Harry Potter and the Sacred Text 4.33 – The Death Eaters: Necessity

Vanessa: Chapter 33: The Death Eaters

(intro music)

“Voldemort looked away from Harry and began examining his own body. His hands were like large, pale spiders. His long, white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face. The red eyes...”

I’m Vanessa Zoltan.

Casper: I’m Casper ter Kuile.

Vanessa: And this is Harry Potter and the Sacred Text.

Casper: MY mother is an exceptionally wise woman, and so when I was eight or nine I was in this wonderful Waldorf school, or Steiner school, which is very creative and play engaged and out in the natural world and artistic. And it was pretty alternative. And so my mom was like “that’s great, and you should also engage with the real world so why don’t you join Cub Scouts”. The Cub Scouts if you remember is very inspired by the military; it has a strong connection to the military. So the idea of uniform and ritual is really ingrained into the culture of the Cub Scouts. So you have to salute, you have to make pledge to serve the Queen and all of that kind of thing. And you have a woggle and this kind of scarfette that you tie around your neck. The woggle holds it all together. And there was a kind of green sweater that you had to wear and dark grey more formal pants. So my mom was gonna get the uniform and there it was like a Tuesday night, 7pm. And there’s these like older people who run the group, one of them is called Akayla, ritually, for some very colonially unfortunate reason. And Akayla was there and the three of us who were joining that week stepped forward. But did I have the right uniform? No. (chuckles) My mom had forgotten to get it.

So I was standing there amongst all of these boys who were all wearing the same thing – green sweater, grey trousers with a woggle and a scarf. And there I am in like a full on grey track suit, just basically crying on the inside. I felt so humiliated. And of course to my mom it was like just another thing, with four children and a business and 100 other things to do probably ordering this uniform had not been the highest priority. And it just didn’t feel necessary. But to me this was like the most foundational moment of me being like “I don’t fit in and everything is awful”. It highlighted for me reading this chapter that we have different understandings of what is necessary. You know because what is necessary is all about what we deem important, what we place value in, what we are really all about.

(Vanessa giggles)

Casper: (laughing) It’s not funny Vanessa, this was deeply traumatizing moment.

Vanessa: (laughing) I’m just picturing you in a grey sweatshirt and I think it’s so cute. And I’m picturing you mad at your mom and I think it’s so cute. Everything about this is adorable to me.
I think that that’s right. I think there are certain things that we all agree are necessities. But yeah, what we all need from one another and the world is quite different and we should be trying to take care of one another’s needs. Casper do you have everything that is necessary for your 30 second recap?

Casper: Why, I read the chapter.

Vanessa: And you have your wits?

Casper: I have my wits about me.

Vanessa: Wonderful. I go first today though.

Casper: You do?

Vanessa: You get a little break.

Casper: Okay. The clock starts in 3, 2, 1. Go!

(clock ticking)

Vanessa: Harry’s in a lot of pain, Wormtail’s in a lot of pain, Voldemort’s like “I’ll give you back your hand” to Wormtail. All the Death Eaters come back, there are holes in where some of the Death Eaters are missing and we sort of go around and we do like a – I can only think of the Hebrew word *insert word here* - of like who’s there and who’s not. Um then Voldemort does this expository like back story evil villain, you think it’s like right before the good guy is gonna come shoot him because he’s doing so much explaining about what did and how he hid and now he’s back! *(buzzer sounds)*

Casper: HE’S BAAAACK!

Vanessa: HE’S BAAAACK! *(Casper laughs)* Attendance!

Casper: I love that. Isn’t it funny when you have the word from a different language before you have it from your first language?

Vanessa: I… could not *(laughing)*

Casper: *Hebrew word lookup*

Vanessa: Casper, are you ready?

Casper: Yes!

