

THE BIG IDEAS

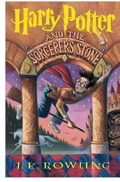
Philosophers
vs. Sorcerers.

The Mirror of Erised
What do you see?

The Well-Organized Mind
Death, adventures, etc.

Got a Fear?
Name it.

The Philosopher's Stone
How to get it.



Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone

BY J.K. ROWLING · SCHOLASTIC © 1998 · 309 PAGES

“A breeze ruffled the neat hedges of Privet Drive, which lay silent and tidy under the inky sky, the very last place you would expect astonishing things to happen. Harry Potter rolled over inside his blankets without waking up. One small hand closed on the letter beside him and he slept on, not knowing he was special, not knowing he was famous, not knowing he would be woken in a few hours' time by Mrs. Dursley's scream as she opened the front door to put out the milk bottles, nor that he would spend the next few weeks being prodded and pinched by his cousin Dudley. . . . He couldn't know that at this very moment, people meeting in secret all over the country were holding up their glasses and saying in hushed voices: “To Harry Potter -- the boy who lived!””

~ J.K. Rowling from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

Harry Potter.

You might have heard of him. He's one of the world's coolest wizards.

And, his story is one of the most epic and epically well-told hero stories ever. (Literally.)

Then, of course, we have J.K. Rowling and her own personal hero's journey. With over 400 million (!) *Harry Potter* books sold, she is the best-selling living author and one of the wealthiest women in the world. All after overcoming the challenges of being a single mom on welfare.

!!!

I loved reading the books as they came out years ago and now I get to relive the magic as I read them to my son, Emerson. We just finished Year 1 and I figured we could have some fun looking at the wonderful wisdom packed into the equally wonderful wizard tales.

So, here we are.

Note: I suppose I should give a “spoiler alert.” My hunch is you've read the book. If not, I think you'll love it. Get a copy [here](#).

Let's jump on our broomsticks and have some fun Seeking wisdom. :)

PHILOSOPHERS VS. SORCERERS

Before we jump in, let's first have a little duel between Philosophers and Sorcerers.

In the US, this book is called *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

But, did you know that in the UK the book was released (and is still known as) *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*?

Yep.

To put it directly: What's up with that?

Can't Americans get excited about a book title with the word "Philosopher" in it? Laughing. Alas, the publishers must not have thought so.

But, come on!

It's a PHILOSOPHER's Stone that turns lead to gold and gives us the Elixir of Life. No "Sorcerer" could make THAT kinda magic happen, eh? (Hah.)

Although I personally can't imagine anything or anyone cooler than someone in love with wisdom, apparently we still have some work to do to make the idea of anything having to do with a "philosopher" cool.

Of course, we love philosophers in the Johnson house and I'm working hard on making the idea of being a philosopher as cool as possible. So, I might have switched all references to a "Sorcerer's Stone" back to "Philosopher's Stone" as I read the book to Emerson. :)

Philosophers unite!

P.S. For those who might have forgotten, let's remember our Greek origins: *Philosopher* comes from the two Greek words *philo* + *sophia*. Put them together and we have a "lover of wisdom."

Although the modern philosopher tends to get lost in abstract ideas, our ancient philosopher who earned that name was ALL ABOUT how to optimize and actualize in service to the world while enjoying the process.

I repeat: My dear fellow lover of wisdom: Here's to making philosophers cool again. :)

THE MIRROR OF ERISED

"So," said Dumbledore, slipping off the desk to sit on the floor with Harry, "you, like hundreds before you, have discovered the delights of the Mirror of Erised."

'I didn't know it was called that, sir.'

'But I expect you've realized by now what it does?'

'It -- well -- it shows me my family --'

'And it showed your friend Ron as Head Boy.'

'How did you know --?'

'I don't need a cloak to be invisible,' said Dumbledore gently. 'Now, can you think what the Mirror of Erised shows us all?'

Harry shook his head.

'Let me explain. The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. Does that help?'

Harry thought. Then he said slowly, 'It shows us what we want . . . whatever we want . . .'

'Yes and no,' said Dumbledore quietly. 'It shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. You, who have never known your family, see them standing around you. Ronald Weasley, who has always been overshadowed by his brothers, sees himself standing alone, the best of all of them. However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.'

'The mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you ever *do* run across it, you will be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. Now, why don't you put that admirable Cloak back on and get off to bed?'

The Mirror of Erised.

