

Changing Seasons

bob mccue
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Nature is not only all that is visible to the eye – it also includes the inner pictures of the soul. Edvard Munch

In the foothills of the Canadian Rockies where we live, fall is more an event than a season.

We don't have Maple Leafs that turn scarlets and blood red. Mostly we have yellows – from pale straw to almost copper - with hints of red in the brush and odd small tree. And from the first bit of color until the last leaf falls is no more than a few weeks. The peak lasts mere days. Today was one of them. Warm. Sunny. Hardly any wind, which is rare here. An unexpected gift.

We live about 15 minutes west of Calgary, Alberta on a small acreage surrounded by farmer's fields and a few trees. I was driving through the country this morning with my 12-year-old daughter, Teresa, to drop her off at a friend's home on my way to work. We were not far out of the driveway when I noted aloud how gorgeous the day was; how the grass in the fields and ditches had suddenly become many hued gold, tinged crimson; how it smelled like fall. Teresa agreed and we chatted about other things. And then we rounded a corner and began to climb a hill through a small forest. The sudden riot of yellows and reds made us both stop talking. I slowed down to take it all in. Silence held us for a few moments. I wished for a camera and the skill to bring landscapes like this to life.

Teresa and I had already spoken of my favourite fall day – one much like today almost 25 years ago – when my wife Juli and I married "for time and all eternity" in the Mormon Temple at Cardston. After the ceremony, Juli and I spent a few timeless minutes by ourselves journal writing and talking in a tree-filled country park before descending into the well-intended maelstrom of family dinner and reception. From the sublime to the ridiculous.

Teresa broke the silence by asking whether I had ever thought about getting married again – "to Mom", she quickly added to my confused look. "And you could do it in these fields instead of in the Temple." She has heard me say that our vows were diluted by the promise we made to obey the Mormon Church while loving and being faithful to each other. We did not question, until recently, the impossibility of that task.

Why had I not thought of new vows? Juli and I had agreed to new terms for our marriage shortly after I decided I would no longer obey Mormon authority. And after many tears and several firestorms, our relationship seemed to work better

than ever. So why not have another ceremony? And what better place could we find for it than right here? I thought the idea brilliant, and told Teresa so while thanking her for insight well beyond her years.

Now it was Teresa's turn to be confused. She had been silent in her own world far from the autumn scene that transfixed me, and was idly musing when she suggested getting married again. "Vows?" she said. "What do you mean?"

Nonetheless, I soared with the day's colours while we completed our trip. By the time I dropped Teresa off, I felt that going to work (even though I had important things to do) would waste something precious. My instinct was to share the moment with Juli, but knowing that she was off doing errands until dinnertime, I settled for relishing the thought of doing that in the evening when we would be together again. And so, on the spur of that beautiful Saturday morning moment, I headed to a golf course I suspected would be replete with fall colours.

Some will no doubt think it a sacrilege to sully a near-sacred moment with a game like golf. But golf is for me a form of walking meditation. My eldest daughter laughed when I told her this. "Sure Dad. Whatever!" she said. "As long as you get to go golfing". Such misunderstanding is a cross people like me must bear.

To golf well I need to find that slender space between fear and desire; to exist completely in the moment, as in meditation. That experience, and pleasant company, is all I ask of golf. And when my plea is granted, I connect more deeply with the present in this way than almost any other. Those who have experienced this with golf or any other activity will understand. And nothing I can say will move those who have not.

It has been an almost golfless summer (five rounds before today) as a result of a variety of family and work related things I chose to do instead. Today was likely to be the year's last opportunity for something like this. And the afternoon golfing was glorious. I wandered like a child after a butterfly. Time disappeared. The company was marvellous. And I even played reasonably well.

As I watched ball after ball soar up through greens, reds and yellows into a blue sky, and then walked after them through paradise, an idea that had been teasing me regarding the nature of fall's appeal came into focus.

For as long as I can remember fall has been my favourite season. On nice days, I love the feeling that I am getting something unearned. And I love the sense of change; of impending peace. But above all, I love the explosion of color.

Today it occurred to me that many things seem to exude beauty as they expire and prepare to feed a new cycle of growth. Ripened crops burst with energy as they are laid in symmetrical rows. Flowers scream for our attention. Salmon leap magnificently upstream through the rapids as they prepare to spawn. But for a head of grain, a flower, a salmon – this process means death. They each in their own way struggle to sustain themselves while engendering new life . And in their

ultimate effort we perceive majesty and mystery. The first draws us. The second awes and holds us. These individual struggles, in endless pattern, create life's greater beauties and harmonies.

And so I now perceive my efforts to free myself from the culture that nurtured and bound me. Something was dying as something else came into being in the course of what felt to me like a clash of Titans or the death (or birth – it is hard to tell the two apart) of the Cosmos. And if my leaf flashed beauty as I fought and then yielded to life's cycle, it was a tiny stroke on renewing humanity's breathtaking canvass. My contribution to this wonder would not be noticed by anyone other than the few fell, and then arose, beside me. For the rest, to notice me would be like deciding for some reason to pick up one leaf among the millions in an autumn neighbourhood.

Mine is a spark from a universe-wide flame – nothing more. My experience is repeated countless times even as I form these words. It is nothing, and yet a miracle for me and a few of those who chanced to see my leaf and its reflection of life's pattern.

I discussed these things a few days ago with one of my partners who since his late teens has read the books and played with the thoughts that now enthrall me. I lamented the loss of almost 30 years. He queried this because he marvels at my energy and wonders if I would have it without my odd and in some ways lamentable history. Speaking to me brings him up short. I make him want to breathe more deeply. He had forgotten the wonder of what he has and is reminded of that by feeling through me the hunger of one who long went without before sitting down to dine. He returned this favor by reminding me of the many worthwhile human accomplishments that have been fuelled by individual pain. I can't change my past, and am grateful for the life I now feel. This life spouted out of that past. They cannot be disconnected.

To be free is nothing, but to become free is everything. This becoming marks us with patterns that inspire, bore or frighten in accordance with the perspective of those who see them. Because my friend feels inspiration, he is glad for my experience much as I am for autumn's leaves.

Each spark of changing life flashes life's majesty, and so becomes mystery's seed. And our contemplation of this miracle has a better chance than anything I know to produce that rarest of all fruits – wisdom – with the grace and peace that bears its crown.