

Catch and Release

A Personal Essay by Charles T. Stanhope

I'm searching for something as I walk along a spring-rejuvenated swamp's edge. My squinting eyes stop and focus on the underside of a leaf attached to the tip of a milkweed one hundred centimeters above the ground. Stuck there is a tubular, segmented, worm-like body, munching away its final bites at the egg it emerged from four days prior. My scrunched, scouting face turns bright and mirthful as scenes from my childhood splash like dew droplets in my mind. I walk closer, remembering my mother's words: *Be gentle with him.*

Hey there, little guy I whisper with excitement as I examine its white, black, and yellow stripes. I gently pluck the leaf and place it into a glass vase I've brought with me. I pick a handful of other leaves and twigs and carefully spread them inside. I cover the vase with nylon, fastening it with a rubber band. I smile and mosey my way back to the car.

Once home, I place the transparent jar on my coffee table. This is where this cryptic insect will lurk for the next fourteen days, the rest of its larval stage of life. Voraciously consuming all it can, devouring its temporary home, the monarch caterpillar will continue to eat until it cannot eat anymore. Feeling heavy, overburdened, sick, tired, and unable to push any further, it will attach itself to a twig I've positioned across the top of the vase. Then, hanging motionless and limited, the almost blind caterpillar will look out at an upside down world and wait.

The transformation begins. The caterpillar's hanging, J-shaped body becomes encased within a hard chrysalis, an entombing cocoon. Now in a very dark, claustrophobic place, unaware of what's going on in the outside world, the caterpillar begins to lose grasp of itself. Over the next ten days, it will seem to the outsider as if nothing is happening inside the cocoon. From my living room, nothing seems unusual, but on the inside, this creature is literally falling apart, losing solidity, becoming ooze.

Inside the cocoon, a new cell emerges, seemingly out of nowhere. This cell does not come from the thick, goopy liquid that once was the caterpillar. This is a brand new cell, what scientists call an "imaginal cell." These cells are so drastically different from the caterpillar's cells that they undergo an attack from the host immune system. Many of these cells become damaged and destroyed, but the production of them hastens with a longing intent, an unwillingness to give up. Soon these imaginal cells become so abundant, the immune system surrenders.

The victorious cells begin to find and to cling to one another, like-cells to like-cells. Now groups of clinging cells find and cling to other groups of cells, forming multi-cellular clusters. These clusters begin feeding on the thick, nutritious soup that was, only moments ago, trying to kill them. Now feasting, the clusters begin interacting with each

other, trading information, bonding. These new, imaginal cells actually start directing the entire metamorphic process.

Soon the organism's DNA reveals a fresh, never-before-seen set of blueprints. Some cells become wing cells, others become antenna cells — an all-encompassing mechanistic game of “I am this, you are that.” Before long, all the goop becomes absorbed; every cell realizes its destiny.

A new creature is created and emerges into a seemingly entirely new world that is my living room. My eyes and mouth widen. I pick up the vase from my coffee table and carry it out the door. In awe, I walk to the center of my backyard. I slowly pull the rubber band off and peel back the white nylon. I whisper, *Thank you*. The monarch butterfly hesitates for a moment, as if acknowledging my gratitude. Then, exhibiting a kind of innate dexterity and ingrained sense of grace, the butterfly takes off, appearing to be weightless as it glides along the wind. Its cellophane-thin, bright orange wings refuse no gust. Living in the moment, it has no need to remember where it came from, no longing for tomorrow.

My nephew Sammy is two years old. One of the first words I noticed him say was “stuck.” Sammy will try to open a door and if he has trouble, he will say “stuck.” Most of the times he says “stuck,” he adds an inflection to it, so as to make it seem like a question in order to get someone to help him get the door to become unstuck. He seems to have this longing to open doors; this curiosity to see what he's not supposed to; an aching to go where he's not allowed. Even when he doesn't know where he is going, or what's behind a door, he begs for it to be opened, or to become unstuck. If he is told “No Sammy, you can't open that,” he begins to cry. Like an old immune system surrendering, this is when I usually open the door anyway.

Often when Sammy comes to my dad's house, he will run straight to my room, yelling “Chah-eeee!” Once inside, he usually finds himself first at my guitar or my djembe, but to Sammy, these things are known as “ih-taw?” and “dwum?” Usually after frantically pulling at the strings of the guitar a few times, he starts twisting the machine heads, the tuners. This of course will put the guitar out of tune, and could quite possibly break a string. Sammy doesn't know that though. No matter how many times I tell him not to, moving his hand off the tuner, he stubbornly tries again. With strong determination, like a caterpillar eating all that can be eaten, Sammy simply wants to twist what can be twisted, to spin what can be spun.

My nephew is also just beginning to come to the stage in life where he can pick up on abstract ideas. In the center of my sister's living room, he sits on top of a black cotton sleeping bag. “Boat?” he asks for acknowledgement. Later that evening Sammy immerses himself inside the sleeping bag. He opens up the portion covering his face. “Door?” he asks. Everyone in the room smiles and agrees, and then he smiles, closes the sleeping bag and repeats. Someone says something about how wonderful his imagination

is, but I don't respond because I'm stuck musing over whether or not a caterpillar knows what it's doing in its cocoon. I smile.

