

“Magic, Muggles and Beating the Boggarts”

Why is a congregation of Unitarian Universalists like a boxful of Bernie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans? Because we too come in such a wild assortment of varieties. Ordinary jelly beans might be lemon or lime or licorice or even cherry. Those aren’t bad flavors. And there are lots of churches for people who like vanilla. But the people who join our Society usually have more peculiar tastes. Unitarian Universalists usually prefer jelly beans with flavors like curry and marzipan and avocado, parsnips and mince and sushi. People who gather in this congregation actually like sitting next to goddess worshipers and shamans and secular humanists. It makes life so much more interesting. Of course the danger with Bernie Bott’s is that every so often you get a really weird flavor, like caterpillars or mayonnaise or toe nails. And UU’s can be pretty weird, too. But the risk is part of the fun.

That risk is also part of what it means to be a magical person instead of a Muggle. Muggles, of course, are people like Harry Potter’s Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia and stupid cousin Dudley. The Durselys lead lives that are safe, boring and predictable. They’d rather not have a pet hippogriff and don’t like dragons. They’re afraid of the unknown and worry too much about what the neighbors might think. They don’t have much creativity or imagination. Being magical, on the other hand, means that life becomes an adventure. Around every corner, a mystery beckons. Magical people are more sensitive than others and see beyond appearances. They’re expecting almost every moment to be astonished.

Magical people are folks who have become completely open to experience and radically alive. But being alive, of course, is not all fun and games. There are also dangers involved, like boggarts, for instance.

Just in case you’re not a Harry Potter fan, boggarts are nasty little creatures that like to hide in dark corners. At the back of your clothes closet, for example, under the bed or inside an old cupboard, ready to leap out when you least expect it. It’s hard to say just what they look like, because they’re shape shifters. They can assume any form you want, or more likely, any form you don’t want. Because boggarts have the unfriendly habit of morphing into your very worst fears. Afraid of big, snarly dogs? A boggart will take the form of a huge Doberman Pinscher, barking and straining at the leash. Don’t like to touch icky, slimy things? A boggart might become a great big garden slug crawling up the handle of your toothbrush.

Harry and his friends learn about boggarts and how to handle them from their instructor in Defense Against the Dark Arts. He explains that one of the best ways to protect yourself against a boggart is to find a friend and face your fears together. Fears seem to get magnified when we’re all alone, but become more manageable when we’re together, and the boggarts get confused. If you’re afraid of dogs and your friend is afraid of slimy things, well, the boggart might turn into a Doberman Pinscher the size of a garden slug, which isn’t even remotely frightening. In fact, it’s rather laughable, and laughter is the one thing that boggarts can’t stand.

So when Neville Longbottom has to contend with a boggart that’s taken the form of one of the meanest teachers at Hogwart’s Academy, the fearsome Professor Snape, Neville speaks the magic formula, “Ridikulus!” And instantly, Professor Snape is dressed up like Neville’s grandmother, wearing a long, lace-trimmed dress and a towering hat topped with a stuffed vulture, swinging a big red handbag. Instead of terrifying, he looks

just goofy.

Of all the defenses against the Dark Arts, humor is one of the best. For instance, lots of people are afraid of public speaking. Many would rather perish than stand in a pulpit like this one and talk to roomful of listeners. And one of the oldest tricks in the book for handling stage fright is just to imagine that your audience is totally naked. Not that any of you look silly in the buff. Most of you, I'm imagining right now, are probably pretty attractive. But you get the idea. Lots of fears can be laughed off.

But then, there are those other creatures, much more terrible than the boggarts. I mean the dreaded dementors, who guard the dungeons of Azkaban and frighten even the greatest wizards among us. Dementors are like those dark thoughts that come to us late at night, in moments of panic or discouragement. They're not the little fears that we can banish with a wisecrack or whistle away. They're not like big dogs or slimy slugs. They're more like deep-seated, gnawing anxieties: What if there is no point to living, after all? What if there really is no mystery, no beauty, no higher purpose to the world and not even really any reason to get out of bed in the morning? As Harry's teacher explains, "Dementors are among the foulest creatures that walk this earth. They infest the darkest, filthiest places, they glory in decay and despair, they drain peace, hope and happiness from the air around them. Get too near a dementor and every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. If it can, the dementor will feed on you long enough to reduce you to something like itself ... You'll be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life."

Dementors take all the joy from the world, and I have to tell you that there will be times in your life when you not only have to contend with boggarts but face the challenge of dementors, too. Sometimes they go by other names. The Blues. The Pits. However they're called, dementors can make you feel so down you have a hard time even remembering up. And if you've ever fought with a dementor, then you know it's the fight of your lives, a struggle for survival. Maybe some of you are wrestling with dementors right now.

The way to protect yourself from a dementor, according to Harry's teacher, is to summon up a very good memory, a moment when you felt glorious and supremely happy just to be alive. Harry settles on the day he learned that he was magical and not a drab, dull person deep down. He settles on the day when he learned that he was a wizard, trickier than he realized, and not destined to live under the Dursley's stairs but headed off to Hogwarts, the world in all directions more spacious than he dreamed. And that, I think, is very good advice. For all of us, there are times when life does feel wondrous, full of possibility, when we know ourselves as powerful. Not all of us can be wizards. But it's in every one of us to be wise. And to a certain extent, those feelings of inner worth can be embraced and consciously cultivated, rather than giving in to negativity. Hope is an achievement, not just the lucky gift of an upbeat personality. It's a choice we make.

Like the choice we make in being here, together. Lemon and lime are fine, okay as far as they go. But the world is spicier than that, not always sweet or sugary, but zestier and more savory than we can fairly imagine. Which means you may occasionally bite down on the taste of earwax or sardines or even shampoo. It's a risky universe, not all marmalade and tutti-frutti, and as vulnerable, mortal, magical creatures, we do live in fear. But we need never live in isolation. Because we are connected to each other and to powers greater than our own little selves, powers calling us into deeper community and into larger life.