

# *A Meditation for the Season*

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**December 8, 1996**

In late autumn, there are no secrets.  
In late autumn, the world is what it is  
and there is no time for pretense.  
In late autumn, the days are short  
and dusk comes early  
and nights are long and dark.  
In late autumn it is obvious  
that light is not the natural state of things;  
it is a transient phenomenon  
in the midst of environing darkness.

In late autumn,  
the trees are stripped to their essentials.  
Leaves lie piled around gnarled trunks,  
green and gold and red and orange  
all transmuted to dun and to dust.  
The trees are twisted, scarred trunks and limbs  
dancing against a stainless-steel sky  
in spite of all the indignities  
of lightening strikes  
and wind storms  
and insect infestations  
and other traumas made obvious  
by the merciless autumn.

The life of the tree  
is now entrusted to a thin band of cells  
protected by the gnarled trunk,  
and to the roots,  
life hidden out of sight  
in dark places  
in late autumn.

Caught in a net of twigs  
near the top of one small oak  
is a red plastic ring,  
part of a child's lawn game,  
tossed and lost

one warm summer afternoon  
and soon forgotten.  
Now the leaves are down  
and a circle of bright red,  
like a halo near the top of the tree,  
recalls a simple summer game.  
Standing under the tree,  
one can almost hear the voices,  
the laughter and shouting,  
the times now gone, never to return.  
Late autumn is a harsh reminder  
that time's arrow is not reversible.

The underbrush,  
the thick screen of bushes and weeds  
which hid so much from the roving eye  
in the bright, light days of summer  
is now a thin and fragile net,  
leading the eye on from place to place,  
hiding nothing.  
The deer, hidden all summer  
by dappled sunlight and green leaves,  
now turns and stares out at me  
from the center of the wooded copse,  
stares like one startled in the bath.  
We stand and look deep into each others eyes,  
eye making contact with eye,  
carrying wordless  
messages each of us understands  
only vaguely and in part.  
In summer we live in separate worlds  
which intersect occasionally, often tragically.  
In the late autumn world,  
with all pretenses stripped away,  
it is clear beyond doubt  
that we share one world  
and one life  
and one destiny.

Small birds,  
having forsaken the trip south,  
daring the worst the coming winter offers,  
flit uneasily from bare branch to bare branch.  
Finding little cover,  
they lift and whirl in the sky  
and return to the leafless tree,

reminding us that they, too,  
are part of this one world,  
this one life, this single destiny.

In late autumn,  
when the gray clouds cover the sky  
from horizon to horizon,  
and wind lashes the rain  
against the window--  
rain that carries crystal promises  
of what is to come,  
in late autumn,  
when the sun is weak and late rising  
and dusk comes early  
and dark arrives before dinner,  
in late autumn  
I feel a yearning somewhere deep within me,  
at the very core of my being.  
Mistaking the meaning,  
I turn on lights against oncoming darkness,  
I turn up the heat  
to ward off the chill and the damp,  
I fill my time with important matters  
--books to be read,  
appointments to be kept,  
meetings to attend,  
jobs to check off an endless list,  
lest I disappoint some unvoiced expectation.  
In late autumn, the world and I  
conspire to fill up the time with business,  
the tyranny of the urgent  
ruthlessly silencing the quiet need  
at the center of my being.

I walk down the street of the town  
as dusk gathers about me.  
The lights come on--  
everywhere the lights--  
street lights and decorative lights,  
chaste electric candles in windows,  
garish lights draped across bushes and trees,  
outlining windows and doors--  
as if all the world were determined  
to deny or ignore or defeat  
the gathering darkness.  
I walk down the street

as dusk gathers about me  
and somewhere in the core of my being  
it stirs again--  
that wordless yearning,  
that melancholy sense  
that I am missing something important.

Like an unexpected gift  
it comes to me.  
I need the darkness,  
the fallow time,  
the clear, unadorned truth  
that is late autumn.  
It is curious that we think of summer,  
when all the world is busy  
with the business of life,  
as our season of rest,  
and we fill the short days and long nights  
of late autumn with a whirl of activity  
and duty and responsibility,  
as if determined to set ourselves apart  
from the rest of life,  
from the natural cycles  
in which we are rooted,  
out of which we have arisen.  
We compensate for diminished sun  
with electric light and heat  
and have no time to cultivate our own souls.

I need the darkness, the fallow time.  
In need to sit in the gathering gloom  
and allow that darkness to enter my soul  
to acknowledge it as part of my being.  
I need to sit and watch the cold autumn rain  
falling from the gray sky  
to puddle on a barren earth.  
I need to watch the stiff dance of leafless trees  
out on a distant horizon.  
I need to see the birds wheel and turn  
in a sunless sky  
and the deer standing quietly  
in some leafless glade.  
I need to decipher the meaning of this season  
for my own existence.  
I need time to enter into the dark core  
at the center of my own being,

to confront my fears and frustrations and follies,  
to accept my limitations and inadequacies.  
I need time to consolidate the season of growth  
and open myself to possibilities  
beyond my dreaming.  
I need the darkness of late autumn.  
I need to embrace it in the world  
and invite it into my soul.

