

**United First Parish Church in Quincy  
Sermon for 7/28/07 by Rev. Michelle A. Walsh**

**“The Spirituality of Harry Potter”**

Harry Potter – “The Boy Who Lived,” “Diagon Alley,” “The Journey from Platform Nine and Three-Quarters,” “The Sorting Hat,” “Quidditch,” “The Forbidden Forest,” “The Man with Two Faces” – these are just a handful of chapter titles from J.K. Rowling’s first Harry Potter novel, known here in the United States as *Harry Potter And The Sorcerer’s Stone*, but known in England as *Harry Potter And The Philosopher’s Stone*. If you are among the many Harry Potter fans, those titles are readily meaningful to you because you live partially in another reality already, a larger reality, another world of fantasy and meaning-making that includes witches and warlocks, giants and trolls, boggarts and dementors, owls that deliver mail, a Hogwart’s School of Witchcraft and Wizardry with Houses of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin, invisibility cloaks, unique wands and flying broomsticks, Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans and Chocolate Frogs – muggles and, of course, You-Know-Who.

You gleefully enter this reality whenever a new Harry Potter book or a new Harry Potter movie comes out – or when you happen to see someone, adult or child, reading a Harry Potter book on the subway, at a desk, or perhaps around the fireplace at Ferry Beach, a Unitarian Universalist Association retreat center. At those special moments, you suddenly find yourself with a co-conspirator and you eagerly share your secret knowledge with your new friend. Your conversation becomes filled with odd language and speculation on the fate of different characters – did Albus Dumbledore really die? Is Professor Snape really evil? Will Ron and Hermione get together in the end – and what does that mean for the saying that opposites attract? And what is the real link between Harry and You-Know-Who – otherwise known as He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named or Voldemort? How will it all end in the last book promised, number seven, for which we have so anxiously awaited? [And please don’t tell me – I’m not done yet!]

On the other hand, there are those who remain rather indifferent to all the Harry Potter books and movies – not particularly interested in children’s literature or way too busy with the fret and fever of daily life or other significant priorities, or perhaps offended by the materialism that surrounds any mass phenomenon in our capitalistic culture and annoyed by the cult-like characteristics of some fans. Then there are those who are deeply disturbed by this international phenomenon and somewhat panicked. Noticeably in the latter category are those on the religious right who fear the poisoning of our children’s minds by exposure to what *they* regard as paganism, witchcraft and Devil worship supposedly. So what *is* all of this about and why is it about this *particular* children’s series and not another?

An analysis of the popularity of this series could draw from many angles, but let’s look at some of the spiritual chords being struck. For the record, the Harry Potter series has nothing to do with paganism, Devil worship, or witchcraft as in contemporary Wicca beliefs and practices. But the series does have everything to do with magic and mystery

and a sense of wonder that is deeply connected to a longing we retain from childhood and can remain open to as adults if we both lucky and intentional about it. This is a longing that another famous English children's author, C.S. Lewis of *The Chronicles of Narnia* series, called "Sehnsucht" – a longing for the mysterious, the wonderful and the other-worldly that is so often missing in our day to day fret and fever.

C.S. Lewis was Christian in a progressive, liberal sense and J.K. Rowling is as well, from what little she has chosen to share in the press about her own beliefs. However, the spiritual core of the Harry Potter series is not explicitly Christian so much as it is humanism – a very profound commentary on what it means to be truly human – human in both a personal sense and a political sense. We find this commentary threaded as sparkling gems of wisdom in the highly imaginative, humorous, and creative world Rowling has created with her witches, warlocks and muggles.

Fantasy and science fiction developed as a potent genre for the expression of radical commentaries with the secularization of religion and the development of humanism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. By stripping away the familiar and replacing the familiar with the fantastic, fantasy and science fiction allow a heightened focus on what is truly human – our capacity to feel and to make choices, including the choice to think about our feelings before reacting or not. It is this type of focus on humanism that shines through in the enduring popularity of other cult phenomenon in the scifi-fantasy genre such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek* and *Lord of the Rings* as well.

Let's look at one major theme in Rowling's books – that of the importance of our life choices and of our soul. There is a classic line from the Christian gospel of Mark: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" The Dark Lord Voldemort wants all power and immortality. He fears death most of all and has hidden parts of his soul in 7 different objects called Horcruxes all over the world. Hermione explains in Book 7, from reading a forbidden book called *Secrets of the Dark Arts*, that your soul becomes terribly unstable when you rip it once, let alone 7 times. The only way to put your soul back together again is an extremely painful way – you must be able to feel remorse, which can also destroy you in the process.

