

**Faith Review: *The Butterfly Circus***  
**Theology of Film- Dr. Pamela Mitchell-Legg**  
**John C. Elam, February 28, 2010**

**Film Title:** *The Butterfly Circus*

**Year Made:** 2009

**Director:** Joshua Weigel. This is Weigel's third film as a director. He has been in L.A. for 11 years with the goal to become a director. He has acted in several films, the latest being *To Save a Life*. He lists *Shawshank Redemption*, *Schindler's List* and *Slumdog Millionaire* as favorite movies. All share a theme of hope, which is the hallmark of *The Butterfly Circus*.

**Original release:** *The Butterfly Circus* is a short film (20 minutes) and was not in theatrical release or on DVD. It is part of the Doorpost Film Project and is the winner of the 2009 Doorpost Film Project's grand prize. The film can be viewed for free at [www.thedoorpost.com](http://www.thedoorpost.com).

**Current availability and format:** See the film at [www.thedoorpost.com](http://www.thedoorpost.com).

**Genre:** Drama/fable; film short.

**Story elements:** Mendez, Owner and ringmaster of the Butterfly Circus, while driving to the next site, makes a detour to see a sideshow. He is fascinated by Will, a man without arms or legs. Will comes along, secreting himself (one supposes) in the rear of Mendez' truck. Mendez explains that the Butterfly Circus is composed of society's discarded; the aged, the prostitute, and others whose worth society long since gave up upon. They find new life as circus performers, reaching heights and breaking through self-imposed limitations. Will learns to exceed his physical, mental and spiritual boundaries, becoming a valuable performer in the Butterfly Circus.

The film is set against the backdrop of the rural 1930's. The costumes convey a sense of the depression... worn out clothes, little in the way of fancy garb, save some of the circus performers' costumes.

The genre is a mixture of drama, fable and fancy. While listed in the category of "hope" on the website, this word is more descriptive of theme than genre.

**Film language elements:** Props and lighting are central to this film. Notable props include:

- **Butterfly:** At the outset, we see a child with a caterpillar in a jar. This is the driving metaphor for the film. As the caterpillar goes into its cocoon, so then does Will, the limbless man, retreat into self-pity and acceptance of his limits, sans the gift of hope. As the caterpillar emerges, so then does Will, finding heart and abilities never before experienced, and rising to new heights of inspiration to others.
- **Water:** From the spit on the face of Mendez, through the rebirthing waters of the creek (clearly metaphorically a baptism into a new life of hope), to the waters in the diving pit and, finally, the tears following, water is front and center as a prop in this film.
- **Food:** First, there are the two kids with tomatoes to throw at Will, as he sits, seemingly immobile, in the sideshow. Then, there is the plate of sliced apples, from which Will must eat like a dog. This is a graphic illustration of what Will must endure to survive. Finally, the loving boy feeds Will popcorn as they enjoy the Butterfly Circus performers thrilling the audience. Food plays a vital role as a prop in this film.

Next, lighting plays an important role as a film element. At the outset, there is an amber lighting adding a golden glow to the faces of the characters. This harkens us back to the thirties, when the film was set. Shadows play upon the characters and background as the group enters the sideshow tent... lending a mystic, almost foreboding sense to the scene. Then, as Mendez cajoles Will by stating that he is “cursed from birth,” the dim setting sunlight faintly illuminates Will’s face, as if life is setting inside of him. Yet, when the camera cuts to Mendez’ face, the light seems brighter, as if to emphasize the light of hope that is ever-burning in his heart. Following this, there is the brightness of the glorious morning sun sparkling on the river as Will is reborn into a life of hope and love of God and neighbor; this morphing into the bright spot light as all eyes watch Will perform his heroic feat... flying through the air into the tank of water. Finally, we see again, what might be the morning coming brightly over the hill, as the butterfly is released for all to behold.

Also notable is music. The film begins with somber strings, steadily playing a serious melody, one which seemingly tells us that much of what follows has meaning and gravity. Then, in the “dustbowl” scene, when the performers give free tickets to the poor family, we hear droning and depressing bass notes, accompanied by slide guitar. We feel the despair of the family. This gives way to a hastening and uplifting in the music as smiles appear on faces and performers bring a magic to the scene.

**Audience/Cultural context elements:** This film is appropriate for anyone over 12 years of age. This assumes a degree of maturity and depth of thought within the hearts and minds of those near the younger end of the scale.

**Theology is found...** Outside of the movie, to be brought in through conversation.

### **Theological themes for conversation:**

- **Baptism/rebirth-** Water is central to this film. Will is lost in a life as a spectacle; a freak. Not yet devoid of hope, he nonetheless needs the saving love of neighbor to, well, *live*. As Mendez tells him to use his own efforts to cross the log and join the fun with community on the other bank, Will is resistant. He tries, progresses, then falls into the water, only to learn he can fashion his body movements to swim. Up he rises from the depths of the water, saved from objectification into a life of meaning. Water streaming from face, his smile radiates. The joy is shared by...
- **Community-** Will joins a community of those cast out of society. This community has found new meaning in life, each person emerging from the acceptance of societal judgment as a “loser” (a cocoon of sorts) into the joy of living lives of circus performers... loving one another and spreading their gospel of hope to others.
- **God is love-** Bonhoeffer observed our inclination to first define love (read: Hallmark Card... McKuen poem) then apply that cultural definition to learn “what” God is. Per Bonhoeffer (and Barth) God is self-revealing and by relating to God as God reveals himself, one might, indeed, get a glimmer of what love is. Mendez is hardly sentimental (or pitying) in the love he displays for Will. He criticizes, cajoles and demands much in his treatment of Will. This love is true and indeed, the audience can see that loving in this manner is discomfoting, at times, for the giver. Yet, therein the only “salvation” for Will. Likewise, the love

Mendez displays is an acting love. At the bridge, he turns his back and walks away, though the natural inclination would be to carry Will across.

- Hope- Hope of “things unseen” is central to the film. From the caterpillar which will turn into the butterfly, to the vision Mendez has for Will, hope permeates this film.
- The last shall be first...- This film illustrates the theology that Christ uses the least of us for his purpose. Will, with no arms or legs, becomes a star circus performer and a hero to the young and old alike... despite his initial protests. Much like Moses, who protested that he was no leader, God had other plans in mind.
- Let he who is without sin cast the first stone...- While not a central theme in the film, there is a scene at the beginning where two boys have tomatoes to throw at Will as he is “on display.” One hits him. The other’s hand is stopped in mid-throw by Mendez, who proclaims Will’s “beauty.” This scene is a vehicle for discussion of Christ and the adulterous woman... and our own proclivity to pick up stones, tomatoes, hurtful and criticizing words, to hurl at others.

**Recommended amounts:** The film is short, and should be viewed in its entirety, perhaps even several times. It should be viewed together, followed by individual reflection (or note taking), then discussed as a group.

**Summary:** Well, simply watch it and weep with every other human possessing even a modicum of heart.