

What Winter's Presence Whispers

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD December 22, 2024

Blessed be the meditative silence of a world draped in snow. Holy be the contemplative dark of a sleeping, hibernating sun. Hallowed be the introspection birthed of the winter's sacred stillness. Blessed be the presence of winter.

Sacred may the transition be, as the sun awakens, light returns, and a new hope is born. Sacred be the space and time when introspection becomes wisdom, reflection becomes change, rest becomes renewal. Blessed be the presence of the solstice.

I remember the awe of winter as a child – an age when magic saturates the air. I remember cuddling up in my blanket at night, watching snowflakes descend from the velvety black sky, small offerings of wonder. I remember waking up in the morning, the earth blanketed in a pure white covering of fresh snow, steeped in silence and wonder and awe. That gift of creating those first footprints, exploring the beauty of a crisp, white, winter day. At night, stars plentiful, breath visible.

What does the winter whisper to me? How am I touched by the presence of this crisp, cold, dark, wonder and beauty and awe? Take rest, beloved. Find that still, small voice within; connect with your spirit. Settle in the quiet peace. Invite the introspection of the darkness. Pause, rest, breathe. Be with the holy in this moment of quiet awe. It is an invitation to a dark that welcomes peace. A quiet that invites sacred contemplation. Darkness is often synonymous with evil or depression or hardship or a broken heart, to be saved by the returning presence of pure light. Today we counter this, as we slip into the blessings of a world cloaked in winter's black shadows.

Winter and all of her blessings is but a piece of a continuous cycle as we celebrate, yearly, the return of light and warmth. The winter solstice – the recognition of the shortest day and longest

night as we gather to honor the rebirth of the sun. It is a time of new life following death, of renewal and hope and a blessed offering of new beginnings as the sun herself returns rejuvenated, as the contemplative dark gives way to renewed and energized light.

It is presence we offer today. What do we welcome into our lives with the intentional presence of this time of hibernation and icy, frosty air and freezing, solid water? What blessings do we receive if we are consciously present to the return of the life-giving, glowing orb of the sun? First, I offer, let us explore the unique wonders of winter.

So much beauty and awe is best articulated through works of art, as illustration or metaphor or prose. So today we begin with reflections offered from awe filled and inspiring poetry. As offered by Rev. Bob Smith,

The distant sun has dwindled to an ember,
There is something holy in its glow.
The Druids knew its power long ago;
It promised passage through the longest night¹

There is a certain, sacred presence in December, the poet writes, even without the gift of snow. The dwindling of the sun, the reliable passage of this sun through the longest night, faint and tired yet eventually ready to be received by the beings on this blessed planet once again. It is holy, he writes, this distant sun. Winter is holy, I offer, as a time to connect with the ever-present soul within our very beings. It is a time when our simple, intentional, existence steeped in wonder and awe becomes a prayer and a meditation in and of itself. It is a promise – this cycle. Winter will always arrive, with its peace and introspection and wonder. Likewise, the sun will always return, ushering us into the new life our inner reflections have crafted and created. The cycle will never end, and as such we grow amidst death and are revived with new

¹ “The Kind Assertion” Bob Smith

life. In the dark the light will return. Such is each cycle of life – birth and death, sorrow and joy, from dust to dust and from mystery to profound, unknowable mystery.

I invite us to reflect on the poetry of Patricia Fagnoli, which Pam read to us earlier. If we have observed and cherished that pervasive, awe-inspiring, wonder of fallen snow, of snow piles reflecting the soft light of a lamppost, of snow creating mounds on tables and chairs, landing on a flowing body of water just to be swept away as the water continues on its ceaseless journey, then we have known beauty. We have known wonder. We feel winter's imminent presence in this awe. And yet just as this is held true, so, too, does snow melt. So, too, does white snow become brown with the exhaust of cars. So, too, does snow turn to black ice, more dangerous than wonderful. As such we know the transience of beauty. The impermanence of awe. The fleeting essence of wonder. To know change is to know loss. And so, I call us to immerse ourselves in this beauty that will soon slip away with the change of the season. The snow, the visible breath of air. May we engage with the beauty in our lives, whether external as nature, or internal as love or joy or contentment or peace. We are steeped in beauty. And yet, so, too, is this beauty transient, so cherish it, welcome it, embrace it with your entire body, for it will slip into oblivion again. And yet let us not be led astray in the anticipation of loss, but enlivened by the wonder of what will come next.²

“Truth is found in silence,”³ the poet writes, uplifting more beauty in this crisp, cold season. I offer this silent truth is that voice within which never lies. This silent truth is the sacred whispering into our receptive ears. In this blessed silence, this holy pause, this cold and dark and introspective winter, all that external noise dissipates. The sounds of nature are reduced to a hushed hum. The crashing of thunder is replaced with tranquil, noiseless snow. Even the cars seem to honk less often, and conversations slip from excitement to contemplation. Our ears take a break from the noise of the world, and thus we hear the truth of our spirits, which never lie. The honesty of all it is we hold sacred and holy, for words of deception will never be

² “Winter Grace” by Patricia Fagnoli

³ Ibid

murmured by such. The presence of winter allows us to be receptive to the truths of the words both within us and of the divine, as we connect to our true, authentic, genuine, and beautiful selves. In this stillness of winter, we learn, within the deepest crevices of our being, within our whole bodies, about, quote, “the significance of cold and the night, which is otherwise always eluding you.”⁴ So may we be receptive to the wonders of this season, a season that has become synonymous with a debilitating darkness. May we, with purpose, not evade those gifts that transform and heal our very being, profound blessings held in a hidden and quiet abundance.

