

Parables for Mission Planters:

Principles of Leadership and Community

(Drawn from Richard Adams' *Watership Down*)

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Story and Community

Make the sign of the cross, and you tell a story – the story of God coming down from Heaven to Earth, extending His open arms to encompass the world in His sacrificial death. This story lies at the heart of a larger story, which stretches from before Creation "unto ages of ages." Story is so woven into the fabric of the universe that you might even say, with the poet Muriel Rukeyser that "the Universe is made of stories, not atoms,"¹ that Story itself *is* the fabric of the universe, deeper and more durable than matter itself.

Story is fundamental to the life of human communities the world over, and most especially to God's own community, the Church, as manifested in the local parish. At every service of the Church,

¹ Muriel Rukeyser, "The Speed of Darkness," in *The Speed of Darkness*, (New York: Random House, 1968).

every Sunday and throughout the annual cycle of feast days, we engage in the telling and hearing of stories. In the Orthodox Church we write, sing, perform, and write (or paint) icons of the stories of God's work in:

- Moses and the prophets,
- our Lord's life,
- the stories He Himself told in the Gospels,
- the growth of the apostolic community in Acts and the Epistles,
- the continuation of that apostolic tradition in the lives of saints and martyrs, even down to the present day,
- and finally, in the Apocalypse, the *parousia*, the coming kingdom.

Stories go to the heart in a way that lectures and theological exposition can never do, and this is certainly one reason Our Lord repeatedly made use of parables.² It is one thing to hear "God wants to forgive you;" it is quite another to read or listen to the painfully sweet parable of the Prodigal Son, feeling in ourselves his hunger and despair, only to have those feelings metamorphosed into joy and relief through the grace of the boy's father, who waits so eagerly for him to come home. Or again, with a jolt we may recognize ourselves in the grudging elder brother, as Jesus clearly intended the Pharisees in the audience to do.

Well do we know that little children learn much from stories, church and world alike produce colorful picture books that educate by means of a narrative thread. To take only one of the simplest Orthodox examples, *Christina Goes to Church*³ takes the liturgy from the abstract and general to the concrete and specific by narrating the church experience of a particular little girl, with whom the child readers/listeners can identify.

² Matt. 13:34.

³ Maria C. Khoury, *Christina goes to Church*, (Ben Lomond: Conciliar Press, 1998).

Sadly, when it comes to higher education, we often seem to mistake Story for one of those "childish" things St. Paul expects us to put away when we become mature.⁴ Go looking for mission planting resources, and no librarian, much less Google, will point you to a work of fiction. With luck you may find your way to historical works that will include stories in their pages,⁵ but you will also likely turn up a great number of Protestant evangelical works that lean heavily on leadership concepts taken from modern business models.⁶ Too many of these resources offer an approach at odds with the natural story-orientation of our human souls in general, and with the sensibilities of Orthodoxy in particular. Where then to find a story which can serve as a detailed παραβολή of the birth, growth and maturing of a leader and his community?

Jung's mythic archetypes,⁷ identified in world folklore and literature, and later explored and popularized by Joseph Campbell,⁸ provide numerous useful insights into the character and progress through a journey story by the universal hero. It is tempting to identify this universal hero figure with the priest, who after all is expected to image Christ to his people. There is surely some merit in this; however, of the myriad stories told in world folklore, literature, drama and film, too many of the most familiar depict the hero as a solitary figure on a journey of self-discovery, a journey from which he eventually returns bearing some talisman or prize of knowledge which, sometimes, he may use to serve his community. This solitary figure is very typical of the Hollywood action hero, but the kinds of

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:11.

⁵ Fr. Michael Oleksa's works on the Orthodox Church in Alaska are excellent in this regard.

⁶ E.g. Rick Warren's best-selling "Purpose Driven" series.

⁷ C.G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁸ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949).

stories that feature him are inadequate for our purposes. More, such a hero-model may prove an actual temptation to the priest, who is often inclined to live by the maxim – "if you want something done right, do it yourself!" For the clergy candidate who comes with deeply flawed motivations, who seeks self-validation through the title and honor given to priests, such "lone hero" role models are nothing short of disastrous.

The story needed by the seminarian or lay leader hoping one day to found and develop a mission parish is a story not of a solitary hero but of a healthy community being born, growing and maturing. The story character/leader with whom such a prospective priest can identify is one who reveals his character and makes his personal journey of learning *in the context of this community*, for whom he acts as visionary, healer, war strategist, and much more.

The story I recommend for the edification of future church leaders may at first glance seem an unlikely one, though it has already received some attention in the field of ethics, in Stanley Hauerwas' *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*.⁹ Marketed as a children's book, British writer Richard Adams' first and most successful novel *Watership Down*¹⁰ possesses a depth of literary sophistication belied by the simple cover illustration of an alert wild rabbit.¹¹ But more importantly for our needs, this best-selling story meets the criteria of 1) illustrating the characteristics and growth of an effective leader, and 2) placing that leader in his proper context, that of a healthy, growing community.

⁹ The relevant essay in this collection of Hauerwas's ethical writings is "A Story-Formed Community: Reflections on *Watership Down*."

¹⁰ All subsequent page citations from *Watership Down* will be from the 1973 Puffin paperback.

¹¹ This classic, widely admired illustration on the cover of the abovementioned edition is the work of Pauline Baynes, better known for her definitive illustrations of C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

In order to expand upon these themes, it will be necessary first to synopsise the story. I hope readers already familiar with the book will bear with me briefly; and those who have not yet read it will, by the end of this essay – be ready to head straight to the library or to purchase copies at the local book store.

