



FABLES WITH ATTITUDE:

Life Lessons for the 21st Century

Katharina Manassis

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The Three Little Squirrels

It was autumn, and the squirrels were busy gathering nuts in the woods. They gathered hazelnuts, acorns, and all kinds of seeds to bury for the cold winter ahead. At the edge of the forest stood a young walnut tree that was bearing fruit for the very first time. Nobody paid much attention to these nuts, because they were not familiar with them. The squirrels scurried beside the tree, around it, and underneath it, barely aware it was there. Their world existed between a lush, green canopy of leaves above, and the brown, nut-burying soil below. Little else mattered.

Just then Quiver-Tail, a rather nervous young squirrel, scurried underneath the tree. A big, green walnut fell on his head.

“Ouch!” exclaimed Quiver-Tail, “What was that?”

Seeing the large green object, hard as a stone, he concluded it could be only one thing: a piece of the sky. “The sky is falling! Somebody do something!” Quiver-Tail shrieked in horror. He ran in every direction, not knowing where to go, until the whole forest was in an uproar.

Steady-Heart, another young squirrel, went to investigate the situation. Just as he passed underneath the tree, he too was struck by a big, green walnut. Seeing the hard, green object, he too believed it was a piece of the sky.

“Oh well, the sky is falling. I suppose we’ll all die,” Steady-Heart sighed sadly. Then he pondered, “At least it’s not my fault. Nobody can control the sky.” He seemed to find this idea reassuring. He went on his way, joined his family for a final nut-feast, and looked at his favorite tree one last time. Steady-Heart was resigned to his fate, but content.

Big Foot, another young squirrel, heard what had happened. Big Foot decided he was not ready to give up without a fight. Boldly he marched to the walnut tree, stood directly beneath it, and waited. A few minutes later, he got what he came for. There was a loud thud as a big, green walnut landed directly on his head.

When he regained consciousness, Big Foot leaped into action. He grasped the walnut with both paws and began to gnaw. A little while later, only a few bits of walnut shell remained. Encouraged by his success, he then devoured the other two fallen walnuts as well.

“There!” Big Foot shouted proudly, “I put a stop to this sky-falling business!”

Everyone cheered with joy. They applauded, sang songs praising the new hero, and celebrated the salvation of their community with a huge nut feast.

Only one, older squirrel avoided the festivities. Zoda Squirrel examined the tree and the remaining bits of “sky” slowly, turning them this way and that way. He searched his memory long and hard. Finally, he nodded in recognition. He chuckled to himself and went home. Zoda knew they were just walnuts.

Busy Bees

Near the edge of the woods was a large field of wild flowers of all sizes and colors: purple tall ones, little white ones, flowers with large, beautiful blossoms, and a few ugly little nettles. Nettles don't have great blossoms, and they irritate everyone with their prickly leaves, so most creatures consider them one of the lowest forms of flora.

One year, a colony of bees built a hive in a tree just at the edge of the field. All day long the worker bees flew about from flower to flower, pollinating them and collecting nectar. They brought the nectar back to the queen bee who sat in the middle of the hive, ruling her subjects proudly. Every worker wanted to impress the queen. It was considered a great achievement and honor.

The summer was coming to an end though, and the lowly nettles still hadn't been pollinated.

"Help us!" they called out to the bees, "Our species will die out if you continue to ignore us!"

"We're too busy," replied the worker bees, "We have more prominent flowers to pollinate." One particularly clever bee added, "And besides, you have a low HQ!"

"What's that?" wondered the nettles.

"A low Honey Quotient, of course," said the bee, "Your nectar yields very little honey per minute spent pollinating you."

And so the nettles continued to be ignored that summer.

Autumn came, and the forest was a very busy place. Everywhere animals were scurrying about, searching for food to store for the long, cold winter ahead. The bears didn't store food though. They just tried to eat as much as they could until they were fat enough to hibernate through the winter without starving.

A big, black bear lived very near the beehive. He had been eyeing it all summer. "Mmm...lots of honey!" he thought to himself.

One day, he decided it was time to get the honey so he could eat it before winter. He swiped at the hive with his big, furry paw. The bees tried to sting him but his fur was thick and few of their stingers to get through.

Inside the hive, the bees were buzzing frantically, "The hive is being destroyed! What shall we do?"

“I know,” said the clever bee, “Maybe we can get the nettles to sting the bear’s legs while we sting his face. If we work together, I’ll bet we can get him to leave!”

“Brilliant!” exclaimed the queen, “Go ask them to help.”

So the worker bees went to the nettles and asked for their help.

“Sorry,” the nettles replied, “We’re too busy.”

The Three Partially Blind Mice

Years ago, there was a great famine in Mouseland. Rations got smaller and smaller until mice began to starve. Something had to be done. The Council of Rodents, a group of the oldest, wisest mice, came to a decision: since young, thin mice were more likely to starve than old, fat mice, the youngest mice would be sent in boats down the river to other lands where food was plentiful.

Flopsy, Mopsy, and Alice were placed in the smallest boat: an old cookie box with just enough room for the three of them. To fit in, Alice had to face forward, Mopsy backward, and Flopsy sideways. After a while on the river, this arrangement began to affect how each of them saw the world.

Alice was unaware of the shore on either side of the river. She looked further and further ahead to spot the promised “land of plenty.”

“I’m sure it’s around the next bend!” she shouted, “You’ll see. If only we get around that next bend we’ll all be safe and fed.”

Looking ahead kept her hopeful, so she pulled on her oar harder than either of the other two mice, and kept the boat speeding along. Unfortunately, what she saw around the next bend was not much different from what she had seen before. As soon as she realized this, she started up again, “If only we can get around the NEXT bend, we’ll all be safe and fed!” As her words repeated themselves again and again, Flopsy and Mopsy began to ignore her.

Flopsy, facing out the side of the box, only saw what surrounded the little boat at each moment. He shouted “Who cares about what’s ahead? Look at the funny creatures on the shore! Look at the fish! Let’s see if I can catch one.” And he proceeded to playfully swipe at the fish with his paws. Of course, they were far too fast and slippery for him to catch. Flopsy didn’t care. He was having so much fun that he just let his oar drift in the current.

Mopsy faced back, and saw only what the mice had left behind. He pulled on his oar without enthusiasm, resenting the whole situation. It wasn’t fair for the older mice to abandon the young ones this way, sending them to an uncertain future. Mopsy thought they should be made to pay for their cruelty.

The little boat proceeded smoothly down the river for many days. Further downstream, however, the water became shallow and turbulent.

When the three little mice got to this part of the river, they faced trouble. Alice was supposed to steer, but she was looking around the next bend, ignoring the rocks next to the boat. Flopsy could have pushed the boat away from the rocks, but he had been too busy playing to learn how to use his oar. Mopsy was still moping about the past, so he wasn't aware of the danger. Inevitably, there was a giant crash, and the boat began to sink.

