

A Caterpillar And A Dream

The Path By The Fence

Perhaps caterpillars don't think about flying very much. After all, legs are for walking, and with the number of legs they have available, I suppose it's enough to keep them going. Nevertheless, once upon a time there was a caterpillar whose dream it was to fly. It wasn't that he was unhappy particularly. There was enough to eat, and enough to climb, and friends who were caterpillars. Certainly all he could have wanted was already there. Yet, tucked away in his heart, there was this distant longing.

I can't really say that his friends identified with him very much, at least not on this point. They were quite taken up with the job at hand, and it was enough for them. Thinking, speaking, dreaming of flying didn't suit their taste. They were a bit more practical than that. To be sure, the topic came up now and again, usually in one of those intellectual treetop meetings. These were attended by those who had their "head in the clouds." But as far as affecting everyday life, well, you can imagine.

It was a warm bright day when the caterpillar, whose initials were C.P., saw his friend Mr. Turtle coming along the path next to the fence. C.P. enjoyed talking with him, for Mr. Turtle had seen a little more of the world than his caterpillar friends, though from a lower perspective, which gave him a very down-to-earth point of view.

"I suppose you've never thought about flying," ventured C.P. Mr. Turtle was a good and wise friend, and you could pop him questions out of nowhere, with no preliminaries leading up.

Mr. Turtle looked him over. "Ah, your dream," he said. "So you've been thinking again."

"I can't help it," C.P. answered. "My friends all think I've eaten too many sassafras leaves or something, but I know it isn't that. There's something else, and I can't explain what it is."

"You don't have to explain it," said the Turtle. "Have you ever tried to fly?"

"Well, no, actually," C.P. said, "and I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be worth it anyway. You can think your way to a conclusion sometimes, and I've sort of come to the conclusion that no amount of legs can add up to two wings."

"You know about wings, then?" asked Mr. Turtle.

"Only a little," said C.P. "But I've seen them. I gather that if you're going to fly you need wings."

"Yes," said Mr. Turtle. "You'll need wings."

It was a short conversation, and it stopped just like it began, with nothing extra being said. It was always that way with Mr. Turtle. He would let you explain how far you had come, but he left the exploring up to you.

Mr. Turtle made his way down along the fence. It was a beautiful day. C.P. climbed to the top of a nearby tree. He felt the branches sway in the breeze, and the wind blew past him with the hint of a promise.

By The Rock In The Garden

“Do you think I was really meant to fly?” C.P. asked some days later. They were sitting in the garden now. Flowers danced just a few inches away.

“It is your dream,” answered Mr. Turtle. “Dreams have a way of being put there for a reason.”

“Then you don’t think it unusual? Me, with a “hundred” legs, every one of them made for walking, and all I can think of is flying?”

“No, not unusual,” said Mr. Turtle. “Unexpected perhaps, in someone so young, but not unusual. Life is filled with the unusual. If something came along that was merely usual, it would be such a surprise it would have to be classed in the opposite category.”

“But my friends don’t understand,” C.P. continued. “I feel out of place in the group.”

“The group is made for individuals,” Mr. Turtle told him, “but not all individuals are made for the group.”

“Then it’s okay for me to continue on?”

“You’re okay,” said Mr. Turtle, smiling. “I’m keeping an eye on you. If you start to get off on the wrong foot, I’ll let you know.”

The two walked away, but the flowers stayed in their places and danced well into the afternoon.

A Few Days Alone

After that a number of days went by. There were two thunderous rainstorms, and C.P. found a reasonably dry place to wait it out. Mr. Turtle was nowhere to be seen, and C.P. reasoned that he too had found himself a shelter somewhere. Rainstorms may be a bit lonely, but they give you a good chance to think, and C.P. didn’t mind that. He sat in his reasonably dry place and turned his thoughts in new directions.

