize it when it is given, and has to ask for help in deciphering this precious gift. *Who are you?*, he asks. *Who are you?*

The story reminds us that is good to not underestimate the power of small acts of kindness, seemingly simple deeds of caring, especially when they come to those who need them. Let me tell you a story of my own: When my husband and I moved to our Santa Barbara home some 17 years ago, I had never lived in a true “neighborhood”. I had never known how it was or why that neighbors became neighbors, in the religious sense of the word, in the way of “love your neighbor, even as you love yourself, and love God”. I had no background to go on of this type of love, except, maybe like Harry, the part-memory part-imagination sense of something like a gentle, swaying soft song of neighborly love, a lullaby of casseroles, and front porches and borrowed sugar.

Some of you know that my husband and I endured years of infertility, then when I finally became pregnant it was with twins, and I lost one of those babies several months into the pregnancy, and shortly after that I was diagnosed with a serious illness, one that threatened the remaining baby. For the rest of my term, I was confined to my bed, not daring to move much, because, as the doctor told me repeatedly, the physiological occurrence that could kill my baby would come without warning, and there was nothing that could be done to stop it. And as I told you about a year ago, that baby was born quite early, and the entire neo-natal intensive care team was there to welcome her, and to take her, if they needed to, to help her. But she was fine. She was fine. And two days later, Thanksgiving Day as it happened, I got to take my baby girl home from the hospital.

Now a couple of the neighbors were aware of our journey through infertility to pregnancy to what is called “high risk” pregnancy, to this premature birth. Though we did not know them well yet, we were all becoming acquainted as we shared bits of our lives with one another, out on the street, as neighbors do. Well, that Thanksgiving Day, my husband and I pulled into our driveway. I was overcome at seeing our house, with my infant daughter tucked safely into her car seat by my side, because finally,

finally we were home. I was seeing a day that I'd thought I might not ever see. My heart was filled.

Then I turned to see something that made my heart overflow, as first our neighbors, Sal and Olivia and their teenage granddaughter, came into our yard. All of them were carrying plates of food, as gifts for us on what was truly a day of thanksgiving. After them, not 10 minutes later, another set of neighbors, Laurie and Russ, came with yet another meal. And then the neighbors at the corner, Ann and John. Before the end of that day, we had five full Thanksgiving meals. And so I learned once more to never underestimate the power in the simple acts of caring that we do for one another.

Being in relationship, for those who for whatever reason did not learn well how to do this when young, like Harry or in some ways like me, and perhaps some of you, is first of all about learning to trust, learning to accept small acts of kindness. It is about learning to recognize caring when it is given and nothing is expected in return. It is about learning to be grateful for love that comes in simple and everyday ways.

Harry has a lot of lessons about this at Hogwarts, where not everyone is good, where evil lurks in faces that appear friendly, where sometimes nothing is as it appears. And at first, Harry cannot trust – as people (or animals) who have been mistreated sometimes cannot.

But Harry has to learn how to do this, he has to learn how to recognize good, and how to make choices that are good, in the face of temptation, doubt, and fear. Much of the six books that make up the story of Harry Potter thus far are about how Harry learns to do this, with increasing maturity. In this sense, Harry's story is everyone's story – for we all must, for all our days, constantly make choices that affect our lives, and the lives of those around us, for better or for worse. And like Harry, we make these choices not in the pure arena of philosophy or the laboratory of an ethics class, but amid the real and lived complexities of our lives.

This is where Hogwarts comes in, and here I quote the scholar Alan Jacobs in the journal *First Things: A Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life*, (January 2000): 35-38. Jacobs tells us:

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is in the business of teaching people how to harness and employ certain powers—that they are powers unrecognized by science is really beside the point—but (Hogwarts) cannot insure that people will use those powers wisely, responsibly, and for the common good. It is a choice, as the thinkers of the Renaissance would have put it, between *magia* and *goetia*: "high magic" (like the wisdom possessed by the magi in Christian legend) and "dark magic."

