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RIP: Rest In Potter

Simply put, *Harry Potter* is a story about a young wizard's understanding of death, coping, and acceptance. A wizard with a peculiar scar, a writer named J.K. Rowling, seven spectacular books, and death, all walk into a bar. At first glance one may not see the numerous permeations of death written into the tale of *Harry Potter*, however, at a closer glance, the magnitude of death's presence in the plot of *Harry Potter* becomes undeniable. Rowling's series, the Harry Potter books, are both a tale of Harry's fight and eventual triumph over the Dark Lord Voldemort, and a tale of his fight to understand the concept of death and inevitably overcome the grief and misunderstandings that ensue as a result of its grim occurrence. He travels through seven books, learning along the way to understand that death happens to everyone, the way in which happens, the right and wrong ways to cope with death, how to cope with his own mortality and how to overcome the fear of death and grief.

Firstly he learns how to deal with past deaths, that death is painful, inescapable and that it must be acknowledged rather than suppressed or avoided. Next, he learns how to cope with present deaths and grief through experiencing The Five Stages of Grief. After successfully understanding the first four stages, depression, denial, anger, and bargaining, he then learns how to cope with the final one, acceptance. By learning how to accept death, he accepts the deaths that will occur in the future, more specifically his

own. The acceptance of his own death is helped along by Voldemort and Dumbledore. The two wizard's discourse over how death should be viewed exemplifies to Harry the proper and improper ways of handling one's own mortality. Finally, he concludes his journey by learning how to conquer his grief, so he can move on to a brighter and better future.

Like mortality shaped bullet holes, the death of countless characters and ruminations on what death means permeate the plot along the course of Harry's lengthy quest. This is not mere happenstance; in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Rowling elucidates, "...it was no coincidence that Harry's journey through the books was to deal with death in its many forms – to ponder about what it means to die, what it does to those that are left alive and what it means to survive death" (quot'd in *Children and 'The Next Great Adventure'*, Alderete-Diez). The emphasis on this topic stems from Rowling's own attempts to understand death and cope with death of her mother, which occurred while she was writing the Harry Potter series (Flood). Rowling's personal struggles with understanding and coping with death are reflected in Harry's own journey as well as in her story *The Tale of Three Brothers*, which serves as a microcosm for the lessons Harry learns throughout the books.

The Tale of Three Brothers centers around three brothers who all are given the opportunity to receive gifts from Death. The first brother chooses the Sorcerer's Stone, a magical item that can bring the dead back to life. The second brother selects The Elder Wand, the most powerful wand in existence. The third and final brother chooses an invisibility cloak. As the tale progresses, it becomes clear that each brother's choice results in a reflection of one of the lessons Harry learns within the novels. The first

brother desired to not acknowledge death in the past by resurrecting his dead lover. The second wished to avoid coping with the present form of death using the wand to keep him from dying and to seek revenge on another wizard out of anger and blaming, two of The Five Stages of Grief. Finally, the third brother fearing his own death used the cloak to hide from Death, because he was not willing to accept his mortality. Eventually, this third brother capitulates to Death after conquering his fear of grief and death. Likewise, the other two are also taken by Death, though not of their own volition like the third brother. All three brothers deny or ignore what must be done to acknowledge, cope, or accept death, and are eventually unsuccessful, with each brother eventually dying regardless of their intent (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 405).

Firstly, Harry learns the lessons of the first brother. From the very first chapter title's name, "Chapter one: *The Boy Who Lived*" and the very beginning of the beginning, the concept of life and death makes itself present and teaches Harry about loss and its inescapability. The first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, is Harry's first encounter with the struggles of understanding death, the death of his parents in this instance that the reader sees. The first chapter of the book begins with Harry's parents being killed. These two deaths are immensely important as they set Harry's quest for understanding death into motion. The deaths of his parents are the first casualties young Harry experiences. The passing of his parents is the morbid inauguration into the basic constructs and facts of what it is to die and how to understand it. With their passing, he learns for the first time what it is to experience loss, that the loss must be explained, that loss is painful and that death, unfortunately, is something everyone will experience, whether they want to or not.

