

Maria Wojakowski

Planet Ocean

by Maria Wojakowski

Two pearly eyes shifted their perception from a crevice in the rocks and met my gaze. Startled at first, little crab to whom they belonged fixed his penetrating little pearls on me, as if trying to ask what this strange creature could possibly be looking for in the tiny rock crevices. I smiled at him. “I am looking for you and your friends.” I shifted my gaze, slowly enough so that the two little pearls followed it, toward the sloping rocks descending into the abyss. “I want to meet your friends, the ones who live down *there*.” My thoughts and dreams drifted down into the blue darkness where I, limited by my lungs, could not go. Feeling my lungs begging for precious air, I bid my friend farewell and pushed off toward the surface opening my eyes to the giant Wonder Wheel and Cyclone that dominate the panorama of Coney Island. Perhaps it is unusual for a New York City kid to spend so many summers of her childhood observing the crabs, shells, and occasional fish that could be found in the Coney Island littoral zone, but it was this beach that nourished my passion for the ocean. Here every undersea adventure that I read about came to life and my desire to venture deeper grew with every look at those downward sloping rocks.

When I was fourteen, I started SCUBA diving in the local Far Rockaway Channel. I was captivated by the intense undersea activity in an ecosystem with such a fragile balance, and still found myself wanting to get to know each creature. I observed every fish and horseshoe crab until I got that nudge from my father and dive buddy which meant, “How about we look at something *else* now?” No matter where my family has gone SCUBA diving or snorkeling in the past few years, whether it be the murky New York waters or the warm Florida reefs, I have observed a common characteristic of all creatures I encountered. It seems that every action is deliberate, logical, and made for some reason. Waste and inconsideration are unknown in the underwater world.

Maria Wojakowski

Humans have already noted the importance of deliberate actions in literature, although I often wonder whether we have taken our own advice. E.L. Doctorow said, “there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative”, meaning that the boundary separating fiction from nonfiction is man-made and in reality nonexistent. Both fiction and nonfiction express universal truths, making them one genre, narrative. All characters by means of their actions initiate a chain of events that in some way affect other characters, even those they have never met. To me this indicates that the world we live in is no different than a fictional world. It can be liberating, knowing that you have potential, even through your most subtle action, to make monumental changes and that we are not confined to what is explainable and able to be observed. To me, this falsifies any concept of a “last frontier”. The more we know, the more we realize that we know nothing when we see what remains to be discovered, and this limited knowledge reminds us of our humanity. This is why, when presenting the results of my research on nest site selection in the diamondback terrapins I studied during their nesting season in Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, I had the confidence to handle an audience of critical scientists and teachers who found it hard to accept that turtles choose their nest sites, and that there is evidence not only in my qualitative data, but also my quantitative data, that supports this hypothesis. Not instinct, but a conscious selection of nest sites puts a simple little turtle too close to the realm of civilized thinking humans.

In fact, most people would think twice about calling a turtle “wise” or even “intelligent”. If I stood on Fifth Avenue and asked any of the passers-by, “Who is more advanced, a human or a turtle?”, I would undoubtedly be flooded by answers of “the human”. Advanced? A terrapin that chooses a nest site heavily exposed to sunlight and in an area with a large amount of bare ground will have mostly female offspring. By allowing males with a given set of traits to father her offspring and nesting in an area of optimal developmental conditions, the female also influences the

Maria Wojakowski

fitness and survival potential of her offspring. She and her ancestors have been participating in this form of genetic engineering for millions of years. Imposing human reason to make sense of natural behavior, Gregor Mendel began his “revolutionary” work a mere century ago.

