

**“Wintering: The Turn Toward Resting and Rooting”**

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**Reading: “Less Here Now” by Rev. Sean Parker Dennison.**

Less light today than yesterday.

Less sun for growing things.

Less time for demanding doing.

Less gleam and shine and sheen and dazzle.

I did not know how much I needed  
this diminishment.

Here is the last green-pink tomato turning.

Here is the rough undercoat thickening.

Here is the urge to dig for hibernation.

Here is the slow return to the fire.

I did not know the importance of  
this respite, this repose.

Now the smell of decay and transformation.

Now the fruiting and the harvest.

Now the letting go, the fiery spin into the wind.

Now the sigh of completion.

I did not know death could be so beautiful.

I did not understand the relief of letting go.

**Reading: by Rainer Maria Rilke, trs. Anita Barrows & Joanna Macy**

You, darkness, of whom I am born --

I love you more than the flame

that limits the world

to the circle it illumines  
and excludes all the rest.  
But the darkness embraces everything:  
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,  
people and nations--just as they are.  
It lets me imagine  
a great presence stirring beside me.  
I believe in the night.

### **Sermon/Homily**

It started with a student who shared with me her plan of writing a cannon of stories about the cycle of the year. She spoke of resting in winter that prepares for the blooming of the spring and summer. I was taken with the idea of the story cycle. As so often happens, the theme repeated itself the next day in a book recommendation. The author Elizabeth Gilbert wrote :

WINTERING is a thoughtful, elegant memoir and treatise about how to survive the hardest seasons of our life — times of sickness, loss, grieving, depression, hopelessness. Seasons where, as Katherine May writes, your leaves fall off, and your bare bones show.(she continues). Learning how to “winter” is necessary in order to lead a rich and soulful life.

I order the book on the spot.

My middle son, the one who is now our local covid researcher at the UW was a colicky baby. A really colicky baby. He cried from about 4pm until 10 pm unless I was actively doing something with him. He was born in the middle of October, so by the time the darkest part of winter arrived, I was pretty stretched. I remember the moment when I realized that the sun was actually setting at 4:20. I remember the cold dread that shot up my spine. How on earth were we going to get through this? How?

Well, we did of course. He grew and I figured out what he was sensitive to and eventually, he learned to move on his own and that made him happy. Today he runs his pup Lucy twice a day--he's still moving. But during those long dark nights of colic, I began to learn to embrace the difficult parts of my life. I reached out to my grandmother who had been dead for a decade but still guided my mothering. I had a three year old, but until I mothered that colicky babe, I hadn't really become the mother I would be. It formed me, molded me.

Here I am a white middle-class American woman talking about what is difficult, right? Get over myself!

But no. Not a thing. I am profoundly lucky, I know that I am.....and still, I've lived through some stuff. Being human means we will suffer.

In her book *Wintering*, Katherine May writes:

“If happiness is a skill, then sadness is, too. Perhaps through all those years at school, or perhaps through other terrors, we are taught to ignore sadness, to stuff it down into our satchels and pretend it isn't there. As adults, we often have to learn to hear the clarity of its call. That is wintering. It is the active acceptance of sadness. It is the practice of allowing ourselves to feel it as a need. It is the courage to stare down the worst parts of our experience and to commit to healing them the best we can. Wintering is a moment of intuition, our true needs felt keenly as a knife.” end quote

I am a person who lives with depression. I have learned to catch it before it slams me to the ground now, at least it's not usually as hard as it used to be. But I have in my life experienced long stretches of feeling hopeless, numb, alone, and worthless. It's not something I want to experience again, but I will, and it's something I pray you don't have to experience. But in many ways, I am grateful for this part of me. Not for the trauma of feeling hopeless but for the fact that I've gotten through it. I have learned to love what this teaches me. It makes me empathetic. It makes me humble. It has taught me that

while happiness can be a goal---we can try to set ourselves up to be fulfilled, whole, and content, happiness isn't always achievable. Accepting my own depression has also taught me to listen to myself, to trust myself.