Synopsis of *Watership Down*

The story opens at Sandleford Warren, where a young male rabbit, Hazel, hears a warning of impending disaster from his brother, the visionary Fiver. Hazel persuades a dozen or so other young bucks to join them on a search for a new home.

Hazel and his crew face danger and hardship, but they depend upon the traditional tales of the rabbit hero, El-ahrairah (Prince of a Thousand Enemies), to guide them and keep their morale up. They come to a warren of sleek, a community of well-fed rabbits that recite strange, depressing poems and evade any question that begins "Where...?" Hazel's rabbits learn the hard way the dangers of this seemingly ideal warren when one of their number is caught in a snare set by the man who provides food for the rabbits.

Escaping, they find their way to Watership Down. Here they settle comfortably, and Hazel cements his position of leadership further when he befriends an injured gull and helps it heal. Hazel explains to the others that unless they grow, their newly-founded warren is not far from extinction. They need does from another warren, which Kehaar the gull can find for them from the air.

Kehaar indeed spots a large warren some days journey distant, and Hazel sends a delegation to invite some does to join his group. While they are gone, Hazel himself nearly dies in an ill-advised venture to release some tame rabbits from a hutch at a nearby farm.

He is only rescued by Fiver's visions; still, Hazel's risk brings the warren two does – their only asset, for the delegation returns with no females from the dreadful, prison camp-like warren of Efrafa.

Undaunted despite his own injuries, Hazel immediately prepares to launch a new expedition to Efrafa, and free a number of does from the rule of the megalomaniac General Woundwort. With help from Kehaar, Hazel leads his team of fighters and tricksters, who accomplish their goal with courage, persistence and cleverness.

However, they are not at peace yet. The General and his rabbits pursue them to their own warren on Watership Down and place them under siege. Hazel leaves his rabbits holding the warren against the enemy and makes one more desperate visit to the farm, to lure the dog back and onto the Efracans, scattering and defeating them. At last the warren on Watership Down prospers; the new rabbit kittens are trained by their elders, and the adventures of Hazel and his friends are told along with the tales of El-ahrairah.

A Parable for Church Planters

When he wrote *Watership Down*, Richard Adams almost certainly did not have church planting in mind, much less the planting of Orthodox missions in the modern West. Nevertheless, the story itself is deeply mythic and religious; the rabbit heroes, as natural creatures, please their Maker, the sun deity Frith, simply by being themselves and living as they were created to live. This fundamental orientation makes the story a natural candidate for use as a parable.

The numerous παραβολαι told by Jesus, mundane on the surface, but revealing depths of spiritual truth, encompass a range of forms, from a succinct image or analogy, as in the parable of the Fig

Tree¹² to a full-fledged, multi-charactered story in three-act structure like the Prodigal Son.¹³ Not every element in every story Jesus tells is intended to have a one-to-one allegorical equivalent; for example, the parable of the Unjust Judge is meant chiefly to make the point that persistence in prayer counts. God is certainly not to be cast as an unjust judge!

Likewise, and more so, we must be discerning and selective when using literary works to make theological points. J.R.R. Tolkien was intensely irritated at commentators who claimed his epic *The Lord of the Rings* was an "allegory" of World War II, and the Ring a symbol of the atomic bomb. He did however approve the idea of *applicability*, a reasoned comparison of the elements in a work of literature with other elements in life.¹⁴

Applicability describes the appeal of *Watership Down* for present and future church leaders and missionaries. Of course the full effectiveness of the story as such a parable only comes with reading the novel; the themes I delineate here will, I hope, encourage readers to do so for themselves.

Portrait of a Leader: Hazel and his Owsia

Humility, Pride and Grace

In the following section we will examine a non-exhaustive list of exemplary leadership qualities and actions shown by Hazel, who is the central character of the book. It is important to note right here

¹² Matt. 21:18-22.

¹³ Luke 15:11-32.

¹⁴ J.R.R., Tolkien, Introduction to *The Lord of the Rings*, 2nd Edition (London Allen & Unwin, 1955): "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of its readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author."

that Hazel, who is eventually recognized as Chief Rabbit, depends throughout the book on the gifts and support of his fellows. By this humility he avoids the fatal error of the Threarah, Chief Rabbit at Sandleford, who "doesn't like anything he hasn't thought of for himself,"¹⁵ and therefore rejects Fiver's prophecy of catastrophe threatening the warren. Hazel, on the other hand, actively seeks the help of his followers, without fearing a loss of authority or prestige to other individuals. "You'd better teach me,"¹⁶ he says to Bigwig, when they first come across a road, which is outside Hazel's limited experience but is part of Bigwig's history as officer of Owsla [council of the rabbit community].

Humility, that fundamental Christian virtue, informs the decision-making processes of all truly successful leaders. When it is set aside, disasters ensue: how often have we seen scandals topple high-profile church leaders who become too full of themselves (falling prey to the deception of *prelest*, as the fathers call it) to listen to the voice of prudence? Even Hazel, though he makes a general habit of consultation, is not immune to this temptation, as we see in the risky raid for the hutch rabbits. "The truth is, you're just trying to be clever," Fiver berates him. "You're [their] Chief Rabbit. You're supposed to decide what's sensible and they trust you...three or four dead rabbits will prove you're a fool, when it's too late."¹⁷

Mercifully, the escapade turns out to be not so costly to the warren. Hazel, however, bears the brunt of the consequences in his body. Shot by a pellet gun, he nearly bleeds to death. Chastened, he retains a limp to his dying day, but does not make the same mistake again. Grace and mercy can rescue us from disasters of our own making, but sometimes the scars remain with us as reminders.

