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Without winter, we would be less whole

by Rich Heffern

Eco Catholic

I've long been a fan of winter. I just like its paraphernalia, its garb, its customs, necessities, limitations and snowflakes. As a kid I suffered every summer from hay fever, welcoming the relief the frosts always brought. A spell of living in the country also helped me cultivate a taste for the cold times. Winter is different away from the cities and suburbs.

An acquired taste perhaps, I believe the season of winter deserves a prominent niche in the Academy of the Underrated.

In the Midwest where I live, the old Puritan from the north comes down every year through its annual

migration routes. With its brisk vanguards and



prefaces in the late autumn dawns and dusks, winter makes its

wide, relentless approach. The nights grow longer. Cold fronts descend like beasts of prey. The frosty winds pounce. Everywhere out of doors life freezes in its tracks and waits like a resigned cottontail. Inch by inch the chill winds clutch at and temper the countryside for the bitter days ahead. Slowly the land is translated into the native tongue and idiom of winter. The days are short and sun-starved but quietly beautiful, without the razzle dazzle of the other seasons. Colors are muted and understated, just homespun shades of brown, russet and tan. With both hands tied behind her back, with a minimum palette, nature still lavishes beauty almost absentmindedly on winter days.

The weekly community woodcutting was one of my favorite events when I lived in the country. Neighbors would gather on Saturday afternoons and together we would cut our firewood in nearby woodlots that need thinning. We'd load pickups with oak and hickory logs chainsawed out of the felled trunks and limbs, then help each other split and stack the wood. At afternoon's end there was the rich satisfaction of having a newly fortified pile of firewood near at hand. I remember the delicious tiredness after those long strenuous afternoons, when we would settle in for the evening with a crackling fire in the woodstove, a kettle of water boiling on top and maybe also a pot filled with a savory vegetable stew or chili. On those forays outside for another long to throw into the stove, the smell of smoke wafting down from the chimney was like the sweetest, most fragrant incense. Sleep after such a day of useful exercise and fresh air was a sweet, welcome embrace.

There is much evidence in our religious ceremonies that winter has always been an occasion for awe and wonder. Hope and belief are easy in June when the world is warm and the garden is ripening. But when the bitter north winds blow and the sun rides low in the southern sky, darkness and nothingness don't seem so far away. Winter keeps us honest; it ups the ante for our faith commitment. Winter's stark realities compel us to fortify the woodpiles of our inner lives. We more urgently depend on our communities and churches to strengthen our hope in these dark months. What liturgist Gertrud Mueller Nelson calls the wise and poetic church offers its richest feasts and celebrations at winter's beginning and at its end.

The winter observation of Lent precedes the bright outburst of promise that is Easter. The paschal mystery sits astride this liturgical season from Ash Wednesday through that first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox, Easter Sunday and beyond. No birth without death; no resurrection without

suffering; no really profound savoring without first the most thorough emptying. The simple yet exquisite satisfactions of a warm fire with a nourishing pot of soup simmering on top would be meaningless without winter's many and various deprivations. Easter gets a good deal of its exultant meaning and flavor from the winter austerities that precede it.

Christmas is everyone's favorite winter event. The Christmas tale of hope is a simple and profound one. Born into a world of cruelty and malice, to people of no consequence in the world's scheme of things, God comes to us in a place where we least expect a divine visitation. The Christmas feast comes at the darkest time of year, the time when we most need the closeness of family and friends, when we most profit from being forgetful of self, when we most ache to be reminded that the love that moves the sun and stars can make its nest in the palm of our hand.

Without winter, life would surely be easier, more of a lark. Without some kind of winter, though, our lives would contain much less of deep connection with the divine in the world. We would be less whole.

NCR's Eco Catholic Blog

Eco Catholic is an exploration of the green Catholic imagination and ecological spirituality. Contributors include Rich Heffern, NCR staff writer, columnist and author, and Carol Meyer, executive director of the Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition.

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