

# HOUSE RABBIT JOURNAL

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 12

THE PUBLICATION FOR MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL HOUSE RABBIT SOCIETY

FALL 2013

## A Volunteer's Paycheck and the Law of Abundance

By Marlene Larkin

Editors: LINDA COOK AND MAUREEN O'NEILL

**H**ave you ever made a donation to a charity, such as a homeless shelter, Toys for Tots, or HRS, and felt a warm feeling in your heart knowing that your donation was going to help those truly in need? Have you ever given help in the form of time, knowledge or assistance to a neighbor or friend and felt that you received a reward that went beyond the "thank you" from the recipient? Have you ever helped care for a sick child or pet and felt a sense of love and satisfaction when you looked into a set of needy but appreciative eyes? If you have ever unconditionally given of yourself and felt a sense of satisfaction and love, then you have experienced what is known as abundance, the Universal Law of Giving and Receiving, and what it feels like to receive rewards as a giver/volunteer.

The universe is made up of energy and the exchange of that energy between bodies. One half of tapping into a special form of that energy comes from truly giving of oneself in a way that puts others' needs first. It's a selfless giving energy. If you've ever felt it, you know how powerful it is. The emotions of satisfaction and pride you may feel or the actual gratitude from the recipient is the second part of that universal energy, the energy of receiving. A beautiful part of the Universal Law also states that the more you give of yourself the more you receive.



*Affection-seeking Amelia thrusts her head on Marlene's knee at the Georgia HRS shelter.*

More than three years ago, our HRS chapter in Georgia had the opportunity to take a dilapidated and nearly condemned home and renovate it into one of the few dedicated rabbit rescue shelters in the U.S. After volunteering multiple weekends with the renovations and seeing our shelter dream become a reality through the hard work and dedication of so many volunteers. I was approached and asked if I would be will-

ing to come regularly after we opened to be a caretaker for the rescued bunnies, preferably on Saturday evenings, for which it was the hardest to secure coverage. I was admittedly apprehensive at giving up every Saturday, my one day for relaxation or fun. Eventually I begrudgingly agreed, wondering to myself how long I'd be able to keep it up. Thus began a routine, after a long work week in my "paying" job, of arriving at the shelter to

provide food and greens for our 20-30 rescued bunnies, administering medicine for those who needed it, cleaning up pens for any of the bunnies fortunate enough to be adopted, or doing other odd jobs that are never in short supply.

After a few months of my “regular” duties I began to add a new task to my volunteer repertoire: I would stop and pet one or two of the bunnies eagerly begging for affection after their meals. A couple of months later, after deciding this had to be the very best part of being an HRS volunteer, I decided, rather than spending just 5-10 minutes petting one or two rabbits, I would go up and down the aisle of pens and pet ALL the rabbits who willingly came forward for attention. Immediately I rewarded with many additional bunnies who would “present,” i.e. lay their heads down to soak up the gentle stroking that was being offered. For those bunnies who were shy I would simply open the pen and talk softly to them for a few minutes and then try again the following week. After a few weeks of seeing their pen mates come freely forward for affection, and through the additional interaction and support from all of our shelter volunteers, even the abused or shy bunnies would eventually come forward to receive affection as they learned to trust humans, from whom something good was being offered.

One evening months ago (and now every week since), I was rewarded with an ultimate expression of bunny love. When I looked down the row of pens, I saw that every bunny had come forward and was lying or flopped against the front doors of their pens waiting for their turns, expressing in bunny language “I like you and want to be near you.” I also find it heartwarming that

## Succession Planning

By Marinell Harriman

Over the years we (my husband, Bob, and I) have been given credit for founding the House Rabbit Society, producing the *House Rabbit Journal*, and running the organization for the first twelve years. But credit would have been meaningless if we had only created an idea that would have lived and died with us.

We started our succession planning in 1998, when we began to raise funds to move headquarters out of our own house into a building structure, where operations could grow with new management. Directors from across the continent were added to our board; the chapter system was strengthened; and rescue programs were expanded.

HRS has widened its reach around the world, saving many more bunnies along the way. Volunteers have come forth to accomplish far more than we initially dreamed possible. It has been a very gratifying process for us to watch.

after they all have been recipients of a petting session, they still lie next to the front doors while I continue to work my way down the row, remaining as close as they can to me until I move on to another row of pens and they no longer can see me.

