

An Ant's Story

One beautiful fall morning as I was taking a walk through the woods I saw my friend Ant taking a break. He was relaxing in the shade of a dandelion leaf, lounging against a bent blade of grass. A piece of rotting fruit was lying beside him, and he was in the process of sticking a foreleg into it so he could lick the sweet juice. I had never before seen him take a break like this. Always before he had been scurrying hither and yon, searching for food or dragging a morsel back to his nest. I considered myself lucky if he took the time to acknowledge my greeting with a brief reply, usually called back over his shoulder as he hurried along on his errand.

"Hello, Ant!" I called out. "Nice to see you enjoying yourself for a change."

He immediately sat bolt upright and started to pick up the morsel of fruit. His eyes were lowered and he looked ashamed to have been caught not working. Then he paused, shrugged his shoulders in resignation, and lay back against the blade of grass.

"Hello," he replied. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is," I answered. "A perfect day to sit back, clear your mind of all troubles, and appreciate the beauty of nature."

"Actually," he replied with a note of concern in his voice, "my mind is troubled by the fact that our pantries are not nearly as full as they should be at this time of year. Nature only shows this beautiful face for a few fleeting moments. Winter is coming, and the colony will need a lot of food to survive until spring."

"That is something to worry about," I said. "If you don't mind my asking, if you're so worried why aren't you gathering food?"

"Creeping grasshopperism," he replied.

"Creeping what?" I asked, not certain I'd heard him correctly.

"Grasshopperism," he said. "You know, like in the fable about the ant and the grasshopper."

"I'm not certain I know that one," I said.

Ant looked at me as though I was an ignorant child. "That's the first fable I ever heard when I was growing up," he said. "Come to think of it, that's the only fable I heard. The nursemaid

ants used to tell it to us over and over. During the summer, the grasshopper frolicked in the sunshine, dancing and playing his fiddle, while the ant was busy gathering food for the winter. The ant warned him several times that winter was coming, but the grasshopper paid him no heed. When winter came, the ant was snug and warm in his colony with plenty to eat, but the grasshopper starved to death.”

“That’s a pretty strong incentive to gather food,” I said. “So why are you just sitting here?”

“I’m tired of being a chump” Ant said with resignation. “Working my butt off so that others can sit around and do nothing.”

“I didn’t know that ant colonies had ants that did nothing.” I was astonished at the mere thought of this, as all the ants I’d ever seen looked so busy.

“It didn’t used to be that way,” Ant said wistfully. “We had the queen, of course, and a handful of nursemaids who took care of the queen and the young. There were hundreds of us worker ants, and a small number of ants who formed the Council of Elders. They were too old to work, but they resolved disputes and made the rules for the colony. And, of course, there were a handful of drones, whose only job was to impregnate the queen. They only worked once a year, if you can call that work, and the rest of the time they pretty much kept to themselves and stayed out of the way.”

“Sounds like a pretty good arrangement,” I said. “Seems like the drones got the best of it, but there weren’t many of them.”

“It was good,” Ant replied. “We all had different jobs, but we were all working for the colony. Even the drones. They didn’t work very hard, but as I said they kept to themselves and didn’t cause trouble. The trouble began when the drones complained that they didn’t have anyone on the Council of Elders. Drones don’t live as long as other ants, so they said we should calculate their age in drone years. That seemed reasonable, but when we did that we discovered the oldest ant in the colony was a drone. Well, there must have been something fishy about that formula because the first thing we knew we had a Council that was comprised entirely of drones.”

“The first change they made was to ban the teaching of the ‘Ant and Grasshopper’ fable. They said it was unfair to grasshoppers and encouraged stereotyping, but I think what really bothered them was that drones acted a lot like grasshoppers. Without the fable to guide them, the young worker ants began to question why the only work they were allowed to do was to gather food. You can’t blame the kids. They weren’t even eggs when we had our last lean winter, and telling the fable was banned before they started to pupate. Some of them felt that being limited to one job was stifling their creativity. They wanted to study philosophy, write

poetry, perform interpretive dances, and pursue a thousand and one other activities that fulfilled their inner larva but didn't put food in the pantry. It would have been OK if they'd done this at night, when they weren't busy gathering food, but the drones said everyone should be free to follow their dreams. They set up a student loan program so young ants could borrow food from the colony to live on while they took the courses they wanted. The courses were taught by the drones, since everyone else was busy gathering food. The drones also managed the loan program, so the interest went to them."

