

Let's Talk About The Birds and the Bees



I've noticed that some people assiduously avoid the birds and the bees at all costs. Others just plow right through them without giving a second thought to whatever disruption their recklessness causes. I have a theory that how you handle the birds and the bees says a lot about your character.

First, please tell me, which kind of person are you? Are you one who pays attention to the ground in front of you when you walk? Do you notice if bees are busily buzzing around and collecting pollen, then make sure to step safely over the industrious little buggers? Are you the type who sees worms wriggling on the sidewalk as they try to escape from drowning in the soaked earth after a rain? If so, do you care whether you smash them or not? When you walk through a park, do you chart a course around the birds hunting for food on the ground to avoid making them fly away? Would you change direction, or do you walk right on through a resting flock with no concern for the hundreds of peaceful birds you've displaced?

I suspect that people's answers will point to a fundamental division between personality types: those who try not to harm or disrupt others, and those who just don't give a shit who they disturb (and for the sake of simplicity, let's include in this category all who don't care as well as the sociopaths who actually take pleasure in upsetting or injuring other living things.) Where do you land on this scale? Are you perfectly ok with demolishing an anthill or costing a seagull its lunch? If so, why? I'm genuinely curious. My guess is, most people who don't bother to alter their courses for the sake of other lives, whether on a walk or just in general, probably have also never given their motives much thought. So think about it. Do you wreak havoc on smaller, more alien lives because those lives just aren't very valuable to you, perhaps not even as important as 10 or 15 of your footsteps, twenty seconds of your time, or even just a few critter-clearing inches added to a single stride? Whatever it is in people to make them that way, I'd truly like to understand.

Maybe you wonder the same about me, so I'll try to explain. I don't know how or when it happened in my life, but at some point farther back than my memories can reach, I began to develop a sense that my own comfort and convenience didn't necessarily trump the comfort and convenience of other living things. I was a child who declined to wipe away the ant trail that climbed a tree my cousin and I sat in, because the ants were there first. I'd sit as motionless as I could for as long as I could to keep from waking up the cat that fell asleep on my lap. It just seemed like common sense for as long as I can recall. It's never been a matter of blindly considering every other creature's needs and wants as equal to or above my own... it's just



a recognition that the cost to avoid upsetting (let alone killing) something is often so vanishingly small that to ignore the impact of my actions is just unforgivably, nastily selfish. I know that I don't like to be unsettled or injured, so why would I unsettle or injure anything else that may have a preference in the matter, so long as I can avoid doing so without too much loss to myself? I suppose that's the bulk of the calculus right there, isn't it? What is "too much loss" for me? What is it for you? How much does our answer depend on the beneficiary of our sacrifice?

This whole line of thought came to me the other day as I walked across a stretch of grass populated by some bees collecting pollen. They were minding their own bee-ish business, hurting nothing and no one so far as I could tell, and it just seemed so obvious that I should behave similarly. One careless step by me could undo many hours of a bee's work, or even destroy its life, which, almost no matter what level of consciousness you ascribe to an insect, it remains almost certain the animal would want to preserve. On the other hand, the tiniest recalibration of my single step, just a bit shorter or longer, would allow that little living thing to continue its own pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, totally unaware of how nearly it almost lost everything. How easily catastrophe could've come. Wouldn't we each like others to allow us such peace, if at all possible?

The morning after the bees, I crossed the same lawn, where countless gulls and blackbirds were now hunkered down in the early misty air. I know vanishingly little about bird habits, but it was undeniable that these birds were where they wanted to be at that moment, and they'd remain there for awhile if not acted upon by some outside force. As I curved far around the outside of the flock, I saw a guy not only walking right toward the birds, but clearly altering his course to run right through their thickest numbers. Then he waved his arms! Of course, all the birds scattered wildly, and all I could think as I watched this was... "Why? What is WRONG with you?"

That guy's actions seem to me to speak volumes about his likely character. But maybe not; of course there are many explanations for behavior that appears pointlessly cruel on the surface. Still, I can't help thinking that such intentional disruptiveness is also a signpost for other unpleasantness somewhere in a person's psyche. And so, I ask again — what type of person are you? Are you a birds & bees avoider, or one who plows right through?