The satisfaction that I feel at this simple sign of freely given affection and the energy that I connect with in giving care and attention to such sweet little souls gives me a sense of completeness, peace

Bob and I are now moving towards the second part of our succession. With a great *Journal* staff in place, we are turning over the editorial, the design, and the production to a talented new team. It has been a pleasure to work on *HRJ* for the past 25 years, but like our other achieved goals, we want it to live on well past our own lifetime.

In 1988, I got a call from the official reviewing my application for the 501(c)(3).

She asked, “Is this a rescue organization or a publishing company?”

I explained to her that it was primarily rescue, but we also needed to educate people in order to reduce the number of rabbits needing rescue. The only way we had to educate the public on a broad scale at that time was the *House Rabbit Journal*.

Today, HRS reaches the world through the Internet. But member feedback tells us that they still want to receive *HRJ* in their mailbox. It is with great pride that I can assure you that it will continue with our dedicated team of successors. ■



Remembering Lefty, an early rescue, who appeared on the first cover of *HRJ*.

and motivation, which is the greatest form of payment I’ve ever known. I joke now when I talk about my decision to volunteer every week that I have the best Saturday night dates of anyone I know. It is what’s considered the “volunteer’s paycheck,” and I have learned gradually over time to tap into and cultivate this universal energy of giving and receiving.

While I’m teaching the bunnies that humans can mean “good” things, I feel they have been *(continued on page 9)*



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## Another Special Bunny

By Charlotte-Ann Chenery

Your recent article about Nika the paraplegic rabbit (Bremers, vol. 5, no. 10) reminded me of my own Nika, if only because the two rabbits share an unusual name. My Nika is not handicapped, although she has had more than her fair share of health problems. Nika came from an awful hoarding case in which 456 animals were confiscated. Typical of such cases, the animals were found in overcrowded, filthy conditions. They were starving and they suffered from untreated illnesses and injuries.

Nika came my way via the Wisconsin House Rabbit Society, which turned her over to me as a sanctuary or permanent foster. Since then I have spent countless hours with her at the vet as she got treated for *E. cuniculi*, *Pasteurella*, eye infections, and even had surgery.

The article about the other Nika mentioned Marinell Harriman's "Triple A's" for gauging quality of life: appetite, affection and attitude. I agree, although there are exceptions to every rule. My Nika does not get the "A" for affection. Perhaps due to her traumatic past, she wants nothing to do with anybody, human or non-human. I can't blame her.

Affection could be replaced by audacity while still maintaining the Triple A device. My little lady has several well-earned nicknames such as Czarina Nika and Ms. Bossy Pants. Soon after arriving at my home, she staked out her territory under the dining table and, from this seat of power, has reigned supreme since. She immediately set about training me, because in her eyes I

exist to serve as her live-in wait staff.

Several people, including fellow rabbit lovers, have said they would not have taken in a rabbit that would not allow herself to be petted. I took Nika in because she desperately needed a home; I didn't consider whether she'd return my affections. There are two other rabbits, Frodo & Francis, always vying for my attention, so I have ample opportunity to snuggle with bunnies.

There is only one circumstance in which

Nika acknowledges me in any special way—doctor visits. She knows from personal experience it can be a cruel world out there, so she is terrified every time she has to be pried out of the house. At the veterinarian's she clings to me like a baby monkey clings to its mother. This assures me Nika does recognize me as her human. Soon after arriving back home, Nika



transforms from a frightened, vulnerable little bunny pressed up against me back into the Queen of All She Surveys.

As for quality of life, Nika does regularly do those head tosses and playful leaps called binkies. She appears to be happy enough. Has it all been worth it? You bet.

Nika is inspiring. She has been through so much yet she has firmly held to her pride, happiness and will to live. ■

**You've stated** *with loving acuity, the pleasures that can come of living with a rabbit who doesn't conform to the "affection model." Many, many rabbits do not meet this standard, and we're so fortunate that there are people who adore them all the same. Kind-hearted volunteers like you, who open their homes and hearts to provide foster care to homeless bunnies are the reason HRS is able to enact its primary mission.* —BW

## Diverse Abilities: *Harmony of Spirit*



By Marinell Harriman

Editors: NANCY MONTGOMERY AND RITA RICHARDSON

**C**hange is inevitable. Our bunnies' health conditions change over their lifetime. Their environments change as they lose companions, and they make transitions into new relationships. Some of these newly formed friendships are between animals with widely diverse physical abilities,

and vastly different physical needs.

