

WIZARDS IN THE MAKING
UU MEETING HOUSE OF CHATHAM
OCTOBER 30, 2011
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This summer saw the completion of the film series based on J.K. Rowling's popular Harry Potter stories about a young English lad who finds himself attending a rather strange school—the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. Rowling became richer than the queen by publication of the books alone—seven in all, and many times richer than that with the film productions, eight in all. I admit I saw all eight of the movies over the past decade or so and did indeed enjoy them thoroughly, though not as much as did my grandchildren.

It is interesting to note that some religious right critics of the books and movies accused Rowling of promoting Satanism and that she herself was an agent of the devil. Could it be, could it be...Satan? Not really. But the Harry Potter series does indeed deal with the ancient struggle between good and evil and the realization that the power of one's magic is connected to the same inner source from which good and evil derive—much like the light side and the dark side of the the Force in the Star Wars episodes. I am reminded of the verse from Dueteronomy: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore, choose life that you and your descendents may live."

It is also interesting to note that long before the Harry Potter books and films there were the Oz books published by Frank Baum at the turn of the 19th-20th century. Baum published some 13 books about Dorothy's adventures in the wonderful land of Oz. Like the Harry Potter books they were very popular—some 5 million copies were sold before it went into the public domain in 1956. It is estimated that the film version of "The Wizard of Oz" (produced in the 1930s) has been seen by more people than any other movie. It's also interesting that Baum's Oz stories were once dismissed as trash and removed from library shelves so as not to poison the minds of children and youth. What goes around comes around.

With Halloween just a day away I thought this might be an opportune time to reflect on the question of what would it take to become "Wizards in the Making" for ministers and congregations in a supposedly modern liberal UnitarianUniversalist church? Can we do it? Is it even possible? It is indeed, and to do so I would have us take our lesson this morning from the older film—"The Wizard of Oz"—not that there are not a lot of lessons in the Harry Potter Hogwarts series, but because it's a lot easier to review one movie rather than eight, and we've only got about 15 minutes to do that. With a little bit of magic we'll get it done.

So here we go. I love the scene in the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy opens the door of her house (which has just been deposited on the ground from a tornado) and steps forth into the land of Oz. The movie suddenly changes from black and white to color and Dorothy

exclaims, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." The first lesson for wizards in the making is that you have to leave home before you can find your way back home.

In the course of our growing up and leaving home we have each had to discover with the novelist Thomas Wolfe that "You Can't Go Home Again", at least not to the home of our childhood. The same is true of our religious faith and development. The faith of our childhood self will not do for the faith of our adult self. Somewhere along the line we have to claim a faith of our own, one that is born out of our own thought, experience and conscience. It may have some of the elements of the faith of our childhood, but to truly be our own we have to think it through and feel it through before we can know it for ourselves. In short, we have to bring Oz back to Kansas.

The Land of Oz is an imaginary world where evil has finally been conquered and eliminated and only good is to be made manifest. Dorothy's house lands on the Wicked Witch of the East and kills her. She is declared a hero and given the key to the city. Then she learns that the Wicked Witch of the East has a twin sister, the Wicked Witch of the West, and it becomes her task to eventually conquer this last vestige of evil in the world.

This is the child's fantasy version of the ancient Jewish/Christian vision of the Kingdom of Heaven come on earth. We all know it will never come to pass in time and space and human history, but the vision of a world of peace and love and justice continues to inspire and empower modern day prophets and politicians, even charlatans and despots appeal to its rhetoric. Can there ever be a world in which evil has been entirely eliminated? Not in Kansas or Washington or Jerusalem, though the struggle to keep the destructive effects of human malfeasance and doom at bay is perennial. And the courage to continue that struggle lives forever in our rainbow dreams and visions.

Dorothy's encounter and adventures with the three characters along the yellow brick road to Oz are the heart of the story. They are meat for a minister's ideal three-point sermon. First, there is the Scarecrow whose hope and dream is to get a brain, a brain he can think with. Second, there is the Tin Man whose deepest wish is to have a heart, a beating heart, that he can feel and hear in his hollow tin chest, a heart he can love with. Third, there is the cowardly lion, whose ambition is to get courage so that he can truly become the king of the forest. Dorothy's wish is to find her way home, to hit a home run, and get back to her home in Kansas. With each encounter she invites her odd companions to join her in her journey to meet the Wizard of Oz.

What we learn from their journey is that intelligence alone is not enough. Intelligence can be cold and unfeeling and become the servant of evil as happened with those who designed and built the Nazi death camps. And let us not forget that it was supposedly "the best and the brightest" in our government that framed the policy that drew us into a war in Southeast Asia that lasted more than a decade and brought death and destruction to thousands.

Heart and compassion alone are not enough. Bleeding hearts devoid of intelligence can foster dependency and become enabling to dysfunctional patterns of thought and behavior. Courage alone is not enough to take us through the world and back home again. Courage can become sheer foolhardiness and bravado. A little bit of cowardice serves the instinct to survival.

