

What Is Death but a Negligible Accident? October 31, 2021

I was in middle school when I discovered the Harry Potter books, by J. K. Rowling. I loved them, and as each book was released, my siblings and I would fight over who got to read them first. They were wonderful, well-written stories.

As an adult, now, I've gone back and reread them, and I still love them, and I've also found that they contain pretty deep, profound theological messages. In fact, I've learned that you can find essays, books, even whole college classes that focus on the theology of Harry Potter, and how the book series offers insight into the nature of God.

Someday, I'll write a sermon called "The Theology of Harry Potter," but not today. Today, I'd like to focus on one small piece of the series that stands out to me today. One object that I found confusing and unsatisfying was in the 5th book, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. This is a spoiler alert, so if you haven't read the book or seen the movie, cover your ears.

Towards the end of the book, at the climax, Harry and his friends find themselves in the Ministry of Magic. They are in a section of the building called "The Department of Mysteries," an area full of strange magical objects. In the middle of this room, there is a raised platform, and on that platform stands a stone archway. There is nothing in front of or behind this arch; it is free-standing. And hanging from this arch is a veil of tattered cloth.

Harry sees this archway and feels drawn to it. He and one of his companions can hear whispering from the other side of the cloth curtain. Obviously, when Harry pokes his head around the back of the archway, there is nothing there. Then he sees the veil move, as if swaying in the breeze, though there is no breeze in the room.

Shortly after discovering this archway, Harry and his friends are distracted by evil Death Eaters who ambush them. Fortunately, they are saved by members of the Order of the Phoenix, the good guys, who arrive to battle the Death Eaters. During the battle though, Harry's godfather, Sirius Black, is hit by a spell, and he falls back into the archway, through the veil. He never re-emerges. After the battle ends, Harry approaches the archway and calls to Sirius, but when he receives no answer, Harry knows in his heart the truth: Sirius is dead.

J. K. Rowling. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. New York: Scholastic, 2003.

And that's all we hear about this mysterious archway and its veil, at least in the official Harry Potter books. It's unsatisfying, isn't it? Fortunately, there is this wonderful thing called the Internet, and there is not shortage of Potter geeks, so pages and pages of digital data have been written dedicated not only to the book series, but to this veil itself.

The consensus among Potter fans is that this veil is a physical representation of the barrier between the land of the living and the land of the dead. Anyone who enters the archway immediately dies and can never return. Harry and Luna Lovegood, who have lost loved ones, can hear only the whispers of their dead family members through the veil.

That's the theory, anyway, which is neither confirmed nor denied by J. K. Rowling herself.

What an image: a barrier between the living and the dead. What would you do, if you found that archway? Would you try to talk to dead family members and friends, seeing if they could whisper back? Would you be tempted to try to part the curtain and look into the beyond? Stick your hand in?

I think these temptations exist because death is so final. Once someone has passed away, they are completely separated from us. I've been open-casket funerals, and [I don't know about you, but] I think it's sad that this person is right here, so close I could touch him; but he is unreachable. He might as well be a million miles away. He is, as we say, beyond the veil.

Or is he? Are our deceased loved ones out of reach?

Looking at what Jesus does with Lazarus, the answer doesn't seem so clear. We know this story. Lazarus dies when Jesus isn't present (in fact, Jesus gets word Lazarus is sick, and Jesus purposely doesn't come for another 2 days. Jesus arrives to find that the dead man's sisters Martha and Mary are distraught, weeping and wailing. The whole crowd is weeping and wailing. Jesus himself begins to weep because of how much he loved Lazarus, his friend.

Then they go to the tomb. When Jesus orders that the stone sealing the tomb be removed, Martha says, "It's going to smell terrible! Lazarus has been dead for 4 days!"

Now it was traditional Jewish custom to bury the body on the same day that the person died. So not only has Lazarus been dead for four days, he's been in that tomb for four days. I don't know about you, but if I go four days without a shower, I'd smell pretty terrible; imagine how badly a corpse would smell.

The detail about four days is also important because there was a belief in Judaism that the spirit of a dead person lingered near the body for 3 days. For Lazarus to be dead for 4 days, it's clear that he is truly gone. He is beyond the veil, unreachable, not there any longer.

But God is God, and Jesus is Jesus. Christ calls out to Lazarus in a loud voice to come out, and out he comes. It's perfect that this reading takes place on Halloween, because Lazarus is the world's first living mummy! His limbs are wrapped in strips of cloth, along with his face.

Wonderful story. There's a lot we can glean from it. For one, it foreshadows and mirrors Jesus' own death and burial in a cave (and his resurrection). For another, it highlights both Jesus' humanity (crying, not knowing where they laid Lazarus) and his divinity ("Father, I know that you always hear me," his power to raise the dead).

But what I find most captivating today, on this All Saints' Eve, is the idea that our dead, our loved ones, our saints are not out of reach. They are not gone or forgotten; they are close. Yes, death is final and permanent (except in the case of Lazarus and a few other folks in the Bible), but death doesn't result in distance. Death isn't a stone wall between us and our loved ones; it is a veil through which we can whisper. We can still talk to our loved ones; we can still feel their presence; we still experience their influence on us and our lives.

And I know it sounds trite to say that “the dead live on in us,” but there is truth to that saying, because we are shaped by our family and friends who have died. Because I know someone, I also have seen reflections of their parents and grandparents and friends, because those saints have shaped that person. And because you know me, Andrew, you have seen pieces of my grandparents and relatives and friends who have made me the person that I am.

So yes, death is final, but it does not separate us from our loves ones.

And on All Saints’ Eve, the belief is that that veil that separates the living, physical world from the spiritual realm is at its thinnest. It is a thin moment.

But I also believe that that veil is thin during other parts of the year and our lives. That veil is thin whenever we talk, actually speak, to our loved ones who have died. Whenever we say something that our parents or grandparents would’ve said, and we catch ourselves: “I just sounded like my grandmother there.” Whenever we see a cardinal or a flower, or hear a song, and we know that it’s our saint speaking to us. That veil is thin much of the time, if we are listening to their whispers to us.

I’ll close today with portions of a poem by Henry Scott-Holland, an Anglican priest, theology professor, and social reformer (1847-1918).

Death Is Nothing at All

Death is nothing at all. It does not count.
I have only slipped away into the next room.
Nothing has happened.

Everything remains exactly as it was.
I am I, and you are you,
Whatever we were to each other, that we are still.

Call me by the old familiar name.
Speak of me in the easy way which you always used.
Put no difference into your tone.
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.

Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes that we enjoyed together.
Play, smile, think of me, pray for me.
Let my name be ever the household word that it always was.
Let it be spoken without an effort, without the ghost of a shadow upon it.

Life means all that it ever meant.
It is the same as it ever was.
There is absolute and unbroken continuity.
What is this death but a negligible accident?

Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight?

I am but waiting for you, for an interval,
somewhere very near, just round the corner.

All is well.

Nothing is hurt; nothing is lost.

One brief moment and all will be as it was before.

How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting when we meet again!

Henry Scott-Holland. "Death Is Nothing At All." 1910. <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/death-is-nothing-at-all-by-henry-scott-holland>.

Amen.

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