"Help! Save us!" squealed the mice as they gasped for air.

Fortunately, a smart mouse on the shore heard them. "I'll throw you guys a lifeline," he offered, "on one condition."

"Anything! Anything!" squealed the desperate mice.

"Get some glasses, so you can see the world as it is!" he shouted back.

The mice agreed. What choice did they have? Soon they were rescued.

On the shore, things already seemed clearer to them. Each could see what he or she had been missing. Mopsy and Alice had been so caught up in the past and the future, they hadn't been aware of what was going on in the present moment. Flopsy had enjoyed the moment, but with no thought of the consequences.

Only the mice on shore had the whole picture. They had learned the lessons of the past, but didn't dwell on them. They enjoyed the moment but did not waste time foolishly. They anticipated future needs, but didn't become preoccupied with them. Each day, young and old searched for food together, sang songs together, ate heartily together, and stored up what was left over for later. That is why their part of the river was called the "land of plenty."

The Pecking Order Part I: A Dog's Life

Barney the dog did a fine job protecting the chickens, scared off many burglars, and generally kept the Brown farm safe. He was an exceptionally good guard dog, and was proud of it. Barney had only one problem: he took things very personally.

One year, Farmer Brown had financial troubles, and Barney's table scraps became less appetizing. "Why is he punishing me?" Barney howled.

Another year, a very stupid chicken wandered outside the fence, right into the path of a fox. Barney rescued her in the nick of time, but accused her loudly, "You're trying to get me in trouble, aren't you?" There always seemed to be some reason why Barney felt unfairly treated.

Finally, something happened that really was unfair: the corn field expansion. One year, the old farmer realized he had more chickens than he could feed, so he had to increase his acreage of corn. Without thinking much, he picked an area with soft earth, so he wouldn't break his back digging it, and fertile soil for the corn. It happened to include a large chunk of Barney's play area.

"This is the last straw!" snapped Barney, "All these years of loyal service, and this is the thanks I get!" He barked loudly and persistently that day and every day for a long time. He hoped the farmer would realize how unfair he was being.

Unfortunately, the barking got on the farmer's nerves, and he started disliking it so much that he began treating Barney worse than before. Barney took this as evidence that the farmer had hated him all along, and protested even more loudly, resulting in more irritation in the farmer and more bad treatment.

The other animals were not sympathetic to Barney's plight either. "He raises a stink about every little thing and has for years," the chickens muttered, "Barney's just paranoid."

Around the same time, Fonz the pig found a leak in the roof of his pen. Fonz was a very cool customer. His motto was "Don't sweat the small stuff." He was usually content and quiet but now began oinking loudly when the farmer's son came to feed him.

"Look Dad, the roof of the pig pen is broken and Fonz is getting soaked in the rain!" the boy reported.

"You're right. Let's fix that this weekend," responded the farmer. True to his word, the roof was fixed.

Barney went ballistic. “I’ve been howling for weeks about my play area and nothing happens, and you get your roof fixed after you only complained once! How can that be?” It was the ultimate injustice.

“Simple,” shrugged Fonz, “I only complained once.”

The Pecking Order Part II: The Rooster’s Response

Roger the Rooster was Barney’s only friend. He liked Barney and respected his work as a guard dog.

“Barney,” he pleaded, “cut out the barking, or Farmer Brown might get really mad and replace you!”

“Well if he thinks he can walk all over me...” started Barney.

“He can. He’s the boss,” said Roger, “But let me see if I can help. Promise to keep the noise down until I get back.”

And so, Roger went off to see the farmer’s wife, Mrs. Brown. Roger had won several ribbons at the county fair for her, so he thought she might do him a favor in return.

“Mrs. Brown, I’d be very grateful if you could convince your husband to expand the cornfield to the west, so Barney the dog still has room to play. It would calm Barney down so he would bark less and do his job better, which would benefit all of us. Can you talk to Mr. Brown?”

“Sorry, Roger, but I’m not causing a family argument over a corn patch,” she replied, “I have bigger problems. Go back to doing your job. Keep the chickens laying eggs, and wake us all up on time like you always have. You’re one of the few animals around here I can rely on.”

Although Roger appreciated the implied compliment, he was very disappointed. What would he tell Barney? He thought for a moment. Perhaps he could try one more thing. The farmer and his wife could ignore his request, but not if the whole barnyard agreed. He started a petition. It simply read “Give Barney his play area back.”

He went to Henrietta, a white hen with a large brown beak. “Are you kidding?” she clucked, “I’ve just got Mrs. Brown to recognize my talents. She’s teaching me to do special tricks. I’ll soon be her favorite hen.” She didn’t sign.

He went to Roberta, a small, yellow hen. “No way!” she shrieked, “Anyone who signst that will end up in tomorrow’s soup!”

Nellie was the most productive egg-layer in the barn. Nobody knew what she looked like because she sat in a dark corner of the barn all day, concentrating on laying, and not talking to anyone. “Barney’s a trouble-maker” was her curt reply to Roger, and she didn’t give him a second glance.

It was hopeless. Nobody was willing to stand up to the Browns, and Roger knew he couldn’t do it alone. He couldn’t face Barney, so he went to sleep.

After hours of tossing and turning, he saw the sun starting to rise. “Time to crow,” he thought. Then it hit him, “Yes, that’s it!” He let out the loudest, most insistent crow ever.

“Cock-a-doodle-doo!” is what the Browns heard. But the animals understood rooster language, and they knew what he really crowed was “Dog’s been abused!”

Roger returned to his friend and explained, “Here’s the deal: I’ll crow every morning about the injustice done to you. I have to crow anyways so the Browns won’t notice. That way, you can stop barking and getting into trouble, but still know that the farmer’s cruelty will never be forgotten.”

Barney agreed. He stopped barking and returned to being an exceptional guard dog. Farmer Brown was less annoyed and treated him better. The barnyard was peaceful, except for Roger’s daily wake-up call.

The Thinker

Among the calves born on the Stratton farm, one stood out: Socrates. Socrates was a fine, ebony male, quick on his feet, strong, and obviously smart. He had all the attributes of a future leader, thought Farmer Stratton. As time went on though, young Socrates became less playful than his fellow calves and more thoughtful. He spent long hours pondering the meaning of his life.

After all, every other animal seemed to have a clear purpose on the farm. The female calves were destined to grow into cows and produce milk, the hens laid eggs, the rooster crowed to wake everyone in the morning, the dog had guard duty, and so on.

But what was the purpose of being a male in a herd of dairy cows? Sure, he could father calves, but so what? He had hardly any part in raising them, and before long they were independent young cows. He didn't feel very useful.

