Harry Potter and the Sacred Text Season 1 - Catching Up on the Owl Post

(upbeat piano music)

?: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”

?: “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.”

Vanessa: “There is no possibility of taking a walk that day. We had been wandering indeed.”

Vanessa: I’m Vanessa Zoltan and this is a special episode of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text.

This is going to be a different episode than usual. My partner in crime Casper is celebrating his wedding in England with his family and we’re so excited for him. And we had a – a different special episode planned and due to technological difficulties you all are now going to be stuck with me today. However, have no fear. We have several voicemails that I will be responding to including one from Casper. And I want to use this opportunity to encourage you all to please keep submitting voice memos. We love hearing from you, so, please do that.

A couple of years ago, I was set to get married to a lovely man and one day, um, it was a bad day, there was a bomb scare at the university where I live and my students and I were evacuated for the day and it was the middle of finals for both them and myself and the middle of the winter and it was just a terrible, terrible day. And um, at the end of that day, my partner and I broke up and we ended up… the final breakup was, you know, it was like hours and hours of back and forth. So it was around 1 in the morning when we were broken up, broken up. And I had a final at 9:00 the following morning. A final exam. And I just remember knowing that I needed to get some sleep in order to do well enough to pass the class and, um, and I ––I didn’t know what to do with my body. I was exhausted but, you know, sort of vibrating in that post-traumatic breakup way.

And so I just-- I remember I tried pacing and um, I--I tried doing some yoga, and I don’t do yoga, so, it was an interesting time to try to start a yoga routine. I tried like deep breathing exercise, I turned on the TV and like nothing was working as far as calming myself down and in like a moment of desperation I reached for my favorite book which was just sitting on my bedside table which is Jane Eyre, and I found my favorite scene which I can basically recite and it just pulled me in, you know. There’s a reason it’s my favorite scene. It’s the scene in which Jane is telling Rochester that she has to leave him, and they have this amazing fight where, when you hear one of them talk, you get completely pulled into their point of view and then you hear the other one talk and you’re like “Oh, no, that’s a really good point,” and I just, I got pulled in. And it’s a long scene, so by the end of reading it I was tired and I was able to fall asleep, and I thought about that in the days and weeks after my breakup where I just kept turning back to Jane. And I was so grateful that I had a book that I loved so much and that was so good that it would give me sort of endless things to think about and it kept making me think about my
relationship in different ways and it just gave me fodder. It gave me a locus on which to contemplate what had happened. And in my gratitude for Jane, I thought about how comforting it must be for religious people to have the Bible to turn to in those moments and how lucky I was to have something, and that was when it occurred to me that I could cultivate things like that intentionally. I didn’t have to be lucky enough to have something I loved that much and that was that good. I could do it on purpose.

And so that semester I started studying how to treat secular texts as sacred with a professor named Stephanie Paulsell. So I did that with Professor Paulsell and then I started a reading group with *Jane Eyre* and Casper came one week and he was so cute and sweet and supportive and got so engrossed and just really gave his all to it in this wonderful way and after, he was like “You know Vanessa, this would be even cooler if we did it with a text like *Harry Potter*, something that a lot of people actually read.” And switching from *Jane Eyre* to *Harry Potter* has been just an absolute gift to me in the form of new friends and a new community and, you know, the real lesson that it has taught me is that faith in people who you love and trust can just lead you to all sorts of amazing places. Um, having faith in Casper that this text was worthwhile motivated me and moved me to start this adventure that I never would have thought of.

*(upbeat piano music)*

That is enough of my voice uninterrupted, so we’re going to move on to listening to some voice memos and we are really excited to have this first one from not only a *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* class participant but Judith G who this voice memo is from is going to be one of our facilitators this upcoming year so we’re really excited to have this voicemail from her.

