Slow and Steady Wins the Race

Second chances sometimes come at a turtle’s pace

I don’t want to wash my feet. Looking down, I can see them covered with dirt, pine needles, and other forest litter. But my unwashed feet represent a renewed belief in community, and compassion.

Two years ago my feet were clean.

I was driving home along the same path that I took every day. The only difference on this day was a quick glimpse of an adventurous painted turtle. I recognized the shock of yellow emanating from beneath the dark, well-camouflaged shell. Well-camouflaged, that is, in its natural environment – but a street is not a turtle’s natural environment.

Within 50 yards I realized it was a turtle. It took me another 100 yards before I finished the negotiations with myself: I needed to stop and help the turtle cross the road.
When we act positively, we are never truly alone, and we just might be setting the stage for a miracle.

I parked on the side of the street, got out of my car, and started walking back toward the little beast. My delay cost that turtle its life.

The SUV approached quickly; its young female driver engaged in an animated cellphone conversation. She barely saw me — a largeish man with his arms extended and his hands waving. So really, what chance did the turtle have?

None, as it turned out. The front tire struck squarely. There was barely time for the animal to flip before the back tire finished it off.

The driver’s face went from confusion, to concern, to anguish. She was upset with herself. I was upset, too. Although angry with the driver, I was angrier with myself. One hundred and fifty yards. It took me 150 yards to decide to do the right thing.

Doing the right thing, but doing it too late, is nothing to be proud of. Anger, shame and remorse accompanied me on the rest of the drive home.

I've thought a lot about that turtle over the past two years. I think of that turtle when I ask if I can help an old woman across the street or over a snow pile. I also remember that turtle every time I pass a pedestrian in a rainstorm, only to realize later that I had a spare umbrella.

I think of that turtle when comfort is winning the argument against sacrifice. And I was thinking of that turtle today. It would have been impossible to think of anything else.

Driving along the same road, at roughly the same location, during the same time of year, I saw another turtle clawing its way across the street. The similarities ended there. This was no painted turtle, but rather a full-grown — and, as I'd soon find out, belligerent — snapping turtle.

I stopped my car immediately.

The turtle was not amused by my presence and responded irately to my attempts to shepherd it across the street. It chose, instead, to defend its current position. An SUV slowed to pass as I was considering the possible outcomes of picking up the beast.

"I wouldn't touch that if I were you," the driver warned me.

"Yeah, I know," I answered. "But if I don't, it'll get hit."

It took the driver just a moment to make his decision: He pulled off the road and joined me. The two of us were no more successful than I had been on my own, but he and I wouldn't be alone for long.

Within a few minutes, additional cars had pulled off the road. Now there were four men attending to the turtle, a few spectators cheering us on, and additional bystanders watching from afar. Not a single car passed.

I'd like to say that the turtle rescue was seamless; that we knew somehow deep in our souls how to work as a collective to save this beast. We did not, however. In fits and starts, and with a stunning lack of coordination, we slowly redirected the turtle off the road, and then over a bank, and finally to the edge of a river. Then we took fallen branches and placed them over the most likely path should our new friend decide that it really did need to be on the other side of the road.

No doubt the turtle was angry. And the four of us were a mess. My sandals — a uniquely bad shoe for turtle rescue missions — had taken on so much debris I couldn't walk painlessly.

Sandals rate pretty low as footwear for turtle rescuing, but these are the very ones Phil Starks was wearing when he and a surprising number of helpers brought one to safety during his commute from work.
Sometimes it’s easier to join in a good deed than to initiate one. Phil Starks, however, found that once he took the lead in saving a turtle, others were happy to follow.

The mission over, we all retreated back into our previous incarnations as strangers. Not a word was said as we went back to our cars, started our engines and scattered.

I think about the painted turtle, its demise, and its lesson differently now.

On a second chance, I acted quickly. And my action attracted others who were willing to help.

People, I believe, are compassionate creatures. But sometimes we need to know that we are not acting alone; thus it is easier to join than to initiate. When we act positively, we are never truly alone, and we just might be setting the stage for a miracle.

So for a few minutes, on a busy day, a lone snapping turtle shut down Boston Street. With my feet filthy, I can finally let my painted turtle rest.

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PHILIP STARKS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Phil, who wrote our Reader Essay, “Slow and Steady Wins the Race” (Page 22), is a fan of animals and their lives. His secret wish to be a modern day Dr. Doolittle has led him to study – and teach – animal behavior.
Still, the subtleties of turtle communication escape him. “If only they had eyebrows, I’d have a better idea what they were thinking,” he jokes.
Phil is a Professor of Biology at Tufts University. He lives in North Andover with Caroline, his wife, and William, his son.

LARS TRODSHON
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Lars believes there’s nothing quite like reading a good book in the summertime sun, and highly recommends Barbara Walsh’s “August Gale: A Father and Daughter’s Journey into the Storm” (On The Bookshelf, Page 20).
Lars, in fact, has written his own book called “Eagles Fly Alone,” a mystery that takes place in New Hampshire.
He is a longtime New England journalist now working as a freelance writer. His second book, “Tide Turning,” is currently in the process of being published.

SARAH ASHLEY DURRELL
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

“I’m obsessed with fro-yo, so when I found out an Orange Leaf had opened in The Andovers, I was excited to try it out,” says Sarah, who wrote about the shop for Dining Out (Page 26).
“I loved the Original Tart flavor,” she says, but keeps her toppings a secret.
A native of Haverhill and graduate of Suffolk University, Sarah has been a contributor to The Andovers since its launch. She lives in Newburyport.

HELENE SPTOTO
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

If you want to try something new and different for your next dinner party, step into Helene’s kitchen (“Dining In,” Page 31).
“Interactive Dinner Parties are a variation on how we entertain,” she explains. “Friends enjoy each other’s company while cooking together.”
Helene owns Sentry Financial Planning with her husband and business partner, John. She also is a cooking instructor, has her own cooking show, “Healthy Cooking for Life with Helene Spoto,” on Andover TV and North Andover CAM. For more information, visit helenescustomcuisine.com.

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THE ANDOVERS 17