

Expecto Patronum

Lessons from Harry Potter for Social Justice Organizing

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Have you daydreamed about being a member of an intergenerational social justice organization like the Order of Phoenix? Do you want Dumbledore to be your mentor? Have dementors ever burned you out to the point where you doubted your ability to take on the Voldemorts of our world? Do you find yourself analyzing Dumbledore's Army for lessons on developing liberatory vision, culture, leadership, and organization?

Me too. Let's develop our magic, build our liberation movement, and defeat the Voldemorts in our world. I'll meet you in the Room of Requirement, and until then, here are my top lessons from Harry Potter for social justice organizing.

1. The Voldemort Principle of Systems of Oppression and Getting Free

Voldemort and the Death Eaters suck and they want to impose pure-blood supremacy in the magical world as a means to consolidate their power. Their strategy follows a familiar logic. Organize society into classes according to socially perceived biological differences. Criminalize those on the margins, those born of muggle parents, like Hermione. Position themselves as the defenders of Tradition and the Natural Order. Divide society according to socially perceived biological differences and political loyalty. Use fear and hate to weaken the bonds of solidarity throughout society, while simultaneously uniting the right. Fight the Left, take power, and remake the world in their own image. Dismal? But there's more, and here's where the insight lies.

Just as many of us come into activism through our growing awareness of injustices in society, such as economic inequality, war, sexism, and racism, Harry comes into activism through his growing awareness of Voldemort's evil. But over time, Harry realizes that Voldemort is also inside his head. While we who are activists can and must be literate in the ways that white supremacy creates profound disparity of access to resources such as housing, health care, and education, we also come to find that white supremacy is inside our heads – for those of us who are people of color as internalized inferiority and for those of us who are white as internalized superiority. Voldemort, like the real-world systems of oppression we are up against, is both a force in the world structuring our society and inside our heads.

The great South African anti-Apartheid leader Steven Biko once said, “The most powerful weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.” If the oppressed fight each other based on differences of race, gender, ability, citizenship status, sexuality, and so on, and if the oppressed also believe that there is no alternative – that they are incapable of making substantial change and are incapable of self-governing – then the oppressed will maintain the logic and institutions of deeply unequal and unjust societies.

In order to effectively take on Voldemort in the world, Harry must come to consciousness about the Voldemort in his head and resist his influence. Voldemort's influence leads Harry into the battle at the Ministry of Magic, which results in Sirius's death. It is Voldemort's influence that also fuels Harry's anger, which at times, isolates Harry from his comrades. When Harry directly challenges Voldemort in the world, Harry is able to free his mind of Voldemort's influence. On the flipside, as Harry becomes more aware of his connection with Voldemort, he is able to gain insights into Voldemort's logic and plans. This moment, an apex of Harry's consciousness, is also an important insight about our internalizing of the logic of systems of oppression. Through reflection and awareness, we can draw lessons on how oppression operates and use those lessons

to help develop an anti-racist, feminist, disability justice, queer and transgender liberationist, working class-based anti-capitalist movement (aka the Left).

As social justice organizers and leaders, the responsibility rests on us to help more and more activists understand the world of power around them and its historical roots, to realize the way socialization and position in society impact our consciousness, and to understand our own personal decolonization from systems of oppression as part of collective struggles for social justice and structural equality. We must help one another become conscious of the ways Voldemort gets in our heads and, together, work to get free.

2. The Power of Love as the Practice of Freedom

After Dumbledore and Voldemort duel in the Ministry of Magic, Voldemort possesses Harry's mind, and tells Dumbledore and Harry that their defeat is imminent. Voldemort declares that Harry's efforts will fail and then fills his mind with images of the horrors that will engulf the world. As Harry struggles in anguish, lying on the floor, Dumbledore whispers to him, "Harry, it isn't how you are alike [with Voldemort i.e., white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy]. It is how you are not." At that moment Harry sees Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and others enter the room and his mind fills with images of loving embraces with his family and friends, of his beloved community. At this juncture, Harry responds to Voldemort, "You're the weak one, and you will never know love or friendship. And I feel sorry for you." Through reconnecting with his values and his community, Harry accesses the power of love, repels Voldemort, and finds his courage for the fight ahead.

