

My dad and I used to raise monarch butterflies. We'd feed them as caterpillars, watch their chrysalises form and hatch, then drive to Natural Bridges every autumn to release them into the wild. As they flew away, I'd wonder how they didn't get lost in the vast expanse of sky.

I say we raised them, but I really mean he; I watched from the sidelines. When we fed the butterflies, I was fascinated, yet disgusted by the way their long black tongues unfurled from their bodies; terrified by the prospect of holding a living, pulsing thing between my fingers because I didn't trust myself to hold on tight enough.

In other aspects of my life, I was the same: apathetic on the outside, but deep down, morbidly insecure. For instance— I detested my school's physical education requirements. My dad told me once how he and his friends had had a blast trying every sport in high school... I told him that running made me feel like I was physically dying. I said it was inhumane to force innocent children to exert themselves in the California heat, but what I really meant to say was that I was bad at P.E. Likewise, I'd been a ballet dancer since I was five, but I dreaded class because I was mediocre in my eyes.

Right before 11th grade, my dad died unexpectedly. My world was irrevocably thrown off its axis. The opaque chrysalis, which had deliberately hardened around me over the years, suddenly turned soft and clear, exposing me for what I really was: a coward. I was afraid of change, yet forced to experience it all the same. I quit ballet and didn't sign up for any extracurriculars during my first year of in-person high school because I needed to take care of my dog and other tasks that my dad used to be responsible for. I spent my time going through my dad's former possessions and worrying about how I barely resembled him in appearance and in character.

Through my dad's death, I discovered that our lives are ephemeral. Although I had thought him old at 58 years, I now think of my father as someone who died young, though immortalized because of it. I also acknowledged that the earth would eventually forget about my dad, his ashes long ago dispersed in the ocean. This comforted me in some perverse way because it meant that the world would someday forget about me, too—all my failures and insecurities—so why not crawl out of my chrysalis?

I started small: tutoring a child from an immigrant family in English, trying a different style of dance at a new studio, joining school clubs. Not all of these activities stuck with me; I realized that I don't want to spend my short life pursuing interests I'm not truly passionate about.

However, I continue to tutor and form connections with children to this day. I love helping them build their own confidence and motivation, and acting as their role model motivates me to continue pushing my limits.

My metamorphosis allowed me to fly into new territories. I began volunteering at the American Cancer Society's local thrift store, founded my own club about international women's rights, taught myself to play guitar, enrolled in my school district's unique digital arts program, and secured a competitive volunteer position at the California Academy of Sciences. I even enjoy recreational running now.

Without realizing it, I became more like my dad. I became the kid who tries every sport and values experience beyond any fear of failure. My dad has guided me through life, just as he did those butterflies, and I can still picture him holding their delicate wings with his wide, barely wrinkling hands. I always wondered what happened to those monarch butterflies after we released them into the open sky, but I think I know now.