



## FILM REVIEW: *THE QUEEN*

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For someone like me, who grew up in a democracy birthed in the overthrow of the British monarchy, the notion of royalty as servant-leaders seems paradoxical. The royal family of Great Britain today appears to consume a disproportionate share of the country's resources in return for performing largely ceremonial duties prescribed more by tradition than necessity.

In the film *The Queen*, however, we see how Diana, Princess of Wales, endeared herself to not only the people of the British Commonwealth, but the entire world, by presenting herself in ways that could be interpreted as servant-leadership. Moreover, we see how, through Diana's death, Queen Elizabeth II came to understand her own role as a servant of the people. Throughout the film there is tension between protocol and relationship, tradition and compassion, service and leadership.

In the early scenes of the movie, we see the new prime minister, Tony Blair, instructed on how to interact with the queen, for example, not to extend his hand until she has extended hers, not to turn his back on her but to back out of the room at the end of a meeting. The protocol seems silly, but harmless; a metaphor, perhaps, for how some view the monarchy.

With Diana's death, however, the harmless protocol that the queen relies on threatens to undermine her as a leader. In the film, Diana is depicted as having lost her formal position as a member of the royal family in her divorce settlement with Prince Charles.<sup>1</sup> However, as the mother of the two young men second and third in line to the throne, she was family to some of the royals. The queen privileges title over relationship, suggesting



protocol dictated whether she should comment on Diana's death or involve the royal family in the funeral arrangements.

As prime minister, however, Blair is free to comment, and his characterization of Diana as "the people's princess" resonates with those in Britain and around the world, many of who remembered Diana embracing AIDS patients at a time when such contact was considered risky. That simple act of compassion was, by virtue of Diana's position in the royal family, an act of leadership, modeling the way those suffering from HIV/AIDS should be treated. Moreover, it was simultaneously an act of servant-leadership. While we know now that such contact did not put the princess in any danger, at the time, her willingness to risk exposure to the virus in order to both physically and emotionally embrace its victims was a powerful statement about compassion, relationship, and the humanity that we all share.

Greenleaf said the best test of servant-leadership is that those served become "healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants," and that such leadership benefits the least privileged in society (1977, pp. 13-14). Diana exemplified how even a member of the royal family could be a servant-leader without endangering the status of the monarchy.

The public sensed that Diana strove to engender this attitude in her two children. Recent statements by Prince Harry indicating that he would not want to remain in Britain while the soldiers he trained were deployed to a war zone suggest that she was successful.

*The Queen* depicts Diana's former husband, Prince Charles, as understanding the importance of relationships over protocol, but unable to break out of the constraints of tradition. The queen's decisions as ruler prevail over his as father and former spouse. However, the focus of the film is on the queen's own transformation.

The queen reluctantly agrees that Diana's funeral can be a state occasion and that Prince Charles can use a plane at the service of the monarchy to return Diana's remains to England. However, she refuses to respond personally to the public outpouring of grief. She resists Blair's entreaties that



she return to London from her estate in Scotland and declines to make any public statement about Diana's death. Her response is not due only to her reliance on protocol; she has been raised to believe public displays of emotion are inappropriate for the monarch and will be viewed by her "subjects" as weakness. Further complicating her reaction is her history with Diana. The queen is not about to take on a new way of being a queen to honor the woman the queen believes made her life miserable through her public discussions of her troubled relationships with her husband and the rest of the royal family.

Blair, who is initially represented as being anti-monarchy, comes to appreciate the difficulty the queen has abandoning tradition. When his advisors start to treat the dilemma as a public relations opportunity, Blair himself becomes a servant-leader, simultaneously working to give the queen space in which to come to terms with her responsibility to the people and trying to help those around him appreciate her position. In caring for the queen as a human being rather than as a symbol, Blair frees her to show her humanity in public.

The notion that her role is to serve her subjects is not a new one for the queen; what emerges from this experience is a new understanding of service, one that is embedded in relationship rather than duty. What the people want from their queen is not guidance or ritual; they want their queen to be with them physically and emotionally as they grieve. They want her to leave her retreat in Scotland to be with them in London, to lower the flag over Buckingham Palace, and to speak about Diana in a way that indicates that all of England shares in her loss.

The queen humbles herself by considering that her approach, while supported by tradition, may not be what is needed by the people she is to serve. Even though she does not completely understand their need that she join them in their grief, she accepts that her role must change. She comes to see that in surrendering to that change, she is not weakened, but emerges stronger. In this way, she herself grows and becomes freer, wiser.



#### NOTE

1. The pre-hearing report of the inquest into Princess Diana's death indicated that in real life, the queen continued to regard Diana as a member of the royal household ("Coroner's Inquest," 2007, ¶ 34).

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#### REFERENCES

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