

Four Stages and Four Wisdom Lessons:
Harry Potter and the Male Spiritual Journey

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Abstract

The “Harry Potter” series has proven to be immensely popular to readers of all ages worldwide. In particular, the series has strong appeal to boys. This paper examines selected characters and events from the books in light of the “male spiritual journey,” a concept currently being explored by Richard Rohr and others. A general definition of “spirituality” is presented, followed by explanation and discussion of four distinct stages of the “male spiritual journey:” (1) the student stage, (2) the householder stage, (3) the seeker/forest dweller stage, and (4) the sage/elder stage. Each stage is accompanied by a particular “spiritual wisdom lesson.” For readers of the books, as well as adults that work with boys, these “wisdom lessons” can provide unique insight into both the characters in the books and the spiritual path that boys follow. (Contains 3 references and 12 children’s book titles.)

Ask a boy “What do you want to be when you grow up?” and you are likely to get an answer along traditional lines: A police officer, a firefighter, a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher. From an early age, most boys (and many girls also) have a tendency to define their future identity in terms of occupation, of the type of work that they think they want to do. A very different question, however, is “Who do you want to be when you grow up?” The difference can be subtle—*who* instead of *what*—but it is a significant and profound difference. Whereas the first question—*What do you want to be?*—centers around identity as defined by occupation, the second question—*Who do you want to be?*—shifts the emphasis to that of the quality of one’s life regardless of occupation. It is this second question that every boy must answer at some point, indeed *will* answer at some point, in the process of moving from boyhood to teen to young adult to mid-life adult to elder adult. Whether as a conscious series of choices, guided and mentored in positive ways, or as the result of unconscious choices made largely by default, the question of “*Who* I want to be” will be answered in one form or another. It is this idea that I seek to explore in this paper, reflecting on how the characters in the *Harry Potter* series of novels by J. K. Rowling provide an interesting perspective on this male journey.

Harry Potter, both as a literary character and as a series of highly successful books and movies, certainly needs no introduction. With the pending publication of the sixth book in the series scheduled for July 2005, millions of readers will once again eagerly resume the journey. It is quite likely that more secrets will be revealed, more questions will be answered, and at the same time more mysteries will be presented, all of which hopefully will be made clear with the publication of the planned final book in the series sometime in the future. Readers can hardly wait!

Although the books themselves were not published in a strictly one-each-year schedule—1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003, and 2005 (pending)—each book chronicles the year-to-year experiences of Harry Potter, the wizard-in-training at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Starting in the first book with Harry’s 11th birthday, the reader is afforded the opportunity to observe Harry’s year-by-year progress of moving from boy to teen to soon-to-be young adult. As such, Harry provides an interesting model of the male spiritual journey. The choices Harry makes, the experiences he gains, and the adult influences in his life each year mold him more and more towards the adult he will eventually become. This journey, even though fictional, provides interesting insight into the larger patterns and themes of the male spiritual journey.

When thinking about spirituality in its broader meaning, different definitions are often presented. Some define spirituality as a connection with the inner self. Others may see it as an outward connection with the larger “there.” Still others may define spirituality in terms of religious or theistic understandings. The definitions are many and varied. Likewise, the application of “spiritual principals” in everyday life is also multi-faceted. A simple Google® search easily results in websites that discuss spirituality in health care, martial arts, religion, educational curriculum, and management/leadership styles. Certainly there is no single commonly accepted definition that fits all.

For purposes of this paper, I employ a broader definition of “spirituality.” It is the sense of being connected with a reality larger than oneself. It is that connection that provides foundation for answering the most fundamental of human questions: Who am I? What is the meaning of my life? What purpose does my life have? Indeed, these are the very questions that Harry Potter wrestles with in his journey toward adulthood.

