Harry Potter and the Sacred Text 4.14 – The Unforgiveable Curses: Transformation

Casper: Chapter 14: The Unforgiveable Curses

(intro music)

“The next two days passed without great incident, unless you counted Neville melting his 6th cauldron in potions. Professor Snape, who seemed to have obtained new levels of vindictiveness over the summer, gave Neville detention.”

I’m Casper ter Kuile.

Vanessa: And I’m Vanessa Zoltan.

Casper: And this is Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. Today we’re joined by Mike McHargue - better known as Science Mike - who is an amazing author, podcaster and speaker, who wrote a fabulous book Finding God in the Waves and hosts a show called “Ask Science Mike” and the fabulous liturgist podcast, of which I’m a big fan. So welcome to the show Mike!

Mike McHargue: Oh it’s really awesome to be here! I literally, I’m so into Harry Potter, that when we do liturgies in churches we read from the Bible and the Harry Potter series alongside each other. So the title of the podcast is completely literal in our work.

(Casper and Mike laugh)

Casper: Well Mike we’re excited to dig into some of your work and think about the theme of transformation together. But we’re gonna ask you to open with a story.

Mike: Sure. I guess I’ll just roll the clock back to when I was seven years old and I was a fat kid. I had just the jiggiest little belly that I kept hidden under Hawaiian shirts, I had copper red hair that I wore in a bowl cut and I loved science fiction and computer programming. And none of that was the recipe for popularity in the 1980’s. I mean I was such a slow child, physically. I ran slow, I couldn’t jump high, I couldn’t do pull-ups. And I was clumsy; I fell over a lot, much to the delight of my classmates. And I was also slow, in the words of my teachers, at learning. I had incredible difficulty learning to read and to write. And that meant that my experience with my peers was marked by cruelty, that I understand other children primarily as a source of bullying and antagonizing me, and to some degree, mentally, physically and emotionally torturing me.

But then suddenly by some miracle I started to get taller and thinner. And by the time I was in high school I was six feet tall, rail thin. And the way I’d marched to my own drummer as a child went from being strange to cool because for teenagers nonconformity is amazing, right? And when people think about this series everyone talks about brave Harry, brilliant Hermione or gregarious Ron. But the character that’s always spoken to me is Neville Longbottom. Because in this series I see Neville struggle with everything other children find easy. He has trouble fitting in. But this ostracization, this marginalization that he experiences makes him brave. And that braveness, that fearless nature to Neville that we see develop in this series, was shaped by
early trauma. We learn in this chapter of the book that his parents were tortured to madness by an unforgiveable curse. What children go through at the hands of their peers and bullying is truly unforgiveable. I wrestled with depression and suicidal tendencies well into my adult years. Bullying leaves a mark on the human psyche every bit as powerful as Crucio.

But it also transforms us. Our broken places as children can turn us into truly powerful adults. Neville will always stand up to his friends, and ultimately to the world’s most powerful enemies, because of what he believes is right. And it’s because he was transformed by pain and rejection into something strong and unique, just like everyone else who survived bullying.

Casper: Mmmm. I was so struck, Mike, by the fierce identification with Neville, especially — you know Vanessa and I have talked about this on the podcast as well — our experience with being bullied. You’re nearly allergic to seeing injustice elsewhere. And I think, you know, I would never want to say that bullying gives gifts. But I think one of the things that I’ve definitely learned from being in a marginalized situation is that you’re able to recognize more quickly when it’s happening elsewhere. And I love that you’re drawing us to Neville, especially in this chapter, because we have this very intense moment where Moody/Crouch is using these unforgiveable curses and the Crucio curse, as you say, has this enormous impact on Neville because he is recognizing what his own parents have been through. In a room where most of the other people are seeing it as a sort of curiosity horror show, rather than something that’s deeply personally connected. So I’m wondering how you make sense of that, that there’s a gift in the wound or something like that, which ultimately allows us to do things and see things that we might otherwise not have seen?

Mike: Well I’ve made my whole life about making people who feel pushed out feel welcome. I mean that’s the animating energy behind literally everything I do in my work. And that absolutely, unequivocally comes from sitting at the edge of the classroom and fearing all of the other children. That absolutely comes from being the strange kid at church that everyone tolerates, but doesn’t accept. I don’t have any tolerance for people to be on the outside. If people are on the outside, I’m going to go join them on the outside and make the outside the new inside (laughs). I mean it’s just, I can’t tolerate it.

