

The Mage's Wheels

The mage built his wheels in a narrow tower above the river. From the windows he could see the river threading past the stones, tugging at them like a child testing loose teeth, always on its way somewhere else, never interested in arriving.

His wheels were fine things: cast in brass, embedded with precious stones, words engraved with care. Each wheel turned another. Virtue answered circumstance. Question answered query. He did not call it prophecy. He called it 'ordering'. He aspired to a complete ordering.

When the wheels were finished, villagers climbed the stairs to watch them turn.

A child spun them first. "Justice and Mercy," she read.

The mage smiled and began to explain. The child interrupted. "Which comes first?"

The mage hesitated, then adjusted a turnbuckle.

Another visitor spun. "Patience and Action." Another furrowed brow. Another peg turned.

For a time, the wheels seemed to be working well enough.

Then the questions deepened.

A farmer asked why telling the truth had cost him his land. A widow asked which wheel explained keeping faith when nothing was resolved. A boy asked where safety was, since it never appeared.

Each time, the mage expanded the system. He added qualifiers. Nested gears. New rings to catch what had slipped through. The wheels grew heavier. Some required two hands to move.

They answered more — and satisfied less.

One afternoon, the village fool arrived. He spun the wheels hard. They rattled, then settled.

"Faithful and Lost," he read.

"Lost isn't there," the mage said.

The fool laughed. "Yes it is — right there between the words! After all, lost happens!"

That night, the mage added yet more rings.

By winter, the tower was so packed with wheels there was barely room for people. The answers were precise, exhaustive, and incomprehensible. Visitors left confused or tired. The mage himself kept notes now — scraps of parchment tucked into the spokes. Sometimes the notes fell out.

One evening, turning the wheels alone, he spun them with particular zeal. They rattled, wobbled, and finally settled on a pairing he had never imagined.

“Finite Infinity,” he read.

He stared at the words for a long time. He tried to explain them to himself — and got nowhere.

He reached for a pencil — then stopped.

To account for what the wheels now reached toward, they would need more room — more distinctions, more of everything than any tower could hold. They would need to be wider than the fields, wider than the river, large enough to turn with the seasons themselves.

They’d need to be wheels as large as the world.

He set the pencil down and went to bed, his head a cauldron of impossible ideas.

A few days later, he dismantled most of the machine. He kept only two small wheels.

On one, he placed roots: Faith, Justice, Mercy, Patience. On the other, their shapes: Faithful, Just, Merciful, Patient.

No outcomes. No explanations.

And when visitors came, he no longer explained. He only smiled and nodded toward the wheels.

One afternoon, he spun them himself. They slowed and settled.

“Merciful Courage,” he read.

He did not interpret it. He leaned back and let the words hang between his ears. “I’m going to have to think about this one.”

So he swept the floor and took a nap.

Later that afternoon, the girl came and spun without asking permission. The mage didn’t mind.

“Patient Justice,” she read, and made a face as if she’d been handed something heavy and oddly shaped.

The mage poured water and set two cups between them, without saying a word.

By the end of the week, people were spinning the wheels the way they might touch a relic. Some laughed and spun again immediately. Some left and returned days later, to see what new pairing would meet them.

The mage watched all of it, silently. There was nothing to say.

He moved the larger wheels to the basement. He did not destroy them. He simply stopped feeding a machine that grew hungrier the more it was fed.

The small wheels stayed by the window, ready for any hand that cared to spin them.

— William Zeitler
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