

## THE BIG IDEAS

### **Burning Day**

For Fawkes and for all of us.

### **Open Your Eyes**

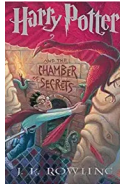
To reality.

### **Eating Our Words**

Be willing to be inconsistent.

### **It Is Our Choices...**

That show who we truly are.



# Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets

BY J. K. ROWLING · SCHOLASTIC © 1999 · 352 PAGES

“Eat quickly! The Masons will be here soon!” snapped Aunt Petunia, pointing to two slices of bread and a lump of cheese on the kitchen table. She was already wearing a salmon-pink cocktail dress.

Harry washed his hands and bolted down his pitiful supper. The moment he had finished, Aunt Petunia whisked away his plate. ‘Upstairs! Hurry!’

As he passed the door to the living room, Harry caught a glimpse of Uncle Vernon and Dudley in bow ties and dinner jackets. He had only just reached the upstairs landing when the doorbell rang and Uncle Vernon’s furious face appeared at the foot of the stairs.

‘Remember, boy—one sound—’

Harry crossed to his bedroom on tiptoe, slipped inside, closed the door, and turned to collapse on his bed.

The trouble was, there was already someone sitting on it.”

~ J. K. Rowling from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*

Quick quiz:

Can you remember who was sitting on Harry’s bed in that opening scene to Year 2?

Hint: Tennis ball-like eyes. Bat-like ears. Pillow case for clothes.

... Got it?!

Yep. Dobby!

That nutty yet lovable little house elf who disrupted that important dinner for the Dursleys right before Fred and George and Ron helped Harry escape via their flying car.

(Emerson made a sweet little costume of Dobby the other day, btw. Old pillow case and everything. Was pretty epic going to the park with him wearing it. Hah.)

So, welcome to our Note on *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Year 2 for our wonderful wizard hero. Get a copy of the book [here](#) and, if you haven’t already checked out the Notes on Year 1 [cruise on over here](#).

As I read this book to Emerson, I was struck by the sheer beauty and delight of J.K. Rowling’s writing. It’s so good it’s easy to overlook. A blurb from the *NY Times* on the dust cover perfectly captures the essence of it’s splendor: “*What makes the Potter books so popular is the radically simple fact that they’re so good.*”

As always, I’m excited to share a few of my favorite Big Ideas so let’s jump on our brooms and have some fun!

*“It is our choices, Harry,  
that show what we truly are,  
far more than our abilities.”*

~ Dumbledore

## BURNING DAY FOR FAWKES (AND US)

“He wasn’t alone after all. Standing on a golden perch behind the door was a decrepit-looking bird that resembled a half-plucked turkey. Harry stared at it and the bird looked balefully back, making its gagging noise again. Harry thought it looked very ill. Its eyes were dull and, even as Harry watched, a couple more feathers fell out of its tail.

Harry was just thinking that all he needed was for Dumbledore’s pet bird to die while he was alone in the office with it, when the bird burst into flames.

Harry yelled in shock and backed away into the desk. He looked feverishly around in case there was a glass of water somewhere but couldn’t see one; the bird, meanwhile, had become a fireball; it gave one loud shriek and next second there was nothing but a smoldering pile of ash on the floor.

The office door opened. Dumbledore came in, looking very somber.

‘Professor,’ Harry gasped. ‘Your bird—I couldn’t do anything—he just caught fire—’

To Harry’s astonishment, Dumbledore smiled.

‘About time, too,’ he said. ‘He’s been looking dreadful for days; I’ve been telling him to get a move on.’

He chuckled at the stunned look on Harry’s face.

‘Fawkes is a phoenix, Harry. Phoenixes burst into flame when it is time for them to die and are reborn from the ashes. Watch him . . .’

Harry looked down in time to see a tiny, wrinkled, newborn bird poke its head out of the ashes. It was quite as ugly as the old one.

‘It’s a shame you had to see him on a Burning Day,’ said Dumbledore, seating himself behind his desk. ‘He’s really very handsome most of the time, wonderful red and gold plumage. Fascinating creatures, phoenixes. They can carry immensely heavy loads, their tears have healing powers, and they make highly faithful pets.’”

Ah, Fawkes.

You may recall that we get to see him at the end of the book when he makes an appearance in the Chamber of Secrets where he saves the day with his healing tears and ability to carry Harry, Ron, Ginny AND a forgetful Lockhart to safety.

But, in this scene, we meet our hero on a Burning Day. Today? His beautiful red and golden plumage is nowhere to be found. Instead, we get to see the ugly side of him.

And, alas, so it is with us. It would be awesome if we had our bright and shiny heroic plumage in full display every day, but that’s not quite how it works, eh? Those Burning Days are, well, a little ugly. (Hah.)

Let’s connect this wisdom to a couple other great teachers.