Harry learns, like the first brother, that while death is painful it must be acknowledged. While Harry's parents died shortly after his birth, giving him ample time to understand and acknowledge their deaths, upon arriving at Hogwarts and learning he had been lied to about how they died, his world was turned on end. This information, that his parents had not died in a car crash, coupled with the fact that no one would tell him how they really met their end, forced Harry to regress back to the start of his coping with their deaths. He now had to live with the reality that while he knew that his parents had died, he had no concept of how, something the adults around him intentionally kept secret. This secret Draco Malfoy made his duty to tease Harry for. The cruelty Malfoy invokes on Harry helps him to learn, in an albeit painful way, that ignorance, when it comes to death, is not bliss, and that experiencing the death of a loved one is a painful experience. As the medical journal *Pediatrician* warns, "Protecting a child from the death of a loved one doesn't work, children who don't openly deal with grief can develop lasting emotional and developmental problems" (*Pediatrician and Childhood Bereavement*, 2000). By not explaining his parent's death to him, the adults of Harry's world actually cause him pain. It is because of this ordeal in the first book, that Harry learns that death must not be kept secret and must be explained. The idea that death must be acknowledged and dealt with prepares Harry for his next lesson-- death is painful to cope with.

After experiencing the events that taught him about the first brother, Harry then learns the lessons of the second brother. Death must be coped with. Harry, now maintaining the knowledge from the first book that coping with death is necessary through his realization that not knowing or not processing death, is worse, must now

learn how to go about this coping process. This is done by experiencing and learning about the Five Stages of Grief. As a new wave of deaths of those close to him begin, commencing with Cedric Diggory and the depression Harry experiences as a result of the death, and ending with Fred Weasley and his denial of the death, Harry begins his journey to understanding how to cope with the deaths. Not by coincidence, Rowling writes the manner in which Harry responds to death to follow the emotions and patterns outlined by the Five Stages of Grief: depression, denial, bargaining or blaming, anger and acceptance. These stages, as outlined by an article by Christina Hibbert, do not have a specific order; rather, they simply occur at random, and happen to help facilitate the coping process of one who is dealing with loss (Hibbert). Harry throughout the text shows numerous instances of depression, denial, blaming or bargaining, anger and then finally, acceptance.

The first stage of coping Harry experiences that the second brother chose to ignore is depression. This stage he experiences when it manifests as the way Harry responds to his parents' death. Thinking until he reaches Hogwarts that his parents had died in a car crash, the realization that it was something different altogether causes Harry to regress back to the start of his journey to cope with their deaths. Harry, confused and lost, misses his parents so much that he becomes incredibly sad. His sadness can be seen as a direct relation to the loss of his parents when he views them in the mirror of Erised. Rowling creates this scene with a mix of joy and deep sadness within Harry for the loss, writing, "And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror, and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his...Harry was looking at his family, for the first time in his life...He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy,

half terrible sadness” (Rowling, *Philosopher’s Stone*, 224). The Hogwarts Gamekeeper, Hagrid, notices how depressed Harry is, and at the end of the year, compiles a book of their photos for Harry to keep. The author, of *Children and The Next Great Adventure*, Pilar Alderete-Diez, explains, “Hagrid, the gamekeeper at Hogwarts and one of Harry’s friends, knows that Harry still has a difficult time with the death of his parents. To help Harry know his parents better, and to help him grieve, Hagrid prepares Harry a book of photographs” (Alderete-Diez, Pilar). While not curing Harry’s depression stage, the photo album, is a kind gesture that showcases Harry’s sadness in the books in a positive way.

Harry then learns the second stage of coping that the second brother chose to ignore, denial. Harry watches his godfather, the first parent figure he has had present in his life, disappear outside his line of sight as he meets his demise. Rowling writes on Harry’s reaction to witnessing this, reasoning, “...he would reappear from the other side any second...” (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 711). Harry cannot fathom that someone so dear to him, like his godfather, could be gone in an instant, and so, he responds with denial to avoid the pain of acknowledging the new reality. Another event where Harry learns about the stage of denial is when he speaks with Nearly Headless Nick. Nick tells him he was so reluctant to die, that he was in denial of his own demise when it transpired. He continues to say that this denial was so strong, that it kept him from fully exiting this world, and therefore he became a ghost instead.

