

# The message of the caterpillars

## A story from Australia

**Key ideas: questions about death, transformation**

**E**arly, very early in the dreamtime, there was only newness, first beginnings. Everywhere in everything, there was freshness, wonder and joy. In sounds and silences, in colours and light and dark, in shapes and movements, in all the teeming swarms of life there was the rush of excitement and discovery. There was as yet no thought of endings, for an end had still to make its mark on the pattern of creation. Then, one evening, a young cockatoo fell from the nest. Neck broken it lay on the ground, still and stiff and lifeless.

A great crowd gathered to see this new event. All felt that it was very different and kept some distance from the body quiet and anxious. The humans moved forward and gently stroked the body of the bird. It was quite cold, blind, silent, the life spirit fled from it. This puzzled all, greatly. Where had the spirit gone? Why had it been taken? Was it to be changed or used in some new way? They would need an experiment if they were ever to find answers to the questions.

So the humans called for volunteers. They needed others to die so that they could watch closely and track what happened. Eventually a caterpillar, crawling from the dark earth, volunteered. Other caterpillars, proud of his bravery and anxious that he should not go alone, agreed to go with him. The humans had watched the cockatoo closely. They warned that if the caterpillars were to follow him in death, they must become like him. They would have to be completely still, blind, alone, cold, without sound. They must reach the stage where they had no need of food or drink. Then, they must remain like that for a long time so that the humans could see what happened.

All creation gathered to make the cocoons to help the caterpillars begin the stage. When each caterpillar had their own, the cocoons were hung high on the branches of those trees that seemed to reach almost to the sky world. There the whole of creation could see what would happen. In the beginning, they all came to look confidently expecting some sign of change. But day after day, nothing happened. Slowly the excitement died and creation forgot about the cocoons. Winter approached, the days grew shorter and there was so much to keep them busy. They had shelters to build, food to gather, tools to make. The cocoons hung on the leafless trees, forlorn and forsaken.

A change of wind marked the turn of the year. The warm, north wind blew away the gloom and cold of winter. Each day the sun rode higher in the sky, bringing delight to all things. A choir of many voices, birds, beasts and humans thrilled in celebration of awakening green pastures, sparkling rivers, rainbows and the flames of colours that were the swathes of spring flowers. The buds on the trees glistened, their delicate shoots of green peeping at the world below. It was their wonder at the delicate new leaves that alerted the birds to the cocoons again. They hovered round them, examining them from every angle. But in all the glory of that changing world, the cocoons, alone, were without change. There was much sadness for the caterpillars.

However the joy and delight of the spring could not be denied. There was a need to jump and shout and sing and the creatures threw a great celebration to give thanks. The dancing was at its height when the birds noticed it. 'Look up, look up,' they pleaded. 'The cocoons are changing.' A hush fell on the crowd as every eye turned towards the trees. It was true. The cocoons were splitting. There, from the cracks on the sides, they saw the first butterflies sliding into the dreamtime. In a creation of many beauties, they still brought gasps of wonder, so delicate so many-coloured and fragile were they. Slowly, they lifted their wings to the sun, paused a moment, then drifted on the air currents down to where the flowers waited for them. In the soft light their colours gleamed. They were simply splendid.

All watched in delight. No-one could have dreamt that their experiment would have such an ending – the dull, lowly caterpillar, confined to the earth, transformed to a creature so fragile, beautiful and free. From that moment too, death held less fear for the people. They had seen for themselves. Really, death was not the end that it seemed. Rather it was a doorway to a wonderful new way of being alive.