Richard Rohr is a contemporary writer on the male spiritual journey. Although he comes from the Christian tradition, and thus his orientation towards spirituality comes from a theist perspective, his concepts are by no means either dogmatic or proselytizing. He draws upon all major geographic and cultural traditions in formulating his framework: Native American, Hispanic, European, African, Asian, and North American perspectives and wisdom. In other words, the spiritual framework he suggests crosses multiple cultures and timeframes. He believes they are ancient and universal. In two of his more recent books, *The Wild Man's Journey: Reflections on male spirituality* (with Joseph Martos, 1996) and *Adam's Return: The five promises of male initiation* (2004), Rohr presents his outline of the stages of a man's life. These stages provide an interesting structure upon which to examine both Harry Potter's life journey, as well as several of the other series' characters. I now turn to an examination of four of these stages, and provide some thoughts as to how the stages illuminate Harry Potter's life journey—as Rowling has revealed it to date—as well as how Harry Potter's life journey illustrates the stages. Indeed, both Rohr's stages and Harry's journey go hand-in-hand, and thus in combination they offer an interesting perspective into the stories.

Stage 1: "The Student"

It is indeed fitting that the first stage in a man's life is called "The Student" because this is precisely both the age and stage at which we first meet Harry. In book one *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (1998), we meet Harry as he is just approaching his eleventh birthday. In fact, it is on his eleventh birthday late that summer that he receives the mysterious letter—actually many letters, as readers will recall—inviting him to a position as a first-year student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This

coincides quite nicely with the beginning of the “Student” stage that Rohr suggests: age twelve.

Each stage of a man’s life, as suggested by Rohr, is marked by a unique “gift,” a particular “demon,” and a “wisdom” to be learned. In the Student stage—roughly identified as ages 12-16¹—the “gift” is that of optimism. This is precisely what is seen in Harry in the first book. Although his life with the Dursleys is nothing short of miserable, he never gives up his hope for the future. Somewhere, somehow, life will get better, and indeed it does! His arrival at Hogwarts both literally and metaphorically opens an entirely new world to him. He intuitively knew that there was something better “out there” but never imagined it would be as good as it turned out to be. Hogwarts literally turned his life around.

But along with the “gift” comes a “demon.” In archetypal language, it is the “shadow” side, or as popularized in contemporary film, the “dark side” that seduced Anakin Skywalker into becoming Darth Vader. The shadow is the inner pain, the irrational, the self-destructive self. In the words of Rohr, “it is the tragic flaw of Greek tragedy and Shakespearean drama.” (Rohr, 2004, p. 26) It needs healing.

It is in this stage that the conflict between “gift” and “demon,” between optimism and cynicism sets the stage for the “wisdom” to be learned. The cynicism at this stage is often the result of the individual becoming more aware of the pain in one’s life. In the case of Harry, this is obviously the pain related to the death of his parents and the life he has led living with the Dursleys. Just as his introduction to Hogwarts fulfilled his sense of optimism, it also deepened the pain over his parent’s deaths. Witness the scene in

¹ The age spans are based on traditional “tribal ages;” i.e. the ages as they were commonly seen in traditional tribal cultures. The ages are slightly different as seen in contemporary western culture. In the United States, the Student stage may more properly be ages 17-28 (approximate).

Sorcerer's Stone where he gazes into the Mirror of Erised, where he longs, indeed aches, to know more about his mother and father. This deep longing is repeated in various events throughout the subsequent books. The young Harry is painfully “wounded” by his parents’ deaths.

Rohr writes that “if we do not transform our pain, we will transmit it in some form.” (Rohr, 2004, p. 37). This is the essential work to be done in this stage, to transform one’s pain. If this work is not successful, the individual has the potential to become inflexible, blaming and petty in later life. Such individuals need enemies, often become victims, seek security as a cover-up for a healthy sense of self, and run the risk of passing on one’s own “deadness” to their family and children. (Rohr, 2004)

Paradoxically, it is this very awareness of pain, and its tension with optimism, that sets the stage for the wisdom lesson to be learned at this stage: “Life is hard.” While at first thought this lesson seems harsh—after all, who really wants a life that is hard, that is painful—as with many spiritual truths the meaning is found in the very paradox. With an awareness and an embracing that reality that life is hard, one can transform pain into something positive, and in the process have the opportunity to break the chain of transmitting pain to the next generation. Rather than devoting energy and attention in self-centered ways that attempt to mask pain with false pleasures—think of many of our contemporary addiction issues—if one learns the wisdom lesson and can find the courage to embrace it, one can use such power to transform lives.

