

WinkWorld July 2003

Potter Pedagogy Dawn Wink, June 2003

I opened my local newspaper yesterday to read about the controversial furor surrounding the release of the latest Harry Potter book, *The Order of the Phoenix*. Here in my home state of New Mexico, one church held a ritual book burning of Harry Potter books. In that bonfire, works of Shakespeare and J.R.R. Tolkien were also tossed. Religious groups against the Potter series feel the books "glamorize witchcraft and undermine parental authority," (*The New Mexican*, June 20, 2003). Opponents of the Potter books purport that the mysticism contained within these books will surely lead our youth down the path to evil.

Frankly, as a deeply spiritual Christian, I just don't get it.

I never expected to love the Harry Potter series. My sons and I missed the initial excitement over the books. We read the first book, *The Sorcerer's Stone*, just last year. Within a three-month time period we then read the entire series-twice. Now, each morning two sleepy, tousled haired, pajama-clad boys clutching Harry Potter as they stumble toward me greet me at my desk. They may not be even fully awake, but they hand me the current book we're reading and turn to go curl up on the couch, knowing I'll follow and we'll cuddle up and read as we begin our day. How can this possible be a *bad* thing? These books have brought us together for countless hours curled up together, giggling in delight and gasping in anticipation. Through Harry, Hermoine, Ron and the other Potter characters, we've discussed good and evil, ethical values and choices, and the importance of truth. And, we've had *fun*.

There is no uniform agreement among Christian churches to take a stance against the books. The Catholic News Service puts the Harry Potter books on its recommended list for children. Both clergy and religious professors liken the exploration of good and evil in the Potter books to stories in the Bible. "If you read these books carefully, they are not only not evil, they are profound stories about good, and they are deeply religious," professes Baylor University philosophy professor Scott Moore. In the climatic conclusion in the second book, *Chamber of Secrets*, he sees sheer Christian metaphor.

It's the story of Harry fighting a serpent and overcoming it with the sword of Gryffindor. He is unable to accomplish this by himself and must call for help, which comes from above, most often in the form of the word of truth or a double-edged sword. It's not just a snake he has to overcome but a snake summoned by the evil wizard Voldemort's memory—The phoenix—a classic symbol of Christ, who dies and rises again—comes to help him. He kills the serpent, then in a moment quite shocking—the phoenix weeps in his wound to heal him. That's a classic symbol of Christ's passion. It's Christ's tears that make us whole. (*Time Magazine*, June 23, 2003).

Now, I will admit that when I read this scene with my sons, I didn't immediately think to myself, "It's an allegory for Christ!" We were all too busy enjoying a rollicking good story. We wanted to know Harry was going to be okay!

My sons and I have entered new worlds together, delighting in what we have found. Through the books we've discovered a new vocabulary, which now has become our familial

code language in love. When my five-year-old is having a rough day and needs love or just wants to express his own love to me, he comes to sit on my lap, reaches up to grab my nose and say's, "Got your conk." Peeves the poltergeist tortures the 'wee student beasties' by doing this one evening in the halls of Hogwarts. This scene tickled our fancy to no end as we read curled up on Wyatt's bed that evening. It has become a part of our family rhythms of reaching out to the other. This saying has become synonymous with "I love you."

Is there magic in these books? Certainly. Are there elements of good and evil? Yes. Of course, these same elements can be found in the Bible. I'd much rather discuss the relevance of bravery opposed to wickedness within the confines of story, to be discussed together, than have my children see people toting machine guns on the front page of the paper daily. Through story we gain context for reality. Madeleine L'Engle writes that she takes the Bible much too seriously to take it literally. Its stories contain Truths that are too large for mere facts to fully encompass.

Does the series include elements of mysticism? Absolutely. And if there are truly Christian themes running through the books, they would be incomplete without this element. What is mysticism other than an awareness and seeking of a power bigger than oneself? A main tenant of many forms of spirituality professes that in addition to unconditional love, one of God's greatest gifts to humanity is the ability to look within and feel God's presence. Christian mystics carry a proud tradition of divine connection. "I cannot dance O Lord, unless Thou lead me. If Thou wilt that I leap joyfully then must Thou Thyself first dance and sing!" writes Mechthild of Magdeburg.

It is the exploration of the interplay between light and dark that I feel holds potent opportunities for discussion and growth for children. Life is a journey through these forces of light and dark. In *The Celtic Way of Prayer*, Esther de Waal writes, "To pray the Celtic way means above all to be aware of this rhythm of dark and light. The dark and light are themselves symbols of the Celtic refusal to deny darkness, pain, suffering and yet to exult in rejoicing, celebration in the fullness and goodness of life."

Yes, Harry Potter addresses the light and dark of life. As do all the other great spiritual traditions. As parents and teachers, guiding our children to be prepared for this journey would be incomplete if we didn't involve vast discussions about the importance of looking within, to God, Spirit, the Creator, for guidance.

As an educator, I see the value in Potter in the love of reading and exploration of books this series has helped to create and foster in my children. To create a love of reading remains one of my main goals, as both an educator and a parent. What better tool can one possibly have for life? Children lining up the world over to read an 800 page book will do more for literacy than any contrived reading program or test can presume.

As a parent, as for all the Potter series has meant to us, I can just say, "Luke, Wyatt, and Wynn, got your conk!"