

A lesson from a polymorphic cockroach

Asaf Rolef Ben-Shahar

I was once terrified of cockroaches, and to be honest I am still not very fond of them. Anyhow, one day I visited my parents and they were gone. So I sat in the living-room, reading a newspaper and waiting for them to come back and a huge cockroach ran across the living room and entered the storage room. Now, had my wife been around – she would have immediately recognized my shouts for their nature and take over the situation – but she wasn't there and neither was any local hero. I was on my own.

I ran over there hysterically with an anti-cockroach spray and emptied the content of the sprayer with abundance of rage into the storage room. After fifteen minutes, I opened the door, still somewhat terrified but victorious nonetheless.

There, before me, was a small mouse, the cutest mouse. He stood there, totally frozen, in a state of shock. I was so surprised that at first I didn't realize that he was the cockroach all that time, poor thing. And he stood there, paralyzed.

Now I felt guilty: cockroaches are one thing, but mice, mice are another thing. And I felt guilty. And I was surprised how I never even questioned my perception, which was clearly created by an unduly fear. I was surprised at how this ugly cockroach turned into this cute mouse. And here he is, before me, totally frozen and shocked, and I was holding the empty container and staring at him staring at midair.

So I took the mouse gently in my hands and went outside, and then walked a little further until I found a nice public space, with grass and earth and plenty of places to explore and play with and enjoy. It wouldn't be my kind of playground but I looked around and there were butterflies and beetles and ants, and mole-holes and mouse holes so I assumed it is a good mouse playground. And I laid this small and helpless creature on the ground and waited for the mouse to run. But he just stood there, not blinking – in a total state of shock.

And the place has many cats, and I thought – well, I got the mouse into this place; the least I can do is help him out of it. And I was considering what to do – shall I bring some food? Or stroke him gently? Or shall I push him so he would start moving, or make cat sounds? Would he survive at all?

In the meantime I was sitting there, besides the mouse, watching him being overwhelmed and watching away the cats around. And after a while he started moving. At first he moved jerkily, in small uncontrolled movements, and his eyes were fixated and I was there watching him so he can explore. And it was funny how for a little while nothing around mattered, and nothing around existed and it was just us, one mouse and me.

And then, after a while, these movements became quite rhythmic, and I watched this little mouse rhythmically moving and I watched so that no cats would eat him while he is moving rhythmically. And the mouse no longer seemed helpless, although he wasn't really in control, but it looked as if something really meaningful is happening, exactly what is needed to happen. And I remembered how my grandma used to rock me on her lap and sing me lullabies and I watched the mouse and I liked him.

And then the mouse was slowly moving in circles, and he looked as if he is learning something; something really important, and I watched surprised and noticed how he is moving and not noticing anything besides the movement. And I became aware of my own body and the fact that I too was making slow movements with my eyeballs, slow movements with my facial muscles, slow rhythmical movement with my chest.

After a while it seemed that it was time and the mouse stopped. And he looked at me, and it seemed as if he sees me for the first time, and all along I was there as a presence but I didn't really mattered, although it was good to keep the cats away. And he looked at me, and turned his head, and swiftly ran away, disappearing between some plants.

And so I thanked the polymorphous cockroach for teaching me about mice and about mice-lf.