Casper: Chapter Seven: The Sorting Hat

“The door swung open at once. A tall, black-haired witch in emerald-green robes stood there. (intro music) She had a very stern face and Harry’s first thought was that this was not someone to cross. ‘The firs’ years, Professor McGonagall,’ said Hagrid…”

Casper: I’m Casper ter Kuile

Vanessa: And I’m Vanessa Zoltan

Casper: And this is Harry Potter and the Sacred Text

(music fades out)

Vanessa: Although I’m going to try to tell this story in as sensitive a way as possible, I would like to offer trigger warnier: we are going to be talking about the culture of sexual assault in this country. I will intentionally be telling the story in a way to honor the fact that we hope that this is a family-friendly show, but please keep in mind that if you are someone who is triggered by stories of sexual assault, this next story is probably not for you. If you would rather not listen to this story, but join us for the rest of the episode, go to our blog post on our website harrypottersacredtext.com and it'll tell you what time to skip to.

As most of you know a major news story a few weeks ago, was about a Stanford student who sexually assaulted a young woman. And, there were a lot of remarkable things about this story, but something that I would like to talk about today was the young woman’s response, which she ended up publishing and you can find the full transcript of if you’re interested on Buzzfeed. And besides just being overwhelmed with how beautifully written this response was, some of the amazing things about it were the vulnerability in what she said. She shared, just, intimate details about this assault, and about her body, and about the heartbreak that this caused her family. And I think that in making herself vulnerable, what she did was she started the new version of the story. The sentencing had come down and what most people consider to be a very disappointing way. But two days later, people weren’t talking about that they were talking about her, and they were talking about the wonderful impact that she was going to have on other victim’s lives. And the Vice-President came forward and thanked her for the amazing thing that she did by being so vulnerable. And it was just evidence to me that vulnerability feels like you’re letting go of control, but really what she was doing when being vulnerable was taking complete control of her life, and was saying this next step, this next pivot starts here. And it starts with my version of the story.

And I know that that’s a very intense way to transition to talking about a young adult novel, but I think it speaks to the power of this book that in reading Harry’s response to the Sorting Hat, this
story of this young woman came to me because she was saying “this is no longer about this rapist, this is about me, and this is about other women.” And that’s what Harry is doing in rejecting Slytherin. He is deciding not to be the victim of the fact that this thing happened to him when he was one year old, and he got infected by Voldemort. And rather than choosing to be obsessed with power, like that thing he was infected with, he’s decided not to be defined by his victimhood, but to be a hero of his own story. And so I’m excited to talk about the power of vulnerability and the real risk of vulnerability for this week’s chapter.

Casper: I’m really excited to talk more about that Vanessa, but before we jump into the theme. It’s time for our 30 Second Recap listeners.

Vanessa: Do you want me to try to do badly for once, so that you have a chance of not looking like an idiot?

Casper: It’s cool; I’m going to be like Neville Longbottom. Like you make fun of me for six books and then suddenly I come back super hot and strong.

Vanessa: Spoiler alert.

Casper: Spoiler alert. Okay Vanessa, 30 seconds, you ready?

Vanessa: I’m ready.

Casper: 3, 2, 1, Go

(ticking noise)

Vanessa: The first years arrive in Hogwarts, and they find out immediately that they are going to be sorted into their houses. They’re nervous for a little while because they don’t know if they’re going to have to do a test or what. Hermione is already being a know-it-all, it’s amazing. Harry is particularly nervous. He gets in line. He puts the Sorting Hat on, and he just says, “Not Slytherin, not Slytherin, not Slytherin.” And the Sorting Hat’s like, “Fine, Gryffindor!” And then he’s like “Wooo!” And Ron and Hermione both get into Gryffindor also. And then they go to bed and he has a weird dream.

(buzzing noise-107 words in 60 seconds!)

Vanessa: The food was delicious.

Casper: That’s pretty good.

Vanessa: Treacle Tart.
Casper: Ugh, made me hungry just reading it.

Vanessa: Okay, Casper. Um..I’m so sorry that I did so well. I meant to do poorly, I tried to do poorly.

Casper: It’s fine, we’re a combo. You give the plot outline, I give delightful detail.

Vanessa: I do the spirit of what we’re trying to do, and you do something else. Okay, on your mark, get set, go.

