

Winter's wisdom

As soon as the shine of the New Year grows dull, urging spring's arrival becomes a national pastime. In a raised chorus of voices, we complain about the cold, grey days. We flip through seed catalogs and dream of future gardens. We drum our fingers; waiting, waiting, waiting.

I moved to Bemidji in December 2013, just as an interminable polar vortex sank its teeth into the Northland.

My family temporarily rented a tiny, poorly insulated cabin while we looked for a permanent place to live.

The day after we moved in, my husband headed to work. This left me alone with my kiddos, in an unfamiliar town, with no friends, and weather too cold to allow for outside adventures.

To cope, I immersed my young family in projects: we didn't build a block house, we built a block town that overflowed the living room. Elaborate blanket forts rose and fell. Recipes with 12 steps were not uncommon. We listened to countless audio books.

But those frigid, lonely days had me leaning hard (hard!) into the wheel that moved each day forward.

And then, in January, a friend sent me an Oscar Wilde quotation, "Wisdom comes with winters."

The first time I read it, I paused and took a deep breath.

I didn't understand what it meant, but I sensed it was important.

I printed it and taped it to my refrigerator. It conjured some old knowledge, already present in my bones, but long forgotten.

Glibly, I thought it had something to do with being rewarded for making it through winter. As in, if you persevere through winter, you will be given wisdom. But that explanation didn't seem solid.

Plus, that winter wasn't making me feel wise. All the decisions that had led me to that place in time felt capital-S Stupid.

What was Wilde talking about?

Every time I opened the refrigerator, I was confronted, and then confounded by his words.

One night, curled up with a quilt on the couch in an effort to escape the cold air seeping through the cabin walls, I found myself reading a book by Oliver and Rachel DeMille. They wrote about how winter, with its cold temperatures and limited daylight, has long been a time for stories and study



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and great learning.

Aha!

According to Wilde and the DeMilles, winter is not simply a time to practice perseverance: I will make it through winter, I will make it through winter. Nor is it a time to passively wait for wisdom to land in your lap.

Winter is a time to slow. To grab hold of that wheel that spins your days too quickly and give it a firm tug. To let your thoughts catch up with your body. To pin down that idea that's been circling your mind for months. To remember that life isn't an emergency.

It is no longer necessary to break stride during winter. We have electricity to keep our mornings and evenings bright. We have propane to keep us warm. We have high-tech clothing to protect us from the elements. We have endless to-do lists. And so we charge ahead. Productivity above all!

The writer Terry Tempest Williams wrote, "I need hibernation in order to create."

Don't we all? Whatever it is we are creating: a family, a book, a business, a self.

Through this new lens, I reconsidered the Wilde quote, "Wisdom comes with winters."

If during the spring, summer and autumn we are planting and tending and then harvesting a garden, it is during winter that we must make stew from the ingredients; slowly and deliberately.

So that's what I tried. The shift was subtle, because it was mostly internal. But it was important because it helped me appreciate exactly where I was, instead of where I wished I were.

For me it meant revisiting my favorite novels, going to bed earlier than usual, writing for myself; not just assignment. It meant gathering together the stray parts of myself.

Surrendering to the fact of winter is a relief: I am grateful for these lingering days of cold. They offer me a few more weeks of quiet and slow before spring emerges, the wheel picks up speed again, and the sound of its exciting spinning fills my days.

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