

# HOLY HORCRUX!

Barbara W. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church, Adelphi, MD

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## CALL TO WORSHIP

(Included this “message,” delivered by owl to Barbara at the beginning of the service)

*Dear Paint Branch:*

*I am so excited that you are talking about Harry Potter in your service today. I think there is so much to learn from him and his friends. As I understand it, the word “worship” means “to shape things of worth.” Well, the stories about Harry are quite worthy of your attention!*

*I have heard about your church and the things it believes in. Here at Hogwarts, we are impressed by your commitment to diversity, your insistence that children learn and grow through exploration, and your belief in the unity of all creation. Most important, however, is our shared belief in the power of love.*

*I want to tell you a secret. The best kind of magic isn't found in our wands or our broomsticks or even in the many spells we learn to cast here at Hogwarts. The best magic is found in love. That's what I tried to teach Harry during his years at Hogwarts and that's what I hope you learned from reading the books about him.*

*Have a great service today. Hope to see all of you at Hogwarts someday!*

*Magically Yours,*

*Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts Headmaster.*

**READING:** *Harry Potter's Secret* [by Michael Gerson from the Washington Post, 10/26/07  
[Intro sections by Barbara; words below in italics are direct quotes from Gerson's article.]

Just a few weeks ago, zillionaire J.K. Rowling, author of the incredibly popular Harry Potter seven book series, made the announcement that Albus Dumbledore, the fatherly and profoundly wise wizard and headmaster at Hogwarts, the school for wizards, was gay. This announcement, coming on the heels of the last book of the series (and yes, I've promised not to give away the ending, and I won't) shook up a lot of people, particularly religious conservatives who have been bashing the Harry Potter books as sinful, satanic and worse since the original book appeared nearly ten years ago.

Given that I was already planning to write a sermon based on my reading of the books, I was delighted to discover conservative author and Washington Post journalist Michael Gerson's article about this very issue. Gerson, a former Bush speechwriter, is not someone with whom I often agree. But the article he wrote after Dumbledore's outing is worth hearing. It's a longish reading so listen carefully. It gives those of you unfamiliar with the storyline of the books a bit of a heads up and it addresses, head on, the religious nature of the series. Here it is, slightly edited for length.

*The Dumbledore revelation was taken by many Christian conservatives as additional confirmation that Rowling is a corrupter of youth. What could be more subversive than the combination of witchcraft and homosexual rights?*

*Having undertaken the monumental task of reading "The Deathly Hallows" [the final book in the series]... I am certain this critical reaction is badly mistaken.*

*Ruling out magic in children's literature would, of course, completely de-populate Narnia and Middle Earth, leaving just silent forest. The use of magic in fairy tales recurs for a reason; it reveals another reality—what C.S. Lewis called the "deep magic"—just beneath the surface of our days. Magic is usually the way that children are introduced to the idea of transcendence.*

As a great fan of C.S. Lewis' Narnia Chronicles, I agree wholeheartedly with Gerson's assessment. Magic can be a powerful tool to help children understand the mysteries of

nature and the wonders of life. My reading of the Narnia Chronicles as a child did not turn me into a Christian or into a believer in magic wardrobes. The books did what fairy tales and religious stories have done for children since people first started telling them: they got me to imagine a world beyond my own door, and to see good, evil, sacrifice and, most importantly, love in a new light.

This kind of love is powerfully present in the Harry Potter books. The rest of Gerson's article addresses this directly. Though he uses the word "tolerance," which many UUs eschew in favor of such words as "celebrate" or "affirm," I believe he is aiming at the same goal.

