

On Pelican's Wharf Mark Tulin

To my far right, I heard muted sounds of something in misery. There was an adult pelican on a wooden rail unable to open its mouth.

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL DAY TO BE FISHING ON Pelican's Wharf. The yellow California sun glistened on the Pacific, and the gulls flew like jet fighters in perfect formation overhead. Kids ate double-dipped ice cream cones and rainbow swirls of cotton candy. Tourists took pictures while being transfixed by the vastness of the sea's beauty and the temperate climate of the central coast.

While enjoying this idyllic atmosphere, I tended to my hobby. I'm retired from my job with Amtrak, and I spend most of my time fishing for sea bass, perch, and silver salmon—if I'm lucky. I was tired of being cooped up in a train, going from place to place in a hurry, and never getting off at the stops to see the view. Now I get to see all the scenery I want, spend the rest of my life in freedom, stay in one place as long as I choose, cast

my reel into the deep blue, wait for the fish to bite, and enjoy the comforting sounds made by the wind.

While fishing, I think of my life, the years I got up at 4 A.M. and the things I missed. I was unable to see my kids grow up and enjoy my parents before they passed. I was too busy going from station to station, working overtime to pay the bills, pleasing my boss, taking up the slack for unmotivated and unreliable co-workers.

I stuck my fishing rod in the hole and leaned against the wooden railing at the pier, watching

the egrets dive bomb with a silent splash into the water and the dolphins out in the distance jumping over the waves.

It's usually peaceful on the pier, but that day there was some drama. To my far right, I heard muted sounds of something in misery. There was an adult pelican on a wooden rail unable to open its mouth. A thin chain had somehow wrapped itself around its long beak.

It's strange how people react to something in distress. While the poor bird struggled for his life, people were snapping pictures, gathering around as if it were some sort of entertainment that the city supplied for the tourists. For the bird, it was far from amusing.

I'm one of those people who can think on my feet. Not many people can. They're either in a state of shock

or wait for others to come to the rescue.

The tourists were waiting for a hero.

I assessed the situation, observed the bird for a few seconds. The pelican was helpless, hopelessly trapped in a struggle for survival with a chain wrapped around its bill, unable to free itself.

I quickly put on my long-sleeve flannel shirt, grabbed a pair of wire cutters from my tackle box, and closed the lid.

I anticipated a struggle, some resistance to being helped. Nature always puts up a fight.



[image info](#)

Birds and animals usually expect humans to harm them, and, in many cases, they are right.

Before moving closer to the pelican, I motioned to the crowd to quickly back up, and to stop snapping pictures. "It scares the bird," I whispered.

I didn't rush the pelican. I wanted him to acknowledge me as a friend as I approached slowly, mindfully, taking shallow breaths and subtle movements.

It wasn't about being a hero. Someone had to do it, and there was no one I could see in the crowd willing to help. It's a sin—a crime, in fact—to let any living creature suffer. I wasn't a religious man, but I had morals. All I thought was that a free spirit was on the wooden railing, bound and gagged by a chain that caught him unexpectedly, and he was fighting for his life. If that were me, I would want someone to set me free, to release me from the chains of captivity. I only wish someone would have set me free forty years ago from working at a dead-end job for the railroad.

The closer I got to the bird, the more I could see the panic in his eyes, and I instinctively slowed down my internal system. I took a deep breath and remained calm so the bird could relax in my presence and not become even more anxious. It's the same principle with fish. I make slow, subtle movements when I'm fishing so I don't scare them away from the hook.

I took a step at a time, and with each step, I became more determined to save the bird that was stuck on the wooden rail of the pier.

I thought of my father's courage, how he once saved a hysterical man whose arm was severed in a machine shop where he had worked. He told me that he reacted quickly and decisively. "That's the only way to do it, Son. You have to be of a single mind. You must believe in your abilities."

I wrapped my left arm tightly around the pelican, grabbed the bird's large beak with my left hand without getting bit, held onto it tightly, and with my wire cutter in my other hand, cut the chain,

allowing it to unravel so the bird would be able to open its mouth again.

By then, a massive crowd of people had assembled to watch the spectacle. Unbeknown to me, there were some local newspaper reporters and a TV van. People applauded and shouted out the word "hero." They didn't realize it was just something I was prepared for and ready to do. At that moment, my valiant effort came naturally—no big deal. I would have preferred to have done it with less fanfare.

After the pelican was free of the chain, I stood back, allowing the bird to regain its equilibrium and realize its newfound freedom.

"Go ahead, boy," I whispered. "You're free now."

In the next instant, the pelican flapped its enormous wings furiously, letting out a guttural bark much like a dog's, pushed off the wooden rail with its legs, and awkwardly ascended into the sky.

Before it flew further, it briefly suspended in the air. The pelican turned toward me as if to express gratitude, if only for a second. It then flew quickly out of sight and back to its place in the universe.

Soon I was surrounded by television cameras, and a microphone was in my face.

"How did you know what to do?" the TV reporter asked.

I had never spoken into a microphone before, and I froze. When I regained my breath, I said, "No need to call me a hero. I just thought about what it meant to be trapped, and I felt he needed to be set free. That's all."

Before the TV reporter was able to ask a follow-up question, I was back at my favorite spot on the pier, reeling in a silver salmon at the end of my line and then removing the hook and releasing him back into the sea. I took the wire cutter from my back pocket and dropped it into the tackle box. The sun was still hot, so I took off my flannel shirt, hoping to get at least another hour of fishing before the sun went down. ❖