

ONCE UPON A CATERPILLAR

by Kathleen T. Pelley



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ONCE UPON A CATERPILLAR

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

NARRATOR

An adult storyteller who tells portions of the story and sets the stage.

SON

A plump, contented caterpillar who loves to eat. Very endearing. He longs for something more in his life, but is terrified of change.

FATHER

The caterpillar's father. A wise and gentle butterfly who comforts and encourages his son.

CATERPILLARS 1, 2, 3

Old caterpillars who are kind and helpful.

LADYBUG

Contemptuous and scornful.

SPIDER

Feels pity for the caterpillar.

EARTHWORM

Scornful.

A FLY

A rude and haughty insect.

ANTS 1 and 2

Happy and friendly, but too busy to talk.

FOUR OR FIVE SMALL CATERPILLARS

No dialog. They just crawl in the background.

SUMMER CHILDREN

2-4 needed. No dialog.

AUTUMN CHILDREN

2 needed. No dialog.

SPEAKERS 1, 2, 3, 4

Adults or older children.

PRODUCTION NOTES

CASTING

The cast of this play is flexible. An entire children's Sunday school department may be utilized. All the children may help sing the songs. You may have extra caterpillars or Summer and Autumn Children if desired. You may opt to have fewer of these parts if you do not have enough children to fill them.

MUSIC

If desired, you may have soft instrumental music playing over the P.A. system as the play begins. There are five songs called for in the script. Song One may be a song of your choice. It should have a message about the nearness of God's presence. The hymns "Be Not Dismayed" or "Abide With Me" would work. These hymns may be found in most hymnals, including *The Book of Hymns* (pages 207 and 289), the official hymnal of the United Methodist Church, copyright © 1964, 1966 by the Board of Publications of The United Methodist Church, Inc. Available from the United Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, TN. Song Two is "I Have Known You." The music is included. Song Three is "New Life." As it is sung to the tune of the familiar "Greensleeves," only the words are included. Song Four is "The Change Song." It is sung to the tune of "The Skye Boat Song." As this tune may not be familiar to everyone, the music is included. Song Five is "We Thank You Father." The music is included.

LIGHTING

There are lighting cues included in this script. Feel free to use them if you have access to a lighting system. If you do not have this equipment, simply disregard the instructions. Lights are not necessary to the production.

SOUND

The script calls for a number of Off-stage sounds. Have fun making your own tape of sounds, or purchase a sound effects record. Sounds needed are: 1. rustling of leaves (p 1), 2. loud popping (p. 1), 3. wind (p. 3), 4. water gushing (p. 5) and 5. a loud cracking (p. 6).

Remember to set up an Off-stage microphone for the Father, as he is heard but not seen for the first half of the play.

PROPS

Only a few props are needed. Cover a box with white paper for

the Ants' sugar cube. Purchase some fall-colored leaves at a craft store for the Autumn Children. Provide glitter and silver stars, made from cardboard covered with aluminum foil with double-stick tape on the back for the Summer Children. For the chrysalis (p. 6), use a large cardboard packing box, draped with crepe paper or material (see diagram). A large opening should be made in the front for the child to burst through — sound effect will come from Off-stage. A small dome-shaped tent draped with brown, crinkly paper could also work.

SETTING

The play takes place in a garden. Use a backdrop with a painting of colorful flowers, plants and bushes. Real flowers and plants could also be used. You may make cardboard trees with green tissue paper leaves (see diagram).

COSTUMES

Caterpillars — A long-sleeved green turtleneck, green tights, sweatpants, or leggings, and a stocking cap.

Son — Same costume as above, worn under a green sleeping bag. (Any color of bag could be covered with green material.) The sleeping bag is tied loosely at several places so the child can still crawl out. When he turns into a butterfly, thin, rayon wings decorated with markers and sequins may be safety-pinned to the back of his caterpillar costume. Loops of elastic, which have been sewn onto the tips of the wings, fit on the child's wrists. Antennae made of black pipe cleaners may be fastened to a headband.