Vanessa: 3, 2, 1

(clock ticking)

Casper: So Voldemort has arisen, it’s amazing, he steps out the cauldron and he’s like “Robe me”! And he touches his body. And then Wormtail is like “please fix my hand”. And Voldemort is like “no, your
other hand girl”! And so then he calls all the Death Eaters with the tattoo, which is becoming black. And so all of these people arrive and Avery is like “Forgive me” and gets crucioed. And then Harry gets crucioed, which is super intense. Um and then he tells the whole story about Tom Riddle’s dad and the bones and just like your mother and now I’m too strong. (Buzzer sounds)

Vanessa: *(laughing)* Now I’m too strong.

Casper: *(also laughing)* Too strong.

Vanessa: I also like that you love “Robe me” so much that even though it’s in the previous chapter, you included it in this 30 second recap.

Casper: It’s so necessary! He’s like getting ready for the Met Gala. *(laughing)* He’s like “just put me in my best Catholic heavenly bodies gown”.

So Vanessa we’ve got this fascinating theme of necessity as we deal with this pretty dark chapter of Death Eaters all returning together with Lord Voldemort. Where did you see it stand out for you, where did we learn about necessity?

Vanessa: Well first of all, just like a meta comment – I think it was really interesting to read this chapter through the theme of necessity because I’m not sure what better theme there could have been to get me into Voldemort’s mindset to create a little bit of empathy, not for him as a person, but for the way that he thinks. Because so much of what he is doing is necessary from his point of view. Even when he crucioes Avery, it’s awful and it’s torture and again I don’t respect his point of view. But if you have been powerless and you are trying to demonstrate that now I have power again *(Casper oooohs)*, like it’s necessary to demonstrate that power.

Casper: That’s so interesting because I was wondering why does he crucio Avery and not do anything to anyone else and that would actually make sense as a strategy – that it was more about demonstrating his power than it was about retribution to something specific that Avery did.

Vanessa: Right, Avery just like prostrates himself.

Casper: Right.

Vanessa: And Voldemort is just like okay you’re the first person to like volunteer in front of me and I need to immediately demonstrate that I am at my full powers and not afraid to punish.

Casper: Right, which is also why he needs Harry Potter to be there. There is this epic moment where he says “I couldn’t even touch him” right? We remember from Book One where Voldemort tries to touch Harry’s skin and he burns. And now this finger, this white finger, goes up to Harry’s face and touches him. And it’s this moment of look I have my full powers back. That makes a lot of sense and I hadn’t thought about that.

Vanessa: That’s so interesting that you point out that he only touches him with his finger. I wonder if he’s testing him?
Casper: *(gasps)* Yes!

Vanessa: Right? He’s like last time I burnt the heck out of my hand *(Casper laughs)*. I went full palm and that was a mistake. Sooo I’m gonna just like barely touch you to see if it burns. I hadn’t thought of that.

Casper: Yeah this is really a moment of discovery and it’s a moment of testing boundaries and limits. I mean he’s literally testing loyalty, by calling the Death Eaters back to see who will return. Because this is a necessary part of his strategy to understand who’s with me and who’s not.

I wanna stay with this piece around his body though. Because this is a really important moment. I mean he calls it his Rebirth Party, I love it.

Vanessa: Like in the late 90’s, early 2000’s when people were having weddings for themselves?

Casper: *(laughing)* Right, exactly!

Vanessa: He’s like yes! That’s a new party.

Casper: Yeah or like divorce parties are now a thing, right? He’s like rebirthing parties! But he’s so thrilled to have his body back, because his body is a symbol of power. And we know about Voldemort that it’s all about overcoming death, and he’s done that now! So there’s something about him that’s even stronger than ever before that I think he wants to demonstrate. So there the crucio curse on Avery itself is something he would have done 13 years ago, but touching Harry is like even more powerful.

Vanessa: I am wondering what we think of his goal of immortality? Because to some extent this is the goal of most religions – it’s to rise again. I mean in Judaism the idea is that the Messiah will come and people will rise from the dead. In Christianity Jesus will return, and there will be a second coming and we will all rise from the dead. And then in other religions there’s an idea of reincarnation or eternity in a next life. So this a very human desire and obviously he’s going about it in this completely monstrous way. But there’s just something to me that’s obviously existentially true about this quest that he is on.

