

One of the most popular stories in community service events is that of the starfish: a (fill in your description, usually young) person is running, hurling starfish deposited on the beach by a storm back into the sea. "What are you doing," asks a (fill in your description, usually old) person, "you can't possibly throw all the starfish back. Your effort makes no difference." "It makes a difference to this one," replies the first person, who continues off down the beach.

The usual conclusions drawn from this hackneyed tale are about the importance of making a difference where you can, one person or problem at a time; about not being put off by skepticism or criticism or cynicism. The story acknowledges the relief that comes when we find a way to relieve suffering. A somewhat deeper reading is that there is merit in jumping into a situation and finding a way to act - the first step in determining what possibilities for action might exist.

But the tale is, ultimately, mis-educative and I wish people would stop using it. First, it is about a problem - starfish cast up by a storm - that is apolitical (unless you stretch for the connection between pollution and el Nino that might have precipitated the storm). There is seldom any hesitancy or moral complexity in responding to a crisis caused by natural disaster. It is the one circumstance in which charity can be an unmitigated good. The story suggests that all problems are similarly simple - that there is a path of action which is right and can avoid the traps of politics, context, or complex and contradictory human relationships.

Second, the story is about helping starfish and not about helping people. It avoids, therefore, the shadow side of the service, the sticky problem of who deserves our help. The starfish are passive; they have no voice; they cannot have an opinion about their circumstances, at least not that we can hear. This one is much like that one. Their silence coincides with the fact that they can have done nothing (the story suggests) to deserve their fate. In most of the situations where this story is told, service is about people working with people: people with histories, voices, opinions, judgment, more or less power.

Third, the story avoids the possible complexity of ecology: it might be that the starfish are part of a food chain that is being interrupted as they are thrown back - birds might go hungry at a critical time of year, for example; or it might be that the starfish have been released by a storm from the ocean bottom because they have outgrown their habitat. It is never smart to intervene in an ecosystem without understanding how all of its parts are interrelated.

Fourth, the tale suggests that we should work from emotional response and not our heads, even though the problem is, in this case, a knowable one. As "overwhelming" as the miles of beach seem, the dilemma of the starfish is finite and knowable - this many starfish on this stretch of beach; a bit of advance organizing could result in enough volunteers to return all the starfish to the sea.

Fifth, the story privileges random, individual acts of kindness. It avoids questions of community (and we claim "community service" as our ground after all). It avoids questions of working with others. It polarizes the relationship of the two actors: how different would the story be if the second person joined in with the first? In short, the story does nothing to teach us about community or service. This in itself is not necessarily a problem; it could be an entertaining tale, and that could be enough. What makes it a problem, however, is that the tale of the starfish pretends to teach us something about community service, even as it misdirects our sympathies, our intellects and our sense of purpose.

Don't go charging out to help. Talk, listen, build relationships, know your self, your environment; work with others where they and the situation itself can teach you how to act with more and more knowledge and effectiveness. Stop hurling starfish.