The Skill of a Seeker: Rowling, Religion, and Gen 9/11

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To DC, MC, BC, KE, HH, WH, KK, TL, BM, MN, JR, ES, and SS, who first showed me this particular facet of Rowling’s magic.

To Eli, in anticipation of sharing Harry Potter with him.

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Abbreviations

As yet, it seems that no conformity has been reached concerning a method to refer to the seven volumes of the Harry Potter series without spelling them out each time, so I have created my own. Throughout the text and notes, J.K. Rowling’s works are referred to as follows:

Book I: Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone
Book II: Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets
Book III: Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban
Book IV: Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire
Book V: Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix
Book VI: Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince
Book VII: Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows

Beedle: The Tales of Beedle the Bard
I

Once Upon Our Times

Gen 9/11 or Gen HP?

The universe is made up of stories, not atoms.
—Muriel Rukeyser in *The Wise Heart* by Jack Kornfield

Stories have power.

Sociologists say that if someone believes a thing to be true, it takes on the force of reality for the believer and can—and usually does—have real-world consequences. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves have as much, if not more, influence on our character and behavior as our heredity and our environment. Just ask anyone who’s suffered from depression—including J.K. Rowling. Doctors know that listening to stories activates the brain’s “story” section, thereby diminishing activity in the pain centers of the brain, which is why there are storytellers who do their work in hospital wards. Those who work with the dying have developed a new tool: dignity therapy, in which the dying assert themselves on the threshold of death by telling their life story to a trained counselor. In this way, the storytellers know they have obtained a kind of immortality, because their stories will live on after them.¹ Some stories are told and retold, and in the retelling they can recreate the culture that created the stories. They may even become sacred stories, the basis for religion, for civic identity, for ethnicity, a moral compass.

No doubt reason can take us far in answering the questions that arise in the day-to-day business of being human. But when the question is something like “What lies beyond Death?” reason can’t help. Sometimes the answer, “No one knows,” isn’t enough. That’s why we tell stories.
Because humans all face a few fundamental questions and challenges regarding this thing we call “life,” each collection of humans develops stories around a few of those fundamental issues: How do we live with the knowledge that we’re going to die? What is the nature and cause of evil? What is a soul—if there is such a thing—and how does it function in life and after death? Are there beings, forces, powers, beyond the material, and if there are, how do we interact with them? How can love be so powerful that it overcomes self-preservation and leads people to make sacrifices to protect the beloved, whether that be a person or a nation or an ideal?

The stories created to answer these questions often become the foundations of religions. Even those who leave ritual and practice behind will still be swayed by the stories that gave rise to the rituals and practices of that particular religion. As Carol P. Christ puts it, “Symbol systems cannot simply be rejected; they must be replaced.” Often these symbol systems will also find their ways into the literature and other cultural forms of their respective societies.

Organized religion has been in steady decline for decades throughout many Western cultures, most especially in Europe. Some point to the rebellious ’60s or to the aftermath of World War II and its atrocities of genocide and nuclear annihilation or even to the trench nightmare of World War I as initial causes for this decline. Secular humanists lay claim to the only “reasonable” approach to ethical living, and others lay claim to being spiritual though not religious. Nonetheless, the sacred stories remain, whether in the subconscious or in the literary landscape or in ever-evolving media—movies, songs, video games, virtual lives. In his time, Carl Jung called them “archetypes.” Clifford Geertz wrote of “moods and motivations.” Joseph Campbell outlined the “Hero’s Journey.” And authors continued to write and rewrite the sacred stories of mythology, fairy tales, and folk stories in their novels, poetry, plays, and other genres.

On a clear, cool day in September, as four planes streaked across U.S. skies to their various dreadful destinations, a new story was born. It featured a shadowy leader who rejoiced in death for the sake of immortality (as he understood it) and who brought new levels of terror to the world, aided by the work of small, secret groups of radical followers. It taught the children of that time and of the following decade that planes were potentially deadly weapons, strangers should be viewed with great suspicion, death could strike at any time, and safety was an illusion. Worst of all, it taught them that religion inspired terrorism and forced
people into false absolutes born of fear: either you’re for us or you’re against us; diversity is untrustworthy, and complexity of thought, belief, feeling, or understanding should be avoided, lest it lead to uncertainty or, even worse, impurity. To paraphrase Rita Mae Brown, the 9/11 generation in the West has the Twin Towers as a birthmark, Guantánamo as a christening gift, and Osama bin Laden as anti-godparent. Religion of any kind became “the enemy” because it only served dissension, and sacred story had to disguise itself yet again in order to survive.

