Harry Potter and the Sacred Text 5.07 – The Ministry of Magic: Progress

Vanessa: Chapter Seven, The Ministry of Magic

Harry awoke at half-past five the next morning, as abruptly and completely as if someone had yelled in his ear. For a few moments, he lay immobile as the prospect of the hearing filled every tiny particle of his brain. Then, unable to bear it, he leapt out of bed and put on his glasses.

[Quote continues, fades into intro music]

Vanessa: I’m Vanessa Zoltan

Casper: And I’m Casper ter Kuile

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

Casper: We’re so looking forward to our live show in Denver tomorrow, so everyone in Colorado come say “hi.”

Vanessa: And we have been able to put up a new event in Austin. We are going to be doing a pre-show Lectio only open to 15 people, so if you go to harrypottersacredtext.com, you can join us at our live shows tomorrow in Denver, then in Chicago, and Austin, and Cambridge, Massachusetts and definitely check out our pre-show Lectios both in Chicago and in Austin.

Casper: So much joy with the Lectio. That didn’t quite rhyme.

Vanessa: It didn’t even remotely rhyme.

Casper: [laughs] The other thing to say is that for those of you who are in Florida and are excited about us coming to Orlando, we’re doing a live show on Saturday, the 16th of February, so come out to Orlando. You can buy your tickets as well at harrypottersacredtext.com. Vanessa, today’s episode we’re reading through the theme of prōgress.

Vanessa: Prōgress.

Casper: Prōgress. And I was really struck with a memory that suddenly hit me as I was thinking about it. Some of you may know that my husband, Sean, is American and was trained as a classical musician – he was an opera singer by trade. Which is very exciting. But the thing that was really interesting to me was that my uncle, who’s also gay, and also called “ter Kuile,” and is Dutch, his partner of nearly 35 years, is also American and trained as an opera singer.

Vanessa: What?!

Casper: Isn’t that wild?!!
Vanessa: That is bonkers.

Casper: Yeah. Absolutely. And so I was so excited for us all to meet and sit down together. And so when Sean and I went to Europe in the first year we were together, I wanted to make sure that we sat down with my uncles, Alex and Jim. And we took the train out to East Holland, and it was just still a miracle to me that we had so many similarities and I was thinking about “Gosh, oh they must have the same experiences we do.” And we arrived and Alex picked us up from the train station and we kind of sat down at their house. And I snuggled up to Sean on the sofa and kind of throughout the day started to realize that we were just much more physically close to each other – I like to hold Sean’s hand, he played with my hair – and I looked at my uncles and I realized that they really didn’t, especially when we were out in public. And what I thought would have been this real moment of sameness ended up being actually really different across generations. And it struck me that the way we are together, physically and emotionally, is so shaped by the experience we had coming out in our adulthood. You know, I’ve been out at work since the moment I was out in my life, when I was kind of 16, 17. My uncle, who worked in a very international context and had to fly around the world for his job, never came out at work ‘cause it would have jeopardized his relationships with partners around the world. And so, it made me think about progress in this really personal way because what happens in our culture and in our society and in our laws gets so embodied in our own relationships with each other. And it left me a little bit sad, but mostly really grateful that my uncles’ generation had done so much to make me feel so much more comfortable expressing my love in this really everyday way with my now-husband in ways that maybe they never could have.

Vanessa: Casper, that’s such a beautiful story, and a sad story. And something that really spoke to me was at the very end your gratitude to your uncles. I just think that this something that only marginalized communities think to be grateful for – the right to hold hands. I’m gonna make a political statement here: we should live in a world where anybody can hold anybody’s hand!

Casper: Yeah, that’s so true.

Vanessa: And it is only marginalized communities that have to feel grateful for these things that everybody else just sees as an entitlement.

Casper: Vanessa, we just roamed around in a story across generational time, but let’s take from the macro to the micro. To a 30-second recap time. Three, two, one, GO!

