

SEASON OF WINTER

Circle of Life

In winter, the heartbeat of the land slows to alpha pace. The eyes of this season are drowsy. Sleepy limbs of nature fold in upon themselves to rest during the long months of inactivity. This is the period of dormancy when the extravagance of summer becomes a distant memory. In places where the land and water are frozen, the cold solidity adds to the non-movement and stillness. Life waits, subdued and hidden in mystery, humbled by pervasive strength of winter's presence.

As the days of light get shorter and shorter, there is an invitation to an unhurried pace in the circle of life. The barren branches are hushed. Hibernating creatures snuggle in their protective homes, and seeds of all sorts bow their heads to the soil's quietness. Nature accepts the great change that the pilgrimage of Earth brings. Now is not the time for stretching and growing. Now is the time for withdrawal and restoration of energy.

The lessening of light and the increase of darkness are necessary ingredients for the earth's nourishment. They enable the fallow process to happen. Nature has been busy producing. It is time to slow down and rest. Without this rest, soil wears out and loses its nutrients. All of creation needs some time to pause and have its spent energy renewed. So do humans. Winter offers this gift of essential renewal.

Life every other season, winter holds a beauty all its own. In spite of the fact that numerous warm-blooded folks do not take kindly to this season, there is much to wonder and be amazed at in the world of winter. It is less busy and more reflective, offering space to snuggle close to loved ones, read a good book, engage in a favorite indoor activity, or relax by a fireplace in the long evenings of darkness.

Winter brings a certain solace in the great hush that settles over a thriving city after a heavy snowfall. When it encases everything in a sparkling glaze of transparency after an ice-storm, this season displays an astounding beauty. Winter's best side shows in midnight-blue skies, crisp invigorating air, brilliant stars, snow-lined tree limbs, fluffy feathered birds, footprints of deer hooves and rabbit paws, frosted designs on window panes, and the invigorating winter sports of skiing and snowboarding, ice skating, hockey, and snowmobiling. There is also the traditional rolling of snowballs to create snowpersons on the front lawn, or lying down in the velvety softness to make snow angels.

Winter has its share of beauty, but it also has its share of harshness. Even though it is quiet and dormant, it sometimes manifests a pronounced and damaging intensity which is of special concern to the vulnerable and the homeless. Winter moves along in an easy, almost inconspicuous manner, until, like a grouchy grizzly bear awakened too early from sleep, it rises

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up with fury, pouncing on the land with force. Bone chilling temperatures, terror-inducing blizzards, loss of electricity, broken tree limbs laden with ice, heavy flooding, and life-threatening car accidents are part of this destructive side of winter.

Because of the uncomfortable conditions of winter, it is natural to underestimate the positive value of this season. The same is true for our interior winters. Few consider their inner wintertime something to enjoy, yet this season is vital for spiritual growth. The human spirit needs dormancy and rest, silence, and solitude. Winter provides this opportunity so we can slow down and refocus our direction and purpose in life.

We also encounter storms and prolonged hard times during our interior winters. This season challenges us out of our comfort zones. Courage to stand strong, faith to maintain a positive outlook, and hope for the future are all stored in the rhythms of winter. The extended darkness of our inner winter can be an opportunity to learn more about ourselves and our relationship with God (Spirit, Great Mystery, etc.). The fury of winter storms forces us to let go of our securities. It causes us to reach out for help from others when our strength is frail and our spirit lacks the confidence to go on.

In the interior wintertime we can easily lose heart, stop believing in our goodness, forget about our resilience, and discount the presence of those who love us. There is often sadness, loneliness, and a depletion of joy. This is the season of grief, depression, of searching and struggling. Dreams and vision of what could be are hidden from us. Enthusiasm wanes. Our passion for life is stripped from us like a barren winter branch. This Gethsemane-like period taunts the wintered heart with a persistent fear that we will never again feel good about ourselves and about life.

Sometimes our interior winter is not fraught with sorrow or utter desolation. It is, instead, filled with emptiness, an extended fallow time when it seems as though nothing at all is happening. Life is dull. Everything seems to be at a standstill. We doubt our growth. Our inner landscape appears bleak and empty.

Winter is the season of waiting. It requires great trust and a willingness to believe that this angst will not last forever. Even though all appears dead and void of movement, there is quiet growth taking place. During the darkness, gestation occurs. In the caves and hidden hollows of winter, baby bears are born. In the frozen air, branches with terminal buds secretly grow every day. In the unmoving soil, flower bulbs are strengthened for their further journey upward toward the sun. In the frozen human heart, the silent seeds of confidence are prepared for amazing new growth.

While are in our winter space, we may be tempted to give up, to lose hope, to stop believing in ourselves and in the presence of the Holy One because we cannot see our growth. Winter asks

us only to be, to live with mystery, to wait patiently. We are required to keep a delicate balance between yielding the winter's silence and keeping our eyes on a future springtime. Each day challenges us to carry hope in our hearts no matter how sparse our awareness of inner stirrings might be.

This gruff-voiced season has another voice less readily heard. It is the calm and wise voice of encouragement. Winter offers assurance that the seeds of life are being tended, that what is needed for future growth is simply waiting to burst forth with the wild joy of spring. And spring will, indeed, come. For just as every season eventually departs, so, too, will winter. It will return again when it is time for each season's entrance and departure is part of the turning in the great circle of life.



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