After this Harry learns the third stage of coping that the second brother chose to avoid dealing with, blaming. Once Harry has learned about depression as a reaction to death, a new fatality of someone he cares about occurs and pushes him into a new stage

of coping, blaming. The death of Cedric Diggory is the first major character death seen in the books and it is also Harry's first experience with the reaction of blaming. Harry, thinking Cedric's death to be his fault, is thrust into a breakdown in the Hogwarts Infirmary. Mrs. Weasley tries to comfort him assuring, "It wasn't your fault, Harry," to which the overwhelmed and disbelieving Harry can only retort, "I told him to take the cup with me," (Rowling, *The Goblet of Fire*, 638). Harry, having convinced Cedric to take the trophy cup, even though neither of them realized it would result in Cedric's death, caused "The Boy Who Lived" to blame himself, thinking it to be his own fault Cedric died. This is not Harry's only instance of responding to death with incorrectly blaming himself. Later in the series, in *Order of the Phoenix*, his godfather, Sirius Black also surrenders to death, and Harry again deems himself the cause. He admonishes himself saying, "It was [my] fault Sirius had died, it was all [my] fault" (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 727). While neither of these deaths are his fault, he nonetheless finds himself to be the cause as a part of this blaming phase of coping.

Following blaming, Harry then learns the fourth stage of coping that the second brother failed to observe, anger. As he grows older, and the body count of those close to him rises and rises, Harry gets increasingly angry at each death. It is Dumbledore's demise in the sixth book in which this anger is seen most clearly. Arguably one of the most important people to Harry is killed before his eyes by Severus Snape, and Harry has no capability of stopping it. The Harry Potter Wikia summarizes the ordeal stating, "Harry, who was forced to watch the entire spectacle from the Full Body-Bind Curse, was set free upon Dumbledore's death, and in an enraged desire for revenge, he immediately set off to pursue Snape" (*Battle of the Astronomy Tower*). We see this anger

reflected directly in the text with Harry's provocations of Snape when he finally catches up to him screaming, "Kill me then. Kill me like you killed him, you coward —" (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 549) in a fit of pure rage over Dumbledore's demise at Snape's hand. It is in the *Deathly Hallows*, that the rage welled up within him reaches its pinnacle over the increasing number of deaths of his friends, and a resentment toward them leaving him without help or guidance visibly manifests. In a moment of pure frustration and weakness, Harry thinks to himself, "Dumbledore would have believed him, he knew it. ... Because Dumbledore always had answers... but Dumbledore, like Mad-Eye, like Sirius, like his parents, like his poor owl, all were gone where Harry could never talk to them again." (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 144). His loss of support from those who died that guided him in the past, manifests as begrudging rage towards them, even though they couldn't control their own deaths, and fills Harry with unreasonable anger.

Finally, Harry learns the lessons of the third brother. While Harry exhibits the four other stages very clearly in countless places in the texts, the acceptance stage of death remains absent until the final book, the *Deathly Hallows*. It is in the *Deathly Hallows* where Harry learns he too must die and is forced to learn the lesson of what it is to partake in the fifth, final, and most important stage of grieving, acceptance. With the explanation of the Horcruxes, comes the upsetting detail that Harry too is one of them, and therefore, must die in order for Voldemort to be defeated. As Harry places his head into the Pensieve, and hears Severus utter those fatal words exclaiming out of shock, "You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?" (Rowling, *Deathly*

Hallows, 551), to Dumbledore, the creator of the horrific scheme, he realizes he must learn to accept death, because he has no other choice.

Dumbledore teaches Harry the lesson of the third brother, that death should be embraced. Rowling's primary argument about death throughout the texts is that one's own death should not be feared but embraced when it comes time. This ideology is reflected in Rowling's story, *The Tale of Three Brothers*, as she writes, "And then he greeted Death as an old friend, and went with him gladly, and, as equals, they departed this life." (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 309). This argument is solidified and shown to Harry through the contrast of his headmaster Dumbledore, and his arch-nemesis Voldemort's conflicting views on death. Dumbledore stands throughout the tale as the correct way to handle death, showing Harry through his teachings and actions that death is to be accepted, and, not only that, but embraced. Dumbledore is the preacher of death being both something good, and something not final, as he says with eloquence, "After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure." (Rowling, *Philosopher's Stone*, 215). His parallel, which exemplifies to Harry the incorrect way of coping with one's own mortality, is Voldemort.