But you know I was in London touring with my book recently and my wife and I went to go see Wicked. And there are themes in the musical about bullying. And I had a completely different experience in that room than my wife did because I was so provoked by my previous trauma in relation to that story that I was moved to pretty intense tears. And as I reread this chapter, I couldn’t help but compare that moment in London in a theatre to Neville watching a spider suffer and relating to that in a way that no one else in the room could, simply because of the way that kind of pain was personal to him.

And yeah so I wouldn’t call what happens from bullying a gift. But I would say out of the ashes of bullying something beautiful can rise. And it is a direct result of suffering. But the result of that suffering can be an ability to aid others in suffering less.
Vanessa: What I’m wondering is, knowing a little bit about your faith and your faith background, how do feel as if your beliefs have impacted the way that you see that? Because to me, as someone whose Jewish, that sounds like a very Christian and beautiful way to see suffering. That you went through something terrible, but you rose from it and prevailed through curiosity and kindness. And I’m wondering if that rings true for you, that your faith is part of how you see how you came out of that time.

Mike: I mean I’m a modern non-specific Christian kind of on the edges of the organized faith that dominates our political culture. But the way that I interpret my faith is actually significantly through the Old Testament prophets, these figures that lament the way that the powerful ignore the needs of those at the edges and those without power and resources. And they lament that and they describe a God that laments that, that can’t stand when the powerful ignore the powerless and can’t accept praise from people and can’t accept fellowship from humanity, if humanity fails to reconcile those power dynamics.

And then as a Christian I see that perspective portrayed in the entire story of Jesus. Jesus consistently spoke of the importance of lifting up people who found themselves under the heel of society. And that’s really what keeps me in the Christian faith is that accountability that God is with us most when we lower ourselves and we invite all humanity together as equals.

Vanessa: Mike, one of the big transformations that I am going to be excited to dig into today is thinking about the continuous transformation that is happening through the Polyjuice Potion and what it means to be looking at Moody, but knowing that it’s Barty Crouch who is teaching the students. I’m just wondering what you make of the fact that Barty Crouch takes care of Neville after the classroom scene. I think that we can get into Barty Crouch’s potential pedagogy later, but the striking moment to me is if we are thinking of Moody as transformed Barty Crouch, what compels him to take care of Neville?

Mike: This was one of the most upsetting flips for me in the whole series. (Laughs) Because I fell in love with the Moody as presented in The Goblet of Fire, I just fell in love with him. I was so excited that Harry finally had this consistent presence in his life that had seen it all and had chosen to invest in children, even if it was just for a year. This person with incredible wisdom and life experience was investing himself completely in the next generation. And the tenderness with which he pulls Neville aside, oh man it was beautiful! And once the book develops and we find out that this is Barty Crouch Jr., I had to wrestle with how many of those moments were genuine and how many of those moments were performative.

Casper: Right.

Mike: And then what impact does that have on Neville and Harry as they process this prior year. I think we’re all experiencing that, like right now. In our culture we can’t go a day without another major scandal coming out about a public figure that many people trust. It’s like Polyjuice Potion is everywhere in our culture (Casper laughs) and it’s forcing us all to undergo this same retroactive introspection about our life experiences, searching for what is real and for what is not. And there’s a beautiful transformation that’s a personal transformation from growth and life
and then there’s a more insidious transformation that comes when people pretend to be what they are not and eventually the mask falls off and it betrays the trust of many, many people at once.

Casper: That’s so powerful, yeah. I mean that resonates so much. And in a way I think that’s also what happens with texts? You know in this case we’re dealing with something from the plot that we know is now different from the first reading. But even thinking about J.K. Rowling on Twitter, there are so many intertextual conversations between an audience and a text or an audience and an author where things become problematic, or difficult or different from what they seem.

Vanessa: Yeah and what both of you just made me think of is I know that we’ve heard from a lot of listeners several weeks ago now who have felt very betrayed by J.K. Rowling’s announcement of sort of absolving Johnny Depp of pretty grave sins. And my response has been one of absolute relief that we have the freedom of treating the text as sacred, separate from J.K. Rowling. While also deeply trouble by the fact that we’re in the middle of this really difficult conversation culturally as to how much we can separate the art from the artist. And I’m wondering if maybe the best way to deal with the question around what J.K. Rowling did with Johnny Depp is to grapple with those types of questions within the text. And I think that there aren’t easy answers to these things. I think that they are deeply complicated things and regardless of who Moody is in this moment, this is a true kindness that he does to Neville.