(ticking noise)

Casper: Okay, the door swung open at once. McGonagall takes the first years from Hagrid and into the…they walk past the Great Hall, not into it, but into a side chamber where they’re told that they’re going to be sorted. And everyone is super nervous because Won Won thinks he’s going to be fighting a troll. One by one they sit down. The Sorting Hat sings an amazing song, everyone cheers, the first few people get sorted into Hufflepuff, Harry gets sorted into Gryffindor by fighting against the Sorting Hat, and then they all sit down and there’s cheering. And they meet ghosts because ghosts are cool.

(buzzing sounds- 106 words in 60 seconds)

Vanessa: I was really nervous, you had basically started reading.

Casper: I did literally start with the first sentence.

Vanessa: I was like, “oh does he remember what we do?” But you pulled it together.

Casper: I made it happen. Vanessa, you were telling us about this theme of forced vulnerability, and using that vulnerability to pivot and reclaim agency and choicefulness. Tell me more about what struck you in this passage about that.

Vanessa: So, Harry’s capacity for Slytherin seems at least in part to be because his parents are dead, so he didn’t know that he was a wizard, so he didn’t know he was a wizard until late. And part of that is also about, you know, that he’s famous, he’s learning that he’s famous, so he’s like I needs to prove that I’m worthy of my fame. And so both of those reasons are very directly because of Voldemort, and because of this thing that happened to him, and we don’t know yet that it turns out that there’s a little bit left of Voldemort left inside of Harry. But that is also true. And so it’s interesting that he is saying, “not Slytherin, not Slytherin,” and he’s sort of chanting that; and what’s he’s really saying is that, “I’m not going to let these moments of victimhood define me. I’m not going to let the fact that I’m already famous define me in the fact that I want to prove myself define me.” And sort of like this young women, it’s, “I’m not a victim, I’m not
going to let you talk me into this.” And he makes a choice about the man who he wants to be for the rest of his life.

Casper: In front of a whole room of you know, all the students, and teachers, and ghosts. You know, just in the same way that this young women was writing in front of the whole internet. There’s something very powerful, and God I’d be terrified in that situation, totally terrified.

Vanessa: I would let the hat do whatever it wanted, right? And I wonder what missed opportunities I’ve had when there’s actually be, sort of, personality defining moments, and I’ve not noticed them and let them slip me by. It’s something I’ve been thinking a lot about, you know, I was a scholarship kid, at like a really fancy, private school; and I constantly let the fact that I was the scholarship kid define me. And I could have, you know, thrown that off, and I could have handled that completely differently. And I think that there’s a lot of temptation, and not just temptation, trauma associated with letting what has victimized us, define us. And I love that Harry is showing us another way, and that you can choose to not let the terrible things that have happened you, define you. Obviously there is some traumas, where that’s harder, you know, I’m not saying like, “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” but it’s something that I need to consider more.

Casper: Yeah, Dumbledore says, you know, it’s our choices that define us; it’s the choices that you make that define us. I want to point out that Harry isn’t the only one who has a conversation with the Sorting Hat. Seamus is on that chair for nearly a minute. And, you know, Seamus is a minor character who we don’t get to know very well, but I think it’s important that we mention that Harry isn’t special in needing to take time to be defined into which house he’s going to be. That’s actually true for a lot of Hogwarts students, and it’s probably true for a lot of us.

Vanessa: Absolutely.

Casper: I mean the other thing that strikes me is how our vulnerability gives us an opportunity to relearn that we need each other. And I wonder if that’s at play with Harry particularly wanting to be in Gryffindor. You know, his one friend that he’s made is Ron, Ron’s entire family is in Gryffindor so it’s a safe bet that he’ll probably be there. So I’m just wondering if there’s a feeling of wanting to be with others that is a bit of a bridge for him, that helps him out of that Slytherin defined-ness.

Vanessa: I love that.

Casper: Vanessa, it’s always fun when we choose a theme because the theme shows up in random places. And I think this idea of victimhood and definition is also at play with Nearly Headless Nick, in a weird way. You know, he introduces himself as Sir Nicholas da Mimsy-Pomsey, something I can’t quite remember, but immediately Ron is like, “Oh you’re Nearly Headless Nick, my brothers told me us about you.” And like, “take off your head, take off
your head.” And he has to, kind of, roll his head off, and he is defined by the fact that he was a victim of a near beheading. And I think that this theme of vulnerability shows up in other random places in this chapter. The staff and teachers of Hogwarts are kind of subject to chaos. The school song, everyone is singing a different melody. Peeves the Poltergeist is unleashing chaos all over the school’s corridors. So I thought it was interesting that in Hogwarts’s own systems there’s all these nudges towards vulnerability that leave the teaching staff and the headmaster or headmistress kind of not always in control.

