

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
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### **The Butterfly Effect**

“On a perfect Saturday in December, sometime in the late 1990s, as snowflakes began to form over Long Island Sound, she decided not to marry him.

“Two hundred people sat in the church under soaring stained glass windows, ... all waiting for her to walk down the aisle. [Standing] in the back of the church, ... her father looked at her and said, ‘You know, you don’t have to do this.’

“From beneath her veil, she looked up, shocked.

“She thought of Ted, her fiancé, standing up on the altar, waiting for her....

“‘Are you sure?’ she said slowly.

“[In the] night, her older brother [had] called.... She picked up the phone immediately. After living with Ted for a year during their engagement, she had grown hyper vigilant, always thinking *this* phone call would mark the time ... the sky would fall.

“‘Is Ted with you?’ her brother asked.

“‘No,’ she said; ‘of course not. It’s the night before the wedding! I thought he was with you.’

“There was a pause. ‘Okay, we’ll track him down. Go back to sleep. Please don’t worry....’ [She] heard herself laugh oddly. [She was a wreck over] Ted’s frequent, ... mysterious disappearances.... Though he always had an excuse, she knew in her gut that something was very wrong. When she asked too many questions, he got angry.

“‘Why are you so obsessed with where I am all the time,’ he [would ask], his voice rising. ‘Can’t you understand I’m [killing myself] to make more money so ... we can buy a house and start a family? Isn’t that what you want?’

*“Isn’t that what you want?”*

“.... [She apologizes.] She is overreacting. No, of course she trusts him. No, of course she wants to start a family someday....

“She considers all of this, and all she really wants to do [now] is go back home, to her childhood room, and pull her old ... comforter over her head, and sleep.

“‘Okay,’ she says to her [father].

“‘Okay what?’

“‘Okay, I’m done. I don’t want to get married.’ And she starts sobbing.

“Her father doesn’t skip a beat. ‘It’s all right, it’s all right,’ he says. ‘Listen, thank G\*d you didn’t go through with it. Where the heck is your mother?’ He peeks into the church, all action now. ‘You need to talk to her; she’s going to be so relieved.’

“And so she realizes that she wasn’t the only one who suspects her [fiancé] of terrible things. She [wonders] what her father knows, and ... what her mother [will say], and she feels shame flush through her bridal gown, her dream dress, the dress she used to sketch in notebooks as a child.

“‘What about all [these] people?’ she asks. Her [father] shrugs his shoulders. ‘Listen, you made your decision.... It’s the right decision.... Never look back.’ he tells her, turning already to find the [minister]. She feels like she’s floating, ... walking out on her own wedding.... [Then] a

bridesmaid appears and leads her by the hand back to the car. She is going home.”<sup>1</sup>

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Many of us have played a part in some variation of a day meant to be so joyful, yet suddenly heartbreaking. Invariably, for months and even years to come, the story is told of that which divided “before” from “after.” But almost always, there is a catch in the telling, a realization that, almost certainly, what seemed utterly tragic was actually unspeakably lucky, a just-in-the-nick-of-time twist of fate that changed everything for the better.

Thankfully, there’s rarely so much drama, though the outcome can be disproportionately magical! In 1992, when she was teaching in the Bay Area, Kem went with her high school students to a fortuneteller, who told her she had to move home to Boston to meet someone. “This is strange, though,” said the fortuneteller. “The only name I’m getting is yours; you’re supposed to meet Kim.” And she did.

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Edward Lorenz invented a model for predicting the weather, based on the premise that even a small perturbation – a little something-something – is capable of affecting weather patterns on the other side of the planet. In 1972, he gave a talk entitled *Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil set off a Tornado in Texas?* His answer was *Yes*, and we now know the phenomenon as the Butterfly Effect.

Translated from weather prediction to spiritual principle, the Butterfly Effect says that zigging instead of zagging changes our destiny, and small causes can have large effects. We can choose to pay attention, to intervene in seeming randomness, and so be agents of meaning-making.

The bride who left her groom at the altar either ruined her life or saved her life. I suspect you can guess. Spoiler alert: he really was as creepy as everyone feared. What if her brother hadn’t called; what if her father hadn’t asked; what if she hadn’t said *enough*? No, the healing didn’t happen all at once, and it wasn’t a smooth road, but owning her choice was profoundly empowering.

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<sup>1</sup> From [madnessandeuphoria.wordpress.com/2014/10/21/she-didnt-walk-down-the-aisle-a-wordpress-butterfly-effect-challenge/](http://madnessandeuphoria.wordpress.com/2014/10/21/she-didnt-walk-down-the-aisle-a-wordpress-butterfly-effect-challenge/)

In March of last year, Chris Rosati was just beginning to lose his voice to ALS – Lou Gehrig’s disease. Notwithstanding, he had a lot to say about leaving his corner of the world better than he’d found it. Reflecting on just how far an act of kindness could travel, he decided to run a test of the Butterfly Effect. In a diner in his hometown of Durham, North Carolina, two girls were seated at the table next to his. He gave them each fifty dollars with one very simple instruction: *Do something kind.*

The two girls were 13-year-old Cate and 10-year-old Anna Cameron. They say they couldn’t believe it when a stranger gave them money. “That makes you want to do something good,” says Anna. Their father had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Sierra Leone, in a village that recently had been fighting for its life against the spread of Ebola. The sisters decided to pay for a feast to celebrate the village being Ebola-free.

Chris had all but forgotten his gift when an email arrived, which included pictures with dozens of people holding up handmade signs that said “Thanks a lot for spreading kindness, Chris Rosati.”

It felt great to help, the girls said. “It inspired me,” says Anna. Cate adds, “I would definitely encourage other people to do it!” Chris is now planning to give out hundreds of little butterfly grants – \$50 each – to any kid who wants to start changing the world. “[Let’s] get a whole lot of butterflies to flap their wings,” he says. Get ready for a hurricane!<sup>2</sup>

Notre Dame Seminary’s academic dean, Dr. Tom Neal,<sup>3</sup> writes, “... We should never underestimate the effects our tiniest acts ... can have on the future world.... Because we can’t see those effects or feel them, we [might despair]. But it all [matters]. We tend to be so myopic and shallow in our judgment [of] the value of what we do, on what’s important or what’s not.... The interdependence of all things is so staggeringly complex and intricate and delicate that just one decision, one smile, one sacrifice ... can change the course of history.... Think of that the next time [you feel] insignificant.”

A Hassidic proverb expresses the Butterfly Effect this way:

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Hartman, CBS News, *Proving the Butterfly Effect with a Single Act of Kindness*, 3/13/15. To read more, and see photos, please visit [cbsnews.com/news/proving-the-butterfly-effect-with-a-single-act-of-kindness/](http://cbsnews.com/news/proving-the-butterfly-effect-with-a-single-act-of-kindness/)

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Tom Neal is the Academic Dean and Professor of Spiritual Theology at Notre Dame Seminary, New Orleans, LA

If we always assume that the one sitting next to us  
is the Messiah,  
waiting for some simple kindness,  
we will soon come to weigh our words and watch our hands.  
And if the Messiah chooses not to be revealed in our time,  
it will not matter.

Beloved spiritual companions,

The butterfly flaps its wings  
and a just-in-the-nick-of-time twist of fate  
changes everything for the better.

Let us choose to pay attention,  
and to be agents of meaning-making.

May we weigh our words,  
watch our hands,  
and spread kindness.

The interdependence of all things  
is so staggeringly complex and intricate and delicate  
that just one decision, one smile, one sacrifice  
can change the course of history.

*Let's do it.*