

It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year

by *Michele Hiczewski*



I despise the cold weather. There is no better way to say it than that, as I can find no redeeming qualities in the bitter chill of the winter season, though heaven knows I have tried over the last fifty-one years. Even as a child, the only reason I ever donned a snowsuit and leggings was to amuse my mother, who seemed to take great joy in turning me into a miniature version of the Michelin man, before sending me out into the elements. The other kids in our neighborhood would play blissfully for hours in the waist-high snow, completely oblivious to the frigid cold, while the very thought of lying in that stuff for the minute required to make a snow angel was enough to send me scurrying inside for my blanket. This repulsion to the cold did not dissipate with age, but grew more intense every year, and now the very thought of winter gives my spine a chill as numbing as from any arctic blast.

I have come to the conclusion that I would not have such an intense hatred for Old Man Winter if I were not so much in love with his counterpart on the other side of the vernal equinox, summer. When I think of utopia, this is the season that comes to mind, with images as bright and vibrant as the sun itself. The Wedgwood blue sky creates the perfect backdrop for clouds that are striking in their surreal perfection, and the dense summer grass covers the ground as if it were a blanket of rich emerald green. Certainly, this must be what heaven is like.

Human beings were meant to live in temperate climates as opposed to frigid ones, and a quick look at other creatures that inhabit the earth will prove this. For example, animals that are native to the Arctic, such as polar bears and walrus, are naturally equipped to deal with the environment they live in. The same is true for camels that travel across the desert, and even for the sheep that graze the hills of Ireland. What natural defenses do humans have against the harsh, icy blasts of winter? I haven't missed too many meals, but I doubt that I have enough blubber to insulate me from the cold. Take that same chubby body and place it in the warmth of the sun, and I have an environment where I can survive without several layers of bulky clothing to protect me. If you stop and think about this, it makes perfect sense. Man, by nature, is designed to live in a climate that is free of any extremes in temperature, especially extreme cold. For protection, we have what we came into this world with, and although very functional, our bodies do not have much to offer in the way of insulation.

We also possess the ability to enjoy all of the wonder and beauty that nature has to offer, and at no time of the year is nature more breathtaking than in the midst of summer. This blessed season stimulates all of the senses with a potpourri of smells and sounds like no other. The summer air is sweet with the heady fragrance of flowers while the tall pines emit a warm spicy aroma so intense, you can almost sense the heaviness of the sticky sap that created it. The tall, slender smoke from a summer's eve campfire carries a fragrance that tickles the nose in a peppery sort of way, while the warm dampness of an afternoon shower almost cleanses the pallet.

The sounds of summer are as plentiful as the smells. With the windows fully opened in the hopes of catching a vagrant breeze, the laughter of children playing and dogs barking come in easily and clearly. Traffic noises are not only intensified but also changed slightly, as the sounds of lawnmowers and motorcycles are added to the mix. Birds of varying species serenade us throughout the day, and after the glowing amber and blue sky has faded, the chirping crickets are the last sound we hear as we drift off to sleep.

Our eating habits go through some changes during summer—some for the better, some not so. At no other time of the year are fresh fruits and vegetables in such abundance, and there is enough of a variety to enjoy a nice selection at every meal. However, should you desire a bit of divine decadence amidst all this healthy

fare there is a never-ending schedule of festivals and lawn fetes that can help in satisfying those gastronomic cravings. Any fried or grilled concoction you can imagine is served up in monstrous portions, and summer-time treats such as Snow Cones and salt-water taffy are available everywhere. After you have taken your fill of artery-clogging goodies and the carnival lights go dim for the night, a stunning display of fireworks might light the sky, bringing a perfect end to a warm summer's evening.

The biggest change to the senses comes from the way that summer feels, and how it makes you feel in return. On a warm, still day, your skin almost seems as though it is soaking the heat of the sun deep down into your bones like a dense sponge, mellowing both your body and your mind. A summer's breeze, kissing your face as you wake in the morning, is sweet with the scent of damp clover, and even the billows from your morning shower have a delicate, spicy note. That long drive to work now becomes a pleasure as you open the windows and enjoy the wind whipping through your hair, while the rest of your senses simply notice what is going on around you, without the need to judge it.

I am writing these thoughts on a September day, which I will describe as "crisp" in a feeble attempt at optimism. The sun is out, but it is lacking the warmth of even a month ago, and the breeze has changed from refreshing to chilling, and by night's end every window in the house will need to be closed. The leaves remain green, but there is now a hint of gold and even a random splash of red buried in the still-lush foliage. There is some beauty to this early autumn season, which seems to have arrived especially early this year. But this beauty seems to have an almost elegant desperation to it, like an aging film star still clinging to the glory days of her youth, but visibly deteriorating a little more every day.

Within a few short weeks, snow will dust that once-emerald blanket of grass as if it were sprinkled with talcum powder, and the trees will lie bare and skeletal after having surrendered to winter's incessant cold. I too will surrender to the elements, and retreat into my home like a potato bug that curls up into a little ball, to protect itself from the outside elements. I will try, as I do every year, to just get through winter and pretend that it really does not bother me all that much. To that end, I go to great lengths to ensure that I will be as comfortable as possible, even as the temperatures drop into the single digits and lower. Vanity takes a back seat to practicality, as tightly knitted hats squash my curls flat onto my head and my quilted full-length coat removes any hint of a female shape with its enormous pillowed bulk.

Perhaps this year, I will think about winter and summer as Yin and Yang—complementary opposites. I could not appreciate the beauty of the warm summer without knowing its opposite, the bitter winter, and each could not exist without the other. Should I lose sight of this perspective, I can look at the dots inside the Yin and Yang symbol, which remind us that there is always light within the dark and that one would not be there without the other. I may not ever like winter, but at least I can try to appreciate it for helping me see the beauty of summer. After all, it's the most wonderful time of the year.

