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Watership Down: The Individual & Society

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Watership Down: The Individual & Society

Randy C. Welch

In *Watership Down*, Richard Adams weaves a number of themes into the fabric of the story, one of the most pervasive being society's treatment of individual talents. Each of the four warrens that Adams describes affects individuals in distinctly different ways and only one, *Watership Down*, truly appreciates and fosters the unique gifts of its members.

Hazel-rah incorporates this ethic as part of his leadership style and therein lies his success. He relies on the talents of other rabbits when he knows his own to be inferior. Unlike most leaders, he does not have a problem with pride or a runaway ego. When the initial embassy goes to Efrafra, Hazel readily concedes its leadership role to Holly, who is more impressive in appearance and as a speaker. He depends upon Blackberry's superior mind to devise a trick to foil Woundwort, Bigwig's immense strength to defend the warren, and of course Fiver's insight to give him direction. It is significant that when Hazel deviated from this policy, disaster ensued: ignoring Fiver's warning against the Nuthanger raid nearly cost Hazel his life.

Hazel is an organizer. Only he can keep the rabbits together on their migration when several times they would have scattered, such as at the river crossing or in the common. He directs the rabbits' activities because he has the courage to take the initiative. He shows this early on by proposing the recruitment of a large-scale departure from Sandleford rather than simply clearing off with a few friends. He does so out of a feeling of responsibility that if he is escaping a catastrophe, he must help others to do so too. Responsibility, of course, always marks a good leader.

Another mark of a good leader is his protection of the weak. Early on Hazel resolves to protect the rights of the smallest rabbits, Fiver and Pipkin, against a bully like Bigwig. When Strawberry first joins the troupe, Hazel protects him against the others' hostility until he can establish his own niche. He does so again with Groundsel and the other surrendered Efrafrans.

Hazel's concern for all individuals under his authority manifests itself again in his attention to their injuries. He takes it upon himself to remove Pipkin's thorn and clean Buckthorn's and Holly's wounds. He cares not only about his community's social health but its physical health as well.

Hazel's rule is lax and tolerant, allowing his rabbits great personal freedom. Only once does he coerce his subjects - forcing them to dig a burrow for Kehaar after

first discovering him - but that was to save the gull's life in order to benefit the whole warren later by solving the crucial problem of finding mates. The rest of the time, he holds the reins of power loosely, encouraging discussion and tolerating dissent, and relying on persuasion and consensus formation to arrive at group policies. He leads by example, not force, as Blackberry tells him: "You go in front and take the risks first." (Richard Adams, *Watership Down*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1972, p. 137.) He is the first to begin digging the Honeycomb and the first to forage insects to feed Kehaar.

Yet another of Hazel's personal traits that makes him a good leader is his openness to change. The Threarah's conservatism led to his downfall while Hazel's open mind enhanced his success. Saving a mouse and a seagull was a revolutionary idea scorned by ordinary rabbits, yet Hazel saw it as an innovation which could benefit his community. As it proved, each rescue played an essential role in establishing and continuing the warren. Without them there would have been no does and no early warning of Woundwort's sneak attack. Hazel was also willing to use innovations such as boats even though he did not understand them. He was a pragmatic rabbit, adopting techniques old or new as long as they served the common good. His approach was an eclectic one: copying Cowslip's great burrow and Woundwort's hole concealment practices as useful inventions while rejecting the grimmer aspects of both societies.

Such is the interplay of society and individual: Hazel's gifts as a leader shaped the society of *Watership Down*, which in turn encouraged the expression of the individual gifts of its members. Without Hazel's exceptional abilities, *Watership Down* and its rabbits would not have been exceptional either. And if his rabbits had not been talented, Hazel's leadership would not have been successful.

In contrast, General Woundwort was a very effective leader but not a good one, since he benefited neither the commonwealth nor the individual growth of his subjects. To be sure, he gave them protection and long lives, but their lives were without freedom, excitement, or fulfillment and on the whole seemed without purpose. Woundwort was more interested in rabbits as a quantitative measure of his success as a leader, while Hazel chose a qualitative scale of how happy, free, and compatible his rabbits were.

