



Touchstones Project

Small Group Discussion Guide

Wintering & Regeneration

Before You Gather

Read the following pieces prior to gathering.

1. *The Gifts of Hibernation* by Andréana Lefton

...I am learning to see hibernation as a time to retreat from the world... It is also a time for my own unspoken philosophy to come into clearer focus. In this way, hibernation is a time of approach. I am approaching the truth in me, a movement that requires both patience and trust.

...An active life is a good and laudable thing. Action has its seasons too — one of which is inaction.

...So, hibernation is a threefold time. It is a time for retreat and replenishment. It is a time for our wordless philosophy to finally be born. And it is a time for our hidden destiny to whisper in our heart, “You’re not forgotten. I’m still here. We’re in this together.”

...Moments like that — of coming closer to the rhythms and mysteries of life beneath our thin shield of technology and distractions — is one of the many gifts of hibernation. Returning to that hope of wholeness is always an approach, never an arrival. Times of deep sleep and silence make even this radical hope possible. It is radical — from the root — especially in a world that tears us apart, then shames us when we take time for healing.

Hibernation, which is another word for healing, restores our nourishing, grounding source. In so doing, it frees us to become a force of reason, reflection, and kindness. In simple terms, we’ve been given to. So, we have something to give. And not just any something. After a deep replenishing, what we give is veined with truth. ...

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-gifts-of-hibernation/>

2. *Winter* by Rev. Jane Thickett

Winter does have its purpose.

Winter invites us to slow down, to go within. To explore the inward soul. The silence, the darkness, the very bleakness of our surroundings, as well as the promptings of our bodies, suggest that we are entering a season of quiet, of reflection, and of low productivity.

Like the earth, we have our seasons too. And spring within can only come if some winter has come first. The winter of the soul can be a bleak time, a time of barrenness, emptiness, and darkness. It is often not clear that it is a seasonal cycle, and that spring will follow. It can be a short cycle, or it can last a long time. It can feel like a wasteland, like nothing is being accomplished, like creativity has withered. It can feel like your soul is dead, just as the winter of the earth makes the earth appear dead. If we don’t recognize it as a necessary cycle, it can lead us to despair, and despair is not fertile soil for the growing of the fruits of the soul.

Source: <https://unitarian.ithaca.ny.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/12-11-16-Winter.pdf>

3. *A Hoot of Hope in Winter*

by Susan Chernak McElroy

Many times, I could not imagine anything existing beyond the dark, threatening seasons of my life. Those days were like living in a perpetual ice age.... On every horizon, icicles seemed to surround me, dangling from sky to earth, and the warmth of hope was a dim faltering light.

Hopelessness is like getting your skin wet and exposed in winter — all the heat leaches out of you, and the ice finds your heart, and that is that. But, ...I heard the faint hooting of the owl. Even more than that, I heard the promise of renewal whispered in the tones of his call. Perhaps I heard him because I had lived through a half century of winters, and my ears were open to a simple faith that winter ends and hope lives.

Hope is not a gift we can sustain simply by our own will. Hope is something we need to hear from outside ourselves sometimes. ...The voice came to me in the call of the owl, but nature has endless other voices that speak of hope: the sound of water to a thirsty creature, the breath of sunshine on a cold one, the call of kin and kind to one who is lost.

The owl's hoot — more a vibration than a sound — wrapped around me like a down cape, insulating me from the most chilling of life's spirits. This melancholy will end. This darkness of loss will find its way to light again. This wound will be healed someday. The cold will move on.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/16361>

4. *Snow and Stillness* by Rev. Craig M. Nowak

"You can't get too much winter in the winter."

So says Robert Frost in his poem, *Snow*.

...Snow ...reminds me to slow down whether I feel I need to or not. I appreciate snow as a reminder to slow down when I need to. And when I don't want to or feel I can't slow down, I appreciate... eventually... snow reminding me I can't....and don't need... to control everything.

Snow also brings me back to my childhood. To the excitement, playfulness and creativity I enjoyed so freely then. I appreciate snow reminding me not to be so serious, to enjoy the here and now, and to live creatively.

And perhaps most significantly for me, winter connects me to a deep stillness. A stillness observed in nature, as I listen to sound of falling snow or gaze up at the almost black night sky when the moon and stars are as bright as ever, but experienced profoundly within. Whereas some find such stillness disturbing, I find it calming, reassuring, centering. I appreciate the stillness for the comfort it brings me and the compassion it awakens in me for those who struggle to find or hold such stillness.