Judith: Hi Vanessa and Casper, this is Judith. Vanessa, in the last episode you mentioned that for you, the opposite of hope is desperation and for me I think that it’s actually disappointment. It’s terrifying to be hopeful because it means the chance that you can be let down. It’s like living optimistically, right, you’re hoping for the best and assuming that that’s what’s going to happen. But there have been many times in my life and I think times in the books as well where I or the characters choose to be pessimistic to alleviate the chance of losing or being let down. And I think we see it all the time with Harry when he wants to do things by himself. He’s so pessimistic, so scared of hoping, that he doesn’t want to include his closest friends in what he believes to be an inevitable loss. That way, if things go well he can be pleasantly surprised and if they don’t go well, well, it’s just him left. But what I’ve recently realized in my life is that hoping for the best and practicing reckless optimism actualizes positive results. Not 100% of the time, of course, but I am just as happy with positive results when I’m expecting them as when they’re a surprise. So to me, hoping isn’t just throwing my hands up in the air and lets what—letting what’s going to happen happen in a passive way, but instead it’s a deliberate choice to be positive and let myself be vulnerable enough to welcome whatever outcome arrives. So thank you both so much for helping to keep me hopeful and being so absolutely fantastic. I love you guys.
Vanessa: First of all Judith, thank you so much for that voice memo. So, there are a few things that I want to sort of pull apart in what you said. I don’t think that desperation is the opposite of hope, I think it is an associated emotion in hope. And, another example of what I mean by that is a friend and mentor of Casper’s and mine is the professor Matt Potts who’s amazing, and he came and spoke at the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* class and he talked about how when his daughter was born, you know, and holding her for the first time he realized that he had not only contributed to creating a life but he had also contributed to creating a death. And, the profound mixed emotion of that, and that to me that’s the way that you know, hope and desperation are intertwined for me. They’re associated emotions, not the opposite from one another.

Um, I love what you said about, you know, that we hold hope at bay for fear of further disappointment, and that that is rarely helpful or productive. And I think that that’s exactly right. I think that we should do everything we can before we turn to hope, but I also think that you’re exactly right, Judith, that there is nothing wrong in being optimistic and that it’s brave and that choosing optimism and choosing hope I think is the exact right thing and I think if we avoid it, it is out of fear and out of pride and out of a fear of being disappointed, so that is a wonderful reminder and a distinction that I hadn’t thought of. So, just, thank you, thank you very much.

This next voice message, um, really brings out the theological components of treating *Harry Potter* as a sacred text and we’re very grateful to Trey for sending it in.

Trey: Greetings, Vanessa and Casper and all those at the *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text* podcast. This podcast means a great deal to me and I know a lot of other people. My name is Trey Lyon and I live and work in Atlanta, GA. I wanted to share with you some thoughts I had over the past week particularly pertaining to sort of all the dysfunction we’ve seen, all the pain and sorrow in this last week. So, um, a couple of thoughts. Somebody on Facebook posted and I quote from a Dominican priest named Herbert McKay and the quote said “You are to have no image of God because the only image of God is humanity.” Wrestling with that idea of idolatry, right, within the Judaic and Christian traditions certainly that’s very strong. That stuck with me because within the Christian tradition where I find myself there’s a Midrash on creation from the Hebrew teachings that says each human being has a fleck of the divine in each of us and that’s unique so when we draw together, whatever image we hold of the divine becomes more cohesive, it becomes more complete, like a mosaic, you know, kind of all the fragments of tile assembling. And so I started thinking about that. What if we saw creation as a reverse horcrux? That God splinters God’s self, the divine, the real, or whatever, into humanity making the taking of a human life means that we’re killing off something that’s divine and somehow part of God’s own self or part of what’s really real. Um, I know that’s probably more of a theological question maybe than explicitly *Harry Potter* but as you guys always say, the beauty of this text is that it gives us a framework where we can talk about and really wrestle with these realities so it’s just a crazy thought from another Potterhead and a lover of all things spiritual and communal. I’m grateful for you guys and all of your work and yeah, just wanted to throw it out there, so. Holy horcruxes. I don't know, what do y’all think?
Vanessa: Trey, I actually don’t have a lot to add to this. It’s just amazing, I think that you’re exactly right that there is something deeply theological happening here um with the horcruxes and what Voldemort does. And I think that there are endless lessons to learn in it. Um, thank you so much for what you said, and I’m just-- I’m not even going to try to respond to it, because I think it is a point to itself, unto itself. So, just thank you so much.

Bridget: Hi Vanessa and Casper, this is Bridget. I just wanted to say a big thank you for making my new favorite podcast. I consider myself a very serious Harry Potter fan and it is so cool to now be able to listen to you two having the kinds of conversations I’ve been having in my head about these characters for 17 years. On that note, I wanted to join in on one of your conversations. Casper, you had a great metaphor from the friendship episode and it really got me thinking. You talk about the Quidditch balls being a metaphor for the kinds of friends in our lives and this kind of ties into how I think about the four houses at Hogwarts, cause like, a functioning society needs all kinds of different people and I think magic needs all kinds of people . It needs people who are brave and people who are steady and loyal and people who are ambitious and people who are intelligent, so it’s important that Hogwarts nurtures all of those qualities. Um, but I guess friend groups also need all kinds of people just like you were saying, Casper.

Sometimes with the way houses are structured there’s a danger of kids not really becoming very well-rounded which always seems like an issue to me. Gryffindor spends so much time with other Gryffindors. There are even rules to make sure they’re spending a majority of the time with other Gryffindors. Like, they don’t even know how to get into other houses’ common rooms which is crazy. Where would you hang out if you were dating someone from another house? It’s baffling.