Woundwort, like Hazel, was an organizer, but he carried this propensity to extremes and organized every facet of a rabbit's life, whereas Hazel organized rabbits only on a

temporary basis to meet some pressing need like building a shelter. Woundwort was obsessed with control and determined precisely when and how a rabbit could eat, sleep, pass hraka, or show his nose above ground. His system of officers, sentries, and runners was remarkably efficient and reveals his talents as an administrator. His courage was unquestionable as he demonstrated by fighting elil without hesitation, including taking on a dog after being torn up by Bigwig. And though he was afraid of Bigwig and his supposedly greater Chief Rabbit, Woundwort was doggedly determined to defeat them when other rabbits wanted to run away. Using his courage, Woundwort led by example as well as by coercive administration.

Yet whatever his talents, he was a bureaucrat gone wrong. Hazel's gifts made Watership Down a healthy society while Woundwort's stifled Efrafra. Individual abilities at the pinnacle of a power hierarchy are crucial in determining how other individuals behave. Woundwort found, but perhaps never admitted to himself, that coercion and oppression breed good servants but not good leaders. While his rabbits were eager to excel as soldiers, they were terrified of him and afraid to take any initiative. The doe's initiative to depart and alleviate the population problem was categorically rejected and later punished. Groundsel felt deeply inferior to Woundwort and thought that he had failed the general rather than the reverse. When Nelthilta revealed the breakout plan, Captain Chervil was primarily concerned with protesting his innocence in the matter rather than suggesting an immediate arrest of Bigwig. When General Woundwort had lost three officers, he found it very difficult even in a very large warren to replace them.

The episode of the fox killing a doe after the Efrafran escape illustrates the stifling nature of Woundwort's system exceedingly well. Blackavar, talented as a tracker and more experienced than any other rabbit present, strongly advised against stopping in fox-prone country but was overruled by Hazel. After a fox materialized and caught a doe, Bigwig tried to tell Blackavar that he had been right all along, yet Blackavar had purged the advice from his mind in what Hyzenthlay described as a common Efrafran practice. Quite contrary to Watership Down, Efrafra did its best to stamp out nonconformity and stifle the individual.

Cowslip's Warren was stifling in a different way since it had no physical coercion or administrative control structure. Its oppression operated strictly through psychology and was self-imposed by every rabbit. Woundwort's oppression had psychological effects, but these were by-products of a crude system of brute force unlike the sophisticated nets of deception at Cowslip's Warren.

The warren of snares was chiefly occupied with maintaining its self-deception,

and it either discouraged or warped individual talents towards this goal. Leadership was one stifled talent since, as Fiver pointed out, a leader must keep his people from death and the rabbits had willingly accepted death in return for prosperity and did not want anyone to lead them back to sanity and life. Cowslip and his rabbits attacked Holly's survivors for their association with Hazel, since Hazel had led Strawberry and his own folk away from the warren after revealing its folly. Leaders who could see the truth and act on it were to be crushed at all costs; even asking "Where?" hinted at the warren's awful truth and such inquiry was also stifled automatically.

Other talents were encouraged in perverted forms to glorify the warren and mask its folly. The rabbits were proud of their mosaics and singing and dancing even though these were unnatural for rabbits. Their wisest folk and visionaries were so twisted by the warren's dark secret and their own moral sellout to materialism that they used their talents to justify and exalt the warren, not denounce it. Only Fiver, an outsider, could use his insight to see through the deception. His counterpart, Silverweed, worked to conceal and glorify it.

Cowslip's society, like the others, harnessed individual talents to serve its own goals. His warren pursued delusion, Woundwort's fostered authoritarian repression, and Hazel's promoted freedom. The Sandelford Warren was something of a mix between Efrafra and Watership Down and had the goals of limited freedom and limited control. The problem with the Threarah's society was that it was too old, tradition-bound, and top-heavy. There was little appreciation of younger rabbits in the Owsla and none for outskirters. The Threarah was too old and cautious, half-believing Fiver's prophecy but too worried about preserving his authority to leave. Conceivably, he could have dispersed most of the warren in small groups that would not have attracted elil and could have settled safely elsewhere, but that would have entailed a loss of power which he found unacceptable.