In narrative it is the story, molded by the characters, settings, and conflicts, that matters. Life has all of these components. Furthermore, conflict and the choices that the characters make are the agents that dictate the revelation and evolution of character. The ability to choose is what makes life significant. I saw this primarily at my research site. Watching the diamondback terrapin females nest and observing the hatchlings emerge has made me aware of how much influence their choices have on the population of their species. If a female lays a nest in a sunny area, her offspring sex ratio will be female dominated. More females will survive and be able to reproduce, thus increasing the population. If this sunny spot has no grass growing within it, her eggs will not be subject to root predation, further increasing their chances for survival. The seemingly minor choice of a single female has the ability to give or take away life. Thinking about Doctorow’s idea has made me realize that the turtles have wisdom to impart. We, like the terrapin females, are free to make our choices, but we must be conscious of potential consequences, even if we cannot see them. It is like sitting on the beach and tossing stones into the water. The speed and angle at which you throw determines the wave that results. You see it for a while, but then it disappears over the horizon and you don’t know which shore it will break upon or which ship’s path it will cross. Perhaps it will hit a rock and come back to you. Will you even know that the wave that hit you was the one you started? Like the nesting female, I want my choices, however minor they may be, to benefit others, both human and animal, instead of just myself.

Doctorow’s concept of narrative has made me realize that every moment, I and all the other people who inhabit this world are writing a novel in which we are the characters. Yet, are we

Maria Wojakowski

conscious of the extent of our actions? Sitting on the beach at the refuge watching and waiting for female terrapins to come ashore, but instead looking at more and more garbage in countless forms washing up with every wave, I know that we have much to learn from turtles and all the creatures of the ocean.

I have learned, through my experiences skin and SCUBA diving as well as through my research, that the ability of every creature to shape the world that enfolds before him or her is enormous and profound. If every human put as much consideration and thought into the consequences of their decisions and actions, the world would be a different place. Species would not be endangered because of human greed, tons of waste would not be dumped into the ocean repeatedly, and terrapins could travel to their nest sites without the danger of being squashed under car tires.

Just as it is not easy to learn the language of a foreign people, it is even harder to learn the language of a species. After all, how is it possible to conclude how turtles, or any animals for that matter, think? If it is in a manner unlike our own, how can we understand it? How can you explain music to a man born deaf or life after death to one who has never died? Through observation and study, I have learned a few words of the terrapin language, but I cannot fathom how much I remain oblivious to. Yet it has only increased my passion for the ocean. This passion is what I have tried to share with others.

My own experiences as a child motivated me to volunteer at the New York Aquarium as a high school student. It was difficult to get city kids excited by marine creatures. Sharks and dolphins were certainly exhilarating, but how do you incite that same reaction in a child from a horseshoe crab or sea turtle? My challenge was to show these children that there was more to animals that were not fierce hunters or huggable sea creatures and furthermore, that sharks and dolphins had other admirable qualities besides those so commonly portrayed. I told the children stories, just as my

Maria Wojakowski

parents did to me when I was younger, and learned how to read a child's eyes to see which direction I should take the story to instigate interest and curiosity. Allowing the children to hold sea stars, I explained that they were holding one of the most vicious predators that inhabited the ocean floor. Other creatures retreat at the notion of a sea star in the vicinity, not wanting to fall victim to deadly digestive secretions, yet a human hand is in no danger. Why? I hope that these children left with an understanding that the marine world is not a separate world, but part of our world. If I was able to ignite the curiosity of one child during my time at the Aquarium, I have accomplished my goal, because I know personally that curiosity once provoked, can never be subdued.

Through study as a scientist, I hope to become more fluent in the language of the ocean and its creatures and to convey my knowledge to other people. Humans are so dependent on the ocean, yet their knowledge of what occurs in its depths is trivial. Arthur C. Clark was right to remark, "How inappropriate to call this planet Earth, when it is clearly Ocean." The ocean is our home as much as the earth is. If, through my passion for the ocean, I can arouse the curiosity of others to come to know the ocean and consider the consequences of their actions not only in regards to the ocean, but also in regards to all creatures and humans, I hope that I will have made a difference in the world. I hope that my research and study of the ocean will allow others to dive down to the sloping rocks at Coney Island as I do now, and be able to smile back at an old friend when faced with a curious crab who looks as if he were asking what this creature, no longer so strange, is doing drifting near the rock crevices. "I am home."