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Thawing Out

“To bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed
To turn, turn, will be our delight
‘Til by turning, turning we come round right.”

Can you hear Nature’s calling us to bow and to bend? To thaw?

After winter’s deep freeze, I love how the trees bend this time of year and how the ends of all the branches tilt up like fingers reaching toward the sun. Along the road, birch trees whose top branches have been blown over nearly to the ground are starting to straighten.

Driving home from a ministers’ meeting in Vermont last week felt like racing headlong into spring. Up there, deep snow still covered north-facing yards and slopes. Lakes were frozen, and rivers and streams barely moved at a trickle. But coming south, the sun shone strong and bright. Fast-moving streams flashed in the sun.

Everything’s melting. Gradually in places: field, yard, and snowdrifts are shrinking, inch by inch. Familiar objects are reappearing – a stone wall, a garden post, the woodpile, there all along beneath a blanket of snow. It’s good to see the world again in this in-between season, unadorned and promising.

Nothing’s quite the same after freezing and thawing. Not a beautiful meal packed up in the freezer, not a cookie, certainly not a banana....Likewise, the natural world doesn’t come back exactly the same after a long, cold winter. Thawing out doesn’t restore everything as it was – while we know where to look for the peonies, what comes up and exactly where is brand new.

We, too, change when we emerge from a time we’ve felt frozen. I’m guessing that every one of us has lived for days or weeks – and sometimes much longer – mired in indecision, trapped in conflict or just plain stuck. When we get caught up in a frozen state of mind, we can find ourselves in a long winter of sameness. It happens in relationships – when we’ve had a fight with our beloved or felt wounded by an interaction. Meanwhile, in our heads, our self-talk repeats the same words over and over, convincing us of our certainties. Thawing out can feel unlikely.

Grief, too, seems to have no end. Life as we know it has ceased to exist. We feel lost, unable to see our way forward. Thawing out – laughing again, loving again – takes a long time.

Deep freezes rarely last forever. Eventually, the life force reawakens our energies, our curiosity. And when we thaw out, we may look the same, but we have recalibrated. Our understandings of each other, and of ourselves, have evolved. Then one day, we are ready to move again.

Many years ago, our young family (the kids were babies) left New England to live in the Poconos in Pennsylvania, the land of heart-shaped bathtubs. It was a job move for my husband. I

would like to say that I was the perfect partner and supported him and the move with all my heart. But I did not want to move. I loved our life in Portsmouth, enjoyed a circle of close friends, my parents and siblings nearby. I had a job I liked and great daycare, no easy feat with two young kids. I resisted the move mightily.

Nothing could shake my certitude, even once we had moved to Pennsylvania. I saw everything through a lens of gloom, all John's fault. I realized that my gloom had gone over the top one day, while John was miles away at work. I was carrying a paper bag of wet kitchen trash through the breezeway to the garage when the bottom of the bag ripped open, spilling the contents all over the floor. "Damn it, John!" I said. And then I heard my words. John? John was nowhere in sight. He had nothing to do with this mess! Sometimes seeing ourselves a bit more clearly helps us thaw. Soften. Change.

Sometimes we are *blessed* with such a thawing, a renewing of our spirits. Other times, we actively *invite* it. Last week at our interfaith clergy lunch gathering, an email came from a minister who couldn't make it: "I hope," he said, "everyone is having a properly dour Lent" – a joke about the seriousness of this season of the Christian calendar, a time when people contemplate their mortality and engage in devotional practices and rituals that take them deep.

My colleague's words reminded me of a longtime Episcopalian friend who observes Lent in a big way every year. For as long as I've known him, this friend has followed a disciplined routine during Lent's six weeks. He sets aside an hour every morning for reading and prayer. A person who enjoys an evening libation, he also foregoes alcohol during Lent. Though he'll joke about that as a hardship, he takes his morning ritual seriously and looks forward to it every year.

When we see each other out in the world, he'll eagerly tell me which passage he read that morning and how meaningful he finds the routine. The same words every year lead him deeper by the day into a time of quiet and contemplation. From the outside looking in, he appears almost monk-like in his gladness to shed what he doesn't need, to let go of the usual pulls on his time and energy. He seems to come into a simplicity. A peacefulness. A starting over, fresh and cleansed.

