

THE DEAN AND THE WEB

CHARLOTTE'S WEB AS A DEAN'S PARABLE

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I. INTRODUCTION

I had a far more controversial essay to contribute to this collection by law school deans, but I decided against it. I submit this essay after one year as the Dean at Syracuse University College of Law. I had 10 years or so of Associate Dean experience at Arizona State University and the good fortune over my career to meet many deans and to observe many more. I decided that I could make a more authentic contribution to this collection than the one I had sketched out over the last year. So I dug out my copy of *Charlotte's Web*,¹ E.B. White's classic that includes Eudora Welty's rave review from the *New York Times* Book Review.

Most of you have read *Charlotte's Web*, if book sales and personal observation can be believed. I read it repeatedly to the point of memorization as a child, and read it out loud to my children. It was a relief to reread it and find that my memory was accurate enough to allow me to proceed with my literary analogy to deaning.

As I do, I disclaim any literary critique credentials, and I also recognize that *Charlotte's Web* is not a story about being a law school dean. The story is rich in many ways, the overwhelming majority of which I will ignore. Instead, I find in it a powerful and whimsical (those need not be irreconcilable characteristics) parable for a law school dean.

In the first section of the essay I outline the basic story of *Charlotte's Web*. In the second section I elaborate on the story in order to create a richer context for my spin-offs on the story for law school deans. (I believe a similar analysis would serve corporate executives equally well.)

II. The STORY IN OUTLINE

For those who have not read *Charlotte's Web*, the outline of the story is simple. A young girl saves a runt pig from her father's axe, and is allowed to keep it.² The pig is sold to her uncle, and the girl spends her time in the barnyard of her uncle's farm.³

The story focuses on Wilbur as he grows up, learns about the barnyard and its animals, and forms a deep friendship with Charlotte, a spider who lives in the barn.⁴ When Wilbur learns that he is destined for slaughter, he is horrified and turns to

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1. E.B. WHITE, *CHARLOTTE'S WEB* (1952).

2. *Id.* at 1-3.

3. *Id.* at 12.

4. *Id.* at 13-41.

Charlotte for help.⁵ She promises assistance and she delivers on that promise by weaving words in her web that refer to Wilbur⁶

First the farmer and his family, then the neighbors, and townspeople, and ultimately Wilbur himself become convinced he is a pig extraordinaire.⁷ At the state fair, Wilbur receives a special award which includes a cash prize for the farmer and Wilbur's long term security (at least in relation to slaughter for food) is implied.⁸ Along the way, the barnyard animals must cooperate, Charlotte orchestrates Wilbur's rescue, and Wilbur becomes self-reliant.⁹ However, Charlotte's life is over, and Wilbur must return to the barnyard and live without her¹⁰

III. THE STORY AND THE LAW SCHOOL CONTEXT

A. Characters

Wilbur the Pig—a law school

Charlotte the Spider—law school dean

Zuckermans (all inclusive reference to Arables, Zuckermans, and Lurvy, the Zuckermans' hired hand)—University Central administration (or other appropriate central office of control, power and oversight outside the College)

Townspeople, Minister, Press—the buzz-makers, those who create reputation and interest, also including potential applicants, potential faculty potential employers of law school graduates, faculty and powers that be at other law schools, even students at other law schools

Barnyard Animals (e.g., the Old Sheep, the Gander and the Goose, the Cow, the Goslings etc, and including Templeton the Rat)—a wide variety of law school stakeholders: alumni, contributors, faculty staff, current students and, perhaps, students at other law schools

The Fair Judges—ultimate arbiters of value (a.k.a. *U.S. News and World Report*, Pulse Takers and Determiners)

Uncle—another law school to contend with if you are Wilbur

5. *Id.* at 49-51.

6. *Id.* at 51, 77-85.

7. *Id.* at 79-101.

8. *Id.* at 158-64.

9. *Id.* at 164-70.

10. *Id.* at 171-84.

B. *The Mise en Scene*

For our purposes, there are two sets—the overall Zuckerman Farm (the University) with most action occurring in the Zuckerman Barnyard (the College of Law campus and its extended connected passageways in and through which non college based stakeholders reside and participate), and the Fair Grounds where ultimate judgment will be passed on Wilbur and other pigs.

