

“Myths For Our Time” by Rev. Meg Roberts

Unitarian Church of Calgary

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For millennia, humans have created myths that would explain how our world came about and why it functions the way it does. These narratives usually involve supernatural characters, doing extraordinary things, embodying some popular idea about natural or historical phenomena. Mircea Eliade, renowned scholar of comparative religion, defines myth as “stories of the gods and the ancestors.” Yet myths for our time are not so much about creating an historical or phenomenological explanation for why things are the way they are. Joseph Campbell says “[w]hat we’re seeking is an experience of being alive. Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life.” For him, myth is not just about the search for meaning---myths help put our minds in touch with the experience of being alive. So for a myth to effectively evoke our response, we must be enlivened through its telling and be able to see the spiritual potential in our lives.

The success of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series are in part because they involve good story-telling, but they also offer clues to our spiritual potential. These books and films have struck such a chord with people of all ages and in various cultures. They are myths for our time. I want to explore with you today in what ways these myths reflect age-old human yearnings and in what ways these stories mirror modern and post-modern world dilemmas.

As background, let me tell you a bit about the myths I want to look at today. John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was a professor of Anglo-Saxon studies and English literature at Oxford. He was a philologist, studying a number of languages. In 1937, Tolkien published a novel called *The Hobbit*. Tolkien wanted to create a mythical history for England, so he created an imaginary epoch when our world was known as known as “Middle Earth,” when human beings lived alongside wizards, elves, dwarves and hobbits. The wizard, Gandalf, includes the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, in an adventure with dwarves to regain treasure and a mountain lost to the dragon, Smaug. Tolkien’s publishers encouraged him to write another light-hearted hobbit tale, but a light-hearted tale is not what Tolkien wrote. In the decade following, Tolkien wrote the trilogy known as *The Lord of the Rings*: first was *The Fellowship of the Ring*, then came *The Two Towers*, and lastly came *The Return of the King*. In the trilogy, Bilbo’s nephew, Frodo, is the protagonist. He is entrusted to be the bearer of a ring of power, forged long ago in the fires of Mordor by an evil being, known as Sauron. Long before, Sauron had created rings for the elves, the dwarves, and for human kings. But they did not know that he also created a ring for himself: “One ring to rule them all, One ring to find them, One ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them in the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.” But Sauron loses the ring in battle and is reduced to a glimmer of his former self. After one of the human kings refuses to destroy the ring, further struggles ensue, and eventually the ring is lost, later found in a lake by a creature that came to be known as Gollum. The ring goes from Gollum to Bilbo in *The Hobbit*, then to his nephew, Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*. Frodo becomes part of the Fellowship of the Ring made up of humans, hobbits, an elf, dwarf, and Gandalf the Wizard, who endeavour to return the ring to the fires of Mordor, so as to destroy it and prevent it being returned to Sauron, who is gaining in power again, through the help of another wizard, Saruman, and his evil helpers, the orcs.

Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic, but he did not write these books as Christian allegory. He instead believed in a process called 'mythopoeia': he believed that a storyteller is in a way reflecting God's act of creation by expressing fragments of eternal truth. Although Tolkien was horrified by World War I and II, he was not using these stories in any veiled attempt to speak of those atrocities (except perhaps to indicate how much the machines of this age are ruining the earth and those on it, as well as the age-old human struggle against evil).

Tolkien's works have created a complex world of Middle Earth, that has depth and texture, with functioning languages, such as elvish. His attention to detail help us to imagine entering into a past epoch of our own earth.

The books of Harry Potter instead put us right in the middle of the time in which we live. At present, Joanna K. Rowling has written 5 out of the 7 books planned for the series. The first one begins when Harry Potter is a young boy of 11, living in England unhappily with his aunt and uncle and cousin. We find out that Harry is no ordinary boy, but is a wizard, with special magical powers that distinguishes him from other ordinary human beings (or 'muggles' as non-magical folk are called in the wizarding world). Not only is he a wizard, he is a famous one. When Harry's parents were killed trying to protect Harry from a powerful, evil wizard Lord Voldemort, Voldemort tries unsuccessfully to kill Harry, and as a result Voldemort is robbed of his strength and is left weak, barely alive. Harry is left with a lightning bolt scar on his forehead as a result of Voldemort's attempt to kill him, leaving Harry also with some of Voldemort's powers and abilities. The 5 books take us through various adventures as Harry goes to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, first saving the Philosopher's Stone, then discovering the Chamber of Secrets, next being reunited with his stepfather who had been a prisoner in Azkaban (the wizards' prison), then going through a tri-wizard tournament, and lastly joining with others in the secret Order of the Phoenix to fight against the rise of Lord Voldemort. With the help of his friends and some of the witches and wizards who teach at Hogwarts, Harry is able to thwart Lord Voldemort on various occasions as he tries to return to power. But despite Harry's best efforts, Voldemort is able to return to physical form and his former followers begin to return to him. The next two books will bring us again to a battle during which one of the two, Harry or Lord Voldemort, will not survive.

