

There Is a Season

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Here is a story for activists about Thomas Merton—the late Trappist monk, social critic, spiritual visionary, and writer—whose books continue to have an important impact on movements for peace and racial justice.

In the early 1960s, Merton, who lived in a hermitage on the grounds of a monastery out in the Kentucky woods, published a book titled *Seeds of Destruction*. In it he dissected the deep-rooted and persistent racism of American society, and prophesied a racial conflagration soon to come. For this he was taken to task in a book review written by a well-known white liberal urban activist, who said, in effect, “How dare this hermit, who has copped-out on society by retreating to the woods, tell those of us who are hard at work on the front lines that we will not prevail!”

A decade later, after Merton’s prophecy of “the fire next time” had come to pass, the reviewer apologized to Merton in print. Merton, he acknowledged, had seen and spoken more truth from his perch out in the forest than most activists of those times had seen and spoken from the city streets. Sometimes we get a deeper look into the world’s heart—and our own—when we stand not on the shifting sands of society and ego but on the bedrock realities of the natural, and spiritual, world.

In my own life as a citizen-activist, involved as I have been for forty years with educational reform, racial justice, peace, and

community-building, I know how easy it is to lose perspective. One day I get swept away on an updraft of hope—often tainted by an illusion of my own prowess—that things are getting better and better. The next day I get swept under by a tidal wave of despair—often driven by some blow to my own ego—as the mindless or intentional cruelty of the powers and principalities overwhelms me and everything I care about. If I stay trapped too long in this kind of whiplash, I grow weary of it and start looking for escape, not engagement.

That is not the way I want my life to be. I want to see things steady and see them whole—see both the world and myself that way—so I can stay engaged with the struggle. As I have tried to do so, I have found that it helps to stay attuned to the rhythms of the natural world, with its endless cycle of birthing, dying, being reborn, and dying to live once again. Through all her ups and downs, Mother Nature is in this for the long haul: I want to be like her!

I do not mean that we must learn to embrace the death of innocents in the political world the way we must learn to embrace the death that comes with the cycles of nature. There is a big difference between state-sponsored or state-condoned killing and the dying that happens in an ecosystem when winter descends. I mean that—if we want to hang in there as citizen-activists—we must learn to “winter through” inwardly, spiritually, letting our inevitable failures become the seedbed for another cycle of planting new life, not the muck and mire of withdrawal and terminal defeat.

Metaphors are more than literary devices: Most of us use metaphors, albeit unconsciously, to name our experience of life. But these personal metaphors do much more than describe reality as we know it. Animated by the imagination, one of the most vital powers we possess, our metaphors often become reality, transmuting themselves from language into the living of our lives.

I know people who say, “Life is like a game of chance—some win, some lose.” But that metaphor can create a fatalism about

losing or an obsession with beating the odds. I know other people who say, "Life is like a battlefield—you get the enemy, or the enemy gets you." But that metaphor can result in enemies around every corner and a constant sense of siege. We do well to choose our metaphors wisely.

"Seasons" is a wise metaphor for the movement of life, I think. It suggests that life is neither a battlefield nor a game of chance but something infinitely richer, more promising, more real. The notion that our lives are like the eternal cycle of the seasons does not deny the struggle or the joy, the loss or the gain, the darkness or the light, but encourages us to embrace it all—and to find in all of it opportunities for growth.

If we lived close to nature in an agricultural society, the seasons as metaphor and fact would continually frame our lives. But the master metaphor of our era does not come from agriculture—it comes from manufacturing. We do not believe that we "grow" our lives—we believe that we "make" them. Just listen to how we use the word in everyday speech: we make time, make friends, make meaning, make money, make a living, make love.

If we accept the notion that our lives are dependent on an inexorable cycle of seasons, on a play of powers that we can conspire with but never control, we run headlong into a culture that insists, against all evidence, that we can make whatever kind of life we want, whenever we want it. Deeper still, we run headlong into our own egos, which want desperately to believe that we are always in charge.

