

FROM TYRANNY TO HUMANITY: LEADERSHIP LESSONS IN THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

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The Epic of Gilgamesh (c. 2100 BCE), one of humanity's oldest stories, offers timeless lessons on leadership, mortality, and personal growth. Initially portrayed as a tyrannical king abusing his power, Gilgamesh undergoes profound transformation through friendship and loss, ultimately embracing empathy and responsibility. His journey reminds us that true leadership stems not from strength or status, but from humility, change, and the acceptance of life's impermanence.

There are many stories from ancient times that are often discussed in history classes today. We memorize dates and the names of ancient documents, but how often do we even consider what we can learn from them? The stories they left behind, and the remnants of their human lives, can teach us so much about how we can be better people and leaders today. Originating in ancient Mesopotamia around 2100 BCE, the story of Gilgamesh (Gil-Ga-Mesh) is one of the most well-known and discussed, and by far one of the most perfect and clear examples.¹ A great and terrible king: a man in a story from thousands of years ago. We don't know if Gilgamesh was a myth from the start, or if similar to Sargon, king of Akkad, his story became mythicized as the years went by. But the story of Gilgamesh contains lessons which continue to hold true.

¹ Sophus Helle, "Gilgamesh in the Twenty-first Century," Yale University Press, December 14, 2021, <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/2021/12/14/gilgamesh-in-the-twenty-first-century>

The parentage of Gilgamesh was said to be a goddess for a mother and a king for a father, which gave Gilgamesh a perfect body and great strength, like one of the gods, but the blood of his father made him mortal. Whether or not this fact of his own mortality haunted him from the start and caused his later maltreatment of his citizens, is never stated or explained in any of the various retellings. Whatever the cause of his actions, Gilgamesh was described as a terrible, arrogant man. Greed without limits and the savageness of a bull.² The people Gilgamesh left in his wake cry out and ‘lament’ saying: “*No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all...His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior’s daughter nor the wife of the noble*”³

Gilgamesh was given the heavy responsibility to govern the land and take care of the people. Instead, he took their wives, their livelihood, he raped and left those in his wake to suffer. He took his power and responsibility, the vulnerability of those who relied on him, to his advantage and instilled fear rather than security. He was a terror among his own people. When Anu, god of the sky, sometimes said to be the father of all gods and specifically mentioned as the father of Enki⁴(En-key), hearing the suffering of the people he brought this to the attention of Aruru (A-roo-roo), the goddess of creation. Anu pleaded with Aruru, saying “*You made him, O Aruru; now create his equal; let it be as like him as his own reflection, his second self; stormy heart for stormy heart. Let them contend together and leave Uruk in quiet.*”⁵ So Aruru dipped her hands in water and “clipped off clay” and created Enkidu (En-Key-Doo).

He is described being as virtuous as “the god of war” with hair that waved like that of the goddess of corn, and as like the god of cattle, his whole body was rough and hairy. Enkidu was strong and innocent and knew nothing but the forests and the beasts of the land. He ate with them, lived with them and even found joy with them. But the peaceful innocent life he had in the vast areas outside of the cities could not last; that was not the purpose Aruru made him for.

² “The Coming of Enkidu,” in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sandars (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 5.

³ “The Coming of Enkidu,” *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 5.

⁴ “The Coming of Enkidu,” *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 5-7.

⁵ “The Coming of Enkidu,” *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 5.

One day he was found at a drinking hole by a local trapper who lived under the reign of Gilgamesh. The trapper was horrified by the sight of him, so filled with terror he ran back to his father. They devised a plan and sent a “Harlot” to entice him. Together they spent six days and seven nights and she showed him the world and ways of men.⁶ This led Enkidu to be rejected by his “home in the hills.”⁷ So, Enkidu found himself in the city, surrounded by the unknown. When the virtuous Enkidu sees Gilgamesh trying to force himself on a local woman, he goes to him and a great battle ensues!⁸ This is how Gilgamesh came to meet his dearest friend, Enkidu. It was this battle that showed them their equalness, and it was Enkidu who softened Gilgamesh and Enkidu who really is the catalyst for Gilgamesh’s own story. After this day Gilgamesh was different.

