

## ONE

Among Aesop's fables we find this story:

In a field on a summer's day there was a Grasshopper hopping about, chirping and singing to his heart's content. An Ant happened by, struggling under the great weight of a grain of wheat that he was carrying back to his nest.

"Hey, Ant," shouted the Grasshopper, "come on over here and sing a song with me. Why is it you work all the time?"

"I am storing up food for the winter," said the Ant, "and, if you don't mind my saying, you would be wise to do the same."

"Winter—sminter?" said the Grasshopper. "Look around us! The fields are green, the air is warm. I feel like singing!"

The Ant shrugged (as ants will) and went on his trudging way, struggling on under his burden, while the Grasshopper went on with his hopping, his chirping, and his singing.

As it will, winter soon came, and as the first snow fell, Grasshopper, through his freezing, dying eyes, saw Ant, having a good meal of wheat. It was at that moment that Grasshopper knew the meaning of an old saying,

"To work today is to eat tomorrow!"

Now is the winter of our discontent. . .

Now is the Dark Night of the Soul.

Or, at the very least, the season of our Seasonal Affective Disorder. Tomorrow is the first day of winter, one of the shortest days of the year; a day a weak sun climbs desultorily to its lowest point in the yearly cycle. Welcome to the Holiday Season when depression skyrockets but visits to therapists plummet: after all, who has time to go?

Here we are, as someone pointed out, one more Nutcracker performance closer to eternity. While it is an urban myth that suicide and murder rates go up during the holidays—actually they drop, purportedly because there are too many people around—they spike the first two days of January—after everyone has gone home.

At one time December 25<sup>th</sup> marked the Winter Solstice in the northern hemisphere, thus the traditional date of Christmas, with the Church attempting to wipe away older religious celebrations. However, the inaccuracy of calendars slowly got the Christian festival out of synch with the sun. Now, December 21<sup>st</sup> marks the beginning of winter on our calendar, though, in older systems that began the year with the harvest season, this was considered mid-winter.

However one looks at it, this is the season of darkness in the Northern Hemisphere. As British poet Christina Rossetti wrote, in a poem set to the music of Gustav Holst (#241):

In the bleak midwinter  
Frosty wind made moan,  
Earth stood hard as iron,  
Water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,  
Snow on snow,  
In the bleak midwinter. . .

(And the gathered congregation said, “ugh!”)

Biologists say that we creatures have three options when faced with the prospect of winter: migrate, hibernate, or tolerate. (The fourth being, like Aesop’s grasshopper, death.)

Here we are. We have watched as the geese—and some of the members of our Fellowship—have flown south. They migrated.

We know that Punxsutaney Phil and others of his groundhog kind are deep in burrows, fast asleep at present, losing something like half their body weight in the process, but warm and cozy and biding their time until warmer weather. Migrate. . . hibernate. . . And we humans have Netflix and pizza delivery and GAIN weight in the winter. . . . Migrate, hibernate,

Or. . .tolerate.

As Denise Levertov says of the trees, “Their spring will find them rested. I and my kind battle a wakeful way to ours.”

Our portion is. . . to tolerate. Or. . .

## TWO

As Christina Rossetti knew very well, “bleak midwinter” may refer to climate, or it may refer to our mental condition—our soul condition in which our choices become migration, hibernation, or toleration, none of which feels particularly attractive. We can feel, as Emily Dickinson put it, “a tighter breathing / And Zero at the Bone.”

Winter. Dark nights of the soul. Change: Bah! Humbug!

A few years back physician Spencer Johnson published Who Moved My Cheese? a book about coping with change that has now sold something on the order of twenty-four million copies. That’s a lot of people worried about change. A lot of people worried over decisions of whether

or not to migrate, hibernate, or tolerate. Winter and darkness make good metaphors for feeling “zero at the bone,” but it doesn’t have to be winter or dark for us to feel like running away, or just lying down and giving up. Change hurts.

Change is difficult—but this old world just keeps spinning around. Take the case of St John of the Cross, a Spanish Carmelite priest; the Carmelites being the most mystical of the Catholic orders, teaching as they do a practice of meditation on silence. (The Carmelites and the Dominicans wrangle over who invented the rosary.)

