

**Phoenix Rising**  
**Don't Miss the Opportunity for Something Greater**  
**By**  
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I'm guessing most are familiar with the Phoenix motif from Greek mythology: A new phoenix bird is reborn from the ashes its predecessor. It probably originated as a solar myth, depicting the return of Summer and longer days, akin to the Greek gods Attis and Dionysus, the Egyptian god Horus, the Persian god Mithra, the Hindu god Krishna and the Roman god Christ, all said to have returned to life near the Winter solstice. But the Phoenix has become as much a symbol representing hope and transformation. It suggests the possibility that we can emerge from the worst periods in our lives triumphant if we are willing to let them change us into something new.

We see this happen in real life through the transformation of a worm into a butterfly. I especially appreciate the Monarch butterfly's transformation. After passing through several larval stages, called instars, the long skinny bug hangs from a milkweed leaf and seemingly dies as its corpse slowly turns into an emerald colored sack adorned with a row of three shiny dots of gold. It looks more like a piece of expensive jewelry than the encrusted cocoons of most other butterfly species. What's amazing is that within that beautiful jeweled sack, all that was one the living creature has become liquid, amounting to no more than a few drops of water. Yet within those small drops the creature's DNA is reordering itself to become something entirely new. If we couldn't see this extraordinary metamorphosis happen right before us, who could ever believe they could have once been the same being? It would be like something made up in a Harry Potter book. The Monarch is a real-life phoenix.

Let me tell you the stories of four other real-life phoenixes: one a child refugee among the thousands of Boat People who made desperate and dangerous attempts to flee their country after the end of the Vietnam War by crowding into whatever small seafaring vessels they could; one a quadriplegic who lost the use of his limbs at age 18 after being shot during a carjacking; one a record breaking Formula-1 racecar driver; and one a leading brain researcher and successful entrepreneur that *Forbes* has called one of the top 50 names you need to know.

In case you haven't already guessed, these aren't really four different people. I'm speaking of only two people who, like the mythical Phoenix, saw their former worlds burn and crumble: one who literally fled a country that had been nearly burned to the ground, and the other who lost his ability to move just as his life was beginning. Neither had any reason to hope they would survive, let alone go on to flourish. But they did. One became a leading neuroscientist, and the other a famous racecar driver.

Naturally, we'd conclude it was the refugee who became the racecar driver, since she had the full use of her limbs, a necessity for driving; and the quadriplegic who became the neuroscientist and successful entrepreneur, since he retained the full use of his mind. But, no, it's the other way around. It is the quadriplegic man who emerged from the ashes to drive the racecar, and the impoverished little girl who emerged from hers to become one of today's most successful women in the world.

"It was 1981, six years after the fall of Saigon had marked the end of the Vietnam War," Tan Li recounts, "I was four years old. I huddled with my mother, grandmother, and little sister on the boat, crouching to stay out of sight—as did the other 150-plus people crammed on board."<sup>1</sup> If captured, they would all spend the rest of their lives in a Vietnamese prison camp. If not, there was also the likelihoods of engine failure and lingering to death at sea, or drowning in the midst of a storm, or being overtaken by pirates who would do unspeakable things before killing everyone. "Like most of the grown-ups on the journey," Li says, "my mother had tucked away a small vial of poison. She and my grandmother had made a pact: If we were captured by pirates, my sister and I would drink from the vial first, then they would swallow the last drops."<sup>2</sup> Her father stayed behind, to be there for them in case they were forced to return, intending himself to make the treacherous journey later on. But he was captured before he could, and spent many years in prison: broken, suicidal, and not knowing what had happened to his family.

Tan Li says their boat had been encircled by pirates several times, but they were lucky to be aboard a tugboat with a steel hull, that made them wary of trying to overtake it without damaging their own vessels. Eventually their engine did fail, however, and they ran out of food and water for several days before being spotted by a British oil tanker. But its crew wasn't allowed to rescue them unless their ship was sinking and they sent a distress signal. So they sank it and put out an SOS.

After 9 months in a Malaysian detention camp, Li and her family landed in Australia, where she would grow up. In school, she became a brilliant and celebrated student, while at home she shared a bed with her mother and sister. Her mother wanted Tan to use her great mind to become a successful doctor or attorney, but she was called in another direction. "My main motivation had always been—and still is—to make my life meaningful, to make a positive impact by creating something that didn't exist before, that would improve the state of the world."<sup>3</sup> Because of her particular interest, she would find her purpose in the area of brain science.

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<sup>1</sup> Li, Tan, *The Neuro Generation*, BenBella Books, Inc., Dallas, TX, 2020, p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. xvii.

