

Photo by Henrik Larsson

## The Courage of a Caterpillar

Messages in meeting for worship almost always originate with a source outside myself. An event, person, or something someone else says touches a place deep inside me and brings forth a thought, an insight, a message to be shared. It seems that the external influence sends off vibrations that produce a complimentary vibration within me that occurs without conscious effort on my part, much like two tuning forks vibrating in harmony with one another.

That was the case recently while attending a meeting for worship via Zoom. One participant's profile picture was an image of a butterfly, which flashed briefly on the screen before she turned on her video to reveal herself. The butterfly was drawn in black on a white background and had blue and orange colors—whether it was a real butterfly or an artist's interpretation I am not sure. It was a striking image in contrast to the squares of solemn faces on my screen and caught my attention immediately. And just as immediately a message came forth, fully formed in my mind in a brief instant, but one that would take me several more minutes to figure out how to say and even longer to actually say it.

During the previous week I had

been reading Book 39 of the Muslim scholar al-Ghazali's *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*, first published in the twelfth century. Book 39 is about contemplation and is based on a story about the prophet Muhammad. The story goes that Muhammad passed a group of followers sitting in meditation and asked what they were doing. Meditating on God was the answer. *But, he said, you can't meditate on God. God is too vast, too unknowable. Meditate on God's creation and that will lead you to God.* Reflecting this advice, al-Ghazali's book is filled with detailed descriptions about contemplating various aspects of creation and marveling at how miraculous and mysterious creation, and therefore God, is.

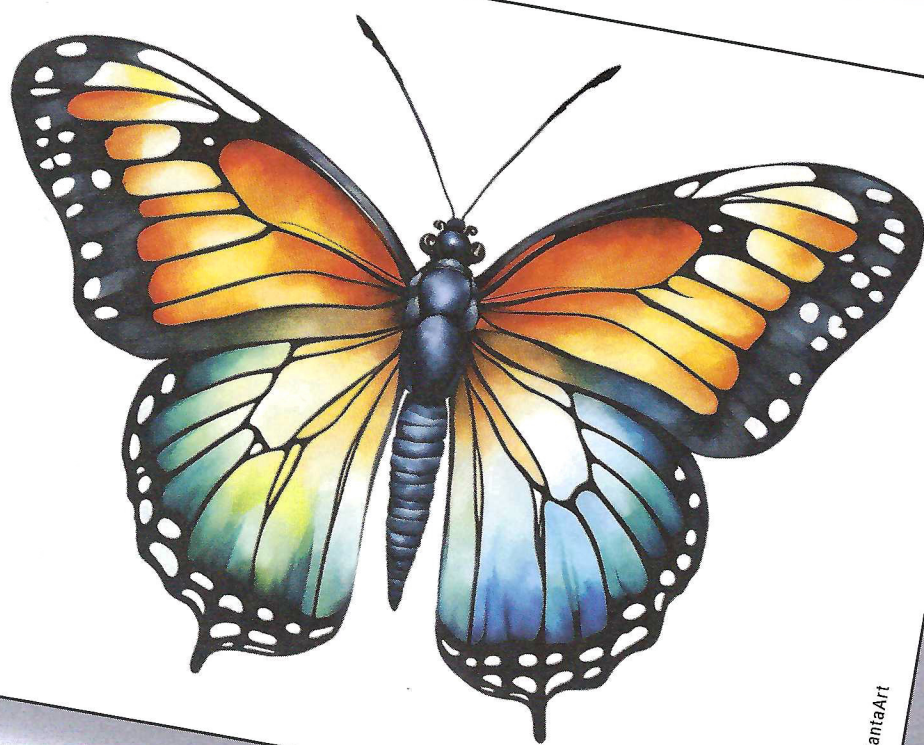
After reading the book I gazed at a bouquet of flowers in a vase on my table, thinking about them in a way I hadn't done before. It takes me some effort to suck up water through a straw, but the flowers were easily pulling water up through their stems and sending it out to their leaves and blossoms above. How was each flower doing this simple and amazing thing? I am sure a botanist knows, but I have no idea. And what happens to the water when it gets to the leaves and the

blossoms and just seems to disappear? No idea about that either, but I know without the water the flowers will wither in a day.

