

ONE STARFISH...

Contributed by Jim Jordal
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By Jim Jordal

This article was prompted by Mary as we sat one morning around the breakfast table. We were discussing a recent encounter in which I said that economic justice was the main message of the Bible. She countered with the thought that maybe that's a bit extreme because people don't understand all the issues and principles and so are unwilling to seriously think about the subject. Then she mentioned that the following story might be one way to bring the subject down to a more understandable level. Since I listen to my wife, here it is.

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."

The Starfish Story original by Loren Easley

When you think you can't possibly make a difference, consider this story, which could just as well be titled One Starfish at a Time. It's a message of hope when all seems lost. It focuses on something or someone outside us. And it raises our spirits to know that something we do---although it might not change the overall situation---does make a difference to someone.

This is a good thought as we consider the impact of unjust domineering political and economic systems upon the earth itself and most of its people. The impression is stunning when it finally overcomes our systems of ignorance and denial and reaches the depth of our comprehension. That's when we need to begin thinking about our role and the opportunities we have---one starfish at a time.

I sometimes struggle with this as I wonder if my writing makes a difference to anyone. I know a little about the overall unjust systems and situation we face, and again I wonder if anything I say has any impact at all. For sure, I don't see the systems changing very rapidly, if at all. But what can I do? I don't have opportunity to do anything directly about government or the economic system, but I can speak out, and that's what I attempt to do.

So perhaps we're basically in the business of individual consciousness raising. No, we can't change the outcomes of governmental or corporate malfeasance, but we can speak out in protest or support as needed. We can educate ourselves and those around us---one starfish at a time. And we can respond in patience and love to those who seem adamantly opposed to any movement away from the status quo---one starfish at a time.

Perhaps you remember the term "critical mass" from physics. It's the idea that a nuclear reaction cannot occur until enough fissile material is gathered to sustain nuclear fission. In more modern terms it's related to author Malcolm Gladwell's 2000 best seller, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, that popularized the "tipping point" concept that when enough weight or movement is added a formerly stable situation will "tip" into drastic change.

Or maybe it's the somewhat questionable "Hundredth Monkey" epiphany that supposedly occurred on some outlying islands of Japan some years ago. It seems researchers were watching monkeys learn to wash their sweet potatoes before consuming them. It began with one monkey discovering this benefit by accident and then transferring the behavior to other monkeys as they watched. Soon all monkeys on one island were washing their sweet potatoes. But then a "miracle" occurred. On other scattered islands monkeys suddenly began to wash their potatoes. How could this happen when there was no observable contact between the widely separated tribes?

The conclusion was that, miraculous as it seems, some unknown force, or critical mass if you will, had caused the idea to leapfrog across miles of ocean. Could this happen here and now? Perhaps. Possibly your behavior will create the critical mass necessary for great social change. Think about it.