"Problems began when the ants finished their studies and discovered they couldn't earn a living while following their dreams. Some of their dreams were pretty stupid, if you ask me. Ants who majored in Grievance Studies wrote hundreds of books on topics such as how unfair it was that worker ants were asexual. (A few books were written about how unfair it was that only a few ants had wings, but the drones quickly pulled those books, saying it was pointless to ponder things that couldn't be changed.) Nobody bought these books. In addition to not being interested in the subjects, we were all too busy gathering food to read and we gave all the food we gathered to the colony so we didn't have any left over to buy books. For the same reasons, nobody paid to attend the public debates over aphids. Were ants exploiting aphids when they stroked them to collect honeydew? Or was it a symbiotic relationship because the ants took care of the aphids? Ants who devoted themselves to the arts tried to charge for public performances. Let me tell you, the only thing worse than listening to an ant recite free verse poetry is watching a dancer wannabe trip over six legs."

"Since nobody paid for these books or performances, the young ants couldn't pay back their loans. You would think the logical thing would be for them to go to work beside the rest of us, gathering food for the colony. Since the food they borrowed came from the colony, this would pay back the loans. The drones wouldn't collect their interest, but since the loaned food came from the colony we didn't see why the interest should go to the drones anyway. Well, that's not the way the drones saw it, and that's not the way the students saw it. The drones said the students weren't workers, they were "nontraditional ants." We were guilty of stereotyping if we thought an interpretive dancer should gather food. The drones set up a 'Sustaining Nontraditional Ants in Poverty' program to give free food to the students so they could pursue their dreams without having to worry about where their next meal was coming from.

That was the tipping point. We worker ants complained, as from our viewpoint it appeared they were just fiddling their time away and doing nothing to prepare for winter. We said they were acting like grasshoppers. The kids didn't know what we were talking about, as they had never heard the fable of the grasshopper, but the drones took offense. They said this was nothing at all like the system that had failed the grasshoppers. They said they were creating a new system, 'Democratic Grasshopperism,' which would be fair and equitable to all because every ant would be free to follow their dream, and all would be supported by the colony. They tried to blame the low level of food reserves on the scouts who searched for new

food sources. 'The scouts are exploiting the workers,' they said. 'Scouts don't bring back nearly as much food as the rest of you do. They're not doing their fair share.'"

"As soon as they said that we realized the drones didn't have a clue as to how the colony worked. The scouts were the key to the whole system. They were the innovators, the risk takers, the adventurers. Without scouts, there wouldn't be any food for the rest of us workers to gather. Not every worker could be a scout. To begin with, you had to have extremely sensitive antennae to sense food at a distance. You had to have a superb sense of direction, and lightning fast reflexes to avoid predators. In addition to the physical requirements, you had to have a special mental make-up to be a scout. You had to be willing to go beyond the established ant trails. Out where you never knew which turn would suddenly bring you into the open, where a bird could swoop down on you. Out where there were no warning signs around ant lion pits, and where you never knew if you were about to enter praying mantis territory. Sometimes scouts would disappear for days – away from the security of the colony, away from the food supplies, away from the known water resources. But when a scout found food, the whole colony benefited. He might just bring back a small sample, but every worker who followed his trail and brought back food was bringing back the scout's contribution to the colony. Imagine saying scouts weren't doing their fair share!"

Ant had worked himself into a frenzy as he said this, standing on two legs and gesticulating with the other four while his antennae waved wildly. Now he collapsed back onto the blade of grass and dipped a leg into the fruit for a second mouthful. "And that's when we decided we were going to stop being chumps!" he announced.

"But what are you going to do when winter comes?" I asked.

Ant looked suspiciously from side to side. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked.

"Promise!" I said solemnly. "You're the only ant I ever talk to, anyway."

"One of the scouts found an abandoned grain silo," he whispered conspiratorially. "It's a perfect place to spend the winter. Plenty of food, cracks in the concrete floor, and soft sand underneath. We're going to continue to gather food for the colony, and then one day, just before winter sets in, we'll make our move. All the worker ants will leave the colony in the morning, like any other day, but we won't come back. We'll all gather at the silo, dig a new burrow, and pack our new pantries full of food. The colony has enough food to see them through the winter as long as they don't have to feed us workers. But when spring comes the poets, the dancers, the philosophers, the drones, and every other ant who's been living off the hard work of others is going to have to gather their own food or starve!"

Ant stood on his two hind legs after he said this, stretched his body, and then picked up the piece of fruit. "Guess it's time to tote this food back to the colony," he said. And with that he ambled off along an ant trail. As he disappeared from view it occurred to me that I'd never before seen an ant amble.

I didn't see Ant any more that fall. I saw him again the next spring, but he was always in a hurry, carrying pieces of food this way and that, and he never had time to say more than a few words of greeting. I saw a lot of other ants carrying food, too. Some of them were huffing and puffing, as if they weren't used to carrying food, so I guess the plan worked.