THE SOFT FLUTTER OF BUTTERFLIES

I never was a good student in school–though first grade was fun. We made hand prints in wet plaster and walked in the woods looking for butterflies and learned the Spanish words for chocolate and hello.

That first summer after school was wonderful. I got bright new shoes and ran and played with my friends and we flew kites whose tails fluttered in the wind and the days were as long as forever. But next year, school was different.

Our teacher stood ramrod stiff at the head of the class and she was tall and thin and the mole on her chin quivered with indignation. Her face disapproved of itself and she wrinkled her nose when she talked as if she were smelling something polite people didn't mention.

She marched to school wearing a backpack filled with rocks (to make her posture better) and she hit our hands with a ruler if we were naughty and gave us demerits if we talked out of turn and taught us that every word could only be pronounced one way and that the dinosaurs were giant cold-blooded reptiles who died because their brains were too small and it took a week for the nerve impulses to get from their tails to their heads.

I didn't like her very much and I began to think that school was something I would rather not do.

But when I told my mother I was informed that I didn't have a choice in the matter and that school was good for little children and that go I would. So, the years went by, as years do, and some teachers were better and some were not and I became as unconscious as unconscious could be.

I remember the day I began to wake up.

Our sixth grade class was being unruly and the teacher was suffering from it and we were informed that the only thing she wanted to hear out of our mouths was nothing. A girl in the next seat asked if she could borrow a pencil. I turned to her and said, “Sure. Here.” And so I was sent into the hall for talking out of turn. It was winter and I wore short sleeves and thin brown pants and the hall of the new school was as cold and dim and empty as damaged hearts.

The hall lights were turned off during class to save electricity and the pale winter sunlight trickled in from the windows at each end of the long hall and the floor was linoleum and the walls lined with metal lockers and the ceiling lights were little square recessed boxes and every little tiny sound echoed as if I were in a metal tube and the alienation and loneliness of the place went through me like a sigh from the mouth of god and left me trembling in its wake.

And then, for some reason that day, I got mad.

It occurred to me there was something wrong with this place and though I did not know it at the time I was beginning to realize there is a difference between schooling and education. And I just decided that I wouldn’t put up with it any longer and so I walked.

I left that place and walked the three miles home, down the endless winter sidewalks with their stark leafless trees and the long, snow-plowed streets, and took the key from under the milk box and let myself into the silent and empty house. And later still, I carefully watched from behind the pale window curtains as the blue car, with the teacher and the vice-principal inside, pulled slowly up in front of the house. I watched as they opened the car doors and got stiffly out. I watched as they walked up the frozen flagstones and then the icy steps to the front door. And I remained silent all through the ringing of the bell.

And I remember later, the 105 degree fever and the bed-and-myself floating in space and the visions and the voices and my wonder at what I was experiencing. And then I went back to

school and I was once again quiet and good but some sleeping thing inside me was stirring and not god nor parents nor school systems could keep it much longer in its box.

Then my parents moved to Dallas, Texas and it was 1966 and I began to listen to the Beatles and the Stones and Bob Dylan and the sleeping thing inside me began to rattle the lid of its box and sometimes the sounds it made were really, really loud.

It was a bad time and a bad place for that sleeping thing to make noise.

The suburbs of Dallas were filled then (as they are now) with the Avon-decorated faces of our mothers and the absence of our fathers and a generation of children were growing up displaced persons and some kind of wildness was beginning to creep out of the emptiness inside us. Our hair grew longer and a strange light began to gleam in our eyes and we discovered words like “fuck” and “shit” and “No.” And our elders began to fear us and I found it was possible to be arrested for walking with long hair.

Handcuffed and taken to the local lockup, my mention of the Bill of Rights was greeted with laughter. I was denied a phone call and held without knowing if anyone knew where I was. I was told I had no right to counsel and my jailers amused themselves by telling me I would never get out, that they had called my mother and she said for them to keep me, and that I would soon be put in general lockup with “the others.”

