



# The Winter of Our Souls

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by Virginia Apperson

**L**ast October, I shared some thoughts about a light that exists in those places where one is absolutely convinced that all hope and potential for change and growth have vanished. We discover these cheerless vacuums in the murky places of our soul, seemingly at the edge of nowhere—the no man's land of the psyche. Now as we trudge through the dead of Winter, we are seasonally situated in the darkest months of the year—muted light, frigid conditions, arrested development. We are caught between the abundant harvest of Fall and the glorious buds of Spring.

Similarly, in the darkest moments of our lives, life appears to be on hold. This is a bewildering time; what could possibly ever emerge from such a barren landscape? Mostly what we know is what we do not know, what we have lost or do not have. We grieve. Or do we? More often than not, that step gets skipped, and the mourning seeps down into our muscles, our bones, buried and locked away from conscious understanding. We are stuck in the past and ache for the future—suspended in a provisional space. We assume what we see is all that there is. Darkness breeds darkness—regret, bitterness, regression and amnesia.

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And so we need an antidote for this seductive decline that leads to a dead-end. Janus is that two-faced Roman deity who stands as Gatekeeper, demanding that we relinquish our ties to the past, so that we can mobilize towards something new. Janus is a dynamic protector of the State. He knows that its viability is contingent upon growth and development, not maintenance of the status quo. He is not interested in unnecessary suffering; he understands the value of this seemingly infertile wasteland of desolation, stillness, emptiness. The insufferable betwixt and between. Janus believes that the nothingness is the sine qua non for something new to sprout. Janus guards the doorway of possibilities—the mystery.

We need the guidance and blessing of Janus as we approach the New Year. So too, in the darkest days of our lives, as we stand at a threshold where as far as the ego's eye can see lies an image of a withering world, we need all the help that we can muster. Here are four tools that might be of assistance in these bleak hours.

## VOLUNTEER

**A**s much as most of us would like to Pollyanna our way through life, crummy things happen. Fairytales have reminded us that at times it is appropriate to adopt the attitude that when you can't beat 'em, you might as well join 'em (see *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Frog Prince*, *Cinderella*, *Iron*

*John*). When things no longer make sense, we must sit amongst the ashes and wait for our marching orders, rather than running helter skelter into a deeper morass.

A volunteer, according to *Webster's*, joins freely "without being compelled by law...with no promise of compensation." *Volo*, the root of volunteer means "I wish." So once we have signed up, we have become "willing participants." We are no longer victims, accidentally and unconsciously stumbling through life. We have a free will and can choose to participate in the mystery of life. We are volunteer seeds "that have fallen naturally to the ground," as opposed to being purposefully planted by our ego gardener. Once we enlist, we are expected to let go of our own game plans. The more we grasp at a more attractive persona (remember Goldie Hawn in *Private Benjamin*) or invent innumerable discharge plans (Klinger in *M.A.S.H.*), the more energy we waste that could be better invested in the delivery of something brand spanking new.

In these abysmal times, our dreams may be taking us back to school to complete a course, to take that unfinished exam, to jump through yet one more hoop, when we thought we had seen our last. As adults, it is rare that we give ourselves permission not to have the answers. So, we have to remind ourselves that students are not *supposed* to know. Furthermore, the Latin word *studium* means zeal. Rather than kicking and screaming, when we voluntarily re-enroll, what if we let ourselves become passionate pupils? Don't forget though; there will be homework. Lots and lots of homework. Our tutors may be ugly and unsavory. Our sergeants and generals may be feline or fowl. But now is the time to humbly request a place at the meager table, thanking our blessings for heaven only knows what.

## TRUST IN SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOU

**T**hough we are fumbling blindly along in the dark, we must not presume that a path does not exist. We cannot see or know or feel the answers. We are in the pre-gestation phase; the seeds have yet to be planted. The ground is still frozen. We wait. We sit still. We give it up, anticipating that order will arise out of this chaos. By all appearances, this seems to be our grand finale, but it is not. How do we know that? We don't! But what other choice do we have than to turn towards that somebody, some being, some force that understands. We are at wit's end. We have no vocabulary or experience to explain our way through this one.

Most of the time, in this muddy place, we do not have a clue as to what the point might be. We do not even know what we are volunteering for. We are operating on a blind faith in something much bigger than we are. It is the time to cry out to a force grander than our measly selves, to accept that which we cannot change, to change what we can, and to have the wisdom to know the difference. The *Serenity Prayer* invites us to shift from the madness and frustration of a totalitarian regime, solely and narrowly controlled by the ego, and to move toward a more tranquil and benevolent domain in which our conscious attitude no longer rules.

Maybe as we approach this step, we are not sure if anyone is in charge. It is quite a scary proposition to turn our twenty first century, reasoned lives over to a shaky belief that something else has our best interests in mind and a better understanding than we do of what lies before us. I never said these steps would make a lot of sense or be easy. But look at the alterna-



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tive: to keep white-knuckling our way into a brick wall or spinning our wheels or treading water. Janus does not expect us to establish roots in his doorway; he invites us to cross the threshold, because he knows there will be something there for us on the other side.