¹⁵ *Watership Down*, p. 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 215.

Obedience to Vision and Compassion for the Weak

Let us now look at Hazel's pilgrimage from the beginning. From the first few pages we observe two more characteristics that mark the born leader: obedience to vision, and compassion for the weak and small.

"Vision-casting" has become a buzz phrase, even almost a cliché in business and church-growth circles. Though this may be misused or misdirected, it is true enough that "where there is no vision, the people perish."¹⁸ Again Hazel exemplifies for us the effective leader: he does not have to be the first to see the vision, but he is the one who can determine to act on it, and persuade others to join him.

In fact we may almost look at Hazel and Fiver (two brothers) as two aspects of one leader character, the practical and the visionary. These traits or types are indeed sometimes combined in one individual, but as noted above, they need not be, if only the would-be leader has the humility to accept inspired direction from another or others. It should be noted that Fiver as visionary only attempts to persuade; when the practical leader is not in agreement with him, he is prepared to leave the community to evade the certain danger himself. He cannot by himself lead the others out of danger and on to the higher goal of establishing a new home; it takes the practical, decisive Hazel to do that.

Fiver's original vision is of blood in the field and the need for escape. Hazel has learned to trust these premonitions of his brother's, but he is also aware of other, more tangible signs that the time is ripe for departure and the founding of a new warren. His concrete observations of the overcrowding and bullying at Sandleford, and of the feelings of the other marginalized young males about

¹⁸ Proverbs 29:18.

their lot, confirm the more mysterious, supernatural inklings of Fiver. This awareness, not always conscious, of the feelings and inclinations of the community is a mark of the leader, as we see later, once a new location is attained. At that point, the task of establishing a new warren is just beginning, and indeed is in grave peril of failure unless they can increase their numbers. It is imperative that they find some does: "Hazel's anxiety and the reason for it were soon known to all the rabbits... He was simply the one – as a Chief Rabbit ought to be – through whom a strong feeling, latent throughout the warren, had come to the surface."¹⁹

Hazel not only presents the vision, but also instigates the action needed to implement the vision, persuading the others to take risks and persist through pain and fear to accomplish their goal. Important, too: the vision is *not* Hazel's personal mission, which he attempts to impose on the others, but recognized by *all* as a fundamental need of the whole community.

Compassion for the weak might seem an unlikely characteristic for the leader of the uncertain and grueling expedition from Sandleford. "*Elil* [enemies, predators] take the hindmost" is a proverb given by Adams to his somewhat anthropomorphic rabbits. But the hero of his story seems not to have bought into such a Darwinian sentiment. "If I ever get into the Owsla [warren council]," thinks Hazel, "I'll treat outskirters with a bit of decency...wherever we settle down in the end...I'm determined to see that Pipkin and Fiver [the smallest rabbits] aren't sat on and cuffed around until they're ready to run any risk just to get away."²⁰ *Woe to him who offends these little ones*, the Gospel warns us...²¹

¹⁹ *Watership Down*, p. 196.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²¹ Matt. 18:6.

The Leader and His Followers: Discerning and Using the Gifts of Others

Hazel chooses his team less carefully than we might perhaps expect. The truth is that Hazel, like any ultimately successful leader, is a realist. The strong rabbits at Sandleford, who might be great assets to the new venture, are mostly comfortable enough where they are, and Hazel is clear from the start that he will have to make do instead with those who are willing, mostly the young, inexperienced, and undersized. As Saint Paul says, not many wise, not many mighty are chosen.²² Nor does Hazel waste any time or regrets trying to drum up greater numbers. The core of the new warren is therefore a committed group of manageable size, soon to develop close bonds through shared trials.

Even before they set out, Hazel the born leader has a keen eye for the gifts of his fellow pilgrims, and for their weaknesses, both as a group and individually. He notes the fighting strength and useful training of the young former Owsia officers Bigwig and Silver, but determines not to let size and strength alone rule in the new warren. When Bigwig is caught in a snare, Hazel already knows that Blackberry is the clever rabbit who can figure out how to free him; and Hazel's nurturing of the runts Fiver and Pipkin pays off, as their very smallness is instrumental in digging out the peg that holds the wire of the snare. By luck, perhaps, Hazel's talent pool offers a balance of physical and mental abilities to draw upon; by design he is alert to opportunities to use those abilities. Gradually the group becomes

warier, shrewder, a tenacious band who understood each other and worked together... They had come closer together, relying on and valuing each other's capacities. They knew now [as Hazel sensed from the start] that it was on these and on

²² 1 Cor. 1:26.

nothing else that their lives depended, and they were not going to waste anything they possessed between them.²³

Earning Trust

By this point in the story, it may be noted, the other rabbits are ready to obey Hazel without question. How did he earn this quick obedience, which on more than one occasion saves lives?

At the beginning of the journey, each rabbit has already an impression of Hazel as a steady fellow, but they come along for their own reasons, chiefly their shared dissatisfaction with the Sandleford warren. Together they face immediate challenges: attempted coercion by the Sandleford Owsla to remain, escape from a dog across water, and the crossing by night of the barren bog. In each case, their deferring to Hazel's judgment leads to success. Throughout these trials, it is his timely decisiveness that keeps the group of rabbits safe.