Anti-racist feminist socialist scholar bell hooks speaks of love as the practice of freedom. What we are up against is daunting and, at times, voices in our heads tell us that we will be defeated or even that we already are. hooks asks us to take up work against injustice in the spirit of Dr. King who said, "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives." Harry often struggled to see the power of love, as revenge and anger weighted his motivation. While anger helped bring him into the struggle, just as it brings many of us into social justice work, it couldn't sustain him or ultimately help him achieve his larger goals.

One of the recurring images throughout Harry Potter is his mother, Lily, standing between her newborn son and Voldemort. Lily's sacrifice was a powerful act of magic which saves Harry. The love of Harry's mother and father was a source of power that healed and emboldened Harry. The more he opened himself to their love, the more he was able to powerfully act from love. In our social justice movement, when we are tired, weary and beat down, we must let the love of our ancestors heal and embolden us. The greatest of our leaders and organizers spoke of working for a better world for the coming generations. We are the ones they fought for. The extent to which we are disconnected from their love and our own ability to love is the extent to which Voldemort influences us.

"Your mother died to save you," explained Dumbledore. "If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love." It is imperative that we ground ourselves in the visions we work for, the values we work from, and the love we have for our friends, families, and communities with which we work. While Voldemort might be in our heads, while there may be ways that we ourselves

reproduce systems of oppression, while there will be many mistakes along our journey, how we are different from systems of oppression, how we love, is what is of utmost importance.

3. Expecto Patronum – Letting Our Light Shine

A Patronus charm conjures up a protective guardian, taking the shape of an animal that can repeal Dementors. The incantation, as Professor Lupin explains, will only work if you are concentrating on a very happy memory, which later we learn must be a memory rooted in love. Dementors are creatures that guard prisons, and in the words of Lupin, “drain peace, hope and happiness out of the air around them... every good feeling, every happy memory will be sucked out of you. You will be left with nothing but the worst experiences of your life.” Dementors are all around us, from pundits on Fox News to Internet trolls who fill the comments section on blogs and Facebook with name-calling and insults. Dementors are also the voices in our heads that Biko warned us about, voices meant to keep us disempowered.

Our casting a Patronus mobilizes love as the practice of freedom that connects us to our power and express it in the world. All of us must work to connect to our own inner power, our own happiest of memories, and our own calling into courageous action. As liberation organizers, our responsibility is to foster culture and practices that light up the world with our collective Patronus charms. When everyday people in the Civil Rights movement sang “This Little Light of Mine, I’m Going to Let it Shine” in the face of violent police, attack dogs, and jail time, they connected to a deeper collective power that not only gave them the courage to act, but communicated the power of love over Jim Crow apartheid, to the world.

We can create a wide variety of such collective practices and rituals that help us step into loving liberatory power. That power removes Dementors and helps us be bold for justice. We can also create personal practices and rituals to connect us to our power, to help us cast our own Patronus charm. Take a moment to reflect on times you have experienced deep joy, liberatory power, and the tenderness of humanity. Now go forth and let your light shine!

4. Hogwarts, the Order of the Phoenix and Building Movement for Justice

Hogwarts is where young witches and wizards are educated and brought into the magical world. It is here they can be who they are, develop their powers, and be with peers, friends, teachers, and mentors. Hogwarts, like many schools around the world, is the primary place where new people come into contact with counter-narratives of history, interact with a wider cross section of people than they have before, learn values of equality and democracy, and, often, through groups like Dumbledore’s Army, have opportunities to join groups putting ideas into action in the world.

While a plurality of ideals exists at Hogwarts (including discriminatory policies against Squibs and non-human magical creatures), the institution is nevertheless deeply influenced by its Headmaster, Dumbledore, a queer, critical educator and a leader of the anti-Voldemort (i.e., anti-imperialist collective liberation-oriented) Order of the Phoenix. Over time, Hogwarts becomes a key site of struggle between the right-wing Death Eaters and the Left. There are Dolores

Umbridge's efforts to take over Hogwarts to suppress opposition to Voldemort and gut Defense of the Dark Arts classes (i.e., Arizona banning Ethnic Studies classes in conjunction with anti-immigrant legislation designed to disempower working class communities of color). Then Severus Snape takes over as the headmaster under Voldemort's rule. The struggle over Hogwarts is ultimately a struggle over whose values will shape the common sense understandings of society.

