

# BUTTERFLIES AND BROTHERHOOD IN A NEW WORLD

BY PAUL HEBNER

Scientists speak of an effect whereby the disturbance caused by the wing beat of a single butterfly sets off a chain of connected events that result in a hurricane or tornado halfway around the world. They use this example to illustrate the inter-connectedness of all things and events. Human beings are linked in the same way, though the complexity of our lives often makes those connections hard to see. Our comings and goings seem random, bearing no obvious relation to one another. We ignore butterflies and complain about the weather, never stopping long enough to see how they are linked.

Every so often, though, the universe lets us know just how close to one another we really are; only later can we look back and see that things happened the way they did because they had to.

Three weeks after the attack on the World Trade Center and we in New York were all still reeling from the shock, still groping for a way to cope. Everything felt unfamiliar, our sense of self no less than anything else. "Lost" would trivialize the emotion of the moment. At Union Square Park in Manhattan, only a quick subway ride from Ground Zero, mourners from everywhere turned the south end of the park into a gigantic, spontaneous memorial. The fences surrounding the grassy areas became galleries for messages and drawings. The statue of George Washington astride his horse was covered in flowers and ribbons and displays of candles; flowers and messages extended some thirty feet from the base of the statue. The sidewalk became a giant canvas for chalked words of hope and grief. People milled about the park in the

thousands, day and night, and for those few weeks the park became a cathedral without walls, with park benches for pews.

I had gone out one night to pick up some ink cartridges, never thinking that simply pausing at a park bench on my way home would change my life, but it did. I passed back through Union Square, watching and listening to people mourn and, to be honest, looking for a flag pin - I had lost mine a few days before and wanted a replacement. I was almost out of the park when at last I spotted him.

"How much are they?" I asked.

"These are two dollars, the ones on the other side are three and the big ones in the middle are four."

He wore a blue and gray jogging suit and his voice sounded similarly rough, but his tone was cheerful. I could hear his Hispanic heritage. I bought the two dollar pin, but what would have been, on any other day, a normal transaction soon became anything but. I ended up in a long and involved conversation with this man, named Happy, and another young man from Philadelphia, a conversation centered mostly on Happy's days in prison, his dyslexia, his drug addicted past, his HIV status. What did Happy have to be happy about?

"You know why I'm happy?" he said, "I'm happy 'cause I can express myself now. I couldn't always do that. I talk to people now. I tell them how I feel. It was a hard thing to learn to do. It was hard!"

That was the source of his joy that evening. For the first time, perhaps in his entire life, he was part of society. That night, Happy could sell his pins and talk to people who would have normally

crossed the street to avoid him. He could tell his story and people would listen. We were listening. It wasn't that he had an audience; he had a connection, a relationship. For that night at least, the world welcomed him.

I must confess why I felt such a strong connection to Happy. A little more than a year earlier, I re-established contact with my biological father and discovered that I had a half-brother who, like Happy, was an addict, HIV positive, and had spent many years in prison. I had been struggling all that time with my feeling about my new family and my growing sense of responsibility. Happy's world, for all of its problems and despair, wasn't any further from my own world than my own brother. Who was he, really, if not my brother?

Looking back, that conversation was when everything changed for me, the pivotal moment where an uncharacteristic step in a different direction altered my life forever. That's the meaning of living in a changed world. It's easy to say things are different and then act as though none of the change has anything to do with you, but that's fantasy. When the world changed on September 11th, it changed in a very personal way, if not in an altogether private one. It was my world that changed, and Happy's world too. The world was different for Happy because he felt like he was part of it for the first time. Everything is different because three men who never would have had anything to do with one another a few weeks earlier shared a few very emotional and personal hours together in a park a short distance from a gigantic hole in the world.