Casper: Yeah I think that’s what makes Voldemort such a powerful character for us. Because there is something in us that wants that too. And I think what he’s so terrified about is that he will be forgotten, that he is not important, that he is insignificant in some way. He wants to be necessary in the story of history and his way to do that is to become this malevolent force. This is not a desire to stay with life because life is so meaningful. It’s the running from death because death is so terrifying.

Vanessa: A friend of mine just told me a story about a big crush she had when she was in high school and she was really mean to the boy. And she said that the reason she was so mean to him was because the only way she could get herself to matter to him is by having him hate her.

Casper: Okay who is this friend because I have done the same thing?

Vanessa: It’s the same thing, right?

Casper: Right!
Vanessa: It’s like if I need to be written in history for being a heinous monster, I will be in history.

Casper: Yeah this is what I did with my high school too! I was like you will not forget me, I’m going to distribute a Burn Book. I think we’ve all done that in much smaller ways perhaps. And it’s also a testing of boundaries. I mean there’s part of what Voldemort is doing with the creation of these multiple horcruxes is that no one has ever done this before. I mean he wants to test what’s possible, which really does not take a huge leap of imagination to compare this Silicon Valley in terms of what people are doing with merging robotics with human bodies and planning to live for 200 years. There’s the same urge of wanting to test the limits of science and the limits of humanity. Which, in some ways, can be beautiful because it leads to advancements in modern science and all that. But there’s something very troubling that sits underneath it about an unwillingness to accept what is.

Vanessa: Yeah and it’s really hard to tell with science or exploration, right? People like Fritz Haber who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry because he invented something would allow crops to grow more quickly and is most likely why like there hasn’t been mass famine in the world. He ended up creating weapons in WWI with that same invention, and then in WWII it got turned into Zyklon B which is what ended up killing millions of people in concentration camps. So we need to keep exploring and we need to keep learning about science, but we just have to be careful. So maybe it is that like the way that you do it matters. Talking about rising again because you are a good person and Jesus comes back is *NEWS ALERT* different from creating horcruxes. Just because the desires are the same doesn’t mean that the methodology doesn’t matter.

Casper: I’m with you. And I feel like there’s another layer to this. There’s the question of what’s right and what’s wrong, but there’s also the question of what’s effective. Since he treats people like things, as soon as they don’t have to show anymore no one is going to look for him in an Albanian forest! There’s no loyalty to the kind of extent for him to be effective, he has to be in hiding for 13 years and randomly finds Quirrell. And what was really interesting in that speech he gives to Harry and to the Death Eaters is his lowest moment wasn’t after his initial defeat to Harry. It was after the first defeat at Hogwarts, when he’s inhabiting Quirrell’s body and again he has to go into hiding because at that point he’s like well now I know no one’s going to look for me. And so in a sense I feel like Voldemort is getting a bit of payback in that he has treated people in this very utilitarian way, without any care or relationship. And now he is left on his own. So it feels like there is strategic angle to this, as well as a moral one.

Vanessa. Yeah. You’re so Slytherin.

Casper: *(laughs)* I’m like I would do it if it worked! *(continues laughing)*

Vanessa: Casper is there somewhere else that you saw this theme of necessity?

Casper: Yeah I feel like I’m still really thinking about Voldemort and his body. We’ve talked before about when he’s creating horcruxes is a piece of his humanity ebbing out of his body? And as he is re-embodied in this scene he is human, but also not quite. He has these red eyes, he has these kind of snake-like nostrils. He has these fingers that are longer and spider-like. So he is human and he’s not. So my question is where is that boundary of being human and not human? And in the back of my mind I am
thinking again about these advances in robotics and artificial intelligence and I’m just really sitting with that – like when are we human and when are we not?

Vanessa: Yeah I mean we have these questions in all different places in life. Often babies, once they’re born, people joke that it’s the fourth trimester.

Casper: Right!

