

## ∞ The King and the Boy ∞

Once upon a time there was a kingdom where everyone was happy. Everything was in perfect balance in this peaceful place and no one ever asked any questions.

Then one day it happened: A little boy became mightily *unhappy*.

The little boy was out shopping and he wanted his mother to buy him a dress instead of trousers and a shirt. When the little boy asked his mother about the dress, she kindly looked down at him and, in a soft friendly tone, she explained no.

The little boy couldn't understand in spite of his mother's thorough explanation. All his girl playmates wore dresses, so why couldn't he? He looked back at his mother with big wondering eyes and asked her "Why"?

The mother stood for a moment thinking and then realized that she didn't know the proper answer herself, so she started to ask around for help. But no one she asked knew the answer either. The only advice she got was to go to the king who was regarded as a very wise man.

However, even the king didn't know why it was the little boy should not wear a dress. But he couldn't reveal his ignorance to his people because he thought that would be most embarrassing. He needed to come up with a proper answer to the little boy's question, so he invented the word "gender" and told the little boy's mother to explain to him that he couldn't wear a dress because he was a boy, and boys don't wear dresses.

Happily the little boy's mother went back to her son and told him in the same soft friendly tone as before what the king had told her to say. The little boy looked back at his mother with even bigger wondering eyes than before and once again asked "Why?", whereupon the mother once again had to go back to the king for an answer as she herself wasn't too sure about what the king meant.

The king now realized that he had a bigger problem to deal with than he first thought. Wise as he was, he decided to better define his new term "gender" by trying to figure out the difference between boys and girls and men and women. He thought that by doing this he would make clear to all of his people what gender they each belonged to and consistently what was expected from them. No more questions would be asked, and everyone would go back to peace and happiness again.

As the king started to define what he thought are gender differences amongst his people, he used small pieces of wood to show what he imagined in both genders for character and looks. He shaped the pieces so they easily could remind him of what he considered to be male or female characteristics, and he made it possible for the wooden pieces to fit together to make an image of a person, either male or female.

When the king finished he had a lot of wooden pieces and he felt very satisfied with himself. But before he could make use of them, he had to see if these pieces worked as he had planned. So in secret he tried to label the people of his kingdom, male or female, by using his wooden pieces.

First he tried with a gardener he knew well, a big strong man. He built the gardener with as many pieces as he thought fit him, but the resulting person didn't turn out the way he thought it should. The wooden pieces he thought matched the gardener's personality and looks didn't fit together, and there was a strange mix of male and female pieces amongst them. The pattern the wooden pieces showed was a mess, and the king had to admit that to himself.

So the king tried once again with another person, a woman he also knew very well. But the same thing happened. When he examined the wooden person he'd constructed from all the characteristics of this woman, he had a big mess once again and, as before, there was this strange mix of male and female pieces he wasn't able to understand.

The king became puzzled. But still wise as he was, he asked for the little boy who had started this confusion. The king spread out all the wooden pieces on a big table in a big room in his castle, and then he showed and explained every wooden piece to the little boy (but he didn't tell him about the male and female difference in shape). The king then asked the little boy to select those pieces he thought fitted him most.

The little boy seemed to like this game, easily selecting his pieces and putting them all together quickly. And now, right before the amazed king's eyes, the image of a little girl emerged.

All pieces fitted exactly to create a full person. However, there was this one odd piece that the king noticed because it showed a vagina. The king gently asked the little boy why he had chosen that piece and not the piece showing a penis. "After all", he said to the little boy, "You have a penis, haven't you"?

The little boy calmly looked up at the king and answered, "But it's wrong".

The king straightened up, looking very surprised by the little boy's answer, and he started to examine the image more thoroughly. He couldn't find anything wrong with it. The little boy hadn't made a mess of the pieces he had chosen, and the king had to admit that he would probably have done so if he had tried himself.

The king was forced to conclude that the little boy knew exactly what gender he belonged to and, as the king saw it now, the little boy was right. It was just that one wooden piece that was out of place. The kindly king looked at the little boy with concern, since if he was able to spot this error so easily, so would everyone else in his kingdom.

He thought, "Now what to do... How do I fix the problem"? With a deep frown in his forehead the king stood there thinking hard, with the little boy looking up at him with big trusting eyes.

After a long while the king suddenly smiled back at the boy. With a small tingling bell he called for his royal magician. When the magician silently emerged before him, the king told him to fix the problem so that the last wooden piece would fit.

The magician looked at the image the little boy had created of himself and scratched his head, puzzled. Then he said to the king, "But all the pieces fit together, so what am I supposed to do"?

The king laughed silently back at him and said, "Oh no, it's not the wooden pieces that are wrong; it's this little boy that doesn't properly match his own image".

The magician looked at the little boy and then started to smile widely as he began to understand. He held his magic wand over the little boy's head and mumbled some strange words, and then he silently vanished in the same magical manner he had appeared.

It worked. The former unhappy little boy, now a happy little girl, finally was able to accompany her mother and buy that dress she so eagerly wanted.

And the king now understood that neither he nor anyone else could tell the true gender of another person, but anyone using his wooden pieces could reveal the proper answer to him. Each person alone knew by heart how to put their pieces together, making them fit, and the wooden pieces that in the beginning had puzzled him so now made him understand.

The king named his wooden pieces a "puzzle", and he used it whenever a gender question was brought before him. And he used it wisely, so everyone in his kingdom lived happily ever after.

And, if you didn't know it before, now you know the true origin of a puzzle.