In the second book, after another near death experience with Voldemort, the Lord of Evil, Harry again goes to Dumbledore whom he has finally learned to trust. He confesses to Dumbledore one of his deepest fears, that the Sorting Hat really meant to put him in the house Slytherin (the house that all dark wizards have come from) where, Harry is terrified, he really belongs. Having survived again the external threat of evil in the form of Voldemort, Harry turns his attention to a deeper fear - of the evil that threatens him from within:

"So I *should* be in Slytherin," Harry said, looking desperately into Dumbledore's face. "The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin's power in me, and it—"

"Put you in Gryffindor," said Dumbledore calmly. "Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. Resourcefulness . . . determination . . . a certain disregard for rules," he added, his moustache quivering ... "Yet the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think."

"It only put me in Gryffindor," said Harry in a defeated voice, "Because I asked not to go in Slytherin. . . ."

"Exactly," said Dumbledore, beaming once more. "Which makes you very different from Voldemort, (who wanted to be in Slytherin when he was at Hogwarts). It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." Harry sat motionless in his chair, stunned.

As when Harry first recognized the power of goodness in the world, in the form of the huge and loving Hagrid, when he comes to see, to really see for the first time the power of goodness within himself, Harry is stunned.

And Harry comes to understand, as many of us here no doubt understand, the conflict between good and evil is never far away, nor is it either in us or completely absent. As UU minister Richard Gilbert has said, "the line between good and evil runs right through the middle of each human heart."²

All of us, like Harry, are challenged, until the day we die, by the choices presented to us. While not as clear, perhaps, as choosing Voldemort or Dumbledore as our role models, always we serve either to uphold life and the common good or to damage or destroy it. The choice is ours. And, as it is

² Richard Gilbert, *The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice*, (Boston: Skinner House, 2000), 73.

for the mythical and magical Harry Potter, so it is for us not always simple or easy to make these choices.

Some of us come to adulthood having been held in the embrace of love our entire lives. We come fully prepared to give love, to receive love, and to devote our lives to goodness and truth. Others, like Harry, knew that embrace for far too brief a time, and the knowledge of that has faded, into a lullaby once sung, in a long ago time and place, more like imagination than a memory. Still others have been hurt by love, and have turned away, forgotten its power, and in so doing, abandoned our own power as well.

For those who struggle like this, we must find places and people in the world that are good and caring, to fill our hearts again, to fill us with the love from which all things began, and the love from which all things proceed. Churches are good for this. And families, especially those we make and choose freely. And friends. Even workplaces and strangers on Main Street can be schools for us, as we learn to recognize the good both within us and outside of us – not only to recognize the goodness, but to act on it, to choose it again and again, until we learn to trust it, both inside us and out in the world.

As Unitarian Universalists we have long stood on the side of goodness, believing that each and every human being is born with worth and dignity, born in the image of goodness, born, the more traditionally religious among us say, in the very image of god. But there is no god at Hogwarts – there is only the potential of human beings to save themselves, to save each other, and to save the world.

And yet we learn that the power of love and goodness – which we see fully embodied in the character of Dumbledore – is somehow stronger than any one person, even the greatest headmaster in the history of Hogwarts.

There comes a time when Dumbledore is forced to leave Hogwarts, to go where he will not be able to protect Harry and the school. And in this scene, we learn something vital about the power of goodness and the embrace of love. In a conversation Dumbledore has lost with one of the disciples of evil, Lucius Malfoy, the author tells us that:

Dumbledore had not taken his bright blue eyes off Lucius Malfoy's cold gray ones. 'However' (he) said, speaking very slowly and clearly so that none of them could miss a word, 'you will find that I will only *truly* have left the school when none here are loyal to me. You will also find that help will always be given at Hogwarts to those that ask for it.'"

And so it is that the point of Harry Potter's story is the same as that of religion, everywhere, to teach us that love bears all things, believes all

things, hopes all things, endures all things... to teach us that love never ends. Even, as so many sacred texts proclaim, even death cannot separate us from love and from the power of love to change us and the world around us for the better.

The message I want to leave you with today I learned again through the Harry Potter stories. Whoever we are, whatever our own stories may be, no matter how far down a dark road we have gone or where we are on our journeys, what is always true is that love was borne into us with our own birth, born when the spirit of life breathed us into being for the first time. And whether we live now consciously and fully in that love's embrace, spreading its goodness wherever we go, or whether we must imagine and remember and again seek out love's power, still this love lives in us and all around us.

Like that lullaby heard so long ago that held us all through the night, love's power lives in us; it cannot die, as long as we are true to its memory, to its story, and to its great, great hope.

