

Making It Through the Darkness

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Opening Words

Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Reading

Mary Oliver, "Stories"

do you know
the old stories
about the stars the
hunter and dog swan crab
lion bear the seven
sisters there on the horizon call it

pleasure call it
comfort call it
rinsing out the dread all

night long the silence of the
heavens remains
intractable the darkness is more dark
than the back

of the moon's silver
eye and heavy
as lead this is why
there are so many stories to draw
each star into the mouth for a single
minute to feel that white fire
against the teeth bearable even

intimate what happens
next we say what happens
next and why does it
happen and what happens
then because *that* has happened
lifting up the darkness
by that much.

Sermon

Every year in the fall, when the days start getting noticeably shorter, there is about a week for me that is pure melancholy. Actually, that's not true. There are moments for a week or so that are pure melancholy for me. There are those days each fall, just as the sun is low in sky, about to set, when it hits me, without my even thinking about it: A kind of melancholy drops right into my heart and lands in my stomach. A dread, a sadness. It is so illogical. I always loved fall, with school beginning -- I was a nerd, I loved school. I liked the settling in of fall, the nesting, the putting away of summer's clothes, the new corduroys and skirts for school. By summer's end, I was almost always ready for summer *to end*. So mine wasn't a sadness about summer passing, or a fear of school or a dread of routine. I *loved* routine. It was something visceral, primal. This melancholy and dread, so heavy and beyond my control, that came and comes still each autumn was beyond volition -- as automatic as the desire to sink to your knees and hold the ground when you approach a high precipice and a long fall.

I have come to wonder whether this feeling I have is hard-wired into my brain and yours. Whether despite all of our arguments about why we can survive winter and darkness, there is someplace inside us that was selected over eons to dread the darkness. If so, it would not be surprising that human communities the world over and from all times have found ways to cope with the darkness.

The most common ways to cope that have developed are rituals that invite the sun back -- the sacrifice of virgins that feed the Mayan sun and renew it to full vigor. The dances around fire that keep away the evil of these days. The celebrations that mark the day

when our part of the Earth begins to tilt closer to the sun, and encourage it not to change its mind. The celebrations of Chanukah, Christmas, Kwanzaa and, before them, the feasts to celebrate the birth of Apollo, Attis, Baal, Dionysus, Helios, Hercules, Horus, Mithra, Osiris, Perseus, Theseus.

Then there are all the ways that we as human beings have made the darkest of nights and shortest of days bearable, when the signs of rebirth have not yet been evident. We gather up evergreen wreaths, reminders of what does not die even in these darkest of nights. We light candles in our windows, use up megawatts of electricity blanketing our gardens and houses with colored lights.

And so it would seem that to dread the dark nights is human -- as human and as natural as the desire to breathe and to live. And so is the desire to stave off this dread. Yet I wonder if the only way, or even the best way, to respond to winter is to fight off this dread.

If you look at each season of the Earth, there is a parallel season of the soul, and each natural season, therefore, issues a kind of invitation. In winter's dark nights, there is an invitation to be in a place that is also necessary for a balanced perspective on the world and on oneself.

I can only speak for myself, but for me, getting over the melancholy of the late days of fall is about surrendering, on some level, to the invitation of winter. For me, it is an invitation to go to a place that is not about joy and possibility, the way spring and summer are, or to a place about settling in and letting go, the way fall is, but to a place of loss and limits.

It was Thomas Moore, a former Catholic monk who lectures on mythology and archetypal psychology, who helped me to flesh out winter's place in the soul's education. I found the clues in Moore's book *Care of the Soul*, in his chapter on depression. To me there are many parallels between winter and depression. Indeed, depression, Moore points out, used to be associated with Saturn, just as was that best known of the ancient winter festivals, Saturnalia.

The celebration of Saturnalia comes from the Roman myth that says that when Zeus ascended the throne, his deposed father, Saturn (Cronus), fled to Rome and began a rule that came to be known as the Golden Age. The Golden Age was a time of peace and plenty, and in honor of that time, the festival of Saturnalia was instituted. It involved feasting and merriment, temporary cessation of war, times when slaves and masters sat and ate at the same table.

However, there was another side to Saturn's personality. That was Saturn, god of agriculture, lord of the harvest. So it was fitting also that there be a feast in his honor sometime after the fall harvest was brought in. But why was such a harvest in December? Well, Saturn also was considered the god of time -- remember, his Greek name was Cronus (like chronology).