Vanessa: Absolutely, I mean it’s really interesting, every year at the beginning of the year; the things that Dumbledore talks about the most are Filch’s rules. So the headmaster is acknowledging the power of the custodian in this wonderful moment of vulnerability of, “I don’t know what it takes to run this castle on a day-to-day basis. I’m sort of up here making these 30,000 foot decision, so Filch gets to make the rules.” There’s all these acknowledgments of moments in which I shouldn’t be the one in control.

Casper, You know, his four words before the meal sound absolutely nuts right? “Nitwit, blubber, oddment, tweak.” But, I have a theory. There are four words, and there are four houses. Nitwit is kind of something nasty to someone to say to someone who isn’t very clever, it’s an insult. Blubber is kind of about fat. Oddment is about being the odd man out. And tweak is about tweaking things need changing. Like these are all words for being an outsider, and I’m wondering if they kind of map out onto the houses. Nitwit being with Ravenclaw. Oddment kind of the odd one out, I don’t know, somehow has to fit with Slytherin, I don’t know it didn’t quite work. But I love reading a text as a sacred text, because I read those four words and I was like “hahahaha,” but then I thought, “what else could this mean?” So I don’t think that it really worked, but it was fun to explore with even those words that seem so simple might actually have something more to say.

Vanessa: At minimum, he’s saying, “It’s all absurd.” Right? It’s, “I have some words to offer to you, and it doesn’t really matter. Most likely you’re not going to remember what I say, so I want you to know that it’s just chaos.” My favorite part of every graduation speech, which I think every graduation speaker now says, is “you’re not going to remember what I say, I don’t remember what the graduation speaker at my graduation said.” And I actually think that that’s such a lovely admission of time passing, and humility, and the absurdity of the pomp and circumstance. And I feel like Dumbledore is embracing the vulnerability of his position. He’s in this great position of power and he’s like, “You guys aren’t going to freaking remember what I say, so I might as well just say something ridiculous.”

Casper: Enjoy your food.

Vanessa: Yeah

(piano music plays)
Casper: Now Vanessa, over the last couple of weeks, we’ve been engaging in Lectio Divina, which as been a lot of fun, but we thought we’d try something new this week. Namely a spiritual practice called Contemplative Imagination, which was made famous by Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Now Ignatius was a Spanish knight who is most famous for founding the Jesuit Order in the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century. And as a knight he would be fighting, and after one battle he was pretty seriously wounded. And so as he lay recovering, he read a book by Ludolf of Saxony, wherein Ludolf visualized himself at the crib-side of the baby Jesus. And Ignatius was so taken with this idea of imaging himself into a story that he developed into a series of imaginative exercises that people would complete over the course of thirty days. Now we’re not going to take thirty day, but I hope that we can get a sense as to what that was all about. So I’m going to read a little passage from this chapter, and as I do that I want to invite you to imagine yourself into this scene. Visualize the whole situation as if you were there. Pay attention to the details, the sights the sounds, the tastes, the smells, the feelings that you have. Try to lose yourself in this story. And as we do this it’s easy to imagine that you’re going beyond the cannon of the text that you might go beyond what’s described. That’s really okay. When you think your imagination is going too far, just ask yourself, “is this imagination leading me closer to the spirit of the text, or is it taking me further away?” As Ignatius would say, “is your imagination bringing you consolation or desolation?”

Vanessa: I’m so excited. I love being read to, so just on that level I’m excited. And I feel like I’m going to be doing this with the listener, because I’ve never done this before.

Casper: Alright here we go. So this little passage is from Chapter Seven, The Sorting Hat:

“McGonagall pulled the door wide. The entrance hall was so big you could have fit the whole of the Dursleys’ house in it. The stone walls were lit with flaming torches like the ones at Gringotts, the ceiling was too high to make out, and the magnificent marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors.

They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. Harry could hear the drone of hundreds of voices from a doorway to the right—the rest of the school must already be here—but Professor McGonagall showed the first years into a small, empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously.

