

DAVID GERROLD - The emperor redux

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE lived an emperor who loved his people very much. Because he ruled with wisdom, responsibility and compassion, he was much loved in return.

One bright spring day, a pair of tailors came to the palace. To celebrate the emperor's birthday, they would make him the finest and most beautiful suit of clothes that had ever been made.

The emperor was no fool. He knew that there are no absolutes in the material universe-- especially when it comes to such subjective things as the individual perception of artistic achievement. And he said so to the traveling tailors. "There are no absolutes."

"You are absolutely right," agreed the tailors. "If there is even one person in the world who does not see that this is truly the very finest and most beautiful suit of clothes possible, then we will have failed completely. This is quite a problem, yes, but we have solved it, we are certain."

Despite himself, the emperor was intrigued. "Go on," he bade them.

"We are going to make your suit of clothes out of a cloth so dazzling and radiant that just to look at it will blind you. Naturally, this would be impractical to wear, so we have made the cloth invisible as well."

The emperor nodded thoughtfully. "That makes good sense."

And then the traveling tailors said, "The name of this cloth is imagination, Your Majesty." And they unrolled the cloth before him, suggesting that he close his eyes, the better to see it clearly.

And truly, the emperor saw in the space between his eyes and his eyelids a cloth so much finer than any cloth that possibly could have been woven, so sheer of texture that silk was put to shame, so intricate of design, so radiant of color, so perfectly stitched and embroidered, that he was struck speechless with wonder. He had not realized he could envision such finery. He understood at once that the finest suit of clothes ever made could exist only in the minds of the beholders. To even attempt to accomplish it in fact would be to lessen the concept of the absolute with corporeal details.

"Do you understand, Your Majesty? If you were to wear a suit of imagination, you would be wearing the finest suit of clothing ever made."

The emperor was not a particularly vain man, but even so, he could not help thinking of how the marvelous suit of imaginary cloth would look in a parade. Nevertheless, remembering his subjects and the royal treasury and his commitment to rule wisely and responsibly, he asked, "How much will it cost?"

"Ah, that is the very best part of all, Your Majesty. The cloth of imagination costs nothing at all."

The emperor was delighted. "Now this truly is a wonder that I must share with my people. I accept your offer. You may make me a marvelous garment of imagination and I shall wear it in a glorious parade so that all may enjoy it."

On the day that the emperor was to march, every citizen in the kingdom lined the streets of the capital city; they had all come to see the wondrous wonder that cost absolutely nothing at all. But there was one little boy who had not heard the news, or maybe he didn't realize that what he was supposed to see was something that could not be seen, so he said in a voice so thin and high and piping that it could be heard all over the town square, "Gosh, Dad -- look! The emperor is bloody starkers!"

The lad's father, embarrassed, tried to explain to him that this was an imaginary suit, but the child refused to understand. "The emperor is naked!" he insisted. "He's got no clothes at all." And all the people heard, and looked, and saw indeed that the emperor was naked, and they were embarrassed -- embarrassed for the child's father. Because the child had proven by his very words that he had no sense of wonder. And in this kingdom the people had a special word to describe those without the sense to wonder; they were called fools. How sad for the poor father.

Only a fool could fail to realize that an emperor never stands naked in front of his subjects without good

reason. Even naked, the emperor still wore the finest suit of clothes ever made: the suit that God had given him the day that he was born. And nothing more, no additional adornment could be added to it that would make it any prettier. If anything, adornment would only detract from the majesty of God's creation.

And for those who wanted and needed to see dazzling raiment, the emperor wore the cloth of imagination, a cloth that costs nothing at all and is free to everyone; they need only close their eyes to see a glorious suit of clothes finer than any that the human hand could make.

All the people loved and honored the emperor for having the courage to be naked in the world, without hypocrisy, without pretense, and for respecting the people enough to recognize that each one had his own special vision of the best, needing only a bit of wonder to exercise that vision. He was a very fine emperor indeed.

And the little boy? Well, yes, he really was a fool, for not realizing the beauty of the human body, nor the wonder of the human imagination. He was taken to a home for the bewildered and stuffed full of honey-bread and jam and then tickled till he giggled in delight, because what else can you do with a fool?