

The Layers of Our Unfoldment

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The process of our unfoldment is so subtle that most of us could probably say with all sincerity that we don't remember getting older. For the most part, however, we do remember some of the more poignant moments along the way...events, experiences that were catalysts which moved us from one sense of knowing to another. Whatever they were, something was always left behind...an innocence, perhaps, a particular viewpoint that got shattered, an old way of doing something, or maybe it was loneliness that was left behind because of love found, or in reverse, maybe it was the loss of a loved one that propelled us into that place of "who am I now?"

Everything, everything that moves us through the transformative stages of life always demands that we leave something behind as we are presented with a new way of being in the world. From infant to toddler, from adolescent to teenager, from young adult to fully-seasoned human, such is the natural order of our physical, emotional and spiritual maturation process.

One layer after another in our evolution reveals the complexity and depth of the life lessons that inform our journey, and while they are naturally progressive, that does not guarantee that everyone will ever reach the same level of awareness or clarity of vision. Unfortunately, not all three aspects *that make-up us* evolve at the same time, and some never fully mature, either. That, in large part, depends upon what resources we have to support ourselves during those moments when life challenges us the most, during those times when we are wrestling with the changes that have thrust us into the turmoil of unknowing and discernment. The reality is that no one can do the work for us. How we emerge on the other side of our transformational confinement depends upon our willingness to engage the struggle and move beyond it. Some of us go kicking and screaming through such times, while others muster up a modicum of grace to carry us beyond the unsolicited chaos.

Each time we unfold is a rebirth process in and of itself. Let's face it, some births are easier than others, but all of them force us into a world of self-discovery that is nothing short of profound.

There is a wonderful scene in the book *Alice's Adventures Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll where Alice encounters a big blue Caterpillar sitting upon a large mushroom (and smoking a hookah, as all good blue caterpillars

do). “And who are you?” asks the caterpillar. “I don’t rightly know, sir,” replies Alice rather shyly. “What kind of an answer is that?” quips the caterpillar. “Well,” says Alice, “I thought I knew who I was when I woke-up this morning, but I think I must have changed many times since then!” “What kind of an answer is that?!” demands the caterpillar. “Furthermore, who ARE you?” And that brought them right back to the beginning of their conversation.

Who are we, indeed! You see, the process of our unfoldment is constant in both large and small ways. One could say that it continues until our last breath, *and* depending upon your theological perspective, it might even continue beyond our physical liberation into non-incarnated, non-linear time. The question of this hour, however, is this: How can we deepen our awareness and experience of the process that is our becoming?

Returning to the realm of caterpillars, perhaps their life-cycle can give us a clue as to our own. A caterpillar instinctively spins its cocoon to do the internal work that transformation necessitates. The only difference is that we, humans, go into our cocoons a multitude of times over the course of our lifetimes. Change does not always come easily, even if it is positive change. In fact, it requires/nay, it demands that we leave our present comfort zone (whether that zone is good, bad or indifferent) so that we can allow what is shifting within and without to take a new form. Letting go of what was in order to create room for what is beckoning us is a necessary part of the rebirth process. Hence the need to spin cocoons...to go to that place deep within where only we can go, where only we can do the hard work that growth requires in all the layers of our lives.

Of course there are many different cocoons that we experience in our lifetimes, beginning with the most miraculous one of all, the womb. But there are others that take on many different shapes and forms, which in their own ways create a protective environment where we can learn and grow and stretch our wings. Oftentimes their purposes overlap, and sometimes they even conflict, but it is within those spaces that we grow our bodies, minds and spirits.

There is the cocoon of family or home, of school and classroom, of religious institutions and their values that nurture us. At their best, these places that “hold” us can provide the necessary support that we need for all of our personal transformations. There are also the cocoons of our friendships, our co-workers, our neighbors and larger communities, even our countries that influence the kind of person we will become. Yet, ultimately, the process of our unfoldment is ours alone to embrace.