Source: <http://www.buuc.org/winter.html>

5. *Trees and Violins* by Megan McKenna

Once upon a time there was a master violin maker. His instruments were exquisite, and the sound that could be drawn forth from them was beyond description. He only accepted a small number of apprentices, and he took them through the long and arduous process of making a violin from the choice of the tree to how to string the piece

at the very end, after the varnish. There was one apprentice, an especially adept one, who had trouble with only one aspect of the process: the choice of wood. He had mastered all the other levels but would balk at the choice of which tree to mark and cut to form the base of the violin. Finally, the master took him out to the forest again.

It was the dead of winter, a frightfully cold and windy day, with snow swirling and ice thickly hung in all the trees. They walked north and the master starting marking out the trees.

"Why?" the apprentice queried. "Why these?"

The master answered, "They face due north and they take the brunt of the wind, the chill, and the ice. They make the best violins."

They returned. The storm grew stronger, and the student asked his teacher, "Master, doesn't it bother you to think about the trees that you marked standing alone in the wind, standing against all this ice and fury? Have you no pity for them?"

The master eyed him and smiled, "No, not at all. You see, they are being tuned!"

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/14213>

6. *Spiritual Winter* by Rev. Josh Pawelek

Spiritual winter is the season before the change: the womb-time before birth, the star-time before daybreak, the dream-time before waking, the frozen-time before spring's thaw. Spiritual winter is the season for wondering and imagining what the change will be like, what it will feel like, how it will impact our routines and patterns. It's the season for trial runs, for approaching the threshold of change again and again until we're ready to cross over. It's the season for rehearsing our lines in front of the mirror, for testing, for making mistakes and learning lessons. It's the season for discerning what words need to be said and how to say them. It's the season for reciting our truths quietly to ourselves, making sure we've got them right, hearing how they sound as they issue forth from our mouths, letting them inhabit our bodies, letting them seep into the marrow of our bones. Spiritual winter is the season for anticipating how others might react to our new lives, our new selves. It's the season for informing those close to us that a change is coming. It's the season for asking them to accept us, asking for their continued love and care. It's the season for putting in place the supports we need to live differently.

Spiritual winter is the season for moving from fear to resolve, moving from aimless anxiety to focused strategy. It's the season in which we cease wandering in the wilderness and begin travelling in a definite direction. It's the season for moving from confusion to clarity, from caution to courage. It's the season for getting ready.

Source: <https://uuse.org/spiritual-winter/>

Gathering

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: *Warmth in Winter* by Ben Soule
Now has come hard winter,
With whip of wind and slash of snow
and the diamond-bright stars in the black ice of the heavens.

Just as we resist the season with shovel and scraper,
wool and windbreaker,
we embrace it with sled and snowboard, cocoa and comforter.

Winter is here: let us find warmth in this time of being together.

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/opening/warmth-winter>

Chalice Lighting: *As the Wild Wind Bites*

by Ben Soule

Let us hold a quiet moment together as our chalice is lit. As the wild wind bites, so does the still flame warm us. As the deep snows block our doors, so does the gentle flame bring us out. As the crackling cold air stops our breath, so does the radiant flame draw from us the words we need to give and to receive: words of greeting, words of comfort, words of solace, words to challenge our minds and words to bring us to action. Let us gaze upon this our common flame, so that we remember who we are and what we can do when we are together.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-lighting/wild-wind-bites>

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5

minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Invite someone to read aloud the following:

The Ants & the Grasshopper by Aesop

One bright day in late autumn a family of Ants were bustling about in the warm sunshine, drying out the grain they had stored up during the summer, when a starving Grasshopper, his fiddle under his arm, came up and humbly begged for a bite to eat.

“What!” cried the Ants in surprise, “haven’t you stored anything away for the winter? What in the world were you doing all last summer?”

“I didn’t have time to store up any food,” whined the Grasshopper; “I was so busy making music that before I knew it the summer was gone.”

The Ants shrugged their shoulders in disgust.

“Making music, were you?” they cried. “Very well; now dance!” And they turned their backs on the Grasshopper and went on with their work.

There’s a time for work and a time for play.