Father — Black turtleneck and black tights, sweatpants, or leggings; wings and antennae as for Son.

Earthworm — Brown sleeping bag and stocking cap.

Spider — Black leotard, black tights, gloves, and an eye mask. Arms and legs represent two pairs of spiders legs. For the other two pairs, two pairs of black tights stuffed with material and sewn onto back of costume would work. (See diagram.) Child crawls across stage.

Ladybug — Black leotard, black tights, eye mask. Make wings as for butterfly, except use thicker red material (like felt) and stick on black dots. Child crawls across the stage.

Fly — Black leotard, black tights, eye mask and wire-framed wings covered with cling wrap. (See diagram.)

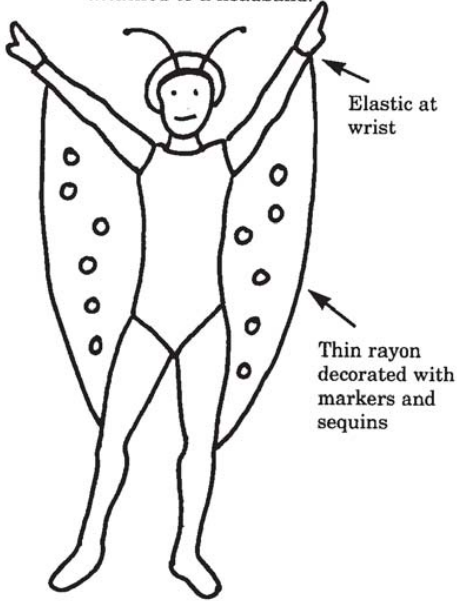
Ants — Black leotard, black tights and eye mask.

Summer Children — White leotards, white tights and a gold cape.

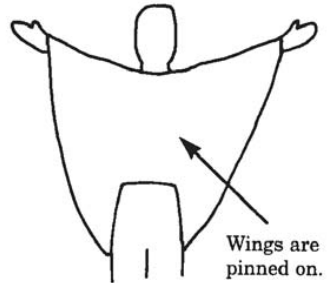
Autumn Children — Orange or brown leotards, brown tights, and a flowing gold/orange cape.

BUTTERFLY

Antennae are pipe cleaners attached to a headband.

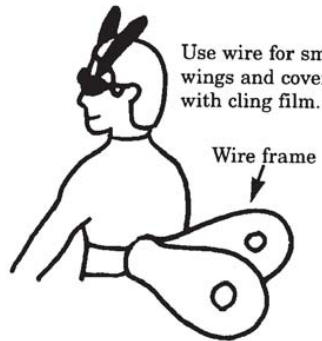


BACK OF BUTTERFLY

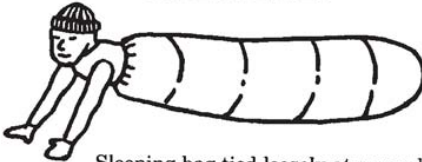


FLY

Use wire for small wings and cover with cling film.

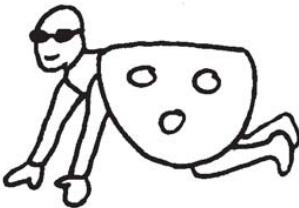


CATERPILLAR

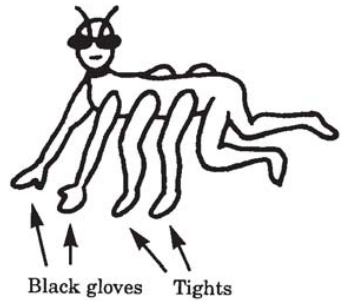


Sleeping bag tied loosely at several points so that child can still crawl out.