Seeing Socrates moping, Farmer Stratton thought "This isn't healthy for a young bull. Maybe giving him a job will help." Socrates was given a yoke and taught to thresh corn.

"Finally, something productive," he thought, and for one year he was happy.

Unfortunately, time doesn't stand still, and modern machines soon came to the farm. The threshing machine was three times as fast as Socrates, and could work day and night without a break. Socrates soon realized he wasn't needed, and he lost his enthusiasm for threshing. He went back to thinking.

Farmer Stratton scratched his head. "Such a fine animal," he thought, "What a shame that he's so withdrawn and miserable. Maybe accomplishing something special would help." He had a plan. The county fair was only a few weeks away, but with good feeding and grooming and a little training, Socrates had a chance of winning the "Prize Bull" category. The farmer assigned his best hand to work with Socrates to prepare him.

On the day of the fair, Socrates shone. Nobody had seen such an exquisite animal before. He easily won first prize.

"I'm special. I'm the greatest bull in the county!" thought Socrates, and felt wonderfully proud.

The feeling lasted about a week. At that point, the thrill of victory had worn off, and Socrates began to think again.

“So, is that all there is to life: winning prizes? What’s the use of that? For a moment it makes me proud but in the long run it changes nothing.”

Farmer Stratton was ready to give up. “Socrates,” he suggested, “talk to some of the other animals. They seem to find their lives meaningful, and most of them are a lot less capable than you.”

Socrates took his advice. First, he asked the cat, “What’s the meaning of life?”

“Shut up!” hissed the cat, “Can’t you see I’m trying to catch that mouse for dinner?”

Sadly, Socrates wandered on.

He saw some puppies chasing their tails. They seemed to be having a great time. Surely they knew the meaning of life.

“We’re not in the mood for philosophy today,” they said, “We’re having too much fun! You should try this sometime!” They continued chasing their tails.

Finally, he asked a mother duck who was waddling by with her five ducklings.

“What meaning?” she quacked, “I’m up at dawn, I groom the kids, I feed the kids, I keep the kids in line so they don’t get lost, I find food, I feed the kids again, I feed myself, I go to sleep. That’s life. Who has time to think about meaning?”

Socrates abandoned his quest. Nobody would tell him the meaning of life, yet all were doing something meaningful with their own lives. He was getting old, and thought he would die soon. He lay down in the barn and waited for the end.

Seeing him lying there defeated, the other animals felt sad. One by one, they came up to Socrates to wish him well.

First, a robin came to visit. “I want to thank you,” she said.

“Thank me?” wondered Socrates, “I don’t even know you.”

“That’s true,” said the robin, “but you walked around the pasture often, and your footprints were so big and deep that little pools formed in them after it rained. In those pools, I caught the worms that kept me alive when food was scarce. For that, I thank you.”

Then, a little chipmunk came. “I want to thank you too,” he started.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve met either,” said Socrates.

“But we have,” said the chipmunk. “When the hawk tried to eat me, I hid between your big, strong legs and he didn’t dare attack. For that, I thank you.”

The parade continued. One by one, the animals told Socrates how he had affected their lives without even knowing it.

“If I did so many useful things,” he wondered, “why didn’t I find life meaningful?”

A wise old hen responded. “Maybe this meaning stuff isn’t something that happens inside your head. Maybe it’s just the result of living and being a part of things.”

Realizing he had been a part of things and had made a difference in the lives of the other animals, Socrates stopped thinking and was finally happy.

A Seal's Fate

Kayla and Hannah were born on an ice floe high in the Arctic. Their mother's body was big and warm, filled with nourishing milk.

Soon they were strong pups, and could swim away from her. She warned them to avoid humans though, as they often came looking for white baby seal pelts.

"We'll be careful, Mom," they said together, and then jumped into the water to play. Tag was their favorite game. Hannah thought she could play it forever, except for occasional milk breaks. Life was good.

Unfortunately, young seals are not always careful when they play tag. One day, Hannah got separated from her sister. When she tried to find her, she saw what she feared most: the stare of human eyes. She expected to die that moment, but to her surprise she found herself caught in a net instead. The net pulled her across the ice. Then, it rose up and lifted her gently onto a wooden deck. Hannah was being taken to an aquarium many miles away.

She cried for many days, missing her family and home. Soon, however, she learned what the humans expected. She and the other seals were to follow their directions, and in return they were fed fish. The humans' directions made no sense, but she followed them anyways. After all, what good could come of balancing an orange, inedible sphere on one's nose or bouncing it through a big ring? For many hours, the directions continued.

At the end of the day, Hannah would ask the other seals, "Want to play tag?" but they ignored her.

"We're work seals, with no time for foolishness," they would say.

Only one male seal said, "Sure, I'll play. Just come over here by these rocks."

But he didn't want to play tag at all, and a short time later the humans told Hannah she would have baby seals soon.

With hungry mouths to feed, Hannah had even less time to play. "All I do is work," she grumbled, "I look after the pups, do tricks to get fish, look after the pups again, and sleep. I wish I could be free and have fun like I used to."

Hannah developed a reputation as a very unhappy seal, until the day the newcomer arrived. The newcomer was a fine specimen of seal: sleek and strong from years of hunting in the wild.

“Kayla!” exclaimed Hannah, “It’s so good to see you!”

“I’m glad to be here,” said Kayla, “Shelter, regular meals, good company, and a safe place to raise your young. You’ve been living the good life, Hannah.”

Hannah protested that her life was anything but good. “There’s all this work they make you do, and when you’re done the pups squawk for food.”

“At least you’ve got pups,” said Kayla, “Mine were eaten by a polar bear. And look at those sweet little brown eyes! I’d give anything to have children like yours.” “And you don’t even have to hunt for fish here,” she continued, “They’re thrown right into your mouth just for doing the humans some minor favor. What luxury!”

“But nobody here wants to play tag or have fun like we used to,” argued Hannah.

“Grow up, Hannah” said Kayla, “You can’t always do what you like. Learn to like what you must do!”

Hannah took her sister’s advice, and soon life at the aquarium didn’t seem so bad.

The Boar

Benjamin was born last in his litter. Farmer Jones referred to the little pig as “the runt.” His mother was an old sow by the time he came along. She cared about him, but didn’t have the energy to play and frolic with Ben.

Ben did his best to get her to notice him. He did summersaults to make her laugh, counted on the barn floor with his trotters to show her how smart he was, and brought her fresh straw at night for her bed.

She smiled, but reminded him, “Now Ben, I can’t always be with you. I need some time for your brothers and sisters too.”

Ben did even more summersaults, counted even higher, and brought straw until it was piled half way up the barn wall.

Eventually, his mother became annoyed. “That’s enough, Ben!” she snorted.

A short time later, she died.

Ben missed her terribly. He dreamed at night that she was still alive and with him. In his dreams though, he had no brothers or sisters, and his mother called him ‘my most special piglet.’