Source: <https://read.gov/aesop/052.html>

Readings from the Common Bowl: Invite group members to read the following selections aloud. Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

“Loving winter can seem, in a very long perspective of history, perverse. Of all the natural metaphors of existence that we have – light versus dark, sweet against bitter—none seems more natural than the opposition of the seasons: warmth against cold, ...and ...summer against winter. ...One of the most natural metaphors we make is of winter as time of abandonment and retreat, ...of loss. ...Winter is Demeter's sorrow at the abduction of her daughter by death. ...The taste for winter, ...a belief that that [winter is] ...as essential to the human spirit and human soul as any summer scene—is a part of modern condition. Wallace Stevens, in his poem the *Snowman*, called this new feeling a mind for winter....” *Adam Gopnik*

“We must emerge slowly from our wintering. We must test the air and be ready to shrink back into safety when blasted by unseasonal winds; we must gradually unfurl our new leaves. There will still be the debris of a long, disordered season. These are

the moments when we have to find the most grace: when we come to atone for the worst ravages of our conduct in darker times, when we have to tell truths that we'd rather ignore. Sometimes we will have to name our personal winters, and the words will feel barbed in our throats: grief, rejection, depression, illness. Shame, failure, despair." *Katherine May*

"As you know, I say unkind things about winter every now and then. But cut me some slack, winter-lovers! I live in Madison, Wisconsin, and I've earned my stripes when it comes to ice and snow and zero temps! Truth be told, there are certain features of this season that I, too, love. For example, on the introverted/extroverted scale, I'm right in the middle. Winter is good for my introverted side. As the days get shorter and the weather gets colder, I find myself going inward in ways that nourish my soul. It's a spiritual version of hibernation, I suppose. ...It takes me on an inner journey, touching on things I need to remember and truths I need to embrace." *Parker Palmer*

"However, it arrives, wintering is usually involuntary, lonely, and deeply painful. Yet it's also inevitable. We like to imagine that it's possible for life to be one eternal summer and that we have uniquely failed to achieve that for ourselves. We dream of an equatorial habitat, forever close to the sun, an endless, unvarying high season." *Katherine May*

"In the depths of winter, I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer,' Albert Camus wrote, ...one of the most beautiful and enlivening thoughts ever committed to words. But it's also a thought emblematic of the cultural baggage that burdens our seasonal metaphors, in which winter is invariably a season symbolic of spiritual barrenness, a psycho-emotional tundra of chilling discomfort and anguishing longing for warmth." *Maria Popova*

"In the depths of our winters, we are all wolfish. We want in the archaic sense of the word, as if we are lacking something and need to absorb it in order to be whole again. These wants are often astonishingly inaccurate: drugs and alcohol, which poison instead of reintegrate; relationships with people who do not make us feel safe or loved; objects that we do not

need, cannot afford, which hang around our necks like albatrosses of debt long after the yearning for them has passed." *Katherine May*

"...Authenticity is the expression of what is genuine and natural. It commands great respect because, unfortunately, it is so rare. ...Ridding ourselves of old patterns and accessing the authentic self are entry ways to freedom and the domain of wisdom. In fact, as we discover how to befriend these processes, ageing and renewing our character can be what Carl Jung called, 'a winter grace.' Jung believed that if we do not develop inner strength as we age, we will become defensive, dogmatic, depressed, resentful, and cynical. Our homeland of authenticity is within... Until we rediscover this ancient truth in a way that is unique for each of us, we are condemned to wander, seeking solace in the outer world where it cannot be found." *Angeles Arrien*

"To get better at wintering, we need to address our very notion of time. We tend to imagine that our lives are linear, but they are in fact cyclical. I would not, of course, seek to deny that we gradually grow older, but while doing so, we pass through phases of good health and ill, of optimism and deep doubt, of freedom and constraint." *Katherine May*

"It's cold. It's the raw, nasty kind of cold. The kind of cold that makes your bones hurt kind of cold. The kind of cold that makes you tear up, and then watch your tears freeze kind of cold. The kind of cold that radiates up from the floor and gets in from-the-walls kind of cold. The kind of cold that makes me reach for the warm kind of comfort food. Comfort food is usually something that takes me back to my childhood.... Everyone's comfort food is different, and mine is called *adasee*. When it is cold, my mom's lentil dish brings me comfort." *Omid Safi*

"Unlike those terrible thrashing summer nights when the room is always too close to allow that final descent into oblivion, the cool winter nights afford me deep sleep and long, magical dreams. When I wake in the night, the dark seems more profound and velvety than usual, almost infinite. Winter is a season that invites me to rest well and

feel restored, when I am allowed to retreat and be quietly separate.” *Katherine May*

Reading

7. *The Slush Puddles of Life* by Omid Safi

Some 15 years ago, I got my first job [in] ...a small village in upstate New York.... Upstate is vast, sparse, beautiful, and... cold.

