

12-4-22 UU talk

Embracing the Wonder of Winter

By Shannon Anderson

I chose to phrase the title of this talk as Embracing the Wonder of Winter because while there is plenty of wonder in the winter season, one must be willing to embrace it to appreciate it. I will be the first to admit this is often very difficult to do. I am writing this when my computer tells me the temperature outside is 1 below zero. I had plans for a sunrise ski at South Park, but made the mistake of checking the temps first, so opted to stay inside cozy under the covers. My dog Scooby who is peacefully sleeping under the covers next to me can relate. I often say he has winter hours himself not wanting to venture outside until mid-morning until at least the time when the sun has decided whether it is going to make an appearance for the day. Yesterday, I had plans to attend a meeting in Billings, but the snow and ice kept me away. But like the reading for our moment of silence suggests, sometimes the need to slow down and reflect caused by mother nature's winter grandeur is exactly what we need.

So, instead of being outside in the snow, I am inside typing away. As I take an occasional look out my window – the sun has come out, the sky is a vibrant blue, the pine trees have a lovely white cover, and the birds that are brave enough to stay with us through this season are all fluffed up with no place to go. Inside, my amaryllis flower has started blooming, the poinsettia plant is a brilliant red, holiday decorations bring me joy, and I have a hot cup of seasonal flavored cinnamon tea in my hand to warm my soul in addition to my body. Plans interrupted, or perhaps time repurposed is a gift of the winter season, and there is certainly wonder everywhere this time of year, both inside and out. But one must be willing to embrace this wonder in order to welcome it into your world.

When I moved back to Wyoming fifteen years ago, I had gone without a true winter season for six years. The first of the six was spent in Namibia after college. I lived in a desert with sand dunes out my office window, so winter was most days the last thing on my mind. Scorpions, however, present a different kind of wonder! The next three years were spent in the rose-filled city of Portland Oregon for law school where the winter weather is almost always a predictable 45 degrees and rainy. The need to check the weather forecast to consider whether I would be able to travel attend meeting obligations ceased during my time there. After law school, I moved to southern California to spend a couple of years working for a legal aid organization. I soon discovered why tens of millions of people live in Southern California. The weather is quite literally the best in the world. Again, no need to check the weather forecast – low 80s and sunny in the summer, mid 60s and sunny in the winter. Rare wind or rain, and if you stay close enough to the coast, it never gets too hot and of course it never gets too cold.

So, when I moved back to Wyoming in the fall of 2007, I was already preparing myself for the winter to come. I immediately booked a ticket to Mexico for late December and promised myself I would always try and take a mid-winter break to somewhere warm. I have successfully done that most years since I've been back, and the beach time has been a wondrous respite from the cold and dry air. But over the past few years, I have tried harder to really embrace winter and enjoy the wonder that is created with four distinct seasons. As the saying goes, how can you appreciate summer if you don't have winter. Or how you can appreciate light without darkness. The world of opposites revolves to create appreciation and joy that might not exist otherwise.

So, I did the Wyoming thing and bought a pair of skis, stocked up on cute winter hats, invested in wool socks, and I told myself that I'd get out there even if the thermostat advises against it. I recently

checked out a book called Exploring Nature in Winter by Alan Cvancara from the library. He has a chapter in it called “Learning to Like Winter” which I found a bit quirky, like you must take a class or educate yourself on how to properly like winter. But his advice is good. He writes,

“For winter enjoyment, it helps to learn to like winter. Prepare yourself mentally. Keep an open mind about the cold. Instead of asking ‘How cold is it’ ask ‘How warm is it?’ If you analyze this perspective further you’ll become aware that there is no such thing as cold, only the absence of heat. That is, heat is measurable but cold is not. Realize that discomfort and inconvenience should be expected at times – not only in winter, but equally so during hot summers. The wintry environment will not always be entertaining to you. You must mentally meet it part way. Mental preparedness also includes self-interest. With it, you enter the winter world without hesitation. Self-interest begins with natural curiosity and is cultivated by learning to observe natural features in winter carefully and critically.”

Entering the winter world without hesitation? Wow, that’s some powerful stuff. Unless you have someplace to be and a real need to go outside, it is only natural to hesitate a bit or maybe more than a bit. When it is cold and dark, is it really worth it? Some of us are drawn to hermit-like hibernation this time of the year. But having that natural curiosity is also helpful – careful, critical observation of the natural world and the wonders of winter does help to get oneself to like winter and perhaps get you out the door to enjoy it.

There is also a magic in this season that is mystical and fleeting and always amazing. In trying to learn what cultures observe something akin to a solstice, I was surprised to find out how dominant the celebration of darkness into light is across time zones, languages, and ages. There is the big one, Yule in Scandinavia, whose stories have all kinds of gods and goddesses with names that are a bit hard to pronounce but exhibit acts of heroism nonetheless. Yule is a time of peace according to legend. The Norse had a tradition that enemies who met under a bough of mistletoe were obligated to lay down their arms. The pagan witchcraft is in high season with Yule as well, bringing plenty of wonder for those who embrace it. Yule also brings us the natural magic of winter. Celebrations of the past included many of the seasonal plants that we incorporate into our holiday festivities today – pine, firs, holly, ivy, birch, and oak. Evergreens in particular are associated with themes of protection and prosperity, as well as that of a continuation of life and renewal.

And then at Stonehenge or a Stonehenge like structure, both Newgrange in Ireland, Maeshowe in Scotland, and even here in Sheridan at our cemetery, stone captures the rays of winter light in a way that is wondrous. The Sheridan Stonehenge is my favorite place to watch the sunset in December. Oh, aren’t vibrant sunrises and sunsets this time of the year a subject of wonder all on their own?

There was a festival called Saturnalia in Ancient Rome, Inti Raymi in the Incan Empire (which for their hemisphere was in June), Dong Zhi in China, and Toji in Japan. The Zuni celebrate with a ceremonial dance called Shalako and the Hopi call their solstice celebration Soyal. The Inuit of North America and Greenland tell the tale of the trickster, Raven, who returned the light to the sky.

And what can be more wondrous than Bodhi Day – a day celebrating Buddha’s enlightenment or Ta Chin, a Taoist festival of reflection and renewal.

During the world cup this year with Iran in the news, I was drawn to an Iranian tradition. On Shab-e Yalda, (which translates to “Night of Birth”), Iranians all over the world celebrate the triumph of the sun god Mithra over darkness. According to tradition, people gather together to protect each other from evil, burn fires to light their way through the darkness, and perform charitable acts. That’s a lot of wonder right there.

For the Iranians, and so many people over the world, including in our own nation, the wonder of winter leads to other wonders of charity, celebration, community, and love. This time of the year and the magic it creates brings so much to our world – if you only learn to like it.

I will leave you with a reflection on one of the most wondrous parts of winter for me, that is watching a busy little chickadee buzz around your backyard. While most song birds desert us for warmer climates, the chickadee stays with us, braving out the cold and finding strength in hardship. I have a poster of the chickadee at home that reads as follows: “Chickadee – remember our little bird, ever resourceful, ever fearless, ever sure of the return of spring and light.” It quotes Emily Dickson with “hope is the thing with feathers.” So, friends, if you are finding yourself in a mood with a need of inspiration to embrace the wonder of winter, I encourage you to think about the chickadee and find hope knowing that light will soon be coming in the next season and in the meantime knowing there is beauty of wonder all around you.