

The following commentary originally was published as part of the Perspectives series of The Emperor's Bridge Campaign, a San Francisco-based nonprofit that honors the life and advances the legacy of Emperor Norton.

The Emperor's New Prose

Putting the "Story" in His Majesty's Story

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After several years of admiring Emperor Norton from afar, I finally worked up the nerve to publicly declare my affection on September 17, 2014. On that day, the 155th anniversary of the day he declared himself Emperor, I organized an event dedicated to his memory. It's a day I believe should be celebrated, so I decided to celebrate it, and to induct as many people as possible into the celebration.

Since then, I've given other talks to larger crowds, always to great response. The most interesting have been from those who've shared what Norton's story means to them. From the friend who told me that knowing he existed "makes the world a more magical place," to the person who told me he saw the lesson of Norton's story as "Be the person you want to be; live your true self," I'm not the only one who can't resist investing myself in the Emperor's story.

Realizing this, I've spent what may well be an obnoxious amount of time pondering the almost certainly obnoxious question of what his story *means*. It's a dangerous urge to overemphasize the "story" part of "history" by analyzing it in terms of thematics, instead of facts, yet Norton tickles literary sensibilities as much as historical ones. Maybe it's because he's already such a character in the colloquial sense that it's easy to see him as a characterⁱ in the narrative sense. Maybe it's just because his story is so damn good. Regardless, I keep returning to the question of significance: Why would anyone nowadays care about this strange footnote from our country's past? Why *should* anyone care?ⁱⁱ

There are many historical reasons, from the artists whose work he inspired to the namesake behind this very Campaign, but let's narrow our focus from the cultural to the personal. Is there anything in Emperor Norton's story that appeals to us as individuals? Are there any lessons to draw from his story? I believe the answer is yes.

There are two phrases that always come to mind when I think of Emperor Norton: “constructive delusion,” and “reality by consensus.” I’ll address those in turn.

One of my favorite things about Norton’s story — and pretty much the defining aspect — is that he invented an identity for himself and completely committed to it. People called him crazy because of that commitment, but his self-delusion was just a more extreme version of something most people regard as a virtue: self-determination. Envisioning who you want to be, then becoming that person. Determining yourself. It involves telling a lie, and telling it until it becomes true — just like Emperor Norton. Or, put less cynically, it requires imagination and conviction, and, on that front, I think Emperor Norton makes an ideal model.

But the thing that struck me the most about Emperor Norton’s story isn’t that he adopted a fantastical idea about himself, but that he bent the world to fit it. Regardless of whether other people validated his dream, for him it came true the moment he declared it so; he was just waiting for the rest of the world to catch up. It did, though. He lived as an Emperor, he was loved as an Emperor, and he was eulogized as an Emperor. By believing he was an Emperor, he *became* an Emperor.

That the world eventually did catch up with him is, I believe, the answer to why His Majesty’s story is worth remembering. I’ve tried my best to tell people about his story, and presented many different ways of looking at his life and legacy. And if all we can find in Emperor Norton’s story is the story itself, I’d say that’s a pretty good haul; a good story need not necessarily mean anything more than the joy its existence brings. But if there’s one thing I would hold up as the ultimate takeaway, one thing above all else, it’s this: the story of Emperor Norton is as much about the people around him as the man himself.

Ten thousand people attended his funeral procession. Ten *thousand*. For many people, Norton was nothing but a joke, and his death — collapsing of heart failure in a rain-soaked gutter, just like the guttersnipe many saw him as — was the ultimate punchline. But, for many others, there was a real grandeur to him, and a real sense of loss in his passing. It may not even have been that they saw him as their Emperor, and certainly few, if any, bought into his story the way he did. But he tapped into something powerful about the human condition, a deep-seated sense of whimsy and fantasy. If you live in a community where a person such as Norton exists — *can* exist — that person’s death would be the death of something magical.

It’s easy to think of Norton’s story as the story of one charmingly bizarre individual, but there’s more to it than that. He didn’t just declare a change to his identity; he declared a change to the nation’s identity. After all, he couldn’t be Emperor without an Empire. And while Congress may have been stubbornly intransigent to his claims of authority, he still managed to change the world. Through force of will, he won over those around him, and carved out a space in San Francisco where a starry-eyed dream was able to become a reality.

