



THERE IS A SEASON:
A Meditation on the Cycles of Our Inner Lives

A Reflective Welcome
to the Fetzer Institute's
Retreat Center



Seasons

FOREWORD

As one way of welcoming guests to a then relatively new retreat center, we at the Fetzer Institute asked our friend and colleague Parker Palmer to explore the meaning and the heart of what Seasons: A Center for Renewal was beginning to embody for us. Parker responded with this reflection on nature's seasons, both as a physical fact and as a metaphor for our lives. Its wise and timeless quality continues to ring true now, more than 25 years later.

Beyond being a physical space for meetings, or a retreat center for the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Seasons is a place with a very specific mission, purpose, and heart—a place where we come together in sacred hospitality to create that which we cannot do alone. This meditation on hope, abundance, dormancy, death, on transformation itself, is the backdrop for our work and for the Fetzer community.

We have learned that tending the spiritual dimension of how we gather contributes to the quality of our individual lives, the research and education agendas of our institutions, and the character of our society. The atmosphere of the meeting place, our presence as participants and caretakers, and the processes and practices that create shared meanings are all critical in establishing the soil where seeds of transformation can take root and grow.

In the Upper Midwest where Parker lives—and where the Fetzer Institute is located—the seasons may differ from those in your part of the world, and the movement of Parker's inner seasons may be quite unlike your own. His reflections are offered in the spirit of dialogue, in the hope that you will be encouraged to explore the seasons of your own life and work.

As we continue our conversations together, in person or from a distance, perhaps we will find that the great rhythms and realities of the seasons transcend the personal and connect us in community.





From Language to Life

Most of us have a metaphor, conscious or not, that names our experience of life. Animated by the imagination, one of the most vital powers we possess, our metaphors are more than mirrors to reality—they often become reality, transmuting themselves from language into the living of our lives.

I know people who say, “Life is like a game of chance—some win, some lose.” But that metaphor can create a fatalism about losing or an obsession with beating the odds. I know other people who say, “Life is like a battlefield—you get the enemy, or the enemy gets you.” But that metaphor can result in enemies around every corner and a constant sense of siege. We do well to choose our metaphors wisely.

“Seasons” is a wise metaphor for the movement of life, I think. It suggests that life is neither a battlefield nor a game of chance but something infinitely richer, more promising, more real. The notion that our lives are like the eternal cycle of the seasons does not deny the struggle or the joy, the loss or the gain, the darkness or the light, but encourages us to embrace it all—and to find in all of it opportunities for growth.

If we lived close to nature in an agricultural society, the seasons as metaphor and fact would continually frame our lives. But the master metaphor of our era does not come from agriculture—it comes from manufacturing. We do not believe that we “grow” our lives—we believe that we “make” them.

Just listen to how we use the word in everyday speech: we make time, make friends, make meaning, make money, make a living, make love.

