Autumn Awareness – A Meditation

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Autumn is that season that comes to us stealthily. It creeps up on us. Summer's days seem endless. Days of doing, doing, doing. Time to do. Time to work more – and play harder. Time enough to enjoy drowsy warm afternoons, leisurely sunsets and long, tranquil twilight hours that slowly fade into balmy night. Days and nights that seem to have no end. But at one chill moment we become aware that those long summer days and nights have yielded to the relentless grinding of the globe. Summer fades, and is gone, like the final throes of a sunset.

Spring – buoyant and irresponsible.

Spring arrives with horns a-blaring, with busy bees a-buzzing, the happily blooming flowers just born from winter's desolation. Sunny yellow blooms, virgin-pure whites, romantic reds, and passionate purples emerge from the cold world of gray and brown. The sterile, chilled air of winter is swept away by March winds and the moist, pungent air of fecundity settles over the warming soil. The long-lost sun peeks through the now-budding tree branches to warm us, to induce us to shed some musty, tired winter clothing, to bare our tender arms and legs, and to turn our faces to its renewed, slanting rays of springtime power.

As our blue Earth rolls past its spring equinox, all of the creation below takes notice. Seeds, sleeping in the cold earth, begin to stir, to quiver, to birth themselves from their brown kernels, to begin searching for the direction of "up," and to at last peek from the ground with their new green heads for the first time at the life-giving sun. Insects, long buried and dormant in the frosty earth, come back to life and begin to creep upward, to find their new legs and wings, and to begin to buzz and hustle to do what they need to do to re-propagate their seasonal species. Ground and forest animals awake and start moving about joyously in the realization that new browsing awaits to quicken their torpid bodies. The deer leap and bound with springtime delight and with the sense of their surging passion to mate. The delicate hummingbirds begin arriving back – barely alive after the long, grueling passage from their tropical exile, to suck up the sweet juices of Spring and to build their tiny, cozy nests. The powerful Ospreys also arrive, exhausted from their odysseys, to rebuild their hardy nests that have been blown about by the cold winter winds. Swallows find their way back, and eagerly look under the dock or under the eaves to see if the nest they left so long ago is still in place. The mating swallows swoop, and swing, and suck insects from the Spring air, replenish their graceful bodies, and cuddle at night in their nests.

The songs of Spring are gay and insouciant. Mozart's minuets lead the whirling, dipping dance. The songbird chorus starts with the rising sun. Crickets click the rhythm and frogs break out into a cacophonous mélange of night songs. The drone of buzzing insects provides the cello accompaniment.

Like our Mother Earth, the human species has its cycle too. Our springtime begins at that signal instant when the peaceful, nurturing, and warm darkness ends and we are pushed by Mother's primordial forces out into that unbearable light, wet and naked into the chill, gasping for that very first breath of the Earth's air. During this springtime of our lives, we enjoy being nurtured; we care nothing for the logistics, we take all we can get, we play and amuse ourselves, never worrying about the cold or the heat or the budget. We are selfish and impatient, caring nothing for the "big picture," searching only for a better game – not for the "meaning of life." Our childhood springtime is a blur. Only occasional events – often trivial – register in our lifelong memory banks. Our main unfulfilled desire – temporarily – is to be older – to move on into the Summer of our life's cycle.

Summer – the season of work and duty.

As our Earth continues its spin on its tilted plane around our sun, our days become longer and longer as we reach the solstice limit. After that welcome springtime reappearance of the sun, now that sun has begun to linger over his creation with a vengeance. Warm turns to hot. Moist and fragrant turns to breathless stifling. The gentle and refreshing spring showers turn to wild and destructive thunderstorms and terrible tornadoes rolling across the land.

Now life gets serious. Now the spring seedlings that sprouted so blissfully are up and trying to survive. Now they discover it is a competitive world. Voracious insects are out to nibble them, and competing weeds are pushing them aside to steal their life-sustaining sunlight. Now the trees flaunt their leaves, lush and full. Now that the Summer's heat has withered the spring blooms, and the bright petals have fallen to the soil, the plants must get serious about producing their fruit.

The animals of the forest have finished their promiscuous springtime frivolity. Now pregnant females feel that ancient urgency to prepare to bear their babies, to nurture them, and to defend them. The birds sing less now. They found their mates. Now they hustle to ready the nests for the tiny eggs and for the insistent, greedy babies that will keep them busy for many weeks of the hot, relentless Summer. No "thank-yous" to come from these squawking brats. They only have weeks to grow strong enough to live on their own and to endure a long flight south. Now the swallows fly their feeding loops and dives from early dawn to evening twilight. The Ospreys – every day – must find and catch enough fish, grow the awkward babies into strong intercontinental fliers by the end of the Summer. Hummingbirds must find new sources of sweet nectar to fatten their tiny bodies.

The songs we hear in Summer are by Bach. The Summer days play a relentless, steady beat, a contrapuntal pace that rolls and repeats with undaunted energy. Birds and insects of the violin section begin the morning movement, and the frogs and crickets of the cello section pick up the concerto in the evening.

We humans reach the Summer of our lives, ready or not, educated or not, trained or not, blinded by the illusion that our Summer will have no end. Passion and play mix with work and responsibility. This is the season when we build our families, our homes, businesses, careers, and empires. We work, we create, we challenge, we sweat, and we think we conquer. As the years of our Summer roll relentlessly by, we see our children grow and go, we see our dreams come to term – some to succeed and some to fail; we see our lives evolve – sometimes as expected, sometimes as not expected. We learn that mere survival is often success. We march to Bach's relentless contrapuntal beat, only occasionally taking an adagio break to catch our breath, to look around, and then – to march dutifully onward, knowing not to what end.