That, after all, is the meaning  
behind the myths clustered about this season.  
It is only when the darkness is complete  
that light is truly born in the world.  
Before history, our ancient ancestors knew--  
they knew this sacred truth.  
Into the dark recesses of caves they went,  
into the darkness  
at the heart of the earth they went  
and there they discovered a vision of life  
and they painted that vision  
with bold strokes and bright colors  
deep in earth's darkness  
where it speaks to us still.  
There they painted the single world  
they shared with all living creatures.  
And there  
in the darkness at the center of the earth  
they celebrated the great Earth Mother,  
who, out of darkness, brought light,  
who, in darkness, nurtured life,  
and who, in the end, received life back  
into the environing and fecund darkness.  
The dark was not to be feared;  
the dark was not to be avoided;  
it was to be invited and embraced as the source  
out of which life and light emerges.

And in sacred circles,  
and atop mounds and barrows,  
wrapped in skins and pelts,  
our ancestors watched the sky,  
the weakening sun and lengthening night,  
not because they feared  
the sun would lose its way,  
would fail to return,  
but because they knew

that only when the darkness was complete  
could the new sun be born,  
the sign of returning light and life.  
They watched  
for the longest and darkest night of the year  
to celebrate the cycle of nature  
which brought light from darkness  
and life from death.

And that is the ancient insight,  
hidden and disguised and  
offered as dubious history,  
which lies at the root of Hanukkah,  
that story of the miraculous light  
burning for eight days in the darkness,  
the story which celebrates the emergence of hope  
in the midst of hopelessness  
and of faith when there is no reason to believe.

And surely that is the ancient insight  
hidden and disguised  
and offered as dubious history,  
behind the Christmas story.  
The tale of the child born  
at the midnight of the year,  
born to a teen-aged, unwed mother,  
born in a cave, in the midst of darkness,  
a child of hopelessness and despair  
who grew to become the symbol  
of light and life and hope--  
surely this tale is the old insight  
repackaged and retold  
to ears that now only half hear  
because we are so busy lighting the darkness  
we have not time to embrace the dark.

The story,  
no matter who told it,  
is the same story.  
Late autumn darkness is not our enemy,  
to be hurried through,  
to be struggled against and overcome.  
Late autumn darkness is an invitation  
to enter into the natural cycle,  
to see ourselves as part of the great process  
which is darkness and light and life and death

and darkness again.  
Late autumn is an invitation  
to find that quiet, nurturing, dark place  
at the core of our beings,  
to rest in that environing darkness  
and to wait for something to stir  
and to grow and to emerge  
for it is at the margins of existence  
that hope is born and light is kindled.

And what emerges is often  
beyond any expectation.  
A dear and cherished friend,  
diagnosed with a terminal illness,  
once told me that his condition  
had proved a strange blessing.  
In the darkness of a world without a future  
he began to see his life and his relationships  
with a clarity he never experienced before.  
For the first time,  
he understood the tangled family conflicts  
which had grown like rank vegetation  
year after year.  
With the authority of one  
who had nothing to lose,  
we was able to speak, out of a dark place,  
to those he loved,  
to call them to new relationships,  
to untangle the twisted resentments,  
to set a new course into the future.  
Out of darkness, new light and hope was born.  
Lying in his hospital bed  
he shook his head in disbelief,  
saying to me that only as he accepted,  
indeed, embraced his perilous state  
had he been able to make this gift  
to those he loved.

It was a remarkable story,  
but not uncommon.  
When we have learned to accept the limits,  
to embrace the inescapable,  
to relax into the darkness,  
then we may be free to accept  
the unexpected gifts which lie all about us,  
unseen and ignored in our business,

in our determination to banish the darkness.

In late autumn,  
with winter coming on,  
there are no secrets.  
In late autumn, the world is what it is  
and there is no time for pretense.  
In late autumn, the days are short  
and dusk comes early  
and nights are long and dark.  
In late autumn it is obvious  
that light is not the natural state of things;  
it is a transient phenomenon  
in the midst of enviroing darkness.

This late autumn,  
take time to embrace the darkness,  
find some fallow time  
when you can watch the gray clouds  
moving across the heavens,  
some fallow time  
when you can watch the rain  
strike the window,  
and listen to the wind  
calling an unfamiliar name,  
and see a weak sun,  
low upon the horizon,  
move across the leaden sky;  
some fallow time  
when you can cultivate your soul  
and learn to accept yourself for what you are:  
a child of this earth,  
a part of its endless rhythms  
emerging from darkness into light  
for this brief moment,  
incarnating possibilities undreamed.  
This late autumn,  
I pray you,  
be not too eager to light the lights.  
Embrace the darkness,  
the still, quiet, nurturing darkness  
out of which all light and hope emerges.