

One Day at the Beach

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Not long ago, I strolled down a beach in West Central Florida. It was before noon and still somewhat cool. As I walked, I passed quite a number of tourists and locals alike each enjoying Florida's special blessing. Up ahead, there was a bit of a ruckus. It seemed that some young children were playing in the sand. *How nice*, I had thought and I smiled with the laughter of the youngsters. It was good that they were enjoying themselves. It was good that they were out on the beach laughing and not playing with some small handheld electronic device in an air conditioned and isolated motel room.

As I neared, I was able to see the source of their mirth. As it turned out, they were playing with the birds. The local waterfowl can be quite entertaining. Which of us has never tossed a french fry or a potato chip into the air to watch the seagulls swoop in and pick it out of the air?

Closer still, I was able to see that there were no fries and the birds were not seagulls. The children, along with a small dog on a very long leash, were chasing some skimmers that had chosen to nest on our wonderful Florida beach. The children would run at the bird and make it fly off. The bird, wanting to protect its nest, would circle a bit and when the children chose another target, it would resettle to the sand and cover the eggs.

Of course, I was stunned. What were these children thinking? Where were their parents? A young woman happened to be standing nearby and I shared my lament. "Why don't the parents of those children stop them from harassing those birds?"

"I'm sorry sir." She replied. "But first of all, those are my children and secondly, whatever do you mean? There is no way they will catch the birds. They are only playing."

I offered my excuses for being rude and then explained that these birds are rare and their nesting grounds are supposed to be protected. Scaring the parents off the nest can result in the eggs failing to hatch. They actually can be cooked in the sun.

Genuinely concerned and confused, the young woman said to me. "I know that. See that yellow ribbon over there? That's the protected nesting area. There are signs all over it explaining exactly what you just told me."

Stunned, I asked her. "Then why do you let your children chase the birds?"

Just as stunned, she replied. "Those birds that my children are playing with, not chasing, are not inside the yellow ribbon. See? They are over there!" She pointed to the area about twenty feet outside the ribboned off sanctuary.

I thanked the woman for explaining it to me and returned to my walk reflecting on her comments. The position of the woman was clear. The law said not to harass the birds inside the ribbon. These birds were not inside the ribbon and so chasing them was okay. It was not against the law, so it must be legal. It must be alright. I don't suppose she had considered that the birds could not read the warning sign that explained the ribbon. The birds did not know to stay inside the sanctuary.

In that moment of clarity, I understood. It seems that when people become so conditioned to the yellow ribbon of government regulations, they may just lose the ability to tell right from wrong intuitively. In a world where the law supersedes the admonition of Grandma to just *be good*, people actually need law to replace the lost morals of a formerly moral society.

It was then that I noticed that a small tear had formed in the corner of my eye. I realized, however, that I was not crying for the birds. I cried for the children.