

On Splitting and Re-finding the Soul: Traumas, Horcruxes, and the Fall of Voldemort

by Nyambura Kihato

A handsome young boy in an orphanage receives an unusual visitor. This is, in itself, a singular occurrence, since the boy has never had a visitor in the eleven years he has lived in the orphanage. But if the circumstances seem strange, the visitor is even stranger. He is dressed in long, billowing robes, and although he sports a long silver beard and silver hair, he has an aura of agelessness about him. At the end of his nose perch half-moon spectacles. He has deep, warm eyes; he speaks in a firm and reassuring tone. The man tells the boy that the two of them share something in common: they are both “different” and have remarkable abilities—they are wizards. The man enrolls the boy in a school for wizards and witches and takes him under his wing. So begins the story of the strange and troubled relationship between young Tom Riddle (who later becomes Lord Voldemort) and Professor Albus Dumbledore. You may recognize this scene from J.K. Rowling’s sixth installment in the Harry Potter series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. (Readers may notice that I have described the younger Dumbledore using the movie version, which depicts him already as an old wizard, and not as the young wizard with auburn hair “dressed in a flamboyantly cut suit of plum velvet,” as he is described in the book—I happen to prefer old wizards).

How does the gifted, charming, and handsome Tom Riddle

become the evil sorcerer Lord Voldemort? In order to understand the wicked villain, we must travel back into his past to discover what energies and forces may have shaped his life, much in the psychodynamic manner of seeking clues to a person’s adult personality by investigating his or her childhood. In fact, Dumbledore tells Harry that the only way he can defeat Voldemort is by gaining insights into his early life. This is how we find ourselves in this bleak orphanage. We are traveling back in time by means of a Pensieve (another of Rowling’s delightful magical creations) through Professor Dumbledore’s immaculately stored memories. The memories have been carefully captured in the form of swirling silvery substances that are poured from tiny crystal bottles into the Pensieve. In this way, Harry Potter (and the reader) plunge into the wretched childhood of the boy Tom Riddle. Here, we see some of Riddle’s past experiences, as well as the ancestral forces that shaped his life.

It is by traveling into Voldemort’s past that we find out that he is the heir of the powerful and ruthless Slytherin family; that his mother, a witch, fell in love with a handsome Muggle (non-wizard); that she was ridiculed and ostracized for this; that Voldemort was born of this union. Voldemort’s fate and troubles appear to stem from his tempestuous past: he looks just like his Muggle father but intensely hates that part of him that connects him to this non-magical family. He despises his mother for not using her magical ability to prevent her own death while giving birth to him. He detests the children and staff at the orphanage and plays cruel tricks on them. He kills his father, drops his Muggle name, takes on the title of Lord Voldemort, and wages war against all Muggles and Half-Bloods. We are now beginning to understand the makings of a villain by peering into the complex inner world of a brilliant but disturbed young boy.

But it isn’t until the seventh and final book in the series that we learn about Voldemort’s grand master plan: his scheme to



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split his soul in order to gain immortality. Voldemort secretly discovers the Dark Art of soul-splitting as a student at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and spends many of his adult years in exile working on it. But splitting the soul comes with devastating consequences and is considered one of the most dangerous things a wizard can do—the deepest violation against the soul—because it renders the soul, in Dumbledore’s words, “unstable.” Literary, mythical, and cultural narratives are filled with cautionary tales about what happens when our souls are violated: Faust sells his soul to Mephistopheles and begins his rapid descent into depravity; Okonkwo transgresses against his *chi* or personal god (some may call this “soul”) and everything crumbles around him in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*; in Rowling’s masterpiece, Voldemort is defeated when he splits his soul and its fragmented pieces are destroyed.

Jungian psychology is not new to the phenomenon of soul-splitting. Donald Kalsched, Jungian analyst and guest speaker at the Jung Society of Atlanta in February, presented a compelling and insightful lecture/workshop on how unprocessed traumas, including sexual, physical and emotional abuse, can cause the soul or psyche to split. According to Kalsched, because unbearable traumatic experiences “cannot be fully metabolized” by the individual, they cause the soul to dissociate in fragments. This trauma becomes what Kalsched refers to as “the inexperienced experience.” Kalsched sums it up thus: “If you are in an impossible situation and you are helpless to leave, then a part of you leaves.” So the individual may well survive the trauma, but does so *in pieces*. This phenomenon has been seen, for instance, in people who suffer from dissociative identity disorder (DID), formerly known as multiple personality disorder, where, as a result of intolerable trauma, the person’s psyche dissociates into different identities or personality states. In this way, says Kalsched, “the psyche provides a partial cure of trauma so that life can go on, but there is a great price for this self-cure—loss of soul.” (*Trauma and the Soul*: p. 20)