We moved to a place with a stronger sense of community than anywhere else I have lived. ... It was a beautiful place.

It was also... cold. ...In the year 2000, the second year we were there, we had 192 inches of snow. Seventeen feet of snow. Another year we had a stretch of 19 straight days when the high temperature did not get above zero degrees Fahrenheit — without the wind chill factor.

...Did I mention that I grew up in Florida, Iran, and North Carolina? ...Mumble, mumble. Grumble.

And here is where the Zen moment came one day.

...Lost in one of my usual daydreams, I stepped into one of those slush puddles.

...In that moment, I hated life, hated the cold, hated my frozen toes, hated the slush, hated winter, hated everything.

It was a high-pitched, giggling ...voice that snapped me out of my misery. I ...saw my little baby girl ...jumping with both feet in the next puddle.

She shouted with absolute and total joy, “Puddles! Puddles.”

...In the ice puddle, there were sparkles of light, all lit up like jewels. Who needs a lotus flower in the pond when you have jeweled sparkles of light in the winter slush?

Same puddles. I cursed the puddles. She giggled and jumped in.

...Life’s not just about the icy puddles. It’s also about the jumping in, the giggles, and seeing the sparkling jewels in the frozen puddles of light.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/the-slush-puddles-of-life/>

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time and interest allow. Fully explore one question before moving to the next. The questions do not need to be discussed in order.

1. In reading #1, Andréana Lefton sees winter as offering the gift of hibernation. Do you agree?

Why or why not? In your life, what have you/could you use hibernation for? She writes that hibernation offers three gifts: “a time for retreat and replenishment,” for “our wordless philosophy to finally be born,” and for “our hidden destiny to whisper in our heart.” Which of these three resonate with you? Why? For her, hibernation includes the process of healing? How might this be true? How has your wordless philosophy been formed? How has it found voice? Have you found your destiny? When? How? Over time, has your destiny changed? How? Why?

2. In reading #2, Jane Thickstun writes that, “Winter invites us to slow down, to go within. To explore the inward soul.” Why might this be true? She continues that winter is “a season of quiet, of reflection, and of low productivity.” What is winter for you? In writing about winter, she concludes, “If we don’t recognize it as a necessary cycle, it can lead us to despair, and despair is not fertile soil for the growing of the fruits of the soul.” Is a personal winter necessary from time to time to grow the fruits of the soul? Why or why not?
3. In reading #3, Susan Chernak McElroy portrays her personal winters as “dark, threatening seasons of my life,” which resulted in hopelessness. Have you experienced hopelessness in response to a personal winter? She then heard the faint hooting of an owl and took it as a call of and cause for hope. When have you heard the call of hope? In this context McElroy writes, “Hope is not a gift we can sustain simply by our own will. Hope is something we need to hear from outside ourselves sometimes.” Do you agree? When has hope come to you from beyond yourself?
4. In reading #4, Craig Nowak is a fan of winter because it takes him back to his childhood, because it reminds him to slow down, and because winter connects him “to a deep stillness.” As you consider winter, what are its positive connotations for you? What does winter ask of you? What are your childhood memories of winter? Has winter changed for you since then? How?
5. In reading #5, Megan McKenna shares a delightful story about a master violin maker, an apprentice, and how the trees facing north in

winter make the best violins because winter “tunes” those trees. Does winter “tune” you? In what sense? Further, what causes you to be out of tune? In tune? Finally, what music do you associate with winter? Why?

6. In reading #6, Josh Pawelek extols spiritual winter as a time for considering the nature of change and how we approach change. As he writes, spiritual winter is “the season for moving from confusion to clarity, from caution to courage. It’s the season for getting ready.” Have you had spiritual winters? Did spring follow? What did it give birth to?
7. In reading #7, Omid Safi goes on and on about how he disliked winter living in upstate New York. Then a Zen moment arose, first because he stepped into a deep slush puddle, driving him to misery, and second, because he witnessed the ecstasy of his little girl jumping into the next puddle which resulted in her giggles and absolute and total joy. In that moment, his misery became bliss. Have you had any Zen moments in winter? Sometimes we are beset by ice-bone cold, and then experience a winter landscape that is so beautiful that it takes our breath away. Have you ever seen “jeweled sparkles of light in the winter slush?” How do you sense winter? What sense do you make of winter?

