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When author Gregory Maguire published *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* in 1995, he never could have anticipated that he was creating a cultural phenomenon. (Helen Maguire; Universal Pictures; NCR composite photo by Toni-Ann Ortiz)



by Maxwell Kuzma

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Gregory Maguire, a lifelong Catholic, is the author of *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, published in 1995. His work has since been adapted into an internationally beloved musical theater production and a two-part film, the first of which garnered 10 Academy Award nominations this year.

National Catholic Reporter spoke with Maguire about how living as a gay Catholic informed *Wicked*, the need for nuance and complexity, and the role of storytelling in perilous times. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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***NCR*: You've written about your experience growing up as a gay Catholic man and how that informed your work, particularly writing *Wicked*. How did your understanding of faith and sexuality shape your approach to creating a character like Elphaba?**

*Maguire*: The way many of us are brought into understanding what faith means and what sexuality means, we are led to suspect that we are going to be pulled in different directions; and there's going to be an internal tension, possibly even mortal damage, by trying to reconcile the different directions in which we feel pulled.

I grew up in a progressive enough circle that the consideration of any kind of sexuality, even straight sexuality, was presented as a potential gift. It could also be a potential temptation, but it was a potential gift. And so you would have to use the tools of faith to slowly and carefully separate those segments that might harm you from those segments that might nourish you, and to braid for yourself a way to be in the world that neither denies your inclination toward faith nor your inclination toward love — which, after all, are very close.



Maguire says Elphaba wants, more than anything else, to do no harm to the world. Yet she is twisted by the fear she strikes in other people's hearts. (Universal Pictures)

How did that lead to Elphaba? I remember getting twisted by what I thought to be contrary impulses. That led me to the story of a person who has the same impulses. Elphaba wants, more than anything else, to do no harm to the world and indeed to assist it as a kind of missionary daughter, really. And yet she is twisted by the way she's looked at, by the fear she strikes in other people's hearts. She has a hard time trying to braid herself into a self-loving, effective minister of good.