Quite remarkably, disabled rabbits are able to generate harmonious relationships between rabbits of mixed abilities. They inspire their partners and bring out the best in their nature. No matter what their capabilities are, rabbits with diverse abilities have one

thing in common: the emotional need to love and be loved.

### **Transition One: Buster Gives Support to New Friends**

Due to various health conditions in 2011, three of my rabbits, Cumin, Bay Leaf, and Oregano, were beginning to lose their hop. Also during 2011, Buster

lost his long-time buddy, Luke, who had been crippled by leg injuries early in his life. Since Buster already understood living with a friend who had diminished abilities, he appeared capable of applying his TLC to a group of rabbits with progressive illnesses.

Generally, it's a little more difficult to introduce a single rabbit into a group. However, it is not so difficult when the group is less mobile than the individual being introduced. I knew that Buster, being much more agile than the other three, could easily get away if they showed any aggression (which was not at all the case).

Though their abilities were mixed, their introduction followed the typical pattern for disabled rabbits—it went very smoothly. After only a few bonding sessions in the neutral territory of my front porch, the four bunnies were ready to live together.

The modular housing in the bunny room made the transition quite easy. Two side-by-side living spaces were converted into one, simply by taking down the fencing panels that separated them. This left a long, rug-covered area and a hay box, which Buster still uses. Buster has offered his friends snuggles and comfort as their mobility has decreased over the past two years.

#### **Transition Two: Keeping Sinbad Socially Committed**

At the far end of the bunny room my sweet and sociable Sinbad had lived with his teacher-partner, Leslie, for several years. In 2013 age and degenerative disease immobilized them both. They remained together, supporting each other for many months under “special care” until Leslie passed on—leaving a bereaved and

### **“My bunnies invariably demonstrate that they are kinder than humans to their infirmed friends.”**

lonely Sinbad without companionship.

With Leslie's help, Sinbad had made a radical change from a ferocious biting terror to an affectionate cuddly bunny. He could not be allowed to revert to a solitary life that might bring out his former defensiveness. So I decided to try him with the group of four. The first step was getting Buster to accept him and welcome him into the group as one of his “charges.”

Leaving Sinbad in his former space at the far end of the room, I removed the separating fence so that Buster could come into Sinbad's territory and get acquainted. Though I supervised their meeting closely, there was not even a hint of hostility. Sinbad was not interested in a fight. He put his head down waiting to be groomed, as he had learned to do from Leslie. Buster had never attacked a disabled rabbit, and he wasn't about to start. Within a few days all five rabbits were together in one large space in a “snugglefest.”

#### **Transition Three: Adding Dickens Into the Mix**

Dickens, a robust and feisty rabbit, has always lived with an impaired partner. When he lost his first love several years ago, I introduced him to Jasmine, who was in slow decline. I set up their living space on a high platform, where I had easy access to Jasmine for constant medicating. My challenge was to provide a padded surface for recumbent Jasmine, without allowing Dickens to chew up the bedding. He needed

plenty of alternative chewing material as well as time on the floor for exercise.

When Jasmine passed away in the summer of 2013, I wondered what to do with Dickens. I knew he would have natural rapport with the disabled group, but blocking the introduction was the able-bodied Buster. I had two healthy males who were used to being boss. But knowing that Buster was where I had to start, I set up their bonding pen in an area where I could monitor constantly. I tried many old bonding tricks, including a smear of applesauce on the top of each head (making each other appealing to lick). At the end of two weeks, I could see no progress and came close to giving up the attempt. But then they made a breakthrough. They could tolerate each other sitting in the same large hay box at the same time.

With the compatibility issue resolved, it was now a matter of tailoring their physical environment to meet everyone's drastically different needs. I brought Dickens's belongings (balls and paper bags) down to the lower platform and added Buster's hay box for a setup appropriate for the two active boys. I removed more fences. Dickens and Buster can run about the bunny room, but more often they choose to sit on the rugs and groom their disabled roommates.

My bunnies invariably demonstrate that they are kinder than humans to their infirmed friends. With generous displays of affection, my two mobile boys take their less mobile companions to the most joyous place in their universe—where individuals of mixed abilities equally experience social interaction with those they love. ■



## Rabbit Massage

By Amy Bremers

Eleven years ago, my mom adopted an orange-and-white mini lop from her local humane society. Not only is he still alive and kicking (pardon the pun), but, even with his age-related deafness and blindness, he is a content and happy little guy.