At the beginning of November, the hospital where I was working as a Chaplain Resident had an outbreak of Covid, a covid cluster. It was on one of the floors that I was assigned to. Just before that one of the staff chaplains in my office contracted covid. It was clear to me, maybe in part due to having a son on the front lines of researching, that there was spread happening between staff and patients. I began having a really hard time visiting patients, you know, doing my job. As much as I loved the work and as much as I could see the difference visits made, especially for people isolated by covid, I feared that I might make someone sick. I offered to carry the pager all day because at least that meant I visited people who wanted or needed a chaplain rather than just walking into patient rooms.

One morning I couldn't make myself get out of my car and go into the hospital. I finally forced myself to go in, but my body was screaming at me. I felt like the building was on fire and here I was, just going about regular business. I know that not everyone feels this way. There are super fine, amazing folks who can face this. But for me, the thought that I could unknowingly transmit the virus to someone made it impossible to stay. The next day I went in and resigned. I had to make the decision that I may never work as a chaplain again. You don't just walk away from a residency in a critical care hospital. But that's not what happened. I was treated with grace and care and love. I can go back after covid if I want to. What I have learned in my own wintering guided me in this situation: I was able to listen to my body, to my instinct, I trusted myself. It was, for me, exactly the right thing to do.

I reached out to CHI, the seminary I worked for this spring and summer to see if they had any projects or work that needed doing while I looked for what to do next. They didn't tell me right away, but 12 hours before I sent that email they learned that their community minister was leaving. When I left in August I said "I hope that someday I'll be

back as your community minister.” So here I am, they named me the Interim Community minister, but it’s not the same situation that it would be in a UU congregation. I can and will be considered for the permanent position and if things go well and they choose me, I hope to stay for years and years and years.

In Wintering Katherine May writes: “In our relentlessly busy contemporary world, we’re forever trying to defer the onset of winter. We don’t ever dare feel its full bite, and we don’t dare to show the way that it ravages us. An occasional sharp wintering would do us good. We must stop believing that these times in our lives are somehow silly, a failure of nerve, a lack of willpower. We must stop trying to ignore them or dispose of them. They are real, and they are asking something of us. We must learn to invite the winter in. We may never choose to winter, but we can choose how.” end of quote

2020 held for me not only the pandemic, my mother’s death, my youngest son moving across the country, my middle son moving out of my house, my oldest son being laid off, a delayed ordination into the ministry due to covid but 2020 also held about half a dozen job changes.

If I had not learned to deeply accept the wintering, the active acceptance of sadness, I believe I would not have weathered this as well as I seem to have done. The wintering is when my roots grow. The wintering is when I learn to be in the stillness. To be fallow, to rest, to be sad, to feel hollow, to be bereft.

And this, friends, is where we are right now. We are all in the wintering. I tell you, I had to eat gluten-free, vegan stuffing for an entire week after thanksgiving. I don’t know how to cook a feast for two people. I just don’t. There will be no early morning cribbage in our pajamas on Boxing day. There will be no midnight telescope sighting of the moon on Christmas eve. No tree trimming while we watch “It’s a Wonderful Life.” All the traditions are canceled this year. We are here in our fortress, holed up against the virus, all of us, apart. Having a covid researcher in the family means I get told to stay the heck

home and detailed reports about the test positivity rates in our neighborhoods skyrocketing.

But there are beautiful things our very bodies can learn from this. We can rest. We can be still. We can continue to take loving care of ourselves and as best we can of each other. We can try meditating, or praying or walking meditation, or feeding the birds. Whatever helps us feel connected to the rest of the people and animals and living things who are wintering, too. I feed the hummingbirds, even when it means trudging through the frost in my robe and rainboots to replace frozen feeders. I light candles and pick a new crystal before every meeting with students or spiritual direction clients. Everything I do now seems to include a ritual of some kind.

This is how I honor the lack of the light, how I honor the deep grief of missing my family. This is how I am growing my roots deep. This is the way I am becoming my deeply authentic self. Trusting. Waiting. Resting. Feeling all of my feelings.

Winters come and summers go. Year follows year. But as long as people live there will be a silent little language our bodies, our souls can understand. Listen to the silent little language. The voice still and small. Find your way through this winter. May it be so.  
Amen.