“I wonder why Mr. Turtle never discourages me when I talk about flight?” he began. “None of my friends even want to listen, let alone relate. But Mr. Turtle not only

understands, he even seems to be guiding me somehow. I wonder if he knows something I don't? But then, he probably wouldn't tell me even if he did. That's his way. He wants me to discover things on my own."

C.P. sat there a while thinking, and eventually it began to dawn on him that he had a choice to make. In a way he had already made one choice: the choice between the perspective of his friends and the hope of his heart. But now there was another choice, and it had to do with trust.

"I've been reasoning for quite some time," he thought, "weighing one thing against another, and it's been an interesting debate. Now I'm standing at an intersection in my thoughts. I can choose to keep debating endlessly, or I can believe I was really meant to fly. I haven't much to go on, except the words of my friend, Mr. Turtle, and even he hasn't given me a definite yes or no. He wants me to figure it out for myself. But if flying was not for me at all, then I think he would have handled our conversations differently."

The thunder and rains continued, but C.P. was in a world of his own. "Then it all comes down to this," he said after a while. "It's a question of whether or not I trust Mr. Turtle." And then, since he hadn't anywhere else to go anyway, he just sat there and let the memories of smiling days along the fence, and bright afternoons in the garden, play through his mind like movies from the past.

The thunder eventually had enough and marched off somewhere else, and the rain decided to go with it, but C.P. didn't notice. He had fallen asleep, with sunshine on his mind, in his warm and reasonably dry place.

And So Things Continued

C.P. climbed down from the top of a tall tree and looked along the fence. Sure enough, Mr. Turtle was coming. It was a good day to be out walking, so they didn't stop to talk; they walked while they talked. That is until C.P. said, "I've come to the conclusion that it's going to be wonderful to fly!"

Mr. Turtle stopped with one foot in the air. He set it back down slowly and looked at C.P. There was a long pause before he said, "I see you've made considerable progress since I last saw you."

C.P. smiled. Compliments from Mr. Turtle were rare and valuable. They walked on a little further. "Of course, that raises a new question in my mind," C.P. said. "The question of how."

"And also the question of when," Mr. Turtle answered. "How and when nearly always go together."

C.P. was a bit puzzled. "I hadn't thought about when."

“It’s an easy thing to miss,” Mr. Turtle told him. “How means you’re looking for a way to do something. But the way we do things changes over time, which means when has a lot to do with how.”

“Okay, so I have two questions,” C.P. responded. “How and when.”

“And then there’s the third question,” said Mr. Turtle. “More important than the first two, it’s the question of who.”

At that point C.P. didn’t know what to say. They walked on a little further. The fenced turned to the right and they both turned with it.

After a while Mr. Turtle said, “Who is actually the secret, but I think you’ve enough to think about for now. Let’s talk about today instead of tomorrow.” So their conversation changed as they walked, but the earlier part was what C.P. stored away in the thoughtful places of his heart.

Over By The Bird Feeder

The days went by in a series of clear, calm ones, as if to balance out the memory of the big storm. C.P. and the other caterpillars chewed on leaves high above the ground, but C.P. was also chewing on something else. The next time he had a chance he would have to ask Mr. Turtle about it. But as things turned out, it was actually Mr. Turtle who mentioned it first. C.P. was making his way down the bird feeder pole when he saw his friend waiting at the bottom. “I suppose you’ve been thinking about the three questions,” Mr. Turtle said.

“Yes, I have,” C.P. answered. “But I’m not getting very far yet. The part about how and when is all right, but what did you mean by who?”

“I meant you,” said Mr. Turtle.

“Me?” C.P. asked. “What about me?”

“Well, you’re going to fly, aren’t you?” the Turtle asked.

C.P. paused. “Yes,” he said.

“And if you’re going to fly, there has to be a time, right? A good time, a right time?”

“I’m following,” answered C.P.

“That good and right time will at some point arrive,” the Turtle continued, “and then the question of when will be completely answered.”

“Yes, that’s true,” C.P. said. “If I know I’m going to fly, then there must be a time.”

