

A Tale of Two Horseshoe Crabs: The Power of Coaches and Guides to Lead by Example



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October 12, 2024

0 Comments



This is a short story illustrating how Guides and coaches can help people to reconnect with nature or reach other goals by leading by example and representing comfort and confidence.

Saltwater streaked my husband’s beard, his face a grimace, as our marine invertebrate zoology professor guided the class through shifting channels, heading toward a sand flat that promised horseshoe crabs for our chelicerates lesson.

“What’s wrong?” I called over the motor and wind. “You usually love boat rides.”

“I do,” he said. “It’s just...well, horse crabs are vicious!”

“Okay,” I laughed, “but can you tell me what’s really bothering you?”

“I’m serious! Horseshoe crabs are basically giant armored spiders with venomous tails.”

“Come on, the tails aren’t venomous! The textbook says they use them to flip over. And besides,” I added, with the experience of a person who had seen a few dead horseshoe crabs stranded on the beach, “these ones will be *babies*.”

“Armored babies.”



The skiff slid to a stop on a sand flat: our destination. Sometime in the late spring to summer, horseshoe crabs pile onto sandy beach shores to lay eggs, which hatch some weeks later as microscopic larvae that resemble the adults minus the tail. Tides carry the larvae to sand flats, where they live out their first two years, gaining a tail and growing larger and harder before heading for deeper waters. Now an inch or so wide, yearlings awaited us on the flat.

I launched onto the sand, racing with the other students to nab the first catch. In no hurry to meet armored babies, my husband lingered near the boat with the elderly professor, who shouted instructions after us. I swiped at several mounds, gaining nothing but fistfuls of sand.

“Dear!” my husband barked.

I loathed to give up the chase, but his urgent tone, his arm outstretched as though holding something radioactive, struck me. As I closed the distance, I saw a small horseshoe crab, its shell still flexible in youth, dangling between his forefinger and thumb. With a relieved sigh, he dropped the little creature into my bucket.

The class regrouped to quiz his success. “How did you find it?!”

“Just like the professor said.” My husband pointed at a wiggling bump on the ground, a disturbed trail of sand behind. “The babies burrow to avoid predators and currents.” Inserting his fingers onto either side, he extracted the arthropod. “Quickly, dear—take it!”

Gleeful, I now possessed two of the two horseshoe crabs the class had collected to date. However, the demonstration had removed the camouflage of our impatience, and now we could see fields of little horseshoe crabs squirming all around us. We delighted to collect one after the other, and our quota quickly reached, the professor signaled the trip over.

On the ride home, I admired our haul, gently rotating the bucket. “You were a pro at finding horseshoe crabs! Look how cute they are.” As I tilted the bucket to show my husband, he flinched. “And yet, you still don’t like them!” I scoffed, lifting one of the babies into my palm. As ten tiny legs tapped my skin, I squealed. “It tickles! You should try this!”

With some hesitation, my husband extended his hand. As the creature clumsily scrambled across his palm, his scowl broke into to a smile, then a giggle.

We soon moved the horseshoe crabs to our classroom aquaria, to be returned to the sound after a few days of study. Crashing into and climbing over each other, flipping over and then righting themselves, the ungainly little creatures hardly testified that they represented a proud lineage of over 350 million years. “They’re like tiny bulldozers!” my husband laughed.

Yet, for all the teasing I would later subject my husband to about “vicious” baby horseshoe crabs, I found myself uneasy the following day when a lab technician brought a surprise find to our class lecture: a foot-and-a-half long horseshoe crab. As I considered the thrashing tail and the spikes on the hardened, barnacle-covered carapace of the sizable arthropod, I began to wonder whether my husband, absent that day, was right about the creatures.

The professor, however, held no such reservations. “What a treat! It takes about ten years and twice as many molts for horseshoe crabs to fully mature. At that point, they stop molting, and barnacles can grow



on it, as we see here.” As the students eyed the impressive horseshoe crab in its saltwater tub, the professor lifted it with both hands, displaying the tail. “The telson is mainly used to flip itself over; it lacks the strength to be an effective weapon. Horseshoe crabs look scary, but they’re harmless...unless you’re a mollusk, perhaps.”

He turned the horseshoe crab belly-side up. “They’re scavengers and will eat just about anything soft: worms, algae, and the like. As they walk, their legs collect food from the seafloor.” He gestured inward along the squirming legs, to the horseshoe crab’s center. “Here you see the mouth, encircled by the legs and these teethlike structures, which grind food as it walks. It looks deadly, but it’s designed for munching worms, not mammals. In fact, it won’t even draw blood from your finger. Anybody care to try?” No volunteers appeared; the professor chuckled. “In that case, allow me to demonstrate.”

As the professor’s frail finger returned from the spiky abyss unscathed, the class found its courage. I placed my forefinger into the writhing appendages, and much like my husband the day prior, laughed as nervousness melted away. The mouth exerted no more pressure than a light massage, and I now saw in the old horseshoe crab, rather than a war-hardened veteran, a bewildered grandparent. Mercifully, the creature’s apprehension was short-lived: that evening, we returned it to the beach, watching it swing its body side to side, each pivot sinking it deeper into the sand until the waves concealed it.

Over eight years now separate us from that summer, and with any luck, some of those little horseshoe crabs have achieved their final molt and full maturity. For my husband, their success is bittersweet: while we recall the babies fondly, he—having skipped lecture—remains wary of the adults.