Sometime later, Tan Li was at a Young Global Leaders Summit in Buenos Aires, when she noticed a “gregarious man in a wheelchair.”<sup>4</sup> When she heard who he was, she had to meet him. Rodrigo Hübner Mendes accomplished something nobody else had ever achieved when taking off in a Formula-1 race car on a Brazilian speedway in 2017. The quadriplegic daredevil controlled the car with his mind.

When he got the okay, he accelerated, roaring down the track. As he came upon the first tight curve, a thought flashed through his mind: *This is it, the moment of truth*. Could he maintain control of the car? It wasn't smooth, but he managed to bank around the hairpin turn without crashing. Exhilarated, he continued around the course, completing three laps before passing the finish line as a checkered flag waved him in.<sup>5</sup>

At age forty-five, Mendes made history by using his mind to drive a race car that had no steering wheel or pedals. He did so with EEG technology that allowed him to control the car with his brain-waves by thinking about it turning, speeding, or slowing. Tan Li caught up with him at the valet station just as he was about to leave the summit. “I ran up to him and told him I was curious about the mind-control helmet he'd worn,” Li says. “He took one look at my nametag and shouted my name with an exuberant grin.”<sup>6</sup> It turns out the device he'd used was developed by EMOTIV, Tan Li's own company. Inspired by *Star Wars* as a child, Tan Li wanted to invent a helmet or headset that can enable us to control machines, like starfighters, with our minds. She wanted to give us the ability to use the Force. And that's exactly what she did for her fellow phoenix, Rodrigo Mendez.

When I learned that *Phoenix* is also the root of Phoenician, and means “those who work with red dyes,” explaining the mythical bird's brilliant purple and red coloring, it reminded me of another real-life phoenix. Around 300 BCE, Zeno of Citium, who was literally a Phoenician who made a fortune working in the expensive dye trade, was transporting his precious cargo of fermenting shellfish across the Mediterranean Sea. They were used for making *the imperial royal purple* dye that colored the clothes of kings and emperors. It would take thousands of the unfortunate creatures just to harvest a few ounces of dye, which is why it was so valuable.

But Zeno's ship was caught in a violent storm, resulting in the loss of everything but his life. Shipwrecked in Athens, a homeless and destitute foreigner, Zeno went seeking advice from the Oracle of Delphi. Speaking through the High Priestess at the Temple of Apollo, the Oracle told Zeno, “*Take on the color not of dead shellfish but of dead men.*”<sup>7</sup> Not understanding its meaning, and feeling more helpless than ever, he made the long trek back to Athens where, nearly exhausted, he stopped to rest at a bookshop. There he began reading Socrates and was profoundly moved by his transformative words. “Perhaps it was at this moment that

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. x.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Robertson, Donald. *How to Think Like a Roman Emperor* (p. 30). St. Martin's Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Zeno suddenly realized what the Oracle meant,” author Donald Robertson writes, “he was to ‘take on the color of dead men’ by thoroughly absorbing the teachings of wise men from previous generations.”<sup>8</sup>

“Where can I find a philosopher,” Zeno asked. In that moment, as legend has it, Crates the Cynic was passing by.

“Follow yonder man,” the shopkeeper said. Zeno did, and became Crates’ student. Eventually he began teaching his own philosophy. He and his students, the Zenonians, as they were called, met at Athens’ *Stoa Poikile*, the Painted Porch, which is where they got the nickname that we still call them today, stoics. I won’t go into Stoicism here, but it remains among the most popular and enduring of the ancient Greek philosophical traditions.

Here we have three real-life examples of individuals who experienced the kind of tragedies that could have ruined their entire lives: one lost her country, another his health, and yet another his wealth. Yet they emerged from these ruins to achieve extraordinary heights. That’s the lesson of the Phoenix, that when all seems lost, when the old ways suddenly crumble and no longer work for us, something new and extraordinary can begin.

But the nuanced point that’s not to be missed is that phoenixes don’t emerge restored. What they were remains gone. What they lost is lost forever and has to be let go of. Li didn’t regain her country. Mendez didn’t regain the use of his body. Zeno didn’t regain his fortune. They succeeded, rather, in brand new ways. The rising Phoenix isn’t about going backward. It’s not about restoring what is past, but about moving forward and being transformed by the losses, injuries, poverty, chrysalises, ruins, and ashes of our lives.

Today our entire society, if not the whole world, is at a Phoenix moment in history. COVID-19 has shown us how vulnerable we are, how fragile our health and our lives, as well as our livelihoods and economies. And right now, many of us are wondering how long it’s going to take for things to get back to normal. But going back to normal would only add tragedy to tragedy. The old Phoenix requires us to be transformed for the better by its sacrifice, not to return to the same old ways. The Phoenix rising is a moment of simultaneous disruption and opportunity to birth something new.

