

The Wise Ways of Fall

A seasonal lesson in living

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Issue: R Home Fall 2006

Leaves seem to understand their fate in fall, and they celebrate it. For everything there is a season. Do what you're supposed to do. Be who you're supposed to be. Be radiant or be muted. Rustle, fall, twirl, swoop — do something stunning before hitting the ground.

Fall is a hot-and-cold neighbor. It first welcomes us with cooler mornings that re-energize even while the leaves are getting the hint that it's time to glow, time to go. And so fall undoes the overdose of green with a flip of a switch — aubergine and gold, orange against green. The leaves flame up and flame out, and darkness falls a little sooner than we'd like. I know it's supposed to happen, yet I'm never ready to say goodbye to warmth.

Fall is a test that teaches patience, hope and fortitude. Whoever first put a hard, lifeless daffodil bulb into the earth in autumn had more imagination and faith than I. But fall is wiser than we are.

Last fall provided my family with its own test and its own lessons. Two of my sisters were pregnant with their first children, and then one gray morning I got a call from my sister, Cara. She had just gotten confirmation that her baby wouldn't survive long after birth. A million years ago, we laughed and twirled in the tornado of leaves that swirled around on our grade-school playground. As the sadness settled in and we cried on the phone together, the occasional oak leaf dropped listlessly outside my window, and the swirl of emotions overtook us.

It must seem crazy, but just a couple of days after one sister gave birth to a healthy baby, and only days before Cara's C-section, I painted Cara's living room. It was a bizarre, spur-of-the-moment renovation, an odd bit of normalcy in an abnormal time, but while I painted, Cara and her husband, Gibson, and I talked and teared up and listened to music and laughed and contemplated the weight of what lay ahead and the preposterousness of what we were doing. Against the deep-brown woodwork, the autumnal honey butter warmed up the room. Painting was a balm, a salve, a soothing, loving laying on of paint that I hoped would stay long after family and friends left.

At some point every fall when I'm running along the river, I stop suddenly to pick up a leaf whose shape and colors won't let me go on. It's usually a reddish-purple one that gets me first. I pick it up, run some more, pick up perhaps a golden one streaked with green and another and another until I'm running with a bouquet of leaves in my hand. When I get home, they sit in a cobalt-blue vase on the kitchen table until they fade away.

I was expecting only sorrow the day my niece Tracy was born. I had it all wrong. It was wonderful to meet her. She was so beautiful and adorable, I just had to smile and take it all in. Sure our eyes glowed, and tears fell, and our faces wrinkled with no sleep, and our heads fell when she died peacefully the next day, but her sweetness and personality transformed gloomy family into loving

parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, oohing and aahing and angling to touch her, to sing to her, even to tell her dumb family stories.

Last fall has changed colors now, too. It had been colorless and dreary when it was only dread and sadness. Now it's a blaze of colors and memories and feelings. It's Cara's family and Gibson's family in their warm-hued living room the night before Tracy was born. It's the orange in the blanket wrapped around her that my sister knit. It's the ruddy red of her cheeks. It's the colors of the sea grass against the sky at the Nature Conservancy spot that memorializes her.

Fall seems to be about the surface of things — the colors and textures of the leaves, the leaves covering the ground, or the first frost coating the pumpkins, but fall goes much deeper than that, deep down into the earth and deep within us. The short story of fall is that we watch leaves wither and die. It doesn't sound the least bit beautiful, but we know otherwise. Looking down the hill in my backyard, where even the unwanted trees glow, I can't help thinking that fall is wise beyond its leaves.