A decade earlier, before those planes took off and the world was forever changed for all who hadn’t yet genuinely understood the vulnerability of life, another story was born on a delayed train from Manchester to London. A woman opened her mind to the inspiration which, according to Terry Pratchett, is forever streaking through the multiverse, and in walked a skinny, black-haired boy with broken glasses and no parents. It took Jo Rowling seven years and the death of her mother to realize that this was a story about how to accept the fact of death and about the power of love to enable that acceptance. The story featured, in addition to the young hero and his friends and helpers, a shadowy leader who rejoiced in the death of others for the sake of immortality (as he understood it), who brought new levels of terror to the world, aided by small, secret groups of fanatical followers. But instead of teaching fear, division, suspicion, and false absolutes, this story taught the power of love and willing sacrifice, the nature of evil, and the presence of some Other who offered support, comfort, guidance, and protection in times of great need. Most importantly, it taught that to the well-regulated mind, death, far from being one with annihilation, is but the next adventure. This story drew upon the sacred stories of many eras and cultures, paring away identifiable doctrine or dogma or deity and presenting them in such a way that readers of any religion or none at all could still resonate with the familiar content in a new guise. It became the sacred story for those of the 9/11 generation and their elders who recognized that beyond cultural differences they could find a diverse unity around the realization that the power they have is love.
Harry Potter: The Class

Stories begin when you discover that you have been born into the wrong family.

—Phillip Pullman

In January of 2010, I taught a class of thirteen college students from this 9/11-HP (Harry Potter) generation. They were the ones who demonstrated to me the growing ignorance of religion in our culture and who led me to discover a new facet of the brilliance of J.K. Rowling.

Of the thirteen students, only one or two were actively practicing the faith in which they were raised. At least three of them were questioning or outright rejecting their family faiths, which included Judaism, Christianity, and Parsi Zoroastrianism. Most of them had no religious background at all and were unaware of the controversy surrounding the Harry Potter series in various religious communities. Since a major purpose of the course was to investigate religious responses to Harry Potter as recorded in media of all types, the students soon had a wide exposure to the startling varieties of responses, often from the same religions. Some Evangelical Christians tried to burn and ban the books, while other Evangelical Christians claimed them as an enormous opportunity to promote their particular interpretations of the Christian gospel. An Episcopal church in Maine used Harry Potter material for their middle-school retreats, while secular authors proclaimed the absence of religion and the technical presentation of magic as evidence of the author's firm commitment to materialism over fantasy and religion. Pagan authors, while pointing out the absence of any Pagan religious practices, nonetheless made multiple connections between the books and the sacred stories that form the basis of their contemporary faith.*

A week into the course, students realized that the series contained more religious references than they’d imagined, even as many of them recognized the absence of genuine religious experience in their own lives. What they did know of religion they’d gleaned largely from the media: scandals, sectarian conflicts, secularization; televangelists demanding money, priests abusing children; ethnic cleansing, the death of God, outright gay-bashing or homophobia hiding behind the desire

to “protect” marriage; misogyny, holocausts, suicide bombings; and over it all, the shadow of four airplanes heading for disaster. For those outside any religious tradition (and for many once inside who had left), religious institutions and practices appeared fanatical, bigoted, exclusive and arcane, irrational, over-institutionalized and opaque—but most of all, violent. One of our most vigorous class discussions revolved around the question, passionately addressed by some, of what useful purpose religion had ever served in the world and whether or not it was relevant or even helpful today. From the outside looking in, faiths of all types seemed to fit only too neatly Freud’s view of religion as mass psychosis. Religion had become, for these students, a dangerous business, so they simply avoided it.