Casper: Mmmm.

Mike: I think it’s important that as our beloved public role models and mentors turn out to be real people, (laughs) flawed people, uh in many cases, bad people that have really, really terrible behaviors that we have to sift back through our past and accept that which helped us grow and find insight and take those things at face value. Because the impact was good for us regardless of the intent of a potentially bad actor. And I think it’s important that we look at these moments where beloved people let us down as opportunities to look at ourselves and our own lives and see ways that we may be unconsciously contributing to things in society that we don’t actually approve of. And I think that if anything great can be gleaned from a Polyjuice fueled Alistair Moody, or Johnny Depp or any public figure who has hurt us is that the best way forward for all of us is to try to be more honest, more self-aware, more compassionate people who, when we wrong others, make sincere and genuine effort to create reconciliation and restitution with the one that we’ve harmed.

Casper: (deep breath) Yeah. So Mike thank you so much for joining us today and I want to share a little bit about the fabulous work that you do in your podcasting life knowing that you really bridge this divide in a way - I think we do as well – of people who, you know, have an active faith life and people who are not at all religious, but are interested in life’s big questions. Can you talk a little bit about what you love about the shows that you do and where people can find out more?
Mike: Yeah our show is designed to model radical inclusivity. So my favorite thing is that we have conservative evangelicals and pretty militant atheists in the same audience with spiritual and not religious people. *(Casper laughs)* We have a large age mix, we have an audience that is majority female. And we’re trying to model healthier media and genuine discussion, especially for people who we would call spiritually frustrated or homeless. If you would like to check out the work that we’re doing you can search iTunes for *The Liturgist* or visit us at theliturgist.com/podcast.

Casper: Thank you so much Mike. We’re so glad that you were with us.

Mike: Oh it has been a joy, thank you.

Vanessa: So Casper we got into some of the details with Science Mike about the chapter, so basically you had a Cliff’s Notes for going first for the 30 second recap.

Casper: I will do my best to use it to my advantage.

Vanessa: Okay, are you ready?

Casper: Yeah!

Vanessa: On your mark, get set, go!

*(clock tick tocks)*

Casper: Okay so really all of this chapter is about a lesson that happens in Moody’s classroom where he introduces the three unforgivable curses. Um Crucio and…oh my gosh…the killing curse and the controlling curse and it’s very scary and Neville has a horrible reaction to it and everyone is kind of intrigued and amazed. And Hermione knows them, of course, because she’s really smart. And Neville’s so traumatized that Moody goes to look after him. And Harry is really angry that Sirius *(loud buzzer)* is going to come back because he’s worried.

I went totally blank on the curses! *(laughs)*

Vanessa: And I disagree with your thesis statement that that’s like the thing that happens. But…

Casper: *(still laughing)* Alright well then let’s hear your version!

Vanessa: Okay, you’ll hear my version!

Casper: Okay here we go – 3, 2, 1 – go!

Vanessa: So they are very excited about Defense Against the Dark Arts, they go and Moody is sorta weird and Neville gets traumatized by it and Hermione is like “What are you doing? You’re really upsetting him!” and everyone thinks she’s talking about the spider, but she’s talking about Neville. And then, um, they go to Divination and they are like “Oh I’m going to die in all these tragic deaths” and Hermione starts S.P.E.W. and Ron is like “that’s hilarious” and Fred and
George are off in the corner working on a letter. And...um...and Snape is *(buzzer sounds)* really upset he doesn’t have the Defense Against the Dark Arts job!

Casper: Snape just can’t get over that. Come on Snape.

Vanessa: I mean I have a transformation theory on that. He’s like “Uh I’ve changed and no one’s noticing”!

Casper: *(laughs)* He’s like “I’m wearing a new dress and I want a compliment”.

Vanessa: Yes, exactly. And you’re like “No, it’s still just you with your bad personality. It was never your dress that we didn’t like”. *(Casper continues laughing)*

So Casper I want us to start where we left off with Science Mike, but really hone in on this question of transformation. I’m wondering what you make of the fact that it is both Moody and Barty Crouch Jr. who take care of Neville in this moment? The thing that I’m wondering about is do you think it is possible that Barty Crouch Jr. has become more empathetic because he is in such a wounded man’s body? I would imagine that when you use Polyjuice Potion you feel the pain of the person whose body you’re in. And to some extent we see that in the text because he can use Moody’s magical eye. But he’s missing an eye, he has a peg leg, he has all of these scars up and down his body and I’m wondering if we make meaning of the fact that he’s compassionate to Neville in this moment in part perhaps because he’s this transformed both self or how we make meaning of that?

