

LESSONS FROM THE WINTERS OF LIFE



The sixth month of the new year! In southern regions days are drawing in, nights are getting longer. Summer heat has given way to milder Autumn days, and nights announce the coming cold of Winter. Rich colours of autumn have dropped, leaving deciduous trees stark naked so that the winter sun can touch the ground below. The focus of life turns inward, silently hibernating, contemplatively re-gathering its energies for a brief few weeks to burst forth anew in riotous abundance when the first warmth of spring calls it forth. The rhythm of life, of seasons, of night and day, as ancient as the birth of life on earth!



For eons we human beings were part of that rhythm, inwardly as well as outwardly. In our modern world, with electric lighting, air conditioned home and workplaces, motorised transport, our frenetic activity and the cacophony of sound that assaults us constantly - it is easy to lose touch with that life-enhancing rhythm.

Wilderness places invite us to feel again, and become at one with those ancient rhythms. When I walk in them, I often find myself listening to their silence, letting it seep into me through all my senses, even the pores of my skin. And I discover that silence is filled with sound, sound that does not disrupt, but enhances the depth of that silence so that it becomes a Presence that embraces me. It reconnects me with my own inner wilderness places, rich in silence, dark as the depths of the long winter night, yet filled with that same life-giving Presence, embracing me from within even as it envelopes me from without.

In that Silent Compassionate Space, I find the scattered fragments of my distracted life are brought together. A sense of wholeness pervades my being; inner peace is restored. I become alive to my surroundings, the rugged beauty of the mountains, the great expanse of sky with its ever-changing hues and clouds, delicate little flowers, all kinds of tiny creatures scurrying in the shrubbery, fungi and insects, the stark dead trees, remnants of devastating fires - everything vibrates with life and beauty,



At the same time, this peace removes within me the walls of separation from the suffering of the world. I become more acutely aware of the cry of the poor, the hungry and homeless. I am taken into the despair of people incarcerated on Manus Island and Nauru whose only "crime" is the desire to live in peace and build a life for themselves and their families. I experience something of the devastation of cities in war zones, and the lostness of their fleeing inhabitants who have nowhere to go.....

The long dark winter of human suffering can fill pages and I have not even mentioned the suffering of our planet home. It often feels more than I can bear and I am tempted to close off to it, withdraw into my comfortable existence. But I cannot, not without closing off the most sacred core of myself, not without closing off to the Compassionate Silent Presence that holds all - the beauty and the anguish, the power and the vulnerability, the nobility and the degradation.



In "Etty", the diary of Etty Hillesum in Nazi occupied Amsterdam, I meet a young Jewish woman who knew the searing experience of suffering shared. The more the dark forces closed around her, the more she consciously opened herself to the realities of her situation, to the suffering of, not only her fellow Jews, but of people everywhere. At the same time, in the forefront of her consciousness, she experienced life as meaningful and the world as beautiful. This awareness of beauty and meaning is what she felt compelled to share, particularly with people whose world had

shrunk until it was reduced to darkness and hopelessness. On the last page of her diary, as she was about to be deported, she wrote:

*When I suffer for the vulnerable, is it not my own vulnerability I suffer?
I have broken my body like bread and shared it among people. And why not, they were
hungry and have gone without for so long....."*



When asked by one of her companions how she could maintain such a positive, hope-filled attitude, she said simply, *"I believe in God."*

Etty continues to challenge me. Do I dare to open myself to Silence until I become one with all suffering, not only in my contemplative moments, but every waking moment? Am I willing, as she writes, *"to act as balm for all wounds"*? It is far beyond my capacity. But not God, whose Silent Compassionate Presence holds all in one embrace. I need only surrender in trust to that Compassionate Embrace and experience there both the beauty and ugliness, the joy and suffering of the world, of all creation. In that space, there IS light in our dark nights of winter.

Contemplation, such as the above, touches the heart of CEN's purpose. In their daily meditation, as members hold the suffering world in love and compassion, they contribute to the growing collective consciousness in our world, that all is one. Suffering anywhere in the world affects the

entire world, not only the people and environment more immediately touched by it. Likewise, those who consciously hold the world in love and compassion contribute to us becoming a more loving and compassionate world.

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