However, Hazel is more than just lucky in his choices. He also gently pushes the others to keep going through fear and darkness. Further, Hazel encourages them to step out into unfamiliar things. "My goodness," says Bigwig, "we've learned a few things since we left the old warren, haven't we? More than we'd have learnt in a lifetime back there. And digging! [usually done only by does] It'll be flying next."²⁴ The result of Hazel's persistent and innovative leadership is accomplishment, with attendant elation and further ambition among his followers, in other words, morale is high in the community.

Hazel also repeatedly acts as healer. It is he who works the thorn out of Pipkin's foot, using the quiet time to encourage his follower's spirit as well as provide bodily healing.

²³ *Watership Down*, p. 131.

²⁴ *Watership Down*, p. 143.

Courage and self-sacrifice can persuade even a more reluctant follower. Early in the story, when they have crossed the common, one of his followers says of Hazel, "I tell you, he's what I call a Chief Rabbit!" to which Bigwig replies, "*Chief Rabbit?* The day I call you Chief Rabbit, Hazel, that'll be the day, that will!"²⁵

Bigwig has a good opinion of himself, his own strength and his Owsla training. But further on in the story, he loses his nerve one dark night as the little band crouches in a ditch, hearing the shriek of some mournful creature who calls Bigwig by name. "The Black Rabbit of Inlé," [Bigwig] whispered...."You have to go," he muttered..."You have to go when he calls you..."²⁶

But Bigwig does not go, paralyzed by fear of the mythical Death-Rabbit; instead, Hazel keeps his head against the tide of his own terror and goes out because "only one idea remained to him – Bigwig must be prevented from going out, for he was helpless."²⁷ He discovers the voice is only that of another rabbit escaped from the Sandleford warren. Afterward, Bigwig says to Hazel, "you got yourself out of that ditch down there instead of me, didn't you Hazel? I shan't forget that." Nor should this act of courage be surprising from the leader of the little band on behalf of one of its members; even before this, others of his followers have remarked to Hazel, "running our risks for us, are you – like El-ahrairah?"²⁸..."You go in front and take the risks first...we've all seen that."²⁹

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

Hazel, like Joseph Campbell's *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, risks even to the threshold of death, in the ill-fated raid for the hutch rabbits. With his second self, his brother Fiver, at his side, Hazel has one foot in the otherworld, one in this, and he will run any risk for the good of his community. Thus he images the rabbit-hero El-ahrairah (Prince of a Thousand Enemies), paralleling the priest who images Christ to his people.

The results of the Chief Rabbit's sacrifice are not only an indispensable gain for the warren (two does) but also the inspiring of similar behaviour in others. When the raid on the dark warren of Efrafa is planned, it is Bigwig who goes in to engineer the breakout. Hazel's raid for the hutch rabbits has already foreshadowed what Bigwig must be prepared to face: the risk of death, in order to win the prize – the does who represent the future of the community, its only defence against ultimate extinction.

"A Chief Rabbit must be El-ahrairah to his people."³⁰ As he screws up his courage for the attempt on Efrafa, Bigwig asks to hear the story of El-ahrairah and the Black Rabbit of Inlé, in which the rabbit hero attempts to bargain with Death for his people, who are under siege and starving. El-ahrairah's journey in the dark costs him much suffering, and the loss of his ears, tail and whiskers. Sacrifice and suffering are intimately tied up with leadership.

The Healthy, Growing Community: Hazel's warren contrasted with Efrafa, Sandleford, and the Warren of Shining Wires

We have seen how Hazel's leadership is focused on care for the community, and inspires its members in turn to emulate his risk-taking and self-sacrifice. Let us now examine the characteristics of the healthy community which is born and develops under his leadership.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

In our post-modern society, community has become greatly fragmented. Nuclear families, indeed broken families, are very much the norm, divided from the wisdom of elders and support of the extended family by distance, transience, divorce and dysfunction. Nor is it easy for individuals or small families to find new community in the workplace or neighborhood; sharing of lives on the incidental and social level is necessarily superficial. However, the thirst for authentic community surfaces in our popular culture, especially in that most relevant to young people. Much of the appeal of television shows like *Friends*, and *Lost*,³¹ and comic books and films like *X-Men*, is in the formation of community among the characters over a period of time. Even "reality" shows like *Survivor* center around community, dysfunctional though it may be.

The local parish is the authentic Christian answer to this thirst for community. *Watership Down* gives us a fictional paradigm of what such a community should be like.

Community Health

If the reasons for leaving an old community may sometimes be negative (overcrowding, unfair treatment, actual danger), the principles behind a healthy new community must nevertheless be positive. Health is found between extremes which, we shall shortly see, are demonstrated by the warrens of the Shining Wires and Efrafa. As well, the healthy community, like Hazel's warren, is both *outward-looking* and *forward-looking*.

³¹ Commentators have noted parallels between contrasting types of communities in both *Lost* and *Watership Down*; a copy of *Watership Down* is seen being read by one of the characters in *Lost*.

The outward-looking community befriends those outside its bounds; the inward-looking community not only regards those outside with suspicion, it even exploits, neglects, controls or oppresses its own members. When Hazel aids first a field mouse and then Kehaar the gull, he acknowledges that these other species can never be one with rabbits; nevertheless, he sees that the lot of all those united in their fear of the *elil*, the predators of the world, can be improved by sharing information and exchanging favours. One cannot help but think of genuine, non-syncretistic interfaith co-operation.

Hazel's outward vision; however, goes beyond these creatures who live in the neighborhood of his own warren to the rabbits of the more distant warren of Efrafa, even though it is a warren set in enmity against Hazel's band. When Woundwort comes to attack, Hazel meets him to parley: "A rabbit has two ears; a rabbit has two eyes, two nostrils. Our two warrens ought to be like that. They ought to be together, not fighting."³² Parochial attitude is not a hallmark of the healthy, growing community, and the advantages of co-operation are self-evident.