LADYBUG

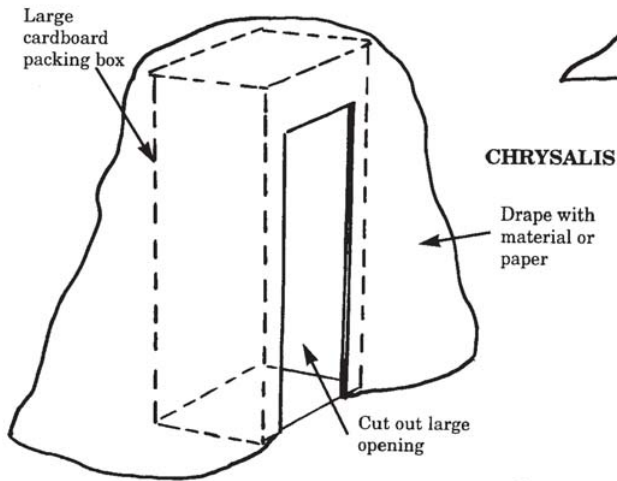
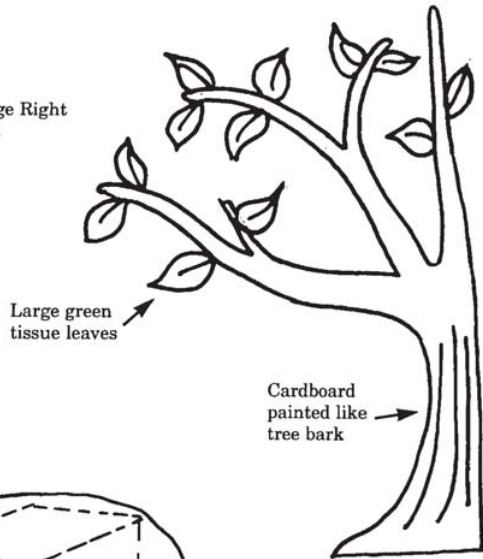


SPIDER



TREES

Make two- one for Stage Right and one for Stage Left.



Dome type tent draped with material or paper might also work.



(NARRATOR speaks from the side at the front of the stage. SON and four or five small CATERPILLARS are crawling in and out among the flowers. Some peaceful, calm music may be playing softly in the background as NARRATOR begins to speak.)

NARRATOR: Once there was a beautiful garden, soft and fresh, filled with the song of birds and the promise of peace. And in this garden lived a caterpillar who was plump and bristly and hungry.

Every day the caterpillar wriggled and crawled along the branch of a tree to find some juicy leaves. Hungrily, he nibbled and gnawed until nothing remained but spindly skeletons. (SON chews on leaves.) Then slowly, inch by inch, he shuffled and wiggled in search of another cluster of leaves. And again, he munched and chewed until his stomach felt so full he could not swallow another shred. (SON pats his stomach contentedly.)

It felt good to gorge upon such tasty morsels, and the caterpillar was very happy in the garden. (SON keeps crawling slowly.) Day after day, leaf after leaf, he grew plumper and plumper. Soon his skin began to stretch out tight and taut across his body, and he felt a sharp tingle of fear ripple down his back.

SON: (With a frightened expression) Oh dear, oh dear, something very strange is happening to me.

NARRATOR: In the rustling of the leaves, the caterpillar heard a voice, soft and gentle. (Loud rustling in the background)

FATHER: (From Off-stage) Don't be afraid, little caterpillar. You are only growing and changing. Now you will have a new and better skin.

SON: (Crossly) I don't want a new and better skin. I just want to stay as I am.

NARRATOR: As he spoke, the caterpillar heard a curious popping sound. (Loud popping in the background) His skin split apart and started to peel away. Slowly he wriggled

1 out of his crumped, old skin. (*SON wriggles out of sleeping*
 2 *bag wearing green costume.*) **Feeling bare and frightened, he**
 3 **lay quivering upon a leaf.** (*SON shakes. Enter three old*
 4 *CATERPILLARS from Stage Right.*) **Three old caterpillars**
 5 **shuffled past him, smiling to one another.**

6 **CATERPILLAR 1:** (*Chuckling*) **Looks like he's just shed his skin**
 7 **for the first time.**

8 **CATERPILLAR 2:** (*Nodding and smiling*) **Yes, the first time is**
 9 **always the worst.**