Um, and this is why the sorting hat process is so important I think. The sorting hat can see all the potential in kids during sorting and I think intentionally mixes things up. So that all Gryffindors are brave but it doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s like their primary personality trait. Hermione was a shoo-in for Ravenclaw obviously, but in the end that hat chose Gryffindor.

Maybe not because at the end of the day Hermione is more brave than she is intelligent, maybe it’s so Hermione can bring Ravenclaw qualities to the table at Gryffindor and Ron can bring Hufflepuff I think and Harry can bring Slytherin, and that’s important. If all three of them are just Gryffindors through and through they wouldn’t be so great as friends or at staying alive through all their adventures over the years. Um, so I guess I’m making two points, the first being that I think sorting is aspirational in some way. That Hermione is her best self when she works with the qualities that make her a Gryffindor, ‘cause the Ravenclaw qualities come naturally and she doesn’t need to nurture that side of herself as much so she isn’t in Ravenclaw.

Um, I guess the second point is that sorting isn’t about surrounding yourself with people who are like you, it’s about finding people who are aspiring towards similar goals but with different skills and talents so the best kinds of friends are the ones who together you make a whole person like a whole person who can be brave and loyal and smart and push you towards your best self. Like, that to be whole you need to surround yourself with the friends who kind of complete that
picture. So, anyways, thank you for building this community for all of us and keep up the good work and I’m excited to keep listening. Thanks so much.

Vanessa: So I love what you are saying about the sorting hat sort of pushing people to grow. And, you know, what a great thing to do in a pedagogical sense. You know, like, what a brilliant move for a school to make to say, you know, it’s great Hermione that you’re smart but you’re also brave and so we’re going to cultivate that bravery because you’re naturally studious. I really love that, and I wonder if there’s a lesson to us in treating things as sacred, you know, if it’s easy for us to love *Harry Potter* but maybe we should be trying to go out in the world and treating people who we don’t like very much as if they’re sacred and as if they are giving us gifts and so I think that the sorting hat is potentially calling us to, you know, cultivate challenging ourselves and things that are maybe secondary to us. So, thank you so much Bridget, that was wonderful. Our next voicemail is from a familiar voice, Casper sent in this voicemail from London and thanks, love, we’re so excited that you’re still here even when you’re not here.

Casper: Hi Vanessa, hi Arianna, it’s Casper calling in, um, from London in England where I’m standing right outside of King’ s Cross station. I thought this was an appropriate place to send my message. Um, it’s been great to be in the UK and I’m sorry I’m not there to record this episode. Um, but as I stand here kind of outside all the platforms including 9 and ¾ which is hidden from view, I’ve kind of been thinking about, you know, this time of year getting back ready for the school season ‘cause I graduated in May. It’s, you know, I’m not going back to university, not to my graduate studies. That school season is over. Um, and I, it just made me think I wonder what the cast and crew of our beloved story felt like after graduation, you know, we don’t really get to see that. We jump ahead to the epilogue and we see them many, many years later but I just made me think like how would they have handled this transition from the safety of school and not so much the safety obviously for their personhood but of the safety of the routine, um, and I guess we see that in book 7, that routine is gone and how challenging that is. But, um, it made me reflect on that and I’m really going to look for that as we read ahead through book 1 and on to book 2 very soon. How that routine, how the structure of the, you know, the Christmas holidays, the Halloween, the Yule Ball, all the all the different elements that we see come back again and again how that gives us safety and that really, um, we feel most free when we are in some sort of structure. Ironically. Um, so with that, I’ll uh, I’ll send my love and I hope everything goes well, and I really look forward to seeing you both very, very soon. All the best from platform 9 and ¾. Bye, bye.

Vanessa: So Casper, as somebody who lives with undergrads, I can tell you that that is such an acute, acute feeling. I--I think, you know, any transition is so hard. And one that’s associated with your identity like getting married or becoming a student or, you know, transitioning away from being a student is just exhausting and so, so hard. And I think that the reason that transitions are hard is because they call attention to the speed with which time passes. And, it’s… it’s sad, right? It’s sad, because these beautiful things are passing us by so fast. I think it’s good to be a little bit sad about these transitions and to grieve what is behind you in order to appreciate what’s ahead of you and to remember how short life is. And so, I think, embrace how hard transitions are as the school year starts back up. This time of year, it’s a time for reflection.
As a Jewish person, the New Year is coming up in a few weeks and so fall is often a time of reflection for me, and I think, you know, Casper, you are calling us to embrace this sad part of those transitions and embrace the grief in transitions and thank you for doing that. I’m so excited to have you back in the studio next week. Right now my bike helmet is sitting in your chair and it is not as good of company, my friend. Come back to us safe.