The successful community is forward-looking as well as outward-looking. The Sandleford Warren refuses Fiver's call to flee the coming danger because, as the elderly Threarah says,

that's rather a tall order, isn't it? It's May, isn't it? Everyone's busy enjoying themselves. And you want to tell the warren...we must all go trapesing across country to goodness knows where and risk the consequences, eh?³³

The Threarah was once a Chief Rabbit to be reckoned with, but now he rests on the laurels of his past achievements. This is a sad

³² *Watership Down*, p. 424.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

situation seen in churches of all kinds, and in fact can be seen in high relief in many Orthodox parishes, whose glory days go back centuries to the mission founders of their old country mother churches. But even parishes less than a generation old can fall prey to the temptation of complacency.

The warren of Shining Wires is also an inward-looking community, one even less healthy than Sandleford. These rabbits are fed and protected by a farmer, at the price of a few rabbits at a time being snared. Unlike Sandleford, they are not overcrowded; they pay for their health and comfort with the lives of the unlucky among them, and live in fear and denial. They have lost their devotion to the tales of El-ahrairah, becoming decadent, morbid and effete. Fiver, ablaze with the passion and conviction of an Old Testament prophet, tells his fellows,

They had no Chief Rabbit – no, how could they? – for a Chief Rabbit must be El-ahrairah to his warren and keep them from death... you suggested that Hazel should tell them of our adventures...but...Who wants to hear about brave deeds when he's ashamed of his own, and who likes an open, honest tale from someone he's deceiving?³⁴

The rabbits of the Shining Wires warren live in physical comfort, but have a demythologized faith, and as a consequence their numbers are declining. Their bodies are healthy enough, but their souls are sick almost unto death without their even knowing it. The parallel with the declining modernist churches of the affluent West, who lack authoritative and traditional priestly leadership, eschewing a missionary mentality and even taking a stand in favour of abortion "rights," is difficult to resist.

Efrafa, which ultimately provides the most formidable challenge to Hazel's rabbits, has a polity quite the opposite of the warren of

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

the Shining Wires. Efrafa certainly has a Chief Rabbit, the powerful Woundwort. It might be said that he looks outward, but only with an eye to conquest and self-aggrandizement. Indeed, his vision is not truly outward-looking, but merely self-reflective, as the epigraph from Chapter 43 illustrates:

What is the world, O soldiers?
It is I.
I, this incessant snow,
This northern sky;
Soldiers, this solitude
Through which we go
Is I.

-Walter de la Mare, *Napoleon*

Woundwort, this story's Napoleon, of course meets his Waterloo, because he fails to appreciate Hazel's outward, and forward-looking vision of two warrens co-operating:

At that moment, in the sunset on Watership Down, there was offered to General Woundwort the opportunity to show whether he was really the leader of vision and genius which he believed himself to be, or whether he was no more than a tyrant with the courage and cunning of a pirate. For one beat of his pulse, [Hazel's] idea shone clearly before him. He grasped it and realized what it meant. The next, he had pushed it away from him.³⁵

For Woundwort, there is no future beyond his own life, and everything is about narcissistic power and control. His community is a personality cult, based on his very real virtues, but maintained by ruthless and constant enforcement of minutely detailed rules governing the behaviour of the members.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 425.

The yoke laid on the females in this community is particularly onerous. They are not free to choose their own mates, and the overcrowded and regimented conditions of the warren cause infertility and serious frustration and suffering for the does. So it is that a delegation of does comes to Woundwort for permission to leave and found a new warren; however, like a cult leader, Woundwort unequivocally refuses, and the Owslafa prevents the departure of any.

Hazel, in contrast to the leadership of the other three warrens, never wavers from his ideal of the establishment of a warren where generations of rabbits yet unborn can live freely, and the does in particular are free to live their natural lives. What is more, he can imagine spreading that ideal even to other warrens, even to the Efracans who have set themselves up as his enemies. There is no coercion in the warren on Watership Down, but neither is the status quo good enough for them. This is the attitude necessary for genuine missionary endeavour: committed to its own vision, but nevertheless free from the sort of triumphalism that is sadly sometimes seen in some Orthodox communities – not content to work out their own salvation, they make it their mission to criticize and correct others around them.

Applying *Watership Down* as a parable of leadership and community

We have seen in *Watership Down* some of the characteristics of exemplary leadership and healthy community. Let us briefly extract and apply several of these points to priest and parish, particularly in a mission context.

1. *The successful leader is not a loner, but inextricably bound up with his community.*

This is a matter of vital concern in the selection of priestly candidates, before the mission can even be begun. One

disadvantage of the academic seminary model is that it may attract some students primarily suited by temperament to solitary academic endeavours rather than to the intensely personally-interactive service of the parish, let alone the mission parish. On the other hand, less formal requirements may lead to the ordaining of candidates not only lacking in liturgical/theological competence, but whose motives and personal issues have never been probed and dealt with, until trouble in the field reveals their ordination to be a form of self-aggrandizement rather than the servant-priest taking his place within a community. Bishops, seminaries, and the candidates' pastors or spiritual fathers need to work together to present candidates who are truly *axios*.

The seminary, bishops, and senior clergy having (God grant) found and approved by ordination a candidate not perfect but at least teachable, humble, and a good ruler of his own household,³⁶ it is vital for the new priest to bind himself to his new community the instant he arrives in the parish. (Note the assumption that even in a mission, there will be a small core ready to embark on the journey; very rarely does a priest begin a mission completely from scratch, and even more rarely does such a mission succeed).