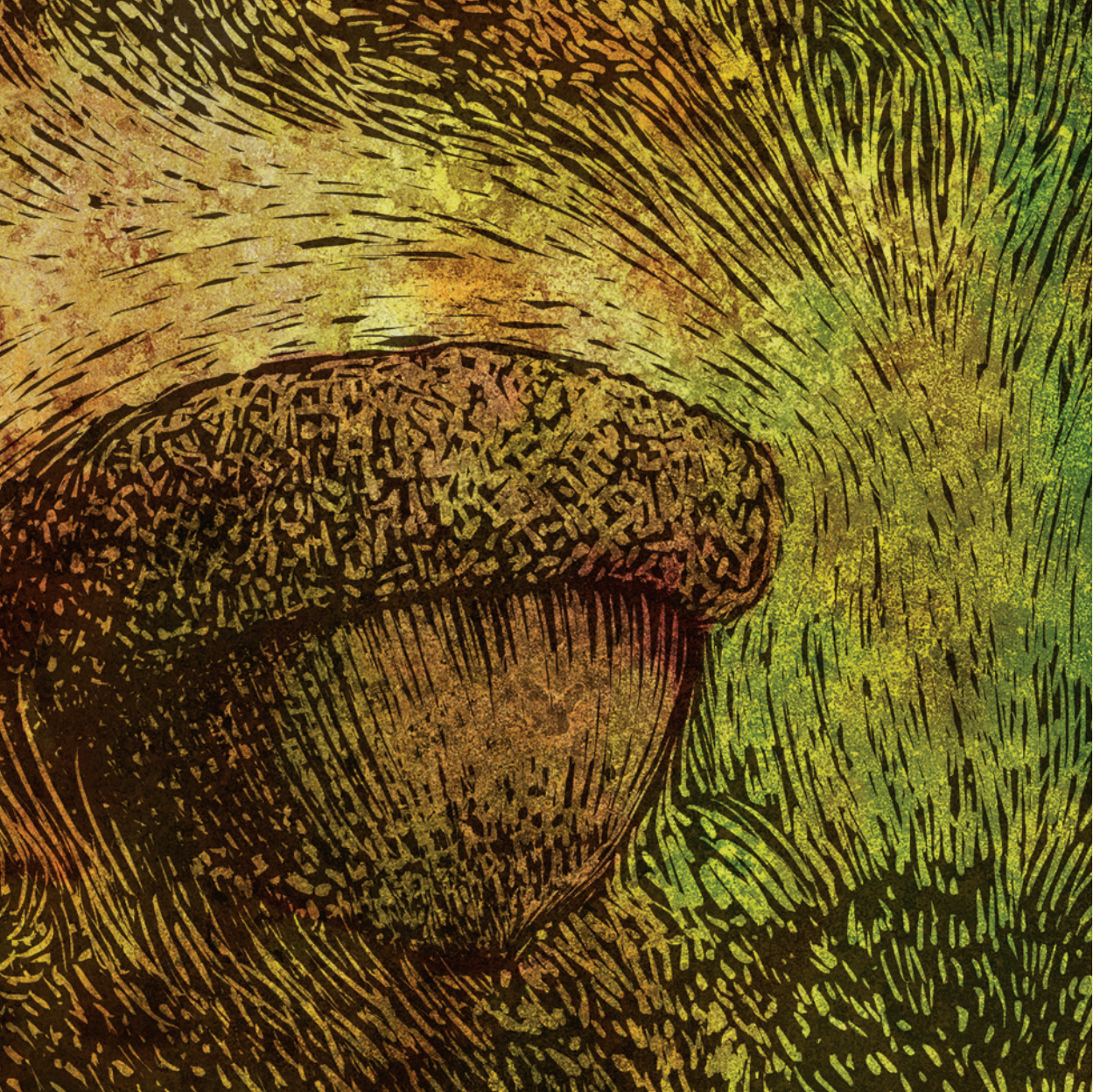
Alan Watts observed that a Chinese child will ask, “How does a baby grow?” but an American child will ask, “How do you make a baby?” From an early age we absorb our culture’s arrogant conviction that we manufacture everything, reducing the world to mere “raw material” that lacks all value until we impose our designs and labor on it.

If we accept the notion that our lives are dependent on an inexorable cycle of seasons, on a play of powers that we can conspire with but never control, we run headlong into a culture which insists, against all evidence, that we can make whatever kind of life we want, whenever we want it. Deeper still, we run headlong into our own egos, which want desperately to believe that we are always in charge.

That is one reason why the Fetzer Institute chose Seasons as the name of its Center for Renewal. The Center is a place where people come to challenge and reform the distortions of both culture and ego—reform them toward ways of thinking and doing and being that are rooted in respect for the living ecology of life. Unlike “raw material” on which we make all the demands, this ecology makes demands on us, even as it sustains our lives. We are here not only to transform the world but also to be transformed.

Transformation is difficult, so it is good to know that there is comfort as well as challenge in the metaphor of life as a cycle of seasons. Illumined by that image, we see that we are not alone in the universe. We are participants in a vast communion of being, and if we open ourselves to its guidance, we can learn anew how to live in this great and gracious community of truth. We can, and we must—if we want our sciences to be humane, our institutions to be sustaining, our healings to be deep, our lives to be true.





Autumn

Autumn is a season of great beauty, but it is also a season of decline: the days grow shorter, the light is suffused, and summer's abundance decays toward winter's death. Faced with this inevitable winter, what does nature do in autumn? She scatters the seeds that will bring new growth in the spring—and she scatters them with amazing abandon.

In my own experience of autumn, I am rarely aware that seeds are being planted. Instead, my mind is on the fact that the green growth of summer is browning and beginning to die. My delight in the autumn colors is always tinged with melancholy, a sense of impending loss that is only heightened by the beauty all around. I am drawn down by the prospect of death more than I am lifted by the hope of new life.

But as I explore autumn's paradox of dying and seeding, I feel the power of metaphor. In the autumnal events of my own experience, I am easily fixated on surface appearances—on the decline of meaning, the decay of relationships, the death of a work. And yet, if I look more deeply, I may see the myriad possibilities being planted to bear fruit in some season yet to come.

