

Harry Potter: Facing Your Heritage

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The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene
April 11, 2010**

I am preaching this morning mainly from J.K. Rowling's outrageously successful fantasy novels, written mainly for youth: the Harry Potter series, now a string of movies. For those of you who believe that the dignity of Sunday morning worship requires only traditional or high art sources, not low art or popular culture, all I can say is, I'm sorry. And, Czeslaw Milosz is a pretty good poet, so perhaps that will work for you. Joni Mitchell isn't such a bad poet, either. We'll be hearing from each of them in this sermon.

I have joined millions of youth and quite a few adults in reading the Harry Potter books, initially for an escape. When I've needed a real break from work I've picked up Harry Potter. It didn't take me long to realize that this escapist holiday reading had some great material for sermons and for life, for Rowling has a wonderful knack for inventing magical metaphors for emotional realities. It's delightfully ironic that fantasy literature can provide such helpful insights into reality.

Reality is something we spend a great deal of time avoiding, it seems to me; we all gravitate to our own fantasies about what life is, or was; or who we are, or were; and the fantasies encircling family history can be as strong as religious myths.

One of the strongest themes in the series is the unfolding relationship between Harry and his father, James, who was murdered when Harry was a baby. In the fifth book, *Harry Potter and the Order of The Phoenix*, Harry's

character development takes center stage; one of the most dramatic scenes occurs when Harry takes a risky look into a Pensieve, a stone basin filled with water, a magical device containing an ill-tempered professor's childhood memories of his schooldays with Harry's father, James.

[Incidentally, the instructor, Professor Snape, had previously magically removed these memories from his mind and placed them in the Pensieve, in an effort to protect them from Harry during a magical training exercise in which it might have been possible for Harry to catch a glimpse of his professor's thoughts. Then Snape, wouldn't you know it, was called away on an emergency – to rescue one of his favorite students, magically ensnared in a toilet – leaving Harry in Snape's office all alone with the Pensieve and thus with the very memories Snape most wanted to hide from Harry. Moral of the story: if you want to hide something from somebody, don't. That which is hidden will be found.]

So there's our hero, Harry the mischievous, peering into a water-filled basin to see if he can learn something of his father through the memories of his father's nemesis. At first he looks cautiously, but then, as J.K. Rowling writes,

“...a reckless daring seized him. He took a great gulp of breath and plunged his face into the surface of Snape's thoughts. At once, the floor of the office lurched, tipping Harry headfirst into the Pensieve...”

“He was falling through cold blackness, spinning furiously as he went, and then --

“He was standing in the middle of the Great Hall...”

From there Rowling leads us along with Harry as he explores Professor Snape's memories of being humiliated and tormented by Harry's father. Curiously, Harry is as disturbed by the little things about his father – such as his keeping his hair meticulously disheveled in front of certain girls – almost as much as his acts of cruelty. Taken all together, the little and the great revelations about his father send Harry crashing to the earth, and rising in a rage: the idealized, perfect father now had become a complete sham to Harry, an arrogant show-off at all times, a cruel prankster on a whim.

Author J.K. Rowling's genius lies partly in the creative metaphors she provides for emotional terrain we all have traversed. I wonder if anybody here has not, over a kitchen table if not a magical water basin, discovered something of their heritage that didn't complement the smiling portraits on the walls. We may experience such a revelation as a splash of ice-cold water in the face; but Rowling takes it further, inviting us to experience the revelation with Harry as falling *into* the water. When we see the past through another person's eyes, and that perspective challenges dearly-held images of one's family or clan, it truly can feel like entering another dimension, the room tipping over as we lean into the story, and we are immersed in it, forgetting everything else. This fantasy series describes emotional realities encountered especially by teenagers but also by adults. Families have secrets, and the revelation of those secrets can be among the most intense experiences of our lives.

In the books, Harry responds with an immediate effort to confront others in the family system – here, including his parents' friends – with the

new perspective. Harry wants to know how his father, who seemed noble and good, could be manipulative and cruel. Harry's thirst for knowledge even leads him to engage in highly risky communication with his fugitive stepfather, Sirius. Harry, faced with very real, immediate threats, and several forward-looking decisions to make, puts everything aside and risks new threats, not because he needs information about his father for any practical purposes, but because he simply feels he *must know*. Think of the time and expense invested in by some adults who were adopted to find their birth parents. The need to know the truth about one's family, particularly one's parents, is strong and primal, often trumping more practical needs.