Here I am reminded of a story that I once heard about a boy who was walking thru his yard after a summer storm when he found a branch that had broken off of a bush. On the branch was a chrysalis that had been tightly formed. The boy found an old mayonnaise jar, put the branch inside, screwed on the cap and punched holes in the lid. He put the jar on his windowsill and every morning and night he checked to see if there was truly life inside that chrysalis.

One morning upon awakening, he saw that the butterfly inside the cocoon had poked a hole in it. When the boy came home from school, he noticed that the butterfly had only partially emerged from its confinement and it was struggling to break through the constrictive enclosure. Not wanting to see the precious butterfly suffer, the boy took the stick out of the jar, found a pair of scissors, and snipped open the cocoon the rest of the way. The butterfly, only partially formed, fell out. Its wings were still very shriveled and its body was swollen. It could neither walk nor fly. Within a few hours, the butterfly died.

What the boy didn't understand was that in order for the butterfly's wings to fully form, it needed the struggle of pushing itself out of the cocoon to send the fluid from its body into its wings. The boy had the best of intentions, as he wanted to spare the butterfly the difficult struggle to emerge into its fullness. While he had provided a safe environment for the chrysalis to form, he neglected to simply hold the space and be present to its unfolding.

As a parent and grandparent, I understand how difficult it is to watch your children stumble and fall when they are learning to walk, how heartbreaking it is when they get hurt and all you can do is put a band-aid on it and hold them in their pain, how incredibly heart-wrenching it is when they make mistakes or get their heart broken and they torture themselves over the trauma. It is equally difficult to come to grips with the separation process, both in the leave-taking and in the letting go. Knowing that we cannot fix every problem for our children, or mend every hurt in their bodies or souls, is one of the hardest lessons of being a parent or caregiver. Yet, knowing when to "hold the space" and be present with loving support is perhaps the greatest gift we can give our children as well as others within our communal circle.

Of course, being tightly wound in a chrysalis has its difficulties and responsibilities as well! Knowing that the desire to break out of your cocoon is strong, and the adults around you are telling you to slow down, make good choices, show some responsibility before you try and fly, is equally frustrating when all you want to do is test your wings. Going through all the necessary changes before you can emerge into young adulthood requires some patience and understanding as well. Your caregivers (or those entrusted to protecting your cocoons) truly love

and care about you, even if you don't always agree with them or appreciate it. Here I'm reminded of something that folklorist Garrison Keillor once said: *It was amazing that the older I got the less stupid my parents became!* (I remember the first time I heard my mother coming out of my mouth when I was talking to my children. Then, a few years ago my daughter called me and said, "Mama, I couldn't believe it. I heard you coming out of my mouth today!" I only hoped it was something good that I had said!)

Alas, the layers of our unfoldment number greater than the stars. We are in constant stages of metamorphosis and change, always keeping alive the child within us that loves unconditionally, sees the world with wonder and awe, and finds joy in the simplest of pleasures. Even though the hard work of our maturation is internal and only ours to do, we desperately need to be fed and nurtured and supported along the way. With what we feed ourselves and surround ourselves matters greatly. The strength and well-being of our personal evolution depends upon what we choose to comfort and inspire us. That is why our religious community is so important to our well-being and growth! What we desire to bring out of ourselves depends upon it. And that is why what we create here matters.

*How we nurture each other from the cradle to grave matters.

*How we encourage each other thru the challenging times, the creative times, the grieving times, the visioning times, the celebratory times all matter. We engage in this lifespan of learning and sharing because that is how we learn to fly...that is how we continuously discover our potential to bring our gifts and talents, our compassion and hope into this world that trembles with pain.

As we continuously unfold, it is in our letting go that we open ourselves to the possibility of growth. Letting go, however, does not mean that we are abandoning what has been important to us. On the contrary, in the process of letting go, we come to understand that what is essential remains imprinted upon our hearts and souls forever, and nothing can ever take that away.

AMEN and BLESSED BE