



Untitled by Michael Battenberg

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*The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning.
Uncertainty is the very condition to impels us to unfold our powers.*

Erich Fromm

I promised myself I wasn't going to talk about bugs again. How many bees and parasites and fruit flies can anyone possibly endure on a Sunday morning? No, this time my message was going to revolve around something more conventional. After all, there are many other life metaphors to draw upon besides the six legged kind. For example, what's wrong with a flower? You may find this hard to believe, but a beautiful magnolia blossom can be just as fascinating, and even as inspirational, as an insect.

So, a week ago I had a rough draft, a title, and had even chosen a photo of a magnolia blossom for the cover of the Order of Service. It looked like I was going to keep good on my promise. But lets face it: parades *do* get rained on. Even the best laid plans *can* go awry. And as the moralistic adage goes, the way to Hell *is indeed* paved with good intentions... whatever Hell is.

But this is no parable about moral failings. This is a story of an eleventh hour epiphany so bright that I felt compelled to let go of my chosen topic and follow its lead. You see, I recently witnessed a transformation, a transformation which unfolded before my eyes, and stirred the depths of my imagination. An event that could not have been more timely. And yes, an event that involved bugs.

I suppose everyone has lived through a season at some time in their life they'd just rather forget. Perhaps a tragic event sends us spiralling into despair. Perhaps a week of frustration at work or at home causes us to withdraw. Or perhaps we endure an entire, Shakespearean, *Winter of Discontent*.

The last few months have definitely been a *Summer* of Discontent for me, one of those seasons where just about everything that can possibly go wrong does go wrong. With one setback after another I spent much of my summer teetering precariously between paralysis and panic, and found myself weaving a tight, silken cocoon into which I instinctively withdrew from the world, and ultimately from myself. I spent agonizing hours muttering the phrase "*what am I going to do*" as I weathered the storms, or to be more precise, *worried* the storms.

Worrying is an art form that I have pretty much perfected, much to my own chagrin. If they gave out awards for being an anxious worrier my mantle would be crowned with the glimmer of countless cups and trophies, testaments to my ability to create mountains out of anthills both inside my imagination and outside in-the-world.

Worrying has the unfortunate tendency of supplying its own fuel for the brewing storm, a feedback loop that like a tsunami builds unseen below the surface then quickly spills out into the wider world. Fortunately my fuel is eventually exhausted, and mercifully begins to dissipate. The beachhead develops dry patches and I make the first tentative steps outside my cocoon to survey the damage and struggle to get back on track.

It is on this damp sand that I either break the cycle or spiral back in. As often happens, something small and improbable tips the balance and starts the blood flowing again. This is where my insect catalyst enters the scene. And In this case the catalyst is a caterpillar.

This summer I became a rancher of sorts: a caterpillar rancher. And not just any kind of caterpillar rancher, a Monarch caterpillar rancher. Monarch Butterflies have experienced a major decline in recent years. As is becoming an all-too-familiar story, Monarchs, important pollinators like bees, are facing pressures from pesticides and habitat loss. What was once a vast cornucopia of rich diversity across the American mid-west has been transformed into a toxic monoculture of nectar-poor crops like corn and soybeans. To make matters worse, their destination in Mexico is increasingly pressured by logging interests and their habitat there is in need of protection.

So this summer, in addition to being the portrait artist of choice for discriminating bugs everywhere, I made the move to do something concrete for the butterflies. And as improbable as it may seem, both the Monarchs and their caterpillar precursors have taken roost in my imagination and offer inspiration in ways I never predicted. But enough fluff, back to the nitty gritty of Monarch ranching.

Caterpillars eat and poop and that's about it. Being a Monarch rancher is pretty much confined to adding milkweed for food and removing frass, (which is what we call insect waste) for hygiene. Pretty mundane chores and certainly not the stuff of epiphanies!

Constant eating means constant growth, and in a matter of weeks caterpillars grow from half a centimetre to a full 5 centimetres in length. Soon the big day arrives, the grand rite of passage as the growing caterpillars instinctively attach themselves to a branch, curl up and shed their striped skin, revealing a smooth, familiar chrysalis: an emerald pod with specks of gold hanging from a stalk.

Motionless. Seemingly Lifeless. Certainly Mysterious.

Inside the pod a transformation is taking place, a metamorphosis that has delighted and inspired people for years. And I am certainly no exception

A chrysalis is a wonderful thing, if it can be called a *thing* at all. For in spite of its seeming stability and stillness, it is a living factory, an organic limbo whose occupant is somewhere between a striped caterpillar and a red and black butterfly.

My morning meditation soon became focussed on my soon-to-emerge first Monarch. Caterpillars don't become butterflies overnight. It takes time. And destruction. The caterpillar is literally falling apart in order to be transformed. I wasn't sure what was being destroyed and what was being built-up at any one moment. Yet it all seemed very uncertain to me; definitely not a simple matter of linear growth.

All the while I was doing what I always do. Making photos. There are only so many ways to photograph a chrysalis hanging at the back of a tupperware tub, but I can assure you that I thoroughly explored all *two* of them.

