

Butterflies or Boxes?

By Dr Josephine-Joy Wright

The young boy sat in the corner of the playroom, carefully picking the pink pen from the box of crayons and marking the paper in a concentrated, constrained circle of colour. He looked up at me, fear flickering in uncertainty behind the soft hazel of his three-year old eyes. He picked up the pink pen again and drew another line, his eyes casting shadows in the cage of his feelings. He looked over at the box of crayons, an overwhelming myriad of colours, exciting, frightening, forbidden. His gaze shot again to mine and I smiled gently and nodded. He watched the pink pen in his hand for a moment, caught between the worlds of his experience where cultures and faiths meet and war, castrating creativity and freedom in a charade of life.

Slowly I poured out the crayons on to the table, tumbling childhood before his eyes. He looked up half-light for a second, restoring his birth. He picked a purple-pink pen as I nodded, a tiny step as he marked the paper with daring delight. As I coaxed him with my eyes, his hands, his heart, his being found the colours and first, like a fleeing deer, next a darting nut-collecting squirrel and finally as a bird laughing in the rainbows of rain-splashed sunlight, the pens sparkled and swirled, dancing with him across the page as we laughed into freedom, cocooned in a world within the chaos of the playroom, where, in the silence of belonging, hope and life were being reborn. I watched and laughed with him as we hugged our joy.

But it was not to be. A solemn hand came down, logically ordering the crayons, fitting them back into their neat packages of convention, disapproval holding her body hard in its brown box of sociably acceptable goodness. The little boy's eyes again met mine, a wistful smile touching the freedom we had shared for a moment in that corner of a hospital cavern - forbidden fruits, or childhood rights to promises of reality? The message was clear. A sad smile acknowledged our grief. We dutifully pushed the crayons into the cold reality of the prisons man had created.

Later that day as I sat musing into bowls of hot chocolate, my heart took my eyes back to that gentle fair-haired child and I thought of another babe whom we too put in a box - Christ Jesus. A box of Fear, a box of Love, a box of unattainable Joy in suits of the world's approval, deceit carved in their backs.

Which box do you put Him in?

Which box do you put yourself or others in?

We have created boxes to constrain, to control, to order, to contain - but in the process we have created coffins. As we read in Isaiah 43 vv16-21 we are encouraged, nay commanded, to forget the former things, not to dwell in the past for He is doing a new thing. He is making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. Maybe it is too simple. Maybe freedom is too beautiful, too dangerous. It requires that we become as that child, willing to dare to be, willing to dare to fly, to find ourselves in the wisdom of wonder. Instead we build our cages and our rockets, weaving the lies of our past into cloaks of chains, trapping ourselves and one another in our first beginnings. But Christ gives us rebirth, a chance to redo the years of our lives when our identities and stories were formed, to have a new song. No boxes, just butterflies.

Butterflies?

Trinia Paulus writes of a story about a caterpillar whose name was Yellow. She used to dream of becoming a butterfly but doubted that this liberating thing could ever happen to her: 'How can I believe there's a butterfly inside me when all I see is a fuzzy worm?' One day, Yellow met a fellow caterpillar who encouraged her to believe that she could be transformed. She decided to take the risk: to lose the life she knew, the caterpillar state, and to weave around herself the cocoon from which she would emerge as a butterfly. Her friends waited. Their patience was rewarded. Rising before their eyes was a brilliant, yellow-winged creature. It was the same Yellow they had always known yet so very different. She looked awesome as she soared into the sky, circled around and gloried in the air she had now inherited. Her freedom was enchanting.

To be free, Yellow had to release herself to being transformed - within the cocoon, every part of her former being was remoulded, used in the creation of something so beautiful, so free. That is what Christ does for us and with us. He takes every part of our pasts, every part of our being and uses it to create and recreate us in His likeness. Nothing is wasted, nothing is a mistake. God does not make mistakes. When you look at me, you may see a little lady in a body that looks like it was whipped in a funfair top of alternatives. I may argue with it at times. I may get cross with it, sad, or jealous when I see beautiful straight women dancing or skiing in the mountains. But it wasn't a mistake. God has used it and me in it, to challenge, to bear witness, to invite you to look again, to look behind the mask to see what He has done and will do with you if you will let Him. Nothing is wasted.

