

Winter Dreams

Reading: No. 543 Winter, from *Singing the Living Tradition*

Let us not wish away the winter. It is a season to itself, not simply the way to spring.

*When trees rest, growing no leaves, gathering no light,
they let in sky and trace themselves delicately against dawns and sunsets.*

The clarity and brilliance of the winter sky delight.

The loom of fog softens edges, lulls the eyes and ears of the quiet, awakens by risk the unquiet.

A low dark sky can snow, emblem of individuality, liberality, and aggregate power.

Snow invites to contemplation and to sport.

Winter is a table set with ice and starlight.

Winter dark tends to warm light: fire and candle;

winter cold to hugs and huddles;

winter want to gifts and sharing;

winter danger to visions, plans, and common endeavoring—

and the zest of narrow escapes; winter tedium to merrymaking.

Let us therefore praise winter, rich in beauty, challenge and pregnant negativities.

Music: “Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening.” (E. Butler)

Reflection

In her meditation on winter, Denise Levertov notices

The bare trees have made up their seed bundles.

They are ready now. The warm brown light pauses briefly, shrugs and moves on.

They are ready now to play dead for a while. I, human, have not as yet devised how to obtain such privilege.

Their spring will find them rested. I and my kind battle a wakeful way to ours.

Slowing down seems harder and harder in our culture, even in January. Sometimes I lament when beautiful snow has fallen overnight, and before dawn the snow plow and snowblowers are disturbing the peace and the beauty. To stop by woods on a snowy evening seems like such a quaint thing to do, something people did maybe in an earlier era when Frost was writing, but it is difficult for us. It seems to me that it used to be a slower time. But now, there is barely time to breathe between the frenzy of the holidays and the need to plan for and get going in the new year. In one weekend we had retreats for the Worship Committee and the Board and for two weeks straight, I've had meetings every night of the week. What's going on here? Why is it so hard for us to slow down, as nature and its keen observers encourage us.

My colleague Mark Belletini wrote:

Grey skies over my head,

Throw yourselves like quilts over my busy life

And remind me to sit down and rest. . .

. . . now come, Love greater than my longing,

Silence greater than fatigue of tongues,

And haul my heart away from the undue frenzy of the season,

And bestow it to rest, proportion and

The haunting dark beauty of winter's long nights.

Mark originally wrote that in a piece entitled "Winter Sequence." He was originally thinking of the "frenzy" of the holiday season. But now, we have frenzy in January. Is it some lack of faith which prevents us from heeding nature's rhythms? Or a lack of courage, as we fear what might bubble up from within? When you ask Unitarian Universalists when they feel most spiritual, the largest percentage answer that it is when they are communing with nature. I sometimes

want to ask those UUs who live in upstate New York that question in February, where we can feel buried in snow for weeks, and seemingly everyone has the winter blahs or cabin fever. About ten percent of us have Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, and it is not just a temporary feeling or mood, but can be season-long sentence.

But is the answer more activity? Marvin Hiles, who writes a contemplative journal, writes of “living January”:

"To live January is to live quietly, like the opening and closing of a door. . . we are tempted to rush into winter's emptiness and fill it with things to do, but winter is about waiting, not static waiting, but a kind of resting readiness. . . For now, the seeds of eventual blossoming curl inward. Tightly bound dogwood buds, red in the January sun, become small, hopeful prophecies. . . When we are closed in, what we need to feed our souls will appear in unexpected places." (Almanac of the Soul, page 25)

This year, for Christmas, I asked for snow shoes. I'm not quite comfortable on skis and a little reluctant to stress my aging knees too much, so thought that snow shoes might be the answer. I decided that rather than wish away the winter, I might try embracing it. I hadn't thought that exchanging skis for snow shoes could be a metaphor for slowing down. I might not be in the winter of my life yet, but I can see the end of fall. I often find winter hard to get through. I feel so starved for sunlight that sometimes I simply go outside and turn my face to the sun and drink in the light like some ancient sun worshipper.

But, what if, instead of treating Seasonal Affective Disorder with anti-depressants, we embraced our lack of energy as nature's wisdom. What if we simply gave ourselves permission to do less, go less, and simply rest. To acknowledge as Wendell Berry says, it is not by our will that “the house is carried through the night.”

The soul has its own sequence in winter. A sequence in which we are called to slow down, and rest in stillness.

Resting in Stillness

Reading: "Snow Fall," in *Letters from Maine*, by May Sarton

With no wind blowing

It sifts gently down,

Enclosing my world in

A cool white down

A tenderness of snowing.

It falls and falls like sleep

Till wakeful eyes can close

On all the waste and loss

As peace comes in and flows,

Snow-dreaming what I keep.

Silence assumes the air

And the five senses all

Are wafted on the fall

To somewhere magical

Beyond hope and despair.

There is nothing to do

But drift now, more or less

On some great lovingness

On something that does bless,

The silent, tender snow.

Music: Hymn No. 55 Dark of Winter

Dark of winter, soft and still, your quiet calm surrounds me.

Let my thoughts go where they will; ease my mind profoundly.

And then my soul will sing a song, a blessed song of love eternal.

Gentle darkness, soft and still, bring your quiet to me.

Darkness, soothe my weary eyes, that I may see more clearly.

When my heart with sorrow cries, comfort and caress me.

And then my soul may hear a voice, a still, small voice of love eternal.

Darkness, when my fears arise, let your peace flow through me.