This simple act of contemplating a common-place object that I'd looked at indifferently many times before left me in awe and enabled me to see how al-Ghazali could say that creation itself is the proof of God's existence. No human intelligence or act of evolution could come up with the design and operation of something as simple as a flower.

These thoughts were still in my mind when I saw the image of the butterfly and considered how extraordinary it was that a butterfly existed at all—how extraordinary and miraculous is the process of a caterpillar wrapping itself in a cocoon to die and yet not to die but be transformed into a beautiful butterfly! While this process of transformation could be an analogy for our own death, suggesting that death is not an end but only a change of state into something new and wonderful, the message that came to me was not about death but about the transformation we may undergo while we live.

The caterpillar is a lowly creature. It crawls slowly across the ground or



suffering, even if only the pain of severing past relationships or rejection by others who can't accept the new person we have become, as Jesus himself experienced.

What makes this process of change happen is as mysterious to me as what makes the caterpillar decide to change. It can be something that happens gradually over time or something that happens almost instantaneously. But once it happens, a new self bursts forth as strikingly different from our old self as the butterfly is from the caterpillar. When this has happened for me, I have had a feeling of light-heartedness, of being relieved of a burden I didn't know I carried, of joy, of a different quality of peace than I'd experienced before that encourages me to move through life with the same ease and confidence a butterfly has as it floats through the air.

After I offered these thoughts, two other participants in worship that day shared their reflections and a personal example of transformation. However, our individual transformations do not only concern ourselves. Each person who has the courage of the caterpillar to take the risk of change—whether spiritual or personal (for in the end they are both the same)—brings forth a gift as inspiring as a butterfly that encourages others to have the courage to change as well, which brings us all one step closer to the peaceful and loving world that God desires.

*John Andrew Gallery lives in Philadelphia, Pa., and attends its Chestnut Hill Meeting. He has authored many articles in Friends Journal and several self-published spiritual books. He has authored four Pendle Hill pamphlets, including the recently released Wait and Watch: Spiritual Practice, Rehearsal, and Performance. Website: [Johnandrewgallery.com](http://Johnandrewgallery.com).*

on a branch or leaf spending most of its time looking for food. Its existence is solely material, solely about the physical world. Yet it is born with the inherent potential of becoming a butterfly. Does it know that—I mean consciously know, or is it a hidden knowledge that requires something else to stimulate it and bring it forth? I don't know. But at some point, the caterpillar is called to change—and I use the word "called" in a spiritual sense—called from some source outside itself. So, it undertakes the marvelous act of creating a cocoon. Does it know that it will die in the process? Does it suffer and feel pain as it transforms? Or does it know that it won't really die but will be transformed and so undertakes the process of metamorphosis with confidence and joy? I like to think that it doesn't know the outcome; it simply knows that it *must* change and takes the risk of changing without being certain what the outcome will be. It faces its apparent death with a leap of faith.

Like the caterpillar, we are born into a material existence. We are tied to a material world, to activities necessary for our own survival. Like the caterpillar, we start out as material creatures, but we too are born with the inherent potential to be something else, something more. But to be that we must also take the risk of change. Many spiritual traditions refer to this type of change as a death. "You must die before you die" is a phrase attributed to Muhammad and is found in a poem by Rumi. Jesus says, "You must be born again." Both mean that we must overcome our attachment to and the limitations of material existence as the primary source of our being—we must overcome "the world" as George Fox put it, the temptations and limitations that hold us back and distract us from a spiritual existence. We must die to our old self in order to become a new self, our true self, the person we were meant to be, united in harmony with God. That change may not occur without some pain and