

Living the Seasons
Lynn Alsup January 2018



I love this poem by Lynn Ungar that Emily shared with Anna and me not long ago:

The cotton woods are
Flinging themselves outward,
Filling the air with spiraling flurries, Covering lawns in
deepening drifts.
You could not call this generosity.
Like any being, they
Let loose what they have
In order to survive,
In order that their lives might continue In a new year's
growth.
The more seeds they send out
On their lofted journeys The greater the chance
For their kind to flourish. There is no hesitation.
No one asks how much
They will give. Without words
They know so clearly
That everything depends on what we call giving,

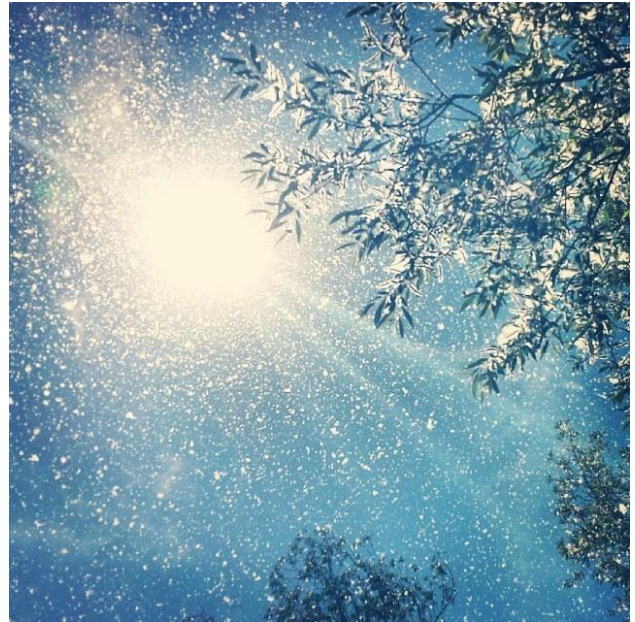


Image by Bradley Gordon

That which the world knows only as creation. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/icanchangethisright/14114884560>

As we reflected on the poem in our chalice circle together, I thought about how the cottonwood doesn't try to "fling itself outward" during winter. Its impossible. For it to resist instead of live its season. I was grateful to think that I don't have to "fling myself outward" during my own winters. As I mentioned last time I was with you, I am just emerging from a long, cold winter in the life of our family. During the stress and demands, I needed to go inward and sink deep roots and conserve my energies mostly for myself and my family. I often felt guilty that I wasn't serving more out in the world and longed to be in a more expansive space. But that was impossible. It was winter for me.

I've spent a lot of my life believing all days should have the same goal of spending as much of myself as possible for the good of others and "for my kind to flourish. Flinging myself outward like the cottonwood in June even if its December in my life. Ignoring the darkness or cold of winter or even sometimes the seduction of the first warmth of spring. Not paying attention to the season I'm actually in. But this is what a cottonwood is meant to be in winter:



Trees Overhead, Geraint Smith

It didn't work well for me. To live this way. Not acknowledging the ebbing and flowing of my days. Of my life. Not paying attention to the season of life I am in and working with it rather than against it. This is part of what I mean when I say living the seasons. There is a gentleness towards myself in it and also a receiving of the gifts that each one offers.

Life span development psychology teaches us that we are constantly changing physically, mentally and socially throughout our lives from conception through prenatal life, infancy, early and middle childhood, adolescence, and early, middle and late adulthood. Through the plasticity of our brains responding to our experiences, we evolve. We acknowledge this when we expect different things from a toddler than a preschooler than a teenager. Your friend in her mid-twenties lives differently from your friend in her mid-sixties. Erik Erikson famously gave each stage of development a task in the 1950's: beginning with trust v mistrust and ending with ego integrity v despair. He believed that each task required dedication and the completion of the one before. There was no skipping ahead. Paradoxically, dedication to and acceptance of this season frees us to evolve and truly live the changing seasons.

Accepting where I am and embracing the changing has brought me more freedom and peace. Paying attention to the cottonwood down the street from me helps. So does noticing the moon in its phases. I have had depression most of my life. When my depression begins speaking loudly it likes to say that whatever is hard will never change. Things will always be this way. There is no way out. Believing this is

like sinking in quicksand. A force I cannot struggle against except to be pulled farther down and under. But as I have learned to watch the moon cycle from new to full and back again each month and winter, spring, summer, and fall come and change the cottonwood, I know deep in my body and soul that the voice is speaking a lie. All things change. I can wait it out.

One literal fall found us letting go of our then 13 year old daughter who was in deep distress. She asked for help, and we drove her to a therapeutic wilderness program in North Carolina. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. For some reason I noticed the moon the last night we were together before we left her at the base camp in the care of strangers. It was full over the trees of the Appalachian trail. I spent every night of the next months stepping out my back door before going to bed to stand under the moon and notice the changing. Each time the moon filled out again I couldn't believe another month had passed without her in our home. And I knew that we were all growing and changing. A new season was coming.