10 **CATERPILLAR 3:** (*Kindly*) **Don't worry, little one. It happens to**
 11 **us all.**

12 **SON:** (*Sobbing*) **But I don't want it to happen to me. I liked my**
 13 **old skin.**

14 **CATERPILLAR 3:** **Don't worry, it's for the best. Nothing stays**
 15 **the same forever.**

16 **CATERPILLAR 1:** (*Cheerfully*) **You'll soon get used to it. We did.**
 17 (*The CATERPILLARS shuffle off, smiling. The SON stares*
 18 *wistfully at his old skin.*)

19 **NARRATOR:** **And in a little while the caterpillar did grow**
 20 **used to his strange, new skin, and off he crawled in**
 21 **search of bigger and better leaves.** (*SON crawls to another*
 22 *branch.*)

23 **Summer passed with her gold-brushed days and star-**
 24 **tipped nights.** (*SUMMER CHILDREN enter Stage Right and*
 25 *Left. They are dressed in gold. Two sprinkle glitter over the stage.*
 26 *The other two pin silver stars to the background.*) **The rains fell**
 27 **in a soft pitter-patter, and a sweet, damp scent lingered in**
 28 **the air.**

29 **Sometimes, when the caterpillar watched a raindrop**
 30 **sparkle or a sunbeam dance, he began to wonder.** (*SON*
 31 *stares above him and speaks slowly, pausing after every sentence.*
 32 *As he speaks, LADYBUG, SPIDER and WORM enter from Stage*
 33 *Left, creeping up behind him. He does not see or hear them. They*
 34 *snicker among themselves as he speaks. The small CATER-*
 35 *PILLARS in the background crawl Off-stage one by one.*)

1 SON: (*Dreamily*) I wonder where the sun goes at night. I
2 wonder how far this tree stretches up above me. And I
3 wonder why the stars twinkle.

4 LADYBUG: Why, listen to that foolish caterpillar. He's so busy
5 wondering that he hasn't even noticed what's happening
6 to his friends.

7 WORM: (*Gleefully*) Wait till he finds out. I don't think he'll have
8 any time to wonder about such foolish nonsense then.

9 SPIDER: (*Concerned*) Don't you think we should tell him? He
10 really ought to know how all those caterpillars crawl into
11 their tiny houses and just...just...shrivel away. (*Shudders*
12 *in disgust.*)

13 LADYBUG: No, no, leave him alone. Let him enjoy his
14 wondering.

15 WORM: Yes, he'll find out soon enough.

16 SPIDER: (*Disappointedly*) I suppose you're right. Poor foolish
17 creature. (*SPIDER, LADYBUG and WORM exit, shaking their*
18 *heads.*)

19 NARRATOR: Soon the caterpillar grew tired of wondering,
20 and when he looked around, he saw that all the other
21 caterpillars in the garden had disappeared. He felt sad
22 and lonely now.

23 SON: I wonder where all my friends have gone. Why have they
24 disappeared? Where *are* they?

25 NARRATOR: The poor little caterpillar began to tremble with
26 fear. For what if he too should disappear one day?

27 SON: (*Crying*) Oh, why must things change? Why can't
28 everything just stay the same?

29 NARRATOR: (*Sound of wind in the background*) In the whisper of
30 the wind, he heard the voice again.

31 FATHER: (*From Off-stage*) Don't be afraid, little caterpillar.
32 Soon it will be time for you to come to me.

33 NARRATOR: The caterpillar was puzzled, for he did not know
34 where the voice was. (*FLY enters on right side of SON.*) He
35 looked to his right and saw an ugly old fly.

1 **SON:** Was it you who spoke to me?

2 **FLY:** (*Haughtily, lifting his nose in the air*) Me? Talk to a
3 caterpillar? Certainly not!

4 **NARRATOR:** (*Two ANTS enter on SON's left with lump of sugar.*) He
5 looked to his left and saw a couple of black ants scurrying
6 by with a lump of sugar.

7 **SON:** Was it you who spoke to me?