Now, since his first name is “saint,” it’s safe to say that things between Saint John and the church worked out in the end, but when he wrote his great work Dark Night of the Soul, St John had been imprisoned by his Carmelite brothers for being just a little bit TOO serious in his devotions—John was requiring himself and his fellow monks to go without shoes. Even in the winter. It’s true, as the old saw would have it, that heroes and saints make for bad dinner companions. My suspicion is that St John of the Cross probably thought his piety would be rewarded on earth and in heaven. Imagine his surprise when, instead, his fellow monks locked him up.

And the heavens did not open.

The case of St John has a lesson: It isn’t change itself we hate. It’s wintery, dark change we don’t like. After all, would John ever have invented the term “dark night of the soul” if all the monks, and perhaps the Pope himself, had followed his lead and gone shoeless? John would have LIKED that change. WE like that kind of change: imagine getting a phone call one morning, “Hey, the people of the earth got together last night, and they’ve voted you Best Human Being alive!”—that’s a good change. Most of us would like that. That’s a bright and summery sort of change.

It’s the dark, wintry change we object to—any dark, wintry change, from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the green beans we cook for dinner turning out soggy. Bad change. Not getting promoted after all our hard work. Bad change. The doctor thinks she sees cancer. Bad change. These are the times when we must choose between migration, hibernation, and toleration.

The shiny purple Mercedes of St John of the Cross’s s expectations ran into the muddy ditch we call reality. Bad change: The Pope said to the monks, “Put your shoes back on and lock that guy up.”

But St John of the Cross dealt with it. He is part of a venerable Roman Catholic tradition that says, “I just don’t get what Thomas Aquinas is talking about, so I am going to go with my gut.” It is a venerable tradition that says, “Instead of the acres of paper theology takes up, I’m going with poetry.”

Take for example this bit of a poem by St John (translated by Willis Barnstone):

The fish taken out of the sea  
is not without a consolation:  
his dying is of brief duration  
and ultimately brings relief.  
Yet what convulsive death can be  
as bad as my pathetic life?  
The more I live the more I die.

Not a happy camper! Bad change. This is not an “afternoon of the soul;” this is “a dark night of the soul.”

Winters of our discontent and dark nights of the soul take myriad forms. For Mother Theresa, according to her journals, the sheer magnitude and depth of human suffering opened the way for doubt concerning the creedalized vision of an all-powerful God. She experienced a dark night of the soul and it appears never got over it. Her expectations ran into the muddy ditch of reality. She wasn't listening to the gut-tradition of mysticism. She was listening to Thomas Aquinas, not St John of the Cross.

I have discussed before how large theological systems are houses of cards. When we look for a foundation, there is none. When we ask what the cards are made of, we discover not “truth” but mysticism and poetry. Yet I contend that these are not “bad” building materials, just so long as we are honest about it. . . It's poetry all the way down.

The gut tradition includes one of my favorite mystics, Richard Rolle, who, after having had a mystical experience while still a young man living at home, stole some of his sisters' clothes and made a hermit's habit, then headed for the mountains: Do It Yourself Sainthood. (This is perhaps preferable to St Francis of Assisi, who, after his mystical vision, left town naked.)

I bring up these mystics because there is a fourth option, a quarter-tarian (do I have that right?) rather than the Trinitarian options of migration, hibernation, or toleration. The quarter-tarian, the fourth option, is. . .ENJOY. Somewhere between grasshopper and ant.

No, this old world is not going to stop spinning around—at least anytime soon. As John of the Cross saw it, you have to get into the muddy ditch; you have to hit a wall; you have to end up in the winter and darkness and snow, before you can figure out that you really don't want to be there. According to St John of the Cross:

Love can perform a wondrous labor  
which I have learned internally,  
and all the good or bad in me  
takes on a penetrating savor,  
changing my soul so it can be  
consumed in a delicious flame.  
I feel it in me as a ray;

and quickly killing every trace  
of light -- I burn my self away.