[ticking starts and continues while Vanessa is talking]

Vanessa: So Harry goes downstairs and everybody’s there and sort of discussing the trial and they go to the Ministry of Magic and it reminds me that there used to be phone booths and they arrive at the Ministry of Magic and you get to sort see the way everything works and there are all these different departments and departmental memos and they don’t use owls anymore and um they go to Mr. Weasley’s office and they’re hanging out and um, Kingsley Shacklebolt is like “Mmm, meatballs.” So then they are in Mr. Weasley’s office and it turns out the trial’s been
moved and they have to rush to get to the trial and they’re running and then Mr. Weasley’s like “I don’t go in there with you”!

[buzzer sounds]

Casper: It’s like, “Deal with that.”

Vanessa: [laughs] Yeah!

Casper: Young child

Vanessa: Sucka!

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: I hate it when people move things to earlier.

Casper: How is that even allowed?

Vanessa: It’s not allowed! And people do it anyway! [sigh] Best of luck to you, ter Kuile. Are you ready?

Casper: I’m ready.

Vanessa: Ok. On your mark, get set, GO!

[ticking starts and continues while Casper is talking]

Casper: So, um, they arrive, uh, well firstly, first of all, they have to leave the house and Harry makes a major mistake by refusing a fully cooked English breakfast and just asking for some toast with marmalade. Basic, basic principles, Harry, always say “yes” to breakfast. Then they get on the Underground and they go to this place and then mmm telephone box goes down, then big atrium and and, and, and voice like AI voice goes “Hello visitor” and they have to sign in and he’s recognized, but no, and then they go up to Mr. Weasley’s office and then [gasp] Perkins arrives and like run, run, run, down, down, down and arrive at the thing and now the hearing starts.

[buzzer sounds]

Vanessa: My god, you are so good at this.

Casper: I think of it really as an embodied experience that I want our listeners to go with me on. But yeah, this is an exciting chapter because you think you know what’s happening, and then [gasp] no you don’t!
Vanessa: You also get to, like, go to the Ministry of Magic.

Casper: Which is a huge, hugely important place in this book

Vanessa: Yeah, and it feels like a field trip.

Casper: Vanessa, I want to start with this chapter in something that Mr. Weasley and Harry both walk past. Once they’re in the atrium of the Ministry, we hear this description of a fountain and we’re told “a group of statues, larger than life size, stood in the middle of a circular pool. Tallest of them all was a noble-looking wizard with his wand pointing straight up in the air. Grouped around him were a beautiful witch, a centaur, a goblin, and a house-elf. The last three were all looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard.” And what struck me about this was that even reading the story now, knowing what’s going to happen, that this statue’s going to be replaced with an even more kind of supremacist witch and wizard statue, so much of that is already embodied in this statue even though this is supposed to seem as like, some sort of unifying, happy thing. Yeah, I’m just wondering what you made of encountering this statue for the first time.

Vanessa: Well it hadn’t occurred to me to think about encountering it, so thank you.

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: But I think that you’re exactly right, I think that somebody installed this thinking, very proudly, “What a progressive statue. Look, we’ve included house-elves and centaurs and goblins in this statue of who it is that the Ministry of Magic represents. Congratulations to me, pat, pat, pat myself on the back.” Right?

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: And it’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately because for the last couple of months and years, it’s been really exciting to see the way that casting has changed in pop culture. So, it was 10 summers ago now that Mamma Mia beat out James Bond as the number one-grossing film in America for the summer. And yet still, we’re having conversations about whether or not female-led movies can really make enough money in the box office in order to be supported. But over the last couple of years, we’ve really seen, right, Get Out was a huge success and now Crazy Rich Asians was a huge success and so, we’re seeing more and more that quote-unquote “minority-led” films can be just as successful as films led by white, straight-seeming, cisgender men. Whereas for so many years, I think that Hollywood sort of would pat itself on the back being like “Look at how diverse our cast is! We have an Asian best friend! We have, you know, a woman sidekick! There’s a black guy in the background!” Right?

