

Contemplating Caterpillars During COVID-19

Time has been playing games with me. We have passed 100 days since the beginning of the shelter-in-place restrictions during this worldwide pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus. It is hard to imagine that much time has elapsed. Some days I am lost in a creative daze and the hours fly by so fast I am astonished. Other days seem to pass more slowly than normal. The sounds, sights, and scents of my environment intensely engage my senses, and enhance my awareness of my surroundings. I find myself looking up from my computer to watch beautiful yellow butterflies flit across the grassy knoll outside my home office window. I think I only watch them for a few minutes and I'm surprised when I discover twenty have passed. How do I lose all track of time?

I was on my little patio this week cleaning up after the house painters. My potted plants had been moved, and the ground disturbed around the fence posts. The commotion must have disturbed the tiny creatures living among the plant life. I looked down to where I was sweeping and just missed sending a bright yellow fuzzy caterpillar flying through the air on the brush of my broom. I stopped in place to watch this beautiful little creature. I have never seen a caterpillar like it. It was about 1.5 inches long, mostly bright yellow in color with a single black strip down its back.

Its conspicuous ornamental spikes were so fine they jutted out in all directions and tempted me to feel if they would tickle my fingertips. But it seemed to be on a mission so I did not disturb it from its path. It was scurrying along at a fast pace with all its little feet moving in perfect synchronization. I watched it hurry across the cement patio and then encounter the

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chicken wire encasing the bottom of the fence. This posed no deterrent for the little furry fellow. I was fascinated to see it pull itself up, over, and through the wire jungle gym. Once on the other side, it started at a fast pace across the open space towards the ivy boarding the street. It deftly climbed over small sticks and rocks, bending and stretching its flexible body to overcome any obstacle in its path.

The little guy was now out in the open. I could not stop watching it now. Some of my neighbors walked along that area to reach the back garden. They could step on my little friend. Or maybe a bird would try to scoop it up. I had to stand guard to yell a warning to tread carefully, or to clap my hands to scare away a feathered predator. Through the slats in my fence, I watched the little yellow fuzzy one determinedly travel across the distance to safely reach the dense foliage at the fence line. How did it know where to hide and the most direct route to its destination?

My encounter with the caterpillar engaged my curiosity. Surely it must be the little creature that will become one of the beautiful yellow and black butterflies I like to watch. I decided to look on the internet to see if I could find out more about it. Did I mention losing track of time?

The next thing I knew, I was sorting through pages of pictures of caterpillars and their reincarnations as winged, flying insects. I had no idea there were so many varieties of caterpillars, moths and butterflies. It seemed like the least attractive caterpillars turned into the prettiest butterflies and many colorful caterpillars became varieties of nondescript moths. I did not find a picture that exactly matched my caterpillar. The caption for the closest match said it turned into a “beautiful white moth that you might see around your porch lights on a summer evening.”

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That was a disappointment! Marveling over a caterpillar that turned into a common everyday moth seemed like such a waste of time. But on further reflection I realized how much I had enjoyed sharing its journey across my yard. I had been engrossed in watching it struggle over seemingly huge roadblocks, never stopping or veering from its goal. I had shared an experience with another living entity without outside interruption or distraction. And who am I to judge the beauty of a moth? Don't many creatures start out attractive and colorful only to transform into sometime simple and gray? And others might be the ugly duckling that becomes the graceful, beautiful swan. "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven."

The pandemic is wreaking havoc around the globe. While forced to remain inside my home, I am recognizing the benefits of leading a less hectic lifestyle. I am getting to spend more time discovering hidden talents, and refreshing forgotten skills. I've used this time to lead a more introspective existence; to explore unknown worlds both within and without myself. I will remember these months spent "cocooning" as a time of self-discovery. My caterpillar-self is transforming into a new version of the old me and getting ready to try out my new pair of wings. When we can say good-bye to Covid19, butterfly or moth, I will fly with abandonment and soar on the breeze.