Ben grew into a fine young hog. No longer the smallest, he could now hold his own with any other pig in a contest. He often raced the others or pushed them around with his snout to show how strong he was.

Soon it was spring, and love was in the air. Clarissa was the object of Ben’s affections. He did summersaults to make her laugh, counted with his trotters on the barn floor to show her how smart he was, and brought her fresh straw for her bed. Of course, he made sure there was a flower on top of the straw. Ben knew the meaning of romance.

Clarissa barely glanced in his direction.

Ben did more summersaults, counted higher, and brought more straw and flowers.

Clarissa chewed her swill and yawned.

Ben couldn’t stand it any longer. “Clarissa!” he burst out, “I’ve done everything a hog could do to please you and show you my undying love. Surely I deserve some love in return!”

“I’m sorry, Ben. I know you deserve my love, but I just don’t love you,” she answered.

“Why not?” Ben asked.

“You’re so serious about everything. You’re no fun. You’re such a...bore!” she replied.

Heartbroken, Ben left his love. He trampled his last bunch of flowers in the mud.

Then, to his surprise, he heard a soft voice behind him.

“Ben, Ben!” it said, “It’s me, Betsy. Do you want to go to the fair with me? It might cheer you up.”

Ben had known Betsy since they were piglets, but had hardly noticed her.

“Sure,” he said, “but why are you interested in me? I haven’t done anything for you.”

“Love isn’t about doing things for someone, silly. Love just is,” she smiled.

And they went off happily together.

Monkey Business

Penny, Jenny, and Matilda were three baby monkeys living at the zoo. Most days, they swung from branches, laughed at the strange-looking humans outside their cage, and ate the good, nutritious food Zookeeper Bob provided. On Fridays though, after all the humans had left, Zookeeper Bob brought them a special treat: sweet, scrumptious marshmallows.

The first time, they weren't sure what to make of the white, puffy balls. Penny thought they were earplugs to help her sleep, and almost got one stuck in her ear. Jenny thought they were toys, and was disappointed when they wouldn't bounce. Finally, Matilda said, "Mmm, this is food!" They all tasted the sweet, gooey goodness for the very first time.

Sadly, the zoo faced financial problems, and the marshmallow budget shrank. Bob had to start rationing the marshmallows. Trying to be fair, he thought, "I'll give the monkeys one marshmallow, and add a second only for those who can wait for me to clean the cage. That way, I won't run out as quickly."

He sat down Penny, Jenny, Matilda, and the other monkeys to give them the news. "You'll get one marshmallow right away or two if you can wait for me to clean the cage. That's how it will have to be from now on."

Penny was hungry, and not very good at arithmetic. "I want mine now!" she screeched, and jumped up and down to show Bob she meant business.

"Very well," said Bob, "Here it is, but there won't be any more for you till next week."

Each week, Penny ate her marshmallow with glee, but envied the other monkeys who got two, and thought Bob was being quite unfair to her. Fortunately, she was pretty and she eventually attracted a smart, male monkey who was able to earn many marshmallows. Unfortunately, he was cruel to her so she eventually crushed his skull with a large rock. She escaped punishment by hiring a clever lawyer who used a "temporary insanity" defense, but spent the rest of her days bored and alone, waiting for the ideal suitor to come along and rattle her cage.

Jenny was shrewd, and she figured out that by enduring the temporary discomfort of an empty stomach she could earn a greater reward later. She consistently succeeded in earning both of her marshmallows. She even thought of saving the extra marshmallow she earned each week to bribe other monkeys later. Through her cleverness and bribery, she eventually controlled all

the monkey business affairs at the zoo. She was voted 'Simian Entrepreneur of the Year' by monkeys from zoos across the country.

Matilda looked at the marshmallows and at Bob and thought to herself, "What a silly arrangement. The zoo saves money, Bob gets his cleaning done, and all my monkey friends are envying and resenting each other because of marshmallows."

Matilda decided to go back to eating bananas, and she was the happiest monkey of all.

The Bear Necessities

Buster was a very nervous bear. When it rained, the other bear cubs splashed in puddles and shook their fur, trying to spray each other. Buster didn't join in the fun. Instead, he asked his mother, "What if I get hit by lightning?" and, "What if a tree gets hit by lightning and falls on our den?"

Patiently she explained that these things had never happened and probably never would, but Buster was not reassured until the rain stopped. Then, he asked her fearfully, "What if it rains again?"

When the young bears were learning to fish, the slippery trout often escaped their paws. Carl, a very confident bear, said "It's a temporary setback. By tomorrow I'll be catching dozens!" Max, a more modest but hopeful bear said, "Oops! I missed. I'll practice and do better next time." Buster said, "I'm useless at this. I'll never learn to fish." And so he never did.

Soon the young bears began chasing female bears. Carl was rejected and said, "So what? She doesn't know what she's missing!" Max was rejected and said, "Too bad. But I'm sure there are other attractive females out there." Buster responded to rejection with, "I'm the most undesirable bear n the forest."

By the time he was grown, Buster had so little confidence that he was hardly doing anything anymore. He clearly had a problem.

His mother suggested, "Hibernate for a while, Buster. You'll feel better in the spring."
He didn't.

His father suggested, "Join the grizzlies, the toughest characters in the forest. They'll make a real bear out of you yet!"

The grizzlies only laughed at Buster.

Finally, Buster's friends asked an old owl, who was said to be very wise, to have a talk with Buster. "A smart, good-looking bear like you has no reason to be nervous," the owl began, "If even an arrogant dolt like Carl can find a place in the woods, why shouldn't you? Try marking a few trees for yourself and see what happens. You might be surprised."

Buster stared at him in disbelief. He didn't have the confidence to climb a tree, let alone mark one as his own. He decided to hide in a cave for a while so he would be safe and the others would leave him alone.

Unfortunately, the cave was on a fault line. It was shaken by an earthquake the next day and Buster narrowly escaped being killed by a large rock.

“See,” said his friends, “even a cave isn’t safe so you might as well take your chances in the woods with us.”

Buster sighed, “No. This just proves I should have worried more about earthquakes.”

Max, Buster’s best friend, decided not to give up. He went back to the owl. “You’re not a very wise owl,” he complained, “You tried to help Buster and now he’s worse than ever!”

“OK, OK, so I screwed up. Nobody’s perfect,” muttered the old bird, “Send him back to me one more time.”

Max returned to the owl, dragging Buster along.

“Buster,” started the owl, “Max tells me you’re not very brave and not very hopeful these days. Is that right?”

Buster grumbled in agreement.

“I have a remedy,” the owl continued, “Have a look.”

As Buster slowly raised his eyes, he saw a bright light. It was a lamp lit by a tiny glow-worm.

