
Different Perspectives On Leadership in “The Sword in The Stone” By T.H. White

In the story *The Sword In The Stone* by T.H. White, a boy named Arthur learned many lessons on leadership as a young boy that he used throughout his later life when he became the King of England. With the help of his tutor, Merlyn, he was able to transform into different animals that enlightened him to see different perspectives on leadership and life from various places of position and status.

The first animal that Arthur transformed into was a fish. Merlyn helped him learn how to swim correctly as a fish would, and taught him how to see in this new context. When Arthur first started swimming, he swam in a zig-zag instead of a straight line. He remarked that “it was no good trying to swim like a human being,” (White 46). In order to swim like a fish, Arthur had to change his mindset from thinking as a human, to thinking as a fish. With this new form, came new vision and Arthur’s eyesight changed. He could see both land and water at the same time and the proportions were distorted. He had to realize where he was in position to the surface and he had to figure out how to look where he was going. In both instances, Arthur had to readjust his perceptions to see from a different point of view, to adapt to his new surroundings. In order to be a great leader, one also must be able to have a growth mindset and see the surroundings from different perspectives, especially in times of crisis.

On their swimming expedition, Merlyn takes Arthur to meet Mr. P., the king of the moat. He is described as, “ravaged by all the passions of an absolute monarch—by cruelty, sorrow, age, pride, selfishness, loneliness and thoughts too strong for individual brains,” (White 51). The power of being in control of the moat had made the king ugly. His everlasting cheerless attitude will forever scar his face and disposition. Mr. P. gives Arthur some advice and says that, “There is only power. Power is of the individual mind, but the mind's power is not enough. Power of the body decides everything in the end, and only Might is Right,” (White 52). Mr. P. is a tyrant and is overrun with the greed for brute force and absolute power, which has made him an uncaring and harsh leader. Merlyn brought Arthur to meet Mr. P. to show him how an unkind, tyrant of a ruler treats those in his kingdom with disregard, in hopes that Arthur will not allow greed of power to overcome him and his rulership. If Arthur is to become King of England one day, he must see and realize that greed of power can corrupt a good leader.

The second animal that Arthur turned into was a hawk. Once he was put in the castle’s cage with the other birds, they embraced him into their group. The castle’s birds put on an initiation of the new birds, in order for the newest members to prove their worth to all the birds. There were three parts to the initiation. First, he was tested on his knowledge about catechism. Then, he was sworn into the group. Finally, the hardest test of all, he had to stand next to the hawk, Cully, who threatened to kill him. Arthur passed all the tests. Arthur’s endurance of the last difficult trial marked him not as a coward, but rather as a courageous one.

The tiniest animal that Arthur turned into was an ant, which happened to be a lesson in communism. Everything in the colony of ants is the same. Each day in the ant’s life is the same as the previous and the next, “Novelties did not happen to them,” (White 127). There is nothing within the colony that would make them unique from each other. None of the ants even have

names, instead, they simply have an order of numbers that which they are called. All of the ants, excluding the queen, are equal and they don't question it. The ants also taught him what a society based on war is like. Their logic and reasoning for war are unjust and are excuses to fight for no reason. Some of their reason for war include, "We are a mighty race and have a natural right to subjugate their puny one... They are a mighty race and are unnaturally trying to subjugate out tiny one... We must attack them in self-defense... If we do not attack them today, they will attack us tomorrow," (White 129). The ant's reasoning for war is hypocritical and unfair to other ant colonies. They are all so small-minded that they can't see past themselves and can't think about the rights or feelings of the opposing ants.

The fourth animal that Arthur turned into was an owl. Like the experience of being a fish, Arthur had a hard time using his wings in his new body. He had to adjust his mindset in order to fly correctly and smoothly. As a leader, we can often think we are doing the right thing and moving in the right direction, when in fact our leadership or lack of leadership is causing restraint and hindrances, instead of soaring opportunities.

Next, Arthur turned into a goose. The flock of geese that Arthur joined, taught him about the true meaning of how to be a leader and stepping up when needed. Every year the flock makes the journey across the North Sea together and every year they need admirals to lead the geese families so they don't get lost. When there aren't enough geese to lead the flock, geese who have made the journey before need to step up and become leaders. The geese also taught Arthur what a society without war is like. When Arthur tried to explain the concept of war to Lyo-lyok, a goose that he befriended, the war idea was so strange to her, that it took some time before she could comprehend what he was talking about. "He asked. 'Are we at war?' She did not understand the word. 'War?'" (White 169). The only fights that occur within the geese colony are the occasional arguments between the males to see who is the best. She was perplexed at the idea of a species fighting against each other. Arthur asked Lyo-lyok, "But don't they fight each other for the pasture?' 'There are no boundaries among geese... how can you have boundaries if you fly? Those ants of yours-and the humans too-would have to stop fighting in the end, if they took to the air,'" (White 170). The geese have a different way of life than the humans and ants because they spend a lot of their time in the air, where it is shared space between all of those who can fly. Therefore, there is no need to argue over territory space since there simply is none. The sky provides a common "ground" for all of the flying animals, it becomes a community with no bounds.

The ants showed Arthur a society based on war as a means to solve conflicts and the geese showed him a society where having no barriers between the flocks of geese allowed for conflict to cease. In the future, Arthur would need to decide which kind of society he would want to establish in his kingdom.

The last transformation that Arthur undergoes is a badger. Arthur's foster brother, Kay has always been dominant over him. So now, Arthur gets to experience what being dominant over someone else is like. With his new, powerful size, he goes off to find something in the woods to scare. He finds a hedgehog curled up, and he orders it to uncurl so he could eat it just for fun, but the hedgehog refuses. "'Hedge-pig,' said the Wart... 'I am going to munch you up,' ... 'Ah, Measter Brock,' cried the hedgehog... 'good Measter Brock, show mercy to a poor urchin and don't 'ee be tyrannical,'" (White 184-185). After arguing with it for several minutes and seeing how terrified the hedgehog is, Arthur gives up and returns back to his sensible self. "'you need not uncurl,' said the Wart resignedly. 'I am sorry I woke you, chap, and I am sorry I frightened

you. I think you are a charming hedgehog, and meeting you has made me feel more cheerful again.” (White 187-188). Arthur got a taste of what dominating power over someone else is like. He was angry, demanding, saw only what he wanted and had no regard for the hedgehog. It wasn't until the hedgehog pleaded with Arthur, that Arthur relented and showed mercy and kindness. As a badger, Arthur was confronted with the intoxication of tyrannical power, just as he witnessed Mr. P. beholden too.

After Arthur's encounter with the hedgehog, he goes to Merlyn's friend's house where he meets a badger, and there, he learns about the parable of how people came to dominate the animal kingdom. In the parable, the badger tells of how all the different species while they were still in their embryonic form, changed their appearance except for man. Man decided to stick with being the way he was originally and decided he would adapt as necessary. “Please God,’ said the embryo, ‘I think that You made me in the shape which I now have for reasons best known to Yourselves, and that it would be rude to change. If I am to have my choice I will stay as I am,’” (White 192). The badger told Arthur this story to make him see how special and unique he is. Throughout his childhood, Arthur has been told that he is inferior to Kay and will always be. He was distraught that Kay got to grow up into being a knight and Arthur had to become his squire. In hearing this story, Arthur learned the importance of being content with what one has, instead of coveting the abilities and/or position of others.

The life-long lessons that Merlyn taught Arthur throughout the transformations of becoming different animals, not only were applicable to situations in his younger years, but also for the duration of his entire life and reign as king.