

Saving a Starfish and Enriching Our Lives

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The late Loren Eiseley wrote a story about a starfish that I am certain many of you have heard. The story has been told with several variations, mainly involving the depiction of the two main characters as either old or young or man or woman. However, the variations do not alter the central message, namely, that each of us has the capacity to make a significant difference in the lives of others. What follows is one version:

An elderly man was picking up objects off the beach and tossing them out into the sea. A young man approached and saw that the objects were starfish. He asked, “Why in the world are you throwing starfish into the water?”

“If the starfish are still on the beach when the tide goes out and the sun rises high in the sky, they will die,” replied the elderly man.

The young man countered, “That is ridiculous. There are thousands of miles of beach and millions of starfish. You can’t really believe that what you’re doing could possibly make a difference!”

The wise old man picked up another starfish, paused thoughtfully, and as he threw it to the safety of the sea, he said, “It made a difference to that one.”

Later that day the young man returned and helped the elderly man throw starfish into the sea.

The key lesson embodied in the starfish story was reflected in numerous newspaper and magazine articles during the recent holiday season. This is not surprising since it is a time of year in which accounts of charitable acts receive special attention in the media. For example, I read of a child who requested that friends attending his birthday party make a contribution to a specified charity in place of giving him a present, of a man collecting gifts for the children of military personnel serving in war zones, of a woman initiating a donation drive to provide toys for families unable to purchase them, and of professional sports figures visiting children in hospitals to offer cheer and gifts.

Last week *The Boston Globe* published an article authored by Stan Grossfield about one of New England’s most beloved sports figures, David Ortiz of the Boston Red

Sox. He helped to establish a cardiovascular unit for children in the Dominican Republic, the country in which he was born and spent his youth. In addition to a substantial monetary gift that Ortiz personally gave, he also obtained contributions from the Red Sox Foundation, corporate sponsors, fans, and players. Ortiz, reflecting on his charitable fund-raising, noted, “It comes from my parents, my mom and dad. They teach me how to do the right thing. I tried to keep it with myself. Now everybody looks at you like a role model. I don’t feel that I am. People are needing help and, basically, if you can afford to do something to help somebody out, I don’t mind.”

One of the first beneficiaries of Ortiz’s efforts was 12-year-old Diana Reyes who was born with a heart defect. Reyes’s mother said, “What David Ortiz has done for us is something that we never could pay back. It is beautiful to give a child back her life. It’s something priceless. God bless him wherever he is. It’s a miracle.”

I recognize that a well-known and respected athlete such as David Ortiz is able to enlist the financial support of others more easily than someone who is not in the public’s eye. However, while Ortiz might be able to call upon hundreds of volunteers to throw starfish into the sea, each of us can still make our own contribution either by ourselves or with the assistance of a few others.

This last point was illustrated in another recent article in *The Boston Globe* that noted the increase of volunteerism in America and highlighted six individuals in Boston who have made a difference in the well-being of their community. One of those cited by reporter Don Aucoin was Jennifer Blackmon who grew up in Georgia and Florida before moving to Boston. After seeing a notice about a nonprofit organization called “People Making a Difference,” she decided to volunteer her time to various causes. Aucoin writes that Blackmon “has assembled books for the blind at the National Braille Press. She has led a flower-planting project at the Lee Academy Pilot School in Dorchester. She has delivered meals to the elderly, cooked for homeless women at Rosie’s Place, helped set up toys for distribution by the Salvation Army to needy families, painted signs for the Walk for Hunger, and played horseshoes with formerly homeless children at a picnic run by the Pine Street Inn.”

The stories of the other five people featured in *The Boston Globe* article are equally inspiring and offer testimony to the far-reaching impact that one individual can have. For instance, Karen Kiefer and her friend Juliette Fay wanted to do something after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As noted by reporter Bella English, “They began by baking loaves of bread for firefighters and police officers, getting their children and neighbors involved.” They then expanded their project to provide bread for the poor and needy.

Kiefer says, “One of the things I’m most proud of is that this initiative has taught thousands of people, young and old, that they can make a profound difference in a simple way.”

The Power of Charitable Acts and Compassion

I have frequently advocated that we should reflect upon our lives, values, and lifestyle throughout the year. However, the ending of one year and the beginning of a new year offers a special invitation for this kind of reflection. As I have suggested in previous articles as well as in the resilience books I have co-authored with Dr. Sam Goldstein, I believe that we would all be enriched if we placed high priority on nurturing the lives of others. Certainly, our interactions with family members—our spouses, children, parents, and other relatives—provide ample opportunities for this kind of enrichment. However, extending our helping hand beyond our immediate family to other individuals or groups or causes should also be considered. Such actions nourish not only the recipients of our kindness, but as research has indicated these actions add meaning to those who offer the nourishment.

