

From Night Comes Dawn

“It’s the ocean” she said, as we sat at the end of a long hallway. “The ocean. The waves, the birds; it’s always there.”

The words of a struggling teenager. We sat together, cross legged on the floor and just talked. The carpet was dirty, pictures hung on the wall. She was struggling. She had struggled a lot. And so I asked her, “What helps when you feel like this?” She replied, “the ocean.” This brave young woman knew that life came in cycles. She knew there were good times and that there were hard times. And when times were hard, she knew what she could do to help herself overcome. She could remind herself of her safe space, the space she could always access in her heart, the ocean. Just as tangible as the tides, this metaphorical safe space brought her back, centered her through the difficult times, and remained a celebration during the good.

To this young woman, the ocean was, as Thoreau wrote, “an infinite expectation of the dawn”

Thoreau writes that the dawn will “not forsake us even in our soundest sleep.” – no matter what struggles we are facing, just like the sun will inevitably rise, our struggles will come to an end.

What is so beautiful about this quote is that it straddles the human experience of joy and pain with the tangible cycles of nature. We know that winter follows fall follows summer; we know that this is inevitable- just as inevitable as the dawn.

And that certainty of the dawn parallels the certainty that good will follow bad; bad will follow good; the expectation that, just like nature; life and experiences will cycle. Even in times of deepest heartbreak, we will reawaken – and we need keep ourselves awake! Just as the sun rises every morning. We can come to expect this.

September is here, a month that straddles summer and fall. That marks the cycle of the seasons as the lightness of summer transitions into the darkness of winter. We can begin to notice this transition with our senses! The transition is marked with trees fading to brown, sweatshirts being thrown over t-shirts and dresses, flocks of birds overhead beginning that migration south. Colors fade, temperatures lower, leaves rustle; – we can taste it as pumpkin pies are made and apples collected; yes it is a transition from warmth to cool and long days to short days and thus the cycle of light to dark; and yet the transition itself is beautiful. This inevitable transition of the season as the earth continues to circle the sun.

Not only can we notice this change in seasons with our senses, we can celebrate this transition!

Tomorrow is the Autumnal Exquinox, the marker of the sun crossing the equator, which causes day and night to be of equal length. It is a day celebrated by those of the Pagan tradition, called Mabon. This celebration focuses on the end of the harvest and serves to honor the changes as well as to celebrate the balance between light and dark; day and night. It serves as a celebration of the gifts offered, as well as an acknowledgement that the soil is dying. It serves to mark the changing of season, and to celebrate this. To celebrate this cycle and acknowledge the changes in the harvest. To thank the sunlight and pay respect to the darkness.

Celebrating this circle, this cycle, this light to dark and the changes that makes on this planet we call home.

There is a cycle to the human experience, a cycle of hardship and joy. If we come to expect this, we can foster strength when things are difficult, and grasp on to celebration when times are good! And yet this concept can feel so daunting and impossible in the midst of hardship. And that is why nature is paramount to understanding and trusting this concept – because the cycle of nature in a tangible, inevitable occurrence – night to day, winter to summer, the ebb and flow of tides – it is this way in our lives, too.

Our reading, "Harbingers of Frost," so eloquently examines this Autumnal period, this transition of "life en route to death." Weston writes, "the trees, flaunting their colors at the sky, in other times will follow where the leaves have fallen, and so shall we. Yet other lives will come. So may we know, accept, embrace, the mystery of life we hold a while." Just as the leaves fall, so shall we. Yet, other lives will come; the cycle renews.

The cyclical nature of all things can serve us during the hard times and the good times

Perhaps it is when times are hard that we need this reminder the most! Hard times can feel as if they will never end. Hard times can feel as if a blanket has been pulled over all light, feel crushing, endless.

Depression can hit. Death can occur. One may succumb to illness of the body or mind; relationships end, friendships are lost. Yes. This is inevitable. And I know that when some of us are in these inevitable times of hardship, it can often feel as if the pain will never end. But I ask that you come to accept that it will. Those hard times will end.

The expectation of this cycle can be paramount in how we enjoy the good as well. In recognizing the past pain, and thinking, wow. Look at this life now! In acknowledging what we have overcome. Or simply knowing that this won't always be so, things will inevitably get hard again, so let us celebrate! Let us take full advantage of the good times.

If we come to expect this, we can make the best out of both

Kathleen McTigue writes, "May the light around us guide our footsteps, and hold us fast to the best and most righteous that we seek. May the darkness around us nurture our dreams, and give us rest so that we may give ourselves to the work of the world."

Light guiding footsteps and darkness nurturing our dreams – both of these phases in the cycle can nourish us. Even in the darkness, we can be reminded of our own strength – strength we never may

have known we have. In the darkness, we can learn so much. So much about ourselves, about the world, about love, about compassion. In the darkness, we gain resilience. What we experience in the darkness – what we learn – can change our lives, can change others' lives.