Casper: Yeah, I think that there’s really something to this idea that he’s impacted in how he’s responding to situations because he has been transformed into Moody’s body. He’s being treated as Moody so much that I feel that there might be some personality transference even. Not just from his experience in Moody’s body, but how other people are treating him. The way he’s lifted up as this incredible warrior. And the way that people see him a little bit as a loon, you know someone who’s marginalized for still really living in the past. And so many of those things I think are true for Barty Crouch Jr. too. He’s holding onto allegiances from a long time ago, for more than a decade. He was a very skilled and is still a very skilled dark wizard and he was this kind of warrior, for evil, but nonetheless a very skilled fighter. So I can imagine that transference happens quite a lot. And part of me wonders like maybe he actually enjoys teaching. And particularly in this moment with Longbottom, who of course comes from a pure blood wizard family, so isn’t inherently repulsive to someone like Barty Crouch J. I wonder if he regrets the Longbottom’s allegiance to people who support Muggle/Wizard equality, he kind of longs to perhaps bring this young man under his wing and shift his thinking?

Vanessa: Also if we are thinking of him as just Barty Crouch Jr. we can take these lines of like “You have to see” on face value, right? Because he wants people to see how strong dark magic is. He wants people to potentially come over to the dark side quickly because it’s like see the weapons that we have, see what you’re up against?
But I think that this gets to the heart of transformation, which is that we are always constantly changing and we don’t know what we are tapping into at any moment when we are behaving. We don’t know. There’s this belief that we can change entirely and I do believe that people can change, but I think that one of the hard things about transformation is that it is never complete. We can’t ever completely transform.

Casper: Well I think this gets to really the challenge of the word transformation because this is the difference between growth or change and transformation. In growth and change the old is still recognizable in the new. Things have molded slightly or they’ve adapted or grown or shrunk, but ultimately you can still recognize what used to be. But with transformation the idea is that it is a complete change and that’s what I think is so challenging here is that for all the eyes to see, it really is a full transformation. There is nothing, apart from the Polyjuice Potion drinking throughout the books, there’s really nothing that would suggest that this is Barty Crouch Jr. throughout these pages. So it does feel like the transformation is complete. And I think that’s what makes the turn at the end so difficult. And I was thinking do we ever see Crouch Jr. in Moody’s body be fully Crouch Jr.? And of course we do at the end and so that theory doesn’t quite hold up. So maybe what we’re seeing in Moody/Crouch through these pages is a false transformation. It’s an illusion. The core has not transformed totally, which leaves that remnant of evil still present.

Vanessa: Well then my question for you is do you believe in transformation? Are there things in the world that totally transform? And you’re gonna answer with like a very obvious thing that I haven’t thought of and I’m gonna feel like an idiot. But I’m not sure that I believe in complete transformation, right?

Casper: I guess the example I think of is the classic caterpillar into a butterfly, where there’s one creature that crawls into the cocoon and spins the cocoon around it. And there is an in between phase where there is just mush inside the cocoon and out comes the butterfly. It’s a classic. Yeah I mean I guess I do think it’s possible even on a very small level perhaps our transition between sleeping into waking every morning. We are completely unconscious of ourselves during the sleeping hours, either in dreamland or just completely absent. And yet we kind of re-inhabit consciousness of our body when we wake up. And I don’t know I guess I want to hold onto that notion that that complete change is possible, even if it is like this case with Moody, just an illusion. What about you?

Vanessa: The quote that keeps coming to mind – you’re gonna be shocked because it’s actually quite an optimistic one – is Carl Sagan’s idea that we are all made of star stuff. It’s a humanistic way of understanding that we are all connected to one another. That, you know, it’s the same atomic structures that make the stars that make each of us. And that we’re all made of the same stuff. And because of that to some extent I don’t totally believe in transformation because I believe that there is something worth holding onto from our past, no matter what. I think that there’s something beautiful and true. I don’t want to throw out the baby with the bathwater! I want to hold onto something from everything and therefore I don’t want complete transformation. Or maybe what it’s speaking to is that there’s always grief in true transformation.
Because if you’re going to entirely transform, you have to lose that beautiful truth thing from before and create something beautiful and truer hopefully. But true transformation, I think, has in it inherent sadness.

