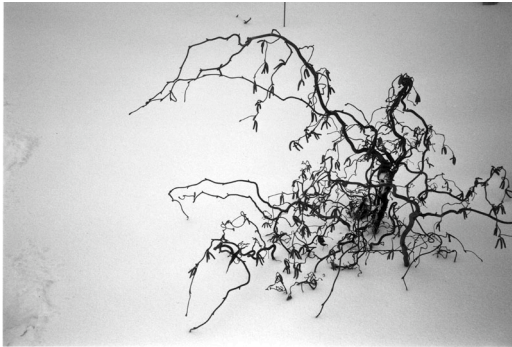


ACCEPTING DARKNESS, WAITING FOR SNOW

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As hard as it is for gardening, I actually long for more winter than our climate permits. In the balmy days that come now more often in October and November, a great sadness comes upon me. Thirty years ago, it snowed regularly

here; now our region alternates between unseasonable warmth, terrible storms, and a microclimate made from millions of sprawling plots and groping tendrils of asphalt and concrete. Now the forsythia blooms in January, only to fall prey to a frost and leave no flowers for spring. The good earth grows uglier as a result.

Given these harsh climatic changes, I try to get the most from each season. Most of my fellow neo-pagans celebrate New Year on Oct. 31, or Samhain. For me, however, the year begins, as it did for the Druids, at Yule (the Winter Solstice). It takes a week or two for me to notice the lengthening of the daylight, longer still to spot the bud amid the ice, Spring appearing as much in a shy snowdrop as in the overt sensuality of a “Nymph’s Thigh” Rose. Glimpsing such subtlety, and becoming more mindful as a result, is a gift for the dark time of the year, when we turn inward for wisdom and slow the pace of life much as one might when starting a garden.

If we get any snow this year, go out in it. Admittedly, I’m the rare type who loves winter weather, but it’s still curious to note how many folks consider life is a business too

serious to be interrupted by snow. For others life is to be a perpetual mild summer, free from care or struggle. Such folk curse when it rains, even during this horrid drought. Both types of winter-haters have lost touch with the rhythms of the seasons and the benefits of a hard freeze. Perhaps the elements remind them of something in nature beyond their control—a power that, if only for a few days, they must acknowledge.

If we are lucky enough to get heavy snow, practice this walking meditation. Bundle yourself carefully in good winter clothes, layering correctly for the weather outside, but be shameless about wearing a cloak or great-coat. People put on odd things in storms, so you may not attract much more attention than any pedestrian wearing a cap topped by a fuzzy ball.

Walking meditation begins with taking note of each step. This will also help avoid icy spots, but the aim is to walk mindfully, away from busy streets. Try to begin and end this meditation where you garden, and starting with the first step, feel how your heel, then the ball of your foot, comes down in the snow. Note the play of muscles as you walk. Take note of the hiss of falling snow. When your mind wanders or you fret about the cold, turn your mind back to the sounds--and lack of them--in the storm.

If your constitution permits, continue the mediation with a longer walk. Go to the woods nearby, to a park, even down a deserted residential block. Catch the scent of wood-smoke in the air; notice the fall of the light streaming from homes and businesses. Be open to the transformative beauty of snow on even the most dreadful places. Once, when I lived near a large mall, I would walk there in snow when the shops were closed. The wind would race across the parking lots, and as the mall was at the top of a hill, the prospect, silent except for the hiss of snow and the howling wind, was beautiful. Given

enough time, I realized, the mall would return to open fields and ever-broadening copses dusted with snow. Humanity seemed only a passing annoyance on such a wild night.

Wherever you walk, stop from time to time as you feel drawn to a specific tree or plant. Take note of its appearance, and how it may have changed from the seasons of growth and harvest. Hunt for the spring; you might see a bud even in January, or a subtle swelling of twigs during a late February snow. You may find plants in your own garden that set berries or retain seed-pods to sustain small creatures through the cold months. You may also find, in this introspective time of the year, that memories of those long past return to you. Whatever you discover, use these moments to learn something new about those people, or even the life of a plant you encounter on your walk.

Leave a gift somewhere. A pocket-full of bird seed will help many creatures when the earth is covered in snow. Then return home to a cup of hot chocolate and write what you found in your gardening diary.