Parker used to be tense and jumpy, aggressive with anyone but my mom. Now, my mom says, he's calm and actually wants to be picked up—he knows something good is about to happen: his daily massage session.

My mom began doing massage on Parker after his mate, Hyzen, died. Hyzen used to groom the areas the elderly Parker couldn't reach, like his hips and tail area. I had been massaging several of my rabbits for years and introduced my mom to Chandra Moira Beal's book and DVD, *The Relaxed Rabbit: Massage Techniques for Your Companion Rabbit*. She realized that Parker needed someone else to "groom" him and also how much he could benefit from massage.

Massage involves working with a body's soft tissues—muscles and connective tissue—and affects many different

aspects of rabbits' health. Physical health benefits of massage can include the following:

- Break-up of muscle adhesions caused by underwork or overwork of muscles and break-up of scar tissue caused by injuries
- Increased range of motion in the joints
- Less severe and/or frequent muscle spasms

- Stimulation of nervous and endocrine systems
- Improved function of the gastrointestinal system
- Better toned muscles (especially beneficial when a rabbit is not able to exercise)
- Increased blood circulation to better deliver oxygen to tissues and remove toxins and waste from them
- Temporary relief of physical discomfort
- Possible recovery from head tilt, if caught early.

Massage can also improve emotional health by

- Relieving the stress of traveling, visiting the vet, or a change in the environment or routine
- Releasing negative feelings toward touch caused by former abuse or neglect
- Establishing trust with humans
- Comforting deaf and blind bunnies by helping to orient them in their spaces
- Simply helping them to relax.

While the initial reason for beginning massage on Parker was to "groom" the areas of his body that Hyzen used to, the

primary benefit from my mom's point of view was his calmer and more relaxed personality.

Perhaps the most important benefit of massage is that it helps the bunny guardian to become and stay familiar with his or her rabbit's body and health so that any changes can be recognized and addressed. A caregiver can note issues such as stomach irregularities; weight loss or gain; and lumps, cysts, abscesses, and sores that may not be otherwise noticeable.

Before massaging, a caregiver should always consider the rabbit's health. There are instances in which massage is contraindicated—and possibly dangerous. For example, massage should not be performed after any type of surgery or when the bunny has an infection or disease; massage can spread the infection throughout the body. In addition, since digestive problems are often secondary to another illness or injury, a rabbit should not be massaged when there is a digestive issue; a qualified rabbit veterinarian should first diagnose it. Performing massage on a rabbit with a serious digestive problem could result in rupturing the stomach, intestine, or cecum.

Massage may also be contraindicated for certain other health conditions, such as hyperthermia (fever) and obesity. A fever is the body's reaction to warding off infection; because massage increases circulation, it can raise a temperature to a dangerous level and interfere with the body's natural healing process. For overweight rabbits, massaging the fatty tissue around the muscle can be painful and stressful. Light strokes of the fur can show affection and reduce stress while the rabbit is brought to a healthy weight.

Areas to avoid when massaging are



*Tiny circles over the cheeks*



*Down the length of each ear*



*Around shoulder blades and hips*



*The webbing between each toe*

the eyes; over the kidneys; directly on the spine; the back of the knees; the carotid artery under the ears, chin, and neck; and the femoral artery on the inside thigh. In addition, while a vibration or light massage of the stomach/abdomen can be beneficial for gas (indicated by a distended but not hard stomach), deep pressure in that area should be avoided.

Rabbits' bodies are delicate, so as you're massaging, be aware and alert to the pressure. Also, like humans, some rabbits want only light massage, while others like slightly deeper work. Some want light pressure in one area but deeper work on tense areas. (Tissue characterized by tension is distinct from normal body tissue because it is less smooth and pliable than the surrounding tissue and has "borders.") If your rabbit's reactions include eyes closing, slow and even breathing, sighs and snorts, stretching out, and teeth "purring," he or she is enjoying the massage. By spending even ten or 15 minutes a day massaging, you can learn your rabbit's preferences.

To prepare for a massage session, remember that a rabbit's sense of smell is

more sensitive than yours, so avoid strong scents in the room and on your hands. Also, try to relax and focus yourself, turn off the phone if possible, and otherwise keep the environment quiet. During the massage, allow your rabbit to move away if he or she feels any discomfort.