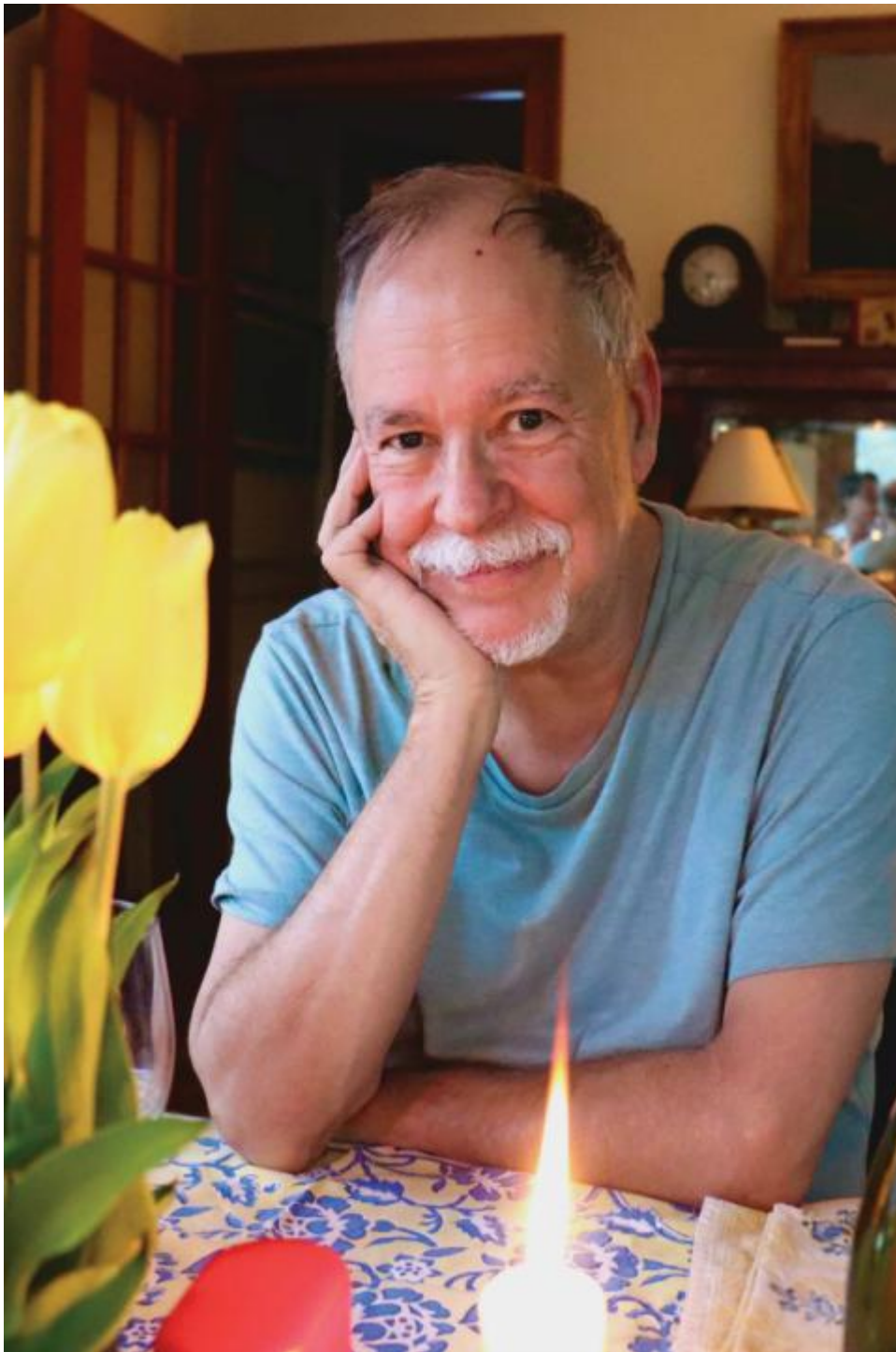
**How do you think the silence surrounding LGBTQ+ issues in the church has impacted the lives of LGBTQ+ Catholics, particularly when it comes to issues of identity and spiritual well-being?**

Well, I love the Catholic Church and I love my faith, but they have done massive amounts of harm by refusing to be honest about the variety of human experiences. As much as I am a defender of my own faith, I can call out grave crimes against charity, grave crimes against the Christian message of inclusion and of supporting

each other.

I've had quite a few friends in the clergy and in the orders that I later realized were gay or lesbian, but they did not reference it. They were bright, warm spirits of tolerance and open mindedness. There was a lot of tacit and silent support. Just as silence can be menacing and annihilating, there is also silent support that is nourishing. You are actually part of an underground before you recognize that that's where you are. If I had entered the priesthood, which I thought strongly about doing, I would have become one of those silent supporters.

**In "Wicked," we see characters who defy expectations and live complex, multidimensional lives. You've discussed the importance of not compartmentalizing the world into "us-versus-them." How can we encourage others to embrace nuance and openness in such polarized times?**



Maguire, a lifelong Catholic, once seriously considered becoming a priest. He credits gay and lesbian religious for giving his faith an inclusive, nourishing support. (Luke Maguire)

If I really knew the answer to that, I would be running for public office. But I have noticed something about the history of polarization.

What did the invention of the printing press do for polarization among the nation states of Northern Europe and Southern Europe? What did the invention of the telegraph do during the Civil War for polarization, for having people be able to identify sides as opposed to being able to identify people on the street?

The very mechanics of the digital revolution limits choices. There is no half value in how a computer works; you have to choose one or the other. I have a feeling it's that very binary command that is partly responsible for our feeling that "I can't hold an x and a zero in my head at the same time." And that that is a kind of loss of, you know, not being able to hold two things in the head at once.

Storytelling has always needed to do more than one thing at a time. If it's going to have any impact at all, it cannot merely comfort. It cannot merely challenge. It has to do both at once.

