

It was called the butterfly village because it seemed to be the place from which all of the butterflies came, yet not a single butterfly lived there. All of the residents were caterpillars, crawling from leaf to leaf, devouring bit by bit, the very plant material upon which each one stood, blindly presuming there would always be another leaf or branch to which to move onto next.

For a long time, the cocoons were a mysterious phenomenon, swallowing up loved ones such that they were never seen again. When the cocoons were later discovered empty and open, a cursory observation suggested that their rigidity and smallness would make them quite uncomfortable spaces in which to be. Yet there was also a curious feeling of security, the feeling that a suit of armor might provide for a warrior.

When the butterflies began emerging from these cases some time later, therefore, the caterpillars would sometimes call to the butterflies to return to the safety and security of the cocoon. The butterflies were quite incapable of doing so, however, once their wings had expanded to greater dimensions than the now empty cocoons could encompass.

On one hand, it was quite miraculous to see a butterfly emerge from a cocoon and launch itself into the air for the first time, going where no caterpillar had ever been. Sipping the sweetness of flowers instead of chewing bitter-tasting leaves. On the other hand, the sight of a butterfly on the ground, its wings shredded beyond repair, its bright colors smeared with mud, was absolutely heart-wrenching. What had they found high in the air that would be worth risking such a tragic and early death?

Ultimately, the caterpillars could learn what to anticipate, but were not for that reason any more in control of their own growth or evolution. It was a work of Life which they could serve but not command. The cocoon was actually a very instructive symbol, demonstrating the necessity of periods of confinement which would be followed by periods of unimaginable freedom.

Freedom is perhaps one of the most fragile things, subject to predators, weather, and unwise personal choices, yet we will never become what God had always intended for us to be, if we do not pursue exactly this.

We will never know flight, the full expansion of our wings, and the myriad of colors which we possess if venture no further than the safety and security of the cocoon. We will never know the sweet nectar of flowers nor the feeling of sunlight passing through our colors and giving them a warmth they would never otherwise have had.

Death will come anyway, at its appointed time and in its peculiarly appointed way. The real tragedy will be if the wings have never expanded, the colors have never been seen, and the nectar of each available flower has never been tasted.

This is ultimately the greatest lesson of the Butterfly village, that we are not now what we someday will be, nor will even that stage of growth be a place of stagnation, a place beyond which there is no more growth. Love and Life will go on, growing ever further toward the Divinity from which they originated, no matter what obstacles may try to prevent them.

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Life is a collaborative effort, encompassing more than we know. In a time of abundant "information overload," news, communication, and travel across great distances, we often talk at each other without listening, communicating, or understanding. Humanity needs its icons, but also its iconoclasts to grow beyond the good and bad qualities that now limit and describe us. The essences of both God and us remain, in the midst of questions, to be discovered, experienced, and expressed. Please share in this ongoing dialogue, remembering to indicate whether and how you wish to be identified. Blessings, love, and peace to you.
--Sister Who

Independence Day

I began July 4 by watching (one more time) the movie, "Independence Day." It seemed like an appropriate tradition to begin, considering how little this particular holiday is really understood by most Americans. So often the only thing which comes to mind are the historical facts of certain military battles and not the deeper meaning of freedom itself and all of the things to which it can be applied.

Within the movie, the deeper meaning which transcends all boundaries is the freedom to simply live--something which most people seem to take for granted these days. With the assistance of the appearance of a common enemy, all of the petty differences about which humanity constantly quibbles--social status, economic class, race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, age--become irrelevant and no one hesitates to join hands with someone who would otherwise be shunned, to accomplish the most basic goal of survival. The president's wife and the exotic dancer, the mentally and emotionally wounded Vietnam veteran and the commander in chief of the United States armed forces, the Jew and the gentile--all find themselves working together without hesitation, just to stay alive.

If we only understood the deeper meaning of staying alive, perhaps we would all join hands without hesitation and work together, just to stay alive in all of the other ways as well. Why do we not recognize the tragedy in a singer who gives up singing and accepts a job working in an office in order to satisfy the current cost of living? Why do we not weep every time a dancer stops dancing in order to march to a more societally dictated beat?

Why is it not as important to keep everyone alive emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually as it is keep everyone alive physically?

Instead we continue to attack and wound each other. In all honesty, we tolerate all sorts of terrorism every day, simply because its violence is not so obvious as destroying a building with a homemade bomb. A few days ago, I received an email which I would classify as theological terrorism.

It was an email designed to manipulate by fear and intimidation, claiming authority and accuracy well beyond the reach of human perception. "Do this or else," was its general theme. "Either way, expect things to get very, very bad within the immediate future."

If I truly believed the content of that email and theological perspective, mass suicide could be considered an intelligent choice. Certainly if the people of Hiroshima had known about atomic bombs, they would have either left the city or euthanized the entire population rather than subject them to the slow lingering death of radiation poisoning or other atomic bomb-related consequences.

I met a friend at the store tonight, whom I'd not seen in a number of years. She commented that some group of people with whom she was familiar, had intuitively or psychically perceived and/or decided that the world will end about a month from now. She quickly added that she didn't believe they were right, but even the most momentary thought of such a possibility is quite sobering.

I suppose it is the most common sermon given at funerals: if you knew you were going to die a month, a week, an hour, a moment from now--what would you do? Would you do anything differently? Would you spend your time, money, and energy in the same way as you are now spending it? Where would you want to be found and what

would you want to be found doing, when the final moment of life comes?

I think if I knew the world would end a few hours from now, I would take my dog and begin hiking to the summit of some high mountain which I'd never climbed before. I would want life's end to find me pursuing yet another new accomplishment, rather than simply sitting in my house waiting for some great cataclysm to sweep me away. I would want life's end to find me in the presence of someone I love and for the moment at least, Galahad may be only a dog, but he's basically the only immediate family I've got.

