

Butterfly
Teachings

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IT WAS THE BUTTERFLIES, my people say, who brought the first human babies to their feet. Before that, the New Ones sat in innocence beneath a tree, watching the world around them with wonder. But Creator had planned more for them. Their destiny called for them to move throughout the world. These human babies were meant to walk upon their two legs, and as long as they sat under that tree their destiny could not be fulfilled.

So the Animal People came.

The weasels came to dart and dance around the human babies. The babies just clapped their hands and laughed. Then the fox came, and in her wily way tried to cajole the babies into following her. But the human babies merely hooted in glee. The crows came, and they hopped and danced about in hopes that the New Ones would stand and join them. But the babies never moved.

Creature after creature arrived. Each one tried to entice the New Creations from their seat beneath that tree, and each one came up short. There was a seemingly endless parade of Animal People, and the human babies marvelled at all of them. But they wouldn't stand and walk.

Then, across the meadow, a brilliant cloud appeared. In the sunlight its colours danced and dipped and shone wildly. The New Ones watched this living rainbow approach, and they grew excited. The cloud seemed to float in all directions at once, and when it came near them the New Ones laughed like never before.

That cloud of butterflies drifted under the branches of the tree where the human babies were sitting. They fluttered among the leaves, dropping lower and lower until they were only inches from the New Ones' heads. They hovered there. The human babies reached out their arms to catch them. But the butterflies inched a little higher.

The air seemed to tremble with butterflies. The human babies were entranced. Each time they tried to snare a handful of colour, the cloud drifted away. They stretched their arms higher. They thrust out their hands. But it was to no avail. When the butterflies danced just out of reach a final time, the New Ones lurched to their feet and raced after them across the meadow.

The Animal People celebrated quietly, then returned to their dens and burrows and nests. The human babies never caught those butterflies, but they kept on running, right into the face of their destiny. Sometimes you can still hear them laughing in the sunshine.

I HEARD THAT STORY for the first time at a gathering of the Three Fires. In traditional times, the Three Fires was

an alliance of the Ojibway, Odawa and Potawatomi nations. We met for a week's worth of activities geared towards perpetuating our traditional ways—what's called *Eneramowin*, or Ojibway worldview. For me, as a storyteller, it was a time to be guided in the principles and protocols of our oral tradition.

It was as if the butterflies were calling me forward to my destiny.

Sometimes you can get to thinking that the way you have come to know, the cultural, spiritual or philosophical way you accept as your own, is the only one with something to teach you. That was true for me for a while. I believed that there was value only in Indian things. It worked for a time. I found small glories in the expression of my native soul. I found people who were generous of spirit and I learned many things. But I had walled myself into a cultural wigwam, and as long as I sat there I couldn't run across the meadow. So the butterflies came again.

This time the butterflies came in the flow of notes from a keyboard. They sprang from the big hands of a black man who had never seen a wigwam. His name was Thelonious Monk, and I heard him play a song called "Epistrophy" on late-night radio. I was standing at my sink washing dishes when the cascade of notes rinsed all my thoughts away.

Monk played with his whole body. You could hear that. He played each note as though he were amazed at the one that preceded it. It was sensual, challenging music, and

it required your full attention to follow it. Once you did, there was a world of musical shapes, textures and possibilities to reach for.

I became a jazz fan. I listened to jazz and I read about the music. I read about the people. When I started to read about the history of black music, I saw where the butterflies were leading me. I learned about field hollers, spirituals, the blues and the call and response choruses of a people chained.

Above all, I learned that soul is a universal experience. We discern that whenever we clamber to our feet and chase the butterflies.