Voldemort shows through the negative outcomes of his actions what happens if Harry doesn't embrace death like the third brother. As we learn over time, Voldemort is terrified of death, something Dumbledore and the correct path, as Rowling outlines, don't possess. Voldemort's outlook on death and the consequences of this viewpoint teach Harry through a negative example that one's own death should be accepted. This fear is shown quite clearly in a debate between Voldemort and Dumbledore where the Dark Lord screams, "There is nothing worse than death, Dumbledore!" to which Dumbledore

rejoins, “You are quite wrong... Your failure to understand that there are things much worse than death has always been your greatest weakness” (Rowling, *Order of the Phoenix*, 718). The entire premise of Voldemort’s horrific reign of terror and violence can be surmised into a simple end objective, to not die. To do this, Voldemort must sever his soul and commit countless atrocities, which show clearly to Harry the repercussions of attempting to evade, and not accept death. In *Children and ‘The Next Great Adventure’*, author Pilar Alderete-Diez expands on these atrocities, elaborating, “The meaning and importance of Horcruxes is revealed... the main liability of the protagonist’s arch-enemy, another orphan, and his reason for becoming a serial killer and a power lord is the fear of death.” (Alderete-Diez) Voldemort’s final punishment for his acts and efforts to elude the ever-present death result in nothing more than him falling victim to what he tried so hard to avoid. His demise through death shows Harry that it is truly unavoidable, regardless of power or desire, to evade the inevitable, and therefore, it should be accepted.

After seeing Dumbledore and Voldemort fight over their ideas on whether or not to accept death, Harry must make his own choice on the topic. Just as the third brother chooses to give in to death, Harry too must learn the final lesson for himself using the knowledge he gained from Dumbledore and Voldemort’s actions by making his choice about death. He must accept death and conquer his fear of grief. When he journeys to the Forbidden Forest, and sacrifices himself to Voldemort, Harry makes his choice to not fear death. In this moment one sees the culmination of all the lessons Harry has learned coming together to make this decision. Once he has died, he awakes in King’s Cross—a kind of purgatory (Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, 805). In this place, Dumbledore presents

him with another choice, to conquer his fear of grief, or to die. While he has dominated his fear of his own death, he has not conquered the grief and fear of others whom he cares about around him dying. Death is an escape from those fears, a way of not dealing with them as they should be dealt with, and of which could make Harry the next Nearly Headless Nick. In a way, as Alderete-Diez proposes, this scene is very representative of suicide (Alderete-Diez). Harry's sacrifice of his life to Voldemort could be seen as the giving up of one's life due to the pain one, Harry, was experiencing at the time. It is in this scene where he gains the final knowledge through his choice to return to the world of the living. He finally realizes that, grief, like the fear of one's own death must be dealt with and not given in to.

Upon his return, Harry defeats Voldemort conquering his fear of death and grief as the third brother did. This victory is one of physical reward with the tyrannical and horrible villain finally being conquered. However it is also a metaphorical, figurative one. The killing of Voldemort to Harry, can also symbolize the killing of his grief, his entrance into the final and most important stage of grief, acceptance. Harry, after killing Voldemort, continues on to live a happy and fulfilling life, one that he couldn't have achieved if he had chosen to die without conquering his grief.

J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is not simply a tale of good versus evil but man versus fear of death and grief. Rowling uses the seven books to show Harry experiencing essential lessons about coming to terms with the reality of death. This reality for Harry involves understanding what the three brothers in *The Tale of Three Brothers* came to learn. The first, that to lose someone is painful but must be acknowledged, the second, that death must be coped with and moved on from rather than

ignored, and the third, which he learns through the examples of Dumbledore and Voldemort, that death must be accepted and one's fear of grief conquered. From his adventures he gains this knowledge, defeats the villain, his fear of death, and his grief and goes on to live a prosperous fulfilling, love-filled life.

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