The Need for Sacred Story

Stories and myths are the connective tissue between life and death that sew the worlds together in their telling. And in the protective and connective body of story the soul quickens. It comes alive . . . Hearing of myth and story is how we are initiated into the traditions and truths of culture and nature. They prepare us for the future and guide us in the present. Facts and facticity aren’t enough.

—Joan Halifax, The Fruitful Darkness

Unfortunately, avoiding religion doesn’t do away with the need to understand those parts of ourselves that are not strictly material. The fundamental questions of death, evil, love, the soul, and the numinous remain, even—or perhaps especially—in the absence of religion. Because we can reflect on our own experiences, we human animals need some way, as Alan Gardner put it, to understand a universe that presents itself as Mystery, to “unriddle” the world.8 We began that task as early humans by drawing astounding figures on cave walls and burying our dead in a fetal position with red ochre and flowers. We told stories around communal fires, and slowly the stories became myths, and the fire pits grew into temples. We devised collective experiences that we eventually called religions to help us understand the Mysteries. But the insistence upon exclusivity, on my story being the only true story (a recent development in the hundred thousand or so years of human existence)
has managed to blow too many of us apart, both figuratively and, alas, sometimes literally. Despite valiant attempts—at first ecumenical and more recently interfaith dialogs and even parliaments—most of us and most certainly the majority of my students have become frightened of conversations about the sacred, because we don’t know what we don’t know, and we might offend. We feel unable to tell our stories of life, death, good, evil, and our own understandings of how to live a decent life in a chaotic world. We’ve retreated to our solitary campfires, and the unknown is as dark as ever. Or so it seemed to most of my students.

Enter J.K. Rowling.

A Fantasy (or Not) About Reality

That fantasists often methodically appropriate actual nature-centered spiritual rituals and folk beliefs confirms the genre’s continual anthropological significance and capacity to say something about human experience.

———Lori M. Campbell, Portals of Power

It’s ironic that the Harry Potter series has been hailed as a masterpiece of the fantasy genre, when it didn’t even occur to the author until after Book I was published that she’d written one. Rowling never set out to write fantasy literature and didn’t think much of the genre itself. As she told Anne Johnston in July of 2000, “I don’t find there is sufficient logic underpinning the worlds that have been created.” (Hermione would approve.) Rowling never finished C.S. Lewis’s Narnia series or J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings and didn’t read The Hobbit until after her first Harry Potter book came out. Her preference was for books like E. Nesbit’s series, which take place in this world with some unexpected magical elements and the humor that results from them. (Interestingly one of Nesbit’s series is about a family of children whose mother has recently died.) As Rowling told Lev Grossman in 2005, “I was trying to subvert the genre . . . Harry goes off into this magical world, and is it any better than the world he’s left? Only because he meets nicer people. Magic does not make his world better significantly. The relationships make his world better. Magic in many ways complicates his life.”

Harry’s magical world exists in our world, and as the series progresses
there is more overlap between the two. Wizard wars and violence spill into our own “unmagical” world, and while only Magicals know how to cross the liminal thresholds between the two, they also have to live in the Muggle world to varying degrees. Narnia is separated from us by space, and Middle-earth by time. Harry’s world is here and now, and very much dealing with the same struggles that we Muggles face: death, violence, and evil.

Rowling, Lewis, and Tolkien have a significant experience in common; all three lost their mothers early: Tolkien shortly before his thirteenth birthday, Lewis shortly before his tenth birthday, and Rowling when she was twenty-five. Tolkien’s father had died several years before his mother, and Lewis was estranged from his father, as Rowling has been from hers. While all three authors affirm that there are worse things than death (Lewis’s Diggory healing his mother with a stolen apple; the terror of Tolkien’s ringwraiths; the devastation of bearing responsibility for the death of loved ones, experienced by both Harry and Dumbledore), Lewis and Tolkien seem to emphasize the desire to escape death entirely. Lewis gives a clear picture of an afterlife in *The Last Battle* (which Rowling never read), and Tolkien wrote in a letter to a reader in 1957, “I should say, if asked, the tale [*The Lord of the Rings*] is not really about Power and Dominion: that only set the wheels going; it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness. Which is hardly more than to say it is a tale written by a [hu]man!”