In her book and DVD, Beal suggests the following for a massage session\*:

- Place your hands lightly on your rabbit's back. Nudge the bunny's body gently from one side to the other in a rhythmic rocking motion, without actually pushing the body back into position.
- Stroke in long, gliding motions down the head, neck, and back. Make complete passes down the length of the body—from the nose, over the top of the head, down both sides of the spine, and to the tip of the tail. Move slowly and see how your rabbit reacts. Do several of these strokes, slightly increasing the pressure each time.
- Gently press into the points between the vertebrae, beginning at the base of the skull and ending at the tail.
- Make tiny circles over the cheeks, on the temples, at the base of the ears, and down the length of each ear.
- Lightly knead around the shoulder

blades and hips, focusing on any tension spots.

- Using an upward motion, lightly stroke the muscles between the ribs.
- Using two fingers on each hand, stroke the chest muscles from front to back.
- If your rabbit isn't "ticklish" on the feet, spread the toes apart and press the webbing between each toe.
- Finish with a few long, gliding motions

Remember that massage is an adjunct therapy to veterinary care and that any health issues need to be discussed with your qualified rabbit veterinarian.

For Parker, who used to run away when my mom tried to pick him up and used to charge and nip at me, massage has been a life changer. He trusts humans; he is relaxed enough to spread completely out on my mom's lap; and, at 12 years old, he can hop and move almost as well as he could ten years ago. He is one content bunny. ■

\*For details on these and other massage techniques, including photos or demonstrations, see *The Relaxed Rabbit: Massage Techniques for Your Companion Rabbit* by Chandra Moira Beal, available as a book and DVD.

# LITTLE ONE

By Randy Withrow

*Sadness is brown, Hope is green.  
Despair is grey.  
Joy and Love are gold.*

## CHARACTERS

**MA'AM:** Large, white bunny.  
Older adult female.

**LITTLE ONE:** Six-week-old bunny.  
Black male lop.

**SIR:** Large, black, special needs bunny.  
Older adult male.

**LOCATION:** The Shelter

**TIME:** Saturday Morning

**LITTLE ONE:** Excuse me, Ma'am, can I ask you a question?

**MA'AM:** Of course you can.

**LITTLE ONE:** The humans took some of my friends out the door. Where did they go?

**MA'AM:** To Adoption.

**LITTLE ONE:** Adoption? What is that? Is it far away? What do they do there?

**MA'AM:** Little One, you have many questions.

**LITTLE ONE:** But I want to know!

**MA'AM:** Well, Adoption is the place we go when a human sees our picture and wants to meet us.

**LITTLE ONE:** Why do they want to meet us?

**MA'AM:** Maybe to take us to our forever home.

**LITTLE ONE:** Oh my gosh! We can have a forever home? Is that why some bunnies don't ever come back here?

**MA'AM:** Yes. If we're lucky, a human will take us to a forever home.

Then we don't come back here.

**LITTLE ONE:** How can I be lucky?

**MA'AM:** Sorry, Little One, but it's not up to you. A human chooses which of us to meet.

**LITTLE ONE:** But how do they choose?

**MA'AM:** Have you noticed which bunnies leave here most of the time?

**LITTLE ONE:** Yes, I have! I pay attention! Bunnies with colors in their fur, or ones all jazzed up with black and white and brown shapes and speckles and stuff, and the little bunnies with colors—they leave, right?



**MA'AM:** You're very observant. Almost all of those bunnies have a special thing called Beauty.

**LITTLE ONE:** We don't have Beauty?

**MA'AM:** Well, I think we do, but the humans don't think bunnies who are all black like you, or all white like me, or really big bunnies, have as much Beauty.

**LITTLE ONE:** But you have lots of Beauty. You're as pretty as the snow when it falls!

**MA'AM:** Thank you, Little One. You and the other black bunnies have Beauty too, because your eyes sparkle like stars at midnight.

**LITTLE ONE:** But the humans still don't want us?

**MA'AM:** I'm sorry, Little One; sometimes they do, but not often.

**LITTLE ONE:** I guess I don't know what to do.

**MA'AM:** Maybe I can help. Every morning, look around your cage really hard, and you might find a little green leaf. We call it Hope. Keep it close beside you all day, and look at it often. It will help you have more Beauty. Then maybe you will go to Adoption, and maybe a human will choose you and take you home and love you. If that happens, your leaf will turn gold. But understand that if you are still here after the sun goes down, your leaf will turn brown and change to Sadness. It's not your fault, but it stays that way all night while you sleep. Just remember every morning when you wake up to look for another green leaf. Sometimes it's not easy to find, but always try very, very hard to find it.

