

The Woods in Winter
Thomas W. Mann

[Adapted from the forthcoming book, *Reading the Two Books of God*]

Not long after I came to Winston Salem, someone told me about the woods behind Reynolda House—the grand estate bequeathed to the town by the family of tobacco magnate R. J. Reynolds. A trail meanders through the woods, around a field, and down along a stream that becomes Silas Creek. Since then, I have walked there many times, and in all seasons of the year. There is something in our culture’s symbolic landscape that prefers such places in spring or summer, or perhaps in the fall—but not in winter. Certainly, you will see more walkers there in May (or July, or October) than in February. We seem naturally more inclined to the lush greenness of spring and summer, and the brilliant colors of fall, than to the bleak drabness of winter, perhaps all the more so in our climate where we so seldom have the beautiful cover of snow. Here, the woods are not whitewashed, as it were, but drained of color, the forest floor covered with dead, gray leaves. No wonder that we do not welcome this season with the greeting, “Ah! Winter!” the way we welcome spring.

Our predilection for the warmer months has its spiritual counterpart. Much religious symbolism derives from the imagery of spring and summer. Consider these familiar lines from the Song of Songs: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone and the flowers appear on the earth.” Of course, the spirituality here is that of two lovers, but much the same images are used for the divine. Consider Second Isaiah’s equally familiar lines about Israel’s spiritual rejuvenation: “the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly” (35:1-2). In fact, this prophet’s favorite word seems to be “spring up”—God is “doing a new thing, now it is springing up.” No wonder that the Church incorporated pagan rituals of springtime into its celebration of Easter. No wonder that the liturgical color for the longest season of the church year (Pentecost) is green, symbolizing the growth of the church. Spiritually, it would seem, winter has only a negative connotation, as is suggested by my dictionary when it cites “a period *like* winter; a period of decline, dreariness, or adversity.”

Now, I do not want to do away with spring, or with the springtime dimension of spirituality. Probably both the natural and the spiritual preference for spring are ineradicable, and should be. But to keep winter completely outside of our spiritual lexicon seems a bit unfair, something (I suspect) like the prejudice our culture holds for being young over being old.

What lessons, then, do we find in the woods in winter? What do we *sense* there? For one thing, we hear very little. The woods are strangely silent. There is a stillness that is palpable. This is a quiet place for “quiet time,” something people sometimes desperately need in order to escape all the noise that bombards us (mute your cell phone!). The stillness is all the more apparent if the ground *is* covered in snow, nature’s great muffler. Moreover, the frigid air is pure and clear, unburdened by the heaviness of summer’s humidity. We breathe more freely, as if we’re suddenly relieved of asthma. The lightness of winter’s air instills in us a levity of being. The stillness is part of what makes the woods a sanctuary.

Surprisingly, we *see* much more than we do in summer. In summer, we seem to be immersed in a world of color—everything around us is green. Green leaves, millions and millions of them, form a canopy over our heads and all around us, and green plants cover the forest floor. Not so in winter, when all is dark and bleak. It is almost like walking out of a color and into a black-and-white photograph. There is a stark beauty here that summer obscured. Imagine one of Ansel Adams’s magnificent black-and-white photographs converted into color and you will begin to see what I mean. In color, those photographs would seem baroque, florid, almost “tacky.” Just so, the woods in winter offer something that colorful summer lacks: chiseled edges, a sharpness of images, deep contrasts between light and dark.

The woods in summer are almost one-dimensional. The Eastern woods are so pervasively dense that hikers have named the Appalachian Trail the “green tunnel.” Often you can scarcely see a hundred feet beyond where you are standing. Not so in winter. In winter, the woods are three-dimensional. With the trees stripped of their foliage, you can see deep into the forest. You see the *depth* of the woods. You discover that the earth has contours, little ridges and gullies, small rivulets that you had not noticed in summer; over there is a dead, fallen tree, covered with moss, slowly disintegrating, something the lush vines had obscured in August; here is a rock outcropping that leafy shrubs had hidden from view. Now you see the essential *shape* of things. It is almost as if you can say, “So *this* is the way the woods really are.” But you can also see *through* the woods. If you are walking on a ridge in the mountains, you can see distant vistas that would be completely obscured in summer. In summer you see only what is in front of you; in winter, you see *into* the woods and out—and, perhaps most remarkably—up.

In the woods in winter, we no longer see the forest, but the trees. As with the ground, so with the trees—we see their elemental shape, their skeletal structure, unadorned by leaves. We see the different textures of bark, the massive trunks, the intricate lacework of limbs and twigs. I had walked through the woods behind Reynolda House many times and not really noticed the effect of this ... well, this vision, this structural vision. Until one winter day something about the trees drew my eyes up and up to their tops and beyond. There was something about the sublime grandeur of these trees, their stark, naked simplicity, the way they seemed to reach for the sky like thousands of fingers, as if in praise to God, that something welled up inside me and I found myself saying, “Glory!” And I said it out loud.

I quickly looked around and, thank God, there was no one there to hear me. Probably would have thought I was some kind of religious fanatic. But uttering “glory” in such a setting is perfectly appropriate. One could even say that *not* to utter it, or at least think it, would be spiritually obtuse. The Psalmist who wrote about the heavens declaring the glory of God certainly thought so (Psalm 19). So do poets like Mary Oliver, for whom “The door to the woods is the door to the temple.”¹ Indeed, she says “Glory is my work.”²

John Muir certainly felt the same way when he immersed himself in California’s Sierra mountains, where, he said, “Never before had I seen so glorious a landscape.”³ Indeed, he embarrassed two steely-eyed visiting scientists when he danced around “shouting ‘Look at the glory! Look at the glory!’”⁴

Unfortunately, the word “glorious” easily *is* used for subjects less worthy of the word. It’s like that most egregiously misused word “awesome,” which has become so trivialized that it can refer to something like a new brand of designer underwear.

“The heavens declare the glory of God,” says the Psalmist, and so do the woods in winter. Of course, I hasten to admit that I do not have such an experience every time I go there. In fact, I have had such an experience in that particular place only once. Most of the time, I just see trees. But then I do not experience the sublime every time I go to Scripture either. Much of the time, I just see words. But I return to those words, as I return to those woods, because at *one* time they led me to praise, because they led me to a Presence that is beyond the words and beyond the woods.

Here is perhaps the greatest irony, the paradox, of the woods in winter. Yes, they do speak to us of “decay” and “dying.” That is why we use the phrase “in the dead of winter,” but not of summer. They symbolize for us “dreariness and adversity.” They are bleak, cold, frozen, numb. And yet, though winter is the darkest time of the year, there is more light in the woods then that on the longest day of summer, and we can see this light because winter’s adversity has opened a window into heaven. Winter has ripped off the leaves, torn down the arboreal canopy. In the woods in winter, you can see the sky.

¹ Mary Oliver, *Upstream*, 154.

² *The Leaf and the Cloud*, p. 10.

³ John Muir, *Nature Writings*, 219.

⁴ Donald Worster, *A Passion for Nature: The Life of John Muir*, 205.