This reminds me of the gleaming wet ledge of rock on Rte 16 this time of year – you know the place – where the thick bluish waterfall freezes all winter? These days, it streams with running water, the ledge wet and shiny, rinsed by the last of the snow.

Thawing out is gradual *here*, exciting and dramatic *there*. The spring sun beats down on snow and ice. Crystalline molecules soften. Start moving. Drops form and then puddles and rivulets...and then every stream and river is alive with movement. We marvel at the power and flash of snowmelt.

Water splatters and clatters from the roof all day long. Frozen streams gurgle beneath the ice, then burst into wild waves rushing over the rocks. River ice breaks up, the surface ice the last to melt. It cracks into chunks that pile up in a jumble as the warmer water below begins to flow. Eventually one will break loose, then another and soon the whole river is in motion.

And so it happens that parts of us reify over time – they become fixed and inflexible. When they loosen and break up, we can find ourselves moving again in ways that feel new. This happened to me just yesterday. After a rare night at home with us on Friday, our daughter, who’s in grad school, wanted to get back to Cambridge early Saturday to attend the morning sessions of a “Black Policy Conference.”

“I want to go,” she said, “because it’s an opportunity to be in the minority.” That inspired John and me to join her on the spur of the moment. The program was called “Affirming Blackness: Protest, Passion, & Policy.”

She was right. People of color outnumbered a half dozen of us white people 10 to 1. In addition to students, participants came from as far away as New York Chicago and Ottawa. They came dressed smartly, formally – an indication of respect and celebration for this occasion.

The presentations were meaty and hard-hitting. Jonathan Jackson gave a keynote. He is one of the founders of the media company and web site Blavity, created by and for Black millennials. Blavity’s mission is to “economically and creatively support Black millennials across the African diaspora, so they can pursue the work they love and change the world in the process.” We also attended a presentation featuring people who had spent years in prison, called “Marked: Understanding the Lasting Effects of Incarceration.”

Being in the minority felt loud and unsettling – a reality that people of color live every day, especially around here. We didn’t understand many of the references. We missed a lot of the jokes. But the stories of struggle hit hard. The media person spoke of the huge ongoing, exhausting effort – “bio-psycho-social,” as he put it – of his line of work, his company an uphill struggle every inch of the way. He named stress and the toll on the health of Black people who have had to prioritize *survival* year after year, generation after generation. The goal now, he said, must shift from survival to *healing*.

Asked how he decides what to say yes to, he said, “Not a lot.” When deciding, he asks himself these three questions, “Do I feel excited about this?” “Six months from now, will I still be saying yes this?” And lastly, “Will saying yes to this get me to my goal set?”

On the incarceration panel, one person after another shared stories of immediate family members being incarcerated, many for more than a decade. At one point the audience was asked to raise hands if a family member had been incarcerated. Every hand went up. In that room, the longing for justice hurt.

The organizers worked hard to publicize the event. They wanted wide participation. At the same time, over and over again, the professors and students at the podium would say, “This place looks really different than it does during the week. I love looking out and seeing all your beautiful Black faces.” While we were warmly welcomed when registering, we talked afterward about that feeling of standing out as different. We also noticed how grateful we felt to be there, as if we’d been let in on an intimate conversation. By the end of the day, I felt exhausted by the intensity of the presentations and the sense of shared injustice.

The journey of seeing more clearly our white supremacist system – and my own racism – feels like the longest of roads. It also feels like a process of thawing out. Not a gentle melting but an internal crashing of icy structures breaking up, assumptions loosening, ideas letting go and hurtling down the river. A raging river, branches and debris tumbling in its wake. There's nothing easy about it once you're paying attention.

So let us be sure to do that.

Let us watch the gentle, barely perceptible melting of the snow and ice. Let us take comfort in the re-emergence of the earth's contours and the first green shoots. Let us celebrate the thaw, the rinse, the newness of spring.

And let us also watch the raging rivers. Let us feel the power that dislodges branches caught up against the shore and sweeps them away. Let us cheer as rigid old structures give way to a brisk, healthy, unimpeded flow. May our brittleness also break away: our old resentments, our stuckness, our frozen white cluelessness. May whole-hearted caring and compassion flow freely.

And when we say yes, let us say it respecting every person's precious life and promise.

So may it be.