“And at that time,” Mr. Turtle continued, “there will be a way, a way quite suited to that particular time.”

“All right,” C.P. said. “I guess if I’m going to fly there must be a way as well as a time.”

“So far, so good,” Mr. Turtle said, “but before going on, did you notice you would never have reached this point in the discussion if you didn’t first believe the dream is true.”

“Yes,” C.P. answered. “Believing has helped me to come this far.”

At that point laughter rang out in a tree branch not far from the ground. C.P. looked up to see several of his caterpillar friends who had climbed down to listen in on the conversation. Now that they had been seen, they too added a few comments of their own, but these were not intended to inspire confidence, so I won’t mention what they were. Some things aren’t worth saying once, let alone putting them into print afterwards. “Come,” said Mr. Turtle to C.P. “Let’s go for a walk down by the lane.” The others seemed to have no desire to follow, but they called out after them with loud accents until C.P. and Mr. Turtle disappeared over the small mound by the mailbox.

The conversation didn’t continue immediately. Some things, when they break, take a while to build again. Mr. Turtle seemed to know where he was going, so C.P. just followed. They walked down the lane and over into a stretch of woods until they reached a place where the ground sloped down to a calm, blue lake not much bigger than a pond.

“This is a really nice spot,” C.P. said. “How did you know it was here?”

“I come here often,” answered Mr. Turtle. “It’s one of my treasured places.”

They walked down the slope and sat near the water’s edge.

“Don’t worry about what the others said,” Mr. Turtle counseled. “Someday all things will be clear, but until then you must follow the things that are clear to you.”

“They don’t understand,” answered C.P.

“They will in time,” Mr. Turtle said. “They will in time.”

“Having a dream can be a lonely road sometimes,” C.P. commented.

“It can be,” said Mr. Turtle, “but it doesn’t have to be. It depends on your point of view.”

“What do you mean?”

“Would you trade away your dream for the companionship of the others?”

C.P. looked at him. “No, I couldn’t do that.”

“Then you’ve ruled out the option of going back. That leaves only one option left.”

“To go forward?” C.P. asked.

“That’s right, unless you prefer to stop and look both ways for a while.”

“No,” C.P. answered, “I was at that intersection once before, and I made my choice then.”

“So you’re in good shape,” Mr. Turtle said. “If you’ve chosen to go forward, and if those you’re leaving behind don’t understand, where does that put your true friends?”

C.P. was a little puzzled. “I don’t know,” he said.

“They’re in the only place left,” Mr. Turtle told him. “They’re somewhere on the road ahead. You will meet them, and each time you do the road will be a little less lonely.”

“Thank you,” C.P. said. “I know I’ve already met one.”

On The Old Log

After that day C.P. and Mr. Turtle were often seen walking along the shore or sitting near the edge of the lake. It was a peaceful place, and well suited to conversations of all kinds. Time seemed almost to stand still during those days. No one hurried to get anywhere fast or tried to get anything done quickly. Mr. Turtle showed C.P. all around the lake front. One day they were sitting on an old log in the sun.

“I was thinking,” said C.P. “We never got to finish our discussion about when, how, and who.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Turtle. “We didn’t mention the who part, did we?”

“No,” said C.P., “at least not enough for me to understand. You said something about the who part being me.”

“The who part is you,” Mr. Turtle said. “When means there will come a time. How means there will be a way. But who is different. It indicates a change.”

“A change?” C.P. asked.

“Sure. If you believe you’re going to fly, and you can’t fly yet, then you know something has to change.”

“Well, I suppose that makes sense,” C.P. answered, “but how does that relate to me?”

“You’re the one who has to change,” Mr. Turtle said.

C.P. just looked at him, with a sort of startled look.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Mr. Turtle told him. “It’s always that way, you know. To experience a situation differently, you have to be different in the situation.”