First, we have [Joseph Campbell](#). Of course, he told us that a good life is basically one hero’s journey after another.

Imagine the beginning of a hero’s journey. That’s when you answer the call and step into the forest of the unknown. That’s a bit scary. In a sense, you need to die to an old version of yourself. In fact, he says *“To have a resurrection one must first have a crucifixion.”* Ouch.

Sounds a lot like our friend Fawkes, eh? We must burst in flames and then be born again from our ashes. The phase \*right\* before and after? Not so pretty.

And, if the good life is one hero's journey after another (it is!) and the end of one journey and the beginning of the next is kinda like a crucifixion/burning (it is!) then we better get comfy looking kinda ugly on a regular basis.

Tragic but true. :)

Then we have Josh Waitzkin and his wisdom on the willingness to get burned in pursuit of greatness. Here's how he puts it in *The Art of Learning*: "How can we incorporate these ideas into the real world? ... My response is that it is essential to have a liberating incremental approach that allows for times when you are not in a peak performance state. We must take responsibility for ourselves, and not expect the rest of the world to understand what it takes to become the best that we can become. Great ones are willing to get burned time and again as they sharpen their swords in the fire. Consider Michael Jordan. It is common knowledge that Jordan made more last-minute shots to win the game for his team than any other player in the history of the NBA. What is not so well known, is that Jordan also missed more last-minute shots to lose the game for his team than any other player in the history of the game. What made him the greatest was not perfection, but a willingness to put himself on the line as a way of life. Did he suffer all those nights when he sent twenty thousand Bulls fans home heartbroken? Of course. But he was willing to look bad on the road to basketball immortality."

And, finally, perhaps our most perfectly appropriate wisdom gem comes from [Viktor Frankl](#) who tells us: "What is to give light must endure the burning."

Here's to your Burning! :)

## OPEN YOUR EYES TO REALITY

"They froze, watching. Harry could just see the outline of something huge and curved, lying right across the tunnel. It wasn't moving.

'Maybe it's asleep,' he breathed, glancing back at the other two. Lockhart's hands were pressed over his eyes. Harry turned back to look at the thing, his heart beating so fast it hurt.

Very slowly, his eyes as narrow as he could make them and still see, Harry edged forward, his wand held high.

The light slid over a gigantic snake skin, of a vivid, poisonous green, lying curled and empty across the tunnel floor. The creature that had shed it must have been twenty feet long at least.

'Blimey,' said Ron weakly."

While I read to Emerson, I like to pause and check in with him on what's happening.

Here's our sequence that followed that passage:

Me: "What was happening to Harry's heart?"

E: "It was beating really fast."

Me: "Why?"

E: "He's scared."

Me: "Yep. That happens when you're scared, huh? Then what did he do?"

E: "He looked back at the snake skin."

Me: "Yep. What virtue is it when you are scared and still do what needs to get done?"

E: "Courage."

Me: "Yep." "I love you, buddy."

So, in this scene, we have the goofball Lockhart—the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor with the bright white teeth and perfectly coiffed hair who pretends to be a hero but, when things get tough puts his hands up against his eyes to shield himself from danger. Unlike Lockhart, Harry is willing to open his eyes just enough to look at reality.

Of course, that's ALWAYS a good practice.

We talked about this same basic idea in our Note on Harry's adventures in Year 1. In that one, we riffed on the fact that most people were unwilling to say Voldemort's name.

Whether we're leaning in to Stoic wisdom via [James Stockdale](#) who tells us that we need to be willing to confront the brutal facts of reality or modern science that echoes that perspective and reminds us to “name it to tame it,” let's open our eyes.

On that note: Anything you might be ignoring that you'd be wise to take a peek at?

P.S. “Blimey!”

## EATING OUR WORDS

“You know, Minerva,’ Professor Dumbledore said thoughtfully to Professor McGonagall, ‘I think all this merits a good *feast*. Might I ask you to go and alert the kitchens?’

‘Right,’ said Professor McGonagall crisply, also moving to the door. ‘I’ll leave you to deal with Potter and Weasley, shall I?’

‘Certainly,’ said Dumbledore.

She left, and Harry and Ron gazed uncertainly at Dumbledore. What exactly had Professor McGonagall meant, *deal* with them? Surely — *surely* — they weren't about to be punished.

‘I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules,’ said Dumbledore.

Ron opened his mouth in horror.

‘Which goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words,’ Dumbledore went on, smiling. ‘You will both receive Special Awards for Services to the School and — let me see — yes, I think two hundred points apiece for Gryffindor.’

Ron went as brightly pink as Lockhart's valentine flowers and closed his mouth again.”

Here we are after Harry and Ron successfully rescued Ginny Weasley from the Chamber of Secrets. (Well done!)

Dumbledore lets us know that even the best among us must sometimes eat their words—which makes me think of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his epic passage from *Self-Reliance*.

