



University Christian Church – Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

## The Butterfly of Faith Effect

Pentecost 2, b, June 14, 2009

Mark 4:26-34

It was Jacob Bronowski in his celebrated book “ the ascent of Man “ who said, “ a new conception was being made...that whatever fundamental units the world is put together from, they are more delicate, more fugitive, more startling than we can catch in the Butterfly Net of our senses. “

We saw it all Thursday evening, didn't we? The incredible storm that began in the Northwest and slowly made its way into the Austin area bringing with it hail, lightning, fierce winds and foreboding. Some thought that they saw a tornado in it.. Our Vacation Bible school was just letting out at the time and I watched as the storm rumbled through the campus area by standing on the covered walk outside our Chapel here. I have some wonderful video clips of lightning strikes as the backdrop of the UT Tower. And the power of the storm impresses us each time they arrive.

But this morning I would like to draw your attention not to the storm's power, but to its path. Did you notice that as the weather reporters describe the movement through our area they use terms such as “ a rogue super cell “ or “a strange, unpredictable and powerful storm.“ An enormous amount of computing work, largely done on massive supercomputers, attempts to value all of the factors that make up a storm and point out its direction. But it is an enormously complex

set of calculations that they must model in order to be able to tell us whether a storm is going to the Southeast or to the east in the course in the next couple of hours. Strange, isn't it? After all, we can predict planetary movements & satellite trajectories with relative ease. Why is it so complicated to forecast a storm?

A part of the answer can be found in a phenomenon known as the butterfly effect. The butterfly effect is a phrase that tries to encapsulate the notion of how utterly dependent any complex system, such as a storm system is, on the initial condition at which it starts.

Imagine with me a baseball poised in perfect balance on a pin point at the top of a very high flat-sided pyramid. It is your job to calculate where the ball will be after it eventually falls. With a little basic physics you could easily calculate the energy the ball will have when it reaches the base, and that'd give you a good idea how far from the pyramid's base it would roll, except that the ball is so perfectly balanced on that pinpoint location that the slightest breeze could send it to the east or to the west a passing fly could be all the force necessary to move it to the north even the slightest change could have an enormous effect on the location of the ball when it finally makes it down one side of the base of the pyramid or the other. Chaos theory tells us that the initial condition is supremely important. And even very slight forces at this initial stage produce fantastic differences down the road. This notion was captured in the title of a paper presented by Philip Merrill at the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1972, a phrase that this morning seems all too prescient: "Does The Flap Of A Butterfly's Wings In Brazil Set Off A Tornado In Texas?" I don't know where the butterfly wing flapped, but Thursday we very nearly got the tornado in Texas!

But there is another factor, a factor that will make special sense to those of us of the Christian faith and that factor is the tendency of an entity to draw towards

certain attractors. For example, let's imagine that you are asked predict the direction a dog will move once she comes out the front door of her home. If you had the advanced knowledge that the dog had buried a bone over on the north edge of the lot you might be wise to guess that the buried bone would be a strong attractor drawing the dog to that part of the yard. Many systems have that character of drawing an entity in a certain direction, including entities such as weather storms. But even knowing initial conditions and knowing where the strong attractors are only gives us so much predicting power. That's why you don't see weather forecasts of much value going beyond a week. Even with super computers we can't do much to predict beyond a week. Beyond that we are just guessing. You might as well rely the Farmer's almanac.

But in human development, especially spiritual development, you can see these two factors at work everywhere you look, the predictive power is impressive. Nature and Nurture, heredity and environment, do so much to form a human soul.

Because of her name, you might have jumped as I did, to the example of 12 years ago. A young woman named Julia Hill from Jonesboro, Arkansas had been given the nickname Butterfly, because as a young child on a hike with her family, a butterfly had landed on her nose...and remained there for the rest of their outing. In retrospect, one wonders what that early in life, intimate, nearly magical, maybe mystical experience might have done to begin forming her views of life and of human purpose. Her father was a Christian pastor, and so there was a spiritual attunement in her home environment that no doubt spurred her along.

But when you and I first heard of her she was making the front pages of the newspapers all across the nation for another reason. At age 22 she'd been in a near fatal auto accident, and though fully recovered the next year her outlook on life had been dramatically changed by that experience.<sup>i</sup> The new Julia came to believe that

we humans have a very high capacity to transform ourselves, by modifying our environment, our physical environment and our spiritual environment.

It was, then, no mere coincidence, but a nearly predictable outcome when as she set out on a physical journey for spiritual fulfillment, she ended up climbing in the limbs of an enormous, 600 yr. old California redwood tree that she named Luna. She pitched a tarp up there and fashioned a little platform and Luna became her home in order to prevent the Union Pacific/Maxxam Corporation from having it cut down, knowing that they would not knowingly kill her in the process. It was an exhausting and recording setting physical endurance test, but Julia Butterfly Hill won her case. On December 18, 1999, 738 days after she had climbed up into Luna's arms, she climbed down. She had struck a deal with Pacific Lumber/Maxxam Corporation to spare Luna and create a three-acre buffer zone in perpetuity. <sup>ii</sup> Her little butterfly of faith had changed the curse of a huge corporation!

Had we time, I could demonstrate to you a more relevant local example of a youngster named Merlin Tuttle – who was featured in the Austin American Statesman last week- who was supported by his parents in his fascination with growing caterpillars into Monarch butterflies; how step by reasonable step, his nature and his nurture created the perfect storm of person<sup>iii</sup>, finely and almost uniquely crafted to become an expert on bats. It is a fascinating story of how Merlin almost magically but quite literally became the savior of the 1.5 million Mexican free tailed bats that make our Congress bridge their home. I'll put that story on these sermon notes on the church website for your reading. One butterfly loving boy, who had faith and tenacity enough to change the way our community thinks about bats, whose love for God's creatures of every kind kept the bats in our bridge free.

And this being Flag Day, we might well remember one of the turning points of WWII was what we usually call the Battle of the Bulge. Historians point out that it was really not one big battle but a multitude of smaller battles, fought out all along the Allied lines. In his book, World War II, James Jones describes these battles like this: "No one of these little road junction stands could have had a profound effect on the German drive. But hundreds of them, impromptu little battles at nameless bridges and unknown crossroads, had an effect of slowing enormously the German impetus... These little diehard 'one man stands,' alone in the snow and fog without communications, would prove enormously effective out of all proportion to their size."<sup>iv</sup> And the course of the war changed...

Or as a much older Ethiopian proverb puts it, "When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion."

I hope that by now you may already have sensed how I believe that our spiritual formation, the growing of our souls, directly parallels the way that any other great force grows. Take a look into the life of any great Christian and you'll find someone who early on planted that mustard seed of faith in the Kingdom of God. Someone else nurtured that faith. You'll find someone who took his or her own spiritual self-discipline seriously; who grew in a community of faith; who was challenged to share his or her gifts with that community and the wider world. Saints don't just happen. They are grown, one committed day at a time. If we as committed Christians can provide the right initial conditions and offer the proper positive attractors to those growing up in our church and our families, we'll have our own miracle stories to pass along before long, as well. Amen!

---

<sup>i</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julia\\_Butterfly\\_Hill](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julia_Butterfly_Hill)

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.ecotopia.org/ehof/hill/bio.html>

---

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.texaslegacy.org/bb/transcripts/tuttlemerl.txt>

<sup>iv</sup> James A. Harnish WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH KING JESUS? (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1987).