Sometimes, when it's that one moment at a time kind of season, practicing the ancient monastic rhythm of the hours of the day brings me home to this truth. Brother David Steindl-Rast wrote a lovely book called Music of Silence talking about the practice of praying the hours of the day. For him, "Prayer is attuning yourself to the life of the world, to love, the force that moves the sun and the moon and the stars." p xix

He compares the hours of the day to the seasons of the year:

"...a season is a mood and an experience, not an exact period...seasons are qualitative experiences: We sense a subtle difference in the quality of light, the length of daylight, the feel of the air on our skin. We know intuitively that something is happening in nature. The hours are the seasons of the day, and they were originally understood in a mythical way. Earlier generations of our human race, not ruled by alarm clocks, saw the hours personified, encountered them as messengers of eternity in the natural flow of time growing, blossoming, bearing fruit. In the unfolding rhythm of everything that grows and changes on earth, each hour had a character and presence infinitely richer and more complex than our sterile clock time. As messenger from another dimension—an angel as it were—each hour was understood to have its own significance." p 2-3

These practices in my life informed both the midday and compline meditations that I offered here last fall. Creating pauses in the day to remember ourselves and our world changes our experience of our lives. Using our senses to experience our days hour by hour or week by week or season by season aligns us with the rhythms of the universe.

Part of our resistance to this is our need for things to be exciting or exceptional. Not walking steadily through the seasons. A friend of mine in Vancouver told me once that it was hard for her to learn to live the rhythms of life there because the changing of the seasons is so gentle. She grew up in South Dakota where the weather is dramatic and wild. Our culture tells us that all our days should end in drinks at the bar, in a party. Dramatic and wild. When most of life is like slowly walking a labyrinth toward the center.

I often think of the book Mastery by George Leonard. He talks about how in our culture we are constantly seeking climax experiences and impatient during the plateaus. And that most of life, if we are trying to truly live it well, is a series of plateaus punctuated by occasional climax—even the weather in North Dakota is like that. But we are always looking for the next extraordinary event or ability to come along. As if we can just slip into them without plodding along the plateau in our practices, evolving slowly and purposefully. He says, “Our dedication to the illusion of endless climaxes puts us on a collision course with the human psyche.” p 36, and “The real juice of life, whether it be sweet or bitter, is to be found not nearly so much in the products of our efforts as in the **process** of living itself, in how it feels to be alive.” p 39 How it feels in our winters, springs, summers, and falls. He says, “People who love the plateau. Life for these people is especially vivid and satisfying.” p 44 We don’t miss the gifts of each season of life always looking ahead to the next. It’s about living in the now with awareness and intention.

Embedding rituals within the seasons helps us live this. When our oldest daughter was four years old, I began creating rituals to mark the Christian seasons, our tradition, with her. Most of our attempts—like green pancakes and celtic bands for remembering Saint Patrick—fell quickly by the wayside. But others stuck. We especially embraced the coming of winter and Christmas through remembering the historical (if also mythical) saints. Nicolas on December 6 with ginger pancakes reminiscent of Turkey where he lived and wooden toys like the ones he is said to have given children. Candlelight breakfast with bright yellow pastry to remember Lucia on December 13 when the catholic church remembers her. We have story boxes that tell their stories of generosity and sacrifice and love because we want to live that way.

On the Winter Solstice, December 20 or 21, the darkest 24 hours of the year, we join people throughout time and the world in lighting fires and expressing hope that the light will return. Both the actual light and the light of hope, justice, love, and peace. The next day, as we enter winter, the light slowly creeps back into more of the day. We remember St Valentine in February sometimes with chocolate but always with cards telling each other what we appreciate and love about each other. We celebrate Easter as the promise fulfilled each spring that winter will always pass and new life will always come. Most of these Christian celebrations have deep roots in pagan celebrations and wisdom.

One of our symbols at Easter is a wooden cross covered in chicken wire that we invite people to cover in cut flowers. Last year I gathered armfuls by the side of the road as we came home from Possum Kingdom and friends brought whatever was growing in their yards. It reminds us that the brutality and injustice of our world symbolized by an instrument of execution can be overcome by peaceful, powerful resistance. In this remembering, we choose to believe with the 21st century President Obama, the 20th century Martin Luther King, Jr. and the 19th century clergyman Theodore Parker that “the **arc** of the moral universe is **long**, but it bends toward justice.” Our family reaches down for the nourishment coming from centuries of remembering as the seasons change.