As noted, the Dean is Charlotte, the law school is Wilbur the runt spring pig, the barnyard animals are various law school constituencies, the Zuckermans (the farm family) is the University administration (or the Board of Trustees of the University, the Board of Regents, the State Legislature, supply your own character with the power over the law school), the neighbors and townspeople are the opinion makers (the press, the outside buzz, the deans and faculty at other law schools and other buzz makers), and the judges at the state fair are the *U.S. News and World Report* Rankings. This is a crude character assignment, and in fact there are a variety of different ways to assign the characters, including assignment that doesn't involve the rankings at all. I just throw that in as an indication of importance the rankings have assumed in our lives.

How does the story work for the law school, and what relevance can it have to a dean? I thought it had a great deal to commend it as a lesson in deaning. See what you think. For the most part, I will restate the story focusing on the themes I think are most clearly related to the Dean, the Law School, the stakeholders, the University, the Buzz-makers and the rankings. I will then extract and list specific morals from the story and distill those morals into applicable principles.

Wilbur the Pig is a truly wonderful spring pig. He is a bit self-centered and a bit naïve: he doesn't really understand the ways of the barnyard at first. Wilbur enjoys being a pig. He has been petted and loved by Fern, the little girl who rescued him from the fate of runt spring pigs, and he does have some sense that he is special—not many pigs get to spend their formative first weeks fed by a little girl from a bottle, get to be pushed around in a doll carriage and get a name, particularly a name like Wilbur.

Once Wilbur moves into the barnyard, he is subject to all the demands of the other animals (the stakeholders, various groups of graduates, students, faculty, staff, etc.). Another way to describe Wilbur at this point is to say that Wilbur is not truly aware of the roles the other animals play: what they can do for him, or how they can harm him. The animals pay attention to Wilbur, but often find him a disturbance.

Charlotte, the Dean (or Spider as she presents herself in the book) watches Wilbur (the law school) from a distance before she decides to speak up and befriend him when he is in a low moment. She develops affection for him, partially because Wilbur helps her (he attracts the flies she catches in her web), partially because of his character (he tries to spin a web, and “she was proud to see that he was not a quitter and was willing to try and spin a web again”).¹¹

When one of the barnyard animals tells Wilbur he is destined for bacon and pork roast, Wilbur turns to Charlotte for salvation. She ponders the situation, and assures Wilbur she will figure something out.

11. *Id.* at 57-58.

Charlotte doesn't create additional anxiety for Wilbur. She thinks carefully about what talent and abilities she has that she can employ on Wilbur's behalf. Wilbur, on the other hand, needs a lot of reassurance that Charlotte's plan is in progress.¹² She can spin webs. She considers the human beings she must reach and decides that they are easily influenced if the communication is proper. So she works hard and spins words in her web.

The first phrase she chooses to call attention to the pig she wants to help is "SOME PIG."¹³

Charlotte does not make an extraordinary statement about Wilbur. She doesn't weave, GREAT PIG or BEST PIG, or SMARTEST PIG or TALENTED PIG, or RANKED NUMBER 1 PIG. She chooses a phrase that is completely honest. In fact, one could say it is a universally true statement. Every pig is SOME PIG. But Wilbur has Charlotte and her web, and the Zuckermans are taken with it, seeing it as a miracle. In fact, it is an eye-opening experience that begins to change their perspective on the special animal they have had in the barnyard and not really noticed except to throw slops at it periodically—the leftovers of the family (other areas of the university, academic or not).

"I think you had best be told that we have a very unusual pig."¹⁴ Charlotte is happy and Wilbur is "pleased to receive so much attention."¹⁵ The Zuckermans see Wilbur differently. Where once he wasn't worth attention, now they declaim: "He is a solid pig."¹⁶ "He is quite a pig...He is SOME pig."¹⁷

Word gets out, Wilbur is mentioned by the minister, and the townspeople (the influence makers) come by and stare at Wilbur. "Everybody knew that the Zuckermans had a wondrous pig."¹⁸ The Zuckermans start paying more attention to Wilbur, they feed him more (better slops—specially prepared, and more feedings a day). They spend a lot more time paying attention to him, and less to other aspects of their farming activities.¹⁹

Charlotte is astute enough to recognize that Wilbur can't be a one-web wonder. And she knows that although she has begun to build momentum around Wilbur in her campaign to save him from becoming the featured ingredient in a year's supply of ham sandwiches, she has to continue with her web spinning. However, she realizes that she can be more effective if she gets help from the other barnyard animals. She calls a Meeting (Chapter XII) to get help for the next slogan in her campaign. She has to exercise real leadership in this meeting, and she gets the support of senior barnyard animals. Indeed, the Old Sheep (perhaps the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs?) convinces the most loathsome of the barnyard creatures, Templeton the Rat, to assist Charlotte if needed. Templeton is only guided by his immediate self interest, and the old Sheep quickly shows him that

12. *Id.* at 63.

