

“Winter Mind”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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“For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”

Thus Wallace Stevens concludes his poetic reverie, “The Snow Man.” Winter mind becomes winter mindfulness through the pregnant act of listening. The howl of the wind, the crunch of boots through a crystalline mass, the thumps of mittened hands shaping a round head atop two larger spheres until a familiar form takes shape. Such are the rewards of winter listening.

As for today, we might not be so gratified by the squish of our own footwear in winter’s slush. Snow is a medium that lends itself so readily to language of the spirit. Slush is another story. Yet I can find in my history cause for gratitude even for slush. It was decades ago when I stepped off a January curb in New York City into a slush puddle at least a foot deep. “Okay, that’s it!” I shrieked. “Time for some serious boots!” And off I went to one of the city’s more expensive ski shops to indulge in a pair of fur—yes, I’m confessing—knee-high fur boots.” I’ve since asked forgiveness of the creature whose coat and life I robbed with those boots and also said a thousand thank you’s to said creature for boots that lasted 40 years—honest! I just tossed them last year!

We learn as we grow and we grow as we learn. Such is the interchange of our teachers and youngsters. Each learns from the other. As a learning community, we grow together. “We touch the earth; we reach the sky!” When we step foot in this congregation and commit part of our lives to the community that we find, we become intentional about transformation. So we dedicate ourselves to this congregation, and within this community we dedicate ourselves to one another other and to our teachers and to our children and to this faith and to the epiphanies of the moment and the season.

“Snowmen fall from heaven unassembled,” reads a plaque on the wall of a coffee shop I once frequented. Ah yes, that’s us, falling from birth, like the highly individual crystalline snowflakes that metaphorically we are, and finding our way into community that matters on the journey that follows as together “we touch the earth, reach the sky,” ... ask together the reasons why, seek to respond with answers that show how in our lives we “learn and grow.” Behold snow, the stuff of epiphany.

The first snowfall is winter’s first showstopper. It came this year in early November, not long after a fierce hurricane pounded the Northeast. Then again on Christmas Eve a gentle snowfall began. By New Year’s Eve, the ground was white, the tree-limbs frosted. It was slow going but magical.

I'm still not beyond that impulse to rush out into the feathery mass and flop on my back to flap my imagined angel wings. How many snow crystals can dance on the head of an angel? Trillions most likely. How many angels can fly through snow? Come the next snowfall, I'm open to volunteers.

What is it, this stuff of winter, this stuff of epiphany that plays with our plans and awakens our senses?

As a young boy growing up in North Dakota, Kenneth Libbrecht asked this question early on. He kept asking all the way into his adult life work, the physics of snow. Libbrecht observes that what we commonly call a snowflake is really a snow crystal,

“a single crystal of ice. A *snowflake*,” on the other hand, “is a more general term that can mean an individual snow crystal, a cluster of snow crystals that form together, or even a large aggregate of snow crystals that collide and stick in midair, falling to earth in a flimsy puffball. Snow crystals are commonly called snowflakes...like calling a tulip a flower.”

To use the generic term snowflake, each holds a story and a structure that intrigue the scientific mind and stretch the spiritual imagination.

Snowflakes branch only in multiples of three, with six branches forming the most common pattern, though there are also three or twelve-branch snowflakes. There are even snowflakes structured in needle-like columns, with the basic form being a hexagonal column of ice, like a plain wooden pencil. How does this happen? Each snowflake tells a birth story.

“...water vapor in the air condenses directly into solid ice. As more vapor condenses onto a nascent snow crystal, the crystal grows and develops, and this is when its elaborate patterning emerges.... From nothing more than the simple act of water condensing into ice.”

As you and I are different yet human, so each snowflake is distinct yet snow. Its distinctiveness lies in the crystal, in the arrangement of branches and ridges and more or less symmetry. “It could snow day and night until the sun dies before two snow crystals would be exactly, precisely alike,” remarks Libbrecht.

Yet all snowflakes share a common fate. Each fallen snowflake gives up its wondrous shape in a matter of minutes, sometimes seconds, and joins the grand assembly of ice lumps. The snow we behold outside these windows is fallen snow, a grand communion of clumped crystals that melt, lending moisture to the earth below, nurturing roots that even now work toward springtime.

Distinctive, singular, transitory, is the story of the snowflake. Distinctive, singular, transitory is the story of each of us. The promise lies in the communion of all the snowflakes that have fallen melting into a legacy of blessing for what will be.

Magical, mystical, and fickle is the stuff of snow.

How magical it is. In a journal entry, Henry David Thoreau remarked:

“How full of creative genius is the air in which these [snowflakes] are generated! I should hardly admire them more if real stars fell and lodged on my coat.”

How mystical it is. Winter became mentor for the late Phillip Simmons. For ten years this father and husband and professor of literature and hiker and climber lived with a debilitating illness. His native New Hampshire served him well. It was there that he spent his last precious years with his wife and young children and where he refined the art of what he called “Learning to Fall.” Slowly but steadily he moved into what he called “winter mind,” culled from the poetry of Wallace Stevens that we have heard like a mantra this morning.

“One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter
Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves....”

“To be of winter mind,” wrote Simmons, “is to be so empty of preconception as to hear without judgment and thus to hear in that wind neither misery nor happiness....Lying in the snow, I let my body cool, my breath slow, my mind empty of thoughts... All separateness falls away, and I am one with snow and stars, rooted as pine, imperturbable as stone.”

In solemn stillness, winter mind becomes winter mindfulness.

Like angels on a hillside, resting our parka-warm wings, like the hardiest of sledders stretching into the silence, like snowflakes whose distinct beauty is the stuff of an eye-blink, we are and then aren't in the form we once assumed. How precious and fickle is the stuff of which we are made; how lovely and fickle is the stuff of snow. In “The Gods of Winter,” a poetic tale of a quiet night, David Gioia describes

“Storm on storm, snow on drifting snowfall,
shifting its shape, flurrying in moonlight,
bright and ubiquitous,
....The world is annihilated and remade
with only us as witnesses.

Briefest of joys, our life together,
this brittle flower twisting toward the light
even as it dies, no more permanent for being perfect....”

Magical is the life we are living, our birth, our breath. Mystical is our oneness with all life. Fickle is the bargain made at birth, that the sure progression of life is toward its end as we know it. Yet we are each as distinctive as a snowflake. There has never been a you or I. There will never be another you or I. Singular I am; singular you are. We know aloneness. We know ourselves apart. And we share a common humanity. We are in community. Like descending snowflakes, like Philip Simmons, we “learn” soon enough to fall. We’re ephemeral, transitory, a descending ice crystal, a shooting star.

Grace comes in the wonder that we are here at all. Grace comes in the wonder that we are each as likely to find our double as a snowflake is to meet its perfect twin. Grace comes in the wonder that we will let go, must let go, and become one with the earth and sky and each other.

With the next snowfall, don your parka, your boots, your snowman scarf; then go outside, stand in it, walk through it, and listen. Listen to the snow.

“For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”

Listen to the silence of the snow flying, falling, drifting, dying, perfect and beautiful, one with all that is. Amen.

Sources:

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