Casper: Yeah I do agree with you that that need for memory is something that holds a bridge to the past. I guess in some way I wonder if the question of transformation is as much about our wanting to be transformed or not. Because sometimes we can use new information to build a whole new tableau of a memory, do you know what I mean? Like I feel like there’s agency in transformation which is more than just what happens to us.

Vanessa: I like that we are seeing this from different sides, and yet both from very optimistic points of view. I don’t totally want to believe in transformation because I want to hold onto what is beautiful and true. And you believe in transformation because you want the most beautiful, most true thing to possibly emerge. I think that that’s lovely and matters.

Casper: Is there somewhere else in this chapter where you saw this theme of transformation?

Vanessa: Yeah I know that we joked about it but I would like to talk about the purgatory that Snape lives in. You know how I am want to sympathize with Severus Snape ever. But it just did occur to me you know that the students have their theory that the reason that Snape is in such a bad mood is because he didn’t get the Defense Against the Dark Arts job and we don’t know if that’s true, but I’m willing to believe that theory. I know we’ve said this before, but it just has to be hard to be living as a double agent, to feel like you have given up so much and to still feel punished and seen as a Death Eater and for your worst mistakes.

It just has to feel so hard! I mean I remember I went through a period as a child where I was like really not nice to my little brother. And I felt like I had outgrown that phase, and was incredibly kind to my little brother and my parents would still say “you’re so mean to him”. I felt so betrayed by that! I was like you’re not seeing me for who I am. I did that and it was terrible, but I haven’t been mean to him for years. And I understand that they like grew protective of him during that phase and so started to see it, but it felt so frustrating to feel as though I had put the effort into transforming and it wasn’t being acknowledged. So I empathize with Snape in that.

Casper: Yeah, absolutely. Like when you’re judged as a human being for your worst mistake and that kind of shapes your life. Yeah. I actually think this touches on a really – I don’t know if it’s silly – but I was really sitting with this phrase “constant vigilance” that Moody keeps telling his students and keeps telling the world “constant vigilance”. And I thought first of all that that speaks to this question of Snape is that we constantly have to see one another anew, whether you’re in a relationship or you’re in a family. It’s not enough to keep looking at someone as if they were in the past, because it doesn’t allow for their growth and transformation.

And it also limits our relational transformation, right? I always think about that time, especially around the holidays, when you’re with your family and the intention of being the grown person
that you are and mature and you come back and everyone turns back into their 10 year old self, right? So we need to be constantly vigilant to see each other for who we are now.

But also I thought of it as kind of like the Buddha arriving in Crouch/Moody form. Like it’s all about this present moment, it’s about experiencing the now, right? We need constant vigilance, constant appreciation for this moment, for this moment, for this moment. So I feel like we’ve uncovered a secret mediation teacher within the pages of this chapter. *(laughs)*

Vanessa: Oh I love that! Constant Vigilance as a mantra?!

Casper: Right! I can just imagine like people walking through, I don’t know, like their office on the way to the printer and just being like “constant vigilance”. Hmm the feeling of my shoe on this soft carpet. *(both laugh)*

Vanessa: I mean I was picking between this moment to bless or not, so I’ll just talk about it now, which is the vigilance and attention that Hermione is paying to Neville in this moment. I think it shows a transformation in Hermione. She is not paying attention to the lesson; she is not watching what is happening to the spider. Instead she has this moment of “Stop it, you’re hurting him, you’re hurting him” and everybody thinks she’s talking about the spider, but she’s talking about Neville. That I think shows Hermione’s A.) constant vigilance to things other than the sleight of hand being done before her, but also that she’s really transformed, right? She’s always been caring towards Neville and, to some extent; we even saw in the last book that she’s willing to get into trouble to help Neville in Potions. But I think she is just becoming a more and more empathetic person, and less and less obsessed with being perfect in school, right? Because she’s watching a fellow classmate instead of the lesson.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: So Casper there is just one more thing that we have to talk about before we move on which is the founding of S.P.E.W.

