

## Growth in the Silent, Gentle Darkness

"January is the emptiest month of the year. Nothing happens in the whole month!" wailed my friend, longing for the parties and excitement of the just-finished Christmas season.

I had to smile. To some extent she was right. There are no major holidays or celebrations to look forward to, buy gifts for, or send just the right card for (unless your birthday happens to fall in January). The landscape is grayish, with no leaves or flowers to catch the eye, while the weather is less than enticing and sometimes even challenging.

But there is more to apparent emptiness than meets the eye. When almost all growing things seem to have died, taking away the color and freshness that delighted us, they are simply resting, preparing for the warmer season to come. It seems that they have given up life forever, but there is more life there than we can imagine. We just need to slow down and pay attention to the signs of life that are visible only to those who know how to look more deeply - the future buds, the tiny marks of color along the branch, the suppleness of a twig.

Scripture speaks of the seed that is planted, and it sprouts and grows into stalks of grain without the farmer doing anything to make it happen (Mk. 4:26-29). While he is going about his daily life, the seed, hidden in the dark and silent ground, is slowly becoming all that it was meant to be.

What is it about silence and darkness that causes most of us to turn and run the other way? Our culture encourages us to seek out noise and excitement, and provides it even when we may not want it. Commercials on television and radio shout at us, the multitude of choices, brightly packaged, assail us every time we walk into a store, and technology now makes it possible to be accompanied by music every waking moment of our day. These things are not in themselves bad, but they can keep us from discovering the riches to be found in times of quiet.

Sometimes quiet is imposed on us, as when sitting with a seriously ill child, or with someone dear who is dying. Waiting for someone to come home late at night is another sort of quiet that gives us time to now more deeply what is truly of value in our life, what our real needs are, and how powerless we are all our efforts to control the events of our life.

Then there are times when we seek to come away from the clamor around us, when we reach out beyond ourselves to the One who holds us in being. Perhaps it's a time of discernment, as we face a major life decision, or we might need time to absorb a great joy or sorrow. Or we may simply want to be with our God who loves us beyond imagining. In that quiet place where nothing measurable may seem to be happening, wisdom and strength and beauty are growing in us as surely as a seed grows, in God's gentle darkness.

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