

Why be a Knight?

By
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What is a knight, and why should anyone want to be one? Isn't knighthood an anachronism? Isn't it an irrelevant relic of a bygone era? Those are all good and important questions and they defy easy explanations. To answer them, we must understand where knighthood comes from and what knighthood is.

The first knights were military officers. Some were mercenaries who offered their military services to local or national governments. Knightly orders – or organized bodies of knights – were established to promote order and to give knights the authority to do their jobs. The Church for the protection of Christian pilgrims authorized some, civil governments authorized others. were established to promote order and to give knights the authority to do their jobs. The Church for the protection of Christian pilgrims authorized some, civil governments authorized others.

Today, knighthood is open to both men and women, though a woman in chivalric orders is styled a dame and not a knight. However, in contemporary usage, knights and dames are equal in rank and responsibilities.

Since knighthood began among military officers, some knightly orders still require that prospective members be either military officers or be able to show that they are of the "officer class". This kind of thinking – in addition to being offensive to most Americans, also misses the point of knighthood rather badly. Knighthood is not about rank or status. Knighthood is a call to service.

A knight is one whose life reflects the age-old principles of chivalry. A knight is someone who has dedicated himself to the lifelong service of others. The formal knight or dame is a public recognition that the person being dubbed already possesses the qualities of knighthood. But knighthood also connects each knight with a network of likeminded people who have dedicated themselves to serving others. This network encourages the knight in service, enables the knight to combine his energies with the energies of others and provides the knight with opportunities to learn and grow.



However, though rank and status are not proper motives for knighthood, they do play an important role. Knighthood is a badge that shows the world that this man or woman is someone special. And knighthood is a continuous reminder of our obligations to others. The medal, the sword, and the mantle are all visible voices that tell the knight, "You are a special person, with special obligations."

One of my friends used to remind his teenage children each time they headed out for an evening of fun with their friends, "Remember your name." He wasn't cautioning them against a momentary loss of memory. He was reminding them that whatever they did would reflect upon the whole family. In much the same way, receiving the mantle of knighthood is a continuing reminder that whatever we do is a reflection on the other brothers and sisters of our knightly band. As knights, we should act like knights.

I am indebted to Max L. O'Starr for this summary *of the duties of a knight in the days of old*:

It behooves a knight to fear God, and with all his power to maintain the Christian faith; To be charitable, and to comfort those who are afflicted; To serve faithfully and to defend his prince and country courageously; To forgive the follies and offenses of other men, and to sincerely embrace the love of friends; To esteem truth, and without respect, to maintain it; To avoid sloth and superfluous ease; To spend his time in honest and virtuous actions; To reverence magistrates and converse with persons of honor; To eschew riot and detest intemperance; To accommodate himself to the humor of honest company and to be no wrangler; To shun the conversation of perverse persons, and to behave himself modestly;

To be sober and discreet, no boaster of his own acts, no speaker of himself; To desire no excessive riches, and patiently endure worldly calamities; To undertake enterprises and defend the rights of others; To support the oppressed and help widows and orphans; To prefer honor before worldly wealth, and be both in words and deeds just and faithful. And in nearly every instance, those same duties apply to everyone who would accept the call to knighthood. That kind of knighthood is not an anachronism. That kind of knighthood is never irrelevant. Which brings us back to the original question: Why should anyone want to be a knight?

We become knights so that, by banding together with other knights, we can multiply our ability to serve. We become knights so that we can encourage – and be encouraged by – our fellow knights in the noble work of serving others. We become knights so that we can learn and grow. We become knights as a continuing reminder of the calling to serve.