But, perhaps, if I told them who I bought my drugs from (assumed from my long hair) they would "go easy on me." Perhaps, if I were cooperative they could intervene, tell the judge I had been helpful, and arrange my release (I still wasn't sure what the charge was–I didn’t know, then, about walking with long hair). But I didn't cooperate and even so, twenty four hours later, my mother did show up to take her wayward, fifteen year old, very terrified, son home. They had collectively felt some experience with Texas justice would teach me something. It did. I have

hated the abuse of power ever since.

And the lid of the box came off and that sleeping thing inside me came out and I have never put it back again and I never will.

How hard it is to honor these most important of our teachers.

My school, of course, was not amused and informed me I no longer need attend (I was a bad influence on the other children) and I finally knew too deep for words that they were not interested in me as a human being but only in my compliance and I filed emancipation papers and worked that summer emptying garbage cans (learning a lot about my neighbor's lives) and saved my money and then, just after Christmas, I left that town, hitchhiking West. I was sixteen and on January 1, 1969 I arrived in Berkeley, California with $50 in my pocket and a tattered Boyscout backpack with two changes of clothes.

The Berkeley protests had been going on all that Summer and Fall and the students at the university still carried gas masks to class every day. I met some people who lived in a flat on Telegraph Avenue and they said I could live in their walk-in closet for $25 a month. They kept green cans of military rations under their beds and hung gas masks on a coatrack near the door and after awhile one of the guys said he thought I should take a high school equivalency test and go to college and so I did.

That first day of class, sitting right in front of me, there was a transvestite and s/he had long purple fingernails and a lot of makeup and I never had seen anything like that in my life.

There was a man with a wild red beard and wild red hair and he told me stories about living for a year in a cabin he'd built in the mountains after he'd left high school and about

building a ship and sailing around the world and about the typhoon that hit him off the coast of Madagascar and wrecked the ship and cast him, wretched and gasping, on the shore. Then he was found by a beautiful woman who offered him fruit and nursed him until he was well. And then they had great sex for the longest time. Then, much later, he decided to leave and he worked his way back to America on a tramp steamer with a load of green hides and he never could get rid of the smell. And I am sure that he (as I do) smells it yet.

A boy in my class knew Cesar Chavez and he'd helped him organize the first migrant worker protests in California and he was Hispanic and played the guitar and was handsome and could sing so beautifully that it almost broke my heart and he told us not to eat grapes because of the boycott.

One of my roommates was called Stone and she was from Georgia and was a stripper in the Tenderloin in San Francisco. She made more money than the rest of us together and was putting herself through school to become a psychologist. Another was a psychopharmacologist who used to get pure liquid LSD from Sandoz in Switzerland for his Masters degree program at the University of Iowa but they all injected it instead of giving it to the chimpanzees and now they couldn't publish their research. And he knew Owsley and sometimes I would see Jerry Garcia walking along the street and James Taylor played at a little venue and only 80 people were there and I had never had such fun in my life.

The university didn't care if I came to class, nor how I looked, and my professors weren't interested in their students complying or conforming, only in their learning. And I loved it. But then the People's Park Massacre happened and the war went on and the riots grew bigger and the years got longer and I didn't know what I wanted to do–or be–so I left and moved to the high mountains of Colorado and rebuilt a nineteenth century cabin in woods.

I learned to work a wood-burning stove and to cut firewood and to survive 32 feet of snow over a winter and to put snow chains on my car and how to build an outhouse that didn't smell and to identify wild plants in the mountains and sometimes to use them for my food and medicine.

But I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life so I went to university again and the teacher in my first class looked like Santa Claus. He had a big stomach and a huge white beard and he laughed a lot. He told us his name was Ben Sweet (Sweet by birth, sweet by disposition) and the name of his class was "On the challenge of being human." My other teachers did not seem to care about the challenge of being human and instead they taught us to think about mathematics and analyze different chemicals and as the months went by I felt farther from myself. And the only thing that seemed to make sense was Ben Sweet and the way he talked to us and urged something in the deeps of us to come out–the way he looked, and listened, as if he had no other place on this Earth to be except with us, as if there were nothing more important in his life than what we had to say at just that moment in time.

And one day, I found myself thinking that I wanted all my teachers to be like that and realized I didn't care if I never did learn to "make a living" and I thought, "why not?"