He tells us: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today.—‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’—Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.”

Now, obviously, not everyone who was misunderstood was great.

And, we want to develop the fundamentals of leadership which include doing what we way we will do and creating a level of trustworthy consistency.

And...

We need to be willing to be INconsistent. We need to be willing to *“Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today.”*

That’s a lot easier said than done. To be all-in intense on what you feel is true today and EQUALLY all-in intense on what you feel is true tomorrow EVEN IF it contradicts everything you just said today. That’s tough stuff!

That wisdom is buttressed by another gem from Emerson: *“What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness.”*

So... Back to Dumbledore eating his words.

Do you have any words you need to eat to avoid turning into a little hobgoblin?

## IT IS OUR CHOICES...

“Professor Dumbledore . . . Riddle said I’m like him. Strange likenesses, he said. . . .’

‘Did he, now?’ said Dumbledore, looking thoughtfully at Harry from under his thick silver eyebrows. ‘And what do you think, Harry?’

‘I don’t think I’m like him!’ said Harry, more loudly than he’d intended. ‘I mean, I’m in — Gryffindor, I’m . . .’

But he fell silent, a lurking doubt resurfacing in his mind.

‘Professor,’ he started again after a moment. ‘The Sorting Hat told me I’d — I’d have done well in Slytherin. Everyone thought I was Slytherin’s heir for a while . . . because I can speak Parseltongue. . . .’

‘You can speak Parseltongue, Harry,’ said Dumbledore calmly, ‘because Lord Voldemort — who is the last remaining descendent of Salazar Slytherin — can speak Parseltongue. Unless I’m much mistaken, he transferred some of his own powers to you the night he gave that scar. Not something he intended to do, I’m sure. . . .’

‘Voldemort put a bit of himself in *me*?’ Harry said, thunderstruck.

‘It certainly seems so.’

‘So I *should* be in Slytherin,’ Harry said, looking desperately into Dumbledore’s face. ‘The Sorting Hat could see Slytherin’s power in me, and it —’

‘Put you in Gryffindor,’ said Dumbledore calmly. ‘Listen to me, Harry. You happen to have many qualities Salazar Slytherin prized in his hand-picked students. His own very rare gift, Parseltongue — resourcefulness — determination — a certain disregard for rules,’ he added, his moustache quivering again. ‘Yet, the Sorting Hat placed you in Gryffindor. You know why that was. Think.’

‘It only put me in Gryffindor,’ said Harry in a defeated voice, ‘because I asked not to go to Slytherin.’

‘*Exactly*,’ said Dumbledore, beaming once more. ‘Which makes you *very different* from Tom Riddle. It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.’”

That is such a gorgeous scene packed with wisdom. Where to begin?

First, how about the fact that one of Dumbledore’s qualities that makes him so wise is his CALMNESS. He keeps a balanced mind in the face of others’ turmoil.

Then there's the fact that Harry has a bit of Voldemort in him. Just like we ALL do. None of us, of course, are perfectly good.

I'm reminded of [our Note](#) on *The Effective Executive* in which Peter Drucker tells us: "Strong people always have strong weaknesses too. Where there are peaks, there are valleys."

Then I think of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and this gem from [Creativity](#): "Are there then no traits that distinguish creative people? If I had to express in one word what makes their personalities different from others, it would be complexity. By this I mean that they show tendencies of thought and action that in most people are segregated. They contain contradictory extremes—instead of being an 'individual,' each of them is a 'multitude.' Like the color white that includes all the hues of the spectrum, they tend to bring together the entire range of human possibilities within themselves.

*These qualities are present in all of us, but usually we are trained to develop only one pole of the dialectic. We might grow up cultivating the aggressive, competitive side of our nature, and disdain or repress the nurturing, cooperative side. A creative individual is more likely to be both aggressive and cooperative, either at the same time or at different times, depending on the situation. Having a complex personality means being able to express the full range of traits that are potentially present in the human repertoire but usually atrophy because we think one or the other pole is 'good,' whereas the other extreme is 'bad.'"*

And, finally, we have the most important point of the passage. What determines our destiny? Far more than our abilities or our genetics, it's all about our CHOICES.

Let's celebrate the wise ones we've made and continue to step forward into our potential with our hearts occasionally pounding, our eyes wide open, and a burning enthusiasm in our souls.

B

**Brian Johnson,**  
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## About the Author of "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets"

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Joanne Rowling, who writes under the pen names J. K. Rowling and Robert Galbraith, is a British novelist and screenwriter who wrote the *Harry Potter* fantasy series. The books have won multiple awards, and sold more than 400 million copies. They have become the best-selling book series in history and been the basis for a series of films, over which Rowling had overall approval on the scripts and was a producer on the final films in the series.

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [optimize.me](http://optimize.me).