**LITTLE ONE:** I sure didn't know all that. I promise I will find my little green leaf every day, just like you said. Maybe I will find extra ones for everybody! Thank you for helping me. How did you learn all that?

**SIR:** Little One, I think Ma'am has gone to sleep. You should be quiet now.

**LITTLE ONE:** Yes, Sir. But can I ask just one more question?

**SIR:** Okay, just one more.

**LITTLE ONE:** Did she find a green leaf in her cage this morning?

**SIR:** Remember what she said about white bunnies and black bunnies like us? She found a green leaf every morning for years. Then it got harder for her to find them, but sometimes

she did. When her fifth year came, she looked every morning of every day, but when she did find a leaf, it was brown or even grey. That was two summers ago, Little One. I'm afraid she doesn't look anymore.

**LITTLE ONE:** Oh.

**SIR:** It's late now and time to go to sleep. Look hard for your green leaf in the morning. ■

**Author's note:** "Little One" was inspired by a big, white, very real bunny who never seemed to be chosen for a forever home. Shortly after I completed this story, that wonderful bun was adopted and thrives to this day with a loving family. Sir found his home about a month later, where he bonded successfully with another special needs bunny. Little One had to be removed from the adoption list because he found his forever home with my wife and me. — RW

#### **VOLUNTEER'S PAYCHECK** *(continued)*

teachers for me. Occasionally those of us who are good at giving don't make the best receivers, often shunning signs of affection or appreciation or discrediting our efforts with statements like "It was nothing." According to the Universal Law of Giving and Receiving, for the flow of energy to balance and not stagnate the giver must be an equally good receiver. The simple signs of affection from the bunnies, and even an occasional bunny lick/kiss, have allowed me the opportunity to practice being truly open to receiving signs of gratitude from the bunnies, and then gradually from my fellow human volunteers.

Since starting my volunteer work with the shelter I've also found additional ways to tap into the powerful giving and receiving energy and develop even greater abundance in my life. After being a HRS member for 21 years, our chapter manager asked me to apply to become a certified HRS Educator. As an Educator I developed a Bunny 201 course, which teaches how to provide home medical care and detect signs of common illnesses in bunnies. I have been rewarded by more than 200 people who have taken the course and provided feedback about



*Volunteer Stephanie Elser is greeted by Winnie*

what a difference their newfound knowledge has made in their bunnies' lives. I've also used my love of crafting to make items that we sell in our bunny store and during special events and also have volunteered time or chaired various HRS fundraisers locally and nationally.

Each and every one of us has unique talents, knowledge and time that we have to offer in so many different ways, and thus we are all open to share in the law of abundance, the energy of giving and receiving. There are so many ways to volunteer. It is indeed the energy of giving on which the HRS is grounded. To put it in terms of a corporation, it is the capital, materials and supplies that allow the organization to function. The payment in return to its volunteers is the

display of affection, gratitude and self-fulfillment that comes from bunnies and humans alike.

The School of Metaphysics teaches that our lives are made up of a series of moments and that the quality of life you live is determined by the choices you make and how you choose to spend your time. It also teaches that gifts given in the correct spirit are returned back to us many fold.

The opportunity to volunteer and give freely of myself and my abilities and the receipt of trust and affection in return, is the greatest "paycheck" I have ever known. It is an energy capable of creating both a powerful flow and, at the same time, a balance to the mind, body and spirit both within the self and in the connection to others. The gift of volunteering with the HRS and learning to cultivate the energy of giving and receiving has developed an abundance in my life that I now could not imagine doing without. ■

*"It's not enough to have lived. We should be determined to live for something. May I suggest that it be creating joy for others, sharing what we have for the betterment of personkind, bringing hope to the lost and love to the lonely."*

— Leo Buscaglia

David Lynch's *Rabbits* (2002) may be the strangest rabbit film you will never see. Running just under 50 minutes, it was temporarily put up on Lynch's website, davidlynch.com, as an eight-part web series. By 2011, the video had made its way to YouTube, where one can see it today, although the production values are low—images are often indistinct quite apart from the intentional fading in and out. I asked a friend to take a look at the piece; and when she returned the DVD, she said, "Lynch has a seriously messed up mind." However, as a fan of some of Lynch's other works, such as *Blue Velvet*, *Wild at Heart*, *Mulholland Drive*, I was intrigued. In fact, when I first saw *Rabbits*, I had this strange feeling that Lynch understood something important about rabbits. But what?

