

Magical Merit

12 August 2007

Mankato Unitarian Universalist Church

Speaker: Craig Allen

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Reading I: *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, p. 269-271

– J.K. Rowling

“How do you do, Tom?” said Dumbledore, walking forward and holding out his hand. “I am Professor Dumbledore.”

“‘Professor’?” repeated the 10-year old Tom Riddle. He looked wary. “Is that like ‘doctor’? What are you here for? Did *she* get you in to have a look at me?” He was pointing at the door through which the orphanage matron had just left.

“No, no,” said Dumbledore, smiling.

“I don’t believe you,” said Riddle. “Tell the truth!”

He spoke the last three words with a ringing tone. It was a command, and it sounded as though he had given it many times before. He was glaring at Dumbledore, who made no response except to continue smiling pleasantly.

“The asylum, that’s where you’re from, isn’t it?”

“I am not from the asylum,” said Dumbledore. “I am a teacher and I work at a school called Hogwarts. Hogwarts is a school for people with special abilities—”

“I’m not mad!”

“I know you are not mad, Tom. Hogwarts is not a school for mad people. It is a school of magic.”

There was a silence. Riddle had frozen. “Magic?” he whispered.

“That’s right,” said Dumbledore, still smiling.

“It’s...magic, what I can do?”

“What is it that you can do?”

“All sorts,” breathed Riddle. “I can make things move without touching them. I can make animals do what I want them to do. I can make people who annoy me hurt.”

Riddle’s legs were trembling. He sat down on the bed again, his head bowed as though in prayer. “I knew I was different, I knew I was special.”

“Well, you were quite right,” said Dumbledore, who was no longer smiling, but watching Riddle intently. “You are a wizard.”

Reading II: If I Were In Charge of the World

– Katherine Allen, age 9

If I were in charge of the world, I'd cancel substitutes
And football
And boys that I do not like
And broccoli
And garbanzo bean soup
And foods I don't like
And also Boy Scouts and things that are boring
And also the Vikings.
If I were in charge of the world, there'd be free ice cream
The only meal you could have was something I liked,
And I would make sure that everyone had a guinea pig.
If I were in charge of the world, you wouldn't have boring concerts
And you wouldn't have pollution
And you wouldn't hear the word “bored”
Or “tired”
Or “war”
Or “drown”
You wouldn't even have a messy room
If I were in charge of the world
An ice cream sundae would be dinner
And underwear would be a sling shot.
All the boys would not got to school
And a person who sometimes forgot to clean her room
Would get ice cream
And who sometimes forgot to brush her teeth
Would still be allowed to be
In charge of the world

Sermon: “Magical Merit” – Craig Allen

Ever since they came into our lives, my wife, Ginny, and I have been striving to give our two children opportunities. We have done so, in part, because we feel—as I’m sure many of you do about your own children—that their potential is more apt to be stunted by their own perceptions of their limitations than by any real deficit they have. All along we have encouraged them in their efforts to talk, to walk, to read, to draw, to be a friend and a student and a teammate and a follower and a leader. We have tried to expose them to a range of experiences: books, theater, movies, sports, crafts, institutions, organizations, people, and places. We have given them opportunities to expand their horizons and generally have supported them in their endeavors as much as we can.

So it is with mixed feelings that I confess to you, during this Harry Potter summer, that it was two weeks ago that a certain letter came to our house. We heard the flap being raised on our mail slot that morning—odd for us because our mail typically is delivered mid-afternoon—and, by the time I got to the door I only just caught a glimpse of what looked to be an owl sailing away over the roof of our house. The envelope was sticking out from under the flap (how the owl managed to open the flap, insert the envelope, and close the flap on top of the envelope I do not know) and, on the reverse side of the envelope, a wax seal stamped with an impressive crest was just visible. I plucked it up and could not help but notice that the hand-written address began

*Katherine Allen
The Southwest Bedroom.*

Of course, I realized immediately, without even examining the contents, that my 11-year-old had just received an invitation to *Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*, with classes starting in early September.

As popular as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series of books is, I am sure that many of you, too, understand what this meant: Hogwarts is Harry’s boarding school, somewhere in Scotland, where he goes to learn a wide variety of magical disciplines: Transfiguration, Potions, Divination, Herbology, and Defense Against the Dark Arts among them. It is where he meets ghosts and poltergeists, house elves and trolls, vampires and werewolves, and very, very nasty bureaucrats. It is where he makes true friends and despicable enemies. It is part of a world in which letters are delivered by owls, travel occurs via flying broomstick, and housework is done by wand. It is, in short, where his previously drab, limited, and constantly victimized life is transformed into a fascinating, unbounded, and sometimes nurturing one by receiving one of the things that we wish all children could have: a chance to develop his potential. And, now, my daughter was being given such a chance.