Enkidu presented a dilemma that Gilgamesh had never had to wrestle with before; he was his equal. In strength and in size, Gilgamesh could not beat him, but also could not overpower him. If Enkidu had been able to dominate over the strength of Gilgamesh, one could reasonably assume this could lead to bitterness and hatred still as strong as the unforgiving entitlement and sense of grandiosity he had previously demonstrated. They fought each other until neither one of them could continue to fight. Gilgamesh did not quit nor win. He quite literally could not continue to battle Enkidu; his physical strength had been exhausted. Then for the first time Gilgamesh felt respect for another living thing, noticing that Enkidu was just like him in *almost* every way. This respect allowed him to see Enkidu as an individual and not just an *obstacle* in his way. This kind of respect is necessary for anyone to be a good leader, and it opened the door for Gilgamesh to experience another sensation previously foreign to him; he loved someone. He grew as a king and leader, allowing his relationship with Enkidu to change him. Enkidu was virtuous, kind, and innocent, and that virtue and kindness began to rub off on Gilgamesh as he began to humble himself and relinquish his sense of entitlement. As his care and love for Enkidu grew, so did his capacity for love and empathy as a whole, and his people began to experience a better king. In fact, it is written that it was during this period of time “that Gilgamesh

⁶ “The Coming of Enkidu,” *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 6.

⁷ “The Coming of Enkidu,” *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 7.

⁸ “The Coming of Enkidu,” *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 6-7.

turned his thoughts to the country of the living; on the land of cedars the lord Gilgamesh reflected,”⁹ for the first time in Gilgamesh’s reign he is shown to think about the wellbeing of the kingdom he was entrusted to protect. Gilgamesh showed his love and gratitude by taking Enkidu in and introducing him to the wonders of the world beyond the trees, taking him on adventures to far off lands, and together they sought to kill the evil in the land, slaying the great beast Humbaba¹⁰ (Hoom-Ba-Ba), and later battled the bull of the heavens.

Sadly, it was this last event where Enkidu, in defense of his dearest friend, offended Ishtar (Ish-tar), the goddess of war, love, intimacy and fertility, beyond what they could mend. Ishtar, enraged at his offense, came upon Enkidu and made him sick, draining the life from his body, killing him.¹¹

THE DEATH OF ENKIDU AND THE MOURNING OF GILGAMESH

Gilgamesh was tormented with grief. Enkidu changed his whole life; he changed the very core of Gilgamesh and now he was gone. One can only imagine the guilt Gilgamesh may have felt and how he might have blamed himself. The whole reason they were fighting the bull of the heavens in the presence of Ishtar in the first place was her love (or maybe lust) for Gilgamesh.¹² Ishtar had presented herself to Gilgamesh and proposed to him, only for him to refuse her offer. Ishtar was enraged and sent the bull of the heavens to avenge her. It was after they defeated the bull of the heavens that Ishtar cursed Gilgamesh.¹³ In an attempt to defend Gilgamesh from her wrath, Enkidu turned to Ishtar, and throwing the right thigh of the bull of the heavens at her said, “If I could lay my hands on you, it is this I should do to you, and lash the entrails to your side.” and with that, his fate was sealed.¹⁴

⁹ “The Forest Journey,” in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sandars (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 16.

¹⁰ “The Forest Journey,” *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 16.

¹¹ “Ishtar and Gilgamesh, and the Death of Enkidu,” in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sandars (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 19-23.

¹² “The Coming of Enkidu,” *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 18.

¹³ “Ishtar and Gilgamesh, and the Death of Enkidu,” *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 19.

¹⁴ “Ishtar and Gilgamesh, and the Death of Enkidu,” *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 19.