“This is a magical glow-worm,” announced the owl in a low, solemn voice. “When you are frightened or hopeless, just look at him for exactly 10 seconds, and a brave, hopeful thought will pop into your mind.”

“You’re joking,” said Buster.

“I’m serious. There’s a money-back guarantee,” offered the owl.

And so, Buster took the glow-worm and tried out its magic. Sure enough, whenever something scary happened or Buster worried that it might happen, the glow-worm provided a comforting thought.

Soon, Buster’s courage grew and he started to roam around the woods more than before. As he got more hopeful, he was able to stand up to the other bears and forest creatures, even Carl. Buster was still cautious, consulting the worm before trying anything risky or possibly foolish, but the other bears respected him for this trait. The consensus was, Buster had good judgment. Eventually, he became a leader in the forest.

Unfortunately, glow-worms don’t live as long as bears. One day, Buster saw his little friend’s light starting to fade. He knew the glow-worm would die soon.

“You can’t die!” cried Buster, “Without your magic, I’ll go back to being scared and hopeless again.”

“You won’t,” reassured the worm. “I can’t do magic anyways. It was your own courage that made you the bear you are today.”

Buster was stunned. “You mean you’ve lied to me all these years?”

The worm was embarrassed. “Well, I was unemployed, you see, and Mr. Owl promised me a steady job looking after you, so I took it.”

Buster smiled gently. “So it was my own brave thoughts helping me all along, with your inspiration. Thank you, old friend.”

Peacocks

The Peacocks were a proud family. Father Peacock strutted around the neighborhood, flashing his plumage at anyone who crossed his path. He bragged about having the biggest and brightest feathers in the land. Nobody was ever going to call him “small-feather” again, as the other birds had when he was little.

His son, Lee Peacock, was expected to follow in his father’s footsteps. Every day, Mr. Peacock gave him long, thorough grooming lessons. Then, he would have Lee strut for hours with a book on his head to ensure good posture. Sadly, no matter how hard Lee tried, his efforts were never good enough. Mr. Peacock was constantly telling him how he needed to improve. If poor little Lee cried, he was accused of disgracing the family name. Occasionally, Mrs. Peacock tried to stop the criticism, but her husband would remind her, “It’s for his own good!” and that was the end of the discussion.

Mrs. Peacock was also proud, but in a different way. She prided herself in doing right. Every day, she prayed to the Great Spirit of Flight for guidance. She had read all the expert views on chick-rearing, and was convinced she was an exceptional hen. She didn’t enjoy it though. In fact, she often reminded her daughter, Sara, what a heavy burden hens bear in tending to the young with little or no male support.

Sara, being young, naturally considered herself part of that burden, and often tried to offer her mother sympathy. If she ever disagreed with her mother though, she was reminded of the many sacrifices that had been made on her behalf, and of how thankless the job of motherhood could be. Sara resented this ‘guilt trip’, so stamped her feet in protest. Then, Mrs. Peacock would remind her of how unladylike such displays were, and how they dishonored the family name.

Eventually, Lee learned to stop crying and Sara learned to stop stamping. They became placid, obedient chicks.

The Peacocks soon notices, however, that their offspring were becoming noticeably plumper. Sara and Lee ate whenever they felt upset. Mr. Peacock accused his wife of feeding them junk seeds. Terribly hurt, she squawked at him that it wasn’t true. Nevertheless, being an exceptional hen, she decided it was her responsibility to solve the problem: she put Sara and Lee on a diet.

And so, Sara and Lee ate small amounts of healthy seeds at the nest, and sneaked away for junk seeds at every opportunity. The Peacocks continued to be a very proud and very miserable family.

Soon, it was time for Sara and Lee to leave their parents and find mates of their own. They made an unexpected announcement: “Mom, Dad, we’ve decided to join the Swans.”

“What!” exclaimed Mr. Peacock, flapping in disbelief.

“You’ll be condemned to everlasting featherlessness!” warned Mrs. Peacock among tears of disappointment.

“How could you both do such a thing?” they wailed together.

Lee explained calmly. “For years, Sara and I have been well-groomed, obedient chicks. We always did as you asked and never heard a kind word. The Swan hatchlings are scrawny, unkempt, ugly little creatures, yet their parents never stop telling them they’re beautiful. Then, one day, they are. We prefer the Swan way of life.”

Dark Deeds

Mantis lived an ordinary life in the meadow. She enjoyed the summer warmth, played with her brothers and sisters, and made friends with the other insects and meadow creatures. She was happy and content until the day she had her fortune read.

“You have a dark side, Mantis, as all members of your species do,” said the fortune teller. “In one hundred days you will do a terrible thing!” was the dire prediction.

“No! I refuse to believe that. I am a gentle and honorable insect!” Mantis protested, but her faith in herself was shaken. Every time she looked at one of her friends with envy or resentment she became frightened. “I wonder if that’s the one to whom I’ll do the terrible thing,” she worried.

Mantis resolved to eliminate the ‘dark side’ the fortune teller had mentioned. She began collecting dewdrops from the grass every morning and splashing them on her head. Maybe she could wash away the dark side. During the day, she looked at her area of the meadow for poisonous plants. After all, another creature might eat them and she would be responsible for the poisoning without even meaning to do harm. In the evening, she prayed fervently for help in her quest to vanquish the dark side.

Finally, the dreaded 100th day arrived. Mantis decided to hide under a rock so there would be no chance of doing anything terrible to anyone. The morning passed quietly, and the sun overhead told Mantis it was noon. In the bright light, a very ugly little male bug spotted her.

“Hi there, pretty lady,” he started.

“Leave me alone!” shouted Mantis.

“Come on, you know you can’t resist this handsome body,” he teased.

“You’re an arrogant pig. Go away!” Mantis cried out.

“Your mouth tells me to go, but your body says stay,” he sneered, and drew closer.

“I’m warning you, go away or else...” Mantis started.

“Or else you’ll do what? You know you want me. Pretty soon you’ll be begging for my love!” the bug replied, and made a disgusting motion with his tongue.

It was the final straw. Without thinking, Mantis pounced on top of him and bit his head off.

“Oh no! What have I done?” she wailed, “The fortune teller was right. I do have a dark side and it’s taken over!” She had become a murderer and, wracked with guilt, immediately surrendered herself to the police.

“Shut up!” her lawyer told her, “Say nothing. I’m sure I can dig up some dirt on that lecherous leech you killed.” True to his word, he discovered that the leech had been accused of attacking females twice in the past. Mantis pleaded ‘self defense’ and was set free.

She wasn’t free from her guilt though. Mantis felt she was the only one cursed with murderous rage, and should live away from civilized insects. She withdrew to a cave to ponder her sinful nature.