In *Trauma and the Soul*, Kalsched states that the process of soul-splitting is orchestrated spontaneously and unconsciously by what he refers to as “the self-care system”, a survival mechanism that “protects and defends the vulnerable core of the self

from further annihilation.” But after the soul splits, where do these vulnerable, fragmented pieces go? Kalsched contends that they retreat into the personal or collective unconscious for refuge and support. In this way, they may remain relatively inaccessible except through processes like psychotherapy, dream work or active imagination. But Kalsched warns that the self-care system is not benign. While it may initially take on the protective role, it tends to turn persecutory by keeping this vulnerable part of the self sequestered and in a regressed state, thereby preventing psychological growth and healing. Also, because the self-care system has access to powerful archetypal forces in the collective unconscious, traumatized individuals may enter into altered states of consciousness where they find themselves encapsulated in inner worlds with powerful archetypal figures that can be at times numinous, at other times terrifying and disturbingly mephistophelean. Because the ego often cannot deal with the tremendous psychic energy and emotional content from the archetypes, it may regress into that infantile period when it got split by the trauma. In dreams, this regressed part of the personality may appear as a vulnerable and innocent animal or child that needs protection.

I would like to offer a recurring dream vignette that reaches back into my own childhood here. Over the years this dream continues to be one of my most frequent nocturnal visitors. First, a little bit of background and context for the dream: As a child, I was very small and sickly. We moved to a coastal town in Kenya where the weather was hot and humid. My father worked as a manager in a huge oil refinery, and we lived right next to it. The air was thick and polluted and I often found it difficult to breathe. I developed painful rashes and other skin ailments which made it difficult for me to be outdoors. I also developed asthma, bronchitis, and malaria all within the same period, at the age of 9 or 10. In one of my hospitalizations, I remember being placed in a women’s ward because the children’s ward was full. I felt lonely, vulnerable and frightened. Also, because I was in the women’s ward, I did not get to see or play with any children during my hospitalization. I was treated by the women’s nursing staff, and not the children’s nurses. The dream:



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I am in a forest and I hear a weak meowing sound. I come closer and realize it's from a tiny abandoned kitten. The kitten is scared and weak with hunger. I pick up the kitten and realize there are more, a litter of around 5 or 6. I feel overwhelmed and wonder how I can feed and protect all of them. Suddenly, I hear a loud, menacing sound. A wolf-dog is approaching. It looks fierce and ominous. I know it is here for the kittens, and because I am in its way, it will harm me too. I want to run away but can't leave unless I take all the kittens with me. I decide I will scoop all of them in my arms and make a dash for it. I am filled with terror and panic.

What I have noticed in this dream and its other variations is the presence of a protector, a predator, and helpless creature(s), usually kittens. (Incidentally, as a child, I would always bring home tiny orphaned kittens. Today, I have a cat that I rescued as a kitten three years ago.) The dominant feeling tone of the dream is always one of fear and vulnerability. In my interpretation of this dream, I see the protector as the archetypal Self appearing in order to assist the various parts of the wounded or traumatized self, which appear as vulnerable, helpless kittens. I view the malevolent figure of the wolf-dog as an externalized threat representing the frightening environment and experiences around my illness and subsequent hospitalization. These unconscious energies still accompany me today whenever I walk into a hospital and get that strange feeling of uneasiness that I haven't been able to shake off after all these years.

It has been said that none of us ever leave childhood unscathed. If this is true, we are all carrying the wounds and scars from our childhood traumas. For the majority of us, these are traumas that the psyche, with time, can process on its own, perhaps through positive life experiences and nurturing relationships with others. Some may be fortunate enough to find a good psychotherapist to guide them through the journey into healing. But these traumas can be dangerous to the psyche if left untended over time. Kalsched points out that this is why a trusting therapeutic relationship is so important to a person who has suffered trauma: it offers a safe container in which the individual can gradually begin to "re-open the transitional space" between his or her inner and outer worlds, between the spiritual and the

material worlds, the unconscious and the conscious, the past and the present. This then gives the soul an opportunity to dwell in what Kalsched refers to as the "mytho-poetic matrix," a place where one's imagination, hopes and dreams can be rekindled, where the figures in dreams, whether diabolical or divine, can lead towards a larger mystery and healing.

