

Preface to the First Edition

During World War II, John Steinbeck wrote a book about collecting marine animals with his mentor Ed Ricketts. He spoke of taking a tiny colony of corals from a tidal pool and how it wasn't very important to the pool itself. He wrote of Japanese fishing boats dredging up tons of shrimp and how that wasn't very important to the Pacific Ocean. He wrote of the bombs that were then falling throughout the world and how the stars were not moved thereby. He wrote of how all of it is important or none of it was important at all.

I was reminded of those words as I replayed the image of the twin towers of the World Trade Center tumbling into a smoldering pile of dust. What was I doing writing about horseshoe crabs when thousands of people had just died and the airwaves were full of the inciting rhetoric of a holy war?

But as the days unfolded, I gradually realized I was doing something important. I was writing about an animal that has been on this planet three hundred times longer than our own species. I was honoring an animal that has saved a million more human lives than died in the World Trade Center, or will probably die in the aftermath. I was writing about caring for our precious planet that we think we can bomb with impunity to achieve safety from members of our own species — people genetically identical to ourselves. I was trying to show the miracle of the universe, the miracle that all life is related, the miracle that all people on the earth are part of the same contentious family, the reality that we must find a way to live together on our wonderful teeming planet or destroy it for all eternity. In my own way I was praying for that never to happen.

As Steinbeck wrote during the last war that so endangered our planet, "None of it is important or all of it is." I like to think the latter.

Pleasant Bay, Massachusetts

September 14, 2001