We need all three--intelligence, love and courage to make our journey through life. And even more, we need one another. Loners do not make or find a home. Home is being with and for others, caring as much about our companions along the road of life as we do for ourselves. Is that not what a church is for, to provide a spiritual home for the needs of the soul for truth, love and courage? Remember Jesus' teaching regarding the summary of the Jewish law—love God and love your neighbor as yourself. One thing is for sure, you can't love your neighbor all by yourself.

I would like to suggest to you that the three characters Dorothy encounters in her journey to Oz represent the three major functions or roles of the professional ministry--that of Preacher, Pastor and Prophet. The Preacher is one who shares his or her quest for existential truth, the truth of being, with the congregation, or as Emerson put it, the truth of our lives passed through the fire of thought. An educated mind or intellect is necessary to this task, but it is not enough.

The minister must also be Pastor to the people of the congregation, one who can stand with others in love and mercy, forgiveness and compassion, through the joys and sorrows that come to all of us in greater or lesser measure. Finally, the minister must also be the Prophet, one who in courage speaks truth to power and calls the people to measure their lives before the plumbline of justice. Some of us are better at being wise scarecrows, or compassionate tin men, or courageous cowardly lions than others, but we must somehow embrace all three roles in our ministry at one time or another. Dorothy represents the minister who brings all three together in a common quest for divine truth, love and justice. Where two or three are gathered together there we have the makings of a religious community.

My favorite scene in the film is near the end of the movie when Dorothy and her three companions have completed their task and mission to bring the broom of the wicked witch of the west back to the Wizard of Oz, in exchange for which, he has promised to grant their wishes. Just as it appears that he is going to renege on his promise, Dorothy's dog, Toto, pulls back the curtain to reveal a man at the controls of a machine and a microphone that projects the image of the face of Oz onto the screen above. He says to them, "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain." That's what too many political, social, and even religious leaders say all too often these days--pay no attention to the man or woman behind the image. Listen to what I say, pay no attention to what I do. Only the image matters. But Emerson said long ago that what we are speaks volumes over what we say.

Dorothy, you will remember, is upset that the Wizard is apparently no wizard at all. She says to him, "You're a bad man." And the Wizard answers, "No, I'm a good man. I'm just

a bad wizard." I'm afraid that's true of all of us. We're all poor wizards more or less, making a mess of things like the sorcerer's apprentice, but most people are well meaning and good at heart. There's a little bit of bad in the best of us, and a little bit of good in the worst of us. The job of being a wizard is to sort out the good and bad within us and between us and to maximize the good. In that sense we are all wizards in the making, the laity no less than the clergy.

In the First Parish Church in Norwell there is a curtain that hangs just behind the pulpit. Over the years different people asked me, "What's behind the curtain?" When I told them there was nothing there, just a bare wall, they seemed a little disappointed. Perhaps they hoped to find God or the Wizard of Oz. In the ancient Jewish temple in Jerusalem there used to be a curtain or veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the congregation. Only the High Priest could enter in and then only on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. If someone had deigned to pull the curtain back on the Day of Atonement they would only have found a man there dressed in priestly robes, no god, no Wizard of Oz.

I would further suggest to you that even in our less priestly and less liturgically elaborate tradition there is a secret yearning or expectation that our ministers will be just a notch closer to God or wisdom or righteousness than the rest of us. How disappointing to discover that when we take off our clerical robes or put aside our ministerial role we are only a man or a woman trying to be a wizard but always falling short of that impossible task.

Or maybe how liberating. It depends on what you're looking for. But the task of ministry belongs to all of us, to the whole church, not just to the theologically trained professionals. Only by walking together and recognizing that we carry our varying gifts of the spirit in earthen vessels can we create a holy caring community where people of all ages can travel together on the road to wholeness.

Poor or inadequate wizards though we may sometimes be, by luck or by grace, we can come through in the end and give our companions on the yellow brick road what they really need--acknowledgment, recognition and support--an honorary doctoral degree in Thinkology, a heart-shaped watch that ticks, and a medal of Courage. Let us not forget the importance of symbolic gestures and remembrances. We need to thank people publicly and in writing for works and deeds well done. We need to remember our friends, parishioners and loved ones at times of grief and gladness--anniversaries, memorials, graduations, weddings, birthdays, christenings, installations, and times of sadness, illness, and loss.

We do so by giving hope and love and encouragement and sympathy. We learn to weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice. It doesn't take a wizard to do it, but it helps, and there's magic in the doing of it. And there is just as much magic to be made in Kansas or Chatham as in Oz or Hogwarts or other extraordinary ordinary places. What it takes is intelligence, and heart, and courage, and cooperation. Put it all together and you're home free. Well, not exactly completely free, because as we know all too well, it also takes generous financial support to make things happen—like finding a way to

bring a Religious Education program person back into our church. But that's meat for another sermon yet to come. This one has reached its final conclusion and prayer.

Bless us, O Spirit of Life, in our journey to become all too human wizards in the making. Help us to find the magic in ourselves and in our relations with one another, and together to create the magic that makes life worthwhile. You who have given us minds to think with, hearts to love with, and courage to live by, give us one more thing--to find our way home to thee who art the source of life and love within us. Amen.