



Metamorphosis: A Story of Loss, Transformation and Abiding Love

Christine Jonas-Simpson
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*Oneness – we are one
our formlessness united
separated by form.*

The warm sun on the deck seemed to betray the reality that it was exactly two weeks to the anniversary of my son, Ethan's, first birthday – and passing. Ethan had red curly hair, rosebud lips, a button nose, and long fingers and toes just like his brothers.

“How will I survive this first anniversary?” I kept asking myself.

As we sat out on the deck a beautiful black-and-white butterfly speckled with baby blue dots joined us. He flitted around our heads and even landed on my eyebrow. My children articulated what I was feeling: “Ethan's Butterfly! Ethan's Butterfly!” It was as if Ethan – now formless – was able to join us on the earthly plane through this tiny butterfly form. The baby blue dots confirmed to me that the butterfly was from him. We had never seen this type of butterfly before, and its behavior was most unusual. He flitted around the boys as they played trucks in the sand then followed us as we all headed down to the water for a swim. The comfort I felt in believing that somehow Ethan embodied this little butterfly was a life-saving anchor and a balm for my broken heart.

“I hope he gives us a sign this weekend of all weekends, Jack,” I said to my husband. “I don’t know what I will do if he doesn’t show up on his first birthday.” We had planned a camping weekend at a provincial park where century-old trees are supported through donations (one of which was in Ethan’s name). In the car on the way there my four-year-old son asked, “Momma do you think Ethan’s butterfly will find us this far away from home?”

“I hope so,” I answered. I really hoped so.

Our campsite was directly across from the century-old trees. While preparing for dinner, mosquitoes were feasting on my younger son’s juicy two-year-old flesh, so I quickly rushed into the tent to find socks for him when both boys shouted, “Ethan’s Butterfly!!” I looked out from the tent and saw the huge black-and-white butterfly with baby blue dots. My heart felt sorrow: relief: joy!

As night came upon us we all snuggled into our sleeping bags, and I lay awake wondering how I would survive the early morning hours. Sleep would not come, and when 5:35 a.m. arrived – the exact time Ethan was born still – my little two-year-old crawled over, climbed into my sleeping bag and lay directly on top of me. My husband rested his hand on my back, and my older son leaned over to rest his head on my shoulder. It was as if Ethan had nudged his family awake to help his mother through this moment. I looked up and saw a caterpillar on the side of the tent. Believing this was another sign, I cried. I now knew that I was going to be okay. A new beginning I felt stir in me; a long journey of metamorphosis and healing but nevertheless a new life.

A passage I read from Elizabeth Lesser's book, *Broken Open: How Difficult Times Can Help Us Grow*, (Villard, 2005) helped me understand what I felt in that moment when I saw the caterpillar.

"The great loneliness – like the loneliness a caterpillar endures when she wraps herself in a silky shroud and begins the long transformation from chrysalis to butterfly. It seems that we too must go through such a time, when life as we have known it is over – when being a caterpillar feels somehow false and yet we don't know who we are suppose to become. All we know is that something bigger is calling us to change. And though we must make the journey alone, and even if suffering is our only companion, soon enough we will become a butterfly, soon enough we will taste the rapture of being alive." (p. 51)

*Butterfly's presence
a tangible connection
warming with his love.*

Four years later, on hot July day and the day before Ethan's fifth birthday, we lugged all of our gear to the dock where our canoe perched on the water. We make it a ritual to be in

the wilderness on Ethan's birthday. When we arrived at our island campsite we sat and watched the sun begin its golden journey of descent. The next morning when I heard the pitter-patter of rain on the tent fabric, I said to Ethan, "Its okay if you can't send us your butterfly this year. Just try, if you can, to give us another sign." We lay in bed listening to the rain, and at about seven o'clock it stopped. The sun shone brightly as the clouds were pushed away by the strong winds. As we shook out the sopping tent the most beautiful of Ethan's Butterflies arrived. It was a young butterfly, or so it seemed, with the perfect lines and vivid markings of the baby blue against the black and white. I shouted, "Ethan's Butterfly!" My younger son drew in a deep breath and had a huge smile on his face. We all stopped what they were doing, and paused to watch this beautiful form we believed to embody our cherished son and brother. We felt a deep sense of connection.

*Two yellow roses
your brothers carry for you
symbols of their love.*

One day as I sat in a café sipping my coffee tears and a story spilled out on to the pages before me. That was the moment a children's book that had been brewing inside of me for a while needed to be written. I used elephants as my characters to tell our story since

they have one or two babies like humans. It was later that I learned elephants mourn the loss of their loved ones: they weep and carry their dead babies for days.

As I wrote the last sentence of the book, I heard my son's words, "Momma, I want to give something to Ethan at the funeral."

"What do you want to give him?" I had asked.

He looked up at me with his big blue eyes that seemed so wise and said, "Momma, I want to give him a flower but I want it to do something too."

"What do you want it to do?" I had asked him.

"I hope it turns him into a baby elephant."

As I sat in the café remembering my son's forgotten words, I realized Ethan *is* the baby elephant in our book¹. The book is a living legacy of both his life and our story of loss, continuing connections, transformation and abiding love. It is called *Ethan's Butterflies: A spiritual book for young children and parents after the loss of a baby* (Trafford, 2010).

¹ C. Jonas-Simpson, *Ethan's Butterflies*. (La Crosse, WI: Gundersen Lutheran Medical Foundation, Inc. RTS Connection Newsletter, Fall, 2007), Vol. 23, No. 2. p. 5