(He anticipated the Beatles by a few years.) The old clichés are sometimes the best: we simply can't recognize the light if we haven't been in the dark. We have to have winter to jolt us into action. We have to be alone before we can reach out.

Our ancient foremothers and forefathers did not know what brought the sun back—or if it would come back. Here is the story the early Christian missionaries to the northlands ran into:

The great god Odin and his wife Frigga had twin sons, Baldur and Hodur. Baldur was a beautiful, radiant boy, and all the gods loved him, excepting one. Hodur was dark and moody, a cold loner who spoke to no one.

One day Baldur came to his mother and said, "Mother, for these past seven nights, each night I have had a dream, and that dream shows me that I will die, killed by the branch of a tree."

As you might suspect, Frigga was very, very worried about her darling boy, and went around to all the trees, speaking to each one of them and imploring them, "Please, whatever you do, please do not kill my lovely boy." And each tree in its turn promised Frigga that no harm would come to Baldur.

In her haste, however, Frigga failed to speak to one family of the woods—the mistletoe, which grows without having roots in the earth.

And so it was that Loki, the terrible trickster among the gods, and the only one of the gods who resented Baldur's cheerfulness, fashioned an arrow of the mistletoe and, going to visit dark Hodur, he said, "Try shooting my marvelous bow! Here—over the top of the house." And so dark Hodur shot the arrow made of mistletoe. And who should it hit, standing on the other side, but Baldur his brother, who bled to death in the lush green grass.

As you expect, Frigga was inconsolable. She wept and wept and as she wept the nights grew longer and longer. Her weeping was so terrible that Odin at last climbed onto his horse and rode all the way to the domain of the dead, and, finding Baldur, brought him back.

And so it is that in midsummer, in all the lands of the North, on those nights when the sun never sets, there is great feasting, celebrating the sunny god Baldur, though people know that already, even on the longest days, Hodur is returning with his bloody arrow. And in the darkest midwinter we celebrate Baldur's return to Frigga's womb, because on the darkest night, called Mother Night, Baldur will be reborn, thus slowly bringing the light and warmth back again.

There's little wonder that, when Christian missionaries went to the northlands and saw the celebrations of Baldur's birth on Mother Night, they said, "Let us tell you our little story of a son of God who died and was resurrected. And, look: he was born at just this time of year!"

Both the Norse story of the death and rebirth of Baldur and the Palestinian-Roman story of the death and rebirth of Jesus are provincial, tribal, exclusionary, and claim way too much—if you look at them that way. Or they both are beautiful attempts to explain some of the deep suffering of being alive. They are both poetry—all the way down—if you allow them to be that.

After all, no matter what it is you're worshipping, putting up multi-colored lights this time of year is a really good idea! Way to go, humanity! Way to adapt to a hostile environment!

### CONCLUSION

Back for a moment to the book Who Moved my Cheese? which poses a good question: "What would you do if you weren't afraid?" This has something to do with going beyond toleration.

This is the spiritual value practiced by mystics: they stop being afraid. The mystical experience changes how the mystic views change. St John of the Cross started going without shoes and took to writing poems. Richard Rolle made a hermits habit out of his sisters' clothes; St Francis took off for the hills in his birthday suit. They changed their way of thinking, and they changed their ways of acting in the world.

They changed as they did because they were no longer fearful of change.

Sometimes circumstance requires that we migrate; sometimes that we hibernate; sometimes that we tolerate. . .but whatever our biological requirements, we can change what we believe, change how we react, and . . .we can. . .enjoy.

Aesop's fables of course aren't about ants or grasshoppers. Grasshoppers cannot act like ants, even were they to choose to. Grasshoppers and geese and groundhogs will migrate, hibernate, or tolerate according to their fashion. We human beings, however, do have some choice in the matter: We can buy plane tickets; we can harden or soften our hearts; we can determine to accept and enjoy. Unlike grasshoppers, we can deal with change . . .because we can change our minds.

Change is a constant. Fortunately, we don't have to become saints to deal with change, though, for me, it helps to be a little mystical about it.

We can enjoy the holidays, despite the busyness and the bad spins on good stories. We can enjoy the dark and the winter and the poetry of it all . . . because . . . it is as it is.