If indeed the typical ages of the Student stage are those of 12-16, then Harry is presently nearing the end of this period in his life. The pain of his parents’ deaths is pain that he carries with him constantly. How he transforms that pain is not yet resolved in the

novels, but there are glimpses of where he may be headed, particularly in light of his relationship with several of the adult mentors in his life. The signs are hopeful! (The role of Harry's mentors will be explored a bit later in this paper.)

Stage 2: "The Householder"

The "Housekeeper" stage is roughly the ages 17-35². In a literal reading of the *Harry Potter* series, Harry is only on the verge of this stage as defined by his actual age—in the sixth book, due for release in July 2005, he will have just turned 16. It is during this stage of the journey that the young man begins to move out into the world. In contemporary culture it involves selecting a mate, establishing a career, and beginning a family. We see these very issues in Harry in book five *Order of the Phoenix* as Harry is confronted with his choices over possible future wizarding careers. Like many boys, Harry has toyed with several options over his previous four years at Hogwarts, but in his fifth year he must become serious about his future. When he meets with Professor McGonagall to discuss his options, and he reveals that he is thinking about becoming an Auror, she does not discourage him nor rule it out, but rather offers him the straightforward advice that such would be a difficult choice. The competition will be keen, the training is demanding, and only the best are selected. Harry's interest in this wizarding career option is entirely fitting with this second stage of life.

Like the "Student" stage, the "Householder" stage has both a gift and a demon, as well as a wisdom lesson to be learned. The gift is that of loyalty. This is a theme that runs through all of the novels—Harry's loyalty to his friends, his house and quiddich team, his surrogate family (the Weasleys), his parents, and in particular to his god-parent Sirius

² In a manner similar to the "Student" stage, this approximate span is based on traditional tribal cultures. An approximate age span in contemporary U.S. culture may actually be 25-50.

Black. Loyalty is a virtue. But this stage, like the first one, also has a demon, and in this case it is the demon of competition and speed. To a certain extent, we can see Harry as always being in a hurry. In each of the books we find incidents where he “plunges ahead, often with little or no forethought about the danger he may be placing himself into, or the unintended consequences of his actions and how such may endanger the life of someone else. In a larger sense, however, it is the demon of competition that can ultimately prove to be hollow. Fighting for a cause that is virtuous may be a good thing. But competition for purposes of “besting” another simply for the sake of establishing supremacy, for purposes of acquiring more for oneself, only leads to eventual disappointment. This type of competition becomes nothing more than a “preta,” a “hungry ghost.” It is, in essence, the king of consumerism, consumption for the sake of consumption, all in an attempt to be in some way satisfied. But the paradox of the preta is that the more it “eats” the less satisfied it becomes. Indeed, all it can do is consume, and it can never be satisfied. This is a critical wisdom lesson for boys to learn. As the twist on the old saying goes: He who dies with the most toys, still dies!” If one’s life, value, and self-worth—one’s spirit—is only based on the drive to compete, to conquer, to acquire and consume, then there can be no final satisfaction. There can never be enough to satisfy. When this demon—the demon of competition—is confronted and transformed, it leads to the wisdom lesson of this age: Your life is not about you; you are about life!

The understanding that “your life is not about you” can be a radical and liberating transformation. The understanding does not always come easily, but once it does it can be an enormous lifting of responsibility. As Rohr (2004) suggests, this creates an understanding in the mind that the individual doesn’t have to understand everything, that

one doesn't have to "fix" everything, one doesn't have to carry all the responsibility to make things happen. The realization that one is not the center of the universe means quite simply that "I don't have to be God." (Rohr, 2004, p.61) It is the difference between a life that is inwardly focused—"My life is all about me"—as opposed to being outwardly focused—"I am about my life." This is a watershed moment, and one that is glimpsed in the life of young Harry. And, whether realized or not, it leads directly to the gift, demon, and wisdom lesson of the next stage.