8 **ANT 1:** (*Giggling*) Not us. Not us.

9 **ANT 2:** We're too busy to talk.

10 **NARRATOR:** The caterpillar tried to peer up above him, but it
11 hurt to lift his head so high, and the sun felt hot and
12 prickly against his eyes. (*Rubs his eyes.*)

13 **SON:** (*In exasperation*) Where *are* you?

14 **FATHER:** (*From Off-stage*) I am very close. It's hard for you to
15 see me now, but one day you will.

16 **NARRATOR:** So the caterpillar crawled over to another leaf
17 and began to nibble busily, (*SON nibbles a leaf*) for after all,
18 he thought, it would never do to waste time chatting
19 when he could be eating.

20 The days seemed long and lonely now, and he began to
21 feel a curious stirring in his heart. He longed for
22 something, but for what, he did not know. (*Stage darkens a*
23 *little and SON lays down.*) In the quiet of the evening, the
24 voice spoke again.

25 **FATHER:** (*From Off-stage*) Soon, little caterpillar, I will show
26 you many wonderful things.

27 **SON:** (*Hopefully*) Oh, do you have some new leaves for me to
28 eat?

29 **NARRATOR:** If the truth can be told, the caterpillar was
30 growing rather tired of eating the same old leaves day
31 after day.

32 **FATHER:** (*From Off-stage*) No, you won't want to eat leaves
33 when you come to me.

34 **SON:** (*Huffily*) What? Not want to eat leaves? Well, I don't think
35 this place of yours can be so very wonderful after all.

1 *(Starts nibbling on a leaf.)*

2 **NARRATOR:** And the caterpillar shuffled off to gnaw upon a
3 leaf. But it tasted rather dry and dull now, and it did not
4 satisfy this strange longing inside him. If only he knew
5 what it was that his heart wanted. Why couldn't it be
6 satisfied with a clump of juicy leaves like his stomach?

7 **SON:** *(Sighing)* Oh dear, oh dear. Why must things change all
8 the time? *(He crawls over to Stage Right. The lights are turned*
9 *off.)*

10 **NARRATOR:** In the deep of the night he heard the voice again,
11 hushed and soothing.

12 **FATHER:** *(From Off-stage)* Be still, little caterpillar. I am with
13 you.

14 **NARRATOR:** *(Stage lightens again.)* Soon the days grew shorter.
15 *(AUTUMN CHILDREN, dressed in gold, enter from either side*
16 *and scatter crisp, brown leaves over the floor.)* The leaves
17 turned to a crisp, burnt gold. Shriveled and crumpled,
18 they fluttered to the ground and lay in a lifeless heap.
19 The caterpillar felt the sharp chill of change all around
20 him. *(SON shivers and looks miserable.)* And again he grew
21 afraid. But as he listened to the brook in the garden
22 gushing and trickling, he heard the voice, pure and
23 rippling. *(Sound of water gushing from Off-stage)*

24 **FATHER:** *(From Off-stage)* Don't be afraid. When you come to
25 me, you will be filled with a great joy. *(SON smiles and looks*
26 *up.)*

27 **NARRATOR:** The caterpillar was beginning to like the voice
28 now, for it made him feel safe and loved. One day he
29 heard it calling to him, loudly and firmly.

30 **FATHER:** *(Calling from Off-stage)* Come, little caterpillar. It is
31 time for you to change one last time so that we can be
32 together.

33 **SON:** *(Alarmed)* Change! Oh no, dear voice, not again. You
34 know how much I hate to change. Can't I just stay as I am
35 a little longer?

FATHER: *(From Off-stage, firmly)* No! You must come to me now and be what you were born to be.

SON: *(Pleading)* Just give me a little longer.

NARRATOR: But even as he spoke, the caterpillar felt a sticky liquid oozing out from his body. *(SON looks in alarm at his body. Stage darkens.)* His skin started to peel away, and he felt himself sticking to the bark of the tree. *(Lights are turned off.)* Darkness closed in all around him. His body became weak and limp, as if his life was being sucked away, little by little.