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: And now, we finally are seeing like, no, Black Panther can be an amazing movie filled with almost an entirely black cast and can become, like, a world-dominating hit, like the world
wants to see these characters. I feel like the Wizarding World with this statue, and this fountain, in this moment, is like “Look! We have a goblin in our fountain! Aren’t we doing great?”

Casper: Right.

Vanessa: And they’re not thinking about the fact like, you have a goblin in a completely supporting role, in a subservient role, looking up at the witch and wizard. So it can sometimes feel like you are being progressive, and maybe there’s some progress involved in having, you know, the black best friend and not just like the black mammie figure in Gone with the Wind, but that doesn’t mean that things are where they should be. It’s not good enough. Progress is not always good enough.

Casper: Right. And we’ve already heard in the pages of this book that the goblins might switch sides and support Voldemort if they get more rights. So, we know that this picture is totally an idealized fiction of what’s actually going on in terms of kind of multiracial species relations in the Wizarding World.

Vanessa: Well what you don’t see under the water is that one of the goblins is actually kicking the wizard.

Casper: [laughs] The thing that really struck me, I was at a wedding recently in Virginia and we went to visit Monticello, Thomas Jefferson’s house for his retirement that he built. And I knew very little, kind of as a foreigner, I know very little about Thomas Jefferson. But as the lead author of the Declaration of Independence, his words really embody this beautiful ideal of equality, you know, that all men are created equal. But then at the time as he was writing these visionary words, he owned during his lifetime, 400 people who were enslaved. Not seeing that layer of total incongruity between freedom and holding people in slavery. And it forced me to think like, “Where in my life do I think that we have reached the end of that progress narrative in some way, when actually there’s still so much more to go?” And it really made me think about environmental questions especially, like, that we think of natural resources as resources, rather than part of who we are as a living ecosystem, right? That we think of certain places as expendable as like trash dumps. Or even, frankly, countries that we kind of just dismiss because they’re out of sight and out of mind. I love the way that you said that “progress might be progress, but it does not mean that it is good enough.”

Vanessa: I guess the moments that I’m curious about in my own life are what are the compromises that I’m making –

Casper: Right.

Vanessa: – that I shouldn’t actually be comfortable with. What stories do I tell myself of like “Oh we’re not there yet, but it’s better than it was, so OK” right? And I think a lot of times, I do that with exactly pieces of art like this, with statues. One of the most overwhelming experiences I’ve had with a work of public art, it was in Rome, the Fountain of the Four Rivers, which is, I mean, just this beautiful Bernini sculpture in Rome. And I’m telling you, I saw it and I was so
moved by it. It’s a great marble piece of art that kids are climbing over and people are eating gelato on, right? It’s just like, this gorgeous thing that feels just very like, of the people and for the people and approachable. And then, of course, you know, the Nile is portrayed in a completely racist way. And looking at it for the first time a few years ago, I was like “Well that’s too bad,” but then just sort of forgave it. I was like “Well it was made a long time ago and that’s not how we would make it now.” And I don’t know, if it was super anti-Semitic, I wouldn’t feel that way!

Casper: Yeah, I mean, there’s also such a challenge just with the physicality of it, because they’ve become so ingrained in our physical space in the way that this statue has as well. Harry walks past and says “Oh, if I get released, I will put 10 galleons in this fountain.” Like, it becomes a place of meaning because our lives are lived in and around this place, this sculpture.

Vanessa: I like, went on a date and ate gelato on that!

Casper: Right! Well like, this reminds me of my hometown, like, this statue has always been here, you know? So it becomes a much bigger deal to take it away, even if that’s the right thing to do.

Vanessa: There’s plumbing involved!

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: Like you’re going to pull out pipes just because I’m a little offended? Don’t worry about it!

Casper: I feel like if they can make a sinking telephone box, they should be able to handle some water supply.