Stage 3: "The Seeker/Forest Dweller"

The third stage is that typical "mid-life" period when careers begin to plateau, kids begin to leave home, and the individual begins to look back and take account of what dreams and goals have been realized and which ones have not been realized. It is also a time of looking forward, sometimes with disappointment or regret over those unrealized goals, and sometime with optimism over creating new beginnings. This is the stage from ages 30-50³.

The "gift" of the "Seeker" stage is that of reconciliation, and it is directly tied to the "gift/demon" tension of the previous stage. If one bases one's life solely on competition, winning, and acquiring—the hungry ghost—then one has every potential to be ultimately disappointed. Such a person can become bitter, negative, cynical. This is the person that can only blame others for life's circumstances. In male terms, this person becomes the bitter old man.

But the gift of the "Seeker" stage is that of reconciliation. Rather than resorting to violence, lashing out at others, blaming others for one's own situation, the Seeker" has the potential to transform unrealized goals into a powerful wisdom lesson. If the demon

³ Again, the ages are those of traditional "tribal cultures." Corresponding ages in the U.S. might be 50+.

of the Seeker stage is allowed to go untamed and untransformed, it leads to violence. In contemporary culture, we see the seeds and fruits of this on a daily basis, both in our communities and in our world. And it plays out drastically in the lives of so many young men, the culture of violence based on demons of competition, protection, blame, fear, and feeding the hungry ghosts acquisition of power and goods.

There is, however, wisdom to be learned in the Seeker stage: You are not in control. Like much wisdom learning, this appears to fly in the face of much of what we learn from popular culture. We feel a need to be in control. We often want to be in control. We fight against being controlled. Yet ultimately in life, we control very little other than ourselves. And therein is the tension that leads to the wisdom lesson.

Certainly, being in control is not all bad. No one would seriously argue that one should stand by and meekly be the victim of abuse. There is a right and proper place for taking a stand and defending one's self. Yet that is not the understanding of "control" that the wisdom lesson addresses. Rather, it is the understanding that giving up the need to control the events and people around us can be liberating. It is the change in orientation from an inward focus to an outer focus. It is the reorienting of domination hierarchies into actualization hierarchies. (Rohr, 2004)

Although young Harry is not yet at this particular stage in the books, there are people in his life who demonstrate the different sides of control. Uncle Dursley is early on one such person. His futile attempts to control both Harry and events surrounding Harry's living with them are always met with futility. Draco Malfoy and his father Lucius Malfoy are another example of attempts to exercise control, largely in an attempt to

establish and maintain positions of power over others in order to protect their own self-interests.

A defining moment of being forced to face the realization that “you are not in control” might be seen at the end of *Order of the Phoenix* in the death of Harry’s beloved godfather Sirius Black. When Sirius loses his fight with the Death Eaters and passes through the archway into death, Harry is unable to believe that he is really dead, and that Sirius will never return. In a conversation first with Lupin, then a bit later in a conversation with Professor Dumbledore, and finally in a third conversation with Nearly-Headless-Nick, Harry faces the horrible reality that he has been avoiding—that Sirius Black is indeed dead and will never return. How Harry transforms this demon of violence, and how he embraces the gift of reconciliation, and whether or not he claims the wisdom lesson that “you are not in control” are all matters that remain unresolved at the end of *Order of the Phoenix*. Readers will simply have to await the next installment.

Stage 4: “The Sage/Elder”

The final stage of the male spiritual journey is that of the Elder/Sage. Identified as age 50+⁴, the still-young Harry Potter is nowhere near this stage, either in a literal reading or as a metaphor. Yet the stage is clearly represented throughout all five previously released books by the person of Professor Albus Dumbledore. Let us examine this stage in more detail, if only briefly.

Just as in the three previous stages, the Sage/Elder has both a unique gift, a demon to be transformed, and a wisdom lesson to learn and to pass on to others. The gift is that of release/forgiveness. The demon is that of bitterness/despair. Both the gift and the demon operate in tension with each other, and just as in the other stages, if the gift can be

⁴ This is the traditional “tribal culture” age. In the U.S. the age associated with this stage is not defined.

employed to transform the demon, the wisdom lesson can be learned. The wisdom lesson for the Sage/Elder is: “You are going to die.”

