

Wizard Theology
[Edited Transcript]
A Sermon by The Rev. Yvonne V. Miller

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This time of year is one of our most human seasons. It's a time that is full of ambiguities and tensions. We feel both anticipation and anxiety; happiness and stress. We go through the darkest days of the year to get to the re-birth of the light as the sun returns.

December is a tightrope, and sometimes we could all use a little magic to help us cross that tightrope.

Which brings me to wizards. Wizards have made it back into the news with the phenomenal success of the *Harry Potter* novels.

This series follows the career and adventures of a boy, Harry Potter, as he studies to be a wizard at the Hogwarts, the famous school for wizards and witches. Some of the students at the school come from famous wizarding families. But other students come from perfectly ordinary families; they have been selected by the omniscient governors of Hogwarts who have noticed their potential.

Harry, an orphan, himself comes from wizard parents, although he does not know this at the beginning. He is plucked from a miserable existence with his uncle Vernon and his Aunt Petunia [who hate and fear magic] and invited to Hogwarts. For him it is paradise.

Harry could not be happier. But he soon finds himself with a powerful enemy: the evil Lord Voldemort - a wizard gone bad who becomes his nemesis. The books follow Harry's course of studies as well as his battles with Lord Voldemort in his various guises.

One of the things that makes the Harry Potter books so popular is that they send the message that anyone may turn out to have wizarding powers. No matter how ordinary or even bleak their life might seem, the invitation to Hogwarts might arrive any day - carried by an owl of course.

Another message they send is that pluck and resourcefulness are more important than sheer talent. It's character that ultimately triumphs here. It's an appealing message because it makes being a wizard very accessible.

Some people, you may have heard, have objected strongly to this series on the grounds that it encourages witchcraft and Satanism. Sure there are spells in the books - mostly in bad Latin - and the students learn to brew up potions, but the word "Satanism" is misplaced. The reason people read these books is so they can watch young Harry triumph over the forces of evil - mostly with his courage. Harry just has a few extra tools.

It's too bad that some people seem to be afraid of the imagination. If we removed all the magic, spells and magical characters from books, the best of our children's literature would be gone. The Wizard of Oz, for example would be gone, and Dorothy would still be stuck in Kansas. It's not the human imagination we should worry about, it's what we do with that imagination that should cause us concern.

Harry Potter is just the latest twist on a figure that has an ancient literary tradition: the wizard. Wizards pop up again and again in literature to rescue people, or save the world, or to undo evil spells cast by wizards and sorcerers gone bad.

Like people, wizards vary greatly in their personalities, and yes, there are evil wizards now and then [although that is usually associated with sorcerers], but all wizards have one common characteristic: they are all agents of transformation and change.

Let me briefly mention some wizards I have known, so to speak:

The oldest of all must be Merlin of the Arthurian legends. He is the archetypal European wizard on whom many subsequent wizards are based.

There is also Gandolf the gray in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the Wizard of Oz [a wizard in his own flawed way], and my personal favorite, the wizard Sparrowhawk from Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* trilogy.

More recently, the Star Wars movies have given us a new variant of the wizard in the Jedi knights - especially the Jedi masters Obi Won Kenobi and Yoda. They use their laser swords and their powers to dispel the forces of the dark side.

And this is what wizards have always done. And that's why we love them. We are allies.

Wizards work to weave the powers of the earth and sky and light and dark. The wizard Gandolf, with his long staff, lit up by his power, lights the darkness so that the hobbits can find their way. His staff burns with a fierce bright light, casting out shadows, repelling evil.

This is what we would all like to do; what we all try to do.

Wizards in literature are projections of our inner selves and our deepest religious impulses.

Good wizards always serve the spirit of life. Evil wizards and evil people never do. And so we cheer on the good wizards because, we too, are in service to the spirit of life. Without it, the wizard might survive for a time, but we know we won't.

Wizards stand with us in our human anxiety. My favorite wizard, Sparrowhawk of the *Earthsea* trilogy, is one of the bravest. In the last book, at the end of a long journey full of dangers, when they have sailed to the edge of the world and are faced with almost certain defeat, Sparrowhawk's companion suggests they surrender. And Sparrowhawk turns to him and says: "No, I will not hear it. I will take not the counsel of despair."

"I will not take the counsel of despair." This wizard stands with us in our anxiety and says no to the forces of despair.

We admire wizards because they seem to be able to do so much more than we can. When we are defeated and overwhelmed by evil or apathy the wizard is undaunted. The wizard also seems to have greater ability to grasp events and shape them. The wizards' strength runs deep, grounded in spirit. After all, the word wizard comes from the same root as the word "wise."

I too would like to be a wizard sometimes. I would like to speak to the wind, commune with animals,

and feel a stronger sense of connection to the heart of things. But we are human.

Still, we should not underrate ourselves. After all, we create these characters. They are both models for us and also reflections of ourselves. The character of the wizard is our own character writ large - the actions more dramatic maybe, but not different in kind, not really.

We are all agents of transformation and change. And we too can and do say "no" to the forces of evil and despair. We too, serve the spirit of life in our own way.

The trick, and the challenge, is to recognize our own wizardry.

Let me tell you a story.

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Once upon a time, there was a group of people who all went to church together on Sundays and sometimes on other days.

One day, as they were sitting in church, thinking their thoughts, the doors of the church suddenly flew open. A mist rolled in. Now most mists cover things up and make it hard to see. But this was a mist from the heart of the world, and what it did was the opposite: it made everybody see better.

And all the people suddenly knew themselves to be wizards. They were not very strong wizards, but they were wizards all the same.

One of the first changes they noticed in themselves was that they had a new clarity of vision. They could see things that other people couldn't and they could name things by their true names. They saw that much of what people considered normal, really wasn't so good. And they also saw that much of what other people called "ordinary," was really miraculous - including themselves.

Oh they still had to get up and go to work, and they still had to do shopping and stand in lines, but now with their new wizard vision they saw that there was power in everything they did. And as they used the power, it grew in them.

They used their power first of all to brighten up their world, which was looking a little drab. Christmas lights sprang up everywhere and fresh fir trees were brought inside to grace the spaces with their fragrance. Presents for the needy appeared under the trees because as the wizards looked around, they saw much poverty that needed to be changed. Then they turned their gaze on each other. With their new vision, they began to see the wizardry in each other. They saw that each had his or her own special wizardry. This one could fix fabulous meals, while this one could change silence into music. Another could build things. Many of them sat and dreamed powerful dreams of beauty and peace, which they told the others about with magical words. This too was wizardry.

As they practiced using their wizardry in small things, their powers grew -- although they never became as powerful as any of the celebrity wizards. Still, as their abilities grew, they were able to catch glimpses of the heart of things. They began to feel the great force that connected them and all living things to each other. It was this that gave them their wizardry. Their hearts sang with the song of the birds and danced with the stars. But despite all these marvels, the wizards stayed together, because they knew beyond doubt that it was by being together that they each came to realize their own true wizardry.

And in this way, many changes came into the world.

So may it be.