Paradoxically, this bonding takes considerable time to achieve. If a mission endeavour is going to be ultimately successful, the leadership must be in it for the long haul. Research has determined that it takes an average of five years for a new pastor to earn the trust of his parishioners, by attending to their pastoral needs through the passages of life, personal crises, baptisms, marriages, funerals, etc.³⁷ It is only when he "gets them through" some of these

³⁶ Titus 1:6.

³⁷ See, e.g. "Long-term pastorates: Kyle Childress says the value far outweighs the challenges" in *Connections* Aug. 2005 Vol. 8 Issue 8, Alliance of Baptists newsletter (article un-attributed). Childress also writes of the formation of church community in the article "Good work: learning about ministry from Wendell Berry" in *The Christian Century*, March 8, 2005 (Wendell Berry is the author of a good deal of rural fiction).

that the community knows he is one of them. Likewise members of Hazel's group first begin to address him as "Chief Rabbit" when they have come together through the frightening trial of the common by night under his leadership. (Unlike Hazel, the priest or pastor may have his title of respect from the first, but it will not fully ring true to him or to the people until they reach this point. There is a saying to new priests, "you are not truly ordained until your people ordain you").

A succession of short incumbencies can be devastating to the morale of a community. The priest must not see himself or be seen as an "outsider" sent by a distant bishop to temporarily plug a hole or to straighten the community out or shake them up. He must not be a mere professional or an employee of the parish, set in an adversarial position to other power loci within the community, but a father in Christ, loving his people and respected by them as such. This last one is a fundamental of Orthodox church polity, but it is often honored more in the breach than in the observance. A mission parish, starting from the ground up, is an unparalleled opportunity to get this principle right from the start, and it needs to be explicitly and honestly stated by the priest upon his arrival. People need to know that he is committed not only to his own vision, but to them personally. Hazel, unlike General Woundwort, exemplifies this attitude: where Woundwort regards his rabbits as interchangeable and disposable in the service of his ego-centered vision, Hazel never wavers from his central concern: to keep his little group together, get them safely to the new home envisioned by Fiver, and lead them to grow and multiply.

2. The successful leader must balance the visionary with the practical.

It is true that, as Browning says, "a man's reach must exceed his grasp;" if nothing great is attempted, failure is already assured.

It is the business of the clergy to have the vision of the wider church and the fullness of an Orthodox parish life, and to challenge the people to growth. If however the clergy cling to ideals impossible to achieve, or try too soon to enforce more than their people have the strength for, the laity will become discouraged or intransigent. Perfectionism is a temptation to be avoided. Grandiose "vision-casting" without recognition of the limitations of the workers and resources can only lead to disappointment and resentment. To give just one common example, a full cycle of services may not be practical for a very small or geographically widely scattered community at first. As neither Hazel nor Fiver alone could accomplish what they were able to do together, parish leaders must not only catch the Divine vision, they must work it out by realistic means.

3. The successful leader has the humility to accept ideas and assistance from others.

The body was not made for the parts to function independently.³⁸ The humble pastor recognizes that while he must teach and lead with authority, he doesn't have all the answers to everything. Humility is the ongoing challenge of the Christian life, and more so to those in leadership, who must model it for others. It requires the ability to say "I was wrong – I screwed that up." It seeks input from others. "You're the fellow for ideas – I never know anything until you tell me," Hazel says, truthfully and generously, to Blackberry.³⁹ As Hazel does not seek to take all credit for himself, but gives tasks and honour to the other members of his band (and even asks them to teach him things beyond his personal experience), so church leaders must have constant awareness that the task of establishing a new community is never theirs alone. Leadership is not something to be grasped at, but approached as a servant.⁴⁰

³⁸ I Corinthians 12: 12-21.

³⁹ *Watership Down*, p. 139.

⁴⁰ Philippians 2: 6-7.

4. *The successful leader nurtures the weak and acts as a healer.*

This begins with sensitivity, alertness to the hurts and needs of the parishioners. Merely being in a parish for five years is not enough for leader and followers to bond; the leader must co-suffer with others in their times of trial, and help them to bear up and recover. The ministry of confession is an important outworking of this principle. Confession should be seen primarily as a healing sacrament, and the penitent never made to fear a scolding or judgment by the confessor. In *Watership Down*, Hazel is first to notice those rabbits who are in need of healing attention, and sees that they get it. When there is failure, he does not indulge in blame, but encourages others to look to the future.

5. *The successful leader chooses as his core team chiefly those who are willing, even if they appear weak*

This is the heart of the beginning of community. During the dark journey across the boggy common, Hazel places the smaller rabbits close to himself, to hearten them. The apparently weakest members of a parish may in the end turn out to be the staunchest, if only the leadership nurtures them, giving them encouragement and responsibility from the start. Nor does the wise mission priest waste time attempting to court those with only a tangential or nominal connection to the faith, but devotes the bulk of his care and efforts to those who show themselves willing to embark on the journey with him by being present at the services and meetings. And finally, it should be noted, the weak or not fully adequate should not be ousted from the leader's favour when more attractive and powerful new members come along. These new members should be encouraged to use their talents to help meet the mission's new challenges, but the "little ones" with the history of loyalty should also be rewarded, and their modest gifts not neglected as the journey proceeds to new stages. Often, like Fiver and Pipkin digging out the peg, their very smallness and modesty enables them to do some task others cannot. This brings us to our next point.