Such a lesson may seem strange, and certainly not a positive one. After all, in much of contemporary culture, death is to be avoided at all costs. It is often feared. People literally spend entire life fortunes to stave it off as long as possible. Yet whether willing to admit openly or not, death comes to everyone. The acceptance and embracing of the reality of death prepares one for the final letting go. Not only a letting go of one’s own physical life, but paradoxically a letting go of circumstances, events, and possessions in one’s life that impede the spiritual self from taking hold. Consider the comment of Dumbledore to a very young Harry at the end of the first book, *Sorcerer’s Stone*. Harry is concerned about Dumbledore’s longtime friend Nicolas Flamel, and that with the stone having been destroyed Nicholas and his wife Perenelle will die. Dumbledore’s reply is quite revealing: “To one as young as you, I’m sure it seems incredible, but to Nicholas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well organized mind, death is but the next great adventure.” If one changes the above quote by substituting “wise” in place of “well trained,” and thus having it read “to the wise mind,” one has captured the very essence of the Sage’s/Elder’s wisdom lesson.

Dumbledore continues his conversation with Harry by adding an additional thought that also strongly speaks the truth of the Sage/Elder wisdom lesson: “You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all—the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them.” Consider Dumbledore’s words in light of the male spiritual stages: “As much money . . . as you

could want!” This is the demon of competition! “As much . . . life as you could want!” This is the demon of control! And Dumbledore the Sage/Elder, calmly states that these are precisely the very things that are worst for us. This is wisdom, speaking spiritual truth.

At the end of book five, *Order of the Phoenix*, there is another conversation that hints of the wisdom lesson “you are going to die.” It is actually that same conversation between Harry and the ghost character Nearly-Headless-Nick. Harry just “knows” that Sirius would not totally abandon him, and that Sirius will indeed come back some day, in some form, just like Nearly-Headless-Nick. But as Nick explains, ghosts that still “hang around” can do so only if they leave an imprint of themselves upon the earth before they die, and that “very few wizards choose that path.” (p. 861) It’s only a hint, and perhaps we will find out more in the next book, but it suggests that Sirius Black may have understood the wisdom lesson before his death.

Putting the Stages into the Journey

The stages of the male spiritual journey are generally sequential, but at each stage there is a wisdom lesson to be learned. If the gift at that stage can confront the demon of the stage and transform the demon, the wisdom lesson can be learned. But if the demon “wins” and the wisdom lesson isn’t learned, the journey can branch into a dead end. For example, consider the Student stage. The demon in this stage is that of cynicism. Consider what can happen if the demon is not transformed. The wisdom lesson of the stage—“life is hard”—can easily become the learning of bitterness. This can become the “angry young man” who never gets to experience his own potential goodness.

Or consider the Householder stage. If the demon of competition is not confronted and transformed, it can lead a learning that is just the opposite of the lesson that “life is not about you.” Without a healthy learning of the wisdom lesson of the stage, this person can become the “old fool.” This person just “doesn’t get it.” He keeps trying to make sense and meaning of life by continually attempting to acquire more, achieve more. He can become a very shallow person.

Consider the Seeker stage. If the stage’s gift of reconciliation can transform the demon of violence, the healthy lesson of “you are not in control” can emerge. If this lesson isn’t learned or cannot be embraced, it creates the potential of the embittered, negative, cynical, blaming man.

Yet look what can happen if the wisdom lesson of each stage is learned and embraced. Such learning opens the possibility of what has been called the “wisdom journey.” Rather than leading the dead end lives of bitterness, blame, resentment, violence, or spiritually hollow consumption, the “wisdom journey” can lead to higher spiritual truths of patience, trust, surrender, and compassion. This is the “mellow grandfather” as Rohr would describe him, who goes beyond judgments, “reason” and control to wisdom. As Rohr states, for this individual, “being human is more important than self-image, role, power, prestige, or possessions.” (Rohr, 1996, p. xxxv) Stated in the context of this paper, this is Professor Dumbledore. The example of his wisdom and humanity is seen repeatedly across all the books published to date.

