

Winter

From Seasons, by Parker J. Palmer

The little deaths of autumn are mild precursors to the rigor mortis of winter. The southern humorist Roy Blount has opined that in the Upper Midwest, where I live, what we get in winter is not weather but divine retribution. He believes that someone here once did something very, very bad, and we are still paying the price for that transgression!

Winter here is a demanding season, and not everyone appreciates the discipline. It is a season when death's victory can seem supreme: few creatures stir, plants do not visibly grow, and nature feels like our enemy. And yet the rigors of winter, like the diminishment of autumn, are accompanied by amazing gifts.

One gift is beauty, different from that of autumn but perhaps more beautiful still. I am not sure that any sight or sound on earth is as exquisite as the hushed descent of a sky full of snow. Another gift is the reminder that times of dormancy and deep rest are essential to all living things. Despite all appearances, of course, nature is not dead in winter—it has gone underground to renew itself and prepare for spring. Winter is a time when we are admonished, and even inclined, to do the same for ourselves.

But, for me, winter has an even greater gift to give. It comes when the sky is clear, the sun brilliant, the trees bare, and the first snow yet to come. It is the gift of utter clarity. In winter, one can walk into woods that had been opaque with summer growth only a few months earlier and see the trees clearly, singly and together, and see the ground that they are rooted in.

A few years ago, my father died. He was more than a good man, and these months have been a long, hard winter for me. But in the midst of the ice and loss, I have found a certain clarity that I lacked when he was alive. I see now what was concealed when the greenness of his love surrounded me—how I counted on him to help me cushion life's harsher blows. He cannot do that for me now, and at first I thought, "I must do it for myself." But as time has gone on, I have seen something deeper still: it never was my father absorbing those blows but a larger and deeper grace that he taught me to rely on.

When my father was alive, I confused the teaching with the teacher. Now my teacher is gone, but the grace is still there, and my clarity about that fact has allowed his teaching to take deeper root in me. Winter clears the landscape, however brutally, giving us a chance to see each other and ourselves more clearly, to see the very ground of our being.

In the Upper Midwest, where I live, newcomers often receive a classic piece of wintertime advice: "The winters will drive you crazy until you learn to get out into them." Here, people spend good money on warm clothing so they can get outdoors and avoid the "cabin fever" that comes from huddling fearfully by the fire during the long frozen months. If you live here long, you learn that a daily walk into the winter world will fortify the spirit by taking you boldly to the very heart of the season you fear.

Our inward winters take many forms—failure, betrayal, depression, death. But every one of them, in my experience, yields to the same advice: “The winters will drive you crazy until you learn to get out into them.” Until we enter boldly into the fears we most want to avoid, those fears will dominate our lives. But when we walk directly into them—protected from frostbite by the warm garb of friendship or inner discipline or spiritual guidance—we can learn what they have to teach us. Then, we discover once again that the cycle of the seasons is trustworthy and life-giving, even in the most dismaying season of all.