13. *Id.* at 77.

14. *Id.* at 79. *N.B.*, Mrs. Zuckerman says in response to this: "It seems to me you're a little off, it seems to me we have no ordinary spider." *Id.* at 80. Luckily for Wilbur, no one else does.

15. *Id.* at 81.

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.* at 82.

18. *Id.* at 83.

19. *Id.* at 84.

Wilbur is the slop king of the barnyard and a great source of food for Templeton. If Wilbur isn't saved and becomes pigs' knuckles, Templeton loses his steady food source.

With Templeton in agreement to help out when needed, Charlotte adopts the barnyard animals' consensus for the new web—"Terrific. Before Charlotte spins this web, Wilbur is reluctant to have the word 'Terrific' applied to him. He says to Charlotte: "But I am *not* terrific, Charlotte. I am just about average for a pig."²⁰ Charlotte disagrees: "You're terrific as far as *I'm* concerned...and that is all that counts."²¹

Weaving is hard work for Charlotte, especially a word like 'Terrific,' but she gets energized and lost in the work of spinning her web.²²

As the crowds gather to see the new web, Wilbur stands beneath it. He hears the word 'Terrific' over and over as the crowds repeat the message that Charlotte wove on Wilbur's behalf. "Wilbur, who really *felt* terrific, stood quietly swelling out his chest and swinging his snout from side to side."²³

Wilbur gets into the newspaper, and the Zuckermans treat him even better than after the first web experience. They clean him up, his living quarters improve, and he gets even better food and more attention from the Zuckermans. They begin to build him a special crate for transportation to the State Fair. Painted on the crate in pretty lettering is "ZUCKERMAN'S Famous PIG."²⁴

What a change for Wilbur—from disregarded runt to the penthouse suite of the barnyard; from no attention from the farmer to a proudly proclaimed ownership broadcast for all to see. Charlotte has maneuvered Wilbur into the very good graces of those who had no particular respect for him, except as ribs for the fall barbeque.

Charlotte is sophisticated enough to know that Wilbur's place is not fully secure. She must do more so the Zuckermans will know that the Wilbur isn't just a flash in the pan pig, but a pig to be cherished and taken care of for his natural life.

She has to turn to Templeton the Rat, who is motivated by his stomach and the slops from Wilbur's pail, to make trips to a dump and return with words he cuts out of the trash he finds. Charlotte recognizes, however, that the words she spins in the web must be authentic, and certainly cannot be inappropriate to her mission of saving Wilbur. She has to exercise the judgment to reject some of Templeton's words—"pre-shrunk' won't do and 'crunchy' is definitely not a word you want to use in a web to convince people not to kill a pig. 'Crunchy' sounds very much like pig cooked to a fine crisp turn."²⁵

Eventually Templeton returns with a soap ad that contains the word 'RADIANT' . Before Charlotte is comfortable weaving 'RADIANT' into her web, she has to see if it is a credible word to describe Wilbur. She puts Wilbur through some paces. She asks him to run, jump and do a back flip. At the end of his performance, Charlotte isn't positive that Wilbur is 'RADIANT' but Wilbur is convinced! The

20. *Id.* at 91.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.* at 92-94.

23. *Id.* at 96.

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.* at 98.

pig who just a few weeks earlier thought he was just an average pig says: "I feel radiant."²⁶ Charlotte decides she has been pushing the envelope and might as well go for it.²⁷

That night, in addition to weaving a new web, Charlotte has to comfort Wilbur by telling him stories and singing him songs.²⁸

As the word 'RADIANT' appears in the web, the reader is reminded that Charlotte's web work is not simply bringing many hundreds of people to see Wilbur, it is also transforming Wilbur.

Wilbur was now the center of attraction on the farm. Good food and regular hours were showing results: Wilbur was a pig any man would be proud of. One day more than a hundred people came to stand at his yard and admire him. Charlotte had written the word RADIANT and Wilbur really looked radiant as he stood in the golden sunlight. Ever since the spider had befriended him, he had done his best to live up to his reputation. When Charlotte's web said SOME PIG, Wilbur had tried hard to look like some pig. When Charlotte's web said TERRIFIC, Wilbur had tried to look terrific.

