

The Raccoon Died

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My wife and I now live in the country. Events in nature which country people have long learned to take for granted are new to us and sometimes troubling. The way of small animals, for instance.

One day in December, Smoky came upon something new under a big white pine and barked loudly to tell me. The newcomer was a small gray and black animal which sat immovably on its haunches and stared fixedly at my collie and me despite Smoky's lunges and my own nearness. Both Smoky and I were puzzled that whatever it was didn't dash for the nearby brier-covered slope where it obviously belonged.

I remember now that I immediately suspected that the animal might be injured or sick; I am not sure what Smoky thought but she clearly decided to dance round the newcomer but not harm it. I noticed that nature had supplied the intruder with a small black mask under the eyes similar to that worn by highway men in romantic novels. While Smoky danced and grew distantly acquainted, I went into my house to tell Bee about the visitor and to consult my favorite family encyclopedia, *The American Educator*. We made a few poor guesses as to the animal and then hit pay dirt under "raccoon." *The American Educator Encyclopedia* carried a fine full-page picture and said in the text, "On its white, fox like face are markings that make the raccoon look like a masked bandit." The animal was a raccoon all right.

We went back to look. The raccoon still sat immovably and stared at us, no matter how close we came. It almost seemed that it needed some sort of help from us. I returned home, got my camera, and took several excellent pictures of Smoky and the raccoon with their noses only inches apart. The sun was going down and it was getting chilly that December afternoon, so we left the raccoon and went home to dinner.

The next day the raccoon had moved. It now sat halfway between the big white pine tree and our house. The visitor walked about a bit but did not disappear down the slope. From the chair in my living room I saw, through my binoculars, Smoky rubbing noses with the raccoon in a friendly way. The weather was getting colder so I didn't venture out save to throw the little animal some scraps.

On the third day, the raccoon came and sat outside the floor-to-ceiling windows which enclose our living room. The animal hardly moved. It just looked at us. That night the raccoon slept with its nose next to the sliding glass door; I guess some heat seeped from the house into the cold outdoors. We again left a few scraps within the raccoon's reach.

The fourth day the raccoon gave us up and retreated halfway down the sharp slope that ends with the lake. It huddled tightly and it hardly moved. We watched the animal with growing concern.

On the morning of the fifth day, it was apparent that the raccoon hadn't moved all night. I scrambled down the hill and looked quite closely. Then I said to Bee, "The raccoon is dead."

I can't get out of my mind the feeling that the raccoon was asking me for help, and in vain. I can't get out of my mind a parallel between the way I behaved and the way we as a nation act when confronted by a social problem, whether it be deteriorating education or the inner city slums or race relations or pollution or whatever. I think I behaved as a nation does.

I looked at the animal, concluded it was in trouble, but expected it to go away. We as a nation look at a social problem, conclude that trouble is involved, but expect the problem to go away.

I looked up the animal in *The American Educator Encyclopedia* and gave the animal a name. The nation makes a massive survey of the problem and gives the problem a name, such as the disadvantaged child or whatever.

I took the pictures of the raccoon, and from my warm house, I watched it through binoculars. We as a nation take pictures of the social problem and in our warm houses we watch the problem through television.

I threw the raccoon some scraps. We as a nation throw the problem some scraps.

I talked a lot about the raccoon. But I didn't do anything really decisive about what might have been its plea for help. We as a nation talk a lot about the social problem. But we don't do anything really decisive about what might be the pleas for help from people involved in the problem.

And, after all, was there really anything which I actually could have done for that raccoon? And after all, is there really anything we as a nation could actually do about that social problem?

But the raccoon died. All I really know for sure is that the raccoon died.

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