

The Case for Enduring Winter

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The countryside in New England in a file photo. Adrian Ace Williams/Archive Photos/Getty Images



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A A Print

Commentary

People of a certain class and income prefer to escape New England winters for Florida beaches. It's their right and wholly

understandable. But something is lost when taking the opportunity. They lose the opportunity to experience winter.

Isn't that the whole point? Yes, of course. But something has bugged me about the idea of escaping seemingly bad times and attempting to game the system so that it is sunny year-round. Here comes the beach in January!

We lose the experience of the seasons. We lose the experience of battling the elements. We lose the awareness of the cyclical patterns in nature. We lose living through nature's greatest metaphor for the ups and downs of life itself.

Think of how much poetry, painting, and music has centered on celebrating the changed seasons as a metaphor for many aspects of the human experience. It can be seen to symbolize the passage of life from the spring of youth to the winter of death. Or it can be rendered as a commentary on the normal ebb and flow of good and bad tidings.

These are the linear interpretations but there is also the biggest possible interpretation of the seasons as a mysterious reflection of the recycling of time and eternity, as perhaps Eastern philosophy might frame it.

Regardless, it seems just aesthetically and philosophically wrong to cut out the most objectionable of the seasons of life and expect all the rest to unfold exactly according to one's own script.

No matter how we look at it, some crucial features of the experience of life itself are lost if we are denied the experience of winter. Think of the literary titles and lines alone: "The Winter's Tale," "The winter of our discontent," "Winter is coming," "Winter Dreams," and so on. The use of the term winter has long been invoked as a time of suffering. Indeed it is.

And yet, our cultural history has long struggled to find ways to celebrate winter as something necessary, even celebratory. It's all

about figuring out ways to survive and thrive, even to the point of inventing means of keeping up hope in darkest times.

Consider the storied tulip, for example, which has been variously treated as the most valuable flowering plant. They are planted deep in the soil in the fall, with a great awareness of what is coming. There they rest during the long dark months. We wait. We wait but we know. The time will come when they spring forth and bloom with the most gorgeous colors.

The act of planting them so much earlier than when they appear is an expression of faith, a tribute to the virtue of patience, and a vote of confidence that the seasons will unfold in regular patterns on which we can depend. It is a bow of deference to that which we cannot control but can beautify.

Just as in life. As sadness and disappointment yield to joy and triumph, so too winter turns to spring. The planting of tulips is a liturgy of affirmation that life is governed by seasonality—literally, emotionally, and philosophically.

Think of the many ways in which winter has given rise to a kind of emotional taming. Christmastide ended up in Winter as a way to catechize the tradition of marking the Winter Solstice, the shortest and darkest day of the year that marks the gradual return of the sun to bathe the world in light and warmth, melt away the snow, and give new life to that which died in the cold.

The allegory is as obvious as it is brilliant. The Sun God becomes the Son of God. There is no redemption without suffering, however: what the winter foreshadows is fulfilled in crucifixion and resurrection. The story is compelling because it connects so closely with our life experience.

Can we do without winter? We cannot. We should not.

In our personal lives, it is a time for retreating indoors, snuggling up in wool blankets, drinking hot drinks, reflecting on spiritual matters,

catching up on our reading, contemplating the meaning of all things. This does not happen in the other seasons because there are too many options. Winter forces us to examine life.

It also forces creativity. How in the world can we get out and about, see friends, entertain ourselves in this ungodly weather? We figure out interesting ways, and look forward to repeating them, making them a habit, once it is warm. Maybe it is an evening of board games, a bundled-up meeting in the park with pets, or a movie outing.

After all, we've gone to herculean efforts to romanticize Winter in music and film. "Christmas in Connecticut," "Holiday Inn," "White Christmas," "It's a Wonderful Life," and so on, all present idealized visions of snowy lawns, streets, and rooftops, along with working chimneys and family celebrations.

Many songs of the Christmas season are really just paeans to winter: "Sleigh bells ring, are you listening? In the lane, snow is glistening. A beautiful sight, We're happy tonight, Walking in a winter wonderland."

See? It's not so bad. You just have to buck up, prepare, give it a go, and find ways to discover joy even in the unbearable cold and unpassable snow. We've even invented skiing and ice skating to bring sport into most unsporting times.

A great New England tradition gets no attention because it is so much part of the culture, namely the fascinating ritual of ploughing. Men with trucks hook up the snow ploughs and get busy from the early morning hours, such that by the start of business, every road is passable as if nothing happened. It's a marvel to behold, truly, and grants to men a true role that technology has otherwise denied them: the chance to beat back nature as its master and commander.

I swear to you that New England men adore this job, even if they engage in ritual complaints about it.

It's the same with sidewalks. They are mostly clear by mid-morning, without exception. And most neighborhoods have some one or several

examples of community-minded younger adults out there shoveling snow from the walkways of the elderly and the widows. It's inspiring and beautiful to see the community in action.

It's all about refusing to accept defeat, as if in battle, a time when masculine virtues shine as essential to community functioning. That said, the feminine also has a role in preparing beautiful homes, implausibly wonderful on the inside as a counterposition to the terror outside, operating as living proof that humankind can invent ways to overcome.

Winter also reminds us of mortality and its inevitability, from dust we came and to dust we shall return. The flowers and leaves vanish and turn back into soil, as preparation for new life on the other side of the seasonal shifts. We cannot have one without the other, the Winter yin to the Summer yang, with two transitional seasons in between.

The human experience has learned to love all four and rhapsodize about them. From the "Epic of Gilgamesh" (2100 BC) to Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" to every popular love song today, seasons are essential to the story of life itself, with winter occupying a distinct role.

There is no world in which life is without suffering, and so too do the cycles of nature need bitter cold to make possible the warmth of summer sun. Those who recognize this will adapt their thinking and find ways to discover joy even in the darkness and cold.

Escape to Florida if you wish, and can afford it, but, I'm telling you, you are missing out on something wonderful and even magical. And, hey, everyone knows that winter fashions are the best. Bundle up and invent ways to enjoy it all.

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