And now the web said RADIANT, he did everything possible to make himself glow. It is not easy to look radiant, but Wilbur threw himself into it with a will. He would turn his head slightly and blink his long eye-lashes. Then he would breathe deeply. And when his audience grew bored, he would spring into the air and do a back flip with a half twist. At this the crowd would yell and cheer.²⁹

In spite of all the hoopla, "Wilbur was modest; fame did not spoil him."³⁰ Despite his anxieties about possible pork and beans futures, "In the daytime, Wilbur usually felt happy and confident."³¹ He was "looking forward" to the State Fair so that he could impress the judges, win money and essentially ransom himself from the slaughterhouse.³²

As the day to go to the fair approaches, Charlotte is unsure she can handle the trip. She is about to spin her egg sac and isn't much up for long distance travel in the pig crate labeled ZUCKERMAN'S FAMOUS PIG. But Wilbur needs her and she goes, after pushing Templeton to go too despite his unwillingness to make the effort. Again Charlotte is assisted by the Old Sheep who describes the culinary delights that await the rat at the fair.³³

Wilbur is spruced up for the fair. He has a buttermilk bath, feeling radiant and when the bath is done he is the "cleanest, prettiest pig you ever saw"³⁴ Off they all

26. *Id.* at 101.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* at 102-04.

29. *Id.* at 114-15.

30. *Id.* at 115.

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.* at 116-26.

34. *Id.* at 121.

go, after Wilbur has a fainting spell when the word 'BACON' is used in reference to how much he will produce for the farmer when he is sold.³⁵

At the fair, Charlotte continues to advance Wilbur's cause. She spies on the pig next door (Uncle), and sees that he is enormous—much bigger than Wilbur—but crude and unappealing in personality. He is also very complacent.³⁶ Charlotte knows that Uncle's sheer size will make him difficult for Wilbur, runt of the litter, to beat at judging time. She doesn't hide the truth from Wilbur, she confronts him with it but reminds him that size isn't everything. Nevertheless, she knows these contests; the judges will be impressed by Uncle and so she has her work cut out for her.

She also knows that "I shall be writing for the last time"³⁷ as she tells Templeton he must go and find a word for her. The word he brings back is 'HUMBLE.' Charlotte considers its meaning and decides that is the perfect word for Wilbur³⁸ and weaves it into the web. She then works on her egg sac.³⁹

The next day, 'HUMBLE' is in the web. Attention flows to Wilbur. Everyone is impressed and alert. Even though the first place blue ribbon is hanging on Uncle's crate, the Zuckermans are so invested in Wilbur and believe in him so much they continue to scrub him and focus their attention on him. They don't give up. The crowds begin to notice that even though Uncle is enormous, Wilbur is clean and nice and he is HUMBLE. A flurry of activity follows the announcement that the Zuckermans and Wilbur are to come forward in a few minutes for a special award. As they stand in a special judging ring, the loudspeaker proclaims the judges are awarding a special prize for Wilbur. The events of the summer are summarized for all to hear as a prelude to and explanation of, the award. Somehow Wilbur, the runt of the litter, is 'SOME PIG!' and 'RADIANT' and the Judges give this prize, including cash, to the Zuckermans, owners of Wilbur, in recognition of all the special qualities Wilbur possesses and all he has brought to add excitement and interest to the community and the fair.

And so, Wilbur is saved by Charlotte, and by his own strengths and potential, which she recognized and he began to demonstrate so others could see them too. Now Wilbur, in the closing pages of the book, shows strength, independence, loyalty and intelligence as he convinces Templeton to help him get Charlotte's egg sac into the crate for the return trip to the farm. Charlotte is about to die, unable to move back to the crate. Although Wilbur mourns her, he is pig enough to stand on all fours and rescue her children. Wilbur lives and graces the Zuckerman farm for (almost) ever.

IV THE MORALS IN THE STORY FOR LAW SCHOOL DEANS FROM CHARLOTTE

1 It isn't about the Spider, it is about the Pig. The Web proclaims the Pig, not the Spider. Attention to the Spider is dangerous to the Pig.

35. *Id.* at 126.

36. *Id.* at 134.

37. *Id.* at 138.

38. *Id.* at 140.

39. *Id.* at 144-45.