All of which are ways that I affirm my own independence and individuality. To be found in the last moment of life, behaving like a herd animal, copying the behavior, appearance, or attitudes of everyone around me, seems to me to be a sneer at the unique qualities and aptitudes which God has placed within me. In the same way that I felt honored when I was told that Sister X, my spiritual godmother, was cremated while wrapped within a quilt I'd made for her/him; I believe it would honor God to be found in my last moments of life making use of some specific and individually unique God-given gift.

Part of what makes the movie, "Independence Day" so ironic and so fascinating, is that it focuses upon a specific day in which each person's individuality and choices resonate with both their individual and their collective independence. Their individual independence is what each of them brings to the unfolding of the struggle for survival. Their collective independence is the combination of all of these choices and personal contributions which thumbs its nose at another species's intention to exterminate the human race.

The problem with the notion of "The End of the World" of course, is that it is simultaneously both possible and unlikely. On one hand, most of us have lived our entire lives knowing that humanity now has the capacity to literally exterminate itself within the briefest of moments. On the other hand, Life has always had a way of slipping through the cracks and persisting in spite of all odds.

Virtually every science fiction book, television show, and movie produced within

the last fifty years, predicts some sort of terrible cataclysm, war, or disaster, occurring at some point during the first fifty years of the twenty-first century. Is this a warning filtering up through the collective subconscious of the human race or just some metaphorical dramatization of humanity's lingering paranoia about its own future?

To avoid any sort of arrogance, denial, or dishonesty with myself, I recognize that within the occurrence of every disaster, can be found the sacrifice of innocents. Children with their lives before them, newlyweds still on their honeymoon, workers who have just been promoted, athletes who have just won the greatest of all trophies--some of each of these are swept away within the occurrence of every large-scale tragedy and none of them are worse sinners or more deserving of having their futures ripped out of their hands than we ourselves are. From our very limited human perspective, it seems almost random, as if God were unconcerned about who lives or dies within any particular moment of Life's unfolding.

Perhaps a better question to ponder when contemplating the end of Life as we know it, could be phrased, "if or when the great cataclysm does come, who will be left when it's over, to begin rebuilding the world and what resources will they have at their disposal, with which to rebuild some sort of habitable world or society? What ideals or stories or understanding might be lost during this most difficult of transitions? On the other hand, what if none of this ever happens at all?

I'm reminded of the perhaps peculiar situation of Gay men with AIDS in the 1980s, who didn't expect to live more than another few months and therefore cashed in their life insurance policies in order to live extravagantly during the last few months or weeks of their lives. At a certain point, new medicines were developed and consequently death did not come. The money was spent and on the morning after, these men woke up to discover that they now had to go back to finding some way to

continue living instead.

I've heard literally hundreds of predictions during the last twenty years or so, of the world coming to some sort of violent end, sometime before the year 2010. But what if it doesn't happen? What if after partying hedonistically for weeks, the only thing I find when I wake up on that morning on which that solemn event of termination was predicted to occur, is that I have the worst hangover known to man and an incredibly big mess to clean up?

On the other hand, what if it does happen? What if I spent the last few weeks of life on earth doing typical mundane activities while dismissing any notion of truth to the rumor that the world is about to end? Instead of telling all my friends and extended family how much I love them, instead of doing things that bring peace and happiness to my soul, I instead spend all of my time doing things which are somehow obliterated when "the end of the world" does finally come?

A friend has a refrigerator magnet that whimsically phrases this as, "Some days, I feel as if all I am doing is rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic."

I would rather carve my initials into another's life through actions and words of unconditional love than let anyone about whom I care, go to his or her grave not knowing the honored place he or she had within my life.

So at the end of each day, with no intention of heaping judgement upon myself, I take a moment to figuratively look at myself in the mirror and ask whether I have given all the love and encouragement I could that day. Have I been the biggest me I could be?

Love and peace are big; hatred and violent conflict are small. The world of politics is especially small, if one sees only the events of a particular meeting or the possible significance of a specific law. No matter how awful or wonderful any piece of legislation may be, Life will go on in some form or another. No human laws are able to demand otherwise. We simply do not have that extreme amount of control over creation.

Most things are not quite that extreme, however. If the right to vote had not been granted to women, the world would not have come to an end. Numerous contributions of intelligent and gifted women would not have

been shared with the rest of humanity, but Life would have gone on in some form or other. Whatever else anyone may say about the United States of America, we have survived the administration of an incredibly long list of unintelligent and/or dishonest politicians. The election of a political candidate with uncommendable character qualities, therefore, may prove to be nothing more than a temporary setback and not the final word on societal reality which it claims to be. How temporary of a setback it ultimately is, depends upon all of us working together to establish something better.

In any case, if there is anything which one can never truly regret, it is the love that was given to another at any (and perhaps even every) moment throughout Life. In the final moments of anyone's life, nothing else seems to really matter.

In closing, I offer the words to a couple of extra verses I created several years ago, to go with the old Christian hymn, "How Firm a Foundation," which in some places could be considered a love song from God to mankind. The goal of these verses, it seems to me, is to believe in love and in God in a way that allows both to be much larger than the parameters of my own physical life. Indeed, as I have said before, we must live for something greater than ourselves if we are to avoid becoming small and petty.

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When the world in great conflict,
begins to appear
and it's widely reported,
Armageddon is near.
In the darkest of hours,
in the brightest of days,
you will find Me each moment,
just a prayer away.

And when that great conflict
has come and is gone,
you will find in the stillness,
My Spirit lives on.
For Love shall not die,
though the world pass away,
and then, even then,
there shall be a new day.

* * * * *

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.