## HAVE FAITH IN YOURSELF

**I**n this time of lifelessness, it is easy to forget or to deny our own unique essence. We have been so busy building what we do know, that we forget to allow the rest of us to flourish. We often do not recognize that there are unborn parts of ourselves until our souls are frozen in our Winter psyches. A yearning from the depths overshadows and haunts the life that we have known or thought that we should have. The more developed sides have been taking up far too much attention, encroaching on the rudimentary facets of ourselves. It is time to kick back, to lose strength, to get out of the limelight, so that there is plenty of fuel flowing towards the new. We are challenged to trust in the un-lived life enough to allow for the collapse and breakdown of the previous order. We have to believe in rebirth enough to allow for this metaphorical death.

The womb must be ready, empty, waiting. Many couples go through significant pains these days to facilitate the fertility process. Conception requires a great deal of thoughtfulness and care, and in some situations very sophisticated medical expertise. But even before those experts are hired, the potential parents believe in their right and longing to bring new life into this

world. It truly must come from an archetypal insistence and urgency. Similarly we prepare and support all that is waiting to be inseminated into our own lives, even in what seems to be the most infertile periods of our lives.

My office is in a building where pregnant women come for massage and yoga. I wonder if some of these women are caring for themselves in a brand new way. They are tending to their bodies and their souls because they want the most idyllic, nurturing environment for the young lives that miraculously are growing within them. These expectant mothers certainly seem to be consciously creating an inner sanctum. This third step of honoring our very essence, fertile or not, challenges us to start this intentional process long before we see the first hope of impregnation.

## SURROUND YOURSELF WITH BELIEVERS

Often in the midst of this cold, barren time, it is as if we are the only people in the world who have suffered so. And we plummet further into an abyss, shivering, bruised and beleaguered. Insult leads to further injury. We need company. This is not a time for hibernating alone. I cannot emphasize this point enough. **DO NOT GO IT ALONE.** We need to search for those who understand. Many do not. Don't waste your time and energy expecting them to get it. Find those who know because they have met the dark nights of their own souls.

In truth, it is hard to volunteer, to believe in a greater order within the void, or to be our own cheerleaders, if we have not surrounded ourselves with our own cheering section. If, as you look around, this appears to be the case, then perhaps a good New Year's Resolution would be to form such a circle.

Certainly getting into a therapeutic relationship is one way of finding a believer. Sadly, though, many therapies want to skip this wintry step. I believe part of Jung's popularity is related to his understanding of the alchemical nature of our lives, his faith in the nigredo process. The greater coniunctio is a wonderful notion to which Jungians aspire, but the journey has many arduous phases including calcification, dissolution and separation. It helps to be companioned by someone who understands the value of such an expedition. [Maybe some of Jung's skeptics prefer a quick fix, care that is quickly and easily managed, rather than suffering the innumerable steps in the individuation process. Who wouldn't!!!]

Here are a few of the unlikely guides: fairy tale and mythic heroes and heroines assisted by resourceful ants, learned owls and magic swords; poets and novelists and biographers who capture a resilient spirit within that is hopeful and sustaining; movies that depict the impossible becoming possible, opening us to the unimaginable, to an archetypal potential that resonates with our own misplaced lives. Saturate yourself with the beauty and wisdom of these experts. I will leave it to you to add to this list. If our foundations are shaky, then we must borrow someone else's until our cement dries. And if we still are having trouble trusting in these nigredo experts, then we just pretend.

A walk in the woods will also help to realign the tortured psyche. Every Spring I am completely blown away by Mother Nature's fireworks. Maybe those dogwoods and daffodils surprise themselves too, but every time I consciously step into the



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untamed, uncivilized world, it is as if my heart knows that there is more to come. The naked trees and the shriveled grass might appear to be forsaken, but they seem to trust that something is around the corner. They, too, believe.

Create a ritual that honors the holes. Pray. Remember dreams and dream them on through active imagination. Draw mandalas. Work with clay or finger-paint. Wail and moan and mourn what was. Weep. Let your soul dance the dance of lamentation. Each of these tasks provides a kind of healing vessel for the misery. By participating in these activities, we honor the old, as we make way for the new.

A Spanish rabbi of the thirteenth century, Joseph ben Shalom captured the challenge of living faithfully and with a symbolic understanding in this time of darkness, "among the possibilities of the Self." He suggested that a special attention should be devoted to that concerning the mystic nothingness, which is apparent in every abysmal crevice of existence. He suggests that in each transformation of reality, in each crisis, or moment of suffering, each metamorphosis or change of form or on every occasion when the state of a thing is altered, then the abyss of Nothingness is spanned and made visible for a mystic instant, for nothing can change without making contact with that region of absolute being which the oriental mystics call Nothingness (J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993, pp. 229-230).

Maybe as we each hunker down in our individual, yet universal "crevices," we can extend a hand, allowing ourselves to touch and be touched by that necessary "Nothingness." Is there really any other viable option? ■