#### Setting and Action

The setting is a single room, dark except for light from two lamps, located in "a nameless city deluged by a continuous rain." The room looks as if it were in a dreary residence hotel or an apartment from bygone days. It has an old-fashioned radiator and a transom window above the door that tips open for ventilation, used before forced-air heating and cooling. A large passage in the back wall is framed in wood trim and provides an exit to nowhere visible; the furniture is non-descript—a brown couch, a lamp next to it, an ironing board in the back corner, and a telephone on a small stand with wood that looks chewed (love it!). The aqua walls are bare except for the shadows of rabbit ears cast by the lamps. The room recalls a box set for a theater performance or television show from perhaps the 1950s or earlier.

## David Lynch's *Rabbits*

By Julie Smith, PhD



Detail from image "Rabbits-lynch.jpg," as posted on Wikipedia.com

The three principal actors are humanoid rabbits named Susie, Jack and Jane. The action of *Rabbits* is a series of disconnected activities: Susie irons; Jack exits and enters the room; Jack and Susie each recite a dismal poem; a flame bursts out on the back wall; Susie enters the room with candles following a blackout; a deep voice, either divine or demonic (think Morgan Freeman on a record played below speed in an echo chamber) speaks prophetically in an unknown language; the telephone rings; steps are heard outside, and so on. The only "plot" is the movement of time from 7:00 p.m. to after midnight, and the ominous hint of a secret. The tag line reads, "Three rabbits live with a fearful secret." References to a man in green intensify the impending doom; and the

sequence ends with a knock, a loud scream, and the Rabbits huddled together on the couch.

#### Dialogue and Screen-Audience

If the action is disjointed, so is the verbal interchange between the Rabbits. They speak, but what they say is never in response to what has just been said:

"There was a call for you earlier today."

"We are not going anywhere."

"I almost forgot."

"I knew that was what happened each time I thought about it."

"Are you going to tell?"

"It is the rain."

"I was wondering when Susie was going to do that."

The lines are not the only *non sequiturs*. An unseen audience cheers, claps, laughs—all for reasons unknown. For example, every time Jack enters the room he gets a hearty round of cheers and applause. But why? Another time, the audience bursts out laughing at the line "Do not forget that today is Friday." Thus off-screen viewers (you and I) are left perplexed about the relationship between the spoken lines, between lines and actions, and between both lines and actions and the audience's responses. Accompanying all of this is eerie background music with sounds of rain and distant trains.

#### Interpretations

As one would expect, film critics believe that real-life rabbits are not critically relevant. However, in "Lynchland: An Overview of David Lynch's *Rabbits*," available at [www.objectifcinema.com/davidlynch/analyses/0004f.php](http://www.objectifcinema.com/davidlynch/analyses/0004f.php), one unidentified critic tries to answer the question, "Why rabbits?" He or she says that because rabbits are less interesting than

humans, having rabbit actors shifts the focus from the characters to the mechanical artistry of the work. He also believes that rabbits are a way to represent an identity crisis for humans lost in a world of darkness and confusion. She argues that rabbits are good stand-ins for humans because they are nervous creatures emblematic of fear; because they are beings filled with paranoia; because they are animals frequently used in dream symbolism; and because they are popular subjects for wall shadows. The critic thinks that the Rabbits' cut-up dialogue represents the "vast chasm of isolation that can occur between [human] individuals."

The blogosphere offers its own entertaining reads. One blogger at [www.who.honestlygivesashit.blogspot.com/2012/04/david-lynch-rabbits-quick-analysis.html](http://www.who.honestlygivesashit.blogspot.com/2012/04/david-lynch-rabbits-quick-analysis.html), lays out four possible interpretations. The first is that the rabbits are three everyday pet rabbits seen through the eyes of a small child. As such, they are as incomprehensible to him as are the adults in his world. The "weird monster head thing" (the demonic voice) is the boy's pet dog or cat getting into the hutch. Alternatively—and this is my favorite—the rabbits are three hunters in hell who died and were reincarnated as their rabbit victims. Another possibility, the blogger writes, is that Lynch shows that humans like to see suffering, because he gives the audience three rabbits trapped in a miserable world while the audience laughs and applauds. Finally, the blogger concludes that Lynch had writer's block and decided to make the audience come up with its own story rather than give it a coherent one himself.