Casper: Yeah, absolutely. I mean we see Hermione has been going to the library all the time on her own, no surprise. But we really learn what it’s all about – she’s been making these badges, she’s set up a whole governance system with a secretary and a treasurer. And by founding S.P.E.W. she is really kind of taking her disgust with the discovery of the house elves working in perhaps enslavement at Hogwarts to the next level.

What I found interesting, you know we’ve talked a little bit about Harry’s narrative arc of moving from a sense of isolation and feeling like he needs to do things on his own and not expecting people to help him and go through these novels to learn to depend on others, to involve other people in his life and his struggles. And you know we’ve already seen him do by writing that letter to Sirius in this book as we’re now halfway through the seven book arc. And it was interesting to me to see Hermione echo some of those challenging traits of she doesn’t involve the boys in thinking about the governance structure or thinking about the kind of manifesto that
she creates. But she does involve the boys in giving them these roles once they’ve been designed. And of course they are going to be very resistant to that.

And, more importantly than that, she doesn’t involve any of the house elves in that work. So I’m just thinking about the transformation of young activists and when I was gosh 13 or 14, maybe a little bit older than that, and was learning about some of the global justice issues around poverty and trade systems I absolutely did the same thing that Hermione did and kind of went all in in telling other people what they should do differently – mostly my dad. But I just didn’t have the maturity or the understanding to think more holistically? And that transformation will come with Hermione. But I think we see some of those echoes. I don’t know if that struck you in the same way.

Vanessa: So I completely agree with all of that. The thing that I want to say though is that I do think that she shows us in this teeny tiny scene sort of two different theories of transformation. Which is 1.) transformation can sometimes happen in an instant. You’re not a parent and then you deliver a baby and you’re a parent, right? The way that parents often talk about it is like it was just me and then it was me and another person.

Casper: Right.

Vanessa: And I feel like we see that (giggles) when Harry and Ron are like “How many members do you have”? And she says “If you join, THREE”! And I just love the idea that in an instant this can go from a one person club to a 200% growth (Casper laughs). Like how quickly that can change – it can go from just Hermione to actually being a club?

But then I love when Ron is like “how is this going to help the house elves? Like what are we gonna do”? And she says “We start by recruiting members”. And that to me speaks to an understanding that transformation and change happens slowly. That like we want a revolution and the first thing we have to do is like the tedious work of collecting dues and recruiting members.

But we see the effort that she’s putting into S.P.E.W. really pay off when, in just a few books, she’s gonna have to help start Dumbledore’s army, right? So yeah I think we’re watching Hermione fail, but also we’re watching her transform. And we’re also sort of hearing her theory of change.

Casper: I love that. And I love that both are true at the same time. I think that’s so important, because as you say with giving birth, it’s that singular moment of suddenly there’s a baby in your arms. And at the same time there’s this whole gestation period of nine months that comes beforehand. And yet both are true and both are different. It’s that kind of polarity of two different things both being true that are opposite. And I think that that’s such a helpful thing to remember when you are in the midst of something, whether it’s tiresome or boring, but it’s part of this big very important thing that both are true at the same time.
And even in our lives, you know, maybe we react in a way that is counter to how we wanted to. Maybe we get angry or stressed when we wanted to be calm and collected. You know it’s in the bigger arc perhaps of us being more responsive with care and compassion. But in THIS MOMENT we fell short. I find that so helpful because I think we all fall short now and then! And to remember that it’s within this bigger arc of change is comforting, if nothing else.

Vanessa: I never fall short. I’m perfect.

Casper: *(laughs)* I know that’s why I like to hang around with you.

*(Theme music plays)*

Casper: So Vanessa we are doing Sacred Imagination once again. And just as a reminder this is the practice where we try and embody ourselves into the text, you know, by being a fly on the wall in a scene, or perhaps being embodied in one of the characters in the scene and really trying to experience the fullness of our five senses. So I’m going to read a passage and if you’re in a place where you can safely and comfortably close your eyes, I’m going to encourage you to do that.

It’s towards the end of this chapter when Hedwig arrives with some post.

“The silence was broken, not by Ron, who in any case looked like he was temporarily dumbstruck, but by a soft tap, tap on the window. Harry looked across the now empty common room and saw, illuminated by moonlight, a snowy owl perched on the windowsill.

Hedwig! He shouted, and he launched himself out of his chair and across the room to pull open the window.

Hedwig flew inside, soared across the room, and landed on the table on top of Harry’s predictions.

About time! said Harry, hurrying after her.