So, I made a list of every person I had heard of that had moved me in the way Ben Sweet did and I decided I wanted to meet and learn from every one of them. And I kept thinking, "This is crazy" but some other part of me kept saying, "Why not?" And for some reason I listened to what it said.

That paper is old now, as wrinkled as this face I see every morning in the mirror. We both have the marks of years upon us; the houses we've lived in and the moving vans and the storage boxes and the mountains of Colorado and the high plains desert of New Mexico and the long

nights when the deeps rose up and demanded answers and all the friends who took a different path and that I've never seen again.

I take it out and spread it on the table. The childish scrawl of my younger self looks up at me from that ragged, lined notebook paper. The names, filled with their simple hope, straggle over the page . . .

Buckminster Fuller, Robert Bly, Jacques Cousteau, Robert Heinlein, Joan Halifax, Stephanie Simonton, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, William Stafford, Jane Goodall, Gregory Bateson, Eric Fromm, Frank Herbert, Ashley Montagu, Margaret Mead.

I was so young then and the world was so new and my whole life was before me.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross dressed with no sense of fashion; she was plain and tall and thin. Her body was always moving, so full of energy that it quivered, constantly seeking an outlet in some comment, gesture of hands, or facial expression. Elisabeth's face was strong and masculine and she chain-smoked and didn't care if people didn't like it. Her eyes penetrated everything they touched and they were the deepest blue and looking into them was like peering into some deep mountain pool that's so clear you can't tell how deep it is. Down in those deeps were things I couldn't quite make out, things I didn't understand, experiences maybe or some aware part of her that looked back, waiting for me to notice it. I could feel whatever it was deep inside, touching parts of me that I did not know I possessed. And those parts of me . . . I could feel them begin to stir under its touch.

When she talked to me–or to anyone the week we spent with her–she was fully present;

she looked back, she *really* looked.

"How did you come to your work?" someone asked. And she told us, her intonations filled with the thick shapes of her German-Swiss tongue.

"I was a young aid worker and it was just after the war. I had heard stories of the terrible things that had happened in the concentration camps and I wanted to see for myself. So, I went to Majdanek in Poland. It is just outside the town of Lublin.

"The gates of the camp stood open, raggedly smashed back as if a tank or truck had burst through them. Rusting barbed wire straggled away, as far as I could see, in either direction from the gate posts. There was a feeling about the place, or maybe it was just a feeling in me, as if I were standing at the opening of a huge, dark room–a room that contained some immense presence.

"By the gates there was a table and a young woman with dark, raven hair. She had to ask me several times for my name. She carefully wrote it down in the book where they kept a list of all the visitors. Then she looked up and smiled a sad, quiet smile, and waved me in. And so, I began to walk, to see the camp, to see the truth of that place for myself.

"There were rusting railroad tracks and weeds growing up between them, and abandoned railroad cars sitting on the tracks, the doors thrown open. Inside the first one were thousands of shoes, tiny children's shoes, quiet now from their running and laughing, no longer a part of children's lives. I could not take it in, thousands of children's shoes, all moldering together. Then I looked into the next car and for the longest time I could not make out what I was seeing. Suddenly I realized . . . it was filled with tangled mats of human hair, hair that the Nazis had shaved from the heads of the people in this camp, hair to be used for mattresses.

"There is a shock that comes when you see something that the world you have grown up

in has no place for; the mind cannot conceive it and it feels as if the fabric of the world has torn and you have stumbled and are falling through into some in-between place that you never knew existed.

"So, in shock I stumbled back from the railroad cars filled with hair and children's shoes and turned and began walking. I don't know where I was going.

"Soon, I found myself in front of a wooden barracks. The interior was shadowed and empty and my footsteps echoed on the rough floor boards. I stood a minute to let my eyes adjust to the pale light filtering in from the doorway in which I stood and the small windows up under the eaves of the roof. In the shadowed gloom I could see the tiers of wooden bunks where the people had slept, one above the other, three in all, the last one close against the ceiling. There was still a faint odor of unwashed bodies–of fear, and of ancient grief .