Back to Harry Potter: Voldemort learns that there is only one way to split his soul: he must commit the most heinous act possible—cold murder. Each time he kills, his soul splits again. But splitting the soul is just the first part. He must then find new "homes" for the split fragments. This is where we learn about Horcruxes, which are considered the darkest of the Dark Arts. A Horcrux is an object that has been enchanted using powerful spells in order to conceal a fragmented part of a person's soul. Horcruxes are such taboos in the magical world that Dumbledore himself cannot bear to talk about them. Having found what he felt were excellent Horcruxes for his fragmented soul, Voldemort embarks on his final business: obtaining the Elder Wand and wielding its power over the wizarding and Muggle worlds. This gripping story is told in the final installment in the series.

As the Harry Potter narrative progresses, it is clear that Harry and Voldemort have a lot in common: both lost their mothers in infancy, both wizards can speak to snakes using Parseltongue, both learned they were wizards at the age of eleven, both were exceptional students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, both their wands share a strange and powerful connection, and later it emerges that they both, in fact, *share parts of the same soul*. The gravity of this fact is not lost on Harry, and he agonizes over it more and more as the story progresses. For if it is possible that he and Voldemort share the same soul, does that not make him just as contemptible as Voldemort, whom he so despises? Are all Harry's efforts to fight the dark forces just a defense against facing who he truly is? Harry is plagued by these questions throughout the book.

It is interesting to note that although Harry experienced enormous traumas in his past—the murder of his parents at an early age, painful rejection, excruciating isolation and loneliness, humiliation and neglect at the hands of his relatives, the Dursleys,—he ends up for the most part, psychologically whole. Where did Harry find the psychological resilience to deal with his traumas? A central theme that follows Harry throughout his adventures points to one of his best defenses: his close friends and fellow students Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, who walk with Harry through his perilous adventures, much in the same way that Kalsched describes Virgil acting as Dante's guide and witness when he accompanies Dante into the underworld. Additionally, Harry has the wise and benevolent Dumbledore as mentor, the loyal friendship of Hagrid, and support of the stern but kind Professor McGonagall. Lastly, Harry has the most powerful defense of all: his mother's fierce and protective love, a legacy she left him when she died. In contrast, Voldemort had nobody—he was unwilling to form any kind of reciprocal relationship with others, and this became a key element in his defeat.

In a sense, I think we are all a bit like Voldemort. We split our souls—unconsciously, by not accepting all parts of ourselves—then conceal these "soul pieces" and continue to live our lives with the discarded fragments scattered messily about. Our task then (if we are conscious of it), is to embark on what Jung called "re-finding the soul." Jungian psychology offers the process of individuation as a way to do this, where *all* aspects of

the soul—the good, the bad, the ugly, the scary—are gathered and embraced into an integrated whole. In Jung’s *Red Book* he writes very personally about his own journey to re-find his soul. But like all archetypal journeys, it is not for the faint-hearted. Jung referred to his own individuation journey as “plunging into the depths” of a sort of personal hell, filled with both terrifying archetypal figures and divine numinous entities. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* Jung states that the years he spent on what he described as his “confrontation with the unconscious” were so emotionally devastating that he felt he was “doing a schizophrenia” and would fall apart; yet he also asserts that they were the most productive years of his life.

In order for Voldemort to re-find his soul and piece back its fragmented parts, he would have to feel remorseful about his evil deeds and suffer the pain and agony of his victims. Harry and Dumbledore know that this kind of undertaking is much bigger than Voldemort’s limited egoic machinations, and would require certain character traits that Voldemort clearly does not possess, such as insight and empathy. Therefore, only one solution remains: Harry must destroy the Horcruxes.

Towards the end of the Harry Potter series we encounter Lord Voldemort again in what appears to be an alternate time-space reality. But he is completely unrecognizable now. Gone is the powerful, merciless sorcerer who terrorized both the Muggle and wizard worlds. Instead, we see a pitiful regressed creature: wounded, tiny and naked, it is curled up on the hard ground. It is helpless and alone, and emits gut-wrenching whimpers of unspeakable suffering. Harry feels a gush of pity—mixed with a good measure of repulsion—for the creature, but Dumbledore’s stern advice is clear: the creature is to be left alone to deal with its own fate. Voldemort violated his soul when he split it into pieces, and was unwilling to do the “soul work” of retrieving and integrating its fragmented parts when he arrogantly rejected Harry’s final offer for remorse. His monumental failure became his final death sentence when Harry destroyed the Horcruxes and recovered the Elder Wand. Nothing can be done to save him now.

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