

The Starfish Story
Original Story by: Loren Eisley

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the boy, he asked, What are you doing? The youth replied, Throwing starfish back into the ocean.

The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die. Son, the man said, don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can't make a difference.

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, he said, I made a difference for that one.

I'm sure many of you may have heard this little story. I heard it awhile ago and there are features of it that have niggled at me ever since. And I'll go into some of the niggings as I go on, but the story, improbable and a bit sentimental, always seemed to me to illustrate different approaches to what might be called social justice or, more broadly, caring for those in need.

Let me get the niggling out of the way. My first question about this story was this: why were so many starfish washing up on that beach? Is this a natural phenomenon, part of Nature's plan, or is something going on to change the way in which the normal cycle of events happen? If that is the case, will the starfish just thrown back into the ocean simply wash right back up on that beach, its life

extended by only a few minutes? To go further, if there is something that has changed to throw more starfish up on the beach, wouldn't the youth be better advised to start working on his degree in environmental science? Or marine biology or engineering? Perhaps by doing so, he could discover what was happening and correct it, thereby saving millions of starfish, not just one.

But that would take quite a while and involve many hours of what could be fruitless labor. It would be work done for the starfish at a distance and would deny the boy the pleasure of holding the starfish by its own little clammy tentacle, the pleasure of knowing the direct result of his effort.

It is no wonder that people are more often drawn to charitable activities that put them in direct contact with the people who need their help. It is more immediately satisfying to see a human face show gratitude than it is to engage in activities to change whatever creates need in the first place. That's why many churches have food banks or clothing exchanges or free lunches but not as many question the reason that there are so many people in need of clothing and food.

However, there are some churches, and we are one of them, that do ask why people are poor, why there is so much need, and what we can do about it. And we have often been a church that has worked on those foundational issues to try

to change things so that the endless cycle of need does not keep reoccurring.

That is why you can tell if you're in a U-U church by counting the "Question Authority" bumper stickers in the parking lot.

I was reminded of these different approaches and the strengths and weaknesses of each one when I attended one session of the conference on Faith for a Fair New York last week. Not one but two of the panelists summed up a lot of what I had been thinking about the difference between approaches to helping those in need. The first panelist noted that, in many churches, the people doing the work in the food pantries and other charitable ventures weren't often the people who were on the social justice committees and the two groups seldom shared the knowledge each had. But I was also interested to hear that, in her observation, the people who are on the ground, those who directly help the poor, often become burnt out and see the poor themselves as the problem. They see the problems that many poor people have as caused exclusively by their own actions and often say things such as "How can she afford to get her nails done but she can't afford to feed her children." Or "That's a new cell phone. How come he can have that and has to come here for food." I think we're all familiar with those statements. On the other hand, the social justice people were often well versed in the structural societal issues that create and sustain poverty but were not at

the food pantry, not meeting and dealing with those actually affected. In other words, people in daily contact with the needy often develop an antagonistic view of them, stressing their fecklessness and foolishness. People doing social justice action often have little contact with the people who need the help but are focused on wider social policy without seeing the situation as it plays out. Both sides see the other as the problem. This divide reminded me of the statement, attributed to the Charles Schultz character, Linus, "I love mankind. It's people I can't stand."

We're too small to specialize. The same people do various kinds of work with social justice and assistance but the same ways of thinking about the problem of need still hold for us as they do in larger churches.

And so I was particularly interested in what the next panelist had to say about how church people understand the causes of need and poverty, since, like all our analysis of all problems, how we see the cause of the problem sets the direction for how we see its alleviation. Just as the two people in the story of the starfish, we take different approaches depending on how we see the problem.

The panelist described three ways of seeing the causes of poverty. The first was that God runs a sort of lottery. To translate for many here, we might say that

nature runs a sort of lottery. And in this, I'd like to refer people to David's sermon last week. We are all randomly given certain traits, certain strengths and weaknesses, and those traits are not evenly distributed. This is God's plan or nature's plan and we are not to interfere with that plan because it is futile to do so. The poor, the weak, the disabled, the incompetent, are always with us and that's how it's supposed to be. This might be the approach of the man who challenges the boy throwing back the starfish. Why bother? More starfish will continue to wash ashore.

The panelist described the second approach as therapy. The needy are always with us because there is some flaw in them. Therefore, our efforts should be concentrated on correcting that flaw. And so they advocate counseling, rehabilitation, parenting classes and various educational programs as the sole cure for poverty. This approach implies that if each poor person would correct their bad habits, then poverty would vanish. This is often the approach of those who deal most directly and constantly with people in need. Those who see those with problems day in and day out come to see their flaws acutely and want to offer personal advice to change them. But they also experience their own frustration with being unable to really make a dent in the huge problems that seem to overwhelm us. The waves of stranded starfish wash over us and our

occasional ability to send one back to the sea seems pretty insignificant. We have to tell ourselves the stories of the successful starfish over and over to motivate ourselves to keep on throwing them back.