The following questions are related to the Readings from the Common Bowl.

8. Gopnik reminds us that, for most of human history, winter has been associated with loss. Have you ever viewed winter in this way? If yes, why? What were the circumstances related to this? Do you agree with him that we have developed a taste for winter? Why or why not? How would you describe your “taste” for winter? Gopnik refers to Wallace Stevens phrase, a “mind for winter.” What does this mean for you?
9. Katherine May cautions that, “We must emerge slowly from our wintering.” She is not writing about a planetary season, but our personal winter. Have you experienced some personal winters? Can you share the broad circumstance of a personal winter? How, per May, did you then “unfurl your new leaves” as you emerged from that winter? What did you learn as a result of that experience?
10. While Parker Palmer struggles against winter, there are also aspects that he loves. Relative to winter, with what do you struggle and what do you love? In what he calls “a spiritual version of hibernation,” he writes, that winter takes him “on an inner journey, touching on things I need to remember and truths I need to embrace.” Does winter prompt you to take an inward journey? What do you need to remember? What truths do you need to embrace?
11. Katherine May writes, relative to our personal seasons that, “We dream of an equatorial habitat, forever close to the sun, an endless, unvarying high season,” which avoids the need for wintering. Has this been true for you? Why or why not? Is a dream of “one eternal summer” realistic? Is it even healthy? Why or why not? What purpose do the personal winters of your life serve?
12. Maria Popova considers Camus’ discovery of an invincible summer in the depths of winter. Have you ever had this discovery? When? Why? She notes that winter has been invariably seen as “a season symbolic of spiritual barrenness, a psycho-emotional tundra of chilling discomfort, and anguishing longing for warmth.” For you, does any of this apply to the planetary season of winter? Why? To your personal season of winter? Why?
13. Katherine May writes that, during a personal winter, the desire to feel whole can lead to bad choices: drugs, alcohol, unsafe relationships, compulsive spending, and more. It is as if the descent into a personal winter creates a “hole in the soul” that people try to fill, rather than heal. Do these unhelpful solutions make sense in the depth of despair? In place of these, what actions can lead to wholeness when we find ourselves in such circumstances?
14. Angeles Arrien writes about the importance and value of authenticity. She notes that accessing our authentic self requires ridding ourselves of old patterns in the process of ageing. As you have gotten older, have you confronted old, un-useful patterns? How did you address them? With what result? She writes, “as we discover how to befriend these processes, ageing and renewing our character can be what Carl Jung called, ‘a winter grace.’” What do you think Jung meant by this? Could it be that a winter

grace forces us inward, since Arrien writes that, “Our homeland of authenticity is within....” Do you agree? Why or why not? Have you benefitted by going within? Does the planetary or personal season of winter invite you to go within? To what purpose? To what result?

15. Katherine May suggests that to get better at wintering we need to shift our notion of time, from linear time to cyclical time, that is from Western time to Indigenous time. As she writes, “we pass through phases of good health and ill, of optimism and deep doubt, of freedom and constraint.” Do you agree? Why or why not? In what ways do you live in linear time? In cyclical time? What benefits might there be in paying more attention to cyclical time? Which season most reminds you of cyclical time? Why?
16. Omid Safi writes that he turns, in the deep cold of winter, to comfort food for solace, notably the lentil dish that his mother made him when he was a child. What comfort foods do you fondly recall from your childhood? Are there any that you associate with winter? Which? Why?
17. Do you, with Katherine May, find it easier to sleep on cool winter nights or in the warmth of summer? Which? Why? Is one of these seasons more conducive to dreaming? She writes, “When I wake in the night, the dark seems more profound and velvety than usual, almost infinite.” What is your experience of winter darkness? Does winter invite you to “rest well and feel restored?” Why? How?

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice by Elizabeth Selle Jones
We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Source: [SLT #456](#)

Closing Words: *The Turning of the Seasons*

by Rev. Dr. Andrew Pakula

May you know fully and deeply the blessings of each of your heart’s seasons
The inward turning of Winter
Springtime’s lush renewal
The effortless, steady growth of summer
And autumn’s rich harvest
May your passage from season to season be blessed—eased by hands to hold, and by the light of love to guide you on.

Source:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/closing/seasonal-transitions>