Vanessa: They’re obviously human but you literally have to teach them how to suck for survival. They don’t know how to do ANYTHING on their own. But we wouldn’t argue that they are not human. And then when someone is brain dead, what questions are we asking about care? (Casper mmmm’s)

And then I’m also thinking about things that technology allows us to do, things like palliative amputations. If somebody is in constant limb pain it is often actually easier for them to get that limb amputated. And now we have more sophisticated prosthetics that that person lives a more pain free life. So I think our ideas about these things change over time, they change with technology, they change as we understand.

Something that I am very interested in is that in England, in the criminal justice system, they are starting to question whether or not having had lead paint as a child has impacted your brain development in criminal cases. That’s another situation that gets to the heart of this other question we were asking which is what is personal responsibility and what is your body fating you to do? I think that these are really important questions - if somebody was severely abused as a child, then we should think about any crime that they commit differently, right?

Casper: I’ve always wanted to go back to the orphanage that then Tom Riddle was being raised and I have to ask the question, well first of all was their lead paint, but was there something even more severe in terms of mistreatment and abuse. To help us understand his actions today, it feels like that’s a question worth asking. But this broader question of what does it mean for us to be human feels like it is going to change as technology changes, which is an interesting and slightly terrifying notion.

Vanessa, did this theme of necessity show up anywhere else for you in the text?

Vanessa: Yeah, so one of the things that this podcast has really taught me a lot about is the idea of forgiveness. I feel like I have a more nuanced idea of what that is. And I’m reading up on another project about forgiveness and atonement right now, so it’s on my mind. So I want to think about it in terms of this moment. This is right after Voldemort has tortured Avery and he says “Get up Avery, stand up! You asked for forgiveness, I do not forgive, I do not forget. Thirteen long years, I want thirteen years repayment before I forgive you”.

And we always do this, right, we talk about forgiveness and punishment a lot together? And I think what I’ve learned through the process of this podcast is that I think forgiveness is one of the great humane projects. And it’s one of the projects I want to work on in my life is being a forgiving person. I’m working on an email to someone right now that’s basically like “I forgive you. I’m so sorry for anything that I’ve done. And I don’t think that we should be in each other’s lives”. Because this person is fairly abusive to
me regularly and my life is better when they are not in it. And it is a very hard email to write and to send and I don’t know if I’m going to be strong enough or forgiving enough to actually send it. But it’s an important thing, I think, for me to be working on. And I think that the desire for punishment in order to forgive - that we believe that if they suffer as much as I did then I will be able to forgive them – is a completely natural feeling. I just don’t think it’s true. I think forgiveness and punishment have nothing to do with one another. I think that, in theory at least, punishment is about justice, but it is not about forgiveness. And we see this all the time, we see people forgiving perpetrators of crimes against them. And then the justice system deals with the punishment, the quote unquote “justice system” deals with the punishment. But I just really think that it is important for us to resist the idea whenever we can that if they get punished, then I will be able to forgive them. I think Voldemort is using unsound logic here.

Casper: (laughs) Would not be the first time.

Vanessa: No! (Casper continues to laugh)

Yeah I wonder what you think of this moment of you ask for forgiveness, I do not forgive. I want thirteen years repayment before I forgive you.

Casper: Part of me can’t help but wonder if he’s saying this to himself as well? In the sense that Voldemort is so thrilled to see the Death Eaters back. He talks about them like a family, he uses this language of a “chosen family”, which really struck me just as an aside because that is something that queer community often talks about – you have your queer family if your own family has rejected you in some way. And that’s certainly the case with Voldemort, he has rejected his own family as much as they have rejected him. But there’s something really intimate about the way he understands his relationship with these Death Eaters. So in the moment when they are all returning, is he saying this to Avery I do not forgive, I do not forget to steel his heart in some way? This is conjecture in its wildest sense, but part of me does wonder is there a part of him that longs for intimacy and connection and friendship and familial love and the way he breaks that and reasserts his tyrannical Lord Voldemort identity rather than Tom, a friend, is by crucioing Avery and then saying “I do not forgive, I do not forget”.