Vanessa: Like, I know you’re kidding, but exactly, right! If I were Hermione and walked in, if I were a witch and walked in, I’d be like, “I don’t like that the witch is only beautiful and I don’t feel comfortable with how subservient how all those other magical creatures look, but whatever.” But if I were a house-elf and I came in, I’d be like, “Well no wonder there aren’t laws supporting me, this is how you think of me!” And so, it’s the more marginalized we are, the higher stakes those fountains not only feel, but materially are. If somebody who’s a legislator is walking by that fountain everyday and sees a house-elf happy with his lot in life and so happy to serve his master, then he’s not going to be thinking about writing laws to dismantle that. These things materially do matter and I think in the name of it being progressive enough for right now, or being too big of a pain to tear down, I am someone, in all of my privilege, who doesn’t get offended enough by these things.

Casper: Mmmmm. Vanessa, where else did you see this theme of progress in the text?

Vanessa: So a moment that really struck me was that this the first time that Harry gets to see Aurors at work.
Casper: Mmmmm.

Vanessa: And I just remember a moment where I felt like I personally progressed as a kid. I sort of announced to my family when I was eleven years old: I was going to be a writer. And saw myself as somebody who cared a lot about reading and writing. But I didn’t know anybody, I certainly didn’t know any women who were writers. And then, my mom’s cousin married a woman who was a writer and worked with other writers. And it meant so much to me and opened up my whole world that there was a Jewish Orthodox woman who worked with writers and was a writer. And it was the first time I was able to visualize a future for myself in a real way. And so I was just imagining how much it would mean to Harry to walk in and by like, “Aurors at work!” And like, see it, and be like, “This is where they go.” And then also how devastating it is that are pictures of Sirius up all over that office and how immediately destabilizing and invalidating of his career hopes that is.

Casper: Yeah. It’s so important to have an encounter with what’s possible. I think throughout this book, Harry’s picking up things about the Aurors, right? He’s meeting Tonks, he’s meeting other Aurors who have their own grades of seniority, right? He’s learning about that process of what you might need to get there. And he’s seeing the reality of what the Wizarding World looks like in the office. I remember doing work experience at my local newspaper when I was 15 and I was having to learn like what do you wear when you go to work, you know? Just things that I’d seen other people do, but kind of having that coming in to an office space, seeing how people sit behind desks and print things and all of that.

Vanessa: Yeah! And it’s so funny that you say “print things;” I remember I worked part-time when I was 15 or so in a law firm and I asked somebody to show me how the copier worked, and she said, “No, no. Figuring out how the copier works on your own is a key part of a work experience.”

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: And I was like, “Oh man!” But it’s true, right?! I actually do think she taught me a really important lesson of like, you don’t want to be asking everybody for help, there are some things you just struggle through and like, figure out when you’re new at a job.

Casper: Like defeating an evil Lord Voldemort [laughing] before you can become an Auror!

Vanessa: [laughing] Right! I know, I wonder if Harry gets to skip some classes in Auror training? But anyway, yes, I just think it’s so important for Harry’s progress just like, as a wizard, right? A couple of years ago, he was in such acute distress that the only thing that was important for him to be able to visualize was that he was going to be able to get out of the Dursley’s.

Casper: Right.
Vanessa: And now, this new world, like, he’s sort of like, personally progressing. He’s on this journey where he’s able to visualize more than escape. He’s able to dream of something not just escaping from something. And I think this is just, like, such an important, although complicated, moment where he’s like, “That. That is where I want to go to. That is not just something I want to go away from. This is now what I know I want to go toward.” Casper, I just want to call our attention to a technological progression that happens here.

Casper: Mmmm.

Vanessa: Which is that we see all of these flying paper planes –

Casper: Yes.

Vanessa: – with memos on them, with departmental memos on them. And Harry asks Mr. Weasley about them and Mr. Weasley says, “Oh, we used to have to have owls, but you wouldn’t imagine the droppings.” And it just feels like this is a transition that we are going through a lot right now, right? Where analog ways of communicating are being digitized and it’s probably really a good thing for, like, sanitary reasons that we got all of those owls out of there. I just also think whenever there’s, like, technological progress, there’s also loss. It must have been nice to have all of those owls around! Those owls might have been, like, feeding their family on whatever it was that they were doing at the Ministry.