She’s got an answer! said Ron excitedly, pointing at the grubby piece of parchment tied to Hedwig’s leg.

Harry hastily untied it and sat down to read, whereupon Hedwig fluttered onto his knee, hooting softly.

What does it say? Hermione asked breathlessly.

The letter was very short, and looked as though it had been scrawled in a great hurry. Harry read it aloud:

*Harry-*
I'm flying north immediately. This news about your scar is the latest in a series of strange rumors that have reached me here. If it hurts again, go straight to Dumbledore – they're saying he got Mad-Eye out of retirement, which means he's reading the signs, even if no one else is.

I'll be in touch soon. My best to Ron and Hermione. Keep your eyes open, Harry.

Sirius”

Vanessa: That was such a like strong experience (laughs) for me. I was Harry and I was SO EXCITED to see Hedwig and then SO TERRIFIED by this response. Terrified and guilty of like what did I send into motion? It was the feeling of like reading an admissions letter and like looking for the words “congratulations” or “we're so sorry” and not really understanding the content of the letter, but looking for the main thing? And having Hedwig come as this like symbol of hope and instead this just like gloomy response of “this is actually really serious, I'm gonna come”. It was so anxiety provoking for me! What about for you?

Casper: It's so funny because – and your reaction of course is so much closer to what happens to Harry - mine was the other way around. And to be honest I've been thinking about this for the last couple of days anyway, is that sometimes I find it such a relief when someone else walks into the room and says “I'm in charge and I'm gonna deal with this”. Like I find going to the dentist relaxing because they know more than me and they're in charge. (laughs)

And I kind of felt validated in the sense that you know the worries that I've had, I'm not the only one who is worried? Sirius talks about Mad-Eye's coming out of retirement because Dumbledore asked him and if Dumbledore’s thinking this and Sirius is thinking this then there is something going on. Of course that has terrifying consequences because what I'm afraid of is really terrifying. But I had this kind of, maybe partly because I was looking for Hedwig for so long, finally seeing her was a comforting thing. And the fact that Sirius said “Keep your eyes open”, I don't know it made me think of Mad-Eye's eyes, it made me think of the basilisk's eyes. You know how harry has to not be seen or not look into the eyes of the basilisk, that there is something about being visible, being invisible that really struck me in this passage.

Vanessa: It's someone else telling him “constant vigilance”.

Casper: Oh my God! Exactly! I love that.

Vanessa: I really like your reading. I completely agree with you and I feel like I just learned something about our friendship, that we both love it when grown-ups come into the room. I feel like maybe we both project the role of grown-up onto the other person. I’m like “Ah, Casper’s here, everything will be fine, someone who knows things”. (Casper laughs)

But also when grown-ups have to get involved, it's a bad thing right? When it has to go above your head it's because things are getting serious.
Vanessa: There’s a great moment in *Grey’s Anatomy* when Izzy, who has had stage four cancer for months and has being seeing the top oncologists, gets like demoted down to a resident, like a not as good, not as experienced oncologist. And she’s like” No, no, no I need to be seeing the top oncologist” and the resident says to her “This is good news, the fact that you no longer need the top oncologist means that your cancer is no longer severe”. And I think that is what worries me about when authorities get involved, I’m like “Oh if the fire department is coming that means this isn’t just something I can put out with baking soda”. So there’s a relief of adults, but there’s also a “oh no if adults have to get involved this is more severe than I thought it was”.

Casper: Well and even the adults are still going on incomplete information. I mean that’s the other thing that struck me is that Dumbledore is reading the signs kind of like Trelawney is reading the tea leaves, right? Like it’s not as if even when an adult or the fire department or the top oncologist is in the room they have all the answers, it’s the person who has the best guess or the person we think is gonna be able to read the signs best. But it doesn’t guarantee safety, it doesn’t guarantee – in this case- victory against evil. In fact it’s gonna get a whole lot worse before it gets better.

Vanessa: This week’s voicemail is from Bethy Crow, and even though it’s a slightly older voicemail we still found it very relevant today.