6. The successful leader notes and makes use of the gifts of his followers

As the new leader gets to know his parishioners, he must be alive to the experience, talents and interests of each of them. In the past, small communities lived in close proximity, like the members of a rabbit warren. Everyone knew everyone else, and knew whom to ask if you needed your horse shod or your fence mended. In our modern far-flung communities, special effort must be made to spend time with the members of the church and learn about their individual abilities. The pastor is the one who can visit them all and learn in what ways their talents can be put at the service of the whole community. This is best done not by some sort of member survey, but in genuine sharing of personal time together. It is at *silflay* (feeding) that Fiver first reveals his vision to Hazel, and where the other young rabbits first agree to embark with Hazel on his adventure. This is a perfect illustration of how the time-honored, sacred act of eating together is the best means of beginning to know each other. A weekly post-Liturgy meal or at the very least coffee time will sow seeds of closeness the priest and parish will reap abundantly in years to come. With that closeness, the gifts of various members will become apparent to the priest and to their fellow members.

7. The successful leader leads by example rather than coercion

As Hazel's followers note, he is first to run risks and dive into new tasks, inspiring others to follow, rather than enforcing orders by sheer physicality and bullying like Woundwort. A priest who holds himself aloof from such homely tasks as hall clean-up will never gain willing obedience, and one who excuses himself from proportional contributions to the church budget will never encourage his parishioners to tithe. (Consider how Hazel pitches in with the initial digging of the warren on *Watership Down*, rather than ordering others to do this unaccustomed task).

A priest who attempts to "guilt" members into higher standards of attendance or participation will only succeed in loosening their ties to the community by driving a wedge between them and himself, and in extreme circumstances may even goad them into leaving the community. It should be noted that guilt and coercion are *never* among the tools Hazel uses for motivation, and also that listening plays a great part in gaining the confidence of his followers. When Bigwig roughly disciplines a few rabbits whose murmuring threatens to damage the group's precarious morale during the exhausting crossing of the barren common, Hazel says,

There was no need to go biting Hawkbit: he couldn't have gone back if he tried. He and his friends would have seen that if they'd been allowed to talk for a bit. Now Bigwig's put their backs up, and they'll think they've got to go on because he makes them. I want them to go on because they can see it's the only thing to do.⁴¹

As Bede notes of St. Cuthbert, he taught "by wholesome admonition and – which is the real way to teach – by example first and precept later."⁴²

8. The successful leader earns respect with decisive action, persistence and courage

Consultation builds community, but the time for deliberating and considering must end some time, and the clergy are the ones entrusted with choosing such times. It is better to act decisively and risk making a mistake than to delay endlessly, and be overtaken by circumstances that force one's hand. The warren of Shining Wires demonstrates the sickness that ensues when there is a leadership vacuum. Sandleford Warren, too, comes to disaster, because its

⁴¹ *Watership Down*, pp. 64-65.

⁴² Bede, *Life of St. Cuthbert* trans. J.F. Webb in *The Age of Bede* (London: Penguin, 1965).

leader prefers inertia to the decisive action required by Fiver's warning vision. In fact, many of the decisions church leaders must make have to do with "when:" when to move to new premises, when to hold an outreach event, when to purchase property.

9. The successful leader sacrifices himself for the future good of the community

One must be careful not to confuse genuine self-sacrifice with lying down under abuse, as does in fact happen to too many clergy in all too many parishes. Hazel's attempt on the farm rabbit hutch, and El-ahrairah's quest to the Black Rabbit of Inlé, both have very specific goals for the health and future of the community in view. The mission priest who goes on indefinitely working full time at an outside job, because the parish has no plan for or intention of giving him a living wage is not sacrificing himself (and his family) to any good end, but is merely enabling the people to exploit him in support of their own selfishness and laziness. The result of such a failure to challenge the people will be a burnt-out priest, incapable of doing the pastoral and liturgical work necessary to enable the parish to grow. This is the opposite of a genuine sacrifice, which may be painful but will bear fruit. Perhaps the greatest challenge clergy face in their ongoing work is learning to discern the difference between fruitful, holy self-sacrifice and merely being a doormat or, in some cases, a self-driven workaholic.

That said no would-be mission priest should be under any illusion that the calling he aspires to requires anything less than death to self. El-ahrairah comes out of his encounter with the Black Rabbit shorn of his tail, whiskers and ears, bereft of any cause for vanity. The priest lays aside vanity for simple priestly garments, and he must also lay down his own will; he cannot pick and choose an ideal geographical location for himself; he may have to move his wife and children far from their extended family. He may sacrifice a considerable amount of privacy, if he must live in a parish-owned house. He can and must place limits on his availability to others, but

only so as to be able to serve them better. There will and must be middle-of-the-night emergencies, missed games and school performances for his children, unfair expectations from parishioners. But any such sacrifices must always meet the testing question, is there any point? Does this "sacrifice" really buy any long-term good for the parish? It must also never be forgotten that the priest's wife and children are members of the parish community too, and their genuine needs should not be set aside for every whim of every other parishioner.

A priest who gives an example of selflessness with purpose while not permitting others to exploit him will gain the respect of his followers and inspire them to similar behaviour.

The healthy community that will grow in response to such leadership will be:

A) A community that is outward-looking, seeking to aid and co-operate with those beyond its own borders

At the end of *Watership Down*, this principle espoused by Hazel at last bears fruit. Their former enemies, the Efrafans, have been freed from the tyrannical rule of General Woundwort, and eventually they co-operate with a proposal made by Hazel: that a third warren be founded between the other two, composed of colonists from both, bringing their diverse strengths and experiences to a new endeavour. How much might we accomplish in terms of charitable works and peacemaking, if all parishes made such open and friendly gestures to their neighbours? How much wasted labour might be avoided, and how much more quickly might new parishes be established, if Orthodox jurisdictions consulted and co-operated about the planting of missions in a given area?