What a fascinating thing. Harry looks into it and sees his family surrounding him. Ron looks into it and sees himself as Head Boy holding the Quidditch Cup.

What do YOU see when you look into it?

There's a longer philosophical chat to be had about the passage but for now let's focus on Dumbledore's wisdom at the end: *"It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that."*

Amen to that. Reminds me of [Marcus Aurelius](#) who tells us: *"Never confuse yourself by visions of an entire lifetime at once... remember that it is not the weight of the future or the past that is pressing upon you, but ever that of the present alone."*

And, when I imagine Harry and Ron (and me and you) getting lost in that Mirror, I see the real-life equivalent of getting lost in the Vision Board or too much journaling and too little doing.

In a little video I created a few years ago, I pointed out [two reasons why your Vision Board might suck and offered some tips on how to unsuck it](#).

The two reasons why your Vision Board might suck:

1. You're probably focused on extrinsic goals rather than intrinsic goals. In other words, you've featured the fast car and the big house and bling and six-pack abs over the deep connection with family and the time affluence + autonomy to do what you find most meaningful.
2. You're probably focused on outcomes rather than the process. It's less sexy to put what you will DO every day up on a board than what you will GET from that effort but I prefer a wall calendar that tracks my Deep Work, Trail Work and Deep Love time blocks to a vision board. Now that I think about it, that IS my "vision board." (Hah.)

As we've discussed so many times, science says that reflecting on what's important to us and where we're headed is a wise thing to do. But we want to a) focus that energy on what really matters and b) limit the time we spend doing that and c) make sure we're using that as a means to get back to the present so we can show up most joyfully in service to our families and world.

Back to Dumbledore: *"It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that."*

DEATH, ADVENTURES, AND THE WELL-ORGANIZED MIND

"To one as young as you, I'm sure it seems incredible, but to Nicolas and Perenelle, it really is like going to bed after a very, very long day. After all, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the Stone was really not such a wonderful thing. As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all -- the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them."

Back to Dumbledore.

Context: Harry and Hermione and Ron were able to save the Stone from Quirrel and Voldemort. Then it was destroyed. Nicolas Flamel, the brilliant wizard who created the Philosopher's Stone had used its Elixir of Life to live for over six hundred years. Now, he and his wife would die.

So, two things. First, we're back to the poor choices we humans often make. In this case, thinking that an infinitely long life and infinite supply of money will bring us happiness. But, alas, that's not quite how it works.

Hint on what *does* work: Focus on micro-moments of positivity resonance (aka [Love 2.0](#)) and masterfully doing meaningful work that contributes to those around you. ([Check out our Notes on The Myths of Happiness](#) for more on what a leading scientist has to say on the subject.)

Second, we have death. All the great teachers have reminded us that, when used properly, embracing the reality of our inevitable death is the fastest way to appreciate this moment.

Here's how [Seneca](#) puts it: "As it is with a play, so it is with life—what matters is not how long the acting lasts, but how good it is."

And, his specific tip: "Every day, therefore, should be regulated as if it were the one that brings up the rear, the one that rounds out and completes our lives."

Remembering death was such a core part of the ancient world's philosophical practice that they actually had a phrase for it: *memento mori*.

Memento mori. Remember death. Why? It's the best reminder to LIVE!

I'm so into this practice these days that I actually carry around one of [Ryan Holiday's "Memento Mori" medallions](#) in my pocket. In fact, right before we read *Harry Potter* each night Emerson and I brush our teeth together. And, right before that, I take the medallion out of my pocket and put it on the bathroom counter waiting for the next day's reminder.

As Emerson and I have discussed, the medallion (with a reasonably intense sketch of a skull on one side) reminds us that no one will live forever and that NOW is the time to be fully alive.

A well-organized mind remembers death. (And, sees it as the next great adventure.)

You?

GOT A FEAR? NAME IT.

"Harry lay there lost for words. Dumbledore hummed a little and smiled at the ceiling.

'Sir?' said Harry. 'I've been thinking . . . Sir -- even if the Stone's gone. Vol-, I mean, You-Know-Who --']

'Call him Voldemort, Harry. Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.'

Voldemort. Voldemort. Voldermort. NOT "You-Know-Who."

As our wise Dumbledore advises, we must "Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."

Reminds me of a few other gems.