*(voicemail beep)*

Bethy Crow: Hi Casper, Vanessa and Ariana. This is Bethy Crow calling from Spokane, WA. And I wanted to talk about this past episode you guys did on destruction and the ways that can affect our lives, sometimes even for the better. This is pretty briefly mentioned, but I would like to explore that thought particularly because of the wildfires in CA right now. My entire family lives in northern CA and that’s where I grew up. I’m the only one who is away besides one cousin and over the past three or four days everybody has had to evacuate, they are all spread out in different directions, we have this massive group text telling us who is where and what’s going on. I’m constantly asking myself “Are they going to need to be evacuated in the middle of the night again? Is the death toll going to rise? Is there another school that is going to be burnt down”? And the more that I think about these things, the more that I remember just how deeply I love every single family member that I have and this has actually been a really, really special time because of that. Each of us has grown in our communication over these past three days and I think we’ve each grown in our understanding of how much we love each other as well.

Within these days my cousin’s little baby girl stood up for the first time and because we were all in such close communication we all got to celebrate that together. And she sent us a video and it was just so cool to celebrate life in the middle of this deep destruction, to celebrate how deeply we each love other and are connecting to each other even as everything around us is burning to the ground. So I wanted to kind of give that different perspective of destruction and
how it can actually cause some beautiful things. Thank you so much for your podcast and all that you do. I love you guys a lot!

Casper: Bethy thank you so much for that voicemail. And, as Vanessa said, there are still wildfires burning across CA at the time we’re recording and it seems to be more of an annual event, the scary climate change future that was predicted seems to be arriving. And I’m grateful that you’re able to find some benefit, I guess in a way, of closer relationships with family and friends because of that. I think so often people talk about the 2nd world war in England as this time when people banded together and kind of perhaps petty rivalries or neighborly gossip kind of fell away and there was this sense of being together in the midst of something tumultuous and dangerous. And that often the best of us comes out in moments of threat and moments of danger. So I’m so glad that you have found that and I’m also so hopeful that it’s not necessary for us to be in those times of threat and danger for those most bonding and most loving parts of ourselves to emerge.

So Vanessa it’s time for us to bless someone from the pages of this chapter. And I feel that there is a wealth of riches for people who might take a blessing with them. But who have you chosen this time?

Vanessa: I struggled so much, it was like an embarrassment of riches there were so many wonderful moments. But I am going to bless Professor Sprout.

Casper: So good.

Vanessa: She, for some reason, has mentioned to Moody that Neville is good at Herbology. And I just love that like, I’m just envisioning that she is just so proud of Neville and excited that he is good at it. Or that she came to his defense if like Snape is in the faculty room complaining about Neville, Sprout was like “Actually he is brilliant at Herbology”. Whatever the circumstances, somebody delighting in someone else’s talent and saying wonderful things about somebody else behind their back is just a good thing. And I would like to offer a blessing to anyone out there who delights in skills and talents of their loved ones and shouts them from the rooftops. So a blessing for Professor Sprout and this like beautiful bragging moment about Neville.

What about you Casper? Who would you like to bless?

Casper: Oh that’s so lovely especially because Neville doesn’t have his mother to be that kind of champion in his daily life and his grandmother is so hard on him, it’s so lovely to see.

I want to bless Harry in the middle of the lesson of the unforgiveable curses. There’s this moment of great self-awareness that I appreciated in the chapter where Harry feels a thrill of foreboding just before the killing curse - this sense of excitement and wanting to see something frightening or dangerous or destructive. And I feel like, you know, we see that in our own lives as well when people slow down to see a car crash on the road, or even just the allure of horror movies? There’s something grotesque in our desire to see death and not just something that is dead, but something that is suffering, something that is painful. You know I think of some of
those exploitive images of people suffering from starvation and I guess I want to bless Harry for tempering that instinctual desire to gaze at suffering. I want to challenge that temptation, that desire in myself because pain and death should not be entertainment in the way that I think Harry is wise to check himself here. So a blessing for Harry.

(outro music starts)

Casper: You’ve been listening to Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. You can follow us on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook and leave us a review on iTunes – we love to read them. You can send us a voicemail to harrypottersacredtext@gmail.com Next week we’ll be reading Chapter 15 Beauxbatons and Durmstrang through the theme of Trauma. This episode was produced by Ariana Nedelman, Casper ter Kuile and Vanessa Zoltan. Our music is by Ivan Pyzowl and Nick Bohl and we are part of the Panoply nextwork where you can find ours and other great shows on panoply.fm Thanks to this week’s voicemail to Bethy Crow, to Harshi Hettige, to Rebecca and Charlie Ledley and Stephanie Pausell.

(music continues)

Vanessa: Ha ha your scaly dragon body. (both laughing) I love it!