

Go ahead... Toss the Starfish!

By: [Paul Shearstone](#)

There is an old story that tells of a man walking along a beach when up ahead in the distance, he catches sight of another man acting strangely. As he gets closer, he notices the man is picking things up from the sand and throwing them into the water.

Upon reaching him, he sees the objects being tossed are starfish, stranded on shore by the retreating tide. Curious about his intentions, the first man asked, "What are you doing?"

"I am saving these starfish," he replied. "They won't survive in the sun until the tide returns."

Totally taken aback by this statement, the first man shot back, rather indignantly, "Aren't you being a little silly? Do you not realize how many hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of starfish there are in the sea and that by throwing a few back will make absolutely no difference at all?"

The second man said nothing but was unfazed. He picked up yet another starfish and threw it out into the waves. He hesitated for a moment, then looked back the first man and said, "I just made a difference for that one."

It is an old story but a good one and it still serves to remind us - or maybe just me - of several important life lessons.

Given the unrest in the world of late and the day-to-day pressures, people endure; it comes as no surprise that too many of us have become conditioned to seeing our lot in life from a jaded point of view. We learn to accept the notion that we, as individuals, have no real control and/or that in the big scheme of things, what we do or influence, doesn't really matter. As a result, we tend to retreat psychically in an effort to deal with conditions we believe beyond the realm of our control.

The net result is we act in a way that is in keeping with a defeatist's outlook, or to borrow a phrase, to see the glass Half Empty. Almost everybody can think of people they know that fit this profile - perhaps even they themselves.

The starfish story serves to underscore the importance of a basic human psychological need for people to find balance and purpose in their daily life.

One could argue about who benefited more, the starfish or his benefactor. At the risk of sounding a little 'out there', we might ponder the question; in this example, whose life was made better? An answer might be that the starfish's life was saved but that the man, albeit on a small scale, found 'Purpose' and no doubt, the feeling of satisfaction that comes from doing something good for others.

Although it would be easy to dismiss this observation as being a little academic or foolish, psychologists, nevertheless, will tell us that genuine feelings of - in this case, doing something simple but good - automatically influence one's physiological chemistry. Simply put, when we

feel good, our body produces endorphins that stimulate our mind and vital organs, which in turn, helps promote better health, pleasure and improved life-balance. We have all heard the expression, It is better to give than receive. Believe it!

Granted, the starfish example is a simple one, but the premise or law still holds true for human interactions more complex. For those who possess 'Purpose' - even marginally - find they are more in control than out. The fact is, they cannot be directionless if they have a 'Purpose'.

Many find purpose in their job or career. They do not dread the work they do; they embrace it and benefit from it. In the workplace, they are a pleasure to be around. People, who find purpose in family, are apt to achieve enjoyment, satisfaction and pleasure in their own life - but only in the pursuit of their purpose, achieved only by serving others - which brings us to perhaps the most important point.

A generation ago, purpose-based coaching was more structured, finding bedrock in the traditional family unit, educational and religious institutions. We were all taught the Golden Rule: "Do unto others". Sadly, however, we now live in different times. The traditional family unit has changed. It might even be broken. Religious institutions play less of a role with a greater number of people and today's work environment is more challenging, complex and stress-filled than ever before.

The result? Near epidemic numbers of people suffering from depression and health related breakdowns. A world filled with too many individuals bereft of passion, purpose and self-fulfillment. As Mazlow once said, "Most people live lives of quiet desperation".

So what can we learn from the starfish scenario? Two things.

1) The act of saving the starfish, in the end, brought greater benefit to the man than the starfish. "It is in the GIVING or the doing that we help ourselves!" Our reward? Purpose... A reason for being.

2) The Contagion Factor: Although the starfish story clearly demonstrates a moral, benevolence and wisdom, it stops short of casting light on the ultimate outcome from such an activity. It is no stretch to believe that the second man may have been inspired, in so doing, reevaluate his own jaded outlook, and wish to emulate the kindness he'd witnessed.

We know that an unselfish act serves as its own lesson and motivates others to react in kind. It is infectious! It is also circular or better put, "What goes around, comes around". It brings with it, renewed purpose, balance, hope, health and satisfaction.

So go ahead... "Toss a Starfish!"

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