

**“Courageous Love”**  
*A Sermon by Alex Jensen*  
*First Parish in Wayland*  
*Sunday, February 21, 2021*

When I was a chaplain this past summer at Beth Israel Hospital, I found myself turning to an interesting phrase I’d say over and over again when I needed to be brave. Just as if being a chaplain in a hospital during a pandemic wasn’t frightening enough, I was nervous—at a loss for words even—as I stared at the door to my first patient visit, my fist hovering and shaking right before I knocked. With this first visit, and with most patient visits, I wasn’t quite sure what would be behind that door. Holding my fear, I’d repeat to myself a sort of unofficial mantra during my time as a minister in the hospital. It went, “*Come on, Alex! You’re a Gryffindor. You can do this*”.

Over and over again, I’d repeat this phrase in moments when I was afraid and needed to tap into a little more courage. Throughout that summer, I began to see how for me turning to this inner source of strength comforted me as I entered into those unknown and uncertain spaces. I began to see how my ministry was a sort of reflection of this inner courage and love that I wanted to share out. The more visits I did, the more comfortable I grew with knocking on doors and walking through that threshold into the unknown. All the while, I’d repeat to myself “*Come on, Alex! You’re a Gryffindor. You can do this*” until my nerves settled and I’d be able to show up, fully present to a patient who just needed me to be their chaplain.

For me, this was an interesting discovery into just how much I had been shaped and molded by the *Harry Potter* series. Growing up with the books as my bedtime stories, my mom and I read them together every night as they came out. The stories of Harry as he’d encounter strange magical creatures and overcome great challenges and obstacles grew to become a sort of background text in my childhood. Not to mention, I looked a lot like Harry then—and maybe I still do!--with my glasses and unruly hair. To this day, the series remains quite beloved to me, and I suspect to some of you.

Whether you’re a Gryffindor like me, or a Slytherin, Hufflepuff, or Ravenclaw, I suspect most of you have at least heard the name “Harry Potter” by now. And for those of you still unfamiliar with the wizarding series, perhaps magic just isn’t really your thing, and you’re more of a *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, or *Lord of the Rings* fan. To date, *Harry Potter* remains one of the most popular series ever created. By books alone, the series has sold more than 500 million copies worldwide across 80 different languages.<sup>1</sup> It has shaped a whole generation of readers and magic lovers, many of whom are now much older than when they first encountered these stories.

However, *Harry Potter* has also come under controversy recently. The series’ author, J. K. Rowling, has said some harmful and hurtful things against the Trans community, especially against Trans women.<sup>2</sup> When called on by LGBTQ+ fans to rethink her position, she’s doubled down on her anti-Transgender and exclusive statements.<sup>3</sup> Her rhetoric has

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<sup>1</sup> Jessie Atkin, “[The Most Popular Harry Potter Book \(According To Sales\)](#)”.

<sup>2</sup> Olivia Petter, “[JK Rowling Criticised Over ‘Transphobic’ Tweet About Menstruation](#)”.

<sup>3</sup> J. K. Rowling, “[J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues](#)”; Kalhan Rosenblatt, “[J.K. Rowling Doubles Down in What Some Critics Call A ‘Transphobic Manifesto’](#)”.

even influenced public opinion in the UK and around the world, making some parts more hostile to Transgender and gender-nonconforming people.<sup>4</sup> Many fans who are in the LGBTQ+ community have also felt that they can no longer support the series or its author. Some have felt the need to leave magic and the wizarding world behind altogether because of this pain and harm. And others are struggling to make sense of what this all means, especially with a series that for so many years has offered them a message of hope, liberation, and courageous love.

For myself, I also feel torn at this crossroads. Harry's character was someone I could relate to, being bullied quite a lot growing up myself. Coming into a sense of my own queerness and sexuality, Harry's story as the boy living in the closet under the stairs offered me hope when I wasn't able to be out. This text I had grown to love as a child had become something *sacred* to me, something I am still discovering and making sense of in the wake of this controversy. And in realizing this, I know I am not alone at this crossroads.

Some of you may have heard of the popular podcast *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*.<sup>5</sup> This podcast attempts to read the *Harry Potter* stories seriously, as if they are sacred texts like the Qur'an or the Torah. In fact, you might be surprised to find out that *Harry Potter* is actually the most requested book in jails and prisons after copies of the Bible.<sup>6</sup> After reading through all of the books across seven seasons since 2015, the podcast's approach to *Harry Potter* as a sacred text isn't a joke. Though, in making sense of this controversy, *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* put out a call for Transgender fans to share their thoughts on the series and what it means to look at them through a sacred lens after these painful remarks.<sup>7</sup>

One fan, Drew—who uses they and them pronouns—shared their trepidation with the series after Rowling's tweets. In their words, "It really made me question how I can reconcile my love of *Harry Potter* with my trans identity. The books have such great messages against prejudice and bullying that [don't] seem to be actually carried out in J.K. Rowling and how she lives her life".<sup>8</sup> For Drew, myself, and for so many other Trans and Queer fans, *Harry Potter* has left an imprint on our hearts. We find that we can't leave our love of *Harry Potter* behind; It's become a part of who we are. The stories continue to shape our lives and help us to make meaning of the world around us.

My sermon today attempts to look at the *Harry Potter* series in light of this crossroads that we find ourselves at. I believe that the *Harry Potter* stories have a greater message about courageous love beyond its author and even the text itself. I believe *Harry Potter* has something sacred to say to us about what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist and what it means to be human. Likewise, the text itself isn't where the magic happens.

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<sup>4</sup> Nick Duffy, "[JK Rowling and Anti-Trans Rhetoric Have Caused 'Significant Damage' to the UK, International LGBT+ Report Warns](#)".

