

# Winter

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First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

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It's December already. And unlike last year, we've had plenty of snow already! Like it or not, winter is here. We've had an incredibly warm fall, but it couldn't last. The cold is here to stay for a while now. The leaves have all fallen by now and the days are really short. Nature is hanging up her "closed for the season" sign.

I'm one of those who doesn't have much good to say of Winter. I know there are those who claim to like it, but come on – who are they kidding? Why do you think all those people head south for the winter? We have a few in this congregation who do it. Florida, the Caribbean – they're no fools. More and more I'm thinking I'd like to go to the Caribbean for a few months each winter when I retire, if I can afford to. The people who like winter are mainly those who engage in some winter sport – avid skiers or snowmobilers, for instance. For most of us, it's pretty inconvenient. All that shoveling, all those bulky layers of clothes! The cars that won't start, the long time it takes for the car to heat up! The runny noses, the stiff bodies, the wet boots . . . oh boy!

But winter does have its place and its purpose. The author of the essay that the reading is taken from is Rev. Max Coots, who served the Unitarian Universalist church in Canton, New York. If anyone knows about long, cold winters, it would be him. And in that same essay he says:

“When did we ever learn that life was always Summertime and Spring and harvest time?  
When was it that someone guaranteed a year of twelve Julys, complete with everlasting picnics  
and never-ending potato salads?

What sort of quaint, mistaken almanac said Spring could come without December—

That life was all in June—

That May and August go on forever?

Even Winter in ourselves may be the poor soul's fertilizer,

And Spring within can come only if some Winter has come first—

Can come, if something like a seed is kept alive through wintering, to sprout and grow.

To sprout and grow because of Winter and the wintering.

Like earth, we have our seasons too.”

(p. 24)

Like the Earth, we have our seasons too. Sometimes the winter within corresponds to the winter without, coincides with it. But sometimes the seasons of the soul have a rhythm all their own.

I remember one year when Easter was approaching, and I figured it was time for me to be resurrected. I thought that my doldrums would pass as the light came back and the weather got warmer, that with everything around me blooming, I would bloom again as well. It didn't happen that way that year. There have been other years when I felt a sense of renewal in the fall. Yet often my inner seasons do correspond to the outer seasons, and there is a rhythm to it all that is reflected in our seasonal celebrations.

No doubt about it, winter is a cold, dark time. But if we can try to take a different approach to winter, both the inner and the outer; if we can try not to fight it, not to fight our

circumstances and be open to what each circumstance has to offer; if we can to accept winter on its own terms, we may find that winter is, indeed, a gift.

We are a part of nature, and the rhythms of nature can sustain us, if allow ourselves to participate. When we think of the rhythms of nature, we must recognize that they are at the same time the rhythms of our own nature. Participating in them means as much trusting the impulses of our own bodies as it does living in synch with the world around us. It means doing consciously that which our natural selves are directing us to do if we listen well.

Unfortunately, our culture expects us to follow the rhythms of the marketplace instead of the rhythms of nature. Societal and economic rules conflict with the laws of nature and force us to keep the same schedules year-round, the same level of activity. We go about our daily business in the same way, whether it is winter, spring or fall, and for many of us summer too.

When I worked as a programmer analyst at an insurance company, I had to be there every day between 8am and 5pm, every weekday, summer and winter, spring and fall, doing basically the same work every day, no matter what the season. In the winter I would go to work in the dark, and come home in the dark, and my only glimpse of the day was through windows that didn't open. In the summer I would sit in the air conditioning and freeze, and huddled in my suit jacket and my shawl and sometimes gloves. I had thin gloves with some fingertips missing and I could actually type with them. The gloves actually improved my productivity, because if I didn't wear them, I had to sit on my hands, and then I couldn't type at all. What was so tragic about it was that it would be 90 degrees and sunny outside. I wanted to throw a rock through those windows to let the warm air in.

In other ways too we're forcing our bodies against the grain, against their natural patterns. Many of us put on weight around this time of year, and it's not all because of the temptations that the holidays provide. Our bodies are telling us to eat more because they think we need to store up for the winter. We also want to sleep more, and are in general more sluggish. (At least I certainly am.) I think of it as an urge to hibernate. Bears do it, why not people? Why don't we allow ourselves at least to eat a little more and to sleep a little more in the winter? Why don't we allow our work schedules and our work places to accommodate the flavor of the season? In order to be open to the gifts a situation has to offer, we have to let ourselves really experience the situation.

This is not to say we should slumber through this winter, when there is important justice work to be done. This is not the time to be silent. This winter our voices will be needed more than ever to lift up our liberal religious values of the inherent worth and dignity of everyone and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Oppressed peoples and the earth will need our advocacy. We need to be awake and we need to be "woke".

Still, winter is a natural cycle that it behooves us to honor. Eileen Schenk writes:

"It is apparent that we are in the dark time of the year. That time when our dreams, like the work of the trees, focus on developing root systems that will later provide nourishment and foundations to those more visible products of our lives. The dark time, when we climb inside ourselves and reflect on where we have been and where we will be called in the Spring, when the sun returns. The Spring, when the warmth and the light demand we leave the silent reflective work of the Winter time and come forth to dance along with the budding trees and blossoming of the flowers.