On the eve of the final showdown, the Left retakes Hogwarts as Dumbledore's Army unites with the Order of the Phoenix and in the struggle for power, everyone, regardless of previous affiliation or neutrality, must decide on which side they stand. As Professor McGonagall steps forward to defend Harry and vanquish Snape, all the other professors, along with the students in the houses of Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw, unite behind the liberation movement. In a matter of minutes, with a new united power led by Left forces, the agents of Voldemort in the administration, and student sympathizers in the house of Slytherin, are disempowered, marginalized, and removed. With the neighboring town of Hogsmeade, Hogwarts becomes, becomes a bastion of the anti-Voldemort movement, and the power of the institution and its communities (from the stone soldiers to the formerly neutral professors, students, and townspeople) are aligned with the Left and in motion to fight back.

Six key lessons emerge for our movement. First, we must assess the institutions in society, determine which ones have the most liberatory potential, and actively support efforts to govern them from the Left and marshal their powers to further social justice. Through our work, our values can shape the institutions and influence the common sense understandings in society.

Second, we need autonomous Left organizations like the Order of Phoenix to keep us guided by a larger vision, unite people across many institutions and communities with shared values and strategy, and take actions beyond the constraints institutional positions have on us. For instance, Kingsley Shacklebolt must play a limited public role in the fight against Voldemort through his position at the Ministry of Magic, but he is able to share information gathered at the Ministry with the Order of the Phoenix and is able to take action against Voldemort as a member of the Order. And even though he is in the Ministry, Kingsley and the Order prioritize direct action as their primary strategy for change.

Third, we need to be mindful of entry points for people to get actively involved in social justice efforts. We should support those entry points with people who have experience and connections in the broader movement, so that when new people come to consciousness about feminism, anti-racism, economic justice, disability justice, queer liberation, and so on, they are adequately supported as budding activists. Schools are hotbed entry points where tremendous national and local student organizations and tens of thousands of fantastic teachers thrive. We need more organizations like the Order of the Phoenix to help connect highly motivated and committed new activists (like Harry, Hermione, and Ron) with experienced activists and a larger multigenerational community of social justice thinkers and activists.

Fourth, there will be times, like the battle at Hogwarts or Occupy Wall Street, where large numbers of people, previously uninvolved, will take sides, get involved, and fight back. They might not all be involved for the same reasons as the Order, but their involvement is what turns the struggle into a mass movement potentially capable of making the systemic changes for justice we want and need. As we do the day-to-day work of social justice organizing, we must remain nimble in times of mass involvement so that we can be expansive while also helping bring leadership in a new phase of mass participation.

Fifth, there will be divisions among our opposition. Severus Snape's love for Lily Potter converted him from a being a member of Voldemort's inner circle, to a key, if not controversial, member of the Order. Draco Malfoy, after years of being Harry's arch-nemesis, doesn't turn Harry over to Voldemort at Malfoy Manor. Draco's mother, Narcissa, boldly protects Harry in the final hour, by lying directly to Voldemort, a move that sets the Death Eaters up for their final defeat. For Snape, it is love for Lily, not the Order and its mission, which converts him. For the Malfoys, the motivation is the realization that Voldemort's rule will bring misery to their family, despite their shared politics. The lesson is that the hearts of our opposition can change and that a victory is won not just when they agree with our politics, but when in some significant way, they transcend and help us move forward.

Sixth, social justice organizations like the Order and Dumbledore's Army are critical as vehicles to put our politics and values into practice, make impacts in the world, bring new people into the movement, pass on history and lessons, provide support and camaraderie to one another, and develop vision, strategy, and tactics over time, as we refine and learn from our mistakes and successes.

5. The Importance of Hermione Granger's Feminist Leadership

I love Hermione. How could you not? She is a brilliant witch, passionate about challenging injustice, a book nerd, and she is, essentially, the catalyst who turns the anti-Voldemort struggle into a movement rooted in the aspirations, urgencies, and power of young people. She is, indeed, the Ella Baker of the wizarding world.

In book five, the situation is looking bleak. With center right power growing through Umbridge and fascist right power growing under Voldemort, the Order of the Phoenix is on the defensive and Harry's godfather, Sirius, instructs, "It's up to your generation now."

