

The Butterfly Effect

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor



(A version of this essay first appeared in October of 2011. Hopefully, you won't remember it any better than I did.- — Margaret)

So, last week I'm on my back deck, beating a rug into submission with a broom. It's another splendid fall afternoon, but I hardly notice.

I'm too busy thinking of all the articles I have to edit and all the bills in the mail pile and all the homework Amelia will soon be dragging through the door – and her big science project that's due next week, and the dance shoes she needs, and when's her next play practice, again? – and I'm wondering if I remembered to sign that paperwork and return those emails, and I'm beating that dusty rug to a pristine pulp... when all of a sudden, a magnificent orange butterfly comes gliding my way.

It floats before me at eye level – treading the air, almost perfectly still – and we have this... moment. The butterfly and I have a moment. And in that moment, I *know*. I know that things don't have to be the way we've made them – so frantic and complicated and striving. In that moment, I see a different way of living. Of being. It's as clear as the October sky. Somewhere, a wind chime tings and the Spanish moss sways and the very air has changed.

And then, the moment passes. The butterfly is gone, and with it, my vision.

Okay, I know I'm not the first stressed-out working mom to have a back porch epiphany about “life/work balance” while making a list in her head as she assaults an innocent floor covering.

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Happens all the time. But this was something... more. At the risk of sounding grossly pretentious, my butterfly moment felt like a mysterious encounter with some kind of higher consciousness. For one brief flash, I “saw” that we were doing it wrong – all of us – and that we’d been doing it wrong (*life*, that is) for a very, very long time. Not just my family... not just my community or my state or my country... but modern civilization in general. In that moment, I “saw” this complex matrix we’ve created – of expectations and aspirations, regulations and obligations – and suddenly it all seemed completely insignificant, like so many gossamer threads in a spider web. Tenuous, weightless threads that might be brushed away at any time. A self-constructed prison easily destroyed.

But such revelations – no matter how powerful – tend to deflate in hindsight, under scrutiny. Because nothing’s ever as simple as it seems when we humans are involved. Civilization *is* like a spider web – intricate and fragile – but like a spider web, it’s both trap... and home. It’s been woven over time – sometimes carefully, sometimes thoughtlessly – and every thread is connected. We can’t just go brushing them away on a whim, willy nilly. We have to think before we brush. Civilization must be handled with care.

And that’s really been humanity’s challenge all along, hasn’t it? Keeping the web of civilization firm but flexible. How do we pull out a strand or two we no longer like without bringing down the whole web? Some of us prefer to “leave well enough alone,” settling for the status quo whether we like it or not, for the sake of the web. Others of us get all fired up and start yanking at strands we don’t like, consequences be damned. We hope to make the web stronger and better, but we really won’t know ‘til we pull, and sometimes we live to regret it. (Has anybody seen Ken Burns’ wonderful documentary “Prohibition”? The saga of the 18th Amendment is a perfect example of this phenomenon, known as “the law of unintended consequences.”)

Lest you fear I’m about to venture into that dark place we call American politics... don’t. Because I’m not. I’m way beyond looking for any honest answers or helpful perspectives in our national political conversation. I’d sooner look to butterflies and spiders for wisdom.

And, as a friend reminded me recently, this is neither a new nor an exotic place to look.

“This moment you describe is what I consider ‘communing with God’,” she commented, when I shared my butterfly moment on Facebook. “Nature is the true gateway to divinity... This fragile understanding you experienced today sums up everything that the native people of this, and just about any other, country have been professing as their faith. We ‘civilized’ people mock them

and their visions, because our eyes are shattered.”

That image of “shattered eyes” really resonates with me. I think many of us, even here in the Lowcountry, live so oblivious to that “gateway to divinity” that is Nature – impervious to her rhythms in our rushing about – that we’re literally blind to certain truths.

Not too long ago, I followed a link online and found myself reading up on the Westward expansion movement in the US. I’m obviously not the first to say it – and it’s certainly not the first time I’ve thought it – but our ancestors sure could have learned a thing or two about harmonious living from all those Native Americans they displaced while harnessing the frontier. Of course, they were too busy “making something of themselves” – herding cattle, homesteading, panning for gold. Pursuing the American Dream. While they sought to tame the natural world – to make it work for them – communing with it wasn’t high on their priority list. And that’s a shame.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m proud of my American heritage. There’s an undeniable beauty in the image of the hard-working, up-by-the-bootstraps, self-made successful American. But I can’t shake this feeling that maybe we’ve lost our way. Sometimes the American Dream feels more like a nightmare to me, with too many of us living to work instead of working to live. We’re all spinning our wheels faster and faster it seems... but where are we going in such a hurry? And why? Are the fancy houses and the nice cars really worth all the time away from those we love? Is that remodeled kitchen really worth the stress of being more deeply in debt? Do we really need all those channels on our TV? What about all those apps on our smart phone? (Remember when we didn’t even have smart phones? When you could escape in your car and nobody could find you? Sigh.) Do the kids really need hours of schoolwork *after* school, and all those extra curriculars, just so they can get into a good college one day, then compete in the global economy? (An even more heretical question: Do all kids need to go to college?) Do you ever find yourself looking out your window in wistful despair, your to-do list thrumming in your head like a drumbeat you can’t turn off? How many forms must be filled out, how many instruction manuals read, how many deadlines met, how many projects completed, how many workshops attended, before we all cry, “Enough!”?

Whew. That paragraph was exhausting. And as usual, I have no answer to my own question. Please forgive my cantankerous mood. It’s been a long week and I’m very tired. I shall now pour myself a nice glass of wine and retreat to my back deck to look for butterflies.

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. Read her regular column at [Rants & Raves](#) or visit

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her blog at

www.memargaret.com