In time the chrysalis became increasingly transparent, revealing what must surely be wings. Any day now it would emerge... my camera was at the ready. Yet I soon discovered that there are no angels proclaiming this miraculous rebirth. One morning I looked in to see an empty chrysalis and a still wet and pliable monarch pumping fluid into its wings. I made the obligatory baby photos (graduate photos?!) and let the monarch dry in peace. In a few hours it was strong and eager to fly, and with little fanfare it left, flying into its uncertain future, leaving me to reflect on what I had witnessed over the past few weeks.

The next night I sat down to review my photos. 1: Small green pod. 2: Large colourful butterfly. 3: A vague, unrecorded history in between. A protective cocoon; a creature falling apart in order to rebuild, to be reborn. A story in pictures, incomplete though they were.

The event I had witnessed was screaming metaphor in my mind. Why did this silent transformation resonate with me so strongly? I needed to make a set of prints, a before and an after, and choose titles appropriate to my experience. *Chrysalis and Transformation? Dissolution and Resurrection?* Too lofty: these were somehow self-portraits in disguise – I needed something real and gritty.

My mind raced through its catalogue of images: empty homes lining the neglected streets of Detroit. The empty tomb of Christ in the gospel of Mark, and the gentle breeze of summer as I nosed out of my own tomb. And what about the people who would look at these photos? Who would they be? How their life stories be playing out a the time?

Untitled

It jumped into my head like a grasshopper. Much against my will... but what else could I think?

Untitled

A photo of an emerald pod, deceptively motionless. An image of a newly emerged Monarch, tired from it's breakout ordeal and racing against time and the odds to raise its sails and catch the wind. A pair of images – a before and an after – that together captured but a brief moment in an ongoing, barely perceptible, yet inescapably real process of Change, of Growth, of Rebuilding.

Untitled

A feeble yet honest response to an event I only barely understood.

Untitled

An invitation to reflect on a powerful symbol of metamorphosis; of change and of struggle.

Untitled

The only suitable name for what had been a profound and unexpected experience. An act of transformation that helped me tear open my own chrysalis and give me a glimpse of the yet un-lived life that lay before me.

Sometimes we have to fall apart to grow. Sometimes our safe and familiar plans and expectations need to be shattered and shed to prepare a future as yet unknown: Uncertain.

Erich Fromm reminds us that the quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. The yearning for stability, for clear predictability, for the same-old same-old, can be a trap, a stubborn chrysalis that refuses to be vulnerable and break wide open, a chrysalis that trades an uncertain tomorrow for the lifeless security of yesterday's dream. He reminds us that uncertainty is the *very condition* that moves us to unfurl our wings, to unfurl our powers.

What am I going to do? Now? What am I going to do, head in hands, curled up inside my own Chrysalis of worry and fear and a seemingly inescapable anxiety? What am I going to do, as I watch my plans and expectations fall apart all around me?

At least I have an idea now—a former caterpillar taught me: *shatter your cocoon, unfurl your powers as I unfurled my wings, and fly. No need to learn... you already know how.*

Falling apart means letting go of what no longer works: ridiculous expectations and unsustainable goals. Falling to pieces means releasing the deceptive safety of the Certain and embracing Uncertainty. Real change – real growth – needs Uncertainty, or else we risk becoming simply really big caterpillars, eating and pooping and hoping someone comes along to clean up our mess.

The Monarchs' journey doesn't end here. As the weather grown cooler, they begin an Odyssey of truly Homeric proportions, migrating across an increasingly hostile terrain to congregate by the thousands in their overwintering grounds in Mexico. Thousands of Monarchs who have fallen apart, thousands of Monarchs who have unfurled their powers and set sail on a journey of survival.

The Monarchs congregate much like we congregate here at First. On Sunday mornings, at board meetings or at choir practices, Monarchs gather here to affirm that in spite of the odds, our doctrine truly *is* love, that our sacrament *is* the quest for truth and our most heartfelt prayer *is indeed* service.

We gather as Monarchs who have experienced our own moments of falling apart, our own seasons of retreating into a chrysalis. And ultimately Monarchs who unfurl our powers to face Uncertainty, who dare strive to create a world that makes room for other speckled wings like ours to soar on the wind.

So, I suppose I was true to my word after all. This isn't really a sermon about bugs, about the beautiful yet threatened butterfly we call the Monarch. It's certainly not about a neurotic photographer with a strange predilection for spending hours staring at a chrysalis. This is ultimately a sermon about the Spiritual struggle to grow wings, to fly and never look back.

What title shall I give this wonderful and enduring story? Maybe someday I will be able to look back and name it *Transformation*. Or *Metamorphosis*. But this sermon is still young – it's wings are soft and unable to support the weight of the world, and that tattered chrysalis is still a tempting place to retreat to.

For now I shall simply wait and watch as it unfurls its powers and struggles to embrace the *Uncertainty* of a better tomorrow. For now at least, I shall simply call it ***Untitled***.