Transformation is difficult, so it is good to know that there is comfort as well as challenge in the metaphor of life as a cycle of seasons. Illumined by that image, we see that we are not alone in the universe. We are participants in a vast communion of being, and if we open ourselves to its guidance, we can learn anew how to live in this great and gracious community of truth. We can, and we must—if we want our sciences to be humane, our institutions to be sustaining, our healings to be deep, our lives to be true.

AUTUMN

Autumn is a season of great beauty, but it is also a season of decline: The days grow shorter, the light is suffused, and summer's abundance decays toward winter's death. Faced with this inevitable winter, what does nature do in autumn? She scatters the seeds that will bring new growth in the spring—and she scatters them with amazing abandon.

In my own experience of autumn, I am rarely aware that seeds are being planted. Instead, my mind is on the fact that the green growth of summer is browning and beginning to die. My delight in the autumn colors is always tinged with melancholy, a sense of impending loss that is only heightened by the beauty all around. I am drawn down by the prospect of death more than I am lifted by the hope of new life.

But as I explore autumn's paradox of dying and seeding, I feel the power of metaphor. In the autumnal events of my own experience, I am easily fixated on surface appearances—on the decline of meaning, the decay of relationships, the death of a vocation. And yet, if I look more deeply, I may see the myriad possibilities being planted to bear fruit in some season yet to come.

In retrospect, I can see in my own life what I could not see at the time—how the job I lost helped me find work I needed to do, how the “road closed” sign turned me toward terrain I needed to travel, how losses that felt irredeemable forced me to discern meanings I needed to know. On the surface it seemed that life was lessening, but silently and lavishly the seeds of new life were always being sown.

In a paradox, opposites do not negate each other—they cohere in mysterious unity at the heart of reality. Deeper still, they need each other for health, as my body needs to breathe in as well as breathe out. But in a culture that prefers the ease of either/or thinking to the complexities of paradox, we have a hard time holding opposites together. We want light without darkness, the glories of spring and summer without the demands

of autumn and winter, and the Faustian bargains we make fail to sustain our lives.

When we so fear the dark that we demand light around the clock, there can be only one result: artificial light that is glaring and graceless and, beyond its borders, a darkness that grows ever more terrifying as we try to hold it off. Split off from each other, neither darkness nor light is fit for human habitation. But if we allow the paradox of darkness and light to be, the two will conspire to bring wholeness and health to every living thing.

WINTER

Winter where I live in the upper Midwest is a demanding season—and not everyone appreciates the discipline. It is a season when death's victory can seem supreme: few creatures stir, plants do not visibly grow, and nature feels like our enemy. And yet the rigors of winter, like the diminishments of autumn, are accompanied by amazing gifts.

One gift is beauty, different from the beauty of autumn but somehow lovelier still: I am not sure that any sight or sound on Earth is as exquisite as the hushed descent of a sky full of snow. Another gift is the reminder that times of dormancy and deep rest are essential to all living things.

But, for me, winter has an even greater gift to give. It comes when the sky is clear, the sun brilliant, the trees bare, and first snow yet to come. It is the gift of utter clarity. In winter, one can walk into woods that had been opaque with summer growth only a few months earlier and see the trees clearly, singly and together, and see the ground they are rooted in.

A few years ago, my father died. He was more than a good man, and the months following his death were a long, hard winter for me. But in the midst of that ice and loss, I came into a certain clarity that I lacked when he was alive. I saw something that had been concealed when the luxuriance of his love surrounded me—saw how I had relied on him to help me cushion life's harsher blows. When he could no longer do that, my first

thought was, "Now I must do it for myself." But as time went on, I saw a deeper truth: It never was my father absorbing those blows but a larger and deeper grace that he taught me to rely upon.

When my father was alive, I confused the teaching with the teacher. My teacher is gone now, but the grace is still there—and my clarity about that fact has allowed his teaching to take deeper root in me. Winter clears the landscape, however brutally, giving us a chance to see ourselves and each other more clearly, to see the very ground of our being.