"Once I became truly aware of the seasonal patterns of the year, I began to welcome the changes of light and temperature and look forward to the opportunity the change afforded me. . . . Our dreams of creativity in this dark time will burst open when the song of the Spring begins.

Earlier, I had thought of winter in terms of bitter cold, uncomfortable dampness, unending darkness, as a time that one had to endure. Sometimes, when my spirits were lower I even envied those who left the darkness behind and escaped to the sun belt. Now, I see them as missing the opportunity of the silence and the darkness, the time given to us to prepare for our growing season.”

Winter does have its purpose.

Winter invites us to slow down, to go within. To explore the inward soul. The silence, the darkness, the very bleakness of our surroundings, as well as the promptings of our bodies, suggest that we are entering a season of quiet, of reflection, and of low productivity.

Like the earth, we have our seasons too. And spring within can only come if some winter has come first. The winter of the soul can be a bleak time, a time of barrenness, emptiness, and darkness. It is often not clear that it is a seasonal cycle, and that spring will follow. It can be a short cycle, or it can last a long time. It can feel like a wasteland, like nothing is being accomplished, like creativity has withered. It can feel like your soul is dead, just as the winter of the earth makes the earth appear dead. If we don't recognize it as a necessary cycle, it can lead us to despair, and despair is not fertile soil for the growing of the fruits of the soul.

A number of years ago, when I was in the grip of a major writing block, I was telling my spiritual director about how empty I felt, and how frustrating that was. Her suggestion to me was to “go into the emptiness.” Well, I didn't really understand what this meant, but I felt her to be a very wise woman, so I couldn't just dismiss it. So it has stayed with me and now and then I roll it around in my mind. Slowly, I'm getting it. The idea is not to fight the emptiness, not to try to get away from it, but accept it, and allow myself to stay with that emptiness, without judging or trying to wish it away.

Going into the emptiness is a good way to describe the goal of Buddhist meditation. In meditation, the aim is just to empty the mind, to stop thinking, and just be. Thoughts arise, and we let them go, without judging, simply returning to the present moment. Feelings come, and we let them go, without judging, and without letting them distract us. In this way we can come into contact with the deeper levels of being. But the goal is not to get beyond the emptiness. The goal is to be simply to be in the moment, to be open to whatever presents itself. Becoming empty allows life and love to flow freely through us. Inspiration does not come from a conscious self, it comes from somewhere beyond. Creativity cannot be forced, it can only be allowed.

May Sarton, a wonderful American poet, and a Unitarian Universalist, in her book *Journal of a Solitude*, describes a day in which her inner and outer winter coincide, and her struggle to allow the emptiness. “A little warmer this morning, zero instead of twenty below. . . . A strange empty day. I did not feel well, lay around, looked at daffodils against the white walls, and twice thought I must be having hallucinations because of their extraordinary scent that goes from room to room. I always forget how important the empty days are, how important it may be sometimes not to expect to produce anything, even a few lines in a journal. I am still pursued by a neurosis about work inherited from my father. A day where one has not pushed oneself to the limit seems a damaged damaging day, a sinful day. Not so! The most valuable thing we can do for the psyche, occasionally, is to let it rest, wander, live in the changing light of a room, not try to be or do anything whatever.” (p. 88-89)

How often do we let ourselves have an empty day? How long do we expect we can just keep doing and producing, without some fallow time? Farmers knew to allow their fields to lie fallow, unplanted, for a season now and then. One ancient culture planned for a day every seven days for people to lie fallow and rejuvenate. They called it the Sabbath.

Sometimes the down time comes whether we want it or not. Sometimes we just get down, and it seems like we may never get up again. The winter of the soul, just like the winter outside, may feel like a barren, dark landscape, with no end in sight. Will the light ever return? Will I ever feel warm again? Will I ever blossom again? Be joyous and light and produce beautiful creations again?

For these times, I offer the words of an old, popular song:  
“When the night has been too lonely, and the road has been too long,  
And you think that love is only for the lucky and the strong,  
Just remember in the winter, far beneath the bitter snows  
Lies the seed that with the sun’s love in the spring becomes the rose.”

Like Earth, we have our seasons too, and seasons are cycles. They don’t last. They do come back again and again, looking a bit different every time, but in essence the same. But when we are in a winter of the spirit and it feels like it will never end, we can take heart in the knowledge that this too shall pass. Perhaps we need to honor the season before we can move on. To accept the phase we are in, however dark and scary, to trust the process. Knowing that this too is an essential part of Life, allowing it, refraining from judging it or ourselves in it, even encouraging it, moving into it, coming even to see it as beautiful. Then we are living fully. To be open to the present moment—whatever it presents—that is the secret of living well.

The fallow times are necessary. The dark times are necessary. Spring can come only if some winter has come first. We can welcome the winter because it truly is a gift. If we accept the gift of winter, we can have a fruitful spring. But winter has a beauty all its own.

As we said in our responsive reading earlier:

“Let us not wish away the winter. It is a season to itself, not simply the way to spring. ... Let us therefore praise winter, rich in beauty, challenge, and pregnant negativities.” (# 543)

Let us praise winter indeed. Let us bundle up, cuddle up, be quiet and reflective, and let things simmer for a while. Let us honor the season, and come forth in the spring rejuvenated.