Franklin Roosevelt's epic line from his first inauguration comes to mind: "So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is...fear itself — nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

(Get some goosebumps [watching/listening to a 30-second clip of FDR giving that speech here.](#))

I also think of the scientific wisdom on the power of properly labeling our emotions. Something amazing happens when we cultivate the presence and self-mastery to step back from the looping rumination and label our emotional state: "Fear." Or, "Anxiety." Or, "Self-doubt." Or, "Anger." Or, "Insert-Your-Negative-Emotional-State-Here."

You know what happens?

In [Your Brain at Work](#) we talked about the fact that simply *labeling* an emotion (not going on an extended archeological dig to try to uncover the ultimate root of your emotion!), moves you from your limbic system to your prefrontal cortex--which, especially when dealing with hot emotions, tends to be a very good thing.

As [Dan Siegel](#) says, we want to "name it to tame it."

Try it! Don't avoid the emotional pain you may feel today. Name it. Tame it.

And, finally, I'm reminded of James Stockdale. [In our Notes](#) on *Courage Under Fire* we discussed the fact that Stockdale was the senior, commanding officer of hundreds of prisoners of war in the Vietnam War. In a chat with Jim Collins we learned about the kind of optimism that worked and the kind that didn't.

Stockdale told him: *"I never lost faith in the end of the story, I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."*

Collins asked him who didn't make it out of Vietnam to which Stockdale replied: *"Oh, that's easy, the optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."*

Stockdale continued: *"This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."*

Collins described that as the "Stockdale Paradox." In short, we must simultaneously confront the (potentially brutal) facts of reality with an unbending resolve to prevail in the end. Naive optimism won't do the trick.

Dumbledore would agree. *"Always use the proper name for things. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself."*

So... You have any "You-Know-Who" things that need to be named in your life? Let's embrace reality. Name it. Tame it.

The only reason you'd want to ignore any given reality is because you might have the mistaken belief that you can't handle it.

But, YOU CAN.

Have intense trust (aka confidence!) that you've got what it takes to meet any and all challenges life throws at you.

Because, YOU DO.

HOW TO GET THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

"And, sir, there's one more thing . . .

'Just the one?'

'How did I get the Stone out of the mirror?'

'Ah, now, I'm glad that you asked me that. It was one of my more brilliant ideas, and between you and me, that's saying something. You see, only one who wanted to *find* the Stone -- find it, but not use it -- would be able to get it, otherwise they'd just see themselves making gold or drinking Elixir of Life. My brain surprises even me sometimes . . . Now, enough questions. I suggest you make a start on these sweets! Ah! Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans! I was unfortunate enough in my youth to come across a vomit-flavored one, and since then I'm afraid I've rather lost my liking for them -- but I think I'll be safe with a nice toffee, don't you?'

He smiled and popped the golden-brown bean into his mouth. Then he choked and said, 'Alas! Ear wax!'

First, no comment on the sweets. Let's assume Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans are naturally sweetened with Xylitol and not sugar for the moment. (Hah.)

Quick context: At the end of the book, with Ron and Hermione’s help, Harry saves the Philosopher’s Stone from Quirrel and Voldemort via the Mirror we chatted about above.

Dumbledore’s brilliant idea? Only someone who wanted to *find* the Stone but not use it for their own selfish ends could get it. Harry didn’t want the gold or the everlasting life. He simply wanted to get the Stone to keep it safe--in the process, serving something bigger than himself.

That very much reminds me of Carol Dweck and her wisdom from [Mindset](#) where she tells us: *“The growth-minded athletes, CEOs, musicians, or scientists all loved what they did, whereas many of the fixed-minded ones did not. Many growth-minded people didn’t even plan to go to the top. They got there as a result of doing what they love. It’s ironic: The top is where the fixed-mindset people hunger to be, but it’s where many growth-minded people arrive as a by-product of their enthusiasm for what they do.*

This point is also crucial. In the fixed-mindset, everything is about the outcome. If you fail—or if you’re not the best—it’s all been wasted. The growth mindset allows people to value what they’re doing regardless of the outcome.”

Then we have [Tom Morris](#), who actually wrote a book called *If Harry Potter Ran GE*. He says: *“The happiest people in the world are people who love what they are doing, regardless of whether wealth, fame, power and elevated social status ever come their way. The most fulfilled people are individuals who delight in their work, whatever it might be, and strive to do it well.”*

Back to you... Why are YOU doing what you do?

Here’s to embodying the pure-hearted, courageous commitment to doing the right thing in service to something bigger than ourselves!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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you’ll probably like...

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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. Connect: jkrowling.com.

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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.