Autumn – the season of reflection and accounting.

Then Autumn – the cusp of winter – is here. It's too soon! What happened to Summer? The chilly wind, a precursor of the coming Winter's freezing blast, steals away the balmy summer airs. We look around. The gay greens and riotous colors of Summer have mellowed to the muted hues of fall and are fading to the somber grays and browns of the approaching Winter. The puffy, white clouds on the blue backdrop of summer days have been replaced by layers and overlapping layers of grim gray. The dynamic summer storms and the bright hot days have melded into pervasive, steady gray and chill – the ashen hue of cold earth blending and blurring into the monotonous leaden sky.

Mother Earth and nature's *other* creatures *knew*. The insects have burrowed back into the protective ground. The squirrels have stored their winter grub. Now birds that winter here are no longer fighting each other for a mate and a secluded nesting place. Instead, they have joined together in great flocks that dip and swirl and scour the earth together for grubs and grain. The swallows, the ospreys, and the tiny songbirds have left us in our graying, chilling place while they have winged their way to gentler, colorful climes. The fawns, now already appearing grown and wary, move with their mother's herd to quiet, hidden thickets to prepare for cold and snow.

What do we feel? The carefree, careless days of our springtime are a fading and irrelevant memory. Do we feel more than chill? Autumn hearkens to us that the dark end of our own cycle is near. We've had to let go of the Summer we thought would never end. Our inner world grays as the Earth has grayed. As we see the tired leaves droop and fall, so do we see our bodies begin to droop.

But as the cacophony of Summer has abated, we have started hearing more profundity in the peaceful quiet of gray mornings. The music of Autumn is a symphony of Brahms. Dark and stirring basses rolling and mingling their voices with the comforting drone of cellos, only punctuated by the plaintive alto notes of the tidewater crows. Sadness seeps slowly from the solemn sound and soaks into our souls. Retrospection comes to us unbidden.

The poet Shelley wrote:

There is a harmony
In autumn, and a luster in its sky,
Which through the summer is not heard or seen,
As if it could not be, as if it had not been!

The Autumn of our lives opens new perspectives on our Spring and on our Summer – a perspective of the whole cycle. The brightness and noisiness of summer have mellowed. The darkening quiet of Autumn lets us finally begin to hear. The neutral hues of Autumn let us finally begin to see – to perceive the details of our lives. The somber aspect of Autumn lets us finally begin to feel, to sense the warp and woof of this strange phenomenon we named life. Now when we view a child we see that child anew – with feelings both of joy and of apprehension that we cannot express – because now, finally, we dimly perceive the whole circuitry of life.

Sometimes when we step out under this Autumn sky, under the layered, woolly grays merging from Earth to heaven, we want to cry. The poignant beauty of this brief coming and going fills our hearts with a strange, sad joy. We suspect this is the feeling that ancestors in the shadowy past experienced – and they named it religion. We feel close to that all-pervading spirit of creation – close to God. Our awe reaches peaks never before experienced. Melancholy becomes wisdom. We have read:

> *Melancholy is at the bottom of everything, just as at the end of all rivers is the sea. Can it be otherwise in a world where nothing lasts, where all that we have loved or shall love must die? Is death, then, the secret of life? The gloom of an eternal mourning enwraps, more or less closely, every serious and thoughtful soul, as night enwraps the universe. (Henri-Frederic Amiel)*

Life would have no meaning if there were no Autumn, no retrospection, no introspection, no sadness. Our Unitarian forbear, Henry David Thoreau, said that this exploration of our own interior is the greatest journey.

> *It is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone. . . . It is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar.*

Gunter Grass wrote that this melancholy and utopia "fertilize one another," and that for him "melancholy and utopia are heads and tails of the same coin."

This Autumn experience is not just about age. From time to time we arrive at our Novembers. We experience those seasons when we need to withdraw into ourselves, and then we feel, right down to our marrow, the poignancy of our brief experience here on Earth. Even though the summery business whirls around us, we escape and curl up apart in our gray November nest.

Autumn opens many of us to practice the tolerance and cooperation that have nourished and sustained the human race. Now we can experience the position of acceptance – acceptance of ourselves, acceptance of others, and acceptance of the disquieting notion that we will never fully understand this mysterious experience we call a life. We have seen the big picture – the whole cycle. We now see ourselves as survivors, and we now reach out to our fellow travelers. Like the birds, we are no longer fighting for our own private nest and for our own selfish desires, but we are joining the big flock and winging across the horizon together.

These Autumn moments invoke our muse. Our creativity becomes greater than we ever expected. In quiet Autumn exiles of lonely separation from summer's turmoil, we can come closest to touching and conveying this elusive perception of existence. Goya painted for us the scenes of Autumn's soul-searing depth, and Beethoven described it in his symphonies.

For Robert Frost, *Sorrow* also was *his* beloved November guest:

My November Guest

My Sorrow, when she's here with me,
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain
Are beautiful as days can be;
She loves the bare, the withered tree;
She walks the sodden pasture lane.

Her pleasure will not let me stay.
She talks and I am fain to list:
She's glad the birds are gone away,
She's glad her simple worsted grey
Is silver now with clinging mist.

The desolate, deserted trees,
The faded earth, the heavy sky,
The beauties she so truly sees,
She thinks I have no eye for these,
And vexes me for reason why.

Not yesterday I learned to know
The love of bare November days
Before the coming of the snow,
But it were vain to tell her so,
And they are better for her praise.

Be thankful for Autumn. Without Autumn we would never get to know life. We would never distinguish between the trivial and the profound, between the transient and the eternal, between the *now* and the *ever*. Without Autumn we would never know the deep beauty of sorrow.