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I listen to the news and I read the papers, and I try my darndest to keep an open mind to think, well, if I strip away all the public relations scandal about how this action is being carried out, could this action have any benefit? I still try to do that. I'm not always very good at it, but I do make the effort. And I think that's what we have to do. We have to ask people who don't believe what we believe to make the effort too. Bringing it to other people's attention is maybe the only thing I can think I can do.

**The story of *Wicked* feels extraordinarily timely in 2025 from a historical, social and political perspective, despite originally being published in 1995. As a gay Catholic man who lived through different struggles and milestones as well for the LGBTQ community, what lessons from our history do you think we can draw on while facing current circumstances?**

Certainly, in the last 40 to 45 years of gay and lesbian history, what we have learned is that we are motivatable. We can be pried off our couch, and we can decide to get dressed and go out and do some good for somebody else. We can disagree and still work toward the cessation of suffering or the alleviation of at least some part of suffering.

I think that's a lesson from the 1980s and early '90s that we've almost forgotten because we have earned so much in terms of gay marriage and not having to hide in the shadows as much. But we have to remember what we've learned, and we have to keep our skill set well-exercised because we are going to need it. We are going to need it.

**What, in your opinion, is the role of storytelling at this point in American history?**

Storytelling has always needed to do more than one thing at a time. If it's going to have any impact at all, it cannot merely comfort. It cannot merely challenge. It has to do both at once.

If you're just getting comforted, then you have not moved an inch out of your sorrow, out of your need. If you're just getting challenged, you may have fallen flat on your chin, exhausted by the second sentence. You need to have both challenge and comfort. You need to feel like you're both a part of a community and that your independence and your individuality is just as valued as your community membership.

It is not enough just to be an individual. You are also a member of your community, and it's not enough to be a faceless member of your community. You bring your individuality to make that community stronger. Stories do that.

And a third thing: You need to be confirmed in your understanding of yourself as a complex human being, not a simple one. A story does not fit as a tagline on the front of a baseball cap. A story has to be lived in, and it has to be processed.

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**What do you hope your work brings to new generations of readers and viewers of the film, this year and well beyond?**

I just saw the film again recently. My daughter and my older son wanted to see it before it disappeared from the theaters. So now I've seen it six times. The more you study something, the more alert you are to the complications and nuances and contradictions in it.

A contradiction in a story is not a mistake. It's an invitation to think. And the movie has invitations to think, and so too do my novels, and those are both intentional. I hope that as people go forward into "Wicked: Part Two," I hope viewers will realize it's about a lot more than its musical comedy origins.

When my book was published 30 years ago, it got largely good reviews. But the fact that I had hitched my intellectual inquiry to a bit of popular culture meant that the pop culture references obliterated the inquiry for most reviewers. I was asking people to think: How would you identify something as evil? If somebody down the street does something, how quickly would you say that's wicked, that's evil? And what would you mean by that?

But the Wicked Witch of the West was too great a star, and people were reading an intellectual novel without realizing it. I would hope that in the years to come, they might do what modern reviewers have done. Now a number of people have used words like "prophetic," "Maguire's prophetic novel of 1995 ought to have prepared us for where we are in 2025."

Well, I did not set out to be prophetic. Believe me, honey. But I would hope that there is even more there than is yet exhumed that will continue to nourish people in ways that perhaps I can't even consider right now.

L. Frank Baum, in his second book about Oz, wrote what I believe was the first transgender character in children's literature – and that was published in 1904! I'm sure he did not mean to be prophetic. He was writing a really interesting story with a twist that nobody saw coming, myself included as a kid. And yet he was prophetic without setting out to be prophetic. I guess that's what I mean.

If you are sinking the bucket into your subconscious as a creator and let it sit there long enough, so that it's collecting some really interesting material, when you draw it up and spill it out on the table you don't necessarily know everything you're doing. You may not even know most of what you're doing. You think you're doing one thing, but really you're feeding inquiry. You're feeding hunger, in more and deeper ways than you recognize.

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