*Tolerance is one of the main themes of the Harry Potter books. In a marvelous social comparison, lycanthropy [the supernatural transformation of a person into a wolf, as recounted in folk tales] is treated as a kind of chronic disease with werewolves subject to discrimination as if they had AIDS. The political ideology of Lord Voldemort is Nazi-like—racist and totalitarian... As the series progresses, the body count of this ideology builds. Like much great children's literature, the series takes evil, hatred and death quite seriously.*

*But the really subversive element of the Harry Potter books is the answer they offer to death. Voldemort believes that death must be mastered and "eaten" [his followers are called Death Eaters]—resisted through Dark Arts that always involve exploitation and violence. Harry Potter, in contrast, is protected from death as an infant by the voluntary, courageous sacrifice of his mother's death. [Throughout the book you read of instances where] love becomes a kind of magic that is stronger than death itself. For every reader, this is an affirmation of friendship, loyalty and courage. For my children [as Christians], it is also a symbol of a greater sacrifice.*

*These, of course, are central themes of religions, particularly Christian religion. And the question naturally arises: how can a book series about tolerance also be a book series about religion? This represents a misunderstanding of both tolerance and faith. For many, tolerance does not result from the absence of moral conviction but from a positive religious teaching about human dignity. Many people believe—not in spite of their faith but because of it—that [all people] should be treated with kindness and dignity. Above all, believers are called to love, even at the highest cost.*

## SERMON: *HOLY HORCRUX!*

Barbara W. ten Hove

The summer I moved here to start at Paint Branch was the same summer I discovered Harry Potter. My nephew, nine years old at the time, came with his mother and me to UUMAC [UU Mid-Atlantic Community] family camp in July of 1999 and as I was occasionally tasked with bedtime duties (so his Mom could enjoy some adult time), I found myself reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* to him. Immediately I was hooked.

I admit I was an easy catch. As a child I read every magic-themed book I could lay my hands on, from the Narnia Chronicles to Edward Eager's *Half Magic*, to the five book Prydain series by Lloyd Alexander. I am a sucker for imaginary worlds, particularly ones that have ties to our own while remaining always just beyond reach. The Harry Potter books found a home in my heart and I've read all of them at least once and seen all the movies (and eagerly await the final two films).

Unless you've been living under a rock, you are aware that this summer saw the arrival of the seventh and last book in the series. It was the long awaited culmination of a story that began nine years ago and that spans seven years in the lives of Harry Potter and his wizard friends. I've thought a lot about whether or not to do a service about Harry Potter. Even though I loved the first six books, I found myself unable to see or feel a clearly religious theme emerging from them. But the arrival of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* pushed me toward today. J.K. Rowling's last book is the most overtly religious, and I discovered a desire to talk about it with you.

Before I do, however, I need to give those of you unfamiliar with Harry Potter and his world a brief overview of the story arc. Harry is an English boy whose parents died when he was only a year old. Told by his unkind guardians (the miserable aunt and uncle he is forced to live with) that his parents died in a car crash, he is shocked to discover (at the tender age of eleven) that not only did they not die in a car crash, they died protecting

him from a killing curse thrown at him by the most evil wizard of all time, Lord Voldemort. Harry learns in Book One that he, too, is a powerful wizard, and because he is, he must be trained at the best school for wizards in the world (at least according to its students!), Hogwarts.

Hogwarts is the venue for the bulk of the Harry Potter books. It is here that Harry learns about his past. How his mother and father met and fell in love at the school and how they joined a secret society called the Order of the Phoenix to stand against the growing power of the evil Lord Voldemort. He also discovers that he, Harry Potter, is famous throughout the wizarding world for being the only wizard to survive a Voldemort curse. That he did so at the age of one and has no memory of it makes no difference. He enters the school well known by all, even as he has so much to learn about who he is.

Thankfully, early in his Hogwarts career he is befriended by the headmaster of the school, the wise and extremely powerful Albus Dumbledore. Dumbledore helps Harry in so many ways, encouraging him to trust his good instincts and to grow into his gifts.

Throughout the series, Harry is challenged again and again to face up to Lord Voldemort, who, after almost dying, finds ways to return to human form. “He-who-must-not-be-named” (as almost everyone but Harry and Dumbledore call Voldemort) has, as his sole purpose in life, to settle the score with the only one he could not defeat: Harry Potter. So throughout his years at Hogwarts, Harry is beset upon by Voldemort and his followers.

Despite this challenging part of his life, Harry also discovers much to love at Hogwarts. He develops deep friendships, particularly with two peers: Hermione, Muggle-born (aka, normal human) but the smartest witch in the school; and Ron, the youngest son in a large, pureblood but poor wizarding family. With his two sidekicks, and many other interesting characters in J.K. Rowling’s imaginary world, Harry, over the course of seven books, grows up.

