

Intersection Turtle

I managed to put about two-thirds of my routine, albeit a slow jog, behind me. Endorphins were ready to break lose. My anticipated 'runners' high would be just a few steps ahead. And there it sat; an uglier-than-God-ever-intended, mid-sized alligator snapping turtle. It stared at its very own end of life at the corner of Shadow Forest and Lake Woodlands Drive. I broke my sweaty momentum, forfeited the anticipated 'high' and stopped.

My memory dished up an instant tidbit: 'When rescuing a turtle, it is best to take it to the nearest body of water in the direction it was traveling.' This lost reptile did not seem to be headed in any particular direction except toward disaster. Its options included nothing but hard, busy pavement.

Why should I be troubled by a misguided turtle? Joggers, bikers and other greenbelt pedestrians passed on by and ignored the obvious. Within the big scheme of all that matters, what could this wayward reptile contribute? And why, as I examine our rotting social fabric after listening to the evening news, should I care? It's just a turtle.

Along with miles of greenbelts in the neighborhood, there are stretches of pseudo streams; drainage ditches bordered by native vegetation that serve as flood control. Close to the Gulf coast, topography is a freeway overpass and water flow lies one mile per hour shy of stagnant. Even though suburban development is consuming prairie land and old growth stands of loblolly pine, small native wildlife seems to adapt to new environments. These urban wetlands have become home to some shore birds, a variety of frogs, fish and turtles, snakes and small mammals. So, flood control measures serve a dual purpose.

The ugly alligator snapping turtle means nothing. It eats insects, tiny fish and swampy vegetation. If this critter were to be smashed by a passing vehicle there would be no consequences. So why save this turtle? T

The Lake Livingston fishing contest.

Before the contest, before the lake there was Genesis; specifically the Garden of Eden, the tree of life, a serpent. Primal interpretation makes the serpent a snake. This evil creature lured humanity to the dark side. So . . . snakes are bad.

Like the turtle at the intersection, the Annual Lake Livingston Fishing Contest also faced death via twisted fate. Large enough to be considered a lake, Livingston is relatively natural since its creation is by a dammed river. Riddled with tree stumps, prime fishing grounds provide income other than summer recreational sports.

The entire Livingston region—lake, town and farms—are enmeshed in the Texas Piney Woods. Other than the dam backing up some creeks, the area has not changed since the migration of settlers seeking refuge from law abiding citizens of the westward moving United States in the early 19th century. The mind-set was then, and still is, fiercely independent; barely past hunter-gatherer customs. Fishing poles and rifles are used to secure food. So, a fishing contest is a natural extension of entertainment from a necessary function.

In many ways, this economically depressed region of East Texas remains locked into the 19th century. The local residents of the lake hate snakes, justifying their primitive fear gleaned from Bible stories. The combination of fear, ignorance and ammunition has reduced the healthy population of snakes to the comfortable number of almost zero.

With snakes locally obliterated, turtle eggs hatched and survived without threat of natural control. The unchecked population devoured the lake's small fish, interrupting the food chain for larger fish. The broken food chain killed the Lake Livingston Fishing Contest. Snakes are bad? Perhaps not.

It's not about the turtle or the snake: it's our fear of the insignificant mystery. The routine question of right and wrong, 'kill the snake,' 'move the turtle,' 'cement the prairie,' and 'destroy the stands of loblolly.' Mystery rumbles in my head and twists my thoughts, then abandons me to wonder.

The beginning, the Garden is beautiful. Everyone celebrates. The egg births an infant, the seed sprouts. In a whispering thought time delivers the serpent. Life is stained with conflict.

The alligator snapping turtle brought me to a screeching halt. Which way should I go? Do I save the little guy or let 'nature' take its course? As if I have any influence over nature. A temporary minuscule action is the most I could accomplish. The dynamic we know as 'nature' is a force that will operate beyond our limits regardless of any efforts we impose. Mountains crumble, rivers change the landscape, animals migrate and evolve; such energy is far superior to man's ability.

Conflict exists.

So. I make the choice of letting nature take its course? It will. I do not have the power to change an earthly force. But, I can decide to transport the daring turtle that made a wrong turn.

So . . . Which way?

I choose the path that sends me through the day without regret.

The mislead creature faced barren, busy pavement. The esplanade in the middle of the parkway offered nothing but a long narrow strip of brushy vegetation with danger just feet away at any turn. The ditch flanking the road was manicured grass with no water.

I continued on my intended direction toward a small pleasant nature preserve. The Shadow Bend pond was maintained in a manner that kept the neighborhood treasure as natural as possible. Permanent

inhabitants include Muscovie ducks, red-eared sliders, raccoons, the occasional deer and urban pests such as squirrels, armadillos, skunks and swallows. Whistler ducks, the great blue heron, water moccasins and egrets also make regular visits. My alligator snapping turtle would enhance the mix. I was sure some of his kind already called this place home.

Do I interfere with nature? Is the turtle a weak link that needs to be cleansed from its genetic pool? Have I earned the right to make such a decision? Am I the superior animal graced with the privilege of choice over others? If I ignore the turtle as runners before me did, its demise is moments away. If I 'save' this animal will it participate in its own Garden of Eden, the Shadow Bend pond?

Which way is right . . . or left?

I am here . . . at this moment. So—it's up to me.

Yep. I will carry this ugly reptile to the nature preserve and hope it contributes to its own order of life. There's a new guy in town. The red-eared sliders, other alligator snappers, muscovies and occasional exotic visitors can welcome or exclude the newcomer. Can he adapt? I will never know.

Adaptation advances the system. Variety is the spice and stained life is the message received.

Still, all is not well. Reptiles and serpents lack a certain beauty, leaving them open to subjective judgment. As superior members of the natural order of life, we fall victim to entrusting subordinate creatures to our sense of righteousness. Slaughter the snakes, disrupt the turtle population control and kill the local fishing-contest-based economy. Give the turtle passage to the parkway and change the possibilities in the pond.

So which way? Let life play out its own drama. Then we can all be invited to enjoy and appreciate the variety, the conflict. Natural progression, our steps out of the Garden of Eden carry us from the beautiful beginning to a conflicted middle. Unknown, the end of our insignificant mystery is left to spiritual imagination.

Tomorrow is another day for an endorphin high, unless I come upon another lost critter. I will dream of unspoiled gardens as I run on flat terrain through my comfortable neighborhood. And, I shall continue to wonder.