Harry primarily sees the struggle against Voldemort and the Death Eaters as his own personal mission. It is Hermione who understands the struggle must be rooted in grassroots community power. With Umbridge preventing students from using magic in their Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, Hermione sees the opportunity to build that power. Using her relationships with students in Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw, Hermoine brings together thirty students to initiate a secret class taught by Harry.

Leadership is often thought of as courageous acts by individuals, acts much like those taken by Harry. However, grassroots movements are built through the leadership of people like Civil Rights organizer Ella Baker, a pioneer who built relationships with people and who supported people to believe in their own abilities to collectively solve the problems before them. Hermione is often thought of as brilliant, but rarely as a leader. In fact, she is one of the most important leaders in the series. Hers is a feminist leadership of building power with others, rather than over them. Hers is a leadership based in respect earned through years of building positive relationships, providing support and encouragement, and consistently acting in a principled way. Finally, Hermione's leadership comes out of her experience of being an outsider, a muggle-born witch, who has defied intimidation when called a "Mudblood" by Malfoy, and used her outsidership to better understand how the system works and with whom she is allied.

There is often an attempt to make leaders appear as though they were born with all the right answers. The genius of Hermione is that she makes strong attempts to practice her politics, and

learns in the process. For example, Hermione moved to “liberate” the house elves through S.P.E.W. (Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare). The effort failed because, though her intentions were pure, Hermione’s effort to save the House Elves was without their input, participation or leadership. For example, Hermione could have supported Dobby’s voice and leadership in telling his own story and sharing his reasons for wanting to be free. Nonetheless, S.P.E.W. gave voice to a politics of solidarity and respect for all magical creatures. Even though S.P.E.W.’s approach failed, Hermione’s efforts matured in the process. She learned about the Ministry of Magic’s attempts to take away the Centaur’s autonomy and land, and her expression of solidarity with the Centaurs’ demands led to a critically important alliance.

Hermione routinely manifested the best big picture thinking of what’s going on, knows who can be counted on, and knows how to bring people together, but these attributes alone weren’t enough to unite the students she assembled into Dumbledore’s Army. As the students listened to her plan, doubts quick arose about whether or not He-Who-Shall-Not-Be Named was really back. Harry ends up giving an impassioned speech about how facing off against Voldemort, with your life on the line, watching your friend die, isn’t like practicing magic in the classroom and that no one else there knew what that experience was like. The room went quiet with the heaviness of Harry’s words and then something transformational happens.

Hermione responded, “You’re right Harry: we don’t. That’s why we need your help.” She speaks on behalf of the group in a manner meant to achieve three goals at once. She needed to convince the group that they need this underground class. She wanted Harry to understand that he in fact does need to step into this role. And finally, Hermione recognized the collective denial and fear in the room, and knew she needed to confront her own fear, publicly, so that others could do so privately. Hermione continued, “Because if we’re going to have any chance of beating... (pause) Voldemort...” and the room is heavy once again, as for the first time someone other than Dumbledore or Harry has pushed past fear to say You Know Who’s name. Acting with the respect and legitimacy of her relationship-based leadership, Hermione spoke with vulnerable courage, her voice trembling as she Voldemort, and in the process inspired others to find their own courage. No of them doubted Harry from that moment on and Dumbledore’s Army was born. Hermione brought the students together, convinced a reluctant leader to step up, and demonstrated the courage needed to build an underground resistance movement that proved key to Voldemort’s ultimate defeat.

6. Dumbledore’s Army and the Role of Organization

As members of Dumbledore’s Army trained during one of their underground Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, Harry boldly declared, “Every great wizard in history has started out as nothing more than what we are now: students. If they can do it, why not us?” Today, as we look back at the great leaders of our social justice movements – the Ida. B. Wells, William Lloyd Garrison, Malcolm X, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn – we can get awe-struck and place them on pedestals to be idolized rather than draw inspiration from their example to become extraordinary ourselves. One of the dynamics of looking at outstanding and inspiring individuals is that the narratives of their lives take them outside of the organizations that helped support them along the way. So we hear about Rosa Parks as the middle-aged woman too tired to move to the back of the bus, rather than Rosa Parks the revolutionary who was the secretary of the local NAACP

who, just a few months before her history-changing action, had gone through non-violent direct action training at the Highlander Center and had made a commitment to utilizing what she had learned.