Or, at least, an alternative one, for as I have said, we have long striven to give her similar chances by different means. So, as much as it gladdened my parental heart to see her potential recognized and rewarded by outsiders, it also bothered me a little that, in spite of our best intentions, we apparently had overlooked talents which we did not realize she had until that owl surprised us at our door. I suppose this is a fault to which any parent might be liable: we can develop blind spots to our children’s strengths and failings that others, more removed, can plainly see. Still, we do wish to provide our daughter with whatever training is in her best interest. So we had two decisions to make: should we tell Katherine and, if we did, should we let her go to Hogwarts?

Should we tell Katherine? You might ask why any parents would withhold such information from their child. Especially in our era, where educational theory leans heavily

towards promoting self-esteem and confidence in all students, it seems a sin not to. And why shouldn't we emphasize self-esteem? How many children grow up thinking less of their own intelligence, appearance, and social skills than they should, and how many grow to be adults whose biggest obstacle in life is insecurity and who deprive themselves of opportunities due only to their lack of faith in themselves?

This is a problem that we do well to try to correct. But I think you will allow me to suggest, too, that a child can sometimes have too many successes, too much praise, such that a true and helpful awareness of their own abilities is impaired. They might even become a little too deaf to the suggestion that they, like every other human being, have both internal and external limits. This could lead them to an excessive expectation of rewards that is not entirely in their own best interest.

We know some people must experience this in at least some venues in their lives because we encounter its consequences when we hear of temperamental artists who throw tantrums when under direction, pampered athletes who somehow progress through school and life with too little accountability for their grades and behavior, and snobbish executives who see themselves as both socially and legally exceptional (remember Leona Helmsley who said taxes were for little people?). Moreover, we are also aware that such personal failings can become institutionalized into caste and class and become so indelible that decades of counter-training cannot eradicate it.

Talent can lead to achievement, yes, but the problem is that achievement leads to reward, reward leads to privilege, privilege to entitlement, entitlement to arrogance, and arrogance to the kind of elitism that benefits no one but, ostensibly, the elite. Talent can engender narcissism which in varying amounts can appropriately be called smugness, selfishness, even, in its worst form, evil. And this brings us back to *Harry Potter*. You heard it: "I knew I was different. I knew I was special," young Tom Riddle said. It is this self-satisfaction, poisonously combined with self-hate, that causes him to grow to magical society's—and Harry's—greatest nemesis: Voldemort. An extraordinarily talented wizard, one of the first things we hear about him is "He did great things. Terrible things, but great..."

So, how do I as a parent, and we as a society, encourage the development and use of ability without incurring the negative result of elitism? Promote self-esteem, yes, but not only by a constant stream of successes and rewards. Frustration needs sometimes to be known and born. Failed efforts should be appreciated, even preferred to easy success, and perseverance should be valued over success. Self-esteem can be built in these ways, too, and it will be more steadfast and much less potentially toxic. In our competitive society, we fear the tag "loser" far too much. Desensitization to this phobia is a goal to be valued in teaching. With that in mind, then, I considered it an open question whether or not to let Katherine know she had received this letter. I want her to have a fulfilling life, not necessarily an easy one. Knowing she might have magic at her disposal could increase the risk of an easy, empty life.

Now, to the second question: if we let her know, do we let her go (if she wants to)? Let me say first that—and this will be no surprise to any who are familiar with the series—Rowling describes a magical society that is intentionally and almost completely separated from our own. But for the occasional accident, lapse of discipline, and rare crime, our non-magical Muggle world has no contact with the magical one. Witches and wizards have their own schools with divergent philosophies, their own government of erratic effectiveness, and their own laws inconsistently obeyed and unevenly enforced. Magical society is self-contained and so segregated by its principles of isolation as to be invisible to most of us, which is why we Muggles are so ignorant of it. Once a prospective witch, like my daughter is admitted to this

world, she is obligated to abide by its rules of justice and secrecy. So, before allowing her to say “yes,” I was concerned about how she would be treated in this new world. That is, I considered the quality of fairness and justice she might find there. And I found myself considering two contradictory criticisms of its justice.

At first, with my liberal predisposition, I asked myself just how much of a meritocracy is magical society? That is, I had to consider whether or not she was likely to succeed in accord with her innate abilities and character, or if she would be more likely to encounter unfair judgments against her because of such irrelevancies as her gender, class, and background. Those familiar with the books know that the last is of particular concern, for social prejudice against those with non-magical backgrounds is rampant among witches and wizards, especially those with purely magical pedigrees. As Rowling depicts it, such bigotry can be found among students, teachers, administrators, and government officials. And not only against the Muggle-born: in the Ministry of Magic, the governing heart of the magical world, there is a fountain depicting a goblin, house-elf, and centaur all looking adoringly at the wizard in the center who leads them. The grouping is referred to as “Magical Brethren” but it is clear who is first here. So we see that even very intelligent and magically powerful non-human beings are sanctimoniously assumed to prefer the culture and leadership of magical humans, and that this assumption is uncritically held by most of magical society. Should she prove to be an accomplished witch of strong character, would Katherine nevertheless be blocked from social success due to the irrational opinions of her magical peers?