In retrospect, I can see in my own life what I could not see at the time—how the job I lost helped me find work I needed to do, how the “road closed” sign turned me toward terrain I needed to travel, how losses that felt

irredeemable forced me to discern meanings I needed to know. On the surface it seemed that life was lessening, but silently and lavishly the seeds of new life were always being sown.

This hopeful notion that living is hidden within dying is surely enhanced by the visual glories of autumn. What artist would ever have painted a season of dying with such a vivid palette if nature had not done it first? Does death possess a beauty that we—who fear death, who find it ugly and obscene—cannot see? How shall we understand autumn’s testimony that death and elegance go hand in hand?

For me, the words that come closest to answering those questions are the words of Thomas Merton: “There is in all visible things...a hidden wholeness.” In the visible world of nature, a great truth is concealed in plain sight: diminishment and beauty, darkness and light, death and life are not opposites. They are held together in the paradox of the “hidden wholeness.”

In a paradox, opposites do not negate each other—they cohere in mysterious unity at the heart of reality. Deeper still, they need each other for health, as my body needs to breathe in as well as breathe out. But in a culture that prefers the ease of either-or thinking to the complexities of paradox, we have a hard time holding opposites together. We want light without darkness, the glories of spring and summer without the demands of autumn and winter, and the Faustian bargains we make fail to sustain our lives.

When we so fear the dark that we demand light around the clock, there can be only one result: artificial light that is glaring and graceless and, beyond its borders, a darkness that grows ever more terrifying as we try to hold it off. Split off from each other, neither darkness nor light is fit for human habitation. But if we allow the paradox of darkness and light to be, the two will conspire to bring wholeness and health to every living thing.

Autumn constantly reminds me that my daily dyings are necessary precursors to new life. If I try to “make” a life that defies the diminishments of autumn, the life I end up with will be artificial, at best, and utterly colorless as well. But when I yield to the endless interplay of living and dying, dying and living, the life I am given will be real and colorful, fruitful and whole.





Winter

The little deaths of autumn are mild precursors to the rigor mortis of winter. The southern humorist Roy Blount has opined that in the Upper Midwest, where I live, what we get in winter is not weather but divine retribution. He believes that someone here once did something very, very bad, and we are still paying the price for that transgression!

Winter here is a demanding season—and not everyone appreciates the discipline. It is a season when death's victory can seem supreme: few creatures stir, plants do not visibly grow, and nature feels like our enemy. And yet the rigors of winter, like the diminishments of autumn, are accompanied by amazing gifts.

One gift is beauty, different from that of autumn but perhaps more beautiful still. I am not sure that any sight or sound on earth is as exquisite as the hushed descent of a sky full of snow. Another gift is the reminder that times of dormancy and deep rest are essential to all living things. Despite all appearances, of course, nature is not dead in winter—it has gone underground to renew itself and prepare for spring. Winter is a time when we are somewhat inclined to do the same for ourselves.

But, for me, winter has an even greater gift to give. It comes when the sky is clear, the sun brilliant, the trees bare, and the first snow yet to come. It is the gift of utter clarity. In winter, one can walk into woods that had been opaque

with summer growth only a few months earlier and see the trees clearly, singly and together, and see the ground that they are rooted in.

A few months ago, my father died. He was more than a good man, and these months have been a long, hard winter for me. But in the midst of the ice and loss, I have found a certain clarity that I lacked when he was alive. I see now what was concealed when the greenness of his love surrounded me—how I counted on him to help me cushion life’s harsher blows. He cannot do that for me now, and at first I thought, “I must do it for myself.” But as time has gone on, I have seen something deeper still: it never was my father absorbing those blows but a larger and deeper grace that he taught me to rely on.

When my father was alive, I confused the teaching with the teacher. Now my teacher is gone, but the grace is still there, and my clarity about that fact has allowed his teaching to take deeper root in me. Winter clears the landscape, however brutally, giving us a chance to see ourselves and each other more clearly, to see the very ground of our being.

In the Upper Midwest, newcomers often receive a classic piece of wintertime advice: “The winters will drive you crazy until you learn to get out into them.” Here, people spend good money on warm clothing so they can get outdoors and avoid the “cabin fever” that comes from huddling fearfully by the fire during the long frozen months. If you live here long, you learn that a daily walk into the winter world will fortify the spirit by taking you boldly to the very heart of the season you fear.