"I walked down the long, passageways that ran between the tiers of bunks on either side, looking around me. Then I saw–on the walls, roughly scratched, sometimes carved, into the wooden planks–hundreds of initials, and names–the last desperate messages to the living. And among those messages–I couldn't believe it–were hundreds and hundreds of butterflies. Butterflies, everywhere. In the midst of that horror, the children had scratched butterflies into the walls!

"I still remember the pale sunlight and its touch on that room. The light seemed worn and tired, as if defeated over the course of days and years by what had been held in that shadowed building. I remember the feel of the wooden floors beneath my feet, and the smell–of wood, and people, and lost hope–and the silence touched only by the slight echoing of my footsteps–as if the whole world had stopped breathing. And the feeling, the feeling that was consuming me as I stood there under the impact of those butterflies.

“Then I felt someone behind me and I turned and found the young woman from the gate standing there, watching me. There was a sweetness about her and her eyes were calm but there was something else, too, in the lines of her face, as if a great wave filled with grief had swept across it and left traces of its touch for all the world to see.

“I, still caught under the spell of the place, did not know what to say, what to do. I had never conceived of such things happening. She saw that in my face and gestured and we walked outside.

“‘My name is Golda,’ she said, and then told me her story.

“She was born in Germany and was half Jewish. Her father was taken by the Gestapo in 1939 during the early arrests. She and her mother, brother, and sister lasted longer; they were taken in 1944 and, eventually, sent to Majdanek.

“‘After we arrived,’ she said, ‘they herded us into a line at the door of the gas chamber. My mother, my brother, and my sister were in front of me but the room was filled after my sister was pushed in, crying. They tried to force me in as well but the door would not close no matter how hard they pressed it against my back, so they pulled me out and slammed the door closed. And so, for some reason that I will never know, I survived.’ She looked toward the crematorium, pointed to the chimney. ‘The ashes of my mother, brother, and sister floated up from there that day.’”

Elisabeth looked at all of us in the room. None of us were moving. We were still, hardly breathing, caught spellbound. “I had never experienced such cruelty,” Elisabeth said, “and my heart was being crushed. But the young woman seemed oddly unaffected by it, so I said to her, ‘But you look so peaceful. How can you be peaceful when your whole family was killed here?’

“Golda looked back at me–those peaceful eyes!–and said in the most penetrating voice I

had ever heard, ‘Because the Nazis taught me this: There is a Hitler inside each of us and if we do not heal the Hitler inside of ourselves, then the violence, it will never stop.’”

Elisabeth stopped then and waited, letting what she had said reverberate in the room, penetrate into the depths of us. Then, softly . . . “So I asked her, ‘What are you doing now?’

“She told me she was working in Germany, at a hospital for German children injured during the war, the children of the Nazis who had sent her family to Majdanek. I was shocked. I asked her why. ‘How else,’ she asked, ‘can I heal the Hitler inside me but to give to them what they took from us?’”

When Elisabeth was done many of us were crying, some were weeping deeply. She looked at us in that way she had and said, “Now you are *feeling* like human beings not acting like dispassionate scientists.” Then she paused and said again, so softly . . . “There is a Hitler inside each of us, and if we do not heal it within ourselves, these things will never stop.”

There was something in her voice that day, some invisible thing that my younger self did not consciously understand but could only feel. And it went into the depths of me and there it remains still. And sometimes when I feel the cruelty in callous and indifferent men, when I hear the velvet violence hidden in the innocuous-seeming words of a mother speaking to her child, when I see the people among us from whom the powerful have stolen the future–and the present, when I feel some rage inside me wanting to do harm because I feel so helpless that I can find no other thing to do, that teaching, in the depths of me, rises up again into awareness and I see that young woman in Majdanek and I feel her eyes looking into me and I hear Elisabeth’s voice once more and I begin to think outside the box again.

There is a difference I learned, long ago, between schooling and education. Do you feel it now, in the room with you?

I was never able to find it in the analysis of chemicals or in degree programs or in any of my schools. But sometimes I find it in the soft flutter of butterflies, in the wildness of plants growing undomesticated in a forest clearing, in the laughter and running of young children, their hair flowing in the wind, and sometimes, sometimes I find it in the words of teachers who come among us from time to time–out there, far outside these walls, in the wildness of the world.