Her best friend, Lily Ladybug, knew Mantis had a good heart and hated to see her suffer. Mantis wasn’t willing to see visitors, fearing she would harm them, so Lily got together with some other insects and made a scrap book. She left it at the entrance to the cave one night.

In the morning, Mantis found the volume, entitled simply “What I Do When I Feel Like Killing.” It began with Lily’s own story of getting jealous when her boyfriend looked at other female bugs. Next to a picture of cliff, she had written “I often think about pushing him off this, but then I count to ten. When I get to ten I realize that he can be really sweet sometimes, and I would miss him terribly if he were gone.” Next came the spider’s story of how she had dreamed of strangling one of her friends in her web after the friend spread a nasty rumor about her. She knew she was angry, so decided to spin very energetically until she got it out of her system. She had pasted some of the extra webbing in the book. Almost every insect Mantis knew had contributed something.

Mantis was blown away. Why would her friends do something so nice for a murderer? She had to thank them.

Emerging from her cave gingerly, she spied Lily. “Thank you for the beautiful book, Lily,” she began, “But is it true? Does everyone have a dark side?”

“What do you think?” smiled the ladybug kindly, “It’s just a matter of learning how to handle it.”

The Trouble With Cats

Rex and Delilah had grown up together since they were very little. Rex was a fine, handsome guard dog and Delilah was a silky feline with a reputation as the best mouser on the block. Over the years, they had learned to play together, share toys and treats, and not interfere with each other's time with their master.

There was only one problem: they disagreed about birds. Rex loved them. He admired their bright feather coats and listened intently to their beautiful songs. In the winter, he barked to show them places where they might find food.

Delilah, on the other hand, was a hunter. Birds were prey to her, nothing more. She usually succeeded in catching and polishing off three or four a week.

Rex barked loudly when he caught her in the act, but by the time their master arrived it was too late. Rex was heartbroken when Delilah devoured his favorite sparrow. He had to put a stop to this!

First, Rex tried to protect the birds. He found a cage where they would be safe from Delilah. For a few nights, everyone slept peacefully.

Then, the birds began to complain, "We're tired of being cooped up like this. We want to fly and be free again!"

Rex pointed out the dangers of leaving their cage, but to no avail. Birds will be birds, and they were determined to be free. Cats will be cats, and Delilah returned to her favorite sport of bird-hunting.

"Alright!" barked Rex at the birds, "If you won't let me protect you, then at least you should learn to protect yourselves!" He lined up the birds in military fashion and began training them in swarming tactics. He made sure they all sharpened their claws. He even showed them an old Alfred Hitchcock movie for inspiration.

It was no use. The birds had neither the discipline nor the brains for battle. They fluttered about in disarray. A few of the stronger ones were able to scratch Delilah on occasion, but she healed quickly and seemed to enjoy the additional challenge.

Rex had one more idea. If he couldn't help the birds, maybe he could at least slow down Delilah. One day while she was sleeping, he took her favorite ball of yarn and began wrapping it around her legs. He wrapped the front paws to the back paws, wrapped the left paws to the right

paws, and finally wrapped the paws diagonally across from each other. “She will never escape,” he thought.

Unfortunately for Rex, cats are very agile creatures. After five minutes of wild screeching and cursing, Delilah was free again and more determined than ever to pursue her favorite hobby. Six birds perished that week.

Things were beginning to seem hopeless to Rex, so he decided to ask for help. In a nearby town lived Tim the toolmaker, known for the gadgets and novelty items he designed. Just a month earlier, he had stuck some seeds on a few clay pigs and watered them with liquor. Now, his “Sangria Pets” were selling like hotcakes. Rex didn’t have much money, but he put on his most mournful, droopy-eared dog face and asked Tim, “Please sir, you must invent a restraining device to keep Delilah from hunting the poor little birds.”

Tim looked puzzled. “But cats are hunters. That’s their nature,” he replied.

“Please sir, they’re dying as we speak!” howled Rex.

“All right Rex. No need for such drama,” reassured Tim, “I’ll see what I can do.”

The next day, Rex came back to pick up his order. “What’s this?” he asked, astounded. “You’re giving me a tape recorder? That’s not what I ordered!”

“But it is,” said Tim, “I agreed to make something that would help with your cat problem and this is it. Think for a minute. Why do you feel so strongly about saving the birds? Delilah seems to think they’re insignificant little creatures designed to provide her with an amusing sport.”

“They’re my friends,” Rex volunteered, “I know their names and their children’s names. I help them through the winter and I really feel proud when the little ones are strong enough to fly. They’re almost like family.”

“But what first attracted you to them?” pressed Tim.

“Their sweet songs, of course,” replied Rex.

“Ah, you have an ear for music. But do you know what animal is even more fond of music than you?” asked Tim.

Rex thought for a moment. “I get it: Delilah! She sings all night long with her cat friends under our master’s window. Maybe she’ll appreciate the birds’ songs if I tape them, and she’ll stop hunting so much.” He decided to try it.

At first, Delilah glared at Rex, remembering his last stunt. Then, she heard the soft, sweet melodies and her heart began to melt. “How could I destroy such artists?” she mewed with remorse.

And so, to Rex’s relief, Delilah learned to only hunt birds if she was desperate for food, and gave up killing them for sport.

The Impossible Dream

Andy was an ordinary ant. He wasn't unusually big or unusually small. He wasn't unusually smart or unusually handsome, but Andy had an extraordinary dream: to cross the Great Deep Water and see what was on the other side. It was a goal he had set for himself when he was just a little hatchling.

Soon, Andy decided it was time to make an attempt. He crawled onto a stone at the edge of the water, closed his eyes, and jumped out as far as he could. The water crashed around him. It was terribly cold, and he couldn't get air.

"Help!" he shouted as his head bobbed to the surface.

"Andy's drowning!" shrieked his mother, and the rescue ants responded. They were the strongest, bravest ants in the colony. They pushed with all their might, and got a twig from the shore out to Andy. "Pull yourself onto it and crawl!" they yelled to the terrified little ant.

It was a struggle, but Andy did it. He was safe.

That night, he got a long scolding from the colony elders. "I hope you've learned your lesson," they lectured, "Ants can't swim!"

After he recovered from his ordeal, Andy remembered something: the twig had floated. It was very smooth and round though, so it was hard to hang onto. Maybe there were other things that floated and could carry him that weren't so risky, he thought.

Every day, Andy threw things into the water to test his theory. He carefully noted each result: "Stones don't float." "Bits of glass don't float." "Baby sisters don't float." He got into trouble for that last one. Finally, he succeeded. "Big, flat leaves float."

Andy was thrilled. If he could convince a couple of his friends to push a big leaf into the water, climb on top with him, and use some small twigs as oars, he could navigate his boat across the Great Deep Water.

At first, there weren't any volunteers. "You'll all fall in and drown," was the most common response to his request.