While considering this classic liberal critique, I also found myself with worries from an entirely different direction. Suppose it turned out she was not particularly gifted as a witch, indeed that she was below average and that, while still magical, not remarkably so by the standards of magical society. Would that society still take care of her? Would she still be respected as one of its citizens, share in its decision making, and be able to attain a safe and comfortable life? And even if she proved adept, would I want her to live in a society which did not provide for the less successful except perhaps when they are exploited in service to the more powerful. Did I really want her to be in a magical meritocracy, real or pretend? This is a more radical critique, to question that the distribution of wealth and power should be based on achievement rather than need. It does not come naturally to many Americans who are not likely to question, or even notice, the competitive market-based culture in which they are immersed. For us, it is like questioning the air we breathe.

Considered from this perspective, magical society is very unjust. While it may not be the case that status depends entirely on character and ability, it is certainly true that the magically deficient fair very poorly. At Hogwarts, weak students are sometimes tormented regardless of their heritage, and in magical society at large we see that an impairment like mental illness, such as is suffered by Voldemort’s mother’s family, can condemn one to a life of destitution and desperation. The most pitied and degraded of all are the squibs, poor wretches who are of magical parentage but lack any magical ability. And, of course, we Muggles—similarly lacking and without even a legacy of magic—are so low as to be below any consideration of status entirely. Our deepest learning and strongest institutions are viewed with varying degrees of amusement, pity, and derision. (At one point Harry’s friend Ron asks him, “Aren’t doctors those Muggle nutters that cut people up?”) Clever feats in science and technology are considered by even the good-hearted in magical society as to be something akin to a dog walking on its hind legs—what matters is not that it is done well, but that it is done at all.

So, on the one hand I worry that magical society is not enough of a meritocracy and, on the other hand, that it is too much of one. In truth, in considering whether to allow Katherine to move into magical society, I found myself in something like the “original position” that the philosopher John Rawls said is the vantage point we should take in considering social justice. He maintained that, if we were coming together for the first time to design a society in which we all would live, social justice would arise from the compromises we would make with each other. Rawls also required that in our negotiations, while we should have some general knowledge of human nature, we must have no good idea of how we would fare individually under certain kinds of agreements. Rawls said we should negotiate from behind a “veil of ignorance,” so that as we bargain we cannot know that we are smarter, fitter, or more attractive relative to others. Otherwise we might bargain for rules that favor our own abilities.

As a result, the notion that you ought to be rewarded for certain kinds of talent would be balanced against the possibility that you might be talent deficient. So, if you add rules that define and reward merit to your designer society, you’ll also want to guard against the possibility that you might end up severely disadvantaged because of these rules. Insofar as I was completely ignorant of Katherine’s magical ability but, thanks to the *Harry Potter* books, not completely ignorant of what it would be like to be magical, I believe I qualified as a Rawlsian observer of magical society.

(Now, let me break away here and ask: when you heard this sermon would be about *Harry Potter*, did you think it would lead to an explanation of Rawlsian ethical theory? Probably not. Maybe this is why my kids think I’m a little nerdy...)

I wish I could say that I have resolved the question of justice in magical society to my satisfaction due to this rare privilege of being able to function as a Rawlsian evaluator, but I have not. When I consider just how heavily to weigh someone’s needs in a just society, I quickly realize that not only are human needs ever changing but also that the idea of need itself is at least as squishy as that of merit. We *need* nourishing food, clean air, and pure water, but what about love? Education? Fun? It can be as difficult to determine what one needs as what one deserves. Furthermore, when considering merit I might say “Let the free market sort it out.” But market-based outcomes are useless for evaluating the needs-component of social justice—markets respond to demands, not to needs, and often the neediest among us make too few demands.

Consequently, I find myself unable to reach a conclusion about the level of justice in the magical world. I believe that a just society with surplus wealth ought to address the basic needs of all before rewarding achievement and that magical society is deficient in this regard. But I must admit that I cannot say for sure that the level of justice Katherine would be likely to encounter in the magical world would be any less than in ours.

Ultimately, we were left to make our decision based on other grounds. As it turns out, things have been rather tumultuous at Hogwarts lately. The school is worried about attracting its normal level of attendees this next year, which explains why this British school has been extending invitations to American children this summer. If you need to know more, details are available in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Suffice it to say my wife and I decided that, with both the safety of the school and the quality of its education open to question this coming year, we had best leave Katherine where she is for now.

Did we end up telling Katherine about her invitation? Well, let me ask you, with all that I have said and given that she will return to her current school next year anyway, do you think you would tell her? I will not tell you what we did, but I suspect Katherine already knows that she is magical, in our eyes at least.

Amen, and Blessed Be.