

The Golden Curse

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Article abstract

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ART, CULTURE ET OEUVRE DE CRÉATION / ART, CULTURE & CREATIVE WORKS

The Golden Curse

Sebastian Straube¹

Résumé

Il s'agit d'un conte de fées aux conséquences imprévues, une nouvelle histoire de Midas, avec des leçons pour répondre à une urgence de santé publique.

Mots-clés

conte de fées, urgence de santé publique, épidémie, conséquences involontaires, effets économiques

Abstract

This is a fairy tale about unintended consequences, a re-telling of the story of Midas, with lessons for responding to a Public Health emergency.

Keywords

fairy tale, public health emergency, epidemic, unintended consequences, economic effects

Legend has it that in a world much like ours there once lived a king whose kingdom was prosperous beyond comparison, because the king possessed a divine gift. The things the king touched turned to gold. You may think that you know the story, but there is a twist. The gift became a curse. One day, the king's touch started to turn people to gold, not things. That sudden change was unexpected and no explanation was found. Not everyone turned to gold, mind you, and there was hope that this curse would stop as suddenly as it had come. But the curse did not stop. One in every hundred people the king touched turned to gold. The other ninety-nine acquired the king's curse: They turned one in every hundred people whom they touched to gold, and passed on the curse to the ninety-nine others, and so forth.

As being of solid gold is not compatible with life, the golden people died upon the touch. Who would die and who would live when touched was not foreseeable with certainty, but there seemed to be patterns: The older subjects of the king were more likely to turn to gold than the younger ones and subjects who were ill were also more likely to turn to gold. However, what would happen in any individual case was not clear until it did happen. What did become apparent was that those who were touched once and survived would also survive any subsequent touch.

Once the king's curse became known, fear spread through the land. The king's astrologers, who had theorized about such a gift turned curse for some time, but who had not been of much prominence in the kingdom nor been involved in government, now wrote horoscopes about who would die and who would live. They genuinely meant well and they became much revered for their skill, even though they were not always right. Some subjects revered the astrologers more than they revered the king himself, so that the king became afraid to contradict his astrologers. What the astrologers advised was done and soon the astrologers essentially governed the kingdom.

In their wisdom, the astrologers advised the king of a temporary cure for the spread of the curse: To stop all the crafts and all the trades in the land except for what they deemed essential for living, so that the chances of people mingling and accidentally touching one another were minimized. They also advised people to not touch one another at home. These measures would last until a definitive cure for the golden curse was found. The king acted on their advice, as had become the norm. The state enforced the astrologers' recommendations and all but the most essential activity ceased. Subjects who disobeyed were punished.

The people were fed and the law was enforced, and it was thought that the definitive cure for the golden curse would be discovered within a year. What would be so hard about doing nothing for a year if there was food and shelter, the astrologers asked? Their advice was logical and the people agreed. Beyond a certain point the golden curse would have been unstoppable if it was not so contained, the astrologers said, and one in every hundred of the king's subjects would die. Such a toll was unacceptable for a kingdom so prosperous, the astrologers reasoned, and again the people of the land agreed. Fear of the golden curse now ruled their hearts, and they distrusted one another, but it seemed that there was no alternative to the drastic measures taken.

There is another twist to the story, a turn the astrologers did not predict. They spent their time studying the intricacies of the golden curse and potential cures, and paid less attention to the mundane crafts and trades, which had ceased. Nor did they think much about the people who had stopped touching one another. Much like the spread of the golden curse would have been unstoppable beyond a certain point, so, it turned out, were the effects of ceasing the crafts and trades. The once prosperous kingdom fell into a recession. The recession became a depression and all the subjects, even the nobles, became poor. Their money was not worth much anymore. What use is money in a kingdom full of gold?

The people did not take well to doing nothing either. Some became so sad that they preferred death by their own hand to life without touch. Children missed the touch of their parents and became strangers to them. Others grew restless and rioting erupted.

When the king finally realized what was happening to his kingdom, he ordered the measures to be reversed and the crafts and trades to start again immediately, as the death of one in a hundred was now felt to be a better lot than poverty and lawlessness

affecting all. But it was too late. The despair and anarchy could no longer be contained and many more died than would have died from the curse. The king and the social order were overthrown and the once mighty kingdom fell without ever being attacked by a foe.

There is an alternative ending to the story, in which the king saw early on what was happening to his people and determined that life could not continue like this. He had a hard conversation with his astrologers. The crafts and trades were allowed to resume after a brief interruption, even though some people still turned to gold. The king took smart measures to protect the people most likely to turn to gold, based on the astrologers' horoscopes. This affected the kingdom less than feared, as few of those most at risk of turning to gold had been engaged in crafts and trades. Eventually, life mostly returned to what it was before the curse, although touching was still avoided where possible. Because steps had been taken to protect the people most likely to turn to gold, far fewer than one in a hundred were affected. One day, a young astrologer discovered the definitive cure and there was much joy throughout the land. The kingdom was now prosperous again and mighty like never before.

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Conflits d'intérêts

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None to declare

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