Eventually, Andy figured out that the only way to get a crew would be to find ants whose dislike of the colony was greater than their fear. He asked the local jailer for help.

"Take as many inmates as you want. We're better off without them!" replied the jailer.

Andy had a crew. Quickly, he explained his plan and got the inmates to the boat. “Start pulling the oars!” he ordered. Unfortunately, being criminals, the crew members weren’t very cooperative. Each one pulled his oar in a different direction. Soon the little leaf boat was spinning like a top, and water began swirling around it.

“We’re out of control! Help!” shouted Andy.

Once again, the rescue ants were called and did what they did best.

“No more foolishness, Andy!” the colony elders shouted, “From this day forward you are forbidden from touching the water.”

“Yes, sirs,” said Andy, meekly.

“And get a real job!” the leading elder added.

Andy’s dream seemed crushed. How could he get across the Great Deep Water without touching it? It was impossible.

The next day, he reported to work. He would be a sand-carrier for the repair crew in the colony. His back hurt, but losing his dream hurt even more. He was aching too much to sleep that night.

Suddenly, Andy had an idea. “If I have to carry sand for a living anyways,” he thought, “Why not carry a few grains to the edge of the water each day and drop them there? After a while, the grains will pile up and start to make a bridge. Maybe I can still get across!”

All day Andy carried sand for colony repairs, and all evening he carried sand to the water’s edge. Progress was slow, and every rainstorm washed away what he had built, but he persevered. Sadly, Andy was getting old and knew he might not live long enough to realize his dream.

One day, the alarm sounded in the colony. Two big human boys were approaching.

“Hey, Matt!” shouted one, “I bet I can jump over that puddle!” He had spotted Andy’s project, now a sizeable sandbar, jutting out into the water.

“No way. You can’t!” challenged Matt.

“I can so...watch me!” bet the first boy, and with a loud whoop he started running towards the puddle. He planted his right foot squarely on top of Andy’s project.

“No!” pleaded Andy, as he was carried up into the air in a cloud of sand. He was terribly upset that his work was being destroyed, but he had no wish to die. He grabbed the first thing he could reach to break his fall. It was the boy’s shirt. Clinging to the shirt, Andy flew across the Great Deep Water to the other side.

After some arguing about whether or not the puddle had actually been jumped (Matt claimed his friend's foot had touched the water so it didn't count as a successful jump), the boys decided to move on.

"Let's play ball, Joe" suggested Matt.

"I'm pitching!" said Joe.

And so Joe, with Andy aboard, trotted towards his destination. Andy hardly dared to look at where he was being carried. Carefully, he opened his eyes. The biggest mountain of sand he had ever seen was right in front of him!

A moment later, he was on top of it. As Joe waited for Matt to get ready, Andy decided to make his getaway. He crawled down Joe's leg and scurried as fast as he could down the giant mountain.

After many days and nights of wandering, Andy eventually found his way back to the colony.

To his surprise, he was received with a hero's welcome. The queen knighted him "Sir Andrew Ant," and for generations he was hailed as the greatest ant explorer ever. Sir Andrew had not only crossed the Great Deep Water for the first time in ant history, but he was the discoverer of The Great Sand Mountain. Now, whenever an ant dies nobly, it is said that his soul journeys to that sacred mountain. Certainly Sir Andrew's must reside there.

A Snail's Tale

Enid the snail liked to please others. She pleased her mother by tending to the garden. She pleased her father by becoming an accomplished shell-builder. She pleased her teacher by learning about aquariums. Her teacher thought she had real potential for becoming a future aquarium-snail, a very prestigious career.

Because she liked to please others, Enid was not entirely honest. She told her mother she wanted to become a garden snail, her father she wanted to become a shell-builder, and her teacher she wanted to become an aquarium snail.

In her heart, Enid was not passionate about any of these careers. She yearned to become a famous reporter, featuring the most exciting news stories of her world. She wanted to cover floods and droughts and other snail disasters. She longed to interview the presidents and royalty of the animal kingdom. She wanted to tell the stories of brave snails that had explored beyond the fence, and narrowly escaped the white-hatted savages that threatened to turn them into escargots.

Enid continued to dream about journalism, but told her mother, father, and teacher exactly what each wanted to hear. Since her parents didn't talk much to each other, she didn't worry about being caught in her deception. The only day of the year she feared was parent-teacher night. To avoid being discovered, she always found some excuse to prevent her parents from going. Since Enid's grades were excellent, nobody insisted they attend.

As she grew older though, the many demands of her parents and teacher became difficult to handle. Garden-tending, shell-building, and aquarium-cleaning were all full-time occupations for a snail, and Enid became exhausted from trying to do all of them. Soon her performance deteriorated.

Her teacher concluded, "Maybe she doesn't have the aquarium aptitude I thought she had after all." Her father concluded, "What a pity. Her shell isn't even as impressive as her younger brother's anymore." Her mother concluded, "Maybe garden-tending isn't her thing. Perhaps I should find a suitable male snail to look after her." All three were disappointed in Enid. By trying to please them all, Enid had pleased none of them.

Enid was despondent. What was the use of living if everyone, even your own mother, thought you were useless? She went to the railroad tracks to end her misery. She planned to wait there until a train crushed her.

Fortunately for Enid, it was Sunday and very few trains were running that day. She had time to wait and think about her life.

Gradually, a new thought began to form in her head. “If everyone thinks I’m useless,” she pondered, “then they no longer expect me to do anything impressive. My reputation is gone, so I have nothing left to lose. With nothing left to lose...I might as well have fun!”

It was an odd sort of logic, but it made Enid feel refreshed and young again. Suddenly, her childhood dream of being a famous reporter didn’t seem so far-fetched after all. True, she would have to do some chores her parents and teacher required, but since she didn’t need to impress them she could focus most of her energies on presenting local news. If other snails appreciated her work, the fame would come with time.

And so, Enid left the railroad track. She followed her own path, and was happy.

Shoulds

Humans are the creatures that are most fond of rules. From an early age, they are told to always do certain things and never do others.

Molly was no exception. She took pride in her ability to do as she should, and was very impatient with people who did things they shouldn't. Unfortunately, most of the people she met seemed to have this problem.

When she met a new friend, the friend said, "I'll call you," and never did. Molly was furious. People should keep their word.

When she lent her best friend some notes at school, she waited until she was hopping mad before asking the friend to return them. People shouldn't have to be reminded to return what they borrow.

When her mother allowed her younger siblings to stay out just as late as Molly, she thought this was terribly unfair. Older siblings should have later curfews than younger siblings.

As she got older, the problem got worse. Molly couldn't forgive people who were even one minute late for appointments. People should be punctual.

Similarly, the Girl Guide troop she led should show her more respect, her co-workers shouldn't need incentives to work hard, and so on.