‘Welcome to Hogwarts,” said Professor McGonagall.

Casper: So Vanessa, where did you land with your imagination?

Vanessa: I’m just going to go, and you tell me if I’m way off okay?

Casper: No, no this is great.
Vanessa: So for some reason, the thing that really struck me was the moment, they’re giving this quick glimpse of a sky that they can’t quite make out. It’s the most beautiful thing, and I sort of felt like there was even a breeze on my face, because you’re outside but in this very safe way. But then before they’re released into this wild place, they’re put into this small room, which I had never really thought about. So I imagine that they’re brushing up against each other. You can like smell each other right? And for some reason I imagine that they all smell good. I feel like eleven year olds don’t really stink yet, whereas if this was a group of sixteen year-olds it would be stinky and disgusting in there, but this is just, you know, that smell of innocence and clean kids? And they’re all sort of up in each other’s necks, and the taller ones can see over everyone. And so that’s what really stuck out to me, to be in a crowd of strangers, and feel the material of other people brushing up against you, and noticing, you know how if you’re sitting in tenth grade English, you know the back of the neck of the person in front of you better than they will ever know the back of their own neck?

Casper: That’s so true.

Vanessa: I’ve always thought about that like, “I have your hair memorized out of sheer boredom.” So they’re noticing things about each other’s bodies. That’s what it really brought for me, just the closeness of these bodies to each other. And what’s interesting to me about that is that sometimes being in a big crowd like that is so suffocating, and other times being, sort of, crammed in a room with a bunch of people—I was just at a beautiful wedding, and you’re like crammed on a dance floor and you’re sweating and sticking to strangers because you’re both sweaty. And sometimes being stuck in a tiny space with people can be so beautiful and so fun, and I would imagine that for some students this is so exciting and they just can’t believe that they’re in this room and for other kids it’s just terrifying and like the worst. That’s what it brought up for me.

Casper: I love that, and what I love about this practice is it really gets us closer to the text. Like, it gets us closer to the people that we’re reading about, and learning about, and learning to love. What really struck me was the image of McGonagall pulling the door wide, and you know, if I was there as a student or just a fly on the wall, and seeing this woman who I presume is more advanced in years and perhaps not physically strong, unlocking a bolt or lifting a piece of wood to be able to pull these doors open wide. And I wonder if I would have stepped forward to help, or if I would have been too scared, or assuming that there’d be someone else, you know a house elf, or something to help. No, she’s just there pulling that door open wide, maybe sweating, and having to put her wand aside, or something like that. Feeling, you know feeling, that she’s taking responsibility for, not only the job that needs to be done, but also a protective quality, which I think we’re going to see more and more of with McGonagall, of course, in the books. But in this moment just imaging myself in that scene, I really felt safe with her.

Vanessa: Casper, what I loved about this practice is, I think that something that we see again and again in literature; we are taught the power of choosing to think a happy thought as a way to console yourself. You know, Peter Pan, there’s the line of “think happy thoughts.” And in
order to make something scary go away, you have to think of something funny. Or in order to
conjure a Patronus, the most powerful defense thing that you can have, you have to think of
your happiest memory. And that is not something that is ever took for me that never resonated
with me. I’ve always felt that my thoughts just happen, and I am in no way in control of my
thoughts. And as I’ve gotten older, and the idea of mindfulness has been proven
neurobiologically to be helpful; I’ve realized when in moments of despair how comforting it can
be to think a happy thought. And what I love about this practice is that it’s inviting us to do that.
It’s inviting us to say, “Oh my mind, took me somewhere desolate, and instead I’m going to
console myself. I am able to turn this into a happy thought.”

Casper: Yeah, that choosing consolation over desolation. And having, exactly as you say, that
kind of mindful awareness of noticing where I’m being taken by my mind and then re-choosing,
re-choosing, re-choosing…

Vanessa: Yeah

Casper: Back to consolation. And I think that what’s cool is that even know we’re inviting people
into a practice here; so many of us have already imagined ourselves onto that little stool, putting
the Sorting Hat on our head, and being sorted, you know, when you meet someone whose read
the Harry Potter books, they can tell you immediately what house they’re in. And so I love that
we are building on something that people are already doing.

Vanessa: The great practice, thank you so much. Okay dear friend, it is time for blessings, who
would you like to bless this week?

