

Larry

Some of you may recall a story I told in June, 2007. For those who were not with us then or may have forgotten, I will just recap briefly. It was about a boy called Michael who had been reading Kafka's "Metamorphosis" in which Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning to discover he has become a giant insect during the night; Michael had thought the story stupid and on that warm, drowsy afternoon he had dropped off to sleep. When he woke he had found himself emerging as a giant bug-like creature from a giant chrysalis or pupa. At first he had thought it was a dream, but soon discovered it was not. Somehow or other he had woken on another planet with a very different sun, possibly in a different galaxy, and was now one of several bug siblings of a mother and father bug. After an unsteady start, he had mastered the language of scents and odours and, some of you may recall, had a successful life there, eventually marrying another bug and having a happy bug family of his own.

But what about back home where Michael had lived and fallen asleep that fateful afternoon? What had his parents found in the garden? A dead body with no "Michael" inside? Or were there now two Michaels: one a human back on earth and the other a bug on some far distant planet? I think we can dismiss this latter idea: Michael was definitely a bug on another planet. He had arrived with earth memories and had had to learn what his larval memories were supposed to have been from listening to his bug brothers and sisters.

Certainly what Michael's parents back on earth found did not have "Michael" inside; but it was not a dead boy. We must remember that on the bug planet it had been a regular larva that had begun pupation there. As, if you recall, the bugs had a language of scents and odours, not of sounds, the larva's name was composed of scents. We cannot represent this. I will call him Larry the Larva

What had happened to Larry during pupation? He had become replaced by Michael in some strange eddy in the space-time fabric of the universe or, maybe, through some mental quantum entanglement. Larry too was also caught up in this same space-time eddy or quantum entanglement and, therefore, found himself not emerging from a pupa case but waking up as a teenage boy in a garden on earth. He moved his arms; they felt strange. He looked; he found to his amazement that he had only four limbs: two arms and just two legs. How was he going to manage? That was not supposed to happen after pupating. Where was his pupa case?

He looked around. He seemed, indeed, to be in a garden, but it was very alien. He did not recognize the flora at all. The sun in the sky seemed to him considerably smaller than it should be, but it was just as warm and bright as the sun he had been used to. Where was he? In another entirely different world? Perhaps in a different galaxy or maybe even in another universe? He had gone into pupation and now arrived here. It was very strange.

One thing he noticed was that this world was considerably less scented than the one he had known as a larva; but he was much more aware of sound and noise. He was startled to hear noise that made words in his head. "Oh," he thought, "we communicated by sending odour waves through the air; maybe here they communicate by agitating the air with sound."

He was not clear how he had been able to translate these sound patterns into sense in his brain; but he was quite pleased that he could. He realized that in fact these creatures did not speak Buggish; it was simply because he thought in Buggish that sound patterns got translated, so to speak, into Buggish in his brain.

He realized that though he was unable to emit odours and scents, he could emit quite a variety of sounds. What he had to do was to learn how to control these and emit combinations that were intelligible. His first attempts showed he had a lot to learn about sound control!

The sun was beginning to set and a creature who he sensed was supposed to be his mother was calling him in. He tried to answer her but was, of course, was unintelligible to her.

She grew alarmed and called to someone else. She said that something had happened to Michael. He could not speak properly. "I think he's had a stroke," she said.

"Sun stroke, more likely," laughed the other person, who Larry sensed to be his supposed father.

But when Michael's father came out and Larry in Michael's body tried to talk, his father ceased to laugh.

"You're right," he said. "Something's happened. We'd better get him to Accident and Emergency quickly."

"Yes," thought Larry. "It must be an accident that I'm here and it's certainly an emergency. Perhaps they'll get me back to where I should be and as I should be."

Of course they did not. Larry was kept in hospital but doctors and specialists could find nothing physically wrong and no signs of any stroke. As he lay there, listening to nurses and others around, he soon picked up they way to organize his sounds and to speak. The hospital took this as a good sign. But when they asked him what had happened and he had begun talking about his larval days and going into pupation, they decided that though there was nothing wrong physically, he was certainly mentally disturbed. They consulted his parents and it was generally assumed his mind had become unhinged through over-exposure to video games and that he was hallucinatory.

Larry, who had soon learnt that everyone called him "Michael", was returned home to his new family. It was accepted by his 'parents' and, as he discovered, his older brother and sister that he had had some sort of mental breakdown and needed to recover his memory of earlier years. His new siblings did their best in trying to recall things from when they were younger. In time Larry began to wonder if in fact they were not right: he had forgotten these things and the larval memories were nothing but imaginings built up over years of too much exposure to video games and science fiction. Perhaps he really was Michael after all (I shall, however, continue to call him Larry so that we do not confuse him with the Michael of the June 2007 story).

The hardest thing had been going to school. Although he had quickly learnt to speak, he had no clue about writing and spelling English; this was clearly a problem. He was taken out of mainstream school and given remedial help; but it was soon found this was unnecessary except for sreading and writing. In time Larry did cope with this, though he found it strange that writing only vaguely corresponded to the spoken language and spelling had so many oddities about it.

By sheer persistence he managed and was determined to show everyone he was not mad – that he was as intelligent as the rest. He eventually did well enough to go to university.

In his later teens Larry, who now identified with the family's son, Michael, developed a great interest in insects. So it was not surprising that at University he read biology with a special interest in entomology. He was particularly interested in the way insects communicated and his Ph.D. thesis was on communication among social insects.

He eventually married and had children of his own and, indeed, had become convinced that he really had been born a human and had had some sort of breakdown in his early teens. He did, however, acknowledge that he had an almost uncanny understanding of insects and he became a world famous entomologist.