Vanessa: How amazing would it be if everyone returned and he was like “Can you help me put on my robe”?

Casper: Yeah, like “Guys I missed you! I’m so sad, where were you”? (laughing)

Vanessa: I’m so sorry that I didn’t build enough trust in you –

Casper: I know!

Vanessa: - that you would feel like you wanted to come find me!

Casper: I failed as a leader, I want to do better.

Vanessa: I had thirteen years to reflect and these are things I would do differently. (Casper laughs heartily)
Casper: IT’s time for our spiritual practice and I believe Vanessa it’s havruta time!

Vanessa: Woooo! So here’s my question for you. Something that we as a society love are like great survival stories, right? I think we just like get very impressed by people who will do anything to survive? I mean I was obviously specifically thinking about my grandparents and how they get treated like heroes for surviving and I’m wondering why we do that? And I think that we really see it with Harry. Harry is The Boy Who Lived and he is a hero just for the fact that he survived. So I’m wondering in this moment in which we judging Voldemort for doing everything that he did to survive, why it is that Harry is a hero for that same thing?

And then the answer that I have is that Harry obviously didn’t need to hurt anybody in order to survive. But I’m just not sure that that’s heroic. Why is that heroic?

Casper: Yeah it’s interesting that we don’t call him The Boy Who Survived or even The Boy Who Lives, but we say The Boy Who LIVED. I’m just thinking what it would mean if those titles were different? Living is so miraculous. On the days that I do my morning meditation time, my gratitude is like for this day, that there is a moment to just celebrate this being aliveness. But that’s hard to do when you’re constantly alive, do you know what I mean? (laughs)

Vanessa: Yeah that is so interesting and helpful. We love that Harry survived because he could have died. (Casper agrees) And so it’s just like oh it’s precious and it reminds us of the preciousness of our own lives.

Casper: Right? I wonder if there is something in that that we lionize people’s survival because it somehow makes us feel less vulnerable to the world and to death, which is an inevitability. If we engage with people’s suffering and death, that it makes us less secure in our own experience.

Vanessa: I have a very good friend who in her twenties had cancer. And it was scary it was stage two or three. And she got out of it and into remission. But she went through a terrible depression because she was like when I was sick I had such an appreciation of every day of life and I wanted to suck the marrow out of every day of life. And I thought if I survived suddenly I would be like Now I’m gonna be something different! But being different is hard. Like what am I gonna do, go to medical school? I’m 26 and I don’t want to do that! And I think that might be why we lionize survivors because we don’t live with them? We just think about them for a second and while we’re thinking of them we get this moment of rush of like “Life is precious and survival is important”! But when you’re just sort of there I can tell you my grandparents were not heroic people, they were lucky people.

Casper: Right, Well I think this is beauty of the book in the sense that we see the whole magical world, the readers of the newspapers, the Colin Creevey’s, even other students in the school look at Harry in that way. And what is so special about Ron and Hermione is that they see that and they see the other 99% of the rest of who Harry is and what his story is about. And you know what? Oh this is so helpful Vanessa – No one has that for Voldemort. Like no one sees that part of him and maybe never did. Even
Dumbledore engages with him as a student because he is an excellent wizard and he has such power. I wonder has anyone, did anyone ever, see Voldemort or Tom in that way?

Vanessa: Yeah, maybe Ginny.

Casper: In the diary?

Vanessa: In the diary.

Casper: (gasps) Oh my God!

Vanessa: But it was like way too late. I think that that’s a really interesting point. I wonder if when we laude survivors the thing to do is to be grateful for the reminder that survival matters, but not to make them heroic. We have to choose what it is that makes people heroic in our eyes. And for me it’s like people who are incredibly passionate and activist and

Casper: Well even they, I think of Dorothy Day saying “Don’t let them make me a saint, I don’t want to be dismissed so easily”. So I think actually heroicism as an ideal is inherently suspect.

