

Butterfly Effect
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Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.' Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, 'When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.' But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, 'Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?' The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.' So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He

was crying, and she took pity on him. 'This must be one of the Hebrews' children,' she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Yes.' So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, 'because', she said, 'I drew him out of the water.'

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In 1961, MIT Professor Edward Lorenz decided to repeat some computations on a weather pattern he was running. He reentered the numbers and set the computer to its task. When he returned after about an hour, the computer had simulated two months of weather. However, it was radically different from the previous simulation. Lorenz realized that in the second set of computations he had rounded off the numbers at the third decimal place instead of carrying it out to the sixth decimal place. The results of this minute change were dramatic.

Lorenz began to theorize that the slightest change to conditions, cascades to large-scale alterations of events. He suggested that the flap of a butterfly's wings might create tiny changes in the atmosphere that may ultimately alter the path of a tornado or delay, accelerate or even prevent the occurrence of a tornado in another location.¹ Lorenz's theory became known as the butterfly effect and has had wide-ranging application beyond the field of meteorology. In fact, I would claim, we can see it playing out in our reading from the book of Exodus.

The butterfly flapped its proverbial wings when two brave midwives refused to slaughter the male children of the enslaved Hebrews. A special son was saved, but then Pharaoh ordered the Egyptians to throw male Hebrew children into the Nile River. A mother placed this special son into a basket, or to translate directly into English from Hebrew, she placed him in an ark. A sister floated the ark into the river and watched as it

¹ "The Butterfly Effect," Wikipedia.org, August 13,2023: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butterfly_effect.

drifted downstream. A daughter, Pharaoh's daughter, went to the river to bathe and saw the basket. She opened it to find the special son. The watching sister offered to fetch a Hebrew woman as a wet nurse. She brought the child's mother who then cared for him until he was three years old. The mother returned the child to Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her own and named him Moses. Moses would lead the enslaved Hebrews out of Egypt.

One act of civil disobedience by two brave midwives, one flap of the butterfly's wings, and the course of a people's history began to change forever. The butterfly effect. If you have never thought that what you do can have far-reaching effects beyond yourself, if you have never believed that you have the capability to literally change the world, it's time to start believing. What we do matters – the good and the bad – and it literally sets ripples in motion that can change the course of history.

New York Times bestselling author and motivational speaker Andy Andrews tells a powerful story to illustrate the butterfly effect, I'll quote from Andrews at length:

On Friday, April 2, 2004, ABC News honored a man who, at that time, was 91 years old. The news program was running a regular segment called "Person of the Week." Usually, the honoree's accomplishments are listed in advance and by the time the name is announced, most folks have already guessed the identity of that week's recipient. In this instance, however, the pronouncement left many viewers puzzled.

"And so...our Person of the Week is..." the anchorman finally said, "Norman Borlaug!" One can only imagine the frowns. Who? Who did he say?

Yet, despite our unfamiliarity, Norman Borlaug is a man who is personally responsible for drastically and dramatically changing the world in which we live. You see, in the early 1940s, Norman Borlaug hybridized high-yield, disease-resistant corn and wheat for arid climates. From the dust bowl of Western Africa to our own

desert Southwest, from South and Central America to the plains of Siberia, across Europe and Asia, Borlaug's specific seed product flourished and regenerated where no seed had ever thrived before. Through the years, it has now been calculated that Norman Borlaug's work saved more than two billion lives from famine.

Or, was it actually Henry Wallace? Henry Wallace was the Vice President of the United States under Franklin Roosevelt. While Wallace was Vice President, however, he used the power of that office to create a station in Mexico whose sole purpose was to hybridize corn and wheat for arid climates. He hired a young man named Norman Borlaug to run it.

So, Norman Borlaug won the Nobel Prize. And Norman Borlaug was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. But considering the connection, it was really Henry Wallace that saved two billion people!

Or was it George Washington Carver? You remember Carver, don't you? The peanut? But here's something that very few people know: When Carver was 19 years old and a student at Iowa State University, he had a Dairy Sciences professor who, on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, would allow his six-year-old boy to go on "botanical expeditions" with the brilliant student.

It was George Washington Carver who took that boy and instilled in him a love for plants and a vision for what they could do for humanity. It was George Washington Carver who pointed six-year-old Henry Wallace's life in a specific direction – long before he ever became Vice President of the United States.

It's amazing to contemplate, isn't it? George Washington Carver flapping his butterfly wings with the peanut and while no one was even looking, George Washington Carver flapped his wings a couple of times with a six-year-old boy. And just happened to save the lives of more than two billion people...and counting. So maybe

it should have been George Washington Carver – Person of the Week! Or, should it have been the farmer from Diamond, Missouri?

His name was Moses and he lived in a slave state, but he didn't believe in slavery. This made him a target for radicals like Quantrill's Raiders who terrorized the area by destroying property by burning and killing. And sure enough, one cold January night, Quantrill's Raiders rode through Moses' farm. The outlaws burned the barn, shot several people, and dragged off a woman named Mary Washington who refused to let go of her infant son, George.

Now, Mary Washington was a friend of Moses' wife, Susan. Though distraught, Susan promptly set to work writing messages and contacting nearby farms. She got word through neighbors and towns and two days later managed to secure a meeting for Moses with the bandits.

Susan looked on anxiously as her husband rode off on a black horse. His destination was a crossroad in Kansas several hours to the north. There, at the appointed time, in the middle of the night, Moses met up with four of Quantrill's Raiders. They were on horseback, carrying torches, and had flour sacks tied over their heads with holes cut out for their eyes. There, the farmer traded the only horse they had left on their farm for what the outlaws threw him in a dirty burlap bag.

As the bandits thundered off on their horses, Moses fell to his knees and there, alone on that dark winter night, the farmer pulled from the bag a cold, naked, almost-dead baby boy. Quickly he jerked open his own coat and his shirt and placed the child next to his skin. Covering him with his own clothes and relying on the warmth from his own body, the man turned and walked that baby home.

Moses walked through the night and into the next morning to get the child to Susan. There, they committed to that tiny human being – and to each other – that they would care for him. They promised the

boy an education to honor his mother, Mary, who they knew was already dead. That night, they gave the baby *their own name*...and that is how Moses and Susan Carver came to raise that little baby, George Washington.

So, when you think about it, maybe it was the farmer from Diamond, Missouri, who saved the two billion people. Or was it his wife who was responsible? Certainly, it was Susan who organized the effort – it was she who demanded immediate action.

Or was it...you get the idea.²

The truth is, friends, we could keep going back and back and back, to different people, in different times and places, each one who, with the gentle flap of butterfly wings, changed the course of history.

The story goes forward too. It goes out from us and into infinity. The little things that we do every single day, for better or for worse, do matter. Like the flapping wings of two brave midwives that refused to kill a special baby boy who eventually led his people to freedom, what we do, or don't do, matters. We can literally change the world. In fact, we *will* change the world. Let's change it for the better. May it be so. Amen.

² Andy Andrews. "The Story of the Butterfly Effect," Youtube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndPZVGwaRww>.