

The Metamorphosis of the Mental Health System a.k.a The Butterfly Song

We, invested with glowing hearts and intentions, have all — to one degree or another — believed that caterpillars remain caterpillars. (Admit it, you have too!)

How could we possibly think otherwise? Caterpillars show up for services!

If it looks like a caterpillar, thinks like a caterpillar and acts like a caterpillar – caterpillar! And it wasn't just us that saw things this way, it was most of the world — including — caterpillars!

So of course we designed a system to meet caterpillar needs: long hallways with low, ceilings. Windows? Why would we? For a specie that never looks up? And for their general enhancement we fed them – what else? Caterpillar food! We provided activities and treatment options mostly designed to keep caterpillars stable and comfortable – as caterpillars.

Well it turns out that caterpillars do not remain caterpillars. They are, in actuality, a rather wonderful sort of specie that has, somewhere hidden within, a butterfly! And what may seem to serve a caterpillar today may overlook entirely the optimal conditions for encouraging tomorrow's butterfly to emerge.

We did not know this! And trust me, we would have been diagnosed if we tried to put apple-blossom nectar in the budget!

It just wasn't part of the paradigm.

One reason things are finally changing is our direct experience. There have been times, thank goodness – happy times – when some of us have actually witnessed a caterpillar change into a butterfly and fly away! What a joy to behold! In part because we knew we'd helped! We had listened, we had shared our hope, our humanity and our knowledge, and we had loved! We had helped to create the chrysalis... and encouraged the unfolding of wings...

And P.S., it was the hope of this very outcome that brought most of us into the field in the first place!

At first we tended to dismiss these events as stray miracles; wonderful, but too rare to set our hearts on. Yes, a few lucky ones made it out the window in some staff lounge somewhere and took off for climbs unimagined. Swell, but... We closed the windows behind them and suffered with a certain quiet sadness and frustration. Too many others, in some awkward phase of transformation, wandered the halls complaining about the food and dragging their atrophying wings behind them.

The thought nagged, "We are simply not 'geared for takeoff.'"

Meanwhile, it turns out, those who were testing their fledgling wings on the outside... dancing over waterfalls in warm breezes, drinking the nectar from a hundred beautiful blossoms, tickling baby cheeks... circled back in ever increasing numbers to tell their friends:

“You can fly! You can fly!”

...and challenge us all to believe in a promise unseen.

The song of a butterfly is powerful; it carries a lot of conviction because butterflies remember what they were, are discovering what they are, and are therefore wide open to what they might become. The song of the butterfly enlivens the heart

And I'm happy to report... we hear the song!

And now we're singing back...

Yes! It's time to plan for the butterfly! It's time to raise the ceilings, plant heaps of sweet smelling flowers and install the biggest, most glorious windows we can find!

It's time to see butterflies everywhere: in ourselves, in the people we serve, in all our relationships within and surrounding the “system.”

It's time for the metamorphosis!

And incidentally, it's also time to fulfill our happiest dreams about what doing this work can mean.

The Beginning...