

On Cocoons, Chaos and Creativity

There was a poster I recall first seeing in the 1970's which read, "You can fly, but that cocoon has to go." It seems to imply that we can just rip out of the chrysalis anytime we wish and be free. I would certainly agree that we sometimes restrict ourselves and others with limited thinking and many other attitudes. However, I would like to explore the cocoon as a necessary place and one in which we don't necessarily choose the time of departure. Sue Monk Kidd in her book, *When the Heart Waits*, writes, "*When it comes to religion today, we tend to be long on butterflies and short on cocoons. Somehow we're going to have to relearn that the deep things of God don't come suddenly.*"

In exploring this waiting and entering into the unknown, I invited my friend, Sue Dunbar, to share some of her experiences about her nearly 20 year journey to come to the place where she is now, Director of Barnabas Ministries based in Canberra.

What is remarkable to me about her story is the series of leaps into the unknown and the testimony that 'the deep things of God don't come suddenly.' I begin with Sue's story in her voice and conclude with a few thoughts of my own and Sue Monk Kidd. Sue Dunbar begins in the present.

"To arrive here, I have followed a dream, one I carried for a long time. In the beginning it was something far outside what I considered possible. When it was first born in me in the mid 90's, I could not see how it could happen."

"The dream was to develop as a spiritual director and be able to assist others in their journey of faith and introduce or support them in discovering the mystery, the magnificence of God. I see my contribution to the world as enabling individuals to befriend their own darkness, to live authentically and in touch with the deeper stirrings of one's soul, and not need to control or dominate others. For me it is one small step towards peace and bringing about the Kingdom of God."

Aware of this desire to get closer to my dream, I took time off work and went on a pilgrimage to Europe, which included some time on Iona. The question I carried was, 'Could I trust God to provide if I gave up full time work?' It was like building up the courage to say 'yes' and I did. I left my job as a head of department at a college and let happen what would happen.

"The day after my return from overseas, I had a phone call from a former colleague, offering me a job. I gave her a number of conditions, including eight weeks leave, and she met them all! This freed me to devote more time to prayer, to be available to others, and to develop my emerging call to soul care."

During the following 7 years, I took the Barnabas Ministries course in Retreat Leadership, became the President of the Australian Network for Spiritual Direction and a member of the

interim Ecumenical Council for Spiritual Direction, joined the Eremos Retreat Team and attended seminars and workshops to develop my skills and knowledge.

“A number years later, a job came up in Melbourne in retreat work that seemed absolutely perfect for me. All indications were that I would get it. All my friends were certain that this was it. I saw this job as the emergence from a difficult preparation time, because I had recently had some health issues with serious skin cancer and some deep personal loss. Every way I knew how to discern God’s will was leading me to this job. The interview went really well. I began to see myself leaving my home in Bundeena and community of over 25 years to move to Melbourne.”

“However, I didn’t get the job and my existing framework of how I understood myself and my relationship with God fell apart. It was like a disintegration of how I made meaning. It was not abandonment; I just didn’t know how to connect to God. I experienced what I would call, ‘interior chaos’. I felt like all I could do was sit in the ashes of my life and wait.”

“For me it was out of the place of the greatest despair that the way forward emerged. The chaos I experienced released energy....out of which I made the leap. The time and place when everything died and there was nothing left, was the place of new birth. It was out of the ashes of that disappointment, that I remembered the dream of going to the Institute of Spiritual Leadership in Chicago to study full time in spiritual direction and formation.”

“It was a time of letting go of a whole lot more things, because I was so ready for something new. Sue Monk Kidd writes that it is in the moment when everything has died and there is nothing left, that there is there is the readiness for new birth. The tomb becomes the womb.”

“As I shared the dream with others, the confirmation that this dream could actually happen emerged. Finances came into place: a friend offered a loan and I received a scholarship. Each step was its own decision in this preparation period.”

“I left for Chicago two weeks after my 50th birthday in August 2003. Arriving at ISL was like landing on my home planet. I was absolutely in the right place and was invited to stay on as a member of the staff for a further two years. It was a great adventure and the most fantastic time. It was worth all the pain and struggle that it took to get there.”

As the time to return home to Australia drew near, a job with the Mid Lachlan Mission Area of the Uniting Church in the Central West of NSW came to my attention. They wanted to develop spiritual formation and spiritual direction and were looking for someone who would be a resource for them. The interview went well and all the details of getting a ministry placement established fell into place and I moved to Parkes in 2006.

