

# Le Guin: Look! There Is No Emperor!

*This speech was delivered in acceptance of the Emperor Has No Clothes Award on Nov. 7, 2009, at the 32nd annual convention of the Freedom From Religion Foundation at the Red Lion Hotel, Seattle.*



By Ursula K. Le Guin

I'm going to tell you my take on the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes." I read it as a kid, in our volume of Hans Christian Andersen's stories, a big red book which I only read when I was already kind of depressed, because so many of the stories were scary and depressing.

I understood the story, I think, but when the little boy yells "Look! The Emperor has no clothes!"—I also understood why his mother tries to hush him up: He's rude. And I have to tell you, I didn't like that little boy. I didn't identify with him. He's the kind of little boy who would look at my kind of little girl and yell, "Look! Ursula's socks don't match! Nyeaahh!"

I have gone on secretly disliking that little boy for most of eight decades. And I'm going to get back at him, by saying what really bothers me about the whole story.

Now, OK, the two tailors are con men out to cheat the Emperor, and the Emperor is a twit—what else can you expect of an hereditary Emperor? But the tailors, now, there's talent—they describe the clothes, the gold embroideries and everything, so well, so completely, so dramatically, that he can't not believe them. They're great artists, those guys. The poor twit Emperor doesn't have a chance against them.

And the court and the people don't have a chance either, because they have agreed to believe that whatever the Emperor says is true is true. So he says he has great new clothes and instead of looking, they shut their eyes and believe him.

And, because he is an Emperor, that is, a man given undue, unjust power over other people, he deserves his comedown and a comeuppance. Which I hope weakens or destroys his unjust power, though Andersen doesn't say so.

But now, look at the story again and consider that this emperor is a man, probably a

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potbellied man with hairy legs, who gets fooled by some tricksters into leading a parade stark naked. And the little kid yells, "He has no clothes on!" and everybody finally looks, and he's standing there bare-assed, with this awful sinking feeling, and everybody laughs and laughs, and jeers and mocks and howls.

Does this begin to sound like a kind of dream you may have had? I certainly have—the one where I find myself in class wearing, for some reason, nothing but a bra and galoshes; the one where I am about to give a viola concert and suddenly realize that I never learned to play the viola—that kind of dream? The dream that tells you: You are inadequate, you are incompetent, you are pitiful, you are naked to your enemies.

I don't have just one Inner Child. I have lots of them. That dream is one of my Inner Children: the unpleasant little loudmouth know-it-all. What children don't understand, and can't understand until they grow up some, is how much the whole fabric and process of human society depends on everybody agreeing to ignore, most of the time, the fact that all of us are, most of the time, inadequate, incompetent, pitiful, and, in fact, naked to our enemies. None of us really has very much in the way of spiritual, moral clothing. We dress ourselves in rags. And we agree to say nothing about it. To a very large extent, it is human



Former FFRF staffer Lynn Lau gets an autograph.

charity that clothes us.

If you read the story this way, the little whistle-blower is not the hero. Certainly the Emperor isn't the hero; he's just as much a twit as ever, only you can maybe be a bit sorry for him.



Ursula K. Le Guin accepting the "Emperor" award from Dan Barker.

The people who first sucked up to him and then jeered at him certainly aren't the hero. We have no hero. Except possibly the little boy's mother, who said, "Shh! dear! That's very rude!" That woman knows what manners are, and that they are important—that civilizations depend, quite literally, on civility. My hope for humanity lies in her. Perhaps she will be able to bring up her little boy to be a decent man, a man who doesn't want to hurt or humiliate anybody else, even a stupid Emperor, even on the FOX Network.

Now, when I try to read the story of "The Emperor's New Clothes" in still another way, in the context of religion rather than of human power—that is, if I try to see the Emperor as God—a really weird thing happens.

It's like I'm standing in the crowd watching the Emperor's parade, and I don't yell it, but I say it: "Where is the Emperor? There is no Emperor! There's just clothes!"

What I see is a marvelous costume, very ancient and beautiful—a halo, a triple crown, robes of white and gold—floating along the street, but nothing, nothing

inside them. Empty clothes.

Now, I honestly do not think all the tailors who have made those clothes, that God-costume, so busily, for all these centuries, did it or do it deliberately and knowingly as a con game, to deceive us. Maybe in part, but mostly I think the people who sew the garments of God are busy deceiving themselves. Priests, of course, can make a good living out of it and also gain secular power. But lay believers weave those garments day and night, all over the world, and to some of them it is the most important thing they do, and they love doing it. That's fine with me, so long as they don't try to make me do it with them.

So, what I value about the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and why I am proud and happy to receive my award from you all, is the great work you do to diminish the place of religion in secular life—my life. I agree with you with all my heart that people who spend their lives sewing doll clothes for a figment of their imagination have no business running a country, making laws, interfering in people's sex lives, teaching in public schools, or getting us into wars against people who make a different kind of doll clothes for a different figment of the imagination.

Let the tailors of the garments of God sit in their tailor shops and stitch away, but let them stay there in their temples, out of government, out of the schools. And we who live among real people—real, badly dressed people, people wearing rags, people wearing army uniforms, people sleeping on our streets without a blanket to cover them—let us have true charity: Let us look to our people, and work to clothe them better.

*Ursula K. Le Guin is the famed West Coast author of more than 20 novels, including pioneering science fiction and fantasy. Her many literary honors include the Hugo for her 1969 gender-bending book, **The Left Hand of Darkness**, and another Hugo in 1975 for **The Dispossessed**, utopian fiction. She has written 21 novels, 11 volumes of short stories, three collections of essays, at least 12 books for children, six volumes of poetry and four of translation. Her other awards include Nebula, National Book Award, PEN-Malamud, etc. Her recent publications include a volume of poetry, **Incredible Good Fortune**, the novel, **Lavinia**, and an essay collection, **Cheek by Jowl**. Just out for children: **Cat Dreams**.*