

Let It Snow

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I have a habit, some might even call it a practice, of casually perusing my bookcases and pulling a book or two from the shelves, opening them to no particular page, and reading what I find. I might read a paragraph or two, sometimes several pages. Sometimes that's it and I'll close the book and replace it on the shelf. But often, maybe about seventy-five to eighty percent of the time, a word, sentence, and even an entire paragraph catches and holds my attention long enough to stimulate some reflection.

I don't recall when I started doing this but it has proven a wellspring for sermon ideas, as well as for getting unstuck or working out a transition midway through writing a sermon. And even when whatever I've found and reflected on finds no direct application to sermon writing, it has rarely been without benefit professionally, personally, or both.

In centuries past, the stumbling upon words, thoughts, and ideas, seemingly at random, that in turn prove inspiring, point to or clear pathways, and offer new perspectives, would have been considered by many to be "a sign." Some sort of divine intervention, directive, or communication. Even today it is not uncommon to hear people talk about or seek signs in personal, geo-political, or weather related events.

Indeed, when I was a chaplain serving people of various faiths, I met people all the time who believed in and prayed for signs from God or sometimes, The Universe. Of course, I also encountered many others who perhaps didn't believe in or pray for signs from God or the like, but found themselves nonetheless wondering if events or situations in their lives were pointing them towards some decision they were struggling with or a reality they had to face.

Regardless of the theology we may hold...whether theist, atheist or somewhere in between, all of us seek to make sense of the world in which we live...our own personal world...and the larger world beyond the events and situations of our own lives. Put another way, we are meaning-seeking creatures. And in this sense, we are all religious.

The late Rev. Dr. Forrest Church, perhaps one of Unitarian Universalism's most widely read authors of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, described religion

as, “Our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” Church saw religion as emerging out of the mystery and questions of human existence...”Why are we here?” “What is the meaning of this life we have been given?” and, “How are we to live knowing our lives are finite?”

It is not surprising then that we human beings tend to seek and find meaning in what happens in our own lives as well as in events that occur around the world. Now sometimes we may read certain events or situations as being a very clear sign, as if a directive to do or not do something...like the person who sees an illness as a sign to stop some behavior that exacerbates or has caused the illness. Indeed, I’ve listened to people describe an illness as a sign that God wants them to stop doing something harmful to their health...sometimes adding...”God has a plan for my life.”

Even if we don’t believe in God or one that, “has a plan” for our lives, we all wrestle with and try to make sense or find meaning in the face of life’s mystery. It is part of what it means to be human. A part we sometimes forget about until something comes along to rouse us from our walking slumber, like an illness or loss, perhaps; a new job or opportunity; or something more subtle...what the Zen poet Ikkyu, describes as “love letters sent by the wind and rain, the snow and moon.” What many might call, “a sign.”

Part of my responsibilities as a hospital chaplain was to serve on-call overnight a few times a month. With the hospital being a large, level one trauma center, with only one chaplain on duty overnight, I was often quite busy in the overnight hours, especially in the emergency room. But there was this one night I was on-call that to this day I remember much more vividly than the others. Rather than being busy as usual it was an unusually, almost eerily quiet night. And as the evening stretched into late night then the early morning hours, I began to wonder why. Why was this night so markedly different from other nights I’d been on-call?

Leaving the small chaplain’s on-call room, adjacent to the cardiac resident’s on-call rooms, where in theory we could sleep during overnight shifts, I took a walk down to the hospital chapel where I’d sometimes play the piano in between calls in the middle of the night. As I sat alone in the large, darkened space, I fixed my gaze toward the windows. Staring through the glass panes, I became aware there was something unfamiliar about the view. It had changed and was covered with, to borrow Dickinson’s imagery, “alabaster wool” that had “filled the wrinkles of the road” and made “an even face” of the landscape outside the hospital.

Upon seeing the freshly fallen snow all my speculations as to why the hospital was so quiet that evening suddenly ceased and I simply yielded to its presence

with gratitude. For as Proust observed, “A change in the weather is sufficient to recreate the world and ourselves.”

Children, like Peter, in our story for all ages, seem to get this without too much trouble. For the young among us snow often brings the promise of new adventures, opening to the door to exciting play and possibilities. Indeed, “A snowball in the face is surely the perfect beginning to a lasting friendship.”, writes Markus Zusak in The Book Thief.

