

The Parable of the Horseshoe Crab & the Seagull

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“What have you got in your pockets, Apple Hat?” asked Mr. Anthill pulling at them. “Guts? Electric trains? Horseshoe crabs?”

—W.A. Davison and Sherri Higgins, *La Chasse A L'Objet Du Desir*

Once, while in my teens, my girlfriend and I were walking along the shores of Plum Beach in Brooklyn on a sultry summer evening to get a breath of fresh air under a full moon. As we walked along the shoreline, we spotted lots of horseshoe crabs that had been overturned on their backs when the tide had gone out.

It seemed unfair to see them lying helpless there on the beach and just walk on knowing they would surely die. So, as avowed nature lovers, we immediately began turning them over right-side up so that they could scurry back to the welcoming embrace of the incoming tide. After gleefully running around the beach turning over every stranded crab in sight, we held hands and looked deeply into each other's eyes with mutual admiration.

We were proud to have used direct action to rescue the crabs from a needless death! Justice had been done! As we were basking in our self-congratulatory glory, we began to hear the agitated squawking of hungry seagulls circling overhead.

As the anguished cries of those angry birds got louder and louder, it began to dawn on us that in our sentimental desire to save the crabs, we had deprived the seagulls of the evening meal which they depended upon for their survival. With the best of environmental intentions, we had actually upset the whole balance of nature in that little Plum Beach ecosystem.

This tidal parable is a cautionary tale that is not limited in its application to the missteps of youthful inexperience. Everything we do always has consequences. Some of those consequences are more well-hidden, and therefore easier to ignore than the accusatory screech of an aggrieved seagull that cuts through human illusion like a knife.

While simple solutions might initially appear to be the most obvious ways of dealing with an immediate problem, the underlying nature of that problem is usually part of a Larger web of complex relationships in which we ourselves become entangled once we enter the problem-solving process by deciding to act.

To be clear, the pointing out of such relational complexity is not meant to be either a refutation of the value of spontaneity or an excuse for inaction in the face of social injustice.

Instead, the desired outcome aimed at here is that a recognition of the intricacy of the intersectional lattice-work of which we are ourselves a part can help us to avoid the trap of a frustrating Sisyphean activism that involves endlessly shoveling the flotsam and jetsam of injustice against the tide while justice itself remains lost at sea perpetually beyond reach.

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