As Harry matures, so do the themes Rowling presents in her books. As Michael Gerson said so well in the earlier article, “Like much great children’s literature, the series takes evil, hatred and death quite seriously” [from the Washington Post article quoted above].

Without taking all day to tell you the entire story of Harry Potter—do read the books if you haven’t; they’re truly excellent!—let me move quickly to what emerges in the last two books, both very bleak and powerful.

After much trial and error described in the earlier volumes, Lord Voldemort returns in the sixth book with a vengeance, fully embodied and eager to rule not only the Wizard world but the Muggle world as well. With support from his followers, the Death Eaters, Voldemort seeks more and more power. Harry, who has a strange connection to Voldemort symbolized in the lightning shaped scar on his forehead, is able to occasionally read Voldemort’s thoughts. Harry’s great friend and mentor, Albus Dumbledore, who knows Voldemort well from when he was a student named Tom Riddle, also learns much about what Voldemort is doing to increase his power.

Together they discover (with many plot twists and other interesting story lines that I don’t have time to go into) that Voldemort has created Horcruxes. Wikipedia [www.wikipedia.org] describes Horcruxes thusly: a Horcrux is a

*receptacle in which a Dark wizard has hidden a part of his soul for the purposes of attaining immortality. Even if the wizard's body is destroyed, a portion of his soul will remain preserved within the Horcrux. However, the destruction of the creator's body leaves the wizard or witch in a state of half-life, without corporeal form.*

This is what happened to Voldemort when he tried to kill Harry Potter. When Lily, Harry’s Potter’s mother, put herself in front of Harry out of her absolute love for him, Voldemort’s curse backfired, and would have killed him if he hadn’t earlier put his soul into various objects. As Wikipedia goes on to explain:

*A Horcrux can be made from any normal object, including living organisms. Destroying a Horcrux will destroy the fragment of soul contained within it, ending its protection and returning the creator to a state of mortality. If a wizard has*

*created more than one Horcrux, he will remain immortal until all are destroyed. Once destroyed, the wizard will die normally if mortally wounded.*

When I read Book Six and then, finally Book Seven, I became fascinated with the idea of Horcruxes. These objects, into which the evil Lord Voldemort places pieces of his soul, were chosen by him over the course of his life to reflect what he believed were important. Each object, with one powerful exception—that I can't reveal without giving away the book's ending—are designed to reflect what Voldemort felt was most important: power over others and over death.

These strange fictional creations—horcruxes—got me thinking about the human tendency to deny death. Part of what makes the Harry Potter books so excellent is how very human this magical world really is. Author J.K. Rowling has a great understanding of human nature and though most of the characters in her books aren't quite like ordinary humans, they are nonetheless inspired and challenged by normal human emotions. Her books are really about two primary human feelings: love and fear.

Let me begin with the latter. Fear is an emotion that you would expect from children, and it is children who are the primary characters in these books. And yes, Harry and his friends are often afraid and for good reason. Learning to fly a broomstick, cast a spell to repel an enormous enchanted spider, and brew a potion that doesn't blow up in your face are scary things. But interestingly, though Harry is often afraid, he is also quite courageous and his fear rarely keeps him from doing what he knows he must do to help a friend.

His nemesis, however (the great and terrible Lord Voldemort), is the one who is truly afraid. He is afraid of two things, losing his power and dying. And the entire seven book series is the story of how Voldemort turns his fear into hatred toward the one person who keeps him from becoming all powerful and whose death he could not cause: Harry Potter.

I find it fascinating that Rowling uses her fictional characters to comment on how the fear of death and the abuse of power lead to terribly stunted lives. Voldemort, who thinks he is all-powerful and who abuses that power in horrible ways, is terrified of dying and does everything he can with his magical skills to keep himself alive forever.

But the life he achieves when no one can kill him is no life at all. He is always angry, takes pleasure in no one and nothing, and lives only to abuse others who are afraid of him. The immortality that Lord Voldemort seeks may look like life but is really just the barest form of existence. Instead, as the other central character in the book—Harry himself— teaches us, life is only meaningful when it is filled with love.