Compassion drives us to help others. To engage in charitable activities is not only an expression of compassion, but it also serves to reinforce compassion and our sense of connectedness; thus, a positive cycle is constantly in motion. Ralph Waldo Emerson captured this dynamic when he wrote, “It is one of the most beautiful components of life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.” Jennifer Blackmon, the volunteer from Boston, echoed a similar message when she said, “Volunteering can be kind of selfish. It makes you feel good.”

An example of the beneficial influence of compassion and connectedness is found in an extensive study undertaken by Dr. Lisa Berkman who followed the lives of 7,000

residents in Alameda County, California for nine years. Berkman and her colleagues interviewed these residents to assess the degree to which they were or were not connected. The researchers identified whether people were married or lived alone, the extent of contact they had with friends and relatives, whether they were members of a church or religious organization, and to what degree they participated in voluntary organizations and groups.

Berkman then examined each person's risk of dying during this nine-year period in light of the data collected. She found that the most isolated people were three times more likely to die in that nine-year period than those with stronger social connections. One might question whether there was another, overriding variable that influenced these results more than the level of one's relationships. However, this was not found to be the case. The protective nature of connections was demonstrated to operate at all ages. People in the study ranged in age from thirty to sixty-nine. The highly connected people lived longer within every age group. Even when such health risks as smoking, obesity, alcohol use, poverty, a lack of reliance on health services, and poor health at the beginning of the study were taken into consideration, those people with strong social ties lived significantly longer than those who lacked such ties.

In a previous article I described the insights of Dr. Dean Ornish, a clinical professor of medicine at the University of California in San Francisco and one of the world's leading experts on preventing cardiovascular disease. Ornish's observations in the October, 2005 issue of *Newsweek* parallel Berkman's research findings. He contends, "Medicine today focuses primarily on drugs and surgery, genes and germs, microbes and molecules. Yet love and intimacy are at the root of what makes us sick and what makes us well. If a new medication had the same impact, failure to prescribe it would be malpractice. Connections with other people affect not only the quality of our lives but also our survival. Study after study find that people who are lonely are many times more likely to get cardiovascular disease than those who have a strong sense of connection and community."

Ornish then advances an idea with far-reaching implications. "I'm not aware of any other factor in medicine—not diet, not smoking, not exercise, not genetics, not drugs,

not surgery—that has a greater impact on our quality of life, incidence of illness and premature death. In part, this is because people who are lonely are more likely to engage in self-destructive behaviors. Getting through the day becomes more important than living a long life when you have no one else to live for.”

Based on my clinical work, I would assert that compassion and connectedness are strengthened when we become the starfish throwers captured in Eiseley’s story. This assertion is supported by a landmark study of a group of male Harvard graduates who have been followed for more than sixty years. Psychiatrist Dr. George Valliant explored factors that contribute to emotional health in the elderly. He discovered that friendships with younger people reinforced enjoyment and satisfaction in old age. These relationships were not those in which the elderly were coddled or patronized by their younger counterparts. Rather, the elderly assessed to be the most resilient gave more than they received, sharing life experiences with the younger generation. Valliant’s findings indicate that the act of contributing to the knowledge and welfare of others enhances our sense of connectedness and resilience at any age.

Questions to Reflect Upon

In considering the research findings and clinical observations of Berkman, Ornish, and Valliant, I recommend that you reflect upon the following interrelated questions:

Is being a “starfish thrower” a top priority in my daily activities?

If it is not, why not?

What is one small step I can take that will allow me to become a starfish thrower?

What obstacles keep me from taking this step?

Is one possible obstacle that I harbor doubts about whether I can truly make a difference in the lives of others?

Do I experience and practice compassion towards myself or do I tend to be self-critical and self-demeaning?

In what ways do I contribute to the welfare of others, including my family, community, colleagues, and co-workers?

When I have contributed to the welfare of others, what have I experienced?

What do I think the other person has experienced?

If I am a parent or teacher or other caregiver of children, do I model compassion, caring, and connectedness and do I provide children with opportunities to experience the joy of giving to and connecting with others?

I would suggest that if acts of compassion and generosity are not part of your daily or weekly routine, you take the first step toward rectifying this situation, both for your well-being as well as the well-being of others. If these acts are already incorporated within your lifestyle, you know how satisfying, self-reinforcing, and self-perpetuating they are; I need not remind you of their benefits since you are reminded each time you fulfill these acts.

I hope that you will consider the questions I have posed above. It is also my hope that during this upcoming year you will set aside time during your journeys to seek and find at least one starfish on the sand that you can gently pick up and toss into the safety of the sea. As you do, recall the words of Charles Dickens: “No man is useless in this world who lightens the burden of it for anyone else.”

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