

The Lantern King

How to be of authentic service and take risks to do what is good, true and beautiful.



There was once upon a time a proud king who ruled over a large and bountiful kingdom at the foot of a tall mountain facing the sea. His castle was enduring and grand - cut of marble and granite and adorned with imported carpets and draperies. His queen was tall and beautiful and of equal grandness to her husband the king. They had a single child, a son, who was very different from his father and mother.

He did everything expected of a Prince - he was thorough in his studies and training - he was obedient and polite - but what separated him from his parents and all the royals for that matter, was his kindness. He was kind - to everyone.

This was very different from the standard behavior of the royals. Kings, Queens, Princes, Princesses, Dukes Duchesses and all other royals were certainly grand, certainly confident, certainly polite - but seldom kind. That was not considered a royal trait. The king and queen found their son's kindness charming, and forgave it as the simple folly of a child. But as he got older and his kindness only grew, they began to be concerned.

Then one day, when the prince was 12 years old, he went with the Queen on holiday to their manor by the sea. The road that led to the sea went through open fields where their grain was grown and their cattle grazed. It was also, however, where many of the field workers had their tiny huts - huts made of scraps of wood and brush - miserable places where people could barely escape the wet and the cold. There were places like this all around the kingdom, but none of them were ever seen by the royalty - and this was on purpose. You see, back then the royalty kept to themselves - the only other people they wished to see were well dressed and polite servants. They did not want to see sick and the poor. That would be beneath them.

Now, since the Queen and the Prince were traveling a road where there were several of these miserable huts, a communication preceded them that instructed every one of the huts to be removed. The cows could stay, the fields of wheat could stay. Well dressed and healthy farm workers could stay but the poor, sick and miserable needed to be moved. So by the time the Queen and her son were coming along this road, all they could see was idyllic farmland and happy cows.

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But someone was overlooked. She was a farm worker who was very ill could not walk. She had made a bed for herself next to a large rock and covered her head with pine boughs cut from nearby trees. When soldiers came to clear out all the huts and the sick and the poor, no one noticed her under the pine boughs and she remained. When the soldiers cleared out, she came out from under her boughs and began to crawl to the road. When the Queen's coach came by, both she and her son could see the wretched woman crawling along the road calling to the coach that she needed help. The Queen covered her son's eyes and demanded that the woman be removed.

The prince, however, interceded and begged of his mother that the woman be given some bread and fresh clothing. The queen sighed and said to her son, "You will one day be King - it is time you started behaving like one. We all have our place. And yours is not to bother with a person such as her."

The boy was obedient and bowed his head - but he did not agree with his mother. He felt that his place was without a doubt to help this woman.

Days past and eventually they returned home. The boy could not stop thinking about the sick woman and one night he resolved to help her. He lit a small lantern and quietly stole to the kitchen to get bread and drink and then to the stables to get a horse. Then, lantern in hand, he headed out the castle gates and into the surrounding country. He found the right road and went through woods and open fields and then came to a large stone, and here the Prince heard someone shift and then a voice, "Leave me be, I've done nothing"

The prince dismounted and walked to the voice. His lantern lit the stone and then the face of the woman below. She was lying on the ground. She had a desperate look and the Prince could see she was cold and hungry. His heart nearly broke at the sight. He took off his cloak and wrapped it round her. Then he placed the bread and drink before her. He knelt down and with his face close to hers he said, "I will come back. I will bring more food and firewood for a fire. I will..." but he didn't know what else to say. She needed so much, he thought. But he stood and looked around, "Are there others?"

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She did not answer him as she started hungrily eating her bread – but she need not answer – he could tell there were others – many others in the darkness. He looked to the woman again.

“I will leave this lantern. Light it tomorrow night and I will find you”

Then he rode into the darkness and found his way home. But he did not sleep that night. Instead he worked out a plan where he could take bread and meat and blankets out of the castle at night and deliver it to the poor unnoticed. He made a choice not to let his parents or any other royal know. He believed that they would not understand and perhaps even stop him from doing it.

He spent the following day doing what he always did, learning his lessons and practicing his skills and behaving in the way that royals did. But that night, he took his lantern and went back to the country to give away food and clothing and this time he took an extra lantern to leave with the poor.

And this continued every night. He found the sick and poor and needy by the lanterns that guided him and every night he would return to the castle to get a few hours sleep before beginning his day as prince. He was successful in keeping his secret from the royals with the exception of his mother, the Queen.

Though she did not know what he was doing, she knew he was involved in something strange. For one thing, she found a stash of handmade rag dolls and rudely made bits of embroidery and jewelry made of stones. She did not know it but these were gifts the poor had given to the Prince. She also heard her servants talking about a man who had been helping the poor. She learned that the man was called, the Lantern Prince – and she wondered, could it be her son?

After a few years of this, the prince’s father – the king – died, and the Lantern Prince became King. His crowning was more grand and wide-reaching than any before him – measured not in pomp or fineries – but in love. The moment the crown rested on his head, there was a booming cheer that rang out “Hurrah for the Lantern King!”

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In that moment the Queen looked at her son and was changed. She saw the love the people had for their new King was more powerful than any army - than any vault of gold. She looked at her son, the King and bowed low. She was proud of her son, and honored to serve him.

And the Lantern King was now able to show a new way to lead - one based not on strength and pride, but kindness and service.

And then, one night when the Lantern King was awake in his bed marveling at all that had come to pass, he stood and went to the window. What he saw was a sea of little lantern lights covering the lands. Each represented a person who was no longer in need, but a person who was ready to serve. And there were so many lights - like stars overhead - each with their own brightness but all in the same sky.