Harry is not a typical hero of a myth. He does not want to be famous. He is reluctant when it comes to taking on the tasks that face him, and yet once he does commit to them, he has great courage. The series of books chronicle his growth, with each book Harry is one year older. He goes through the struggles of adolescence as well, finding it difficult at times to control his own emotions, especially anger. There are times when he too is tempted to hurt others---we see that there is a shadow-side to Harry as well.

Tolkien's and Rowling's stories engage several mythic themes that are so often addressed because of our human experience: the battle between good and evil; the yearning for friendship and community; the appreciation of virtues such as courage, the search for justice, honesty, and self-sacrifice. In ancient myths, the struggle for good and evil is often embodied as the good god or goddess pitted against the evil god or goddess. Usually after some struggle, the good triumphs. Yet in these stories, it is not so straight forward. In Tolkien's work there seems to be a more modernist approach. There is still an external source of evil (Sauron, as an immortal wizard, is the follower of a fallen angel, much like the myth of the Christian devil). But Tolkien recognizes that evil is also in those that are mortal as well. "The hearts of men are not to be trusted" says the elvish Queen Galadriel. Human beings are not to be trusted because they crave power. Even the

hobbit-halfings, who we relate to in many ways as the protagonists, are over time susceptible to the ring's influence. Roberto Rivero, in writing about this says "Evil in the novel doesn't overpower, it seduces. How? By using our idea of what's good against us." When Frodo offers the wizard Gandalf the ring, Gandalf responds "Do not tempt me... The way [of evil] is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good." Even those with the best of intentions can succumb to the desire for power. This is classic Christian belief about human nature---that we are capable of good, yet have an inherent flaw that can blind us to the evil that we do. We are born with that sin that comes from Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, when Eve has the desire for power which comes from eating from the tree of knowledge.

The struggle for good and evil is also found in Harry Potter. But what differentiates Rowling's world from Tolkien's world is that there are not external sources for good and evil. This is what I would refer to as a post-modern worldview. Good and evil is created by us humans in what we choose to do to one another. Lord Voldemort, like Harry, is also a child of one magical parent and one muggle. They both are orphans now. But there was a time when maybe things might have gone differently for Lord Voldemort (a.k.a., Tom Riddle), and he might not have ended up so destructive and without remorse. We see the struggle in Harry himself whether to do the right thing. At one point, before he knows the truth, Harry wants to kill Sirius Black, his godfather, because he believes that Sirius betrayed Harry's parents. Evil can be created by the choices we make, just as can good. When Harry has doubts about himself, given some of his similarities to Lord Voldemort (such as being able to talk to snakes), Dumbledore reassures Harry by saying, "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

In the world of the rings, Tolkien implies that there is an external source for good. Gandalf thinks that Frodo is 'meant' to have the ring, just as Bildo was 'meant' to find it, as if there is some divine plan. One of the main points that Edmonton Unitarian, John Pater, made when he preached here last year on the theology of Harry Potter was that there is no sovereign deity. That is precisely why is it appealing to so many now. From the modernist age into the post-modernist age, many of us question the existence of an external, supernatural deity---and yet we are open to the creative power in the universe, a creative power that exists in us as well. Perhaps that is why the magic that appears in both Tolkien's and Rowling's worlds appeal to us. In Rowling's world, there is a sense that you can develop your powers, if you are so lucky as to be born with them. In Tolkien's world, there are special powers, skills and abilities that come from being part of different groups (whether elves or dwarves). In both there are values that can be developed: trustworthiness, honesty, integrity, courage and a willingness to sacrifice for the good of all. We also need to trust in ourselves and that we can play an important role in our lives. When Frodo says to Gandalf that he wishes the ring had never come to him, Gandalf replies, "All we have to do is decide what we will do with the time given to us." And we do not have to be powerful to do it. As Galadriel says to Frodo, "Even the smallest person can change the world."

What I find particularly moving about both Lord of the Rings and the Harry Potter series is that Frodo and Harry do not change the world alone. The age-old need for friendship and community is reinforced, each in different ways. We see the faithfulness of Frodo's friend, Samwise Gamgee, whose loyalty binds him to Frodo til the end. Yet there is also the reality that not everyone who professes to be faithful will be. The Fellowship of the Ring includes both those who advance their cause, such as Aragon (the descendant of the human king), and those who would thwart their mission, such as Boromir, thinking that he can use the ring more effectively. The communities that we witness in Tolkien's myth are imbued with a sense of history, of rootedness. Yet we witness that these communities shift over time. The elves, who have decided that their

stay on Middle Earth is now drawing to a close and they will go to the Undying Lands, communicate that there is a time for things to change and that time has come. In Tolkien's world, there are epochs of time that unfold, and we play the role in it that we are meant to.