But Rowling wanted something else. Rather than escaping death, she sought a way to live with the fact of death, to accept its reality and to affirm that love is stronger. The fantasy of escaping death gives way to the reality of accepting it, a reality that confronted her six months into the writing of her first book, which would eventually take seven years to complete.

By making death irreversible in Harry’s magical world, Rowling made it “a mirror image of the real world.” She told Meredith Vieira she was proud that many readers feared even Harry, Ron, and Hermione might die, “because it means that the books are imbued with a sense of genuine mortality.” She went on to say, “Definitely Mum dying had a profound influence on the books, because I had been writing about Harry for six months when she died. And in the first draft, his parents were disposed of really quiet — and quite an almost cavalier fashion. I didn’t really dwell on it. Six months, and my mother dies, and I simply can’t kill a fictional mother that callously . . . It wasn’t what it became . . . And I really think from that moment on, Death became a central—if not the
central—theme for the seven books . . . The theme of how we react to death, how much we fear it . . . in many ways, all of my characters are defined by their attitude to death and the possibility of death.” And she told Oprah, “If she [her mother] hadn’t died, I don’t think it is too strong to say there wouldn’t be Harry Potter. The books are what they are because she died.”17

The Skill of a Seeker

The presence of those seeking the truth is infinitely to be preferred to the presence of those who think they’ve found it.

—Terry Pratchett, Monstrous Regiment

I certainly had this need for something that I wasn’t getting at home, so I was the one who went out looking for religion. —J.K. Rowling

Fantasy became reality, and Jo, who had started exploring Christianity on her own as a child, became a Seeker through her writing. She couldn’t see her story as fantasy because it was imbued with the wrenching reality of her own enormous loss and her struggle to accept it. Suddenly, the greatest of all human mysteries was the focus of her life, and Harry’s Hero’s Journey became a reflection of her own. Because she omitted any reference to specific deities or religions* while telling Harry’s story, Rowling was able to create a series with deep spiritual underpinnings which addresses all the questions that sacred stories are meant to address.

The font: here Rowling was baptized at her own request, at about age twelve.

* While she does refer to Christian holidays, these occur only in connection with school terms and are usually entirely secular in their observance by the characters.
As a result, my class found the Harry Potter series to be a safe space to read about, discuss, and form/reform their own understandings of those mysteries. They learned, in fact, that Dumbledore was right when he said, “Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.” For members of the 9/11 generation, the HP generation, this is an extraordinary message and one the class embraced wholeheartedly, whether or not they recognized the spiritual context from which it grew, though some of them did.

In her final paper, one of my students, who was reading Harry Potter for the first time, described her Catholic upbringing and how it left her feeling isolated and uncomfortable. She wished that the nuns had thrown out the Catechism and replaced it with the Harry Potter books, because she felt safer exploring the big questions within those pages and found more meaning there than she had found in her church, which she had left behind in her search for a new source of understanding. Like so many others, this student had found in J.K. Rowling a new bard to reassure her at her solitary campfire. Such readers, battered by or ignorant of organized religion, now have the story of Harry Potter to ponder, in which institutions of all types are vulnerable to fear-filled seekers of domination or “power-over,” and the hardest lesson may be to learn to trust in others as well as in one’s own solitary hero-self to defeat evil. In Rowling’s written reflection of our world, evil is demonstrably human and thus open to defeat; death is (to the well-regulated mind) nothing more than the next adventure; the nonmaterial (what happens inside one’s own head) is as real and as important as the material; and love is so powerful it can shield others from death and must be studied with great caution. And religion is remarkably absent.

But spirit is everywhere.

This, then, is Rowling’s gift: to use her own deep pain to write searchingly, meaningfully, and movingly of the classic concerns of religion in such a way that any individual of any religious or spiritual path, or none, who is willing to set aside doctrine and dogma, may find themselves at home in her world of magic and Mystery—which is also our own world. A world where even in the midst of wars and terror and great losses, all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.*

So what does Rowling say about the great religious and spiritual questions?

* As stated by the mystic, Julian of Norwich.