Casper: I’m just worried when the, like, long distance owls are going to be replaced by long distance paper airplanes. But, on a more serious note, I do think that these flying memos are really not a full solution. I mean, A. they’re not exactly secure.

Vanessa: [laughs]

Casper: If you just want to read someone else’s, like, paper airplane, you just go like, “Accio paper airplane message” you know?

Vanessa: You don’t know, they could have security!

Casper: Wand recognition software?

Vanessa: Yeah! You have no idea!

Casper: [laughs] But I do wonder if, here’s another example of like, email has not quite been embraced, or at least texting has not quite been embraced in the Wizarding World for questions that are beyond our understanding.

Vanessa: I mean, it is interesting because we do see at the Ministry that they have embraced massive technology, right? Like there’s a, you step to the right if you’re apparating and to the left if you’re disapparating. Like, they do have all of these like, mass systems. It’s also weird that the paper airplanes need to take the lift.
Casper: [laughing] Yes! Is there some sort of paper airplane system?

Vanessa: Yeah, it’s very confusing.

Casper: You know, maybe what it is, is that they actually tried email, and then were like, “This is not healthy. Screen time is not good.” Their HR department is actually very progressive and we don’t recognize it. [laughs] Vanessa, we’ve talked a lot about progress, our theme in this chapter, but do you see any kind of anti-progress happening here, like regression in some way?

Vanessa: Yes. At the very end of the chapter, there is absolute regression, which is Harry gets the news – Harry and Mr. Weasley get the news – that Harry’s trial has been moved up earlier.

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: Ugh. But has also been moved. And it’s been moved to a room and Mr. Weasley says, “But we haven’t used those courtrooms in years.”

Casper: Hmmm.

Vanessa: And I feel like there’s a such an ominous tone to that, like, “We haven’t used those since Voldemort was here last time,” right? It feels like some old law that we’ve all agreed is, like, inhumane has been entered back into society.

Casper: It makes me think of the Patriot Act. You know? Where liberties that had been enshrined, human rights that had been enshrined in law were certainly, kind of, shredded, or at least paused, in a time of national crisis after 9-11. And it’s taken years, and frankly, not all of them have been brought back in; Guantanamo Bay still exists because it’s kind of embedded now, into the economy and into the Military-Industrial Complex, if you will.

Vanessa: Right. It just seems like a warning of, like, “Be careful when you are willing to, like, take steps back because you don’t know when you’re going be able to take those steps forward again.”

Casper: Yeah! Progress is not inevitable. I think that’s something that’s really frightening and we’re all in it right now. Like, it’s not one-way traffic through history. Can I just make one final observation? This, I love. So, when they get into the descending telephone box entrance to the Ministry, Mr. Weasley types in a number on the telephone and the number is six-two-four-four-two. Now, if you go to your phone and type those letters into the number keypad, it’s going to spell out M-A-G-I-C. THE NUMBER IS “MAGIC”!

Vanessa: Nothing in our three and a half years together has made me happier than that revelation!

Casper: [laughs]
Vanessa: It’s an incredible revelation, you are a genius and a star.

[transition music plays]

Vanessa: So Casper, we are now going to do your favorite spiritual practice: Lectio Divina, in which I’m going to put thumb somewhere in the text and we are going to pick a sentence and we’re going to take it through our rigorous four-step reading process. And the place I put my thumb is [laughs] - it’s really short - “‘This way,’ said Mr. Weasley.”

Casper: Ooooohhhh.

Vanessa: So, step one of Lectio Divina is what is literally happening in this sentence.

Casper: Uhhmm, I’m having to figure out where it is. Is it towards the end when they’re running to find the courtrooms?