The third way the panelist outlined was to think structurally. Perhaps this way corresponds to an imaginary third person in the starfish story, the person who questions why so many starfish are swept onto the beach and wants to know if there are things that can be done to save a great number of them. This is a very hard way for people raised in this culture to understand others. We have all been raised to think of things individually, in a society that prizes the individual. As U.S. we are very conscious of individual choice, individual freedom. But that often means that we don't see the way that the larger society and the institutions created by that society function. And they often function to keep things as much as possible as they are. This is a way of thinking that goes beyond good and evil, that transcends individual action and, instead, stresses the inertia of institutions and the unintended consequences of institutions created by those who benefit from them. Even with the best will in the world, unless we examine how we are all part of the way that our society functions, the problems of those in need are often made more difficult and the ability of people to raise themselves out of poverty are much harder. Lack of a transportation system means that people are

more impacted by, let's say, a bad wheel bearing than someone with means.

Wheel bearings cost the same but are a different proportion of each person's income. Lack of affordable daycare means that poor people who work see most of their income go to the babysitter and therefore are often better off on welfare, if that's available. Lack of mental health care means that people under extreme stress often aren't able to cope or make good decisions and do turn to substance abuse for their relief. Lack of affordable housing means homelessness, with all the problems of the danger and hopelessness, the sheer effort to survive each day. Failing schools or individual disabilities mean that people are unable to acquire necessary skills. As the economy becomes more competitive, those without sought after skills are pushed to the margins. It is also more difficult than people imagine to get back into the game for those who have been forced out of it. This is a problem which will grow more acute as technology and outsourcing replace more people. And, in a competitive society which values people only as cogs in an unforgiving economy, little problems become big disasters while big disasters, layoffs, illness, become irreversible catastrophes. Human wreckage is scattered along the way as the juggernaut goes on. Just some some of the ways in which all but invisible structures in our society contribute to the persistence of poverty.

People are given different talents and gifts. The solution is not to handicap the gifted to make everyone equal, obviously, as David's story last week illustrated, but to examine the ways in which people are valued. Who does gain and who does lose in this society? Do we really value everyone and give everyone dignity or, as in *Animal Farm*, are some people more equal than others? Why? What traits do we reward and what do we punish? If we look at society from a structural standpoint, we can get beyond the easy notions of good guys and bad guys and begin to see that we are all part of the structures we have created. And perhaps we can see that everyone loses in a society that keeps some people from realizing their potential, that keeps some people in a hell of despair and self-loathing. A system that ignores the real needs of many of its citizens does moral damage to everyone in the system, winners and losers alike.

So there is a real need for people to see how the world functions, how institutions acquire their own momentum and how they appear to become laws of nature, there is also a need to work with people in need, now, immediately, because that is when those suffering need the help. Now, immediately. And, working directly with those in need offers the only possibility of understanding the texture of the lives that need help. The hard part is to put ourselves, our assumptions, our judgment, aside and just listen. Listen with understanding to try

to understand someone else's world. Listen behind the surface to hear the frustration, self-loathing and self-destructive rebellion that is often masked by insolence or anger. Listen with humility knowing that, with a few differences in circumstances, we could be standing in that place. Without that, charity is as cold as, well, charity. In addition, when solutions are given from a distance, the real needs are often misunderstood. What helps people? What hinders people? What keeps the cycle of need going? For whose benefit? Those are all essential questions.

And above this hovers the larger, often invisible, question. How are we all to live on this earth? How will we decide who lives and who dies or who will decide that for us?

The way the system operates appears like a law of nature, like the ocean which casts starfish randomly on a beach. If we are committed to understanding the structures that keep people in poverty, we need to see through that illusion. These structures are created by people and can be changed by people. Our beliefs determine whether we think this change is possible. Our beliefs determine where we invest our time and energy. Our beliefs about people, about the relative merits of different traits, about what makes for a good world, all

these invisible, often unquestioned assumptions, determine how we want to see things change.

We are a people who stress freedom. Because of this, we often see ourselves as free of beliefs, as free of assumptions, or, at least, as being able to shed our assumptions. In some ways this is good. In other ways this can be dangerous. Because we all have beliefs, beliefs that are embedded in us by our upbringing, by our communities, by our culture, by our occupations, by the joys and sorrows of our lives. If we do not examine our beliefs, we are unable to challenge them and to grow. As one of our hymns that I didn't use today says, #134 Our World Is One World. "The thoughts we think affect us all. The way we build our attitudes, with love or hate we make, a bridge or wall. The way we build, the way we share, who are the rich or poor, who stand or fall?"

What place do words like mercy, pity, compassion have for us? When do we say words like "there but for fortune go I?" What is the path to a world made fair and all her people whole?