In the upper Midwest, newcomers often receive a classic piece of wintertime advice: "The winters will drive you crazy until you learn to get out into them." Here, people spend good money on warm clothing so they can get outdoors and avoid the "cabin fever" that comes from huddling fearfully by the fire during the long frozen months.

SPRING

Before spring becomes beautiful, it is plug ugly, nothing but mud and muck. I have walked in the early spring through fields that will suck your boots off, a world so wet and woeful it makes you yearn for the return of ice. But in that muddy mess, the conditions for rebirth are being created.

Though spring begins slowly and tentatively, it grows with a tenacity that never fails to touch me. The smallest and most tender shoots insist upon having their way, coming up through ground that looked, only a few weeks earlier, as if it would never grow anything again. The crocuses and snowdrops do not bloom for long. But their mere appearance, however brief, is always a harbinger of hope, and from those small beginnings, hope grows at a geometric rate. The days get longer, the winds get warmer, and the world grows green again.

In my own life, as my winters segue into spring, I not only find it hard to cope with mud but hard to credit the small harbingers of larger life to come, hard to hope until the outcome is

secure. Spring teaches me to look more carefully for the green stems of possibility: for the intuitive hunch that may turn into a larger insight, for the glance or touch that may thaw a frozen relationship, for the stranger's act of kindness that makes the world seem hospitable again.

Late spring is potlatch time in the natural world, a great giveaway of blooming beyond all necessity and reason—done, it would appear, for no reason other than the sheer joy of it. The gift of life, which seemed to be withdrawn in winter, has been given once again, and nature, rather than hoarding it, gives it all away. There is another paradox here, known in all the wisdom traditions: If you receive a gift, you keep it alive not by clinging to it but by passing it along.

From autumn's profligate seedings to the great spring giveaway, nature teaches a steady lesson: If we want to save our lives, we cannot cling to them but must spend them with abandon. When we are obsessed with bottom lines and productivity, with efficiency of time and motion, with the rational relation of means and ends, with projecting reasonable goals and making a beeline toward them, it seems unlikely that our work will ever bear full fruit, unlikely that we will ever know the fullness of spring in our lives.

SUMMER

Where I live, summer's keynote is abundance. The forests fill with undergrowth, the trees with fruit, the meadows with wildflowers and grasses, the fields with wheat and corn, the gardens with zucchini, and the yards with weeds. In contrast to the sensationalism of spring, summer is a steady state of plenty, a green and amber muchness that feeds us on more levels than we know.

Nature does not always produce abundance, of course. There are summers when flood or drought destroy the crops and threaten the lives and livelihood of those who work the fields. But nature normally takes us through a reliable cycle of scarcity

and abundance in which times of deprivation foreshadow an eventual return to the abundant fields.

This fact of nature is in sharp contrast to a human nature that seems to regard perpetual scarcity as the law of life. Daily I am astonished at how readily I believe that something I need is in short supply. If I hoard possessions, it is because I believe that there are not enough to go around. If I struggle with others over power, it is because I believe that power is limited. If I become jealous in relationships, it is because I believe that when you get too much love I will be shortchanged.

The irony, often tragic, is that by embracing the scarcity assumption, we create the very scarcities we fear. If I hoard material goods, others will have too little and I will never have enough. If I fight my way up the ladder of power, others will be defeated and I will never feel secure. If I get jealous of someone I love, I am likely to drive that person away. If I cling to the words I have written as if they were the last of their kind, the pool of new possibilities will surely go dry. We create scarcity by fearfully accepting it as law, and by competing with others for resources as if we were stranded on the Sahara at the last oasis.

In the human world, abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store. Whether the "scarce resource" is money or love or power or words, the true law of life is that we generate more of whatever seems scarce by trusting its supply and passing it around. Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection, but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them—and receive them from others when we are in need.

Here is a summertime truth: Abundance is a communal act, the joint creation of an incredibly complex ecology in which each part functions on behalf of the whole and, in return, is sustained by the whole. Community not only creates abundance—<community is abundance> If we could learn that equation from the world of nature, the human world might be transformed.