The problem for us that old dying Phoenix is ancient. In most legends it lives to be 500 years old, which means it represents habits that are extremely hard to break. White Supremacy is such a phoenix. It’s been around a long time, so long that even if most of us don’t believe in it anymore, it’s seeped into our institutions. That’s because we don’t know how to let it die. We end slavery, only to replace it with Jim Crow segregation. We end Jim Crow segregation, only to replace it with mass incarceration. Instead of letting the old bird perish, we put it on

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

life support even though its time has passed. We've got to let this phoenix die so we can rise above it.

I think about the economic recession that hit just as Barack Obama took office in 2008. That was another dying phoenix that didn't need life support. But instead of seizing the opportunity to truly transform our economy, Obama only revived it. He didn't break up the banking industry so it would never be too big to fail us again. His Department of Justice never made one arrest or prosecution of a senior Wall Street banker for participating in widespread systemic fraud. And he put the same Wall Street insiders who had been in charge when the collapse happened—Larry Summers, Timothy Geithner, and Ben Bernanke, back in charge of the National Economic Council, the Treasury, and the Federal Reserve. His effort, to his credit, may have temporarily revived the ruined economy, but it did not transform it, which left most of us just as vulnerable as we had been before. As we see today, it did not prevent us from being just one economic disaster away from another collapse. The 2008 economic collapse was another opportunity to rise above an economy that already left too wide a chasm between the haves and the have nots. But we couldn't let the old bird living in an inflated bubble die when it ran out of oxygen.

There are so many missed phoenix-moments in human history. Remember what we called World War I, "the war to end all wars;" and what we said after World War II and the Nazi Holocaust, "never again." Yet we've had numerous wars and genocides since then, because we can't let the old war bird go either.

And remember 9/11, when we were told the whole world had changed. People around the globe stood with Americans in those first moments. "We are all Americans Now," a French newspaper proclaimed. It was an opportunity for world unity and goodwill that could have brought the entire human community closer. Instead, our leaders told us to keep shopping so the terrorists couldn't win. Then they began two endless wars that have cost trillions of dollars, killed millions of civilians, left communities in ruins, traded the global good will we'd been gifted for global hatred. We even turned on our own allies as soon as they refused to go along with the plan to shift the blame for the attacks onto Iraq, adding insult to injury by renaming French fries and French toast, Freedom Fries and Freedom toast. It was another embarrassing and costly failure to recognize the opportunity to be transformed by the rising phoenix.

Racism and oppression, economies that leave too many people out, and warfare have repeatedly left our lives, and our communities, and our countries in ruins, and we have repeatedly failed to head the lesson of the rising Phoenix by not taking the opportunity to transform all of these devastating habits in something far better, instead of trying to prop up the same old systems out of the dead bird's bones and ashes.

Today COVID-19 has shown us once again just how precarious the economy Obama rescued and Trump likes taking credit for, really is. A few people still have most everything, while most of us are one economic disaster away from losing everything: our income, our homes, and our very lives if we don't have healthcare. We are at a phoenix moment in history: an opportunity to commit ourselves to rising above the failings of our past, to learn our lessons and move onward and upward by transforming our lives and our world into something better.

An economy that doesn't provide for the needs of everyone is a failed economy. A healthcare system that doesn't care for the needs of everyone is a failed healthcare system. A bailout that only bails out the wealthiest industries is a failed bailout. A tax system that isn't equally as taxing on everyone is a failed tax system. Environmental policies that don't protect everyone's environment are failed policies. Politicians who care only for their voters and constituents are failures. Housing, education, employment systems that don't provide for us all are failures. They are all dying phoenixes we need to let die because we need to do the laborious work of birthing something better.

COVID-19, disastrous as it is, is still an opportunity for us to emerge from ashes and ruin in a new way, not the same old ways that will only put us back in the same desperate position in another few years from now. It's not really going to take much to emerge better than we were, considering the trillions we've already spent on wars for the past twenty years to keep the old oil-driven economy on life support. It's not going to cost us much to provide affordable healthcare to everyone, not compared to what we're spending to keep the old economy of the healthy-wealthy on life support. It's not going to cost us much to reinvent our tax systems compared to the trillions we're now spending to bailout the very industries that haven't been paying their fair shares to begin with. If we look closely, the ashes beneath us are parting and we can see the crown of something new and beautiful longing to be midwived into being. Let's not waste the opportunity this time. Let's be like Tan Li, and Rodrigo Mendez, and Zeno. Let's become the Phoenix rising.