

Nature's Cycles Brings Us Back



by Kevin Kearney

Two days after the earthquake I found myself staring at a sky full of butterflies. By then my nerves were so frayed by the incessant aftershocks that a slamming door or a rattling truck would nearly send me jumping out of my skin. My equilibrium was shot; the world seemed to be swaying like the deck of a ship even when everything was perfectly still. Sleep deprivation — the result of long nights waiting in the dark for the next rumbling, house-rattling tremor to roll through — had finished the job. I felt as unsettled as the earth.

Now, nearly 48 hours after the first shock, I was outside gazing up over the grove of eucalyptus that circles the lagoon near my house. It was another gorgeous Indian summer day, sunny and clear with temperatures in the 80s — the kind of weather that attracts people to California, the kind of weather we were enjoying that late afternoon when the edge of the continent shifted just miles from our homes and businesses.

Thousands of monarch butterflies from as far away as the plains of Alberta winter in the tall eucalyptus trees at the head of the lagoon, and suddenly I realized they were back. Monarchs are extremely sensitive to the weather. When it's cold and damp they huddle together in clumps along the trees' lower branches, looking almost like a dense orange foliage. Warmer weather sends them out into the air currents, and I stood and watched scores of them fluttering above me in a graceful dance that seemed to affirm and honor both the delicacy and the resilience of nature.

Most of us in Santa Cruz were extremely lucky. The quake roared through, but we survived. My own experience lacked the high drama and absolute terror of the more newsworthy accounts, but there was

drama enough, and terror enough to last me a lifetime.

The initial shock was agonizingly long and intense. Our hours shook violently and threatened to split into a thousand pieces. The kitchen seemed to literally fly apart; cupboards flew open and rained glassware, china, cooking oil, syrup, red wine, vinegar and a miscellaneous inventory of canned goods, cook books, spices and utensils.

After the wave had subsided, we gathered on the lawn, unhurt, but thoroughly frightened and bewildered. The magnitude of the quake and the destruction it inflicted wasn't apparent to us then, and wouldn't be for nearly a day.

Californians are frequently accused of placing the demands of their own individuality over any sense of community. According to our critics, we're each too wrapped up in our own lives. And maybe much of the time that's true. But on Tuesday night, in a scene that must have been repeated thousands of times in Santa Cruz County, neighbors and friends gathered together like small tribes, sharing food, light and information. We had lasagna with three other families at a picnic table on a neighbor's front lawn. Our kids, at least 10 of them altogether, raced around in the twilight, while their parents tried to understand what had happened and made plans for the night ahead.

The shocks continued through the night. We bedded down with our two children, but got very little sleep. I had a sense then of what it must be like to be in an artillery barrage, hunkered down within the flimsiest of shelters, waiting for the inevitable next assault to rattle our house. When the quakes came rumbling down from the epicenter, we gathered our sleeping children in our arms and held them in the dark. Never had I felt so utterly helpless.

Phone calls came in sporadically, as friends and family out-of-state were able to get through. Lacking a transistor radio, we received the first details of the quake's widespread devastation by phone. My sister in Chicago told me that people had died in a Santa Cruz mall; and for some reason I thought it was the Capitola Mall. I'd heard about the Bay Bridge, but she was the first to give me the alarming news of the collapse of the Cypress Street Viaduct.

Then I asked her something that almost made her laugh with disbelief, as though I were making a sick joke.

"Where was the epicenter?"

"In Santa Cruz," she said. "Didn't you know?"

Up until then, I didn't.

We spent the next morning gathering information, walking the neighborhood and checking in on friends. In terms of tragic loss, this quake was very selective. Apart from the some fallen masonry, collapsed chimneys and some serious cracks in East Cliff Drive, there was very little evidence at my end of town that we'd endured a major earthquake the night before.

Survival of a tragedy evokes a complex response: exhilaration and depression, inexpressible relief and joy at coming away intact, and periodic stabs of guilt for having been so lucky when so many had suffered so terribly. Most people we met seemed to be suffering at least some degree of emotional shell shock.

By 5 o'clock that day, we had cleaned up the kitchen mess, the power was on, and I was on my way to the video store to rent movies for the kids. Seemingly everything was back to normal. But it wasn't that easy.

There were more aftershocks that night, moments of terror that the kids slept thorough while my wife and I lay awake, wide-eyed and tense in the dark.

Then after dawn, another phone call from a concerned relative back in Illinois — this time my father had finally gotten through. I gave him my earthquake story, by this time well-rehearsed, and he asked the question that would logically occur to a person 2,000 miles away:

"Are you moving?"

Was I? It had to be considered. After all, maybe this quake was just a valuable warning. With as much damages as had been wrought by a 7.0, what would an 8.0 do? All the experts, with almost gloomy smugness, repeated time and again that this was not the Big One. What if we weren't so lucky when the next one hit?

All I could say was "No," giving the obvious reasons of work and the difficulty of resettling a family. But I knew that I had not touched on the real reason, which I found hard to express just then, but which is deeply understood by all of us who live here: Santa Cruz is home.

And later that day I was watching the butterflies ascend in fluttering spirals toward the sun. I knew many of them had had their fragile wings tattered during their incredible migration from Canada, that many would not survive the winter in Santa Cruz, but that their instinctual obedience to nature's cycles would always bring them back. I meditated on the butterflies until I was called inside by another phone call from another friend. •