Vanessa: No, actually, it’s at sort of the beginning, they’ve just seen this big fountain and we’ve just gotten the description of it and Mr. Weasley is like, “This is the way to my office.”

Casper: Ok, perfect. I’m with you. So it’s right after they’ve had the, kind of, security search and Harry’s had his wand, you know, tested to make sure all is well. And the guard, at the end, suddenly realized it was Harry. So Harry’s just had this moment of, like, “I want to keep my head down, but I've been recognized, we're going to Mr. Weasley’s office to wait for a while.”

Vanessa: Perfect.

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: You are an “A” student. So step two of Lectio is allegory, so what does this sentence remind you of, allegorically? “‘This way,’ said Mr. Weasley.”

Casper: I mean, I’m thinking of Joseph Campbell’s The Hero’s Journey, you know, that kind of narrative structure where there’s these tropes you see again and again in great myths and stories and one of the most important roles is the entrance of the mentor or the guide who helps our hero in some way, across thresholds. And Mr. Weasley’s done that so beautifully in this chapter already, right? Taking Harry from 12 Grimmauld Place through a journey into this new Ministry of Magic. So, literally, what Mr. Weasley is saying is “this way,” like, he’s guiding Harry. And I’m thinking about how in the Campbell architecture of a story, at some point, the hero has to go beyond what the guide can offer. I’m now thinking that that’s exactly what happens at the end of this chapter, right? Mr. Weasley doesn’t go into the courtroom with Harry. And so I’m just suddenly seeing this whole chapter within that framework of “Arthur as a guide.” And he’s proven his trustworthiness, you know, throughout the books so Harry is allowing himself to be guided into this new world by Mr. Weasley.
Vanessa: Mind blown!

Casper: What about you Vanessa? What – are there any allegorical things that strike you? Stories or otherwise?

Vanessa: I was reminded of, like, *Alice in Wonderland*, where, like, signs point “this way” but it’s actually the wrong way.

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: Right? Just, like, the chaos of somebody who thinks they know where they’re taking you. Because it turns out that Mr. Weasley is wrong – he’s operating under the wrong information. So he’s saying, “this way,” but it’s actually the wrong way. It also reminds me, one of my favorite things in the world, and I know it’s sort of dopey, but I love really specific signs. Like, I love it when a house will be like, “The ter Kuile house, 3412km from the Netherlands.” I’m like, “Cool!” And like, an arrow pointing, like, “Netherlands, that way.” I’m like, “Amazing!”

Casper: That’s super cute!

Vanessa: I love a specific sign. So yeah, that is what it reminds me of. So I love that our minds sort of created Mr. Weasley as this, like, fantastic guide, and yet, also is this, like, very limited and flawed guide.

Casper: Mhm.

Vanessa: And I think both are true.

Casper: Yeah.

Vanessa: Step three of Lectio Divina is when we asked ourselves, “What does this sentence remind us of in our own lives?” The sentence, once again, is, “This way,” said Mr. Weasley.

Casper: I’m really embarrassed about this, and this is totally shaped by my being a man. I have such confidence in directions, and at least 60% of the time I’m wrong. Sean and I will be travelling together and I’ve just had to learn that, like, I cannot trust what I think is true when it comes to directions. I’m like, “it’s definitely this way,” and it’s like, really not. [laughs] And Sean is much more quiet in those situations, but he’s also much more right. And so, I’m thinking about we know that Mr. Weasley doesn’t have the updated information because they’re trying to trick him, but, at the same time, has Mr. Weasley maybe lived a life where he’s so confident in his own, you know, sense of direction? If he had called ahead to make sure, there are some things that are embedded in his confidence that also lead to Harry’s downfall here. And I think, frankly, lead to my own downfall, like, because I’ll say, “No, it’s definitely this way” and we’ll spend five minutes walking in that direction before I realize or maybe, double check and actually, it’s the other way. [laughs] How about you Vanessa?
Vanessa: I think what it’s speaking to me in my life is how much I crave, sometimes, somebody being like, “this way.”