Mandy: Hi Casper and Vanessa. This is Mandy Rice calling from Newton, MA. I have loved your intention to bless characters each week and loved the thoughtfulness that you have in choosing those characters. But, I’m surprised that I don’t hear you actually offering blessings to them, I just really hear your logic for the choice, so I’d love to hear what you have to say about offering interface or humanist blessings and the kinds of forms that those take. Um, and I would like to share one from the kind of blessings that I gave when I worked as a chaplain myself. Um, so Casper and Vanessa, um, may you have peace and courage as you continue this work of podcasting and building community around Harry Potter. May you find strength and kindness with one another and feel the appreciation of all of us listening for the work that you do. Blessings.

Vanessa: Mandy, thank you so much. I really feel like your voicemail is pushing us to grow and I’m so grateful for that. I think that you are tapping into something that I will address, but first I’m going to offer the defense which is that what we are trying to do by saying we want to honor Mrs. Weasley’s generosity is we’re hoping that people feel as though we are honoring the invisible generosity that they offer and so there’s intention in the way that we’ve been saying these blessings, but Mandy, I think that you are hitting on something that is true for me. If you go back and listen, um, I think Casper does offer blessings in a very explicit way, and I really resist it. And I am, you know, an atheist chaplain who grew up Jewish so I think there are a lot of reasons why I resist blessing explicitly. One reason why is simply that I’m really uncomfortable with it. I just think I’m guarded enough that offering an explicit blessing feels so vulnerable to me. Um, and Casper’s amazing at it. Right before I defended my thesis, Casper came to my thesis defense and I had ostensibly been practicing praying with Jane Eyre for my thesis. The title was Praying with Jane Eyre and it had been the hardest part of my masters of divinity thesis, the praying part, and so we were standing outside the thesis defense room and Casper took my hands and said “Ok, recite a prayer form Jane Eyre,” and I was like “No! Why are you making me do that?” and I just so resented him for pushing me to that vulnerability. So prayer is something or contemplation or blessings are something that are very, very private to me, and even as a teacher it’s just, I should be modeling it and I--I appreciate you calling me to model this better, to model this vulnerability better.

And so, Mandy, I’m going to use your call to offer a blessing, um, in a vulnerable way and I’m going to try to give myself a very low hurdle to jump over and make it an easy blessing for myself and start to practice that vulnerability and, you know, blessing with specificity. I would like to offer a blessing to my dad. Um, my dad listens to this podcast every week even though he has absolutely no interest in Harry Potter. And, he delights in not only my voice but he called me last night to tell me how great Casper is at this. And he was about to go to dinner with some
friends and as he was hanging up on me, I said “Dad don’t brag about me!” and he said “Of course I will,” and sort of hung up. And so my father grew up in Hungary and came from a different world and he never could have anticipated that his success would look like three children like my brothers and I look. And he has just stuck with my weirdness, you know, the whole way through his favorite book is War and Peace and, you know, he’s this great sort of classics worshipper and Jewish, you know, grew up so Jewish and instead, his daughter is not reading the classics but is reading Harry Potter and is not, you know, a rabbi but is an atheist chaplain and he is so supportive and takes such pride, and so dad, I want to say thank you and I also want to offer a blessing that I wish for you that you revel in that pride in what you have created in this family. So, Mandy I hope I did well enough, um, and we will see if I can get better at it.

(outr music)

Vanessa: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. Next week, we will be reading chapter 14 through the theme of rebellion. This episode of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text is produced by Ariana Nedelman and Casper ter Kuile, and me, Vanessa Zoltan. Please do not forget to subscribe and review especially on iTunes, it really helps get the word out. Please follow us on Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Facebook all of which are managed by our social media coordinator extraordinaire Jenn Stark. A huge thank you to Stephanie Paulsell, Julia Argie, and Bob Philman. Thank you to all of the people who sent in voice messages this week. Our music is by Ivan Pyzow and Nick Bohl. We’d like to thank Rebecca and Charlie Ledley,, Lauren Taylor, Shane Bannon, and the gorgeous Rufus. The Harvard communications office, the humanist hub, and as always our Harry Potter and the Sacred Text reading group. Thank you so much for sticking with me this week and we will see you next week.

(outr music fades out)

Vanessa: I think I’m...it’s really easy to love Casper when he’s not here. And it’s just an empty chair and not sass, staring at me. I love you, Casper, I miss you. Ariana I miss you too. Guys, audience, not only is Casper not here this week but Arianna and I couldn’t find a reschedule time in which we were both available so she’s not even here producing me. I’m literally sitting alone in a room, ok. *Sighs*