C.P. still didn’t say anything, though it was clear he was thinking hard. “That’s a very unusual thought,” he said at last. All was quiet in the warm afternoon. C.P. gazed across the lake. “All this time I’ve been longing to fly,” he thought, “and now I’ve bumped into a great secret. For the longing to come true, it’s me who has to change.”

Mr. Turtle didn’t interrupt. He knew when to speak and when to be silent.

Finally a small voice said, “Then I have a new question altogether. It isn’t how to fly. It’s how to change.”

“You have come a long way,” said Mr. Turtle. “You have come a long way.”

Close To The Wading Stream

Over the next few days, C.P. thought a lot about the conversation on the log. It had come as a surprise to him, at least the part about changing did. Like so many others, he had thought his dream would come true as a result of outer circumstances being different. How those outer circumstances would become different, he really didn’t know. But now he was face to face with another concept, that the dream would come true as a result of an inner change, a change in C.P. That was the startling part.

He climbed to the top of one of the tall trees and looked out at the world. “How different it will be to see the world while flying,” he thought, “free to move and explore, not limited to just one tree at a time.” He could imagine himself darting this way and that through the open air, his heart beating faster for the bright joy of it. But he was puzzled a little too. How could such a change happen? What would he be then?

He was walking again with Mr. Turtle one afternoon. They crossed over a small bridge by the wading stream and found a resting place in the shade beneath a maple tree.

“I’ve been thinking about changing,” C.P. said, “but I don’t think I know how.”

Mr. Turtle was silent. “Yes,” he said after a while, “but the good news is you don’t really need to know how. It’s enough just to cooperate with.”

“Does that mean I’ll be a part of the process, but not the cause of it?” C.P. asked.

“Yes,” Mr. Turtle said. “There are some places where we can be the cause and see the effect. Then there are other places where the cause is bigger than we are, and the effect is seen in us.”

“That’s wild,” C.P. said.

“It is,” Mr. Turtle responded.

Both were silent for a while. Then C.P. asked, “How does one cooperate?”

“It’s easier than you might think,” Mr. Turtle told him, “but not everybody understands that.”

“What do you mean?”

“They make it harder than it needs to be, resist their own progress, and slow down just when they have the opportunity to move in the direction of freedom. They bring themselves a lot of pain in the process.”

“But it doesn’t have to be that way, right?” C.P. asked.

“No, it doesn’t,” Mr. Turtle responded. “Most things aren’t hard on their own. It’s usually we who make them so difficult.”

“I’ve heard some say there aren’t any easy answers,” C.P. said.

“Oh, the answers are easy enough,” Mr. Turtle replied, “but they’re found in such unexpected places. That’s why they’re so often missed.”

“So then what’s the easy way to cooperate?” asked C.P.

“There are a few,” Mr. Turtle answered. “One is surrender.”

C.P.’s eyes widened. “I wouldn’t have guessed that one,” he said.

“And yet it’s sort of obvious,” said Mr. Turtle. “In order to become what we’re becoming, we have to surrender what we’ve been.”

C.P. looked at him. “Then that means a change in identity.”

“All changes are,” Mr. Turtle told him. “All changes are.”

They listened for a while to the wading stream as it flowed near the tree and then on its way.

“Then there’s another one,” Mr. Turtle continued. “Stillness. Inside changes are easier when outside noise levels are lower.”

“I’ve noticed that,” said C.P. “I learn more when I’m quiet than when I’m trying hard to think.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Turtle. “And when the stillness is great, so are the results.”

Again silence, until C.P. said, “Anything else? You haven’t mentioned the dream yet? Is the dream important?”

“It’s a starting place,” Mr. Turtle told him, “but eventually you have to let it go.”

C.P. was a little surprised. “Why is that?”

“Because a dream is like a promise that isn’t yet. When the promise comes true, you will no longer need the dream. Therefore anyone who experiences a promise has at some point let go of a dream.”

“But couldn’t you hang on to your dream right up to the moment when it’s no longer needed?” C.P. asked. “Kind of like a trade, a dream for a promise?”