Adams does not delve deeply into the Sandelford social network, and it would have been unfair to blame the Threarah for having a sick society like Efrafra, but the Chief Rabbit did fail to value the outskirters who later proved to have outstanding abilities once given the chance to express them. Adams carefully constructs the Watership society so that each rabbit has an important role to play and fits into a niche in the social fabric. The achievements of Hazel's rabbits are attributable to pioneer vitality and creativity, a young colony like Carthage or the U.S. outgrowing and overshadowing the accomplishments of its fatherland. This pioneer success is due to the joy of a newfound freedom, a readiness to change, and the need to pull together with each member's input. Such an ethos allowed Hazel to become the natural leader of the exiles, and he perpetuated that ethos at Watership Down.

What had been a couple of rebel Owsla and a pack of harried yearlings became the founders of a dynamic, indomitable new state.

Bigwig was a mere sentry for the Threarah but became captain of the Honeycomb Owsla and defeated Woundwort when even his former superior, Holly, probably could not have done so. Silver was Bigwig's second-in-command, a reliable officer and sturdy supporter who had been teased and mistreated in the Sandleford Owsla. Buckthorn was another sturdy fighter and follower to back up Bigwig: every general needs his troops, and Buckthorn was noted also for being decent and straightforward, a kind of model citizen that every society needs. Together they formed the brute force to support authority (Hazel) when times were tough and rabbits became rebellious as Hawkbit and his friends were in the common.

Holly was part of the Honeycomb Owsla but also played the role of senior statesman. He was well-respected by all the rabbits for his natural authority, tracking ability, judgment, and experience in command and was chosen as leader of the embassy to Efrafra. Other respected advisors were Blackberry and Fiver. Blackberry, a mere outskirter at Sandleford, proved to be exceptionally brilliant and provided the society with clever plans like Bigwig's spy mission in Efrafra and the use of boats. Fiver was both intelligent and intuitive, providing the society with the insight to see through Cowslip's deception and with visionary goals like reaching Watership Down to build a new and better home, though at Sandleford he was dismissed as only a runt. Together the intellectuals helped their people solve their problems through new policies (having bucks dig for themselves) and technological innovations (using boats). By identifying closely with Hazel and accepting his authority, they helped to legitimate his rule with brains while Bigwig's Owsla legitimated it with brawn.

Rabbits such as Pipkin, Hawkbit, and Acorn provided the rank-and-file which every society needs since not everyone can play Indian chief. Pipkin in particular was devoutly loyal to Hazel and provided him with unquestioning support when he needed it, such as on the scouting mission to Nuthanger or when Hazel first proposed digging burrows on Watership Down. Yet though followers, the rank-and-file made worthwhile contributions of their own. Hawkbit discovered the safety of the chalk holes on the downs which saved the rabbits from the elil at night, and Acorn proved especially adept at grubbing insects to feed Kehaar. Pipkin, besides being loyal, proved an expert at compassion and therapy by soothing Holly's anguish in the chalk holes.

Every rabbit had some forte that aided the society. Dandelion's exceptional speed made him useful as a scout, and his story-telling ability provided entertainment during tense moments in addition to keeping alive the rabbits' culture, since stories were the repositories of their wisdom,

religion, and history. Bluebell was similar to Dandelion in providing relief in tense moments, especially with humor.

Strawberry played an important role as architect of the Honeycomb, the warren's wonder. He showed the Sandleford survivors that cultural contact can bring in new, better ideas and probably made them more willing to accept the Efrafrans and hutch rabbits. Knowing firsthand the difficulties of fitting into a new society, he took it upon himself to help Boxwood make the adjustment. He was also an eloquent speaker for the embassy to Efrafra and spoke well about the need for rabbits to be natural and cooperate with each other since he knew personally how dreadful an unnatural way of life could be.

Little mention is made of Boxwood but Blackavar is noteworthy as a tracker, an important skill for rabbits. In sum, each rabbit used his special talents to help the others and improve their society. That is why it survived the Sandleford zorn, passed through Cowslip's deception, and cheated and defeated a terrible general all without a single buck casualty. Watership Down's success stands in clear contrast to the shortcomings of the other warrens and is Adams' statement that the best society is one which protects and values the individual. It induces people everywhere to ask: are we cheating ourselves by stifling or ignoring the creative gifts of our own "outskirters"?



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