

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

**“Peaceful Joy of Frozen Ground”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 5, 2021

**Call to Celebration**

If you enjoy poetry, and story, you came to the right service this morning.  
I begin with a very familiar Robert Frost poem:

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake  
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

May we linger a little longer this morning  
before fulfilling the promises we have to keep in this busy season,  
to dwell with the lovely, dark and deep spiritual woods  
and allow ourselves access to the joy of easy wind and downy flake

As we join together in the Celebration of Life.

## Reflective Readings

(sourced from poetry.org)

A Winter Bluejay by Sara Teasdale

Crisply the bright snow whispered,  
 Crunching beneath our feet;  
 Behind us as we walked along the parkway,  
 Our shadows danced,  
 Fantastic shapes in vivid blue.  
 Across the lake the skaters  
 Flew to and fro,  
 With sharp turns weaving  
 A frail invisible net.  
 In ecstasy the earth  
 Drank the silver sunlight;  
 In ecstasy the skaters  
 Drank the wine of speed;  
 In ecstasy we laughed  
 Drinking the wine of love.  
 Had not the music of our joy  
 Sounded its highest note?  
 But no,  
 For suddenly, with lifted eyes you said,  
 "Oh look!"  
 There, on the black bough of a snow flecked maple,  
 Fearless and gay as our love,  
 A bluejay cocked his crest!  
 Oh who can tell the range of joy  
 Or set the bounds of beauty?

**Snow Day** by Billy Collins

Today we woke up to a revolution of snow,  
 its white flag waving over everything,  
 the landscape vanished,  
 not a single mouse to punctuate the blankness,  
 and beyond these windows  
  
 the government buildings smothered,  
 schools and libraries buried, the post office lost  
 under the noiseless drift,

the paths of trains softly blocked,  
the world fallen under this falling.

In a while, I will put on some boots  
and step out like someone walking in water,  
and the dog will porpoise through the drifts,  
and I will shake a laden branch  
sending a cold shower down on us both.

But for now I am a willing prisoner in this house,  
a sympathizer with the anarchic cause of snow.  
I will make a pot of tea  
and listen to the plastic radio on the counter,  
as glad as anyone to hear the news

that the Kiddie Corner School is closed,  
the Ding-Dong School, closed.  
the All Aboard Children's School, closed,  
the Hi-Ho Nursery School, closed,  
along with—some will be delighted to hear—

the Toadstool School, the Little School,  
Little Sparrows Nursery School,  
Little Stars Pre-School, Peas-and-Carrots Day School  
the Tom Thumb Child Center, all closed,  
and—clap your hands—the Peanuts Play School.

So this is where the children hide all day,  
These are the nests where they letter and draw,  
where they put on their bright miniature jackets,  
all darting and climbing and sliding,  
all but the few girls whispering by the fence.

And now I am listening hard  
in the grandiose silence of the snow,  
trying to hear what those three girls are plotting,  
what riot is afoot,  
which small queen is about to be brought down.

## Silent Meditation

### Sermon

Al DeSalvo wrote this for me this morning:

There is nothing so exhilarating, so peaceful, and so beautiful than being at the top of a mountain on a bright sunny day in the winter surrounded by a blanket of freshly fallen snow.

The view is breathtaking-a 360 degree panorama of mountains, valleys, villages, streams and lakes. Everything is so still: can they be real?

The branches of conifer trees, pine, spruce and balsam, are burdened with the weight of the new snow, so much so that they seem to blend into the white ground, their trunks nowhere to be seen. The brilliant sun's rays create a wonderland of sparkles reflecting from the new blanket of snow on the trees and the ground.

The clear deep blue sky enhances the visual feast.

It is time. I push forward and begin my descent through unbroken powder. My skis make no sound, respecting the quietness of all that is around me. A rare time of serenity and peace.

Thank you, Al, for these words. I'm with you now, on that mountain, ready to go.

Yet, I suspect this mountain top experience of winter might be the exceptional rather than the rule. The more mundane experience of winter many of us encounter is scraping ice and snow off car windshields, fearing black ice, limited street parking, fighting salt corrosion on our vehicles, and a host of other inconveniences. And this year, add higher heating costs and gas prices. And let's hope for no dangerous blizzards or extremely low temperatures.

These negatives add a level of ambivalence we Northerners experience toward winter. Those inconveniences can have a cumulative, unfortunate effect of crowding out some of the joy winter can offer.

