

# From butterflies, some lessons about life -- and death

May 26 2011, By Barbara Mahany

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If you were to catch Loretta Downs loping through the shoulder-high milkweed along her alley fence come the end of June, you might not realize she was searching for something so sacred it leaves her speechless.

What she's searching for, on the underside of those tonguelike leaves, is smaller than a pinhead, and what emerges from that itty-bitty white dot would surely drown in a raindrop.

You'd know it, though, once the miracle of the monarch flipped through to the last page of its unlikely story.

You'd know it by the stained-glass wings of orange and black with drips of white, and the thousands upon thousands of [butterflies](#) that flutter in the monarch's migratory river. It's one that stretches from the old-growth oyamel fir forests in the mountains of central Mexico across 2,000 miles - with a scheduled stop, year after year, in Downs' urban milkweed patch - to southern Canada, along the shores of [Lake Ontario](#) and beyond.

The milkweed meadow - planted hard against the pocked asphalt and trash cans of an unnamed Chicago alley - and the once-dirt lot that sidles up to Downs' Bucktown two-flat is a most essential way station for the most uncanny butterfly with so much wisdom tucked deep inside its jade-green chrysalis, the transformation chamber that dangles from a leaf, where striped caterpillar unfolds into winged beauty, catching drifts of wind.

"It's a mystery, and we don't get so close to these kinds of mysteries," says Downs, who has been raising and releasing [monarchs](#) since 2002. "To watch this unfolding, it's a miracle. There is no better symbol for transformation, for the mystery of death."

When the jade of the chrysalis gives way to the orange- and black-winged butterfly, as it somersaults from upside-down [cocoon](#) to something altogether new, "my heartbeat speeds up," she says. "I'm watching this rebirth."

With the release of each and every monarch, as she allows that newly hatched pair of wings to take to the wind, "I think about what that first flight must feel like," she says. "I really think that's what the moment of death must feel like, when at last we are free of our bodies, which very often at the end have become hard to be in."

Downs, who is 61 and a certified end-of-life care practitioner, talks easily about death, intermingling freely the metaphors of monarchs and life after death. For nearly three decades, until she retired in 1998, she worked in sales at the Merchandise Mart, and as the AIDS epidemic took so many of the ones she loved in the 1980s and '90s, she never shied from those friendships - or those hard goodbyes.

But it wasn't till she spotted a windowsill filled with glass jars at a friend's house that she realized how the migrating butterfly might deepen and propel her understanding of the mystery of all those deaths.

When Downs asked her friend what was with all the old mustard and pickle jars, she got her first lesson in monarchs. And before she packed up for home that day, she had in her keep a couple caterpillars and a stalk of milkweed, a must-have ingredient for monarch caterpillars.

"I fed them, and they grew up. They went into their chrysalis right here

on the kitchen counter," she said. "I was sitting here having coffee as I watched it, right before my eyes. They were my pets. Every day I watched. It is such a sacred meditation."

She was hooked. She started scouring empty lots near her house, gathering up all the milkweed leaves with the telltale white pin dots - the monarch's egg - and carrying them to her kitchen nursery. Back in 2002, she hatched only two. Every year since, her crop has multiplied; last year she raised and released 270 monarchs.

Along the way, she has planted her own stand of milkweed and with it, a side yard filled with what she calls "a tavern for the butterflies, they go there for a cocktail." Monarchs by the dozens alight upon her buddleia, purple coneflower, black-eyed Susan and bee balm.

Downs began bringing boxes of chrysalises and butterflies to the Fairmont HealthCare and Rehabilitation Centre, the North Side nursing home where her mother died in 2006. Believing deeply that nursing home residents deserve to die in the serenity of a hushed and tranquil room, surrounded by ones they love, she worked to create such a room at the Fairmont. It opened five months before her mother died, and Downs named it The Chrysalis Room.

Now president of the Chicago End-of-Life Care Coalition, she is leading an effort to open Chrysalis Rooms in nursing homes across the country.

Downs never forgets the ones whose hands she has held as they took their dying breaths. For every one who has died, she has planted a perennial in her butterfly garden: forget-me-nots, bleeding hearts, lots and lots of lilies.

Come summertime, when the stained-glass wings dot her garden, Downs can't help but be washed over by the peace that all those monarchs bring.

"The garden is a healing space," she says, stepping along a pea-gravel path that winds through an archipelago of butterfly-beckoning beds. "I come here to heal."

And the monarchs, surely, bring the balm, in their uncanny metamorphosis from wrinkled caterpillar to outstretched wings.

## **A FEW MONARCH MORSELS**

Monarchs flap their wings 5 to 12 times per second.

Monarchs glide at 11 mph; when flapping, they've been clocked at 30 mph.

Monarchs fly up to 80 miles a day.

In her lifetime, a female monarch lays 500 eggs, one at a time, but only about five will survive to maturity.

Monarch feet are thought to be 2,000 times more sensitive to taste than human taste buds.

Go to [monarchwatch.org](http://monarchwatch.org) to learn how to raise and release monarchs, grow a butterfly garden - and follow their migration.

Want to bring on the monarchs? Plant a milkweed meadow.

Want to attract monarch butterflies? Plant milkweed (*Asclepias*): common milkweed (*A. syriaca*), swamp milkweed (*A. incarnata*), and butterfly milkweed (*A. tuberosa*) are just three choices; [monarchwatch.org](http://monarchwatch.org) lists dozens of varieties, with photos and growing tips.

Some planting advice:

You've got choices: Pop a milkweed plant in the ground, tear open a seed packet (many butterfly and garden websites sell seeds) or go the old-fashioned route like Downs: Start with a seed pod collected from mature common milkweed in the fall. (Called "pioneer plants," they are quick to seed in undisturbed lots, so it won't take much looking.) Seed pods ripen in October.

Select a mostly sunny site. One square foot of garden can support five plants. ("I've seen decent milkweed patches next to trash cans and garages," Downs says.)

If you go the seed route: Clear the ground and sprinkle seeds. Cover with an inch of soil. Thin plants as needed. Roots grow long and thin like radishes; once they take hold they are difficult to uproot. It takes two summers for common [milkweed](#) to mature from seed, Downs says; the first year it grows up to 3 feet tall and, when fully mature, it can reach 6 feet.

Planting in fall before the ground hardens gives you earlier plant growth, but you can plant in spring if you overwinter seeds in a cold place (such as a garage).

Don't forget to plant nectar flowers to feed mature monarchs.

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Citation: From butterflies, some lessons about life -- and death (2011, May 26) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-05-butterflies-lessons-life-death.html>

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