The caterpillar began to cry bitterly. He wept for all the things he was leaving behind: for the beautiful garden, for the leaves he had once liked to eat, and for the golden sunlight that had warmed him. Alone in the darkness with his thoughts, the caterpillar still felt that curious emptiness in his heart — the same gnawing pang of hunger that he used to feel in his stomach. Then he heard the voice, close and soft.

FATHER: *(From Off-stage)* Hush, little caterpillar. I am with you still. I will never leave you. *(Stage remains in darkness as CHILDREN sing Song One, a song about the nearness of God's presence. Suggested songs: "Be Not Dismayed" or "Abide With Me." While they are singing, the SON exits and has his butterfly wings attached and puts on his antennae. Chrysalis is put at Stage Right, at the very edge. The SON curls up in the chrysalis.)*

NARRATOR: And the caterpillar's heart leapt with joy. Now he knew what his heart yearned for. More than anything, he wanted to be near the voice. Every day in the darkness, he heard it speak to him again and again until he felt as if it was almost part of him, and he was part of it. His fears began to melt away, and a strange power surged through him. *(Lights come up.)* Day after day, he pushed and shoved with all his might against the brittle shell that surrounded him. *(Shakes against his chrysalis.)*

One day he heard a loud cracking sound. *(Loud cracking*

from Off-stage) The chrysalis split apart, and the caterpillar struggled out into the light. (SON crawls out, blinking in the light. He keeps his arms at his sides. FATHER enters holding his arms out, so his wings are displayed.) Dazed and stunned, he gazed in wonder at the sight before him. A beautiful winged creature, in a blaze of colors, spoke softly in the voice he had come to know so well.

FATHER: Welcome, my son. Welcome.

NARRATOR: Slowly the caterpillar looked down at his own body and saw a pair of damp, matted wings clinging to his sides.

SON: But...but...I am just like you.

FATHER: Yes, my son. You too are a butterfly. (CHILDREN assemble up front for Song Two, "I Have Known You.")

ALL CHILDREN: (Singing) I have known you in the balance of the slowly moving stars

And I think I've glimpsed you sometimes as the bitter night has passed

I have sensed you at the moment when you still the storm
The moment when you touch our world and make us calm again

Oh, it's easy then to see you and know that you are near,
It's easy then to know for sure the way ahead is clear
And I have seen the open road before me, heard the words you held behind my eyes.

And I have often heard a fragment of the long-forgotten song

And for a moment felt the presence that will lead us on.
I've known the heavy fall of silence and moments of the clearest sight

I've known you in your darkness and I've known you in your light,

And I know the gift is freely given, hard to understand,
And I know the gift can only be returned.

1 I know the gift is freely given, hard to understand.

2 And I know the gift can only be returned.

3 *(CHILDREN remain in place following the song.)*

4 **NARRATOR:** Now the son stared longingly into his father's
5 face and caught a tiny glimmer of himself flickering back
6 from those gentle, wise eyes. He stretched out his wings
7 and felt them become dry and firm. *(SON stretches arms out*
8 *wide and stares in wonder.)* Then the two butterflies soared
9 up into the endless blue sky. *(FATHER and SON dance*
10 *across stage as if flying.)* The young butterfly felt the brush
11 of the wind, the warmth of the sun, the power of the
12 flight, and the love of his father all rushing and spilling
13 over him, until he felt as if he might truly burst with
14 happiness. *(While the FATHER and SON dance across the*
15 *stage, all sing Song Three, "New Life," to the tune of*
16 *"Greensleeves.")*

17 **ALL CHILDREN:** *(Singing)* At last, my son, you come to me
18 To live a new and wondrous life,
19 And I have loved you so long
20 Waiting for your company.

21
22 Come now and follow me.

23 See what joy is yours today.

24 Dance, sing, and be glad, my son, for

25 You've been given a new life.

26 *(CHILDREN sit on the front pews following the song.)*

27 **SON:** *(Looks around.)* This is such a beautiful place. Where are
28 we?