His godfather, Sirius, tries to contextualize the events for Harry, explaining that while, yes, James did do these things, it was not entirely without provocation, and, besides, he was just a teenager. James grew out of this particularly obnoxious phase, and while it's true that he wasn't perfect, Sirius said, still James was a good man. Harry, confused and angry, can't yet assimilate this perspective.

This story illustrates several practical lessons. Our heritage matters to us. Our heritage is part of our story, part of our identity – and we dearly want it to be something in which we can take pride. But this desire can easily lead us to idealize our heritage, and whenever we idealize something, we have created what in physics is known as “potential gravity”: we have set ourselves up for a big fall. And the story shows that when our idealizations come crashing to earth, we may swing the other way, seeing only the bad where we had previously seen only the good.

Our task is then to hold all of the seemingly conflicting realities together, to accept what life shows us: to see the shades of gray, the shadows and rough textures, to let go of our storylines and fantasies and look at life unblinkingly.

Czeslaw Milosz writes in "Faith":

*The word Faith means when someone sees
A dew-drop or a floating leaf, and knows
That they are, because they have to be.
And even if you dreamed, or closed your eyes
And wished, the world would still be what it was,
And the leaf would be carried down the river.*

*It means that when someone's foot is hurt
By a sharp rock, he also knows that rocks
Are here so they can hurt our feet.
Look, see the long shadow cast by the tree;
And flowers and people throw shadows on the earth:
What has no shadow has no strength to live.*

By the end of the fifth book, Harry has not yet reached this level of faith with regards to his father. Harry's growth is to see his father as he was, and accept this reality. His task is to come to see his father's arrogance, mischief, and occasional cruelty as the shadow side of a strong, young personality coming to terms with his own power.

Harry is ready to take the plunge into the shadow side of his father's character because he is almost ready to see those parts of himself. Preparing to meet real, present-time, external challenges, Harry can ill afford to be burdened by an unexamined dark side, particularly as it pertains to the use of power. Harry's learning to see his father in a more holistic way will help him become a person less shocked and angry at hurts in general, in Milosz' words, at the sharpness of rocks against his feet. He will also be more able to see the ways his own words and actions can, like sharp rocks, cut and hurt others.

It's not easy to see with eyes fully open. As Joni Mitchell sings in her song, "Both Sides Now":

*I've looked at life from both sides now,
from up and down...
and still somehow
it's life's illusions I recall,
I really don't know life at all.*

That's the most challenging part of the process – when our illusions are stripped and we feel that we don't know anything at all. Disillusioned, disenchanted, disoriented, dismantled – we no longer feel we know the one we idealized, we don't know life at all. We may no longer know or trust love; we may feel we no longer know ourselves.

And this is where we may turn to faith – not a naïve faith in future outcomes or in the infallibility of anything, but a faith in life on its own

terms – a faith that by looking at anything, and seeking to understand it, we can learn to love more deeply.

I'm tempted to say that this sort of faith is a way of looking with eyes wide open – but that's not quite it. Our eyes are wide open when we are frightened or joyfully anticipating something. The faith of which Milosz writes requires eyes open, but softly – a looking without expectation or attachment or illusion – eyes gently open to see what is there: a floating leaf, a sharp rock; a person who looms large in our life, casting a long shadow.

This is a mature faith, a faith that requires no singular object to adore and worship; it is more a way of seeing and being in the world, with eyes softly open, with mind and heart ready to acknowledge not just the bright spots but the whole picture, with hands and feet ready to serve.

I invite you to join with me in the spirit of prayer.

Unending Love,
Hidden Wholeness we sometimes glimpse within, among, and beyond us,
We turn to you now.

When all seems broken, false, illusory,
 help up to step back with soft eyes of compassion,
 seeing the hurts behind the hurts, seeing the Whole.

When all seems perfect, bright, too good for words,
 help us to step back with soft eyes of wisdom,

seeing the shadows, the texture, the frailties – seeing the Whole.

When we look back and see the power of our heritage over us now,
help us to step back with soft eyes of gratitude and of forgiveness,
so we can look forward to those who come after us,
and know that our actions today are the legacy we hand to them.

Amen and Blessed be.

Please join in singing our closing hymn, #128, For All That Is Our Life

Benediction

Life is complicated,
Life is messy,
Life is so often not what we think it is.

May we honor our life as a blessing,
as a gift.

May we, imperfect as we are,
with shadows and parts of ourselves that are surprises even to us,
trust in life

to work through us
to serve life.