Our theme for the month is Opening to Joy. The key here is the word "opening." In the preoccupations common with holiday preparations and activities, it can be easy to miss the simple joys and delights of winter.

So today, I encourage you to connect with those winter joys as you hear these short essays from Sigrin Newell, then from Steve Moskowitz and Darnell Rohrbaugh, and finally a few of my personal reflections on the joys of winter I've experienced. I hope they will help you enter the winter season a little more open to its potential joys.

Sigrin writes:

The rope tow was the core of the Black Hawk County Alps, our jocular name for the hill behind Blair Wood's house. Every November the men of our neighborhood rigged up a pulley system for the rope. They built a platform at the top of the hill for the gasoline engine that moved the rope. They put small pulleys on the trees to keep the down-going rope off the snow. At the bottom of the hill, they attached a pulley to a gigantic oak tree. This turned the rope around at the bottom. While the men worked, the rest of us roamed the hillside beneath the ancient oaks and maples, collecting downed branches and using a whip scythe to cut tall weeds. We worked willingly. None of us wanted hazards sticking above the snow...

The Alps designation was ironic. Surrounded by flat Iowa prairies, our neighborhood was a string of houses spread out along a ridge at the top of a river valley. We were the "Ridge Kids".

Iowa snows were abundant in the 1950s. We eagerly awaited their arrival. After each new snowfall we all went out to pack the snow by sidestepping down the hill on our skis. We were finally ready for the first runs of the year.

On the back hill, the engine turning the rope cable chattered into life. ... Once the rope was moving smoothly, we'd ski down. At the bottom, we'd line up our skis just so and then grab the rope. For a few seconds it felt as if the rope would pull your arms out of their sockets. Then your feet would start to slide and up you would glide. ...

In years of abundant snow we held the Black Hawk County Alps Ski Festival. Friends from around the State were invited to come out and join us. Skiing was mostly unknown in Iowa back then. Guests stood at the top of the hill and watched the Ridge kids glide among the trees and tackle the rope tow. Guests could also clamber down to the bottom of the hill and go ice skating on "Lake Placid."

There was also a ski jump. Visitors would walk along the ridge until they came to the jump built in the woods. It was a wooden structure about two stories high. Steps led to a platform up in the treetops. A long ramp led from there down to a flat lip. ... The jumpers pushed off from the platform, gaining speed down the ramp so they could fly off the flat lip. The hill dropped away beneath them. They landed downhill and kept on gliding until coming to a stop at the bottom. Watching the skiers jump was a high point for the guests at [our] Ski Festival.

Thank you Sigrin. Steve writes:

I'm about to tell you something about myself that you have probably not ever heard before from anyone else. I moved to the Albany area **for** the weather. Yes, it's true. Growing up on Long Island, I dreaded summers even though I was off from school, living as much as possible in air conditioning and getting cabin fever during July and August. While I had the ocean 20 minutes away at Jones Beach, I wanted mountains. I wanted a three dimensional landscape. As an adult, I realized that I was looking for some place cooler in the hot months. I recognize that this is very much against the grain of the rest of the world.

Then I discovered this area, with 3 more weeks of winter and 3 weeks less of summer. Tall mountains, large lakes, and forests galore. And glorious snow in great quantities. Oh, the snow. White gold. Sure, just like everyone else, I don't like shoveling. So, now I just pay someone else to do it. They come early, clearing the driveway, so I can get out easily to go skiing.

Winter is a quieter, simpler time that allows my mind to contemplate matters with fewer distractions. The shades of black, brown, white and gray calm me. The world seems to settle down into a more basic mode. At the same time, playing with the landscape and weather of winter offers me a vast playground when I can be at my most physically active without the heat, humidity, stickiness, bugs and sweat of the hot months. There are many excellent,

adventurous skiers, some in this congregation, around as jolly companions on these trips. I'll get back to this subject in a little bit.

And that brings me back to the skiing. Tree skiing that is. This will be my 64<sup>th</sup> year of skiing. Somewhere along the way, I was getting a little bored with just cruising groomed trails and even banging the bumps and steeps on the trails marked on the resort map. I started skiing in the woods and discovered a whole new dimension of the sport. A dimension of few people, total nature and a place where I had to use every skill developed over the years. I also had to invent many new tricks to maneuver my way around a maze of trees, stumps, rocks and streams without kissing any wood or getting slapped around. Exhilarating would be the best one-word description of it.

While certainly not for everyone, more and more skiers went into the woods as recent ski technology allowed shorter, faster turning skis that are highly responsive to the tree skier's every movement. At the same time, skis like that require a very advanced technique of precision body-to-ski communication. One bad move at a critical time could lead to rather unpleasant consequences.