2. Know the Pig before staking your career on it.
3. Pick a Pig that matches your enthusiasm, talents and abilities. Charlotte needs a soulful Pig like Wilbur.
4. Don't spin the words until you know the Pig.
5. Check frequently on the Pig's evolution into a better Pig. The right Pig will discover the qualities the Spider sees in it.
6. The Spider must tend to the Pig—attention, assurance, challenge, and story telling. The Spider makes sure the Pig takes a break, even when the Spider cannot.
7. The Spider should know its readership.
8. The Spider only makes claims that fit the particular Pig.
9. Sometimes the Spider's understanding of the Pig is beyond the Pig's, but sometimes the Pig knows itself and its capabilities better than the Spider.
10. Usually the Spider knows better
11. Have evidence before publishing, and believe it. (Okay sometimes the Spider can stretch it a bit if the Pig believes and the Spider can see the possibility that the Pig is right, or soon will be.)
12. It isn't just about the word in the web. It's also about catching the pesky flies.
13. The Spider cannot do it alone, no matter how intelligent, level headed, industrious and dedicated it is. The smart Spider will ask for advice from the other barnyard animals, know what a team means and understand that sometimes even a loathsome and reviled rodent can provide an important contribution with appropriate service. There will always be Rats, try and get them to help, not harm. But no matter what, in the end, the Spider will have to make her own decisions in context.
14. Within the group of barnyard animal stakeholders, some are more wise and helpful than others.
15. Motivate, but don't sell the family farm in the process.
16. The Spider recognizes what the Pig does for the Spider. In addition to attracting flies, the Pig provides the Spider with the satisfaction of a job well done. It is even better when the Pig appreciates the Spider. In fact, if the Pig doesn't, the Spider had better find another Pig .. quickly
17. The Spider is confident of who it is and what it does. It knows its talent, enjoys its work, and takes pleasure and pride in it. If it is only a burden, the Spider should get into another line of work, or find a different Pig.
18. The Spider is not apologetic about its traits—its many legs, its ability to spin, spell, persevere and don't forget the way it can catch a fly, anesthetize it and eat it.
19. The Buzz-makers have short attention spans for the Good Stuff. The Spider must keep its focus and plan ahead.
20. The Spider cannot afford to get distracted by barnyard antics.
21. The Spider knows that calling attention to the Pig only works in the long run if there is something authentic to call attention to.
22. A Pig does better with additional food, better facilities, regular grooming and positive attention from the Farmer
23. The Spider contributes to all in the barnyard, catches flies which bother all the animals. Once the Pig is noticed, EVERYONE in the barnyard has a better environment.

24. Once the Farmer recognizes the true wonder of the Pig, the Farmer will become engaged, energetic, and helpful; the Farmer will not get easily disappointed in the Pig once the Farmer believes in the Pig.
25. A strong, recognized Pig helps the Farmer win recognition, satisfaction and PRIZE MONEY
26. The Spider observes before it acts. It thinks first, but makes a decision and follows through on it.
27. The Pig will never get to the State Fair if the Farmer doesn't take him.
28. The Spider knows the strength of the other Pigs, but remembers there is no Pig quite like her Pig.
29. The Spider is honest with the Pig, but doesn't feed its anxieties. It remembers it is the Spider and the Pig is the Pig.
30. The Spider encourages the Pig to be the Pig it is, not some other PIG. Wilbur cannot be Uncle, but Uncle can never be Wilbur.
31. Remember the Spider is more than a web-spinner for others. Charlotte knows she has to pay attention to her own personal agenda. In her case it is an egg sac with more than 5,000 spiders. But it could be other things.
32. The Spider isn't picky about the source of its inspiration, a soap flakes box might have a useable message. The Spider is careful because using the wrong word is worse than having no word at all.
33. The Spider doesn't give up until the job is done, even when it is tired.
34. The Pig lives; the Spider dies. The Spider won't be there very long; the Pig will, if the Spider does the job well. The Spider should leave the Pig better, more confident, realistic, self-reliant than when the Spider first arrived.
35. When it is time to depart, the Spider shouldn't belabor the point. Cut the PIG loose with minimum fuss, the PIG is ready for what comes next.

V THE PRINCIPLES FROM THE MORALS

1. Remember it isn't about your power, your glory, your achievement. It is about the College.
2. Your task is to find the true potential of the College and to work to advance that potential. Don't disregard other law schools, but don't be intimidated by what others already have done.
3. You have to work with all constituencies, even those you (and others) find greedy and completely selfish.
4. Your job ends, the institution goes on. Leave the College better than you found it, and on its way to achieving more than it could when you were around.
5. A strong College is a contributor to its constituencies, and an asset (not only a source of funds) to its University
6. Make sure promises and claims are rooted in your context. Don't make silly, self-defeating or grandiose claims for your College. Believe in your College, and advocate for it.
7. Don't quit until you are done.
8. Have the sense to know when it is time to go. Leave then, and without a fuss.
9. Enjoy your work, appreciate what you do, don't ask for attention for it.
10. You don't do it alone.