“Winter is not the death of the life cycle, but its crucible,” writes author Katherine May. As we have reflected, winter does not end growth and transformation and contemplation and beauty, this blessed season of dormant life, but fosters a creation for something entirely new. Perhaps hope. Wisdom. Creativity. She juxtaposes animal’s responses to winter with that of an engrained human response. Animals do not fight winter nor pretend it is not there, they do not attempt to behave as if it were still spring or summer or fall. Instead, they prepare and adapt. They perform extraordinary, transformational acts to persevere through this dark, cold, still, and quiet season. Winter invites a time to withdraw from the world; to hibernate. To make the most of one’s resources. To survive with great efficiency. To disappear into the darkness. This – this withdrawal, this resourcefulness, this efficiency, this deliberate disappearance – this fosters true and profound transformation in a way that intentional ignorance to the world around us never could. It is a season of death in the natural world, yes. The inevitable death of pansies and wasps. But more than that it is a season of quiet dormancy, the hibernation of bears and chipmunks and turtles alike, not only welcoming change, but creating an opportune moment where change is necessary and cannot be avoided. That is what the natural world teaches us. We may enter this season remorse and through quiet introspection and an embrace of dormancy, return repentant. We may carry with us into the pervasive cold anger and through our dormancy transform anger to peace. Within intentional engagement, there is no option but to return in spring as a changed and transformed being.⁵

⁴ “Winter Grace” by Patricia Fagnoli

⁵ *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times* by Katherine May

This transitions us seamlessly to our reflection on the winter solstice. We emerge from the peace, calm, and contemplative introspection of winter, that which necessitates transformation. We resided in the dark place of rest, a space to reconnect with our inner light, absorbing the blessings of the quiet, the pause, the moment of peace. We are offered the gift of quiet renewal and contemplation. And the inherent cycles of nature do not cease. We warmly welcome the return of the sun, the rebirth of spring, the season of life rejuvenated. We return wiser, more resilient, and transformed. We cannot have the gifts of the light without the blessings of the dark. We observe this in the rhythm of dormancy and renewal, of reflection and release, of introspection and rebirth. In the center of our contemplative selves, as the light returns, we let go of that which hinders us, and we prepare for the year ahead.

I want to pause to lift up the importance of hope and potential held in the return of the sun, the rebirth of spring. It is a new light, delivering us from the dark and the cold. What potential does this reemerging illumination offer this long dormant world? It is the awe-filled possibility of all of that of which is yet to come and all of that which can be: wonder, joy, celebration, delight. It is the pervasive hope that life will continue to flourish in love and peace and beauty and awe. There is so much wonderment held in the long days and short nights yet to come. Anything is possible; there are a plethora of wonders arising with the emerging light and warmth and abundance of new life. We reemerge from winter as a new and blessed being, ready to bring our new selves to the year ahead.

It is both a spiritual and a physical reality, the winter solstice – that point when the earth tilts as far from the sun as possible. There is a natural and inherent shift to this beautiful planet that houses us and provides for us and offers us beauty and wonder and awe. It is a pause – a moment to hold our collective breath – a shared pause, a common, brief minute to lean into potential as the light slowly begins to return. This moment becomes monumental – that instant before a tangible shift. A moment of transition – a moment of hope – ushering in the return of blessed warmth and illumination. A moment to halt before the light is restored, with a quiet

reminder that the dark will come again. It is a moment to welcome as a catalyst to transformation.⁶

So may we celebrate this shared pause, this brief moment of a collective breath. And may we center in presence. What are our bodies attuned to as we are fully present to the dark, to the cold, to the quiet of midwinter? It invites us into introspection, into meditative contemplation. It ushers in rejuvenation and renewal. And what happens when we are present to the returning light, to reemerging warmth? We lean into the possibility of all that may lie ahead and settle in a hope for this promising future. So may we pause in the months of a darkness and revel in the simple beauty of the snow, all that is wonderful and impermanent and awesome and transitory. And may we usher in that transformation that is both welcome and inevitable, as resentment becomes love, anger becomes peace, and despair becomes optimism. May we engage with this season with the curious enthusiasm of a child, just as I did many years ago. As the snow falls may we know wonder, and as the light returns may we know awe and peace. Blessed be this time of contemplative introspection. Holy be this time of transformation and hope.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁶ "Winter Traditions: Living Meaningfully in the Year Ahead" by Dr. Sharon Blackie