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UU Congregation of Marin

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“The Bear, the Brook and the Bird”

For all our known history we humans have gathered round fires in the dark times of the year to share the stories of hope and of life’s continuation. The cold calls us to wear, like a warm coat, these kinds of stories of our human journey, to carry us forward in our search for meaning. The tales are like a vessel, a ship, which carries and delivers essential goods, those pieces of our collective human story that are either too difficult to face straight on or too conflicted to find in the complex culture of today. They can teach things plainly or be indistinct, intuitive, yet poignant. Either way, we learn through the stories. We are the creatures of the story, and like dreams, we are the characters that dance in them. They help us to remember our own deepest selves and the unchanging nature of our planet and the enduring human spirit which, at times, can seem so far away.

So sit back and let yourself be taken by this mid-winter tale. It is one of those simple and straightforward stories which always

awakens and feeds my own spirit at this time of year. It doesn't have a moral or lesson to it. But it seems to have a subtext, moving in a low winter light that can touch us with great meaning. So I offer you now the Bear, Brook and the Bird:

The leaves had been blown down and scattered across the forest floor as the evergreens stood in patches amid a land of browns and grays, their limbs and twigs snapping in the frosty air. All the maple and poplar were stripped clean of their harlequin colors that had cast an illusion of warmth over the hillsides. The long nights were still holding as shortened days stayed in deliberate cold, with the sun not ascending above its low crescent across the southern sky. Indeed winter had fully claimed the days.

The whistling wind through the branches shot biting fingers under the fur of the bear. His winter undercoat had thickened now but didn't seem to make him much warmer. In fact it felt like it was dragging him down. "I know I'll be happy for all that fur when I lay down to sleep," he thought, "but I still hate how it feels this year." He looked around at the world and shivered a bit.

The wind blew again and made his stomach tighten. All the old bear could think about now was that ravenous hunger that had been

nagging him—that, and the drowsiness. “I need food,” he thought, “lots of food. I need to find more food to keep me asleep through the winter,” he thought, remembering his cozy den that he’d used for many a year. But he wasn’t quite sure just where it was? That bothered him. “Maybe I’m just too hungry to remember.” And that thought brought him back to the empty pit of his stomach.

Yes, what bothered him most now was the hunger. He’d been over the open meadow by the lake to see if there were any berries left. But no luck. All the berries were gone or had shriveled up and the lake was starting to ice-over.

A little ways away there was another whose voice sounded through the frosty air in that windswept forest. A low and not very energetic bird sang. (Whistle slowly.) “Oh how I wish the sun would warm me.” (Whistle slowly.) “Boy, oh boy, this time of the year is just no fun at all. Not a berry left on the bushes with any flavor, and all the beetles and worms tucked away out of reach. What’s a poor bird to do? Tough times, girl, tough time for sure. I’ll fluff up my feathers and see if that will make a difference.” (Whistle slowly.) “Hmm, not much help.”

She sat there preening and fluffing away and that old sleepy, hungry bear walked right under the branch she was on and looked up.

“I'm so hungry I could eat that bird,” he thought. And of course the bird didn't miss that look. She was not a dumb bird. Looking down from her branch she said “You don't really want to eat me. I'm just a bunch of feathers with nothing but bones and goose bumps. And that does not mean I am a goose!”

The old bear looked away, kind of ashamed that he would think such a thing. He never had eaten a little bird, or any bird for that matter. What was he thinking?

As the bird looked down at the old bear she noticed how thick and long his hair was and longingly thought just how nice it would be to nestle down in all that fur, out of the wind and next to a warm body. “How nice it must be to be covered in all that fur” she said to him.

"Aren't you suppose to be sleeping by now?" she asked.

"Yes, I am certainly tired, but I am just too hungry to sleep."

"Oh, that's too bad. Yes, you do look sleepy."

"Well, I would love to sleep but I need to eat something."

He scratched at a rotting log hoping to find a grub or a sleeping lizard, or any snack. "I just can't sleep on an empty stomach."

"Hmmm," the bird thought. "Maybe if I can get him to go to sleep I can nestle down in that fur of his and get warm. I'll have a home like no other bird in the forest for the whole winter! Let's see how can I make this work out?"

Just then the bear looked up and said, "I'm way too tired to look for food, and way too hungry to sleep. I never thought it would get to this. I've been through lots of winters, time and time again, but I never have been so tired and so hungry before."

