The Butterfly Metaphor for Transformation  
by John Renesch

[Last month I featured champagne as metaphor. This month it is butterflies.  
That’s it on metaphors for a while.]

As we began the new year and welcomed a new U.S. president into office I was reminded of the metaphor of the caterpillar turning into a butterfly, befitting a time for transformation - new beginnings and paradigm shifts. The market crash offers a triggering event that could lead us into another aspect of a paradigm shift.

I first heard the metaphor from evolution biologist Elisabet Sahtouris who made the analogy between this miracle of Nature and the prospective global paradigm shift in which we find ourselves today. Sahtouris tells this story: “My favorite metaphor for the current world transition, first pointed out to me by Norie Huddle (author of *Butterfly*), is that of a butterfly in metamorphosis. It goes like this:

When a caterpillar has plowed rather destructively through its ecosystem, devouring up to several hundred times its weight each day, it gets bloated and hangs itself up to sleep. Its skin hardens into a chrysalis and then, deep in the caterpillar's body, tiny things biologists call 'imaginal disks' begin to form. Not recognizing the newcomers, the caterpillar's immune system ‘snuffs’ them. But they keep coming faster and faster, then begin to link up with each other. Eventually the caterpillar's immune system fails from the stress and the disks, becoming imaginal cells, build the butterfly from the meltdown of the caterpillar's body.

For a long time biologists could not understand why the caterpillar's immune system attacked the new cells, but recently it was discovered that butterfly (imaginal) cells carry a completely different genome. Apparently all metamorphosing insects acquired the second genome somewhere in their evolution and have lived these double lives ever since. If we see ourselves as imaginal cells working to build the butterfly - a better world - we will also see how important it is to link with each other in the effort and to recognize how many different kinds of imaginal cells it will take to build a butterfly with all its capabilities and colors.

I love this metaphor because it shows us why we, who want to change the world, are co-existing with the old system for a while and why there’s no point in attacking the old system because you know the caterpillar is unsustainable. It’s
going to die. The question on which we can focus is “Can we midwife a viable butterfly?”

Patience and understanding is called for in this metamorphic transition. While many of us understand how paradigms change few of us possess the patience. In his book *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life*, Greg Levoy he tells a story that speaks to impatience, also using a butterfly metaphor. He writes:

In his autobiography, Nokos Kazantzakis, author of *Zorba the Greek*, described an incident in which he came upon a cocoon cradled in the bark of an olive tree just as the butterfly was making a hole and attempting to emerge. Impatient for results, he bent over it and warmed it under his breath, by which he succeeded in speeding up the process. The butterfly, however, emerged prematurely, its wings hopelessly crumpled and stuck to its own body, which needed the sun’s patient warmth, not the man’s impertinent breath, to transform it. Moments, later, after a desperate struggle, the butterfly died in the palm of his hand. "That little body," he wrote toward the end of his life, "is the greatest weight I have on my conscience."

As this butterfly story teaches, we have to learn to trust that all things happen in their own time when our lives are ready to receive the miracles in store for us.

Both of these stories can serve us as we weather this storm of the collapse of one economic system and hospice the old while standing ready to midwife whatever new system will emerge from the rubble. As Buffalo Springfield sang long ago,

*There's something happening here*
*What it is ain't exactly clear*
*.... Everybody look what's going down*