Sammy also says "stuck" when something really is stuck: a toy train jammed between the floor and a recliner or a shoe that won't come off. "Stuck?" Sammy says repeatedly until someone comes to the rescue. Even if he doesn't necessarily want to play with a certain toy, if he notices it's stuck, he'll free it, or ask someone else to. Now that the captured giraffe has been freed, Sammy can get on with his games.

I wonder why, to a two-year-old, no thing shall remain trapped; no door shall be left unopened; no longing intent unanswered. I wonder if metamorphosis is intrinsic.

Throughout my life I've heard many people compare their lives to those of butterflies. There's something about transformation that seems so congenital, so innate. Lately though, I've been feeling more like an imaginal cell becoming a *piece* of the butterfly. The word *imaginal* comes from the root word *imagine*. Is it coincidence then that I find myself bonding with artists, poets, musicians, and other open-minded, imaginative, creative psychonauts? Out of thin air, I am not who I was even just yesterday.

Like a toy airplane stuck in the bottom of Sammy's toy box, I've been feeling as though a hand has reached into my life to loosen things up. I feel myself becoming unstuck. As though someone is finally answering to my longing inflection, doors are opening in my life like never before. Every day I find myself drawing deeper connections between the things around me. A torn leaf can't fall off the end of a white oak branch in a certain way without triggering a thought in my mind about a specific event that has happened in my life or an image of a person I know or once knew. Metaphors are making my life more meaningful, analogies are helping me feel real.

Which came first: passion, or imagination?

When I was a child, I loved to paint and draw. One day in sixth grade though, I met Hayden Jordan. Hayden had an incredible talent. I usually had to look back and forth between the object I was drawing and my pencil, slowly making my marks, checking to see if they looked "right." Hayden, on the other hand, was coming up with incredible characters and scenes on the spot, right out of his head, and quickly getting them out on to paper while we waited for class to start. I wondered how. I gave up. I forgot about it.

Years later, I have a new understanding. My bamboozled beliefs on what is actually important to me have been shattered and replaced with new passion, new excitement, more creativity and a whole new sense of imagination. The songs I write have gone from basic, three chord, simple melody, 4/4, verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus ones to songs with tempo changes, key changes, time signature changes, volume swells, following no specific order or mold. They seem to have substance, hold meaning. I'm painting again.

I am no longer cryptic like the caterpillar either, that is to say I seem to have lost my desire to simply blend in with my surroundings, to camouflage my colors. I don't

necessarily go out of my way to stand out, but I have lost the motivation to impress others by acting in a way I think they want me to act. As caterpillars push themselves along, they leave a pheromone trail so others can follow. I seemed to have lost my ability to pick up on such a pheromone, or maybe I'm just ignoring it.

Actin and myosin, the two proteins used by a butterfly to help unfold and flap its wings, are the same two proteins that are responsible in the human heart for keeping a regular, balanced, and rhythmic heartbeat. The same evolutionary trait to keep an insect's opposing twin wings fluttering keeps our opposing dream lives and waking lives livable.

When we were children, our mother took my sisters and me to a field full of milkweed plants right down the street from our grandmother's house. I had been assigned by Miss Violette, my first grade teacher, to bring in a vase with a monarch caterpillar inside. Everyone in the class was to do this.

My mother took my homework assignment and turned it into a family event. When we got to the field, she told us what we were looking for. "Okay, see these plants that have these weird-looking pods on them?" she asked. "Well these little yellow and black caterpillars love to eat these things. Charlie needs one to bring to class on Monday, but I bet we can all find our own!"

Finding the golden caterpillar was finding the golden treasure. The first one found brought jealousy and hope. Our inquisitive pace quickened until we all found what we were looking for.

"I found the first one Mom!" Sheena bragged, as she always did, being the oldest.

"You did?!" Mom asked in a way that always got us to reply even more excitedly. We were always trying to impress her, always asking for approval.

"Be gentle with him. Put him into this vase."

Shortly after, we all had our caterpillars. I brought mine to class Monday morning.

The counter along one of the walls in the classroom slowly filled up as students brought in their vases, all different shapes and sizes. Weeks passed. We watched. We waited.

One by one every butterfly hatched. One by one, students brought their vases outside and released their butterflies. One by one, the vases disappeared off the counter, until mine was the only one left. I began to lose hope. Why hadn't mine come out yet? What was it waiting for? Why was mine stuck?

My mother was in our kitchen cooking shepherd's pie when I came bursting through the door.

"Mom! Mom! It happened today! It happened today! My butterfly finally hatched!"

"Oh Charlie, that's so wonderful!"

"The whole class watched me take it outside with Miss Violette and I set it free!"

“See honey? It wasn’t stuck. It was just waiting to make its special appearance, and it sounds like it was a great one. I’m so happy for you!”

Looking back, I have to wonder: what will Sammy do when he’s old enough to be taken to the swamps edge, where he’s told to go catch the caterpillar. Will he? I wonder what symbols he will use to explain his own metamorphosis one day. For me, it’s a sleeping bag turning into an open door. It’s a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. It’s a twisted tuner, an imaginal cell, a toy airplane.