We can use our experiences to help someone else, even if the only help offered is to offer a kind ear to someone who has struggled through the same darkness as you. Many things – death, illness, abuse - can only be known – can only be understood - if they have been experienced.

And so, in our interdependent web, this fluctuation of dark to light can be used to help one another; to use experiences to help a struggling friend; to use that compassion that comes from pain.

Acknowledging this cycle allows us to know that we have overcome things before, and can overcome them again. Acknowledging this cycle is an acceptance that life is in fluctuation and these changes will inevitably occur. We need come to expect this, and in expecting garner strength when times are hard, and truly celebrate when times are good.

I am reminded of a Celtic prayer:

I arise today

Through the strength of heaven, light of sun,

Radiance of moon,

Splendor of fire,

Speed of lightening, swiftness of wind,

Depth of sea,

Stability of earth,

Firmness of rock

Celtic wisdom ascertains that we are always on this journey – beginning from birth when we left the darkness of the womb and entered the light of the world. We were formed in darkness. In life; each day – each season – each year; we experience this journey; this cycle. Balance comes when one is able to accept this – accept that life exists in cycles. John O’Donohue, Irish poet, author, and priest, writes that “light is the mother of all life. Where there is no light, there can be no life... light is the secret presence of the divine.” He calls this the Celtic circle of belonging. A cycle that “hallows the moon” and “adores the life force of the sun.” Nourished by nature, companions with the seasons; infused with belonging. And this idea – this understanding – this expectation of cycles is paramount to many philosophies and religions.

In Buddhism this cycle is called samsara, the round of birth and death

This plays directly into Karma – actions to determine fate

Some Buddhists understand this cycle to be reincarnation – life after life, insight and awakening until laid to rest, cycles of life and death that permeate the centuries.

In Zen, this understanding of Karma is seen in more figurative ways; this process of death and re-birth is not played out in reincarnation but moment by moment; reincarnating each and every moment, action and its resolution in continuous cycles.

And so we see this expectation of cycles throughout cultures, throughout religions – Paganism, Celtic wisdom, Buddhism – This, to me, reiterates this inevitability of the cycle; and reinforces the sacredness of this cyclical nature of life.

I have a story about a tree – a folk tale that comes from India. The story I am about to share is adapted from a version written by Ellen C. Babbitt. There was once a wonderful tree called the red-bud tree. Four young princes heard of this tree, and yearned to see it. The oldest of the four princes asked his driver to

take him to the tree. It was early spring, and when the prince arrived, he saw no red buds – instead, the tree was bare. The prince was confused and left. The second prince traveled to see the tree later in the spring, and, when he arrived, he saw a tree covered in red buds. Satisfied, he went home. By the time the third prince arrived, the tree was covered in lush, green leaves. Once the fourth prince arrived, the leaves were shriveled and brown. Confused, but excited, he went back to the other princes. I have seen the red bud tree! He cried. “So have I,” said the eldest prince. “But it was not covered in red buds. It was bare.” “No it wasn’t!” cried the second son, “it was covered in red buds!” “Red buds?!” cried the third prince, “there were no red buds, it was covered in leaves!” The prince who had just seen the tree laughed, and said, “The tree was dead! It was covered in dead leaves.” The king overheard the four princes. He paused, and said, “my sons, you have all seen the same tree, but at different times of the year.”

Although there were changes – although four different princes thought they saw four different trees – it was the same tree – it was the same tree undergoing those cycles that are inherent to life. It was the same tree, no matter what part of the cycle it was experiencing. Just as each one of us, each one, no matter what we are experiencing, we always retain that common core; we are always ourselves. We are always ourselves. And all of these pieces of the cycle have their own unique beauty – whether green buds or red buds or crackling leaves. And – all of these cycles – the budless tree, the tree with red buds, the tree with lush leaves, the tree with brown, cackling leaves – each one of these phases is a necessary part of the life cycle of the tree – just as all we experience – all of our cycles - are necessary in our own lives.

Eunice Tietjens writes in her poem, “cycle”

Again, again we have lived through

A stubborn winter of our grief.

The aspen tree puts forth anew

Her silver leaf.

Once more the springtime of the year

Rides shining down our dusty skies

Till we again see beauty clear

With the old surprise;

See her and taste her, drink her in,

Bathing in beauty crystal bright;

And the ice of the heart melts and runs thin,

Lost, lost in light

I love what this poem reiterates. Again we have done it! And again we will continue to do it. Once more the springtime of the year rides shining down our dusty skies. One more the cycle has been renewed.

Once more, we made it through the winter. Once more.

John O'Donohue writes, "If you have ever had occasion to be out early in the morning before dawn breaks, you will have noticed that the darkest time of night is immediately before dawn"

The darkest time of night is immediately before the dawn. Hold on to this. Cherish this. Keep this hidden away to be drawn upon when you are in that moment right before the dawn – that moment when that veil is drawn over your head – and know – know – that dawn is coming.