Of course, none of these explanations

shows any interest, never mind understanding, of our cherished rabbits *per se*, except perhaps the one about being trapped in a miserable world. As rescuers, we all know rabbits who have lived in a human-created hell. And while I would never presume to say what Lynch's Rabbits mean to Lynch, I can say what I find compelling about them. On the one hand, they are a wonderful joke on anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism seeks to give non-humans human-like qualities in order to make them familiar when they would otherwise be disturbingly alien. This is called intellectual domestication. Yet the three anthropomorphized Rabbits remain unsettling *because* they are anthropomorphized. There is just something about a rabbit doing her ironing that discombobulates one's point of view, particularly when she keeps going over the same spot.

The attractions for me of the Rabbits are the things about them that remain impossible to humanize, like their different sense of time and timing, their obscure relation to cause and effect, their masked intentions. I find our real rabbits wonderfully mysterious in some of the same ways. In addition, the Rabbits have a powerful sense of presence and connectedness to each other without the usual human strategies for achieving that. They speak, but their communication depends not on what they say but on their responsiveness to each other apart from its mode or timing. Thus, while other critics see Lynch's Rabbits as dysfunctional humans, I see them as beings inhabiting an alternative world of social cohesiveness and mutual understanding that leaves humans way behind. ■

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### WARRENWISE

#### ***Bleating Hearts: The Hidden World of Animal Suffering***

By Mark Hawthorne

BOOK REVIEW BY Anne Martin, PhD

In welcoming mostly-silent prey animals into our families and trying to understand and protect them, many of us find new appreciation for other animals. *Bleating Hearts*, which opens with a dedication to Hawthorne's rabbit companions Nibbles and Sophie, is impeccably researched, his writing clear and organized, and gives a voice to animals who continue to be systematically harmed in our society. *Bleating Hearts* systematically investigates the ways that animals are used, for food, fashion, animal testing, hunting, sports, entertainment, religious sacrifice, art, as working animals, and finally how they are sexually assaulted. For animal lovers, this is not always an easy book to read, but it is a compelling and important one. Each chapter closes with a short list of non-profits that are actively working to assist animals affected, giving readers hope for animals at the end of every chapter, and empowering readers to become involved with organizations making a difference.

This year at House Rabbit Society headquarters, we rescued four rabbits released from research labs, including Lola. While Lola is currently safe with us awaiting adoption, her brothers and sisters from the same litter were undoubtedly also sold into laboratories, and we wonder what they have endured. In the chapter "Trials and Errors: Animal Testing," Hawthorne describes common animal tests, recent abuse cases by animal dealers and laboratories, scientific shortfalls of animal testing, and newer technologies that may replace animals. Hawthorne discusses how rabbit physiology compromises the scientific value in using them to test for human reactions, such as rabbits'

inability to vomit, or to produce the quantity and quality of tears that humans do. He also discusses how animal advocates have approached the issue, in highlighting the harms to animals as well as the human costs of poor scientific models. The chapter provides resources so readers can contact policy-makers, purchase cruelty-free cosmetics and household products, choose alternatives to dissection in school, or bequeath their body to science. In concluding the chapter, Hawthorne encourages readers to adopt a rabbit from a shelter or rescue, stating "the more that people can see these wonderful animals as companions and not test subjects (or food or fur trim), the better educated the public will be" (p.211). House Rabbit Society and [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org) leads the list of rabbit rescues at the end of the discussion on animal testing, where readers can learn more about rabbits as companions.

*Bleating Hearts* illuminates the unique plight of many different animals using interviews, news articles, and government reports in synthesis with secondary data from experts. From sharks being hunted to near extinction for fins and tournament

prizes, to elephants kept in confinement in small railcars for circuses, Hawthorne gives voice to ways in which animals are systematically harmed. With our love of rabbits, who are so deserving of our care and protection, *Bleating Hearts* offers us the opportunity to learn more about the 'hidden worlds' they inhabit and offers us tools to harness our love to help rabbits and other animals. *Bleating Hearts*, published by Changmakers Books, is available in paperback and ebook. ■

*House Rabbit Society celebrates 25 years in 2013! To mark our accomplishments, we are offering a commemorative book full of full-color photos of volunteers and the rabbits we've rescued. Visit [www.rabbit.org](http://www.rabbit.org) to buy your copy.* —WW