<sup>5</sup> [Harry Potter and the Sacred Text](#).

<sup>6</sup> I initially heard this years earlier I believe on a podcast of HPST, yet couldn't locate the specific episode. To be as accurate as possible, I've included these sources to explain *Harry Potter*'s popularity in prisons: its popularity at [Guantánamo Bay](#), included amongst the most popular books with [waiting lists](#) in prison, and how *Harry Potter* is [becoming more of a foundational text](#) for Millennials than the Bible.

<sup>7</sup> "[JKR's Transphobic Statement](#)," *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*.

<sup>8</sup> "[Community Responses to J.K. Rowling](#)," *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* SoundCloud.

Instead, it's what we do with these stories in our communities. The magic is really in us, and what we choose to do with these lessons and values beneath the text.

For this reason, I've picked some excerpts from the stories that I believe speak deeply to both love and courage and what *Harry Potter* has to share with us about living out courageous love. Since we have some active readers of the series in the congregation, I've been careful with choosing passages from only the first two books. I've also been careful not to spoil the later plot, just in case some of you are still reading! My hope is that we might approach these stories both courageously and lovingly as we rethink what this series means for us today, even 24 years later. So I invite you to encounter this magic with me—to *get those wands and broomsticks out!*—as we explore The first of our readings this morning, from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

Taken from the first book in the series, this passage comes right after Harry faces Voldemort—known as “He Who Must Not Be Named,” the wizard who murdered his parents. After a perilous fight over the Sorcerer's Stone—a stone that's used to create an immortality potion—Harry has many unanswered questions. Harry is confused as to why Voldemort was unable to touch him in their fight and struggle for the stone. When he reaches for Harry, his hand crumbles away and withers, causing Voldemort and Professor Quirrell's body to turn to dust. A bit frustrated with Albus Dumbledore, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School where Harry attends, Harry asks Dumbledore for the truth.

Dumbledore tells Harry that he can't tell him why Voldemort wanted to kill him... Not right now. This is something Harry will have to discover when he's ready. However, when asked about why Voldemort couldn't touch him, Dumbledore clues us into a special sort of magic that's important throughout the series. He says to Harry:

If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's... leaves its own mark... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever.<sup>9</sup>

Harry learns in this moment that love is some of the most powerful magic in the whole world. This magic, put over him by his mother's love, protected him against the harsh and evil magic of one of the most villainous wizards to ever exist. However, this powerful magic didn't leave a mark or a scar, like his signature forehead lightning bolt. Instead, this magic was in his very skin. It traveled with him, though his parents and loved ones were no longer with him.

This first glimpse at courageous love shows us an important truth about life. By being loved so deeply, Harry experiences some of the most powerful magic that even evil can't overcome. Likewise, Harry learns that love is what ultimately matters in the face of so much pain and loss. Modeled by his mother's courage, this love is enough to sustain him and even protect him against all odds. Through this, we learn the important maxim—*that love is one of the most powerful forces of being human*. Though in real life it's

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<sup>9</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, p. 299.

perhaps not magic itself, it does have a sort of magic: to love someone into being, to affirm their worth and value, and to defend them against harmful voices that would say otherwise. From our first reading that the Williams read so wonderfully, we learn that love always wins and that love sustains.

Moving into our second reading, that Susie read for us, we see Harry and Dumbledore in another conversation after a moment of great danger. Harry has just faced the Basilisk—a giant snake with venomous fangs—and defeated Voldemort in the Chamber of Secrets. Harry asks Dumbledore why he was put in Gryffindor house in the first place, remembering what the Sorting Hat said: that he would have actually done really well in Slytherin. Dumbledore gives us a clue to another important aspect of courageous love, through his memorable quote: “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, Far more than our abilities”.<sup>10</sup>

For Harry, when he pulls the sword out of the sorting hat, he chooses to remain loyal to hope and the cause for the greater good. The sword appears to him because he remembers his self-worth. What this moment has to teach us about courageous love is that our choices matter. Our choice to love others, especially those who are different from ourselves, and in moments that are challenging, proves who we are far more than what we can do. Likewise, choosing to love ourselves is an act of great courage. Harry’s choice to take a stand against Voldemort and to remember his place as a Gryffindor reminds me a lot about those moments when I’d visit patients in the hospital, repeating to myself those words, “*Come on, Alex! You’re a Gryffindor. You can do this.*”

Our Time For All Ages this morning also talks about the importance of our choices in choosing love.<sup>11</sup> Amelia realizes that there were no other magic powers given to her by the witch after all. Instead, the magic came from Amelia’s own kindness, bravery, and determination. Amelia brought out this magic by loving others courageously. This is a lesson for each one of us on how our choices matter, how our choosing to love courageously in those uncertain moments is truly where the magic happens.

To close, even if you’re not a Gryffindor like me or Harry, I want to invite you to love courageously. There is so much that we have still to do in this hurting world. There are very real and present dangers facing us: global climate change, a raging pandemic, issues of racial injustice and white supremacy. What matters now is our choices. Ultimately, who we choose to become matters. And if *Harry Potter* has anything to teach us, it’s that we are to choose love and courage each time.

May you find ways to bring love into our shared world, and may you find courage in times that you’re afraid. May the *Harry Potter* stories continue to inspire you to find the magic you’ve had within you all along. With both of these parts—with *love and courage*—we might yet imagine another world still possible. *May it be so. Mischief Managed. Amen.*

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<sup>10</sup> J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, p. 333.

<sup>11</sup> Adapted from Gail Sphar, “[Amelia and Her Super Magical Powers](#)”.