The final straw was when her roommate didn't pay her share of the rent by the end of the month, and the landlord reminded Molly it was overdue.

"Sorry, I forgot," stammered the roommate, but Molly's face was deep red with rage, and steam seemed to be emerging from her ears.

Fortunately, Molly counted to ten and was able to remind herself that murder was not a good solution to this problem. She went for a walk to cool off.

As she was passing through the park, she noticed a well with an inviting sign: "Toss in a coin and make a wish!" Molly wished, "I wish people followed the rules more so I could be happy."

The wishing well replied, "That's a good wish, but I don't think other people are making you unhappy. I think you have a sickness."

"What sickness?" Molly asked.

"Another coin please," replied the well. Molly threw in another coin.

“You have the ‘should sickness.’ It makes you sick when other people don’t do as they should,” explained the well.

“That’s right!” Molly exclaimed, amazed at the well’s knowledge. “How did you know?”

“Another coin please,” came the familiar reply.

Molly thought this was a rather greedy well, but she was hooked. “Tell me how to cure this sickness,” she demanded.

“You must come to me each day and tell me what others have done to upset you. But I must warn you: every time you say the word ‘should,’ you owe me a dollar. If you don’t pay, I can’t help you,” said the well.

Molly thought this was a pretty good deal. After all, how many times could she use the word ‘should’ in describing the events of one day? Even if she slipped and said it once or twice, one or two dollars a session was not a bad price for therapy.

The next day, she began. “Today, I got up and noticed that my roommate hadn’t screwed the cap back on the toothpaste. I told her she should be more careful...oh darn!”

“That’s one dollar, please,” said the well, “Continue.”

“OK. I got dressed and watched the news,” added Molly, “They were showing a picture from a war that was really gory. I wondered what would happen if small children were watching and had to see something so terrible. Newscasters should think about that before showing such bloody pictures.”

“Another dollar, please,” droned the well.

And so it continued. By the end of describing her day, Molly had spent considerably more money than she expected, but she reassured herself, “I’ll do better tomorrow.”

Days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, and still Molly got no relief from her ‘should sickness.’ Finally, she threw her last dollar into the well.

“Oh no, I’m broke! I don’t have any money for supper!” she sobbed.

The well took pity on her. “You should have thought of that before you came here,” he said. “See? Now I owe you a dollar for a ‘should,’” and he gave her back one dollar.

On her way home, Molly passed by the library to return a book.

“You’re a week overdue. That’s a one dollar fine,” said the librarian.

“Overdue? I can’t be. I never do things I shouldn’t!” exclaimed Molly, horrified, “and I only have this one dollar for supper.”

“Oh, all right,” smiled the librarian, “I shouldn’t do this, but since you’ve been so reliable in the past, I’ll forget about the fine this time. Just remember to bring back your book when it’s due next time.”

Molly was stunned. By neglecting to charge the fine, the librarian had broken the rules but had saved her life.

From that day on, Molly was cured of her sickness. She stopped resenting people who didn’t follow all the rules. After all, she knew she wasn’t able to follow them perfectly herself. If people broke the rules repeatedly, she avoided them so they wouldn’t take advantage of her, but the occasional lapse was greeted with humor, not anger.

As Molly became less critical of other people, they liked her more and treated her better. Although it had cost her dearly, her wish had come true.

The Game Warden

Gordon started out as a zookeeper. He fed and groomed the animals, kept the meat-eaters from attacking the herbivores, and made sure all of the animals got lots of fresh water and outdoor exercise. The animals followed the rules, and lived together in peace and contentment.

Designing the zoo to ensure peace and contentment had not been easy, but Gordon thought of it as a challenge and found satisfaction in each new improvement he discovered. Eventually, he ran out of ideas. There simply wasn't any way to make the zoo better. Day after day the animals ate, slept, exercised, lived peacefully together, and didn't change. Gordon was bored.

One morning, Gordon had a new idea. Perhaps the animals could learn to take care of themselves. In fact, with enough experience, perhaps they could learn as much about life as Gordon had. Gordon was eager to teach them. Unfortunately, the rules and restrictions of the zoo prevented the animals from experimenting with new ways of doing things, and teaching them by telling them what to do didn't seem to work. Lectures that were not tied to experience were quickly forgotten.

Gordon had only one alternative, if the animals were to learn: he would have to set them free. Reluctantly, Gordon decided to change careers. He became a game warden instead of a zookeeper. The animals were allowed to roam free, interact, and learn from their experiences.

Unfortunately, the animals didn't know how to use their freedom. The herbivores ate more grass than was healthy for them, until the ground was barren. Then, the taller ones ate the leaves off the trees as well. The meat-eaters not only ate the herbivores, but also hunted them just for the sport of it. The hyenas even decided to betray their friends, the elephants, by selling their long, white tusks for profit. All the animals polluted the lakes and streams with waste. Peace and contentment vanished, and the game preserve became a violent, foul-smelling desert.

Gordon felt sad. There had to be a less painful way for the animals to learn. Perhaps freedom had to be combined with instructions. Gordon started telling the animals how to improve their lives. They didn't listen. Then, he held his lectures on stormy days so that he could emphasize his main points with thunderbolts and lightning. Only a few animals listened. The others thought that Gordon was just pompous and full of himself. They reminded him that they were free to choose their destiny and didn't appreciate his meddling.

“Well,” thought Gordon, “If they won’t listen to me, maybe I can use one or two of the smarter ones as messengers to teach the others my wisdom.”

At first, it seemed like a good plan. Animals were more likely to listen to other animals than to Gordon. Faithfully, the messengers delivered Gordon’s ideas, and each gathered a band of followers willing to spread the ideas further.

Unfortunately, the ruling animals were rarely wise, and they made life miserable for the messengers. One was considered insane and banished to a cave. A second was forced to eat poisonous berries after being accused of corrupting the minds of the young. A third dared to challenge the hyenas’ ivory trade. He was called a traitor and killed. Worse yet, the messengers’ followers started fighting amongst themselves, each claiming that their messenger was the only true source of wisdom.

Gordon was ready to give up and flood the whole game preserve.

Fortunately, he did not act on his anger but continued to look for a solution. As he was thinking, a humble flea jumped onto his neck. Gordon swept it away, feeling irritated. A second later though, he was struck by an idea. What if the flea could sneak onto the necks of bigger animals, jump up to their ears, and whisper Gordon’s messages to them? The animals wouldn’t even notice the fleas, and would assume that the messages were coming from their own minds.

And so, Gordon proceeded with training the fleas and setting them to work on his plan. Soon, many of the bigger animals were proudly reporting brilliant ideas for improving the game preserve. Recognizing their brilliance (and greater size), the other animals followed their suggestions. Peace and contentment began to emerge again. Progress was slow, but the animals were definitely on their way to learning about living well.