Honestly, by summer solstice, I am usually hidden in my cave. A friend of mine once did some research and discovered that the scientific name for an animal like me is an aestivator: one who hibernates in the summer. Some of these beautiful animals are just like me:

the salamander



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/41/Salamander_head.png

the lady beetle



https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f2/Coccinella_magnifica01.jpg

the California red legged tree frog



And the desert tortoise



Photographed in the Mojave Desert, southern California. By Tigerhawkvok
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gopherus_agassizii.jpg

I especially resonate with this guy in July and August when its best to just not talk to me. I'm grateful to know this about myself and accept it. Interestingly, two of my best friends are winter hibernators. We pass each other one going outside and one coming in around the solstices. And because we are aware of the changing seasons changing us, we can be gentle with ourselves and accommodate our own needs.

Although literally never going outside isn't something I'd recommend. Being outside in whatever the weather keeps us more alive and grounded in the seasons. One way I do this is walking the few blocks from my house to the duck pond. In the summer, I go early in the morning to miss the heat. In the winter I go late in the afternoon when it is usually warmest. I experience the changing of the cottonwoods there and the amazing migration of ??? ducks that come through Midland. It grounds me in today and lets me know tomorrow always comes. It helps me receive the beauty of each season. And its practice for watching things come and go and return in my own life. I can live more openhandedly and freely because of my friends the ducks.

There are lots of ways to live the seasons with deep awareness and response. Rituals, being outside, contemplative practices are some. Christine Valters Paintner, in Eyes of the Heart teaches a practice of receiving images through photography on contemplative walks outside. These photos came from winter in my front yard in Midland, spring at Lake Austin, summer in the Guadalupe mountains, and fall in Portland, OR.



Pausing to photograph something of beauty as we live the seasons deepens our awareness and responses.

One powerful practice is eating the seasons. I first learned about eating seasonally as I studied macrobiotic cooking. My father-in-law began a macrobiotic diet to treat cancer over 25 years ago. I honestly had never thought about giving my body what it needed before. Only keeping from it what it didn't. Turns out our bodies need what grows or preserves in our own environment in the season we are living. It is what has the most nutrients and what the microbes in our bodies are prepared to use best. Apples and greens for fall, winter wheat and squashes, baby lettuces in spring then summer squashes, tomatoes, and berries. We are affected by the environment in which we live just like the plants. Our bodies need the root vegetable soup that's simmering in the Stone Soup pot in the kitchen right now. Because its winter. The seasons, our bodies, our minds: all connected.



<https://thenourishinghome.com/2012/09/stone-soup-memories-in-the-making/>

And I promise you one of my kids will begin clamoring as soon as it warms up, "Is it strawberry season yet?!" to my "Not yet. Not yet. Not yet." We have to wait for the season to change. A powerful lesson. And, man, do those first summer strawberries from Morgan farm on a Saturday morning at the farmers market taste sweet. And the first apples of fall. And winter's pomegranates. Respecting the seasons reveals the extravagance of their gifts.

Barbara Kingsolver's wonderful book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* chronicles her family's commitment to eating locally for a year. This meant eating seasonally as well as the only reason we can eat strawberries at Valentines is that they are shipped in from California or Mexico. They discovered that eating this way not only had the environmental impact that they were striving for but also developed relationships with the community of farmers and ranchers and animals around them. It brought their family together in the dirt for planting, tending, and harvesting and in the kitchen for processing and cooking. It brought abundance to their lives. She says this of Spring:

I like putting on my muck boots and traipsing up to the garden in springtime to see what's come up overnight. When I discover little curve-necked bean sprouts emerging in perfectly even rows, I'm flooded with a warm glow of predictable order imposed on a disorderly planet. It will evaporate as soon as I come back inside and read the newspaper. But that's part of the deal; hope is a renewable option. Farming is renewal by definition. I love watching the curly-haired lambs the first minute after they're born as they find their wobbly legs, stand up, and stagger after mama, doggedly bunting a nose against her front legs, back legs, belly, the wall of the paddock, and me—if I'm in there with them—until they finally latch onto the bliss of colostrum and milk. When I pick up these fresh-born creatures they're damp and surprisingly hot, with little hearts pounding like the engines of life they are. In lambing season we stay close to the barn because sometimes they'll need help, not just finding the teat but getting through the mortal doorway. I've had to deliver stuck lambs, breech lambs, tangled triplets, and revive two or three that were born not breathing. If I had any chance of pausing first to consider whether I knew what I was doing, I would have said, in every case, "heck no!" And any livestock farmer will tell you that's a regular April morning: save a couple of lives and then go in the house, wash up, and make your oatmeal.

I like to think of myself as in the autumn of my life. What a relief from summer it is for me. I know who I am so much more than before and am moving from life defined by motherhood back out into the broader world. The light is gentler in my life these days. I am so grateful I have learned from the seasons of the year to live where I am as fully as I can. To fling myself out like the cottonwood in June and shed my leaves and rest in January. As we acknowledge our connection to the natural world and live the seasons of the year mindfully, we can begin to live the seasons of our lives more mindfully as well. We might even discover that the divide between us and the other animals and plants of the world is illusion. We might embrace their wisdom and abundance. I invite you to consider living the seasons into balance and freedom.