So, this is how and why I love winter. It's a joyous season. When it's grudgingly over, I start looking forward to the beginning of the next. Seven and a half months, but who's counting?

Thank you Steve! I expect if I were skiing in the woods I'd kiss a lot of bark.

And this last bit from Darnell sharing some of her winter joys:

I think of the absolute solitude, beauty and peace that only snow shoeing through a wilderness area can bring. All of your senses are awakened and overwhelmed with being part of a greater whole. I remember the exhaustion of helping children up sled hills, while also weighed down with layers of clothing, and rolling off the sled into the wet cold nip at the bottom. The sharing of hot chocolate from the thermos while sitting in snow and cold was as natural a picnic as the ones in July.

I loved snow days when school was canceled and felt the same joy as an adult teacher as I felt as a child. I will still listen for the school closings with a kind of giddy glee. I grab a hot drink, pull my rocking chair up to the picture window, sit in my pajamas, and just watch it snow.

Thank you Darnell! As for me, my appreciation for winter comes from deprivation. Growing up in Newark, Delaware, we rarely had much snow and when we did get it, it didn't hang around long. Living in the San Francisco Bay Area and in Florida, I was snow deprived. My internship in Rochester, New York enchanted me with the winter I'd never experienced. Living with and marrying a resident of Buffalo gave me many opportunities to become more acquainted with snow.

The visual and auditory experience of snowfall continues to bring me joy. The softness and muffled quality of sound during a snowstorm has a calming effect. Snow piles up on every surface bring attention to shapes and edges I might not have noticed without snow whitening them. Tracks in the snow reveal the presence of mysterious, previously unknown residents and visitors of the animal

kingdom. The surface of the snow is constantly changing with the wind's shaping and the sun's glazing it.

At other times without much snow, there is still visual interest. The nakedness of the trees reveals what was hidden by leaves. Ridges of hills become visible. Old abandoned stone fences show up as do the contours of the land. To the west of our home, we can't see the sunset because of a wall of green. In the winter, however, the low sun crossing the horizon filters through the branches reflecting yellows and orange colors.

The bare branches themselves can become the stage for winter's beauty. The jewel like refracted light of ice coating tree branches makes a spectacular display after an ice storm.

Ice wherever it shows up is often beautiful. The ability to step off the shore and begin to walk on ice is always a thrill. Partly a thrill because of the potential risk of falling through. But even if a pond is solidly frozen, it is wonderful to be able to walk on water and look down and see the bottom, maybe even a slow moving fish. Back on land, there is visceral pleasure in walking on iced-over puddles and breaking, even smashing the ice.

I can't end this joyful exploration of winter without discussing the pleasurable aspects of snow shoveling. Yes, I acknowledge the misery of shoveling heavy, wet snow, especially that wretched stuff the snowplows dump at the end of the driveway. But a light powdery snow several inches deep briskly gathered up and distributed on the lawn without stressing the arms, shoulders or back, and cleaned off the driveway and sidewalks by the early dawn light, can leave one with a joyful feeling of accomplishment.

I hope these testimonies to the joys of winter connect with your own experiences and bring a sense of joy just hearing them. I cannot erase the reality that may go with them such as wet shoes and socks, frozen toes and fingers and runny noses. This is the nature of existence. The pleasant and unpleasant intermix. The joys and woes of living often are not under our control.

Yet, when those joys are present and available, may we be open to them. May they feed our spirit and energize our willingness to share them with each other.

## Prayer of Affirmation

A favorite poem of mine and I hope yours too:

Welcome Morning by Anne Sexton

There is joy  
in all:  
in the hair I brush each morning,  
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,  
that I rub my body with each morning,  
in the chapel of eggs I cook  
each morning,  
in the outcry from the kettle  
that heats my coffee  
each morning,  
in the spoon and the chair  
that cry “hello there, Anne”  
each morning,  
in the godhead of the table  
that I set my silver, plate, cup upon  
each morning.  
All this is God,  
right here in my pea-green house  
each morning  
and I mean,  
though often forget,  
to give thanks,  
to faint down by the kitchen table  
in a prayer of rejoicing  
as the holy birds at the kitchen window  
peck into their marriage of seeds.

So while I think of it,  
let me paint a thank-you on my palm  
for this God, this laughter of the morning,  
lest it go unspoken.

The Joy that isn't shared, I've heard,  
dies young.