Gilgamesh's sorrow is palpable in his speech at the death of Enkidu, saying,

*I weep for Enkidu,
my friend,
Bitterly moaning like a woman mourning I weep for my brother.
O Enkidu, my brother, You were the axe at my side,
My hand's strength, the sword in my belt, The shield before me...
Enkidu, young brother.
Hark, There is an echo through all the country like a mother mourning.
Weep all the paths where we walked together...
What is this sleep which holds you now?
You are lost in the dark and cannot hear me.¹⁵*

It is written that after he said this, he placed his hand on Enkidu and felt for the beating of his friend's heart once more, then laid a veil over his face. He "raged like a lion"¹⁶ and made him "rest on a royal bed"¹⁷. And for seven days and seven nights Gilgamesh bemoaned over the loss of Enkidu. This sorrow, mourning, and maybe even the guilt of putting Enkidu in that situation in the first place, weighed on Gilgamesh and ignited an existential crisis of sorts. He cried out his deep fear of death and wished to be able to bring Enkidu back from the underworld Gilgamesh wandered and roamed the forests, fields, and plains and asked the most human question one can ask, "How can I rest, how can I be at peace? Despair is in my heart. What my brother is now, that shall I be when I am dead. Because I am afraid of death I will go as best I can to find Utnapishtim whom they call the Faraway, for he has entered the assembly of the gods."¹⁸

THE SEARCH FOR UTNAPISHTIM

Gilgamesh left the land he cared for, distraught and confused. Enkidu had changed the person and leader he was. If Enkidu could die so easily, what did that mean for him and all the lessons Enkidu taught him? Was empathy and care a weakness? Enkidu died standing up for him, Gilgamesh, his closest friend whom he cared for deeply. In his wanderings, Gilgamesh decided to seek Utnapishtim (Ut-Na-Pish-Tim),

¹⁵ "Ishtar and Gilgamesh, and the Death of Enkidu," *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 22-23.

¹⁶ "Ishtar and Gilgamesh, and the Death of Enkidu," *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 23.

¹⁷ "Ishtar and Gilgamesh, and the Death of Enkidu," *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 23.

¹⁸ "The Search for Everlasting Life," in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sandars (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 24.

the man who was granted immortality after surviving the great flood (a myth that has been around much longer than the Christian and Jewish bibles). Gilgamesh hoped that it would be he who could give him the answer to his question, "How do I obtain immortality?" When Gilgamesh finally reached Utnapishtim, he did not understand why immortality was even something Gilgamesh would want, saying,

There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand for ever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep for ever, does the flood-time of rivers endure? It is only the nymph of the dragon-fly who sheds her larva and sees the sun in his glory. From the days of old there is no permanence. The sleeping and the dead, how alike they are, they are like a painted death.¹⁹

Upon hearing the grief of the king of Uruk, Utnapishtim took pity on Gilgamesh and gave him an opportunity to prove himself worthy of such a gift. He instructed Gilgamesh to "prevail against sleep for six days and seven nights." Though Gilgamesh tried he was still just a mortal man who had endured a rough journey, and he quickly fell asleep. Utnapishtim woke him seven days later, and tells him to go home, but again Utnapishtim showed mercy to the mourning king who pleaded with him and give to Gilgamesh a secret, "*There is a plant that grows under the water, it has a prickle like a thorn, like a rose; it will wound your hands, but if you succeed in taking it, then your hands will hold that which restores his lost youth to a man.*"²⁰ Determined, Gilgamesh set out in search of the plant.

But once he had it in his possession, Gilgamesh would not hold it long. For he set it down to take a bath, and a snake approached, taking it from him. Some sources say the snake ate the plant, while others say the snake simply coiled around the plant and vanished. But either way when Gilgamesh noticed it was gone, he began to lament once again. Why had he done all this; gone on this journey, tired himself out, and gotten his hopes up? Now after everything, after being so close, he had to return home empty-handed.²¹

¹⁹ "The Search for Everlasting Life," *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 28.

²⁰ "The Return," in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sandars (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 32-33.

²¹ "The Return," *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 33.

CONCLUSION

In the end, Gilgamesh lost his closest friend, failed his “quest” and died. So, why do we continue to share his story? A myth where in the end our main character fails²² and yet there are people who dedicate their entire academic lives to the many writings of his story. The story shared here is one of many, and very simplified, but it paints the picture of why Gilgamesh is so important.