Our inward winters take many forms—failure, betrayal, depression, death. But every one of them, in my experience, yields to the same advice: “The winters will drive you crazy until you learn to get out into them.” Until we enter boldly into the fears we most want to avoid, those fears will dominate our lives. But when we walk directly into them—protected from frostbite by the warm garb of friendship or inner discipline or spiritual guidance—we can learn what they have to teach us. Then, we discover once again that the cycle of the seasons is trustworthy and life-giving, even in the most dismaying season of all.





Spring

I will wax romantic about spring and its splendors in a moment, but first there is a hard truth to be told: before spring becomes beautiful, it is plug ugly, nothing but mud and muck. I have walked in the early spring through fields that will suck your boots off, a world so wet and woeful it makes you yearn for the return of ice. But in that muddy mess, the conditions for rebirth are being created.

I love the fact that the word “humus”—the decayed vegetable matter that feeds the roots of plants—comes from the same word root that gives rise to the word “humility.” It is a blessed etymology. It helps me understand that the humiliating events of life, the events that leave “mud on my face” or that “make my name mud,” may create the fertile soil in which something new can grow.

Though spring begins slowly and tentatively, it grows with a tenacity that never fails to touch me. The smallest and most tender shoots insist on having their way, coming up through ground that looked, only a few weeks earlier, as if it would never grow anything again. The crocuses and snowdrops do not bloom for long. But their mere appearance, however brief, is always a harbinger of hope, and from those small beginnings, hope grows at a geometric rate. The days get longer, the winds get warmer, and the world grows green again.

In my own life, as my winters segue into spring, I not only find it hard to cope with mud but hard to credit the small harbingers of larger life to come, hard to hope until the outcome is secure. Spring teaches me to look more

carefully for the green stems of possibility: for the intuitive hunch that may turn into a larger insight, for the glance or touch that may thaw a frozen relationship, for the stranger's act of kindness that makes the world seem hospitable again.

Spring in its fullness is not easy to write about. Late spring is so flamboyant that it caricatures itself, which is why it has long been the province of poets with more passion than skill. But perhaps those poets have a point. Perhaps we are meant to yield to this flamboyance, to understand that life is not always to be measured and meted as winter compels us to do but to be spent from time to time in a riot of color and growth.

Late spring is potlatch time in the natural world, a great giveaway of blooming beyond all necessity and reason—done, it would appear, for no reason other than the sheer joy of it. The gift of life, which seemed to be withdrawn in winter, has been given once again, and nature, rather than hoarding it, gives it all away. There is another paradox here, known in all the wisdom traditions: if you receive a gift, you keep it alive not by clinging to it but by passing it along.

Of course, the realists will tell us that nature's profligacy always has some practical function, and that may well be so. But ever since I read Annie Dillard on the immoderation of trees, I have had to wonder. She begins with a mental

exercise to help us understand how superfluous in design an ordinary tree can be—if you doubt it, she suggests, try to make a faithful scale model of the next tree you see. Then, taunting the realists, she writes:

You are God. You want to make a forest, something to hold the soil, lock up solar energy, and give off oxygen. Wouldn't it be simpler just to rough in a slab of chemicals, a green acre of goo?

From autumn's profligate seedings to the great spring giveaway, nature teaches a steady lesson: if we want to save our lives, we cannot cling to them but must spend them with abandon. When we are obsessed with bottom lines and productivity, with efficiency of time and motion, with the rational relation of means and ends, with projecting reasonable goals and making a beeline toward them, it seems unlikely that our work will ever bear full fruit, unlikely that we will ever know the fullness of spring in our lives.

And where in the world did we get that "beeline" metaphor? Just watch the bees work in the spring. They flit all over the place, flirting with both the flowers and their fates. Obviously, the bees are practical and productive, but no science can persuade me that they are not pleasuring themselves as well.



Summer

Where I live, summer's keynote is abundance. The forests fill with undergrowth, the trees with fruit, the meadows with wild flowers and grasses, the fields with wheat and corn, the gardens with zucchini, and the yards with weeds. In contrast to the sensationalism of spring, summer is a steady state of plenty, a green and amber muchness that feeds us on more levels than we know.

Nature does not always produce abundance, of course. There are summers when flood or drought destroys the crops and threatens the lives and livelihood of those who work the fields. But nature normally takes us through a reliable cycle of scarcity and abundance in which times of deprivation foreshadow an eventual return to the abundant fields.

This fact of nature is in sharp contrast to human nature, which seems to regard perpetual scarcity as the law of life. Daily I am astonished at how readily I believe that something I need is in short supply. If I hoard possessions, it is because I believe that there are not enough to go around. If I struggle with others over power, it is because I believe that power is limited. If I become jealous in relationships, it is because I believe that when you get too much love I will be short-changed.

