

## IN THE DEAD OF WINTER

Sometimes the most obvious is the most difficult to see.

Today is January 9<sup>th</sup>. It is winter. It is cold. This is what is.

Nature is such a wonderful teacher. It tells us civilized beings just how crazy we are to try to force the environment to accommodate to us so we don't have to accommodate to it.

In Winter everything in nature turns to it's opposite. Rain turns to snowflakes. Water in the birdbath turns to ice. The clouds are heavy and dark. In the Fall the deciduous trees start to pull inward, retreating from their outward extension, reducing their need for water. Their leaves turn from green to reveal beautiful colors beneath and then are let go and fall in the winds. The tree, turning further inward and deep, slows its circulation. Bears and snakes and groundhogs burrow underground and hibernate. Nature does not resist Winter, it accepts it, it turns inward and deepens.

I've been thinking. What would happen if I followed nature's lead? What would happen if I went in the opposite direction of my normal life which seems to be pretty much the same – all year round? The first thing I notice is that I am programmed NOT to do that. So the first barriers are my habits, my usual way of doing, of thinking, of behaving. Wow! What an awakening! The biggest obstacle is put out there by my thinking. I am constantly thinking of extending out there – as in what needs to be done – paying bills, grocery shopping, fixing things- my responsibilities. I wouldn't make a good leaf. I'd be trying to stay green, making that chlorophyll, drinking water, holding on to that branch!

OK so if I am to follow nature's Winter, I will have to compromise. I can't completely hibernate. I will have to alter my habitual programming. My thinking will need to adapt to occasions that are conducive to a new inwardness and contemplation.

I am comfort directed. I like to be warm, well fed and entertained. So this winter, I am trying something different. I am attempting non-resistance. I realize that my desire to be warm, well fed, and entertained are all strong efforts of resistance. Resistance is the opposite of acceptance. Resistance intensifies the sensation, it magnifies the unwanted effect.

Have you heard that catchy phrase? What you resist, persists!

I tell myself "I don't like to be cold." ' Which means RESIST – FIGHT BACK!

What happens in my body when I 'resist' -'fight back' – I go on alert, I breathe shallowly, my muscles tense up, my blood flows slower. The result being that I experience the cold more intensely. So I gave my new program a try. I stepped outside in the cold and I said, "It is Winter. It is cold. I accept what is." And I'll be dang, something different happened. The cold was still cold, but "I"- my body, didn't experience the cold. My relationship to "the cold" had changed.

I wasn't guarding against it. I wasn't resisting it physically or mentally. The cold was there but my distress was not! What a profound discovery!

I next tried my experiment on eating. Mealtime comes and my mind says “I am hungry.” Immediately I start believing I need to eat. So I turned it into something a little different. I thought “It is lunchtime. I am fasting. I am not eating now and I am just fine. This is what is, now.” To my surprise, the moment passed without angst. So now I am trying to figure out this phenomena. If this little experiment works on cold and hunger, what will it do on emotions that cause misery? What causes misery is the resisting – the trying to get away from the facts of life, always trying to avoid pain and seek happiness. I have been using resistance and thought it would bring me comfort but it has only intensified what I did not want. I realize I have to turn my usual way of thinking completely upside down. It is taking the difficult moments of life and turning them into holy moments. Instead of escaping from the discomfort and pain, can I honor the feel, the sense, and the quality of exactly what is happening? Can I touch the center of my pain? Can I stay with suffering, both yours and mine, without trying to make it go away? Can I stay present to the ache of loss or disgrace – disappointment in all its many forms – and let it open me? Now in the dead of Winter it is the time to go inward and observe my resistances, my barriers to my living life as nature lives life.

I have come across the writings of Pema Chodron, an American Buddhist nun, who speaks of crossing our inner walls or barriers by developing an “unconditional friendliness with oneself.” That means moving in and not avoiding all those parts of ourselves we generally don’t want to touch. “Qualities that are the toughest to be kind to - are the painful parts, where we feel ashamed, we feel as if we don’t belong, as if we’ve just blown it, when things are falling apart for us. Accepting what is going on within becomes the basis for extending the same unconditional friendliness to others.

Carl Jung used to say “The only way out is through.” So what to do is to recognize when an aversion is forming within. Say “There it is. I feel it.” The next step is to accept it. “Oh yes, it feels terrible.” Be careful not to escalate the emotion with interpretations and opinions. Embellishment with thoughts is a form of self-torture and a definite violation with “unconditional friendliness with oneself.” Chodron suggests that focusing on the physical experience and not the thoughts allows for the next step – that of breathing into the aversion. Breathe in to the sensation, the feeling, and then breathe it out. When staying with the aversion and breathing into it, it dissolves. It is not an opponent that we’re struggling against. It’s not anything except energy that gets solidified and that we justify and then, on the basis of that justification, we hurt. If following nature’s Winter by contemplating inwardly, slowing & accepting what is, leads me to more moments of peace; then I have a lot of wonderful things to learn from the dead of Winter.

Rosellen Alequire