Gilgamesh was a leader, a king, and a demigod, and at the start of his story he was *not* a good person. It was not his power or position that made him good. It was not his wealth or influence. It was love for his friend Enkidu. It was this love that allowed him to self-reflect and ask the bigger questions in life. It was this love that changed him on a fundamental level and made him a better person. In a simple way, it is what taught Gilgamesh how to empathize. He was a leader who accepted and embraced change. But he was also just a mortal man, filled with all the fears mankind is tormented with. He was cocky and could be harsh. He mourned the loss of his closest friend and sought a way to put everything back to how it once was. He wanted Enkidu back. He wanted to fix the “weakness of mortality” and didn’t want to die himself. If Enkidu, the man just as strong and capable as him could die so easily, he could too. That fact filled him with terror and unease. But this fear led him to a greater understanding that people of all walks of life have been holding to for thousands of years.

Whether he was a real king or not, I’d be confident in saying the story isn’t all true. However humans tell stories to teach important morals or lessons, and a possible reason the name of Gilgamesh has lived for so long is threefold:

First, there is so much we don’t know about life or what comes next and those questions can be scary at times. And everyone, no matter their size or position will deal with the basic fundamental fact of humanity that is death. It happens to each of us; rich or poor, famous or isolated, no matter what country, gender, or religious belief, death comes. There is no escaping it. You may believe something comes after, or maybe you

²² “The Death of Gilgamesh,” in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. N. K. Sandars (London: Penguin Books, 1960), 34.

don't. Whatever you believe, each and every one of us must die. Gilgamesh was terrified by this reality and did everything he could to escape it and yet, in the end, he too had to accept it. But it was not just accepting the reality of death, he had to learn to embrace it and continue to live a life where he actually tried. It was written that the good Gilgamesh did was of an importance that changed everything, His people who once feared him, mourned his death, lamenting:

*He overcame evil, he will not come again;
Though he was strong of arm he will not rise again;
He had wisdom and a comely face, he will not come again;
He is gone into the mountain, he will not come again;
On the bed of fate he lies, he will not rise again,
From the couch of many colours he will not come again.²³*

This leads to a second point; a good life does not have to be eternal. To leave an impact and make a difference, one does not need all the time in the world. Enkidu died prematurely but left a mark on Gilgamesh, changing him and, in turn, the entire community of Uruk. Gilgamesh became a better king, leader, and friend. He did not sit back and accept the reality of his own death, nor did he wallow in hopelessness for the rest of his mortal life. He did not return to his abusive ways or indulge in his own wants and pleasures without consideration for those he was meant to lead. Because now he knew they would all die anyways. Rather, he returned to his kingdom, empty handed, and ruled with such grace that some of the most beautiful imagery was used to describe the sorrow which followed his death. He made a choice; he chose to leave good behind.

Finally, a leader who accepts faults and makes changes is inspiring and needed. A cocky, arrogant, entitled ruler, will not make a good leader, no matter the power, no matter the money. The story of Gilgamesh teaches this so clearly. It is a lesson we are all drawn to as it is still a concept that affects us today. We can allow ourselves to grieve losses and failures, to change the things we once fervently and publicly believed. Like Gilgamesh, we can continue to show up and strive to make positive change, collaborate, and show respect and empathy. Simply put, a good leader embraces the human aspects of themselves and their human limitations.

²³ "The Death of Gilgamesh," *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 34.

The myths, beliefs and insights of the past are not some products of simple, unintelligent, early peoples. They are the result of thousands of years of coming to terms with the human condition, embracing love and empathy, and at the same time accepting the mortality and insignificance of it all. The people of the past asked the same questions we asked. They felt all the range of emotions we do. We can learn from them, the stories they left behind and the remnants of their human lives. And in turn, we can become better leaders and friends. We can build a better society. And there is *no* example which makes this clearer than that of the legend of Gilgamesh.

*Gilgamesh, the son of Ninsun, lies in the tomb.
At the place of offerings he weighed the bread-offering,
at the place of libation he poured out the wine.
In those days the lord Gilgamesh departed,
the son of Ninsun, the king, peerless, without an equal among men,
who did not neglect Enlil his master.
O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab, **great is thy praise.**²⁴*

²⁴ "The Death of Gilgamesh," *Epic of Gilgamesh*, 34.

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