

The Cycles of the Monarch: An Exercise in Letting Go

By Dennis Payton Knight

The idea of letting go can be illustrated by tracing the cycles of four generations of the Monarch Butterfly. The first begins early in the spring somewhere in North America, maybe Colorado, when a larva hatches from an egg deposited on a milkweed plant. The caterpillar gorges on milkweed for two weeks until it is fully grown. Then it lets go of that phase of its life, attaches to the plant, and with its own silk, spins a chrysalis around itself. Monarchs thrive only by the hospitality of the milkweed; no other plant will do. It seems a shame to call it a weed.

Ten days shielded in the chrysalis produces a remarkable transformation known as metamorphosis, and a beautiful butterfly emerges, letting go of its cocoon forever. She feeds on flowers, reigning gracefully over a world in which formerly she only crawled. Hers is the first of four generations that will flutter through summer. Her own eggs laid on milkweed will hatch later in the spring to begin yet another round of hatching, growing, emerging, reproducing and letting go. In July, a third generation will hatch, and the sequence repeats.

In early fall, a great granddaughter will begin her own fascinating cycle, number four in the series. But she will do it differently. She will not lay her eggs, let go, and die, like her mother and predecessors. Instead, she will metamorphose, let go of her changing environment and migrate to Mexico to hibernate with millions of other monarchs in an oyamel fir forest. In the spring she will again let go, fly north, lay her eggs and launch yet another year's series.

Like the monarch, the law of nature is that we too must let go, but it's not so easy for us humans. We have a hard time letting go of life. We have a hard time letting go of each other. Perhaps it's because we know too little and fear too much. Sometimes life is ripped from us violently and we are not given the opportunity to let go. But when we are, it can be a beautiful moment.

A few days ago my brother-in-law passed away in his Windsor Gardens home. He had been recovering from a broken hip but then suffered another and more devastating fall and fracture. Knowing he was nearing the end, his many children had come from distant points, when they could, to share what they could, of his final days.

Using one of his favorite expressions, the man we called Mac was tougher than woodpecker lips, but finally he was ready to let go, and his family was letting him go with love. His humor and zest for life was expressed in his last words, responding to a nurse's offer to make him more comfortable. It was strained and faint of breath, but he said it distinctly. "Sounds like a winner." And then he let go.