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: More in a metaphorical way, there are times in my life that I wish somebody would be like, “it’s this way.” I think that right now, the lesson that I am learning again and again in my life is that nobody has the right answer –

Casper: Mmm.

Vanessa: – and we’re all just making it up. And so, looking for someone to say, “this way” is a fool’s errand. And that, really, what you should be doing is sort of, like, crowdsourcing with, like, trusted people to come up with your best possible guess and that you might be wrong. But, I think that often, I’m sort of looking around being like, “who knows the way?” And the answer is “no one” and we probably wouldn’t be in the, like, bad situation we’re in as a society if someone did know.

Casper: This is so interesting, because I feel the tension like we talked about before, that Mr. Weasley is the perfect guide and also deeply flawed. Because you’re so right, like, no one knows the answer and we are all making it up as we go along. And the more I realize that, the more forgiving I am of myself for not knowing it and making it up as I go along. But on the other hand, there are also people who’ve done things before and really have things to teach us. And I think about, you know, especially the value within spiritual traditions of having a teacher who introduces you to a practice or will sit down with you and do something together so you develop the confidence and the skills. It’s just such an interesting duality of knowing and not knowing and of guiding and not guiding; that both are true at the same and completely contradictory and help, how does that work?! [laughs]

Vanessa: Well, great question, because now we get to do step four –

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: – of Lectio Divina and try to answer that question!

Casper: Huh.

Vanessa: So the sentence is, “‘This way,’ said Mr. Weasley. And the prompt of Lectio is “What action do we feel called to?” And I can go first, because I feel like –

Casper: Hmm.

Vanessa: – you really helped me figure out, which is, I apologize so much when I ask for help.

Casper: Hmm.
Vanessa: And I think I need to just ask for help. I recently asked friend of the podcast, Matt Potts, to write a letter of recommendation for me for something. And I apologized so many times it was actually, like, annoying him –

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: – and making it harder for him to write. It’s ok to ask for help! Because we need each other, right?

Casper: Hmm, absolutely.

Vanessa: What about you? What do you feel called to?

Casper: I think the thing that this is really making me think about, when I feel like I really don’t know anything, I probably know more than I do. And when I feel really confident –

Vanessa: [laughs]

Casper: – about something, I probably know less than I think I do. And yeah, I guess this is an invitation to just hold knowing and not knowing lightly. And, to not let it paralyze us. Uhmm, the wisdom of Harry Potter is great, my peoples! [laughs]

Vanessa: Hot take!

Casper: Hot take! [laughs] It’s time for our voicemail, and we’re going to hear from Aya Ahmed, who is reading Book 1 and it’s a lovely throw back to the beginning of the series.

[beep]

Aya: Hi Casper and Vanessa, this is Aya, all the way from Cairo, Egypt. I was just listening to the episode about Vulnerability and about Harry and his experience with the Sorting Hat. And I really related to what you guys were saying, and what Vanessa was saying, about making the choice about who you are and the kind of person you want to be. And how Harry was, he kept on chanting, “Not Slytherin, not Slytherin, not Slytherin.” And it just reminded me of my experience, because I sort of had this experience of going to a new place and having people have these expectations of me. When I was 11 years old, we moved from America, where I had lived for almost half of my childhood, and we moved back to Egypt. And, in America, I never felt like I was completely American, because I’m not. I’m just this Egyptian girl who was thrown into America and I had to deal with this new culture that I’m not used to, these people I’m not used to, and by the time I got the hang of it and sort of, became an American, I was thrust back to Egypt without warning. And when I came back here, people had these expectations of me that I did not really know how to live up to. Everybody expected me to be this American girl. They expected me to behave a certain way and act a certain way, and I was rejected by everyone around me, basically, because I wasn’t American enough. I came to Egypt, I wasn’t Egyptian
enough or American enough, like when I was in America, I wasn’t Egyptian enough or American enough. And that vulnerability really made me understand Harry and where he’s coming from. And luckily, in my first few months here, my Arabic was very poor. I didn’t know how to communicate with people. My dad wanted to encourage me to read, and this is when he got me my first Harry Potter book. But it got it for me in Arabic. And I remember, I struggled through the pages, but at the same, I found myself relating to Harry. Relating to the new world he’s in. When I read Harry Potter, I felt less alone, I felt, “If Harry can do it. If he could be so vulnerable, if he could be such an outsider with all these expectations put on him, but yet, he’s just going to rebel a little bit, but at the same time, just hold on to who he is, he’s going to be ok.” And I was friendless for my first two years in Egypt, because no one understood me. And, in that time, Harry and Ron and Hermione were my only friends. And, sort of, they gave me the power to, every day, just wake up and face the world and that’s why I’m so attached to these books.