Love is at the heart of the Harry Potter books. Harry Potter, only a child when his parents died, and raised without love by his aunt and uncle, somehow discovers that he has an enormous capacity for it. Very early in the story you learn of Harry's deep love for his friends and his mentors. As the book series progresses, so does Harry's ability to understand how important it is to love even those who are imperfect in their love for him. One of the interesting side stories in the books is about Harry's godfather, Sirius Black—a complex character—neither wholly good nor wholly bad. But because his love for Harry is real and true, Harry learns from him about courage in the face of loss and grief.

The contrast between Voldemort and Harry is what makes these books so meaningful and religiously significant in my eyes. Voldemort, angry at life, eager for power and afraid of death, places his soul into things so that he can't die. The horcruxes he creates are symbols of power over others. Each thing he chooses to turn into a horcrux has some powerful significance in his life. But with the exception of the snake he always keeps by his side, and one other unexpected source, the things into which Voldemort entrusted pieces of his soul are just that: things.

When I read the last Harry Potter book, I finally understood at least one spiritual meaning written deep into the heart of these books. J.K. Rowling, by having Lord Voldemort split his soul into pieces and place them into objects, is telling us that our souls are destroyed

when we lose them in things. It doesn't matter how beautiful or powerful a thing makes us feel. If it's only a thing, and our soul gets entrusted to it, it will betray us, no doubt about that.

She compares this with Harry Potter, who—we are told over and over again in the book—has very little interest in things (with the possible exception of the Mirror of Erised and his invisibility cloak). Harry cares very little about material goods but cares a lot about people.

It got me to thinking about where Harry Potter was putting his soul. If there could be such a thing as a Holy Horcrux, what would it be? The answer is quite clear: Harry Potter trusts his soul to his friends. And when he must face the fear and hate that Voldemort sends his way, it is his love for his friends, and their love for him, that saves him.

And it is that kind of love that allows Harry to face the scariest thing of all—the thing that so frightened Voldemort that he did everything he could to keep it at bay. I am, of course, talking about death.

The Harry Potter books are all about death. We learn very early on of Harry's parents' deaths and as the series goes on more and more people die. Harry, like anyone facing such great loss, gets angry at death. But despite this normal response, his loving spirit helps him recognize that there is far more to life than death. At a pivotal point in the final book, one of his mentors says to him, "The true master does not seek to run away from death. He accepts that he must die, and understands that there are far, far worse things in the living world than dying" [from *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*].

When Harry understands this, he becomes stronger than Voldemort, and nothing Voldemort can do can keep him from doing the most important thing in the world: loving and being loved.

The lessons I take from these wonderful books go straight to the heart of what I believe it means to be a religious person. All the great faiths remind us that love is central and that without it we are less than human. Christians teach that God is love, and this is a Christian teaching I believe in. If this is true, and it certainly seems true to me, then we can also say with confidence that love is stronger than hate, stronger than vengeance, even stronger than death.

It is this kind of love that breeds forgiveness, acceptance, hope and justice. It is this kind of love that allows the oppressed to stand up to the oppressor and say, “You can hurt me, even kill me, but my love is stronger than your hate.” Gandhi called it “soul force.” Martin Luther King, Jr., used it to change our world.

People who argue that Rowling is promoting some evil agenda—since her books are about magic and wizards and witches—aren’t paying attention. These books have deep religious values, just as Michael Gerson (whose faith is very different than mine, I might add) described in his article. The Harry Potter books have been read by millions of children (and adults) in countries around the world. And I think that’s terrific. For Rowling’s vision of a realm where love is stronger than both hate and death is one I want to live in. Her visionary world is real in the lives of so many. Perhaps our children will carry that vision into the future, creating a brighter planet for us all.

J.K. Rowling’s realm of wizards and witches is fictional. There are no horcruxes to hold evil wizards’ souls and Harry Potter is just a figment of her prodigious imagination. But I can’t help but be grateful to her for creating a world where the deep magic that is love emerges when friends care deeply for one another, families overcome enmity and learn compassion, and young people grow into adults who face their fears with courage and bless the world with their love.

We, too, can bless the world with our love. Let us commit to it, and seal that commitment by singing a wonderful song, Hymn #1014, written by a UU composer, called “Standing on the Side of Love.”

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