It’s time for our voicemail and this week we get to hear from Rachel Diedner.

Rachel: Hi Casper and Vanessa, my name is Rachel and I have a question for you guys. I read somewhere that one of you said something to the effect that if you love something and it makes you a better person, you should treat it as sacred in your life. So how do we take the methods that we’ve learned from the podcast and reading Harry Potter and apply them to very different things. Like running or painting or reading a book for the very first time? If you have an answer or thoughts, I’d love to hear them. Thanks.

Vanessa: Rachel that is just one of my favorite questions in the whole world. We believe that in order to treat something as sacred you have to have faith that the more time that you do it, the more gifts it will give you. So the more time that you run, not necessarily in the length of your runs, but like maybe over months or years as long as you don’t injure yourself – the more that you ritualize that, even do it on the days that it’s hard you have to have faith that it will continue to give you gifts even when it is difficult.

And then the second step we say in order to treat something as sacred is rigor. And by rigor what we mean on the podcast with the sacred practices that we do the rituals of gathering the three of us in the studio, we’ve ritualized the reading that we do ahead of time, we have a document that we write notes. All of that is rigor that we put towards this process.

And the third thing we say is community – that you find other people to do it with. And again, I mean for us, we have a community of three where we gather. And then we have our listening community. And to we’ve really to some extent started our whole company, Not Sorry Productions, in order to answer this question. You know we’re doing pilgrimages to think about how we can walk sacredly, you know when we set aside the time, but also just when we walk through the world. And we’re starting writing retreats
So Casper now it’s time for blessings. Who would you like to bless this week?

Casper: I’m gonna bless Wormtail. I mean he’s done despicable things. But in this moment, in this scene, he’s so helpless and kind of pathetic. And he’s so conscious that he is just being used, that he is a piece of machinery that has been tossed to the side and is no longer relevant. You know the moment when he presents his stubby arm that is bleeding and Voldemort just says, “No, the other one” and then calls the Death Eaters together, it’s just heartbreaking. And so for anyone who feels like they’ve been used and just been tossed aside and that their only value was for something that wasn’t even really about them – I guess this blessing is for you. How about you?

Vanessa: I’m going to bless Lily. Voldemort – you get the sense that he has been thinking about her over the last thirteen years. Because he is like this is OLD magic and I forgot about it. And I think that we often can take for granted the most basic forms of love in our lives. It’s the easiest form of love to forget about, the kind that’s always there. And Lily’s love is like still there. And this is the immortality that I believe in. That if you love someone they will remember you and carry it with them. And it will touch them, which will touch the world. So I just want to bless Lily for loving her son so much that like it has gotten Voldemort to contemplate love - that is how much she loved Harry. I just think love is a really radical act.

(music starts)

You’ve been listening to Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. Follow us on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook and leave us a review on iTunes. You can also send us a voicemail by recording one on your phone or computer and emailing us harrypottersacredtext@gmail.com.

Casper: Next week we’ll be reading Chapter 34, Priori Incantatum through the theme of Grief and we’ll have a very special guest Professor Reverend Doctor Matthew Potts.

This episode of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text is produced by Ariana Nedelman, me Casper ter Kuile and the wonderful Vanessa Zoltan. Our music is by Ivan Pyzow and Nick Bohl and we’re part of the Panoply network. You can find ours and other great shows on Panoply.fm. Thanks to Rachel Diedner for this week’s voicemail, Rebecca and Charlie Ledley, and of course Stephanie Paulsell. Thank you everyone.

Vanessa: Bye!
(music playing)

Vanessa: I’m Vanessa Zoltan

Casper: And I’m Slytherin Salazar...

Vanessa: Wanna try that again?

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: I’m Vanessa Zoltan

Casper: (in creepy voice) And I’m Lord Voldemort and I have risen!

Vanessa: It was so nice of you Ariana, to wear him on your body. (Casper laughs) And to give him access to the back of your skull.

Casper: (creepy voice) I have my own body now!

Vanessa: Wah- wah.