But what is the soul in Harry Potter's world? The soul is the repository of the spirit. The root meaning of "spirit" is to breathe and it is synonymous with life, soul, courage, vigor, and the animating or vital principle. It is not surprising, therefore, that the deadly Dementors, guardians of the Azkaban prison, suck the soul, the breath, out of their victims through their mouths – a process which involves sucking out all of the happy memories of their victims and leaving them only with their worst memories and fears, a fate worse than death. One writer has described the dementor as "a cross between the Grim Reaper, a ringwraith from *Lord of the Rings*, and the character in Edvard Munch's painting, 'The Scream.'"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David and Catherine Deavel, "A Skewed Reflection: The Nature of Evil," in *Harry Potter and Philosophy: If Aristotle Ran Hogwarts*, ed. by David Baggett and Shawn E. Klein (Chicago: Open Court, 2004) 135.

In Potter's world, choices have consequences that catch up with the characters sooner or later and there is no perfectly good and no perfectly evil character. Each character struggles with some flaws and each character carries a seed of redemption. This becomes evident in the political structures of the society. One major structure that has been underplayed in the Harry Potter films but grows increasingly important toward the end of the series is the accepted oppression of the elves by the wizarding world, including Harry and his godfather Sirius.

Elves are slaves to their wizarding masters and can be physically and emotionally abused and commanded to do terrible deeds. While Harry had freed one elf, Dobby, in an earlier novel, he does not challenge the oppressive system as a whole (unlike Hermione), nor the particular neglect and abuse his beloved godfather Sirius subjects his own elf Kreacher to. This eventually reaps consequences when Kreacher finds a loophole permitting him to betray Sirius to his death. Dumbledore later tells Harry:

I warned Sirius when we adopted twelve Grimmauld Place as our headquarters that Kreacher must be treated with kindness and respect. I also told him that Kreacher could be dangerous to us. I do not think that Sirius took me very seriously, or that he ever saw Kreacher as a being with feelings as acute as a human's....Kreacher is what he has been made by wizards, Harry... Yes, he is to be pitied. His existence has been as miserable as your friend Dobby's. He was forced to do Sirius's bidding, because Sirius was the last of the family to which he was enslaved, but he felt no true loyalty to him. And whatever Kreacher's faults, it must be admitted that Sirius did nothing to make Kreacher's lot easier....

Sirius did not hate Kreacher. He regarded him as a servant unworthy of much interest or notice. Indifference and neglect often do much more damage than outright dislike...We wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward....

While Rowling spells "Kreacher"'s name with a "K" and a "ch," it is her sense of irony that leads us to consider the sound of his name as spelled like "creature" instead. Kreacher is a creature – a being in creation worthy of respect and dignity, no matter his obnoxious manner. Damage is done when attention is not paid to the feelings and development of every creature and consequences are reaped for every individual in the system that participates in oppression.

Rowling's Harry Potter novels do become darker as Harry ages and grapples with complexity, power, and ambiguity in new ways. Themes of political fascism, racism (in the division of the wizarding world into purebloods and muggle born), and torture are introduced that resonate in our post-9/11 world here in the United States but which probably feel much more familiar to post-World War II Europe. War becomes inevitable as evil rises to power.

Yet hope remains because of an ancient magic that is much more powerful than the darkest of magic – and that is the bond that is created by love as the deepest reality. Evil is parasitic on the good – the dementors live so long as they have the memories of their victims to siphon off and Voldemort lives by inhabiting the body of another or by killing a unicorn and drinking its blood to live a “half-life, a cursed life.” Evil is not an ultimate match for the power of love given freely by family and friends. Harry’s mother, Lily, sacrifices her life protecting her baby and thereby gives him a lasting form of protection. Time and again, the courage and love of family and friends represent a spirituality of hope that shines a light through the darkness. Such a love conquers even death, as Dumbledore tells Harry again and again and remains with one forever as a spiritual power we find within ourselves.

Rowling has written a children’s series of deep spiritual truths found in many religions across the world. She has struck an international spiritual chord for both children and adults through the simplicity of her wise commentary amidst an incredible array of characters and scenarios, large and small in detail, that make her a queen of her chosen genre. Where has this chord been struck for you, those of you who wish to share as Harry Potter fans your own spiritual journeys with this series. But be discrete, remember that some of us have not yet finished Book 7!