Through the student-formed underground practice sessions of Dumbledore's Army, a cadre of young witches and wizards became skilled with spells, deepened their commitment to fight the right, and created a thriving community of comrades who encourage and support one another. The DA created a space for collective praxis to emerge. Praxis is the process of putting ideas into action and then drawing out lessons from the experience. As Harry said earlier, none of the other students had the experience of going up against Voldemort. They only had lessons learned in a classroom. Praxis is taking the lessons from the practice sessions into a fight against the Death Eaters, which is exactly what happened when Hermione, Ron, Harry, Ginny Weasley, Neville Longbottom, and Luna Lovegood faced the Death Eaters in the Ministry of Magic. Leadership is born of values joined with experience and that is why it is no coincidence that Ginny, Neville, and Luna became the primary leaders of the DA when Hermione, Ron and Harry went underground and Hogwarts was taken over by the forces of Voldemort.

Leadership is a dynamic process that draws on people's backgrounds and experiences, but also relies on the choices and actions people take. Furthermore, leadership is usually developed through the support, encouragement and teaching of others. While some of us as individuals will receive this leadership development, organizations routinely provide spaces for more of us to have our leadership developed. Leadership matures through practice and again where Harry, Hermione and Ron have ample opportunities to practice their leadership, it is the DA that creates opportunities for a more and more people to practice and mature.

For example, Ginny's leadership was certainly rooted in being raised in a working class family guided by Left values and a practice of solidarity (earning them the label "blood traitors" from right-leaning families). Ginny's parents are both in the Order from the early days and nearly all of her siblings becoming members of either the Order or the DA. It is, however, through her participation in the DA that Ginny moved from being a supporter of the Left to being a leader in the fight against Voldemort. The DA created an entry point, and she found support to develop her magical power and take action. Or look at Neville. He could have easily been dismissed as a nice enough person, but hardly a revolutionary; yet in the end, Neville is the courageous leader who declares that the struggle continues even when it seems as though Voldemort has killed Harry Potter. Similarly, Luna was a weirdo outsider, who was routinely mocked. She quickly becomes one of Harry's most important advisors, regularly giving him critical insights and direction. One of Harry's gifts as a leader, is that he not only listened to her, but actively courted her friendship. However, it is through the DA that Luna's "think outside the box" perspective is able to help shape the overall liberation struggle as she too becomes a core leader who keeps hope alive during Voldemort's rule.

Another important dimension of organization and collective efforts in general, is that they can, if we are willing, open space for more and more people to play important roles. This is particularly important for Ron and Harry. In the early years, Ron grew increasingly jealous of Harry's public persona and popularity. At the same time, Harry became, at times, self-centered. This often happens in our social justice work. Ego, jealousy and rivalry can often hurt our efforts and destroy relationships. As the DA took form, Ron was able to play important public roles bringing others into the group. Harry and Ron were both able to mature past their squabbles and focus on the larger goals of their efforts. As they began to pay attention to the needs of the

dozens of students in the DA who were hungry for leadership and opportunities, Ron and Harry let go of petty grudges and exaggerated hurts. The truth is, leadership, organization, collective efforts for liberation, are all deeply challenging and we need our friends and comrades. Harry and Ron need each other, not just because they are stronger together against Voldemort, but because the love of our family, friends and communities is the magic of life and that love is what makes facing the challenges so rewarding.

At the end of the Goblet of Fire, Dumbledore challenges everyone at Hogwarts to "Remember Cedric. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a boy who was good, and kind, and brave, because he strayed across the path of Lord Voldemort. Remember Cedric Diggory." Social justice organizations and communities help us support each other to do what is right, rather than what is easy. They help us live our values and develop grassroots power to fight the Voldemorts in our world and help us expand justice and equality for all. It is important to join collective efforts, support them, work alongside them, and help create an ecosystem of social justice organizations, institutions, communities, crews, families, and relationships that form movements that can win.

The Magic of Taking Action for Social Justice

In closing, let us learn from Harry, Hermione, Dumbledore, Ginny and Neville. Let us learn from the Order and from the DA. And let us bring forward the magic of social justice organizing to liberate us from the Voldemorts in the world and in our heads. Let us cast our Patronus charm, vanquish the Dementors, and be in our power. Let us come together with others to build grassroots movements, build up liberation organizations, take direct action, sing and dance together, and love with all our hearts. Let us create magic together and act courageously from a place of love for collective liberation.

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