The bird looked down with different eyes this time. She could see the years now in his eyes and the dark stained claws that had pawed at the old log. She felt sad and almost forgot how cold she was.

"I know a place that you might get some food. I can show you where it is."

She flew down from the tree and landed on the old bear's back.

It was so warm and nice in all that fur and she almost forgot what she was doing.

"Well?" said the old bear.

"Oh yes." she said. "Follow the path on the left there, down the gully, and at the rocks by the old fallen tree cross over. When you get on the other side I'll tell you where to go next."

The old bear did what he was told, but was getting more and more tired, and more and more hungry. When he arrived at the fallen tree he hollered up to the bird that had nestled down and fallen asleep.

"OK. OK. We are at the other side, now where?"

She opened her eyes and looked round still a bit in a daze from her warm nap. "OK, over that ridge and down the far side of the draw. At the bottom you'll find a brook and a pool in it. Go there."

The old bear turned and headed off. He went over the ridge and down the draw until he came to the brook. He followed it just a little way and found the small pond.

He was so tired now that he dropped to his knees and leaned over on his side. The bird felt him flop over from inside her warm furry nest and popped her head out to see where they were.

"This is it." she chirped in the old bear's ear. "This is the place. Look in the pool there!"

The old bear looked over in the pool and saw a whole patch of salmon that had been trapped there in the low water. He smiled and stood up. "Ouch, grrrr!" he growled as his knees popped and his shoulders and hindquarters ached and throbbed.

Not wishing to get wet in such cold, the bird jumped off into the dry grass. Wouldn't you know it: there were hundreds of seeds in the grass there and she started to feast.

The old bear stepped into the pool with all his aching joints and swatted here and there. It was a small shallow pool, so he eventually knocked a salmon onto the bank and sat down to eat. The next one was easier; the next and then the next. He ate and ate and got sleepier and sleeper. Eventually he lay over on his side by the pool, groaned a contented groan and fell into a deep sleep.

The bird having filled up herself jumped back onto her bear friend and nestled into his long fur and fell asleep herself.

When she woke up she noticed that it was not as warm as it had been. Sticking her head out of the old bear's fur she looked round to see the snow starting to fall. The old bear had not moved. She called to him, "Wake up old friend. You need to get into your den. It is starting to snow!" But the bear didn't answer.

She called again and again; but still he did not stir. She climbed up onto his head and looked at his eyes. They were closed and a look of contentment was on his face. She knew then that her new friend had died while they slept.

She flew up into the highest tree where the snow was blowing almost sideways and started to sing. She sang a song about winter and the cold brisk wind. Then she sang a song about her friend the old bear who had died full and happy while he slept. It would be a long winter she thought to herself and flew back down and nestled into the long fur on the back of his neck out of the wind and close to a good memory of this new very old friend she had made. She rested there until the snow stopped, then flew off to find a hollow in a tree and wait for the spring to arrive.

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Even without the happy ending that we would expect, I like this story because it is a truth of what can happen at this time of the year, not only in the lives of bears and birds but all of us in a way. And I do believe, the old bear was quite content and comfortable when he fell asleep, and knew a new journey was awaiting him on the other side. But most important in this story of wind, weather, hunger and death, there was a bird warmed by an unusual and unexpected friendship. One this bird would carry as brief as it was, to the end of her days, honored to be with the old bear at such a time. And the brook, well the brook as all brooks do, laughed at the dance of life played out in its pool, as it awaited the roar of the high waters in the spring melt.

Even when the full grip of cold, damp, short days are upon us, we can expect life's gifts to continue to unfold, in the most unlikely ways even if it involves death.

There is also here, if heard, a tale of hope and trust in the other side of this seasonal dance. Be it a bear, bird, brook, or you and me, it speaks to a common journey, a common inheritance which is filled

with the gifts of friendship, care and wealth for those aware of the world and the great mysteries it surrounds us with. These connections will sustain us through all trials and tribulations if we trust them to bring us to the other side.

So no matter your fears, challenges or loss, may you find this tale a gift for the season. Sometimes the best of life only can reveal itself in the cold and barren times, when you least expect it. May you hear a winter's song that asks nothing and offers only the truth of a life well lived. This is the message of the seasons, brought to you as a gift by the bear, a bird and a brook. May we all, embrace good friends and good meals as we step towards new, longer days of abundance trusting the world and all of its truths.

Amen.