

SEASON OF AUTUMN

Circle of Life

As the hemisphere of the planet slowly continues to tilt away from the sun, the season of autumn comes on stage. Autumn has a distinctive change of personality from spring and summer. This is the season that has often been associated with melancholy. Its mood is mysterious and nostalgic. The reason autumn is often called fall is not necessarily because leaves fall from trees. This is the season when Earth slowly falls away from the sun and light rays are lessening. This lost light, of course, will spring back to us in six months. The amount of sunlight reaching Earth's surface determines the kind of changes that take place each season.

Autumn is a royal season. To temper the necessary disrobing of the glory of summer, autumn dons a coat of many colors, for beauty softens departure. Autumn holds fragments of the other seasons in transformative arms. Even while forecasting an end to lush green summer, we are still gifted with some warm, green moments. The quiet turning of the leaves from summer green to radiant arrays of color offers us a splendor as lovely as the blossoms of spring. Sitting in autumn's quiet sunlight can be a sonnet without words. Ever so slowly, this season turns its face toward winter. It is a bridge between the warmth and the cold. Beginning with summer's dew still in its hair, it can quickly become a friend of winter's frost.

Everywhere there are icons of autumn. In their spectacular flying formation the geese honk their farewells as they begin their journey to warmer lands. With great drama the squirrels scurry about filling their winter cupboards with nuts and acorns. Animal coats thicken in preparation for winter. Groaning cornstalks become musical instruments, swaying and whistling as the wind moves in and out of their crumbling bodies. Blackbirds swish through the sky in great numbers. Leaves dance in the wind and blow across yards as though they are walking on water. Children, and adults with childlike hearts, roll in the leaves laughing happily. Sometimes they lie quietly in the leaves in dreaming state while experiencing a sacred connection to the earth.

It is harvest time. A sense of completion and accomplishment enwraps the land. Earth invites us to gather the fruits of her womb. From soil and vine, from tree and bush she pours out food to humankind and to creatures of the land. Fields of grain send forth their blessing. Trees laden with fruit sing sweet songs of nourishment. Vines thick with pumpkins display their beautiful readiness. Grapes and tomatoes generously offer their gifts. Potatoes and peanuts buried in the earth reveal their maturity. In the midst of all this harvesting, how appropriate that we should pause from our labors to celebrate the festival of gratitude. Thanksgiving. Earth is our table. Gratitude turns over in our hearts during the fall season, like an old-fashioned plow turning the soil.

The mood of autumn is the ebb and flow of life. Autumn stands as an epiphany to the truth that all things are passing and even in the passing there is beauty. It holds out platters of death and life. As the bright colors of fall fade away, and the leaves make their final descent, rich

brown and charcoal colors take center stage. This is a decaying season, but the rotting ritual that surrounds us has another face. Compost and mulch are food for the soil. There is life in the dying. Moments of death are full of life and our fear of the unknown sometimes hides that life. All this dying is a prophecy of life to come. Everything is dying to live.

While many people dread the approaching winter season, often these same people claim autumn as their favorite season. Perhaps this says something about the haunting call of this season to turn our eyes toward home. Autumn touches the core of the soul with its wordless message about the necessity of transformation and death. We are gently encouraged to look toward the west and embrace the bittersweet truth that all things are transitory. As we face the painful reality that nothing lasts forever, autumn teaches us humility. We learn to honor the dying. Everything is moving, flowing on into something new.

In this lovely season when the dance of surrender is obvious, we find large spaces left where something beautiful once lived. As one by one the leaves let go, a precious emptiness appears in the trees. The naked beauty of the branches can be seen, the birds' abandoned nests become visible. The new spaces of emptiness reveal mountain ridges. At night if you stand beneath a tree and gaze upward, stars now peer through the branches. This is an important autumn lesson—when certain things fall away, there are other things that can be seen more clearly.

The same truth can be celebrated in our personal lives. When we are able to let go of a relationship that is not healthy, the heart is given more room to grow. We are able to receive new people into our lives whose gifts we never noticed. These people come to us with their own visions and dreams. If we are receptive, our lives are enriched. Perhaps it is not a person we have lost, but a dream of good health that would last forever. Our health fails; our dream dies. People often speak of becoming more grateful after having lost some of their health. Suddenly they see all they have taken for granted. Gratitude for all that has been enables them to say yes to all that is to come.

Another significant area of surrender comes with possessions. Our possessions can become little gods that eventually get in our way. Yet, it can be very difficult for us to turn things loose that have ceased to give us joy. When the wondrous moment of letting go of something that is not serving our spiritual life arrives, however, a unique and joyful freedom is born.

There are those who struggle to discover the blessing and wisdom of the aging process. The surrender of youth can be most difficult of all. To these I would say, "Sit for a while with a young tree; then plant yourself in the shade of an old tree. Let these share their wisdom."

Autumn is a wondrous metaphor for the transformation that takes place in the human heart each season. When we notice a subtle change of light outside our windows, we know the dark season is near. Everything is being prepared for winter. Autumn calls us in from summer's playground and asks significant questions about our own harvest: What do we need to gather

into our spiritual barns? What in our lives needs to fall away like the autumn leaves so another life waiting in the wings can have its turn to live?

It is easy to read the human story in these autumn pages between summer and winter. This is the season that evokes nostalgia and pours longing into human hearts. Autumn speaks of connection and yearning; wisdom and aging, transformation and surrender, emerging shadows, and most of all, mystery. This is the season that touches our longing for home, for completion. We are invited to let go, to yield . . . yes, to die. We are encouraged to let things move in our lives. Let them flow on into some new life form just as the earth is modeling these changes for us.

The season of autumn will not stay with us forever. It will fall into the womb of winter. In this dark resting place another dimension of growth will reveal itself. Each season's entrance and departure is part of the gracious turning of the circle of life. Autumn will return to the land and to our lives when it is time. The wheel keeps turning.



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