Vanessa: Aya, thank you so much for that beautiful voicemail. And I think that you were speaking to something that is universally felt, that there are times in our lives where the only people who can keep us company are fictional. And that sort of brings us back into the world eventually, right? Because we realize that the people around us have felt the same. Obviously, you felt it in a really acute, linguistic way, but I think that what you’re speaking about is so universal.

Casper: Mmm. Thanks, Aya. Vanessa, who would you like to bless from this chapter?

Vanessa: I would like to bless Nymphadora Tonks.

Casper: Aww.

Vanessa: Who only likes to be called “Tonks.” Tonks does a great job at the beginning of this chapter of demonstrating one of my favorite things, as our listeners know, which is making boundaries. She says, “I am exhausted, I’ve stayed up the last two nights and I’m going to tell Dumbledore that I can’t stay up again tonight because I’m just too tired.” And, I don’t think that it should have to get to that place where you are exhausted and have been up for, like, 72 hours before you set a limit. But I would just like to offer a blessing to our dear Tonks for saying, like, “I can’t do this anymore, and even if the fate of the world is on my shoulders, my shoulders can’t handle it.” And so, a blessing to anyone who needs more boundaries in their lives. Set one. Set an arbitrary, tiny one just to do it. I love a boundary!

Casper: [laughs]

Vanessa: Who would you like to bless this week, Casper?

Casper: We’ve not talked about this character at all and we really only meet him very briefly, but it’s Perkins. He’s the man as Harry and Mr. Weasley are kind of, like, settling in to his, like, little office-cupboard situation, which I’m sure Harry is stressing about, reminiscing about life under the stairs. Suddenly Perkins, Mr. Weasley’s office-mate, comes running in and said, “I tried to
reach you! They’ve moved the hearing! It’s happening, like, right now! You’re already five minutes late!” And I just love that Perkins is so clear about the information he needs to share, and has done everything he could to try and share the important message. Because I think, so often, we can see things that need to be done and just be like, “Oh, it’s not my job” you know? Because it’s really not Perkins’ job, but he does it because he cares. And so, for anyone who’s picking up extra stuff because they care, I’m just so grateful for you, and for Perkins.

[Outro music begins]

Casper: You’ve been listening to Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. You can follow us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, or leave us a review on iTunes. Thank you to everyone who’s done that. You can send us a voicemail or come to one of our live shows or weekend away experience in Florida this February. Next week, we’ll read chapter eight, The Hearing, through the theme of “Partnership” with our very dear friend and special guest, Lauren Taylor. This episode is produced by Ariana Nedelman, by Vanessa Zoltan, and me, Casper ter Kuile. Our music is by Ivan Pyzow and Nick Bohl. Thanks to Aya Ahmed for this week’s voicemail, Julia Argy, Amanda Madigan, Brigid Goggin, and, of course, Stephanie Paulsell. We’ll see you all next week!

[Outro music ends]

Casper: There’s something at the end of the chapter which is interesting. No, you should say it.

Vanessa: Just say it.

Casper: No, it’s your point.

Ariana: Don’t say “is interesting” as if your last point wasn’t.

Casper: Oh! [laughs]

Vanessa: [laughs] Everything else has been BORING!

[Final music] Panoply