Adults can get a bit rusty when it comes to finding changes in the weather “sufficient to recreate the world and ourselves.” Particularly if that change is from warmth and sun to cold and snow.

Still, with the often hectic holiday season having already arrived and the official start of winter less than two weeks away, I’m reminded that for me snow is in fact, a sign. By which I mean snow invites inquiry and conveys meaning for me beyond the atmospheric effects that cause it and the science that explains it.

And I’m not the only one.

Snow has long invited engagement and reflection on life and its meaning and continues to do so today. Aristotle said, “To appreciate the beauty of a snowflake, it is necessary to stand in the cold.” While the late Betty White observed, “Snow always inspires such awe in me. Just consider one tiny snowflake alone, so delicate, so fragile, so ethereal. And yet, let a billion of them come together through the majestic force of nature, and they can screw up a whole city.”

White’s observation reminds us snow both awakens us to the thrill of being alive while confronting us with our very real limitations and vulnerabilities as human beings. A quality that inspires one writer, Parker Palmer to pine, “I am not sure that any sight or sound on earth is as exquisite as the hushed descent of a sky full of snow.” And another, e.e. cummings, to note with resignation, “The snow doesn't give a soft white damn whom it touches.” While others make a point of the tension, as Glen Duncan does, writing, “Snow makes cities innocent again, reveals the frailty of the human gesture against the void.”

Of course it is true snow can both amaze and annoy. It can be both beautiful and threatening. It can surface fond memories and ruin present plans. Given this how is one to interpret a sign like snow? Or in the spirit of the Zen poet Ikkyu, how does one read such a love letter?

Well, I don't pretend to have a one size fits all answer to that question, but I think the fact that snow often causes us to pause, rethink, loosen, or even change our plans is good place to start.

I know for me snow is at the very least a sign to slow down. A reminder that despite living in a hurry up to keep up world I am a human being not a human doing. Gently it encourages letting go of illusions, like belief in the ability to "make" time or that time will be there waiting for us after we've done everything that needs to be done. Being, snow reveals, is the real life doing pretends to be. Snow, in effect, stops the world for a moment, prompting a reality check that invites us to question how we're doing with being.

Perhaps that's why snow doesn't pay any mind to our schedule. Snow doesn't hold off until a more convenient time. It doesn't care how much we have to do or where we need to go. Snow reminds us the rest of nature is not in our hurry.

Snow teaches patience, counsels getting comfortable with change, and advises humility, cautioning us not to get caught up in the righteousness of our path as individuals, groups, or as a species.

In this regard snow is counter cultural. In a world who's slogan has become, as Nike's, "Just Do It", snow says ease up, learn to receive from life rather than attempting to control it. Snow speaks a language unfamiliar and uncomfortable to the modern ear. With a blare of silence in a noisy world, it admonishes us to be our own company for a while and listen for the still, small voice within. While outside it obscures the world as we typically know it, presenting us with an opportunity to perceive and experience the world, and ourselves anew. As the Scottish poet John Burnside observed, "Snow isn't just pretty. It also cleanses our world and our senses, not just of the soot and grime of a mining town, but also of a kind of weary familiarity, a taken-for-granted quality to which our eyes are all too susceptible."

Snow, then, awakens our imagination. It helps us to see the world and ourselves in a new light. Much the same way the stories and celebrations of the winter season including Solstice, Christmas, and Chanukah inspire and illuminate life anew.

In the Buddhist tradition meditation is sometimes described as a process of illumination whereby the "monkey mind", that ceaseless barrage of thoughts and emotional busyness that keeps us from knowing ourselves and seeing the world as it really is, is revealed and tamed. Similarly, snow directs our attention to the stillness beneath the current of our busy lives. It reminds me that my own

“monkey mind” is not my true reality, but a distraction from it. In that sense snow is perhaps most like a literal sign. One pointing the way home.

And so I say, let it snow.

Let it snow, lest in the habits of the holidays, we forget to celebrate the stillness of the season.

Let it snow, that satisfaction from doing not supplant our gratitude for being.

Let it snow, that in the quiet hush of falling snow, we’re able to hear the breath of life within and around us.

May it be snow :)

Amen and Blessed Be