Casper: My blessing goes to Neville. His family is so desperate to prove, or find out, if he’s a
wizard that they’re doing absurd things like dangling him out a window, and Uncle Algee is
throwing him off the pier at Blackpool. You know, magic manifests when we’re most in trouble,
and it does for Neville and he does end up in Hogwarts, but for every Neville there’s probably a
number of people who didn’t make it to Hogwarts, who grew up in a magically family. I guess
my blessing is for Neville, and for anyone who feels they don’t have what it takes, or that they
feel if only they had what it takes that they’ll never be good enough. So my blessing is for him.

Vanessa: That’s beautiful.

Casper: How about you Vanessa?

Vanessa: I’m so excited to finally be able to bless Hermione. My dog’s middle name, yes my
dog has a middle name, is Hermione. And I would like to bless Hermione for unabashedly
being a know-it-all. And unabashedly wanting to show everybody that she’s already done the
work. There is something very performative about how smart she is, she could have done all
the work and kept it all to herself. And you know, good for her, she’s eleven and she does not
need to be managing herself yet. And so I would like to bless curiosity, I would like to bless
wanting to share information with other people. And I would like to bless the instinct to show people how awesome you are, and to be confident in your awesome-ness. There’s every once in a while where you feel like you look good, and you’re strutting along the street, and I want to bless those moments of strutting. Because we all are great at self-loathing, and let’s practice our struts a little bit more. So I want to bless Hermione and her know-it-all-ness.

Casper: Before we close, we’re excited to introduce a new segment. We are looking forward to hearing more and more from those of you who are listening, and this week Caroline Howe in Fredericksburg, Virginia sent us a little message reflecting on the way we read an earlier chapter.

(beep)

Caroline: Hi Casper and Vanessa! I thought I would take your advice, and leave you a voice recording. I’ve just finished listening to your podcast on the chapter of the Keeper of the Keys, and I have a little bit of a different interpretation of the passage you were reading in the Lectio Divina; and wanted to share it with you just as another perspective. In that passage, which given I don’t know how long it’s been since you recorded it, but having just listened to is where Harry asks, “Blown up? But I thought they were killed in a car crash?” The passage was really personally meaningful to me, and I could imagine how it’s been twenty-four since I found out that my brother was killed in a car accident. And I can imagine the difficulty in making the words, as I’m having right now, but also in finding out that, actually, if I were to find out that his death were a different way, it’s just such a part of our being to have imagined so many times the accident itself. To have imagined so many times, you know, ask yourself these questions which Harry must have been asking himself. So the past eleven years, and so you know, my interpretation of him turning to Petunia is his last chance of hearing them say that what he thought the reality he knew was true, and perhaps less of an accusation and more of a chance to confirm, is Hagrid right or not? Have you been lying to me? Because as you pointed out, if they have been lying it crumples everything he knows about his parents. It’s really been the only information that he’s gotten from the Dursleys. So I guess I just wanted to share it with you, because it struck me as a different way to see that passage. And yeah, I loved what both of you decided to take on, and I hope that you both are able to, as I will inspired by you Casper, to try to understand as much as possible about our parents. So thank you guys for this week’s podcast, and I look forward to hearing the rest of them.

Casper: Thank you so much Caroline. What a beautiful and insightful reading, and I’m definitely learning from you. So thank you for listening, thank you for sharing that, and really modeling what it means to use the text to think about our own lives in new ways. We’re so glad to have you with us.

(outro music plays)

Casper: You’ve been listening to Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, produced by me, Casper ter Kuile, Vanessa Zoltan, and Arianna Nedelman. Next week we’ll read Chapter 8: The Potions
Master through the theme of promises. Please subscribe to the podcast and review it wherever you find it. Thanks to those of you who’ve added your reviews recently. Big thanks to Trey Lyons, Shia French, and Katie Meehardy. Our Kick Starter Supporter of the Week, Robert McChovsky, music by Ivan Pizzo and Nick Bohl. Big thanks to Rebecca and Charley Ledley, Lauren Taylor, Shane Bannon, and Rufus. The Harvard Communications Office, the Humanist Hub, and the Harry Potter and the Sacred Text Reading Group. We look forward to seeing you next week. Thank you.

Vanessa: Thank you.

(outr music ends)

Casper: Buh Bye

Vanessa: Bye suckers

Final music: “Panoply”