“It’s not like that,” Mr. Turtle said. “A promise grows where a dream is planted. And growing takes time, which means there’s a gap between letting go the dream and experiencing the promise.”

There was a long pause while the wading stream flowed on by. “I don’t know what to say,” C.P. said at last.

“Then you don’t need to,” Mr. Turtle told him.

By The Calm Lake

C.P. had much to ponder for a few days. So much in his thinking had changed since that first day he spoke with Mr. Turtle by the fence. He wondered what his life would be like, and what he would be thinking about, if he had never had the privilege of such a good friend. The dream in his heart was still there, for he had not yet discovered any way of letting it go, but he wasn’t as worried about it anymore, so the first step toward letting go was already being manifest. He was beginning to feel more relaxed about many things, and got on a little better with his caterpillar friends as a result. They still didn’t understand him, but he understood them more than before, and so the gate he thought was locked from the other side swung open quite easily on his side.

It was during these days that another idea began to stir in his imagination. It wasn’t a dream exactly; more like a natural desire. For where his dream was impossible in his present condition, this new idea was quite easy to accomplish. One day he mentioned it to his good friend while they were relaxing by the lake.

“I’ve been thinking again,” he began.

Mr. Turtle was not surprised. He just waited for him to continue.

“Only this time it isn’t about flight. What I’m thinking about now is a nice, long nap.”

“Go right ahead,” said Mr. Turtle. “The sun is warm. Maybe I’ll take one myself.”

C.P. sat up and looked across at his friend. “I don’t mean just for an afternoon,” he said. “I mean for days.”

Now it was Mr. Turtle’s turn to sit up. He looked at C.P., but he didn’t say anything at first. Finally he asked, “When did you start thinking these thoughts?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” C.P. said. “Recently. I’d like to climb up in a tall tree, find a nice sheltered place, and weave myself a warm blanket. Then I’d like to zip myself in and sleep and sleep and sleep.”

Mr. Turtle didn’t answer immediately.

“What are you thinking?” C.P. asked him.

Mr. Turtle lay back down on the grass. “I was just noticing,” he said, “how very much the opposite of flying that is. Why, wrapped up that tight, you wouldn’t even be able to walk.”

C.P. looked up at the tall trees by the lake. “Yes, I know,” he said. “It does seem to be in the opposite direction of the dream, doesn’t it? Still, dream or no dream, I feel it’s something I must do.”

“So you’re letting the dream go?” Mr. Turtle asked.

“For now,” C.P. said. “For now.”

Mr. Turtle was silent again for some time. The lake was as calm as always. C.P. didn’t know quite how to interpret the silence, so he just waited. Finally Mr. Turtle spoke. “When do you want to start?” he asked.

“I guess this evening, at sunset, in one of these trees here by the lake,” C.P. told him.

“This is a good place,” Mr. Turtle said. “This is a good place.”

After that the conversation turned back, and for some reason they both started remembering all the walks and talks they had experienced together. Their laughter brightened the afternoon, and when at last the sun began its slow exit, they knew it was time to choose a tree, and they settled finally for a sturdy looking oak near the old log. C.P. climbed up the trunk, aware only of the moment and the freedom he felt inside, while Mr. Turtle watched his ascent from the ground, seeing not only this moment, but many that had gone before all at once.

So the sun's rays slanted through the trees, brushing the treetops with a final goodbye, and yielding, as always, to the stars. But down by the lake a dream had been planted.

The Bright Awakening

Mr. Turtle was never far from the lake in the following days. He had some other things to do, but none were as important to him as being there when the right time came. So it was that he was down on the grass below when a very sleepy C.P. began waking up.

He wasn't waking up fast, mind you. It was similar to those mornings when you slowly drift out of a refreshing sleep, at first not quite sure where you are, but feeling very comfortable. He felt warm and protected. But as time went by he began to feel like he was more and more awake, and that maybe it was time to start moving a little. This turned out to be easier said than done.