In Harry Potter's world, there are dual realities existing simultaneously---the muggle world, and, unbeknownst to them, the magical world. This post-modern plurality of worlds adds to the fun for the reader who gets to look at our muggle world with new eyes, trying to see our modern conveniences as the clumsy mechanical inventions they are when compared with the magical conveniences of the other world (such as self cleaning dishes, or being able to apparate from one place to another in the blink of an eye). In Harry's world, the need for friendship also exists. It is through Harry's friendships with Hermione and Ron, as well as with others, that provide him with the strength to continue his struggle against Voldemort. If it were not for the contributions of these others in Harry's life, his struggles with Voldemort would not be successful. Again and again, it is the teamwork that makes the difference.

Before I close, I want to say a word about the main protagonists. When I spoke with Jennifer Jessop, who is well versed in the Lord of the Rings, I appreciated what Jennifer had to say about what Frodo teaches us: when we use our courage and our intelligence (such as it is), we can take on a task of great importance, especially when we trust our own judgment. That helps to give us strength to draw on. She also pointed out that there are things over which we cannot have control (such as in Frodo's case, the power of the ring). Frodo in the end does not give up the ring, it is wrestled from him by Gollum---so in one way, Frodo fails in his mission. But it was because of Frodo's mercy on Gollum earlier in the adventure that saved Gollum's life. As Gandalf reminded Frodo, we do not know the role one person has to play in what is yet to come. Because of Gollum seizing the ring from Frodo in the mountain in Mordor, Gollum ended up falling with the ring into the very fires that created the ring, and thereby destroying it and the power of Sauron. Each played their role and the mission was completed. Tolkien, in a letter explaining the dilemma of Frodo, Gollum, and the ring, asks his reader to remember these words in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Frodo forgave Gollum, showed him mercy; so even though he gives in to temptation, Frodo is delivered from evil because of the pity he took on Gollum. Tolkien writes, "we can at least judge them by the will and intentions with which they entered" the situation....But one must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is not finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however 'good'; and the Writer of the Story is not one of us." Such is Tolkien's modernist worldview.

In Harry's case, this post-modern tale is still being told. We do not yet know what his final acts will be in the face of evil. But as I mentioned before, the evil in Harry's world, is more about the choices the characters make than any external sources of good and evil. Harry is answerable for his actions. Like Frodo, Harry uses his courage and intelligence and abilities (such as they are), and he is helped by his friends. Yet there is something in Harry that puts him on a different plane. When his mother died, her self-sacrifice for the love of her son gave him some sort of protection. As Dumbledore says to Harry, "love as powerful as your mother's love leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign...to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin." The willingness also on Harry's part to put his own life on the line for the sake of his friends, for the sake of combating the malevolence of Voldemort, increases the strength of his character.

If these modern and postmodern myths are to show us our spiritual potentials as human beings, giving us a glimpse into some eternal truths, perhaps we can learn from a hobbit halfling and a teenage wizard that we need to use whatever abilities we have, whatever virtues we possess (such as courage, honesty, mercy, and being willing to sacrifice for the good of the whole). And that it is the choices we make that will show who we are in the end---there may be points beyond which we may falter, but in the fellowship of others, we can survive and achieve whatever good there is in us to share. As Gandalf says, “All we have to do is decide what we will do with the time given to us.”

Closing Words

Our closing words are by Thorin Oakenshield, the leader of the dwarves in *The Hobbit*:
“If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded treasure, it would be a merrier world.” Big Issues, Small Groups
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1. Joseph Campbell says “[w]hat we’re seeking is an experience of being alive. Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life.” For him, myth is not just about the search for meaning---myths help put our minds in touch with the experience of being alive. So for a myth to effectively evoke our response, we must be enlivened through its telling and be able to see the spiritual potential in our lives.

What myths have inspired you?
How did they evoke spiritual potential in your life?

2. When Harry has doubts about himself, given some of his similarities to Lord Voldemort (such as being able to talk to snakes), Dumbledore reassures Harry by saying, “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”

What do you think about what Dumbledore says?

3. Tolkien, in a letter explaining the dilemma of Frodo, Gollum, and the ring, asks his reader to remember these words in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Frodo forgave Gollum, showed him mercy; so even though he gives in to temptation, Frodo is delivered from evil because of the pity he took on Gollum. Tolkien writes, “we can at least judge them by the will and intentions with which they entered” the situation....But one must face the fact: the power of Evil in the world is not finally resistible by incarnate creatures, however ‘good’; and the Writer of the Story is not one of us.”

What do you think of Tolkien’s words about Frodo’s failure and the role of temptation?
How do you understand what brings about good and evil in our world?

Closing Reading:
As Gandalf says, “All we have to do is decide what we will do with the time given to us.”