Years ago, I laboured over a PhD, unable to say 'no' to the pressure to fulfil the academic accolade, fighting for freedom to be able to breathe, to paint, to sing, to play with the children He had called me to walk with. A recent trip to China showed me how He needed and used that prison to release others. As a Christian lady with a wiggly body and a strange profession, I was a reject within the Chinese culture; but as Dr Jo I was to be honoured, respected, listened to, neither of us losing face, and able to teach and be heard and bear witness to how as one Chinese lady said: 'I have a whole body but I am so broken inside and fear I can never be whole. Your body is broken yet you radiate with joy and are so whole - How? Why? Could it ever happen to me?' It was so beautiful that before the end of the trip, she too became a butterfly for Christ.

So often in my life I have seen how as Christians we play the game of freedom. We put ourselves and others into boxes of acceptability. We judge, we gossip, we condemn. We label ourselves and others by our pasts. Yet why, when the Bible so clearly, so powerfully shows that Christ did the exact opposite? If this beautiful land of former Yugoslavia is to be released, to be healed, to be transformed, we need to be willing to dare to read and put into action what Christ really commanded us to do, to forget the former things for both ourselves and others and allow Him to create through us rivers of joy and real new life, not the charades of religiosity which we seem to almost worship and let control us. We need to be willing to be taken slowly and carefully apart and remade as happens with the cocoon. We need to be willing to look for His miracles in unexpected places.

My mind goes back again to the playroom where we began our story. In another corner, two boys in turn are carefully building tissue boxes, painted to look like bricks, into castle walls around them. One works with all the red ones, putting them carefully on edge while the other places the blue and green ones the other way around. Both are building their own

castles. They exchange the odd word but no more as we as adults do as we build our own castles of our lives with drawbridges of conditional love.

A small boy watches them from afar, a quizzical expression fluttering across his face, half joyful, half bemused at their quest. Suddenly the joy wins and he runs and flings wide his arms as gates of freedom through the castle walls. The two lads look surprised, threat looming for a second, then laughter as they tumble in the ruins and rise and run. The small boy suddenly stoops, clutching a brick that has just flown free. He holds it to his ear. It rattles. He opens the box and releases the tiny, exquisite figure of a doll. 'I have been looking for that for ages' exclaims the Play Master with delight 'I thought it was lost forever!' This is the same delight with which the Father welcomed the Prodigal Son and Christ welcomes us. But we have to be willing to stop long enough to hear the rattle, to climb outside the false comfort zones of our lives, to give all we have to look for the pearls and treasures He wishes to transform - to encourage them to dare to be transformed; to dare for ourselves to be transformed. In so doing we may not just entertain angels, we may see and fly with the angels.

We need to allow caterpillars to become butterflies, to expect caterpillars to become butterflies. It won't make sense through the looking glass of our adult eyes but with the wise eyes of a child His plan will be wonderfully plain. Our pasts may, and are needed to, mould us but they do not need to define us (John Ch.8,v.7) – and neither must we. Butterflies, not boxes. We can be, we shall be truly, joyfully, gloriously free. Can we? Will you?

Come butterfly-seeking and I promise you your life will never be the same again. The cages, the fear will be replaced by space to run and breathe and a solid, unbudgeable, illogical peace. It is scary yet so secure and wonderful. My name used to be Much Afraid, with Sorrow and Suffering as my companions. Now it is Joy. There is still pain at times. There are still times when the world does not make sense but the lies of my past are replaced with the Reality and Truth of my future. So come fly with me. He will set us free.

But do we?

*Written in Mostar, Bosnia
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