The position was for 5 years, so as the years rolled on, another time of waiting and reflecting on 'What next?' began. A coincidental conversation with Ross Kingham led to the invitation to accept the Directorship of Barnabas Ministries when Ross retired in mid 2011.

"I was ready for the challenge of it, and it also offered the freedom to continue to do the work I really loved. I had a powerful meditation experience shortly before moving to Canberra where I was flying in a small plane and had a strong sense that I had to get out of the plane. At first I thought I had a parachute, but then realized I didn't have one. But I knew I needed to jump anyway, and as I jumped out of the plane, I turned into a bird."

"It feels like I have moved from an external organizational structure to discover a more organic structure. This carries with it equal parts freedom and vulnerability. In exploring that image, I think it says that if I took this risk I would be transformed and I would be able to do this work more organically. In my first 5 years I have had the structure, the plane, to fly. Now, the invitation is to fly like a bird, powered by inner resources, rather than a built structure."

Barnabas is completely self-funded, so there is a financial risk. A new board has been established and fundraising is underway. It is an ongoing challenge to live trustfully and faithfully day by day, month by month. I seem to have the interior resources to live this journey. It surprises me to some degree."

"I find the image of turning into the bird just as I 'took the leap' very confirming that this work will unfold and what is needed will emerge. It is also an encouragement to take up the challenge of developing Barnabas with the help of the Board. Now I am embodying the hope of what I began to dream almost 20 years ago. What I do each day is not a dream; it is real and it is a dream come true."

Sue's journey of listening deeply, and waiting in hope and trust is one that many of us resonate with even though our narrative may be quite different. For me one of the hardest aspects is the waiting, which often seems passive. Sue Monk Kidd offers another perspective, "*The words passive and passion come from the same Latin root, pati, which means 'to endure.' Waiting is thus both passive and passionate. It's a vibrant, contemplative work. It means descending into self, into God, into the deeper labyrinths of prayer. It involves listening to disinherited voices within, facing the wounded holes in the soul, the denied and undiscovered, the places one lives falsely. It means struggling with the vision of who we really are in God and moulding the courage to live that vision.*"

The most crucial turning point for me in Sue's account is not getting the job in Melbourne. I remember when she told me the news. It was a shock. Sue Monk Kidd's words speak to us about being so sure, "*We seem to think that God speaks by seconding the ideas we've already adopted, but God nearly always catches us by surprise. If it's God's Spirit blowing, someone ends up having feathers ruffled in an unforeseen way. God tends to confound, astonish, and flabbergast.*" And confounded we were! We already had her packed up and

down in Melbourne in our planning. 'The fools', I thought to myself, 'they don't know what they have passed up!'

The days and months that followed of 'interior chaos' were a germinating time. I heard many echoes of my own experience as Sue told of hers. When everything breaks down, it seems we become ready for the new. Kidd's words resonate, "*Creativity flourishes not in certainty but in questions. Growth germinates not in tent dwellings but in upheaval. Yet the seduction is always security rather than venturing, instant knowing rather than deliberate waiting.*" (p. 25)

I remember a time of crisis in my mid 20's. I entered this deep interiority, where it was like I almost needed to be a monk amidst an active life. There was nothing to do but wait and hope the answer emerges. For Sue it was following her dream, for me, it was listening to allow a new work to become known, one completely new and surprising.

Kidd offers a description of 'waiting prayer', "*We place ourselves in postures of the heart, in the stillness that enables us to become aware of what God is doing so that we can gradually say yes to it with our whole being.*" *When the Heart waits*, p. 129.

I asked Sue what she would say to others who are facing the unknown, disappointments, or loss. She responded, "Don't be afraid to dream and no dream is ever too big. The place of despair and loss of hope can be the beginning of a revitalisation of essential energy which will eventually send you soaring."

Sue's journey seems to me to be a response to Kidd's original challenge at the beginning of this piece. Her 20 years of cocoon experiences have released a beautiful and strong butterfly that inspires us to dream, to wait and to be transformed.

I would like to give the final word to Sue Monk Kidd who invites us to "*Welcome the gentle push of God, who is both our wings and the wind that bears them up.*" (p. 205)

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Sue Dunbar who was born in Hay, NSW, is an experienced spiritual director, trains others in spiritual direction, and is now the Director of Barnabas Ministries, based in Canberra. She was a member of the Eremos Retreat team from 1997 – 2003.

Sue Monk Kidd, author of When the Heart Waits, is best known for her novel, The Secret Life of Bees, and has written several other novels and nonfiction works.

For information about Barnabas Ministries, www.barnabasministries.org.au or phone, 6295 6766.