Reflecting on His Majesty made me think about identity, and how it's formed, and how we can form it. There were numerous factors in Joshua Norton's life that contributed to the person he was, but it was his force of will, combined with the support of his admirers, that led to the legend he became. He could not have been who he was had it not been for the indulgence of those around him. The same is true of any cultural figure — leaders; performers; artists. Culture is symbiotic. That is the power of a community. That is a power we all possess. We are not merely members of communities; we are the agents of their creation.

Norton's story inspired me to become more involved in my own community, which brings me back to that celebration of his anniversary. In preparation for it, I started a literary group named in his honor, The Emperor's New Prose. Not only did he inspire its name, he inspired what has become its flagship event, which launched the very next month, IDeclare (a tribute to his inaugural proclamation). IDeclare is a reading and art series of pieces based on personal identities, providing people with the chance to publicly define themselves the same way Emperor Norton did. Reflecting on his story, I wished that everyone had that opportunity to become the person they want to be. As surely as we create our communities, we create ourselves, so I wanted to form a community dedicated to supportive self-exploration.ⁱⁱⁱ

Norton had the good fortune to live in a community that bolstered him. I wish the same for all of us. Supporting and encouraging each other as we pursue our dreams...to me, that's the essence of a good community. And we can have it, if we make it.

Be it through an eccentric individual, an eccentric place, or the eccentric crowd it attracts, we have the power to create our community. If we wield that power with intention, we can create the kind where the strange is no barrier to the possible, where a group of people can come together and raise a man to be Emperor — or come together to celebrate his memory.

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ⁱ Alternatively, another fascinating way to look at Norton, rather than as the protagonist of a story, is as the creator of a story; that is, as an artist himself. And I don't mean by suggesting that Norton's reign was an elaborate, purposeful performance art piece, but by suggesting that maybe the reason for his enduring popularity is that he appeals to us in the same way artists do.

Why would we think of him as an artist? Norton lived in a world of his own creation and did everything he could to introduce his world to ours. He was patronized by some in his community, misunderstood and mocked by others. Yet his commitment to his vision immeasurably improved the culture San Francisco, and endures as a gift to posterity. In short, he was a dedicated, creative force, which sounds like an artist to me.

By what other frame does the sum of his words and actions make sense than as a grand (if unintentional) performance art? As a grandly self-appointed statesman? As much as people cared about the Emperor, they didn't care about him *as* Emperor. It was his spirit that captured people's hearts, not some latent nostalgia for the bygone days of royals. No, a model statesman he may have been (if given the chance), but what he really was was a model *of* a statesman. Like an actor in a play, he refreshed our view of reality by representing it to us through the lens of artifice — though he always believed in the role.

ⁱⁱ Of course, one could say we *shouldn't* make an effort to understand him because he was crazy, and his role in history is nothing more than that of a spectacle. But it's not enough to say, "He's just a lunatic!", or even, "He's just a self-serving eccentric!" Well-documented cultural influence aside, clearly people care about The Emperor, or else Campaigns like this one wouldn't exist.

In nearly everything he did, Norton had the health of the realm at heart. Even in his first edict, the one declaring himself Emperor, Norton grounded his power grab in his observation that the government was failing its people, and if it wasn't going to serve the greater good, somebody had to seize the wheel to steer the wayward ship of state. Obviously a man who would declare himself Emperor had no shortage of ego, too, but it's telling that a man who believed himself entitled to all the trappings of royalty his rank carried never levied any taxes on his subjects greater than what it took to meet his modest needs. This was not a man simply trying to accrue power and prestige; Norton believed he was acting in the public good, and never burdened his subjects any more than was necessary to meet that goal. Certainly less than many with such grand notions of authority. If for no other reason than as a delightful counterbalance to the grim legacies left by so many others cast from his mold, I think he deserves our consideration.

Besides, if we must reserve our contemplation, validation, and memorialization for those in full possession of their senses, our history books would be empty. No human is entirely sensible; nor, thankfully, is any human entirely devoid of their own quirks and peculiarities. And no human, irrespective of their mental faculties, should be deemed incapable of contributing to human society or our understanding of it.

ⁱⁱⁱ Plus, a supportive community requires empathy, and I believe self-analysis is a good tool for building it. Analyzing the forces that shape your life is the first step to shaping your own life. Once you have control of the building blocks, you can build your own story – and you can build some empathy for the stories of others. We're all shaped by forces outside our control, and acknowledging that important both to understanding ourselves and appreciating what other people make of their lives with the space leftover. It's difficult to relate to other people if you can't even relate to yourself.