It isn't exactly clear how he came to have the association with time. One theory is that its origins lie in a common picture of Saturn or Cronos devouring his children -- something the god did in an attempt to forestall his deposition from the throne. It was an image that came to be connected with time, which, like Saturn, also devours everything. Another suggestion is that sluggish motion along the celestial vault came to be associated with time -- time as an aged man. Indeed, as Saturn gradually acquired the connotation of the god of time, his representations changed from a vibrant middle-aged god to a worn-out old man, often leaning on a scythe. He became the one who brings things to their end, not just the harvest, but all things. So Saturnalia, not surprisingly, was scheduled for December, the time of year when nature too seemed at its end.

Perhaps not surprisingly, medieval and Renaissance scholars associated Saturn with one of the four humors of ancient medicine, melancholy. It makes sense: Saturn, being about times of harvest and endings, can be about both the ripeness of life's bounty (like the wisdom that comes from having lived many years) and a reckoning with one's own limitations, including that ultimate limitation -- the specter of death.

In so many ways, then, winter seems like Saturn's ideal season. The harvest over, nature and life seemingly at its end, and with all this the press of melancholy.

What Thomas Moore argues is that this is not a season to shrink from, but to embrace. So often we treat the hard questions and the moods that usher them in as something to be avoided. Look at the Paxil ads that run almost hourly in this season. "Are you feeling anxious, frustrated, sad?" they ask. And then a woman wails into the camera, "You are ruining our family!" Yes, the deepest of depressions is good for no one, and should be treated with medications if necessary, but feelings of anxiety, frustration, sadness are as natural as jubilation and *as healthy*. So why not give them their day?

"Some feelings and thoughts," Moore writes, "seem to emerge only in a dark mood. Suppress the mood, and you will suppress those ideas and reflections." Ignoring or suppressing those ideas and reflections doesn't make them less real or less true for us. It just makes them less visible. It just renders us unable to respond to them in healthy ways. It just covers their mouths. Winter, with its permission to be melancholy, opens a window to moods of grayness and gives voice to what finds its fullest expression in such moods.

For instance, one issue that winter seems to make room for better than any season (at least for me) is reflection on the realities of aging. Ignoring the questions that are raised with the passing of each year can certainly be a temptation -- especially in a culture as youth-obsessed as our own. Yet denial of our aging does not free us to escape it. All it does is make our aging less seasoned and graceful. Facing up to our lives as they pass in stages "weathers and ages a person naturally," writes Moore, "the way temperature, winds, and time weather a barn." When we reflect on life -- *our* lives -- in stages, we garner wisdom as it comes, not putting off the press of time and the questions it asks us to face simply out of desire to maintain an illusion of invincibility. There will be a time to indulge in a sense of power and full potential. That too has its season, but *this* is the

season of reconciling with loss and the unrecoverable passage of time. Or that's how winter can feel to me.

In that sense, winter's connection to Saturn as the god of agriculture is even more appropriate. For in many ways, what we tend to do in winter, like the bushes we prune and cut back, is what sets the stages for the health of what will be reborn. Winter's invitation to turn inward will invite us to do the same thing: We will find ourselves pruning the dead and the outmoded in our lives, and as a result, what grows back in seasons to come will be vital and strong and reflect the essential self we understand ourselves to be, and our hopes for what we wish to become. This winter too will prepare us for richer harvests.

Of course, all this makes the "invitation of winter" sound so wonderful and easy, and it isn't necessarily so. Sometimes the questions that we hear in these dark nights are ones we have ignored for years. And we have ignored them for years because they are painful. Facing them in winter, when so often we are alone, can be natural, but certainly not easy. And like Frost's poem says of the man riding through the winter landscape on the longest night of the year, there can be miles to go before we sleep. Sometimes the work of winter is long and hard.

Also, this year might be especially tough, with so many reasons to be melancholy. There is the specter of war, economic insecurity, fear for personal safety, and a haunting, ambiguous sense of loss that is hard to get our arms around. Yet, rather than hide from the questions that this year raises for us, we can use the long nights to make our peace with them.

Some Renaissance gardens had a bower, Thomas Moore writes, that was dedicated to Saturn. It was a shaded, dark and remote place, "where a person could retire and enter the persona of depression without fear of being disturbed."

Those men and women of Renaissance times, like the Romans before them, saw the moods of Saturn as something as necessary as the seasons themselves -- with a time and a place for them, and a purpose. This year, let us give ourselves permission to do the same.

Of course we light candles against the darkness. We would be crazy not to. Of course we host celebrations when we need to be reminded of the power of life and its joy. Of course we can tell stories that, as Mary Oliver describes them, allow us to take the stars into our mouths for a moment and lift up the darkness by so much. However, in these dark winter days, we can also see the darkness as an invitation to submerge in another mood for a while, into the embrace of an older, wiser god, who wishes to use this season of earth and soul to prune us and prepare us for a deeper, richer rebirth in the season yet to come.

So may it be.