B) A community that is forward-looking, aware of the vital need for growth and long-term concerns

Orthodoxy on this continent began with the missionary fervour

of the likes of Saint Herman and Saint Innocent. They were not original, but only following in the footsteps of the apostolic laborers of earlier times like Saints Cyril and Methodius and their mission to the Slavs, Saints Patrick and Columba in the British Isles, Saint Thomas in India and all the others from the New Testament onward. Saint Paul prayed often for the little communities he helped establish throughout the Mediterranean that they would increase in grace and spread the Gospel. The early leaders of Orthodoxy in North America looked to this vision, seeking to reach out to the surrounding culture and to nurture their own young in the faith, by means such as worshipping in the language of the land. More than two centuries after the first missionary endeavours in North America, there are, sad to say, still many parishes that fail in this forward-vision, defining themselves largely as cultural preservation societies. The tragic and ironic result is the numerical and spiritual decline of the community through the loss of the next generation, who become assimilated to the North American culture but leave their Orthodox faith behind with much of their parents' ancestral culture and language.

The next generation of rabbits could well be said to be the whole focus of the book *Watership Down*. What at first seems the end of the journey for Hazel's rabbits, arrival on the Down, soon proves to be only the beginning. Not only the ethnic churches but also new convert missions are only a few steps away from extinction, unless they move heaven and earth in the pursuit of growth and reproduction.

Here is the place to note that *Watership Down* demonstrates an intriguing parallel to the Orthodox Church regarding the roles and ministries of the sexes. *Watership Down* is told as a very masculine adventure. The leaders, good and bad alike, are males. And yet the does, though they are "off-stage" for most of the book (as they are in the Bible, in comparison with men), play a part which is in fact the lynch-pin of the whole story. Without them, the entire endeavour

comes to nothing. As with the mothers who became eventually the old babas who persisted in church attendance and secretly instructed their grandchildren during communist regimes, the does are the bearers of both new life and of tradition. We see them at the end of the story incorporating their own community history into the larger rabbit tradition, faithfully recounting the tales of El-ahrairah and establishing their offspring firmly in their own places in the ongoing Story. Thus mothers and elder women (whether they have children of their own or not) in healthy Orthodox parishes today nurture and educate the next generation, following the Theotokos in her great yes to God.

It is interesting to note too that Orthodox families tend to be more fertile than the average in the surrounding secular culture of North America today. Women in Orthodoxy are freed to be themselves, as the does in Efrafa were not.

Yet even in Efrafa, they never gave up their devotion to the traditional stories, keeping the light burning. The Efrafan does have their example of ill-advised, reactive and immature feminism in the young doe Nelthilta, who nearly destroys the escape plan with her strident and ill-timed defiance. But they also have the wise young leader of the does, Hyzenthlay, who helps Bigwig plan the escape: "Hyzenthlay was silent again and Bigwig realized with admiration that she was going over what he had said and searching for flaws."⁴³ One thinks of the admiration of St. John Chrysostom for his friend, the deaconess St. Olympias or St. Basil for his sister Macrina. Such women are not ordained to the priestly leadership role, yet they are the indispensable teachers and consultants of the leaders, as Bigwig notes, "what he needed most of all: a strong, sensible friend, who would think on her own account and help to bear his burden."⁴⁴

⁴³ *Watership Down*, pp. 334-335.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 334.

C) *A community that is devoted to the traditional ideals exemplified by heroic stories*

There is no room in a truly Orthodox community for cynicism, pretentiousness or snobbery. We should not be afraid of the simplicity of spirit that delights in many of the popular stories of our day and of earlier times. The scripture tells us to test all things and hold to that which is good.⁴⁵ Children can often be our guides here, as they know a good story better than most of us. J.R.R. Tolkien writes in his famous essay "On Fairy Stories" that children seldom ask if a fairy tale is "true," but whether the hero was "good" or chose rightly.⁴⁶ Like the rabbits of *Watership Down*, we need our hero-tales, stories that are open and honest and brave, stories in the Great Tradition of the Church, and stories that are in accord with that Tradition.

Conclusion

Mission planting, even in the affluent West, is not a game for the faint-hearted. The priest and lay people who set out to establish a new Christian community will most certainly meet with the spiritual equivalent of the dangers and obstacles encountered by Hazel and his rabbits. They will have to leave home and comfort behind, and be prepared to learn new ideas and take on unaccustomed tasks. Discouragement and losses will press upon them. They may wander long before finding a permanent location for their community, and once they have it, they will still face many challenges. All the time they must persist in the pursuit of their vision, and employ every talent they can muster to bring it to pass. Above all they must never become like the rabbits in the warren of shining wires, who turned away from a health-giving diet of good stories.

⁴⁵ 1 Thess. 5:21.

⁴⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien "On Fairy Stories" in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Del Rey, 1986).

This treatment of the topic of leadership and community in Orthodox mission is by no means exhaustive. Much more needs to be said, particularly about prayer and sacraments, to say nothing of evangelism. However, as Hauerwas writes, the authentic Christian community is very much a "story-formed" community. In addition to the Scriptural and Traditional stories of the church, stories like *Watership Down* can inspire and instruct those who have ears to hear the many lessons provided for the establishment of healthy communities.

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