29 **FATHER:** We're in the very same garden where you have
30 always lived.

31 **SON:** But how can that be? It must have changed somehow.

32 **FATHER:** No, my son, it hasn't changed. It is only you who
33 have changed.

34 **SON:** But Father, why did you never tell me how wonderful it
35 would be to become like you?

FATHER: I tried, but when you were a caterpillar you thought only your caterpillar thoughts and dreamed only your caterpillar dreams. You couldn't even begin to imagine what wonders were in store for you.

NARRATOR: The father and son glided and fluttered, dipped and soared. (*FATHER and SON dance around the stage. One of the SMALL CATERPILLARS enters and begins to crawl around.*) When they stopped to take a rest, (*FATHER and SON kneel*) the young butterfly gazed around him and spotted a tiny caterpillar crawling over a leaf.

SON: (*Excitedly*) Oh, if I could only tell you what wonders await you!

NARRATOR: But of course, the caterpillar just continued to crawl and shuffle, and munch and chew, as caterpillars will do. (*CATERPILLAR crawls to Center Stage. All the CHILDREN enter singing Song Four, "The Change Song," to the tune of "The Skye Boat Song" [music included].*)

ALL CHILDREN: (*Singing*) Caterpillar, like you we must
change,
Change and grow again,
Change and die to be reborn
In a new life with Christ.

Jesus our Lord,
He is risen,
He has set us free.
Free from death,
Free from pain,
He gives us life anew.

(*Repeat once more.*)

(*SPEAKERS 1, 2, 3 and 4 now come forward. Their words are an opportunity for all to reflect on the joy of Easter. These passages should be read very slowly to allow time for reflection.*)

SPEAKER 1: We are all like the little caterpillar. Sometimes we are afraid to change, afraid to grow, afraid to leave

1 behind the things of this world to be what we were born
2 to be.

3 **SPEAKER 2:** Jesus said, "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the
4 ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it
5 dies, it produces many seeds." (John 12:24) Things must
6 change and die in order to grow again. Just as the
7 caterpillar shed his old skin and burst out from his
8 chrysalis in a blaze of glory, transformed into a beautiful
9 butterfly, so too shall we shed our old skin, our old life,
10 and be transformed into a new and glorious life with
11 Christ.

12 **SPEAKER 3:** It is a life so wonderful that, like the caterpillar,
13 we find it hard to imagine. No eye has seen, no ear has
14 heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for
15 those who love him. (I Corinthians 2:9)

16 **SPEAKER 4:** Jesus died on the cross, but God the Father
17 raised him to a new and glorious life, a life that knows no
18 death. The resurrection of Jesus brings us a new life.
19 Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who
20 believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever
21 lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26)

22 **SPEAKER 1:** God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his
23 Son. He who has the Son has life. (I John 5:11-12) *(The*
24 *Scripture reading John 20:1-9, about Mary Magdalene*
25 *discovering the empty tomb, could be used here instead.)*
26 *(All CHILDREN enter and sing Song Four, "We Thank You,*
27 *Father" [music included].)*

28 **ALL CHILDREN:** *(Singing)* We thank you, Father, for the One
29 Whose Resurrection is among us now,
30 And in the Spirit, let us share the joy we've found:

31
32 And we thank you for the Word that you have opened us
33 to hear,

34 We thank you for the certainty of knowing you are near.
35 We thank you for the gift of being sure we have received

A deeper understanding now of all that we believe.

And we praise you in the Spirit for the glory of your Son
 We praise you for the mystery of what we have become
 We praise you for the fullness of the life in which we share
 And most of all we praise you just for being who you are,
 and for the

Power that is given in the speaking of your name,
 For the healing that his hidden as we turn to you again,
 And we'll praise you in our living and we'll praise you in
 our prayer
 And most of all we'll praise you just in being who we are
 Most of all we'll praise you just in being who we are.

NOTE: The numerals running vertically down the left margin of each page of dialog are for the convenience of the director. With these, he/she may easily direct attention to a specific passage.



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