Even in writing this essay I have had to struggle with the scarcity assumption. It is easy to stare at the blank page and despair of ever having another idea, another image, another illustration. It is easy to look back at what one has written and say, "That's not very good but I'd better keep it, because

nothing better will come along.” It is difficult to trust that the pool of possibilities is bottomless, that one can keep diving in and finding more.

The irony, often tragic, is that by embracing the scarcity assumption, we create the very scarcities we fear. If I hoard material goods, others will have too little and I will never have enough. If I fight my way up the ladder of power, others will be defeated and I will never feel secure. If I get jealous of someone I love, I am likely to drive that person away. If I cling to the words I have written as if they were the last of their kind, the pool of new possibilities will surely go dry. We create scarcity by fearfully accepting it as law, and by competing with others for resources as if we were stranded on the Sahara at the last oasis.

In the human world, abundance does not happen automatically. It is created when we have the sense to choose community, to come together to celebrate and share our common store. Whether the “scarce resource” is money or love or power or words, the true law of life is that we generate more of whatever seems scarce by trusting its supply and passing it around. Authentic abundance does not lie in secured stockpiles of food or cash or influence or affection, but in belonging to a community where we can give those goods to others who need them—and receive them from others when we are in need.

I sometimes speak on college campuses about the importance of community in academic life, one of the most competitive cultures I know.

On one such occasion, following my talk, a man stood in the audience, introduced himself as occupant of the “Distinguished Such-and-Such Chair of Biology,” and began what I thought—given his rather pompous self-introduction—would surely be an attack. Instead, he said simply, “Of course we must learn to live in community with each other. After all, it is only good biology.” Biology, the discipline that was once driven by anxious metaphors like “the survival of the fittest,” and “nature red in tooth and claw,” now has a new metaphor—community. Death has not ceased, of course, but now it is understood as a legacy to the community of abundant life.

Here is a summertime truth: abundance is a communal act, the joint creation of an incredibly complex ecology in which each part functions on behalf of the whole and, in return, is sustained by the whole. Community not only creates abundance—community is abundance. If we could learn that equation from the world of nature, the human world might be transformed.

Summer is the season when all the promissory notes of autumn and winter and spring come due, and each year the debts are repaid with compound interest. In summer it is hard to remember that we had ever doubted the natural process, had ever ceded death the last word, had ever lost faith in the powers of new life. Summer is a reminder that our faith is not nearly as strong as the things we profess to have faith in—a reminder that, for this single season at least, we might cease our anxious machinations and give ourselves to the abiding and abundant grace of our common life.

PARKER J. PALMER, founder of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a world-renowned writer, speaker, and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change. He has reached millions worldwide through his ten books, including *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Courage to Teach*, *A Hidden Wholeness*, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, and *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity & Getting Old*.

Parker holds a PhD in sociology from the University of California, Berkeley, as well as thirteen honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press.

In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award, whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. In 2011, he was named an *Utne Reader* Visionary, one of “25 people who are changing your world.” In 2017, he received the Shalem Institute’s Contemplative Voices Award, given annually to an individual “who has made significant contributions to contemplative understanding, living and leadership.”

A member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker), Parker and his wife, Sharon, live in Madison, Wisconsin.



THE FETZER INSTITUTE Like nature, our organization has its own changing seasons. Our work has been dedicated to mind-body-spirit unity; accessing the power of love, forgiveness, and compassion; and helping build the spiritual foundation for a loving world. Though we are as yet uncertain of what our next season may be, in all of our efforts we seek to fulfill a guiding purpose of awakening into and serving spirit for the transformation of self and society.

GILCHRIST AND SEASONS RETREAT CENTERS The Institute’s two retreat centers were created to support both personal use and our work with Fetzer partners. These special spaces invite reflection; foster community and well-being; and encourage a deeper sense of connection with Spirit, ourselves, our many communities, and our planet.

A stay at GilChrist, our public retreat center, is an invitation to stillness and reflection. The practice of retreat restores the wholeness we know is possible between grief and gratitude, between humans and the natural world, between contemplative practice and the work toward a flourishing society for all. GilChrist warmly welcomes both small groups and individuals of all faiths and affiliations.

Seasons is where we gather with Fetzer partners to bring heart and soul to some of our society’s greatest challenges. Our founder, John Fetzer, envisioned a place that would support small groups in dialogue, and Seasons: A Center for Renewal is just that place. We like to say that it is not so much a retreat from the demands of the world as an engagement with its deepest possibilities.

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