"This blanket wasn't so tight when I first got in," he thought to himself. "I must have twisted or something in my sleep." But try as he might, he couldn't get it untwisted, and so he finally decided his best bet was to start chewing his way out. Even this took him longer than expected. He was working hard now, and he felt as though he was using muscles he hadn't experienced before.

Mr. Turtle was watching from below when, with one last effort, C.P. pulled himself out of his homemade prison, and stood there blinking in the sunlight. He was a little winded for having worked this hard just to get up, and he took a minute to steady himself and catch his breath. He was looking around at the scenery and the lake when he saw his friend, Mr. Turtle, down on the grass below. His face lit up and he called out to him, "Hey! How's it going down there?"

"Marvelous!" was the reply. "How's it going up there?"

"I couldn't be feeling better," C.P. called back. "Why, I haven't slept this well in weeks." And then he did one of those big stretches you do when you've first gotten up and the day is all ahead of you.

Well, you can imagine how when he stretched a flash of color appeared off to the side and back. He only saw a little bit of it, out of the corner of his eye, but when he turned his head, you should have seen the look on his face. It traveled from surprise to a question mark to a stunned realization, and finally to the acceptance of a miracle. When he looked back down at Mr. Turtle, he didn't have to say anything; there was so much joy in his eyes. He literally leaped off the tree branch where he was, and toppled over and around and sideways and upside down, but he never hit the ground, because in that first attempt he caught on enough to keep himself in the air, though I'm afraid learning to steer accurately took him a few more tries. But steering or no steering, he was flying, and he laughed out loud for the unbounded happiness of it. So infectious was his laughter that Mr. Turtle, who was usually quite calm, started laughing too, especially when C.P. did unintentional spirals and near misses around large obstacles. It was a momentous day by

the lake, and when C.P. decided to come in for a landing, he kind of bumped and bounced a couple times before ending with a wobbly stop in the grass.

“What do you think?” he asked Mr. Turtle.

Mr. Turtle smiled. “I think you just made your first three landings,” he said.

And so began their first real conversation in a while, but this time C.P. could hardly sit still, and so he bounced and flipped and floated while they talked, and their conversation kept getting interrupted by laughter and wild landings, till eventually they gave up trying to say anything serious and just started grading the landings on a scale from one to ten.

What’s Left To Tell

This story is nearly over, but perhaps I should tell you a few things to wrap it up. Mr. Turtle and C.P. remained good friends. In fact, their friendship grew even better, as good friendships do. They talked about many things as time moved on, but they didn’t talk so much about the dream any more, for the dream had become a promise, and the promise was real.

C.P. became an expert flyer, and even visited his caterpillar friends, who hadn’t yet taken any long sleeps of their own. They didn’t recognize him at first, and were genuinely surprised to hear the same voice coming from such a different looking creature. Needless to say, he became quite the topic of conversation in the back yard. Some said they didn’t think it was really him, but most agreed that it probably was, and those who held a dream of their own were very thoughtful.

C.P. and Mr. Turtle visited their old favorite places, but the calm lake was their most favorite of all, so that’s the place C.P. decided to call home. They were talking one night, when the stars were just beginning to appear, when Mr. Turtle said something C.P. wasn’t expecting.

“I’ve been thinking,” Mr. Turtle said.

“That’s usually my line,” C.P. said. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking there’s still one thing that needs to change. Do you know what it is?” C.P. hadn’t any idea, so Mr. Turtle told him. “It’s your name. I think you need a new name.”

C.P. was silent. “It never crossed my mind,” he said, “but if it’s important, then I give you the honor of choosing.”

So Mr. Turtle had the privilege of making the choice, and C.P. had the honor of a new name, and everywhere he went his new identity and his new name were an inspiration to all who understood.

That's the end of the story, except perhaps to mention two things you may already know. The name Mr. Turtle gave him was B.T.F., and if ever in your travels you see either one, there's a good chance the other is somewhere close by.

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