

# The Caterpillar Syndrome

Scott Sattler, MD

May 23, 2010

As a family practice doc for the past thirty-odd years, I've had the opportunity to follow the births, lives and deaths of many Humboldt County residents. One of the most humbling and rewarding aspects of my practice has been its involvement with the intricacies of the dying process and the medical and family dynamics involved. As a profession we don't talk about this very much; not that it's secret per se, but perhaps it's that we hold it as sacred. Most of us are shy when it comes to sharing these things. Yet we can gain a great deal from looking in this direction, as it is such an integral part of our practices and of our personal lives.

There is an aspect of the dying process that I have observed on many occasions that begs for discussion and contemplation. I wonder whether others who are working with the dying have observed this phenomenon, and I wonder whether, as you read this article, you might nod your head in recognition. Then again you might consider these musings merely the dodderings of a chronologically gifted, eccentric airhead. I look forward to your impressions and invite you to share them with me.

There is a Sufi saying that there is but one major sacred book -- the sacred manuscript of nature. The perception in this editorial comes from observing one of nature's wonders -- caterpillars. After hatching from its egg and devouring its eggshell, the caterpillar spends its life exploring its favorite vegetation, eating, and growing. Then, at a given point, it is as if it knows that it is time for its caterpillar life to end, and there emerges an irresistible desire to prepare for its caterpillar demise. "Been there. Done that. Got the fuzzy t-shirt. Time to move on..." might be its driving motive. An internal switch is thrown; the desire to eat wanes and then disappears, supplanted by a desire to find a secluded protected environment where it will conclude its caterpillar life in relative safety. It finds the underside of a twig on its favorite bush, wraps itself in its security-blanket cocoon and surrenders to the overwhelming urge to release all aspects of its caterpillar life, simply trusting that all is well and as it should be. And then it dies to being a caterpillar.

I can almost imagine younger, more energetic caterpillar friends urging it to eat, eat just a little, and perhaps wanting it to stay involved with caterpillar community life. And in completion of this fantasy, I hear the cocoon-spinner's final plea to its more active companions: "If you really want to help me, just keep the birds away."

I think many humans do this, too. Over the years I've noticed a similar pattern, especially in elders who have recently survived the death of their lifelong mate. Quite often the surviving spouse will unexpectedly die within six to eighteen months after their loved one passes. When I talk with their families, I often hear a similar story, namely that the surviving spouse had proceeded to wrap up the family business after the funeral of their mate, had often mended any personal issues that needed tending, and then simply withdrawn from societal obligations, reduced their food and fluid intake, gotten the dwindles and simply died. It was as if a switch in the core of their being had been triggered, and they knew that their life as a human was drawing to its natural end. They were fully ready to move on, and all family entreaties to "eat just a little more" were kindly ignored. They did not meet the formal medical criteria for depression. They were not, on the whole, nearly as unhappy as their families. I have witnessed this pattern of end-of-life behavior time and time again.

Sometimes the triggering scenario is different. I often saw a similar pattern of behavior in those diagnosed with end stage malignancies. When confronted with the reality that long-term quality survival was no longer a realistic option, this same pattern frequently emerged. The gift of cancer, it seems, is that of Time. Unlike sudden cardiovascular death, the incurable cancer patient is given a window of time within which to do the necessary homework on the physical, mental and spiritual planes if they so desire and if they are given the freedom and the opportunity to do so. Read: "Keep the birds away." In many ways this end-of-life-pattern mimics the pattern described above, namely, that of the Caterpillar Syndrome.

I do not feel that this condition is pathologic. In the case of the surviving spouse, beyond the normal grieving there is little if any dis-ease on the part of the patient unless those caring for them induce this condition out of their own frustration, anger, fear or need. I have felt no sense at all of suicidal ideation in these patients. Is the caterpillar being suicidal when it attaches its silk purchase to the twig and starts to spin its cocoon? To the contrary, my sense is that this syndrome is a part of the 'death with dignity' that we espouse so repeatedly at the theoretic and institutional levels. It is natural that we physicians have a hard time dealing with this. We have a hard time remembering that our obligation to care for patients begins and ends with actual caring for our patients even as they prepare for their dying. It's not easy to support their heartfelt desires at this stage of life, but we must. Even as we must honor them, comfort them, and indeed protect them from 'the birds,' namely those who would impose a different scenario upon them for their own personal needs and desires. We owe this to our patients, for who shall provide this service to them if we do not?