Reflection:

A couple of weeks ago, I had a most perfect afternoon. I saw my Spiritual Director at 1. Together, we listen for the urgings of the Great Spirit, God or the Spirit of Life or the Universe, or my deepest self, or the creative powers of the universe, you may choose your preferred label – we listen for where that Spirit is calling me, especially where it is calling me in my ministry with you. We are new to each other, but very comfortable, and I left our session feeling blessed and calm. I decided I would stop at the Wilton Wildlife Preserve on the way home. I arrived at the preserve about 2:30, strapped on my snow shoes, made my way across the little bridge over the pond and stream and up the hill. The sun was beginning to sink into the west. As I made my way toward the top of the hill, the breeze stirred and the snow began to dance among the tops of the trees. That late-afternoon slanting light bounced off millions of snowflakes. It was a magical forest of shimmering light. I had to stop to simply watch. I sat down on an old stump and let myself be dazzled. If I were a painter I would paint it. If I were a poet, I would write things like my “five senses all are wafted on the fall to somewhere magical/ Beyond hope and despair.” In that arresting beauty, I rested, reminded again of “ . . . some great lovingness, . . . something that does bless.”

At those moments there is no where to go, nothing to do. Just peace beyond words, beyond music, beyond sound. The great silence.

Dreaming

Reading: "Thanks, Robert Frost," by David Ray

Do you have hope for the future?

Someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.

Yes, and even for the past, he replied.

That it will turn out to have been all right

For what it was, something we can accept,

Mistakes made by the selves we had to be,

Not able to be, perhaps, what we wished,

Or what looking back half the time it seems

We could so easily have been, or ought. . .

The future, yes, and even for the past,

That it will become something we can bear,

And I too, and my children, so I hope,

Will recall as not too heavy the tug

Of those albatrosses I sadly placed

Upon their tender necks. Hope for the past,

Yes, old Frost, your words provide that courage

And it brings strange peace that itself passes

Into past, easier to bear because

You said it, rather casually, as snow

Went on falling in Vermont years ago.

Music: Songs of a Winter's Night, op. 30 N. 1 (V Novak) Michael Harrison, Piano.

Reflection

The slower pace of winter, the resting in stillness can be a way of making room in our lives for something new, whether it be a new relationship, career, or maybe just a new way of seeing things. From whence shall it come? A couple of decades ago Starhawk wrote a book entitled, *Dreaming the Dark*, a sort of celebration that all newness and creativity come out of darkness and mystery.

In many cultures, dreams are thought to be “the secret wishes of the soul.” The Onkwehone people, part of the Mohawk Nation of Native Americans, each year at midwinter hold a Festival of Dreams. Robert Moss led a workshop on “Dreaming at Midwinter” yesterday at Stillpoint, the Interfaith House of Prayer in Stillwater. He said this in his description of the workshop:

"In Huron language, ondinnonk means 'a secret wish of the soul as expressed in a dream.' . . .The ancient dream healers understood that we are often out of touch, in our surface mind, with what we truly desire, on the level of heart and soul. If we fail to follow the secret wishes of the soul, part of our vital energy goes away. We become prone to illness and depression; we lose our magic. Through dreams, in which we may travel far beyond the body and the physical plane, we find our soulmates and our soul's purpose. By celebrating our dreams and helping them to take root in the world, we become whole and well, and live our deeper story."

Similarly, in the ancient healing cult of Asclepius, it was thought dreaming was an important part of the healing process. Patients were given a special room in which to sleep, and told to pay attention to their dreams, because it was thought the dreams would hold clues to healing.

Winter is a good time for dreaming because we are not as active. We may actually be sleeping more. But whether our dreams are coming through sleep on long winter nights, or during waking reveries as we watch snow falling, they are a way for us to touch deeper springs, to get in touch again with our souls. Darkness “nurtures our dreams.”

David Ray's poem elucidates Robert Frost's dreaming the past, and reforming it, making of it a kind of peace. What may have seemed challenging or even horrible at the time, can, a few months or years or even decades later, seem like a blessing, even like a great teacher. The Buddha taught that suffering is often a gateway to the spiritual path. Paul Tillich, great theologian of the twentieth century wrote, "Providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation." Dreams can help us see and bring forth those "saving possibilities," to help make them a reality.

Winter is a good time to reflect on the past, especially injuries received and given. We may have the leisure to examine them from many sides, and see them in new light, perhaps even dream of how healing might occur.

Winter is also a time to dream the future. Henri Frederic Amiel wrote, *"If you are conscious of something new – thought or feeling, wakening in the depths of your being—do not be in a hurry to let in light upon it, to look at it; let the springing germ have the protection of being forgotten, hedge it round with quiet, and do not break in upon its darkness; let it take shape and grow, and not a word of your happiness to any one! Sacred work of nature as it is, all conception should be enwrapped by the triple veil of modesty, silence and night."*

Words for Prayer and Meditation

Let us not wish away the winter.

May we embrace the rhythms of earth and sky,

Recognize that cycles of activity and rest are nature's wisdom.

May we gratefully receive winter's beauty.

And accept its invitation to a slower pace and
opportunity for reflection.

May we find our way through the maze of pain and failure

To places of solace, wider vision, more enduring peace.

May we trust our dreams,

Honoring them

as healing messages from those most sacred places deep within,
heart and soul,

wellsprings of a life of fulfillment in love and service.

Amen

Benediction

*Sunday afternoons in winter
When everyone has gone out!
The pure, yellow-green sun
Penetrates to the cold corners
And into the roses,
Just tended this morning—the light
Is listening, Spotless with love.*

The perfect hour

*Resembles one of my books.
And I go smiling through the whole house alone,
Savoring my soul,
Picking up and kissing the fallen crumbs.*

May you have such an afternoon.

***“Sunday Afternoons in Winter” in Selected Writings of Juan Ramon Jimenez,
translated by H.R. Hays***