The importance of spirituality the spirituality wisdom lessons

I offer three reasons why the wisdom lessons are important, for boys in particular but in actuality important for everyone.

1. It is a rediscovery of ancient truths and practices. There is a reason why the ages identified with the various stages of male spirituality are identified based on “tribal cultures.” These are lessons that our various ancestors learned, but which modern (and post-modern) society worldwide is in danger of losing. Indeed, as Rohr points out, his work with men’s groups in Australia revealed that even in many contemporary tribal cultures, the wisdom learning of the elders has largely been lost. (Rohr, 2004) There is value in the wisdom of the past, both from communities and from families.

2. The wisdom learning as mentored by wise elders (not all of which must be male elders—wise women elders are important, too) is vitally necessary in creating healthy young men’s lives. Again, as Rohr states, “unless a young male is shown real power through a community of wise elders, he will always seek false power and likely will spend much of his life seeking prestige, perks and possessions.” (2004, p. 17)

3. Wisdom learning based on spiritual awareness is part of a balanced, whole life. The five elements of social needs, physical needs, emotional needs, intellectual needs, and spiritual needs all work interactively in making a person’s life complete.

Final thoughts

1. Wisdom lessons are often best “caught” rather than “taught.” After all, how many times have parents (and teachers) “nagged” to no avail at kids about some particular issue, only to have the lesson eventually learned by the kid “the hard way” at some later date? A wisdom lesson or spiritual truth that is presented before the opportune time is often a lesson or truth that doesn’t “take.” But given the right time, and taught with compassion, the lesson can be powerful. We see this over and over in the exchanges between Harry and Dumbledore.

2. Harry Potter, both the series and the character, can serve as a model for the stages and associated wisdom lessons. As such, teachers and parents can take advantage of the “teachable moment” during the reading and discussion of the books. Again, such lessons are better “caught” than “taught.” If a reading of a particular chapter or event seems to present the “opportune time” to point out an appropriate wisdom lesson, do so. But let the book speak to the reader. Don’t approach the story with a pre-determined intention of “teaching” a wisdom lesson. (i.e. the traditional “instructional objective”—“the goal of this lesson is to learn the wisdom lesson of . . .”). Rather, let the book speak naturally to the reader, and the reader to the book, both under the observant guidance of the adult.

3. Look for other examples of wisdom and “wise characters” in other children’s books. The old man Omar in Walt Morey’s *Canyon Winter*; the school custodian Mr. Fridley in Beverly Cleary’s *Dear Mr. Henshaw*; the wise old rat Nicodemus in Robert O’Brien’s *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*; Lefty Lewis in Christopher Paul Curtis’s *Bud, Not Buddy*; and Grandma Dowdel in Richard Peck’s *A Long Way from Chicago* and *A Year Down Yonder*. More sophisticated readers may want to explore such images, characters, and lessons in works such as Tolkein’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

I conclude with a brief story from Deepak Chopra, as related in his book *Fire in the Heart: A spiritual guide for teens*. In the opening of the book, Chopra relates an encounter he had as a young boy with a wise elder. Each day, over a four day period, this wise elder answered one of four “burning questions” that Chopra had, questions about the very meaning and purpose of life: *Do I have a soul? How do wishes come true? What is the supreme force in the universe? How can I change the world?* As Chopra explains, there will always be “burning questions” in life, but these four were of particular

importance to him at that point in his life. For Chopra, “they remain special, because they start a spark, and from that spark you will have a fire in your heart. That fire will make you live your life with excitement and passion.” (Chopra, 2004, p.2)

I conclude with the question asked at the beginning: “Who do you want to be when you grow up?” *Harry Potter* offers a unique and engaging entry point into these very same questions. With the books providing the entry point, adults have the opportunity to expand upon these questions and mentor the wisdom lessons that lead to healthy and positive life meanings.

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