

Isolation Cocoon, May 2020—After Zhuangzi's *Butterfly Dream*

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Sarah Gregory] Hello, I'm Sarah Gregory, and today I'm talking with Dr. Ron Louie, a clinical professor in Pediatrics Hematology–Oncology at the University of Washington in Seattle. We'll be discussing his poem, "Isolation Cocoon, May 2020—After Zhuangzi's *Butterfly Dream*," which was inspired by the early events of the COVID pandemic.

Welcome, Dr. Louie.

[Ron Louie] Thank you for having me.

[Sarah Gregory] Your poem was published in November of 2020 in the EID journal. When in the COVID pandemic did you write it and what was going on with you at the time?

[Ron Louie] I started it in May of 2020. I live in Seattle, and our state of Washington had the first COVID death in the United States. So, we had a stay-at-home order in March of last year. At that time, you know, the deaths reported around the world (especially in New York City and in Italy) were really tragic. So we were all hunkered down at the time.

[Sarah Gregory] You're a physician, how does writing poetry fit in with that?

[Ron Louie] Doctors are observers and interpreters. So, we do that naturally. And then we record things in a medical record in a very abbreviated style. So, that's not poetry, but those kinds of habits lend themselves to writing poems.

[Sarah Gregory] And what does writing poetry do you for emotionally, spiritually, a release valve? What is it for you?

[Ron Louie] In some ways, for me writing is a compulsion. It's like making lists of things to do. I don't consciously write for a release, but I do enjoy crafting words and lines and I try to incorporate a light touch, which is fun. I do like listening to poems read out loud, like Amanda Gorman at the inauguration or Billy Collins or Kevin Young or other contemporary poets. And then I love poets who read out loud with an accent.

[Sarah Gregory] Like Irish or something? Scottish? Robert Burns?

[Ron Louie] Yeah. Heaney (Seamus Heaney), you know, is one, and a lot of British poets. You know, I kind of love to hear the language spoken with accents.

[Sarah Gregory] You used the metaphor, a chrysalis or a cocoon for our situation during 2020. What does that mean to you and ultimately which do you think it was for you?

[Ron Louie] Cocoons are a common metaphor for hunkering down, and it's easily understood. So I thought I'd use that for a central image. Cocoons are moth-related though. So, they're biologically a little bit different than a butterfly's chrysalis. And you know, doctors have to be sticklers for being biologically correct. So, I use both words in the poem to relate it to the subtitle about the butterfly dream.

[Sarah Gregory] Ah, I see. Did you feel like you were in a cocoon or a chrysalis, personally?

[Ron Louie] I guess I felt more like a moth, so I guess I was more like a cocoon.

[Sarah Gregory] Tell us how Zhuangzi's butterfly poem influenced you, first telling us a little bit about him.

[Ron Louie] Zhuangzi or Zhuangzi (my Chinese is not up to par), but he was an ancient philosopher who described the dream that tested reality. It's usually stated as that he woke up and he started thinking, was he a man who dreamed he was a butterfly? Or was he a butterfly who was still dreaming he was a man? And the pandemic has been like a weird nightmare at times. So, that brings up what I'm trying to do with this poem. And I have four words for you (it's kind of an inside joke in our family), but the four words are Entomology (which is the study of insects), Etymology (which is the study of words), Epistemology (which is the study of truth and knowledge), and Epidemiology (which is the study of epidemics).

[Sarah Gregory] Okay. What do you see as the function of poetry in reader's lives?

[Ron Louie] Well, I think of poems as a pause that refreshes. Poems are usually short and dense. They may allow for a different perspective, a different aspect of thinking and a different use of words to approach, you know, an issue or a subject. In many ways, it's entertainment, but it doesn't pay anything.

[Sarah Gregory] Not even published poets make any money, I think. I mean, people that are only poets. You're obviously a published poet.

Besides poetry, you have a lot of activities going on, while I understand you're technically retired. Tell us about all your various ones besides writing poetry.

[Ron Louie] Well, I'm still a clinical professor because I mentor a few medical students and I do some medical writing. I run two non-profit blogs. Alzheimer GADFLY is about dementia therapeutics from a clinical cancer investigator's point of view. My other blog is Caregiving Old Guy, which is about dementia home-caregiving from a male perspective. I was also a volunteer advisor on the recent National Academy of Medicine report on caregiving, and I'm the medical advisor for a local cross-cultural non-profit that trains medical interpreters.

[Sarah Gregory] You're very busy, thank you for talking to me.

Do you have any other poems published in medical or scientific journals?

[Ron Louie] Well, I've been lucky to have had poems in *JAMA*, *Neurology*, *Pediatrics*, and the *BMJ* (*British Medical Journal*) has a journal called *Medical Humanities*, and they've published two of my poems.

[Sarah Gregory] So, now that the situation in the U.S. may be on the upswing, is that inspiring another poem? How about one about vaccinations?

[Ron Louie] My inspiration for poems is sporadic, so I'm not working on one at the moment. I will say that vaccination biology and technology and the speed has been truly amazing. But the rollout is, dare I say, kind of unpoetic. It's kind of management to me.

[Sarah Gregory] So, as an epitaph, if you had to choose one, would you rather be known as a physician or a poet, since both can heal?

[Ron Louie] I'm not sure poems can heal, you know. I just hope some of my poems can bring a smile or provide a different insight into a situation. But as for epitaph, I'd like to be known basically as a doctor who tried his best.

[Sarah Gregory] And on that note, why don't you read us your poem now?

[Ron Louie] Ok, thanks. This is “Isolation Cocoon, May 2020—After Zhuangzi’s *Butterfly Dream*.” Spinning, what you will, in heeding that swarm of guidance, creating your own shell, then transforming, as you will, within that isolation, still seems like an almost unconvincing, almost unnecessary nuisance. You had chosen this situation, if it is fair to say there was a choice, when there was no viable alternative. Your cocoon can feel so safe, an illusion perhaps, but reality provides nothing less vulnerable. The walls are thin enough to allow you to breathe, and to vaguely hear or feel vibrations, even though their meaning cannot be known. Light penetrates, and darkness, too; the changes remain obscure. Ruminating on that former lifestyle, you can digest time thoroughly, like those last memorable green leaves of Springtime, then so succulent, and satisfying, but to what end you know not; not all cocoons survive. Time, space, being, identity, the interpreted past, the fancied future can all be consumed within your insatiable capsule. Chrysalis or cocoon, distinctions no longer matter; each benefits from a covering and distancing. Complacency or contentment allows a concentration on one’s only certainty, the presentness right now, in this cell-like confinement, because emergence would require several just preposterous miracles.

[Sarah Gregory] That was lovely and wonderful. And thank you so much for talking to me today and reading that to us, Dr. Louie.

[Ron Louie] Thank you. May the fourth be with you.

[Sarah Gregory] And thanks for joining me out there. You can read the November 2020 poem, *Isolation Cocoon, May 2020—After Zhuangzi’s Butterfly Dream*, online at [cdc.gov/eid](https://www.cdc.gov/eid).

I’m Sarah Gregory for *Emerging Infectious Diseases*.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov) or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.